

The PAT MASTER

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

WHEN Dingman, the fat game warden, came panting over the mountain from Spencers to confer with young Byram, road master at Foxville, he found that youthful official reeling in his barn.

The two men observed each other warily for a moment; Byram jingled the shingle nails in his apron pocket; Dingman, the game warden, took a brief but intelligent survey of the premises, which included an unpainted house, a hen yard, and the newly shingled barn.

"Hello, Byram," he said at length. "Is that you?" replied Byram coldly. "He was a law-abiding young man; he had not shot a bird out of season for three years."

After a pause the game warden said, "Ain't you a-comin' down off'n that ridge pole?"

"I'm a-comin' down when I quit shinglin'," replied the road master cautiously. Dingman waited; Byram fitted a shingle, flung out a nail from his apron pocket, and drove it with unnecessary noise.

The encroaching forest recoiled the hammer strokes; a squirrel scolded from the orchard.

"Didn't I hear a gun go off in them alder bushes this morning?" inquired the game warden. Byram made no reply, but hammered violently. "Anybody got a ice house 'round here?" persisted the game warden.

Byram turned a noncommittal eye on the warden.

"I quit that business three years ago, an' you know it," he said. "I ain't got no ice house for to hide no patridges, an' I ain't a-shootin' out o' season for the Saratoga market!"

"Don't get riled with me, young man," he said. "I'm a 'ficial' of this state. Anyway, it ain't you I'm lookin' for—"

"Well, why don't you say so, then?" broke in Byram, with an oath.

"But it's one o' your family," added the warden.

"My family!" stammered Byram, in genuine surprise. Then an ugly light glimmered in his eyes. "You mean Dan McCloud?"

"I do," said the warden, "an' I'm fixed to git him, too."

"Well, what do you come to me for, then?" demanded Byram.

"For because Dan McCloud is your cousin, ain't he? An' I jest dropped in on you to see how the land lay. If it's a fight it's a fight, but I jest want to know how many I'm to buck against. Air you with him? I've proofs. I know he's got his icebox stuffed full o' patridges an' woodcock. Air you with him?"

"No," said Byram, with a scowl; "but I ain't with you, neither!"

"Don't get riled," said the warden. "I'm that friendly with folks I don't want to rile nobody. Look here, friend, you an' me is 'ficials, ain't we?"

"I'm road master of Foxville," said Byram aggressively.

"Well, then, let's set down onto this bunch o' shingles an' talk it over 'ficially," suggested the warden suavely.

"All right," said Byram, pocketing his hammer; "if you're out to ketch Dan McCloud I don't care. He's a low-down, shifty cuss, who won't pay his road tax, an' I say it if he is my cousin, an' no shame to me, neither."

The warden nodded and winked.

"If you hep me ketch Dan McCloud with them birds in his icebox I'll hep you git your road tax outen him," he proposed.

"An' you git half the reward, too."

"I ain't no spy," retorted Byram, "an' I don't want no reward outen nobody."

"But you're a 'ficial, same as me," persisted the warden. "Set down onto them shingles, friend, an' talk it over."

Byram sat down, fingering the head of his hammer; the warden, a fat, shiny man with tiny, greenish eyes and an unshaven jaw, took a seat beside him and began twisting a greasy black mustache.

"You an' me's 'ficials," he said with dignity, "an' we has burdens that folks don't know. My burden is these here folks that shoots patridges in July; your burdens is them people who don't pay no road tax."

"One o' them people is Dan McCloud, an' I'm goin' after that road tax tonight," said Byram.

"Can't you wait till I ketch McCloud with them birds?" asked the warden anxiously.

"No, I can't," snapped Byram; "I can't wait for no such thing!" But he spoke without enthusiasm.

"Can't we make it a kind o' 'ficial surprise for him, then?" suggested the warden.

"Me an' you is 'ficials; your path masters is 'ficials. We'll all go an' see Dan McCloud, that's what we'll do. How many path masters hev you got to back you up?" Byram's face grew red as fire.

"One," he said; "we ain't a metropolis."

"Well, git your path master an' come on, anyhow," persisted the game warden, rising and buttoning his faded coat.

"I—I can't," muttered Byram.

"Ain't no road master?" asked Dingman, astonished.

"Yes."

"Then can't you git your own path master to do his dooty an' execute the statutes?"

