

ADVENTURE

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ADVENTURE

CAMPFIRE

UNDERSTANDABLY intrigued by Virgil Burford's account of the salmon-poaching in Alaska ("I Was a Fish Pirate," page 24), we got off a short note to Walt Morey, the writer to whom Burford told the story. Who is Virgil Burford? we asked. And what has he done besides poach salmon?

This is the memorandum we got back:

"1. Virgil Burford is an adventurer.
2. He has done damned near everything.

"Mr. Burford's life of adventure began when he ran away from home as a kid and hit the open road. He has been a prize-fighter. He has been a carnival boxer and wrestler, taking on all comers. He has been a pile-buck and construction stiff. He has prospected for gold.

"For the past dozen years he has been adventuring in Alaska. There he has been a big-game hunter, fisherman, construction worker and deep-sea diver.

"He has seen Alaska by air, with the bush pilots, and tramped over hundreds of miles of that rugged land. He has seen Alaskan seas from the cabin of a 30-foot boat which he operated alone in some of the worst weather the North can throw at a man. He has seen the bottoms of those same seas, searching for sunken ships and treasure.

"Fish pirating, like shooting a giant Kodiak bear or diving for the first time, was a thing he tried just for thrills.

"In summation, I can say from experience that in fun or a fight, Burford is a fine man to have on your side."

We are filing the information away, in case we should run into fun or a fight.

THE moment of decision for Jacob Hay came, he says, when he was barely six years old. "My hopes of ever earning a sensible living vanished shortly after my entrance into the public schools of York, Pennsylvania. My teachers and I discovered simultaneously that I was constitutionally incapable of adding two and two. I never made it to subtraction.

"I decided to be a newspaperman." In 1941, clutching a diploma from Penn State, Hay started out to set the publishing world afire, but he never quite made it. As an ROTC second lieutenant, he was needed elsewhere.

After the war he spent a term at Oxford, wandered back home and launched himself into journalism again. Came the Korean War and another demand for Reserve officers, and Hay spent 17 more months wearing out shoes.

His story, "The Breakout" (page 18), he says, is the result of some news photos of returning Allied prisoners in Korea—before and after their first shaves.

"I was struck," he says, "by the amaz-

ing change in their appearance, and that's about it. That, and some long bull sessions with friends who had spent time in German prison camps in the last war."

FRANK Harvey is a reformed advertising man. The life he escaped, he says, consisted mostly of drinking three dry martinis for lunch, and spending whole days deciding whether to change a comma into a semicolon.

From this he went into the life of a freelance writer.

A graduate of Columbia University,



Harvey doctors engine of own plane.

Frank spent six years in the advertising department of Bethlehem Steel, put in three years as a Navy Air Force lieutenant, directed publicity for Daytona Beach, and spent another five years in advertising.

His assignments as a magazine writer have taken him from Fort Worth to Istanbul, and he has traveled in everything from his own Piper Super Cub to a jet bomber. A demon for on-the-spot reporting, he has risked his life countless times in such activities as flying through hurricanes, riding over the Caucasus Mountains with the Turkish cavalry and driving an automobile in the London fog.

He has done stories on practically every new airplane the Air Force flies. His story on a crop-duster pilot ("Death Is His Copilot") appears on page 10.

EVAN Hunter says that the idea for his story "The Intruders" (page 22), has been churning about in his mind ever since the days when he was a student at Hunter College in New York.

"I was living in the Bronx then," he says, "and commuting between there and school on the Lexington Avenue subway. One night I was going down the platform on 68th Street when I saw a man very much like the hero of my story.

"He was not young. He was short, and he was fat—unlike my hero. He looked tired. It was late at night, and I thought there might be danger for him on a subway platform, so I went to him and took his arm and asked if I might help.

"He swung his arm at me and shouted, 'Leave me alone! Leave me alone!'

"I left him alone, but I've never forgotten the sound of his voice or the tortured personality that must have produced that outburst. I carried the idea for a long time, and finally pitted a younger version of that man against a menace to society.

"The result is 'The Intruders.'"

IF IT were true that a rolling stone gathers no moss, Colonel E. A. Powell would probably be the baldest boulder in the whole neighborhood.

Colonel Powell, whose "Yankee Nabob" begins on page 34, describes himself as a professional onlooker, but in the course of onlooking he has racked up a considerable amount of mileage, covering most of the globe and striking up acquaintances with any number of kings, presidents, and dictators.

