



“TAKE ‘IM ALIVE”

By WALTER C. SCOTT

An Ex-Dick Tries a Double-Cross

“PRIVATE Detective” Jake Kilgore raised his heavy, brooding face and scowled as the rain-soaked figure of the little crook slithered into his dingy office.

“I told you to keep out of here, Slats,” growled Kilgore, his resentful voice filling the room. “No use to come whining around me with your grief.”

But “Slats” Kehoe came on, trailing a dark stream of water across the floor from his shiny, wet garments.

Kilgore glared in contemptuous irritation at the pinched face of the treacherous crook smirking at him across the desk, shoe-button eyes aglow.

“Lissen, Jake—I got a fat deal for you,” protested Slats, his twisted mouth working excitedly. The man’s voice was reedy, tense. “It’s a pipe, Jake—an’ lousy with sugar.”

Kilgore stirred his bulk like a hungry shark. His

harsh, gray face lifted higher, and into his bulging eyes there came a venal glitter as they probed the mean soul of the shriveled parasite fawning at him.

Slats fidgeted uneasily; a violent cough racked him. His thin lips were bright red and curled back, showing buck teeth.

The breathless rush of the rain on the window was the only other sound in the office.

KILGORE was in the temper of a wounded bull. Since he had been summarily dismissed from the detective bureau by the Commissioner for grafting, ill luck had trailed him like a pestilence.

Often, of late, thoughts tintured with homicide rolled like scarlet mist through his brain. An inner whisper, sibilant and urgent, kept mocking his inertia. The devil had posted a beguiling shadow at his elbow. “Private Detective” Jake Kilgore was

ripe for any dark and desperate venture.

But he knew Slats Kehoe was treacherous. To hide a surge of suspicion Kilgore glowered at the rain-splashed window, and grudgingly waved a broad hand.

“Spill it, Slats, but no funny angles or I’ll wring your dirty neck.”

The pinched face of the thin little crook flamed evilly.

“This here cashier, Cyrus Rathbone,” breathed Slats, darting red tongue flicking his red lips nervously, “who ducked outta th’ Citizens National Bank with twenty grand in currency is our bacon. I got it straight where th’ mug’s hidin’ out with th’ dough.”

Kilgore snorted in disgust.

“You pinheaded little jackass! Headquarters would run me ragged if I messed in that case to chisel in on th’ reward. Anyhow I know this Cy Rathbone—wise guy. He’s just about on his way to South America by now.” Kilgore’s cold eyes mocked Slats with sardonic skepticism and mounting anger.

“Don’t be a sucker,” squeaked Slats indignantly. “Didn’t I tell you I know where he’s hidin’ at? What in hell do you want, anyway? Monk Gazzo an’ Spider Bailey tailed Rathbone when he lammed. They put on th’ stickup, but Cyrus was too flip with a rod. He eased a coupla slugs into Monk an’ that scared th’ punks off. They laid up with a pal of mine an’ he tipped me off. Honest, Jake, th’ rumble ain’t an hour old. That’s how I got th’ lowdown on Rathbone an’ found out where he’s headin’ for.”

“What in billy-hell’s all this to me?” exploded the intolerant Kilgore. The cuspidor rang as he exasperatedly fed it a dead cigar butt. “You trying to fix me?” he blazed. “Tangle me up in a mess so the department’ll climb my back?”

“Nuts!” smirked Slats scornfully. “You won’t lissen. Rathbone’s outta their jurisdiction—away down th’ river. You nail Rathbone an’ lift th’ twenty G’s off him. Ain’t cha hep? Th’ hell with th’ reward.”

THE drowsing shark in Kilgore whipped furiously into life. He slapped his massive thigh with a resounding thwack.

“Bully boy, Slats! Where’s Rathbone?”

A violent coughing spell, brought on by the sudden excitement, shook Slats’ frail body. He

came out of the spasm weak and gasping. Wiping his red lips with a white handkerchief, he tried to hide the crimson stains.

Kilgore had bounded to his side like a worried uncle.

“Take ‘im alive, Jake. Take Rathbone alive.” Slats’ breath was coming laboredly; the lower rims of his eyelids turned outward, showing two half circles of red membrane. “And keep me out of it, Jake.” His voice rose to a whine. “Me—I can’t take any chances on gettin’ thrown in th’ pen with what ails my lungs. A damp cell would plant me under the daisies,” he panted. “When I get my share of this dough, me for Arizona.”

