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DOUBLE CHALLENGE

By **Jim Kjelgaard**

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The characters, incidents and situations in this book are imaginary and have no relation to any person or actual happening.

DOUBLE CHALLENGE



THE JOLT

When Ted Harkness reached the summit of Hawkbill, he hurried. He grinned a little smugly as he did so, for his had been a non-stop climb and most people who wanted to reach Hawkbill, the highest point in the Mahela and the only one that wasn't forested, had to rest at least twice. Some, starting out with firm determination to climb to the top, wavered en route and never did get there.

The gorgeous, tricolored collie that had been pacing beside Ted ran a short ways, snuffled into some brush and disappeared. Presently he came wagging back, to fall in beside his master, and Ted let a hand rest on the dog's silken head. A little farther on, the collie pricked up its ears and Ted stopped in his tracks.

Just ahead, a fallen tree lay at an angle down the slope. Either rooted in soft earth or shallowly rooted, it had toppled when its upper structure became too heavy for its root system to support, and it had fallen so recently that its leaves had not even started to shrivel. Sitting nervously on its trunk, suspecting danger was near but lacking the faintest idea as to where it was, were seven young bobtailed grouse.

An imp of mischief danced in Ted's eyes. Ruffed grouse were one of the sportiest and one of the wisest of birds, but they weren't born wise and experienced. Like everything else, they had to learn and certainly these grouse weren't old enough to have learned much of anything. Ted said softly, "Get one, Tammie."

Very slowly, knowing his game and stalking it as a cat would have stalked, Tammie slunk forward. Ted watched with great interest. Rarely could any dog catch a mature ruffed grouse unless it was injured, and it was questionable as to whether Tammie could take one of these comparative babies. But he might.

Tammie neared the log, sprang, and six of the seven young grouse took fluttering wing. The seventh, clamped in Tammie's slender jaws, fluttered a moment and was still. Eyes proud, plumed tail waving, Tammie trotted back to Ted and placed the prize in his master's hand. Ted complimented him.

"Good boy, Tammie!"

He took the young grouse gently, feeling its thumping heart and understanding its terrified eyes. It wasn't hurt. When teaching Tammie to catch various birds and animals, Ted had taught him to be tender-mouthed. After a moment, he tossed his captive into the air and watched it fly out of sight.

"Let's go, dog."

They broke out of the beech woods onto the abutment that rose above. Almost solid rock, nothing grew here except lichens and, in the cracks, occasional strips of grass. Bent somewhat like a hawk's bill, it was a favorite playground for hawks that wanted to test their wings. The view was unsurpassed.

Ted sat down on the very tip of Hawkbill and Tammie squatted companionably beside him. Ted looked at the Mahela.

For as far as he could see in any direction, forested hills folded into one another. Spinning Creek sparkled like a silver ribbon that some giant hand had draped gracefully down a forested valley. The road to Lorton, from this distance, was a footpath beside the creek. Two miles down the valley, the green clearing in which lay Carl Thornton's Crestwood Resort, the only resort in the Mahela and Ted's place of employment, gleamed like a great emerald.

Just below, almost at Ted's feet, was the snug log house in which he and his father lived, surrounded by two hundred acres of forest, except for small and scattered patches here and there. The Harknesses owned the last remaining private land in the Mahela. Its only clearings were those in which the cabin was built and one for a garden patch. Al Harkness didn't want or need much clearing. He preferred the beech woods to the cultivated fields, the trap line or woodsman's ax to the plow.

Behind Hawkbill rose a mountain that, long ago, had been ravaged by fire. The fire had burned slowly in the lower reaches and the forest there remained green and virgin. But a little more than halfway up, probably fanned by sudden, fierce winds, the fire had become an inferno. Nearly all the trees had been killed and had long since fallen. The place

had grown up into a tangle of blackberry canes, with a few patches of scrubby aspen here and there. As Ted watched, he saw what he'd hoped to see. It was only a wisp of motion, a mere flutter in the aspens, and as soon as Ted spotted it, he lost it. Presently he picked it up again.

It was an immense deer, a great gray buck. Heavy-bodied, thick-necked, it would outweigh most big bucks by at least fifty pounds. Massive of beam, with four perfect points on either side, its antlers were a hunter's dream come true. It was feeding on something, probably patches of grass that grew among the briars. Ted's eyes glowed and he continued to search.

Presently he saw the second buck, an exact twin of the first. It was standing quietly in the warm sun, a hundred feet up-slope.

These were the bucks that were known throughout the Mahela, and far beyond it, as Damon and Pythias. All who'd seen them thought that either one, if bagged, would set a new record. But so far, both had carried their antlers safely through several hunting seasons and from the lazy way they posed on the mountainside, they might have been two gray steers in any farmer's pasture. The appearance was deceptive, though, and Ted knew it. Let anything at all excite either buck's suspicion and they'd prove their mettle. Ted rubbed Tammie's head reflectively.

"There they are," he observed, "and one of these days I'm going to hang one of those heads over our fireplace."

Tammie yawned and Ted laughed. "Okay, so I'm bragging again. But I'm still going to do it. Let's go, dog."

Having seen what he had come to see, he struck back down the mountain, through the forest of massive, gray-trunked beeches that marched like rows of orderly soldiers in all directions. Forty-five minutes later he emerged into his father's clearing.

No shanty or casual cabin, but a solid log structure built by a master craftsman, the house was set back against the line of trees. Artfully designed, it belonged exactly where it was and as it was. The Harkness house fitted the Mahela as well as did the big beeches against which, and of which, it was built. With a wing on each side and a covered porch that jutted forward, somehow the house itself seemed to hold out welcoming arms. A huge brick chimney told of the big fireplace within.

To one side was a shed, half of which formed a home for the few chickens Al Harkness saw fit to keep. There were never fewer than six of these and never more than ten, just enough to furnish Ted and his father with the eggs they needed and to provide an occasional fowl for the pot. The other half of the shed was a storage place for tools.

Behind the house was another, larger shed which sheltered a gasoline engine and buzz saw and provided a place for Al to take care of the furs, wild honey, herbs and other treasures that he brought in from the Mahela. In front stood the game rack, a cross pole mounted on two heavy timbers imbedded in the ground. Here hung the deer and occasional black bear that Al, Ted and their guests brought down.

To one side lay the garden, big enough to provide all the vegetables the Harknesses needed but not big enough to make a glaring scar in the beech woods. As a protection against raiding deer, this garden was surrounded by an eight-foot fence. The road to Lorton ran about sixty yards in front of the house but was hidden from it by trees. Beside the road was the high line with its two wires stretching into the house. There was a rutted drive that served as an entrance and exit for the battered pickup truck which was all the car Al Harkness had ever thought he needed.

When the boy and dog entered the clearing, Tammie raced ahead and streaked toward the work shed. Knowing his father would be there or Tammie wouldn't have gone, Ted strolled up and looked in at the open door. Sitting on a wooden chair with a broken back, Al Harkness was using his hunting knife to put the finishing touches on a board over which, when the time was right, a mink pelt would be stretched. He looked up and said, "Hi, fella."

"Hi, Dad. I'm back."

"Figgered that out all by myself, when your dog came in to say hello." Tammie was sitting near, watching Al work. For a moment, Ted watched, too.

Perfectly-shaped, with exactly the right taper, the board upon which Al worked did not vary a hundredth of an inch from one side to the other. Al, who got more money for his furs than other trappers did because he took better care of them,

sliced off another shaving and squinted down the board. A big man, he seemed as rugged as one of the giant beech trees. His brows jutted out like stone crags, while the eyes beneath them were gentle. But they were gentle in the manner of a soft wind that can become a fierce gale. There was something about him that was more than faintly akin to the grouse Ted had held in his hand, the rugged summit of Hawkbill, and the two immense bucks he had seen. Al Harkness would be out of place anywhere except in the Mahela.

"What'd you see?" he asked.

"Damon and Pythias," Ted answered happily. "Anybody who thinks they had a rack of horns last year should see them now!"

"Where they hangin' out?"

"Where they always are at this time of year, in the briers on Burned Mountain."

"And where," Al asked, "will they be come huntin' season?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure going to find out. One or the other of those heads will hang over our fireplace."

"For sure now?" Al smiled faintly.

"If it doesn't, it won't be for lack of trying on my part."

"One, two, three, four," Al counted rapidly. "One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand—You'll have to get at the end of a long line of hunters who want those heads."

"I know a lot of hunters have tried for them, but they can be had."

"Anything can be had," Al observed sagely, "and one nice thing 'bout young 'uns is they think they can get it. Land either of those bucks and your picture'll be in every paper in the state. Maybe even in some out of state."

"Sure," Ted grinned, "I'll be famous as a deer hunter before I ever am as a resort owner."

Finally satisfied with his stretching board, Al laid it carefully in a corner. He took a blackened pipe from his shirt pocket and an exquisitely wrought tobacco pouch from his trousers. Made of home-tanned buckskin, even if the pouch had not borne the stamp of Al's craftsmanship, it would have been recognized as his. His name, A. HARKNESS, was stencilled on it. Al filled his pipe, lighted it and puffed lazy bursts of blue smoke into the air.

Tammie, who, in common with most dogs, disliked the smell of tobacco, sneezed and moved farther away. For a moment Al did not speak. Finally he murmured, "So now you're goin' to be a famous resort owner?"

"Why, didn't you know?" Ted asked gaily. "The Mahela Lodge will be known all the way from Lorton to Danzer."

Al grinned faintly. "That's a real long ways, nigh onto six miles. You wouldn't change your mind?"

"About what?"

"You can still go to college this fall and learn to be a dentist, lawyer, or anything else you want."

"Colleges cost money."

"I have," Al said tartly, "been scarin' up a penny every now and again since I been changin' your didies. I can still scare up enough to send you through college, but I mistrust about startin' you in the resort business. Crestwood cost Carl Thornton more money than I've earned in my whole life."

"I don't want to leave the Mahela."

"Too much of your pappy in you," Al growled, "and not enough of your mother. I want you to be somethin' besides a woods runner."

"It isn't that, Dad. I've tried to explain to you. It's the people—seeing them come in here all tired out, and seeing them go away rested and refreshed after we've shown them everything we have in the Mahela. I know college is valuable and I

don't look down my nose at education. But this is my job."

Al sighed. "I've tried to talk some sense into you. How are you and Thornton gettin' along?"

"Dad, Thornton owns Crestwood. I just work there."

"So that makes Thornton better'n you, huh? You're goin' to be a right smart passel of time, savin' enough to start your own resort on what Thornton pays you."

"I'm getting experience, meeting people, learning how it's done. I'm really learning the business from the bottom up."

"Huh?"

"Nels Anderson and I have been working on the plumbing in Crestwood's basement," Ted grinned.

Al frowned. "I'm not foolin'. This is a big job you've set up for yourself and I don't see how you'll ever get enough money to do it."

Ted said confidently, "I'll work it out."

"I wish," Al declared, "that I was eighteen 'stead of forty-nine. I'd be able to work things out, too. But it's you doin' it. Everybody's got to live the way they see fit."

Al picked up another board and began shaping it. Ted took his pocketknife from his pocket.

"I'll help you, huh?"

"Reckon not." Al shook his head. "Sunday's your day off."

"Let me help. It wouldn't really be work to me."

"Nope. Even if I did want help, nobody but me can make my stretchin' boards."

"Then I'll go get dinner."

"That's a smart idea."

With Tammie pacing beside him, Ted went into the house. Everything about it was solid, strong, heart-warming. The front door was made of oak boards an inch and a half thick, the windows were set ten inches back in the log walls, the ample fireplace was of native stone. Obviously it was the home of an outdoorsman. Two mounted bucks' heads stared from the same wall, and of the five rugs on the living room floor, three were bearskins and two were bobcats. Ted's and Al's rifles and shotguns hung on a rack and there was a glass-enclosed case for fishing tackle.

But Al Harkness, child of the Mahela though he was, did not spurn modern conveniences. Electric lights hung from the ceiling. Bottled gas furnished fuel for the kitchen range and there was a hot water heater. Al had an electric refrigerator, a large freezer and a tiled sink with regulation hot and cold faucets.

Tammie, knowing they'd been out and would go no more, curled up on one of the bearskin rugs. Ted took a chicken from the refrigerator and began to stuff it with a dressing made of bread dough, giblets, apples and seasoning. It was a task he'd done often, and his thoughts wandered.

Al, who'd never gone beyond the sixth grade, had a near-worshipful regard for education and he'd insisted that his son be educated. After graduating with honors from Lorton High, Ted himself realized that college training would be valuable. But there were other factors involved.

With no desire to become a trapper and woodsman like his father, Ted wanted to stay in the Mahela. It was worthy and wonderful. Wilderness would always be needed, and, deep inside him, Ted saw himself running a grand lodge to which guests could come and partake of the benefits Crestwood's clients certainly found. People who came back to the wilderness always seemed to be coming back to the source of things and finding spiritual values that lay only at the source.

Ted had taken a flunkey's job at Crestwood two days after he graduated. It did not pay as much as he might have earned

elsewhere, but it was what he wanted and he saved as much as possible. Meanwhile, his dream continued to grow. The couple of hundred dollars he had put aside was a mere drop in the bucket compared to the—Ted had never even dared let himself imagine how many—thousands he needed. But he knew he would find a way and, above all, he wished that he could make his father know it, too.

Ted lighted the oven, put his chicken in to roast and scrubbed potatoes to be baked in their jackets. He mixed biscuit dough. Since neither he nor Al cared for dessert, he didn't prepare any. But he did take a package of carrots and peas from the freezer. He remembered whimsically that, before they had the freezer, his father used to can dozens of quarts of vegetables. Dreamily he went about setting the table. As he did so, he noticed a man in an expensive car driving up the Lorton Road.

There was a squeal of brakes as he stopped suddenly and a shriek of tires as he turned up the Harkness drive. He was a short man, and fat, but his smile was nice, although his eyes were shrewd.

"Do you own this land?" he demanded.

Al and Ted told him that they owned it, whereupon the short, fat man declared breathlessly that a diamond mine had just been discovered in their back yard and that he, personally, would guarantee them a hundred thousand dollars for the mining rights! He would give fifty thousand at once, and it was all right with him if they built a great resort in front, as long as they didn't interfere with his mine.

Ted grinned ruefully as his daydream faded and he went to call his father to dinner.

The next morning, the rising sun was only halfway down Hawkbill when Ted walked to his job at Crestwood. His heart lifted, as it always did when he saw the place. He liked to imagine that he owned it.

Semi-luxurious Crestwood, the only resort in the Mahela, had accommodations for sixty guests under normal conditions and perhaps ninety if they were crowded in. It was well patronized in fishing season, had a sprinkling of guests who wanted to do nothing save enjoy the out of doors when there was neither hunting nor fishing, filled up again when the small game season started and was packed in the deer season for which the Mahela was famous. While deer hunting was on, Thornton turned away twice as many guests as he could accommodate. Afterwards, Crestwood was closed until fishing season opened again.

At the far end of a spacious clearing, set back against the beeches and blending very well with the background, Crestwood's main lodge was a big log building that contained a dining hall, a kitchen, a lounge, a game room, an office for Thornton, quarters for the help and rooms for guests who preferred to remain in the lodge. To one side were ten neat log cabins that accommodated four guests each in normal times and six during deer season. The utility rooms and outbuildings were behind the main lodge and hidden by it and the wide driveway was of crushed stone.

"Hi, Ted!"

Ted turned to wait for middle-aged Nels Anderson, his co-flunkey at Crestwood. Neither brilliant nor subtle, but always gentle, Nels had been taught by a lifetime of hard knocks to appreciate the good things that came his way, and, as far as Nels was concerned, the best thing that had ever come his way was his job at Crestwood. Always a hewer of wood and a drawer of water, the most Nels asked was to be paid with reasonable regularity for his hewing and drawing. He smiled a slow Scandinavian smile as Ted returned his greeting.

"Good morning, Nels. How are you feeling?"

"Goot. And you?"

"First rate. Shall we start earning our wages?"

"Yah. You go down? Or me?"

"I'll go. You catch the pipe."

They entered the lodge. Ted ducked into Crestwood's gloomy basement, turned on the light and caught up a length of pipe. He and Nels were running water to some of the upstairs rooms. He maneuvered the pipe through an already drilled hole and waited for his companion to catch it and stab it into an elbow.

Nothing happened and Ted sighed resignedly. Nels was one of those rare people who know enough about many things to do a passable job. He could run water pipes and wires, build a stone wall, shingle a roof, tend a sick cow or horse, fell trees, construct a root cellar and do well any of a few dozen more things that might need doing. But he was apt to get sidetracked, in which event he needed a while to wake up. Obviously he was sidetracked now. Then the door opened and Nels stood behind Ted.

"The boss, he wants to see you."

"What's he want?"

"He forgot to say."

"Well—"

"He say right now."

"Will you take this pipe?"

"Oh! Yah, I take it."

Nels took the pipe and Ted went back into the lobby. He knocked on the office door, and Carl Thornton opened it.

"Come on in, Ted."

The boy stepped into the spacious office. The floor was covered with a thick carpet. At one side was a mahogany desk upon which stood a typewriter. Over it were hung bookshelves. There were four cushioned chairs and a satiny davenport upon which the owner usually slept. In a wall rack were Thornton's high-powered rifle and a belt full of his distinctive, brass-jacketed, hand-loaded shells. Ted turned to face his employer.

In his late thirties, Thornton was not slightly built. But there was about him an air of slightness that was accentuated by his quick movements. Thinning blond hair was artfully combed to hide a bald spot. His eyes were pale blue, almost icy blue, behind gold-rimmed glasses. The ghost of a smile haunted his lips. He had a flair for conversation that always made it appear as though nothing anyone else could say was nearly as important as what he had to offer.

"I've been watching your work, Ted, and I like it."

"Thanks, Mr. Thornton."

"There'll be a better job pretty soon; Crestwood's going to expand."

Ted's heart leaped. This was what he'd always wanted. "Thank you."

"A good man," Thornton said, "is not easily come by and I've learned the value of one. That's why I'm putting you on a special job right now."

"You are?" Ted's voice quivered eagerly.

"Yes. You're a pretty good deer hunter, aren't you?"

"I—I guess so."

"You know of those two bucks they call Damon and Pythias?"

"Everyone does."

Thornton said, "I want them."

"You—?"

"That's right. With those two heads on the wall—" Thornton shrugged. "Crestwood would be mentioned in every paper in the state. If they're really records, there probably would be national publicity. In any event, they'll help bring guests here."

"But—Nobody has even managed to get near those two bucks in hunting season."

Thornton looked shrewdly at him. "But before the season?"

"You mean?"

"That's just what I mean. Those two bucks don't go into hiding until after hunters take to the woods. I'm pretty sure that anyone who knew what he was doing could get both of them before the season opened. How about it?"

Ted said reluctantly, "It might be done."

"Good! Take all the time you need and I'll leave the details up to you. If you're caught, of course you'll keep your mouth shut and I'll pay the fine. But I think you'll know how to go about it without getting caught. Deliver both bucks to Crestwood—we'll arrange those details after you get them—and thereafter it's up to me. Good luck."

Ted heard himself saying, "No, Mr. Thornton."

Thornton looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

"I can't do it."

"I've already told you that I'll pay your fine if you're caught."

"It isn't that."

"Then what is it? Does it make any difference if those bucks are shot now or six weeks from now?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Getting them now would be violating the law."

"Who doesn't violate the law? Considering the mass of laws we have, few people can live a single day without, intentionally or otherwise, running afoul of them. Have you ever looked up some of the crackpot laws, such as the one which states that, on Sunday, in this state, no horse shall wear other than a plain black harness?"

"It's not that."

"Ted, do you know anyone at all in the Mahela who lives up to the full letter of the game laws? Do you know anyone who doesn't take what he wants when he wants it, in season or out?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"My father and I."

There was an ominous silence. Thornton broke it.

"It seems that I've misjudged you."

"It seems you have!" Ted's anger was rising. "I'll leave now!"

THE THREAT

Tramping along the Lorton Road toward his father's house, Ted told himself that he had been a complete fool. With a start in the only business that interested him, he had sacrificed everything for what suddenly seemed a trivial reason.

Carl Thornton had spoken the truth. Those who lived in the Mahela thought that just living there gave them a proprietary interest in the game and fish that shared the wilderness with them. But, except for Smoky Delbert, a notorious poacher who hunted and fished for the market, most dwellers in the Mahela confined their poaching to killing a deer when they felt like having venison or catching a mess of trout when they thought they needed some fish for dinner. They broke the law, but as far as Ted knew, their chances of going to Heaven when they died were fully as good as his. They weren't sinners.

Half inclined to turn back and tell Thornton he'd reconsidered, still Ted went on. It wouldn't be easy, but definitely it would be possible to shoot both of the great bucks before the hunters who invaded the Mahela when the season opened sent them into hiding. If Ted got them, or even promised to try to get them, he would be back in Thornton's good graces.

"If I was smart," he told himself, "I'd tell Thornton I was hunting those bucks and not get either."

He played with the tempting thought, then put it behind him and walked on. Nobody who called himself a man took another man's pay for doing a job and then failed to do it. Ted asked himself questions and tried to provide his own answers.

Was he afraid of Loring Blade, the game warden? He didn't think so. The Mahela was a big country and the warden could not be everywhere at once. The chances were very good that anyone who knew what he was doing could get both bucks safely to Crestwood, where they became Thornton's responsibility. Besides, Thornton had said he'd pay the fine if Ted were caught.

Did he shrink from breaking the law? Yes, of course. At the same time he knew positively that if he and his father were in desperate straits, if they had no food and no other means of getting any, he'd shoot deer or any other edible game he could find, regardless of whether it was in season or out.

There seemed to be something else involved and Ted could find no precise bracket in which it fitted. It concerned the grouse he'd held in his hand, the cool morning breeze, the view from Hawkbill, his father—everything Ted loved and held dear.

His mind was a whirlpool in which nothing at all was clear except that he could not shoot the two bucks for Thornton. It would be as easy to shoot Tammie—his lips formed a sick grin at that thought! Yesterday his dreams had been bright as bubbles in the sun. Today all the bubbles were burst. There wasn't the faintest possibility of getting a job at another resort for the simple reason that there was no other resort.

Of course, if he left the Mahela—But he couldn't do that either.

Ted was a half mile from their house when he saw Al's tobacco pouch lying beside the road. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. Obviously his father had been here—probably he'd been scouting mink sign along Spinning Creek and had walked back up the road—and he was forever losing his pouch. But somehow somebody always found it and brought it back to him.

Ted tried to put a spring in his step and a cheerful smile on his lips. A man faced up to his own troubles and did not inflict them on other people. He tried to whistle and succeeded only in hissing.

He was a hundred yards from the house when Tammie, who'd caught his scent, hurried to meet him. Sleek fur rippling and short ears jiggling, he advanced at the collie's lope, which seems so restrained and is so incredibly fast. Tammie came to a graceful halt in front of Ted and looked at him with dancing eyes.

"Hi, dog! Hi, Tammie!" Ted ruffled his head with a gentle hand as Tammie fell in beside him. Plucking the tobacco pouch from his pocket, he gave it to the collie. "Here. Take it to Al."

The tobacco pouch dangling by its drawstrings, Tammie streaked up the road. Disdaining the drive leading into the house, he cut through the woods and disappeared. Ted squared his shoulders, tried again to whistle—and succeeded. His father must be home. When Ted was working and Al went out, Tammie always went with him.

Ted turned up the drive and was halfway to the house when Tammie came flying back to meet him. They went to the shed in the rear; Al would be working. Ted peered through the open door and his father, shaping another stretching board, glanced up to greet him.

"Hi, Ted!"

"Hello, dad!"

"No work today?"

"That's right."

Al bent his head to hide the question in his eyes. Something had happened and he knew it. His voice was a little too casual as he said, "Figgered when Tammie fetched my tobacco pouch that he'd made up his mind to go 'round pickin' up after me."

"No, I found it beside the road and sent Tammie with it. You should put a string on that pouch and tie it to your britches."

"Guess I'd ought. Tammie and me took a whirl down the crick to look for mink sign. Must of lost my pouch on the way back."

"Find any sign?"

"There'll be mink on the crick this year. I can take a string of pelts and leave enough so there'll also be mink next year."

"Now that's just swell!" Ted bit his tongue. Wanting to keep his troubles to himself by appearing gay and careless, he'd leaned too far in that direction and been over-emphatic. Al raised his head and searched his son's face with wonderfully gentle eyes.

"Want to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"What happened to you."

"Oh," Ted forced what he tried to make a casual laugh, "Thornton fired me."

Al remained calm. "He what?"

"Thornton gave me the gate, the bounce act, ye olde heave-ho. He said, in short, that I was never to darken his kitchen towels again."

Al said, "Come off it, Ted."

Suddenly Ted's misery and heartbreak were too great a burden to bear alone. He fought to keep his voice from quavering and his lower lip from trembling.

"That's right. I've been fired."

"Want to tell me why?" Al did not raise his voice.

"I—I wouldn't shoot Damon and Pythias for Thornton."

Al arched surprised brows. "Why's he want those two bucks?"

"He's going to expand Crestwood. He said that if he had one or both of those heads to put on the wall, it would be written up in every paper in the state. He said they'd help bring guests."

"Boy, seems to me like you went off half-cocked."

"What do you mean?"

"Thornton's takin' a lot for granted to think that you, or anyone, could get either one of those bucks. But if you wanted to hunt 'em, and if you did get one, 'twould do no harm to give it to him. 'Twould save your job for you."

"That would have been different," Ted said wryly, "but that wasn't what he asked. He wants both bucks *before* the season opens."

"So?" Al was almost purring. "And you turned him down?"

"That's right."

"You don't aim to change your mind?"

"No."

"Not even to get your job back?"

"Not even for that."

"You're sure now?"

"I'm sure."

"That bein' the case," Al said, rising, "I think I'll go down to Crestwood and have a little talk with Mr. Thornton. You stay here with Tammie."

When Al Harkness climbed into his old pickup truck and pressed the starter, his thoughts went back thirty-six years. The Mahela had been young then, and he'd been young, and that, he'd told himself a thousand times since, was probably the reason why he'd also been blind. It was not that he'd lacked eyes, very keen eyes that could detect the skulking deer in its copse, the grouse in its thicket and the rabbit in its set. But he hadn't seen clearly what was right before his eyes.