"You see," stammered Byram, "I appointed a—a lady."

"A what!" cried the game warden.

"A lady," repeated Byram firmly. "Tell the truth, we ain't got no path master; we've got a path mistress—Elton's kid, you know—"

"Elton?"

"What hung hisself in his orchard?"

"Yes."

"His kid? The girl that folks say is sweet on Dan McCloud?"

"A scowl creased Byram's face.

"It's a lie," he said thickly.

After a silence Byram spoke more calmly. "Old man Elton didn't die nothin' there. She done chores around an' taught school some, down to Frog Holler. She's that poor—nothin' but pertaters an' greens for to eat, an' her a-savin' her money for to go to one o' them female instoots where women learn to nurse sick folks."

"So you 'pinted her path master to kinder hep her along?"

"I—I kinder did."

"She's only a kid."

"Only a kid. 'Bout 16."

"An' it's against the law?"

"Kinder 'gainst it."

The game warden pretended to stifle a yawn.

"Well," he said petulantly, "I never knowed nothin' about it—if they ask me over to Spencers."

"That's right! An' I'll hep you do your dooty regardin' them patridges," said Byram quickly. "Dan McCloud's a loafer an' no good. When he's drunk he raises hell down to the store. Foxville is jest plumb sick o' him."

"Is it?" inquired the game warden, with interest.

"The folks is that sick o' him that they



was talkin' some o' runnin' him across the mountains," replied Byram; "but I jest made the boys hold their horses till I got that there road tax outen him first."

"Can't you git it?"

"Naw," drawled Byram. "I sent Billy Delany to McCloud's shanty to collect it, but McCloud near killed Bill with a ax. That was Tuesday. Some o' the boys was fixin' to run McCloud outen town, but I guess most of us ain't hankerin' to lead the demonstration."

"'Fraid?"

"Ya-as," drawled Byram.

The game warden laboriously produced a six-shooter from his side pocket. A red handkerchief protected the shiny barrel; he unwrapped this, regarded the weapon doubtfully, and rubbed his fat thumb over the butt.

"Huh!" ejaculated Byram contemptuously. "He's got a repeatin' rifle. He can cut a patridge's head off from here to that butternut 'cross the creek!"

"I'm goin' to git into his icehouse all the same," said the warden, without much enthusiasm.

"An' I'm bound to git my road tax," said Byram, "but jest how I'm to operate I dunno."

"Me neither," added the warden musingly. "God knows I hate to shoot people."

What he really meant was that he hated to be shot at.

A young girl in a faded pink sunbonnet passed along the road, followed by a dog. She returned the road master's awkward salutation with shy composure. A few moments later the game warden saw her crossing the creek on the stepping stones; her golden haired collie dog splashed after her.

"That's a slick girl," he said, twisting his heavy black mustache into two greasy points.

Byram glanced at him with a scowl. "That's the kid," he said.

"Eh? Elton's?"

"Yes."

"Your path master?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Nuthin'—she's good lookin'—for a path master," said the warden with a vicious leer intended for a compliment.

"What of it?" demanded Byram harshly. "Be you fixin' to splice with that there girl some day?" asked the game warden jocosely.

"What of it?" repeated Byram, with an ugly stare.

"O," said the warden hastily, "I didn't know nothin' was goin' on; I wasn't meanin' to rile nobody."

"O, you wasn't wasn't you?" said Byram, in a rage. "Now you can jest git your patridges by yourself an' leave me to git my road tax. I'm done with you."

"How you do rile up!" protested the warden. "How was I to know that you was sweet on your path master when folks over to Spencers say she's sweet on Dan McCloud—"

"It's a lie!" roared young Byram.

"Is it?" asked the warden, with interest. "He's a good lookin' chap, an' folks say—"

"It's a damn lie!" yelled Byram, "an' you can tell them folks that I say so. She don't know Dan McCloud to speak to him, an' he's that besotted with rum half the time that if he spoke to her she'd die o' fright, for all his good looks."

"Well, well," said the game warden soothingly; "I guess he ain't no account now, an' it's jest as well that we ketch him with them birds an' run him off to jail or shoot them mountains yonder."

"I don't care where he is as long as I git my tax," muttered Byram.