“Take ‘im alive, yeah,” gloated Kilgore. “But dead or alive I’ll take ‘im.”

All during the spasm of coughing Kilgore hovered around Slats with oily solicitude. What if the nasty little runt croaked before he came through? A benignant concern, like a smoke-screen, veiled the rapacious greed in Kilgore’s lobster-like eyes. With a practiced hand he yanked a secret drawer of his desk open and withdrew a flask.

“Here, Slats, my boy”—and Kilgore, enlarging on the exhibition of brotherly unction, poured four fingers of whiskey into a glass. “Throw this into you. Just what you need. Wish I’d have known it before. Say,” with a lavish gesture, “put the bottle in your pocket. It’s good stuff. Big Dan Gaffney from the Bureau of Criminal Identification gave it to me. I keep in touch—slip him a tip once in a while—see.”

“Gee, Jake!” blurted Slats in embarrassed amazement. “You mean it? That’s swell. Now I’ll give you th’ full directions in writing. Th’ walls might have ears. Rathbone was beatin’ it away in an old twenty-four model flivver. I’d go after him myself only my nerve’s shot an’ I’m ‘under th’ gun,’ an’ gotta lay low from th’ bulls. They want me for that Fountain Inn stick-up. Here you are, Jake—here’s where Rathbone is,” and Slats handed Kilgore a card on which he had penciled the directions.

KILGORE all but snatched the card from him. His big cheeks puffed out gloatingly.

“Jake, when you get your hooks on that twenty G’s,” rasped Slats, his shoe-button eyes burning, “keep it in mind that yours truly gets an even fifty-fifty cut—ten grand. This lunger’s Arizona bound.”

“Well, I should say so, Slats,” boomed Kilgore, and he reassuringly patted the crook’s thin shoulder, beaming on him with a lupine grin. “Where’ll I find you?”

Slats hesitated, wavered, then flung caution to the winds.

“At th’ Sailors’ Roost. It’s a classy hideout, even if th’ bedbugs are big as Java beans.”

Kilgore put on the grand air.

“Leave it to me, Slats. Go home and rest—stay inside. Take good care of yourself—and remember I’ll take good care of you.”

“I’m sure you will,” leered Slats, turning toward the door.

“Here, old boy—go out the back way—it’s safer.”

Alone, Kilgore reread the card:

Michael Whorl, taxidermist—an’ old stir-bum, known to th’ mob as Chuck “Hardhead” Yandi. Ask at Gant’s Landing on the river for Whorl’s farm.

“This old ex-con must be a relative of Rathbone’s,” mused Kilgore.

“Well, that pretty pair’s going to have a caller—a first-class collector.”

Kilgore left his office, went downstairs to a telephone pay-station. A moment and he had the central police station on the wire. “Talk to Dan Gaffney.” A moment’s wait. “That you, Dan? This is Jake. Here’s an earful—and, Dan, keep my name out of it. Slats Kehoe wanted in the Fountain Inn robbery can be found at the Sailors’ Roost. Check? Okay, Dan. Eh? Yeah, I could use another batch of that spring medicine.” He hung up.

“That saves me ten grand,” he grinned to himself, “and it’ll keep Slats out of the wet.”

PPRIVATE Detective Kilgore, snug in a slicker, and unmindful of the driving rain, sat hunched at the wheel of his rented powerboat, as he raced down the swollen river in greedy pursuit of the absconding bank cashier.

The storm god droned and hissed over the inundated lowlands where the rocky shoulders of the pine-clad hills splay out, and swooped over the boiling flood to taunt and thwart the fever-eyed man hunter.

Gray ghosts loomed suddenly in the slanting rain-lines, were caught up and wound around Kilgore in fierce tumult by the blaring gusts of wind. A soggy trip.

He ran in, tied up at Gant’s Landing and entered the store, where he bought a supply of gasoline.

“How far is it to Michael Whorl’s place?” he asked.

Gant looked at him curiously.

“A good twelve miles by th’ river. Figurin’ on stoppin’ there?”

“I got a little business with Whorl. Odd duck they tell me.” Kilgore sat down to smoke and dry out.

