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5 WESTERN Novels Magazine

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FEATURING

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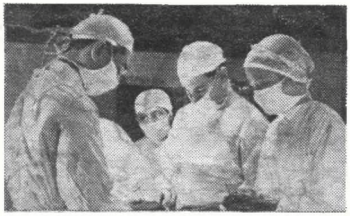

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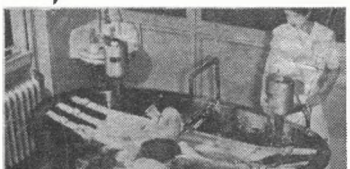

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THE INDIAN AND HIS HORSE

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

HISTORIANS have just about succeeded in correcting the mistaken idea that the Indian got his horse from the wild mustangs which had escaped the Spanish, and have proved that the so-called horse Indians were all mounted long before they ever learned to capture wild horses. Despite which fact, the acquiring of horses was about the most important activity of the horse tribes of Indians. And it is surprising to note that they preferred to steal them from rivals rather than to breed them. They had as many horses as they needed, but they still wanted more.

Their reason for stealing horses then was not the need for them, but was the gauge of their prowess. Just as a businessman wants to prove his worth by making more money than the next man, or a fisherman wants to catch a bigger fish, the horse Indian wanted to be able to steal more horses and thus demonstrate his ability and cunning.

The young buck who wanted to make a name for himself did not care so much about getting scalps, as the historian would have you believe, but wanted to prove his ability by stealing a rival's horse right out from under his nose, and the better the horse and more closely guarded the animal was, the more credit the young hunter got for having stolen him.

There are many historical proofs of this. It might come as a surprise to many of us to learn from white men who lived among the Indians that, in the case of the Blackfeet in particular, it was considered a lot more brilliant to steal a man's horses without having to kill him than to murder him in the act of theft. Anybody could kill a man and take his horses. They made a game out of it, and would risk and often lose their lives in an effort to get away with the animals without having to kill the owner.

Some Feats Unbelievable

Some of the feats of these Indian horse thieves seemed unbelievable. There was a big mine in Arizona which used a lot of pit mules and horses in the handling of ore. In order to keep these animals out of the hands of the Indians, a thick, high adobe wall was built around the mule yard. The wall had only one gate in it, which opened beside an adobe house in which slept the *vaqueros*. They kept this door open all night, and put watch dogs in the corral so that the guards could defend the mules at the slightest sound of movement or barking of the watchdogs. They barred the gate with logs tied down with rawhide, and hung chains from the logs so that they would make a noise if disturbed.

One night five Apaches were tempted by the challenge. They worked without a sound, first trying to tear down the adobe wall.

Failing that, they cut the rawhide holding the bars and managed silently to remove the noisy chains. Even the watchdogs did not hear them.

Not a sound came from dog or chains, and the guards slept on until they were awakened by the sudden sound of five Indians astride five of their mules, racing out of the corral and driving 39 other mules and horses ahead of them.

At another place, a big Spanish rancher tried to outsmart the Indians by building a ten-foot-high stone wall around his lot and closing it with a big steel gate which was kept padlocked. The Indians couldn't break through this barricade without making noise, so they thought up another caper. They climbed over the walls in the darkness, mounted the horses they wanted, and waited patiently in the darkness within the barn.

When the rancher's men threw the gate open at daylight to drive his stock out, the Indians leaned over their stolen mounts and raced out the gate which the rancher's own employees had so obligingly opened for them.

Horse Trading Deals

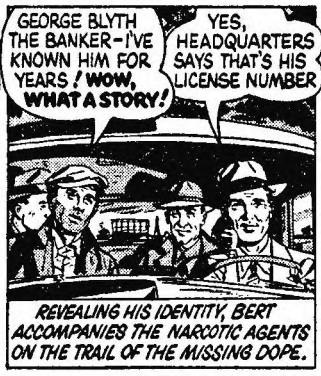
At one time there was a section in Colorado to which horses and Indians seemed to gravitate every year. One white trader reported in his journal that, in 1821 at the meeting place, which was near the present town of Pueblo, there were half a dozen Indian tribes with more than 20,000 head of horses for trading purposes, hundreds of which had been stolen from the very tribes which were now trading other stolen horses to get their own back.

He also reported that while this big horse-trading deal was going on, other tribes came in with herds of as many as 200 horses stolen from Spanish ranchers, and that while these horse thieves were doing business with one another, still other Indians somehow managed to slip in on them and steal more than 500 head of the horses right out from under the noses of the men who had originally filched them.

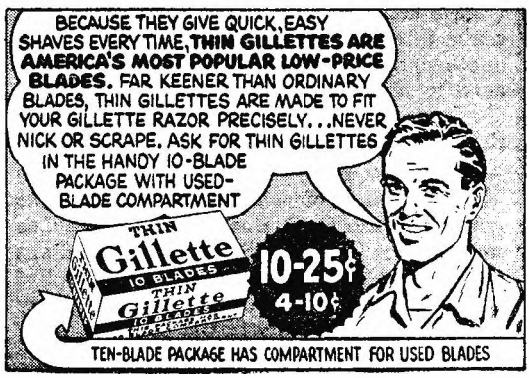
As evidence of wealth and ability, the horse was the Rolls Royce of its day. This same trader reported that the Crow Indians at that time had about ten thousand head of animals, averaging three horses for every man, woman and child in the tribe.

REPORTER'S HUNCH PAYS OFF TWO WAYS...

MASQUERADING AS A "SKID ROW" CHARACTER TO GATHER FEATURE MATERIAL FOR HIS NEWSPAPER, BERT EVENS, FAMOUS REPORTER, WITNESSES A PECULIAR HAPPENING...



REVEALING HIS IDENTITY, BERT ACCOMPANIES THE NARCOTIC AGENTS ON THE TRAIL OF THE MISSING DOPE.



A Reptile That Squirts Blood

The Last of the Dinosaurs

A MINIATURE dinosaur of the desert country, the horned toad, or lizard, is despite its ferocious appearance one of the West's most harmless wildlife denizens. Though gentle and retiring by nature, the horned toad has taken on a legendary aura in some cases.

There was a toad named "Old Rip" who resided in a space in a cornerstone of a Texas courthouse for three decades. During that time Old Rip wasn't given any water or food—but small insects must have crawled through the air hole. And horned toads get most of their water by eating insects.

Another famed Texas toad was "Big Jim," who traveled all over the country in a specially built wire cage. Named in honor of Jim Farley, postmaster general in 1938, Big Jim was sent to the postmasters of the cities by a Big Spring, Texas, man. His cage was profusely autographed when he returned to Big Spring.

Although he does look fierce, the horned toad is quite helpless against such enemies as snakes and birds. He has several features and characteristics, however, that offer some protection. The ability to change colors, and to merge with his drab desert setting is the principal means of protection. The rough, spiny body and the rather sharp horns on the toad's head also make snakes and birds hesitate in attacking.

Hungry snakes will, however, try to swallow this toad—and the results are usually disastrous. I once found a sidewinder rattlesnake dead on an Arizona desert trail. There was a big bulge in the snake's middle and a spine protruded through the skin. The horned toad had died, but it had also killed its enemy.

Birds, such as the road runner and the butcher bird, are more fortunate, because they peck the horned toad apart a little at a time. I've seen small horned toads hanging from the barbs of barbed-wire fences in Texas, put there by the small but vicious butcher birds.

In addition to the above characteristics, the horned toad will close its eyes, go completely limp, and pretend to be dead if something or someone is holding it. Once the grip is relaxed, however, Mister Spiny is off in a flash!

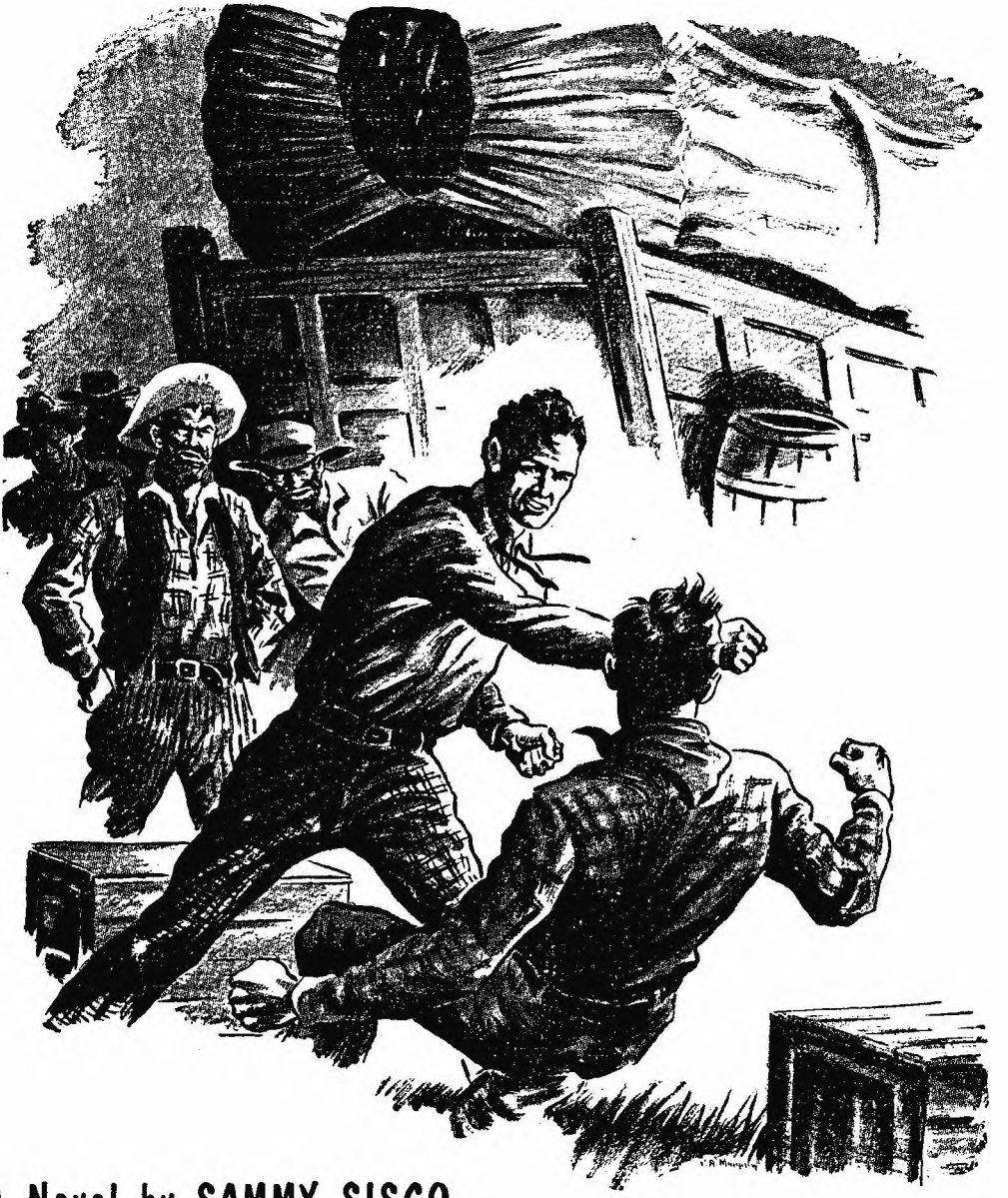
Scientists reveal that horned toads either lay eggs or give birth to their young alive, depending upon the variety. Twenty or more young may be born at one time. Scientists also think that at one time the horned toad had three eyes, the third one being located in the center of the head. But the only indication of it today is a scale.

This desert denizen doesn't like the cold, so it hibernates by burying in the sand during winter months—and also buries itself at night, coming out when the sun begins to warm the sand. Apparently it is able to do without food for weeks and even months, although it will eat large numbers of black ants when it has the chance.

One may pick up these members of the reptile family without fear of being hurt, although the toads will try to bite, or hook one's hand. Their most weird defensive action is to spit blood from their eyes, sometimes for a distance of three feet. However, this is not a too common action, since very few of the toads seem able to accomplish this feat. In some sections of the country, a religious significance has been attached to this characteristic. Thus the name "sacred toad," by which the creature is known in certain areas of the Southwest.

In the parade of Western wildlife, the horned toad may be just a miniature, but he gets his share of attention.

—*Ferris Weddle*



A Novel by SAMMY SISCO

WAGON BOSS

Miles Nelson acquired the reputation of a loafer when he took over a freighting line—but he didn't do any idling when he got on the trail of his brother's killer

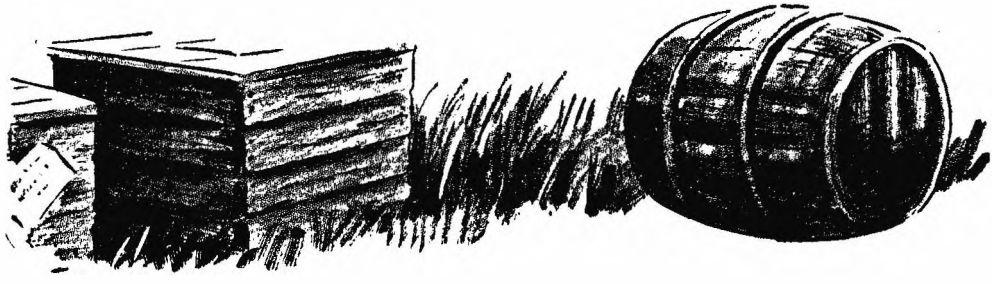
I

MILES NELSON sat in the corner booth of the Congress Bar, fingering a glass of amber-colored liquor with his right hand and gazing hard at a clean deck of cards on the worn table in front of him. Finally he cut the cards several times and placed them carefully on the table, solitaire fashion. His long fingers manipulated the deck with the ease of a professional gambler, but a closer look showed his hands to be too brown and too strong for those of a cardman.

Presently, Doc Cardiff, the town's combined doctor-lawyer, pushed through the swinging doors with his customary black bag under his right arm. Placing his bag on the bar he took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair that was well grayed at the temples. He spotted Miles in the booth and waved a greeting.

Miles Nelson, new owner of the immense Nelson Line, once Lordsburg's biggest freighting outfit, nodded and continued playing. He turned up four cards, with the last being the ace of diamonds. Seriously he put the card above the row he just made, and listened to the voices coming over from the bar. Doc Cardiff didn't know it, but some of the things he was saying could be heard in that corner booth.

By accident, Miles had discovered that the small corner card booth, usually unoccupied in the late afternoon, was a nat-



# of LORDSBURG

ural receptacle for sound. The Congress Bar, occupying the corner on the main street, was a rarity in Western architecture, for it was octagonal in its structure. Miles thought this odd shape was the reason why sound funneled into his corner booth. Men standing at the bar fifteen to twenty feet away, speaking in moderately low tones, could be distinctly heard in the booth.

EACH afternoon, since he arrived five weeks ago, Miles Nelson made it a fixed habit to take this position, armed with a glass and a deck of cards, listening and saying nothing. Gradually he acquired the reputation of an idler—while the Nelson Freight Line headed for the rocks.

The doctor was speaking again, occasionally glancing at Miles out of the corner of his eye, contempt showing plainly on his thin, small face.

"Lane Nelson spent ten years of his life building up the Nelson Line to what it is," Cardiff said bitterly. "Miles will ruin it in another couple of weeks. I'll give him a month at the longest. All he does is loaf in saloons—a damned solitaire player. His freight line is losing customers every day. There's dissension in the yards."

Miles Nelson turned up four more cards and found another ace. His lean, brown face showed no expression as he placed the second ace beside the first. His gray, flat-crowned Stetson was pulled low over brown-colored eyes that showed a trace of recent physical pain. When Doc Cardiff mentioned Lane Nelson, Miles lips tightened slightly as he remembered his brother.

It was over ten years ago that Lane had purchased his first dilapidated old Conestaga. Miles hadn't want to be tied down in Lordsburg; he wanted out of New Mexico. There was a lot of world for a seventeen-year-old fellow to see. Miles Nelson had saddled his horse and kept going. In his travels he had heard and seen that Lane was building up the Nelson Freighting Line, from one Conestoga to one hundred and fifty Studebaker and Murphy wagons. He had them on the trail with nearly fifteen hundred head of stock to keep them rolling, and over two hundred employees on his pay-roll.

"It was Lane Nelson who made this town," Doc Cardiff was saying to one of his recent patients. "If he'd lived, he'd have built the Nelson Line into the biggest freighting outfit west of the Missouri. Thirty-three is a hell of a time to die."

"Heard it was a steer that killed him." Cardiff's patient-client stated.

Miles Nelson leaned slightly forward, big shoulders hunched. The years he spent in Arizona had darkened his skin and put crows-feet around the corners of his eyes. He had punched cows in the Panhandle of Texas, ridden herd through Mexico, been a faro dealer in El Paso. He'd been to Dodge and Virginia City, and even ridden up to San Francisco . . . Miles Nelson had been around.

Doc Cardiff's letter, saying that Lane had fallen into one of his own steer pens and been trampled to death, had been the first news he'd had from Lordsburg in over nine months. Cardiff had advised him that Lane Nelson's will had passed on the entire Nelson Line to his youngest brother.

It was the will that had first aroused Miles suspicions. Lane had never married, and at the age of thirty-three, a man didn't usually worry about a will—not the type of man Lane had been. He had always been bubbling over with enthusiasm and new plans for the freight line. He hadn't been thinking about death, not unless he'd expected it to come up behind his back. And Lane Nelson hadn't been the kind of a man to fall into one of his own steer corrals.

"Lane had just got a shipment of half-wild Texas steers," Cardiff stated at the bar. "One of his teamsters saw him sitting on the top rail of the corral at three in the afternoon. At six that evening they took what was left of Lane out of the corral."

"What about this other chap, his brother?" the former patient asked. "Is he trying to run the Nelson Line now?"

"I don't see how he can—no drive in him." Cardiff stated. "He likes his cards and his drink too much. I say, he'll loose or throw away what Lane Nelson built up."

MILES NELSON permitted a faint smile to slide over his face. He'd only been in Lordsburg five weeks or less, and already they had him labeled.

He'd made it his business to frequent the towns saloons in place of the freight office. He sat in the Congress Bar and kept his eyes and ears open—hoping to hear one thing—one clue—anything that would shed light on his brother's death. At present he wasn't interested in freight.

Presently Doc Cardiff left with his client.

Miles still continued to deal out the cards in serious solitaire fashion. A waiter walked over to his table to pick up his glass. Seeing that it was still filled, he gave Miles a quizzical look and walked away.

Miles had an idea what the waiter thought, so when his back was turned, Miles picked up the glass, sipped the top of it, and quietly poured the rest of the contents into the spittoon at the side of the table. Then he caught the waiter's eye and had his glass refilled.