As a roving correspondent for American and English magazines, he has traveled by caravan and car across the Middle East from Arabia to Iran, by safari and river boat across Africa from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, by elephant across the Himalayas to Nepal, on horseback through the interior of Ethiopia, and by plane across the Pacific, southeastern Asia, India, Persia and Russia. He has been an officer of the United States Foreign Service in Asiatic Turkey and Egypt, and a special representative of the Department of Agriculture in Central Asia. During World War I he covered the Belgian, French, British, Italian and German armies as a correspondent for the *New York World*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *London Daily Mail*, and later became an officer in the American Expeditionary Forces. In World War II he was political editor of the Office of Censorship and an official of the Foreign Economic Administration.

To fill in his idle time, Colonel Powell has written 32 books and several hundred magazine articles.

Nowadays he usually spends his winters in the tropics and the rest of the year at home in the Connecticut Berkshires. Since an almost-fatal accident three years ago, he's been trying hard to take it easy. ■ ■



Burford found piracy was more profitable than diving.

I Was a Fish Pirate

Off Alaska's coast, salmon pirating is a recognized business. Here is the story of how it works, by a diver who sailed with the pirates on an actual raid

THE salmon canneries approached me with

by **VIRGIL BURFORD**

offers to dive for them to inspect and repair the underwater sections of their fish traps. So I found myself with a boat, furnished by the canneries, and with the diving gear set up on deck, rambling over hundreds of miles of the Gulf of Alaska and Prince William Sound.

Of all the people I met, the most fascinating was that legendary character, the Alaska fish pirate.

It's impossible to spend any time along the Alaskan coast and not hear amazing stories of his raids on the canneries' fish traps. In the countless places where fishermen gather, in bars, hotel lobbies, pool

halls, on boats, pirating held a high priority over any other conversation.

I heard of the pirate who makes the rounds of the traps in the Sound each spring, lining up watchmen to help him steal from the traps. With each watchman he leaves a walkie-talkie so they can contact him when the trap is full and the coast is clear.

Another pirate has been known to sail past a trap in broad daylight when the cannery tender was there, then hoist the Jolly Roger in a thumb-to-nose gesture.

Fish pirating, I soon discovered, is a flourishing, recognized business. This amazing condition is brought about by

the fish traps and the fisherman's attitude toward them.

A fish trap is an ingenious device made of logs or pilings and hung with chicken wire. Its purpose is to catch the salmon as they come in from the open sea to spawn. A trap will hold from 50 to 70,000 fish and some have caught as many as a million in a single season. The traps are owned by the canneries and the same sites are leased to them by the War Department, year after year. The canneries operate on the assumption that the fish caught in the traps are theirs to dispose of as they see fit.

The Alaskans disagree. They prefer to recognize another law, the White Act,

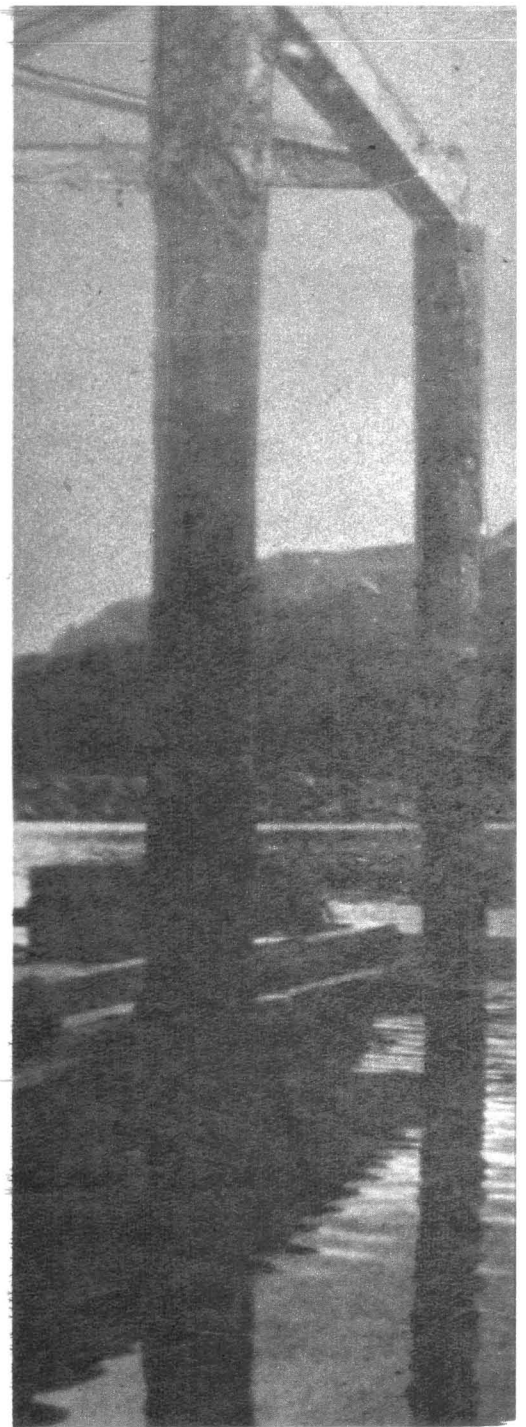




PHOTO BY WALT MOREY

Pirates meet little resistance when they approach fish traps. Many Alaskans approve of raids, blame bad laws.