“You can say that again. There’s funny talk about that fellow. Lives alone on his small farm—shoots and stuffs eagles. Ships th’ mounted specimens to a shopkeeper in Saint Looney. Th’ general idea is that he’s bad medicine. Him an’ me don’t hitch. A bullet-headed old crab.”

Kilgore nodded, and hurried to his powerboat.

By now the rain had stopped and Kilgore swung away from Gant’s Landing, his motor roaring wide-open. The river valley was dotted with flocks of hungry-wheeling birds, flying low above the flood waters. Scavengers of the air.

KILGORE lumbered through the gate and across Whorl’s yard to where he saw a stocky, heavy-jawed man cleaning the carcass of an eagle.

“You Michael Whorl?” Kilgore asked.

“That’s me,” answered the man, out of the corner of his mouth; he looked his caller over with an appraising and somewhat suspicious eye, for “copper” was written on Kilgore in block type.

“I understand you hunt these big birds and mount ‘em, Whorl,” Kilgore began disarmingly.

Whorl relaxed.

“Yeah, I’ve mounted hundreds of ‘em. I’d like to sell you a nice specimen. I got some beauts.” He cocked an eye skyward. “There’s th’ chieftan of ‘em all.”

Kilgore saw a great eagle soaring aloft in wide interweaving circles.

“I’m goin’ to bag him one of these days,” promised Whorl. “I’ve got a whole family of his on pedestals. Missed more shots at that old lord than any bird I ever drew a bead on.”

The eagle began to plane downward. He bucked the uprushing air currents joyously as he sailed for a perch on a limb above the river, near where Kilgore had moored his powerboat. As the eagle lighted, the limb swayed up and down from the bird’s weight, with a pleasing rhythm.

“I saw that fellow when I turned in to your

landing,” said Kilgore. “Sure is a whopper.”

“There he is—home again,” grinned Whorl. “Many a shot I missed at him from here ‘count of th’ limb dancing up an’ down that way.”

The great bird perched there breasting the airy torrent, his fierce eye sweeping the rolling expanse of water, scornful of the scrutiny of the two men.

“But I’m not interested in birds,” said Kilgore. “I’m looking for a man—friend of mine,” he added craftily. His sharp eye didn’t miss the sudden tension in Whorl’s bulldog face.

“A friend of mine by the name of Cyrus Rathbone,” continued Kilgore, in an off-handed manner. “Cy told me to meet him here at your place.”

By now Whorl’s expression was blank as porcelain.

“Haven’t seen any such party. Never heard of th’ mug.”

Kilgore nodded and frowned. Here was a complication.

“Then I’ll have to send a telegram to his folks. Maybe they’ve heard from him and can let me know where I can find him. Where’s the nearest telegraph station?”

“Fayette. It’s ten miles back from th’ river.” Whorl’s voice was hard, but level and calm. Kilgore was suspicious.

“Got a car? I’d like to borrow it.”

“I got one. But you couldn’t get through. High water.”

“That your car in the shed?” Kilgore’s trained eyes had been busy. He walked over to the machine and his pulse jumped. “Flivver, eh?” It was a twenty-four model! Kilgore’s eyes moved over an old mower, then widened with interest. One wheel was missing. It startled him. A new and sinister angle presented itself.

Kilgore’s mind worked fast. Whorl was lying. Rathbone’s car and the missing wheel pointed to foul play. Kilgore subdued his growing excitement. He scented robbery and murder.

“Say, Whorl, if Rathbone shows up tell him to wait for me.” Kilgore knew he was on a hot trail, but he intended to conceal his investigations from Whorl. “I’ll be back,” he said in a casual tone. “I’ll have to go to Hollendale in my powerboat to send the wire.”

KILGORE started his motor and gazed over the sullen flood and on to the distant marshland.

The busy flocks of carrion birds intrigued him. He decided to investigate each milling huddle of feathered scavengers and learn what deleterious flood-drift caused their voracious activity.

Kilgore held the wheel of his powerboat with a grim hand, as he scouted eager and tense through the water trails of the inundated areas. He stuck to the marshes where the flood waters often floated strange cargoes.

He had frightened flock after flock of scolding crows away from drifting carcasses. In an expansive backwash, Kilgore came upon a milling cluster of carrion birds near an upthrusting sand-spit.

