

JIM KJELGAARD

DAVE AND HIS DOG
MULLIGAN



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DAVE AND HIS DOG, MULLIGAN

by Jim Kjelgaard

ILLUSTRATED BY SAM SAVITT

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**Omitted
Illustration**

Illustration
covering
two page
spread.

Man with
rifle and dog
looking out
across the
land towards
pile of
rocks.

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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

I

A LION KILLS

TWO MILES NORTH of Bad Luck Wash, seventeen-year-old Dave Keller steered his desert cruiser from the blacktop down a nameless dirt road that led into the desert. Considerably less than a boulevard to begin with, the dirt road became progressively worse with each succeeding hundred yards. The cruiser's lights stabbed intense darkness that would shortly lighten to a brief predawn morning, then give way to daylight.

Dave eased into a dry wash, a creek bed that flowed sand most of the year but filled its banks with a roily flood during the summer and autumn rainy seasons. The wash was still soft from fall rains, and the desert cruiser sank tire-deep in mud. Dave gave it the gun and the jalopy sped out of the wash.

The dog on the seat beside him whined. Dave's smile flashed in the dim lights of the instrument panel. "Getting nervous in the service, Mulligan?" he asked. "It was just another dry wash."

The dog quieted and sat relaxed on the seat beside his master. A big animal, Mulligan weighed almost seventy pounds. There was a trace of Weimaraner in his muzzle and in his dark, black-spotted gray coat; a hint of German shepherd in his ears; a bit of greyhound in his racy body and trim legs; a suspicion of hound in his soulful eyes—and the destructive potential of a buzz saw in his ability to take on anything that wore fur, give it a handicap of twenty-five pounds, and whip it to a standstill in nothing flat. Because he was a little bit of everything, and not entirely anything, Dave had named him after the stew that hunters make from every imaginable ingredient.

Dave ducked his head a bit deeper into the collar of his wool hunting jacket. The desert, blistering hot in summer, was cold enough in November, and Dave's desert cruiser boasted no top. Nor did it have fenders, doors, bumpers, or anything else that might be dispensed with. Because it weighed only a little more than half of what it had before Dave undertook the stripping job, it would go where a heavier car would surely have bogged down.

The road dwindled away to two ruts of varying depth and abrupt curves. Dave shifted to second . . . and changed to low when he dipped into another wash. Usually, only pickup trucks and jeeps ran this far, but Dave had proven more than once that his desert cruiser would go wherever these versatile vehicles were able to travel.

The desert cruiser growled across the wash and started up the other side. When they struck an uphill slant, the lights probed almost twice their usual distance. Dave stopped suddenly.

The vegetation on both sides consisted of various kinds of cacti, paloverde trees, mesquite, greasewood, a scattering of other shrubs, and the lush green grass that sprang up like a magic carpet in the wake of all prolonged rains. A desert bobcat, that ordinarily would have been fifteen pounds of lightning-fast muscle and sinew, came out of the brush into the road and halted.

Dave reached for his rifle, the trim little scope-sighted 257 Roberts that had been his high-school graduation present from his game warden father. Shooting a hundred-grain bullet that was adequate for most game if the man behind the rifle knew how to use it, it was sighted in at two hundred and fifty yards and the cat was only about twenty yards away. Dave made a mental calculation of the distance he'd have to undershoot in order to score a hit.

Bristling, Mulligan stood on the seat and awaited Dave's order to go. Then, bewildered, the big dog sat down. One hand in his pocket where he kept loose shells—only a fool or a person bent on suicide carries a loaded firearm in his car—Dave withdrew his hand and eased the rifle back into place. Anger flared in him.

It was not unusual for bobcats to prowl these desert roads. Frequently, when they came from the scrub into the lights of a car, they were either so dazed or so fascinated by the glow that they merely stared. This cat was neither dazed nor fascinated, just very sick.

Rather than stare into the car lights, the animal looked straight ahead. But it was neither supple nor agile. Its head seemed to sag, as though its owner found it very hard to hold it up. Presently, the bobcat rose . . . and continued rising until it had attained a height that made its lean body appear twice as gaunt. Suddenly, it tumbled in a furry ball, kicked feebly, and lay still.

Dave said grimly, "Come on, Mulligan."

He stepped out of the desert cruiser. Mulligan leaped lightly from the other side and came to stand beside his master. The big dog was still puzzled and—something abnormal for him—more than a little afraid. He had fought bigger cats, but there was something here that he did not understand, something that smacked of evil, and terror, and complete ugliness.

Dave did understand, and, in the darkness, he raised his eyes to the north. He could not see them, but he knew that the cloud-stabbing peaks were there and that, at this season, they were white beneath their first layer of snow. They towered over some of the best deer range in the nation, and Dave's father was there now, helping man a checking station through which hunters brought their deer. Many of the deer lived all year round on the desert. Others started down with—or even before—the first snowfall and they continued to come as the snow deepened. By the time that winter locked the heights in with from seven to twelve feet of snow, all the deer were at lower altitudes because none could hope to survive the harsh winter in the mountains. Dave, who had this day off from his job at Marcy's Filling Station, had come to the desert to hunt deer.

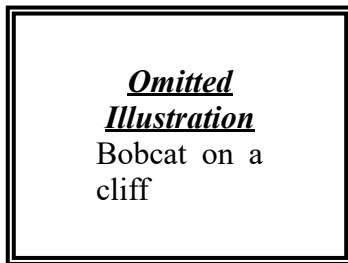
Deer were not by any means the only creatures that came out of the mountains in winter. Vast flocks of sheep that browsed all summer long in lush alpine pastures wintered on the desert, too. Ahead of the sheep came the poisoners.

When Dave and Mulligan looked down at the dead bobcat the boy's indignation mounted. It was entirely true that there must be some control over every species of wildlife. If there were none, deer, for example, would shortly increase to such an extent that they would eat themselves out of pasture. Those that did not starve would be easy prey for any disease that struck. Over a period of years, if sane conservation were again practiced and if hunters were allowed to crop the increase under careful supervision, so that the available range would support the deer herd, the few survivors might build up the herds to what they had been. But it took such a short time of carelessness—or ruthlessness—to wipe them out and so long to restore them!

Control must also be exercised over predators, including bobcats, mountain lions, foxes, coyotes, weasels, and a variety of other animals and birds that were considered either harmful or useless. Such creatures received no protection whatever from the law, which, within itself, was probably right.

However—and Dave’s father was wholeheartedly in agreement with him on this point—it definitely was not right for certain of the sheepmen to slaughter predators or anything else in wholesale lots simply because they believed that such creatures preyed on their flocks. Undoubtedly some carnivorous animals did kill sheep. But there certainly were no statistics to prove how great a toll they took. Dave and his father believed, along with numerous others, that their raids were not nearly so damaging as the sheepmen charged.

These sheepmen had some valid arguments and every right to protection, but, in Dave’s mind, the wholesale scattering of poison baits was an unmitigated evil. Six years ago, on this same road, Dave’s father had shown him coyotes, foxes, and bobcats stacked like cordwood, as many as fifty or sixty to a heap. Within two years after that, the mice, gophers, and jackrabbits so vastly increased and destroyed so much vegetation that there was nothing left for the sheep, anyway. But these relentless sheepmen, none of whom had ever been known to admit anything except that the only good predator was a dead one, ascribed that inevitable and unhappy consequence to some mysterious whim of nature. Only this year, with predators back in moderate numbers, did the area afford adequate pasturage for sheep.



Besides their value in controlling other pests, predators had an important role in preventing the spread of disease. Sick animals, that were sure to infect others, seldom had an opportunity to do so if there was a balanced population of predators. In addition, predators aided conservation in numerous other ways. Dave thought of one area in which it had been decided to exterminate bobcats. The next year, the yucca failed to bloom. It had required exhaustive investigation to determine that the yucca was pollinated by a certain moth. With no bobcats to keep them under control, the mice increased to such an extent that they ate all the moths. Only when bobcats were allowed to return in reasonable numbers did the yucca bloom again.

Finally, although poison baits were aimed at predators only, they were not the only ones to suffer. Javelinas, the little wild pigs of the desert, would eat meat and nobody had taught them to distinguish between that which was poisoned and that which was not. Desert quail and a variety of other birds were partial to meat. Even deer were not averse to varying their diet with an occasional morsel of meat. Domestic dogs had been wantonly sacrificed, too.

Dave picked up the bobcat, carried it off the road, and laid it down. He scraped dirt over it and covered the dirt with rocks. Buzzards, those desert scavengers whose value was beyond question, would eat this cat if they could find it. Dave had never seen evidence that whatever ate the flesh of a poisoned animal would in turn be poisoned. But neither had he ever seen proof that it wouldn't.

With Mulligan beside him, Dave returned to his desert cruiser. He tickled the dog's ears. Mulligan wriggled with joy. There was no need to worry about him as far as poison was concerned. Three years ago, when Mulligan was just a puppy, Dave had decided that he would be the ideal companion for desert tours. Knowing that they could not keep out of areas where poisoners had been at work, the first thing Mulligan had been taught was never to eat anything unless Dave offered it.

Dave drove down the narrow crown where the road now took him, eased over a nest of boulders, and sighed. The sheep were back, the poisoners with them. . . . For a while he drove ahead in gloomy silence.

But it was impossible to remain depressed. He was young, he had the day ahead of him, and he had come to the desert to get a buck. The meat was needed to stock the family larder, of course. However, it went without saying that the animal must be a big one—or none. When his father had taught him how to hunt, for food—or for preservation—he had instructed him to seek trophies only. Dave grinned.

His father's normal patrol was the desert, which he knew and loved as few men did. Two weeks ago, when deer season opened, he had been assigned to the checking station in the mountains, for the simple reason that most deer hunters went to the high country. He would have to do his hunting when he could, but he never failed to bring a buck home from the mountains and it was always a worth-while trophy. The twenty racks of antlers that had been gathered over the years occupied almost all available wall space on their back porch at home. Dave's grin was inspired by the thought that, this

year, he might get an even bigger buck than his father—and of the good-natured needling in which he might indulge if he did.

Dave sighed again, wistfully this time. Game wardens were always overworked and underpaid. In the few months since he'd been at Marcy's Filling Station, his weekly check was nearly equal to what his father could show after twenty years with the Game Commission. Nevertheless, Dave had never wanted to be anything else except a game warden and he had his application in now. Despite the long working hours and short pay, however, there were numerous men who would gladly accept these drawbacks because they offered the bonus of living a game warden's outdoor life. By Dave's reckoning, there were so many qualified applicants ahead of him that his application wouldn't even be processed until he was a hundred and seventy-nine years old!

Dave drove his desert cruiser down the final stretch of what passed for a road, backed into a level space between two tall saguaro cacti, and got out. Mulligan leaped down beside him and Dave loaded his rifle.

Morning had come, but it was not precisely the kind of morning that those who operate plush desert resorts assure prospective guests lies in store for them. Rather than a dreamy, azure-blue sky with a smiling sun shining warmly down, the sky was shrouded in murky clouds that held more than a hint of rain to come. Nor was the stiffening wind, that blew directly from snow-covered mountains to the north, in exactly the same category as a gentle soothing tropical breeze to caress one's cheek. Dave pulled the collar of his jacket still higher and looked about.

He was in an area of rocky hills that, because they supported only desert vegetation, appeared strangely naked under the gray sky. On the face of the nearest one, halfway to the summit, the tunnel of an abandoned gold mine yawned like a toothless mouth. The hill was about a quarter of a mile away. Between it and Dave was a comparatively level stretch that, because of its apparently sparse vegetation, looked incapable of sheltering anything at all. But Dave had long ago discovered that casual first glances in the desert are invariably deceptive. Even careful looks often are.

There was that thicket of paloverde, for instance, about two hundred yards away. Most of the trees were scrubby, as is customary in lands of little rainfall. Many had tumbled over, evidently victims of some fierce wind that had raged through here. However, although the thicket looked unimpressive, the trees were so close together and their branches were so hopelessly

intermingled that it furnished cover fully as good as any evergreen thicket in any northern forest.

More important, Dave knew of thirteen washes, canyons, and gulches between the base of the mountain and the spot where he stood. All were deep enough to shelter a deer, or even a herd of deer, and desert deer are past masters at the art of sneaking down washes where a hunter appears. Few of these depressions were visible, partly because they were flush with the land about them and partly because they were screened by cactus and greasewood. They came as a surprise, not always a pleasant one, to the desert hunter who set out to stroll blithely across what appeared to be a quarter mile of undulating land.

To the right of the hill containing the gold mine, a series of lower and gently sloping knolls rolled serenely toward a range of desert hills. Dave turned to his dog. "Stay with me, Mulligan," he commanded.

Mulligan wagged his three-inch tail and gave a happy canine grin in return. Lacking the complete skill that might have been possessed by any one of his numerous ancestors, Mulligan was not a trailing hound. But he was a good enough tracker of anything at all, from a bobcat to a human being, if Dave put him on the trail or if he wanted to follow it for reasons of his own. Although he lacked the finesse of the Weimaraner, he would hunt desert quail if that happened to be the order of the day. A racing greyhound would have outdistanced him, but Mulligan was capable of great bursts of speed that would top that of most other dogs and he also had the greyhound's farseeing eyes.

In addition, he had an intelligence and ability to reason that are sometimes the mark of a composite dog.

Now he paced contentedly beside his master. A hundred yards from where they started, they crossed a wide path beaten by thousands of tiny hoofs, while hundreds of clipping jaws had sheared off every particle of edible grass. Dave grimaced, for this was the trail of a flock of sheep. It was not that he disliked either sheep or sheepmen, but he loved the wild things deeply, and he remembered the bobcat that had died under the lights of his desert cruiser. His thoughts went to other dead or dying creatures that, even now, were lying in the scrub because it was a tradition with some sheepmen to poison varmints wherever sheep were to graze.

Since the sheep trail headed northeast, Dave struck directly west. He skirted a stand of cholla, the terrible jumping cactus that can sink a hundred near-invisible but excruciatingly painful needles into the flesh of whatever

touches it. The desert-wise Mulligan likewise gave an adequate, but not over-adequate, berth to the stand of cholla.

Without appearing even to look where he was going, Dave never made a misstep. Wearing soft but thick leather shoes with cleated crepe soles, he seemed to be wandering, if not aimlessly, at least erratically. But he knew every inch of this country, and what seemed to be an unnecessary side excursion brought him to the shallow head of a deep gully that offered treacherous crossing at the steep part because the walls tended to crumble.

Omitted
Illustration

Illustration
covering
two page
spread.
Man with
rifle and dog
looking out
across the
land towards
pile of
rocks.

He stopped to look down the gully. This was not because he expected to see any deer in it, since it was not the place for deer. These alert animals balked at entering any depression from which they could not escape easily and at any point, and the steep walls of this gully made escape difficult. But javelinas would travel such a gully because they were small enough to hide beneath overhanging walls.

Dave saw only a cactus wren that, for reasons of its own, was pecking vigorously at some sand in the bottom of the gully. Glancing at Mulligan, Dave grinned when the dog looked back with an expression of polite boredom. Mulligan's eyes said plainly that there was nothing worth while in the gully. If there was, its scent would be drifting out.

Dave spoke softly. “If people could tell as much with their eyes as any dog can find out with its nose, they’d have a right to call themselves skilled observers. Let’s go, Mulligan.”

The pair mounted the first of the low knolls and Dave stopped again to look at a scene he had watched a hundred times but that somehow was always new.

To the west, the rocky, steep-sided desert hills marched until they were lost on the horizon. In that direction, it was twenty-nine miles to the nearest road. After reaching the road, one could travel ten miles in either direction before finding a house and nineteen miles to the nearest town. It was a wilderness complete within itself. Few men knew it because few had ever seen any reason to enter what most considered a forsaken area, worthless to anything except scorpions, Gila monsters, and rattlesnakes.

Sometimes in the furnace heat of summer and sometimes in the cool, and often cold, of winter, Dave had been over every foot of this ground. He knew it in its cruelty and its kindness, its ugliness and its beauty. He had traveled the endless stretches that meant certain torture and possible death to whoever might enter them without water—and he knew the water holes. He was acquainted with the places where game would be most plentiful in winter and the spots, always within striking distance of a water hole, favored by such hardy creatures as elected to spend the summer on the desert. Some men had, with good reason, condemned it as the nearest thing to hell that would ever be achieved on earth. Dave knew it as a source of complete inspiration.

Now, for a moment, he stood indecisively. The autumn rains did not always fall and weren’t always plentiful enough when they came. There would still be areas, probably those most suited to hold moisture, where a fair amount of forage grew. Where there was forage, there would be creatures that ate it. And the carnivores would not be far from the grass eaters upon which they lived.

This fall, with more rainfall than had been recorded for the past quarter century, the entire desert was rich with grass. Every little cup and depression that normally held water, but for only a short time following every rain, might still be fed by seepage and thus form a drinking place. With favorable conditions everywhere, there would be no concentrations of deer.

Dave grimaced. Even a great herd of deer would not loom largely in a few million acres of desert.

Mulligan whined, very softly and very deep in his throat. At the same instant, his eye attracted by motion, Dave looked into the gully beneath him. There were a few scattered cacti and a ragged growth of greasewood, scarcely belt-high to a man and seeming incapable of hiding a field mouse. Nevertheless, not easy to detect, even though they were in motion, four deer were sneaking across it.

They were three does and a buck. A four-point, or bearing four tines to an antler, the buck carried a good rack but not good enough. Dave knew that, if he brought it home, his father would nominate him for the Herod Club, for even though the buck was no baby, the elder Keller would consider it one.

Dave leveled his rifle on the buck's shoulder, sighted through the scope, and knew he had only to flick the safety and squeeze the trigger. But it was not his kind of trophy and he never killed for the sake of target practice. However, he knew now where to find the deer.

Just before high noon, after rejecting two more bucks, Dave found the trophy he wanted.

With Mulligan beside him, he was a third of the way up one of the rocky hills, searching the opposite slopes with his scope, when he located the buck. He gasped and lowered his rifle.

"There are no bucks *that* big!" he exclaimed incredulously.

Mulligan, who knew something out of the ordinary was under way but did not know what, came to tense attention. Dave raised his rifle a second time, and, exactly at that moment, the sun broke through the murky sky.

Dave steadied his rifle across a boulder, centered his scope on the place where he'd seen the buck and peered through the eyepiece. He gasped a second time. The buck was no illusion. It was there, real as the boulder across which the rifle was held. It was a regal thing, even though its physical proportions probably did not greatly exceed any of the three bucks seen so far. It was the antlers that held Dave's excited attention.

They were huge and branching, with at least seven tines to a side. As nearly as Dave could determine, they were also perfectly symmetrical. Not one of the twenty his father had brought home, and every one was superior, could come near to matching this. Dave knew as he looked that it was not just the buck of the year. It was the trophy of a lifetime.

Realities possessed Dave's mind. A buck with antlers so impressive must be at least six or seven years old. It followed that the animal had

carried those antlers through a number of hunting seasons, and it had done so because it knew how to outwit hunters. Perhaps a half mile away, hopelessly beyond rifle range, it would not be easy to take.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the buck trotted toward the summit of the hill upon which it was grazing. Dave knew that it had neither seen nor scented him. He guessed that the momentarily shining sun had glanced from the end of his scope. The buck, without knowing what caused the flash, did know that it was out of the ordinary. Anything that did not fit in with the normal course of events was best avoided.

Omitted
Illustration

Deer buck
showing
shoulders to
head

Dave waited until the buck disappeared over the crest of the hill. Then he started to run.

He knew where he was going, for he decided, even as he began to run, exactly where the buck would go. Just over the crest of the hill beyond which it had disappeared there was a long wash, deep enough to hide a deer but not so deep that it could not be left at any given point. The wash sloped in a northwesterly direction, dipped into a gully, then rose to join a paloverde thicket that led into another wash, which, in turn, offered entrance to any of a dozen washes. By cutting across, Dave hoped, he would intercept the animal when it left the wash to enter the paloverdes.

The buck merely suspected the presence of an enemy, without having positive evidence that one was near. He would not hurry, but would stop frequently to test the wind and search his back trail. In the buck's world, running without knowing exactly why he fled and what he fled from was far more apt to bring disaster than lead to safety.

With Mulligan keeping effortless pace, Dave ran at top speed toward the point where he would intercept the buck—if he'd guessed right. He opened his jacket as he ran, for the swift pace made him hot, but he must go on. A

buck traveling at relatively slow speed could still cover ground twice as fast as a human being exerting his best efforts.

Directly beneath the hoped-for point of interception, Dave halted to catch his breath. Another human being probably wouldn't hear a winded runner gasp, but the buck would never miss it.

His breath regained, Dave walked noiselessly up the slope toward the junction of the paloverdes and the wash. He reached the summit, inspected the paloverdes, and saw nothing. A flood of disappointment washed over him. Perhaps he had erred in his judgment and the buck had chosen another path. Or it was entirely possible that the animal had decided to run rather than walk, and had already gone through.

Just then Mulligan growled, and Dave looked at his dog.

Mulligan was staring fixedly down the wash. He was bristling. This would not have been the case if he had caught the scent of a deer and nothing else.

Dave said softly, "Go on, Mulligan."

The dog walked stiff-leggedly down the rim of the wash up which the buck should have come. His head was high, indicating that he had body rather than trail scent. His nostrils worked constantly and he was still bristling. Two hundred yards from where he had started to stalk the enemy the big dog stopped. Peering across the wash, Dave saw his buck.

It was lying where it had fallen, its head twisted to one side. The antlers were even more regal than they had appeared through the scope. Dave raised his rifle to shooting position, even while the short hairs on the back of his own neck prickled. He had heard no shot and seen no other hunter. Just the same, the buck lay dead, a few yards from where it had obviously broken out of the wash.

Two minutes later, Dave reached the animal. A few drops of blood speckled its neck and a shoulder—and plainly imprinted in the sand nearby were the biggest lion tracks Dave had ever seen.

He shivered. A bold lion it was, indeed, to take a buck from under the very nose of a hunter. Dave read the story as it was written in the tracks. The lion had hidden in ambush in the wash, and the buck had appeared. It had not died easily, for it was a big and powerful animal. But it had been attacked by a bigger and stronger creature of the wild.

Mulligan snarled ferociously and cast about for the lion's scent. He found it, got a true lead, and looked inquiringly back at his young master.

“Stay,” Dave ordered.

Mulligan returned reluctantly. Dave wanted to hunt, but it would be suicide to send one dog on the trail of such a monstrous lion. Almost certainly he would not tree. He would whip around at the base of some boulder, grasp Mulligan with both front claws, flip him over, and disembowel him with his rear talons.

Dave looked around just in time to see a coyote, doubtless a scavenger that had been following the lion in the hope of sharing the big cat's kill, whirl and streak back toward the wash. Dave raised his rifle and shot.

The first bullet kicked up a little geyser of sand three feet behind the racing coyote. The second was six inches to one side. Before Dave could shoot a third time, the fleeing animal disappeared in the wash. Dave lowered his rifle and, in spite of his disappointment at failing to get the buck himself, it was as though, after all, he had crossed swords with a worthy foe and was not wholly the loser.

Dave leaned his rifle against a boulder, took out his knife, and stooped to dress the buck.

DAVE'S PLAN

HARRY KELLER, Senior Warden in charge at Apache Checking Station, sighed with relief as the last red taillight on the last of six cars bobbed southward down the highway. Red Ethridge, the snow-plow jockey who'd cleared a path for these six final diehards, sat behind the wheel of his plow. One hairy arm—a minor legend of the high country was built around the fact that Red never wore a coat or jacket—was braced against the open window of his cab.

“The last of your babes in the woods, Harry. Apache Plateau is closed for another season, and I can't say I'm sorry.”

“Are you sure that's all?” Harry Keller inquired.

Red answered grimly, “I made sure. Never will forget the time I thought I had 'em all, but this one camp figured they'd stay a bit to admire the beautiful snow. They admired it till it was six feet deep twixt here and Two Pines and I hate to think how deep some of them drifts were. Took a whole crew of us three days to reach 'em and two more to get 'em out. Yep, I made sure there ain't nobody left this time.”

Harry Keller nodded toward the small camp where the three wardens posted at Apache Checking Station lived. “Come in and have a cup of coffee?”

“Thanks, but I'd best be getting back. How was the deer season?”

“Not too good.” Even as he spoke, Warden Keller mentally translated the statement into official figures for his report. Number of hunters entering Apache Plateau—4,379. Number of deer taken—1,876. Number of fawns among those taken—734. Number of does among those taken—851. Reason for preponderance of does and fawns—unavailability of bucks. “The whole kaboodle took just under nineteen hundred deer.”

Red asked, “And that ain't good?”

“No. There were 4,500 permits issued and the Commission hoped for a hunter success of 70 per cent, in order to reduce this Apache deer herd to what the range can support. Definitely, it isn’t good. These animals must be thinned out or few of them will survive.”

Red said dryly, “From all the shooting I heard, those fellows should have killed all the deer on ’Pache and everything else, too. Guess some of ’em miss better’n they hit, but they ought to have got more deer than that. Why didn’t they?”

Harry Keller replied, “Heavy rains during the early part of the season either restricted the hunters’ moving about or immobilized them in camp. By the time the rains stopped and they could move, unseasonably early snow had already sent too many of the Apache herd into the lowlands.”

“What can you do about it?” Red asked.

“Nothing any more this year. But the heavy autumn rains brought plenty of forage to the low country. If enough deer survive, and they should, there’ll just have to be more hunting permits issued next season.”

“You send any more hunters down there, you’d best tell each one to fetch his own rock to stand on,” Red commented. “Well, I’ll be seeing you.”