At that time, the road to Lorton had been a mud track in spring and fall, a dusty trace in summer and impassable in winter. Nobody had needed anything better. The only car even near the Mahela belonged to Judge Brimhall, of Lorton, and excitement ran at fever pitch when the respected judge drove his vehicle to Danzer, seven whole miles, without breaking down even once!

Lorton and the Mahela itself had been almost as far apart as Lorton and New York were now. Even when the road was good, a traveler had needed a whole day to go the fifteen miles to town and back. Whoever had extensive business in Lorton might better figure on two days for the round trip. The dwellers in the woods had been inclined to sneer at the town folk as sissified and, in turn, were sneered at for being hicks.

There'd been seven families in the wilderness; the Harknesses, the Delberts, two families of Staceys and three of Crawfords. All of them had gardens, a milk cow, a few chickens, a couple of pigs and a team of horses or mules. But all this was only secondary—the Mahela itself fulfilled most of their wants. It was a great, inexhaustible larder, provided by a benign Providence who had foreseen that men would rather hunt than work. Al remembered some of the hunts. His father, George Stacey and Tom Crawford had shot thirty-three deer in one day and sold them all in Lorton. Two days later, they shot twenty-nine more.

There weren't that many deer when Al came of an age to hunt. His elders were at a loss to explain the scarcity, unless some mysterious plague had come among the animals. Never once did they think of themselves and their indiscriminate, year-round slaughter as the "plague." On Al's thirteenth birthday, he shot a buck and a doe. They were the last deer taken in the Mahela for the next thirteen years.

It wasn't an inexhaustible larder at all, but just a place that could be depleted by always thoughtless and often vicious greed. Then had come the change.

The Game Department, the Lorton paper announced, had purchased deer from a state that still had some. In the hope that they'd multiply and rebuild the vast herds that had once roamed there, twenty of them were to be released in the Mahela. There was to be no hunting at all until such time as there were sufficient deer to warrant a hunt, and game wardens were to enforce that regulation.

It hadn't been easy. Bitterly jealous of what they considered their vested rights, the natives of the Mahela had resisted the game wardens. There had been quarrels and even a couple of shootings. But the wardens had won out and the deer had come back.

There were as many as there'd ever been and perhaps more. Protected by strict and sane laws, they flourished. Seven families had all but exterminated the Mahela deer. Now four thousand properly regulated hunters a year couldn't do it, and this Al Harkness had seen.

He thought of the families—still the Harknesses, the Delberts, the Crawfords and the Staceys, who lived in the Mahela. With the exception of Al and Ted, who observed the game laws to the letter, most of them took more than their share of the Mahela's wildlife. Smoky Delbert was an especially vicious poacher who belonged, and one day would land, in jail. But, with game wardens on constant patrol, even Smoky could no longer indulge in wholesale slaughter.

There was, Al had always conceded, some excuse for the Crawfords and the Staceys. Al was the only Mahelaite who'd held on to the entire family acreage. Glad to raise money any way he could, the Staceys and Crawfords had sold theirs, all but a homesite and garden patch, and the proceeds were long since exhausted. Most of the men worked at day labor and their employment was never certain. Always struggling, there were times when they would have no meat at all if they did not shoot an occasional deer. That condition would not endure. Since all the younger people left the Mahela, preferably for some brightly lighted city, as soon as they possibly could, the Staceys and Crawfords who remained were not going to last forever.

But if there was some excuse for them, there was none whatever for Carl Thornton. Comparatively wealthy, certainly he was in no danger of going hungry. Educated, he must understand what conservation meant. Supposedly intelligent, he must know that nobody at all could take what he wanted simply because he felt like taking it, or for his own advantage, and still hope to leave enough for others and for future generations. Al braked to a halt in Crestwood's drive and entered the lodge.

Jules Crowley, Thornton's pale-faced clerk, stepped in front of him. "You can't come in here!"

Al said, "Oh yes I can."

He moved around Jules, jerked the office door open and closed it behind him. Thornton was sitting at his desk, going over some papers. He looked up. Al hesitated. Now that he was here, just what was he supposed to do? It would be silly to threaten Carl Thornton, and how could he report him to the game warden when he had broken no law? Al felt a little foolish and Thornton's voice was as cold as his eyes when he spoke.

"What do you want?"

"You fired Ted?"

"That's right."

"What for?"

"Inefficiency."

"Ted told me different. He told me you fired him because he wouldn't shoot those two big bucks for you."

"He's a liar."

Al stepped to the desk, twined his right hand in Thornton's lapel, lifted him to his feet and used his left hand to slap both Thornton's cheeks. Then he let the resort owner slump back into the chair and turned on his heel.

"For callin' Ted a liar," he said.

He stalked out, knowing as he did so that he had made a deadly enemy but not caring. Thornton owned Crestwood. But he was still a little man and sooner or later little men stumbled over big problems. As Al climbed back into the pickup, he almost forgot Thornton. He had something more important to occupy his thoughts.

He had hoped mightily that, after he finished High School, Ted would go on to college. It didn't matter what he studied there as long as it was something; a Harkness would go out of the Mahela to become a man of parts. But Ted had not only wanted to stay in the Mahela, but also to start a resort there, and for almost the first time in his life Al faced a problem to which he saw no solution.

An expert woodsman, he earned a comfortable income. Since his own wants were simple, there would certainly be enough left over to pay Ted's college expenses. But Al couldn't even imagine the vast sum of money needed to start a resort. He had told the truth when he said Crestwood cost Thornton more than he'd earned in his whole life.

Al fell back on an idea that he himself had been mulling over. Hunters and fishermen were a varied breed, with varying tastes. Some preferred the comforts of Crestwood, but every season numbers of them hauled trailers into the Mahela or set up tents there and they did so because they liked that way of hunting or fishing. Not all of them wanted the same things and not all cared to be crowded.

Driving back into his own yard, Al got out of the pickup and faced his son serenely. But seeing Ted's uncertain hand fall to Tammie's head, he grinned inwardly. The boy turned to Tammie whenever he was worried or at a loss.

"Did you see Thornton?" Ted's voice was too casual.

"I saw him."

"Did—?"

"No," Al told him gently. "I didn't. He's still alive and, as far as I'm concerned, he can stay that way. Ted, let's go up to Beech Bottom."

"Swell!"

Ted and Tammie got into the pickup and Al drove. He did not speak because he was thinking too busily to talk. A father, if he was worthy of being a father, showed his children the right path. But it was always better if he could guide them into doing their own thinking, instead of leading them along the path—and sometimes that called for subtle measures.

Two miles up the road, Al came to a clearing. A little less than an acre, it was a jungle of yellow-topped golden rod. Here and there a milkweed raised its spear-shaft stem and showed its silk-filled pods to all who passed. In the center was an old building with all the windows broken and part of the roof fallen in. Sun, wind, rain and snow had exercised their own artistry on the unpainted boards and tinted them a delicate shade which no brush could possibly achieve. There was a little patch of summer apples and two small bucks, stretching their necks to get the wormy fruit, moved reluctantly away when the truck stopped.

Al got out of the truck and Ted and Tammie alighted beside him. Al looked at the tumble-down building.

"My gosh! It ain't possible!"

"What isn't?"

Al grinned ruefully, "Seems like yesterday I worked here."

"You worked at the old Hawley logging camp?"

"Yep. Chore boy. Got up at four every mornin' to feed and curry the horses so they'd be ready to go into the woods. You wouldn't think fifteen men, or fourteen men and a boy, ate and slept in that old house, would you?"

"It's big enough."

"By gosh! Seems like a person gets born, takes six breaths and gets old. That old house is still good, though. Those boards are really seasoned and I bet they last another hundred years."

Ted asked without much interest, "What happened?"

"Old Man Hawley sold everything 'cept that little patch when the state took over and made the Mahela into state forest. Jud, his son, was goin' to make a huntin' camp of it. But he never did and he never will. Bet you could buy the works for a hundred and fifty dollars."

Ted almost yelled, "Dad!"

"What's the matter? Bee sting you?"

"No, but something else did! Dad, I'm going to buy it!"

"That?" Al looked puzzled.

"Don't you see?" Ted's eyes were shining and Al knew his heart was singing. "With more and more people coming into the Mahela every year, they must have more places to stay. I'm going to tear this house down and build a camp right here! Bet it'll rent five months out of the year!"

"Well, I'll be jugged!" Al hoped Ted couldn't interpret his smile. "That *is* an idea!"

"We'll buy them all!" Ted bubbled, "with the money you were going to use to send me to college! There're plenty of these small plots in the Mahela and nobody else wants them! They can be had cheaply! Dad, it can be done that way!"

"By gosh, Ted, it might! But it'll take a while."

"I know but—What's Tammie barking at?"

"One way to find out is to go see."

Off in the goldenrod, Tammie barked again. They made their way to him and found him peering into a shallow little stream, Tumbling Run, that wound out of the beeches, crossed the clearing and hurried back into the beeches, on its way to meet Spinning Creek. In the middle of the run, a small gray raccoon with a trap on its left front paw did not even glance up. It had fought the trap fiercely and now was too spent and too weary to fight anything.

Al's words were almost an explosion. "Smoky Delbert!"

He jumped down into the creek, encircled the little raccoon's neck with an expert hand and used his free hand to depress the trap spring. Free, but not quite believing it, the little animal went exactly as far as the trap chain had previously let him go and then ventured two inches farther. Sure at last that the miracle had happened, he scuttled into the goldenrod. Al jerked the trap loose from its anchor.

"Let's go, Ted."

"Where?"

"You want to buy this place. We'll go into Lorton and see Jud Hawley. But on the way, we'll have a little palaver with Smoky."

A half hour later, Al drove his pickup into the Delbert yard, to find another truck there ahead of him. It belonged to Loring Blade, the warden, who was talking with Smoky. He turned to nod at Al and Ted.

"Hi!"

Al said, "I won't be but a minute, Lorin'." He held the steel trap out to Smoky Delbert. "This yours?"

Smoky looked at him through insolent, half-closed eyes. "Nope."

"You lie in your teeth! I've told you before not to set traps before furs are prime. I'm tellin' you again and this is the last time."

"What goes on?" Blade demanded.

"Nothin' you can help, Lorin'. Smoky, if I find you poachin' in the Mahela once more, I'm goin' to beat you within an inch of your life!"

"You got any ideas along that line," Smoky remained insolent, "come shootin'."

Al said, "I can do that, too!"

THE CAMP

Sprawled on his favorite bearskin in the Harkness living room, Tammie dreamed a dog's good dreams and his paws twitched with excitement as he lived again some old adventure. Al, sitting in front of the fireplace, studied the bed of glowing coals within it as though they were as fascinating as the first coals he had ever seen. Sitting at the table with a pen in his hand, a pile of fresh paper on one side and a pile of crumpled sheets on the other, Ted was busy writing.

He laid the pen down, picked up what he had just written and frowned over it. Making a motion to crumple this paper too, he thought better of it and called, "How's this, Dad? 'For Rent, furnished camp in the Mahela. Bunks for eight. Forty-five dollars a week in small game season, sixty in deer season. Available for season. Ted Harkness, R.D. 2, Lorton.'"

Al shrugged. "Says 'bout everythin' you got to say."

"I don't know." Ted's frown deepened. "'Bunks for eight,' it says. If a bunch of deer hunters take the place, they may bring twelve or sixteen. Do you think I should say, 'Bring extra cots for more than eight?'"

"Mighty important point," Al said gravely, "but do you figure you got to throw out that much sign?"

"If I was readin' that and wanted to rent a camp and saw 'bunks for eight,' I'd calc'late that there wasn't bunks for ten or sixteen. I'd figger that, if I brought more than eight, I'd best bring somethin' for 'em to sleep on."

"If I say 'accommodations for eight,' and a bigger party wanted to take the camp, they might pass it up."

"'Bunks' is the word," Al pronounced. "Why it's pra'tically liter-choor. City people are always gettin' accommodations. Might help rent your camp if they knew they was goin' to sleep on bunks."

"That's a point," Ted agreed. He continued to frown thoughtfully. "Now this 'available for season,' do you think I should say at ten per cent discount?"

"Nope."

"But doesn't everybody do that?"

"Everybody 'cept horse traders, and you can always do your horse tradin' when and if you have to. But I don't think you're goin' to rent for the season."

"Why not?"

Al shrugged. "Figger it out by yourself. How many city people can take a whole season just to go huntin'? Most they get is a couple of weeks or so."

"That's right, too. Do you think I should say, 'deer and small game abundant?'"

"I wouldn't. Nobody'd come into the Mahela 'thout havin' some idea they could find game here and there's another point."

"What's that?"

"You're tryin' to build up a business, and the more repeat business you can get, the less it'll cost to get it. Promise too much and you might drive business away. Some people, readin' about over-plenty game, might expect a flock of grouse behind every tree and a ten-point buck in every swale and be mad if they didn't find it. Let 'em do their own lookin'."

"I was thinking of hiring out as a guide."

"Wouldn't put that in either. Some people want guides and some don't. Anybody who rents your camp and wants a guide will ask you where to find one. Then you can dicker."

"Do you think I'm asking too much money?"

"Nope. Chances are that you won't get less than six in any party. Split the cost amongst 'em and it won't break any one."

Your prices are fair."

Ted lost himself in his literary effort. "It doesn't seem very forceful."

"Land o'goshen!" Al's eyes glinted with amusement. "You're tryin' to get information across, not writin' a speech! How many papers you crumpled so far?"

"Well," Ted looked at the pile of discarded papers beside him and grinned, "quite a few. You really think this is all right?"

"A masterpiece," Al answered solemnly. "Mail it afore you change your mind again."

Ted folded his paper, wrote a short letter to the effect that he wanted his ad to run in the classified section, wrote a check, put all three in an envelope and addressed it to a leading daily newspaper in a city from which the Mahela drew numerous hunters. Tammie trotted beside him as he ran down to the mailbox, put his letter in and raised the red flag to let Bill Parker, their rural carrier, know there was mail to pick up. He ran back to the house.

"*Br-r!* It's cold!"

"The jackets in the closet," Al observed drily, "are not there because they look pretty."

Ted said meekly, "Yes, Dad."

He re-seated himself at the table and took up his pen. The first hunting season, for woodcock, opened next week. Two weeks later, squirrels, cottontails and ruffed grouse became legal game and the season ran for a month. During the last week of small game season, black bears could be shot. Then everything else was closed and hunting wound up with the three-week deer season.

Ted calculated carefully. There were six weeks of the small game season. If he rented his camp throughout at forty-five dollars a week, it would give him a net return of two hundred and seventy dollars. Three weeks of deer season would add another hundred and eighty, or a total of four hundred and fifty. Ted consulted his expense records.

Jud Hawley had sold them the land with the old building on it for a hundred and fifty dollars and Al and Ted had torn down the old building and rebuilt it. Just the same, expenses had mounted with incredible speed. Al had all the tools, but it was necessary to buy nails. The window casings Al had fashioned, but the glass that went into them cost money. They'd had to buy a secondhand cooking range and a heating stove and enough table and cooking ware to serve many people. Bedding had been an expensive item, and composition shingles for both the roof and outer walls had cost a great deal.

Economizing as much as possible and hiring no labor, the camp had still cost six hundred and fifteen dollars. However, the old building had been a huge place and there was enough lumber left over to build another, smaller camp as soon as they acquired another building site. Ted nibbled the end of his pen.

"We'll be in the clear on this one before next hunting season; then everything it brings in will be pure gravy."

"How do you figger it?"

"There's six weeks of small game hunting and three of deer season. If the camp is rented continuously, it will bring in four hundred and fifty dollars. Then, when fishing opens—"

"If," Al broke in, "is a right fancy word. Might be a good idea to rent your camp 'fore you spend the rent money."

"It might at that," Ted said meekly, "and I forgot to charge against it the fifteen dollars the ad's costing."

"Charge it," Al advised, "and get this one thing straight. There's no such thing as 'pure gravy.' What a body gets, he works for. What he don't work for, he don't get. You started the ball rollin', but it will stop if you don't keep it rollin'."

"What do you suggest I do?"

"Just what you are doin', but don't get cocky about it. You've made a start, but it's a small start that stacks up against a big job. See how things work out. If they come 'round like I think they will, this camp will make money. But it won't be your

money. It belongs to the job you've set yourself. Build another camp—and another and another, until you've got as many as you can handle. Go on from there."

"Go on?"

"You started out," Al reminded him, "to own a place like Crestwood."

"That will take years!"

"Did you expect to get it in a week?"

"Well—No."

"Good, on account you won't. You'll need years. Then, after you finally get what you want, or somethin' close to it, all the people who set 'round on their hunkers while you worked will still be settin' 'round tellin' each other how lucky you are."

Ted grinned, then yawned and stretched. "Gosh! All this heavy philosophy's making me tired!"

"What do you think your bed's for?"

"You get the best ideas!"

"Oh, I'm the smart one!" Al smiled and filled his pipe. "Catch yourself some shut-eye. There's work to be done come mornin'."

The next morning, with Al driving and Tammie on the floor in front of Ted, they started back toward the camp they had built. The lazy sun, reluctant to get out of bed, made a splash of gold only on the very tip of Hawkbill. The rest of the wilderness was a deep-shadowed green, with overtones of gray. A doe danced across the road in front of them and stopped to look back over her shoulder at the passing pickup. They saw two more does, then a buck—and Al stepped suddenly on the gas.

Spurting ahead, the old truck still missed by a wide margin a lean coyote that was running a scant twenty feet behind the buck. Tammie rose and bristled. Ted held him down. The collie was fast, but nothing except a greyhound was fast enough to catch a coyote. Visible for only fleeting seconds, this one disappeared in the forest. Failing to run the coyote down, Al stopped his truck.

"Doggone! Of all times to be without a rifle!"

"It looked to me as though he was chasing that buck," Ted observed.

Al shook his head. "Just followin' it; one coyote couldn't kill a grown buck. But he can and will do a lot of damage 'mongst the small game. I'll have to nail that critter's scalp to the wall soon's I can. Let's have a look."

They got out and examined the tracks in the dusty road. Al made careful observations of his own. He went a little ways into the forest and came back to the truck.

"Looks like he's been crossin' here quite a few times. I'll fetch the rifle tomorrow mornin', on the chanst I'll nail him. If I don't, I'd best string some traps. Can't have coyotes in the Mahela."

"We sure can't."

Without completely understanding his father's bitter lesson—seeing his beloved wilderness all but denuded of game by thoughtless or greedy hunters and built back through sound conversation—Ted knew only that Al had an almost ferocious hatred for destructive elements wherever they were found. Therefore, the coyote could not be tolerated. Ted's eyes roved up Hawkbill, and the cool wind felt good on his face. When they mounted a hill, he strove for and caught a glimpse of the burned mountain behind Hawkbill. Al saw and interpreted his look.

"They're there all right, and it's my bet they'll be there after deer season ends."

"Not both of 'em," Ted asserted. "I'm going to nail one or the other."

"Which one you aim to get? Damon? Or Pythias?"

"Either will satisfy. How do you tell 'em apart?"

"I imagine there'd be some small differences if a man was close. But on a far look, I can't tell which is which. They're alike as two peas in a pod. All I'm sure of is that I never saw bigger bucks."

Ted said smugly, "Either should be as much advertising for the Harknesses as it could be for Crestwood."

"Hadn't you ought to get it first?" Al asked wryly. "Well, here we are again."

To the vast delight and relief of a colony of chipmunks that were snugly at home beneath it, the Harknesses had built their new camp on the site of the old. However, they had done so to save hauling lumber and because the old foundation was so solid; any benefits accruing to the chipmunks were merely incidental. The new camp was a one-story structure, twenty-six feet long by eighteen wide.

The exterior, if less than magnificent, did promise comfort. The windows were small, consisting of four panes each, and set well back in their casings. Two tin chimneys, one for each stove, protruded well above the roof. The shingled walls and roof gave assurance that no cold winds could creep in and there was a covered porch. Probably not so much as one hunter would ever sit on it, but it did provide a place for storing wood and keeping it dry. The surrounding goldenrod had been crushed and scattered and the truck had made its own path in.

Al drew up in front of the door and Tammie leaped out to sniff at the various cracks and crevices the chipmunks used in their comings and goings. Al and Ted went inside.

In the center of the one room, not too close to the heating stove, was a long wooden table, with benches on either side. Convenient to it was a built-in cupboard, one end of which contained tableware and dishes. Running along the wall, the other half of the cupboard held skillets, pans and kettles. Nearby was the cooking stove, with cabinets for food storage and a sturdy table for the cook's use. At the other end of the building, as far as possible from both stoves, were the bunks. Scattered along the walls were two secondhand davenport and five chairs that had seen their best days but would still offer comfort to anyone who'd been hiking the hills all day.

Al surveyed the place critically. "Not much like Crestwood."

Ted teased, "It is kind of ramshackle."

"Ramshackle!" Al bristled. "Why you young whipper-snapper! This is as good-built a camp as—"

"There you are!" Ted grinned. "If you had a choice, would you stay here or at Crestwood?"

"Why here," Al grumbled. "I never did go for that fancy stuff."

"And neither do a lot of other hunters. When they go out, they'd as soon be in the woods. Besides, the prices here aren't much like Crestwood's, either. In deer season, Thornton's cheapest room is fifteen dollars a day. We could rent twenty camps like this if we had 'em."

"And we won't even rent this'n 'thout we finish it. Now let's do some figgerin'."

At the kitchen end of the camp, they had built a wooden stand and in it placed the tub from a large kitchen sink. There was an overflow pipe that led to a septic tank beneath the floor of the camp itself; thus it wouldn't freeze. Al scratched his head.

"My figgerin's all done."

"It is?"

"Yup, and it figgers out the same's it always does. If we want water in here, we'll have to work to put it in. Get your

boots on."

"Yes, boss."

Ted donned rubber boots and they went out. Tammie, who had been having an exciting time trying to catch a chipmunk that insisted on poking its nose out of a crevice, wagged his tail and ran to join them. A doe that had come to the apple trees stamped an apprehensive foot and drifted slowly into the forest. The two workers took a pick and shovel from the truck, and Al led the way to a little knoll.

On the very top of the knoll was a seepage of water that sent a tricklet into Tumbling Run. Green grass, rather than goldenrod, lined its length and at no place was the runlet more than four inches wide or two deep. Never in Al's memory had it been more or less; the spring provided a constant flow. Even in coldest weather, the runlet never froze, and its banks were always free of snow. It was a favorite drinking place for deer that found other water icebound.

Al asked, "Can you think of any more excuses for deep thinkin'?"

"Not even one."

"Me neither," Al said mournfully, "so I guess we can start the workin' part. Do you want the pick or the shovel?"

"Is there a choice?"

"Could be, but here's the shovel and you might as well dig."

Ted sunk his shovel point deep into the wet earth and scooped out a chunk of soggy earth. Ice-cold, muddy water at once filled the hole and Ted scooped again. He made a wry face.

"This is like shoveling glue!"

"Case you ever get a job in a glue factory, you'll know how to shovel it," Al soothed. "We got to get down anyway three feet."

"I'll persevere, but I know now why you wanted the pick.

"Who's the brains of this outfit?"

"Obviously you are."

"There ain't any real need for a pick." Al grinned. "Wet ground don't have to be loosened. I'll go snake in some wood."

Al left and Tammie frisked beside him. Both got into the truck, and Al drove across the clearing into the woods. Then there came the sound of his ax ringing on dead wood.... An hour later he was back. The pickup's box was filled with wood and Al dragged a log that he had chained to the truck. He left the wood beside the camp and, with Tammie sitting proudly in Ted's accustomed place, drove back for another load.

Ted continued to deepen the spring. It was cold, dirty work, but it was a good idea and certainly it would make the camp more comfortable. The spring must be made deep enough to form a pool. Then its present overflow would be plugged, diverted into some secondhand pipe they'd already bought and led into the kitchen sink. Al thought there was sufficient fall so no pump would be necessary and the water would force itself through the pipe. Thus the cabin would be assured of a continuous flow of fresh, pure water. In winter, when the camp would have no occupants, it would be necessary only to pull the pipe or plug it and so send the overflow back into its original course.

Al returned with a second load of wood, dumped it and came up to see how Ted was doing. Tammie sniffed at the muddy pool, then promptly jumped into it. He climbed out, shook himself and sent a roily spray flying in all directions.

Ted ducked and sputtered, "For Pete's sake, dog!"

Al grinned. "He thinks you need a bath."

Ted glanced down at his mud-spattered boots and clothing. "Maybe I do. Is this deep enough?"

"Let's have the shovel."

Ted stood aside while Al took the implement. An old hand at this sort of thing, he probed expertly into corners that Ted had missed and lifted out shovelfuls of mud without splashing his clothes at all. Ten minutes later he leaned on the shovel and inspected the spring, which in its present stage of construction was a muddy pool, four feet square by a little more than three deep, with the overflow still going down its natural channel.

"That'll do," Al decided. "Now for the plumbin'."

He caught up a length of pipe, walked to the apple trees, inserted his pipe in a crotch and bent it into an 'L.' He bent it again, so that one end formed a gooseneck, and carried his pipe into the cabin. Al maneuvered one end through an already drilled hole in the floor, hung the gooseneck over the sink and used a metal clamp to fasten his pipe to the wall.

Ted marveled. His father had measured nothing, but the bent pipe fitted perfectly and the straight half of the 'L' lay flat on the ground beneath the cabin.

Ted asked,

"What now?"

"Let's eat."

"Most sensible idea I've heard all day."

They ate the sandwiches and drank the coffee they'd brought along while Tammie, sitting hopefully near, expertly caught and gobbled the crusts they tossed him. Then the two went back to work.

Taking a bit of soap from his pocket, Al soaped the threads on another length of pipe; filling the threads, the soap would prevent leaks. The two "plumbers" then fitted this section into the pipe that protruded beneath the cabin and continued with additional lengths until they were within five feet of the spring.

Al cut that five-foot length off with a hack saw. He plugged the cut end with a piece of wood, started at a point about a foot below the top of the knoll and used the flat of his ax to drive the plugged section of pipe through so that it emerged a foot below the surface of the spring. He screwed the short length into the already laid pipe and straightened.

"Now we're diggin' where there's taters!" he said cheerfully.

Catching up the shovel, he closed the spring's outlet with dirt and mud. Then he rolled up his right sleeve, reached into the water and pulled the wooden plug out. A second time he straightened, grinning. "If it don't work, it's a sign we did it wrong. Let's go see."