It was half-past-six when Karen Collins looked over the swinging doors. Miles saw her in the bar mirror as she swung through the batwings. Karen Collins walked past the bar, dark eyes flashing, her pretty lips tight over even teeth. Miles wasn't quite sure whether her hair was just black or blue-black. He told himself that it was none of his business and that he didn't greatly care.

Karen was one of the few, if not the only business woman in Lordsburg. Her father had been a wagonmaster for the Nelson Line, and he'd been killed along the trail to Tucson by Indians. Lane Nelson had taken the girl into the office and showed her the in's and out's of freighting. That had been when she was fifteen, well over seven years ago. The lawyer-doctor, Doc Cardiff, told Miles that Lane had promised her a job with the Nelson Line as long as she wanted it.

"Which means," Cardiff had chuckled to Miles, "until she decides to become my wife."

Miles saw the grins on the men's faces as Karen made her way past the bar, and it annoyed him. Patiently he waited, knowing she'd come over to him. Once before she had burst into the Congress Bar, belittling herself, and demanded that he return at once to the office to confer with a customer who had been waiting well over an hour. Miles wondered what it was now.

Karen saw him and hurried over, small hands tightly clenched. "Mr. Nelson," she said grimly, "it might interest you to know that your teamsters are on the verge of a riot with your blacksmiths—back in the yards."

Miles fingered the glass of liquor, then placed the deck of cards on the table before him. "Is Naylor around?" he asked.

"You know he's not!" snapped the girl. "He told you he had to take the morning stage to Deming!"

Miles frowned. "That's right, I just forgot," he stated. "And Hayden?"

Karen Collins was mad, and bit her lip in anger. "I haven't seen Hayden," she again snapped. "But I did think, since you own the Nelson Line, you would know where some of your men are, some of the time, sir!"

"I guess I do own it." Miles nodded. "Well, I'll come over and see what the trouble is." Deliberately taking his time, he took another sip from the full glass, then drew a silken handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his lips. He noticed the anger rising in her eyes, and a smile played faintly across his face. "There's nothing to be frightened about. If they like to beat each other, a little fight won't hurt them," he said seriously. "A good fight once in a while keeps the others contented, you know."

ANGRILY the girl told him: "Skib Royce was supposed to take eight wagons to Fort Grant and be on the way at five o'clock this morning. Colonel Wells telegraphed from the post wanting to know why his consignment hadn't arrived. Those wagons are still in our yards—and the teamsters are drunk!"

"Haven't you seen Royce?" Miles asked her.

"He says his hands are tied until the men sober up. He can't do anything with them."

Miles rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'll go over and see what I can do, but—" He didn't finish his sentence, just shrugged his shoulders and pushed back his chair as he rose. He winced as a sharp pain went through his left shoulder and down his chest, and he secretly damned the bronc that had bucked down on top of him. But that had been about two months ago, hell he'd been in the hospital

when he got word of Lane's death. The doctor in Dallas had said he should take it easy for at least five, six months—and keep out of fights until his cracked bones healed completely. But hell, thought Miles, what's a fellow to do when the town and a girl he would like to know better, thinks him a drunken, card-playing coward.

He was glad that the girl didn't see him grab his chest, as he made his way to the door, with Karen Collins trailing after him.

No words were spoken as they went down the street. They noticed a string of new Espenshied freight wagons turn into Main Street, bullwhackers shouting hoarsely. They could see that each wagon bed was empty . . . it's load delivered. On the canvas of each wagon was written one word: Tucker.

"Ruck Tucker," Karen Collins snapped, "will put you in the gutter in three months."

Miles grinned as he murmured, "At the Congress they give me only a month." He watched the Tucker wagons with interest. Doc Cardiff had told him that Ruck Tucker had been Lane's biggest and only competitor immediately before Lane had died. Tucker was classed comparatively as a newcomer to Lordsburg, but for some reason he was moving forward by leaps and bounds.

"Tucker's a hard man to beat," Doc Cardiff had told Miles, "but he always plays clean. I do think your brother liked him, although they were always fighting each other over contracts. But they could always take a couple of drinks together."

Karen Collins was saying: "I knew your brother, Lane, for several years. I also knew the plans he had for the Nelson Line. I'd hate to see his dreams smashed because the new boss has no gumption—just sits in saloons every afternoon, playing cards."

"I do think Miss Collins," Miles replied, "you worry much too much." Then, looking directly into her eyes, he added: "I assure you the Nelson Line won't go under."

"Well," snapped Karen, "I see nothing that you are doing to help the situation!"

Miles shrugged. "Some things just can't be helped along too fast," he muttered, as he thought of his cracked ribs and dislocated shoulder that were finally on the mend. Damn, he muttered to himself, if I get into a fight and lose, the teamsters won't have any use for their new boss; they'll think he's what his clothes insinuate—a tenderfoot!

"That's why Miles had sat around since he hit Lordsburg—to gather his strength. Now he was being pushed head-first into a fight which he knew would eventually come. Miles Nelson was carried away with his thoughts and hardly heard Karen saying:

"Ruck Tucker offered me a job with the Tucker Line, yesterday," she muttered slowly. "I said I'd wait until he takes over Nelson."

DAMN women in general, Miles thought. Always needling a man. Then a small smile played around the corners of his mouth as he stared down the street. The Tucker Line office was directly in his view, a large sprawling building with the yards behind it. He noticed the long rows of freight wagons and the big consignments of goods piled high on the landings, heavy tarpaulins covering them, ready for loading and delivery.

A big, dark-haired man was standing in the doorway. Upon seeing Nelson and the girl, he stepped out to meet them. He was fingering a cigar. A wide, flat-crowned black Stetson was pushed back on his head so people could see his wavy hair. Miles had only seen Tucker from a distance, and had never spoken to him. Tucker waved his hand at Karen Collins and flashed a grin that showed his teeth to be white and even. He had a massive jaw and light blue eyes, set far apart, that made an odd contrast to his blackish hair.

Miles Nelson nodded his head and Karen smiled. Already Miles could hear angry voices coming from the Nelson yards. From under the brim of his Stetson, he looked quickly at Ruck Tucker, and fancied he had seen a small smile on the man's face. He wasn't sure, but that smirk rang a bell inside of him.

Miles didn't stop, but hastened his steps. Then he heard Tucker call after him:

"I'd like to see see you some time tonight, Nelson."

Miles flung back his answer, "Any

time," and the little bell inside him seemed to ring again. He felt his pulses begin to quicken, as he thought of the weeks of waiting and listening that were now past. He had the sensation that action would begin within the next few days. As he turned into the Nelson yards, Karen looked up at him. He was walking very fast. She gazed queerly at the man ahead of her and half-trotted to catch up.

II

AT LEAST twenty-five to thirty men were in the yards, and one fist fight was going on. A big teamster with a beard was slamming his huge fists into the face of a much smaller and shorter man, who wore a blacksmith's apron around his waist. Finally the smaller man got up with a rock clutched in his fist and lunged forward in an attempt to smash the teamster's head.

The teamster charged, lowered his head abruptly, and butted the smaller man in the stomach, knocking him down again. The bearded teamster stepped back then and laughed. The bullwhackers cheered.

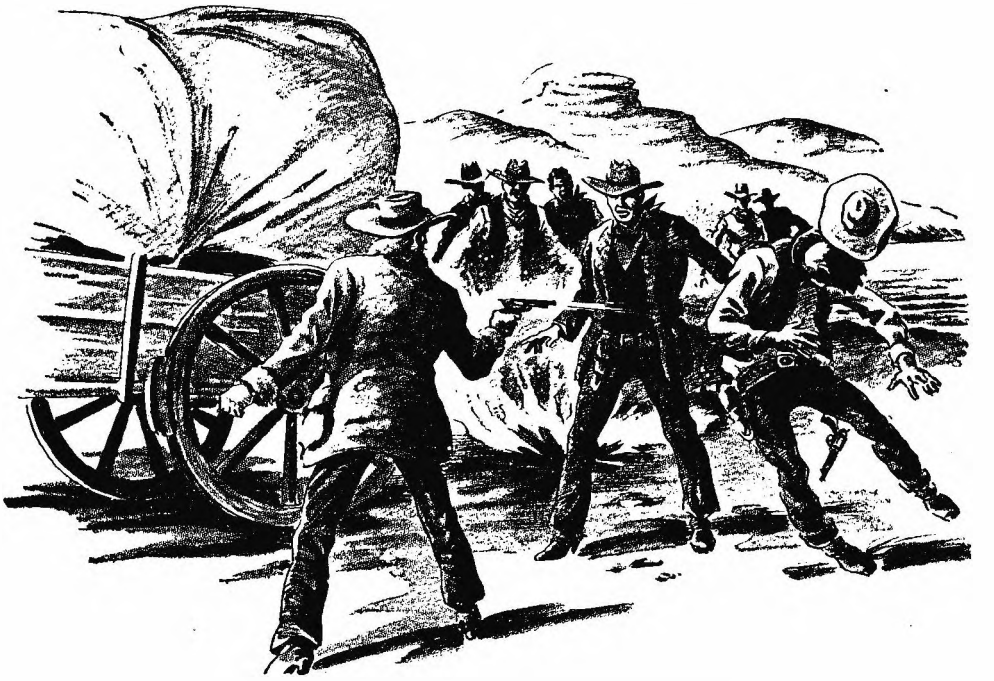
Miles pushed his way through the crowd until he was standing in front of the bearded teamster. Nearby a teamster cursed at him, then recognized who he was, grinned, but offered no apology.

"What seems to be the trouble boys?" Miles asked with a smile. He was dressed in a gambler-style claw-hammer coat, white silk shirt, shoe-string tie, fine check trousers that were worn on the outside of highly polished, Mexican-styled boots. His face was clean-shaven and he contrasted sharply with every man in the yard, for practically all of them wore beards.

The big fighting teamster with the beard stared hard at Miles for a moment, then spat contemptuously. He stood about three inches taller than Miles, and was heavier in the waist and shoulders. His blue flannel shirt, stained with blood and sweat, was sticking out of his pants. He stood, feet apart, braced and with balled fists as big as wagon hub caps as he chuckled:

"Hell, Mr. Nelson! We've just been settling a friendly little argument!"

"Any business of mine?" Miles asked



Hayden staggered backward, clutching at his stomach

him, still smiling, as he looked over the heads of the mob and gazed at the wagons, loaded and waiting to move. He remembered that they'd been there all day and should have left early in the morning for Fort Grant. Then he caught a glimpse of the thin-faced, blond-haired Skib Royce, Nelson wagonmaster, who was supposed to head that load out.

Royce was grinning broadly as he edged his way back into the mob of teamsters. Practically all of the men had been drinking, but Royce had managed to stay sober. Again that bell started to tinkle in Miles Nelson's head. There was a reason for all the slow deliveries and lost contracts; there was certainly a reason for liquor-drinking in the yards, and for the fights among the men. Miles Nelson secretly wished he was physically able to get that reason out of the men—but he wasn't.

Then the booming voice of the teamster broke through Miles' thoughts: "It's no damned business of your's," the blackish-bearded teamster told him flatly, his brown eyes glancing to the blacksmith who was finally trying to get to his feet, still gasping for air.

Miles smiled and nodded his head in agreement. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and then said in pleasant tones: "Let's go to the office and have a drink on that, friend." He saw surprise come into the big man's eyes, immediately followed by a crafty smile. The big teamster thought he'd frightened Miles into a friendly talk.

"Reckon you're one of these fellows they call—gentlemen, Mr. Nelson." The big teamster looked around triumphantly.

MILES glanced up and saw the contempt on Karen Collins face. What did that woman want? he thought. For him to get all beat up so she could say I told you so? Thrusting hands in his pockets, Miles Nelson walked past Karen and headed toward the office. "Don't think I know your name," he said to the teamster.

"Kimroe—Lon Kimroe. I've been working for the Nelson Line for near on to six years."

Miles smiled as he looked at Kimroe. "You must have known my brother pretty well."

"A damned good man." Kimroe returned, while already he was wiping his lips in anticipation.

Lon Kimroe was a rough and tumble teamster, big, crude; but always gave a hand to the under-dog—if he thought the under-dog was worthy. He was in his late thirties and liked the hard work of a teamster, and a good drink now and then.

Miles led him into the yard office and went to a side cabinet. He returned with a bottle of choice whisky and two glasses, and poured. He watched the big teamster down his drink in one gulp and he drank his more slowly as he mentally measured the giant. Kimroe must weigh near two hundred and twenty pounds and stand close to six feet three in his boots.

"Like it?" Miles asked him.

"Give me another." Kimroe grinned insolently.

"Right now," Miles said as he took the glass from the giant. Suddenly Miles grasped him by the shirt front and just as suddenly smashed his right fist against the teamster's hairy jaw, knocking him back against the wall. Brushing a chair aside, Miles went after Kimroe, ramming home terrific blows with both fists, knocking Kimroe's head against the wall with each blow. Miles completely forgot the sudden pain in his chest and shoulder. Shucks, he couldn't sit around forever waiting to mend and, in the meantime, let his brother's business fold up!

Kimroe roared, cursed and tried to break away. He threw a ponderous fist in the direction of Miles' head, but Miles ducked. Then he hammered Kimroe against the wall. Only this time Kimroe managed to get one good blow in, and slammed a brutally, vicious fist through Miles' guard and landed square on his chest. Miles let out a short groan as he doubled up, lowered his guard and grabbed his ribs with both arms.

Kimroe was back against the wall getting his breath in heaves. When Miles raised his head, Kimroe saw pain clearly written across the younger man's face and he knew he had hurt him. Why, he must be softer than butter—if one blow does that to him, the teamster thought. Grinning he stepped forward ready to finish the job. Miles knew he would have to make his next blow count or nothing else would, for he could feel himself growing suddenly sick and weak. Forgetting his

cracked ribs, Miles smashed Kimroe's mouth with his left and left the sharp pain of that blow clear up to his brain. Then he hit Kimroe in the stomach with his right, getting his full hundred and eighty pounds behind that blow.

Kimroe suddenly collapsed. He folded over in the middle, and fell like a sack of meal. With blood dripping from his mouth and nose, he sat on the floor, stupidly shaking his head and staring up at Miles with bleary brown eyes.

"Remember this," Miles huskily whispered, as he clasped his chest with his left arm. "Anything that goes on in my yard is my business!" His voice had no emotion as he continued: "You understand that, Kimroe?"

"I sure do—now!" Kimroe said dully. "I—we didn't figure you had it in you."

MILES poured two more drinks. Bending down, he handed one to Kimroe. The teamster gulped down the hot liquor, still sitting against the wall, as Miles said:

"I—I—haven't—" Miles commenced. "Don't let this fight fool you—you're a hard man to beat—I—" He barely made it to the chair at the desk before he collapsed in it, his glass of whisky spilling on the floor.

Dimly he heard the slight movement behind him, turning his head slightly he saw Karen Collins standing in the doorway, and he knew she had seen part of the fight. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kimroe getting up, holding his jaw and rubbing his stomach ruefully. So the teamster still wanted to fight he thought. Well, he'd show that grinning woman at the door. Rising, Miles stumbled to his feet, left arm clasped to his chest, the pain of it was taking his breath away as he tried to gasp for air. The last thing he remembered was Kimroe starting forward, and the crash of his chair where it fell to the floor behind him, where he shoved it . . . Then the room seemed to revolve around him. He tried to put a foot forward to stop it, but his knees buckled and the swaying floor came up to meet him.

Twenty minutes later, Miles forced his eyes open and found that he was sitting at the desk with his head on his arms. He tried to focus his surroundings before he looked up. Then he raised his head, tried to blink the dizziness away and looked up into Kimroe's grinning face. Getting unsteadily to his feet, Miles pushed back his chair, ready to fight.

"You got me wrong, Nelson," Miles heard Kimroe say as he eased the younger man back into the chair. "Take it easy. You had no sense to fight, with those ribs and that shoulder. How'd you get 'em?" Kimroe asked, then added: "If it's any of my business."

Miles wondered how the teamster found out about his condition, but he didn't care at present. Putting his head back on his arms, he rested on the desk top and muttered: "Bronc, bucked down with me . . . I was in the hospital when I got word about Lane . . . I'll be all right in a minute . . . You knocked the wind out of me."

"By God, Nelson," cried Kimroe as he sat down on the desk and put a hand on Miles shoulder, "I'd hate like hell to tangle with you when your ribs are healed."

Miles Nelson again picked his head up from the desk and unconsciously ran his right arm across his chest. His shoulders felt chilled and he noticed his shirt on the desk top. Looking down at his chest he saw a clean row of bandages that was pulled tight to help strengthen his weakened ribs. Wonderment was in his eyes as he looked up at Kimroe.

"Your old wrappin' was loose—so Miss Collins and me wrapped you up again," smiled back Kimroe.

Miles got up and put his shirt on. As he finished tucking his shirt-tail in his trousers, Karen Collins came back into the room with a tray of coffee and sandwiches. Miles nibbled on a ham sandwich and found that he was not a bit hungry. But he downed three cups of black coffee.

PRESENTLY, Karen gathered up the tray and left the room without saying a word to Miles, which didn't hurt his feelings for he wanted to have a talk with Kimroe.

"What's going on in the yards, Kimroe?" Miles asked. "Why didn't that load leave for Fort Grant this morning?"

The teamster shook his head. "Too damned much liquor out in the yards, Mr. Nelson," he replied.

"Where did it come from?"

"It just has a way of showin' up," Kimroe muttered. "And there's plenty on the

trail, too. I reckon that's why your loads ain't going through on time, Mr. Nelson.

"Skib Royce had charge of that cargo," Miles said. "Why didn't he get the men together?"

"Ask Skib that. Skib is Hayden's pet. Nobody asks Skib any questions—unless they want to buck Hayden."

Miles nodded. "I want those wagons rolling at dawn. And I'll put you in charge, Kimroe."

The big man gulped. "Me—a wagonmaster?"

"Don't you want it?" Miles asked him.

"Why—hell! You know I do!" Kimroe replied.

"Tell Skib Royce that you're in charge," Miles said. He pushed the two glasses and the bottle away, and he sat down behind Lane Miles' battered roll-top oak desk. He heard Lon Kimroe going out the door, still muttering to himself. From the window he could see the entire Nelson Freight yards. Two riders were coming through the south end entrance. Miles recognized one of them as Hayden, Nelson Line chief wagonmaster. Hayden rode a big buckskin horse. He was sitting straight in the saddle, like a block of granite, wide shoulders scarcely swaying.

Miles toyed with a knife that was used as a letter opener, and waited for Hayden to come in. The men in the yards were lighting lanterns now, and Miles could hear the cattle bellowing in the large corral into which Lane had fallen. The corral was behind the warehouse at the very far end of the long yard, but he could see it from the office window.

Karen Collins came back into the room, a small hat on her head, a bright colored shawl around her shoulders. She gazed at Miles for a moment with a peculiar expression upon her face.