“Sure thing.”

Red put his truck in gear and rumbled away toward that station from which, whenever conditions warranted, he fared forth to keep his own section of this all-year highway passable for traffic.

For a moment before he joined his younger companions in the warden’s camp, Harry Keller remained where he was. . . . This was his twentieth season at the Apache Checking Station, and he had tried and failed to recapture some of the ecstasy and sense of adventure he had known on his first. At last he was no longer a rookie warden. He had an assignment and it had seemed an important one. But all that had been so very long ago that it was almost as though it had happened to a different person.

All he could be certain of right now was that his feet hurt, his back ached, his head reeled, and he was homesick. This high country was glorious, but, as far as Harry Keller was concerned, three weeks in it were two too many. He glanced toward his snow-shrouded car and the buck strapped on the fender. It was a fair-enough five point that he had taken only after letting seven smaller bucks go past. But several of the trophies on his back porch at home equaled it and at least four were bigger.

He thought suddenly of his son and smiled wanly. Dave was impatient because he'd had his application in with the Game Commission since leaving high school, less than six months ago. Harry Keller had asked for his job when he was twenty-two, with more than a dozen knockabout jobs behind him. He'd waited three and a half years to take the examinations and another eighteen months for an appointment. It seemed that kids not only wanted but expected everything at once these days.

Warden Keller sighed, wondering why he should feel so old and tired. No believer in visiting doctors too often—or perhaps not often enough—the last time he'd had a checkup he'd been assured that there was nothing wrong with him and he knew there was nothing wrong now that any medicine or doctor could cure. The only remedy was to swim back against the years and once more be twenty-seven. There was a vast gulf between that and forty-seven. Harry Keller walked to and entered the warden's camp.

Designed for strict utility, the one-room building contained a cooking stove that doubled as a heater, three bunks, a wooden table, three chairs, and adequate cooking and eating utensils. One of the other wardens, Mike Gentry, had removed his snow pacs, socks, shirt, and probably he'd have taken his pants off, too, if he hadn't run out of energy at the crucial moment. Thirty-four years old and seven years in the service, he lay cater-cornered across his own bunk. Henry Leonard, the third warden, was a rookie such as Harry had been on his first assignment to Apache. He'd removed his snow pacs only and now sat in a tilted chair with his feet on the table.

“That ends it, eh?” he asked.

Harry Keller nodded. “That's the last of them.”

“Good!” Mike said feelingly.

“I'm sort of sorry!” young Leonard exclaimed. “I know it's been tiring, but I feel as though I've been a part of something big and wonderful. It's important work and I found it exciting!”

Mike said caustically, “If you want some real excitement, why not go down on the causeway and watch the trains pass?”

“Oh, I know you're an old hand at the game!” Leonard fairly bubbled. “But I'm not, and I joined the warden force because I saw an opportunity to be of real public service. Didn't you?”

“Not me.” Mike Gentry was dead pan. “I joined for the money and I sure got it. There's nine dollars and sixty-five cents in my bank account. Just think! I've been able to save more than a dollar a year!”

“I still say it’s exciting,” young Leonard asserted.

“Did I say it wasn’t?” Mike asked plaintively. “We stand out there behind our de-luxe checking stand that says ‘Stop. State Game Wardens’ on the front. We wait for a car to come out of Apache Plateau. We halt the car. We say, in that courteous but at the same time brisk and businesslike tone that the manual says all wardens should use, ‘May I please see your licenses?’ They show us their licenses, except those that lost them in the woods, left them on Aunt Alice’s dining-room table before they started out, or used them to start a fire on account they were cold and there was no other paper handy. We take their names and addresses for a later check back—unless we happen to think they’re trying to get away with hunting deer on Apache without buying a license. These we find out about right away by telephone, and I wish I’d challenge a suspicious character some time who doesn’t turn out to be a minister, or anyhow a deacon. We check the age, sex, and guess at the weight of any deer they happen to have. We say to those that have deer, ‘Thanks a lot, gentlemen, and we’re glad you know how to hunt.’ If they don’t have any deer, we say, ‘Better luck next time!’ We let them go and wait for the next car. Oh, boy! It’s like sitting on a powder keg with a lighted cigar in your teeth! Isn’t that so, Harry?”

Harry Keller answered quietly, “It’s necessary work.”

“I guess so.” Mike yawned. “Tommy Harnish brought a little billy doo when he came down from the post office today, Harry. It’s on your bunk and it looks to me as though it’s from His Royal Lowness himself.”

Warden Keller walked over to his bunk. He picked up the official envelope with the name and insigne, a leaping trout and a running buck, of the Fish and Game Commission in the upper left-hand corner. Beneath, in smaller letters, was printed, “J.C. Bannerman, Executive Secretary.” Not unduly interested, Harry opened the envelope and withdrew a form directive;

FROM—J. C. Bannerman, Executive Secretary, Fish and Game Commission.

TO—Harry Wilson Keller.

EMPLOYED AS—G.W.

SUBJECT:

On or after six months of the date on this letter, you will be prepared to undergo re-examination concerning your ability satisfactorily to discharge the duties of your office.

It was signed, with a neat flourish at the beginning and another at the end, “J. C. Bannerman.” Harry Keller turned away so that Mike and young Leonard couldn’t see his face. High-echelon personnel of the Commission, like that of most other state agencies, was sure to change with a changing administration. J. C. Bannerman, whoever he might be, had been top man for less than three months.

**Omitted
Illustration**

Three men
in cabin.
One in suit,
standing
with paper
in hand; one
sitting at
table having
coffee and
cigarette;
one standing
with coffee
in his hand.

“You will be prepared to undergo—” Harry Keller stared unbelievably at the wall. Every now and again a crusader came along, a zealot determined to separate the wheat from the chaff and head an organization which, even if it didn’t always perform efficiently in the field, never looked too bad when presented on paper. If the High Brass who were the true overlords of the Commission hunted and fished at all, they did so lackadaisically. If the Executive Secretary could point with reasonable pride to the fact that not one of his fieldmen was past thirty-eight, the least he usually rated was a pat on the back.

Harry stared hard at the wall. Once he had passed the test with flying colors, but he’d been twenty-seven then. Could he pass it again at forty-seven?

“Well?” Mike queried lazily. “Pass the dirt on, Harry. For meritorious service, which includes paying your own travel expenses half the time because that tight-fisted auditor in the front office has a convulsion every time he okays another nickel; unswerving devotion and years of loyalty to this mighty state, are you in line for a raise? Maybe a big one? Like a dollar and eighty-six cents a year?”

Harry Keller crumpled the directive and the envelope in which it had arrived, strode across the floor, lifted a stove lid, and dropped both into the fire. Shaken, but hoping the other two would not notice, he faced them.

“Just some more red tape,” he said.

“And you burned it!” Mike pretended shock. “The least they can stick you with now is treason. I wouldn’t be surprised if they add heresy to that. What are you thinking of, Harry? Red tape is the very lifeblood of every government bureau. I wouldn’t care to sleep with your conscience tonight.”

Harry Keller grinned appreciatively. He was tired, but he was afflicted with a sudden urge to be out of these mountains, where he was an alien, and back in the desert that he loved and understood.

He said, “Reckon I’ll pull out.”

“Brother!” Mike exclaimed. “They’ll send you to a head shrinker, too! If they don’t, they should. Who’d want to drive four hundred thirty-five miles at night?”

“Hadn’t you better stay?” young Leonard asked anxiously. “I’ll fix us something to eat right now.”

“No, thank you. I’ll be going.”

“It’ll be dangerous, Harry,” Mike sat up on his bunk. “You’ll find ice for sure and the chances are good you’ll bump into more snow. The only trouble-free driving you can really count on is the last eighty miles, after you dip into the desert.”

“Just the same, I think I’ll go.”

“Then I’ll go with you.”

“Thanks, Mike, but I’ll make it.”

Mike eyed him suspiciously. “What’s come over you, Harry? You remind me of that movie star, what the dickens was her name, who always wanted to be alone?”

“Don’t forget I have a kid waiting.”

“Right good-sized kid,” Mike said dryly. “Is he the one who wants to be a game warden?”

“He’s the one.”

“Then take my advice and shoot him now—or shoot yourself. If he gets a warden’s job, think of the years of suffering he’s in for. If you can’t put your own flesh and blood out of the way, shoot yourself and you won’t have to think about it. Well, you’re over twenty-one and I can’t stop you. Happy highways.”

“Thanks, Mike, and so long. So long, Hank. See you both next deer season.”

“I hope so, Harry. Please be careful.”

“Careful Harry’s what they call me.” Warden Keller managed a feeble grin. “Keep your faces washed.”

He went out into the cold night, and at once felt a little relief because he no longer had to face the other two. He’d burned the note, but in so doing he seemed to have burned the message it contained into his own person. He couldn’t hide it forever. The whole world must soon know that Harry Keller, game warden for twenty years, had grown too old to discharge his duties.

Throughout the years he had known of other wardens who had received such directives, but, without exception, they had been misfits who never should have become wardens in the first place. Not all of them had been given six months to make ready. However, a man with twenty years’ seniority could not gracefully be offered less. Although he had no political influence, Harry Keller had acquired a host of friends among sportsmen. If he were summarily dismissed, even J. C. Bannerman would hear the outraged howl that was sure to arise.

Warden Keller climbed into his car, coaxed it to start, gave it a few minutes to warm up, and used the tip of his finger to melt a hole in the frost-rimmed windshield. He eased slowly onto the highway. Red Ethridge did a good job, but the plow blade that would get every bit of snow had yet to be invented and the cars that had gone before his had pounded the snow that remained into slick ice.

Harry Keller had never been a fast driver, except on those rare occasions when he was hot on the tail of some violator who was trying to escape, and then he was recklessness itself. Under ordinary circumstances, there was no

necessity for speed. The deer and the porcupine both got there, even though the deer usually arrived first.

Thinking wistfully of the years that were gone, Harry Keller marveled at their swift disappearance. A panorama of his life flitted through his mind.

The son of a man who'd been eternally tormented by the next horizon, his early years had been wandering ones. Inevitably, his education was sporadic. It was rare when he did not attend at least three different schools in the course of a year and there had been as many as seven. He was halfway through his first year of high school when his father was killed. A mine where he was certain he would strike the Big Bonanza fell in on him. Harry Keller's formal education ended with his father's death.

There followed a whole series of jobs—teamster, pick-and-shovel man, trapper, anything that would serve to fill the moment's gap and at the same time furnish a livelihood. He was twenty-two when he met and fell in love with Moira Crandall, but experience had taught him that he could not ask her to share the uncertain life he was leading. He needed a firm anchor for marriage.

Naturally inclined to the out-of-doors, a game warden's job seemed the right answer. He did not receive an assignment until five years after applying. But Moira had waited for him and their happiness had been complete. Sometimes it seemed to Harry Keller that it had been too complete to endure, for Moira had sickened and died six months after Dave was born. Now . . .

Harry Keller clenched his jaw and drove on. He had aimed at the highest mark he could hope to hit, and, regardless of anything else, he had no reason for shame. Having picked his job, for twenty years he had served to the best of his ability.

Dave was different. With his mother's quick wit and keen intelligence, he had graduated with honors from the Three Palms high school. He could go to college and be somebody, a lawyer, accountant, doctor, anything he chose. Warden Keller did not have the money to finance such an education, but he could sell the house and a man who knew how could always pick up extra money trapping. Dave could be somebody if he would.

But he didn't want to be anybody except a game warden and how was a man to stop him—especially his understanding father?

Warden Keller drove into Three Palms at ten forty-five the next morning. Behind him was a slow trip, with treacherous roads all the way from Apache to the final descent of Harrow's Hill and his entry into the ice- and snow-free desert. He had halted for coffee at various truckers' stops along the way and a game warden was used to being up all night. He was tired but not fatigued when he pulled into Phil Marcy's Filling Station, which, if distinguished for nothing else, was at once set apart by the fact that it was one of the few service stations in the whole area that failed to flaunt a large sign advising motorists that they were now in the desert, and that it was imperative to buy a water bag, spare fan belt, and anything else the proprietor thought he could sell them.

Phil Marcy, one-time prospector, cowboy, roustabout, miner, homesteader, and various other things, was wiping down the gas pumps with a wet cloth. Old, but aged in the same manner as a desert boulder, Phil had turned his face to so many glaring suns and blasting winds that his eyes were never quite open. They were alert, though, and filled with the wisdom of his years. He dropped his cloth into a pail of water and came happily forward.

"Hi, Harry! Did you leave the mountains all buttoned up?"

"For another year at least. Is Dave around?"

"Dave doesn't come on till noon today. I reckon you'll find him at home."

Harry Keller's heart sank. Despite the blow he'd suffered in J. C. Bannerman's directive, it seemed to him that something wholly good and wonderful awaited his arrival in Three Palms. Now he knew how much it would mean to see Dave again. Phil's eyes strayed to the frozen buck on the fender of Harry's car.

"Got one, eh? Nice one, too."

"Fair-sized."

"That he is, but take a look at the window."

Warden Keller looked at the glass-fronted building and gasped. In the window, mounted on a plaque of shellacked pine, were the scalp and antlers of a buck so huge that he averted his eyes. But when he looked a second time, the antlers were still there and just as big. He turned to Phil.

"Great, thumping tarred and feathered cats! Who got that one?"

"Read the little card in the corner."

Harry Keller read the card that he had overlooked:

THIS BUCK BROUGHT IN
FROM THE KELSEY MINE
COUNTRY BY DAVE KELLER.

“My kid!” he exclaimed delightedly.

“Your kid,” Phil affirmed. “Came luggin’ it in on that stripped-down clunker he calls his desert cruiser. ‘Got me a buck, Phil,’ he said.”

“Is that all?” Harry Keller asked incredulously.

Phil shook his head. “That’s all he said about the buck, and he wasn’t any more excited about it than if it’d been a jack rabbit. But he sure was high about somethin’. ‘That’s a mighty big buck,’ I said. ‘Big enough,’ he said. ‘What you goin’ to do with it?’ I said. ‘Skin it out and eat it,’ he said. ‘Will you let me show that rack at the station?’ I said. ‘I’ll bring ’em down soon’s I can saw ’em off and mount ’em,’ he said. ‘Would you mind lettin’ me show my next trophy, too?’ ‘If it’s anything like this, I’ll build a new station so you can,’ I said.”

“But—” Harry Keller groped for words. “That’s a record head!”

“All I know is it’s the biggest I ever saw, and I’ve seen a passel of bucks. But that kid of yours is boilin’ like a teakettle ‘bout somethin’ better.”

“I think I’ll find out.”

Harry Keller drove onto Three Palms’ main street, heading for his house at the outskirts of town. As he pulled into the driveway beside Dave’s desert cruiser, Mulligan came roaring to greet him. He stooped to pet the big dog. The door opened and Dave dashed out.

“Dad!”

“Hi, Dave!”

Their embrace was warm. When they stepped apart, Dave asked, “Have you had breakfast?”

“Right-o. I stopped at Happy Jacks, on top of the hill.”

“Well.” Dave laughed heartily, “I see you’re still my pop and I won’t have to nominate you for the Herod Club.”

“Maybe you should. I stopped at Phil’s and saw the rack from the buck you killed.”

“I didn’t kill it.”

“So? It says on the card that you did.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Dave corrected him. “The card says I brought it in.”

“That buck will rank among the best heads on record, Dave, and you act as though it’s nothing.”

“It’s nothing compared with an idea I have. Come on in and let’s talk.”

They entered the house. Mulligan trailed in behind them and threw himself down on the rug. Warden Keller removed his pacs and made himself comfortable in his favorite chair.

“Shoot,” he invited.

“I figured there’d be deer around Kelsey Mine,” Dave began. “We—”

He told of the bobcat that had died under his car lights, and of finding the sheep trail. He spoke of passing up three bucks for the right one. He described finding the great buck, his plan to intercept it, and the lion.

He finished with the statement, “I think I’d have downed that buck if the lion hadn’t.”

His father exclaimed, “It’s a darn shame!”

“No, it isn’t,” Dave declared happily. “Dad, what’s the reason all those hunters give for coming to this area every year?”

“Sport, of course.”

“Exactly. Well, twenty seconds or so after Mulligan and I reached the buck, a coyote sneaked out of the same wash. I had two good shots at him and missed both! Do you get the point?”

“I can’t say I do.”

“Sure you do. It’s harder to get a coyote and some of the other varmints that are being poisoned wholesale by certain ruthless sheepmen than it is to lay over many of the game animals, so isn’t it more sporting?”

Warden Keller shrugged. “I suppose so, but what’s it add up to?”

“The fact that hunters have just never been taught to regard varmints as sporting animals,” Dave declared. “I’m going to prove they are.”

“What varmints are you going to work on, Dave?”

“Coyotes, bobcats, and lions.”

Warden Keller said dubiously, “You may get the first two, but you won’t get a lion without hounds.”

“That’s out,” Dave told him quickly. “If we go making this into a junior-sized safari, it’ll be only for hunters with money. We must prove to common, ordinary hunters that varmints are sport. If we can, they themselves will keep the varmints under control, so it will never again be necessary for anyone to lay poison baits.” Dave glanced at the clock and exclaimed, “Oh gosh! Two minutes of twelve! I’ll see you.”

He raced out, with Mulligan beside him. Harry Keller stared pensively at the door. He’d had every intention of telling his son that his warden’s job would be finished in six months. . . . But when he faced his son, he just hadn’t been able to do it.

THE SHEPHERD'S STORY

MULLIGAN MOVED a little nearer to Dave on the cold rock ledge upon which they awaited dawn. He transferred both front paws from the chill stone to his master's lap. Dave grinned and reached out in the darkness to grasp and warm the big dog's rear paws with his right hand.

"Sissy," he chided. "Think of the poor little Eskimo dogs that think it's a new heat wave every time it warms up to forty below zero. This isn't much below freezing."

Mulligan sighed, pillowed his head on his front paws, and drew his hind legs up under his own body to warm them there.

"Guess it all depends on where you live," Dave admitted. "After spending a summer on this desert, anything below ninety-four does seem like a cold wave. Cheer up. The day will be warm."

A cold wind that swept in from a frost-crisp desert clawed with icy fingers at his light hunting jacket. Dave did his best to keep his teeth from chattering but he shivered anyway. It was impossible to have everything, and if he hadn't started out at half-past four, and walked three miles back in from where he'd left his desert cruiser before the sun rose, he wouldn't have as much time as he wanted for this day's hunt.

"The trouble with working for a living," he confided to Mulligan, "is that it takes so much time that might better be given to more interesting things."

He stared into the darkness, more than a little troubled. It was a whole week since he had told his father about his idea and what had then seemed a perfect plan to solve the entire varmint problem, no longer appeared so simple. The problem could exist solely because, aside from having no economic value whatsoever, certain creatures possessed a definite nuisance value. Since their pelts were worthless and their flesh inedible, few people

cared to hunt them. Dave reluctantly conceded that most hunters wanted a bit more than sport. Something for the larder never came amiss, either. Nevertheless, the picture was not all black.

His father had thought of many aspects of the whole thing that had escaped Dave, and one of the foremost was adequately publicizing the idea. In no small measure, that was taking care of itself.

Dave had been interested in the lion-killed buck only because of its huge rack of antlers. He could feel no enthusiasm for it as a personal trophy because it was not one, and he had agreed to let Phil Marcy display it solely as an accommodation to his boss. But the size of the antlers immediately attracted both the residents of Three Palms and passing motorists.

They spread the word. Other motorists interested in such things—and there were many—came to see for themselves. The Three Palms paper, *The Desert Gazette*, had run a feature story, headed by a picture of Dave holding the antlers, and opined that it would probably prove to be the biggest of all the mule deer brought in for the current season. Outdoor writers from several big metropolitan dailies not only confirmed this opinion, but their stories and pictures brought the southwestern representative of The Boone and Crockett Club to see the antlers. According to his measurements, the buck definitely rated with all-time records.

An accident was responsible for the rest of the publicity. When Three Palms residents wanted to know where Dave had killed the buck, he jocularly replied that he hadn't killed it at all, but found it dead. This was interpreted as a subterfuge of one who, understandingly enough, did not care to reveal what must be a choice deer-hunting stand. As the story circulated, it gathered stature that was considerably magnified by Dave's veiled reference to a real trophy that he hoped to bag.

Thus it became a news story rather than a routine report of a record mule deer buck. Papers from coast to coast and border to border, and some of the outdoor magazines, speculated about the young hunter who had already "brought in" a record buck and shrugged it off with the declaration that he would shortly produce a worth-while trophy—what, he was not telling.

Dave grinned ruefully. There was a very good reason for keeping his new trophy quiet.

"If I go gassing it around Three Palms," he confided to Mulligan, "they'll think I already have more bats in the belfry than I'll ever have trophies on the wall. Whoever heard of a coyote being a trophy?"

Mentally, he answered his own question even as he asked it. As everybody knew, always had known, and probably always would know—unless Dave succeeded in changing their minds—coyotes were pesky vermin and nothing else. Now and again some hunter succeeded in shooting one, but it was always by accident and nobody even thought himself a hunter just because he shot a coyote. Still . . .

Dave harked back to his stalk of the big buck . . . and the coyote that had been following the buck. He'd shot at the former largely because everybody always shot at coyotes. Only when he scored two straight misses did it occur to him, very suddenly, that he had just sighted on the most difficult target he'd ever known.

The first flush of enthusiasm had endured a full week, when his father's common-sense observations revealed a few of the obstacles in his path. But even though his spirits had suffered, his determination hadn't and he counted on an ace in the hole. Everybody he knew who had ever shot a coyote, bobcat, or mountain lion, had been hunting something else. Most of them had been waiting on a deer stand, scanning the country for javelinas, or merely resting, when the varmint happened along. Nobody was really in a position to judge whether varmints were sporting because, as far as Dave knew, nobody except the poisoners, and a few addicts of pursuing lions and bobcats with hound packs, had ever deliberately set out to hunt them.

The night gave way to the brief false dawn, which in turn surrendered to full daylight. The sky was cloudless and a blaze of gold behind the eastern mountains heralded the rising sun. Frost whitened the cacti and clung like a silver coating to exposed boulders.

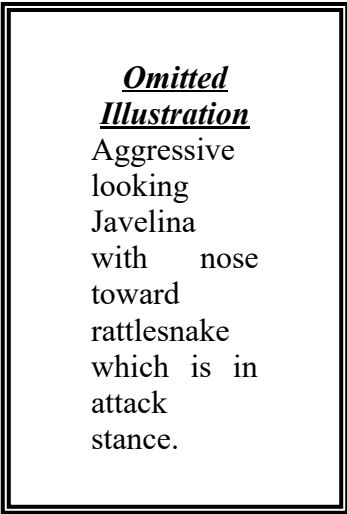
Dave rested his rifle across his knee, sighted at a boulder about two hundred yards away, and lowered the rifle. He could see, but not clearly. Five minutes later, he tried again, and in the stronger light, he saw plainly every little pockmark and knob on the boulder. He was about to rise when Mulligan sat up and peered steadily into the little swale beneath them.

Dave sat very still and looked intently where the dog was looking. Mulligan gave no false alarms. At first the boy saw nothing . . . and then what appeared to be a gray boulder moved slightly. Dave saw the object change gradually to the shape of an old boar javelina, or desert pig. Then there were more, until eighteen of the little wild pigs moved from the nest of boulders into a thicket of prickly-pear and started eating the spiny pads.

Dave continued to watch, only because he was interested in all desert life. Unaware of his presence, obviously enjoying their meal and apparently

caring nothing for the needle-sharp spines with which it was studded, the javelinas bit the pads off and swallowed them. Dave shuddered, wondering how they could make a meal of prickly-pear without tearing their mouths to shreds. But then he remembered that desert cattle sometimes ate cactus and often stayed their hunger with the spined branches of paloverde trees.

In no hurry, the javelinas made a leisurely way through the prickly-pear thicket, eating as they traveled. The sun came up, and at once the chill of the night was tempered. Dave recalled a fight he had witnessed between a javelina and a four-foot rattlesnake.



The snake had struck with lightning speed, but there was no evidence that it had hit its attacker. There were various theories for this immunity from venom, beginning with the idea that javelinas were too ornery themselves to be poisoned by anything else and ranging to the thought that a desert pig's hide was simply too tough to be punctured by a snake's fangs. The attacked javelina had first chopped the snake with its hoofs, then bitten it in two and calmly eaten it.

After twenty minutes, their hunger satisfied, the javelinas trooped slowly down the swale and disappeared in a wash. Dave waited until the last of them was out of sight before he rose. There had been, and still were, occasional terrible tales of a herd of javelinas attacking a human being and cutting their unfortunate victim to ribbons. Perhaps some such stories were founded on fact, but all the javelinas Dave had ever seen had either sneaked away or run off at full speed with the first intimation that a human being was

in their vicinity. He hadn't wanted to frighten this herd, partly because he was interested in watching them but largely because, if the pigs were frightened, anything else that happened to be near would take fright, too.

But it was all right to move, now that the javelinas were gone. Dave unbuttoned his jacket and Mulligan panted slightly, for with a clear sky and no wind, the winter's day became as mild as a pleasant spring morning in northern climates. For the first time it occurred to the boy that he was working blindly.

He had seen coyotes and his first impression was that he had watched a great many, but now he knew that the many was merely the total observed throughout all his years of desert roaming. Although coyotes were supposedly plentiful, he'd never seen more than three in the course of a whole day's hunt and, in retrospect, that was an outstanding day. The few he'd bagged were brought down while he was hunting deer or javelina, so now he still hadn't the vaguest idea of how to go about hunting coyotes and coyotes only.