They re-entered the cabin and stood expectantly near the sink. For a moment nothing happened. Then a series of choking gurgles and a rush of air came through the gooseneck. This was followed by a muddy trickle that subsided to a few drops. Then there was a violent surge of water that leveled off to a steady flow. Al and Ted looked triumphantly at each other.

"It works!" Al said.

"Running water yet!" Ted exulted, "Even if it is muddy!"

"It'll clear itself in a few hours."

"Don't you think we should have a faucet on this gooseneck?"

Al shook his head. "Not in cold weather. It don't freeze 'cause it runs fast. Come spring, we may tie a faucet onto it."

"What do we do now?"

"Go home. It's quittin' time."

Ted was surprised to find that long evening shadows were slanting across the valleys. They had worked hard, and perhaps that had made the day seem so short. Only when they climbed back into the pickup for the ride home did he realize that he was very tired. He tickled Tammie's silken ears.

"Tomorrow's another day," he murmured.

"Yep," Al agreed somberly, "and another day brings more work. Reckon I'll take after that coyote. He's got to be caught. You want to saw wood?"

"Sure thing."

Early the next morning, Al let Ted and Tammie off at the camp and turned back, with traps and rifle, to get on the trail of the marauding coyote. While the collie renewed his acquaintance with the chipmunks, Ted laid a chunk of wood in the sawbuck and sawed off a twelve-inch length. He sawed another ... and worked until noon. After lunch, he started splitting the wood he had sawed. It was the right way to do things. If hunters cut their own wood, they might injure valuable trees.

Evening shadows were long again when Al came to pick him up. "Get your coyote?" Ted greeted his father.

"No, but I will. I found where he's runnin' and I put traps in the right places. See you got a sizable pile of wood."

"I haven't been loafing."

"Not much anyhow."

Ted said tiredly, "What a refreshing sense of humor my old pappy's got."

They turned into the driveway of their own house, to see Loring Blade's pickup truck already there and the game warden waiting. With him was Jack Callahan, Sheriff of Mahela County.

Al's voice was weighted with surprise as he welcomed them. "Hi, Lorin'. 'Lo, Jack. Been waitin' long?"

"Not very long," Loring Blade said. "We figured you'd be in about now. We have to ask you some questions, Al."

"Well, come in and ask."

They entered the house and Ted snapped on the lights in the living room. He started into the kitchen to prepare supper. Al swung to face their guests.

"Ask away," he invited them.

"We came to find out," said Jack Callahan, "what you can tell us about the shooting of Smoky Delbert."

THE FUGITIVE

The words brought Ted to a shocked halt, just as he was entering the kitchen. He turned to stare in disbelief and Tammie, sensing that something was wrong, searched his master's face as though this would show him what he must do. Failing to find any guiding sign, the collie turned toward the two strangers. He did nothing and would do nothing until Ted or Al told him to. But he was ready for any part he must take.

In his turn, Ted looked to his father for a clue and found none. Whatever Al might feel, he was successfully hiding it, and his voice was neither raised nor lowered when he spoke.

"Somebody finally got him, huh?"

Jack Callahan challenged, "What do you mean by that?"

"Where you been the past twenty or twenty-five years, Jack? Smoky's been askin' for it at least that long."

Callahan's voice was hard as ice and as brittle. "You didn't answer my question."

"So I didn't, but I will. I know nothin' 'bout who might've shot Smoky, but I can think of lots of reasons why."

"Is this yours?"

Callahan's hand dipped into his pocket and came up bearing Al's distinctive tobacco pouch. Ted gasped. His father was unmoved.

"Yep. But I haven't seen it for two weeks or more."

"That's true!" Ted asserted. "He hasn't had it for at least that long!"

Al said quietly, "Stay out of this, boy."

"You needn't stay out." Callahan swung toward Ted. "Was your father with you today?"

"Well—no."

"Where was he?"

"He was out hunting a coyote."

A note of triumph in his voice, Callahan turned again to Al. "By any chance, a two-legged coyote?"

Al said disgustedly, "Don't be a fool!"

"Did you have your rifle with you?"

"What would you carry if you was huntin' a coyote? A pocketful of pebbles?"

"Can you account for your actions of today?"

"Yep. Crossed the nose of Hawkbill, went into Coon Valley, climbed that to its head, swung behind Burned Mountain, crossed the Fordham Road and come back by way of Fiddlefoot Crick."

"Can you prove all this?"

"Sure!" Al snorted. "I'll get you an affy-davit from a couple of crows that saw me."

"That is your tobacco pouch?"

"I've already said it is."

"That pouch," and again Callahan's voice rose in triumph, "was found not six feet from where Smoky fell!"

"So?"

"Al, I'd hate to have to get tough with you."

"Don't think you'd better try it."

"Loring heard you threaten to shoot Delbert."

"And I also," Loring Blade broke in, "heard Smoky threaten to shoot Al. There's more than one side to this, Jack, and suppose you simmer down?"

"I'm in charge here!"

"But you're getting nowhere. Al, will you talk to me?"

"I'll tell you what I can, Lorin'."

"If you had anything to do with this, tell your story now. I don't hold with shooting, but certainly I never held with Smoky Delbert. I, for one, am willing to believe that, no matter how it happened or who he met, Smoky raised his rifle first. I've known him a long while."

"But you never jailed him."

"Only because," the warden said, "I could never catch him. He was crafty as he was mean. But he's still a human being."

"Could be some argument 'bout that," Al murmured. "Lorin', where was Smoky shot?"

"Coon Valley," the warden answered reluctantly. "Almost beside those three big sycamores near Glory Rock."

"Is he dead?"

"No, but he probably would be if he hadn't dragged himself to the Fordham Road. Bill Layton, passing in his logging truck, found him and took him into the hospital at Lorton."

"Is he goin' to die?"

"He's in a bad way."

"Has he talked?"

"Not yet."

"How about the bullet?"

"It went right through him; we couldn't find it."

"How do you know he was shot near them three sycamores in Coon Valley?"

"Bill told us where he picked him up. Jack and I went up there to see what we could find and," the warden shrugged, "the back trail wasn't hard to follow. Smoky was hit hard."

"And you found my tobacco pouch?"

"That's right, Al. It was within a few feet of where Smoky fell."

"How do you know he fell there?"

Loring Blade shrugged again. "He laid a while before he started to drag himself out. There was plenty of evidence."

"Now here's a point, Lorin'. I've already said I was in Coon Valley today. Suppose I had my pouch, couldn't I have lost it when I passed the sycamores?"

"You could have."

"What time did you go up Coon Valley?" Jack Callahan broke in.

"'Twas before eight. I started early."

"Then you crossed back to the Fordham Road?"

"Don't try to snarl my words up," Al warned. "I've already said that I went up Coon Valley to its head and crossed back of Burned Mountain to the Fordham Road."

"But you heard no shooting?"

Al seemed a little contemptuous. "You ever make that crossin'?"

"I asked you a question."

"And I asked you one. Did you ever cross that way?"

"No." Put on the defensive, Callahan sulked.

"Try it," Al advised shortly. "It's a right smart hop. There's places back in there where you couldn't hear a cannon fired in Coon Valley."

"Look, Al," Loring Blade pleaded, "I'll ask you again to tell your straight story. I'm sure there has to be more to it than this. I know you too well to think you'd shoot Delbert or anyone else down in cold blood. Won't you help me to help you?"

Al said doggedly, "I've told my story. Seems like there's an easy way to settle this whole works."

"What is it?"

"Delbert ain't dead. When he talks, he'll tell who shot him."

"There's no guarantee that Delbert will ever talk."

Jack Callahan said, "I'm afraid I'll have to take you in, Al."

"On what grounds?"

"Suspicion. If Delbert lives, the charge will be assault with a deadly weapon. If he dies—" Callahan shrugged.

Al looked aside, and the fierce storms that could rage in his usually gentle eyes were raging now. Ted shivered, and then Al calmed.

"All right, Jack. If that's the way it must be."

"You won't resist?"

"I promise I won't raise a hand against you or Lorin'."

Loring Blade said relievedly, "That's a help, Al. Thanks."

"Is there any reason," Al asked, "why a body can't eat first? Ted and me've been out sinst early mornin' with only a snack in between."

Loring Blade said agreeably, "No reason at all, Al." Callahan glared at the warden. Al smiled faintly.

"Have a bite with us, Lorin'?"

"I'll be glad to."

"How about you, Jack?"

"Look here, Al, if you try anything—"

"I've give my word that I'll raise no hand to either of you."

"See that you keep your word."

"Leave that to me. Will you eat with us?"

Callahan answered reluctantly, "I'll stay."

"Then Ted and me'll be rustlin' a bite."

Silent, but seething inwardly, Al joined Ted in the kitchen. Knowing something was amiss, but not what he could do about it, Tammie lay down woefully on his bearskin rug. Wanting to speak, but not knowing what to say, Ted looked dully at his father's face. It was unreadable.

Finally Al said, "We'll all feel better when we've had a bite to eat, and I for one am hungry."

He lighted a burner and stooped to take a kettle from beneath the sink. Ted stared his astonishment. Al had the huge kettle, the one they used when there were ten or more hunters staying with them. Half-filling it with water, he put it over the burner to heat and took an unopened peck of potatoes from their storage place. Industriously he began to peel them.

Ted said, "Dad—"

"We'll need plenty," Al broke in. "S'pose you get about four more parcels of pork chops out and start 'em cookin'?"

"But, Dad—"

"Let's not," Al whirled almost savagely, "waste our time talkin'. Let's just do it."

Sick with fear, Ted did as directed. He and Al froze pork chops six to a package, and three were all a hungry man wanted. Four more packages meant that they would cook thirty pork chops, and what were any four men—even four ravenous men—to do with them? Ted got four more packages out and began breaking them apart. He stole a sidewise glance at his father. Had this sudden, terrible accusation unseated Al's reason? Ted put the still frozen pork chops into two of their biggest skillets and began thawing them over burners. Loring Blade came into the kitchen.

"Can I help?"

Al said, "Reckon not, Lorin'."

"My gosh! You're making enough for an army!"

"Might's well have plenty. Ted, give me another sack of biscuit mix."

Ted's head whirled. He licked dry lips and looked at the two pans of biscuits Al had already prepared. Loring Blade turned away and in that instant when they were unobserved, Al shook a warning head. Ted took another sack of biscuit mix from the cupboard while cold fear gnawed at him as a dog gnaws a bone. If there was some idea behind this madness, what could it possibly be? Al was preparing enough food for a dozen men.

Ted turned to his skillets full of sputtering pork chops while Al tested the boiling potatoes with a fork.

"Most done," he commented. "How you comin'?"

"Another five minutes."

"Guess I can drain the spuds."

He drained them into the sink, shook them, and added a generous hand full of salt and a bit of pepper. He shook the kettle of potatoes again to mix the seasoning thoroughly. Then he put them on the table and pushed the hot coffee pot to a warming burner. While Ted took their biggest platter from the cupboard and began forking pork chops onto it, Al slipped in to set four places at the table.

"Ready?"

"All ready."

"Guess we can eat, then."

Leaving the potatoes in their huge kettle, he carried it in and put it in the center of the table. Ted brought the platter of pork chops and returned to the kitchen for coffee. Al passed him with two plates of biscuits.

"Chow."

Jack Callahan, who had been so grim and unrelenting and now seemed to regret it, smiled.

"Whew! Are four of us going to eat that?"

"If we can."

"I'll do my darndest."

"You're s'posed to."

"Doggonit, Al," Callahan said plaintively, "don't blame me for this. I have a job and I intend to do it!"

"I know."

"There's nothing personal."

"I know that, too."

"Do you have to be so gloomy?"

"What'd you do if you was on your way to jail? Turn handsprings?"

Loring Blade grinned mirthlessly, speared two pork chops and added a generous helping of potatoes. He broke a hot biscuit and lathered it with butter. The game warden began to eat.

"Seen Damon and Pythias lately?" he asked companionably.

"Nope."

Loring Blade looked down at his plate. Under ordinary circumstances they could have made easy conversation. But circumstances weren't ordinary; the shadow of one in trouble cast its pall over the other three. The game warden ate a pork chop and some of his potatoes. Then, unable to refrain from talking about that which loomed so largely, he burst out, "Al, for pete's sake! If you have anything to say, say it! If you shot in self-defense, I, for one, will buy the story. There's a way out if you'll take it!"

"I've told my story, Lorin'."

"You refuse to admit you shot Delbert?"

"I didn't shoot him."

Callahan said, "There's evidence to the contrary."

"So?"

Ted toyed with a single pork chop, one potato, and almost gagged. He took a drink of hot coffee and found it stimulating. Tammie, lying on the bearskin, looked questioningly at his master. Loring Blade pushed his plate back.

"I'm full. Told you you cooked far too much."

"No harm's done."

"We'll help you clean up."

"Right nice of you."

Al put the uneaten pork chops, a great pile of them, in two covered dishes and placed them in the refrigerator. He covered the kettle of potatoes and left them on the table, and put the biscuits in the breadbox. Ted washed the dishes and Loring Blade dried them.

While he worked Ted brought some order to his scattered thoughts. His father was in trouble, serious trouble, and nothing mattered now except getting him out. That meant the services of a skilled attorney and they had little money. But he could sell the camp for at least as much as it had cost and probably he could get a job in Lorton. Ted washed the last plate and Loring Blade dried it. There was an uneasy interval during which nobody did or said anything because nobody knew what to do or say.

Finally Loring Blade asked, "Are you ready, Al?"

"Yep."

"Shall we go?"

"Guess so."

Ted said firmly, "I'm following you in. I'm going to see John McLean tonight. He's a good lawyer."

There was a ring of command in Al's voice, "No, Ted!"

"But—"

"Don't come to Lorton tonight! Stay right here!"

Ted said reluctantly, "If that's what you want—"

"That's what I do want. This thing's too harebrained already. No use makin' it more so by actin' without thinkin'."

"I'll come in in the morning."

"If you think best. So long for now."

The door opened and closed and they were gone. Ted heard Loring Blade start his pickup and watched the red taillight bobbing down their driveway. They reached the Lorton Road and Loring Blade gunned his motor.

Ted sank dully into a chair and Tammie came to sit comfortably beside him. The big dog shoved his slender muzzle into Ted's cupped hand, and, getting no response, he laid his sleek head on his master's knee. The measured ticking of the clock on the mantel seemed like the measured ringing of tiny bells. Ted fastened his gaze on it, and because he had to do something, he watched the clock's black hands creep slowly around. Like everything else, he thought, time was a relative thing. Fifteen minutes seemed no more than an eyewink when one was busy, but it was an age when you could do nothing except struggle with your own tortured thoughts.

Another fifteen minutes passed, and another, and an exact hour had elapsed when Tammie sprang up and trotted to the door. He stood, head raised and tail wagging. Ted opened the door.

"Dad!"

"'Fraid I got to move, Ted. Help me pack all the grub we cooked for supper, will you? Hills'll be full of posse men for the next few days and I can't be startin' any fires."

"But—"

"I kept my promise," Al assured him, "and all I promised was that I wouldn't raise a hand 'gainst Lorin' or Jack. Never did say I wouldn't jump out of the truck when it slowed for Dead Man's Curve."

"They'll be on your trail!"

"Not right away, they won't. I went into the woods when I took off and they're lookin' for me there." He grinned briefly. "Callahan found me. 'Come out or I'll shoot!' he said. I didn't come out and he shot. Hope the beech tree he thought was me don't mind."

"You could have run from here if you were going to run anyhow!"

"When I run," Al Harkness said, "nobody 'cept me gets in the way of any bullets I might draw. Think I want 'em shootin' up you or Tammie?"

Al laid a canvas pack sack on the kitchen table. While Ted wrapped the cooked pork chops in double thicknesses of waxed paper and the excess biscuits in single, his father spooned the potatoes into glass quart jars and mashed them down. He packed everything into the rucksack and added a package of coffee, one of tea, some salt and a few miscellaneous items. Donning his hunting jacket, he shouldered the pack. Filling two pockets with matches, he slid two unopened boxes of cartridges into another. Finally he strung a belt ax and hunting knife on a leather belt, strapped it around his middle and took his rifle from its rack.

"Don't try to find me, Ted."

"What shall I say if they come?" Ted whispered.

"Tell the truth and say I was here. They'll find it out anyhow."

"What are you going to do?"

"Lay in the hills 'til somethin' turns up. Can't do nothin' else now."

"Dad, don't go!" Ted pleaded. "Stay and face it out. It's the best way."

"It might have been," Al agreed, "and I was most tempted to go clear in. But it ain't any more."

"Why?"

"Lorin' had his radio on; listened on the way down. Smoky Delbert come to and talked. He named me as the man who shot him and said I shot from ambush! Be seein' you, Ted."



COON VALLEY

Tammie whined uneasily and Ted woke with a start. He glanced at the clock on the mantel and saw that it read twenty minutes past five. The last time he had looked, he remembered, the clock had said half past two. Obviously he'd fallen asleep in the chair where he'd been waiting for someone to come or something to happen. No one had come, but they were coming now. On the Lorton Road, Ted heard the cars that Tammie had detected twenty seconds earlier.

He got to his feet and looked out into the thin, gray mistiness of early dawn. With its lights glowing like a ghost's eyes in the wan dimness, a car churned up the Harkness drive and a second followed it. The boy shrank away. Last night's events now seemed like some horrible nightmare, but the tread of steps outside and the knock on the door proved that they were not.

Ted opened the door to confront Loring Blade and Corporal Paul Hausler, of the State Police. He glanced beyond them at the men gathered beside the cars and saw that three of the nine were attired in State Police uniforms. The six volunteer posse men were Tom and Bud Delbert, Smoky's brothers; Enos, Alfred and Ernest Brill, his cousins; and Pete Tooms, who would go anywhere and do anything as long as it promised excitement and no monotonous labor.

Loring Blade greeted Ted, "Good morning, Ted."

The boy muttered, "Good morning."

"You seen your dad?"

"Yes."

"I mean, since we took him away last night?"

"Yes."

"Did he come back here?"

"That's right."

"What time?"

Ted hesitated. He'd had his eyes fixed on the clock, but seconds and split seconds counted, too.

"I don't know the *exact* time."

"Better tell the truth," Corporal Hausler warned bluntly. "It can go hard with you if you don't. Where's your father now?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe a couple of slaps will jar your memory!"

He took a step forward. Tammie, rippling in, placed himself in front of Ted. There was no growl in his throat or snarl on his lips, but his eyes were grim and his manner threatening. Hausler stopped.

"I don't think you'd better let him bite me."

Loring Blade said quietly, "Cut it out, Paul. There's enough trouble in this family without adding unnecessarily to it. Ted didn't do anything."

"He can tell us where his father is."

"I cannot!" Ted flared.

"When did he leave here?"

"Last night."

"What time?"

"I forgot to hold a stop watch on him."

"Why didn't you stop him? Don't you know that failing to do so can make you liable to arrest as an accessory after the fact?"

"A sheriff and a game warden couldn't stop him."

"He's right," Loring Blade agreed. "We couldn't. Why don't you start your men into the hills?"

"If he left this house," Hausler threatened, "we'll be on his track in two minutes."

He turned and went out, and Ted laughed. Loring Blade swung to face him.

"You feel pretty bitter, don't you?"

"How would you feel?"

"Not too happy," the warden admitted. "Why did you laugh?"

Ted grinned faintly. "Does that trooper really think he, or anyone else, can track Dad?"

"If he does have such ideas," Loring Blade conceded, "he'll soon have some different ones. Nobody can track Al Harkness."

"Nor can they find him."

"Perhaps not immediately, but sooner or later they will."

"Yes?" Ted questioned. "Send a thousand men into the hills, send a thousand into any big thicket, and they wouldn't find him unless they happened to stumble right across him."

"Al can't stay in the hills forever."

"Maybe not, but he can stay there a long time. He knows every chipmunk den in the Mahela."

"He won't be easy to find," the warden conceded, "but he will be found. What time did he come back last night?"

"Just about an hour after you took him away."

Loring Blade exclaimed, "Wow!"

Ted looked quizzically at him and the warden continued, "We were on Dead Man's Curve, and he was between Jack and me, when suddenly he pushed the door open and just seemed to float out of it. We beat the brush around Dead Man's Curve until one o'clock this morning. About then I tumbled to the idea that he must have come back here."

"Why didn't you come last night?"

Loring Blade shrugged. "He slipped through our fingers once. It wasn't hard to figure that he wouldn't have done that only to let himself be picked up again. Besides, it did seem sort of useless to hunt him at night. He headed into the woods, and because he didn't make a sound that either Jack or I could hear, we thought he was holed up right close. Ted, do you think he shot Smoky?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"He said he didn't."

"Delbert said he did."

"Just what did he say?"

"That's all. He regained consciousness briefly. The officer with him asked who shot him and he said Al did from ambush. I doubt if he's talked since."

"Do you believe Dad shot Smoky?"

The warden frowned. "If he did, it wasn't from ambush. There's more to it than that. We could have brought it out, but it will be harder now. When Al ran, he made things look pretty bad."

"Not to me."

"But to a lot of other people. Do you think you can get him to come back and give himself up?"

"I asked him last night to stay and face it out."

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Dad's part of the Mahela," Ted said quietly, "and the Mahela's code is the one he knows best. He would not go to jail for a crime he didn't commit, any more than a wild deer would voluntarily enter a cage."

"Doggone, that sure complicates things. Do you have any bright ideas?"

"What did you find in Coon Valley?"

"Just what I told you, Smoky's back trail and your dad's tobacco pouch."

"Nothing else?"

"Smoky's rifle. We brought it in with us."

"No sign of anything else?"

Loring Blade answered wearily, "You know what it's like there. Unless it's a trail like Smoky's, and Smoky was bleeding hard, there's little in the way of sign that a human eye can detect."

"Just the same, I think I'll go up there."

"What do you expect to find?"

"I don't know. Anything would be a help."

"Guess it would at that. Good luck."

"Are—are you going to join the hunt for Dad?"

Loring Blade grinned wryly. "I'm not that optimistic. I agree with you that, if Al wants to lose himself in the Mahela, he won't be found. But sooner or later he'll show up. He can't spend the winter there."

"I wouldn't bet on that."

"Bet the way you please. Now I'm not saying that you will, but if you should run across Al up there in the hills, see if you can persuade him to give himself up. He still has a good case, in spite of Smoky's testimony. Too many people know Al too well to believe he'd shoot anybody from ambush; he has a lot of friends. The only ones who'd join the posse were Delberts and Pete Tooms, and I sure hope none of them stumble across Al. If they come in fighting, he's apt to fight right back, and one stove-in Delbert around here is enough. Good luck again, Ted."

Ted lost his belligerence; the warden was his father's friend. "Stay and have breakfast with me."

"Thanks, but we breakfasted in Lorton before we came here. I'll be seeing you around."

"Do that."

The warden left and Ted was alone except for Tammie. He dropped a hand to the collie's silken head and tried to think a way out of the bewildering maze in which he was trapped. He was sure of two things; Al had not shot Smoky Delbert

and his father would stay in the hills until, as Loring Blade had said, winter forced him out. But it would have to be bitter, harsh winter. Al could make his way in anything else.

Ted whispered, "What are we going to do, Tammie?"

Tammie licked his fingers and Ted furrowed his brow. The situation, as it existed, was almost pitifully vague. A man had been shot in Coon Valley, and the only signs left were the hurt man's trail and an accusing finger to point at who had hurt him. There had to be more than that, but what? Loring Blade had found nothing and Loring was an expert woodsman. However, even though everything seemed hopeless, somebody had better do something to help Al and, except for Loring Blade, Ted was the only one who wanted to help him. Even though it was a slim one, finding something that the game warden had not found seemed the only chance. Ted decided to take it.

"But we'll eat first," he promised Tammie.

Ted prepared a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs and fed Tammie. Then he fixed a lunch and, with Tammie beside him, got into Al's old pickup. He gulped. The seat had always seemed small enough when he and his father occupied it together. With Al gone, and despite the fact that Tammie sat beside him, the seat was huge. Ted gritted his teeth and started down the drive.

He turned left on the Lorton Road, slowed for the dangerous, hairpin turn that was Dead Man's Curve, speeded up to climb a gentle rise, descended back into the valley and turned again on the Fordham Road. A well graded and not at all a dangerous highway, somehow the Fordham Road had never seemed a place for cars. It was as though it had always been here, a part of the Mahela, and had never been torn out of the beech forest with gargantuan bulldozers or ripped with blasting powder. For the most part, it was used by the trucks of a small logging outfit which, under State supervision, was cutting surplus timber and by hunters who wanted to drive their cars as close as possible to remote hunting country.

Ted slowed up for five deer that drifted across the road in front of him and stopped for a fawn that stood with braced legs and wide eyes and regarded the truck in amazement. Only when Ted tooted the horn did the fawn come alive, scramble up an embankment and disappear. The boy smiled wearily. Had Al been with him, both would have enjoyed the startled fawn and they would have talked about it.

An hour after leaving his house, Ted came to the mouth of Coon Valley. Long and shallow, the upper parts of both slopes were covered with beech forest. But if any trees had ever found a rooting in the floor of the valley or for about seventy yards up either side, they had died or been cut so long ago that even the stumps had disappeared. The usual little stream trickled down the valley.

Ted pulled over to the side and stopped. He got out and put the truck's keys in his pocket. Tammie jumped to the ground beside him. The big collie bristled and walked warily around a dark stain in the road. Ted fought a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. There was no doubt that some hurt thing had lain here, but unless someone had told him so, he never would have known that it was a man. Ted licked his lips, and Tammie stayed close beside him as they started up the valley.

Smoky Delbert's journey had indeed been a terrible one. Had he not been hardened by a lifetime of outdoor living, probably he never could have made it. In a way, Ted supposed, it was Smoky's atonement for his many vicious practices. Yet, the boy found it in his heart to admit that, whoever had shot the poacher and forced him to crawl, wounded and bleeding, to the Fordham Road, was even more vicious.

Ted stirred uneasily, then calmed himself. Al had said it was no part of his doing. Therefore it was not. Who had done this dreadful thing?

