

By HAROLD DE POLO



## OLLIE FISHES A BLACKOUT

OLLIE BASCOMB, on this early evening in June, was having a joyous time. The sheriff of Derby was out on the long graveled driveway that adjoined the county courthouse and jail, in the rear of which he had his living quarters, casting a hookless bass plug at objects he had set out on the ground at various distances ahead of him. He was hitting those targets beautifully and accurately, and the words and ejaculations of admiration from his rather large audience did not precisely displease him.

No true fisherman or hunter is ever averse to praise for what he considers a good cast or a good shot. Ollie, incidentally, was called the greatest troutin' an' birdin' fool in the whole State o' Maine. He freely conceded that he preferred to handle a dry fly for trout and to take partridge on the wing, but he likewise admitted that he liked *all* kinds of fishing, *all* kinds of hunting. He had fallen under the spell, late last season, of casting a wooden lure for black bass, particularly on dark nights, and he was now close to agreeing that the bronze-back, inch for inch and pound for pound, was the gamest fish that swims.

He chuckled, in genuine happiness and



*The cry of pain and fear and brain-numbed surprise was almost terrifying.*

actually childish self-approbation, as he hit a pie plate no more than six inches in diameter that he had set up over a hundred feet away. He said, exuberantly:

"Judas Priest, folks, that's *castin'!*"

"That's very *fine* casting, sheriff," said an onlooker in city clothes and a sporty, well-fed, well-cared-for appearance.

Ollie turned and literally beamed his gratitude. Ollie was short and squat and rotund, with a round face and wide china-blue eyes, and he invariably wore a frayed old canvas shooting jacket and an ancient and battered black felt hat. He removed the latter, now, and rubbed a hand across his utterly bald head. He stroked his jaw, after that, in his characteristic gesture, and said in his slow drawl:

"Shucks, Mr. Keene, that's tarnation good o' you to say so, but I cal'late you're jest a-quizzin' me. I—crimus, mister, from the talks we had since you been here to the hotel, this last week, I'll bet you'll outcast me to beat all Sal Brookes an' the Devil when we get out on Lower Saltash t'night. I'll bet—"

"I'm not quite sure, sheriff—" the city man

started to say.

**B**UT Les Heald, the teller at the Derby National Bank, interrupted him. He stepped forward from where he had been standing on the edge of the crowd and looked at Ollie somewhat sternly.

He said stiffly:

"You mean to tell me, Ollie Bascomb, that you're going fishing *tonight*? ... Tonight, when our glorious county seat of Derby is having its first complete blackout test and air raid practice with a plane going over and dropping flares that will simulate incendiary bombs? ... I can scarcely believe it, sir, even though I am well aware that your love for these fishing and hunting sports is—hmmm, well, very strong."

Ollie, blinking his eyes, gazed at the tall, spare figure of Lester Heald, garbed in severe black that accentuated his severe face, and asked in a slightly puzzled fashion:

"What—what day o' the month does this come to be, Lester?"

Heald, as a few titters ran through the audience, looked decidedly superior. He was out sniping for the nomination against Ollie that Fall, it was fairly well known, and he hadn't lost any opportunities whatsoever, during these past few months, of getting in any possible dig at his opponent. He replied suavely, in his best oratorical manner and with a smug little smile:

"As a banker, I can answer that easily. As a proud yet humble citizen of Derby, who is responsible—who is *partially* responsible for arranging the test, I can answer *more* easily. It is June nineteenth."

Ollie smiled, quite contentedly, and let out a sigh of vast relief. He turned his back on Heald and said, like a youngster who has had the fun of catching his teacher in a mistake:

"That's what I *thought*. Bass season begins the twentieth o' June, an' that means you can start fishin' one *secon*' after twelve t'night. Me an' my fr'en' Mr. Keene reckon to be up on Lower Saltash Lake a-plungin' for 'em right then.... I ain't got no *time* for these blackouts, seein' this un' don't start till ten o'clock."

"Disgraceful—disgraceful and unpatriotic," snorted Heald, and it was noticeable that a few coughs and murmurs of approval sounded.