But he did care. At the irresponsible suggestion of the gossiping game warden a demon of jealousy had arisen within him. Was it true that Dan McCloud had cast his sordid eyes on Ellie Elton? If it was true, was the girl aware of it? Perhaps she had even exchanged words with the young man, for McCloud was a gentleman's son and could make himself agreeable when he chose, and he could appear strangely at ease in his ragged clothes—nay, even attractive.

All Foxville hated him. He was not one of them; if he had been perhaps they could have found something to forgive in his excesses and drunken recklessness.

But, though with them, he was not of them. He came from the city—Albany; he had been educated at Princeton college; he neither thought, spoke, nor carried himself as they did. Even in his darkest hours he never condescended to their society, nor, drunk as he was, would he permit any familiarities from the inhabitants.

Byram, who had been to an agricultural college, and who, on his return to Foxville, had promptly relapsed into the hideous dialect which he had imbibed with his mother's milk, never forgave the contempt with which McCloud had received his advances nor that young man's amused reputation of the relationship which Byram had ventured to recall.

So it came about that Byram at length agreed to aid the game warden in his lawful quest for the icebox, and he believed sincerely that it was love of law and duty which prompted him.

But their quest was fruitless. McCloud met them at the gate with a repeating rifle, knocked the game warden down, took away his revolver, and laughed at Byram, who stood awkwardly apart, dashed by the business-like rapidity of the operation.

"Road tax?" repeated McCloud, with a sneer. "I guess not. If the roads are good enough for cattle like you, pay for them yourselves! I use the woods and I pay no road tax."

"If you didn't have that there rifle—" began Byram sullenly.

"It's quite empty; look for yourself!" said McCloud, jerking back the lever.

"O, you'll be sorer yet!" cried Byram, self out of the nettles-choked ditch where he had been painfully squatting and started towards Foxville.

"I'll ketch you at it yet!" he called back; "I'll fix you an' your icebox!"

McCloud laughed.

"Gimme that two dollars," demanded Byram sullenly, "or do your day's stint on them there public roads."

McCloud dropped his hands into the pockets of his ragged shooting jacket.

"You'd better leave or I'll settle you as I settled Billy Delany."

"You hit him with a ax; that's homyicide assault. He'll fix you, see if he don't!" said Byram.

"No," said McCloud slowly. "I did not hit him with an ax. I had a ring on my finger when I hit him. I'm sorry it cut him."

"O, you'll be sorer yet!" cried Byram, turning away towards the road, where the game warden was anxiously waiting for him.

"We'll run you outer town!" called back the warden, waddling down the road.

"Try it," replied McCloud, yawning.

McCloud spent the afternoon lolling on the grass under the lilacs, listlessly watching the woodpeckers on the dead pines. Chewing a speck of mint, he lay there sprawling, hands clasping the back of his well shaped head, soothed by the cadence of the chirring locusts. When at length he had drifted pleasantly close to the verge of slumber a voice from the road below aroused him.

He listened listlessly; again came the timid call. He arose, brushing his shabby coat mechanically.

Down the bramble-choked path he slouched, shouldering his wood axe as a precaution. Passing around the rear of his house, he peered over the mess of tangle of sweetshrub which supported the remains of a rotting fence, and he saw, down in the road below, a young girl and a collie dog, both regarding him intently.

"Were you calling me?" he asked.

"It's only about your road tax," began the girl, looking up at him with pleasant gray eyes.

"What about my road tax?"

"It's due, isn't it?" replied the girl, with a faint smile.

"Is it?" he retorted, staring at her insolently. "Well, don't let it worry you, young woman."

The smile died out in her eyes.

"It does worry me," she said. "You owe the path master two dollars, or a day's work on the roads."

"Let the path master come and get it," he replied.

"I am the path master," she said.

He looked down at her curiously. She had dropped her faded pink skirts. Her sleeves were too short and so tight that the plump, white arm threatened to split them to the shoulder. Her shoes were quite as ragged as his. He noticed, however, that her hands were slender and soft under their creamy coat of tan and that her

fingers were as carefully kept as his own.

"You must be Ellie Elton," he said, remembering the miserable end of old man Elton, who also had been a gentleman until a duel with drink left him dangling by the neck under the new moon some three years since.

"Yes," she said, with a slight drawl, "and I think you must be Dan McCloud."

"Why do you think so?" he asked.

"From your rudeness."