He sent his boat in close, scattering the crows, who reluctantly took to the air, voicing their anger in a harsh and clamorous cacophony.

Above the water an object the size of a man’s arm caught his startled eye. The hair on the back of his neck prickled. Using a stick he had picked up Kilgore poked at the object, and a human arm came into view. A moment later a man’s foot, bare and muddy floated slowly to the surface, the ghastly center of a ring of poisonous-looking bubbles.

Smothering his revulsion Kilgore got the body into the boat, rinsed the mud and filth from the features, and thereby justified his zeal, for the dead face of Cyrus Rathbone confronted him.

A wire trailed from the waist into the water. Kilgore tugged at it, pulling strongly, and presently fished a mower-wheel from the flood.

Further examination revealed a jagged bullet hole in the back of the dead cashier’s head. The hands had been bound with wire, a remnant still clung to one wrist.

Pools of mist hung in the gullies and it had started to rain again when Kilgore’s motor roared into life and he headed for Whorl’s landing.

THE murderer saw the gun in Kilgore’s hand first, and then he looked into the private detective’s gloating, sneering face.

“I found a piece of your property, Mr. Chuck Yandi,” rasped Kilgore. “Come on—I’ll show it to you.”

Whorl’s massive jaw shot out, his little eyes flamed.

“What th’ hell you drivin’ at? Thought you went to Hollendale.”

“Walk in front—no funny business now, Hardhead,” and Kilgore waved his gun.

Whorl glared, tense bodied, eyes dangerous.

“Thought you was a flatfoot.”

“Out of the yard—go on,” yelled Kilgore contemptuously. “Down the path to the river—move.”

Whorl stepped out slowly, trembling with passion.

Kilgore followed, gun leveled at the man’s spine.

Whorl stared at the ghastly passenger in the powerboat stolidly, unmoved.

“Know him, Hardhead?”

“If you’re dredgin’ stiffs from th’ marshes you’ll have plenty to do, copper.”

“Yeah?” Kilgore grinned. “Pull the body out on the bank.”

“What you want me to do—take that up to th’ house, stuff ‘im an’ mount ‘im?” Whorl sneered, but he obeyed.

“Can the wisecracks—now pick up that wheel.”

“What for?”

“Because this roscoe says so,” gritted Kilgore, and rammed the gun-muzzle into Whorl’s midsection.

Eyes hot with hate, Whorl shouldered the mower-wheel.

“Back to the barnyard,” ordered Kilgore.

They trudged up the muddy path in silence. The rain was lashing down again, boisterous gusts of wind went whooping through the pines. The barnyard looked like a hog-wallow, in the downpour.

“Over to the mower there, Whorl. Now slip a wagon-jack under the axle and put that wheel back on the spindle where you took it from.”

Kilgore inspected the completed job with infinite satisfaction and expansive conceit.

“You see, Whorl,” he goaded with relish, “the wheels match. A dead giveaway on you. Two-by-four brains. You shot the cashier, Cyrus Rathbone, in the back of the head with your rifle and then like a fool gave him to the river.”

WHORL’S face worked ferociously, a desperate fear in his eyes.

“You’re a damned liar! Dirty, crazy dick!”

“Don’t you know better than to trust the river—with its changing moods and bad manners? Huh! Sap.”

“You can’t pin this on me in court—you can’t prove it.”

“Th’ hell with court,” snapped Kilgore. “I’m not monkeying with courts of law. I’ll hold a little trial right here. Where’s the dough you took off that stiff?”

“You’ll get fat tryin’ to talk that way to me, flattie,” jeered Whorl, his little eyes blinking swiftly. “Cheap dick.”

Kilgore knocked him sprawling in the mud.

Whorl bounded to his feet in a fury, and unmindful of the menacing gun rushed the big detective. He rightly judged that Kilgore wouldn’t shoot him, for dead, he couldn’t reveal the hiding place of the stolen money. As the murderer came in savagely, teeth bared, roaring oaths, Kilgore grinned. His great fist whipped up and again Whorl splashed full length in the muck.

“I can knock you down as often as you get up,” Kilgore laughed, for Whorl was a ludicrous sight. “Wipe the goo off your handsome puss and show me where that dough is.”

A blazing volley of curses was the only reply.

