



The big scaly brute looked like fifteen feet of nightmare

ORDEAL BY OSWALD

By HAL K. WELLS

A corpse lashed to the back of an alligator and a beautiful girl in evening clothes give Bill Cory the shock of his life!

THE old codger's name was Eph Carson, and he was looking for a general handyman to work on a small mountain ranch out in the high country north of Los Angeles. I met him at the United States Employment Office in town.

Our little talk was going along just dandy when suddenly the old man dropped a blockbuster out of a clear sky.

"I hope you ain't got anything against lizards, son," he said casually.

I couldn't have straightened up in my chair any quicker than if he had given me the hotfoot with a flame-thrower. I was just back from a three-year hitch with the Marines in the South Pacific. Most of that time had been spent in places where the principal kinds of animal life are lizards and more lizards.

You find the scaly little varmints in your morning cup of Java. You find them nibbling your K-rations at noon. And after you have hit the sack for the night, you find them snugly parked between your shoulder blades.

"Mister," I said, "if it is a choice between a lizard and a slight case of double pneumonia, I will take the pneumonia."

The old man grinned.

"Take it easy, son," he cackled. "I was just funnin' you. The only lizard around the ranch is Oswald, and you won't have to do no takin' care of him. Oswald's my baby.

"I think you'll like the job, son," he continued. "Big Mike Murphy is a little peculiar, but Mike's a right good boss to work for. It's Mike that owns the place, you know. I just do the hiring."

There was a funny something away back in the old man's eyes that gave me the idea he was laughing at some very good but highly secret joke that nobody knew but him. I didn't get it.

I WAS still wondering about it when I tooted my jalopy over the mountain roads that night. One thing sure, I was going to get firsthand knowledge on the matter pretty soon. There was a USES paper in my pocket, stating that William Cory, ex-sergeant, U.S.M.C., was now in the employ of Michael Murphy, ranch proprietor.

Old Eph Carson had headed back to the ranch that afternoon, but I didn't start till evening. It was ten o'clock when I got to the foothills. Two hours later, I was still looking for the big cottonwood tree that Eph had said marked the side road through a canyon to the ranch.

The gasoline gauge was hovering just over the zero mark when I finally spotted the big cottonwood looming ghostly white

in the brilliant light of a nearly full moon. I left the main highway and turned into a narrow hard-surfaced road that led back through a high-walled canyon.

About a hundred yards from the intersection I came to a station wagon parked beside the road. I slowed down with the idea of asking if I were on the right trail. There wasn't a sign of anybody around, so I drove on.

The road climbed for another hundred yards, then started downgrade toward the canyon floor. By that time, the needle of my gas gauge was as low as it could get and still stay on the dash. I tried to conserve what little fuel I had left by shutting off the engine and coasting. The car dropped on down the winding road as quietly as a ghost tiptoeing across a feather bed.

It was the utter silence of my approach that caught the weird cavalcade completely by surprise. The car glided around a sharp curve in the road, and there they were!

They were in the middle of the narrow roadway, not over twenty feet ahead of the car. The glare of the headlights spotlighted them with a brilliance that brought out every fantastic and incredible detail.

Named in the order in which they registered in my startled brain, there was a large gun, a pretty girl, a very large alligator and a corpse.

The gun was one of those colossal six-shooters with which our grandpappies used to knock over buffaloes. It would have looked big enough in the hairy paw of Gargantua. In the hand of the girl who toted it, it loomed like a siege howitzer.

The girl was not taller than five-feet-one, but she was sixty-one inches of as gorgeous pulchritude as I have ever gazed upon. Her dark hair was set in a rippling coiffure that looked as if it had been varnished. Her high-heeled slippers

sparkled with rhinestones. The part between the coiffure and the slippers was occupied by about equal parts of shimmering white satin evening gown and creamily tanned skin.

The sight of a beautiful damsel in formal evening togs roaming this isolated mountain district at midnight with a frontier model six-gun would have been disconcerting enough, but when I looked at her companion I completely forgot the girl.

It wasn't enough that the brute happened to be about fifteen feet of live alligator. It wasn't enough that the bench-legged monster was toddling docilely along beside the girl like a pet dog. No, there had to be a final and utterly insane detail in the fact that the brute was carrying, lashed by ropes to its broad scaly back the body of a man.

