

# On the Edge of the Barrens

By Stephen Allen Reynolds

Continued from Last Week

On the down-grade, which sloped gradually to the pond in the rear of the police hut, better time was made. Buck's leaden feet swung forward automatically in the train of the panting dog.

His eyes burned. His head throbbed and swam. He could have dropped in his tracks. In fact, he was in no condition to plan the assault on the barrack.

He had a vague idea of grasping a Winchester when the time came—that he might drive a leaden slug between the greenish eyes of Whisky West.

Hours afterward—so it seemed to buck—the pond was gained, and a score of men, weapons in hand, crept toward the hut.

But no flashing volley greeted them. Instead, they heard the sound of singing. There was a certain cadence and military rhythm to the song that brought the blood to the cheek of the listening constable. Between the leveled rifles of the foremost hunters Walsh stepped, and jerked open the door.

Napier turned to meet him—Napier, mire from head to foot, with fever-

ish Oolah, took a fresh breath, and continued:

"Oolah left me. She said she'd dodge the men and find you. I told her I'd stay in the hut, make believe my hands were still tied, and take my chances of trying to snatch a weapon. The plan worked fine, but there was a bit of delay.

"The gang came back. They found me, as they'd left me—apparently. Then they fell to arguing what should be done with me. They ransacked the place for preserved goods, and one of the men went down to the boat for liquor.

"I gathered from what they said that there was a dead man outside—that the three of them were the only living members of the original crew of eight. I—

"Take it easy, lad," broke in Buck.

"I watched my chance to grab a gun," went on Napier after a rest had strengthened him. "It was long in coming—but it came, finally. They'd gotten hold of your automatic, and West was explaining the working of it.

"He laid it down for a moment, fully loaded. I judged the distance separat-



Austro-Hungarian troops have found comfortable quarters in the parliament buildings, College, Montenegro

burned cheeks, and vacant eyes that gave no hint of recognition.

He was standing with one foot upon the neck of the dead body of Whisky West, bawling aloud the regimental "March Past" of the King's Royal Rifles. In his raised right hand, keeping time with his self-made music, he brandished Buck's automatic pistol.

From the tail of his eye Walsh caught a glimpse of two other bodies lying on the floor in the midst of a litter of broken glass and crockery. Then he stepped closer, approaching cautiously the staring singer.

Napier suffered Buck to take the pistol from him. He reached the last stanza of his song; his voice broke as he sobbed out the final line; then, his head drooping drunkenly, he permitted Buck to lead him to his bunk.

It was a matter of days before Walsh learned what happened during his absence from the hut. Several times after the fever had burned itself out had the junior constable broached the matter, but upon each occasion "Doctor" Buck had forbidden his patient to speak.

There came a day, however, when Napier refused to obey.

"I'm all right, Buck," he declared. "I want you to know how lucky I was. I'm strong enough to talk. Look at the big supper I ate!"

Oolah looked up from her dishes. Buck scowled and nursed his bandaged arm. But this time he did not forbid the telling of the tale.

"When you were carried out," began Napier, "I almost went wild. Then, a moment afterward, Oolah dashed in here and untied me. I looked around for weapons. There were none to be found in the hut.

"I looked outside. The loaded carabines were nowhere in sight. There was no time to look thoroughly. We heard West and his gang coming back."

Napier ceased speaking. He smiled

ing me from the weapon. West was helping himself to a drink. He'd just decided to shoot me after they'd eaten.

"I sprang for the weapon and plugged the fellow with the big ears. He never moved afterward. I got the second fellow thru the neck. By that time West had his gun out. He got in one shot.

"I ducked, and the bullet went thru your front bunk-board. Then I shot him thru the right wrist of his pistol hand. I might have put an end to him right then and there. I didn't."

Napier swallowed hard. "You saw his body?" he asked in a lower tone.

Buck nodded.

"Oolah!" went on Napier, "do you mind getting some fresh water from the pond?"

The girl hastened from the barrack.

"Buck," continued Napier, "I want to confess—I shot him by inches!"

Buck stared at his partner.

"It's God's truth! I did it deliberately! When he picked up his gun with his sound hand I thought of you pegged out down there with the mosquitoes. I broke his left wrist.

"He rushed at me with both his arms dangling. I drew back and let him have one thru the leg. He toppled over. I stood over him and saw that he was still conscious.

"Then I told him that I was one of the six hundred and twenty-five mounted men that you were telling him about. I thought about his burning you, and was going to smash his other leg—but his eyes closed. So I sent him where he belonged; and kept two shots for any emergency."

Napier was silent for a long time. His eyes were closed. Then, as Oolah entered with the water, the junior constable concluded his story.

"There's not much left to tell—that I remember. I went wandering around

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