“All right—all right, Hardhead—that’ll do. I got plenty of time and you’re going to dig up all that kale for me and like it.”

He leered at the ex-convict. Quick as a flash he snapped on the handcuffs.

“Get this through your thick skull: Stall all you want to—have a good time. But I’m too smart for you, and in the end you’ll sing pretty for me.” Kilgore emphasized his prophecy with a grim snarl.

Whorl laughed, a confident, taunting laugh.

“Get into the barn—there,” roared Kilgore, giving him a violent shove. “I need a few yards of hemp.”

Back of the horse-stalls Kilgore found a coil of rope. Here he also found a cow-whip.

“So you beat up the gentle cows?—you dirty dog!” Kilgore took the “blacksnake” off its hook, and grinning maliciously at Whorl, picked up the coil of rope. “Now, Hardhead, we’re ready to open court in the basement of the house. Waltz out of here.”

But he had to drag Whorl all the way through the mud and rain. A cussing, spattering passage.

IT was dark in the basement and Kilgore lit a kerosene lamp standing in a bracket on the wall. Cutting off a few yards of the rope he tied Whorl’s legs tightly together, running the rope in a spiral from ankles to knees. Then he removed the handcuffs.

“That’ll let you thresh about a bit,” Kilgore grinned, in sadistic anticipation. “Off comes the coat and shirt. There you are—squat on the floor,” and he kicked Whorl’s bound feet from under him. The murderer hit the floor with a crash.

“I’ll poke a knife into you for this,” choked Whorl, face livid with passion. “Yella dick!”

“Now grin and take it,” hissed Kilgore, cutting the air with the whip.

“Not th’ whip,” choked Whorl. “I—I can’t stand th’ whip—they lashed me to death in th’ pen.”

Craftily he began to quiver and whine, and then started crawling across the floor toward Kilgore in whimpering humility. He drew himself forward with his hands, like a hamstrung beast.

As Whorl crawled he paused at intervals and beat the planks with bruised and bloody fists. Wild, blind energies and a madman’s greed for a stolen fortune sustained his acting. The basement resounded with his animal cries.

Racking sobs shook his body. He kept his mouth hanging open, drooling. His crazy, darting, bloodshot eyes were hideous pits from which hell’s cunning looked out. His act appeared real.

“Greetings, Hardhead. Going to shell out like a beer baron on a souse, eh? ‘Bout time—You look a mess, what I mean,” said Kilgore, in mock sympathy. “A tough world.”

Whorl’s mouth worked with unsightly writhings.

“I’ll—split it—with you—give half. That’s—fair. I’m a fair-minded guy. I took all—th’—chances.”

“Oh, yeah? I guess not all the chances.” Kilgore grinned. There was Rathbone—and good old Slats! “Anyway, Whorl, I can’t take an ex-con and a murderer in partnership. Why, it would hurt my reputation.” Kilgore smirked with malicious indignation. “Nope—I’m still in business for myself.”

DISAPPOINTED, Whorl glared, his fists clenched, unclenched, lifted in clawing threat, slicing the air with revolting frenzy. Greed goaded him to greater heights of histrionic effort. He twitched convulsively—then began to weave his bullet head right and left—eyes hot, agonized—pleading.

“Half!” he panted.

Sweat streamed from him. Great drops trickled into his bushy eyebrows, paused to pick up the

light-beams and glow for a brief instant with weird fires. Strangling, gulping sobs erupted from his straining throat. Explosive curses, beguiling and wheedling overtures were strangely mixed.

“Half—half!” he wheezed hoarsely.

A funny sight to Kilgore.

“E—lk . . . e—lk . . . e—lk,” he laughed until his sides ached.

Closer and closer the prone wretch inched his way, and then in a piteous ecstasy of abasement, he began to plead and to kiss Kilgore’s muddy boots.

“Here—here! You daffy nut! Nix on the smacking. Where’d you hide the old grouch-bag, rat?”

These groveling attentions were nauseating to the hardboiled Kilgore. The prone creature was deranged, he felt, mad now beyond recalling what he had been grilled for.

“Half—half—half!” he gurgled in a haunting, barbaric rhythm.

A pathetic whining and moaning interspersed Whorl’s panting words. His unsightly, monstrous face was raised in trembling supplication, eyes swimming in a reek of anguish, beseeching clemency.