Ollie, for once, made no comeback. Instead, he turned to Keene and said, somewhat whimsically:

"Well, me an' Mr. Keene aim to get us some

bass, don't we?"

The stranger, a big and affable man, shook his head sorrowfully, and he seemed to be really pained. He said, apologetically:

"Mighty sorry, sheriff, but I was just going to tell you a few minutes ago that I'd have to postpone our trip—or my part in it. I've got to wait here for a very important business call on the 'phone. I'll be with you tomorrow night, though—with bells on, as they say."

"Mean to say you're throwin' me down?" Ollie almost groaned. "I been countin' on openin' the season with you."

"Sorry, sheriff, but this call is important."

Ollie nodded sadly, but as if in thorough understanding, and began to retrieve the plug with which he had made that superb cast. He said, as he wound the line onto his reel:

"Too bad, too bad... Oh, well, t'morra's another day, like you said... But—but say, Mr. Keene," he added eagerly, his face lighting up, "what *were* that you tol' me 'bout fishin' the shallers over sandbars, last year when you was to Michigan? Did you tell me to use one o' them Tango plugs, like I remember it?"

"That's what I did, sheriff," said Keene heartily. "Can't beat 'em for that kind of work, my boy."

"Thanks, thanks. I'll be gettin' 'long now an' fixin' up my kit. Like to have everything ready an' in apple-pie order, I do. S' long," said Ollie amiably, waddling off toward his quarters in the courthouse.

**O**LLIE BASCOMB, in fact, didn't begin to fuss with his tackle when he got back to the large room in his comfortable suite where he kept all his fishing and hunting implements in cases and cupboards and various racks. For that matter, he always kept his stuff in the apple-pie condition he had mentioned. At present, in place of looking at fishing gear, he put in two telephone calls—one to Boston, the other to New York—to police officials of high position who happened to be personal friends of his.

As he hung up the receiver on the last one, and meditatively brushed a hand over his head and rubbed at his jaw, his old crony Doc Appleby bustled into the room. Doc, a slim little wisp of a man with wispy white mustaches and sparkling brown eyes, was bubbling over with angry excitement. He and Ollie had been friends since early boyhood—they had been bosom fishing and

hunting companions during all the years since then—and the medico now showed that he thought this long comradeship at least allowed him a certain freedom of speech:

“Cuss your hide, Ollie Bascomb, what you mean by keeping on making a fool of yourself? Practicing that crazy bass casting! Making a public exhibition of yourself! Playing right into that sly Heald’s hands! ... Don’t you know he’ll *take* that nomination away from you, the first thing you know?”

“Close to fifty-five, I be, Doc. Been sheriffin’ close to thutty year,” said Ollie mildly. “Lots o’—yep, even lots o’ *good* men has tried to beat me, to the prim’ries. None o’ them even got up to run ag’in me ‘lection day,” he finished dryly.

“I know all that, darn you,” continued Doc, “but this Les Heald, the fake sanctimonious fool, is a pretty slick *customer*. He’s out there now haranging those simple voters about how criminal it is for their sheriff to go off galivanting for bass when this big and super-super blackout test and air raid is happening. Ollie—”

“Forty-odd miles from the coast we be, don’t we?” cut in Bascomb gently, “an’ we got no ‘sential industries here, neither.... Doc, you got *any* idee the Germans or the Japs is goin’ to waste one o’ them sort o’ costly big bombs on us?”

“Damnation, no,” snapped Doc, “but this Lester prig has them believing it. He *got* us the blackout, don’t forget, and all the lodges and female associations and kid clubs for miles around expect a great and glorious picnic. Dummit all, Ollie, you’re an old enough politician to know how folks like to wear badges, and carry stretchers, and ring bells, and act like circus clowns.... Well, he *got* it for ‘em, as I said—and you’re going off after bass!”

“Allus did know you was jealous, since I took up this castin’ at night for bass, Doc,” smiled Ollie. “Great sport, great art—close to as great a’ art as castin’ a dry fly for trout be, no foolin’. You take it on a black, black night when you can’t see nothin’, an’ you try to hit a lily pad, say, that’s anywheres from fifty to a hundred feet away— ... Why, Doc, it’s—it’s plumb a *masterpiece* o’ art.”