He gave her an ugly look; his face slowly reddened.

"So you're the path master?" he said.

"Yes."

"And you expect to get money out of me?"

She flushed painfully.

"You can't get it," he said harshly; "I'm dog poor. I haven't enough to buy two loads for my rifle. So I'll buy one," he added, with a sneer.

She was silent. He chewed the mint leaf between his teeth and stared at her dog.

"If you are so poor—" she began.

"Poor!" he cut in, with a merciless laugh. "It's only a word to you, I suppose."

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"I also, am terribly poor. If you mean that I am not sorry for you, you are mistaken. Only the poor can understand each other."

"I can't understand you," he sneered.

"Why do you come and ask me to pay money to your road master when I have no money."

"Because I am path master. I must do my duty. I won't ask you for any money, but I must ask you to work out your tax. I can't help it, can I?"

He looked at her in moody, suspicious silence.

Idle, vicious, without talent, without ambition, he had drifted part way through college, a weak parody on those wealthy young men who idle through the great universities, leaving unsavory records. His father had managed to pay his debts, then very selfishly died, and there was nobody to support the son and heir, just emerging from a drunken junior year.

Creditors made a clean sweep in Albany; the rough shooting lodge in the Fox hills was left. Young McCloud took it.

The pine timber he sold as it stood. This kept him in drink and a little food. Then, when starvation looked in at his dirty window, he took his rifle and shot partridges.

Now, for years he had been known as a dealer in game out of season. The great hotels at Saratoga paid him well for his dirty work; the game wardens watched to catch him. But his ice house was a cave somewhere out in the woods, and as yet no warden had been quick enough to snare McCloud red handed.

Musing over these things, the young fellow leaned on the rotting fence, staring vacantly at the collie dog, who, in turn, stared gravely at him.

The path master, running her tanned fingers through her curls, laid one hand on her dog's silky head and looked up at him.

"I do wish you would work out your tax," she said.

Before McCloud could find voice to answer the alder thickset across the road parted and an old man shambled forth on a pair of unsteady bowed legs.

"The kid's right," he said, with a hoarse laugh. "Git yewr plick an' hoo, young man, an' save them two dollars tew pay yewr pa's bad debts!"

It was old Tansey, McCloud's nearest neighbor, loaded down with a bundle of alder staves, wood axe in one hand, rope in the other, supporting the heavy weight of wood on his bent back.

"Get out of that alder patch!" said McCloud sharply.

"Ain't I a-gittin'?" replied Tansey, winking at the little path master.

He Was Too Embittered Against Society to Work Out His Road Tax and Too Poor to Pay It Until the Little Path Master Told Him She Would Have to Pay It for Him.

"And keep out after this," added McCloud. "Those alders belong to me!"

"Pay yewr debts!" called out Tansey at the turn of the road. "Pay yewr debts, an' the Lord will pay yewr taxes!"

"The Lord can pay mine, then," said McCloud to the path master, "for I'll never pay a cent of taxes in Foxville. Now what do you say to that?"

The path master had nothing to say. She went away through the golden dust, one slim hand on the head of her collie dog, who trotted beside her waving his plummy tail.

That evening at the store, where McCloud had gone to buy cartridges, Tansey taunted him, and he replied contemptuously. Then young Byram flung a half-veiled threat at him, and McCloud replied with a threat that angered the loungers around the stove.

"What you want is a rawhide," said McCloud, eyeing young Byram.

"I guess I do," said Byram, "an' I'm goin' to buy one, too—unless you pay that there road tax."

"I'll be at home when you call," replied McCloud quietly, picking up his rifle and pocketing his cartridges.

Somebody near the stove said, "Go fur him!" to Byram, and the young road master glared at McCloud.

"He was a-sparkin' Ellie Elton," added Tansey, grinning. "Yew owe him a few for that, too, Byram."

Byram turned white, but made no movement. McCloud laughed.

"Wait," said the game warden, sitting behind the stove; "jest wait a while, that's all. No man can fire me into a ditch full o' stinging nettles an' live to lart no plizen'd lart at me!"

"Dingman," said McCloud contemptuously, "you're like the rest of them here in Foxville—all folks who run to earth when they see a Vinchostater."

He flung his rifle carelessly into the hollow of his left arm; the muzzle was in line with the game warden, and that official promptly moved out of range, upsetting his chair in his haste.