"A nice fix," he confided to Mulligan, who was pacing slowly beside him. "I'm out to show other people that hunting coyotes is sporting, and I don't know how to hunt 'em myself."

He called up in memory all the coyote lore he had acquired. Discounting the fact that they supposedly killed sheep, there were indications that their principal diet consisted of various species of rodents and small game. Undoubtedly, they ate newborn fawns and antelope kids when they could get them, and it was certain that a pack of coyotes, working in unison, occasionally pulled down adult deer and antelope. Dave believed that these last were sick or crippled beasts or too old to get out of the way. When they could find such fare, coyotes also enjoyed feasting on young green corn and melons.

"Which leaves me," Dave told his dog, "right up the same tree I was in before. How the blazes do you hunt 'em?"

Mulligan, moving a few feet ahead, stopped suddenly. His nostrils twitched as he read the story the wind carried, then he voiced a low growl and looked back inquiringly.

Dave hesitated. Mulligan had been born with a deathless hatred of everything feline, and only after several stern lessons had he been taught to leave the domestic cats of Three Palms alone. But desert bobcats were fair prey, and Mulligan's stance, as well as his growl, said plainly that he had cat

scent now. Dave continued to hesitate. If there were desert bobcats in here, there was also a lion, and one dog could not take on a lion.

However, not only were lions on Dave's list of varmints, but if he could get one, it would put his campaign in high gear. Whatever Mulligan had winded was very near, and if he couldn't overtake it in the first short rush, Dave was confident that he could call the dog back in time to keep him from following the trail.

He said softly, "Take him, Mulligan."

At once, Mulligan ran into the wind. Dave followed, trotting to keep pace with the running dog. They crested a ridge that overlooked a stone-and-boulder-littered canyon. Mulligan gave a mighty roar and leaped recklessly down the steep side.

Rifle halfway to his shoulder, right thumb ready to flick the safety, Dave halted on the rim. Whatever Mulligan smelled was obviously in the canyon, and from the rim, Dave had a commanding view of everything in it. Once over the side, visibility must necessarily be restricted.

Now in sight and now hidden behind boulders, Mulligan roared no more but saved his breath for running. Dave's eyes turned to a clump of cholla toward which the dog was streaking. In one of the cacti was the nest of a pack rat, a half bushel of grass, twigs, and cholla spines. In the middle of the mass was the soft nest. The cholla spines kept soft-mouthed and soft-pawed predators from reaching it.

Racing at near greyhound speed, Mulligan was thirty yards from the cholla thicket when a bit of the desert detached itself and sped away. No lion this, but a desert bobcat that had been sitting in plain sight but so well camouflaged that Dave had seen nothing until it moved. Waiting quietly for the pack rat to emerge from its nest, the prudent cat had decided to wait no longer, once there was no possible doubt concerning Mulligan's objective.

Dave flicked the safety, snapped the rifle to his shoulder, and shot. It was close, so close that the bullet struck directly beneath the cat's belly and kicked pebbles and sand upward. But the only effect was to make the creature shift into a still higher gear and flash into a hole beneath a boulder, a safe ten lengths ahead of the pursuing dog.

Mulligan sniffed into the den and his wail of disappointment floated up. Dave waited a moment, feeling again, as he had felt when he shot at the coyote, the full thrill of this kind of hunting. Then he went over the side of the canyon and made his way to the dog.

Lying full length in front of the den, Mulligan had his head and front quarters inside and was doing his best to push himself the rest of the way in. But the cat had chosen wisely, and a den that would admit an eighteen-pound bobcat was far too small for an eighty-pound dog. Dave touched Mulligan's rear and, when the dog would not come out, grasped his hind legs and pulled him back.

"You can't get in, dog," he explained. "Kitty's picked himself a snug little apartment here and he's sticking with it."

Mulligan surged forward for another sniff at the hole, wriggled part way in, then backed sadly out and stood with flattened ears and a dejected expression. Besides being too small, the hole was roofed by the boulder and the ground beneath it was almost as hard. There was no possibility of enlarging the hole by digging.

As boy and dog went on, Dave had a better picture of the project he'd undertaken. Coyotes, bobcats, and lions were on his list—and now he thought that bobcats would be the easiest varmint of the three to take. He wasn't sure whether coyotes or lions would be the hardest, but probably it would be lions, for the simple reason that there were more coyotes.

An hour later, Mulligan jumped another bobcat which, in a desperate leap from the rim of a sheer-walled canyon, landed safely. It allowed Dave three snap shots as it streaked beneath overhanging banks, and went to earth in a nest of boulders. Twenty minutes afterward, there was still a third bobcat at which Dave got no shooting, for it denned too quickly.

But he was certain now that, before too many hunts had gone by, he would begin his new trophy list with the pelt of a bobcat if nothing else. Probably they were no more plentiful than coyotes and perhaps not even so abundant, but they were far less wary and Mulligan couldn't resist them. Now, Dave thought, if he was only half as enthusiastic when it came to hunting coyotes . . .

Dave discarded the idea at once. This was supposed to be something anyone could do with the materials at hand, and not every casual hunter had a good bobcat dog. That could be balanced by the near certainty that the majority of them had one or more advantages which Dave did not possess.

It was high noon when, from halfway up one of the rocky hills, Dave finally saw two coyotes. One was obviously casting, as a hound casts for scent. The second was nonchalantly trotting down a wash about two hundred

yards from its partner. A moment after Dave saw them, the first struck scent. As though that had been a signal, the second disappeared.

Presently, the jack rabbit that the first was trailing bobbed among the cacti. Realizing something was on its track but not knowing what, the running rabbit leaped four feet in the air for a better look. It descended and continued to run, its enemy located now. But it knew nothing whatever of the second coyote, and ten minutes after the race started, the jack rabbit literally ran into its hungry jaws. Carrying their prey, the two coyotes trotted side by side up a wash and disappeared.

*Omitted
Illustration*

Coyote, up
on a hill
watching
man with
rifle and dog
below.

Having forborne to shoot, since both coyotes were hopelessly out of range, Dave rose, and with Mulligan running beside him, started toward the head of the wash up which the two varmints had gone. Having made a kill, it logically followed that they would stop and eat. It was entirely possible that he might come within range before they saw or scented him.

He was halfway to the wash in which the coyotes had disappeared, with a gentle wind fanning his right cheek, when Mulligan halted abruptly. He faced the wind, his hackles raised, and a fierce snarl rippled from his lips. Dave stopped wonderingly. This was no bobcat, for the greatest respect Mulligan extended to bobcats consisted of a scarcely-audible growl. Nor was it a coyote, which Mulligan ignored. What lay down-wind?

Dave said, "Take it, Mulligan."

Dismissing the coyotes for what promised to be more interesting game, Dave swung in behind Mulligan as the big dog let himself be pulled by the thread of scent that trickled into his nostrils. He remained bristled, angry . . .

and just a bit hesitant. It was not fear, for only when he encountered something past his understanding did Mulligan show fear.

The pair crossed three ridges, topped the fourth, and looked down on a flock of sheep that spread like a living woolly blanket over the desert. Dave whirled on his dog.

“What the blue blazes! Have you gone off your bat for a flock of fool sheep?”

He turned to look toward the place where he had seen the coyotes, then dismissed them with a shrug. There had been a chance of stalking them, and coming near enough for a shot, but that chance, which had not been excellent from the beginning, was nonexistent now. He might as well go in, talk with the shepherd, and find out whether coyotes or anything else had been bothering the flock. Dave spoke sharply to the still-bristling dog.

“Heel!”

Mulligan came to heel and Dave quartered down the slope on a course that would take him away from the flock and toward the shepherd’s camp. Sheep dogs probably would let a man approach their charges. However, Mulligan knew they’d never tolerate a strange dog, and there was no point in risking a fight between him and one or more of this flock’s guardians.

A man whose five feet four inches of height, great mustaches, wide-brimmed hat, long hair, and blue-denim work pants combined with a rainbow-hued shirt made him look markedly like some character from a comic strip, waited for Dave to draw near. From his hand dangled a huge, old-fashioned.44 revolver that he had evidently seized when his dogs warned him of a stranger’s approach . . . and lowered as soon as he recognized the invader.

Dave waved to Juan Areque, one of Harry Pendleton’s Basque herders. When he was near enough, Dave saw that Juan stood over a freshly-dug grave. And if the shepherd’s physical proportions were not imposing, the fury that burned like live fire in his black eyes definitely was.

Dave asked, “What happened, Juan?”

“He come this morning,” the little Basque answered. “Not quite light, not quite dark. A big and bad thing.”

“Was it a lion?”

“It was a devil,” Juan said. “The color of the sun, it was, and fire of the sun came from its eyes and mouth. It leaped upon and killed a fine ewe.

When Rosita dog try to fight”—Juan nodded toward the new grave—“it kill Rosita.”

Dave murmured, “A very bad thing.”

For a moment he did not look at the little Basque’s face. What had come to kill a sheep and a dog, too? Certainly it was no coyote or bobcat, and just as surely no devil. Probably the same lion, a very bold one, that had ambushed the great buck. In the uncertain light of early morning, Juan Areque’s excitable imagination had painted it the color of the sun, with fire of the sun coming from its mouth and eyes.

“I no shoot,” the little shepherd said sadly. “My big gun, he no shoot as long as yours.”

“Not quite,” Dave agreed. “I wish I’d been here.”

“I, too,” Juan Areque said soberly.

Dave nodded, more than faintly impressed by this man of such small stature but such great spirit that neither lions nor devils could frighten him from the flock that had been entrusted to his keeping. Mulligan whirled, stared back in the direction from which he and his master had come, and again snarled fiercely.

“He smell devil,” Juan Areque said.

“He smells nothing!” Dave was irritated because his hunt had gone astray and this visit of “the devil” could result only in spreading more poison. “He is a great fool!”

Dave was wrong and both Juan Areque and Mulligan were right.

MULLIGAN

EVEN WHILE he slept in the kitchen of the Keller house, Mulligan's nose and ears told him what was going on outside. The kitchen door was closed these winter nights, and the window was open only a crack. However, through this crack came most of the scents that advised Mulligan.

He knew when a desert skunk, prowling the back yard, came face to face with a kit fox that, friendly and trusting under most circumstances, and bold enough to venture right into town under night's cover, was hoping to pick up a stray tidbit around the garbage pail. Not afraid of the fox, but not caring to be bothered, the old and querulous skunk stamped a threatening forepaw but did not consider it necessary to deliver a nauseating blast. Mulligan knew when the kit fox backed, raced around the skunk, flew triumphantly to the garbage pail, and departed with a chicken bone that had fallen when Dave emptied the refuse from last evening's meal.

Mulligan also knew where both these creatures lived. The skunk, too old to want a mate and completely unsuspected by the humans who used its interior, abode in placid peace under the schoolhouse by day. The kit fox and his mate lived in the tailings of an abandoned mine on the outskirts of town. Both came every night to scavenge a living from the garbage pails of Three Palms.

Both were old acquaintances. Mulligan knew the skunk's life story for the three years that the dog had been on earth. Had he been able to write a life story of the kit fox, Mulligan could have contributed a hundred bits of lore never known to man. When Mulligan was six months old, the fox had been born in the same pile of tailings where he now maintained his home den. Two-Gun Datcher, would-be desperado who had never succeeded in anything more desperate than bullying children out of pennies before he was finally invited to leave Three Palms, had trapped and killed the father and mother and three of the four cubs.

Mulligan had worked out no explanation for Two-Gun's daring murder of these animals which, at full growth, were scarcely the size of cottontail rabbits and about as ferocious. But Mulligan never tried to rationalize the acts of human beings; he merely accepted them. Primarily, he lived to please, first Dave and then his father. What either did must be right because neither could be wrong.

The scents came through the open window, but sounds penetrated even the closed door and Mulligan interpreted them, too. He knew that the far-off growl of a motor, inaudible to any except a dog's ears, was a truck driven by Jess Billings. Jess's job was to pick up the papers in the nearest city, ninety miles away, and deliver them throughout the desert and into the mountains, three hundred miles away. Mulligan neither knew nor cared why this should be; he knew only that it was.

The other sounds presented a whole medley of the night in the sleepy town of Three Palms. There was a shuffle of feet that meant old Tracey Donlin was again sneaking home, very late. A slamming door and a quickly starting motor said that Harris Schober, Three Palms' Highway Patrol officer, was going out on some emergency. A lighter tread of feet told Mulligan that moody young Jerry Tramwade was off for another of his lonely walks.

Mulligan came to a quick awakening and jerked his head erect when he heard a low-pitched growl that shortly became a yowl and then a hideous clamor as two tomcats met behind Tracey Donlin's house and started to fight it out. Mulligan's every nerve and muscle was charged with vibrant feeling as the fighting toms continued to spit and snarl.

Now came the sound of a window slammed open, a clatter of tin, and Mulligan knew that Tracey Donlin's robust daughter, with whom Tracey lived, had opened a window and thrown a tin water pail at the battling cats.

The sounds of battle faded with the final fading echo of the thrown pail, but Mulligan strained for a renewal of the noise. Naturally, he had never wondered why some humans kept cats, but there was no doubt whatever as to his own feeling toward them. If it was a cat, it was his enemy.

There were, however, varying degrees of cats. Lowest in the scale were the house cats of Three Palms. They were interesting enough and might furnish fair game when nothing else offered, but Mulligan had learned the painful way that they were not to be bothered.

Considerably more fascinating were the desert bobcats. Capable of offering a satisfactory fight, they'd inflicted numerous cuts and gashes on Mulligan's flanks and ribs before he learned how to handle them. More experienced now, he could kill the biggest bobcat without suffering more than superficial wounds—providing he were fortunate enough to overtake it before it gained shelter.

Whenever he went into the desert with Dave, Mulligan hoped that bobcats were to be the objective of the day. Until recently, however, he had been allowed to hunt them disappointingly few times. Not that he couldn't have hunted them anyway, but even more than chasing cats, his mission was to please Dave.

Until very recently, however, the most interesting of all the cats were the mountain lions. During his rambles with Dave, Mulligan had run across the tracks of fourteen lions that were fresh enough to be remembered and a dozen more that left a less distinct scent. He had yearned to hunt each one of them, but never once had he been permitted to take a lion's trail.

Now, and at long last, Mulligan knew a scent that was infinitely more tantalizing than the freshest of lion tracks.

He had first run across it the day Dave stalked the great buck, and the dog had known, even before they broke over the rim of the wash that the buck was dead. He had known also that The Thing that had killed it was waiting—and not in fear, for it feared nothing. Even as Mulligan and Dave neared the buck, the destroyer was debating and analyzing, wondering whether it could defend its lawful prey against the oncoming man and dog and wondering also if it were worth while to try.

Dave knew that the killer of the buck was incredibly bold. But Mulligan knew that it had stood its ground until the final split second. Only then had it run away, but it had not run far. It had halted over the next ridge until Dave shot at the coyote. The blasting rifle had jarred its uncertain nerves.

Mulligan realized that it was the great challenge, the ultimate game. When and if he were allowed to hunt such a thing, and if he came to grips with it, his secondary objective in life would be fulfilled. His first was to serve Dave Keller.

He had scented The Thing a second time near Juan Areque's sheep. With a keener nose than that possessed by the sheep dogs, he'd known that the enemy, scornfully contemptuous of humans, had carried its plundered sheep

only a short distance away. There it had stopped to eat and brazenly gone to rest in a tangle of boulders.

Now, as he lay in the kitchen of the Keller house, Mulligan gave himself over to a happy canine dream of hunting this creature. It was big, terrible, and very dangerous. But until he pitted himself against it, he would never know whether he ruled the desert or whether it was ruled by The Thing.

Lacking the faintest conception of watches and clocks, and their function, Mulligan nevertheless divided the twenty-four hours of the day almost as exactly as though he owned and could use one or the other. It was the same animal instinct that sent doves to water, deer to browse, and coyotes to hunting, at almost the same minute of each day. It was a natural thing, founded on natural needs, but shaped by habit and routine. Thus, when Dave went to work at six in the morning, Mulligan knew that he would be through at three in the afternoon. He did not understand that it was three o'clock, but only that sufficient time had elapsed for his master to be leaving. From wherever he happened to be—and he often rambled about Three Palms while his master was working—Mulligan always returned to the filling station in time to go home with Dave.

A few minutes before 4:30 A.M., the hour at which Dave usually arose when he wanted to go hunting in the desert, Mulligan sat up. It was several days after his discovery of the presence of The Thing.

Presently, the soft creaking of bed springs, followed by the pad of Dave's feet hitting the floor, told the dog that this was one of the days when they'd go hunting. Mulligan arose, tail wagging, and waited expectantly at the bedroom door. The door opened and Dave came out. In the darkness, he reached down to pat Mulligan's head, saying softly, "Hi, pup dog!"

Dave entered the kitchen and snapped on the lights. For a moment he studied the door of the bedroom where Warden Keller still slept. His lips pursed thoughtfully. There was something wrong with his father. He was not his old self and certainly he lacked his old spirit—and the disturbing change dated from his last tour of duty at Apache Checking Station. But he had not cared to talk about it.

Dave slipped his hunting shoes on and laced them, then lighted two burners of the stove and put the coffeepot over one and a skillet over the other. He took a package of bacon from the refrigerator, laid strips of it in the skillet, then washed his face and hands at the kitchen sink.

Mulligan waited patiently, for this was part of what must be. He himself ate only one hearty meal in twenty-four hours, always at night. He found that sufficient.

Washed and with his hair given a water-slick brushing, Dave forked the bacon aside, broke two eggs into the skillet, and made and buttered three slices of toast.

He ate, rinsed off his dishes in the sink, put on his hat and jacket, and caught up his rifle. Carefully, he placed the loose cartridges that he always carried there in the right-hand pocket of his shirt. At last, he said, "Okay, Mulligan."

The dog's brief tail wagged vigorously, for now the routine was done and the hunt was about to begin. He pranced to the door, crowded through as soon as Dave opened it, and jumped into his side of the desert cruiser. When a sharp little gust of wind blew coldly against him, he winced, for he had an intense dislike of cold weather. But he leaned happily forward to lick his master's cheek when Dave took his place behind the wheel.

"Hey!" Dave protested. "Cut it out, dog! My face is clean enough!"

Mulligan paid no attention, for he knew his master was teasing rather than angry and he would soon be engrossed in the hunt. It never began for Dave until after sunrise. But it always started for Mulligan as soon as they were out of Three Palms. Although he could see little and the desert cruiser's noise, added to the rushing wind, let him hear little, there were endless fascinating scents. They were to Mulligan what the newspaper is to human beings.

He smelled a little knot of range cattle that huddled together for warmth and identified them as five cows, three calves, and a young bull. He drank deeply of the scent, for although the cows and calves had ranged the same area for months, the bull was a stranger. Next was a covey of quail, gathered in a cholla thicket. Beyond them, fourteen deer raised astonished heads to stare as the desert cruiser sped past.

Then the car crossed Bad Luck Wash and Mulligan waited eagerly for the turnoff that would take them into the desert.

Mulligan continued to sort scents, for that was something he did automatically. Three times he shuddered, for his nose told him what Dave's eyes could not reveal. Off in the cactus lay two dead bobcats and a dying coyote that had found and eaten the poisoned baits.

They came to the end of the road and Mulligan padded beside Dave as they started on foot into the desert. But where Dave walked blindly, Mulligan knew all. Darkness was still intense when they climbed two-thirds of the way up one of the rocky hills and sat down to wait for hunting light. The scents of four deer drifted to the dog from the low country about them, but so powerful as almost to erase the odor of the deer was another scent.

Omitted
Illustration
Deer buck
standing
proud and
tall, side on.

Not until dawn broke did Dave see what Mulligan had known was there.

There were so many of the desert quail, that normally gathered in coveys of from five to perhaps twenty-five, they formed a living blanket across the floor of the swale into which Dave and Mulligan looked. Almost a thousand birds chirped and twittered as they dashed nervously about.

Omitted
Illustration
Man in
cowboy hat
sitting
against rock.
Dog in front
seeming
very alert, as
is the man.
They are
looking out
forwards.

It was the great winter flocking of the quail, a mystery to humans but an open book to Mulligan. He knew that coveys consist of parent birds, plus their young of the season, and that the winter flocks are composed of dozens of such coveys. When the flock broke, it would again separate into coveys but brothers and sisters would not be among these. The winter flocking was nature's way of preventing inbreeding.

Mulligan had no interest in the quail. But Dave was fascinated, and because his master's way must be his, Mulligan waited for two hours. Finally, the pair went on.

A pulsing excitement throbbed in Mulligan, for this was the country of The Thing. Mightily he wanted to find its track, but the first scent he discovered was that of a bobcat, sleeping in a nest of boulders. Mulligan looked inquiringly at Dave.

“Take him,” Dave said.

Mulligan raced happily forward. He saw the cat, suddenly awake to danger, leave its couch in the boulders and streak away. Mulligan heard Dave's rifle crack. The cat stopped as abruptly as though it had run into an invisible brick wall.

Dave had his first trophy.

WHITHER BLOWETH THE LOCOWEED?

WITH MULLIGAN BESIDE HIM, Dave steered his desert cruiser into the driveway of the Keller home at half-past ten. Phil Marcy had gone away at noon to attend to some business or other, and with all the tourists and everyone else who had forgotten to buy gas before the usual nine-o'clock closing hour at night wanting it that time, Dave had been able to lock the station only ten minutes ago.

It had been a long day, and a very tiring one, but the weariness was more the result of tension than overwork. Residents of Three Palms, stopping for gas, had been genuinely interested in the bobcat skin that Dave had arranged on a sandpapered and shellacked board, placing it next to the great deer antlers. Suddenly, their interest had become open ridicule.

Dave had racked his brains over the correct legend to attach to the bobcat. That on the antlers stated merely that the buck had been brought in from the Kelsey Mine country by Dave Keller. Obviously, there must be something different for the bobcat, but arranging a suitable placard was not easy.

Dave had thought of, "This trophy brought in from the Kelsey Mine country by Dave Keller." But to describe the deer, a magnificent trophy, if ever there'd been one, as a mere buck, and to call the bobcat a trophy, were stretching things beyond the point of reason.

Seething over the taunts he had endured, Dave got out of his car and went toward the house.

He had finally settled for, "This bobcat killed in the Kelsey Mine country by Dave Keller." Between the antlers and the bobcat skin he had fastened another sign, printed in large black letters and with an arrow pointing toward each. The sign, that Dave hoped would be provocative, read, "Which is the more sporting trophy?"

Phil Marcy had merely looked puzzled when Dave brought the bobcat skin to the filling station. In order that the owner might get away on time, his assistant had reported for work at eleven-thirty, for what should have been a twelve-to-eight shift. Was this the other trophy Dave wanted to display? Phil had asked. Assured that it was, Phil had offered no comment and gone to wait on a gas customer.

Fifteen minutes later, old Tracey Donlin, who never had anything to do and was always bored accordingly, walked past the station and stopped in the hope of striking up a conversation. Becoming interested in the bobcat skin, he studied it, read both placards at least six times, and swung on Dave.

“Gosh dang!” he snorted. “Take that fool thing down. ’Tain’t no ways fitten to be in the same window with a buck like that’n!”

Still snorting, Tracey stalked off to find and talk with somebody who had more sense than to classify a bobcat as a trophy. For a moment, Dave stared resentfully after him, but his resentment died. An old-time rancher, Tracey Donlin had been perfectly described by Dave’s father as “having dollar signs in both eyes.” He typified a breed that considered every edible grass and shrub on the range as the rightful property of cattle or sheep, whichever they favored. All of them would whoop with joy if the last deer, elk, rabbit, or anything else that might trespass on their God-given rights to free range were killed.

The next customer was Harris Schober, the young Highway Patrol officer who was stationed in Three Palms. Active and quick, alert as a wild horse and lithe as a panther, Harris studied the window display while Dave serviced his car. The eyes he finally turned to Dave wore a genuinely puzzled look.

“I don’t get it.”

Dave said, “It’s simple enough. Which is the more sporting trophy?”

The perplexity in the young officer’s eyes deepened. “Is this your idea of a joke?”

“It is not!” Dave bristled.

Harris Schober shrugged. “Well, it’s all too deep for my simple brain.”

The next three cars contained only tourists. The driver of the first, an affable but self-assured young Easterner, inspected the display, told Dave at some length of a buck he had shot in Maine, said that the antlers were a trifle smaller than Dave’s but far more symmetrical, paid his bill, and drove

on. The second car held a chattering group who were too interested in discussing the intricacies of their bridge game even to notice the window. In the third car were an elderly man and lady who were obviously delighted with the desert and everything they felt must be related to it. The lady inspected Dave's trophies and remarked that, although the moose was very impressive, the woodchuck was attractive, too, and she was sure that both were very sporting, as well as sweet.

The next visitor was Rance Raleet, who owned what the signs placed on all approaches described as "Three Palms' Most Luxurious Motel." In no sense of the word were they misleading signs, since Rance's was also Three Palms' only motel. Rance stared, wanted to know the idea behind Dave's display, and shrugged when told to figure it out for himself.

Shortly before one o'clock, during a temporary lull in business, Pawnee Markson came along. Owner and editor, and sometimes reporter, rewrite man, advertising manager, and printer and janitor, of *The Desert Gazette*, Pawnee was openly scornful of all journalism save his own. All he had to do to become a big name in big-time newspaper work—or so Pawnee said—was to offer his boundless talents to any large metropolitan daily. But—and still according to Pawnee—he preferred living in the clean air of Three Palms to wallowing in the "garbage" that had become the sole stock in trade of international journalism. His pride was a column entitled "Pawnee and His Injuns." It consisted of choice tidbits such as, "Tom-toms rattled in Horse Gulch last Tuesday. Joe Collins and Murphy Detschel did the war dance over a maverick calf. (We hear it was a battle worth seeing, waddies!) But no hair was lifted and the peace pipe must have been smoked. Joe and Murph, who visited Three Palms together on Friday, were seen plying each other with mugs of Heap Big Chief Don Mizler's malt brew."