"Hayden's in the yard," she remarked. Then she added: "Mr. Nelson, you're a very strange man."

Miles Nelson slightly bowed his head and gazed down at his knuckles. The skin on his right hand was broken, and he knew she had witnessed the complete fight, and that she didn't understand it, or him. He didn't say anything. What was there to say?

"Does this mean that you're firing Skib Royce?" Karen asked understandingly. "Hayden's with him, and he's mean."

Miles found his voice: "He's finished," he looked up, "the minute he steps in this office." He had met Hayden only once or twice before and didn't like his close-set, smoky, sea-green eyes. "And I don't care about Hayden."

"I do hope," Karen observed, "that this is the start of better days to come, Mr. Nelson."

"Time will tell," Miles answered. After she left the office, he sat back in the chair again and rolled a cigarette. He was puffing on it in a contented manner when Skib Royce came in with Hayden. Royce followed Hayden the way a dog follows its master. Hayden was not quite as tall as Miles, but through his strenuous work, he was heavier in the shoulders, and his physique was of a man of tremendous physical strength. He had an extra wide mouth, and very small pinched-in teeth. His nose was broken at the bridge, and twisted around toward the right side of his cheek.

Hayden stepped forward, "Royce, here," he began, "has something to ask you, Nelson."

MILES let the smoke of his cigarette curl into the air, as he ignored Hayden and looked directly at Royce. "Since it concerns you, you ask it," he said without once looking at Hayden.

Royce, wiped a hand across his face, and grinned as he glanced at Hayden out of the corner of his shifty blue eyes. "Kimroe say's he's takin' my wagons out. Damn him, I'd like to know what he means."

Miles turned his head and glanced at the clock on the back wall. "What delayed you from taking your outfit out? You were supposed to leave early this morning!"

"Men were under the weather!" Royce snapped. "Can't take drunks on the road. Damned fools would run the wagons over a cliff or in a river."

"Any good, reliable wagonmaster," Miles returned, "see's that all his men are sober when it's time to hit the trail."

Hayden stood with his feet wide apart and eyes half-closed as he cleared his throat. "Skib, here, has been with the Nelson Line over four years," he voiced. "Your brother never had any complaints with his work!"

Miles swung his chair around. "Hayden,

you came in without your wagons," he snapped. "What happened? Where are they?"

The wagonmaster hooked his big hairy thumbs in his gun belt. His eyes became slits. "Had some trouble," he purred.

"What kind?" demanded Miles, feeling hot anger boiling inside of him. He wanted to get up and hit this man in his sneering face.

"Lost seven wagons when we crossed the Rio Grande," Hayden snapped. "Quicksand got 'em. The others are stuck on the east side in the muck. We'll need fresh teams to get to Las Cruces."

"Seven wagons," Miles grated. "What's the matter? Didn't you ever cross the Rio before, Hayden?"

"The Rio was high," the wagonmaster started, "and we had to go upriver to cross, and we never crossed there before. We didn't know there would be quicksand along that stretch."

III

DELIBERATELY Miles put his half-smoked cigarette in the ash tray. His hand was quite steady. There was little doubt in his mind that Hayden and Royce were deliberately trying to get the Nelson Freight Line on the rocks. Miles, although he was inexperienced in the freighting business, knew that no experienced wagonmaster would ever get his wagons into quicksand—possibly one wagon—but never seven.

Slowly, Miles let Hayden's words penetrate his mind. "All right, Hayden," he voiced, "Forget it."

"What about Royce, here?" Hayden asked, as he tossed his head in Skib's direction.

Miles looked over at Skib Royce. "You're through Royce," Miles told him. "You can draw your pay, when Naylor gets back."

Royce started to make an angry retort, but he glanced at Hayden's face and changed his mind.

Carefully the blond-haired Royce declared: "I won't forget this, Nelson. You'll hear from me."

Miles shrugged his shoulders and leaned back in his chair. Hayden watched Royce leave; then he asked: "What about the wagons over on the Rio?"

"I'll get to that tomorrow," Miles voiced. "I said forget them!"

Hayden's jaw tightened. "That's my load, Nelson," he snapped. "I don't like to leave full wagons on the trail."

"It's a Nelson load," Miles reminded him flatly. "And they wouldn't still be out on the trail if you knew your business. Forget them; they're my business. I'll do the worrying about them!" Then glancing at the door he saw Naylor standing there. Miles hadn't heard the man come up. He must have heard their conversation. Good!

Naylor was pay-roll-clerk for the Nelson Line, and his tall, stoop-shouldered physique, told Miles that this skinny man was between thirty-five or thirty-seven. He had a long pointed nose and long stringy neck. His black bead-like eyes switched from Miles to Hayden; then finally rested on Miles.

"Come on in, Naylor." Miles raised his hand and beckoned. He wondered how much of their conversation the bookkeeper had overheard.

Chris Naylor stepped into the office, smiling sheepishly.

Hayden swung around. Miles watching Hayden, saw him snap a warning glance in Naylor's direction. He knew then that Naylor and Hayden were on the same side and against him. To Miles it was a revelation, for he'd thought Chris Naylor a faithful employee of the Nelson Line.

"You're back sooner than I expected, Hayden," Naylor said as he clicked his thumb nail against his little finger nail, which was his annoying habit.

"Hayden got into some trouble," Miles said. "Damn near lost his whole load in the Rio."

Naylor's beady eyes widened, as he listened in disgust to the report Hayden made. Then looking at Miles, he stated flatly:

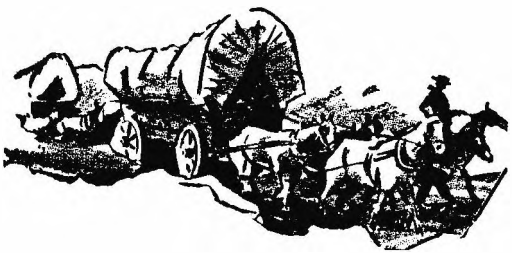
"We'll never keep on our feet and keep our customers that way, Mr. Nelson." Then abruptly changing the subject, he added: "Ruck Tucker is outside, waiting to see you."

"Show him in."

Naylor went out. Hayden lingered around, looking for any excuse to stay. Miles Nelson didn't say a word, but just stared at him and watched the man grow uneasy. Presently, Hayden left.

WHEN Ruck Tucker came in a few seconds later, he had his big hand outstretched, a wide grin on his face. He walked over to where Miles sat at the desk. Miles shook hands and watched Chris Naylor close the door behind Hayden. Naylor made it evident that he did not wish to intrude on their conversation but Miles realized that every word could be heard through the thin-board partition.

"Take a seat," Miles invited. Looking at Ruck Tucker, Miles could see how a girl like Karen Collins could fall for a man like Tucker in Lordsburg. In the frontier town there were not many Tuckers to be found. He was young, had looks; he had money, and a certain polish which had its own appeal to women.



Tucker looked at Miles carefully for a moment and then, as if satisfied with what he saw, and that he had been right in his appraisal, said calmly: "How much would you take for the Nelson Line—lock, stock and barrel?"

Miles grinned across at Tucker. "Well, make me an offer, and I'll see if I like it." Miles said it loud enough so that if Naylor were in the other room, he could hear.

"Thirty thousand dollars." Tucker grinned. "Cash."

"You can make that much in eight months, after taking over the Nelson contracts," Miles said flatly. "I knew you were a piker, Tucker."

Tucker's grin turned to an open faced smile. "Thirty-three thousand," he offered again.

"Keep it up—I like it," Miles told him, as he leaned back in his chair. He saw the glimmer of annoyance creep into Tucker's eyes, and he secretly enjoyed the moment.

"You know that the Nelson Line will crack open in two months, why hold on to something you know nothing about," Tucker snapped. "Why not crawl out while you are still able, Nelson?"

"I'll crawl when I'm ready," Miles replied. "Do you want to make another offer, Tucker?"

"You don't want to sell," Tucker observed. "I'm wasting my time."

"It's a wise man who knows when to stop bidding." Miles shrugged.

"I'm a fool to even offer to put up money now," snapped Tucker. "I'll get the Nelson Line after it goes on the rocks —bankrupt."

"We'll both wait for that day," Miles said pleasantly.

Taking a cigar from his pocket, Tucker lit it, and openly studied Miles, leaning back in his chair. "You have damned funny ideas on how to run a freight line; hanging out in the Congress—"

"Has anybody asked you how to run the Nelson Line?" Miles asked. He was thinking of his brother Lane Nelson then.

The cigar was gripped tightly between Tucker's teeth as he snapped: "Your brother and I got along fine." Then he smiled: "If it's a war you want, Nelson—"

"Anything you want to dish out, I'll take." Miles' smile broadened. "That goes for bribing the men or rate-cutting. It takes two to keep a fight going."

Tucker's face was still bland, immobile. His cigar moved slightly. "You'll get plenty—and you're asking for it." After saying this, he quickly left the room.

Miles lit another smoke, sat in his chair and waited for a moment, waiting for Naylor. He knew Naylor would come in.

THE payroll clerk knocked a full five minutes after Tucker had left the small building. "Couldn't help overhearing some of your conversation," Naylor mildly stated.

"We talked loud enough," Miles said dryly.

"I would like to speak to you," Naylor began, "as an old friend of your brother's and a faithful employee of the Nelson Line."

"Fine—what's on your mind?" Miles asked.

"I really think Tucker made you a very good offer, Miles."

"I suppose you are considering the present condition of the Nelson Line?" Miles asked him casually.

"Well, we've lost a lot of customers," Naylor admitted. "Tucker's been forging ahead while we've been idle."

Miles Nelson looked up at the skinny man, tilted back his chair. Miles puffed on his cigarette, let the smoke curl about his head, and said nothing.

Naylor shrugged. "You know," and he hesitated as he tried to find the words, "every man isn't born for the freighting business. It takes work—hard work."

"Tell Hayden he's fired," Miles said. "Pay him off as soon as you see him. I don't want his kind in the yards."

Naylor's mouth opened and then closed again. "Hayden?"

"You heard what I said." Miles smiled flatly. "We're firing him."

Naylor started his nervous habit of clicking his thumb against his little finger nail. He nodded, eyes narrowing. "Mr. Nelson, you just don't pick up experienced wagonmasters in the street," he finally said. "Most of them work for Tucker. The rest are scattered among the smaller remaining lines."

"Fine; then we'll take boys out of the yard," Miles replied. "Chaps like Lon Kimroe."

"You're wrong Mr. Nelson," Naylor protested. "They're bullwhackers, not wagonmasters. When it's too late, you'll find there's a big difference."

"If they can take a load safely through," Miles snapped, "I don't care what the hell you call them."

Chris Naylor didn't say any more on the subject; he wanted to get out of the room. Miles smiled as he watched the man rub his thin hands together for a few moments, gathering up enough courage to nod and leave the room.

Miles watched him go thoughtfully. He was positive now that Naylor was working against him as much as Hayden was, but he didn't know if either man had tried to ruin Lane Nelson. The thing uppermost in Miles' mind was the finding of his brother's killer. By keeping Naylor around he might learn something, and the one thing he wanted, was the man who had pushed Lane into that corral.

IV

IT WAS dark when Miles went out into the yard, near seven-thirty. Over near the outfit Skib Royce had been ordered to take out that morning, lanterns were burning. He heard Lon Kimroe's booming voice as he cursed out a rapidly sobering bullwhacker.

Walking over toward the wagons, Miles watched, grinning a little. Kimroe had five men scurrying from one wagon to another, jacking them up, greasing axles and tightening the wheels.

When Kimroe glanced up and saw Miles, he shook his head angrily and growled: "We'd have had trouble a couple of miles out of town, Mr. Nelson. Over half of these damned wheels are ready to come off. Nobody put grease on 'em since the last trip."

"I'm glad you noticed," Miles stated, and started to stroll toward the street, following a patch of light cast by a near by lantern. It wasn't quite clear in his mind why he should step out into the light, but he did so just as a knife plunged into the wagon, a few inches from his shoulder.

He felt the breath of the blade as it swept past, and he knew it had come from the direction of the Nelson sheds. Leaping to the left, he whipped a Smith & Wesson .38 from beneath his jacket. He danced away from the wagon, farther into the shadows. Seeing a figure on top of a shed, Miles fired—but as he did, he knew he had missed. Then he heard Lon Kimroe roaring:

"Who fired that shot?" Kimroe came running forward.

Miles started to make a quick circle of the stalled wagons, coming up behind one of the huge wagon sheds.

Lon Kimroe rumbled up, gun in hand. "Was that shot for you, Nelson?" he grimly asked.

"No, I fired it, but someone tried to stick a knife in me." Then he wanted to know: "Where's Royce?"

"I saw him leave through the main gate a few minutes ago."

Miles ran toward the building on the top of which he had seen the figure, trying to creep away.

"I'll head up the other direction," Kimroe volunteered. "We still might catch him."

They made a complete circle of the long shed, and Miles found the ladder that had been set up against the rear wall.

"Damn him," roared Kimroe. "He was on the roof waiting for you to come out of your office. I guess it was Royce."

"He's left the yards now," was Miles' comment as he stared at the ladder for a long moment.

Kimroe climbed up it, looked around, and came back down again, shaking his head distastefully.

Suddenly Miles asked: "Were you around, Kimroe, when my brother was killed?"

Kimroe tugged at his beard thoughtfully. "I just came back from a trip, the mornin' after Lane got it," he replied.

"You knew Lane pretty well," Miles went on quietly. "Was he the type of man to fall into a stock corral?"

Kimroe couldn't say anything for a few minutes. "You figure someone pushed Lane down among those crazy cows?"

"Somebody threw a knife at me this evening," Miles pointed out. "Someone wants the Nelson Line, and they don't want any Nelson around."

"Who?" Kimroe asked.

"That's what I aim to find out," Miles stated flatly. "But tell me," he continued: "Who didn't like Lane?"

KIMROE slowly shook his bushy head. "I reckon everybody around here had a good word for him, and liked him. Hell, he made this town."

"What about Ruck Tucker?"

"Lane and Tucker, were— Well, they were good friends and I hate to say it," Kimroe said. "Lane and Tucker made a game out of their freight lines, to see who could get the most contracts."

"Who wanted the Nelson Line besides Tucker?" Miles asked flatly, as he persisted with his questions.

"A lot of men would have liked to have had it," Kimroe replied, "but Tucker's the only one who had the cash to buy it out." The giant hesitated, tugged at his beard, and then said suddenly: "I reckon Miss Collins knows more about this business than anybody, exceptin' Chris Naylor; she might be able to help you out."

Miles nodded in agreement. He knew now that he should have had a long talk with Karen before this. He didn't trust Naylor or Hayden, but Karen Collins— she was loyal to the Nelson Line, and she was on the inside of all the business transactions of the freight line.

"I guess I'll go see her."

As they went back toward the stalled wagons and put their guns away, a crowd of men had appeared at the sound of the shot Miles had fired. They looked at Miles Nelson curiously. He recognized some of them as Nelson hands, but others had come in from the street. A big lantern had been hoisted up on one of the wagon sides, and in the light he recognized Hayden in the crowd.

The wagonmaster was watching him, wide-brimmed Stetson set well back on his head in an offensively coarse manner, both feet planted firmly on the ground, a grim smile on his face. Miles knew that Naylor had already broken the news to Hayden. Miles had half-expected that Hayden would come back to make some trouble.

"Nelson," Hayden called out.

Miles walked straight toward him, Lon Kimroe following right behind him.

"Do you want me to work him over for you, Miles?" the giant murmured. "You won't be able to stand your ground with him—the way your ribs are."

"Forget it," Miles replied. He now realized that Hayden was here for one purpose, and that was to show Miles up in front of his men. Everyone knew that a freight line ran on the strength of its owner; and if that owner proved to be a weakling, every bullwhacker, wheelright, blacksmith, and every yard-man would know about it and act accordingly. Schedules would be slowed down; there would be no drive in the yards. If Miles fought Hayden, he would have to win, or he would never find out who had killed his brother.

"Naylor tells me that you fired me." Hayden grinned coldly. "Afraid to tell me yourself, Nelson?"

"You're told," Miles said. "Get the hell out of the yards."

Hayden braced himself firmly on the ground. He grinned, revealing his small, even teeth. "There ain't a man in the yard that can put me out, Nelson," he said with conviction.

Miles measured the distance between himself and the wagonmaster. He'd been in enough rough-and-tumble fights in the south to know his way around. He only wished that his chest and ribs were com-

pletely healed. There was one way, he knew, to fight a tough, and that was to get at him swiftly, savagely, giving no mercy, hammering until it was all over.

WANTING to forget his physical handicap Miles moved very fast then, reaching his man in a few long strides, swinging his right hand for Hayden's face. The blow missed by a fraction of an inch. Hayden smashed a heavy fist into Miles' stomach, stopping him very abruptly, taking most of the wind out of him.

Miles reached out for a wagon wheel to steady himself. His knees became suddenly very weak. Hayden hit him in the face a half dozen times with hard fists, knocking him to the ground. Miles tasted blood in his mouth and he was trying to straighten himself out when Hayden's knee came up, catching him on the side of the head.

Kimroe, who was fighting mad, started forward toward Hayden with murder in his eyes. "Do that again Hayden and I'll hit you over the head with a ax."

"Get back Lon," Miles managed to say as he got weakly to his feet. "Hayden asked for this fight, and I'll give him a good try for his money!"

Miles had underestimated the tough Hayden, and he knew it. Hayden was not chief wagonmaster for nothing. He shook his head several times before his mind cleared.

Then Miles came in more carefully, fists balled. He could feel the blood sliding down the left side of his face where Hayden's fist had cut him; the side of his head was numb from where Hayden had kicked him.

"Have some more," Hayden invited. "There's plenty where that came from—wagonboss."

Favoring his left, Miles lunged forward, and Hayden hit him again full on the jaw, knocking him to his knees. Immediately he got up and started in, head bent forward a little, seeing the surprise in Hayden's eyes. His brain was spinning, and his chest hurt, but he didn't care. Miles grabbed at Hayden and they both lost their balance, and fell in a wild tangle of arms and legs.

They were up in an instant and slugging without thought of science. Bony knuckles dug at Miles' face, bringing the blood. Hayden's punches had a sting, his whip stock frame was packed with layers of quick, stringy muscle, and he fought a man as he fought the freight lines mules and horses giving everything that was in him to bring his adversary to his knees before he had a chance to strike back.

For a minute Miles Nelson was stumbling back, his own punches falling short while Hayden's fists thundered against his body and face. The pain of a blow over the heart shook him and he winced as the pain from his ribs shot up to his head. It was a violent reminder of the last fight he had been in, when he and Lon Kimroe had fought. His anger was for himself more than for Hayden in front of him, for it was the second fight for him tonight. And Miles now asked himself whether this fight was worth the price. Then he reminded himself that it might lead him to his brother's killer.