which forbids the granting of exclusive fishing rights to any individual or group. Therefore they disapprove of the fish traps and in 1946 they voted them out, eight to one. Being a territory, their vote means nothing and Uncle Sam hasn't seen fit to help them yet. But the fish pirates have.

On the day the season opens they are combing the sea, sneaking up on traps in the dead of night, in fog, storms and even broad daylight, giving the canneries unwanted help in gathering the Silver Harvest. Their exploits were told to me time and again during that first season. There was the seiner, with an old, beat-up boat, who came into the

cannery day after day with staggering loads of fish. The amazing contradiction was he worked alone, which no man can do, his equipment was worn out, his seine so holey a whale could have passed through it and so rotten that straming water would have ripped it in two. Everyone knew he was pirating and guessed the trap watchmen were helping him load. Finally the cannery superintendent called him on it.

"Me, pirate!" the man said righteously. "I'll show you where I seined these fish any time."

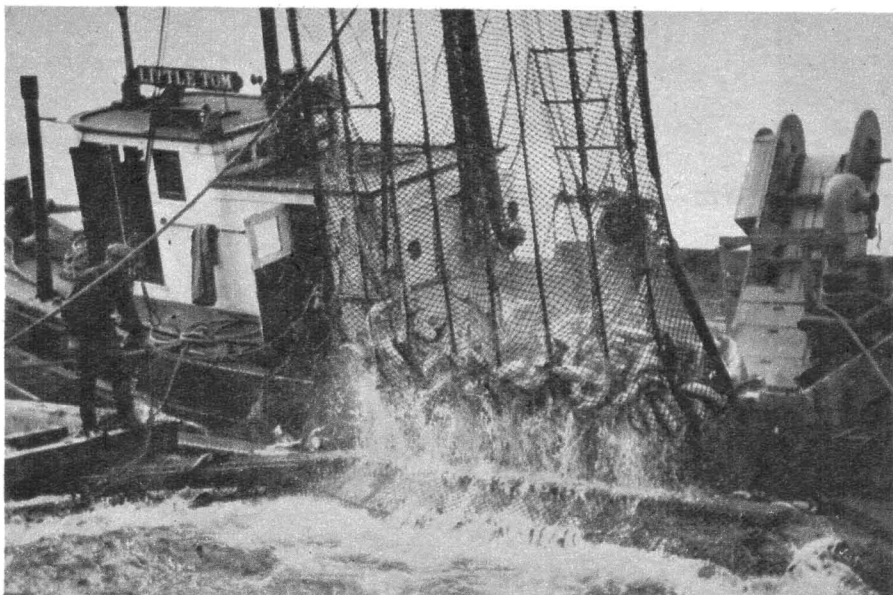
The superintendent hopped aboard. "We'll go right now!"

A few hours later the old boat stag-

gered into the dock again, decks almost awash with her load of fish. The superintendent was screaming bloody murder. "You damn crook! You stole those fish out of our nearest trap. There wasn't time to seine such a load even if you could, and there ain't but one trap in miles. Besides, this even looks like a trap-caught load. There's five or six different kinds of fish in it—everything that gets into the trap. A seined load's only got one and you know it."

"I promised to show you where I seined 'em," the fisherman said patiently. "If you want to sleep all the way out and back, that's your problem."

"You slipped (*Continued on page 40*)



BRAZEN PIRATES brail canneries' fish traps in broad daylight.

BLACK STAR

I WAS A FISH PIRATE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

me a mickey," the superintendent raged. "I should'a known there was somethin' phony when you offered me a drink."

"If you don't want th' fish . . ." The pirate said with dignity.

"Oh, we'll take 'em. But damn you, leave our traps alone!"

Soon I began meeting this hardy fraternity. It was logical I would. I dove for half a dozen canneries inspecting more than 30 traps that were situated around some 7,500 square miles of Prince William Sound. I learned an amazing number of things and some of my experiences could have happened only on a frontier like Alaska.

My own pirate education began one sunny afternoon while sitting against the cannery building between dives, enjoying the unusual warmth. Over at the conveyor, three men leisurely pitched fish from the hold of a boat into the traveling belt. The salmon flashed silvery in the sunlight.