Pawnee was shrewd enough, observant enough, and willing to work hard enough, so that frequently something or other from his paper was reprinted in a metropolitan daily of a big city. More rarely, it was given nationwide distribution over some wire service. Also, a fact of which everyone in Three Palms must be aware, since Pawnee had framed copies on the walls of his office, he had written a few articles for nationally-circulated magazines.

Dave welcomed him, for Pawnee and his paper had given the great buck national prominence and could help now. But when Dave would have relinquished Phil Marcy's battered old swivel chair, the best seat in the filling station, Pawnee nonchalantly waved the offer aside and sat down on a pile of old tires.

“So something new has been added.” He gestured toward the window display. “Our numerous agents reported it immediately, and the fourth estate is here, eager as a bloodhound on a fresh scent.”

“What?” Dave asked.

“Give us the pitch,” Pawnee urged. “The public pants for news. The people yearn for truth, and an uninformed people is a lost people. What is behind all this?”

“It really began when I went out to hunt a deer, to get some venison for our larder—” Dave started.

He told of the poisoned bobcat that had died under the lights of his desert cruiser, and of his own sincere conviction that the wholesale scattering of poison was both cruel and unwise. While he was definitely not in favor of letting predators, or anything else, get out of hand, extermination, or even an unreasonable reduction in numbers, of anything at all was never the answer. The despised predators, far from being worthless, were very valuable. The major reason behind their value was the fact that they controlled rodents, which ruined the range anyhow, if they were not held in check. They were more a friend to, than relentless enemy of, the stock raiser.

Without dwelling on unnecessary details, Dave said that the buck had been a simple kill. In fact, he hadn't even had to sight his rifle. But the coyote following the buck was an entirely different matter. Thus Dave's inspiration. No experienced hunter ever found it unduly difficult to bag a deer. But aside from accidental encounters, what sportsman ever shot a coyote, bobcat, or mountain lion? Dave had set his sights on all three. He told of his many hunts around Kelsey Mine, of his numerous failures, and of the bobcat that represented his first success.

Pawnee, who had been busily taking notes, stopped writing and looked up. His eyes, as usual, were unreadable. But Dave's hopes climbed because his expression was thoughtful.

“I see.” He frowned. “You're out to prove that varmints are more sporting than anything else?”

“Not anything else,” Dave corrected. “A bear isn't easy to get, even with hounds. And whoever shoots a wild turkey, elk, or antelope has no reason to apologize. But I believe varmints are the equal of anything else and the superior of deer when it comes to a challenge for the sportsman.”

“And after you've proven it?” Pawnee questioned.

“If I can prove it,” Dave amended, “and if I can also find a way to let enough people know, hunters themselves will keep the varmint population within reason. In return for genuine sport that very few hunters are enjoying now and a year-round hunting season, they’ll eliminate the necessity for poisoning campaigns. As a result, everybody will come out ahead.”

“Anything you’d like to add?” Pawnee asked.

Omitted
Illustration

At gas
station, man
in suit and
hat and
spectacles,
sitting on a
barrel. He
has a pen
and paper in
his hand.
Younger
man is
standing in
front of him.
They appear
to be
talking.

Dave answered, “I can’t think of anything.”

“You needn’t.” Pawnee put pencil and notebook in his pocket. “It’s a topnotcher as it stands, and a story I’ve been waiting to get for a long while. I’ll give it a good play.”

“Thanks,” Dave said happily.

“Oh, you’re very welcome.”

Until about half-past four, the window display continued to rouse only comment and curiosity. Then Joel Deering, who ranched out at Beautiful River—which might have been an appropriate name if Beautiful River flowed water at any time except during the rainy season—came in grinning.

“Whither bloweth the locoweed?” he questioned pointedly.

Dave asked, “What?”

“Now blast me for a blanket Injun if I didn’t think you could tell me!” Joel exclaimed.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about!”

“You will. You will, Dave.”

His mouth still forming a grin, which further wrinkled a face that was already as wrinkled and almost as tough as a green cowhide left in the sun, Joel paid his bill and drove away. That was just a beginning.

There had been no end, just some interludes of tourists. Every native of Three Palms and the adjacent area who had come to Marcy’s had come grinning. Without exception, they had asked Dave the same question Joel Deering had, “Whither bloweth the locoweed?” A few had gone into more detail, most using a variation on the old theme that they were glad they’d known Dave while he was relatively poor and obscure. They hoped he would not forget them when he became rich and famous.

Now, as Dave walked toward the house and saw the kitchen dimly lighted, for the first time it occurred to him that he had neglected even to notice whether his father’s car was in the drive. A dim kitchen when Dave came home meant that Warden Keller was either on patrol or sleeping. If the latter, his son would enter quietly.

Dave went back and failed to find his father’s car, which meant that the warden was on patrol. He returned to the house, scooped up this week’s edition of *The Desert Gazette* that lay where the delivery boy had thrown it on the dark porch, and entered. Snapping on the overhead light, he unfolded the paper and stared in horror at a two-inch headline that fairly screamed:

WHITHER BLOWETH THE LOCOWEED?

BY PAWNEE MARKSON

Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. We think William Shakespeare penned these immortal words, but in our present state of bubbling

delirium we do not care. We have learned that Dave Keller, lifelong resident of Three Palms, will shortly build the better mousetrap that shall cause all other men to beat a path to his door. Let us not, while genius blooms among us, even consider the base thought that it may cause other men to do something else, and bring about young Dave's incarceration in some institution where half the patients believe they're carrier pigeons and the other half are sure they're Napoleon Bonaparte.

Whither bloweth the locoweed?

Young Dave, who recently brought down a buck that is certain to stand with the biggest recorded by The Boone and Crockett Club, and may lead all, now has a trophy that outranks his record buck as a nuclear-powered submarine outshines a leaky canoe. It is—Dear readers, please do seat yourselves! The surging ecstasy that grips us is certain to seize you, and we do not care to be responsible for the collapse of anyone at all. Seated? All right!

It is a bobcat!

Ye of little faith may discern for yourselves that we speak truly by visiting Marcy's Filling Station, where our young Dave is currently employed, and—

Cheeks flaming, Dave read on. This young hero discovered for himself that varmints are far more sporting than most game and the equal of any. Who but a genius could think up anything like that? He had embarked on a national campaign to spread his doctrine, and by its very sweep and force, plus the pure logic of its originator's arguments, the campaign was sure to become worldwide. Poisoning, Pawnee wrote grandly, would be eliminated, and let small minds ponder the agonies endured by cattle and sheep when they become the victims of coyotes, bobcats, or mountain lions. The more broad-minded and intelligent would think only of the tortures suffered by some noble bobcat, coyote, or mountain lion that happened to swallow a poisoned bait. Did sheep and cattle possess any sporting qualities whatever? A thousand times no, and none but the greedy would even consider the fact that they contributed heavily to the general economy. Varmints, on the other hand—

Dave's rising anger became sick chagrin. He had been so very certain that someone else would see it as he did, and he had counted so very heavily on Pawnee Markson.

Dave walked to the table, let the paper drop from a listless hand, and sat down. A throbbing drum, whose beat swelled and ebbed, pounded in his head. Although the night was not unduly cool, he felt cold.

Mulligan, seated beside him, tapped the floor with his stubby tail and buried a moist muzzle in his master's cupped hand. Dave stroked his dog, but found little comfort. He had sown a great and wonderful idea—and he had reaped ridicule!

A car swerved into the driveway, stopped, and the driver switched off the light. Mulligan leaped to the door and stood before it with wagging tail and dancing feet. A moment later, Warden Keller came into the kitchen.

Dave rose to meet him, forcing a welcoming smile as he did so. These days, his father was becoming increasingly more withdrawn, far less ready to laugh or even smile—and if he was not ill, he was surely worried. Therefore, he was also an object of worry. At any rate, he already had all the problems he could handle and he did not need any of his son's.

“Well, come on, out with it.” Dave's father saw through the forced smile. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing, Dad.” Dave hoped his reply sounded carefree. “I'm all right.”

“You are not all right,” his father corrected him. “What's the bad news?”

“Look!” Dave's anger blazed suddenly and broke down his resolution to keep his troubles to himself. “Look what they wrote about me! Read Pawnee's story!”

“So?” Some of his father's very calmness communicated itself to Dave. “Now you simmer down a bit more.”

Warden Keller seated himself and began to read. . . . He did not look up until he had finished the final word. Then he questioned, “Well? What do you intend to do about it? Go flatten Pawnee's nose?”

“It wouldn't be a bad idea!” Dave snapped.

“You know better,” his father told him. “Only fools descend to physical violence for any reason whatever except self-defense. It will accomplish nothing whatever to fight Pawnee and you'll be sorry if you do. Tell me, just what did you expect?”

“Something besides that,” Dave answered.

“The courageous young crusader, who has undertaken to champion the cause of varmints? Was that what you wanted?”

Dave said, “Hardly, but I did want fair play.”

“You got it,” Harry Keller said.

Dave started. “What was that?”

“You got it,” his father repeated. “At least you got fair play in so far as Pawnee—and I’m afraid the rest of Three Palms—understand it. Consider it from their side. With the exception of we two and young Schober, everyone in Three Palms is a rancher, has been a rancher, has relatives connected with ranching, or directly or indirectly derives some portion of his income from a ranch. Did you think they’d sit back and cheer?”

Dave replied, more calmly, “No.”

“Now that you know the entire community is opposed to it, hadn’t you better forget this idea?” his father asked.

“No,” Dave flared, “I’m going through with it! Mulligan and I are going to get ourselves a coyote and a lion if—if only to prove what hardheaded idiots both of us are. I don’t care if the whole state’s against it!”

“Stand up and move a couple of yards away, Dave,” his father requested.

Dave rose, moved almost to the wall, and stood with a questioning expression on his face. His father looked long and carefully at him, then shook his head, as though only partly believing.

“It was sure to happen,” he said finally, “but I did not think it could be this soon. I’ve always considered you a boy, but you’re looking remarkably like a man.”

“Do you think I can still do it?” Dave asked anxiously.

Warden Keller answered. “I think only that, if you believe in this, or anything else, and consider it right, you are false to yourself if you do not try to do it, no matter what the odds.”

Dave grinned. “You missed your calling, Dad. You should have been a preacher.”

“Hardly.” Warden Keller’s smile, a rare sight these days, glowed briefly. “I’m sure the Lord has enough burdens without the additional one of being responsible for how I might interpret His word. I’m just giving you the best advice I know. How’d it all start?”

“Pawnee came in to the station just a little before one o’clock. He asked for the story and I gave it to him. He must have worked fast after that. About

half-past four, Joel Deering came and he was the first to pull this locoweed business. I never tumbled as to where he and the others got it until I came home and read the *Gazette*.”

“I’m afraid you’re in for a bad time, son.”

“I knew that when I started,” Dave said, with a note of confidence in his voice he wished he could feel deep down.

“You’re going ahead with it, then?” his father asked.

“Let them try to stop me!”

“Well,” Warden Keller stifled a yawn, “I hope you’ll stop at least for tonight. Your old pappy has to roll out at four in the morning and pad his carcass up to Sinking Wells. A game warden’s life is a tough one, Dave.”

“And how many years have I been hearing you say that?” his son scoffed. “You know darn well it’s the only life you’d have wanted and it’s the only one I want—if ever I’m lucky enough to get it.”

Warden Keller looked quickly away and Dave frowned worriedly. His father was hiding something that he would not discuss. Probably it would be better if he talked it out, but he knew it would also be the height of futility to question him. Harry Keller did nothing until he thought the time was ripe.

The latter turned back to Dave. “Good night, son.”

“Good night, Dad. Take it easy tomorrow.”

“Sure thing.”

When he reported for work at noon the next day, Dave went directly to Phil Marcy.

“Do you want me to quit?” he asked.

“Quit?” Phil’s brows arched. “What for?”

“Didn’t you read the paper?”

“Yeah, I read it.”

Dave said bitterly, “As the laughing stock of Three Palms, I don’t care to hurt your business by hanging around and giving Pawnee Markson a sequel to his loco story.”

“Foosh!” Phil snorted. “Don’t take Pawnee too serious, Dave. He’s aw right, but I mistrust he ain’t the great man he says he is. And don’t trouble

your head ‘bout losin’ business for me. I set up here to give people their money’s worth. Long’s I do that, I’ll have business. Course there’s some as ain’t goin’ to like it; there’s always some as don’t like nothin’. Them as don’t can just darn well take their cars some where else.”

“Thanks,” Dave said. “I wanted you to know how it is.”

“Forget about it. It’ll blow over in two days, anyhow.”

Phil Marcy was right, and Three Palms would have forgotten the incident within forty-eight hours had it not been for an unforeseen incident. On the second morning after the appearance of Pawnee’s story, old Tracey Donlin came in with the feature section of the daily newspaper from the nearest big city.

“Look!” he snorted—and snorted his way out again.

Dave read the headline, THREE PALMS UP IN ARMS AGAINST WOULD-BE SAVIOR OF VARMINTS. The subtitle was, “This story speaks for itself.” There followed Pawnee’s piece about Dave. When he had finished reading it, Dave handed the paper to Phil Marcy, who read and grinned.

“With so many pages to fill, I suspicion they got to fill ’em with somethin’.”

Dave went grimly about his work, steeling himself against the rain of taunts and jibes that had ebbed but now began afresh. He thought wistfully of the three days—that had suddenly become three thousand years—before his next day off and his next chance to seek the peace of the desert with Mulligan.

Just before six o’clock, a long, low sports car came into the station. Dave went to attend the wants of the driver.

“Gas?” he queried.

“Gas,” the driver said, “but the sort you make with words instead of put in a car. I’d like to talk with Dave Keller.”

JACK EBBETS

THE MAN in the sports car was young, probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He was stockily built, and a mop of unruly blond hair crowned his erect head. Dave noticed that his hands, which remained on the steering wheel, somehow managed to look as though they were gripping the reins of a horse. He was a stranger to Three Palms—his car license had been issued in Cutter County, seat of the metropolis—but definitely he was no stranger to horses and the world of outdoors.

Mulligan, who never molested strangers but almost never sought their friendship, trotted up to and stood beside the car while he wagged a welcome. A smile flitted across the man's lips and lighted his eyes. He took one hand from the steering wheel and scratched Mulligan's ears. It was the practiced gesture of one who must be very familiar with dogs.

Dave hesitated. The stranger was likable, even appealing. But—except when he launched one of his long-winded tirades concerning the ease with which he could conquer big-time journalism if only he wanted to—so was Pawnee Markson. A black little cloud of suspicion floated across Dave's mind. Why should anyone at all drive ninety miles just to talk with him unless he was a reporter who wanted to do a follow-up on Pawnee's story?

After a moment, Dave said, "I'm Dave Keller."

The stranger smiled again and again the smile lighted his eyes, too. He extended his right hand and Dave shook it. "I'm glad I found you, Dave. My name's Ebbets, Jack Ebbets, known as just plain Jack except when somebody's sore at me."

"What can I do for you?"

Jack Ebbets produced a tear sheet of the same feature that Tracey Donlin had cut from the metropolitan daily. "Are you the young man who's out to prove that varmints are sporting game?"

“That’s right,” Dave answered, a bit coldly.

“I must say that whoever wrote this story doesn’t seem to lend complete personal approval to the idea, but it interested me. I’d like to know more about it.”

Dave’s suspicion mounted. “Who are you?”

“Not much of anything,” Jack Ebbets admitted, “although, when born into this world, I did have foresight enough to choose a wealthy father. I inherited his money but not his desire to work, so I just don’t. But I do like to hunt, and the idea of finding year-round sporting game is a new wrinkle in my private prune. That’s why I’m here.”

Dave looked away. Far from entertaining any personal prejudice against wealthy playboys who’d inherited enough money to gratify their whims, he was sure it would be no intolerable burden to have that much money himself. But something here rang falsely. If Jack Ebbets were indeed wealthy, and the car he drove was a rich man’s plaything, he could find year-round hunting if he really wanted it and was willing to travel to it. Dave became certain that he was talking with another reporter.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ebbets,” he said in a tone that indicated he was not sorry at all, “but I’m working. I have no time for talking.”

Jack Ebbets asked plaintively, “Have I got smallpox or something?”

“Just a long nose!” Dave flared. “So turn that junior-sized locomotive around, go back to where you came from, and tell your boss when you get there that I have no second-class thrills to peddle to any third-, second-, or first-class snoops. The story’s been written, Mr. Ebbets!”

“Do you think I’m a reporter?” The stranger seemed genuinely astonished.

“I know you are!”

Jack Ebbets voiced a throaty chuckle and spoke to some presence that only he could see. “There, Dad! I never did amount to a hoot owl’s hoot and never expect to, but quite often people mistake me for somebody respectable. Dave Keller thinks I’m a reporter, a working man. Doesn’t that make you proud?” He addressed Dave, “I’m flattered, but you’re mistaken.”

“I’m also working,” Dave reminded him.

“Yes. Yes, of course. Do you have a customer now?”

“Not right now.”

“Then this clunker can stand a grease job. How about it?”

Dave hesitated. The car Jack Ebbets drove, and that he had probably borrowed from the newspaper publisher or some wealthy friend of the publisher’s, was one ordinarily serviced in a private garage by a private mechanic. Certainly it was almost never found on a grease rack in a highway filling station. On the point of refusing, he thought suddenly of Phil Marcy, for whom he was supposed to help recruit business rather than turn it away.

“Can you do it?” Jack Ebbets questioned.

A little spasm of anger rippled through Dave at the slur implied in such a question. If it was machinery, he could take it apart, put it back together in better running order, oil it, grease it, and operate it.

He asserted, “I can do it.”

“Okay. It’s all yours.”

Jack Ebbets stepped out of the car and Mulligan, tail still wagging, paced beside him as he turned toward the filling station. Dave favored his dog with a disgusted glance. Dogs, according to an old theory, were expert judges of character. Maybe Mulligan favored bad characters.

Dave slid into the driver’s seat, sank back on the luxurious cushions, and knew a thrill of purest joy when he started the engine. Three hundred horsepower lay beneath that sleek hood, and it worked as smoothly as a Swiss watch. Dave had a fleeting vision of gliding up the road in such a vehicle, then thought of the track into the low hills around Kelsey Mine.

This car, for all its streamlined power, would be hopelessly stalled within the first half mile. Dave felt a little less envious. Any car that must be confined exclusively to paved highways would be as useless to him as the desert cruiser would be to Jack Ebbets.

Dave eased onto the grease rack, got out of the car, set the wheel chocks in place, and glanced at Jack Ebbets. With Mulligan still beside him, he was intently studying the buck’s antlers and the bobcat skin. Dave turned the lever that activated the hydraulic lift and the car moved gently upward. When it was high enough, Dave went under it.

Such a car in a roadside filling station was an event so rare that Phil Marcy didn’t even have a lubrication chart for it, but there were certain common-sense rules that could always be followed. Friction occurred where parts moved, and such parts needed lubrication in one form or another.

Grease cups would help guide him. Looking upward to locate them, Dave discovered why such cars were so expensive. The undercarriage was as finely made and as smoothly fitted as the sleek hood or the superb instrument panel. Artists, as distinguished from artisans, had built this car from tire treads to top. Dave wondered fleetingly if such a piece of machinery, providing it had proper attention, would ever wear out.

He also discovered that the vehicle needed a grease job about as desperately as Mulligan needed false teeth. He tightened his jaws. Jack Ebbets, whoever he might be, was nobody's easy mark and he wanted what he set out to get. Refusing to leave when requested to do so, he was employing pretended need of car lubrication as a ruse to enable him to talk with the serviceman. Dave clenched his jaws a bit more tightly.

Jack Ebbets had asked for a grease job. A grease job he was going to get. If there was any ethical way to charge double for lubricating such a vehicle, he would also pay double. Dave started shooting grease into already filled cups. Jack Ebbets shouted to make himself heard above the staccato pound of the grease gun.

"Say! That buck's even bigger than it looked in the picture!"

"It's a nice rack," Dave replied briefly.

"A rack like that and you call it 'nice,' eh? There aren't too many like that running around and none are easy to get. How long did you hunt him?"

Dave, who had anything except a poker face, was glad that his features were half hidden beneath the car. If Jack Ebbets wanted a story, let him have one and make it good!

"I've known of that buck for four years," Dave started off. "He has carried about the same size rack all four of 'em. This past season, I hunted him a full week before I finally connected."

"Was it a hard shot?" Ebbets questioned.

Dave replied smoothly, "Easy. The buck was no more than six hundred yards away."

"And that's easy, eh? Where'd you hit him?"

"It was a heart shot," Dave said. "That's the best way to put 'em down to stay."

"Was the buck standing?"

"Running full speed," Dave stated solemnly.

“Six hundred yards away, running full speed, and you pick a heart shot.” Ebbets pondered. “Something tells me that all the grease around here isn’t going into my car.”

Dave turned his back to hide a grin. None but the rankest of tenderfeet would have swallowed the wild yarn he had been spinning for Jack Ebbets. The man’s refusal to accept it bore out Dave’s earlier observation that he knew much about the out-of-doors. A sudden thought came in direct conflict with Dave’s deduction that Ebbets was a reporter.

While it was doubtless true that many reporters turned to hunting and fishing for recreation, and some were probably even expert outdoorsmen, there was a certain air about Ebbets that bespoke more than casual trips afield. It was a manner imparted only by vast experience. While Dave understood that reporters receive good salaries, were they good enough to finance an undue amount of either hunting or fishing? If they were, and any reporter took as much time off as Ebbets had obviously taken, would he continue to be a newspaper employee?

“How about the bobcat?” Ebbets asked.

Dave answered truthfully, “It was a darn’ sight harder to get than the buck and a lot more sport.”

“So are you going to reveal your secrets?” Ebbets grinned, “or are they pure uranium?”

“I have no secrets.”

Dave went out to wait on a gas customer. . . . He returned shortly, let the car down, attended to the lubrication points beneath the hood, and turned to Jack Ebbets.

“It’s all set. You can leave now.”

“Oh, no. Uh—change the oil, please.” He smiled apologetically. “I should have told you while you had it up.”

Dave said dryly, “It would have been handier.”

He lifted the car, drained out oil so pure and clear that it couldn’t possibly have been driven more than two hundred miles, and wondered. Jack Ebbets wanted something. He had no intention of leaving until he got it. Dave let the car down, punched a can of oil, and made ready to empty it.

“You want a coyote and a lion next?” Ebbets queried.

“That’s right.”

“The coyote you’ll get, but you have a job on your hands if you intend to still hunt a lion.”

“I knew that when I started.”

“Do you know of anyone at all who has deliberately set out to still hunt a lion and succeeded?”

“Nope.”

“I did once,” Ebbets reminisced. “It was a crazy Indian in British Columbia who called himself, of all things, Hanschristiananderson. He pronounced it just like that, too. Some white man must have hung the handle on him for, since the Indian could neither read nor write, it’s reasonable to suppose that he knew nothing of Hans Christian Andersen, the teller of fairy tales. But he certainly knew his lions. We ran across the track of a big tom in the snow and Hans started trotting after him. He was still going strong after I quit at a mile and a half. I doubt if a good horse could have maintained such a pace. But at noon the next day Hans came trotting into camp with the lion’s skin across his shoulders. ‘Got heem,’ he announced, and fell to eating. Aside from stowing away enough grub for six men, you’d never know he’d been anywhere or done anything.”

Dave punched another can of oil and turned interestedly to Jack Ebbets. “You’ve hunted in British Columbia?”

“There and a few other places.”

Dave asked, “Then why are you so all-fired interested in year-round hunting for varmints?”

“And why shouldn’t I be?” Ebbets queried.

Dave challenged back, “Why should you be? You’d have no trouble finding year-round hunting, if that’s what you really want. Polar bears in the Arctic, lions and everything else in Africa, jaguar in Mexico or South America. Some season is open somewhere all the time and you—you could hunt exciting game.”

“You said yourself that varmints are exciting,” Ebbets reminded him.

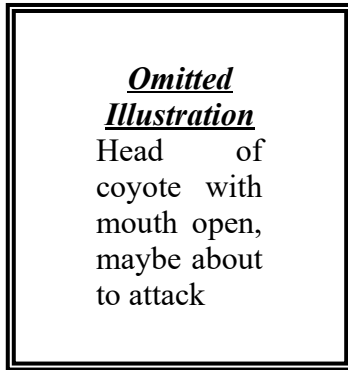
“Well, the most exciting game I’ve ever hunted.”

Suddenly, Ebbets gave a great whoop of laughter that brought Mulligan up with a snap. The man leaned against his car, helpless in the grip of mirth. Presently, he straightened, wiped his face with a crisp handkerchief, stifled a

few chuckles, and gasped, “From now on just call me Jack the Dope! I get it.”

Dave asked bewilderedly, “What do you get?”

“The reasons why you wouldn’t talk and thought I was a reporter. I blow in driving a car fourteen miles long, tell you I’m a no-good loafer who was lucky enough to inherit more money than he knows how to spend, that I’m interested in year-round hunting, and will you please take me out after varmints? Ascribe it to some remote ancestor who must have been as naïve—and as useless—as I.”



Dave said suddenly, “I’ll take you varmint hunting.”