"Quit that!" bawled the storekeeper from behind his counter.

"Quit what—eh?" demanded McCloud. "Here, you old rat, give me the whisky bottle! Quick! What's money to say? Trot out that grog or I'll shoot your lamps out!"

"He's been a-drinkin' again," whispered the game warden. "Fur God's sake, give him that bottle, somebody!"

But as the bottle was pushed across the counter McCloud swung his rifle butt and knocked the bottle into slivers. "Drinks for the crowd!" he said, with an ugly laugh. "Get down and lap it up off the floor, you fox cubs!"

Then, pushing the fly-screen door open with one elbow, he sauntered out into the moonlight, careless who might follow him, although now that he had insulted and defied the entire town there were men behind who would have done him a mischief if they had dared believe him of his guard.

He walked moodily on in the moonlight, disdainful to either listen or glance behind him. There was a stoop to his shoulders now, a loose carriage which sometimes marks a man whose last shred of self-respect has gone, leaving him nothing but the naked virtues and vices with which he was born.

McCloud's vices were many, though some of them lay dormant; his virtues, if they were virtues, could be counted in a breath—a natural courage and a generous heart, paralyzed and inactive under a load of despair and a deep resentment against everybody and everything. He hated the fortunate and the unfortunate alike; he despised his neighbors, he detested himself. His inertia had given place to a fierce restlessness; he felt a sudden and curious desire for a physical struggle with a strong antagonist—like young Byram.

All at once the misery of his poverty arose up before him. It was not unendurable simply because he was obliged to endure it.

The thought of his hopeless poverty stupefied him at first; then rage followed. Poverty was an antagonist—like young Byram—a powerful one. How he hated it! How he hated Byram! Why? And, as he walked there, shuffling up the dust in the moonlight, he thought, for the first time in his life, that if poverty were only a breathing creature he would strangle it with his naked hands. But logic carried him no further. He began to brood again, remembering Tansey's insults and the white anger of young Byram and the threats from the dim group around the stove. If they molested him they would remember it. He would neither pay taxes nor work for them.

Then he thought of the path master, red-riding as he remembered Tansey's accusation. He shrugged his shoulders and straightened up, dismissing her from his mind, but she returned, only to be again dismissed with an effort.

When for the third time the memory of the little path master returned he glanced up, as though he could see her in the flesh standing in the road before his house. She was there—in the flesh.

The moonlight silvered her hair, and her face was the face of a spirit; it quickened the sluggish blood in his veins to see her so in the moonlight.

She said: "I thought that if you knew I should be obliged to pay your road tax if you do not you would pay. Would you?"

A shadow glided across the moonlight. It was the collie dog, and it came and looked up into McCloud's shadowy eyes.

"Yes—I would," he said; "but I cannot."

His heart began to beat faster; a tide of wholesome blood stirred and flowed through his veins. It was the latent decency within him awaking.

"Little path master," he said, "I am very poor; I have no money. But I will work out my taxes because you ask me."

He raised his head and looked at the spectral forest, where dead pines towered, ghastly in the moon's beams. That morning he had cut the last wood on his own land. He had nothing left to sell but a patch of brambles and a hut which no one would buy.

"I guess I'm no good," he said; "I can't work."

"But what will you do?" she asked, with pitiful eyes raised.

"Do? O, what I have done. I can shoot partridges."

"Market shooting is against the law," she said faintly.

"The law!" he repeated. "It seems to me there is nothing but law in this God forsaken hole!"

"Can't you live within the law? It is not difficult, is it?" she asked.

"It is difficult for me," he said sullenly. The dogged brute in him was awaking in its turn. He was already sorry he had promised her to work out his taxes. Then he remembered the penalty. Clearly he would have to work or she would be held responsible.

"If anybody would take an unskilled man," he began, "I—I would try to get something to do."

"Won't they?"

"No, I tried it—once."

"Only once?"

He gave a short laugh and stooped to pat the collie, saying: "Don't bother me, little path master."

"No—I want," she replied slowly.

She went away in the moonlight, saying good-night and calling her collie, and he walked up the slope to the house, curiously at peace with himself and the dim world hidden in the shadows around.

He was not sleepy. As he had no candles, he sat down in the moonlight, idly balancing his rifle on his knees. From force of habit he loaded it, then rubbed the stock with the palm of his hand, eyes dreaming.