The man's face was frozen in a grimace of contorted agony, but I recognized it. The man was old Eph Carson. I recognized something else, too. I've seen it too many times in foxholes and on jungle trails ever to be mistaken about it, even in the brief flash of headlights on a canyon road. Eph Carson was dead.

The jalopy shuddered to a back-breaking stop as I jammed on the foot brake and the emergency. For what seemed a full minute, and probably was about five seconds, stark surprise kept everybody as rigidly motionless as some weird group carved out of ice.

Then everything started happening at once. The 'gator's ugly snout opened to show a vast expanse of tooth-lined red mouth that looked only one size smaller than the Grand Canyon. It emitted a grunting roar that boomed like distant thunder. The girl's gunhand raised, and there wasn't anything distant about the thunder that came from her over-sized

piece of ordnance. One of my headlights went out in a crash of shattered glass.

I went over the side of the car without bothering to open the door. While I was still in the air, I heard the crash of another shot, and the remaining headlight vanished. Two more shots whistled over my head as I landed in the ditch. I couldn't have rammed my nose any deeper into the dirt had a couple of Zekes been strafing the canyon.

There was a short period of silence. Then I finally heard what sounded like the girl and her scaly little pal beating a retreat. I lifted my head and took a cautious look-see. The road stretched clear and deserted in the bright moonlight.

There was the acrid smell of burnt powder in the air and a musky odor that was singularly disagreeable. I'd loafed around Florida some before the war, so I recognized that scent. It was the battle perfume of a bull alligator.

AS I started to climb up out of my improvised foxhole, a rock about the size of a coconut gave way beneath my weight, and went sliding down into the ditch with a noise that sounded like a young avalanche.

Orange-red flame spurted twice from the brush about thirty yards away. The big alligator's booming roar blended weirdly with the six-gun's thunder and the banshee wail of ricocheting slugs as I nose-dived back into the nice cozy shelter of the ditch.

I heard sounds retreating through the brush again. I waited until they had faded out completely. Then I picked up a rock and sent it bouncing along the road. The noise didn't bring any gunfire this time. I cautiously got back up on the road and took a look around.

There was the sound of a stream somewhere to the right. To the left there was a flat, brush-covered space about a

hundred yards across, and on the far side, the yellow glow of a lighted window. It was across that brush-covered meadow that the gal and the 'gator had retreated.

I promptly followed them. The brush was tough, thorny stuff growing nearly shoulder-high. But there were open lanes that made it possible to travel a fairly direct course toward the distant light.

I was halfway there when I rounded a heavy brush clump and came to a halt so suddenly that I nearly pitched on my nose.

One step more and my foot would have come down squarely on Eph Carson's dead face.

The ropes that had bound Eph to the alligator's back were in loose coils around him. It looked as if the flight through the brush had scraped the old man's body off the big 'gator. The brute and the girl had gone on, leaving the corpse where it had fallen.

I knelt beside the body for a quick examination.

Eph had been shot in the back. There was no trace of an exit wound, which meant that the bullet must still be somewhere inside the body.

That was all that I had a chance to notice before a curt command came from close behind me.

"Take it easy, mister. You're covered."

I got slowly to my feet and turned around.

The girl was standing about eight feet away, with the muzzle of the big six-gun pointed at my midsection. There was about a yard of alligator snout sticking out from behind a bush beside her. The two of them had apparently been waiting for me to come along.

I kept my eyes on the gun and started to take a slow, easy step forward.

"Oswald!" the girl called.

The remaining four yards of bench-legged scaliness emerged from behind the

bush and opened its jaws till they yawned like an LST about to disgorge a load of tanks. I stepped hastily backward. The Marine Corps had taught me various ways to disarm gun-toting adversaries, but had never taught me any practicable method of defanging a fifteen-foot bull alligator.

The girl pointed toward Eph's body.

"Pick him up, mister," she ordered. "We're going to the house."

There didn't seem to be anything else to do. I picked Eph's body up and started off through the brush. The girl and the 'gator came along behind me, so close that I could almost feel the brute's hot breath on my heels.