“Do my ears deceive me?” Ebbets looked startled.

“Not this time,” Dave told him.

“Is it a sea change?” Jack Ebbets looked keenly at him. “Or has my charming personality overcome your objections?”

“Neither. We’ll just go varmint hunting.”

Because he wanted to hide his face, Dave bent over to pet Mulligan. He still was not half sure who Jack Ebbets was, but there was a positive way to find out. The Kelsey Mine country was never made for tenderfeet or armchair hunters. If Jack Ebbets belonged in that category, he’d never be able to take it. If he did not—

At any rate, they’d go varmint hunting—and what a hunt it would be!

“Now that I’ve bulled my way into going along, all we need do is set the time,” Jack Ebbets said.

“I’m off next Tuesday and Mulligan and I like to leave about four in the morning.”

“I’ll be on deck,” Jack Ebbets promised happily.

When he was washing his breakfast dishes the following Tuesday morning, Dave glanced at the clock. It read ten minutes to four. He squirmed uneasily. It was part of the plan to see just what Jack Ebbets was made of, but it was hardly fair to ask anyone at all to drive ninety miles, be in Three Palms by four in the morning, and hunt all day. He might have asked Jack Ebbets to come the previous day and spend the night with him. There was plenty of room.

Dave looked again at the clock. It now read three minutes to four. He felt a stabbing disappointment, for a nasty little suspicion that Jack Ebbets had no intention of coming anyhow became a nasty big suspicion. . . . Exactly at four o’clock, a car eased to the curb in front of the Keller house, its lights winked out, and Mulligan ran to the door.

A moment later there was a soft knock. Dave opened the door to admit Jack Ebbets.

“I’ll be quiet,” he promised in a whisper. “Some people do not appreciate the true beauties of this hour, and they object to being awakened.”

“It’s all right,” Dave reassured him. “Dad’s away.”

“Oh, then it’s just you, Mulligan, me, and the varmints. Right? Tallyho!”

A COYOTE RUNS

WITHOUT BEING INVITED, Jack Ebbets pulled one of the kitchen chairs away from the table and sat down. It was another mark of the experienced hunter as distinguished from the tenderfoot, who must be told or invited to do everything and almost never take the smallest initiative himself. Mulligan sat down beside him and Jack began tickling his ears.

“May I fix you some breakfast?” Dave asked.

“No, thanks,” Jack declined. “I stopped at an all-night lunch stand about twenty miles down. The proprietor, also the night cook and waiter, is plagued by more ailments than should afflict all humanity. Business is terrible, his corns ache, his liver’s acting up, his wife’s sickly, there are two more payments due on his car, his son-in-law lost his fifth job in two months, his dog had nineteen pups, so why don’t they hurry up and drop their hydrogen bombs?”

Dave grinned. “Cheerful way to start the morning.”

“More so than you think,” Jack replied serenely. “The next time I imagine I have troubles, I’ll remember one who really suffers.”

“Didn’t you bring a rifle?” Dave asked.

“I left it in the car.”

“You’d better get it.”

“I’m perfectly willing to drive my car.”

“I’m afraid you can’t,” Dave told him. “The road we’ll travel is hardly a boulevard. My car will make it but yours won’t.”

“You’re the boss. I’ll get my rifle.”

With Mulligan tagging at his heels, the visitor left. Dave donned his jacket, took his own rifle from its rack, put a box of cartridges in his jacket

pocket and the usual four loose ones in his shirt pocket. He pondered the additional information he had gleaned.

Jack Ebbets wore cleated pacs, trousers that came well over the tops of his pacs and were heavy enough to offer some protection against cactus, a light jacket, and a wide-brimmed hat. His clothing was scarcely stylish, although it was expensive. Not scuffed or worn, for fine hunting attire does not wear out easily, it had the look of a much-used saddle. Jack Ebbets had obviously been hunting before.

Jack returned with a cased rifle, a box of cartridges protruding from one pocket and a parcel from another, and a canteen slung over his shoulder.

Dave said, "You needn't carry water."

"We're going into the desert, aren't we?" the other asked.

"Yes, but after the heavy autumn rains, every water hole is full. We'll never be more than an hour away from a drink unless, of course, you happen to need one oftener."

"Not me," Jack declared. He laid the canteen on the table. "The less weight I pack, the better I like it."

Dave flushed. He had not meant to be sarcastic, but it was entirely true that some people, including some seasoned outdoorsmen, needed water often. He looked at the rifle case that, like Ebbets' clothing, was both expensive and much used. Jack interpreted the glance correctly.

"I carry a .270 with a hand-loaded 90-grain bullet for varmint hunting. Like to see the critter?"

Dave answered, "I'm always interested in rifles."

Jack unzipped the case and removed a rifle that made Dave gasp. Obviously custom made, it was a thing of sheer beauty—if one happened to love fine rifles enough to appreciate their beauty. The scope was one of those simple, practical, and very expensive affairs that can be adjusted to anything from three to eight power.

"Here." Jack extended the weapon. "Look it over."

Dave took the rifle. With the scope, it weighed just over seven pounds, but it was balanced as perfectly as a flying bird. He swung it to his shoulder and sighed with ecstasy. Jack's rifle was so exquisitely fashioned that it seemed to fall almost magically in tune with whoever handled it, and to

center at once on any target its handler had in mind. He gave the weapon back.

“One thing I no longer doubt,” he blurted out. “You are rich!”

Jack chuckled. “My dad knew how to pile it up but my talents lie more in spending. This little fusee is sighted in at three hundred and fifty yards and you can all but drive nails with it at such a distance. May I see your rifle?”

Suddenly, Dave was ashamed. His rifle had been a dream come true when he received it, but with scope and mount included, it had cost perhaps a tenth as much as the weapon he had just inspected. Just as suddenly he determined not to be ashamed. It was the man behind the gun that counted.

Old Denny Whitcomb, who lived all alone up beyond Cass Wash, never used anything but a muzzle-loader and never needed more than one shot for anything. But Denny never had held any faith in the machine age. He owned a good car, but he never drove it anywhere unless he towed a trailer wherein stood a saddled horse, so he'd have something reliable if the fool car broke down.

Dave took his rifle from its case and handed it over. Jack inspected it with sincere interest.

“A .257 Roberts, huh? A right sweet little piece, but don't you find it sort of light for big game?”

“It depends on where you put your shots,” Dave answered. “I'll tackle anything there is with it.”

Jack grinned. “I forgot I'm talking with a man who picks heart shots on running bucks at six hundred yards.”

Dave said lightly, “It isn't impossible.”

“Nor is anything else. Shall we go?”

“I'm ready.”

Mulligan tagged amiably along as the two went out into the cold darkness. About to relent, and tell his companion that, if he cared to be more comfortable, he might follow with his own car until they reached the turnoff for Kelsey Mine, Dave said nothing. He'd planned a hunt to remember. Let it begin with a ride to remember.

“Stow your rifle here.” Dave indicated the rifle compartment just behind the seat. “Mulligan will sit between us and be careful you don't fall out.

There aren't any doors."

"A jeep or a stripped-down car is just the thing for getting into back country," Jack observed casually.

Dave stifled a sudden disappointment. By no means sure of Jack Ebbets, he'd looked forward with keen delight to guiding a pretentious dude into the Kelsey Mine country and walking his legs off. But if Jack was really a dude, he should have recoiled from the desert cruiser, rather than accepted it so naturally.

Presently, Dave's disappointment turned to hope. Pawnee Markson's caustic story, when Dave needed good publicity for his cherished venture, had been a bitter pill to swallow. It would hurt nothing to have one influential friend, and if Jack was who he claimed to be, he had influence.

Safely away from Three Palms, Dave speeded up and grinned to himself in the darkness. The desert cruiser had a top speed of about forty miles an hour. Traveling at such a rate in Jack's car must be remarkably akin to swinging in a cradle. Forty in the desert cruiser was something else! As Phil Marcy had once remarked, its top speed was really a hundred and twenty, forty ahead and eighty up and down.

"Cut it out!" Jack yelled suddenly. "For pete's sake, Mulligan, cut it out!"

"What's he doing?" Dave asked.

Jack answered plaintively, "Sitting in my lap!"

Dave grinned. "He likes you."

"My fatal charm!" Jack moaned. A white handkerchief flashed in the darkness. "I wouldn't even mind his liking me if he did not also insist on licking my face!"

Dave marked Bad Luck Wash and slowed so he would not pass the track into Kelsey Mine. Shunned by all except the hardiest of local drivers, and ignored by highway crews who didn't mind if fools risked their necks as long as they were called upon for no extra work, the track was not easy to find, even in the daytime. The desert cruiser's lights illumined a paloverde tree with a broken top that stood six feet back from the highway and a hundred away from the near side of the entrance.

Dave further decreased his speed. The mouth of the Kelsey Mine road was a steep little pitch that must be hit squarely if one did not care to risk overturning. Dave struck it square, but, at the sudden turn and quick descent,

both Mulligan and Jack came tumbling into his lap. Dave hit the clutch and the brake at the same time.

“Sorry,” Jack apologized. “I just wasn’t ready for driving into canyons.”

“I should have warned you,” said Dave. “Watch yourself from now on. There are better roads.”

Cautiously, but with a skill born of long experience, Dave eased across dry washes, climbed rises, edged over boulders, and passed the place where the poisoned bobcat had died. . . . Presently, the lights reflected from three sets of eyes. Dave did not slow down, for eyes of that color, and at that height, could belong only to deer. When they were near enough, the car’s lights revealed the three deer to which the eyes belonged. Three does, they stood their ground a moment. . . . Then they trotted a few feet to one side, stopped, stamped their feet, and snorted as the desert cruiser went past.

Dave came to the end of the road and backed into his usual place between the two saguaro cacti. Mulligan leaped to the ground. Dave turned to Jack Ebbets.

“This is about as far as we can drive.”

“I’m most disappointed,” Jack said dryly. “I’d counted on seeing the sun rise from the top of one of those hills, and of having you drive me up.”

“Did I frighten you?” Dave asked concernedly.

Jack answered, “I did recall a past sin or two, especially when you crossed that crown where there was a full half inch to spare and a sheer drop on either side. . . . What now?”

“We’ll walk back in a ways and wait for sunup on a hill I know. We may catch our coyote from there.” Dave got his rifle, discarded the case, and moaned, “Oh, no!”

“What’s up?” Jack queried.

“The lunch!” Dave confessed. “I had enough packed for both of us and, knucklehead that I am, left it on the table!”

“If you can stand what I have, we won’t starve,” Jack promised.

Dave said ruefully, “By the time you’ve batted around these hills for five or six hours, you could stand boiled rocks. I’m glad one of us didn’t leave his brains behind. Ready?”

Dave led off through the darkness, knowing the general path from long familiarity and avoiding obstacles directly before him because they loomed just a bit darker than the ground itself. It occurred to him that he should have warned his companion about the cactus. Nobody in his right mind would bump into saguaro, but some of the smaller cacti, especially the thigh-tall cholla, were a genuine menace. Anyone who brushed against the cholla, however lightly, inevitably became the victim of its hair-thin, needle-sharp, poison-tipped spears that were capable of penetrating shoe leather.

On the point of advising Jack to be wary, Dave held back. Just as it would have been superfluous to warn his father, Phil Marcy, or any other experienced desert traveler, so, Dave sensed, he needn't tell Jack. By this restraint, he admitted to himself that his companion was an experienced desert traveler.

There was a blasting snort, a sudden pound of hoofs, and shadowy forms moved away in the darkness. Mulligan growled, just to show that he could. Dave halted and Jack stopped just behind him.

“Wild burros?” he asked softly.

“That’s right,” Dave agreed.

“I thought they’d all been shot for dog food?”

“Not all, but there are no more of the big herds that Dad used to see in his younger days.”

Jack queried, “Maybe we can arrange a burro hunt?”

“I wouldn’t kill one.”

“Dog gone it, did I say anything about killing? We’ll run one down, always supposing we can.”

Dave turned quickly to his partner. Wild burros, no real menace to anyone or anything, since there were not enough left to threaten available range, received no legal protection at all. Any licensed hunter was entitled to kill all he could find, and they offered no difficult mark for even a mediocre rifleman.

But shooting them and capturing them alive were as different as taking tame turkeys from a roost and hunting wild ones in the woods. A fast horse could outrun a burro, but not even a desert-bred horse could enter some of the thickets and tangles through which the burros plunged as easily as a dairy cow crossed a field of alfalfa. The burros had a knack for turning and twisting, so that many a first-class roper, sure of a catch, saw his loop settle

where a burro had been a split second before. Once captured, however, the wild burros adjusted quickly to a life in captivity.

It occurred to Dave that, providing he was able to get his program rolling at all, here in the Southwest, an annual Burro Stampede might very well be part of it. There was absolutely no danger of anyone capturing too many wild burros, while arousing popular interest might be one way to get them the protection they deserved. When they were gone, as they certainly would be soon if every trigger-happy hunter was allowed to shoot them, a colorful part of history would depart, too. The early Southwest had literally been packed into place on the sturdy backs of burros.

A half mile from where they'd spooked the burros, Dave began to climb. . . . He stopped on a ledge two-thirds of the way to the summit and whispered, "We'll sit it out here until daylight. You can see a long ways and we should be able to spot any coyotes on the prowl."

"Check."

The two sat down, Dave keeping one hand on Mulligan's ruff, so that he might detect the big dog's reaction to any story the wind might bring. Presently, Mulligan went to sleep. Dave relaxed. Coyotes were the target for today and Mulligan was not interested in coyotes. But neither could Dave hope to see any until after sunrise.

The false dawn glimmered, gave way to true dawn, and the sun came up as though some giant hand wielding a colossal brush had painted the eastern horizon with every shade of gold and lemon, and laced the whole canvas with scarlet.

Dave groaned. "Gosh darn it!"

Jack turned to where his companion was looking. "Sheep!"

"Yeah, Juan Areque's flock. Let's go down and see what's up."

Dave called Mulligan to heel for, as usual, the sheep dogs were on guard and would doubtless start a fight with any intruder. Little Juan Areque, the huge .44 thrust in his belt, rose and stood without speaking as the trio approached.

"Hi, Juan," Dave greeted him.

"Hi."

Dave introduced his companion. "Juan, this is Jack Ebbets. Jack, Juan Areque."

“Glad to meet you, Juan,” Jack said cordially.

The little Basque murmured, “An’ me to meet you.”

“Have you seen any more of the devil?” Dave queried.

“No, but I ready if he come.” Juan tapped the revolver.

“Have you lost any more sheep?”

“No. What you hunt?”

“Coyotes.”

“Good!” There was genuine feeling in that expression. “I hope you get all!”

The visitors turned away. When they were far enough from the shepherd’s camp, Jack commented, “I thought you didn’t like stockmen?”

“I never said that, and Juan’s the salt of the earth,” Dave protested. “What I don’t like is some methods that should have gone out twenty years ago but are still used by certain stockmen.”

“What’s this business about a devil?” Jack asked.

“It hit Juan’s camp awhile back,” Dave told him. “It killed a ewe and one of Juan’s best dogs. He claimed that it was the color of the sun, and that fire of the sun came from its eyes and mouth.”

“What was it?”

“A lion,” Dave explained. “Far and away the biggest—and boldest—lion I’ve ever run across. It killed my record buck when I myself was hot on its tail.”

“The card says that buck was killed by Dave Keller.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Dave corrected him. “It says ‘brought in by Dave Keller.’ I never told anyone I killed it. When I said I found it dead, nobody believed me.”

Jack Ebbets chuckled. “I’ll be doggoned! That’s the lion you hope to get, eh?”

“It’s the one I’m going to get, if it hangs around here,” Dave promised.

Dave struck directly away from the flock, always keeping to hills and ridges that offered a good view of the surrounding desert. Twice Mulligan hopefully announced that bobcats were near and each time swung dejectedly

back to heel when ordered to do so. A second bobcat would be accepted, even welcome, but a coyote and a lion had priority now.

At high noon, the trio halted in the shade of a house-sized boulder that crowned the very summit of a rocky hill. Beneath the boulder was a cavern big enough to serve as a garage for Jack's car—had he cared to park in the glass-clear, glacier-cold water, eighteen inches deep, on the cavern's floor. There was no visible outlet but doubtless there was a subterranean spillway. The overflow from the pool went underground, perhaps to be lost, and perhaps to appear one or twenty miles away. Leading from the pool, and worn into solid rock, was a maze of trails.

The two hunters knelt to drink. . . . Finally, Jack rose and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Whew! That's water! Is it really that good, or does it just seem so here in the desert?”

“Some of both.” Dave conjectured. “It's Big Rock Spring, one of the very few in the entire Kelsey Mine country that never goes dry. It must have been in use for thousands of years before any white man came this way. Some of those paths are four inches deep in volcanic rock that you couldn't chip with a crowbar, and all of them were worn by wild animals that came here to drink.”

Jack said, “The cave shows it, too. It's the result of erosion, and certainly it did not erode that much since last night.”

Dave grinned. “I'll buy that.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.”

Jack took the parcel from his pocket, broke it, and handed half to Dave. Dave looked questioningly at the paper-wrapped food.

“Pemmican,” Jack explained. “It used to be made from buffalo meat and tallow, plus—I suspect—buffalo blood, hair, and any dirt that happened to be around or that rubbed off the hands of the pemmican chef. Now it's made from beef, and even if it isn't as romantic, it's a lot cleaner and will stick by you.”

Dave nibbled experimentally at the chunk of pemmican, found it much tastier than it looked . . . and took a bigger bite. He finished, then studied the terrain.

Beneath them was a shallow basin, about a mile long by a thousand yards wide at its widest. There were the usual vegetation and the usual dry washes, all of which could be seen when looking down from this height. Flanking both sides were rocky hills that commanded a view of the basin. Toward the end, the hills curved inward like giant pincers, came within a hundred yards of meeting, and dropped into a valley.

“Big Rock Basin,” Dave said. “The place is lousy with jack rabbits and for that very reason there should be a coyote or so. If one of us travels down each of these hills, any coyotes that may be there will be caught in the center. If we’re lucky, we’ll connect. Which hill do you want?”

“Eeny, meeny, miney—. The one to the right.”

“Okay. I’ll take the other and we’ll meet in the gully.”

With Mulligan beside him, Dave started slowly down the hill. He halted at frequent intervals to survey the basin and the opposite slope with his scope. Deep in the basin, but brought near through the magic in his scope, he saw a number of jack rabbits. There were two javelina and a little knot of six desert sheep. Occasionally, he caught glimpses of Jack Ebbets on the opposite hill.

Dave was halfway down, overlooking the widest part of the basin, when he saw the coyote.

Making not the slightest attempt to hide, it was running back and forth on top of a small knob. It sat down, tail straight behind it, for all the world like some furry dog. Then, leaping high and twisting like a sunfishing bronco with every third or fourth leap, it resumed running back and forth.

Dave knitted puzzled brows. The coyote—which appeared to be a big male—was an estimated seven hundred to seven hundred and fifty yards from where he stood. But it was no more than three hundred yards from Jack, and, in contrast to the tricky shots coyotes usually offer while streaking full speed through the thickest available cover, this one sought no cover at all and seemed determined to show itself.

Raising his scope, Dave found Jack on the opposite hill. He was directly in line with the coyote and he seemed to be looking straight at it. Dave’s suspicion returned with overwhelming force. It was quite possible to talk familiarly about a good hunt and even to act as a hunter should, as long as nothing else was necessary. The true test arrived when game was sighted, and the most verdant greenhorn should have seen the coyote.

Suddenly, the coyote dashed from the knob, disappeared, and reappeared a bit later on another knob a full hundred yards nearer Jack Ebbets. It indulged in its seemingly pointless running and jumping, then sat still once more. Dave shook his head, scarcely able to believe what his eyes told him was true.

Presently, the coyote ran directly toward Jack, and, for a moment, Dave felt a stupefying fear that it might be a rabid beast, bent on attack. But when it was no more than fifty yards from the man, the coyote swerved and quartered toward the top of the hill. Only then did the hunter come awake and fire three wild shots.

*Omitted
Illustration*

Coyote
watching
man with
rifle and
another man
further back,
also with
rifle.

Dave snorted in disgust and continued down the hill. He dropped into the valley, waited a few minutes . . . and Jack came along.

“I heard you shoot,” Dave said innocently. “What’d you shoot at?”

“Nothing really.” The other grinned. “I saw a coyote, a big dog, and I bet I watched him a full ten minutes. I think I might have bopped him down with a slingshot—if I’d wanted to, but he has a mate and five cubs in a den. I know it’s early for cubs, but there they are. Papa took it on himself to lead me away from Mama and the kids. I shot a couple or three times just to make him think he’d done it.”

Dave was silent, but his feeling of warmth and respect for this huntsman grew rapidly firmer.

The desert dusk was gathering when they trudged wearily back to the cruiser. They climbed in, but before he started the engine, Dave turned to his companion.

“I’m off again next Monday. Want to come along?”

“Count me in and I’ll be on deck at four in the morning,” Jack declared.

“Come up Sunday afternoon and stay with us,” Dave said quietly. “It’ll save you that long, early-morning drive and we have lots of room.”

THE WARDEN DECIDES

SITTING IN his parked car, which was hidden by the trunk of a ten-inch mesquite tree and the forest of mesquite whips that had sprouted around the parent trunk, Warden Keller tried valiantly to occupy his thoughts with the tree. The night was cool without being cold, and the thin twigs of the mesquite whispered softly back to the gentle little wind that was whispering to them.

Mesquite was a marvelous and almost a miraculous growth. It bore seed pods, mesquite beans, that at one time had furnished a staple food for all the Indians of the desert—and still were eaten to some extent. The beans could be devoured raw, boiled, ground into flour, and they even served as the basis for a mild beverage. In any form their taste was pleasant. Harry himself was fond of them. Horses and cattle grew fat on mesquite beans.

It is almost the only desert tree suitable for lumber. Some of the ancient Spanish missions were built around mesquite beams that were five hundred years old—and they are as sound today as they were on the day they were hewn. They seem immune to termites, decay, wear, all the destructive forces that eventually have left other wooden buildings in ruins.

Mesquite is another example of change wrought by white men in a perfectly balanced nature. Formerly, the mesquite grew as trees only, usually clustered in washes, gullies, coulees, and other places where taproots might explore a way to water. Wandering horses and cattle spread the incredibly hardy beans, which took root wherever they dropped and sent up tender shoots that were promptly cropped off by other horses or cattle. But the roots insisted on living and sprouted three withes for each one that had been. Thus the mesquite thickets came into being and—

In spite of his resolution, Warden Keller's thoughts swung to J. C. Bannerman's fateful letter, which he had received at the Apache Checking Station.

Closing his eyes, he saw again, as he had seen a thousand times in his imagination, the wording of J. C. Bannerman's directive.

On or after six months of the date on this letter, you will be prepared to undergo re-examination concerning your ability satisfactorily to discharge the duties of your office.

Warden Keller opened his eyes and sat for a moment in somber meditation. The duties of his office had certainly been satisfactorily discharged, and the state he served had received three times full value, since his return from Apache. He had driven himself for as many hours each day as he was able to stay awake—but in his heart he knew that devotion to duty was not the real reason behind the man-killing pace he had chosen.

Dave was the true answer. Fair-minded, Harry admitted that Dave had a right to know. But he remained unable to tell his son of his impending discharge and—he might as well face it—disgrace. Dave evidently knew—or at any rate he suspected—that something was amiss, and the youngster had all his mother's charm that seemed so guileless but could be so devastating when it came to worming a secret from anyone at all. The best way to avoid telling his son was to avoid him, and the most practical way to avoid him was to spend as many hours as possible in the field.

Warden Keller glanced casually up the dark canyon in whose mouth he waited.

Horse Thief Canyon it was called, and possibly it had actually figured in some incident or other that had to do with a horse thief. More likely, with so many hundred canyons, trees, washes, creeks, hills, and other objects in the West named Horse Thief something or other, somebody without too much imagination had simply decided that this might as well be Horse Thief Canyon.

About seven miles long, the canyon ended abruptly at a range of steep hills which, in turn, gave way to forested mountains. There were four water holes, good grass, and a passable road winding the length of the canyon. The road was used during spring and fall roundups by the cowhands of Tom Paley, who owned the grazing rights in Horse Thief Canyon and enough adjacent territory to form a grazing empire about the size of Connecticut.

In open season, hunters used the road. In between, an occasional tourist who wanted the thrill of getting off the beaten track drove up Horse Thief. An hour ago, while returning to Three Palms, Warden Keller had stopped for a routine look and read a story so familiar that it was almost monotonous.

Cattlemen, hunters, and tourists all had legitimate business driving the Horse Thief Canyon road by day. But at this season of the year nobody at all had any business driving it by night, and when Harry turned his flashlight on the road, he discovered fresh tire tracks going in but none coming out. It followed, therefore, that somebody had gone up Horse Thief Canyon to jack light an illegal deer.

The warden pondered the ways of lawbreakers, of whom some were remarkably clever—but most were just as remarkably stupid. For some reason they seemed to think that isolation alone offered safety, so, without thinking of anything else, they drove into a blind road whose only outlet was the same way they'd gone in. It never seemed to occur to them that, even if they abandoned their car and took to the hills, ownership could be traced through the license plate. Whoever might be up Horse Thief was trapped as surely as a coyote with a steel trap on each paw and a snare around its neck.

In shifting his position, the warden's hand brushed lightly his holstered .22 pistol, the only weapon he carried on patrol, and he carried that solely because, now and again, it was necessary to shoot a trapped varmint or to ease the suffering of a horse, cow, or deer that had contested the right of way with a car and discovered too late that it was no fair contest. In his early years as warden, he had packed a .38, but, although he had been threatened many times, the most desperate outlaw he had ever encountered had not been fool enough to shoot it out with a warden and risk adding murder to the charge he already faced.