A spring trickling across the valley had left a soft spot. Here Ted stopped instantly. Very plain in the soft earth were the tracks of a single, unshod horse that had walked down Coon Valley and back up it, or up it and back down. Ted could not be sure, but his heart leaped. Loring Blade and Jack Callahan had said nothing about any horses. Who had taken a horse up the valley, and why? His interest quickening, Ted looked for more horse tracks.

He found them farther on, where the trail became a stretch of sand from the little stream's overflow, but he still could not determine whether the horse had gone up or down the valley first. He knew definitely only that it had traveled both ways, and if he could find out why, he might also find a clue as to who had shot Smoky Delbert. Ted kept downcast eyes on the

trail.

Save for that unmistakable sign left by Smoky Delbert and an occasional path or little trail which anything at all might have used, for a long ways he found only scattered indications that Coon Valley was traveled at all. The lush grass, beginning to wither because of lack of rain, formed its own hard cushion. An Indian or bushman tracker might have been able to read the story of what had come this way. Ted could find little.

Trotting a little ways ahead, Tammie stopped suddenly, pricked up his ears and looked interestedly at a small clearing that reached perhaps three hundred yards into the beech woods. Following his gaze, Ted saw two brown horses and a black one. Their heads were up and ears pricked forward as they studied the two on the trail. Ted sighed in resignation.

The Crawfords and the Staceys, who lived in the Mahela, each kept several horses. Why they did, why they kept any at all, only they could explain, for neither had enough land to warrant keeping even one horse. Still they had them. The horses were usually left to forage for themselves from the time the first spring grass appeared until hunting season opened. Then sometimes they were pressed into service, to pack or pull the tents and gear of hunters who had a yen for some remote spot, or to pack out deer or bears that had been brought down a long ways from any road.

At any rate, the horse tracks were explained. While it wasn't usual for one horse to break from its companions and go wandering, now and again one would do it. The black horse broke from the two browns, trotted down to Ted, arched its neck and extended a friendly muzzle. Ted petted him.

"Lonesome for a human being, fella?"

Ted went on and the black horse followed him a little ways before it turned back to join the other two.

A half mile from the Fordham Road, Ted came to the three sycamores near Glory Rock.

The sides of Coon Valley pitched sharply upwards here, and the beech forest came closer to the valley's floor. The three sycamores, a giant tree and two near-giants, rustled their leaves in the little breeze and remained aloof from everything else, as though they were the royalty in this place. Even Glory Rock, an elephant-backed, elephant-sized boulder whose ancient face wore a stubble of lichens, seemed demure in their presence. To the left, a raggle-taggle thicket of beech brush crawled to within twenty feet of the valley's floor.

Ted looked down at the place where Smoky Delbert had fallen, and there could be no mistaking it. The boy stood still, searching everything near the spot, and as he did hope faded.

The bullet, Loring Blade had said, had gone clear through Smoky. That, within itself, was unusual. With no exceptions of which Ted knew, everybody who came into the Mahela used soft-point hunting bullets that mushroomed on impact. But now and again, though very rarely, a faulty bullet didn't expand when it struck. Probably that was another factor that had saved Smoky's life. A mushrooming bullet did awful damage. In spite of the fact that some of it might escape the hunter, probably at least eighty per cent of anything hit with one died sooner or later. Smoky, Ted's experience told him, never would have moved from beside the sycamores if this bullet had mushroomed.

Ted furrowed his brows. The bullet might prove a lot, but finding it was as hopeless as locating a pebble in the ocean. There was nothing except the sycamores and grass right here, and none of the sycamore trunks were bullet marked. Going through Smoky without expanding, the bullet had snicked into the ground the same way. Locating it might mean sifting tons, and perhaps dozens of tons, of earth. Even then, unless one were lucky, the bullet might elude him.

Tammie, who was sitting beside Ted and staring into the beech brush, whined suddenly. In turn he lifted both white front paws and put them down again. He drank deeply of some scent that only he could detect. Ted looked keenly at him.

"What have you got, Tammie?"

Tammie ran a little ways toward the beech brush and turned to look back over his shoulder. Ted frowned. Loring Blade had reported correctly and in full everything that could be found in the valley, but Loring hadn't had a dog with him. Obviously, Tammie's nose had discovered something that any human being might well miss.

Ted ordered, "Go ahead, Tammie."

The dog started up-slope toward the brush and Ted followed. He ducked into the thicket, so dense that, once within it,

visibility was limited to twenty feet or less and there were places where he had to crawl. In the center of the thicket, Tammie halted to look down and Ted came up beside him.

In the center of the beech brush was a well-marked trail used by deer that knew perfectly well the advantages of staying in a thicket. Tammie was looking down at a splash of drying blood, obviously a deer had been badly wounded here and had fallen. Ted heaped lavish praise on his dog.

"Good boy! Good boy, Tammie!"

He set his jaw and his eyes glinted. Unless a hunter were within twenty feet of the trail, in which case it was highly improbable that any deer would have come down it, nobody within the beech brush could have wounded the deer. But how about the opposite slope?

Ted retraced his steps and climbed to the top of Glory Rock. From that vantage point, where he could look across at it instead of trying to look through it, the beech thicket became more open. He couldn't see everything, but he could see very plainly the place where the deer had fallen. Moving to one side, Ted had the same view. The deer could have been shot from any of a dozen places on this slope.... What had taken place assumed definite shape in Ted's mind.

Smoky Delbert, always the poacher, had known of the beech thicket and the trail through it. He had waited for a deer and shot one when it appeared. Somebody else, somebody who knew and took violent exception to Smoky and his antics—and there were at least thirty men who did—had either happened along or had witnessed the whole thing. Probably there had been an argument, followed by the shooting.

No nearer a solution than he had been before, Ted nibbled his lip in frustration. He knew now why Smoky had been shot, but he still hadn't the faintest idea as to who had shot him. All he had were widely scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, with too many pieces missing. However, first things came first and he'd better get the hurt deer, for it was both practical and merciful to do so. Badly wounded, it couldn't possibly travel far. If he found it still alive, the least he could do was put it out of its misery. If it was dead, he should save what could be salvaged of the venison. Al would have done the same had he been here.

Ted said, "Come on, Tammie."

They returned to the place where the deer had fallen and took up the trail. It was easy to follow, for the animal had been badly hurt. Straight down the trail it had run, and sixty yards farther on Ted found where it had fallen again and thrashed about. The beech brush blended back into beech forest and the trail Ted followed swerved to within twenty feet of the valley floor. He found a great puddle of blood where the deer had fallen a third time.

He marveled. The deer had been down three times in a little more than three hundred yards and it never should have been able to get up and go on. But it had gone on and it had also nearly stopped bleeding. From this point there was only a spot here and there to mark the leaves. Ted shook his head. If he wasn't seeing this himself, he wouldn't have believed it. He remembered that a deer is an incredibly tough thing. It can still run after receiving wounds that would stop a man in his tracks.

Overrunning the trail, the boy had to stop and circle until he picked it up again. It was necessary to do this so many times that, by midafternoon, he was scarcely a mile from the three sycamores. A half hour later he lost the trail completely; the deer had stopped bleeding. Ted made a wide circle in an effort to find the trail again, and when he failed, he made a wider circle. He stopped to think.

He'd have sworn, knowing how hard the deer was hit, that it would never run five hundred yards. Obviously he had guessed wrong, and what now? Anything he did would be little better than a shot in the dark, but if he could help it, he would not leave an injured beast to a lingering, terrible death. Wounded wild things were apt to seek a haven in thickets. Perhaps, if he cast back and forth through brush tangles, Tammie would scent the deer again.

Ted made his way to a grove of scrub hemlock, cut from there to a laurel thicket and pushed and crawled his way through half a dozen snarls of beech brush. He knew that he was not going to find the wounded deer and he sorrowed for the suffering animal. About to drop his hand to Tammie's head, he found that the collie was no longer beside him.

He was about twenty feet back, dancing excitedly in the trail. His ears were alert, his eyes happy, and there was a doggy smile on his jaws. He had a scent, but it was not the scent of a wounded deer. Ted took his handkerchief from his pocket

and gave it to the dog.

"Take it to Al," he ordered quietly. "Take it to Al, Tammie."

Carrying the handkerchief, Tammie streaked into the forest and disappeared. Ted walked down Coon Valley and waited at the truck. An hour and a quarter later, no longer carrying the handkerchief, Tammie joined him. Ted petted him and looked somberly at the forest. He didn't know where Al was hiding and he didn't want to know.

But Tammie knew.

MESSENGER DOG

In the gathering gloom of the beech woods, a silver-throated thrush sang its evening song. Then, starting where it had ended, the thrush repeated the same notes backwards. Ted paused to listen and Tammie halted beside him. The boy grinned faintly. Because it first seemed to wind itself up and then to unwind, Al had always insisted on calling this thrush the "winder bird." It was, Ted supposed, as good a name as any.

Tammie sat down and turned a quizzical head to look at the harness he was wearing and, for excellent reasons, could wear only at night. Ted himself had made the harness from a discarded pack sack. It had a chest strap to keep it from sliding backwards, a belly strap to prevent it from falling off, and on either side was a spacious pocket with a flap that could be fastened. Right now, the pack was laden with thirty pounds of junk that Ted had picked up around the house.

Tammie tried to scrape the harness off with his right hind paw. Ted stooped to pet and coax him.

"Come on, Tammie. Come on. That's a good boy!"

Tammie sighed and got to his feet. He didn't know why he was thus burdened and he had no aspirations whatever to become a pack dog. But if Ted wanted it, he would try to do it. He followed to the end of the drive and stood expectantly while Ted opened the mailbox.

The metropolitan daily in which Ted had placed his ad, and that was always delivered to the Harknesses a day late, lay on top. Beneath were thirteen letters.

Ted's heart began to pound. He'd watched the mail every day, but except for the paper, the usual hopeful bulletins addressed to "occupant," and a few miscellaneous items, there had been nothing interesting. Ted had almost despaired of getting anything, but he realized, as he stood with the letters in his hand, that he hadn't allowed hunters enough time to answer his ad.

The thirteen letters represented more first-class mail than the Harknesses usually received in three months, and Ted held them as though they burned his fingers. They were important, perhaps the most important letters he had ever had or ever would have, for the future of the Harknesses could depend on what was in them.

Ted ran back up the drive. Running with him, Tammie was too busy to pay attention to the obnoxious pack. Ted burst into the house, slammed the door behind him, laid the letters and papers on the table and knelt to take the pack from Tammie. He thrust it, still laden, into the darkest corner of a dark closet and turned excitedly back to the mail.

Sighing with relief, Tammie curled up on his bearskin. Ted looked at the sheaf of letters. Except for two, they were addressed in longhand. He picked one up, made as though to open it then put it back down. If the news was good, it would be very good. If bad, it would be very bad. His eye fell on a box on the paper's front page.

GUNMAN STILL AT LARGE

After a week's intensive manhunt, Albert, "Al" Harkness is still at large in the wild Mahela. Harkness, named by Clarence Delbert as the man who shot him from ambush, escaped from two officers the same night he was apprehended. Delbert, still in critical condition, has supplied no additional details. Corporal Paul Hausler, of the State Police, has expressed confidence that Harkness will be captured.

Ted pushed the paper aside and stared across the table. For three days the hunt had been pressed with unflagging zeal. Only Pete Tooms and the duly deputized Delberts had gone out for two days after that and now, Ted understood, even they were staying home. They had discovered for themselves what Ted and Loring Blade had known from the start: if Al chose to hide in the Mahela, he couldn't be found. But the item in the paper cast a shadow of things to come.

Al could hide for a while, perhaps for a long while, but without proper equipment or a place to stay, even he couldn't live in the wilderness when winter struck with all its fury. Sooner or later, he would have to come out, and what happened when he came was so terribly dependent on what was in the letters! Ted slit the first one open and read,

Dear Mr. Harkness:

I saw your letter in the *Courier* and we would like to rent your camp for the first two weeks of deer season. Can you let me know at once if it is available? There will be ten of us.

Ted put the letter aside and picked up the next one. That likewise wanted the camp for the first two weeks of deer season. There would be eight in the party. But there was a very welcome, "I enclose an advance to hold our reservation," with a twenty-dollar check made out to Ted. He folded the note over the check and took up the third letter. That also wanted the camp for the first two weeks of deer season. Ted turned to Tammie.

"Doesn't anybody hunt anything except deer?"

But the fourth letter, containing a deposit of ten dollars, was from a party of grouse hunters who wanted the camp during the first two weeks of grouse season, and the fifth had been written by a man representing a group of hunters who obviously liked to do things the hard way. Scorning anything as easy as deer, grouse, squirrels, or cottontails, they wanted the camp for bear season. There was no deposit enclosed, but if they could be persuaded to send one, the camp would be rented for another week. The next five letters, two of which contained deposits of twenty dollars each, were all from deer hunters who wanted to come the first two weeks of the season and the one after that was from a confirmed grouse hunter who wished to come the first week. Ted picked up the last letter, one of two that were typewritten, and read:

Dear Ted Harkness:

For lo, these many years, my silent feet have carried me into the haunts of big game and my unerring rifle has laid them low. I have moose, elk, grizzlies, caribou, sheep and goats to my credit. Honesty compels me to admit that I also have several head of big game to my discredit, but that happened in the days of my callow youth, when I thought hunting and killing were synonymous.

Presently, in my mellow old age, I still love to hunt. But I have become—heaven help me!—a head hunter. In short, I want 'em big or I don't want 'em. I do not have a whitetail buck to which I can point with pride. Living in the Mahela, and I envy you your dwelling place!, you must know the whereabouts of such a beastie.

The simplicity of your ad was most impressive and I always did admire people who sign themselves "Ted" rather than "Theodore." I do not want your camp, but do you want to guide a doddering old man? Find me a room, any old room at all as long as it's warm and dry, and I'm yours for three weeks. Find me a buck that satisfies me and, in addition to your guiding fee, I'll give you a bonus of twenty-five dollars for every inch in the longest tine on either antler.

Humbly yours,
John L. Wilson

Ted re-read the letter, so friendly and so obviously written by a hunter who had experience, time and—Ted tried not to think it and couldn't help himself because his need was desperate—money. The Harkness house was very large and, now that Al was not in it, very empty. There was no reason whatsoever why John L. Wilson, whoever he was, should not stay here. Twelve dollars a day was not too much to ask for board, room and guide services. As for the twenty-five dollars an inch—there were some big bucks in the Mahela!

Ted sat down to write, "Dear Mr. Wilson: Thanks very much for your letter—" He crumpled the sheet of paper and started over, "Dear Mr. Wilson: There are some big bucks—" Then he crumpled that sheet and did the only thing he could do. "Dear Mr. Wilson: I am going to tell you about Damon and Pythias."

Ted told, and he was scrupulously honest. His father, born in the Mahela almost fifty years ago, had never seen bigger bucks. Certainly they were the biggest Ted had ever seen. In their prime now, royal trophies, a couple of years would see them in their decline. Ted gave it as his personal opinion that both were at their best this year. Next season, they would not be quite as good and the year after, Ted thought, both would bear the misshapen antlers that are so often the marks of old bucks. But just getting a shot at either would involve more than a routine hunt. The two bucks were very wise; many hunters had tried for them and nobody had come near to getting either. It might very well take three weeks just to hunt them, and Ted could not guarantee success. However, though they were far and away the biggest, by no

means were Damon and Pythias the only big bucks in the Mahela. He concluded by writing that Mr. Wilson could stay with him, and that his fee for board, room and guide service would be twelve dollars a day.

Ted sealed the letter, addressed it, put two stamps on, marked it air mail and turned to the others. He shook a bewildered head. The way Carl Thornton ran Crestwood, catering to guests had always seemed the essence of simplicity. Obviously, it had its headaches.

Of the dozen applicants for his camp, eight wanted it in deer season only and all wanted the first two weeks. Ted screened the letters again, then narrowed them down to the three who had sent advances. They'd offered earnest intent of coming, the rest might and might not appear. But which of the three should he accept?

Ted solved it by consulting the postmarks on the letters. All had been mailed the same day, but one had been stamped at ten A.M. and the other two at two P.M. Ted wrote to the author of the letter with the earliest time mark, a Mr. Allen Thomas, and told him that the camp was his for the first two weeks of deer season. The other two checks—if only he had three camps!—he put in envelopes with letters saying that, he was very sorry, but the camp had already been reserved for the time they wanted.

Then, in a flash of inspiration, he opened both letters and added a postscript, saying that the camp was still available for the last week of the season. He grinned ruefully as he did so and seemed to hear Al saying, "Most missed a pelt there, Ted."

Ted assured the other deer hunters that his camp was reserved for the first two weeks but open the third. He contemplated bringing his price down to forty-five dollars for that week. Then he reconsidered. Most hunters thought that hunting would be much better the first of the season than it ever could be the last, and, in part, they were right. Unmolested for almost a year, during the first days of the season game was apt to be less wary. As compensation, during the latter part of any season there were seldom as many hunters afield. Anyhow, deer hunters who really wanted a camp would not let an extra fifteen dollars stand in the way of getting one.

Writing to the bear hunters, Ted accepted a tentative reservation that would be confirmed as soon as he received a deposit of ten dollars. Too many people made reservations with no deposit; then, if something arose that prevented their honoring their reservations, they simply didn't come. Anyone who paid money in advance would be there or cancel in plenty of time to get their money back.

Ted told the grouse hunters who'd sent a ten-dollar deposit that the camp was theirs for the first two weeks of the season and he pondered over the other grouse hunter's letter.

Nobody at all had applied for woodcock season because, Ted decided, woodcock are so uncertain. One of the finest of game birds, they are also migratory. A few nested in the Mahela, but they were too few to attract sportsmen. Depending on conditions, flight birds might and might not be in the Mahela during the season and some years they by-passed it completely. But when they came, they offered marvelous shooting.

Ted wrote the second grouse hunter, a Mr. George Beaulieu, that the only vacancy he had left was for the third week of grouse season. But was he interested in woodcock? If he was, and if he would advise Ted to that effect, Ted would be happy to call him long distance in the event of a worthwhile flight.

Tammie rose, yawned prodigiously and lay down to sleep on his other side for a while. Ted shuffled the pile of letters, which he needn't put in the mailbox because he was definitely going into Lorton in the morning, and pondered.

It hadn't worked out quite as he'd hoped it would, with the camp rented continuously throughout six weeks of small game hunting and three of deer. He figured with his pen on a discarded piece of paper. The camp was definitely rented for two weeks of grouse and one of bear hunting at forty-five dollars a week. That added up to a hundred and thirty-five dollars. It was certainly rented for two weeks of deer hunting at sixty a week, thus he would have a hundred and twenty dollars more.

Ted sighed wistfully. Two hundred and fifty-five dollars was by no means an insignificant return on their investment, even if they had put a price on their labor, and they could look forward to the next hunting and fishing seasons. If Al were here, they'd be happy about it and eagerly planning more camps.

But Al wasn't here, and all that mattered now was that, by the end of deer season, Ted could be certain of having at least

two hundred and fifty-five dollars in cash. If John Wilson came, stayed with Ted for twenty-one days, and paid him twelve dollars a day, that would be two hundred and fifty-two dollars more. If Mr. Wilson got a buck that satisfied him, and the buck's antlers had one tine nine inches long—

"Cut it out!" Ted advised himself. "Cut it out, Harkness! Count on what you know you'll have, and that's two hundred and fifty-five dollars."

Tammie, hearing Ted's voice and thinking he was called, came over to sit beside his master. He raised a dainty paw to Ted's hand and smiled with his eyes when the boy took it. Ted glanced at the clock.

"Great guns! Twenty past one! We'd better hit the hay!"

He shucked off his clothes, put on his pajamas and crawled into bed. But even though he was tired, sleep would not come because he was thinking of Al. How was his father spending this chilly night—and where? In some cave perhaps, or some thicket. Ted tried to put such thoughts behind him. Wherever Al might be, that outdoorsman was warm, dry and even comfortable. But Ted's mind insisted on seeking the gloomy side, and he was brought out of it only when Tammie whined.

Instantly Ted became alert. Taught to whine but never to bark when a stranger came near the house, Tammie was warning him now. The boy slipped out of bed, and, in the darkness, he felt for his shoes and pulled them on. He laced them so there would be no danger of tripping over the shoelaces and soft-footed across the floor to take a five-cell flashlight from its drawer and his twelve-gauge shotgun from its rack.

Out of the night came a sound that has been familiar since the first ancient man domesticated the first chickens. It was the sleepy squawk of a hen protesting removal from its warm roost. Ted opened the door softly, stabbed the darkness with his light and trapped within its beam a figure that ran from the chicken coop toward the forest.

"Get him, Tammie!"

Tammie rippled forward, and the light magnified his bobbing shadow twenty times over. He was not a dog but a monster, a nightmare from some antediluvian swamp, bearing down on the fleeing man. He rose into the air, struck the runner's back with his full weight, knocked him sprawling and snarled over him. It was what he'd been trained to do and it was all he'd do unless his captive tried too hard to get up. Then a little fang-work might be necessary, but this prisoner wasn't even moving.

Ted shined his light into the terrified face of a young ne'er-do-well known to his parents as Sammy Allen Stacey, to himself and a few of his intimates as S.A., and to too many others as Silly Ass.

His captor asked sternly, "What are you doing here?"

"Uh—Nothin'."

"What's in the sack?"

"I—I just borrowed three of your hens!" Sammy started to snifle. "I was goin' to bring 'em back tomorrow! Honest!"

"Guess I'll go back to the house," Ted said meaningfully. "When I hear you scream, I'll know Tammie's working on you."

"No! Don't! Please don't!"

"Think you can stay out of other people's chicken coops?"

"Yes! Yes!"

Ted ordered, "All right, Tammie." The collie moved back and Ted addressed the prostrate youth. "Get up and get out of here. If ever you come back again, I'll just turn you over to the dog."

Sammy rose and ran into the woods. Ted returned the three indignant hens to their roost and addressed Tammie, "I'll bet that, if ever he is found in another chicken coop, it won't be ours. You must have scared some sense into him."

Back in the house, Tammie sought his bearskin. Ted replaced the flashlight and shotgun, took his shoes off and went back

to bed. Tomorrow he must go to Lorton but it needn't be bright and early because, by Mahela standards, Lorton just didn't get up bright and early.

Ted slept until a quarter to seven. An hour later, with Tammie on the pickup's seat beside him, he started down the road.

He drove slowly because the business and professional offices in Lorton wouldn't open for another hour. Coming opposite Crestwood, he saw Nels Anderson, his former partner, working with a pick and shovel beside the driveway. Ted eased his truck over and stopped.

"Hello, Nels."

"Py golly, Ted!" Nels' face could never reflect anything he did not feel. "Is goot to see you!"

"It's good to see you, too. How are things?"

"We must not holler. Yah?"

"Guess it never does any good. How's the boss?"

Nels smiled sadly. "Mad."

"What's he mad at?"

"Me. I go to fix the freezer and he say, 'Get out of there, you crazy Scandahoovian! From now on you work only outside and joost three days a week!'"

"For Pete's sake! Why?"

"He's mad."

"Why don't you get a different job, Nels? One you can depend on?"

"Yah, I like to. I do not like Mr. Thornton no more."

"Why not?"

"He gets mad. You hear from your pa, Ted?"

"No."

"I'm awful sorry," Nels said gravely. "I do not believe your pa, he shoot this man like they say he did. If I could help him, I would."

"Thanks, Nels. Be seeing you."

"So long, Ted."

Ted drove on, wondering. He'd had only two personal contacts with Carl Thornton—the day he was hired and the day he was fired. He couldn't really say that Thornton was not an unpredictable individual, given to sudden rages, because he didn't know him that well. He had impressed Ted as somewhat cold and carefully calculating. The boy shrugged. Nels was a nice person. But an idea soaked into his head about as easily as sunbeams penetrate mud. Probably he'd broken some rule which he had not understood and still didn't understand, and Thornton was punishing him. But putting him on halftime, and Nels with five children to support, seemed like extreme punishment.

Ted drove on to Lorton, where, even though most of the town's residents were his friends, he could not help feeling self-conscious. Smoky Delbert's shooting had brought Lorton more fame, or notoriety, than it had known since its founding. The story had been in most of the State's papers and gained wide distribution through a couple of news services. Parking in front of the First National Bank, Ted left Tammie in the truck, dropped his stamped letters in a mailbox and walked up the dimly lighted stairs that led to the law offices of John McLean. Edith Brewman, McLean's ageless secretary, had not yet come in but John McLean was rummaging through her desk.

He looked up and said, "Howdy, boy."

"Good morning, Mr. McLean."

Ted stood awkwardly, a little embarrassed and a little lost. Just how did one approach an attorney and what did one say to him? John McLean continued to paw through the desk and Ted studied him covertly.

A huge, gaunt man in an ill-fitting suit, with unkempt gray hair and a black tie askew on his collar, John McLean looked like anything save the successful attorney he was. His dress and person were part of a clever act. Slouching into a courtroom, he was more apt to provoke snickers than admiration. But an opposing attorney who underrated him, and most did, literally fell into his clutches. There was a silver tongue behind John McLean's rather slack lips and a razor-sharp brain beneath his gray hair. He grinned loosely now.

"Edith's too darn' orderly. When she puts something away, I can never find it. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Ted Harkness, Mr. McLean."

"I know."

"I want to find out if you'll take care of my father."

"Judging from what I've read in the papers, your dad's taking pretty good care of himself."

Ted said hesitantly, "He can't stay in the Mahela forever. Sooner or later, they'll get him."

"Sooner or later," John McLean said, "they get everybody. Wish people would stop making a joke out of that old saw, 'Crime Doesn't Pay.' It doesn't."

He resumed poking through the desk while Ted stood uncomfortably, not knowing whether or not he'd been dismissed. Two minutes later, John McLean whirled on him.

"Is your dad guilty?"

"No!"

"How do you know?"

"He said he isn't!"

John McLean chuckled. "Simmer down. I don't want to fight you. Just wanted to find out if you had a good reason for thinking your dad innocent."

"Is the reason good enough for you?"

As though forgetting Ted, the attorney opened another drawer and leafed through its contents.... He said suddenly, "I'll take the case."

Ted sighed relievedly, "Oh, thank you!"

"Better save that until after the trial."

"But—"

"Save your worries, too."

"Then you can help him?"

"We'll figure out something. Who did shoot this Delbert?"

"I wish I knew."

"So do I."

Ted said uneasily, "I haven't any money right now, but I'll have at least two hundred and fifty-five dollars, and perhaps a great deal more, right after deer season."