Hayden could not know the change that was taking place inside Miles Nelson. He could not taste, with him, the bitterness that came to fill all those little pockets in his soul left empty by his lonely, wandering existence. Hayden could not understand all this. But he could savvy the language of Miles' fists, that suddenly came jolting into his head and body like bullets. Miles' heavy muscles were behind every blow. He clipped Hayden on the jaw so hard that the wagonmaster's eyes went out of focus. A down-chop took a patch of skin off his nose. Hayden groaned as a punch to the stomach collapsed his lungs.

Miles was getting sick from the beating he had taken, but he just closed his eyes and kept boring forward. He hit Hayden in the stomach with both hands, ignoring the pain of his sore left fist, and hearing Hayden grunt every time a fist landed.

MILES heard Lon Kimroe howling gleefully, and he knew that Hayden was retreating. Miles measured him; then with a roundhouse swing to the jaw he knocked the wagonmaster down. Bleeding from the mouth and nose, Hayden fought to his feet and staggered back. There was no reason in his eyes—only an instinctive urge to keep fighting. Miles jolted him off balance. Then, with a sickening impact of bone and gristle, he slugged Hayden on the point of the chin.

Hayden groaned, covered his face with his hands and slumped down.

Miles and Hayden had fought out of the ray of the lanterns. Now, as Miles stood over Hayden the crowd milled closer to the darkness, trying to see who was down. Miles reached over to where Hayden lay and grabbed him by the front of the shirt, dragging him to his feet.

Other men were pouring into the Nelson yards as the news of the fight had spread outside the gate. Miles backed his man through the crowd, toward the lantern's light, rammed him up against the six-foot-high fence which shut off the Nelson yards from the street. Then Miles hit until Hayden slumped to the ground.

Again the lanterns were rushed over. Hayden climbed painfully to his feet, mouth tight, the pain showing in his eyes. He kept his guard low over his stomach and bent down to avoid those punishing blows to the body. Then Miles hit him twice in the face, making Hayden lift his guard, and then he hammered another fist into the stomach.

Before Hayden completely fell, Miles grabbed him and shook him, saying so everyone could hear:

"Hear me, Hayden? . . . You're fired! Get it—fired!" Miles was trying to get his breath in gasps and couldn't really make it. Then he left go of Hayden, and the fired wagonmaster sat down on the ground, then fell flat. Miles turned his back and walked away, his left arm clasping his hurt chest. He went up the steps to the rear door of the office, leaned against the door-jam and then he heard the shouting of the bullwhackers. Lon Kimroe was leading them in giving him three long cheers!

V

KIMROE came into the office with a bucket of water and some towels, and found Miles slumped in Lane Nelson's chair again. He'd been weak when Hayden had knocked him down, and he didn't know yet where he'd found the strength to go after his man. He just knew he had to keep going. Now he was tired.

"After seeing what you did to Hayden," Kimroe said, "I don't feel so bad any more." He got the liquor bottle from the cupboard and poured Miles a drink. "And your ribs, I bet, are giving you hell."

"Not so much," Miles replied as he felt the fiery liquid going down into his stomach and it braced him a bit. "Anybody else in the yards that you suspect?" he asked Kimroe.

Just then Chris Naylor came in, a long black cigarette in one corner of his mouth. Miles wasn't sure whether he'd seen the fight, or heard the question he'd just put to Kimroe.

"Mr. Nelson, you're tougher than we all thought," Naylor said, with a smile. "I knew you'd have trouble with Hayden."

"Well, Naylor," Kimroe answered. "Just think how much tougher he'll be when his ribs heal!" and he reached down and jerked open Miles' shirt, exposing the taped up chest. "And he fought with broken ribs, too!"

Chris Naylor's mouth dropped open, leaving the cigarette fall to the floor.

Miles started buttoning his shirt. "In the morning," he said to Naylor, "bring me a list of all the wagons on the trail, and hauling contracts that we have."

All Naylor did was nod his head.

Miles watched him closely, thought he saw the gleam of hidden triumph in the man's eyes, and waited for him to close the door behind him before he said to Kimroe,

"You go on about your business. I'm all right."

LATER Miles wondered about Naylor as he walked down the street toward the Lordsburg Hotel.

Karen Collins usually ate there, in the dining room. Miles had seen her in the hotel several times, but had never sat down at the same table with her. She was at a corner table now, alone, and she looked up as he came through the door from the lobby. She gazed at his puffed face queerly as he pulled up a chair without an invitation.

"Had two fights in one night," Miles said. "I'll be getting a bad reputation in this town."

"Who was it this time?" the girl asked. He saw a different light in her eyes now. She was smiling. She seemed willing to talk to him, and didn't want to snap him off as she always had.

Miles smiled back. "Hayden," he told her. "He objected to being fired."

"Skib Royce," she said slowly, "and now Hayden; two big men in one night!"

"I didn't think they had the Nelson Line interests at heart." Miles grinned. "We'll get along without them."

Karen nodded. "I know what you mean. I've noticed a few things lately," she said. "Royce had no excuse for not leaving this morning with his outfit."

"Hayden was worse than Royce," Miles stated. "He says he lost seven wagons in the quicksand."

Karen had started to eat, but she stopped now and stared at him. "Hayden didn't make it to Las Cruces with his load?" she hastily asked.

YOU CAN'T BLAME HIM!

SINCE today's redskins dress in blue-jeans and shirts like any other Westerners, a tribe of Blackfoot Indians appearing in a new movie had to be outfitted with traditional tribal costumes. Soon after they started work, a small brave whined to his mother, "I'm tired of playing Indian. Let's go home."

—Harold Helfer

Miles shook his head. "He got stuck at the Rio. Claimed he lost seven of the wagons in the quicksand, and the rest are stuck in the mud. He went out with twenty wagons, and came back with three."

Karen got up excitedly. "Then maybe it's not too late!" she exclaimed. "Hayden may have been lying about those seven wagons."

Miles fingered his hat on the table, puzzled. "That load pretty important to the Nelson Line?"

"Important!" Karen gasped. "It means the whole Nelson Line. Tom Forrest, of Las Cruces, has fourteen of those wagons full of hydraulic equipment, supplies and foodstuffs for his mines. Forrest is the biggest man in Las Cruces, and lately he's been complaining on deliveries. Mr. Nelson, he was your brother's best customer, but he's been threatening to switch to Tucker Lines. If anything has happened to that hydraulic equipment, we're lost—wiped out!"

"And Hayden took those twenty wagons out." Miles now remembered that little smile that crept upon Chris Naylor's thin face.

"Whatever Tom Forrest says in Las Cruces," Karen explained, "a lot of other business men follow suit. If they all switch over to Ruck Tucker, it'll cut Nelson Line profits in half. You'd never be able to operate."

Miles asked her: "Did Naylor know that?"

"No one knew it better than Chris Naylor," Karen told him bitterly. "Didn't he tell you when Hayden came back?"

"I reckon he forgot about it," Miles murmured.

Karen said quietly: "If those wagons don't reach Las Cruces within the next few days, the Nelson Line will go bankrupt. You have a slight chance of making it with some of the equipment, if you try and get it back on the trail."

"I'll go over myself," Miles said; then asked: "How far is Las Cruces?"

"You could make it by nightfall tomorrow," Karen told him. "But you can send the fresh stock on after you. It'll be a long hard push—but it's a chance—and you might make it."

HE EYED the girl for a moment.

"One more thing," Miles said. "Did anybody offer to buy the Nelson Line before Lane died?"

"Ruck Tucker made an offer," Karen replied. "Lane laughed at it."

"Would you know—when that was?"

"Just the day before Lane died."

Miles smiled, and nodded. "I had my offer tonight."

"You—you aren't thinking of taking it," asked Karen.

Miles quietly returned: "Some joker threw a knife at me, back in the yards, ten minutes after I turned the bid down."

"You—you think Tucker—?" Karen Collins hesitated.

"I don't know," Miles voiced. "But I'm finding out."

As they went down the street together,

Karen was again hurrying to keep up with him.

"First of all, we'll have a little talk with Naylor," Miles said. "I have a few questions I want to ask him."

Reaching the Nelson offices, they found them to be empty. Lon Kimrose was still in the yards, busy, but he hadn't seen Naylor.

"Do we have any other wagonmasters in town?" Miles quickly asked the girl.

"Tom Marlow is usually sober," Karen returned. "You'll find him over at the Congress Bar, tonight."

Miles turned to Kimroe. "Have Marlow take this load out first thing in the morning. Tonight, we're leaving for the Rio Grande. And round up about a half dozen men, and have the herders bring up fresh stock in the morning. We'll need them."

Kimroe's eyes widened. "Are we goin' after Hayden's outfit?" he asked.

"They're stalled at the Rio, and that's where we're going," Miles explained. "I think that Hayden is trying to put us out of business."

"I'll cut his damned throat," Kimroe snarled. "Lane Nelson put that fellow on his feet. Hayden was flat broke when he hit Lordsburg; now look what he's trying!"

"Be ready to ride in a half hour," Miles said briefly, and left the yard. He walked Karen back to her boarding house. They had reached the steps before the girl spoke.

"Be careful, Miles," Karen told him. "Hayden won't stop at anything. Please watch yourself."

"He'll stop," Miles returned, "if he's hit hard enough." Walking down the darkened street, Miles was sure Karen was still standing in the doorway watching him, and it gave him a queer feeling. Never before had he known a woman to be concerned about him. Thinking about it, he felt good inside.

IN THE Congress he found Tom Marlow, one of the Nelson wagonmasters. He was playing cards in one of the booths.

Marlow had been having a few drinks, but instantly sobered up when Miles called him out.

"I fired Royce," Miles told Marlow. "You're taking his outfit through to Fort Grant tomorrow."

Marlow, a lean, tall man, with brown colored hair and gray eyes, said quietly: "Did you know that Hayden left Lordsburg, about fifteen minutes ago—with a crew of men?"

"No, I didn't know that," Miles muttered. "Thanks for telling me. Was Royce with them?"

"I suppose he was," Marlow returned. "I guess they're goin' over to the Rio to get Hayden's outfit movin'."

"Looks like everything is coming to a head," was Miles' remark. "I fired Hayden tonight."

Marlow raised his eye-brows, and whistled softly. "Sure looks like the Nelson Line is finally showin' some fight. When Hayden took that load up to Las Cruces, he had nearly all the men stone drunk. Probably they ain't sobered up yet—"

"I'll get them sobered," Miles said, and smiled. Then he went back to the yard and found Kimroe saddling up in the barn. Miles grinned when he saw that the big man had sobered up half a dozen of the yard men for the trip.

"Mr. Nelson, if it comes to fightin'," Kimroe said with a grin, "these fellows will do. And none of 'em has any use for Hayden or Royce."

"Fine," stated Miles. "But Hayden is already headed for the Rio. Marlow saw him ride out with a crew."

Kimroe's eyes narrowed. "I reckon that means he figures on wreckin' your outfit altogether, Miles, before you can get up there."

"Did you get your boys armed?" Miles asked him.

Kimroe nodded. "I told them that we might get in a fight."

Miles saddled a big sorrel, examined the Smith & Wesson, then came out of the barn leading his horse over to where Kimroe stood.

"We might have to ride pretty fast, to beat Hayden to the river," Kimroe observed. "So I'm takin' some extra mounts along."

Miles looked toward the gate, and saw the six men mounted and waiting silently near the entrance. Each man was leading a horse, and two of the men were leading two apiece. These horses, Miles knew, would be his and Kimroe's.

"We can make Deming by morning," Kimroe said, "and I figured on cuttin'

across over the Ridge at Deming, using the fresh horses. By doin' that, we should beat Hayden to the Rio by a few hours."

"Good," Miles replied. "That will give us a few hours more to sober up the crew out there. Hayden won't try too much when he finds twenty or twenty-five fellows waiting for him. He'll be that wise."

Turning to the six mounted men, Kimroe shouted: "Hear that boys? Now we'll have to push and keep on pushin', if we really want to beat Hayden to the Rio, and save Nelson's wagons for him. Let's ride!"

VI

THE men followed the well-beaten wagon trail out of Lordsburg, passing a small Mexican town around five o'clock in the morning. A couple of times Miles had called a halt to give the horses breathing spells. Kimroe left the trail, and led them on a route over the mountains.

At seven-thirty in the morning the men dismounted on the other side of Deming Ridge, a low-lying, long wall cut through the mountains, with a narrow gap of a trail. A small stream ran through the side of the gap, and the men watered the horses there. Kimroe tossed down a bulging saddle-bag, dismounted and took out a big slab of bacon and a mound of sourdough biscuits. One of the men put the coffee pot over the fire that had been made for that purpose.

Miles sniffed the aroma hungrily. He gazed across the rolling hills to the east and spotted the winding trail again, disappearing through a small cut in the side of the mountains. Then he remembered that this was Lane's country, and the old tightness came into his throat. How he wished that Lane was riding with him now.

"We'll hit the Rio, sometime this afternoon—say around four-thirty, or five," Kimroe stated confidently. "I don't think Hayden will make it until about an hour or so after us." The big man watched the men saddling up the extra horses and he grinned. "I reckon we sure learned a lot from the Comanches," he mentioned to Miles. "Those fellows would take a whole string of horses along when they went on a war party. Then they would keep changin' mounts every few hours and would run our troopers into the ground."

The men were on the move again in twenty minutes, crossing the Deming wagon trail, and then heading over the flat hills on a much more direct trail to the Rio.

Once Kimroe paused to examine the trail carefully. "Nobody passed here for a couple of days."

"Hayden won't stick to the trail," observed Miles, "without the wagons. He's probably riding overland like we are."

"Well, when we catch up with 'em, I'd like to work on that Skib Royce. I bet he could tell us something about how your brother came to fall in that corral."

"All right by me," Miles agreed.

At four-thirty in the afternoon they spotted the huge white tops of the Nelson wagons scattered along the bank of the Rio Grande. All of the oxen were unharnessed, and were grazing a short ways down the river. A blazing fire was going full-force near one of the wagons, and all of the men were sprawled on the ground near the fire. Miles heard a man whoop drunkenly, and then a whisky bottle hurled through the air and made a splash in the river.

"Liquor's flowin' free in that crowd," Kimroe said. "Your brother had strict orders against liquor on the trail."

"Two wagons are in the river," Miles said. "Hayden claimed seven of them had been lost in the quicksand."

"Hayden lied like hell," growled Kimroe. "He could have taken this load on to Las Cruces."

The men on the other side of the Rio had started to sing, but they broke off suddenly when one of them saw the riders on the opposite bank.

"Let's get over there," Miles voiced grimly, then walked his horse into the water. He felt that the river bottom was very solid here, and the wagons could have got across without any trouble. Over where the two wagons had been stranded in the middle of the river, it looked muddy —no doubt the river bottom there was not as firm. Miles knew then that Hayden had deliberately run those wagons into the mud and then gone back to Lordsburg with his false report.

THE men with Miles scrambled up the bank on the other side in a couple of minutes. Miles quickly dismounted near

the campfire and walked toward the drunken teamsters, smiling pleasantly, with his hands in his jacket pockets. There were about twenty bullwhackers, one cook and two herders. Then glancing toward the stock, Miles noticed that no herdsmen were out with the mules.

"Are you boys having a little party?" Miles coolly asked.

One teamster, a squat, sandy-haired chap, with a red nose, lifted a whisky bottle to his lips. Then after draining the bottle, he tossed it past Miles' head, into the river.

"Wagons got stuck, mister," this man grinned. "Hayden told us to wait here, for him."

"He's not comin' back, Burton," Kimroe said, scowling. "Nelson, here, fired him last night."

Burton surveyed Miles insolently. "You aim to run the Nelson Line now, mister?" he inquired.

"Any thing wrong about that?" Miles asked him. Then he took a few steps closer to the fire and picked up another empty bottle. This maneuver brought him within a few paces of Burton. "Plenty of whisky with this outfit." Miles observed.

"Not enough!" Burton chuckled. "Damn stuff is startin' to run low."

"Do you want more?" Miles asked him.

The teamster's gray eyes widened in surprise. Then he let out a hoarse yell as Miles grasped him by the shirt front and yanked him to his feet. In five strides Miles rushed the man down to the river edge and pushed him headlong into the water. Burton landed on his stomach with a splash.

Burton came up, cursing and spluttering. Lon Kimroe was waiting for him, and ducked him down again, and held him under the water for a few seconds. When he left Burton finally up, he was sobered, and his face showed a spot of blue color.

Miles nodded toward the herders. "Get out with the stock."

The herders stumbled away from the fire and Miles watched them climb aboard their horses and head toward the grazing stock.

Turning to the men, Miles called out: "Harness up."

The teamsters watched Burton stumbling out of the river, choking, the hair hanging down over his wet face. Most of the men got up, ready to do the work Miles demanded of them, but one man reached for a half-filled bottle of liquor. Miles stepped forward and placed his foot on the drunken man's chest and gave a push. He went down with a yell, tumbling over the log on which he'd been sitting.

Kimroe leaned up against a wagon and grinned: "Better move. The boss means what he says!"

Then he turned to Nelson and said: "Miles, that equipment in that wagon out in the river is goin' to get ruined if we don't hurry and get it to dry ground."

Miles yelled for the men to bring up four mules. Getting them, he splashed out to the stranded wagons. He hooked them up; then with a pull of his shoulders, he hoisted himself up to the top of his loaded wagon. He played out one set of ribbons, and pulled back on the reins of the wheelers. The air echoed to his yell.

THE leaders churned the water as they pointed their noses to the opposite bank, trying to push through their collars. The wheelers lunged back on their haunches, seemed to hang from the rising wagon tongue as the wagon swayed, trembled and moved forward. Before Miles stopped them, a distance of forty feet was made. It was enough. Here the ground was flatter, more firm and the animals didn't thrash so in the mud.

Miles Nelson let the animals rest a few moments, then he kicked off the brake. The animals leaped into their collars again, and the wagon rolled across the Rio's slippery river bed. The heavy wagon jerked and ploughed up through the soft dirt. Mud and sand went flying as sixteen flying hoofs tore into the embankment. They knocked down enough dirt to get the front wheels over. Then with a steady, trembling show of strength, the four splendid mules pulled the wagon up onto the level of the Rio Grande River bank.

Miles heard the cheers of the teamsters; then moved the wagon onto flatter ground. As the traces went slack, he set the brake. Little streams of water ran from out of the soggy wagon bed, and Miles wondered if the hydraulic mining equipment was ruined. He jumped down from the wagon seat.

"That was a fine show of driving, Miles,

if you never drove a team before," grinned Kimroe.

"You can do a lot, even if you never did it before, if you want to save something," returned Miles Nelson.

A man called suddenly: "Riders comin' from the west."

Miles spun around and stared down along the river. He could see about eight men on horseback jogging up along the side of the river.