Warden Keller's thoughts turned to his son. Dave was young, with his eyes full of stars and his heart full of ideals, and for a moment his father envied him. He hoped that he himself retained his ideals, but the stars that had once glowed in his eyes had lost much of their luster.

Let Dave savor his youth while it was his to enjoy, and let him give his whole heart to his glorious project of proving that varmints are sporting game—even if he did not win. If he failed—and his father thought he would—he would learn from failure. Warden Keller smiled faintly in the darkness. Youngsters were very like balls of mercury that must roll all the way to one end or the other and never can linger on middle ground. Pawnee Markson's caustic story had crushed his son. But this new-found friend who was going varmint hunting with him—his name was Jack Something-or-Other—once more had Dave riding a pink cloud.

When the fall came, let it not be too hard. In Warden Keller's opinion, Jack Whoever-He-Might-Be was precisely as he represented himself, a rich

playboy who sought to relieve his current boredom by hunting varmints. Harry Keller murmured what was really a prayer:

“Don’t let Dave become a game warden! Don’t let him! He’s meant for better things!” The very thought unnerved him.

The window was down, and the mesquite twigs continued to trade secrets with the wind, but the warden merely waited. He did not strain to hear a shot, for he did not expect to hear one. Most jack lighters relied on what they considered another very clever trick and forsook high-caliber rifles for .22s on the theory that big guns could be heard but small ones could not. If one knew how to shoot, and most jack lighters did, it was not only possible but relatively easy to kill a deer with a .22 rifle.

Presently, Warden Keller heard what he had expected to hear.

It was the sound of a motor, still far up the canyon and growling along in second. This was not only a part of the story, but a part so familiar that he could have written it in as he sat waiting. At no point was the Horse Thief Canyon road so bad that any car might be forced to run in second, but for most of its length the road was only one car width.

The warden waited, not at all excited, and knowing what took place up the canyon almost as well as though he were present. The car was in second gear because that enabled the driver to go more slowly. The only reason he must go slowly was that he ran without lights and feared running off the road. When he reached the highway, the driver would turn his lights on, travel at a moderate speed, and, he hoped, receive no more attention than any legitimate driver going about legitimate business.

Reaching to the door opposite the driver’s seat, Warden Keller opened it silently, and let it remain open. He resumed listening to the oncoming car, gauging its nearness by the increased volume of the growling motor.

This was an old game, one he’d played so often that he knew every move and the precise timing that would make each one effective. When the car growled past the cut bank north of the mesquite tree, where there was not the faintest possibility of turning around, he started his own car, shot ahead, braked to a rocking halt across the road, turned on the lights, slid out the open door, and faded into the darkness.

He ran around the mesquite tree to see the other car, halted within thirty feet of his, a black shadow save where occasional beams of starlight danced on its exterior. Knowing that this unexpected turn of events would result in

complete confusion, he waited, confident that, in a moment or two, whoever might be in the car would get out. . . .

A door opened, slammed shut, and the Warden barked, “Stay where you are!”

“Come get us, Copper!” someone snarled.

Warden Keller felt a sudden revulsion. He knew the voice, but he dared sacrifice none of the advantage given to him by the very element of surprise.

“I’m coming,” he promised.

He walked slowly toward the stalled car, keeping in the shadow. When he was near enough, he knelt to feel for a little stone. Rising, he tossed it in front of the car. He heard it make a small noise when it landed.

“I’ll shoot!” There was a tinge of hysteria in the voice.

Without answering, the warden walked softly around the back of the car. He saw them crouching there—two small figures staring intently in the direction from which they thought he would approach, as he stalked up so softly that they did not even suspect he was coming from the rear.

“I’ll shoot!” the quavery voice threatened again.

Warden Keller ordered, “Give me the gun, Johnnie.”

The pair whirled quickly, and, even as they turned, the warden’s right hand shot out to seize and wrench away the .22 rifle the older boy carried. For a moment, because he must maintain the authority he had won, he did not speak. The two were Johnnie Childress, thirteen years old, and his nine-year-old brother, Stevie. The car belonged to their father, a traveling salesman who visited his home in Three Palms and his motherless sons about one day in ten. Right now, Warden Keller thought grimly, Blake Childress was doubtless playing cards in Don Mizler’s Tavern.

He ordered, “Come here, Johnnie.”

“Wh—what are you goin’ to do?”

“What I promised I’d do when I caught you shooting quail out of season. Hurry, Johnnie.”

Both youngsters started to cry. Wondering why the car could not have contained a desperate outlaw, even one who wanted to shoot it out, Warden Keller grasped Johnnie Childress, upended him, applied the flat of his hand to the youngster’s buttocks . . . and plunked him back on his feet.

Omitted
Illustration

Boy with
rifle, being
spanked by
man. They
are in front
of vehicle.

The warden said quietly, “This is the first time I’ve caught you, Stevie, so I’m not going to spank you. But I will if I catch you again, and that’s a promise.”

He opened the rear door of the youngsters’ sedan, took out a yearling buck that lay on the floor, transferred it to his own car, then went back to face the culprits. Johnnie stopped sobbing and the warden supposed he was glaring, but he did not want to see it.

“We aren’t through,” he said sternly. “Breaking a law, any law, is bad business and the sooner you two learn that, the better off you’ll be. You know where my quail troughs are along the Sandy Flats. You two keep every one of them filled with water all summer long, and don’t let me find even one empty. Now get in your car and go home.”

Disdaining so much as a backward glance, the warden stalked to his own car, backed far enough to let the youngsters pass, then followed them down. He wondered worriedly if he’d been right or wrong, and what else should he have done? The jails are filled with men who might not be there if they’d had a good spanking at the proper time—and better to plead with the Sphinx than with Blake Childress, who just didn’t care what happened to his sons.

Warden Keller saw the pair home, then drove on to his own place. He swung in beside Dave’s desert cruiser, and hung the little buck in a shed. Mulligan came to greet him when he entered the kitchen. He looked at the clock. It read half-past one.

There was an unopened letter on the table. It was another official directive, and he slit it open to read by the kitchen’s dim light:

FROM—J. C. Bannerman, Chairman, State Game and Fish Commission.

TO—Harry Wilson Keller.

EMPLOYED AS—G. W.

SUBJECT:

On a date of which you will be advised, you will receive G. W. Henry Leonard as trainee.

Warden Keller let the directive fall from nerveless fingers, then, lest Dave find it, he retrieved the letter and stuffed it into his pocket. He conjured up an image of Henry Leonard, a promising youngster but strictly a rookie, and sat down to spread his arms on the table and press his hot face against them. Injury was not enough; they must add insult, too. They might at least have replaced him with a veteran like Mike Gentry.

Presently, he raised his head and stared across the table. Until now, he had been so very unsure. But at last he was certain, and one thing he definitely could not do was stand helplessly by and let Dave see him fired. He wrote a note.

Dave,

I collected a little buck last night and hung it in the shed. Will you please ask Dr. Jensen to have it picked up for the hospital? Don't ruin too many cars for Phil Marcy.

Dad

He returned to the car he had just parked and drove out of Three Palms. There was good hunting on the desert, if one knew where to find it, and there were many hunters who would happily sacrifice luxury, and at the same time pay well, whoever could lead them to good hunting. There were many hunters who would gladly . . .

Somehow it did not seem very convincing, for there were many resorts and lodges that offered good hunting and luxury, too, but he clamped his jaws and drove on. Regardless of whether there were many hunters, or any, who would come to an isolated lodge merely because they could be certain of an experienced guide, there was only one course for Harry Keller. He could build the lodge and even much of the furniture himself, and after he sold his house and cashed in on everything else he didn't need, he'd be able to buy a few horses and the rest of the gear hunters expect.

If he failed, he could always go back to odd jobs and trapping. He'd done it before.

Daylight found him far up a back road, approaching an adobe house. The place was shaded by citrus, olive, and palm trees that, in contrast with the desert all about, looked as incongruous as a dinosaur in a zoo. He parked his car in the yard.

The trees he had planted seemed alien, but the man who came from the house couldn't possibly have fitted any scene except this. Lean as a rock lizard and tough as ironwood, Buck Gresham's father had founded, and held, the BG spread when wild Apaches and wilder desperadoes offered their own assurance that life on the desert would never be dull.

He said, "Mo'nin', Harry."

"Good morning, Buck." Warden Keller came directly to the point. "How'd you like to run cattle over in Cougar Canyon?"

Buck looked at him suspiciously. "You askin' me?"

"I'm telling you that you can if you'd like to. I own the water rights but you own the land. For maybe fifty acres of land, plus a permanent right of way, I'll share the water."

"I'll shake on that."

"Done."

Warden Keller drove back to Three Palms, entered his house, sat down at the table, and wrote:

I hereby tender my resignation, to become effective as soon as the best interests of the Commission may be served.

Signed,
Harry Wilson Keller

He was about to include his proper title of Game Warden, but, instead, he grinned maliciously and signed the initials, G. W.

THE DEVIL AND JUAN AREQUE

SITTING NEAR his breakfast fire on a hillock—he always camped on a hillock so he could look down and see at a glance what the one thousand and fifty-nine ewes in his flock were doing—Juan Areque glanced up briefly. It was an automatic gesture, born from years of looking after sheep.

Most of his charges were lying down in a grassy basin and the sheep dogs were watching them. They were scattered at strategic intervals around the flock, and, like Juan each dog had chosen a hillock from which it might look down. The three burros that carried Juan's gear from camp to camp, because it was necessary to move when the forage around one water hole was cropped off, were standing indolently some distance from the flock. The bell on the bell burro clanged as the animal shook its head to rid itself of a fly that was biting its nose.

Assured that all was well, Juan took the huge revolver from his belt, broke the cylinder, ejected the massive cartridges, and cleaned the bore by shoving a bit of cloth through it with a worn brass rod. Then he took a vial of rattlesnake oil from an inner pocket, spilled a bit on the same cloth he had shoved through the bore, and lubricated each moving part of the revolver.

Some herders used melted bacon grease or mutton tallow as a lubricant, but both hardened in cold weather and were apt to interfere with the proper working of a gun. Rattlesnake oil, which has nothing to do with rattlesnake poison but is made from the fat of rattlesnakes, remained fluid. It was even better than bear oil.

Juan slipped the five cartridges back into the cylinder and eased the hammer down on an empty space where the sixth cartridge might have been. He gave the revolver a thorough examination.

The weapon had belonged to Juan's father before it became Juan's, and it was so old and had seen so much use that the grip was worn to the shape of fingers that had curled around it. Juan's father had shot the revolver far

more than Juan ever had, for in the day of his father there had been many more creatures to prey on sheep. But the elder Areque had needed no other weapon. Had he not killed with it the Great Bear of the Mountains—known vaguely to town dwellers and others outside the select society of shepherds as the grizzly bear?

The revolver's age was far more an asset than a liability. Only fools forsook the proven and trusted for the new and untried. Juan looked again toward the sheep, then resumed studying the gun.

Truly a great and marvelous weapon, Juan's father had carried it for twenty-six years and Juan had had it for fourteen. The revolver had served his father, who now slept peacefully in the high meadows he loved so dearly—Juan reverently crossed himself—very well and it had served Juan equally well.

In his early years he had needed it more often than he had had reason to shoot of late. Then, before the poisoners became sensible enough to do away with everything that might hurt a sheep, there had been more coyotes and bobcats. It was entirely true that Juan had shot at more than forty coyotes and bobcats and killed only two. But aside from hurling a vast slug, the revolver had a most satisfying roar. To the best of Juan's knowledge, nothing that heard the gun blast had ever dared come near a second time.

He had last shot it four years ago, to kill a bear. It was not like the great bear his father had killed—there were none of those left but a smaller black bear that had brazenly attacked the flock and, in turn, had been attacked by the dogs. The dogs were holding it at bay when Juan ran up. Standing within six feet of the bear, he had shot twice and twice the gun had missed fire. But the third shot more than atoned for two failures. The great chunk of lead plowed into the bear's skull and laid him limp and dead among the dogs.

Juan had not shot the revolver since or had he any desire to shoot. First, last, and always he was a shepherd, and what man in his right senses would wish to be anything else? Since he had already scaled the highest peaks a human being can climb, he was entirely willing to leave in peace whatever left his sheep in peace.

But he was just as willing to battle anything that endangered the flock. If he must pay such a price, he would buy the safety of his sheep with his own life.

Juan thrust the revolver back in his belt and glanced again at the sheep. Anger flamed within him. There were one thousand and fifty-nine ewes

where there had been one thousand and sixty. The missing ewe marked the first he had lost to a raider in four years. Rosita, mother of the three dogs that now attended the flock, was the first dog he had ever lost.

The devil that had killed the fine ewe, then turned upon and killed Rosita when she rushed to the sheep's aid, had haunted Juan's dreams ever since. He saw it as it had been that morning when neither daylight nor darkness held sway. It was a great thing the color of the sun, with fire of the sun coming from its eyes and nostrils. Juan prayed to meet that devil again.

He turned to his camp, a one-man tent pitched from the low branches of a great cottonwood, with a bedroll within the tent and supplies and packsaddles beside it. Laying a skillet across his fireplace, that was exactly wide enough to accommodate that cooking utensil, Juan fried bacon. He fried tortillas, thin slices of bread, in the bacon grease, then ate half the tortillas and bacon and laid half aside to serve as a cold lunch. Tonight, he would eat bacon and beans.

With infrequent variations, sometimes Juan treated himself to a bit of fruit or green vegetable and sometimes he visited another shepherd, where he could not courteously decline anything offered. That was his year-round fare and he thrived on it. He had no taste for mutton, which other Basque shepherds liked, but he was only half an Euskaldun, or one who speaks the Basque tongue. His father had emigrated from Vizcaya, but his mother was a dark-eyed Mexican woman, made exclusively of fire that could flare hotly at times but for the most part radiated the gentlest warmth. It was his mother who had taught Juan to know and like the foods of her people.

Finished eating, Juan filled his skillet with water that he dipped from a pail, put it back over the smoldering embers of his fire and dropped his plate and spoon down in it. In time, the warming water would do most of his dishwashing. Scouring with clean, dry sand would complete the job. Juan entered his tent, opened a leather case that he himself had made, and brought forth his one luxury.

It was a *jarana*, a musical instrument that his mother's remote ancestors had copied from ukuleles brought to Mexico by the swashbuckling, conquering soldiers of Cortez. It was even more precious than the money credited to his account in the bank at Three Palms. Since he was almost never close to a store and thus almost never spent anything, Juan's monthly pay was deposited for him. The money would keep his body when he became too old to herd sheep. But the *jarana* charmed his spirit.

Sitting cross-legged, Juan struck up a melody. Presently, he began to sing along with it. This was no song that has been or will be heard through television or radio loud speakers. Neither the lyrics nor the melody has ever been imprisoned on paper, and probably the centuries that have elapsed since the first shepherd sang the song have changed both. But the music was there because it was in the heart of Juan Areque.

“The grass is green,
The sheep grow fat.
Fear naught, my sheep,
For I guard thee.
My dogs and I guard thee.

“Before the wind,
The trees bow down.
Fear naught, my sheep.
For I guard thee.
My dogs and I guard thee.”

He sang on and on. There was no specific moment when he must stop singing and be about something else, for Juan had never been aware of time as the clock measures it. He knew only that any day would indeed be lost if it were not begun with music, and the proper time to stop singing was when his heart told him the day was rightly started. Presently, that time arrived.

Juan replaced the *jarana*, closed the case—then whirled and leaped from the tent when one of his dogs, Miel, barked. He brushed something and there was a sound of ripping cloth. Without stopping to look at it, or even think about it, he raced on.

He halted where he could see all his sheep and shook his head sadly. One day Miel would be a good dog. Now he was little more than a puppy and he had barked, and was still barking, at a long-eared jack rabbit that paid not the least attention to him. The two older dogs, Pablo and El Agrio, called The Sour for his short temper, were still in their places, and now and again both gave Miel a disgusted glance.

Reassured as to the safety of his flock, Juan had time to inspect his damaged trousers.

He had snagged them on one of the packsaddles that lay just outside the tent, and there was a six-inch rip between the top of his shoe and the knee of the right trouser leg. This should not be, since he had paid an ample amount

of money for the trousers and he had worn them only three years. But it was unfortunately so. Rather than mutter against the merchant who'd sold him inferior goods, however, it was wise to repair the damage.

Juan looked about for a fallen saguaro, found one, made his way to it, crushed the dry and brittle needles with the sole of his shoe, stripped off a section of the leathery outer shell, and shredded it into threads. He used the point of his knife to punch tiny holes on both sides of the rip and clamped it together by running a saguaro thread through opposite holes and tying it.

It was not the job he wanted, but he had used the last of his thread to patch a hole in his jacket and then lost the needle. He thought a trade rat had carried it off, for those four-footed collectors of anything they could find always gave value received and Juan had discovered a shiny stone where the needle had been.

The next time he saw Dave Keller, Juan would ask him to bring a needle and thread for proper tailoring. But there was no hurry.

His trousers temporarily repaired, Juan went down among his flock.

Pablo and El Agrio, seeing him, demonstrated their pleasure with wagging tails. They did not leave their posts, for Juan had not given the signal that would bring them in. But the puppyish Miel bounded eagerly forward.

Juan halted and turned to face Miel. There was no anger written on his face, however, for he knew better than to become angry with a dog—especially a son of Rosita, who had fought so gallantly that morning when it was neither light nor dark and the devil came to seize a ewe. Rosita had died rather than betray her trust and Miel, even as Juan, must be ready to die should the need arise.

When the gamboling puppy was near enough, Juan pointed a finger at him and said thunderously, “You have left your sheep, useless dog! Return to them at once, and seek favors after you have first learned your duties!”

Miel stopped, flattened his ears, drooped his tail, and—when the pointing finger did not waver—padded back to his abandoned post. Juan went on.

An apprentice sheep dog, he thought, was not unlike an apprentice shepherd. Both made mistakes because they knew no better. Whoever raged at them, or sought to correct with violence what he could not manage with wisdom, found himself with a coward, a rebel, or a mediocre creature who did as ordered simply because he was ordered. Firmness tempered with

kindness invariably resulted in a sheep dog that was the pride of Juan's heart and the envy of other shepherds.

Approaching a ewe that came to meet him, Juan took a bit of greasy brown paper from his pocket, emptied the salt wrapped in the paper on the palm of his hand, and let the ewe lick it off. Then she stood quietly to have her nose scratched.

The ewe, Emilia, had been born to the flock six years ago. Juan himself had found her, a mite of life whose long legs seemed all out of proportion to her elfin body, standing perplexedly over the mother that had found death in giving Emilia life. He had warmed her, and fed her from a bottle, and crooned to her when she was frightened or lonely. This marked Emilia's last season with the flock, for after the lambing, her worn teeth would no longer be capable of cropping the rough herbage that provides a range ewe's food.

Juan pondered a thought that occurred to him rarely. Although he always considered them his, the sheep did not really belong to him. They were owned by Harry Pendleton, who had a dozen such flocks and a dozen Basque herders on various grazing grounds. But if the sheep *were* Juan's, rather than go to the slaughterhouse, Emilia would be put on soft browse for another two years, or perhaps even three years. Thus she would produce another three to five lambs before her life on earth was ended. Only one who did not appreciate the true miracle of sheep would summarily dispose of aged ewes simply because it was too much trouble to give them the care they needed.

When he did not think of Harry Pendleton, and the fact that the flock really belonged to this other man, Juan was very contented. When he did, he was very discontented. He let his thoughts dwell on the money in the bank and made a resolution that he had been making for the past ten years, whenever he thought of Harry Pendleton. He would herd no more for anyone else, after the lambing was over—and who but Juan Areque could be trusted to see that his ewes were properly delivered of their lambs? He had enough money to buy a flock of his own.

Then he saw Dave Keller and Jack Ebbets coming with Mulligan and immediately forgot all about Harry Pendleton and his own flock of sheep.

Juan did not go to meet the trio. He liked Dave, whom he had known for years. But he liked the solitude of his isolated pastures even more and nowadays, when scarcely a week passed without a visitor, the pastures seemed overcrowded. However, they were coming to his camp and, of course, one must be courteous.

“Good morning, Juan,” Dave sang out.

“*Buenas dias*, good morning,” Juan replied, and nodded to Jack Ebbets.

“Lost any more sheep?” Dave queried.

“No.”

“Everything’s all right, eh?”

“Yes.”

Dave grinned. “Well, I guess we’ll move on then. We’re still after a coyote.”

There was a short silence . . . then Juan asked, “When you come again?”

“In one week,” Dave answered.

“Will you bring me the needle and thread?”

“Sure thing.”

Juan reached inside his shirt, unclasped a safety pin that held a sheepskin pouch, took out a dime and a penny, and pressed the money into Dave’s hand.

“One needle only,” he stipulated. “To Cottonwood Springs.”

“I’ll be glad to buy you a couple of packs and—” Jack Ebbets began.

Dave shot him a warning glance and Ebbets quieted. Basque shepherds ask no odds from any man and no man has to buy them anything. Dave pocketed the money.

The trio left and Juan turned to his sheep. Sheep need water, approximately a gallon and a half per day per animal, and the secret of keeping them in desert country hinges largely on the ability of the shepherd to find both water and forage. The forage near his present water hole was almost exhausted, and tomorrow Juan must move to Cottonwood Springs, four and a half miles away and a long trek for any flock of sheep. It would be impossible in desert country if an inexperienced herder were in charge.

But cold nights and warming days invariably brought a heavy morning dew, and Juan had known since childhood that sheep may get much of their daily requirement of water by browsing on dew-laden herbage. If he started very early and traveled very slowly, letting the flock forage as it moved, by the time the dew was gone, the sheep would be both thirsty and near enough to Cottonwood Springs so that they’d need no urging.

It was still darker than a black cat when Juan, having breakfasted, struck his tent at midnight, brought his burros in, and packed them by the fire's light. When the first wan promise of dawn lighted the cloudy sky, he started the flock. The older ewes led. The younger ones obediently followed.

Pablo and Agrio, the more experienced of the three dogs, patrolled endlessly on either flank, both to cope with any peril that might arise and to round up strays. Swollen with pride at what he probably considered the most important post of all, Miel brought up the rear.

Juan and the burros trailed all, and it was not even necessary to hold the animals' lead ropes. They were too intelligent to run away while carrying packs, for they knew that they could not rid themselves of their burdens.

The sun rose. The flock continued to browse its way toward Cottonwood Springs and Juan was entirely contented. This was how things were meant to be. Only town dwellers, who live by the clock rather than by the sun, the wind, and the necessity for finding new forage and water, live frantic lives. Shepherds know that there are times to hurry. But there are also times to take it slowly—and even some wise men do not know the difference.

The day became warmer, almost summery, and, as the sun stole the dew from the herbage, the sheep browsed less and moved more. Presently, they ceased to browse at all, for although their paunches were filled with food, their throats cried for water. The last quarter mile to Cottonwood Springs was made at a near run.

Omitted
Illustration
Two page
spread. Man
squatting
under a tree
while
smoking a
pipe. Two
alert dogs
and the man
are watching

over a flock
of sheep.

The sheep went down to drink. Juan unpacked his burros. He hobbled them before turning them loose, for there were wild burros about and tame ones are easily lured with the promise of a free life. Then he pitched his tent, spread his bedroll, and cooked his supper.

At sundown, the sheep were bedded peacefully near the water, with the dogs on guard. Juan sought his own bed with the foreknowledge that he would sleep peacefully, for he had earned his rest.

He was awakened by the angry barking of Pablo. As soon as he heard the dog, Juan leaped from his bed. Thrusting his feet into shoes and taking the huge revolver in his hand, he rushed outside and looked to the left of the flock, Pablo's assigned station.

It was not quite dark and not yet light, but the devil was plainly to be seen. He was the color of the sun, with fire of the sun flashing from his eyes and nostrils. Emilia, who would never feel the butcher's knife now, since she was pinned beneath one of the devil's forepaws, lay very still.

His anger mounting with every step, Juan started to run. This was what he had waited for; this was what he had wanted. The devil had taken toll of his flock once. Now he was back, and Juan must reach him before he killed Pablo as he had Rosita.

Juan did not halt until there was only ten feet between the devil and himself. Then he cocked the huge revolver, steadied it with both hands, took careful aim, and pressed the trigger.

Omitted
Illustration
Man and
dog
watching
something
near a tree.

THE SHEPHERD'S CAMP

DAVE KELLER awakened a few minutes before the tinny clatter of his alarm clock would have brought him leaping out of bed. He reached down in the darkness to shut off the alarm, lay for a moment with his arm trailing over the side of the bed, then rose and dressed without bothering to turn on a light.

As he entered the kitchen and flicked the light switch, Mulligan left his favorite sleeping place near the stove to wag to him and have his ears tickled. This ritual completed, Dave opened the door, let the dog out, lighted a burner, and put the coffeepot over it, and washed. About to start preparing breakfast for Jack Ebbets and himself, he glanced at the open door of his father's bedroom and a troubled frown creased his brow.

Warden Keller had been away a great deal of late. Within itself, that was not extraordinary because he was often away, but it did seem more than coincidental to Dave that his father was usually absent just when he was home. He tried to rid himself of a feeling that his father was deliberately avoiding him because he was in some serious trouble that he preferred to keep to himself.