John McLean murmured, "It'll help. The price of justice is too often too blasted high."

"Do—Do you want to talk with Dad soon?"

"Where is he?"

"Laying out in the Mahela."

"The Mahela's a big place."

Ted said honestly, "I don't know where he is. I haven't seen him since he left but—I could get a message to him."

"I won't ask you how. Does your dad mind laying out?"

"No."

"Then leave him until the time's right. It would have been better if he'd given himself up right away; but staying out now will do more good than harm. People, even prosecuting attorneys, can forget quite a bit in a short time."

"Is there anything else?"

"When he comes in, or when you bring him in, I want to be the first to talk with him. Can you arrange that?"

"I'm sure I can."

That night, back at the Harkness house, Ted took Tammie's harness from the closet and emptied it of junk. He replaced the junk with an equal weight of food, added a handful of matches, thrust a pad of paper and a pencil into one of the pockets and strapped the harness on Tammie. Ted took his dog to the back door and let him into the darkness.

"Take it to Al," he ordered. "Go to Al, Tammie."

Tammie, who hadn't been able to see any sense in the pack but who saw it now, raised his drooping ears and wagged his tail. He raced away in the darkness. Ted had scarcely closed the back door when there was an imperative knock at the front.

He opened it to admit Jack Callahan.

A FLIGHT OF WOODCOCK

The sheriff stood tall in the doorway, his face unreadable, while at the same time he seemed to strain forward like an eager hound on a hot scent.

Disconcerted, showing it and aware that he showed it, Ted fought for self-possession. He said, "Well hello."

"Hello, Ted." Callahan was not unfriendly. "How are things?"

Ted tried to cover his confusion with a shrug. "Not much change."

"You seem," Callahan was looking narrowly at him, "a bit nervous."

"Is that strange?"

"Guess not." Callahan was too casual. "It's probably a nerve-wracking business. Uh—thought I heard you talking?"

"You might have. I was talking to Tammie."

"Your dog, eh?"

"That's right."

"I don't see him around."

"I just let him out the back door. He likes to go for a little run at night."

"I'm darned," Callahan said, "if I didn't think I caught a glimpse of you letting him out. Tammie looked awful big."

"He's a big dog."

Just how much had Callahan seen? Definitely, a pack-laden collie was not going camping and Callahan would know where it was going. The sheriff dropped into a chair and crossed his right leg over his left knee.

"I know he's big, I've seen him before. But he sure looked bigger than usual. That's a mighty good dog, Ted."

"Yes, he is."

"Highly-trained, too, isn't he? That dog will do almost anything you want him to, won't he?"

"Oh, sure," Ted said sarcastically. "Every night he sets his own alarm for five o'clock. Then he lays and lights a fire so the house will be warm when I get out of bed."

"Aw now, Ted!" Callahan said reproachfully. "You know darn' well what I mean! Why only the other night I found Silly Ass Stacey running down the road like a haunt was chasing him. 'Don't go up there!' he told me. 'Don't go up to Harknesses! They have a man-eating dog and it just ate me!'"

Doubtless unintentionally, Callahan had given something away. The Harkness house was being closely watched or the sheriff wouldn't have been on the Lorton Road at the hour when Sammy ran down it. In full control of himself now, Ted did not let himself reveal what he had just learned. He said grimly, "Sammy was in our chicken coop."

"*Hm-m.* Want me to pick him up for it?"

"I doubt if he'll be as fond of chicken stealing from now on. Tammie knocked him down and did a little snarling over him. He didn't hurt him."

Callahan grinned. "Figured that out all by myself; nobody who'd most been eaten could run as fast as Silly Ass was running. Hope it does teach him a lesson; if he gets rid of his oversized notions, he won't be anything except a harmless sort of nut. Jail might make him vicious. But that's what I mean about your dog. You've really got him trained."

"I spend a lot of time training him."

"You have to if you want results, but it's worth it. You have a dog you can really work."

"There are limits."

"Of course. Of course there are. A dog's a dog. But I'll bet," Callahan looked squarely at Ted, "that Tammie would even go find your father if you told him to."

"You're sure?"

"Well, who could be sure? But I admire trained dogs no end and yours is the best I ever saw. Call him back, will you? I'd like to see him again."

"I—" Ted hesitated and hated himself because Callahan noticed his hesitation. "I don't know if I can. Tammie takes some pretty long rambles at night and he may be out of hearing."

"You'll have Loring on your tail if he bothers game."

"Tammie doesn't bother anything unless he's ordered to do it."

Callahan said admiringly, "That's where training comes in. This could even be a story!"

"What could?"

"Why, your dad laying out in the Mahela. He doesn't have any grub except the load he cooked the night Loring and I were here—and wasn't I the dope not to see through that? He needs about everything. You can't take it to him because you could be followed. But you have a big, strong, well-trained dog. You, oh you might even make a pack for him. Then you load the pack and send it to your dad. Who's going to follow Tammie? Get it?"

Ted looked at the floor. Coming at exactly the wrong second, Callahan had seen enough to rouse suspicion but not enough to be sure of anything. The boy conceded, "It's a story all right."

"Could even be a *true* story, huh?"

"You're doing the guessing."

"Oh, well," Callahan shrugged, "I didn't come here to bother you. But I sure would like to see that dog of yours again and I haven't much time. Call him back, will you?"

Both hands in front of him, fingers tightly locked, Ted walked to the back door. When Tammie took anything to Al, he usually ran. If he had run this time, and kept on running, he would be out of hearing. If he was not out of hearing, he would come back. Ted hoped Callahan didn't see him gulp. If Tammie returned with the pack, it would be all the evidence Callahan needed that the dog could find Al. But not to call him would serve only to convince the sheriff, anyhow, that Tammie was on his way to Al.

Ted opened the back door and whistled. He waited a moment, whistled again and closed the door behind him.

"He'll come if he heard."

"And if he didn't," Callahan commented, "he's a long way back in the Mahela, huh?"

"That's right."

"Now that's strange," the sheriff mused. "I know a little about dogs. You take an airedale, for example. He'll make long tracks, if he gets a chance. But I always thought a collie was pretty much the home type. I never figured they'd get very far from their doorsteps. Unless, of course, maybe it's a trained collie that's sent away."

"Dogs vary."

"Of course, of course. There's no rule says two of any one breed have to be alike. Couple of years ago, over beyond Taylorville, we had to get a pack that was running wild and, believe it or not, there was a Boston bull with them. Now

who'd think a Boston bull—What's that?"

"I—I didn't hear anything."

"Well, I did. Ah! There it is again!"

A second time, and unmistakably, Tammie's distinctive whine sounded at the back door. Ted's heart plummeted to his toes and his throat went dry. He was about to rise and let Tammie in—the only thing he could do—but he was forestalled by Jack Callahan.

"There he is. He heard you, all right. I'll let him in."

He walked to the back door ... opened it. Ted hoped his gasp was not as loud as it seemed. Wearing no pack, Tammie came sedately in, greeted Callahan with a wag of his tail and tripped across the floor to sit down beside his master. The boy bent his head to conceal ecstatic eyes. Poker-faced Callahan showed nothing of what he must be feeling.

"Just as handsome as I remember him!" he said admiringly. "That dog's a real credit to you, Ted!"

"He has just one little flaw," Ted said gravely. "Sometimes he thinks he sees things he never saw at all."

Callahan grinned engagingly. "Some people make that mistake, too. Especially when there's deep shadow. How are you making out, Ted?"

"All right. My camp's rented for five weeks and I may rent it for woodcock season, if the flight comes in."

"Loring told me there's flight birds at Taylorville. He said there's quite a few, and he thinks there'll be a big flight."

"Hope it comes here!"

Callahan said soberly, "If it'll help you, so do I. I'm sorry you're in trouble."

"Trouble comes."

"I know, but being the sheriff who makes it isn't the snap job it's cracked up to be. I've had to hurt a lot of people I'd rather not bother, but when I swore to uphold the law, I didn't make any exceptions and I'm not going to make any. I hope you don't hold that against me."

"I don't."

"Just so you understand. A lot of people who cuss peace officers would find out for themselves what a mess they'd be in if there weren't any."

"I know that, too."

"Then you know why I must bring your dad in. When I do, and I will, he'll get every break I'm able to offer. By the same token, Smoky Delbert may have some breaks coming. So long for now, Ted."

"So long."

Callahan left and Ted was alone with Tammie. He tickled the big dog's soft ears.

"The Lord watches over idiots!" he murmured. "He sure enough does!"

What had happened was obvious. Disliking the pack anyway, Tammie hadn't gone more than a couple of hundred feet before ridding himself of it. Only he knew how he'd unclasped the buckles, but he'd managed. Of course, when ordered to do so, he should have gone to Al. But he could be forgiven this time.

"I'd best get to bed," Ted told him. "I don't know where you left that pack, but do know I'd better find it before Mr. Callahan comes back this way. That man has sixteen eyes, and don't ever let's think he's dumb! He came right close to tipping over our meat house tonight!"

Ted was up an hour before dawn and had breakfasted by the time the first pale light of day began to lift night's shroud

from the great beech trees. With Tammie at his side, he stepped out the back door and formed a plan of action.

He didn't know exactly how much time had passed between his whistle and Tammie's appearance at the door, but it couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty seconds. Certainly the collie had needed some little time to rid himself of the pack. It couldn't possibly be far from the cabin. Ted petted the dog.

"You lost it," he scolded gently. "Why don't you find it?"

Tammie raced ahead twenty yards, whirled, came back to leap at and snap his jaws within a quarter inch of Ted's right hand, then flew away again. He continued running around and around, stopping at intervals to snap. But though he never missed very much, he never hit either.

Ted walked slowly, on a course parallel to the cabin, and he turned his head from side to side as he walked. There were no thickets or windfalls here. There was nothing at all except the big beeches. Wherever Tammie had dropped it, the pack wouldn't be hard to see.

Descending into a little swale, Ted flushed three woodcock out of it. Their distinctive, twittering whistle, which Ted had always thought was made by wind rushing through stiff flight feathers, sounded as they flew. The boy's eyes glowed with pleasure.

The ruffed grouse was a marvelous game bird and nobody who knew him well, or even fairly well, would ever deny it. But there was a very special group—Ted himself belonged to it—who held the woodcock in highest esteem. Swift-winged and sporty, the woodcock had an air of mystery and romance possessed by few other wild things.

Measuring eleven inches, from the tip of his bill to the end of his tail, the woodcock's plumage varied from black to gray, with different shades of brown predominant. So perfectly did they blend with their surroundings that, even though a hunter might watch a flying woodcock alight on the ground, he was often not able to see it afterwards. Their legs were short and their bills, with which they probed into soft earth for the various larvae and worms upon which they fed, were ridiculously long. But their eyes remained their outstanding characteristic.

Placed near the top of the head, they were luminous and expressive, as though, somehow, they mirrored all of nature. They were very large in proportion to the bird's size. Whoever saw them would never forget them and who knew the woodcock knew one of the finest and most delightful of all wild creatures.

Ted marked the trio down, but he did not approach them again. The season was not open, and nobody could ever be sure of woodcock. Perhaps these were stragglers. Maybe they marked the vanguard of a big flight that would be in the Mahela when the season opened and maybe they didn't. He'd have to wait and see and, even then, neither he nor anyone else could be sure. Cover that might be alive with woodcock one day could be empty, or hold only a few birds, the next. During the night, every woodcock had often picked up and moved on.

When he'd gone as far as he thought he should, Ted moved twenty-five yards deeper into the woods and swung back on a course parallel to the one he'd followed. He began to worry.

The pack couldn't possibly be far because Tammie hadn't had time to go far. It was good sized, so it should be easy to see. Ted made another swing about. Two hours after he had started hunting, he stopped. He was a half mile from the house, definitely the extreme limit Tammie might have reached. The boy went back to cover the same area more carefully.... He went through it a third time. By midday, he was wholly baffled.

The pack was not here. Where was it? Had Jack Callahan, nobody's fool, seen more than he had admitted seeing? Had he slipped back after leaving Ted and found the pack himself? It seemed improbable. Recovery of the pack, so obviously for a dog and not for a man to wear, would be proof within itself that Ted had intended to send Tammie to Al. And if Callahan had the least reason to suppose that Tammie could really find Al, he'd be in the house right now, insisting that he do it. Ted petted the collie.

"Why can't you talk?" he murmured. "Why can't you tell me what you did with it?"

Tammie licked his master's fingers and wagged his tail. Ted sighed. He'd looked in all the places where the pack might be and hadn't found it. It stood to reason that nobody else was going to find it either, or at least, they wouldn't find it easily. Still worried, Ted went back to the house and fixed a lunch. He thought of looking for the pack some more and

decided against it. There was no other place to look but there were things to do. He hadn't been at the camp since the night Al was accused of shooting Smoky. If he intended to rent it to hunters, he'd better go see how things were.

Ted chose to walk, for he had been doing a great deal of serious thinking and had changed many of his ideas. Running a successful resort, or even a successful camp, involved a great deal more than just being a gracious host. In any city, or even any town, such a camp probably wouldn't rent at all because it was so radically different from what urban residents had come to expect in their dwellings. But it fitted the Mahela, and for a short time each year, it would be appreciated because it offered a refreshing change from conventional living. But there was still more involved.

Few people wanted to get into the out-of-doors merely for the sake of being there. The place must offer something, and beyond any doubt the Mahela's prime attraction was its deer herds. But nobody, regardless of whether he was running Crestwood or renting camps, could hope to make a living just from the three-week deer season alone. He would also have to lure all the small game hunters and all the fishermen he could, and if he didn't lure them honestly, they'd never come back. It stood to reason that nobody who lived a couple of hundred miles from the Mahela could know what was taking place there. They must be kept informed, and Ted wished to walk now because he wanted to judge for himself whether or not there would be a worthwhile flight of woodcock.

The birds might be anywhere at all. Ted had flushed them from the very summit of Hawkbill. But as a rule they avoided the thickest cover and haunted the streams, bogs and swamps because they found their food along stream beds and in swamps. With Tammie trailing happily beside him. Ted followed the course of Spinning Creek.

He flushed two woodcock from a sparse growth of aspens and watched them wing away and settle on the other side of the creek. Then he put up a single and, farther on, a little flock of five. In the clearing, almost at the camp's door, another single whistled away and dropped near Tumbling Run. That made nine woodcock between the Harkness house and the camp. Definitely it was not a substantial flight and no hunter should be advised to come to the Mahela because of them. But there were more than there had been.

A doe and two spring fawns were nosing about the apple trees. Bears had been climbing the same trees, leaving scarred trunks and broken branches in their wake. Black bears, of which there were a fair number in the Mahela, would come almost as far for apples as they would for honey. But they came only at night and did a lot of damage when they climbed the trees. However, these tough apple trees had been broken by bears every year they'd borne a crop and they'd always recovered. They'd recover again, and Ted supposed bears had as much right as anything else to the apples. He grinned. The fruit was gnarled and wormy, but it was a woodland delicacy and woodland dwellers competed for it as fiercely as a crowd of undisciplined children might compete for a rack of ice-cream cones.

Ted walked all around the camp, saw nothing amiss and unlocked the door. He pulled the hasp back, went in—and saw Tammie's pack lying under the table. Momentarily alarmed, he stopped. Only one person could have left the pack! He picked it up and thrust his hand into a side pocket. He found and pulled out a page torn from the pad of paper he'd inserted in the pack and read the penciled note.

Dear Ted; I was cuming to see you last nite. Tammy met me a sniff from the dor and I snuck up and saw Calhan. Gess he wants to see me rite enuf but I don't want to see him!

Hope taking Tammy's pak don't throw you off.

I can get along a good spel with the stuf in the pak and wudcok seson cuming on. I've saw a mess of flite wudcok. Don't send Tammy agen without you know it's safe and send him after midnite. I won't be so far away he can't get to me and bak. Watch Calhan. He's sharp.

Your dad

P.S. I got the kyote.

Ted heaved a mighty sigh of thanksgiving. Al had the pack's contents and there were three blankets missing from the camp. For the first time, the dark clouds that surged around the boy revealed their silver lining. Al was still a fugitive, but he had enough to eat and he was sleeping under blankets. It seemed a great deal.

Ted read the note again and smiled over it. A hunted outlaw, Al was still abiding by the principles in which he believed.

He might have been justified in killing game for food, but the reference to woodcock season indicated that he had done no such thing. Possibly—Ted remembered that he had his coyote traps—he had caught a bobcat or so. The season was never closed on bobcats and, if one could overcome natural squeamishness, they were really delicious eating. Ted lifted the stove lid, put the note within, applied a lighted match, waited until the paper burned to ashes, then used the lid lifter to pound the ashes to dust.

He looked fondly at Tammie, who had been nowise derelict. Ordered to go to Al, he had done exactly that and it was none of Tammie's doing if Al had been within a "sniff" of his own back door.

Ted said cheerfully, "Guess we'll go home, Tammie. But we'll come back for the pack tonight, Mr. Callahan, or some of his friends, probably will be patrolling here and there."

That night there were three more letters, two from deer hunters who wanted the camp the usual first two weeks of the season and one from a grouse hunter who wanted the first week. Ted advised them of the camp's present status, put his letters in the mailbox and lifted the red flag to let the carrier know there was mail to pick up. The next night there were five letters, two of which had been sent airmail. Ted opened the first.

Dear Mr. Harkness: Your letter intrigued us no end. We haven't seen a good flight of woodcock for ten years and didn't think there was any such thing any more. Should they come in, by all means call me and reverse the charges. My business phone is TR 5-4397; my home is LA 2-0489. Call either place and we'll start an hour afterwards. There'll be seven of us, and I enclose a ten-dollar check as deposit.

Cordially,
George Beaulieu

The second airmail letter read:

Bless you, Ted! You've started me dreaming of Damon and/or Pythias. One or the other will do, but nothing else, please! By your own invitation, you're stuck with me for the full twenty-one days. I'll see you the day before the season opens.

Gratefully,
John L. Wilson

There was a check for a hundred dollars enclosed and almost grimly Ted folded both checks in his wallet. He'd have to spend some money for food, but not a great deal. The freezer was almost full and much of the garden remained to be harvested. He stared at the far wall.

He had not planned it this way. He had looked forward to a happy venture, to enjoying and helping his guests, and if he made money in so doing, that would be fine. Had things turned out as he'd planned, there was already enough money in sight to build and equip another camp. But that was not to be. Al had to come out of the Mahela some time. When he did, they were in for a fight, and money would be a powerful weapon in that all-out battle. They must win, and anything else must be secondary.

The other three letters were from deer hunters who wanted the camp the first two weeks of the season.

Ted devoted the next fortnight to harvesting the garden. He dug the potatoes, emptied them in the cellar bin and stacked squash and pumpkins beside them. Bunches of carrots and turnips were stored in another bin, and shelled beans were put in sacks.

Almost every mail brought more letters, and two out of three were from deer hunters. Ted rented his camp for the season's third week. Maybe nobody could make a living from deer hunters alone, but anybody who had enough camps, perhaps ten or twelve, could certainly earn a decent sum of money from just deer hunters.

The Mahela changed its green summer dress for autumn's gaudy raiment and the frosts came. Woodcock continued to drift in, and two days before the season opened, they arrived in force. Where there had been one, there were thirty, and still they came. Ted drove into Lorton and called from the drugstore.

"Mr. Beaulieu?"

"Yes?"

"This is Ted Harkness, Mr. Beaulieu. The woodcock are in."

"A big flight?"

"The biggest in years."

"We'll be there tomorrow," George Beaulieu said happily. "Hold the camp for us!"

"I'll do that, and anybody in Lorton can tell you where to find me."

"Thanks for calling. We'll be seeing you."

TROUBLE FOR NELS

In the beech forest, just beyond Tumbling Run, a buck so young that budding antlers did little more than part the coarse hair on its head stamped a front hoof and snorted. Old enough to have a vast admiration for himself and his own powers, but too young to have any sense, the little buck snorted again and tried to sound as ferocious as possible. Nosing about for any apples that might remain under the trees near Ted's camp, he had stood his ground gallantly when Ted and Tammie approached.

Not ten minutes before their arrival, he'd chased a rabbit away from the trees and he was so impressed by that feat that he thought he could chase anything. But when Ted and Tammie refused to run, he'd trotted into the forest to do his threatening from a safer place. He snorted again, more hopefully than angrily, and when he did not regain possession of the apple trees, he looked sad. Ted grinned at him.

"Junior's almost decided he can't bluff us, Tammie. Poor little guy! He'd just about convinced himself that he's a real ripsnorter of a buck. Oh, well, it's a hard world for everybody."

Ted continued to string clotheslines between the apple trees. He pulled them tight, tested their tension with an experimental finger and turned thoughtfully back to the camp. It might be a hard world for adolescent bucks, but if it weren't for the fact that his father was still laying out in the Mahela, right now it would be a pretty good one for Ted.

True to his promise, George Beaulieu and his six companions had arrived the day before woodcock season opened. In his mid-fifties, Beaulieu was branch manager for an insurance company. Of the six men with him, only twenty-six-year-old George Junior, an insurance salesman who thought his father was the greatest man in the world and who wanted nothing more than to follow in his footsteps, had been less than middle-aged. The other five were a filling station owner, a dentist, a toolmaker, an electrical appliance dealer and a printer. Their party had been complemented by two dogs, an English setter and a springer spaniel.

There had been nothing sensational about any of them, including the dogs. Except for George Beaulieu, his son and the printer, none of the men had been even fair hunters. The three, far and away the best of the seven gunners, had averaged three shots for every woodcock brought down. The worst gunner, the electrical appliance dealer, who appropriately enough was named Joseph Watt, had fired at least fifteen times for every woodcock he put in his pocket. Yet Ted felt that the happy man had lived through an uplifting and a near-sensational experience.

Although unpretentious, his guests had definitely not been meek or demure. Whoever missed an easy shot, which practically all of them did at least twice a day, was needled mercilessly by the others. Not one among them, under the best of conditions, could have made even a meager living as a professional hunter. Yet they represented the best type of present-day game seekers.

They had come to shoot woodcock and they would have been disappointed not to shoot some. But they did not pursue their quarry with the calculating coldness of a Smoky Delbert or, for that matter, with the intense concentration of an Al Harkness, when Al was after a pelt he wanted. They were out for fun and they had fun, and although game mattered, meat did not. There were so many woodcock that everybody, even Joseph Watt, got some. But considering the shells they shot, the camp rental, food, transportation and licenses, their game probably cost them at least fifteen dollars a pound!

After the first week ended and there seemed to be more woodcock than ever—the flight was still coming in—they had decided that another ten years might pass before they saw this again and stayed the second week. They'd left only this morning, promising to be back next year if there was another flight of woodcock, or for grouse if there was not.

Ted hummed as he started toward the camp. The Beaulieu party had been wonderful guests and certainly they were welcome back. If the Mahela was good for them, they were just as good for the Mahela.

Ted gathered up as much bedding as he could carry. He'd been a little worried about it because he'd provided neither sheets nor pillowcases. But lack of them hadn't seemed to worry the Beaulieu party in the slightest. Most people who hunted all day were too tired by night to care whether their beds were formal, or anything except comfortable. Next year—always supposing his father and he still had the camp, Ted thought that they would have to provide linens, too.

Summer campers spent more time in camp than hunters did, and they were apt to be more particular.

Ted hung the blankets and quilts on the lines he had strung and pinned them securely. If they aired all day long, they'd be fresh by night. The grouse hunters—Ted had corresponded with an Arthur Beamish—were due some time after supper and there would be ten in the party.

The small buck, that had been lurking hopefully near and awaiting a chance to come back, snorted his astonishment when the bedding began to blow in the wind and ran away as fast as he could. The little fellow thought he was fully capable of dealing with anything natural, but wind-blown bedclothes smacked of the supernatural. Ted lost himself in thought.

The camp was completely rented, except for the third week of small game season, and it would return a little more than four hundred dollars in rent. Added to that was the money he'd certainly get from John Wilson, and the total was more than it had cost to build and furnish the camp. Some of it would have to go for food and John Wilson probably would expect good things to eat, but he'd get them. Ted had six woodcock, a gourmet's delight, in the freezer, and he would add the legal two days' possession limit of six grouse. He'd need more than that, but even after buying whatever was necessary, he'd still have enough money to put up a hard legal battle for Al when his father finally had to surrender. There would be at least twice as much money as Ted had told John McLean he would have. If more was needed, and it probably would be, he'd sell the camp.

Ted gathered up the dirty towels and wash and dish cloths, put them in a bushel basket brought along for that purpose and replaced them with fresh, clean laundry. The Beaulieu party, another proof of their sportsmanship, had left the camp in fine shape, with the dishes washed and stacked where they belonged and the floor clean. Tammie came in the open door and Ted grinned at him.

"Guess we can go, Tammie, and you'd better rest a bit. You're going into the hills tonight."

Tammie wagged an agreeable tail and trotted out to the pickup with his master; Ted eased the little truck onto the road.

He'd sent Tammie, with a load of food, the night before the Beaulieu party arrived and everything had gone without a hitch. Tammie had left shortly after midnight and returned two and a half hours later. The pack was empty save for the note Al had thrust in it.

Dear Ted: Tammy cum al rite. This works good, huh? I got enuf to last me anyhow 2 weeks mor. Don't send Tammy befor. The les you got to send him, the beter it is. Good luk and thanks.

Your dad

Ted sighed wearily. He'd hoped that, with passing time, the situation would clear itself or be cleared. If anything, it was worse.

Definitely out of danger, but due for a long convalescence in the Lorton hospital, Smoky Delbert had told everything. Starting from the Fordham Road, he had gone up Coon Valley with the intention of finding good places to set fox traps. He'd carried his rifle because there was always a chance of seeing a fox or bobcat, predators upon which there was a bounty. He'd known Al Harkness was ahead of him, for Al's distinctive boot marks had been left in the soft place where the spring overflowed the Coon Valley trail. Nearing the three sycamores, and without any warning at all, Al had risen from behind Glory Rock and shot.

It was a simple, straightforward story and one that bore out other known facts. By his own admission, Al had been in Coon Valley the same day. He did wear boots with soles of his own design, and therefore they were distinctive. Smoky Delbert, a woodsman of vast experience, might very well have seen these tracks, in spite of the fact that Loring Blade had missed them. Ted sighed again.