The cannery superintendent wandered along the dock, stopped and looked down at the three men. Suddenly he blew this calm day to bits, "Damn you!" he shouted. "You stole those fish out of one of our traps and I know it."

The biggest of them, a young fellow wearing a baseball cap and sporting a face full of black whiskers leaned on his pew and said in an aggrieved voice, "Aw now, Nick, what're you talkin' about?"

"You know damn well what I'm talkin' about! This's th' last time I'm tellin' you. Keep away from our traps. Understand?"

"If you don't want the fish, there's half a dozen other canneries we can take 'em to," Whiskers said calmly.

The superintendent clenched his fists, "Oh, I'll take 'em this time. But it's th' last," he warned. "Tomorrow I'm puttin' rifles aboard every trap, with orders to sink your damn tub if it even comes in range."

"I can see your point," Whiskers said sympathetically. "But you're gettin'

steamed up at the wrong people. We're just seiners that 've been lucky at makin' good hauls." He smiled at the apoplectic superintendent. "This's our third good haul in a week. I figure we must have about ten thousand here, don't you?"

The superintendent glared at them. Then he said in an ominous voice, "Just remember what I said about those rifles." With that, he swung on his heel and stalked away. The three young fellows burst out laughing.

Their boat was plainly a seiner with all a seiner's gear. She was a nice job, around 50 feet, with a black hull and gray superstructure. She was built to carry a heavy load of fish.

A few days later, I pulled into a trap for an inspection dive. The cannery had said the trap wasn't fishing. Apparently there was a hold-up, that is, the wire was being held off bottom by a nail or knot leaving a huge hole for fish to escape, or a playing whale or shark had punched a 10-foot hole through the wire.

While I was still a hundred yards from the trap, a boat pulled away. It was the same black-hulled boat that had been in the argument with the cannery superintendent. The men waved as we passed, the big fellow with the whiskers called, "How goes it, diver?"

"Fine," I shouted. "How's it with you?"

"Couldn't be better."

I dived the trap and found nothing wrong. Afterward, sitting in the shack drinking coffee, I asked the watchman, "Those three fellows in the boat friends of yours?"

"Why?" he asked in a careful voice.

I told him of the happening on the cannery dock and the superintendent's threats. "I thought you might meet me with a rifle," I said.

"Bunk. No watchman's gonna dodge bullets for a cannery for three hundred fourteen dollars a month. That was plain bluff. The super knew it and so'd those boys. The cannery makes those threats

every season but nothin' ever happens."

I didn't answer and he ran on as though he expected me to know all about it. "I figured you was wise th' minute you saw 'em tied to th' trap. Well, they made me a good deal so I took it. They pay me a dime a fish for all I let 'em take outa th' trap. I figure to go outside this fall with an extra four thousand bucks. It's money right on th' barrel-head. No arguments." He finished his coffee then asked abruptly, "How come you're divin' th' trap? I didn't send for you."

"The cannery said it wasn't fishing." "H-m-m," he said. "It's fishin', all right. But they don't know that. Maybe I better ease up a little before they get suspicious."

"Suppose you'd said 'no' when they propositioned you?" I asked.

"It wouldn't made no difference. Plenty of other trap watchmen 're anxious to work with 'em."

There was the time I dove the trap at Eagle Point and the storm boomed out of the Aleutians and caught me. I ran into Andersen Bay to lay it out. I was tying up to a dolphin when another boat nosed up beside me. She was around 50 feet and painted a camouflage battleship gray. The color was the first giveaway. Practically all pirate boats are painted a dark, water-blending color making them hard to spot from the air or from a distance at sea. The name on her bow was that of one of the most famous pirate boats in the North.

The stories I'd heard of this nervy skipper and his boat were legion. This fellow even had a trap brail, a special sort of dip net used only for taking fish from a trap. It was fastened to his boom, a billboard advertising his trade.

The temptation was too great. After I'd finished tying up, I jumped aboard his boat. He opened the galley door and called cheerfully, "Come in, man, before you blow overboard."

I introduced myself and he smiled, "I know the diver. I don't envy you your job."

He was middle-aged, tall, slender, but looked rawhide tough. His hair was dark and his eyes were deep-sea blue. He had the calm, efficient air of a successful business man.

We sat on either side of the table in his spotless galley. He got out and packed a pipe and I found the remnants of a cigar. I asked, "You getting any fish?"

He smiled. "I'm getting a few, but the run hasn't hit big yet." Then he said, "You get around more than anyone. Where's the fish running best now?"

"I saw a few jumpers off Miner's Point," I said. "But they're running good at Bly Island."