So Oswald was Eph's "lizard," I remembered grimly. The old boy had certainly had a genius for understatement. Anybody who would call that thing a lizard would probably call a full-grown boa constrictor a caterpillar.

We came out of the brush, crossed a truck garden and passed stables and outbuildings. Then we came to a low wooden shed. The musky aroma told me that it was Oswald's happy home, even before the girl ordered him into it and bolted the door behind him.

The main house was a one-story Spanish-type affair. We passed through the back door into a large, well-lighted kitchen and then went on into a hall bedroom. The girl ordered me to put Eph's body on the bed.

Then she herded me back into the kitchen.

"All right, mister," she said coldly, "before I lock you up and go for the sheriff, fork over that money."

"What money?" I asked.

"The money you took from Eph, of course. I don't know how you found out that he habitually packed his life's savings around on his person, but you stumbled onto it somehow. That was the reason you

came sneaking around here tonight and killed him.”

I took a long breath.

“Listen, lady,” I said carefully, “I didn’t kill Eph Carson. The first and only time I ever saw the old man was in Los Angeles today, when he hired me to work on the ranch here. I suppose this is the ranch of Big Mike Murphy?”

She nodded.

“It is. And you may be the new hand Eph went into Los Angeles to hire. But that doesn’t prove you didn’t kill him tonight. You could easily have found out he was carrying a roll when you talked with him in L.A. Come on mister, empty those pockets, and muy pronto.”

WITH a shrug of my shoulders, I unloaded my pockets on the top of the kitchen table. The girl fumbled my wallet open with her free hand.

She looked disappointed when she found only four dollars in it. Then she fished some ribbons out of one of the compartments. There was a Purple Heart, a Pacific Area Ribbon with some bronze and silver battle stars on it, and a couple of others that I’d just as soon not talk about.

She studied them for a minute, then glanced at the papers that were with them.

Her face lost its taut hardness. She put the gun down on the table.

“I’m afraid I owe you an apology, Mr. Cory,” she said contritely. “A man with these credentials is not likely to be a thief and a murderer. The job here is still open if you want it. I’m Mike Murphy.”

“Not ‘Big Mike’ Murphy?”

“The Big Mike was just one of Eph’s jokes. My name is Michael, though. My dad picked that name for the son he was expecting, and Dad wasn’t the sort of person to change his mind just because the boy happened to be a girl.”

I started putting my stuff back in my

pockets.

“Just what happened here tonight, anyway?” I asked. “Were you here when Eph was killed?”

She shook her head.

“There was no one here with Eph at the time, except the killer, of course. Our only help consists of a Mexican and his wife. They went down the valley to visit relatives overnight. I spent the evening at a party at the Everly ranch, about ten miles east of here on the main road.”

“Ranch parties must be formal around here,” I commented, glancing at her fancy get-up.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Madge Everly likes to put on the dog, even for a hen party like tonight. If it hadn’t been for these glad rags, I’d have fixed the tire myself when I had a flat just after turning into the ranch road. As it was, I left the station wagon there and came on in, intending to send Eph back to take care of it. But when I got here, I found that Eph was dead.”

“Where did you find him?”

“In a small tool shed out back. His body was on the floor. Somebody had started to pile gasoline-soaked rags around him. My arrival apparently scared the murderer away before he could finish the job.”

“Trying to hide the murder by making it look like Eph lost his life in the fire when the shed burned,” I said.

“That’s the way I figured it,” Mike agreed. “I tried to phone for help, but the phone was dead. That left me really on a spot. I had Dad’s old six-gun, but I didn’t want to spend the night standing guard over Eph’s body. And I didn’t dare leave him while I went for help, because the killer might come back and finish the job of burning him. The only thing I could think of was to take Eph’s body with me to the station wagon. I couldn’t lift it up on a

horse, but I managed to get it on Oswald's back."

"Smart idea, at that," I said. "But what is that scaled monstrosity doing around here, anyway?"

"He was Eph's pet. Eph used to work on an alligator farm down around San Gabriel. He wouldn't come to work for me until I agreed to let Oswald come with him. Oswald looks ferocious, but he's really as gentle as a kitten."