“Nothing like wading a stream and placing a dry fly at the end of a three ounce rod where you want to put it, and you know it well, Ollie Bascomb,” growled Doc Appleby. “You old renegade, going back on—” but the physician cut himself off, suddenly, and shook his head in furious exasperation. He went on, grimly: “Trying

to wean me away from the one important topic, aren’t you? You can’t. I’m your friend, worse luck to *me*, it now looks. This Keene sport, for instance, was saying that he’d heard you were the best sheriff in Maine, and this Lester Heald dolt came back and said you were the best *fishing* and *hunting* one, maybe. That got another laugh from the crowd. That even got a laugh from Whit Moseby and Jeff Slocum, and you know how loyal *they* always used to be to you.... No, Ollie, you better give up this bass business and come to school to the blackout,” he ended, with a touch of irony.

“Said I was goin’ bass castin’, didn’ I, Doc?”

“What difference does that make?”

“Feller can do a heap, with a castin’ rod an’ a plug with three triple-gang hooks on it, sometimes,” drawled the sheriff. “Hopin’ I can t’night.”

“You—you got something up your sleeve?” asked the other, his attitude instantly changing to one of anxiety. “Ollie, you got one of those nutty crook or crime or detective bugs in your head?”

**O**LLIE, before replying, rose from the swivel chair behind his desk and ambled over to a wall cabinet in which dozens of bass plugs were hanging in rows from thin, round metal bars. He chose one—all white, with a bullet-like end that would cut through the air cleanly—and fondled it quite lovingly. He said, musingly:

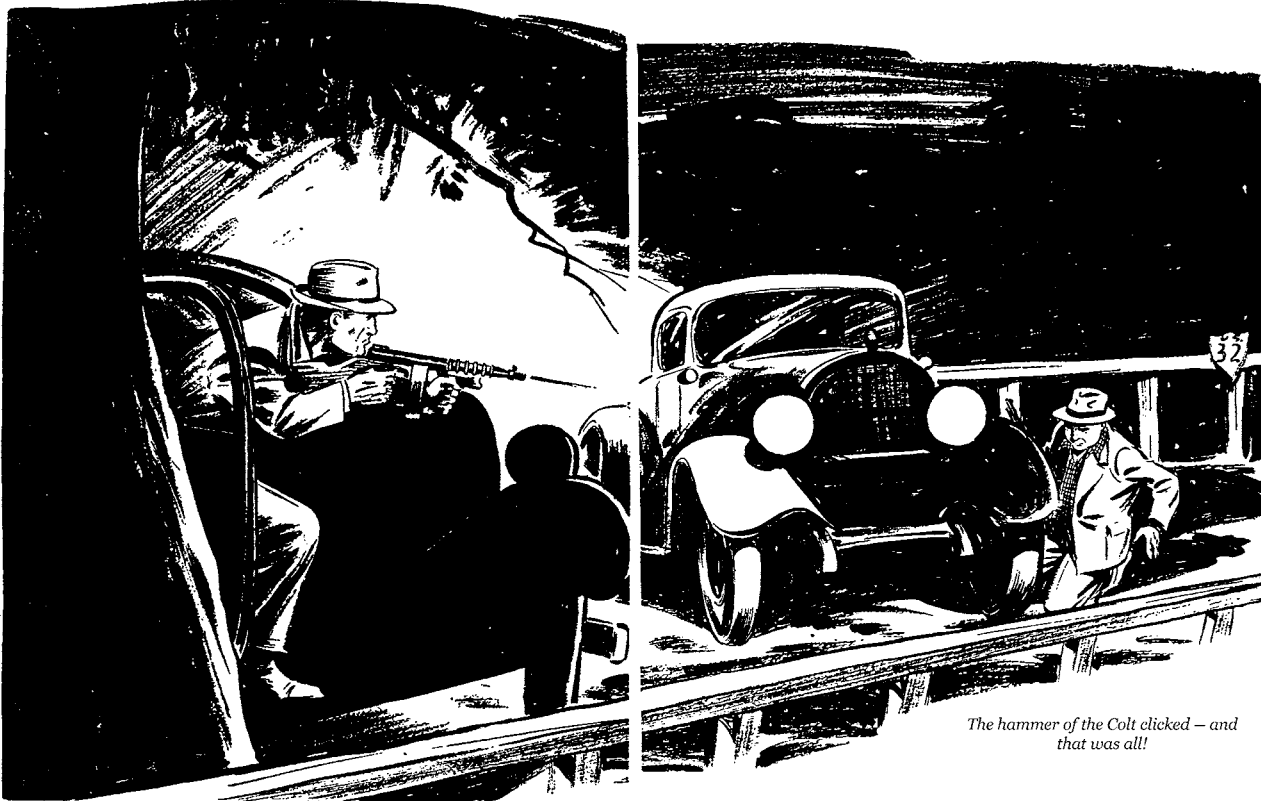
“Nice plug to use on a dark night, Doc. Goes like a arer, an’ bein’ white makes it easy to watch.”