"The runs aren't what they were a few years ago," he said. "If I'd had this boat then I'd have her made by now. There's no doubt the traps are doing us plenty of harm, but then, we've got more seiners in these waters than ever before—and we'll be getting more each year. In fact, the time's not far off when there'll be nothing but seining."

"You think the traps are on the way out, too?" I asked.

"Without a doubt. But we'll probably have them until Washington wakes up,

if ever, and gives us statehood. By then I hope to have my own cannery." . . .

Next morning when I crawled out into a cold, soggy world the storm and my friend were gone.

Several days later I went aboard a cannery tender with a pair of Swedes, Oscar, the captain, and Swanie, the deck-hand. I was to dive for a lost 10-ton anchor. I spent most of the day 90 feet down and found nothing. We were headed back for the cannery when the call came short wave to go and lie off the Bly Island Trap overnight and report all that went on. It seems the watchmen had been drunk when the tender arrived to brail the trap and the trap had been empty.

For safety's sake, liquor is never allowed aboard a trap. The watchmen's only source had to be a passing boat, and liquor is often a pirate's chief persuader. Liquor indicated that the watchmen were selling fish.

We pulled into position off Bidarka Point at dusk. Two miles across darkening Tatitlek Narrows we could make out the outline of the Bly Island Trap.

Oscar grumbled, "I don't like this playin' stool pigeon. I got nothin' ag'in them pirates."

Swanie rubbed a huge, suspiciously red nose and said, "I tell you she gonna be a cold night. Vot ve need iss a couple damn big drinks. "We got time to go to d' trap an' see have dey got any."

"An' give th's whole thing away?" Oscar said.

I said, "If the pirates were here a couple of nights ago it's not likely they'll come again so soon."

"Dat's f'r sure," Swanie said. "I start d' motor, huh?"

Oscar scratched his jaw, "I guess what we don't see we can't tell," he said.

We stayed, but the pirates didn't come. If they had, they could have taken every fish, built a fire on the trap high as Mt. McKinley and fried them and we wouldn't have seen a thing. We slept like logs.

The cannery super suspected what had happened. The following evening he came out, and, running quietly without lights, slipped across the narrows into the trap. He caught my big friend from Andersen Bay just pulling away. The watchmen were frantically letting down the spiller again, that section of the trap where the fish congregate. Fresh scales littered the head log and the trap was almost empty. Also, both watchmen were half-drunk.

The pirate went free. The watchmen were fired, but frankly admitted, "Sure we were sellin' fish, but there's nothin' you can do about it. Them fish was in your trap, but they was still swimmin' in the sea. They ain't yours till you take possession of 'em in your boat."

"That's right," the pirates insist.

What has brought about such a seemingly lawful, yet unlawful situation?

First, Alaska's fishing and pirating is somewhat similar to the prohibition and bootlegging era when otherwise upright citizens registered their disapproval of an unpopular law by making their own brew. Second—and this hits the seiners where it hurts most—a seiner churns over hundreds of miles of sea, strains water for days, barely making expenses,

then comes on a trap with 10,000 boiling in the spiller. The trap, as always, is situated off a choice spot where the salmon run heaviest and he could seine a good load. Now an 1,800-foot lead, hooked onto shore and running out to the huge frame trap, completely blocks him out. The trap is there year in and year out. It fishes day and night and during storms when the seiner is lying behind a point waiting it out. Third the Alaskans contend that the traps, due to their choice locations, catch all the fish and damage the runs, and that traps are fish-killers, whereas the seiner is not. And the seiners complain that it is unfair to give the same choice locations to the canneries year after year.

The canneries counter with the fact

that the trap is the cheapest way of catching salmon. That without the traps the price of salmon would be doubled.

The Alaskans come back with: salmon fishing is Alaska's main industry, and of the 438 traps licensed in 1948, 245 were operated by eight absentee companies.

Absentee control of the fishing industry is so complete that Alaskans lack even full benefit of employment in their own major industry. The wages paid non-residents are double that paid residents. The bulk of these non-residents come north from the States by boat and do not receive their pay until their return to Seattle at season's end. Thus, Alaska does not receive even their pin-money business.

Fourth: and playing right into the

pirate's eager hands—the Bureau of Fisheries has notified the canneries the traps are on the way out because they are harmful to the industry. In fact, if for any reason a trap site is not used for a season, its further use is cancelled by the Bureau. The Bureau's wardens are therefore primarily interested in the pirate when he tries to seine in the restricted spawning streams. This leaves the canneries to battle the pirate alone.