"Maybe so," I said, "but he certainly didn't purr like any kitten when I ran into you down there on the road, and you started target practice on my headlights."

"I'm sorry about that shooting business," Mike said, "but you startled me. I thought you were the killer coming back to dispose of Eph's body."

"That's just what he was doin', Miss Mike." It was a man's voice. It came from the back door. As Mike and I turned, the speaker stepped into the kitchen. He was a tall, loose-jointed specimen, wearing a battered, felt hat and dirty Levi's. He had a narrow, small-eyed face that would have looked good on a gopher.

"Who is this character?" I asked.

"Pete Ruhl," Mike answered. "He has a little place up the canyon. What did you mean by that crack you just made, Pete?"

"Just what I said, Miss Mike," Pete answered doggedly. "This fellah didn't just get here, like he claims. He was here 'bout an hour ago. I was goin' by and I saw him when he come. A little later I heard a shot, but I didn't think nothin' of it. Then I got to figurin' maybe I'd better see. No doubt about it, Miss Mike. He's the fellah that plugged poor old Eph in the back and took his roll."

MIKE snatched the six-gun from the table. I looked into its yawning muzzle again.

"Could be," she said, half to herself.

"The money might be hidden in your car. And those ribbons and things of yours might be phony."

"Listen, Mike," I said wearily, "let's not go through that artillery routine again. You're too pretty a girl to be waving a gun around all the time. Or you would be pretty if it weren't for that smudge of dirt on the end of your very cute nose."

There was a looking glass on the kitchen wall opposite us. Mike promptly did what any woman would have done. I grabbed the gun from her hand and tossed it on the table.

I did it as gently as I could, but I couldn't avoid twisting her fingers a little. Mike gave a sharp little gasp of outraged pain, then pivoted and threw a left hook at my chin that would have done credit to a ranking featherweight. I dodged it and grabbed her wrists.

There was a click-click from behind me, then an exclamation of disgust. I turned my head.

"That six-gun is empty, Pete," I said.

"Empty?" Mike gasped. "How did you know?"

"Because you shot at me six times, which is all the shells that cannon will hold. You certainly didn't have any extra ammo with you, because you couldn't pack a .22 cartridge in that evening gown without the bump showing. And you didn't have any chance to reload after we got to the house."

Pete scowled and tossed the empty weapon back on the table. I grinned at him.

"You don't think I'd have been sap enough to put a loaded gun in your reach, do you, gopher puss?" I asked.

Mike's eyes were puzzled beneath the finely arched line of her brows.

"I don't get this," she said. "You knew that gun was empty, yet you came meekly along when I ordered you to carry Eph's

body to the house.”

“Maybe the gun was unloaded,” I said, “but Oswald wasn’t. Anyway, I wanted to see what it was all about.”

“And then you deliberately put the gun in Pete’s reach. Why?”

“Just a hunch. I thought he might grab it and try to plug me. I was doing a little wrestling with you, and he might have made out a plausible story of shooting to save your life. With me dead, his yarn about Eph’s murder would stand up without argument.”

“But why would he want to frame you for Eph’s murder?”

“Because Pete is the man who did murder Eph,” I answered. “He as good as admitted it. in the course of his conversation a few minutes ago.”

“What do you mean?” Pete exploded. “I did no such thing.”

“You said that I was the one who plugged poor old Eph in the back and took his roll,” I answered. “How did you know Eph was shot in the back?”

Pete hesitated.

“I heard one of you folks say it.”

“You did not,” I said flatly. “Neither of us ever mentioned it.”

“That’s right,” Mike seconded me. “We never said a word about it at any time.”

Pete licked his lips nervously.

“I was just guessin’ when I said that.”

“You’re cock-eyed,” I retorted. “You knew Eph was shot in the back because you shot him. You took his money, then started to burn the body to hide the fact that he had been murdered, but Mike came along and scared you away. You’ve been hanging around ever since, trying to find out what was going on. You heard enough while you were bending an ear outside that door, to give you the bright idea that you could hang the killing on me. So you came barging in and spoke your little piece.”

Pete’s face set stubbornly.

“You can’t prove any of what you’re sayin’.”

“Maybe we can,” I answered. “The bullet that killed Eph is still in his body. It will be an easy matter to see if you own the gun that fired it.”