Doc Appleby calmed, at that one, and made a perfunctory and even professional little bow. He said, with raised eyebrows:

“I have known you since you have been a fingerling and fledgling, Mr. Bascomb, and I have come to know that when these dire symptoms are upon you, I, as your medical practitioner, had far better allow your ailments to take their natural course—and merely hope for the best.... I, sir, must now go and wet-nurse our Red Cross nurses before they attend to the casualties envisioned by that sterling citizen, Lester Heald ... Good fishing, old friend.”

“I’ll be tryin’, Doc,” retorted Ollie with a grin. “Thanks.”

But Doc Appleby, as he reached the door and pulled it open, turned and waved his other hand apologetically. He said in a tone of genuine annoyance:



*The hammer of the Colt clicked — and that was all!*

“Cuss those mail order houses, Ollie. They didn’t send me those .45 caliber bullets yet. Terribly sorry I can’t replace those I had to borrow. Cheer up, they ought to be along soon. Great sport, that revolver practice. Glad you inveigled me into getting into it. I—”

“Won’t do you any good, Doc, even when you do get ‘em,” said Ollie disconsolately.

“How’s that, how’s that?” asked the medical man sharply.

“Can’t compete with *me*,” drawled Ollie.

“You go to Tophet, Ollie Bascomb,” said Doc testily as he went out and slammed the door behind him.

**O**LLIE, instead of taking the advice of his physician and attempting the journey to the place designated, stayed right where he was. He did nothing but sit behind his desk, lolling back in his chair, watching the late sun sink toward the lower and southern ridge of Big Sawtooth Mountain. This War Saving Time, he ruminated, was as good as daylight time—it made the long June days even longer.

Finally the sun did go down, and Ollie could already hear, outside, various groups of blackout and air raid coterie getting together. It was

Saturday night, as well, and this meant that thousands of people would be here from the surrounding towns. He waited until dusk fell before sallying forth. Before he did so, he slipped the old .45 calibre Colt revolver into the accustomed right hand pocket of his dilapidated shooting jacket. It had a homey feeling—made him feel more homey—when it nestled there.

He then got his tackle box and short casting rod, running the line through the guides and attaching the large white plug he had discoursed upon to Doc. He was ready for action. He went outside, after that, and met with the twitting he knew was in store for him. Some of it was good-natured, but he had to admit to himself that a fair portion of it—an assuredly large portion—was downright mean and cantankerous.

Even Whit Moseby and Jeff Slocum, those rabid adherents, bore out what Doc had said and made some caustic remarks.

Ollie, as before, had no retort. He merely looked up at the sky, and held up his hand to catch any breeze, and said:

“Goin’ to be a nice black night for castin’, folks. No wind to bother a feller, neither.”

“It will be just as hard putting out these incendiary bombs, wind or no wind,” said Lester

Heald, who was very ostentatiously busy at the task of supervising a bunch of Boy Scouts setting out pails of sand along the sidewalk. "Please notice, Ollie, that we intend to take care of the courthouse—and your home. It would be tragic if that were burned up and you lost your tackle and guns."