Dave was not wholly successful, but he wondered at himself because such a thought could even occur to him. What sort of trouble—at least trouble that he dared not discuss with his son—might a game warden find himself facing? Nevertheless, there was no denying that Dave's father had not been his old self since returning from the Apache Checking Station, at the end of deer season. Even during the few times when Dave and his father had come face to face, the latter had said little except that his son should consider anew, and carefully, the dog's life led by all game wardens and the lush rewards he might reap if he forgot all about following in his father's footsteps and turned his talents to almost any other job.

A wistful little smile flitted across Dave's lips. His father, who'd never seen any reason for being proud of himself, probably did consider his the lowliest of jobs. He never failed to show Dave his monthly pay check, along with some comment to the effect that nobody except an idiot would work so hard for so little. However, there were other rewards that might never occur to Keller, Senior, but were not lost on his son.

For instance, on one of those rare occasions when both the Kellers were home, Blake Childress had come storming into their house just as Dave left it. Nobody except Blake and Harry Keller knew exactly what had taken place after that. Blake had received his black eye, Warden Keller explained, when he stumbled and fell. But shortly afterward Blake started coming home every night, instead of every tenth night. Johnnie and Stevie Childress, or so the talk went, had enlisted their father's wholehearted aid in taking care of the quail troughs on the Sandy Flats.

Dave shook a puzzled head. Johnnie and Stevie had been running wild. But they were wild no more, and just what part had Warden Keller played in taming them? Dave didn't know and his father would never tell, but Dave did know that Blake had not received a black eye because he stumbled by chance. It went deeper than that, and, because it did, a pair of youngsters were receiving the parental attention they deserved and a home was happier.

Dave looked again at the open door of his father's bedroom, at the closed one behind which Jack Ebbets still slept, and at the clock. It was half-past three. If they were going to start into the desert at the customary four o'clock, it was high time to get moving. When the coffee in the pot began to bubble, Dave laid thick strips of bacon in a skillet, placed a half-dozen eggs within easy reach, and plugged in the toaster.

Mulligan whined at the door. Dave admitted him, then went in to shake the shoulder of Jack Ebbets.

"Time's a-wastin'."

"Huh? Oh! Be right along."

Hair tumbled and eyes sleepy, Jack came into the kitchen, shaved with an electric razor, washed, combed his hair, and grinned at Dave.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that this is the time reasonable people go to bed?"

"Nobody said I'm reasonable."

“I didn’t anyhow,” Jack conceded. “If you were, you wouldn’t be giving your free time to hunting coyotes, and all just to prove you can do it. How many hundred million miles of that desert have we tramped over?”

“Fifteen,” Dave guessed.

“At least that many. My legs are a full two inches shorter than they were when I started.”

“Breakfast’s all set and I won’t forget the lunch.”

Jack grinned. “I’ll think you don’t like my pemmican.” He sat down, helped himself to some bacon and three eggs, and a slice of toast that Dave had piled on a plate in the center of the table. He took a hearty drink of black coffee and sighed appreciatively. Then he looked inquiringly at his companion.

“Are you on a diet, or something?”

“Nope, there’s just a little item I mustn’t forget.”

Dave dropped the spool of thread he had bought for Juan Areque into a pliofilm sack. He split a cork, imbedded an end of the needle in each of the two halves, and put it beside the thread. Rolling the sack into a small bundle, he snapped a rubber band around it, tucked it into an inside pocket, and buttoned the flap of the pocket.

“For our shepherd pal, eh?” Jack remarked. “I’d darn’ near forgotten about him.”

Dave seated himself. “If I forgot, Juan would consider himself slighted by a friend.”

“You mean he’d get mad over a spool of thread and a needle?”

“Not over that, but he wouldn’t like the idea that I’d promised something and failed to come through. Besides, out where he is, needles and thread are not exactly easy to come by.”

Jack said wryly, “Then I should think he’d stock at least a couple of extra needles. Or is he too tight-fisted?”

“He’s just different,” Dave explained. “In his opinion, a needle’s a needle, and why buy two when one will last for a dozen or so years? But let one of his friends become ill, or face need, and Juan would hand over his whole bank roll without thinking twice.”

“Then he does have a bank roll?”

“Yes, and it must be a pretty hefty one by now. I don’t know how much Harry Pendleton pays him, but I do know that Juan probably spends less on strictly personal needs in a year than most people do in a week. The rest is stashed away, probably in the bank right here at Three Palms.”

“Didn’t anybody ever let him know that he can’t take it with him?” Jack queried.

“He wouldn’t know what they were talking about if they did,” Dave assured him. “There never has been and never will be a Basque shepherd who doesn’t know what money’s for, but neither will there ever be one who isn’t sure that sheep are more precious than anything else.”

“I like that little guy,” Jack commented. “He really thinks a devil did in his ewe and his dog.”

“He’s sure of it,” Dave said.

“Yet, he seems to live for the day when it comes again, so he can get even.”

“Juan will slug it out with a devil or anything else that hurts one of his sheep or one of his dogs. He isn’t afraid of the most evil of foes when it threatens his flock.”

“Wish I could say the same about myself.” Jack chuckled. “I can’t recall seeing any devils, but if ever I did see one, I’m afraid it’d be somewhat less than one-nineteenth of a second before Jack Ebbets was a cloud of dust, disappearing over the farthest horizon.” Abruptly, he changed the subject. “What gives with your father, Dave?”

“What do you mean?”

“This is the fourth time you and I have girded our loins and set out to slay a coyote for ourselves, but he has not been home one single time. Doesn’t he ever sleep in his own bed?”

“Sometimes game wardens find it better to work at night,” Dave evaded.

Jack commented dryly, “Evidently your father finds it expedient to work night and day. I’ve yet to meet him, although I look forward to that pleasure. From what you’ve told me, he must be the best of the best.”

“He is,” Dave asserted with quiet conviction.

“There’s nothing like buttering up your dad,” Jack teased. “What do you hope to get for your birthday? A new car, or an introduction to a ravishingly beautiful girl?”

“Either would be acceptable.” Dave grinned. “Shall we put an end to this chin-chopping and get out on the desert before it’s time to turn around and come home?”

It was not so cold as it had been, but still nippy enough so that tightly-buttoned jackets did not come amiss, driving through the cold night. As usual, they picked up speed as soon as they were outside the limits of Three Palms.

Dave pondered the mission he had undertaken. The idea that he could prove varmints are sporting game, and, as such, are worth the attention of any sporting hunter, no longer inspired hearty laughter and ribald comment in Three Palms. Only occasionally was he asked whether he had recently partaken of the locoweed.

On the other hand, he seemed just as far from realizing his goal as he had been that day he’d stalked the great buck and the lion had intercepted and killed it. Both the buck’s antlers and the bobcat skin were still defiantly on display in Phil Marcy’s window, but neither drew more than casual glances and both had outlived their news value. Now, barring a miracle, the whole project was destined for that selfsame doom which has enveloped so many of the best-laid plans of mice and men.

A month ago, on the first field trip with Jack, they had found a pair of coyotes with cubs and had interfered in no way with the family. Although those cubs had arrived long before the customary time, the season when every coyote in the desert would be burdened with family duties was short weeks away. The hunt did not necessarily have to end then, for there was no law that said it must, but Dave knew he’d end it at least until the cubs were able to take care of themselves.

What then? The coyote that followed the great buck had set the whole thing rolling, and Dave felt that interest might flare afresh if he could put a coyote’s pelt on the opposite side of the antlers. But it must be done soon. Dave recalled one of his father’s axioms to the effect that most people have very good memories but few have very long ones.

Of course there was the alternative of forsaking coyotes completely and swinging over to a lion hunt. Naturally, lions produce families, too, but the lioness assumes all family responsibilities. If they were able to bag an old male, almost certainly it would arouse new interest.

Dave clenched his jaws and drove on. Since there was so little time left for coyote hunting, it probably would be well to try as hard as possible for

one of these varmints. Then they'd turn their attention to lions. After that—although Dave hadn't the faintest notion of how he'd do it—he'd try his best to put the idea across. He'd interest other hunters. The whole idea seemed as good now as it had the day he'd thought it out.

As they approached the Kelsey Mine turnoff, Jack Ebbets murmured, "Ah! The boulevard once more!"

Dave asked, "Does it look as bad as it did the first time?"

"This is one instance where familiarity has not bred contempt," Jack admitted. "But since you've brought me back alive on several occasions, I've seen no reason to increase my insurance. What's on the agenda for this morning?"

"Coyotes. They'll be denned soon and I don't think much of the idea of shooting coyotes—or anything else—if that'll mean starvation of their young. We might as well work toward Cottonwood Springs, so we can deliver Juan's needle and thread."

"Check."

Dave came to a stop and the occupants of the desert cruiser climbed down and struck off through the darkness. Mulligan padded behind or beside Dave. None of the trio was especially concerned as to the way they were going because there was no need for concern. There was a robot in the brain of each that seemed automatically to guide his feet and to keep him out of trouble. Dave planned the hunt as they walked along.

Cottonwood Springs, their rendezvous with Juan Areque, was about three miles—or two hours as hunters would take it—from the hill where they would await sunup. There was a good chance of jumping a coyote between the hill and the springs. Then, after delivering Juan's needle and thread, they'd make a wide circle and hunt back toward the desert cruiser.

They waited on the dark hill, and the breeze that fanned their cheeks bore more than a faint promise of spring to be. The sky lightened. . . . When it was light enough to permit adequate sighting through a scope, the two friends separated to begin hunting.

Dave, who must guide, since he knew the exact location of Cottonwood Springs, glanced occasionally toward Jack Ebbets. He was not unduly concerned about his partner, since they'd hunted together often enough to prove the other's abilities. There was no danger of Jack's getting lost, or of his failing to keep his guide in sight.

Mulligan, with no orders to stay near Dave, padded restlessly into washes and canyons to read the story of the desert as only a dog's nose can read it—and no human eye will ever see it. Bobbing up ahead and waiting, or racing to catch his master when some especially interesting tale delayed him, Mulligan's canine grin and bobbing stub of tail were evidence enough that he was enjoying himself to the fullest.

As usual, Dave kept to the knobs and low hills from which he could look down into the canyons and basins. Coyotes, as experience had conclusively demonstrated, were not easy to find and, when found, they were not easy to hit. He reflected ruefully that, aside from being sporting game, coyotes might even be impossible game.

Dave climbed a hill, and, in the distance, saw the cluster of great cottonwood trees from which Cottonwood Springs took its name. He swung to the right, so that he might stay on the spine at the head of a basin rather than dip into it, and reached the top of the next hill. Juan Areque's sheep were clustered near the springs, and Dave knitted his brows in wonder. There was nothing wrong with sheep being near water, but when they had met Juan a week ago, the forage on the range he'd then occupied was almost exhausted. Cottonwood Springs had furnished lush pasture indeed if Juan, who must have been there nearly a week, could still keep his flock so near.

Mulligan panted out of the basin to fall in at Dave's heels, and, off to the left, Dave saw Jack Ebbets silhouetted on top of another hill. Dave lowered his rifle, and, with Mulligan still at his heels, hit a fast stride. Since a shepherd was so near, it was unlikely that he'd find any coyotes between here and Cottonwood Springs.

A gusty little wind blew from the springs toward the pair. When the wind played about his nostrils, Mulligan bristled and snarled ferociously.

Dave whirled in his tracks, momentarily too astonished to do anything else. He thought he knew all Mulligan's signals, and all the ways he reacted to various scents, but this was wholly new. Mulligan's lips were drawn back, his eyes blazed fury, he bristled like an enraged wolf. Dave looked over toward Cottonwood Springs.

The sheep seemed to be browsing peacefully, and to all other outward appearances everything else was serene. But Mulligan continued to bristle and snarl. Dave waved to Jack Ebbets, saw his signal acknowledged, and Jack turn and start toward him. A few minutes later, his friend climbed the hill on which he stood.

“What’s up?”

“Something’s wrong at Juan’s camp.”

Jack turned to study the browsing flock, then glanced back at Dave. “I see nothing wrong.”

“Look at Mulligan.”

“He doesn’t seem exactly the ideal pet for a refined lady at this moment,” Jack admitted. “Well?”

“We’ll go in, but we’d better go carefully.”

Mulligan broke from them and darted ahead, then returned grudgingly when Dave ordered him back to heel. Dave’s wonder mounted even while his anxiety grew. Many times he had seen Mulligan angry, but never before had he known the big dog to be so completely enraged. Something was indeed amiss at Juan Areque’s camp.

They passed the sheep, browsing over a basin that was already almost browsed out and with two dogs guarding them. Juan Areque, Dave remembered, had had three dogs. Now the one called El Agrio was missing. Another, Pablo, limped about on three legs. The puppy, Miel, seemed unhurt. But more than just the fact that one dog was missing and another hurt was involved here. If Juan Areque were not also dead or badly hurt, he would not let his beloved flock pick over scanty forage that had obviously been picked over at least three times.

Once more, Mulligan broke and stiff-legged ahead. Dave ordered him back, speaking more sharply than he usually did because the dog’s anger was fast getting the better of his self-control. Dave put his thumb against the safety of his rifle, so that he could flip it and be ready to shoot in an instant. He noted automatically that Jack Ebbets followed suit. They climbed the hill where Juan Areque had made his camp, and from the hill they saw what had happened.

Juan lay still on the ground with the great revolver clutched firmly in his hand. Evidently, the devil had come a second time to attack his sheep.

Omitted
Illustration
Dog walking
up to a man

lying on the
ground. The
man's hand
is the only
part of him
that is
visible.

THE FACE OF THE DEVIL

FOR A MOMENT all three halted in their tracks, as though they were actors in a moving picture and the projector had stopped abruptly. Then Mulligan bristled forward once more and Dave found his voice.

“Stay!” he shouted.

The big mongrel halted reluctantly, and for a split second he looked at the prostrate shepherd. Then he glanced over his shoulder at Dave and faced away to search the wind currents. The dog scented something that neither of the two humans could see. His head moved as sinuously as that of a cobra turning to meet an enemy.

Dave ordered, “Here!”

Mulligan padded unwillingly to his master’s side, but his body alone was there. Once again, he had found The Thing he did not know but must challenge. Its scent filled his nostrils and fired his heart and brain, and had he been alone, he would at once have leaped forth to offer battle. But above and beyond his own lust to fight came an age-old obedience to his master.

He continued to read the story the breezes brought him, and his anger flared higher. The Thing had felled Juan Areque some time ago, so the scent it had left then was almost faded. But it had been at the flock, now defended by only two dogs, within the past hour, and when it left, another ewe had gone with it. After striking down the shepherd, The Thing had found an easy source of food in the sheep.

It had never stood in great fear of any human being, and this triumph over Juan Areque made it brazen. It knew its own power and was willing to match that strength with anything at all. Mulligan understood that it was a mighty strength, and that The Thing was by far the fiercest enemy he would ever meet. For that very reason, he must meet it.

So absorbed was he in the scent of The Thing that he whirled almost savagely when Dave stooped to grasp his bristled ruff. He snarled, resenting this interference—or any other that might keep him from his enemy. But he had not yet become the complete beast, and, rather than slash the restraining hand, he submitted to it. Dave slipped a length of rawhide around his neck, tied it, and straightened.

“I’ve never seen Mulligan so mad!”

Jack Ebbets asked quietly, “What do you think it is?”

“I’d guess the lion, but we’ll find out.”

Side by side, with Dave half dragging the furious Mulligan, they walked over and looked down upon Juan Areque. The little Basque shepherd lay where the devil had felled him. His shirt was ripped to shreds. There were punctures on one side of his neck where great fangs had clamped and then penetrated.

There was that present which saddened the heart but at the same time lifted it. A man, dedicated to a job, had chosen to risk death rather than fail his flock. In addition, rather than an ordinary foe, he had unhesitatingly pitted himself against the devil. Few men have so much courage.

Jack Ebbets said, again quietly, “Juan still has his gun in his hand. He must have shot, and that revolver of his packs a slug half as big as a ten-ton truck. Anything able to take it and then walk off has the stamina of an elephant unless, of course, Juan missed.”

“He didn’t miss,” asserted Dave.

“How do you know?”

“Look at the tracks.”

“Tracks?”

“There. In that patch of soft earth.”

Jack looked and whistled his astonishment. Still visible in a bit of loose ground were the paw marks of a huge cat. Jack shook his head in disbelief.

“I’ve seen wildcat tracks, but never any *that* big.”

Dave said, “It’s the same varmint that cut in ahead of me and killed the buck. There aren’t two that big.”

“What makes you so sure Juan didn’t miss it?”

“Because I know Juan. The first time this beast hit his flock, it was too far off to let him get in a shot. He wouldn’t have made the same mistake twice. Since it was obviously attacking anyway, my guess is that he waited until it was practically within spitting distance before he shot.”

Just then, Mulligan, who had kept his nose in the swirling breezes, lunged, pulling his master with him for three wild steps. Dave gained control and led the excited dog to a nearby paloverde tree, where he tied him, then returned to Jack and Juan Areque.

Dave knelt beside the shepherd. Gently, he started to remove the gun from Juan’s hand, so that he could shift him to a better position for counting his pulse and testing his heartbeat. To his amazement, the man’s fingers tightened on the butt.

Jack noted the movement and quickly set about helping Dave to transfer Juan carefully to his tent, where the injured man could rest more easily on his bedroll, protected from the glare of the sun later on. Then he went to work with the emergency medical kit that he always carried on hunting trips, bandaging up the shepherd’s wounds and stemming the flow of blood. Dave served as a capable assistant.

When they had finished, Jack said, “We had better go get someone to help bring Juan in to the hospital.”

The two were startled to hear a voice coming from the direction of the bedroll. “No, you must get that devil first, while the tracks are fresh. Juan is strong. I will be all right. The dogs will keep guard. Hurry! No time must be lost.”

“We will get him,” Dave promised quietly. “It will not take long.”

Jack gasped, but for a moment he said nothing because he was too startled to talk. A seriously injured man lay before them. By all the rules and conventions he knew, and by everything in which he had been taught to believe, their first duty was to see that Juan Areque was taken to where he could receive skilled and proper care.

“We can’t go on hunting!” he exploded.

Dave replied firmly, “I’m afraid we must.”

“Count me out,” Jack said flatly. “I’ll come back and hunt with you to the bitter end, but first I intend to bring help and get Juan out of here!”

“Then you will do it alone.” Dave extended the keys to his desert cruiser. “Mulligan and I are going after that varmint.”

“I can’t understand you, Dave,” Jack said in obvious bewilderment. “I know you consider this varmint hunt very important, but for pete’s safe, humanity should come first!”

Dave replied coldly, “I know these shepherds. They come from sturdy stock and Juan is the most stalwart of them all. It would be far harder on him to let that Devil get away unchallenged while we were taking care of him than to leave him here for a short time while we carry on the fight for him.”

Jack started to argue the point once more but the burning intensity of Juan’s gaze halted him. The shepherd looked as though he would insist on carrying out the varmint hunt himself, if they did not.

Dave continued urgently, “That beast will keep on visiting Juan’s flock whenever he wants a sheep. If he hadn’t been here very recently, Mulligan wouldn’t be so riled. We’ve got a fresh track. If we go all the way to Three Palms, then return here and help carry Juan out, we won’t have one. Nor is there any guarantee that he’ll come back here for another sheep. If we don’t get on him, and *get him right now*, we may never kill him. And he’ll live to kill again. He’ll go on to attack other sheep—and other shepherds.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Jack admitted.

“I can’t think of it any other way, and you know how Juan feels about it. I’m not forgetting his safety either. . . . But go ahead and get help first, if you think you should.”

“I guess not,” Jack declined. “Your explanation makes sense.”

They stepped out of the tent, after placing water and some of Jack’s pemmican within reach of a relaxed Juan. They also left the great revolver, although, after a quick inspection, Dave had realized its ineffectiveness. When he had flipped the cylinder open and examined the cartridge, he had found the story plainly written for anyone able to read it. Juan Areque, who preferred to put his faith in the old and proven, had never doubted that he could trust the great revolver. Had not his father trusted it? Had not it served Juan very well? He had never once considered that ammunition does not necessarily improve with age, and he had bought the cartridges with which the revolver was loaded seven years ago. The firing pin had descended and left its mark, but nothing else had happened. For a second time, his great revolver had missed fire.

For a moment, the pair just stood outside, watching the flock. Pablo, who had also challenged the devil had been mauled by him, hobbled on three legs to head off a ewe that had left the other sheep and cut into the

cactus. Miel, still the puppy but doing his best, patrolled his side of the flock like an eager rookie soldier on sentry duty.

The two friends started toward Mulligan, who was sitting down now, but still shaking his head into the various wind currents. Dave swallowed a lump in his throat. He tried not to think that it takes a pack of dogs—a pack of very good dogs—to hold a lion. To cut just one dog loose on any lion's track, unless the lion treed at once, probably meant a death sentence for the dog.

Where was the desert tree, aside from one of the great cottonwoods, big enough to hold the huge beast that had again raided Juan's camp? What was the likelihood that a lion so big would tree, anyway? But where was the choice? The creature's fresh track was here and now. It might never be found again—and Mulligan could take it this minute!

Jack asked, "Do you think we can get him?"

"We'll sure try, and we're going to do some traveling." Dave forced a laugh in which there was no mirth. "Mulligan always has figured he can lick anything on four legs. I aim to be within shooting distance when he tangles with the lion."

Jack declared, "I'll try hard to be with you."

Miel, seeing the unfamiliar pair and fearing they might be bent on harming the sheep, came a little way toward them, the better to fight, if battle he must. He watched them steadily, anxiety written in every line and nervous action, for Miel had a fearful responsibility.

Jack exclaimed, "That's a good dog!"

"Juan Areque wouldn't have any other kind," Dave remarked.

"What about the sheep?"

"They've been all right for a while. They'll be all right until we come back."

"You don't sound very convincing."

Dave said shortly, "I know what I'm doing."

But in his own heart he was aware that he knew only partly what he was doing and that his very uncertainty had communicated itself to Jack. Mightily he wished that his father were here. Warden Keller was never at a loss in any situation that had to do with or arose from the desert. Dave put the thought behind him. His father was not here, there was no time to get

him, and the lion must not escape. He turned to Jack Ebbets. "Sorry I boiled over, and I'm not convinced about much of anything except that somebody has to have a crack at that lion before he kills again."

Jack grinned briefly. "And there's nobody here but us chickens, hey, boss? Lead on. I'll be a faithful follower."

Mulligan continued to strain into the wind currents as Dave paused beside him and untied the rawhide thong. Then he rose slowly and stood tensely, wild to be on with the hunt but willing to wait for the order that would free him. It came.

Dave said, "Take him, Mulligan!"

The dog catapulted away, head held high rather than with his nose to the ground, for the scent of The Thing still hung heavily in the air. A single challenging roar burst from his throat as he raced up a narrow defile to the summit of a rocky hill. Then he was silent. This was the great hunt, the one for which he'd been born, and he must concentrate only on finding and closing with the enemy.

The scent faded where the rising sun had warmed the opposite slope, and Mulligan had to stop and cast about. Finally, he picked up the trail, once more, his rage growing because he must run more slowly. Then he raced into a cool canyon, where the scent lingered. The faster he ran, the sooner he'd come to grips with The Thing.

Dave panted up the hill beyond which the dog had disappeared and looked anxiously at the expanse of desert that faced him. He saw no living thing. Not even a bird fluttered its wings in all that vast area. A steel band seemed to tighten around his neck, so that it was difficult to swallow the lump in his throat. He strained to hear . . . and heard only the sighing wind. He turned and waited for Jack to catch up.

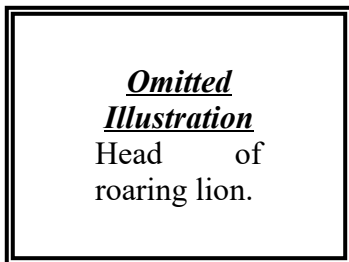
A full hundred and fifty yards in the rear, but obviously working hard just to stay that close to his younger companion, Jack slowed his trot to a fast walk when Dave halted. His jacket hung open. He had lost his hat. When he finally came to a stop beside Dave he mopped his moist face and forehead with a handkerchief.

As soon as he caught his breath, he said, "You needn't wait for me. I'll get there."

"We'll both get there," Dave promised. "But we had better use common-sense. We won't run that cat down."

Jack smiled thinly. “You’re the boss.”

Dave turned again to the country that could be seen from the hilltop. He said, as though he were speaking to himself, “That cat’s brazen as a yearling buck with his first antlers, and he has already gotten away with murder. He’ll see no reason to run fast or far, but he’s no fool. I think he’ll hole up in some brush-grown dry wash or among the boulders.”



Jack indicated the country below them with a sweeping motion of his right arm. “Will we find him there?”

“I’m sure we won’t. Mulligan isn’t barking on the trail, but he’ll make plenty of noise once he bays the cat. If he were down there, Mulligan would have bayed him by this time.” Dave’s eyes sought the next rocky hill. “My guess is that he went at least that far.”

“Lead on.”

“It’ll be a walk,” Dave promised. “We won’t do anything except play ourselves out if we keep running.”

“Whatever you say.”

Dave led the way down the hill. Circling the deep washes and canyons, but moving straight across the shallow ones, he set his course for the next summit. Again he tried to stifle doubts and fears. The lion might have cut to the right or left in any of a hundred different places. If he had, Mulligan would fight alone—and probably die alone—somewhere on the desert. If his father were only here—

Again the wish must be put behind him, for Warden Keller was not here and there was not the faintest possibility of his coming. In this, the most critical situation he had ever faced, he must be completely dependent on his own resources. He was not alone, he reminded himself. Jack Ebbets was with him. But a master craftsman was needed, and, at the very best, Jack was skilled help.