"That'll be Hayden," Kimroe stated. "I reckon he'll be here in about ten minutes."

Miles watched the small figures thoughtfully. Then he turned to the teamsters. "You boys keep your mouths shut," he said quickly. "And stay where you are."

"Hayden will be kind of surprised to see us." Kimroe smiled, as he rubbed his hands and cracked his knuckles together.

"Put your six men on top of the wagons," Miles told the big man. "Have them cover every man but Hayden."

Kimroe smiled: "Are you goin' to handle Hayden yourself?"

"He's trying to wreck the Nelson Line," Miles pointed out. "So I'll be the one to talk to him."

Kimroe pointed to the wet Burton, who was sitting near the fire, trying to dry his clothes.

"Crawl back yonder in the brush, my friend," Kimroe told him. "We don't want Hayden to spot you right away."

Burton swore, but he did as he was told, and moved behind one of the stalled wagons. The six men with Kimroe climbed atop one of the wagons, and Miles heard their gun hammers click. The sobered teamsters around the fire watched Miles silently as he walked behind one of the wagons. The horses of Miles' party was led into a small hollow a few feet away.

Miles lit a cigarette and leaned against a wagon wheel. He ran his right arm up against his chest and smiled, for his ribs didn't hurt as much as he thought they would. Two fights in one night, then a long ride. Yet he was on the mend.

SOON Miles heard horses splashing into the Rio. He was puffing on the cigarette when he heard Hayden's voice boom out. Hayden was ordering the teamsters to head back for Lordsburg on Miles Nelson's orders. They were to leave the wagons and another crew would come out to pick it up.

"Now start ridin'," Hayden ordered. "There's plenty horses to go around."

Miles heard one of the teamsters mutter something in an undertone, and he stepped around the wagon, coming out into the open. Hayden didn't see him at first as he approached the big campfire. The former Nelson wagonmaster had his back half-turned, but he spun around quickly when he saw the eyes of the teamster swivel toward Miles.

"Are you still giving orders for the Nelson Line?" Miles asked Hayden. "Even after you're fired?" Miles grinned and watched Hayden's right hand, remembering that this man had a reputation as a gunfighter. Skib Royce stood a few feet away to Hayden's left, and the blond man's hand moved toward his gun—fast. It froze there however, for Lon Kimroe called out from the top of the wagon:

"I reckon that will be far enough!"

Royce's thin face tightened. His long fingers had been wrapped around the butt of a six-gun, but they came loose now. "Kimroe," he said softly, "I'll get you for this."

"You also said you'd get Miles," grinned Kimroe. "But your aim with a knife ain't so good."

Miles saw the other teamsters sitting in the wagons. He watched the weak smile on Hayden's face fade. "You figure to wreck and then burn my wagons?" Miles asked him gently, and he walked to within fifteen feet of Hayden and then stopped.

VII

HAYDEN measured Miles Nelson carefully, knowing that one of them would be dead within a few moments, and he didn't want it to be him. Then he said: "I suppose you'll say I'm goin' to rob the Nelson wagons—then put a slug in my back."

"Nobody has you covered. That was my orders!" Then he said to Kimroe without turning his head: "Remember that, Lon."

Hayden's faint grin broadened to a wide smile. The teamsters around the fire suddenly got up and moved away. Miles kept his eyes fastened on Hayden, watching the slightest move that would give the man away.

The ex-wagonmaster started to bring his left hand up toward his hat, and by this move, Miles knew, was calculated to draw his eyes in that direction—away from his gun.

He noticed Hayden's right shoulder move just slightly, and he deliberately went for his own gun, knowing that if his stuck on the way out of its holster, spoiling his aim, he would be dead within the next few seconds.

Automatically, his thumb pressed back the hammer as the gun cleared the holster in a clean sweep. He released it as the weapon was coming up, above Hayden's waist line. He caught a brief glimpse of Hayden's gun, and saw flame dart from the rising muzzle. The slug kicked up dirt to the left of Miles' boot.

Then he saw Hayden staggering backward, clutching at his stomach; then falling awkwardly to his knees. Skib Royce made another grab for his gun.

"Better think twice!" urgently voiced Kimroe as he hopped down from the wagon and came up to Royce.

Hayden rocked back and forth on his knees for a moment. He looked down at the blood seeping through his fingers on his stomach, and fell forward on his face, dead.

Silently, Hayden's men dropped their gun belts when the other six men covered them. Kimroe walked over to Royce and said:

"There's a few things I want you to tell us."

Miles watched Kimroe drag Royce to the fire. The smaller man was helpless in the grasp of the giant, and was forced down in front of the fire.

"Get me a rope, somebody," called out Kimroe.

"What are you goin' to do?" Royce rasped.

"Who killed Lane Nelson? Tell us, and I won't put no hot coals on your chest." Kimroe grinned savagely.

Royce tossed a quick look in Miles' direction. He looked away without saying a word, but his face was paler than it had been. "Everyone knows that Lane fell into that corral," he growled. "You're crazy to think I know anything about it."

"Well," Kimroe chuckled, "a few live coals will help you remember, Skib."

Wooden stakes were driven into the ground and Royce was tied to them, and his shirt front ripped open. The teamsters stood around, open-mouthed as Kimroe got a spade from one of the wagons and filled it with hot coals from the fire. Miles leaned back against a wagon wheel watching.

"Skib, I heard of Apaches livin' a whole day," Kimroe said, still grinning, "with a good fire goin' on their chest. How long do you think you'll last?"

Skib Royce strained at his ropes as he answered: "You won't do it. No whiteman—has the nerve."

"Try me, Skib," replied the giant. "I always liked Lane Nelson—and I have a likin' for his brother. But I never had no damned use for you!" He lowered the shovel towards Royce's chest. "Now tell me who killed Lane Nelson?"

SWEAT started on Royce's white face, and he screamed as he felt the heat of the shovel. He tried to strain at his ropes, and Kimroe only smiled:

"Tell me or I'll put it right on."

"Don't—don't—take it away; I'll tell!" yelled Royce. "Hayden and Chris Naylor were workin' with Ruck Tucker to break the Nelson Line. Tucker tried to buy Nelson out, but he wouldn't sell. I knew they were goin' to kill Lane—"

Miles stepped forward: "Who did it then?"

Royce was fascinated by the shovelful of glowing coals, and he made several attempts to open his mouth before the words came out: "They waited for weeks so they could make it look like an accident. Lane had too many friends in town—"

"Who did it?" snapped Miles. "You saw him killed!"

Royce stuttered: "I knew Lane was out back with the steers, and they were pretty spooky. Then I saw Naylor follow him to the corral. It was that night they pulled what was left of him out of that steer pen."

"What was Naylor's stake in this?" Miles asked through clenched teeth.

"Hayden and him was goin' to get six thousand apiece for the job, when Tucker took over the Nelson Line," Royce explained. "But they didn't figure on you comin' around. So when you did, they were told by Tucker to wreck the Line. That's all I know!" he muttered. "Now

get that shovel away from me!"

Miles nodded to Kimroe. "All right, let him up."

As Kimroe tossed the coals back on the fire he smiled over at the white-faced Skib Royce: "Even on you I didn't have the nerve to put those coals on, so you talked for nothin'."

Royce sat up, sweat pouring down over his face: "You sure came close, for not wantin' to do it!"

"Get on your horse, Royce," Miles snapped, "and ride. Don't go near Lordsburg, or you'll never go out alive."

The men watched Skib Royce stumble over to his horse and climb aboard, he headed north-east and never said a word or looked back over his shoulder for fear Miles would change his mind.

"He won't go back to town," Kimroe chuckled. "He knows what Tucker and Naylor would do to him, or even yourself."

Miles walked over to his own horse and slipped off the saddle. He caught up a dun-colored animal and threw the saddle on its back.

"Get these wagons started, Kimroe," Miles called back over his shoulder as he mounted. "And keep 'em rollin' until you reach Las Cruces."

"Right," replied Kimroe, then asked: "You headin' back to Lordsburg?"

Miles nodded as he looked down at the big man. "I'd like to come back with you," Kimroe voiced.

"You're needed to get this load through," Miles said and smiled. "And I came a long way for this." Then he spurred his mount and splashed across the Rio Grande at a full gallop, leaving the teamsters with Lon Kimroe on the opposite bank. He could hear Kimroe's voice yelling out orders and he knew the load was in good hands.

IT WAS near five o'clock the next afternoon that Miles reached Lordsburg. He rode through the back alleys to his hotel, and went up to his room the back way, positive that no one had seen him.

After shaving and washing, he lay on the bed until he was sure it was dark outside. He got up, looked out the window and saw Karen Collins come from a store with a small bundle under her arms. He watched her until she was out of sight. Then he went down into the street and walked toward the Tucker Line office.

He saw lights in the office windows, and he crossed the street, going up the office steps in three bounds. Ruck Tucker, he knew, was the more dangerous of the two, so he decided to deal with him first.

Miles grasped the doorknob and leaped into the room. Ruck Tucker was sitting behind his desk, a broad smile on his handsome face, a cigar in his mouth. Tucker had both thumbs hooked in his vest pockets and he let the blue smoke curl up from his cigar.

"Glad to see you Nelson—but you didn't have to bust in like that." Tucker grinned. "Come in."

Miles' hand dropped to his gun, then he heard that familiar clicking sound going on behind the door, and he knew Chris Naylor was here too. He'd been a fool to bust in here the way he did, he thought.

Naylor behind the door murmured: "Leave it in your holster, Mr. Nelson."

Tucker again invited: "Come in. We've been waiting for you to come back."

[Turn page]

Naylor stepped from behind the door then, a gun pointed at Miles' stomach.

"You were followed by one of my boys," Tucker said, with amusement. "He came back early this afternoon, and we had your hotel watched while you slept."

Miles smiled back, as he stood by the open door, still grasping the edge of it with his left fist. Naylor said softly: "So the wagon boss killed Hayden. You're really tougher than we all thought."

"He also chased Royce out of the country," Tucker added. "Think of that, Chris! He's a big man now."

"Mr. Tucker," observed Naylor, "we had a couple of boys follow Skib Royce. I do think he's dead by now."

Miles didn't say a thing, only listened, for he was measuring the distance between himself and Naylor. He noticed that Tucker had the desk drawer in front of him open, and he had a hand in it . . .

"Nobody around this town really minds a gun shot, and this room is in the back," went on Tucker, with twinkling eyes. "No one will hear me kill you."

Miles knew that this was it. He slammed the edge of the door back against Naylor knocking the gun out of his grasp. At the same time he fell to the floor, whipping out his Smith & Wesson. He got one shot in, and knew he had missed.

Tucker's first shot hit Miles as he was rolling, and Miles felt his side go numb. He fired at Tucker as the man ducked behind the desk. Miles wasn't sure he hit the man, until he saw a blind expression steal over Tucker's face as the big man swept the lamp from the table with his left arm. The blow knocked it to the floor and plunged the room into black darkness.

MILES jumped to the left just as Naylor's gun roared. He felt the breath of the book-keeper's bullet and he ducked behind the desk. "I've waited a long time for this night, Naylor!"

Naylor fired at where he thought the voice came from. Miles threw a return shot at the flash of Naylor's gun. Then he heard someone stumble along the wall and the dull thud of a falling body. Miles waited, not quite sure that Naylor wasn't putting on an act, for he then heard Naylor getting to his feet.

Miles felt his side, it was warm with a sticky wetness. Squatting on the floor, gun leveled, he waited. But Naylor was still making sounds in the dark, then he heard a groan and the sound of a gun falling to the floor, followed by the blunt sound of Naylor as he crumpled up and struck the desk and fell to the floor. He felt Naylor's gun bounce against his boot, and he picked it up, knowing Naylor wouldn't need it any more.

Getting to his feet he struck a match and looked down at the grim sight. The match flickered out, and he had to strike another to find the door. Now that the shooting was over a crowd was gathering.

Then he heard a woman's voice call out: "Mr. Nelson, are you there?"

As he came out into the night, he leaned against the door: "It's me," and went down the steps, swaying.

Karen Collins grasped him by the arm.

"It's all over—Naylor was the one that killed Lane," he managed to say. Wearily he pushed his way through the crowd and started to walk toward the hotel, his gun still in his hand. Crossing the street, he remembered to put it back in his holster. "In the morning, tell the sheriff that I want to see him," Miles told the girl.

Karen Collins walked at his side, glancing up at him now and then. Before they reached the hotel, he gave her the whole story. "Then all of the freight line enemies are dead?" asked Karen.

"All those who worked to kill Lane."

"What are you going to do about the freight line now?" asked the girl again.

Miles sighed, took a deep breath. "I reckon Lane wanted it to grow. Let's see what we can do about it."

Karen was silent for a few moments as they walked down the street. Then she found her voice: "I—I'm very glad," she simply stated. "I'm quite sure you'll make a success of it, Mr. Nelson."

"It could be that," Miles told her, "if you'd stay and help me."

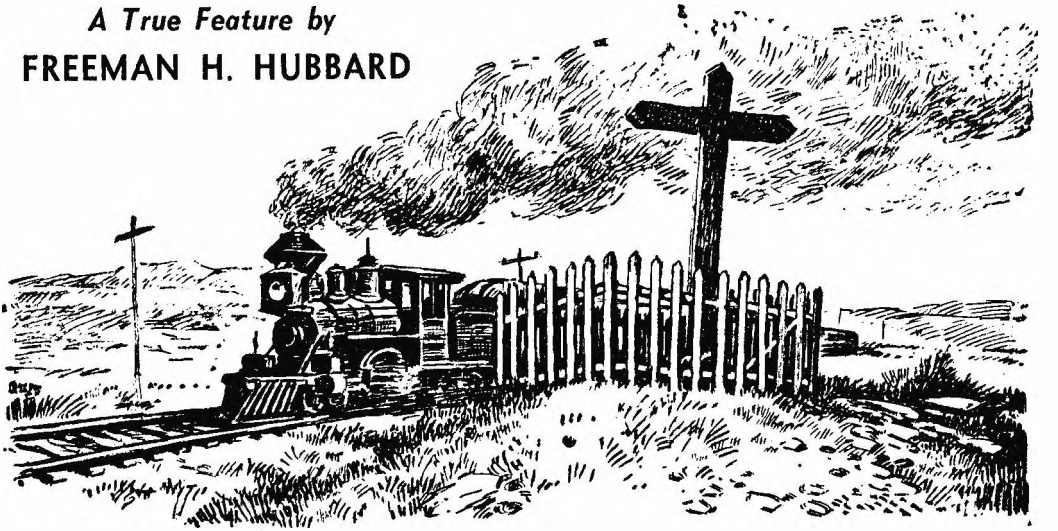
She replied, a little puzzled, "I've always wanted to work for the Nelson Line."

Miles found her hand in the darkness. "But I mean for you to be a part of it—not just an employee."

She didn't say anything. He waited for her to pull her hand away, but it stayed, and Miles Nelson had his answer in the slight responsive pressure of Karen's small fingers. The answer was good, something to look forward to.

A True Feature by

FREEMAN H. HUBBARD



TRACKSIDE GRAVES

If these tombs could talk, what tales they'd tell

TRACKSIDE graves dot the hills and prairies and canyons of the West. Many an early settler and Indian brave, many a workman who stopped an arrow while laying rails, many an outlaw hanged by vigilantes, and many a hobo who fell off a freight train, or was kicked off, is sleeping out eternity beside the right-of-way fence. Day and night, trains thunder above the bones, now turned to dust, of pioneers whose names have long since been blotted from the Book of Remembrance.

When the Central (now Southern) Pacific steel was being pushed eastward from Sacramento in the 1860s, Chinese labor cost little and was used for most of the hard physical work. The death list ran high. It was said, with some exaggeration, that one coolie was buried beside the rails for every tie laid in the Golden West. In those rugged days they usually didn't dig graves for the Chinese but placed their bodies in the railroad fills.

The first trackside grave I ever saw was in South Dakota, when I was en route to a wheat harvest job. A fellow traveler told me I would see it if I looked out the train window just after we passed Elrod. I did and saw a little mound in stark isolation on flat prairie land, with a pitiless sun blazing overhead. I wondered why a human being had been interred so far from any habitation.

An Unknown Boy

Behind that mound is the story of Bill Chambers, a Chicago & North Western freight brakeman who, in 1888, was helping to haul rock ballast for track layers in Dakota Territory. Only an occasional claim shack and a few settlements broke the monotony of far horizons. The track layers lived in bunk cars and were fed from a cook car, and as they completed one section they moved on to the next. A small boy, name and age unknown, whose parents operated the cook car, used to wave at Bill, and the brakeman would return his greeting. Bill watched for the lad every day.

There came a time when he looked in vain. The urchin was gone; a new grave

had been dug on the prairie. It seems that Bill's young friend, before succumbing to a fever, had asked to be buried at the spot "where the train goes by and the man waves." The bereft parents moved away, following the track gang.

Bill took the loss hard. He set up a cairn and vowed to care for it the rest of his life. In due time he was promoted to passenger conductor. Since he was still on a run that passed the lone grave, he often made trips to it and kept the site clear of weeds and planted flowers.

Since his death in 1931, members of his family have carried on the tradition. Even since the last passenger train has been pulled off that line and only a rare freight chugs by to lift the silence that lies over the grave, Bill's son-in-law, Vince Ford, continues to visit the spot by automobile every Memorial Day. The "little fellow" is not forgotten.

One of America's oldest trackside graves was dug ninety-seven years ago, west of Laurel, Iowa, on a quiet green slope sprinkled with wildflowers. On it stands a granite marker with an epitaph telling us that Mary Emma Wright, who died at the age of six, is buried there. Mary was born in Indiana and traveled West with her parents in a covered wagon. The family was residing in a log cabin when she sickened and died.

Stagecoaches and prairie schooners rattled past her grave on the trail that has since become U. S. Highway No. 32. When the Rock Island Railroad decided to build through that section many years ago, it bought enough land so that it could lay tracks *around,* instead of *over,* the hill, a condition of the sale being that the railroad company would protect and maintain Mary's last resting place.

In Arkansas, a mystery broods over the Missouri & North Arkansas Railroad tracks some miles from Leslie, where a ledge juts out from a bluff beside the gleaming rails and the Red River. Beneath that ledge are a spring and a huge boulder. An old retired section hand told me that one summer morning, long ago, when he was young, the track gang he was working with stopped at the spring and saw two tramps cooking breakfast there. The gang went away. Returning about an hour later, they found that the boulder had slipped down onto the exact spot where the two strangers had been camping. Whether or not it now covers their tomb, my informant did not know. He did say, though, that he never again saw the two tramps.

A cairn at Sanderson, Texas, on the Southern Pacific right of way, stands as a grim memorial to Ben Kilpatrick and Ole Beck, who died of "lead poisoning" in a futile attempt to rob an express car. In the mountains of Montana, beside the Northern Pacific tracks, there used to be graves of some desperadoes who were hanged in the winter of 1882-83.