The papers had printed Smoky's story and most were sympathetic. There had even been a couple of resounding editorials demanding that Al be brought in—regardless of the cost and effort that might be expended to apprehend him—and face the justice he so richly deserved. But editors were not the only ones who had swung to Smoky's side.

Time, John McLean had asserted, made people forget. Only, in this instance, it had made too many of them forget that Smoky Delbert was a vicious poacher. He had, instead, become the wronged innocent, and when Ted went into Lorton now there were those who averted their faces when they passed him or even crossed to the other side of the street to

avoid meeting him at all.

Carl Thornton had become something of a local hero. Nobody knew how the news had leaked out, but everyone knew that Crestwood's owner was paying all of Smoky's extensive hospital bills. That puzzled Ted, for Thornton had never seemed the type to care about anyone's welfare save his own. But he would do anything that worked to his own advantage, and perhaps he thought it worth his while, at the price of Smoky's hospital expenses, to have Lorton solidly behind him. There could be no doubt that Lorton was there.

"Cut it out!" Ted urged himself. "You don't like Thornton, but give him credit, if credit's due."

Ted swung up the Harkness drive and parked. While Tammie went off on an inspection tour to assure himself that everything was as it should be, the boy took the basket of laundry inside. He grimaced. Modern in some respects, Al had by no means accepted the streamlined age as an unmixed blessing. He'd bought a freezer and refrigerator because their advantages were obvious. But he scorned washing machines and was sure that, though clothes emerging from one might look clean, they couldn't possibly be as pure as those that were washed on a scrub-board.

Ted put the washtub on its stand, filled it with hot water, added soap and went to scrubbing. He rinsed the laundry, ran it through a hand wringer and hung it on a line stretched behind the house.

An hour before sundown, he went back to camp to replace the bedding and wind his clotheslines on a spool. He got his own supper, fed Tammie, washed the dishes and had just finished putting them where they belonged when the collie whined a warning. A car, followed by a second, came up the drive and, a moment later, there was an unnecessarily loud knock on the door.

Ted opened it to confront a rather plump man, who was probably in his mid-thirties. He was dressed in a gaudy wool shirt, hunting pants, ten-inch lace boots, and around his middle was belted a hunting knife almost long enough to be a small sword. His black hair was a little wild and so were his eyes, but his smile was pleasant and his outstretched hand was quite steady.

"Ted?"

"That's right."

"I'm Beamish," the other stated, a little thickly. "B'-gosh, we found you!"

"You certainly did!"

Ted smiled faintly. Hunters going into camp often did a little anticipatory celebrating and evidently Arthur Beamish had been overdoing it.

"This the camp?" he asked.

"No, the camp's farther up the road."

"Good!" Arthur Beamish said happily. "You go in the woods, you go in the woods! More woods, the better! That's what I always say! What do you always say?"

"Same thing." Ted grinned. "If you want to follow me, I'll show you the way up there."

"Ride with ya," Beamish declared. "Tha's just what I'll do."

"You're welcome."

Ordering Tammie to stay in the house, Ted guided his exuberant guest to the pickup and opened the door for him. Arthur Beamish bellowed, "Follow us, men! Ah, wilderness!"

He sat companionably close and draped a friendly arm across Ted's shoulder. "Lots of grouse?"

"Plenty. You like grouse hunting, eh?"

"Best darn' game there is!" Beamish exploded. "I rather get me one grouse than forty-nine deer! And I get 'em, too!"

"You do?"

"Didn't you ever hear about me?"

"I—" Ted hesitated. Obviously, he was supposed to know his guest. But he didn't, yet to say the wrong thing might mean to give offense, "Uh—aren't you—?"

"Tha's right!" Beamish said happily. "I'm Beamish, the trapshooter! Traps in summer, grouse in season! Br-br-br! Up they go! Bang! Down they come! Every time!"

Ted twisted uneasily. Three grouse was the daily bag limit. Nobody should need, or take, more than that. He calmed himself. As yet, nobody had taken more. He pulled in to the camp and stopped.

"Fine camp!" enthused Beamish, who could see only that part of it which was illuminated by the pickup's lights. "Best I ever did see! Great lil' camp!"

The other two cars stopped and the rest of the hunters got out. Even in the night, there was that about them which at once set them apart from the quiet Beaulieu party. They were younger, more restless, and they fairly oozed that nervous sparkle which so often marks young executives. They were also sensible—only Arthur Beamish and one other had been over-indulging themselves. Definitely, the drivers of the two cars were in full possession of all their faculties.

The three beautiful setters that had ridden in a pen in one of the car's trunks were as smartly turned out as the men. Obviously, they were hunting dogs, the best money could buy. But this crowd had money to spend.

"Come 'round!" Arthur Beamish bellowed. "Wan'sha to meet Ted!"

One by one, Ted was introduced to the rest of the party and as he met them, he liked them. If they were young and restless, they were also competent and talented and they had an air of belonging here in the wilderness. Probably this was not the first camp they'd ever seen.

"Let's go in," Ted suggested.

Arthur Beamish bubbled, "You get the best ideas!"

Ted let the men into the camp, watched closely as they inspected it and knew definitely that they'd been in such places before. Their glances were quick but all encompassing.

One of them, and although Ted did not remember all the names, he thought this one was Tom Strickland, turned with a smile. "This will do very well. Do you know where we can get a wet nurse?"

"A what?"

Strickland grinned, "A sort of combination cook, fire-builder, sweeper-upper, dishwasher; we'll want to spend our time hunting."

"I think I can find somebody. Is nine dollars a day all right?"

"Sure. Can you send him up tomorrow?"

"Send him tonight!" somebody yelled.

Strickland said scathingly, "I wouldn't inflict you wild hyenas on anyone tonight. I'll cook breakfast."

"Oh, my aching ptomaine!"

Ted grinned. "I'm sure I can send somebody tomorrow. Everything's O.K., eh?"

"Right as rain."

Ted got grimly back into the pickup and started down the road. Nine dollars a day for fourteen days meant another hundred and twenty-six dollars that probably would be sorely needed when Al had his inevitable day in court, but Ted hadn't wanted to accept the job tonight because, somehow, doing so would have seemed grasping. But he'd swallow his

pride and take it tomorrow. He must think of nothing except clearing his father's name.

Back at the house, Ted loaded Tammie's pack very carefully. Laying out in the Mahela, Al would not expect and did not need luxuries. Ted packed cornmeal and oatmeal, desiccated soup, a parcel of dried apricots, powdered milk, sugar, tea, flour. But when everything else was in, there was room for a parcel of frozen pork chops. Ted added them and a note.

Dad: Everything's fine. There are grouse hunters in camp now and there will be bear hunters next. Take care of yourself and let me know what you need.

Love,
Ted

At five minutes past midnight, he strapped the pack on Tammie, took him to the back door and let him out. Just as he did, there was an almost timid knock on the front door. He jumped nervously.

"Go to Al!" he urged. "Take it to Al, Tammie! And please run!"

He shut the back door and perspiration broke on his brow as he stood anxiously near it. Callahan, whose suspicions should have been effectively lulled, was not lulled at all. He'd merely bided his time, struck at the right hour and Ted was trapped.

He crossed the floor on shaky legs and opened the front door to come face to face with Nels Anderson. Ted gasped.

His one-time working partner was pale and looked ill. Weariness had left its impression in great blue patches beneath both eyes, but it was not entirely physical weariness. Nels had suffered some terrible shock—and in his extremity he had come to his friend.

"Nels! What's wrong?"

"I," Nels forced the shadow of his former smile, "am all right."

"Come on in!"

"I—I do not want to bother you. But I saw your light and—"

"What on earth have you been doing?"

"Walkin'. Yoost walkin'."

"All night?"

"I—" Nels looked at the floor. "I did not want to see Hilda. I—I lose my job."

"How come?"

Nels smiled again, but it was a sickly smile. "Mrs. Martin, she's helpin' in the kitchen while huntin' season's on, she says, 'Nels,' she says, 'the door on the walk-in cooler is stuck. I can't open it. Can you?' I say I open it and Thornton comes. 'Told you to stay out of here!' he yells. He was awful mad. 'Now get out and stay out!' So, no more job."

"You'll get another one."

"Oh sure. I get another one easy. You—You know where?"

Ted said recklessly, "I know where you can work for the next two weeks. There's a bunch of hunters in my camp and they're looking for somebody to do their cooking and odd jobs. Get up there tomorrow morning and say I sent you. The pay is nine dollars a day."

Stars shone in Nels' woebegone eyes. "You mean it?"

"Sure I mean it."

"Yah! I go tell Hilda!"

Nels had shuffled in the door but he seemed to float out of it. Ted stared grimly at the black window. He needed the money himself, but Nels had a wife and five children and whether or not they ate regularly depended on whether Nels worked steadily. Ted paced back and forth, then sank into a chair.

Weariness overcame him and he dozed.... He awakened suddenly, sure he'd heard something. Then Tammie whined for admittance and Ted got up to let him in. He took off the pack and looked for the note he knew he would find.

Dear Ted: Tammy cum agen, as you know. I'm set rite nise now. There is no need to send Tammy agen for a cuple weeks. Tel your bear hunters that a lot of bears hang out in Carter Valley.

Your dad

A BLACK BEAR CHARGES

Ted had had an awakening.

Four days after he sent Nels to work for the Beamish party, Nels had come back singing their praises in the loftiest tones. They were all gentlemen of the highest order. Nobody cared what he cooked as long as there was plenty of whatever it was. Driving Nels into Lorton, Mr. Strickland had asked him to order groceries and had paid the rather large bill without a murmur. That night they'd voted him the best camp cook they ever saw and given him a ten-dollar tip.

Of course, they were a little bit queer. He'd told them his name at least a dozen times, but everybody insisted on calling him Hjalmar. They pronounced it exactly as it was spelled, too. Nels didn't mind because Hjalmar was certainly a fine old name. But it had taken him almost a day to get used to it.

They were wonderful hunters, especially that Mr. Beamish. The first day he'd shot five grouse, the second seven, and on the two succeeding days he'd shot five and seven. That made twenty-three grouse in four days and he'd used just thirty-two shells. It must be some kind of record or something, Nels didn't know. However, each day everyone else in the party had paid Mr. Beamish money. Nels understood if Mr. Beamish scored too many misses, he'd have to pay all the others. Still singing the praises of the Beamish party, Nels hurried off to resume his duties with them.

Ted was left to ponder a problem that he had hoped he would never have to face.

Too many people—who were too often intelligent people—took game laws far too lightly. They shot what they wished when they wished to, and few of them ever thought that they were doing any wrong. Actually, in every sense of the word, they were thieves. Bag and possession limits, insofar as it was humanly possible to apportion wild game justly, were provided so everyone might have a share and still leave some behind. Who took more than his share, took from all the others.

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, it was the duty of anyone who knew of game law violations to report the violator to the nearest warden so the proper action could be taken. But how could Ted report Arthur Beamish's when Beamish was his guest? The boy still hadn't made a decision when, the next day, Loring Blade came in.

The warden said quietly, "I've been watching the grouse hunters in your camp."

"You have?"

"Yes, and I arrested one of them this morning, a man named Beamish. He's killed nineteen grouse that I know of, seven over anything he should have had, in four days."

Ted said reluctantly, "He's killed twenty-three."

"How do you know?"

"Nels told me."

"Wish I'd known that, but I think he'll toe the mark now."

"What'd you do to him?"

"Took him before Justice McAfee. Mac fined him fifty dollars and a positive revocation of his license if he violates any more."

"But—"

"But what?"

"There's a twenty-five dollar fine for every illegal grouse. As long as you were taking him in, you should have had him fined a hundred and seventy-five dollars."

"Not him," Loring Blade declared. "You can't hurt him too much by hitting him in the pocketbook. His hunting privileges are what he holds dear."

It was, Ted decided after the warden had left, a smart way to do things. The penalty for breaking game laws should be harsh, but fining Arthur Beamish a hundred and seventy-five dollars would bother him less than a ten-dollar fine might inconvenience a Stacey or a Crawford. However, Beamish's hunting privileges really meant something to him.

At any rate, the warden's method worked. Nels, who lost none of his admiration for the grouse hunters, gave Ted a complete report at intervals. Nobody in the camp took more than the limit after Beamish was fined—and there was still another angle. Ted had always known that he and his father were in the minority—sometimes it seemed that nobody except he and Al cared what happened to the Mahela. But now the boy was assured that others worked for its best interests, too.

The grouse hunters had gone home and for a whole week there would be nobody in the camp. There was nothing to worry about in the immediate future. Al, as his last note indicated, was doing all right. The Beamish party, who'd really liked Nels, had expressed their satisfaction in more lavish tips and for the first time in three years, Nels' family could get by for a while, even if he did not work. However, he could certainly work all through deer season. The Andersons might face a bleak New Year, but they would have a happy Christmas.

Ted had decided to seize the week's interlude as a fine time to go over the camp from top to bottom, but there was little to do. Nels would never write a learned dissertation about Shakespeare, or come up with a startling new aspect of the nuclear fission theory, but whoever hired him got all they paid for, plus a substantial bonus. Working by the day, in Nels' opinion, meant working twenty-four hours, if that were necessary. The cabin was spotless. Even the blankets had been aired.

With time heavy on his hands, Ted fretted. He collected the six grouse to which he was entitled and put them in the freezer. For lack of something else to do, he went twice more to the three sycamores near Glory Rock, the scene of Smoky Delbert's shooting. He didn't find anything, but he hadn't really expected to discover any new evidence or clues. Looking for them had helped kill time while he waited anxiously for the bear hunters.

Deer were not especially hard to get, if all one wanted was venison; there were does and young deer that wouldn't even run from hunters. But the big old bucks with acceptable racks of antlers got big because they were wary and they were difficult to bring down. Woodcock were sporting and who hunted grouse successfully had every right to call himself a hunter. Squirrels were fun, providing one hunted them with a rifle instead of a shotgun. But unless one used dogs to bring them to bay—and it was against the law to use dogs on any big game in the Mahela—black bears were far and away the most difficult game of all.

Keen-nosed and sharp-eared, they almost always knew when hunters were about. Wise, they were well aware of the best ways to preserve their own hides. As circumstances prescribed, they could slink like ghosts or run like horses and they laid some heartbreaking trails. Fifty miles was no unusual distance for a black bear to cover in a day and they were full of tricks. Ted himself had followed black bears on snow and come to where the trail ended abruptly. The bears had walked backwards, stepping exactly in the tracks they had made running forward, and made a long sidewise jump that always delayed their pursuer and sometimes baffled him.

Some men who'd spent their lives in black bear country had yet to see their first one. It took hunters of the highest caliber to get them, and thus Ted looked forward to those who would occupy his camp. But while he waited there was little else to do and he spent some of his time in Lorton.

Just another sleepy little town for forty-nine weeks of the year, Lorton was almost feverishly preparing for its moment of glory. If it was not exactly the center of all eyes, due to its geographical position as the town nearest the Mahela, it was the center of deer hunting. Every room in its two hotels and three motels had long since been reserved and any householder with a room to rent could have a choice of at least ten hunters. In the next few weeks, Lorton would see at least twice as many deer hunters as it had permanent residents. Its normally quiet streets would have bumper-to-bumper traffic. Parking space would be at a premium; there'd be crowds waiting in every eating place; stores would sell more merchandise than they did at any other time of the year; and any Lortonite who knew anything at all about the Mahela, even if his knowledge was limited to how to get into it and out of it again, could have a job guiding deer hunters, if he wanted it.

In addition, every camping ground in the Mahela would have its quota of trailers, tents and hardy souls who either slept in cars or made their beds on the ground. Sometimes, in the event of heavy storms, these venturesome ones got into trouble and were trapped until snowplows or rescue parties reached them. But this fall the weather had been mild, almost springlike, and there was every indication that it would continue to be so.

Twice, just after the grouse hunters left and again four days later, Ted sent Tammie to Al. He would send him again just before deer season opened, for that was an uncertain time. There would be hunters everywhere and no assurance as to what they would do. Horses, cattle, sheep, leaves fluttering in the wind and men had all been mistaken for bucks with nice racks of antlers and punctured accordingly with high-powered ammunition. If Tammie should be delayed and have to come back in daylight, there was no guarantee whatever that some trigger-happy hunter would not consider him a choice black and white deer. Stocking Al with plenty of everything he needed meant that Tammie would not have to go out again until deer season ended.

Ted spent the two days prior to the opening of bear season cutting more wood for the camp. On the afternoon before, he built and banked a fire in the heating stove so that the camp would be reasonably warm and dry when the hunters arrived. Then he prepared his supper and Tammie's and was ready for the knock on his door when it sounded. He opened the door and blinked in astonishment.

The man who stood before him was young, not much older than Ted himself, and very grave. He wore hunting clothes and hunting boots, but perhaps because they were new, they seemed somewhat ill-fitting. Strapped around his middle were two belts, one containing a knife with a blade at least a foot long and the other supporting two enormous 45 caliber revolvers. He was making every effort to appear nonchalant, but it was an effort so strained that the effect was a little ludicrous. His eyes brimmed with a lilting excitement and a vast anticipation.

"Mr. Harkness?"

"Yes."

"I'm Alex Jackson."

"Oh, yes." Ted extended his hand. "Glad to see you, Mr. Jackson."

"As you can see," Alex Jackson indicated the two revolvers, "I'm ready for them."

"Uh—are you going bear hunting with revolvers?"

"Oh, no! Definitely not. I have my rifle, too. It's just that one must be prepared when the beasts charge."

"Ah—What'd you say?"

"I said—Oh, before I overlook it."

Alex Jackson took out his wallet and counted out the thirty-five dollars still due on the camp rental. Ted tried to collect his spinning thoughts. Expecting a seasoned, experienced hunter, he'd met instead a youngster who talked seriously about black bears charging. Or hadn't Ted heard correctly? He slipped the money into his pocket and looked sidewise at his guest.

"If you'll follow me, I'll take you to the camp."

"Would you have a little time to talk?"

"Of course."

"May I bring the fellows in?"

"Certainly."

The man turned to beckon, and somebody shut off the car's idling motor and flicked off its lights. Five more hunters came into the house, and Ted was introduced as they came. None were older than Alex Jackson. Two, Alex's brother Paul and a youngster named Philip Tarbox, looked as though they should be behind their high-school desks, rather than in a hunting camp. Alex Jackson turned with a smile.

"Now you know us. How do you like us?"

"Fine," Ted murmured. "Uh—how much bear hunting have any of you done?"

Alex Jackson's eyes were full of dreams. "None of us have ever hunted any big game, but I've read all about it."

"You've never hunted?"

"Not big game," Alex Jackson said modestly. "You see, I just came of age last month and thus was able to handle my own affairs. But I've always wanted to hunt big game, especially bears."

"Do—do your folks know you're here?"

"Paul and I haven't any, and I am now Paul's guardian. But the other fellows' parents do. Yes, of course, and they were glad to have them in my charge. I've been counsellor for three summers at Camp Monawami. You needn't worry about our ability to handle firearms. We've all hunted rabbits. But I would like to ask your advice."

"Sure." Ted felt weak.

"Philip, Steve, Arnold and Wilson are armed with nothing but shotguns. Do you think I should return to the town through which we just passed and buy them rifles and revolvers?"

"Gosh no!"

"I'm worried," Alex Jackson said seriously. "Grimshaw, in his *Bears of the North*, says that when the beasts charge—"

"Grimshaw was writing about grizzlies. These are black bears."

"Oh!" Alex Jackson elevated his brows. "You can say definitely that they will not charge?"

"Nobody can say that. They're wild animals."

"I thought so!" Alex Jackson seemed vastly relieved. "Will a shotgun halt them when they charge?"

"Oh, yes."

Ted wished he could sink through the floor. Expecting hunters, he had his hands full of what, very literally, were babes in the woods. But they had a great dream and a great hope, and regardless of who told them that not once in 1000 times will even a wounded black bear charge a hunter, they wouldn't believe it because they did not care to believe it. They had come bear hunting to live dangerously!

Alex Jackson nodded happily. "Thank you very much. Now will you please show us the camp?"

"Follow me."

As he drove up the Lorton Road, Ted gave himself over to his own grim thoughts. Obviously, there was much more to building and renting camps than met the casual eye. One never knew who was coming or what they'd do. Now he was certain only that this crew of naive hopefuls should not venture into the Mahela alone. He wasn't even sure that they should be permitted to stay in camp without supervision, but he'd risk that much for at least one night. He parked in front of the camp, waited for his guests and admitted them.

"Just what I'd hoped for!" Alex Jackson exclaimed. "Semi-primitive surroundings! Delightful!"

Ted asked, "Can you handle the stoves and everything?"

"Oh, yes! Oh, indeed yes! But perhaps you will tell us where we have the best chance of encountering bears?"

"I'll do better than that. I'll show you."

"That's good of you. Would you care to start at daylight?"

"I'll be here."

"We'll be ready."

On arriving at the camp a half hour before daylight the next morning, Ted saw that it was not burned down and that his young guests had made no obvious blunders. Rather, with breakfast eaten and the dishes stacked away, they seemed to be doing pretty well for themselves. But, even though they knew what to do around a camp, the fact remained that none of them had ever hunted big game.

Ted exchanged greetings and looked out of the window. Renting hunting camps might be a nice way to earn a living, but there must be easier ones! The very fact that he'd rented his camp to them implied an obligation. Six hunters who knew exactly what to do had little enough chance of getting a bear. These youngsters had one in a thousand. But if there was any way to do it, Ted still had to offer them their money's worth and he considered himself responsible for them. Sending them into the Mahela alone probably, and at the least, meant that they would get lost.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Let's go!" Alex Jackson said happily.

Ted led the six into the lightening morning. Since there was no snow, it was futile even to think of tracking a bear. Without any experience, these youngsters had no hope whatever of staging a successful drive, or putting four of their number in favorable shooting positions while the rest beat through the forest and tried to drive a bear past them. Only Alex Jackson and his brother were armed with rifles, therefore they were the only two who had even a slight chance of getting a bear, should one be sighted at long range. But the possibilities of even seeing a bear were so slim anyway that Ted had not wanted Alex to buy rifles for the other four.

There was just one faint hope.... This was the season of the Great Harvest. Frost had opened the pods on the beech trees and beech nuts had fallen like rain into the forest litter below. Tiny things, they were in vast quantity. Deer, bears, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, foxes, practically every creature in the Mahela was spending almost full time filling itself with beech nuts or storing them away. Winter, that would bring hunger and lean bellies, was just ahead and well the wild things knew it.

If Ted posted his crew at favorable places among the beech trees and if they sat absolutely quiet, one or more of them might at least see a bear. Very definitely there was not much of a chance, but there was none at all if they did anything else.

Al had told of a lot of bears in Carter Valley and Ted took his hunters there. He left them in various strategic places where scraped and pawed leaves told their own story of being turned aside so that hungry creatures might partake of the beech nuts hidden beneath. Lacking snow, there was no foolproof way to tell just what had been scraping or pawing, but something had and it might be bears.

After the rest had been posted, Ted took Alex Jackson out to the rim of Carter Valley. The slope pitched sharply downwards and rose just as sharply on the other side, but here the valley was shallow, with perhaps a hundred yards to its floor. It was possibly another hundred yards from rim to rim, and the opposite rim was almost treeless. About a half mile away across the treeless slope was a crumbling slag pile. Years ago a vein of coal had been discovered here and mined as long as it paid off. But it had ceased to pay and had been abandoned long before Ted was born. Only the tunnel and the slag pile were left.

The opposite slope was covered with beech brush that would be jungle thick to anyone within it. But from this vantage point, eyes could penetrate the brush. Any bear going up or down the valley, and one might do just that, would certainly travel through the beech brush and any hunter posted here would surely have some good shooting. Ted turned to Alex Jackson.

"You stay here."

"Here?"

"Yes. Move as little as possible and make no noise. Watch the beech brush across there. Sooner or later a bear's going

through it. I'll pick you up tonight."

"Right-o."

That night, the bear hunters were still reasonably happy. All had seen squirrels and feeding grouse. Four had seen deer and three had watched turkeys feeding. Paul Jackson had thought he'd seen a bear, but it turned out to be a black squirrel running on the opposite side of a fallen tree, with only its bobbing back appearing now and then.

For the next few days, the sextette stayed quite happy. Then deer, squirrels and turkeys began to pall. They were proud bear hunters, and so far they hadn't seen even a bear's track. The last day, disappointment was in full reign. They'd not only told their friends they were going to get a bear but, Ted suspected, Alex Jackson had done considerable talking about the way bears charged hunters.

Nevertheless, they all followed Ted back into Carter Valley and the five younger hunters took the places assigned them. It was the best way. They'd occupied these same stands for six days without seeing any bears, but sooner or later the law of averages would send one along.

With Alex Jackson in tow, Ted started back toward the valley's rim. Alex Jackson touched his arm.

"I say, would you mind if I just wandered about on my own?"

"Not if that's the way you want it."

Alex Jackson had arrived so full of dreams and spirit and now he seemed so despondent. "I won't get lost—and I may find something," he said quietly.

"Good luck," Ted replied gently.

Ted wandered gloomily out to the rim of the valley and sat down in the place Alex Jackson had been occupying. Not every hunter can leave the woods with a full bag of game, but Ted felt that, somehow, he had failed this eager young group. His guests might at least have *seen* a bear. Carrying no rifle—he was the guide—and with nothing special to do, Ted basked in the warm sunshine.

An hour later, his eye was caught by motion down the valley. Coming out of the semi-doze into which he had fallen, he looked sharply at it and gasped. A bear, not a monstrous creature but no cub—it weighed perhaps 250 pounds—was coming through the beech brush. It was about two hundred yards down the valley and halfway up the other slope, and it was not in the slightest hurry. It stopped to sniff at some interesting thing it discovered and turned to retrace its steps a few yards. Then it came on.

Ted groaned inwardly. A rifleman posted here could have an easy shot—and Alex Jackson had sat here idly for six days! The bear came on for another sixty yards, lay down beside a huge boulder and prepared itself for a nap.

Ted crawled away. Bears have a remarkable sense of scent and good hearing, but very weak eyes. This one couldn't see him. If it smelled him, it certainly would not be where it was. If he was very careful, it might not hear him. As soon as Ted thought he was far enough from the valley's rim, he rose and ran back to where he'd left Paul Jackson.