Into the tangled garden a whippoorwill flashed on noiseless wings, rested a moment, unseen, then broke out into husky, breathless calling. A minute later the whispering call came from the forest's edge, then farther away, almost inaudible in the thickening dusk.

And, as he sat there, thinking of the little path master, he became aware of a man sinking along the moonlit road below. His heart stopped; then the pulses went bounding, and his fingers closed on his rifle.

There were other men in the moonlight now—he counted five—and he called out to them, demanding their business.

"You're our business," shouted back young Byram. "Git up an' dust out o' Foxville, you dirty loafer!"

"Better stay where you are," said McCloud grimly.

Then old Tansey bawled: "Yew low cuss, git outer this here town! Yew air meane'r'n pussley an' meane'r'n quack root, an' we air bound tew run yew into them mountains, b'gosh!"

"There was a silence; then the same voice: "Be ye calculatin' tew mosey, Dan McCloud?"

"You had better stay where you are," said McCloud; "I'm armed."

"Ye be?" replied a new voice. "Then come out o' that or we'll snake ye out!"

Byram began moving towards the house, shotgun raised.

"Stop!" cried McCloud, jumping to his feet.

But Byram came on, gun leveled, and McCloud retreated to his front door.

"Give it to him!" shouted the game warden; "shoot his windows out!" There was a flash from the road and a load of buckshot crashed through the window overhead.

Before the echoes of the report died away McCloud's voice was heard again, calmly warning them back.

Something in his voice arrested the general advance.

"I don't know why I don't kill you in your tracks, Byram," said McCloud. "I've wanted the excuse often enough. But now I've got it and I don't want it, somehow. Let me alone, I tell you."

"He's no good!" said the warden distinctly. Byram crept through the picket fence and lay close, hugging his shotgun.

"I tell you I intend to pay my taxes," cried McCloud desperately. "Don't force me to shoot!"

The sullen rage was rising. He strove to crush it back—to think of the little path master.

"For God's sake, go back!" he pleaded hoarsely.

Suddenly Byram started running towards the house, and McCloud clapped his rifle to his cheek and fired. Four flashes from the road answered his shot, but Byram was down in the grass screaming, and McCloud had vanished into his house.

Charge after charge of buckshot tore through the flimsy clapboards. The moonlight was brightened by pale flashes, and the timbered hills echoed the cracking shots.

After a while no more shots were fired, and presently a voice broke out in the stillness.

"Be yew layin' low or be yew dead, Dan McCloud?"

There was no answer.

"Or be yew playin' noxy possum," continued the voice, with nasal rising inflection.

Byram began to groan and crawl towards the road.

"Let him alone," he moaned; "let him alone. He's got grit if he ain't got nathin' else."

"Air yew done for?" demanded Tansey sobberly.

"No, no," groaned Byram; "I'm jest winged. He done it, an' he was right. Didn't he say he'd pay his taxes? He's plumb right. Let him alone, or he'll come out an' murder us all!"

Byram's voice ceased. Tansey mounted the dark slope, peering among the brambles, treading carefully.

"What be ye, Byram?" he bawled.

But it was ten minutes before he found the young man, quite dead, in the long grass.

With an oath Tansey flung up his gun and drove a charge of buckshot crashing through the front door. The door quivered; the last echoes of the shot died out; silence followed.

Then the shattered door swung open slowly, and McCloud reeled out, still clutching his rifle. He tried to raise it; he could not, and it fell clattering. Tansey covered him with his shotgun, cursing him fiercely.

"Up with them hands o' yours!" he snarled; but McCloud only muttered and began to rock and sway in the doorway.

Tansey came up to him, shotgun in hand. "Then you're gone fur Byram," he said. "Yew air bound to set in the chair for this."

McCloud, leaning against the sill, looked at him with heavy eyes.

"It's well enough for you," he muttered; "you are only a savage. But Byram went to college—and so did I—and we are nothin' but savages like you, after all—nothin' but savages."

He collapsed and slid to the ground, lying hunched up across the threshold.

"I want to see the path master!" he cried sharply.

A shadow fell across the shot-riddled door snow-white in the moonshine.

"She's here," said the game warden sobberly.

But McCloud had started talking and muttering to himself.