“I ain’t got no gun.”

Mike’s brows arched ceilingward.

“Since when?” she demanded. “You’ve been packing an ivory-handled .38 around this canyon ever since I’ve known you.”

“I lost that a coupla days ago back in the hills,” Pete said defiantly.

“You don’t expect anyone to believe that, do you?” Mike turned to me. “It looks as if I’m fated to spend the night apologizing to you. There’s no longer any doubt about who killed Eph, of course. It was this gopher-faced baboon. He probably has Eph’s roll in his pocket right now.”

“No, he wouldn’t be quite that dumb,” I said. “I imagine he hid the roll and the gun out somewhere around the place.”

“You can’t prove it,” Pete said sullenly. “You can’t prove nothin’.”

I STUDIED Pete’s face in silence for a long minute. You don’t get sergeant’s stripes in the gyrenes without picking up some savvy about human nature. Pete wasn’t a particularly hard book to read. He was both ignorant and dumb in a good many ways, but he had enough animal cunning and sheer stubbornness to make him a plenty tough nut to crack. I doubted if you could beat the truth out of him with an axe handle. There was a chance, however, that it could be scared out of him.

“I don’t know, Pete,” I said slowly. “You might be able to lie your way out of it if we hauled you into court on a murder rap. I don’t think I’ll take that chance. I’m

going to put you on trial right out here tonight. And the judge, jury and maybe executioner is going to be Oswald."

Pete's eyes went jittery. I pressed my advantage.

"That big alligator was Eph's pet and pal for years," I said. "He loved the old man like a dog loves its master. Alligators are like dogs and other animals in their strange sixth sense about certain things. Maybe Oswald didn't actually see the man while he was killing Eph, but I'll bet my last two-bits that Oswald's instinct will tell him who the murderer was. We'll put you out there in the shed with him and see what happens."

As I took a step toward Pete, he started backing away. I had him cut off from the back door, so he retreated toward a corner of the kitchen. His narrow face was a dirty gray.

"You ain't gonna put me in with that brute," he protested vehemently.

He reached the corner and made a sudden jump for a cupboard. Before I could get to him, he opened a drawer and grabbed out a butcher knife with a twelve-inch blade. That was a mistake. Situations of that kind have been covered very early in the practical education of all little boys in the Marine Corps.

I made a left-handed feint at the knife. Pete's eyes followed my hand. He didn't notice my right foot until it cracked viciously into his shin. He yowled in agony, and his knife-hand dropped.

My right hook to his jaw was a fraction of an inch off the button, but his head slammed back into the wall hard enough to finish the job. He was out colder than an Aleutian icicle when he hit the floor.

I knelt beside him to search his pockets, but I came up empty.

"What if he hasn't got the money on him?" Mike asked. "We've got plenty of

other proof that he killed Eph."

"We haven't got a doggoned thing that would stand up in court," I said flatly. "The only real proof would be to find Pete's gun and to prove that it fired the bullet that killed Eph."

"But how can we find it?" Mike asked hopelessly. "He could have hidden it anywhere within a radius of a square mile."

"We'll make Pete tell us where it is," I answered. "Or rather, Oswald will make him."

She shook her head.

"You can't do anything with that big, scaly clown. If you put Pete in the shed with him, Oswald will only open one eye for a minute, then calmly go back to sleep again."

"Maybe you overlook some of Oswald's possibilities," I said. "I've got an idea."

Some of the skepticism faded from her eyes as I told her about it.

"It might work at that," she said thoughtfully.

After tying Pete hand-and-foot, Mike and I went out to set the stage for our little experiment.

Pete was still unconscious of the world when I returned to the kitchen.

I slung him over my shoulder, and toted him out to Oswald's cozy little nest. Over in the far corner of the long, low shed, there was a big spike driven into the wall about two feet above the floor. I sat Pete on the floor in the, corner with his legs sticking straight out in front of him, lashed his bonds to the spike so that he couldn't move, and started massaging the base of his skull.

He grunted feebly, shuddered, then slowly opened his eyes. He took a short look around him, a longer smell, and panic flooded his close-set eyes.