That alert youngster heard him coming and had his rifle ready, but its muzzle was pointed at the ground. Paul Jackson lacked experience, but not sense. He wasn't going to shoot at anything until he knew what was in front of his rifle.

Ted came close and whispered, "Come on! I've got one spotted!"

"You have?"

"Take it easy and quiet! He won't be there if you don't!"

Nearing the valley's rim, Ted dropped back to a crawl. He peered at the boulder and breathed easily again; the bear had not moved. He put his mouth very close to Paul Jackson's ear.

"There he is!"

"Where?"

"Just to the right of that big boulder!"

"I see him!"

Paul Jackson knelt, rested his right elbow on his right knee, raised his rifle—and Ted groaned silently. The youngster's stance was perfect, but so was his buck fever. The rifle shook like an aspen leaf in a high wind. It blasted, and Ted saw the bullet kick up leaves twenty feet to one side of the sleeping bear.

The bear sprang up as though launched from a catapult and kept on springing. Straight up the slope he went, and across the nearly treeless summit.

Ted shouted, "Shoot!"

"Did you say shoot?"

Paul Jackson was still in a daze, bewildered by this thing that could not be but was. The bear was four hundred yards away when he raised his rifle a second time, shot and succeeded only in speeding the running beast on its way. He lowered his rifle and muttered, "I guess I'm not a very good hunter."

"Nobody connects every time."

The bear was running full speed toward the old mine tunnel. Surprised, its first thought had been to put distance between the hunter and itself, but now it was planning very well. The old tunnel had one outlet that led into a dense thicket of laurel. Certainly the bear knew all about this and he would go into the thicket. Definitely, he was lost to the young hunter.

Then, within the mouth of the old tunnel itself, another rifle cracked spitefully. The running bear swapped ends, rolled over and lay still. Alex Jackson emerged from the tunnel.

Twenty minutes later, when Paul and Ted reached him, he was sitting quietly beside his trophy and looking at it with unbelieving eyes. But they were wonderfully happy eyes. Long ago he had dreamed his dream. Now—and probably it never had been before and never would be again in hunting annals—he had seen it come true. He looked dreamily up at Ted and Paul and his voice was proof that, whether it's bringing down a bear, shooting a hole-in-one, or playing a perfect game of chess, any dream can be as bright as the dreamer makes it.

"It charged," he said.

DAMON

In the parking lot beside Lorton's little railway station, Ted sprawled wearily in his pickup truck.

It had taken much of the day to bring Alex Jackson's bear out of Carter Valley. The animal might have been skinned where it fell, cut up and brought out piece by piece, but not one of the young hunters would hear of such a thing. They had come a long way and worked hard for this trophy; they would take it with them intact. It had been necessary to do things the hard way.

Dragging it would have injured the fine pelt, so Ted had lashed its feet to a long pole and put a man on each end. The start had been easy, but game carried in such a fashion has an astonishing way of adding weight. By the time they'd traveled a quarter of a mile, instead of a mere 250, the bear weighed at least 2500 pounds, and the panting carriers were relieving each other every fifty paces.

Finally, they'd reached an old tote road up which Ted could drive with his pickup and the rest had been easy. They'd lashed the bear on Alex Jackson's car and six exhausted but happy youngsters had piled in to begin their long journey homewards.

Ted grinned to himself. He'd spent a week with the Jackson party solely because he'd thought they would get into trouble if he did not. No guide's fee had been expected or asked, but, just the same, it might have been good business. The fathers of three of the youngsters were ardent hunters themselves. Ted had been assured over and over again that they'd hear about the Mahela and be directed to Ted, far and away the world's best guide. The youngsters were certainly coming back for fishing season and to spend part of their summer in the Mahela and they'd want the cabin.

Ted's grin faded. Next year there might not be any cabin to rent. He stretched wearily in the darkness and yawned.

He'd reached home just in time to pack Tammie and send him on what must be his last visit to Al until deer season ended. Sending him so early might have been taking a chance, but when Ted next returned home he'd have a guest with him, and letting anyone else see the packed Tammie would surely be taking more of a chance. Ted had fixed a meal for himself, taken two woodcock from the freezer and put them in cold water to thaw. Then he had driven in to meet John Wilson.

The little station's windows looked as though they hadn't been washed for the past nine months and probably they hadn't. Lights glowed dully behind them, and the clicking of the telegrapher's key sounded intermittently. Ted looked about.

The parking lot was full, and the night before deer season opened was the only time throughout the whole year when it ever was. Though by far most of the deer hunters came by car, some traveled by train from wherever they lived to the city of Dartsburg, sixty miles away. Then they came to Lorton on what some of the local wags described as the "tri-weekly"—it went down one week and tried to come back the next. Actually, it was a daily train, and in spite of a superfluity of jokes and near-jokes about it, it kept a tight schedule.

When Ted's watch read ten past seven, he left the pickup and went to stand in the shadows on the waiting platform. The drivers of other cars joined him, and here and there a little group of men engaged in conversation. Then the train's whistle announced its approach and every eye turned down the tracks.

Ordinarily, the train pulled a combined baggage and mail car and one coach, but on this eventful night a second coach had been resurrected from somewhere and every window gleamed. The train hissed to a halt and hunters started piling off. Without exception, they were dressed in hunting gear; red coats, red caps and whatever they fancied in the way of trousers and footwear. They lugged everything from suitcases to rucksacks and, invariably, either strapped to the luggage or carried in a free hand, rifles were in evidence.

The men waiting on the platform went forward to greet hunters they knew and bundled them off to cars. Jimmy Deeks, Lorton's only taxi driver, called his "Taxi!" just once and was stampeded by a dozen hunters who wanted to go to a hotel or motel. There was some little argument and, after promising to return for the rest, Jimmy went off with as many hunters as his cab would hold.

The arriving crowd thinned rapidly and Ted looked with some bewilderment on those who were left. He'd never seen John Wilson and hadn't the faintest idea as to the sort of man he must look for. Certainly he'd be alone, and the only hunters left were in groups of three or more. Then Dan Taylor, the station agent, passed and saw Ted.

"Hi, Ted."

"Hi, Dan."

"Waitin' for somebody?"

"Yup."

"Well if he ain't on this train, he's sure walkin'!"

The station agent guffawed at his own not very subtle humor and moved on. A second later, a man detached himself from one of the groups and approached Ted. He was not tall, even in hunting boots he lacked five and a half inches of Ted's six feet. He wore a red-plaid jacket, a red-checked cap and black wool trousers that tucked into his boots. In his right hand was a leather suitcase and in his left he carried a cased rifle. Despite the gray hair that escaped from beneath his cap, he walked with a light and firm tread and humor glinted in his eyes.

He asked, "Are you Ted Harkness?"

"That's right."

The man put his suitcase down and thrust out his right hand. "I'm John Wilson."

Ted shook the proffered hand. "I—I thought you'd be different."

"Don't let my grotesque appearance frighten you. I'm harmless."

Ted blurted out, "You said in your letter that you're a doddering *old* man."

"Ten years older than Methuselah." John Wilson laughed and the sound was good to hear. "I'm glad to know you, Ted."

"And I you. Shall we get out to the house?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to grab a bite to eat. The dining car on the Limited was crowded and I couldn't get in."

"The cafes will be crowded and we'll have to wait. I'll fix you something, if you want to come along now."

"Fine!"

Ted picked up the suitcase, escorted John Wilson to the pickup and put the luggage in the rear. About to open the door for his guest, he was forestalled when John Wilson opened it himself and climbed in. Ted settled in the driver's seat.

"Mind if I smoke?" John Wilson asked.

"Not at all."

He lighted a pipe and sat puffing on it while Ted steered expertly through Lorton's hunting season traffic. A happy warmth enveloped him. He liked most people, but very few times in his life had he been drawn so close to one on such short acquaintance. John Wilson was probably ten years older than Al, but far from doddering. He was that rare person whom age has made mellow rather than caustic.

Then they were on the Lorton Road and started into the Mahela. John Wilson spoke for the first time since leaving the station.

"They crowd in."

"For deer season they do," Ted agreed. "The day after it ends, you could shoot a cannon down Main Street and never hit a person."

They passed a tent set up beside the road, and a gasoline lantern burning inside gave its walls a ghostly translucence.

There was a neat pile of wood beside it and wood smoke drifted from a tin pipe that curled through the wall. The car in which the campers had come was backed off the road. It was a good camp and as they passed Ted was aware that John Wilson knew it was good. But he said nothing, and Ted had the impression that he did not talk unless he had something worthwhile to say.

A quarter mile beyond the camp, the truck's probing lights reflected from the startlingly bright eyes of a deer. Ted slowed. Deer were always running back and forth across the road and, since bright lights dazzled them, they would not always get out of the way. They came closer and the lights revealed very clearly a magnificent buck.

So alert that every muscle was tense, he stood broadside. One rear leg was a bit ahead of the other, the animal was poised for instant flight. His antlers were big and branching, and in the car lights they looked perfectly symmetrical. It was a splendid creature, one that would command attention anywhere. After ten seconds, it leaped into the forest and disappeared.

John Wilson said, "A nice head."

He spoke as though the buck had delighted and warmed him, but there was in his voice none of the babbling enthusiasm which some hunters, upon seeing such a buck, might express. Obviously, he had seen big bucks before.

Ted commented, "He was a darn' big buck."

"As big," and a smile lurked in John Wilson's voice, "as your Damon and Pythias?"

Ted answered firmly, "No sir. He was not."

"Then I am in the right place?"

"I hope so, Mr. Wilson."

"It'd be just as simple to call me John."

Ted grinned. "All right, John."

They passed more tents and trailers, swerved to miss a wild-eyed doe that almost jumped into the truck. Finally, Ted drove thankfully up the Harkness driveway. The house was stocked with everything they needed, and as far as he was concerned, he was willing to stay there until deer season ended. At any rate, he hoped he'd have to do no more night driving.

He escorted his guest in, snapped the light on and waited for what he thought was coming next. It came. John Wilson glanced about and he needed no more than a glance. It was enough to tell him what was here and his voice said he liked it.

"You do all right for yourself."

"Glad you like it. If you'll make yourself at home, I'll have something to eat rustled up in a little while."

"Let me help you."

"It's a one-man job."

John Wilson reclined in an easy chair while Ted went into the kitchen. He put a great slab of butter in a skillet, let it brown, seasoned the brace of woodcock, put them into the pan, covered it and turned the flame lower. He prepared a fresh pot of coffee, biscuits, potatoes and a vegetable. All the while, he waited nervously for Tammie to whine at the door. There'd have to be some nice timing when the collie returned. Ted must slip out, strip the harness off and let the dog in without letting John Wilson know he'd worn a harness.

When the meal was ready and Tammie still had not come, Ted's nervousness mounted. The dog was a half hour late already. What could have happened out in the Mahela? Ted put the dinner on the table and tried to sound casual as he announced, "Chow's ready."

"This is 'chow'?" John Wilson chided him. "Butter-browned woodcock is deserving of a better name. Let me at it!"

He cut a slice of the dark breast and began to eat it. "Mm-m! That's good! Something wrong, Ted?"

"Yes—uh—That is, no."

"You're nervous as a wet cat."

"My dog's out and I'm a little worried about—There he is now! Go right ahead and eat."

Tammie's whine sounded again and Ted slipped out the back door. Hastily he knelt to strip the harness off and take Al's note from the pocket. Then he threw the harness aside—he'd get it in the early morning—tucked the note in his pocket and, with Tammie beside him, went into the house. John Wilson stopped eating to admire.

"That's a beautiful collie. What's his name?"

"Tammie, and he's just as good as he looks."

Tammie sniffed delicately at their guest, received a pat on the head and went to stretch out on his bearskin. John Wilson glanced at him again.

"Aren't you afraid to let him run?"

"After tomorrow, poor Tammie will be confined to quarters until deer season ends."

John Wilson nodded. "That's wise, some hunters will shoot at anything. What time do you plan to get out in the morning?"

"Whenever you care to leave."

"Isn't it traditional for hunters to be in the woods at dawn?"

"That's right."

"Then let's not violate revered custom. Where do these two big bucks hang out?"

"They've been on Burned Mountain for a long while. Hunters may put them off there and then again they may not."

"Where do they lurk during deer season?"

"Nobody knows exactly," Ted admitted. "They've been seen in a dozen parts of the Mahela. Sometimes they've been 'seen' in a dozen different places at the same hour on the same day. We'll just have to plan as we go along."

"That suits me. I'll help with the dishes."

"I'll do them."

"You'll spoil me!"

"Take it easy while you can. You're in for some rough days."

John Wilson resumed sitting in the easy chair. Before Ted washed the dishes, he stole a glance at Al's note.

Ted; I got enuf. Don't send Tammy agen til deer seson ends. I wish your sport luk. I saw one of the big buks on burned mountin today. Gess you'll find both.

Your dad

Ted nodded, satisfied. If Damon and Pythias were still on Burned Mountain, he knew exactly where to go. He touched the note to the flame, waited until it burned to ashes, swept them into a wastebasket and joined his guest.

John Wilson, looking at the dying embers in the fireplace, asked quietly, "Got your campaign mapped, General?"

"Only the first skirmish. I know—That is, I'm pretty sure that Damon and Pythias are still on Burned Mountain."

"Then at least we'll know where to find them."

"I believe so. Do you mind if I carry a rifle?"

"Why, I hope you do."

"I won't shoot either Damon or Pythias, even if I should get a shot," Ted promised. "But I would like to get a buck. It helps a lot on the meat bills."

"By all means get one. Pretty warm for this time of year, isn't it?"

"Too warm. Some snow would be a great help."

They exchanged more hunting talk, then went to bed.

An hour before dawn the next morning, after ordering Tammie to stay in the house, Ted closed the back door behind him and started up Hawkbill with his guest. He walked slowly, for Hawkbill was a hard climb for a young man, even in daylight. Though John Wilson was by no means doddering, neither was he young. Ted stopped to rest at judicious intervals.

The darkness lifted slowly, but it was still a thick curtain of gray when, in the distance, a fusillade of shots rang out. Ted grimaced. Some fool, who couldn't possibly see what he was shooting at, had shot anyhow. That was one way hunters managed to kill each other instead of game.

As daylight became stronger, shots were more frequent. Some quite near and some far-off, the sounds were a ragged discord, with now four or five hunters shooting at the same time, then a single shot or succession of shots, then a lull with no shooting. Hunters were seeing deer and shooting, but definitely not all of them were connecting. As Ted knew, many a deer, many a herd of deer, had emerged unhurt after a hundred or more shots were fired at them.

Ted mounted the crest of Hawkbill and turned to offer a hand to his panting guest. John Wilson wiped his moist brow.

"Whew! Why didn't you tell me we were going to climb the Matterhorn?"

Ted grinned sympathetically. "You're up it now, and we can see what there is to be seen."

Ted buttoned his jacket. The weather was unseasonably warm, but here on Hawkbill's summit, little fingers of cold that probed at his exposed nose and throat told of chillier things to come. While the temperature made no difference, snow would increase their chances a hundred per cent. He studied Burned Mountain.

Spread out in a thin skirmish line, a party of red-clad hunters were about halfway up it. A deer fled before one of them and the man stopped to raise his rifle. There sounded the weapon's sharp bark, but the deer ran on and disappeared in some brush.

John Wilson said, "He should have had that one with a slingshot."

"Wonder if he could tell whether it was a buck or doe. I—There he is!"

"There who is?"

"One of those big bucks! See him?"

"No."

"A quarter of the way below the summit. Look a hundred yards to the right of that light-colored patch of ground and thirty yards down slope."

"I still don't—Oh, my gosh!"

He uncased his binoculars, put them to his eyes, focused and stared for a full three minutes. When he took the glasses down, there was a gleam of purest ecstasy in his eyes and at the same time a little awe.

"There isn't a buck that big!" he murmured breathlessly.

"Look again," Ted invited. "Wonder where the dickens the other one is."

He searched the briers, a little puzzled. Damon and Pythias were known as such because, except during the rutting season, they were never far apart. But definitely only one of the two huge deer was on Burned Mountain now. It was very unusual.

Ted shrugged. There was no unchangeable rule that said the two big bucks must always be together. Maybe the sound of shooting or the hunters going into the woods had caused them to separate, or perhaps they had parted for reasons of their own.

The shooting continued spasmodically, and not too far away came the outlandish cacophony of shrieks and shouts that meant a hunting party was staging a deer drive. A thin voice screamed, "He's coming your way, Harvey!"

As Ted continued to watch the big buck, John Wilson became restless.

"Let's go after him."

"Wait a bit," Ted advised. "It isn't going to be that easy."

The climbing hunters, about a hundred and fifty yards apart, broke out of the forest and into the briers. Two of them were so placed that, unless he moved, they would pass the big buck at almost equal distances. But the buck let them pass without so much as flicking an ear. He knew very well exactly where both hunters were, but he was no fawn to panic because men were in the woods. The buck had a good hiding place, knew it, and he had eluded hunters this time merely by doing nothing.

"He's smart, all right." John Wilson had appreciated the strategy, too. "What do you suggest, Ted?"

"I'm going over to flush him out. You stay here and let me know what he does."

"But—What good will that do?"

"Deer are pretty much creatures of habit. He's in that bed now because he likes it. If he doesn't become too frightened today, the chances are good, both that he'll go into the same bed tonight and that he'll do the same thing when he's flushed out of it tomorrow. Only you'll be waiting for him."

John Wilson nodded. "That listens all right."

"Wave your red hat when he goes," Ted directed. "I'll see that and wait for you, and we can figure our next move afterwards."

Unencumbered by an older companion, Ted half-ran down the opposite slope of Hawkbill and started swiftly up Burned Mountain. He had no hope of seeing the buck, but just going to the bed where it had been lying was within itself no easy task. Viewed from the summit of Hawkbill, various parts of Burned Mountain had various distinguishing characteristics. But once on the mountain itself, everything looked alike. Ted emerged from the forest into the briers, crashed a way through them, and when he thought he was very near the place where the buck had bedded, he turned to see John Wilson waving his hat.

Ted sat down for what he was sure would be a long wait. He had climbed to this place in twenty-five minutes, but he was eighteen years old.

An hour later, he heard John Wilson's, "Hall-oo!"

"Here!" Ted yelled.

Carrying his hat, streaming perspiration, but entirely happy, John Wilson panted up to join him.

"He went out," he said cheerfully, "and I'll swear he flushed no more than twenty yards ahead of you! Thought sure you'd see him."

"Where'd he go?"

"Quartered up the mountain and crossed the summit just a little to the right of some white birches."

Ted nodded. The course described by John Wilson had kept the big buck in thick cover all the way. It was the route he might have been expected to take, except that there were a dozen others with brush just as thick. However, there was every chance that he would go the same way a second time and tomorrow morning John Wilson would be posted in the birches while Ted tried to drive the buck through.

"What's it like on top?" John Wilson asked.

"Patches of laurel and rhododendron. We'll go see what we can do."

That night, tired and hungry, the pair made their way down Burned Mountain. They hadn't seen the monster buck again, but were in no wise disheartened. There were twenty days of the season left and John Wilson had had, and failed to take, a chance at a very good eight-point buck. Obviously, he'd meant it when he said he wanted only the biggest.

Ted prepared supper and washed the dishes afterwards.... The two hunters were sprawled in the living room when Tammie whined to announce that someone was coming. A minute later there was a knock at the door and Ted opened it to confront George Stacey.

"Come on in, George."

"Cain't. Gotta git home. Thought I'd stop an' tell ya that Thornton, down to Crestwood, fetched in one of them big bucks today."

"He did?"

"Sure did, an' hit's big enough for ar'y two bucks. Go see hit. Hit's a'hangin' on the game pole."

"Thanks, George."

"Yer welcome. Go see hit."

"Want to go?" Ted asked his guest.

"Sure thing!"

The night air had a distinct bite, and a definite promise of freezing cold to be. Ted turned the heater on, and after they'd gone a mile or so, the pickup's cab filled with welcome warmth.

As soon as they came in sight of Crestwood it was evident that something unusual had occurred at that resort. Carl Thornton provided parking space for his guests. Now all the available area was filled and parked cars lined both sides of the driveway. Ted backed into one of the few empty spaces. He and John Wilson got out to join the crowd at the game rack.

Crestwood's hunters had brought in seven other bucks this opening day and three of them were big deer. But the biggest seemed puny beside the monster that the crowd was eyeing. Its antlers were laced close to the game pole, but its outstretched hoofs nearly touched the ground. If this buck did not set a new record, it would come very close to so doing.

John Wilson murmured, "Gad, what a buck! Is the other as big?"

"They're twins."

Ted went up for a closer look. He put his hand on the hanging buck and set it to swinging gently. He gasped. As unobtrusively as possible, hoping none had noticed his outburst, he drew back into the crowd.

But several matters that had been very cloudy had become very clear.

PYTHIAS

Ted lingered on the fringes of the crowd, and in his mind's eye he conjured up an image of Nels Anderson. Nels always earned his pay plus a little bit more, and Ted wondered why Carl Thornton had fired him. But he wondered no more.

The great buck hung on Crestwood's game rack and bore Carl Thornton's deer tag, but it had never been killed today. The weather, though colder, still had not dipped to the freezing point and the big buck was frozen solidly. The others hung limp and pliable.

Failing to persuade Ted to hunt the big bucks for him, obviously Thornton had hired someone else and Ted's thoughts swung naturally to Smoky Delbert. Smoky would do anything for money and he knew how to bargain. If he'd hired Smoky, Thornton must have paid a stiff price and the rest was simple.

Crestwood's walk-in refrigerator had a freezing compartment that would accommodate a side of beef. It had been necessary only to bring the buck to Crestwood—no impossible or even difficult feat—hang it in the freezer, and on this, the first day of the season, bring it out again. Nels, of course, had been fired solely to keep him from discovering what was in the freezer. It would hurt both Thornton and Crestwood if it were known that Thornton had bought his buck. The favorable publicity for which he'd hoped, and which he'd certainly get unless Ted exposed him, would turn to scathing condemnation.

Alan Russell, Crestwood's part-time bookkeeper, broke from the crowd and came to Ted's side.

"Hello, Ted."

"Hi, Alan."

"Some buck, eh?"

"Sure is," Ted said wryly. "I can imagine Thornton telling his adoring guests just what a Daniel Boone he had to be to get it."

"After this season he won't be telling 'em at Crestwood."

"Why not?"

"Thornton's sold out."

"Sold out!"

"That's right."

"When did all this happen?"

"It's been hanging fire for a couple of months, but the prospective buyers met Thornton's price only three days ago. It was a stiff price."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm handling the book work."

Ted said happily, "Alan, I love you!"

The other looked suspiciously at him. "Do you feel all right?"

"I never felt better!"

Ted's heart sang. Game laws were game laws, and they applied to Carl Thornton as well as to everyone else. But Crestwood was important to the economy of the Mahela. One did not jeopardize the livelihood of those who worked there, or the sorely needed money Crestwood's guests spent in the Mahela, because of a single illegally killed buck or

half a dozen of them. But now Ted was free to act. He sought and found John Wilson.

"Shall we go?"

"Guess we might as well. Looking holes right through this buck won't bring the other one in range. Wonder how the lucky cuss got it?"

"I have an idea."

"I expect you have. *Br-r!* It's getting cold."

"It will be colder. We have to hurry."

John Wilson looked at him curiously. "What's up?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

They got into the pickup. Ted started the motor that had not yet had time to cool completely, and a trickle of warmth came from the heater. John Wilson looked sharply at Ted.

"All right. Give."

"Did you notice anything unusual about that buck?"

"Only that it's the biggest I ever saw."

"It's also frozen solid."

"I—I don't understand."

"The weather hasn't been cold enough to freeze deer. Thornton never killed that buck today."

"Then he—?"

"That's it exactly."

There was a short silence. John Wilson broke it with a quiet, "Is there a story behind it?"

"There is."

"Want to tell me?"

Ted told of his love for the Mahela, and of a heart-rooted desire to dedicate his life to helping people enjoy it. He spoke of his work at Crestwood, and of his great dream to have a similar place, one day. He related as much as he knew, which was as much as anyone knew, of the story of Damon and Pythias. He told of Carl Thornton's commissioning him to get both bucks before the season opened, of his refusal to do so and the consequent loss of his job.

He described the camp, and how and why it was built. Then the bombshell; Smoky Delbert's shooting and Al a fugitive in the Mahela. He spoke of his father's near-passionate interest in true conservation, and of his near-hatred for those who violated the sportsman's code. However, aware of Crestwood's importance to the Mahela, knowing that this violation would hurt and perhaps ruin Thornton, Al himself would not have reported it. But now that Thornton was leaving, was there any reason why he should be shielded?

There was another brief silence before John Wilson said quietly, "Don't do it, Ted."

"You mean let him get away with it?"

"Under any other circumstances," John Wilson said, "I'd say drive into Lorton and report him to the game warden. As things are with you now, if you do, you'll hate yourself. How are you going to decide exactly whether you turned him in to settle a grudge or because you're a believer in conservation? I agree that he should be arrested and fined. But arresting him won't return the buck to Burned Mountain. It won't do anything at all except bring Thornton a hundred-dollar fine, and he can spare the money. Yes, I'd say let him go and good riddance."

"But—"

"You asked my advice and you got it. If you turn him in, you'll hurt yourself more than you will him. By all means report law violators, but never let even a suspicion of personal prejudice influence your report. It won't work."

"I guess you're right."

"I hope I am."

That night the temperature fell to zero, and every buck on every game rack in the Mahela froze solid. There was no longer any evidence whatever to prove that Damon, as Ted thought of the great buck on Crestwood's game rack, had been taken by other than legal means.

Even if Ted wanted to do something now, his chance was gone.

For twenty days, always leaving the Harkness house before dawn and never getting back until after dark, Ted and his guest had hunted Pythias.

They had seen deer, dozens of them, and Ted had dropped a nice eight-point so close to his house that they had needed only fifteen minutes to dress it out, slide it in over the six inches of crisp snow that now lay in the Mahela and hang it on the game rack. John Wilson had had his choice of several bucks, and at least four of them had been fine trophies. But he had come to hunt the big buck that still lurked on Burned Mountain and he was determined to get that one or none.

It looked as though it would be none, Ted reflected as he sat in front of the blazing fire, tearing a bolt of red cloth into strips. Pythias, who had sucked in his woodcraft with his mother's milk, had only contempt for any mere human who coveted his royal rack of antlers.