In an effort to discourage pirating, the canneries hire watchmen to guard the traps against pirates, then hire watchmen to watch the watchmen. They charter patrol planes and patrol boats to cruise the traps. Pinkerton men work under cover among crews, on traps and on the boats. There are two-way radios aboard the traps, the tenders and at the cannery. Code is used in all reports concerning fish in the trap.

With all the money and effort put forth by the canneries to insure against loss of fish, they overlook the one simple, sure method of stopping piracy. That is, by refusing to buy from the pirates.

Their own competitive greed defeats this end. A trip through a modern cannery makes that understandable. The season on Pinks, the big run, is but a month long. During that time a cannery may have to put up \$5,000 cases before paying expenses. That means a continual stream of fish pouring into the cannery, regardless of where or how they are obtained.

As a cannery superintendent told me, "Maybe they are pirated, and from my own trap to boot, but if I turn 'em down a competitor won't, and his cannery'll keep running. A pirated fish in a can is as good as any."

The Pirates' Code

The pirates use ingenious methods for counteracting the canneries' protective measures. They have their own radio code with co-operating watchmen. The watchmen may come on the air at a given time and, sounding like a fox farmer or trapper ordering groceries through a friend say, "If you're comin' this way tonight bring me a dozen loaves of bread." To a pirate lying miles away in a cove this means the coast is clear and the trap is full. If the trap is empty or the cannery tender is due, the watchman may say, "I've got plenty of grub."

Another class of pirates roam the sea as freebooters grabbing loads wherever they can. These boys will cruise close past a trap and glance into the spiller. Experienced eyes estimate the number of fish with uncanny accuracy. If it's good he'll swing back, and as he passes will hold up a fistful of bills temptingly fluffed out like a head of lettuce. "Three, four hundred for the fish," he'll call. If the watchmen are nervy and interested they motion him in. Or the pirate may stop and argue price, trying to strike a bargain.

I stumbled into such a situation one night when I'd been called to inspect a trap. A whale had been playing about and the watchman, alone on the trap, was afraid he'd nosed up and punched a hole through the wire. It was late afternoon when I arrived, and dusk when I

finished the dive. The watchman and I were standing in the lee of the shack having a last word when we noticed two boats, minus lights, bearing down from opposite directions. Both nudged the trap. Men bore down on us. Two held fistfuls of bills. "Five hundred for th' fish in th' trap," one said.

"I'll meet that," the other said. "Wait a minute! J-Just a minute." The watchman was flabbergasted. "There ain't enough fish in th' trap to sell to both you guys." He scratched his head. "Tell y' what—flip a coin, I'll sell t' th' one that wins."

A coin spun. A voice said, "Heads!" The watchman nodded, "Your fish. Come on in th' shack. Coffee's still hot."

We were drinking coffee when a crew member from one of the boats burst in. "Cannery tender's comin' up from th' point. We gotta get outa here!"

We rushed outside. The approaching tender was a black dot in the distance. The pirates piled aboard their boats and faded into the night.

Several minutes later, the third boat nudged the trap and a man hopped aboard. "I was past t'day," he said. "I'll give you three hundred."

"Hell, no!" the watchman said then. "I been offered five."

"Man, there's not that many fish in th' trap!"

"I say there is."

"No, you're wrong. But I'll make it three-fifty."

"Forget it," the watchman said.

The pirate persisted, "Split th' difference. Make it four."

The watchman shook his head, "Them guys that left just ahead of you offered five. They'll be back."

The pirate hesitated, "All right, five," he conceded. "But it's a hold-up."

The watchman stuffed a fistful of bills into his pocket and we turned into the shack, closed the door, and finished our coffee to the sounds of brailing.

I Take a Job

Several weeks later I dropped into a bar in Cordova and found it empty except for the bartender and Vic Hanson. This was typical during the middle of the week when everyone was on the fishing grounds. Vic was unhappy. He had brought one of his crewmen into the hospital with a broken arm. Now he was short a man for a week. "It would happen just when business gets good. I've got to find a man for a week." I knew what he meant by business, so did the bartender. Vic is a successful pirate and is proud of it.

I moved down beside him and said, "How about taking me, Vic?"

"You!" he said. "You're a diver."

"I haven't had a dive for a week," I told him. "And this late in the season I'll be lucky if I get another one or two."

Vic winked at the bartender, "Well, here's where you get initiated. You ought'a get thrown in th' bucket once before you go back to th' states." He tossed off his drink and rose, "Got to rustle up a bale of five- and ten-dollar bills for bait. See you aboard."

As casually as that I had become a member of a crew of fish pirates.

I locked the diving suit in the cabin of the boat I'd been using, left the boat tied to the dock and went aboard Vic's *Lady Luck*.