“Faugh!” exploded Kilgore, in disgust. “All of it for me.”

Instantly Whorl’s strained face went slack and laughter began to shake him. Laughter in weird chuckles—a wild mirth that rose in swelling volume until a shocking torrent of sound rattled in an eerie, chattering cacophony from his quivering mouth.

A horrible twisting spasm and he fainted, lids open, his protruding eyeballs dead white.

KILGORE coolly took a cigar from his pocket, bit the end off and spit it against the wall explosively. His match flared, and he puffed slowly. He was sure now that physical violence would not break the will of this tough prison-hardened ex-convict.

More subtle methods must be used. He felt it would require a creeping and corroding fear, product of the relentless forces of nature—a force uprearing in elemental menace only could crack the shell of Whorl’s granite-like resistance.

Kilgore pondered ways and means. Listening to the maddening refrain of water pounding against the house, he was suddenly inspired by the vague outline of a plan.

Rain fell in lashing fury. The world was blind with storm. Creeks filled and overspread the lowlands. The big river crept up its banks, snarling viciously.

In sudden decision Kilgore got together, rope and block and tackle. He peered out, down toward that projecting limb, near where his boat was moored, noting the while that the engorged river was still rising.

He handcuffed Whorl, and hobbled his feet, having removed the spiral bonds from his legs. The wretch came to, and shuddered. He stared mute, fascinated as Kilgore worked deftly, then cursed as he was yanked upright.

“Move,” barked Kilgore. “We’re going to the river.”

A short and sodden journey, but sparkling with emotional eruptions, kicks and blows.

On the bank Kilgore halted his blasphemous prisoner and lashed him to a young pine. Then Kilgore climbed the big tree, and fastened the block and tackle near the end of the limb out over the current. He rove a line through the pulleys, carrying the end of the rope back to the ground where he knotted it tightly to Whorl’s bound ankles.

“Couldn’t coax it out of you,” grunted Kilgore, “so I’ll soak it out. You’re going to the laundry like a dirty shirt.”

Cursing, threatening, sullen defiance in his glittering eyes, Whorl was drawn up and out, to dangle head down from the limb. He slobbered in an ecstasy of fury. His distorted face came to rest but a few inches above the hissing surface of the river.

Kilgore got into his powerboat and moved close to Whorl’s body.

“Looks like you’re going to get your ugly face washed,” Kilgore leered. “Last chance now—to address the Chair.”

“Th’ hell with you!” Whorl’s words leaped with sudden violent ferocity, startling testimony that new strength had come into his body.

“Okay, tightwad. But wait until the water starts running into your smeller.” Kilgore’s tone was taunting, exultant, confident of victory.

THE yellow tide rose steadily. Whorl groaned, rolling his hate-choked eyes. Blood thundered in his head—an excess of blood—an agonizing whirlpool, a tearing, out-thrusting pressure.

“You look down-the-mouth,” grinned Kilgore.

“I think it would brighten your day if you gave me some financial news.”

Whorl broke out in a renewed fury of vehemence.

In sudden impatient rage Kilgore stood up and threatened to drive his knotted fist into Whorl’s stomach. The man screeched. Kilgore dropped his arm and grinned.

The far-off bellow of a river steamer echoed mournfully through the rain-lashed hills, offering uncertain cheer and remote relief to Whorl in his dangerous plight.

“You’ll—get caught!” he choked. “Let me down—an’ I give you my word—I won’t squawk.”

“Coming through?”

“Go plumb to hell.”

Kilgore craftily backed his boat downstream, under the shelter of a leafy limb. It would hide him from sharp eyes on the approaching steamer, he thought, and also keep off the downpour. No use of *him* getting soaked. He lit a cigar and puffed contentedly, vigilant but serene.

The water rose. It was almost up to Whorl’s eyes. The flood bubbled and hissed loudly in his ears. Whorl began to curse again—fearful oaths cracked out. The water crept up his forehead and Kilgore watched, silent and impassive, but much pleased.

Kilgore’s smile was wide and satisfied. That would break the stubborn fool.

“Dark down there, Hardhead? Dark as hell! The old river’s blindfolding you with muddy water. Looks like your finish. Too bad. I just got to give up. You know I tried—gave you a chance. I see you’d rather croak.”