Down in New Mexico, on the Santa Fe, a huge cross stands near the north entrance to the tunnel atop Raton Pass, not far from the spot where "Uncle Dick" Wootton, for whom a Colorado town and a Santa Fe locomotive were later named, used to keep a wayside tavern. One night in 1865 a party of Californians and Mexican soldiers, escorting a wagon train of about one hundred and fifty vehicles to protect them from hostile Indians, stopped at Uncle Dick's tavern. During the night three of the Mexican soldiers murdered their corporal, and Uncle Dick helped to bring the slayers to justice. All three confessed. Two were hanged at Las Vegas; the other served a life term in prison. The grave in Raton Pass is that of the slain corporal.

Victims of the Indians

The need for protection against redskins on the warpath is attested by the fact that two years later, in October, six Union Pacific trackmen were massacred by Cheyennes at what is now Victoria, Kansas, and were planted on railroad property where they fell. A bronze and granite marker tells their story.

Speaking of redskins reminds me that Chief Wa-pel-lo of the Fox tribe, who died in 1842, is buried near Agency City,

Iowa, beside the Burlington Railroad. His grave is marked by whitewashed concrete letters thirteen inches high that spell his name, and the county is named for him. Another Indian rests in earth shaken by the iron horse at a remote spot where he may have once hunted buffalo, between what is now Newport and Meteline Falls, Idaho. When the tracks were about to be laid many years ago, loyal braves objected to desecration of the tomb by laying rails beside it, but the rumpus ended with an agreement that the railroad company would tend the site forever.

On the Montana Division of the Northern Pacific, between Reynolds and Big Timber, there is a fenced-in grave marked by a white cross. The crews of heavy-tonnage trains sigh with relief when they get past that spot with their "drag" intact, for they know they have climbed the grade and will not have to "double"; that is, take the train up the hill in two sections. Old heads say that under the cross lies a track laborer known only as "Mike."

In California, the body of an unidentified hombre who was run down by a Stockton & Copperopolis (now Southern Pacific) Railroad train at Culvert 113-B was once the center of a ludicrous controversy. The accident happened on a long wooden bridge spanning an arroyo, which has since been filled in, at a point where three counties meet. The coroners of all three counties argued for the right to be paid for burying the deceased. The Calveras County official settled the row by making a hasty trip to Minton, collecting dry-goods boxes from a general store and using them to build a casket for the stranger, whom he laid to rest beside the track.

In New Mexico, on the Santa Fe line at Manuelito, is the trackside grave of a pretty Mexican woman who was stabbed to death by her jealous husband. The landmark is situated at the east switch. One dark night a freight train entered the siding to allow a westbound passenger train to pass. While the freight was waiting, some practical jokers in the crew painted a lady's shoe with phosphorus and set it on the grave.

When the freight pulled out of the siding, the flagman got off, as usual, to close the switch. Someone emitted a hollow groan. The flagman glanced around in fright, saw the shoe gleaming in the darkness, and made a bee-line for the caboose. He swore he'd seen the girl's foot dancing on her grave.

On the Mormon Trail

The most famous of all railside tombs may be seen on the Burlington Railroad three miles east of Scotts Bluff in Nebraska's North Platte valley. Back in 1899, when railroad engineers were surveying a route along the old Mormon Trail, they came upon a grassy mound with an iron hoop jutting up from the earth. It was roughly in an oval shape and had once been a tire on a covered wagon. Chiseled deep in the iron was the name REBECCA WINTERS. The men respectfully examined the unusual grave marker, then retraced their steps to change the proposed rail route.

By doing so, they preserved the only known grave of the 20,000 or so Mormon emigrants who had perished on the trail from Nauvoo, Illinois, to what is now Utah between the years 1848 and 1853. Rebecca was the wife of Hiram Winters. Their family, including five children, had set out for "the Promised Land" in the spring of 1852 with a caravan of prairie schooners, along with other members of the Church of Latter Day Saints. Mrs. Winters fell sick and died on the trail, August 13, at the age of fifty.

At first, her grave was marked only by the wagon tire, in a section that later became a vast cattle range. Cowboys regarded the landmark with superstitious awe. At length, in 1900, the Burlington built an iron fence around the plot, and two years later descendants of Mrs. Winters erected a granite tombstone, without disturbing the wagon tire. The trackside grave is a priceless heritage in Western Americana. • • •

BOOTHILL

I

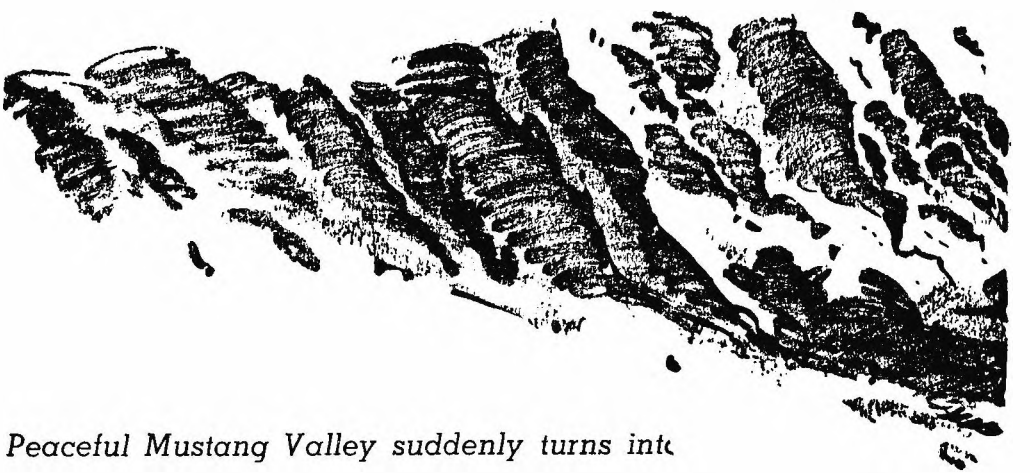
FRIENDSHIPS have a strange way of snapping, like a rope that is drawn too taut. Only in the case of Jeff Connor and "Big Ike" Taggert it was a rope around the neck of a brockle-faced heifer that fractured their friendship.

The brush-poppers of both men's big outfits were returning from the chuck-wagon when the trouble happened. Neither Jeff Connor nor Ike Taggert had paused for coffee since dreary dawn. They were dog tired. Their nerves were ragged.

Jeff Connor, tough and wiry and shorter than most men, could fork any salty bronc in the remuda. He could rope, heel, or neck, tie hard and throw an outlaw mossy-horn bull to the ground with amazing speed. Caustic-tongued and quick-tempered, Connor paid good wages and asked no man to do what he wouldn't do himself. No *chaparro prieto* thicket was too dense for Connor to ride into full tilt, bent low over the kak horn. Usually he came crashing out into a clearing with a cow ahead of him.

Big Ike Taggert was slower of speech, slower to irritate. But once angered, he was a one-man tornado. It was said that he was the only man in the Brasada who could blister the hide of his men with words and make them submit to it. Hard-headed and brawny, this grizzled cowman stood well over six feet. A staunch friend and a bitter hater was Big Ike. Men either blessed him or cursed him for a tyrant.

The two men and their outfits were working their roundups together. Each had his own branding fire and crew. For



Peaceful Mustang Valley suddenly turns into a gun-splashed outpost of hell when two old ranch friends start a hard-headed feud over an unbranded calf

BROTHERHOOD

A Novel by LARRY A. HARRIS

"Don't move, Taggert!" the man yelled. "All right, Lem, take his gun—and money!"

years they had worked like brothers, lending help, sharing hay during the winters, giving more than either expected in return. It was an ideal friendship. Both men were honest as the day is long. Either would give you the shirt off his back—or shoot you if you tried to steal it.

That fateful morning, Jeff Connor, astride his sorrel cutting pony, dragged a bawling heifer up to his branding fire. Big Ike jogged up, dust-smeared and grim.

"Makin' a mistake there, ain't you, Jeff?" he asked.

Jeff Connor was off his horse, piggin-strings in hand.

"What do you mean, Ike?" he snapped.

"Nothin' much, Jeff. Only the mammy of that heifer happens to wear my Bent T brand. She's weaned, sure, but if you'll cut her loose, I'll gamble she'll still trail with an ear-notched cow of mine."

Fire suddenly leaped into Jeff Connor's eyes.

"I ain't askin' for any cow that ain't mine, Ike. I remember this brockle-face when her Tomahawk mammy was stuck in a bog this spring. I'm slappin' my brand on her and shovin' her over in my herd. I don't like bein' accused of stealin', Ike."

"I'm just sayin' she's mine, Jeff."

"Ike, you're a cussed liar!" Connor said hotly.

BOTH men were white with anger. One word from the other men might have broken the tension and brought the cowmen to their senses. But none came. Ike Taggert and Jeff Connor would live to regret this day. Normally either man would gladly have given the other this ten-dollar heifer.

Big Ike Taggert didn't fight, bellow or swear. Rage flamed through him, flamed and burned deep. He turned to his staring men, eyes bloodshot from fatigue, his voice as cold as ice.

"We'll work alone from here on, boys. Split the herd. Brand our stuff and turn loose any critter that smells of Connor's iron. I never figured I'd live to see the day when there'd be bald-faced thievin' in Mustang Valley."

With that Ike Taggert whirled his horse and rode off. The taut rope of friendship had snapped. Over a brockle-faced heifer, worth ten dollars!

Jeff Connor sat his horse stunned and angry. He suddenly felt weak and sick inside when he realized what had happened. Only an inherent stubbornness and pride kept him from shouting to Big Ike and telling him he was sorry.

Whirling his horse, Connor spurred across the brush-dotted valley into the foothills. In a live-oak motte, near Apache Creek, he found his son, Toby, and a Tomahawk vaquero chousing a ladino bull into a clearing. As they came crashing through the buckbrush, Jeff Connor stopped them. Jeff's bloodshot eyes were hot with rekindled anger, his square-jawed face was stony. He told the two men what had happened.

"You'll take over from here, Toby," he ordered. "You'll have to work like fury or winter will catch us. We'll sell to the first beef buyer in town and let him do the shippin'. Take nothin' from the Taggerts and give nothin'. The devil with 'em!"

"But, Jeff—"

"You heard me, Toby!" Connor bawled, and spurred off.

Toby Connor stared after the oldster. Toby was a strapping youth, barely nineteen, wide-shouldered and lean-hipped. He had inherited his mother's brown hair and eyes, while from his father he got his fighting spirit, recklessness and temper.

To him his father had always been "Jeff." There had always been a deep, abiding understanding between father and son. And their wild, untamed spirit had worried Toby's mother.

Two winters ago, on her death bed, Toby's mother had called him to her side. She had been as gentle and patient as her menfolk were headstrong and reckless. She had begged Toby to look out for Jeff when she was gone.

"I'll look out for Jeff, Ma," Toby had whispered chokingly. "I promise."

"He needs a level head to restrain him, Toby. When he flares up, you keep cool."

Now Toby turned to the little Mexican vaquero with him.

"Chouse out and brand what you can, Chico," he said grimly. "I'm goin' to the wagon."

Both the Tomahawk and Bent T crews were at work splitting up the main herd when Toby rode up. Riders, numb with cold, spurred in and out of the milling, bawling herd. Toby sensed the tension that gripped the camp. Riders of both ranches

glanced furtively at him as he headed for the chuck wagon.

Big Ike Taggert's foreman, Lem Bullard, was standing at the campfire, coffee cup in hand, when Toby strode up. Bullard was a tall, bony-cheeked man with bird-like black eyes. Six months before Bullard had ridden in out of nowhere, braced Ike Taggert for a job, and got it. Soon after that he had been promoted to foreman. Though he sometimes smelled of whisky and boasted a lot, he did know the cow business. About his lean middle he always packed a black-butted six-shooter.

Toby had never liked the man. For that reason he had avoided him as much as possible. Now, when he asked the whereabouts of Big Ike, Bullard grinned unpleasantly.

"Goin' to apologize for your old man or pick up the fight, kid?" he asked, a mocking gleam in his eyes.

"I'll tend to that, Bullard," Toby answered. "Where's Ike?"

"Ranch house, maybe. I wouldn't know, button."

Toby checked an angry retort. Some day he meant to smash his fist into Lem Bullard's ugly face for calling him "button." He spurred away, heading toward Taggert's Bent T ranch across the valley. The sun was up, but an icy wind whipped out of north, hinting of an early winter. Storm clouds hovered over the brush covered hills.

WORRY gnawed at Toby. Since Lem Bullard had come to the Bent T there had been a drouth. More than once Big Ike and Connor had interchanged hot words. And it seemed to Toby that Bullard had goaded the two men on, rather than trying to pacify them. But Big Ike reckoned he had hired a good man in Bullard, despite the man's unpopularity with the other hands.

Toby splashed his bay across the icy flow of Apache Creek. A few miles further the buildings of the Bent T stood in a grove of cottonwoods. The buildings and corrals were in repair. Two windmills pumped water into earthen tanks. Across the clearing, stacks of hay told of sufficient winter feed. Big Ike had always bested Jeff Connor in the matter of ranch upkeep. Since Toby's mother had died, Jeff Connor hadn't seemed to care much how things looked.

When Toby rode into the Taggert yard, three saddled horses stood near the portico of the main house. Greg, Big Ike's only son, strode outside as Toby wheeled up. Greg was a tall quiet man of twenty-five. He had spent two years at an Eastern university. His speech and dress were impeccable. In school he had learned to box, but in all ways he was as unlike Big Ike as day is from night.

"Want something, Toby?" he asked coldly.

"Where's Ike, Greg?"

Anger lay deep in Greg Taggert, the same anger that burned in Toby.

"Dad has nothing to say to you, Toby," Greg said stiffly. "So far as we're concerned, our relations with you Connors are over. Now will you kindly get off our land?"

Toby bit his lips. Face white with fighting rage, he whirled his horse and rode away. He told himself he hated the Taggerts—hated their high and mighty ways. Some day he would show them!

Toby came out on the mesquite-hemmed wagon road that led across the valley to Jamul. He wanted to find Jeff, get him back to the ranch before further trouble broke loose. Toby was positive that Jeff would seek solace in the bottle. It would be the first time Jeff had taken a drink since Toby's mother died.

The town of Jamul was quiet when Toby rode in. Gnarled and leafless mesquite trees flanked the main street. 'Dobe homes stood back from the dusty road. There were unpainted picket fences enclosing some of the houses, and lace curtains at the windows. Wood smoke coiled from the chimneys. In the center of town, the false-fronted buildings were weather-beaten and old.

Saddled horses stood at the hitchrack in front of the Red Heart Saloon. A man came out of the general store and waved as Toby rode past. At the hitchrack Toby spotted his father's mount. He pulled in beside the animal, dismounted.

Three gun-hung, hard-faced men were standing at the bar when Toby entered the saloon. Behind the counter Ace Westbrook, the proprietor, glanced up. He was a pasty-faced man, black-haired, black-eyed, with long thin fingers and a gambler's cold smile. He nodded significantly

toward a booth at the far end of the room.

"Your dad's back there, Toby. Dead drunk after gulping down a full pint. And on the prod. Best get him home."

Toby's spurs jingled as he hurried past the gambling tables. In the back booth he found Jeff, a glass and a half-filled whisky bottle on the table in front of him.

Toby swallowed a lump in his throat.

"Come on, Jeff," he said softly.

"Ike Taggert can't call me a thief and get away with it!" Jeff raged thickly. "Blast his soul, I'll make him eat them words some day. He stabbed me in the back, son. Always remember that."

"I'll remember," Toby agreed.

Toby got Jeff outside. Toby was loading Jeff upon his horse when Sheriff Charlie Gordon came down the walk. Worry filled the lawman's eyes. Word had spread like wildfire of the sudden break between Jeff Connor and Ike Taggert. Sheriff Gordon knew of it. He was also smart enough to know that range wars have started for less.

"Try to calm Jeff down when he sobers up, Toby," he said gently. "Just hope that both men see the light before it's too late. I'll try to reason with Ike. Neither man knew what he was sayin'."

"Ike Taggert can't call Jeff a cow thief!" Toby flared.

"Take it easy, son. Ike didn't mean it."

"Like thunder he didn't!" Toby rapped, and rode away, leading Jeff's horse behind him.

"I'll get even with the Taggerts!" he shouted back. "Watch me!"

II

THE first snow fell that night, swirling out of the north, borne by a roaring, arctic wind. Toby was up before the dawn, rousing out the men. Topping snuffy broncs, they were at the roundup camp by daylight.

Wild mossyhorns were roped and branded, along with the young stuff. All salable beef was thrown into one herd, the breeder cattle in another. It was dangerous, man-killing work. And the tally was heartbreaking. Toby had counted on a sizable herd to sell. But when the count was made that noon he tallied less than a hundred that were fit for market. And some of them were lump-jawed and too old.

The storm held that day and the next. Snow blanketed the hills and valley. Toby kept his men clear of the staked-off boundary of the Bent T ranch. He saw nothing of Big Ike or his brush-poppers. In the blinding storm he worked the draws, topped out the hills, riding, roping, branding, until every muscle in his body screamed for a rest. He set a pace for his men, and forced them to follow.

At meal time they barely paused to eat. Half-frozen, gaunt from exhaustion, the men became sullen. Toby overheard portions of their boorish mutterings and knew that something was afoot. They were a rollicking, tough bunch and, up to now, loyal to the brand that paid them their forty a month. But since the break between Jeff and Big Ike, they had grown surly.

To add to Toby's worries, each time he returned to the house, he found Jeff stupidly drunk. No amount of arguing seemed to bring the oldster to his senses. Toby knew that deep in his heart, Jeff was waiting, hoping that Big Ike would be the first to make amends. Jeff might make up with Big Ike. But Toby's bitterness toward the Taggerts never dimmed.

Neither Toby nor Jeff knew that the day after the big argument, Big Ike had been willing to shake hands and forget everything. Only Big Ike was too bullheaded to make the first move. He was in the Red Heart Saloon when a shirt-tail rancher, hoping to curry favor, said:

"Always did figure Jeff Connor was a skunk, Ike. He—"

Big Ike whirled and knocked the rancher flat.

"I'll be the judge of that, Harker—not you," he said, so that the entire barroom could hear.

Toby and the men finished the roundup the third day. It was still bitter cold, but the storm had abated. With the salable stuff corraled, one of Connor's Tomahawk men approached Toby and said they were quitting. The other sullen hands stood nearby.

"What's the matter?" Toby asked.

The spokesman looked down at his snow-wet boots.

"Nothin's the matter, Toby. Ain't got anything against you or old Jeff. We're just offered more money, that's all."

"More money?" Toby snapped.

"Go ahead and tell him, Red," one of the men growled.