Mike had Oswald outside, but Pete

didn't need to see the 'gator to know where he was sitting. The smell of musk in the shed was so strong you could have hung your hat on it. Pete's face shone wet and sticky with sweat in the light of the single lantern that was hung high up on one of the walls.

"This is it, Pete," I said. "The old-time boys used to call it trial by ordeal. Oswald will be your ordeal. If you're innocent, you haven't got anything to fear. They tell me that Oswald ordinarily wouldn't hurt a fly. But if you're guilty, if you are the rat who shot old Eph in the back, then heaven help you. That big 'gator is going to come swarming all over you. When he gets through, there won't be any need for court action, because there won't be any pieces left big enough to try."

PETE set his lips stubbornly. He remained silent as I walked across the shed to where Mike was waiting just outside the door. The door was one of those two-section things, with the top half nailed permanently open. Oswald's monstrous body was standing beside Mike, nuzzling his ugly snout against her like a big pet dog.

"Okay, Mike," I said, "put him inside."

Mike opened the door. Oswald hesitated for a moment, then slowly slithered into the shed. Mike closed the half door behind him. We stood with our elbows on top of it and waited.

Oswald gave Pete's bound body a brief and utterly unconcerned glance, then turned away and yawned. For a minute I was afraid the whole thing was going to prove a bust. Then Oswald took another look at Pete, and this time he kept on looking.

Sweat streamed down Pete's face as he stared into Oswald's extremely unattractive puss.

But he managed to choke his panic

back for the moment.

"You—you can't bluff me," he chattered.

"We're not bluffing," I said grimly. "See if you can bluff Oswald."

The big alligator took a slow, tentative step toward Pete, then another one. I felt the hairs raise on the back of my neck. In the dim yellow light of the lantern, the big scaly brute looked like fifteen feet of nightmare straight from some particularly gruesome Hades. I could imagine how he must look to Pete, sitting there on the floor helplessly watching the monstrous body come slithering toward him.

Pete's nerve started to break.

"You can't do this to me!" he choked huskily. "It's murder!"

"Look who's talking about murder," I said. "We'll give you just one more chance, Pete. Tell us where you hid the gun with which you killed Eph, and we'll call Oswald off."

Pete started to answer, then stubbornly pressed his quivering lips together again. Oswald swung his long tail from side to side, hitched his enormous body ponderously along on his wide-spread legs, and headed for Pete in a straight and inexorable line.

"Better not wait too long, Pete," I warned him. "If he once gets hold of you, I doubt if even Mike can call him off."

Oswald's snout reached Pete's outstretched feet. The 'gator hesitated for a brief second. Then his incredible mouth opened to show long rows of white-fanged death, and he went scrambling squarely into Pete's lap.

Pete broke then.

"I'll tell you!" he screamed. "Get him off me! I shot Eph. I hid the gun and the money in the irrigation ditch at the far corner of the alfalfa patch."

"Know where that is, Mike?" I asked.

She nodded. I flung the door open, and

we raced for the corner where Pete's body was now almost completely hidden under the squirming alligator.

We were still six feet away when Pete gave a final choking scream and slumped in a dead faint. Oswald's open jaws reached at an object above Pete's head. They snapped together again with the click of a giant steel trap.

Then Oswald squirmed down off Pete's body with something firmly clamped in his mouth.

I picked Pete up and we headed for the door. There wasn't any doubt in either of our minds about whether he had told the truth or not.

He had been too mortally scared even to think of lying.

His confession by itself wasn't worth the wind that uttered it under the circumstances, but finding the gun and Eph's money would give us all the

evidence needed in any court in the country. All we had to do now was go and get them.

I turned at the door and waved a hand at Oswald.

"Nice going, pal," I said gratefully. "You were perfect."

Oswald looked up lazily, then resumed his chewing upon the five-pound dressed chicken that we had taken from the kitchen refrigerator and hung up on the shed wall just above Pete's head.

Any alligator loves a chicken dinner. Oswald was no exception. He had headed for Pete and had climbed up over him for the excellent reason that that was the only possible route to get to the fowl.

It was probably the first time in the history of crime that a murderer was trapped by a combination of five pounds of dead chicken and fifteen feet of live alligator.