"My soul an' body, *wouldn' it?*" agreed Ollie. "Gosh, but you're a reputable an' trustworth' cit'zen, Lester."

He walked to the curb and put his box and rod into his ancient coupe and climbed in after them.

He didn't care any more about show in a car than he did in clothes, but the vehicle that appeared to be so ramshackle, so banged and dented, nevertheless had an engine under its hood that was always kept in perfect condition. He stepped on the starter, as he dimmed his lights, and headed north.

**O**LLIE drove slowly. Up at the further end of town, after the stores and business offices had thinned out, he saw that the Derby bank was also in darkness. Set up with a lawn before it, back from the street, it stood there rather imposingly in the brick and gray granite of which the president and directors—and decidedly Lester Heald—were so inordinately proud. As he passed it, Ollie could not help a faint smile from coming to his lips.

Beyond it, a hundred yards or so away, stood Saltash Tavern. The lights were still on in the bar and lobby, probably waiting for the siren to shriek before they would be extinguished. This didn't bother Ollie. What pleased him, rather, was the fact that the dark sedan used by Keene, with the New York license plates, was still parked in front of the place. Not only was it parked there, but it was headed *north*. Keene, Ollie knew, had come from that direction when he had last used the car in the afternoon. He had taken the trouble to turn it around.

Ollie not only smiled, as he passed the tavern—he allowed himself a deep-throated chuckle.

Looking at the clock on the dashboard, he stepped on the gas a trifle. He wanted to get up to Saltash Corners, and the crossroads were some four miles away, before the siren sounded. He did, as he usually managed to do things the way he planned them.

Once there, he backed his coupe off onto the road to the right, and then he got out and sat on the running board and looked off down the hill at the few remaining lights that were still burning in his

home town.

He hoped that his hunch—his suspicions—would be right. It would take anywhere up to an hour, he figured, to find out.

Then the siren blared out—three ear-splitting blasts—and as they died down his keen sense of hearing detected the drone of a plane coming from the south. That would be the machine that would drop the fake incendiary bombs. As he saw Derby darken, as he saw the first flare fall from the air, Ollie smiled again. He could picture, quite clearly, just what a beautiful time Lester Heald was having in running this blackout and air raid shebang.

Ollie just sat there and waited.

**K**EENE, as he had figured, must have been a fast worker. He had to wait exactly twenty-six minutes, his wrist watch told him, before he saw a car, with unmistakable New York plates, start up the hill from the south, a few hundred feet away. Instantly, Ollie was in his own car, had it running, and had driven it out into the center of the road and blocked traffic. Then he turned off the lights, stepped out, and got behind the far side of the hood.

The dark sedan, when seventy or eighty feet away, ground to a stop and a voice called out:

"What in hell's the idea?"

"Your voice don't sound so pretty and cultivated like it did back to Derby, Mr. Keene," was Ollie's drawling reply.

"Bascomb, eh?" came the answer. "What's the joke?"

"Joke's on you, be there one. Askin' you to come out with your hands in the air, high. Patrollin' this road durin' the blackout. Got to search your car."

There was silence for a moment, and then Keene's voice came in an affable fashion, and with a hearty laugh:

"Great Scott, sheriff, come on down and search it. Then—then we can go up to Lower Saltash and fish together. Got my call, and I was just on the way to join you."

"Join me now, with your hands in the air," said Ollie, showing a portion of his head and shoulders beyond the cowl of the car, for no more than a fraction of a second.

He had ducked in time, for immediately the rat-a-tat-tat of a Tommy gun cut into the quiet of the black night and lead spattered against the hood of the coupe.

Ollie got out his Colt. Ollie was very proud of

that weapon. It had come down to him from his uncle, who was rumored to have used it with telling effect—with very telling effect, family gossip had it—when he had been on the western frontier. Ollie, as well, had learned how to use it. He proved this now. He got down behind the wheel and fired twice, and the two front tires on the dark sedan from New York were put out of commission.