Red glanced up, half angry. "We're goin' to work for Big Ike, Toby!" he blurted. "I met Lem Bullard at the boundary yesterday and he made a proposition we couldn't turn down. You might as well face facts, Toby. We know you and Jeff are broke. And what with Jeff drinkin' himself to death, you ain't got a chance of pullin' your ranch out of the fix."

Swift, unreasoning anger flamed through Toby. Until now he hadn't seen Jeff standing in the bunkhouse doorway behind him. Jeff was half-drunk, his eyes bloodshot. His broad shoulders sagged as if under a crushing weight.

"Let 'em go, Toby," he muttered thickly. "I might have knowed Ike would pull somethin' like this. Come into the house and get your checks, boys."

"Keep 'em, Jeff," Red growled. "You need 'em worse than we do."

Jeff stiffened, fighting mad. "You heard me!" he barked. "Come get yore checks!"

Toby waited until the men followed Jeff across the yard into the big house. Then he went into the kitchen. Chico, the Mexican, was there alone. Much of the time Chico did the cooking.

"Me stick with you, Toby," he said sadly.

The loyalty of the little Mexican stirred Toby.

"Thanks, Chico," he said.

In a few minutes the Tomahawk hands left the house. Through a window Toby watched them haul their gear out of the bunkhouse, mount their horses and ride away. When he went into the front room, Jeff was sitting before a roaring fire in the fireplace. He didn't look up when Toby entered.

"Why didn't you tell me of the tight we were in, Jeff?" Toby demanded.

"I didn't want to worry you, Toby. I figured we could pull out without you knowin'."

"You borrowed money from Banker Caples?"

"Four thousand, six months ago, to meet expenses and buy hay," Jeff confessed miserably. "Seemed the only thing to do, Toby."

IT HAD been a bitter pill to Jeff. He had been forced to mortgage the ranch to get the money. Stiff pride had kept him from going to Big Ike at the time, though Big Ike would have lent him the money without note or promise.

"I'll hunt up a beef buyer tomorrow, Toby," Jeff said. "With any kind of price at all we'll have enough to meet half the note. Caples will have to give us an extension on the balance."

Pity stabbed at Toby. Jeff was broken. He looked old, worn, and unutterably tired. For days now ill-luck had dogged him. The Tomahawk men suddenly quitting to work for Big Ike had cut him deeply.

"We'll make it some way, Jeff," Toby told him.

Sheriff Charlie Gordon drove his buckboard out to the Tomahawk ranch that night. With him came his daughter, Molly. She was Toby's own age, as pert and lovely as a range-bred girl can be. When Toby's mother had been living, Molly had spent a lot of time at the Tomahawk. Her own mother had died when she was a child. She and Toby had ridden together, laughed and played as kids will.

Toby took Molly into the kitchen where they could be alone. In the lamplight her face was flushed with the cold. She was wearing mannish range garb and sheepskin. Beneath the brim of her Stetson peeped reddish-brown hair.

She tried to smile, tried to hide the worry in her eyes. But it was no use.

"Now let me hear your side of the story, Toby," she said, in her usual blunt way.

"What do you mean, Molly?"

"Cut it, cowboy. You know what I mean. Let's have it."

Briefly Toby told her of Jeff's break with Big Ike, of the discouraging roundup tally, of the men quitting. He made no effort to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"And the money Jeff borrowed at the bank?" Molly asked.

"You know about that?"

Molly Gordon smiled wryly. "Jamul's a small town, Toby. Gossip flies fast, and Ab Caples has a mouth. I know the trouble you're in. So does Dad. That's why we're out here tonight—trying to help."

"There's nothing you can do, Molly," Toby told her.

"Not so fast, cowboy. You and Jeff are stewing in your own hate juice and asking for trouble. I knew why you were avoid-

ing me the last few days. Dad told me Jeff was hitting the bottle and you were trying to kill yourself working. Jeff was in town the other day alone, Toby. The day after the break with Big Ike. I don't know whether you know it or not, but he got tanked up and made all kinds of big talk about squaring with Ike. That's only going to cause more trouble, Toby. Ike's square—"

"Ike Taggert's turned snake, Molly!"

Milly clutched Toby's arm, shook him.

"Stop it, Toby! For heaven's sake, come to your senses. Big Ike won't take that kind of talk always. There'll be gun-play. If Jeff and Big Ike want to make fools of themselves, let them. But you keep a level head before shooting starts."

Molly's beseeching words tumbled from her. But Toby, swayed by his father's rancor, paid little heed. He was conscious only of Molly's beauty, of the fact that she had grown into lovely womanhood.

"Please, Toby," she begged. "Please be careful."

She was trembling, clinging to him. Toby drew her closer. Then after a firm embrace, he bent and kissed her. He felt her warm tears against his cheek. He knew then that his life would never be complete without this spirited girl.

When he released her, she drew back, flushed and shaken by his ardor.

"You love me, Molly?" he asked hoarsely.

"I—I don't know, Toby," she said honestly. "You've changed so."

They said little after that. When Molly and Sheriff Gordon left, Toby went with them out to the buckboard. The old lawman took Toby to one side, so Molly couldn't hear.

"I didn't tell Jeff this, Toby," he said. "But I figure you ought to know. Big Ike claims you've rounded up some of his Bent T stuff with yours. If you have, I know it's a mistake. Hold your horses, son! Big Ike ain't entirely to blame. He'd listen to reason if it wasn't for Lem Bullard. If my guess is right, Bullard is a mean snake. He's doin' all he can to keep Big Ike riled up. And Ike is listenin' to him, convinced that Bullard is lookin' out for his interests."

"I'll call their bluff!" Toby cut in.

"And get a bullet to Boothill! Bullard is poison, son. Take my advice and sit tight. If Big Ike or Bullard ride over for a recheck on your herd, let 'em have it. Otherwise there'll be gun-play."

SHERIFF GORDON turned and got into the buckboard. There in the frigid darkness Toby watched them drive away. Anger, humiliation, boiled up in him.

He heard the crunch of a bootheel on the frozen ground behind him. He whirled, right hand slapping down to the butt of his six-shooter. Chico, bundled up in a huge sheepskin coat, came out of the black shadows.

"The Sheriff is right, Toby," Chico muttered. "Trouble is comin'. I feel it."

Toby's mind raced. He felt positive he could trust this little Mexican.

"Then let it come, Chico!" he said. "From now till our herd is sold, we're goin' to guard it. If Big Ike or his men ride up, shoot first and talk later. Get your rifle and ride to the corral. Take the first watch. I'll relieve you soon after midnight."

Chico was willing. He hurried out to the shed, rigged his horse and rode off into the stormy night. Teeth chattering from the cold, Toby returned to the house. He didn't tell Jeff what he had done, nor did he reveal Sheriff Gordon's warning.

Toby went to his room, undressed, and climbed into bed. He closed his eyes, but sleep would not come. Outside, the icy wind moaned, like dying men. A tingling, soul-stirring uneasiness sawed at Toby's nerves.

After a time he dozed fitfully. Nightmares plagued him. When he awoke, it was with a start. He was clammy and shaking.

Quickly he lunged out of bed, began dressing. He knew it was long past midnight. The house was dark, quiet. Outside, the storm had increased to a raging blizzard. He went into the kitchen. There he pulled on his heavy coat and tied a muffler about his ears.

Lighting a lantern, he hurried outside to the shed.

Rigging his horse, he mounted and rode off into the bush. The shrieking gale whipped at his hunched figure. Snow and sleet stung his face like buckshot.

He was a mile from the house when he dipped his horse down a sharp incline. Here in a natural amphitheater, Toby and

Jeff had built their pole corral. It was an ideal spot, protected from winter drifts.

Toby yelled when he was halfway down the slope.

"Chico! It's me, Chico! Toby!"

No answering shout, no bawl of restless cattle came out of the inky darkness below. And a psychic sense of disaster filled Toby. Steely fingers clutched at his heart. Through the high brush he sent his horse plunging to the basin floor. Two cows, vague and blurry in the night, suddenly went crashing off into the brush ahead of him.

Then Toby reined short, cold horror and shock pouring through him in a ghastly

WISE GAL

I've met a gal down Texas way,
Who builds up all my hopes—
She's never thrown a lariat,
But, gosh, she knows the ropes!

—Pecos Pete

tide. In the snow-filled darkness he stared at the wreckage before him. The herd was gone; the pole corral was smashed.

Beneath a rocky ledge, glowed the remains of a campfire. Near it lay Chico's body, arms outstretched, one hand still clutching a rifle.

For one shocked instant Toby stared at the scene. Stiffly he dismounted and strode to the smoldering campfire. Bending down, he saw the bullet-hole in Chico's forehead. The Mexican's body was stiff, frozen.

Chico had died fighting. All around the wrecked corral churning hoofs had packed the snow. Two dead cows, obviously killed in the raid, lay dead and stiff not far away.

For a long minute Toby shook with uncontrollable sobs. Then as bitter rage drove back the grief, he stood up, his face hard and merciless.

"This is your doings, Taggert!" he raged hoarsely. "But I'll square with you for this if it's the last thing I ever do!"

The rolling hatred in Toby made it hard for him to think clearly. He believed beyond question that Big Ike and his men had made this raid. They had shot down Chico in cold blood.

Big Ike had taken the cattle he claimed were his and stampeded the rest. And because Big Ike Taggert was a power, and had money, Sheriff Gordon's brand of law wouldn't touch him. Big Ike, belligerent and defiant, would simply say he had retrieved his stolen stock. And Chico just happened to get killed.

Holding the Mexican's body in his arms, Toby mounted and headed back toward the ranchhouse. Lamplight glowed at the kitchen windows.

Jeff, nightshirt tucked into his pants, six-shooter in hand, met Toby at the door. A low curse escaped the older man as Toby stepped inside with his burden. There was no surprise on Jeff's face. Rather the hopeless look of a man who has met a nightmare in the flesh.

"Couldn't sleep, Toby," he explained. "Thought I heard gunshots some time ago. I heard you get up and go out."

"They got Chico, Jeff. They took what cattle they wanted and wrecked the corral."

Jeff stared like a doomed man who knows he is done. Without asking, he knew who had done it. His arms dangled loosely at his sides. His shoulders sagged and he looked old, terribly old and broken. There was something pitiful about him. All his fight and bluster were gone.

A month ago Jeff Connor would have raged like a wounded bull. Crazy mad, he would have sought vengeance and justice. Odds would have meant nothing to him. But now he was a changed man.

"I guess we're done, Toby," he said dully. "It's too late for another roundup, even if we had help. I was afraid all along Ike'd crack down on us."

Rage, too deep for words, burned in Toby. He carried Chico's body into the front room, covered it with a blanket. He and Jeff sat up the rest of the night. Not a dozen words passed between them.

III

WHEN daylight finally came, Toby Connor buckled on his six-shooter, pulled

on his coat and hat.

"Bury Chico on the hillside near Ma's grave, Jeff," he said tonelessly. "I'm headin', first, for the corral, and then for town."

Toby went out to his horse, mounted and rode again toward the wrecked corral. He circled the basin until he came upon the hoofprints of the raiders in the snow.

The storm had abated. Snow had ceased falling. A frigid wind still lashed out of the north and the sky was overcast.

The trail was easy to follow. Only a light veil of snow had fallen since the raid. Toby back-tracked, riding slowly. At least eight riders had been in the band. At Apache Creek Toby saw where they had crossed, coming in a beeline from Big Ike's Bent T. Patently Big Ike hadn't given a hoot who knew he made the raid.

A strange calm settled over Toby as he turned back through the brush toward town. The burning rage inside him had spent itself. Yet his hate was a poison, blinding him to all else save a mad passion to smash back at Big Ike.

He avoided the wagon road, taking cover in the rolling brush land.

In Jamul, women were out sweeping the snow off their front porches when Toby jogged into the outskirts. He pulled up at the rear of Sheriff Gordon's modest 'dobe home. Molly met him at the kitchen door. But her usual cheerful greeting was never uttered, for she knew something had happened.

"Where's your father, Molly?" Toby asked, quietly.

"He's already gone to the office," she said quickly. "What's wrong, Toby?"

"Ike and his men raided us last night, Molly. They killed Chico."

Briefly, Toby related what had happened, his voice dull. As he stood by the kitchen stove, he looked a lot older than his nineteen years. And Molly, pale and shaken, knew that nothing she could do or say would change him. What she saw in his eyes frightened her.

"Oh, Toby, why don't you and Jeff sell out?" she begged, her voice half a sob. "Banker Caples will pay you something."

"I won't run from anybody, Molly," Toby said and laughed queerly.

He sat down in a chair near the stove. Molly took a chair near him. Words were such futile things. Each was a prey to the same black forebodings. A stick settled in the hot stove. Outside in the street they heard riders pass, but neither Toby nor Molly looked up. Molly held back the tears. Once her head dropped and her eyes closed, as if she were praying.

After a time Toby got to his feet. At the door he turned.

"See you later, Molly," he said.

He kept going when she called to him. Out in front he quickly forked his horse and rode down the street. He happened to notice someone peering at him through a window in one of the nearby houses. Lace curtains fluttered as the face withdrew. Farther down the street two men turned to stare.

Then, quite suddenly, the tension of the town became apparent to Toby. Except for the moaning wind, an expectant hush hovered over the place—startling, concrete, tangible. Toby felt the impact of eyes. Jamul had heard of the raid. Toby was positive of that when he spotted Big Ike's steel-dust gelding in front of the Red Heart Saloon.

Toby passed the saloon, staring straight ahead. Further on, in front of the bank, he pulled over to a hitch-rack and dismounted. Inside the bank he found a popeyed cashier building a fire in the stove. Toby strode past the man, barely nodding.

In his office, Ab Caples was sitting behind a desk when Toby walked in. Scowling, Caples glanced up from some letters. He was a big man, bull-necked and powerfully built. Over a back-trail, none too savory, gossip had it that Ab Caples had been a prospector in the Klondike, a rancher in Mexico, a political power in Dallas. No one knew anything for sure, except that he was a shrewd bargainer and a good banker.

NOW in his middle forties, and a bachelor, Caples had his living quarters above the bank. After banking hours he mingled with the men in the saloons, but he never quite brought himself down to their level. Now his wide, lipless mouth was twisted into a mirthless grin.

"What do you want, Toby?" he asked unpleasantly.

Toby's voice was steady. "We were raided—"

Impatiently, Caples lifted his hand frowning.

"I know all about that, Toby. Your old man was here when we opened, smellin' of rotgut and beggin' for an extension on the loan." He paused, shrugged. "I'm sorry. There's nothin' more I can do for you. Jeff's note is due in a week. If he's unable to pay, then I'll have to foreclose on the ranch. Have I made myself clear?"

Toby's temper flared, but outwardly he was calm.

"Plumb clear, Caples," he said slowly.

"Then I'll have to ask you to leave. I have work to do."

"Only one thing, Caples. Please get to your feet."

Surprisingly, Caples arose, a little puzzled.

"I just wanted," said Toby, "to get a full-size picture of a slimy snake."

Then he swung, hard and fast. His rock-hard fist caught Caples on the chin, jerking his head back. A mule's kick couldn't have hit the banker harder. With a crash he fell back over his swivel chair to the floor. When he got to his feet his heavy-jowled face was livid with fury. A hide-out derringer was in his big fist. But Toby was outside on the walk.

Sheriff Charlie Gordon came out of his office as Toby drew near. His puckered eyes were haunted.

"For Pete's sake, get out of town, son," he muttered. "You're only askin' for more trouble here."

"I've already asked for it," Toby said, and went on.

From doorways and windows a dozen or more people saw Toby enter the Red Heart Saloon. Just inside the door he paused, eyes sweeping the room. All talk stopped. Heads at the bar turned.

Big Ike Taggert, drink in hand, stiffened, eyes narrowing. Lem Bullard was on one side of him, Greg Taggert on the other. Farther down the bar were five other Bent T brush-poppers, hard-faced, double-gunned men who were new in Mustang Valley.

Big Ike bristled with all the belligerence of his fighting soul.

"Where's Jeff, Toby?" he bellowed. "Or didn't Jeff have the nerve to face me?"

"Let's not have any trouble in here, boys," Ace Westbrook said uneasily, from the end of the bar.

Toby's spurs jingled as he strode to the middle of the room. Hate, unlike anything he had ever known, shook him to the depths of his soul.

"A Connor will match nerve with you any time, Ike!" he retorted. "It don't take nerve to make a raid like you did last night. You've got a killin' comin' for that. Now draw!"

Blind to the odds against him, Toby's right hand slapped down to his gun, fast! But Lem Bullard was faster. His right hand made a blurred streak. Toby's eyes were on Big Ike, who hadn't moved. Gun thunder suddenly rocked the room. Toby's hand jerked away from his gun as a bullet cut through his coat sleeve.

Stunned, he felt the pain of a bullet gash on his arm. Then blood was dripping from his finger tips. When he looked up, he saw the smoking six-shooter in Bullard's fist. The other men had their guns drawn. The Bent T foreman, his eyes burning with a desire to kill, was grinning evilly.

"Hold it, Bullard!" bawled Big Ike, a little pale. "Go on home, Toby. Tell Jeff, when he sobers up, I'll talk terms to him any time."

Something seemed to snap inside Toby. Crazy mad, he lunged forward, driven by a fury he knew no reason. Caught off balance, Big Ike stumbled backward as Toby swung. Greg, white and unnerved, started forward to join in the fight.

But Lem Bullard, quick as a flash, held Greg and the others back. The Bent T foreman's gun was back in its holster. Above the hubbub, he made himself heard.

"Let me handle the young hellion, Ike!" he bawled. "I'll stamp him to the floor and make him eat that toy pistol he's packin!"

"Taggerts can do their own fightin', Bullard!" Big Ike stormed. "Either me or Greg can handle this!"

"As a favor, let me do it, Ike," Bullard insisted.

"Then try to beat some sense into him!"

Toby was out of his sheepskin when Bullard charged. Toby was as tall as the Bent T man, much younger, and muscled like a two-year-old mustang. However, Bullard, experienced in rough-and-tumble fighting, knew all the tricks. Gouge, kick and stamp were his tactics.

Toby met the charge head on, swinging with all the power of his trembling body. Each man took a blow that would have

floored most men. They rocked back, then drove in like two raging bulls. Breath gushed from their lungs as they crashed together, but neither gave an inch.

TOE to toe they stood, panting, slugging, dodging, weaving, and then coming up for more. All the bitterness and hate in Toby roared through him in a blinding tide. An uppercut rocked him back on his heels, tore a groan from his bloody lips. He caught himself in time and lunged in for more. When Bullard swung, Toby dodged. Then Toby speared through with a tremendous right that caught Bullard in the mouth.

Bullard crashed back into the bar, pain and surprise flooding his birdlike eyes. Fury etched his bony face. The confident, arrogant grin vanished from his lips. Cursing, he came out of his crouch like a wounded cougar.