The second day of the season, giving John Wilson ample time to post himself in the white birches, Ted had gone to the bed in which they'd seen Pythias on the first day. A small buck and two does had gone through, but Pythias had not. Most deer have favorite runways, or paths, that are as familiar to them as sidewalks are to humans. Pythias seldom used one, and he never took the same route twice in succession.

Hunted hard every day, he hadn't let himself be chased from the top of Burned Mountain. Staying there, he knew what he was doing. Sparsely forested, the top of the mountain was given over to a devil's tangle of twining laurel and snarled rhododendron. Some of the stems from which the latter evergreen grew were thick as tree trunks, and some of the winding, snaking branches were thirty feet long. It was heartbreaking work just to go through one, and impossible for a man to do so without making as much noise as a running horse. Once within the laurel or rhododendron, and some thickets were a combination of both, it was seldom possible to see seven yards in any direction. Often, visibility was restricted to seven feet.

Pythias haunted those thickets that varied from an eighth of an acre to perhaps eighty acres. Chased out of one, he entered another, flitting like a gray ghost through the scrub aspen that separated them. Then he lingered until the hunters came and entered another thicket. Only when going through the aspens, where he knew very well he could be seen, did he run. In the thickets he walked or slunk, and he never made a foolish move.

Every day there'd been snow—and John Wilson and Ted had had tracking snow for seventeen of the twenty days—they'd found Pythias' bed and his fresh tracks. His hoofmarks were big and round, and they indicated him as surely as a robe of ermine or a scepter marks a king. But except for the first day, when he'd been hopelessly out of range, the two hunters hadn't seen him even once. Pythias could never conceal the fact that he had walked in the snow. But he could hide himself.

Methodically, Ted continued to tear strips from his bolt of red cloth and lay them on the table. Tammie, grown fat and lazy during the three weeks he'd been confined to the house—even though Ted had let him out for a run every night—

raised his head and blinked solemnly at the fireplace. Bone tired, John Wilson turned in his chair and grinned.

"You have enough of those red ribbons so you could fasten one on half the deer in the Mahela. Think they'll work?"

"I don't know of anything else. We've tried everything."

"It's been a good hunt," John Wilson said contentedly, "and a most instructive one. I don't have to have a buck."

"But you'd like one?"

"Not unless it's Pythias."

"We have one more day and I have plans. Here, let me show you."

Ted tore the last of his red cloth into strips, pulled his chair up to the table, took a sheet of paper and a pencil and drew a map. John Wilson leaned over his shoulder.

"This is the Fordham Road," Ted explained, "the first left-hand fork leading from the Lorton Road. Climb over the mountain and drop down the other side. The first valley you'll see, it's right here, is Coon Valley. You can't miss it, there's a turnout and hunters have been using it. Park the truck and walk up Coon Valley. In about half a mile, or right here, you'll come to three sycamores near a big boulder. On this slope," Ted indicated it with his pencil, "there's a thicket of beech scrub. You can see everything in it from the top of the boulder, Glory Rock. Climb it and wait."

"That's all? Just wait?"

"That's all. If I can put him out of the laurel, there's at least an even chance he'll cross the ridge and try to get back into the thickets at the head of Coon Valley. If he does, he'll come through the beech scrub."

"And if you can't?"

"He won't."

"What time do you want me there, Ted?"

"There's no great hurry. He isn't going to leave his thickets easily. It will take you about an hour to reach the mouth of Coon Valley and maybe another half hour or forty-five minutes to get set on Glory Rock. If you leave the house by half-past six, you should be there soon after eight. That's time enough."

"How long should I wait?"

"Until I pick you up, and I will pick you up there. I may not come before dark. If I can put him past you, I will."

"As you say, General."

The tinny clatter of Ted's alarm clock awakened him at half-past three the next morning. He reached down to shut it off, reset it for half-past five and stole in to put it near the still sleeping John Wilson. Ted breakfasted, gave Tammie his food and a pat, donned his hunting jacket, put the strips of red cloth into the game pocket and stepped into the black morning.

He bent his head against the north wind and started climbing Burned Mountain. He knew as he climbed that he was pitting himself against a force as old as time.

The woodcraft of Pythias, or any deer, shamed that of the keenest human. Deer could identify every tiny sound, every wind that blew and the many scents those winds carried. They knew everything there was to know about their wilderness and they were all masters of it. No human could hope to equal their senses.

But Pythias, the greatest and most cunning of all, was still a beast. He knew and could interpret the wilderness, but he couldn't possibly apply reason to that which was not of the wilderness. If his confidence could be shaken...

It was still black night when Ted reached the summit of Burned Mountain, but he had crossed and re-crossed it so many times in the past twenty days that he could do so in the darkness. Pythias was there, and possibly he already knew that Ted was back on the mountain. But he'd feel secure in the thicket where he was bedded and he would not go out until he was flushed.

Ted sought the aspen grown aisles between the thickets. He hung a strip of red cloth on a wind whipped branch, walked fifty yards and hung another. The night lifted and daylight came, and an hour later Ted tied his last strip of cloth to a twig. Carrying no rifle—but Pythias couldn't possibly know that—he put his hands in his pockets to warm them. Now he had to flush the big buck.

He and his guest had left the great animal in one of the larger thickets last night, but it was almost certain that he hadn't passed the whole night there. Ted circled the thicket, found Pythias' unmistakable tracks and followed to where the big buck had nibbled tender young aspen shoots and pawed the snow to get at the dried grass beneath it. Thereafter Pythias had done considerable wandering. Ted worked out the trail and discovered where his quarry had gone to rest in another thicket.

He tracked him in, and he'd done this so many times that he knew almost exactly what to expect. The big buck would wait until he was sure someone was again on his trail, then he'd get up and sneak away. There would be nothing except tracks in the snow to mark his going. A man could not travel silently through the thickets, but a deer could.

Deep within the thicket, Ted found the bed, a depression melted in the snow, to which Pythias had retired when his wandering was done. The tracks leading away were fresh and sharp, no more than a couple of minutes old, but they were not the widely spaced ones of a running buck. Knowing very well what he was doing, aware of the fact that he could not be seen while there, Pythias always walked in the thickets.

However, when he decided to leave this thicket, he had leaped through the scrub aspen separating it from the next one. It could have taken him no more than a second or so. If a hunter had been watching, he would have had just a fleeting shot and only a lucky marksman would have connected. Ted followed fast. There were no cloth strips in these aspens.

But when he came to where Pythias had intended to leave the next thicket, he discovered where the big buck had set himself for the first leap then wheeled to slip back into the laurel. Ten feet to one side, the strip of cloth that had turned him still whipped in the wind. Pythias had tried again to leave the thicket, been turned a second time by another fluttering cloth and leaped wildly out at a place where Ted had hung no ribbons.

The buck's pattern changed completely. He was safe in the thickets, knew it, and had never deigned to run while sheltered by friendly brush. Now he was running, either in great leaps that placed his bunched feet six yards apart or at a nervous trot. Ted began to have hopes.

Pythias had the acute senses of a wild thing plus the cunning of a wise creature that had eluded every danger for years. But the wilderness he knew changed only with the changing seasons. What did the fluttering cloths mean? Where had they come from? What peril did they indicate? Pythias' tracks showed that he was becoming more nervous.

Ted pushed him hard. The buck could not reason, but if he passed enough of them safely and discovered for himself that there was no danger in the red ribbons, he would pay no more attention to them. An hour and a half after taking the track Ted knew that, at least in part, he had succeeded.

Unable to decide for himself what the fluttering cloths meant, Pythias swung away from the thickets into beech forest. Now he ran continuously. In the thickets, knowing very well that he could not be seen, he had walked until the fluttering cloths introduced an unknown and possibly dangerous element. This was beech forest, with visibility of anywhere from fifty up to as much as two hundred and fifty yards. A hunter might be anywhere and well the buck knew it. He was going to offer no one a standing shot.

Ted followed swiftly, for now the hunt had a definite pattern. A young buck, chased out of the thickets on Burned Mountain, might linger in the beeches. A wise old one would hurry as fast as possible into the thickets at the head of Coon Valley, and the nearest route lay through the scrub beech at Glory Rock. Ted was still a quarter of a mile away when he heard the single, sharp crack of a rifle.

He left the trail and cut directly toward Glory Rock. A volley was very picturesque and sounded inspiring, but whoever ripped off half a dozen shots in quick succession was merely shooting, without much regard to aiming. Ted murmured an old hunter's adage as he ran, "One shot, one deer. Two shots, maybe one deer. Three shots, no deer."

He ran down the slope into Coon Valley and found John Wilson standing over Pythias. The hunter's delighted eyes met Ted's, but mingled with his delight was a little sadness, too.

"I now," John Wilson said, "have lived."

"You got him!"

"I got him, poor fellow!"

"He'll never be a better trophy than he is right now."

It was true. At the height of his powers, Pythias faced a certain decline. Soon he would be old, and the wilderness is not kind to the old and infirm that dwell within it.

John Wilson laughed. "I know it. Look at him! Just look at him! I'll bet his base tine is thirteen inches long!"

Ted said, "Ten inches."

"Are you trying to beat yourself out of seventy-five dollars? I did promise you twenty-five dollars for every inch in its longest tine, if I got a head that satisfied me! This is surely the one!"

Ted grinned. "I'll dress it for you," he offered.

He turned the buck over, made a slit with his hunting knife and pulled the viscera out. At once it became evident that John Wilson was the second hunter of whom Pythias had run afoul, for he had been wounded before. Ted probed interestedly. Entering the flank, the bullet had missed the spine by two inches and any vital organs by a half inch. It had lodged in the thick loin, and nature had built a healing scab of tissue around it.

Ted probed it out with his knife and almost dropped the missile. In his hand lay one of Carl Thornton's distinctive, unmistakable, hand-loaded bullets.

John Wilson asked, "He's been wounded before, eh?"

"Yes!"

"Ted, I swear that you're more excited than I am!"

Ted scarcely heard. He was here, beside Glory Rock, the day after Smoky Delbert was shot. Damon and Pythias, always together, and a deer so badly wounded that it couldn't possibly go on. Damon hadn't gone on. Only Pythias had. Hurt but not mortally, he had left enough blood on the leaves to convince Ted that there'd been only one deer.

"When do you suppose he picked that one up?" John Wilson asked.

"I don't know."

Carl Thornton, who got what he wanted, had decided to get Damon and Pythias himself.

"He's darn' near as big as a horse," Wilson said.

"Sure is."

A horse, a friendly, easily caught horse, that had gone down Coon Valley that night with Damon on its back, then been released to go back up it.

"You certainly know how to field-dress a buck."

"I've done it before."

Smoky Delbert, happening to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thornton couldn't afford to be found out. Smoky would blackmail him.

Thornton paying Delbert's hospital bills.

"Did I hit him square?"

"A good neck shot."

Factory-loaded ammunition that almost never failed to mushroom. Hand-loaded cartridges that might fail.

John Wilson fumbled in his pocket. "Doggone, I seem to have lost my pipe."

Al, forever losing his tobacco pouch, had gone to see Carl Thornton the day Thornton fired Ted.

Ted wiped his knife blade on the snow, stood up and sheathed his knife. He looped a length of rope around the great buck's antlers.

"He'll be easy to get out of here," he said.

AL'S BETRAYAL

Deer season was ended and the village of Lorton brooded moodily between the snowclad hills that flanked it. From now until arriving fishermen brought new excitement, Lorton would know only that which arose from within itself. Ted, who had put John Wilson and his great buck on yesterday's outgoing train, steered his pickup down the street with its plow-thrown heaps of snow on either side and drew up in front of Loring Blade's house. He said, "Stay here, Tammie."

The collie settled back into the seat. Ted walked to the front door, knocked and was admitted by the game warden's attractive wife.

"Hello, Ted."

"Hello, Helen. Is Loring home?"

"Yes, he is. Come on in."

She escorted the boy into the living room, where, pajama-clad and with a pile of magazines beside him, Loring Blade lay on a davenport and sipped lazily from a cup of coffee. He looked up and grimaced.

"Whatever you want, I'm ag'in' it. I aim to stay here for the next nineteen years."

Ted grinned. "Have they been pushing you pretty hard, Loring?"

"I've been on the go forty-seven hours a day and, at a conservative estimate, I've walked nine million miles since deer season opened."

"Was it bad?"

"No worse than usual. Most of the hunters who came in were a pretty decent lot. But there always is—and I suppose always will be—the wise guy who thinks he can get away with anything. I caught one joker with nine deer."

"Wow!"

"He was fined," Loring said happily, "a hundred dollars for each one and suspension of hunting privileges for five years."

"Smoky Delbert give you any trouble?"

"You know better than that. Smoky can't walk a hundred yards from his house and won't be able to for a long while to come."

"I feel kind of sorry for the poor cuss," Ted murmured.

Loring Blade looked at him sharply. "You didn't come here to ask me about Smoky."

"Oh, yes I did. Who talked with him after he was shot?"

"I did, for one. Why?"

"What did he tell you?"

The warden shrugged. "You know that as well as I do. Smoky was walking up Coon Valley when your dad rose from behind Glory Rock and shot him."

"Can you tell me the exact story?"

Loring Blade looked puzzled. "What do you want to know, Ted?"

"Did Smoky hear any shooting?"

"Come to think of it, a half minute or so before he got to Glory Rock he heard two shots."

Ted's heart pounded excitedly. The two shots had been for Damon and Pythias. Smoky wouldn't have heard the one that got him. Ted continued his questioning.

"Did Smoky have any idea as to who was shooting at what?"

"He thought your dad was banging away at a varmint."

"Then he did know Dad had gone up Coon Valley ahead of him?"

"Why yes, he saw his boot track in the mud. But you knew that."

"Was Smoky afraid to go on?"

"Why should he have been afraid? Who expects to get shot?"

"Tell me exactly how he said he saw Dad shoot him."

"Smoky was near the three sycamores when he thought he saw something move. A second later, your dad rose from behind Glory Rock and shot him."

"Smoky's very sure of that? It was Dad that rose from behind the rock?"

"He told the same story at least a dozen times that I know of. It never varied."

"Dad didn't step out from beside the rock, or anything like that?"

"No, he rose from behind it."

"Loring, has it occurred to anybody, except me, that the back of Glory Rock is a sheer drop? Anyone who could rise from *behind* and shoot over it would have to be at least nine feet tall!"

"I—By gosh, you're right! I knew Al never bush-whacked him! He must have been standing in plain sight when Smoky came up the valley!"

"Smoky never saw who shot him."

"That's not the way he told it."

"Think!" Ted urged. "Think of the sort of man Smoky is. There was bad blood between him and Dad and had been for some time. You were there when Dad dressed him down for setting traps before fur was prime. There was, as you'll remember, talk of shooting even then. Smoky knew Dad had gone up Coon Valley ahead of him; probably he even *thinks* Dad shot him. He said he saw him because he wanted to be sure of revenge. Smoky would do that."

"Yes, he would. But it seems to me that you're doing a lot of guessing."

"Maybe. You brought Smoky's rifle out?"

"Yes."

"Had it been fired?"

"No, the bore was mirror slick."

"What would you do if you ran across Dad?"

"I'd bring him in, if I had to do it at gun point."

"Loring, I am going to do something that neither you nor I thought I would ever do. I am going to betray my dad into your hands."

"Then you do know where he is?"

"No, I haven't seen him since the night he left."

"Cut it out, Ted. We all know you've been taking him supplies and we've tried a dozen times to catch you at it. You do know where he is?"

"I don't, but Tammie does."

"So!" the warden exploded. "Callahan was right! He thought he saw Tammie leave your house that night with a pack on his back. But when you whistled him in, and he didn't have any pack, Callahan figured he'd made a mistake. How'd you manage that?"

"Dad was coming to see me and he saw Callahan, too. He met Tammie within yards of the house and took his pack off. Loring, if this is to be done, it's to be done my way."

"What's your way?"

"You do exactly as I say."

"I'm listening."

"Meet me at my house two hours after midnight. We'll cross the hills to Glory Rock; we won't be able to walk up Coon Valley. Then you're to hide behind or beside the rock, any place you can listen without being seen, until I say you can come out."

"Now look here, Ted, I like you and I like your dad, but I'm not sticking my neck out for anybody."

"I promise you won't, and I also promise that you will get a chance to bring Dad in."

The game warden pondered. Finally he agreed, "All right, Ted, it'll be your way. But if there are any tricks, somebody's going to get hurt."

"O.K. Meet me at two?"

"At two."

Ted drove happily to Nels Anderson's modest house and found his friend chopping wood. Nels greeted him with a broad smile.

"Hi, Ted! Come in an' have a cup of coffee?"

"I can't stay, Nels. How are you doing?"

"Goot, goot for now. Them deer hunters what stayed in your camp, they paid me nice an' I get another job soon."

"Crestwood's changing hands and the new owners are taking over next week. You might go ask them for your old job back."

"Yah! I do that."

"If you don't get one there," Ted said recklessly, "I myself will be able to offer you something that'll tide you over until you get another job. I'm going to build more camps."

"Py golly, Ted, I yoost don't know how to thank you!"

"Will you do me a favor?"

"For you I do anything!"

"Then listen carefully. At seven o'clock tomorrow morning I want you to go to Crestwood and see Thornton; he'll be out of bed. Tell him that there's something near those three sycamores in Coon Valley that he'd better take care of."

Nels scratched his head and let the instructions sink in. "At seven tomorrow mornin' I see Thornton. I tell him, 'There's somethin' near them three sycamores in Coon Valley you better take care of.'"

"That's it."

"Yah, Ted, I do it yoost that way."

Ted's alarm awakened him at a quarter past one. He reached down in the darkness to shut it off, and as he lay there he knew a cold foreboding. Until now, the day to put his plan into execution, he had been very sure he was right. But suppose he was wrong? Al would be in Loring Blade's hands, delivered there by his own son! Ted got up and almost grimly clothed himself. His father couldn't stay in the Mahela much longer anyhow, and Ted knew he was right. When he was dressed, he sat down and wrote a note:

Dad; Meet me at the three sycamores near Glory Rock and bring Tammie with you. It's very important. When you get there, hide in the beech scrub until you think it's time to come out. You'll know what it's about after you arrive.

Love,
Ted

He put the note in a pliofilm bag and was just on the point of handing it to Tammie when he hesitated. Timing was very important, and certainly Al Harkness was never going to show himself at the three sycamores if he saw Loring Blade anywhere near them. Ted put his doubts behind him. His note said plainly that something was stirring and his father wasn't going to show himself anyway until he knew what it was.

Ted opened the back door, gave the pliofilm bag to Tammie and said, "Take it to Al. Go find Al."

Tammie streaked away in the darkness and Ted turned back to the kitchen. He set coffee to perking, laid strips of bacon in a skillet and arranged half a dozen eggs nearby. At seven o'clock—and because he was who he was it would be exactly seven o'clock—Nels would go to Carl Thornton and deliver Ted's message. If Thornton was innocent, he'd probably think Nels had gone crazy.

But if Ted was right and he was guilty, Thornton would come up Coon Valley as soon as possible, to find and destroy any incriminating evidence that lay there. He would get the message at seven. Give him ten minutes to get ready, forty minutes—Crestwood was nearer than the Harkness house—to reach the mouth of Coon Valley and another twenty minutes to reach the sycamores. If he was not there by nine o'clock, he would not come.

There was a knock on the door and Ted opened it to admit Loring Blade.

"Hi!"

"Hi!" the warden grumped. "I've made all arrangements."

"For taking Dad to jail?"

"For having my head examined!" the warden snapped. "Who in his right mind would let himself in for this sort of thing?"

"In about three minutes," Ted promised, "I'll have hot coffee and bacon and eggs. You'll feel better then."

They ate, the warden maintaining a sour silence and Ted again filled with doubt. All he really knew was that Carl Thornton had killed Damon and wounded Pythias before the season opened. The wounded deer in the beech scrub could have been shot by anyone at all and—

No, they couldn't. Al and Smoky Delbert, as far as anyone knew, had been the only two people in Coon Valley that day. Al wouldn't shoot an illegal deer and Ted had Loring Blade's word for it that Smoky's rifle had never been fired. There had been a third party, and after Ted chased him out of the thickets on Burned Mountain, Pythias had cut through the beech scrub. Obviously, he knew the route and he wouldn't have remembered that, a couple of months ago, he had almost come to disaster on it. A deer's memory isn't that long.

When the two had finished eating, Ted asked, "Shall we go?"

"I'm ready. But if we're going to Glory Rock, why can't we drive to the mouth of Coon Valley?"

"You promised to do this my way."

There must be nothing to warn Carl Thornton away—if he came—and fresh tracks leading up Coon Valley might do just that.

Loring Blade said, "I suppose I might as well be a complete jackass as a partial one. We'll walk."

They went out into the cold night, while the north wind fanned their cheeks and trees sighed around them. A deer snorted and bounded away, and there came an angry hiss from a weasel that, having all but cornered the rabbit it was hunting, expressed its hatred for humans before it fled from them.

Ted asked, "You tired?"

"Lead on."

The wan, gray light of an overcast morning fell sadly on the wilderness when the pair came again to the three sycamores and Glory Rock. Ted's watch read seven-thirty. Carl Thornton had his message and, if he was guilty, even now he was on his way.

Loring Blade asked, "What now?"

"You'd better hide."

"Oh, for pete's sake—"

"Dad isn't going to walk into your open arms."

The warden said grimly, "All right. But if he doesn't come, there'll be one Harkness hide tacked to the old barn door and it won't be your dad's."

He slipped in behind Glory Rock and it was as though he'd never been. Ted was left alone with the keening breeze, the murmuring trees and the Mahela. He looked across at the beech scrub where Al was supposed to hide, where he might even now be hiding, and saw nothing. He shivered slightly—and knew that he was lost if Thornton didn't come.

Then he was sure that Thornton was not coming ... but when he looked at his watch it was only five minutes to eight. There simply hadn't been time.... Mentally Ted ticked another hour off. However, his watch said that only seven minutes had passed and he stopped looking at it. Forty-eight hours later, which his faulty watch said was only forty-eight minutes, he looked down the valley and saw motion.

Ted stood very still in front of Glory Rock, and a prayer went up from his heart.... When the approaching man was very near he said, "Hello, Thornton."

Carl Thornton stopped, and for a moment shocked surprise ruled his face. But it was only for a moment. He replied coolly, "Hello, Harkness."

"I see," Ted observed, "that you got my message?"

"Message?"

"The one Nels Anderson gave you at seven o'clock this morning. The one that sent you up here."

"What are you talking about?"

"This—and I found it within six feet of where you're standing. Now do you think it could be the bullet that went through Smoky Delbert?"

Ted took from his pocket the bullet he had dug out of Pythias and held it up between thumb and forefinger. Again, but only for an almost imperceptible part of a second, Carl Thornton's composure deserted him. Then, once more, he was the master of Crestwood and as such he had no association with ordinary residents of the Mahela. He said scornfully, "Give me that bullet."

"Well now, I just don't think I will. The Sheriff, the State Police—and maybe others—will sure be interested as all get out. You'll have some explaining to do, Thornton, and *can you explain?*"

"I want that bullet!"

"Why do you want it, Thornton?"

"Give me that bullet!"

"Not so fast. I might *sell* it to you. What's it worth for you to have it?"

Carl Thornton's laugh carried an audible sneer. "You slob! You hill monkey! You're even lower than I thought! Sell the evidence that would clear your own father for money!"

"Then you *did* shoot Smoky!"

"I want that bullet!"

"Come take it."

"I'll do just that."

Ted balanced on the balls of his feet, a grin of sheerest delight on his face. Thornton was bigger than he—and heavier—and he was moving like a trained boxer. But because his back was turned, he did not see Tammie burst from the scrub beech and race him down. Tammie went into the air. His flying body struck squarely and Carl Thornton took two involuntary forward steps. He fell face downwards and rolled over to shield his throat with his right arm. Tammie's bared fangs gleamed an inch away and Thornton's voice was muffled.

"Call him off! I'll give you a thousand dollars for the bullet!"

"No, thanks," Ted said evenly, "and I wouldn't move if I were you. Anyway, I wouldn't move too far or fast. Tammie might get nervous." He raised his voice. "All right, Loring, I think he'll tell you the rest now."

Ted scarcely noticed when Loring Blade came out from behind Glory Rock because his whole attention was centered on the man who emerged from the beech scrub. Al Harkness was lean as a wolf. His ragged hair had been hacked as short as possible with a hunting knife and his beard was bushy. His tattered clothing was held together with strips of deerskin, fox pelt, wildcat fur and fishing line. But his step was lithe and his eyes were clear and happy.

"Hi, Ted!"

"Hello, Dad!"

They came very close and looked at each other, saying with their eyes all that which, for the moment, they could find no words to express.... Then Al asked, "How you been, Son?"

"Fine! Had a swell season! As soon as you get squared around again—and used to living like a civilized man—we can start two more camps."

"Right glad to hear it. You'll have your lodge yet."

"Might at that. How have you been?"

"Not too bad." Al grinned his old grin. "Not too bad at all."

"Hey!" Loring Blade called plaintively. "Call your dog, will you? I've told him six times to get away so I can start taking this guy to jail and all he does is growl louder!"

Ted turned and snapped his fingers.

"Come on, Tammie. Come on up here and join your family."

JIM KJELGAARD

was born in New York City. Happily enough, he was still in the pre-school age when his father decided to move the family to the Pennsylvania mountains. There young Jim grew up among some of the best hunting and fishing in the United States. He says: "If I had pursued my scholastic duties as diligently as I did deer, trout, grouse, squirrels, etc., I might have had better report cards!"

Jim Kjelgaard has worked at various jobs—trapper, teamster, guide, surveyor, factory worker and laborer. When he was in the late twenties he decided to become a full-time writer. He has succeeded in his wish. He has published several hundred short stories and articles and quite a few books for young people.

His hobbies are hunting, fishing, dogs, and questing for new stories. He tells us: "Story hunts have led me from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Arctic Circle to Mexico City. Stories, like gold, are where you find them. You may discover one three thousand miles from home or, as in *The Spell of the White Sturgeon*, right on your own doorstep." And he adds: "I am married to a very beautiful girl and have a teen-age daughter. Both of them order me around in a shameful fashion, but I can still boss the dog! We live in Phoenix, Arizona."

[The end of *Double Challenge* by Jim Kjelgaard]