“Damn you,” yelled Keene, and Ollie could tell that he had gotten out of the sedan. “*You* better come to *me* with your hands in the air, you dumb hick. I’ll drill you like a sieve, you boob.”

“Don’t hanker to drill you, Sportsman Jim Rafferty,” called back the sheriff. “I like to bring ‘em back alive.”

There was another curse from the other man—an explosive series of them, rather—and again silence.

Ollie, behind his wheel, crouching on the ground, tried to peer through the darkness for a sight of his opponent. He thought he saw a shoulder emerge from the right rear of the sedan, and he stuck out his Colt and let go.

The hammer clicked—and that was all.

Then Ollie remembered. Doc Appleby had wanted to borrow enough cartridges, for his target practice, to allow him to fire a round of a full fifty.” Ollie had had no more than thirty-two to give him, and still his old crony had been short—short just four. These Ollie had taken from the six-gun, leaving himself two. He had used these on those tires, and now he was without ammunition.

But Ollie was too old a hand, too seasoned a woodsman and veteran campaigner, to have this beat him. He had planned and hoped to use his rod and plug and line *after* he had subdued and captured the famous bank robber, but he’d certainly have to try and see if his tackle wouldn’t get him out of this hole right now. Cautiously, he edged along the road, opened the door of the coupe, and got out the rod.

“You comin’ to *me*, hick?” snarled the other.

**O**LLIE, in reply, took off his hat, stuck it on the end of his rod, and pushed it out in front of his right headlight. Then, as a furious and vicious rat-a-tat-tat came from the Tommy gun, the sheriff took his one big gamble. He flipped the hat off the rod tip, gave a deep groan, and flung himself down on the roadway.

A laugh, harsh, ugly, triumphant, came from Sportsman Jim.

Ollie, prone on the ground yet with his rod

gripped in his right hand, fingers on reel and handle, watched carefully. He saw the other, in a scant second, step from behind the sedan, weapon lowered, and start to walk forward hurriedly.

Ollie waited until he had come five feet, ten, a dozen, and then he shot out that plug, with the three triple-gang hooks on it, for the hand that showed up in the darkness that was holding the machine gun.

As he watched that white plug cleave through the air, going like a streak, he knew that it was the most important cast that he had ever made in his life. He saw it hit that right hand, felt the barbed hooks sink in, and then he struck with his sturdy bamboo rod. As the hooks dug deeper, as he put on more pressure, he saw the Tommy gun drop to the road while his enemy let loose an almost crazed cry of pain and fear and brain-numbered surprise. Ollie was on his feet, then, reeling in fast, and his words came lustily and joyously:

“You come to *me*, Sportsman Jim Rafferty. Raise *both* them hands in the air, high, and keep comin’ to this dumb hick. Don’t try to break that line, mister,” he added as he walked toward his captive. “It’s thutty poun’ test an’ you can’t do it.... That’s right, that’s right, keep ‘em high.”

“They told me you were a fox, damn my luck,” was all that the crook said when Ollie was within four or five feet of him.

“Got to be, t’ hold this job ag’in all the op’osition I seem to get,” replied Ollie dryly. “Drop them hands, now, by your sides. Keep ‘em there. Keep ‘em there quiet whilst I bind ‘em up.”

When Keene, or Sportsman Jim, docilely and obediently complied, Ollie elevated his short rod and began winding that tough silk line around and around his prisoner. He used almost the entire fifty yards of it, and in a few minutes more the bank robber was as securely trussed as an Egyptian mummy.

“*Me* finally taken by a hick constable,” was the only remark the other could make.

“That bank money in the car or did you toss it out?” Ollie enquired briskly.

“In the car. In that black bag.”

Ollie got the bag, prodded his prisoner in the back with the tip of his rod, and said even more briskly:

“Hike for my car. I’m in a hurry. Aim to get back to town when that blackout’s over. Your little gun didn’t hurt my tires none.”

When they reached the coupe, Ollie picked up Keene, tossed him onto the seat, and then got in

and started back to Derby.