The rain abated. The clouds parted and silver banners of light slanted to the earth. A rainbow arched down in gorgeous splendor behind the green forest. A gentle wind whispered like a prayer in the pines.

Whorl’s body jerked spasmodically, agonizingly. The horror of the creeping water-cap engulfing his head—the inky blackness pressing in upon him—was maddening.

THE line of yellow tide was now traveling gently up the bridge of Whorl’s nose. It seemed to sear his skin like a streak of fire. He began to slobber in terror. A choking shriek escaped him. The current climbed steadily up the bridge of his nose—neared the tip.

He gasped—his mouth hung open, lax, exposing its red interior.

Again Whorl uttered that animal cry.

“Quick! I’ll tell! Quick! Get me down! I’ll tell—everythin’—you thievin’ flatfoot!”

“Right on the dot,” chuckled Kilgore. A pleasant exultation filled and warmed him. Twenty thousand dollars—all his! “Kidding me all the time, wasn’t you, old eagle stuffer?”

“I’ll think of you when I’m spending this dough around Paris. Now, before I take you down—an office rule of mine: Just where is this dough planted?”

“Get me down first—hustle!”

“Think I’m a sucker?” chided Kilgore. “Kick in first.”

“Quick—I’ll tell you—”

Kilgore laughed smugly in huge delight. *He* had plenty of time. Whorl and the twenty thousand dollars were in *his* bag now. He licked his lips.

“I’ll tell you—”

“Sure you’ll tell me—*from where you’re hanging*. Nothing can stop you—absolutely nothing,” Kilgore grinned with jovial brutality and conceit.

Like a thunderbolt out of the sky sped the great eagle, his mighty pinions thrashing and vibrating as he swooped to his accustomed perch on the swaying limb.

The limb sagged under his weight and the suspended Whorl was driven down headfirst in the boiling tide.

KILGORE gaped, spellbound with amazement. Then, infuriated, he lost his head and precious time in the surge of rage and panic. Excitedly, he yanked out his gun, but it slipped from his wet fingers into the river. He lunged clumsily for the motor, tripped and fell flat. Half-stunned and cursing, he turned the motor over. It sputtered promisingly, aggravatingly, and went dead. Hurry, hurry—you fool, Kilgore urged himself, frantically. But the motor remained perverse and silent. He felt himself turn sick as he darted a dismayed glance at

the submerged man.

“Shoo there!” he screamed desperately at the uneasy eagle, suddenly aware of a strange presence. “You damn stinking—! Shoo, there!”

Kilgore raised his knotted fists skyward, spouting obscene oaths of rage and vilification.

At this insulting tirade, the eagle swooped from the limb with imperial dignity and ascended the clean steeps to the far heavens. Relieved of the bird’s weight, the limb swung upward and Whorl’s shoulders came awash, then his neck and chin cleared the water.

Paralyzed at the swift reversal of events, Kilgore stared crazily at the bound man on the limb, idly dipping, swaying, a ghastly pendulum, with the current creaming in angry sulphurous froth in and out of the pitiful, widely gaping mouth that mocked him. Cheated by the whim of a bird. Inscrutable trick of Fate.

Unheeded, the warning roar of the steamer’s siren went crying into the drenched hills. The nerve-tingling alarm of the bell, the sloshing wash of the back-threshing hull, the sharp commands as men piled into the throbbing motorboat and streaked toward him, were unnoticed by the frantic Kilgore.

“There’s th’ rat—git ‘im!” The words came in a familiar reedy shriek. “Th’ dirty double-crosser!”

Kilgore whirled, stunned, pop-eyed—and fixed a swollen stare on the beady-eyed, hate-choked, triumphant face of Slat Kehoe—and then cringed under the black muzzle of an officer’s gun.

“Keep ‘em up, Kilgore!” barked a stern voice. “You’re my prisoner.” Then: “Quick, men! Get that fellow down.”

And the infuriated Kilgore’s bitter humiliation made him gnash his teeth when the revived Whorl hoarsely revealed the hiding-place of the twenty thousand dollars of stolen money.

Ringling down over the desolate scene of flood and tragedy, blending oddly with Slat Kehoe’s thin, gloating cough, came the ironical screech of the winged instrument of an implacable justice.