Dave squared his shoulders and walked on steadily. He did not have his father's assistance, but he had all the lore that had been carefully taught him, plus his own experience. It was his responsibility to put it to practical use. For example, straying from the trail would be fatal just now, for only with the wildest luck imaginable would they pick it up again. But indecision was almost as bad, and the lion *had* climbed the next hill because a lion *would* climb it. This fitted the pattern that he had been taught should be.

Dave and Jack mounted the summit and looked from it into a series of low ridges that were cut by washes and canyons. It was an almost exact replica of the country they had just crossed. Five hundred yards away, a long-eared jack rabbit sat erect on a gopher mound. A couple of javelinas listlessly ate prickly-pear pads, and a single small doe disappeared in a wash.

The steel band around Dave's throat became a little tighter, so that, for a moment, he could not have spoken if he would. Again he was confronted by a vast and lost desert. There was not the slightest indication that either Mulligan or the lion had disappeared into it. To search blindly for either or both was as hopeless as trying to find a single pebble in the sea. Dave studied the next hill.

The lion had climbed it, his mind told him, but his heart said that his mind played him false. Somewhere behind them, the lion had turned either right or left. Mulligan, whose nose told him of tracks that human eyes couldn't possibly see, had turned with the lion, but Dave fought an almost overpowering temptation to go back. He had planned and set a course. To falter even slightly meant to lose all.

Dave prayed for a miracle. . . . His prayer was answered.

Twenty yards down the slope, a copse of ocotillo cactus sent thin whips snaking upward, and a sudden gust of wind set the whips to dancing. Dave started excitedly, seeing that which he had failed to notice until motion attracted his eyes. He grasped Jack Ebbets' shoulder. "Look!"

"Where?"

"There! On the ocotillo!"

"Oh, yes. It looks like a patch of wool."

"It is wool, and that lion was carrying a sheep when he left Juan's camp. He brushed the ocotillo in passing!"

"Let's go!"

They crossed to the hill beyond. Here Dave halted while doubt again tortured him. There was neither sign nor sound, nothing at all to prove that lion or dog had come this way. He glanced uneasily at the hill they'd left . . . and at the one beyond. Then he went unhesitatingly forward.

He told himself for the twentieth time that, if the lion were afraid, he never would have stolen the sheep. Nor had fear been at his heels when he left Juan Areque's camp. He had no reason to circle and dodge, or to try hiding his tracks. Therefore, he would travel in a reasonably straight line. The fact that he had already taken his plunder farther than was necessary before stopping to eat was probably explained by the fact that he was seeking some favorite lair. It necessarily followed that this would be a secluded place, one the lion knew intimately, and that, therefore, was very dangerous.

Dave called over his shoulder. "Can you trot awhile?"

"I'll keep up," Jack replied.

Dave mounted the next hill, panting and breathless, and inwardly scolding himself for the folly that made him hurry. He glanced around and saw his friend toiling a hundred yards in the rear. While he stood perfectly still, to catch his breath and quiet his pounding heart, Jack puffed up beside him.

"I think that baby intends to run—" he began.

"Listen!"

Dave strained for a repetition of a sound he thought he'd heard. It came again—from ahead and a little to the right—the unmistakable roar of an angry dog with a quarry at bay.

Omitted
Illustration

Two page
spread.
Roaring,
snarling
wildcat on
guard over
the prostrate
man with

only boot
visible. Dog
running up
to attack.

“Go ahead!” Jack urged. “I’ll catch up!”

Dave said grimly, “We’ll walk. I intend to shoot straight when I get there.”

His feet wanted wings, but his mind ruled his feet and created for him an image of the terrain they were entering. There was a nameless canyon whose sheer walls could be descended at only five places. Three hundred feet from rim to rim, the canyon’s floor was littered with boulders that ranged from the size of a football to the dimensions of a house. Dave had never hunted the canyon because there was little to attract game to it, but it was exactly the sort of place where a lion would seek refuge. The hunt was coming to a logical climax.

Now seeming near and now far off, Mulligan was barking steadily and angrily. The rising and falling volume of the sound was puzzling, but it was something that could be figured out after they got there. Dave headed straight toward the nearest place where the canyon’s walls could be descended.

He came to the rim and peered over, then recoiled in surprise. Mulligan seemed suddenly to have become two dozen dogs, barking from two dozen separate places. He was at the canyon’s head, foot, center, and all points between. Dave whirled on Jack Ebbets. “Now I know why his barking was so irregular! The canyon’s full of echoes!” he said.

“You hit it,” Jack agreed. “What now?”

“We’ll have to go in, and this’ll take us pretty close to the head. Then we’ll each pick a side and work toward the foot. Be careful!”

Jack replied dryly, “Don’t worry.”

They descended the steep trail, bracing themselves precariously against boulders and the trunks of stunted paloverde trees that had found a rooting in the canyon’s wall. As they neared the floor, boulders acted as sounding boards and the two dozen dogs became two hundred.

“Stay on this side,” Dave instructed his companion. “I’ll go across.”

Jack said grimly, “Good hunting.”

Battling a feverish impatience, Dave began to work slowly around the boulders on the canyon’s floor. Mulligan continued to roar in rage. Obviously, the lion was lying on a ledge, or had gone into a crevice where Mulligan could not reach him—and there was something insulting in the very act. It was as though any dog was worth only contempt. After the lion had feasted on his stolen mutton, he would deal with Mulligan at his leisure.

Ten minutes after he started, Dave circled a boulder and Mulligan’s roaring became full-throated and clear. He looked across the canyon, for this was one of the very few places where lack of boulders permitted both an unobstructed view and sound acoustics. He froze in his tracks.

He heard Mulligan plainly, but he saw only Jack Ebbets. His friend stood near the opposite wall with his rifle half raised. Able to hear, but unable to see, he was obviously bewildered.

What followed happened so suddenly that, although Dave snapped his rifle into shooting position the second he saw, there was no time for a shot. Yet, somehow, it seemed to be taking place through a slow-motion haze. The Thing detached itself from a ledge and appeared to float down on Jack Ebbets, as though it were borne on wings. To Dave, it was like some tableau that must be occurring in a feverish dream, for there was no connection with reality.

The devil was the color of the sun, Juan Areque had said, and with the fire of the sun coming from its nostrils and eyes. The description was perfect. A split second later, Mulligan hurled himself from a crevice that he had been desperately trying to climb in order to reach his enemy. The devil turned from the prostrate Jack Ebbets to deal with the dog.

Dave aimed, shot, and saw his bullet strike the shoulder of the varmint. The devil whirled away from Mulligan to deal with this new danger. Dave shot again.

He aimed squarely in the face of the devil.

NIGHT TRACK

WHEN WARDEN KELLER returned to Three Palms, the night was an hour old. He knew he should be elated, for the deed he wanted was signed and in the glove compartment of his car. According to the terms, Buck Gresham gave him fifty acres of land, plus a permanent right of way into Cougar Canyon, and, in return, received an equal share of the water rights.

Instead, the Warden was very depressed. He tried to tell himself that he was downhearted because the last few weeks had brought too much work and too little sleep. He could not neglect his job. As long as any people were paying him to do anything, they'd get the best he had to offer. They'd get it, he reflected grimly, even if J. C. Bannerman did consider him too old to be an efficient warden. In addition, he had wanted the deal with Buck Gresham to be all buttoned up before telling Dave anything about it.

He tried to cheer himself by building rosy mental pictures of things yet to be. His lodge was built. Hunters as well as winter vacationists were so eager for accommodations that every room was reserved for a full eighteen months ahead. Money was rolling in by the bucketful. Best of all, Dave had finally come to his senses. Rather than insist on the futile career of a game warden, he'd decided to go to college and make some use of his intelligence.

Somehow, this mental ride on a pink cloud never did quite come off, though.

The fact that all the money Warden Keller would be able to scrape together, plus all the resources at his command, would still fall woefully short of building a proper lodge and competing with wealthy lodges that were already established had little to do with the breakers upon which his dreams were being dashed. Although he tried to conceal it even from himself, the truth was that the last thing in the world he wanted was to run a lodge for anyone at all. His first love was, and would remain, conservation.

He found himself playing with the thought that, if it might be arranged, he'd take a menial job at lower pay just to stay with the Commission. Irritably, he shrugged the notion away. J. C. Bannerman was the boss, and, obviously, Bannerman had already decided that no man on the shady side of forty had any place on the Commission.

Warden Keller wondered momentarily why there had, as yet, been no word about his resignation. Probably he was no longer considered important enough to merit a reply. When they were ready to kick him out, they'd do so with as little ceremony as possible. Then they'd ease young Leonard in and that would be that.

The Warden shrugged again. He'd been bent too many times in his life to let this break him. Ostriches might hide their heads in sand but men had better face realities. He eased his car into Marcy's Filling Station.

Phil himself came to meet him. "Evenin', Harry."

"Good evening, Phil. What's new in the world?"

Phil Marcy grinned. "Quite a few things, I've no doubt, but by the time you get to be my age and see 'em through the same old eyes, they look like the same old story. Whyn't you ask that kid of yours?"

"Is Dave back?"

"He didn't stop here, which ain't to be wondered at. Dave and that dude he's been takin' 'round head for the desert in the middle of the night and hunt there all day. For sure, neither one of 'em feel like anything 'cept goin' to bed when they quit. I reckon you'll find him at home."

"I wonder if he got his coyote?" Warden Keller speculated.

"If he didn't," Phil said, "he'll get it."

"What makes you so blasted sure?"

Phil grinned again. "Dave won't quit till he does. He ain't got sense enough to know when he's licked. You got 'nother visitor, too. Some kid warden's come 'round wantin' to know where he might find Harry Keller. 'You might find him most anywhere,' I said, 'but you prob'ly won't. Best thing you can do is wait till he comes home.' I sent him up to your place and I s'pose he'll be waitin'."

"Thanks, Phil. Fill up the tank, will you?"

"Sure thing."

Phil Marcy filled the car's tank, checked beneath the hood, and cleaned the windshield. When the Warden had signed for the gas, he drove on up the street. His spirits lifted, as they always did, now that he was soon to talk with his son once more. The worst that could happen never seemed disastrous as long as he could go home and see Dave again.

He slowed as he approached his house, and automatically noted the big sports car parked in front. Dave had told him about Jack Ebbets' car and the very fact that it was still here meant that Dave's dude, as Phil Marcy chose to call him, was spending the night. Well, it was a good time to meet him. He should have done it before.

He swung wide to cut into the driveway, and knew, even as he turned, that the house was dark. His heart seemed to skip a beat. It was very early, and tired though Dave must be, he would not have gone to bed. Then the lights of the Warden's car illumined the drive and his heart skipped another beat.

The car parked where Dave's desert cruiser should have been was a battered club coupé that Warden Keller remembered seeing before, although offhand he could not remember where. He thought back over the years, and other cars that had been awaiting him when he came home. Usually, they brought news of trouble—someone lost in the desert. Harry stopped his automobile and got out. The man sitting in the other vehicle spoke. "I thought I'd better wait for you, Harry, and sort of get the lay of the land," said young Henry Leonard. "I've been ordered to report to you as trainee."

Warden Keller muttered under his breath. In his anxiety to see Dave, he had given only passing thought to Phil Marcy's comment that some kid warden had been sent to his house. When he had noted the dark house, he had forgotten everything else. Now he remembered the directive stating that young Leonard would be assigned to him, but that he was to receive advance notice. The armchair wardens in the front office, who had obviously sent the warden before the notice, were running true to form.

He stifled his annoyance, however. Henry Leonard was a rookie, but he was good warden material and he was hardly to be blamed for following orders. Warden Keller spoke cordially. "Oh, sure, Hank. I've been advised that you'd be here. Come in."

The younger warden left his car and followed his superior officer up on the dark porch. The latter took two letters from the mailbox as he passed, opened the door, and flicked on the kitchen lights. He glanced at the two envelopes. The first, in large red letters, assured whoever received it that he

was missing the opportunity of a lifetime if he did not study the contents at once and reply by the first mail. The second, doubtless the letter advising him that he might expect young Leonard, was from the Game Commission. He tossed both, unopened, on the table.

Henry Leonard was inspecting the kitchen. “So this is how you live on the desert?” he queried.

“This is it,” his host agreed. “Uh—Hank—”

“Yes?”

Warden Keller hesitated. His weariness was gone, and so was everything else except the dread certainty that Dave should be home and was not. Therefore he was still on the desert. He would not be there if he were not in trouble—and it was a very poor time to be burdened with a trainee. On the point of telling young Leonard that he must go out on an important patrol, and to wait in the house, he changed his mind. If this kid was going to take over the warden’s job in Three Palms, let him be as well equipped as possible.

He said, “You picked a bad time to come, Hank, because it looks as though your training starts tonight. There are a couple of people in trouble on the desert.”

“So?”

Warden Keller sighed with mingled approval and relief. Although he was still very much the rookie, young Leonard was not the raw recruit he had been at Apache. He did not offer a dozen rapid-fire and nonsensical ideas but waited for his superior, a man of proven desert experience, to speak. The stars still shone in his eyes, but beneath their sparkle lay the promise of a steadier and enduring glow.

“So we’ll have to go look for them.”

“I’m afraid you must show me how it’s done, Harry. I’ve had no experience with this sort of thing.”

“I’ll get a kit together.”

Warden Keller laid a knapsack on the table, and even as he started to work, he gave silent thanks because young Leonard asked no questions. Actually, it was a routine patrol, one he had performed forty times during the last twenty years—and he’d never failed to find the people he sought. He tried not to think that he hadn’t always found them alive.

Warden Keller packed a first-aid kit, a parcel of food, a canteen of water, a small flask of whisky, and a folding stretcher. He laid a six-cell flashlight on the table, and put six fresh batteries in his pockets. Then he took a box of cartridges, lifted his rifle from its rack, and turned to his trainee, saying, "I guess that does it."

"Do you know about where they're lost?" Hank inquired.

"I know the general area they're hunting. We'll take it up from there."

"I see."

Warden Keller laid the rifle on the rear seat, put the knapsack on the floor, and took his place behind the wheel. With Hank beside him, he backed from the driveway, drove very carefully until they were out of Three Palms, then surrendered to the great anxiety that tormented him and pushed the accelerator floorward.

Young Leonard asked quietly, "Isn't it better to get there in one piece, Harry?"

David's father glanced at the speedometer, saw that the needle had crept past eighty, and relaxed his pressure on the gas pedal. The needle dropped to fifty-five and the car seemed to be standing still, but the anxious driver forced himself to maintain the slower speed. Hank was entirely right. Dave was in trouble on the desert, but it would not help him if they killed themselves rushing to his aid.

Warden Keller slowed still more, of necessity and not of will, when he entered the Kelsey Mine turnoff. Ordinarily, he would not have tried his car on such a road, but years of off-pavement driving came to his aid now. He jockeyed across the washes, bounced over boulders, made the hairpin turns, and crawled along the narrow crown where there were only inches to spare on either side. His lights picked up Dave's desert cruiser, still parked between the giant saguaros, and he said, "Their car is where I figured it would be."

Hank expressed his first doubt. "I thought you'd find the car, but blessed if I know how you're going to do any trailing, or anything else, until daylight."

Warden Keller replied, "I'm hoping we won't have to start blind. One of Pendleton's herders is in here with a bunch of sheep. With any luck, he'll give us a lead."

Hank remained doubtful. “I don’t see how you expect to find even a flock of sheep at night.”

“They’ll be near a water hole. My guess is either Grady or Cottonwood Springs, and we’ll try Grady first. Have you done any desert traveling at night?”

“Very little night or day,” Hank admitted.

“Then stay close to me and walk exactly where I do. Cactus needles won’t kill you, but there are experiences more pleasant than getting a skin full of them.”

“I understand.”

Warden Keller shouldered the pack, loaded his rifle by the car lights, and switched off the lights. He took the rifle in one hand, the flashlight in the other, and sniffed deeply of the cool night air. “We’re getting one break,” he said.

Hank asked, “What is it?”

“The humidity is high and scent carries a lot farther on damp air.”

“You mean you’re—” Hank started and stopped, and, in spite of his tension, the older man grinned in the darkness. Hank Leonard had intended to ask if he meant to sniff out the tracks of the lost people, but he was no longer *that* much of a rookie.

“Ready?” Warden Keller asked.

“All set.”

The skilled tracker led off through the darkness, and, as he did so, he gave fervent thanks for the past twenty years. Whatever happened from now on, they were anything but wasted years. Without the experience they’d given him, he hadn’t the faintest chance of finding Dave tonight.

He chose a slower pace than he would have set had he been alone or if he were accompanied by an experienced desert man. It was too easy for inexperience, especially young inexperience, to get in trouble, even when following a guide. . . . He stopped at intervals to give Hank a breathing space, and automatically catalogued the night sounds as they occurred. That sudden pound of hoofs was a herd of wild burros scurrying from their path. The sharp snort came from a grazing deer, suddenly disturbed. A sullen grunt had to be a javelina, who knew that he need not run from humans

while night covered him. The faint rustle of wings was a tiny desert owl leaving its perch on a saguaro.

After an hour and a half the leader stopped again to sniff deeply. Then he turned to his trainee.

“We missed the boat on the first try,” he remarked.

“How do you know?”

“You can’t see it in the darkness, but we’re overlooking Grady Springs right now. If the sheep were there, we’d smell them.”

“That’s something!” Hank Leonard received this news as though it were of earth-shaking importance.

“It’s an old trick,” Harry said. “If you’re hunting the desert at night—and you will be if you stay in Three Palms—depend on your nose. You might also give thanks to the fact that most people who get lost on the desert do so in the fall and winter, when the humidity is highest.”

“Why not summer and spring?”

“It’s hot here then. Not nearly as many people travel the desert.”

“I see,” Hank said gratefully, “and I’ll remember. What now?”

“We must go to Cottonwood Springs.”

Warden Keller swung toward Cottonwood Springs, resolving as he did so that never again would he violate a rule that he had flagrantly broken this time. He should have asked Dave exactly where he was going, whether he intended to visit Juan Areque, and if so, where. He and Hank would have saved the time lost going to Grady Springs and the additional time it would take to reach Cottonwood. Of course, that could not be helped now, but it certainly could be the next time—and so could his notion that it was impossible for Dave to get into trouble on the desert. Anybody could get into difficulty in any wilderness. He increased his pace, and when there was neither comment nor complaint from Hank he kept the swifter speed. . . .

Presently he said, “A bulls-eye this time, Hank.”

Faint and far off, but unmistakably present and becoming stronger as they drew nearer, was the greasy smell of sheep. A dog began to bark furiously as Miel, scenting the two strangers in the night and fearful of their intentions, challenged them.

“We’ll stop now,” Warden Keller said.

Hank asked, “Will the dog give us trouble?”

“Not as long as we stay away from the sheep,” his guide assured him. “But the herder’s likely to make a fuss unless we let him know we’re coming.” He flashed the light and shouted, “Juan! Juan! *Amigos!* Friends!”

Omitted
Illustration

Man, with
torch in
hand,
looking into
tent.

Another
man wearing
a hat looks
on.

He waited for an answer that was not forthcoming, and a little wonder stirred within him. Few Basque herders slept so soundly that they were not awake at the first hint of danger, and Miel was continuing to bark.

He shouted a second time, “Juan Areque! We’re friends!”

Again he waited for an answer that did not come or did it? He thought he heard a muffled reply. Turning to Hank Leonard, he said, “Something’s wrong here. We’ll go see—but watch it!”

He stabbed the night with his flashlight, advancing toward the water hole and directing the beam up all the little hills around it. Finally, it centered on Juan Areque’s tent. He held it steady with his left hand while he kept the rifle in his right.

The pair halted before the tent. Warden Keller handed the rifle to Hank, stooped, and, exploring the way with his flashlight, entered.

A challenging voice demanded, “What do you want?” And a giant revolver was aimed steadily at him. Hastily, he revealed his identity to the belligerent shepherd.

To anxious Hank, waiting outside, it seemed ages before the murmur of voices inside the tent stopped and Warden Keller stepped out beside him. Actually, the conversation had been brief and to the point.

“Something went very wrong, ugly wrong,” the older warden informed his companion. “Juan Areque’s there in his tent, injured badly enough, but I am sure he will get over it. His kind are hardy—and brave. The two men we’re looking for fixed him up there and took out after whatever mauled him. He insisted on that.”

“Where do we go from here?”

“The hills,” Warden Keller answered. “The highest hills in a widening circle.”

The first hint of daylight was faint in the sky when the intent leader of the two searchers finally stopped, saying, “This should do it.”

He shot his rifle into the air, and a red tongue of flame licked hungrily out as the bullet sped away from the muzzle. Lowering his rifle, he mentally timed ten seconds. Like an echo of his shot, but with so much time between the two that it couldn’t possibly be an echo, came the answer.

The senior warden’s voice was tinged with vast relief and almost as much pride when he spoke to Hank Leonard, “It always pays to know something about the men you’re hunting, too. One of the people we’re looking for is my kid, Dave. I knew he’d feel sure I’d be out to hunt for him, and I figured he’d build the smokiest fire he could on a night like this. Smell it?”

The sun was a mass of scarlet-streaks, bold in the eastern sky when Warden Keller and Hank Leonard walked down the canyon where Dave Keller and Jack Ebbets had met the devil. Mulligan, limping on three legs and with a piece of his left ear missing, rose and came to meet them. Jack Ebbets, his right arm, shoulder, and leg splinted and bound with strips from his and Dave’s shirts, reclined on the fresh pelt of a mighty jaguar.

Dave Keller shouted, “Hello, Dad! You’re a sight for sore eyes!”

“You look pretty good yourself, Dave.” And his father felt even surer than before, that, no matter what else might happen, he would forever bless the years he had spent as a desert game warden. “Got him, eh?”

Jack Ebbets smiled wanly and said, “Dave got him—but not until he almost got me. Hello, Hank.”

“My gosh!” Young Henry Leonard, who had grown up suddenly during the night, covered the concern he felt with what he hoped was an impish grin. “The things you see when you haven’t got a gun!”

“Do you two know each other?” Dave asked.

“This rich playboy?” Hank scoffed. “Sure I know him! His dad earned a lot of money and he’s spending it. What he’s spending it on is conservation, here in his own state. He got me my job and, the last I heard, he was heading into the desert to find some kid who has an idea varmints are sporting game. He said that, if the kid came through, he’d give him a job himself. The job will be proving to other kids that varmints are sporting.”

Hank stopped abruptly because of the lump in his throat. Jack’s grin widened.

Omitted
Illustration

Man running
across
grassland
with rifle in
hand.
Another
man follows
behind.

“How some people do carry on,” he murmured. He turned to Warden Keller. “You’re Dave’s father, aren’t you? I’ve tried to meet you several times but we always missed each other. I have something for you.”

Warden Keller asked, “What is it?”

“Your resignation,” Jack answered. “I’d hoped to hand it to you in person and ask you to reconsider, but I guess you’ll have to help yourself. It’s in my pants pocket. I told Bannerman I was tired of hearing your kid brag about you, and that I thought he should take you out of the field and put you in charge of the entire southern district.”

For a moment Warden Keller stood stunned. Then he asked, “You’re an official of the Commission?”

“No,” Jack declared, “I’m just a worthless playboy who is interested in conservation and has money to spend, and who feels like spending it in a way that will benefit for generations to come. I also edit the Commission paper and I aim to interview this Pawnee Markson when Dave brings that jaguar skin to Three Palms and hangs it beside the buck and the bobcat. To the best of my knowledge, it’s the first jaguar killed in the States in thirty years. What about the job, Mr. Keller?”

“But—” Warden Keller fumbled for an answer.

Dave said softly, “Dad, he means it.”

“All right then,” Warden Keller roared. “I’ll take the job, and I suppose this knothheaded kid of mine will end up being a game warden, and if you’re going to organize kid varmint hunters, I know where there are fifty acres of land, plus water rights, where they can build a hunting lodge, set up a rifle range—or get lost!” He stopped roaring and smiled. “I’ll bet neither of you has had a drink of water or a bite to eat for some time. Before we put you, Jack, on the stretcher and haul you out of here, along with Juan Areque, how about some grub?”

“Grub!” Jack cried ecstatically. “Did you hear that, Dave? He brought grub!”

“Probably it’s not pemmican,” Dave teased. “Will you mind that too much?”

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 commented: “If I had pursued my scholastic duties as diligently as I did deer, trout, grouse, squirrel, etc., I might have had better report cards!”

Jim Kjelgaard worked at various jobs—trapper, teamster, guide, surveyor, factory worker and laborer. When he was in his late twenties he decided to become a full-time writer. He succeeded in his wish. Several hundred of his short stories and articles and quite a few books for young people have been published.

He indicated his favorite hobbies as hunting, fishing, lifelong interest in conservation, dogs and questing for new stories. He has described some of these searches in this way: “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, as in *The Spell of the White Sturgeon* and *Hi Jolly!*, right on your own door step.”

Sam Savitt was born in Pennsylvania. He graduated from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. During World War II, he served for four and a half years with the U. S. Army engineers in Burma. On returning to civilian life, he began his career as a magazine and book illustrator in New York City. In addition, he paints portraits of horses and dogs that are treasured in homes all over the United States. He has also written several books.

Sam Savitt lives with his wife and two children and assorted livestock on their “One-Horse Farm,” in North Salem, New York. Horses are his specialty but he is skilled in capturing the likeness and exact movements of all kinds of animals.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been omitted as they are still in copyright. They have been replaced with a short description of the pictures.

[The end of *Dave and his Dog Mulligan* by Jim Kjelgaard]