The *Lady Luck* was a 48-footer and could carry eight or 9,000 fish. She was a typical seiner with seine turn table and a brail fastened to the mast. There the similarity ended. She was painted a dull, battleship gray. There were two small hooks above her name from which a sack or board could be hung, blotting out her identification. The seine was for looks and in all probability had not touched the water all season.

The crew consisted of Vic Hanson, Yonnie and myself.

Vic came aboard later with a case of whiskey and shoved it under the galley table. "More bait," he said.

Yonnie looked hungrily at the case, "Boy, you said it!"

We lay the first night in a cove some twenty miles from town. Early next morning we began poking along the coast, contacting the traps I'd dived earlier. It was late in the afternoon when we found a trap with some 7,000 salmon milling about in the spiller. The watchman, a grizzled old fellow and a young one with a head of wild black hair, came from the shack to watch us swing back and nose up to the head log.

Yonnie tossed them a line and the young fellow took a turn about a cleat. We jumped to the headlog with Vic carrying a full bottle. The watchmen gave me a startled look but said nothing. Vic wrenched off the top of the bottle, saying, "A mighty dry day, boys." He handed it to the old fellow.

The old man drank, sighed gustily and wiped his mouth, "Didn't know how dry I was." He drank again long and hard, and passed the bottle to his partner.

"A nice bunch of fish," Vic commented nodding toward the spiller. He held a roll of bills big as a baseball in one hand.

The old man nodded, his eyes darting from Vic's face to the money.

"About seven thousand," Vic said.

"Pretty close," the old man agreed.

Vic extended the bottle again, "Long time between drinks out here."

"Too long." The old man took a long pull—and another. The bottle made the circuit and returned to Vic. He held out the roll, "Here's seven hundred. Your money, my fish?"

"Okay by me," the kid said instantly.

The old fellow scratched his jaw, plainly he was afraid, but he was tempted, too. Finally, "You guys pretty fast?"

"Give us forty minutes. Nobody'll ever know we were here."

The old man nodded, "Make it about one. But you gotta be fast. Understand?"

"We'll be fast." Vic shoved the half-empty bottle in the old man's hands and we climbed back aboard. "See you about one," Vic called.

We pulled up the coast about five miles, went in behind a small island and nosed up close to an overhanging bank. We spent an hour getting the brail ready, checking the hold, the winch and tying sacks from the hooks to blot out her name. Then we were ready to rob a trap.

We turned in then because we would be up all night, but I was too keyed up

to sleep and lay looking out the port.

The hum of a plane poured suddenly across the water, thundered overhead and fled away into silence. The canneries patrol plane making its tour at dusk, hunting people like us.

Yonnie and Vic were up by eleven. I told them about the patrol plane and Vic yawned, "Our snoopin' pal; wouldn't know what t' do without 'im."

Yonnie nodded, "He don't see nothin', ve know. D' bank mak a shadow right over d' boat at night."

We had a leisurely meal of bacon, eggs and coffee and at 12 pulled out for the trap.

After a time Vic doused the lights and cut the motor until it barely turned over. We drifted quietly forward. Far ahead, low on the water, a light beat feebly against the night. Beneath it the black outline of the trap slowly took shape.

Yonnie went forward into the bow, picked up a coil of line and crouched, waiting. We presented a sinister picture—a black-hulled, nameless boat drifting stealthily forward to nudge the head log with the barest jar.

The shack door opened. The wild-haired kid came swiftly across the trap and caught the rope Yonnie tossed. The old man moved across the logs and looked up at us owlishly shaking his head. He had probably finished the bottle alone because he wore the beginning of a good drunk. "It's no use," he muttered. "I can't do it."

The young fellow said disgustedly, "He's lost his nerve."

"Th' plane was over early, real early,"

the old man said. "Circled us twice—right low. That means he's suspicious."

"We can be gone in forty minutes," Vic reminded him.

"Th' plane could come out clear from the cannery in that time. An' it's a good flyin' night. No, it's no use."

"Okay," Vic reached under the galley table for a bottle. "Might as well have a couple anyway." He jumped to the logs and started for the shack. "Watch th' boat," he called.

They all disappeared inside. I sat in the bow of the *Lady Luck* and wondered at this strange behavior.

Some 20 minutes went by, then the shack door opened and Vic and the young watchman came swiftly across the logs. "Let's get at it," Vic said. "Yonnie and th' bottle 're takin' care of him."

The three of us went to work on the spiller. The spiller is the only section of the trap made of netting. It is a complete pocket that can be worked to the top bringing the fish up until there is more fish than water in the spiller, making brailing easier and faster. It took but a few minutes to work the net up and the 7,000 salmon turned the spiller to boiling froth.