THE sheriff, it must be admitted, *did* know just a *mite* about Maine politics, as he was sometimes grudgingly willing to admit to his friends. He timed his entrance to his own bailiwick most propitiously, drawing up before the courthouse precisely when the great blackout and air raid test was over and all the street and store and lights went on.

Lester Heald, as he had suspected—had virtually known, indeed—was right there in the center of, the excitement. It was to him, with a heavy sigh, that the sheriff addressed himself:

“Well, Lester, your blamed blackout didn’t low me to go fishin’ for bass after all. I had to go fishin’ for a crook that robbed your bank. There he be in the car, with the money in that black satchel he took from your vault.”

“You—you’re crazy, Ollie,” said Heald, as he went to the coupe and peered inside while literally hundreds of people tried to crowd in around him. “Why, Mr. Keene is a New York sportsman who—hmmm, who has honored our town by coming here to fish our surrounding waters.”

Ollie, in reply, edged the bank teller aside, opened the door of his coupe, and yanked out his captive, being very careful to hold onto the butt of his rod and raise it in the air, his remaining line taut, as if he were holding onto a precious piscatorial prize.

He got the laugh that he had probably expected.

“No, Lester, whilst you was attendin’ to this blackout an’ air raid test in our noble town, forty-odd mile from the coast, I was workin’ on protectin’ that same town—*an’* your bank—from out-o’-town city robbers. This here is the famous bank robber, that’s s’posed to know more ‘bout safe combinations than anyone alive, called by the police o’ lots o’ big cities by the name o’ Sportsman Jim Rafferty. He allus plays for places ‘bout the size o’ Derby, you see, an’ makes b’lieve to be a fisherman or hunter to get in right— an’ then he cracks the bank. He—”

“Who put you wise, Bascomb?” asked Rafferty, although his voice was dull and vague with hopeless resignation.

“You did, Sportsman Jim. When I first got

talkin’ to you, up to the hotel, I see you didn’t know too much ‘bout bass tackle an’ plugs—I see that you was doin’ a heap o’ bluffin’ for a man that pr’tended to be a’ expert like you made out to be. I got to thinkin’, an’ it seems like I remember readin’, a few year ago, ‘bout a feller had robbed a bank in the Adirondack country that was posin’ to be a great deer hunter. Then, one night when I was comin’ home late, I happened to see you come out from behin’ the bank. I went there later, to the back door, an’ even though there wa’n’t no wax left on the lock my nose told me, when I got down an’ smelled it, that you’d took a’ impression. I—”

“By gum!” said Whit Moseby.

“Cracky!” chimed in Jeff Slocum.

“I didn’t even convic’ you in my own mind even *then*, Rafferty,” Ollie went on. “The thing that made me sure ‘bout you bein’ a liar on bass castin’ —the thing that made me call two p’lice ‘ficials I know in Boston an’ New York—was you tol’ me you used a Tango plug over shaller sandbars.”

OLLIE paused, while the crowd surged closer, breathlessly. Ollie took off his battered felt hat, brushed a hand over his bald head, and then stroked thoughtfully, caressingly, at his jaw. He said, with a low chuckle in his drawl:

“Judas Priest, feller, a Tango is a deep *divin’* plug, goin’ down eight to ten feet. It ‘ud scrape ‘long the bottom an’ wouldn’t catch a bass on shaller sandbars in a week o’ Sundays. What you want on *them* kin’ o’ grounds, mister, is a *wobbler* plug that jest ‘bout slithers ‘long eight or ten *inches* right *under* the surface. Sakes alive, man—”

“We sure got us a *sheriff*, Jeff,” cut in Whit Moseby with riotous jubilation.

“Halleluyah *right* we have, an’ we aim to keep him jest as long as he lives,” cried out Slocum.

As the crowd cheered, as Lester Heald tried to make himself smallish and slunk away, Ollie’s keen eye detected the figure of his old crony, Doc Appleby, pushing his way through the gathering.

“Hi, there, Doc,” he called out gaily, “you go right back home an’ get your bass castin’ tackle. Soon as I put this bank crook in a cell you an’ me is goin’ up to Lower Saltash an’ take us the first bass o’ the season.”