I steered the brail into the spiller. Vic handled the winch, hoisting the brail aboard bulging with fish. The watchman steered it over the hold.

In a surprisingly short time we emptied the spiller. We let it down, splashed water over the head log to wash off the scales and were through.

Vic handed the young watchman the wad of bills. He went to the shack and

a moment later Yonnie stumbled uncertainly across the logs to the boat.

We pulled away fast into the night. We ran all night and the next morning sold the catch, 7,200 salmon, to the cannery who owned the trap. As Yonnie said righteously, "It wouldn't be hardly right not to." The catch brought \$2,160. After Vic's \$700 he'd paid the watchman was taken out, we split slightly more than \$1,400. According to the split, the boat takes a share, and the rest of us a share each. My cut was \$360.

Two days later we came on a trap opposite a rocky point where the tide was such a mill race the watchmen stayed in a shore shack almost half a mile away. Yonnie was steering and Vic climbed to the flying bridge where the added height gave him a better look into the trap.

"A good ten thousand, boys!" Vic called down.

We hid in a cove. When the sun fell into the sea fog banners rose off the land and drifted across the water. A chill mist began falling.

"Just right," Vic said happily. "By midnight it'll be too thick for th' plane to fly and th' boys on shore won't be able to see th' trap. We can take our time and milk this one dry."

Again we came into the trap with all lights out, though the fog was so thick we could have burned a thousand watts and not been seen. Yonnie handled the brail this time. I steered the loads into the hold.

In about 30 minutes we had filled the hold. Then we began dumping flopping,

squirming salmon on deck. We filled the deck a foot deep and when they threatened to overflow the rail I stood the hatch covers on edge and piled them higher. At 30 cents each it was a mouth-watering pile.

Vic finally called, "That's it, Yonnie. We got a load."

"Yust vun more," Yonnie begged. The brail rose, loaded, swung inboard and with a rifle-sharp report and a cracking and snapping of ropes and steel crashed down on the fish pile. The hooks holding the brail had broken.

We let the spiller down in a rush and got out fast.

The fog had become thick as cotton and we crept into a cove to wait for daylight. Vic switched on the radio to pick up cannery gossip and almost immediately the trap we had just robbed came in. They were reporting the robbery to the cannery. "We heard this racket out at th' trap so we rowed out to check. We couldn't see any fish in th' spiller and there was scales all over th' head log, so we pulled it up. It was damn near empty. In th' bottom of th' spiller we found a piece of broken brail. Somebody's lifted th' trap."

"How many did they get?" the cannery asked.

"About ten thousand."

"Did you see any boats hanging around today?"

"Three or four went by. There was th' *Sea Otter*, th' *Pelican*, th' *Wild Goose* and a big gray job, th' *Lady* somethin'."

"*Lady Luck?*" came back immediately.

"Yeah, I think so. *Lady Luck.*"

"The *Sea Otter* and *Pelican* are here at the cannery now. . . ."

Another voice cut in, "This's the *Golden King*. I was in Cordova tonight and the *Wild Goose* is there on the grid with a hole in her bow."

A third voice said, "This's th' *North Wind*. I seen th' *Lady Luck* laying behind a point not more'n two miles from th' trap at sundown."

Vic snapped off the radio. "There's no doubt who the guilty party is."

"Who gonna prove it?" Yonnie wanted to know. "Fish is fish. I tell you, vot ve need is damn goot drink und sleep."

It was nearly noon when we pulled in to the cannery from whose trap we had lifted the fish. Vic had gone there because it was the nearest cannery and fish are highly perishable. The superinten-

dent came down, looked at our load and said pointedly, "Vic, that sure looks like a trap-caught load to me."

"Hell, no. We seined these," Vic insisted. "You want 'em or not?"

"It still looks trap-caught to me," the super said. "But go ahead, unload 'em."

If I'd still had any doubts as to the fish pirates' immunity from punishment, the humorous article in the *Ketchikan Daily News* of August 11, 1950, would have dispelled it:

"It seems there is a movement on foot to organize a union of trapwatchmen to put a minimum price on salmon sold to pirates. A delegate appeared in a row-boat at a trap in the vicinity of Ketchikan last Thursday. He proposed that all watchmen agree to sell no fish for less than \$200 a thousand. He explained that pirates will be numerous this year and the opportunities for watchmen to make easy money are much better than in the past.

"The boys had better watch their step or they'll be hauled up for violation of the anti-trust act."

Captain Kidd and Jean Laffite and the rest of those old boys must be turning over in their graves. ■ ■