Toby tried to side-step that mad drive. He slipped. And, off balance, Bullard caught him with a knee in the stomach and a left to the ear.

The entire barroom seemed to explode in front of Toby's eyes. Pain flamed through him. Blind and sick, he went down. His ears roared. He didn't hear the other Bent T gunmen bawling at Bullard to finish the job. He didn't know that Big Ike, deathly white, was bellowing above the uproar.

"That's enough, Bullard. Stop it!"

Greg, tutored in fair fighting, lunged forward to halt the massacre. But Bullard, lusting for the kill, had already smashed his heavy boot toe into Toby's ribs.

Sobbing for breath, afire with agony Toby rolled free of the torture. Somehow he found the strength to crawl to his knees. Then with a mighty effort he lurched erect, bloody and bruised, but not beaten. He saw Greg restraining the raging Bent T foreman.

Unconsciously, Toby's right hand dropped to his side. A hawkfaced Bent T gunman, misinterpreting that move, swore and went for his own gun. And in that split-second Toby knew that his life hung in a balance. In one lightning move he drew and fired. Through the gunsmoke he saw the Bent T gunman, six-shooter clear of leather, crumple and fall. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Where Sheriff Gordon came from, Toby was never to know. But the old lawman was suddenly among the panic-stricken men. Above the tumult his voice rose commandingly.

"Put up the gun, Toby! You're comin' with me."

Toby stood reeling, leveled six-shooter holding back the mob. His eyes glowed feverishly in his dead-white face. His bloody lips were pulled back in what might have been a grin. He stopped, picked up his coat. Then he was backing to the door.

"I'm not goin' with you, Charlie," he managed. "That gun-totin' gent went for his gun first. It was either me or him, and you know it. In a way that kind of pays for the murder of Chico. I'm leavin' now. And the first man that tries to stop me will get another bullet!"

Toby backed out of the stunned room. The cold air felt good when he reached the boardwalk outside. He was deathly sick. As if in a daze he went across the street toward his horse. If he heard the babble of riotous voices in the Red Heart Saloon behind him, he gave no sign.

He was mounting his horse when he heard Molly cry out to him. She had been in her father's office when she had heard the shooting. As she came up to Toby, she was sobbing hysterically.

"Toby! Toby! What happened?"

"I just killed a man, Molly." Toby said, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. "One of Big Ike's gunmen."

Molly Gordon stared, shocked, bewildered, frightened. She looked pitifully small, standing there with one hand crushing her lips. Tears filled her eyes. A half-moan, half-sob escaped her.

"Oh, Toby! Why—why did you do it?"

She turned and fled back toward the sheriff's office.

Men began pushing through the door of the Red Heart Saloon. From store doorways townspeople stared in breathless wonder and fear.

Brain rioting with emotions, Toby rode down a side street. Toward the edge of town he spotted Jeff's sorrel in front of a 'dobe saloon. It was a disreputable place, owned by a halfbreed Mexican, who served home-distilled sotol.

In front of the dive, Toby dismounted running. As he banged through the door, the breed proprietor turned, startled. A

grizzled, double-gunned hombre and two goat-herding peons stood at the makeshift bar.

Off in a far corner, Jeff Connor and another man sat in close confab.

JEFF turned, bleary-eyed. He grinned drunkenly as Toby strode nearer. One glance showed Toby that the man with Jeff was staying sober. He was a shifty-eyed man with protruding yellow teeth. For weeks he had been around Jamul, spending most of his time in this side street saloon.

"Want you to meet a friend of mine, Toby," Jeff called blearily. "Shake hands with Shag Puckett."

Toby wiped the blood from his lips. He ignored the stranger.

"Come with me, Jeff. We got to get out of town—pronto!"

Jeff shook his head. He didn't see the blood on Toby's face. He wasn't going home, he said belligerently. He was enjoying talking to a gent like "Shag" Puckett.

"Let the old man stay, kid," Puckett put in. "He ain't hurtin' nothin'."

Too sick and weak to argue, Toby turned and went out. Forking his horse, he rode to the Tomahawk Ranch.

IV

JEFF didn't show up at the ranch that night. It worried Toby. Yet he reasoned that Jeff was on a spree. Jeff was taking the bottle method to forget his troubles.

No other riders came near the Tomahawk. It was the quiet that precedes a crashing thunderstorm. Even the wind ceased blowing. But the sky remained overcast, threatening more snow.

Next day, utterly depressed, Toby wandered about the ranch. Bitter memories went with him. He told himself he might as well pack up and get out. But an unrelenting pride, a fierce determination to hold on to the end gripped him.

He found the unmarked grave where Jeff had buried Chico. Hat in hand, he stood beside his mother's grave.

"I've failed you, Ma," he said, a lump in his throat.

He fed what little stock was left in the shed. When night fell, he returned to the house. He was still a little sick. His side, where Bullard had kicked him, ached like a knife stab. He got a fire going in the fireplace and lay down on the sofa.

Drowsiness stole over him; then the sleep of utter exhaustion.

He had no idea how long he slept. Swelling hoofbeats, men's low voices, the thump of boot heels on the portico seeped into his consciousness. He was on his feet when the front door burst open and men clumped into the room.

It didn't make sense to Toby at first. Groggily, he stared at them—Sheriff Gordon, Banker Ab Caples, two men from town and a couple of small ranchers. Grim-jawed men with leveled guns, who meant business.

"You'll have to come with us, Toby," the lawman muttered.

Toby shook himself free of his mental fog.

"You were a witness to that shootin', Charlie," he began.

"It's not that this time, Toby. You're wanted for questionin' about the bank robbery tonight."

Toby stood wordless, shocked by the accusing stares of these men whom he had always regarded as his friends.

"Bank—bank?" he gasped. "Why—"

He tried to tell them that he hadn't been off the ranch since yesterday.

"The bank cashier was killed, Toby," Sheriff Gordon said grimly. "We've already taken Jeff in as one of the accomplices. The holdup man with the money got away. Your spur was found outside the bank door."

Toby's eyes dropped. He saw then, for the first time, that his right spur was missing. When or where he had lost it he had no idea. All he knew for sure was that he was being framed. Fight was all he knew —fight back at a hostile world.

He reeled forward, driven by a mad impulse to reach the door, then flee. Rough hands grabbed him. Banker Ab Caples, blatant and furious, was mouthing threats when they half-carried Toby out to his horse.

Toby always remembered that ride into Jamul. When they reached town, Molly came into the lighted doorway of the sheriff's home, watched the posse ride past. Ace Westbrook and a dozen or so other men stood in front of the Red Heart Saloon.

Guided by Sheriff Gordon, Toby was

led through the lawman's office and down a coridor of the jail to a cell. Toby flopped on a bunk, barely conscious of men stirring about in the corridor outside. He didn't see Doc Menafee, pill bag in hand, leave the adjoining cell with Sheriff Gordon.

"Jeff will be all right, Charlie," the medico said quietly.

Later, when the old lawman reentered Toby's cell, he resembled a doomed man himself.

"I might explain a few things to you now, Toby," he said.

"Tonight the bank was robbed, like I told you out at the ranch. The cashier was workin' late over his books. He tried to stop the stickups and got killed for his trouble. The man with the money got away. Caples is hog wild, claimin' his loss is thirty thousand dollars or better. He claims you was out in back holdin' the horses. That's where they found your spur. Jeff was one of the men who entered the bank."

The holdups had been at the door, fleeing, the sheriff explained, when the cashier had fired his pistol. Somehow in the shoot-out Jeff had been wounded. When help got there, they had found the cashier dead and Jeff lying near the door in a pool of blood. Now Jeff was in the next cell, unconscious.

Toby closed his eyes in utter hopelessness.

"And you believe all that, Charlie?" he croaked.

"I don't know what to believe, son," the lawman said.

SHERIFF CHARLIE GORDON was at his wits' end. All the evidence and testimony pointed to the guilt of Toby and Jeff. Everybody in the valley knew that Caples had refused to extend the Connor loan. They knew of the ill feeling between the three men, and of the break with Ike Taggert.

"Just appears like you and Jeff was makin' your last stab at squarin' things Toby. When court convenes, you may get off fairly light. But only Providence can help Jeff. That cashier had a family and a lot of friends."

For hours Toby paced his dark cell that night. Finally he flopped on the cot. Shortly after daybreak Sheriff Gordon and Ike Taggert came to his cell door. Neither man looked as if he had slept a wink. Toby looked up at Big Ike, startled.

"You're goin' free, Toby," Big Ike said queerly. "A Connor might be a lot of things, but I've never known one yet who'd stoop to robbin' a two-bit bank. I'm bettin' eight thousand dollars you and that fool pa of yours were framed. You've got from now until the trial to prove it."

Toby was frankly puzzled. "What's the game, Ike?"

"You'll decide that, Toby. Good luck, cowboy."

Big Ike turned on his heel and left the jail. Toby stared after him. Then he turned to Sheriff Gordon, who was unlocking the door.

"For all his faults, Toby," the lawman said, "there goes one of the whitest men who ever lived. You and Jeff will realize that some time when maybe it's too late. Ike didn't know, till after it was over, about the raid on your ranch. Bullard just told him that him and some of the boys were goin' to your place to get back some Bent T beef. When Ike learned what they'd done, he mighty near beat Bullard to death. And Bullard whined like a coyote, sayin' he didn't know how Chico got killed. Ike's been up all night fightin' for you, Toby.

"I was with him when he talked to the prosecutor into lettin' you be bonded for eight thousand dollars. Ike promised to turn over the money by noon today. Legal or no, he got his way. But where he'll get that money, I don't know. Ike's in the worst trouble of his life. He stands to lose everything he's got—includin' the Bent T. Most of that stolen bank money was his. And there's not a chance of Caples makin' up the loss."

Toby had a queer feeling in the pit of his stomach. When he asked to see Jeff, the lawman led him into the adjoining cell. Jeff was lying on a cot, his head swathed in a bandage. He had overheard what the lawman said.

Remorse in Jeff transcended all physical pain. Too late, he had come to his senses. He knew that the link between him and Big Ike had been more than formal friendship. It had been a link of understanding and trust and affection that human frailties could never break. He knew that in body and soul Big Ike Taggert was a

greater man than he could ever be.

"Tell Ike, Charlie, I didn't rob the bank. I don't know what happened, but I didn't do it."

Jeff didn't ask for sympathy as he told his story. Last night's happenings were hazy to him. He remembered Shag Puckett loading him up on liquor while in the side street bar, but that was about all.

"I know now he played me for a fool. When we left it was late. Puckett said he had a little business at the bank which had to be finished. . . ."

Puckett had asked Jeff to ride with him. Ordinarily, Jeff would have known something was wrong when they rode up to the rear of the bank. Although past business hours, Puckett had persuaded the cashier to admit them. He said Ab Caples was to meet him there. Jeff had gone inside the bank with Puckett. Then, too late, he had realized it was a holdup. Next thing Jeff had known, Puckett had the bank money in a sack.

When the cashier had screamed and gone for his pistol, Puckett had fired. Jeff, shaken into reality, had gone for his own gun. Puckett had whirled on him, fired twice and fled out the rear door. And Jeff, lying in a pool of blood, had been found unconscious.

There was a choked, tight feeling in Toby's throat when he left the jail. Whatever the cost, he meant to find Shag Puckett, the man who had framed Jeff and brought ruin to Big Ike Taggert.

"It'll be a big chore, son," Sheriff Gordon had told him. "But I'll help all I can. Keep in touch with me."

As Toby passed the general store, the owner, a fat-faced man with kindly eyes, said:

"Howdy, Toby. How's Jeff?"

"He's better, Lewis."

"I'm glad, Toby. They's just a lot of us folks that don't figure you and Jeff are as bad as some say. Glad you're out."

THE constriction in Toby's throat grew tighter as he went on. Several other townspeople spoke to him. And Toby knew that this was not because of morbid curiosity. Rather it was true friendship, built of faith, that could stand a lot of wear and tear.

Toby made straight for the Red Heart Saloon. The place was empty except for a couple of townsmen. Ace Westbrook and the men spoke cordially enough when Toby ordered a beer. Bottle in hand, he went to a rear booth and sat down.

Hoofbeats swelled in the street outside. Toby glanced up as Big Ike strode into the saloon. The old rancher's thick shoulders were slumped. The coils of some deadly threat seemed to be squeezing the life's blood out of him.

"I'd like to see you, Ace," he said dully. "Alone."

Big Ike followed Ace Westbrook around the corner of the bar to a door marked "Private." Neither man glanced back at Toby. In the quiet of the barroom the scrape of chairs was audible.

The door stood slightly ajar. Big Ike's voice came clearly. Apparently neither man realized they could be heard in the barroom.

"I need ten thousand dollars between now and noon, Ace. You're the only one in town who's got it. That's why I'm here."

Ace Westbrook's voice came flat and toneless.

"Bond money, Ike?"

"That, and to meet my payroll, Ace."

"You're a gambler, Ike."

"We all are, Ace. You gamble on cards and I gamble that friends don't turn snake overnight. I'm in the biggest mess of my life, what with the bank bein' cleaned out. I'm shippin' every salable head of beef we can lay a hand to. Greg and Bullard are takin' 'em through by rail to San Antonio. I can pay you back half when they return. But you may have to wait a year for the balance."

"I'm not in the loan business, Ike."

"I figured that."

"But I'll be glad to help you out with ten thousand."

"I'll sign a note."

"Your word is your bond with me, Ike."

Toby left the saloon before Big Ike and Ace Westbrook came out of the private office. He didn't want to face Big Ike. All the remorse and contrition Jeff had felt was in Toby. All his hate for Big Ike was gone. He suddenly felt cheap and small. He knew now that nothing—not even Boot Hill—could destroy the bond of brotherhood between his father and Big Ike Taggert.

In his desire to avoid people, Toby got his horse from the shed at the rear of the jail. Sheriff Gordon had given him back his six-shooter. Mounting, Toby headed for the Tomahawk Ranch.

His task of clearing himself and Jeff seemed utterly hopeless. Shag Puckett had made a clean getaway. Sheriff Gordon had sent word to the scattered towns to be on the lookout, but there was a good chance, Toby knew, that Puckett had hit for Mexico.

Gloomily he rode into the Tomahawk ranch yard. He would eat, he decided, pack up a roll, and head for the Border. Across the Line, in the squalid little town of Rosario, he might get a lead. He dismounted near the portico, strode to the door.

As he stepped inside the front room he stopped, every nerve taut. A log fire crackled in the fireplace. Cigarette smoke lay heavy in the air. An empty whisky bottle was on the hearth.

Some instinct warned Toby of another presence. A nerve-prickling chill coursed his spine. Keen to some unseen threat, he reached back to close the door. In the shadows back of the door a figure stirred. And Toby spun, grabbing for his gun—too late! The butt of a six-shooter caught him in the side of the head. His senses reeled, all strength left his body, and he fell.

But in that last horrible moment of consciousness, Toby glimpsed his assailant. It was the man he was seeking—Shag Puckett!

Slowly, inch by inch, Toby struggled out of the clutching morass of unconsciousness. He was numb and thirsty. The side of his head throbbed with jarring pain. A tomblike cold and dampness enveloped him; the blackness was impenetrable.

It took a full minute for Toby's brain to clear. Then all that had happened came to him. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he tried to move. He found then that his wrists and legs were bound. He was lying flat on his back. How long he had been here or where he was, he had no way of knowing.

Suddenly into his consciousness came the muffled crunch of boots in the snow. Hinges creaked. Lantern-light pushed back the Stygian darkness as a man clumped down some nearby stone steps. The truth dawned on Toby then. He was a prisoner in the storm cellar beneath the Tomahawk ranch house.

Out of pain-glazed eyes Toby looked up at the man standing over him, lantern in hand. It was Shag Puckett.

"Glad to see you awake, feller," Puckett said. "Thought for a time I'd maybe slugged you too hard." His yellow teeth showed in a mirthless grin.

"Tryin' to figure things out, eh? For a while I thought you was goin' to kick the bucket. We didn't want it that way, Connor. When you die, it'll be with a bullet through your heart—quick. Here, chew on this jerky. It'll keep you alive."

Shag Puckett took a strip of jerky from his sheepskin pocket, tossed it on the floor near Toby. Then he got his lantern and went out. In the pitlike blackness Toby groped around with his bound hands until he found the jerky. Weak and trembling, he clutched it to his mouth, chewing and savoring the juice. It allayed some of the gnawing pain in his stomach. But thirst deviled him.

Later, drowsiness stole over him and he slept.

V

SOMETIME later Puckett returned. His coat, hat and boots were wet with snow.

"Come on, Connor," he growled. "We're movin'."

Toby was too weak to resist. He had no idea what was happening when Puckett dragged him up the cellar steps. In the snow-filled darkness back of the ranch house stood two horses. The icy wind ruffled Toby's matted hair, knifed through his pain-racked body.

Puckett loaded Toby into one of the saddles, tying the cowboy's hands to the kak horn. Then, mounting himself, he rode away, leading Toby's horse behind him.

Toby's head sagged to his chest. Thorny brush clawed at his legs. He was still wearing his sheekskin coat, but the cold numbed him. Vaguely he knew they were cutting across the hills to the north. He knew Puckett was going to kill him. But why all this riding?

They were only a mile or so from the railroad siding, when Puckett turned into a brush-choked draw. Mesquite was higher than the horses heads. At the door of

an old 'dobe hut Puckett halted. Toby knew the place. Years ago a goat-herding old Mexican had lived here. It was a lonely spot, known to only a few people.

Puckett dismounted, shoved open the plank door. He went inside, lighted a lantern and hung it on a wall hook. Then he dragged Toby inside, placed him on a makeshift bunk. Toby closed his eyes. He heard Puckett depart. By the sounds he knew that the gunman was stabling the horses in a lean-to shelter at the rear of the shack.

When Puckett returned, he kicked shut the door. Grumbling, he soon had a fire going in the mud fireplace. It didn't make sense to Toby.

The windows were boarded up. On an old table in one corner was some jerky, cornbread and a canteen of water. Puckett spread some blankets in front of the fire. He hunkered down, warming himself.

Toby stirred.

"What's the reason for all this, Puckett?" Toby managed to ask.

Puckett turned, scowling. "This ain't my idea. I'd have finished you this mornin', if I'd had my way."

Toby tried to learn more, but Puckett held a brooding silence. When the room got warm he blew out the lantern and rolled up in the blankets in front of the fire.

For hours Toby lay awake, trying to fathom Puckett's game. He wrenched, twisted, and tore at his rawhide bonds, but they only seemed to draw tighter. It was almost dawn when he fell asleep from exhaustion. . . .

Next day the snow stopped falling. But the wind kept howling around the shack. Twice during the day Puckett untied Toby's hands so he could eat. That afternoon the gunman bound Toby securely to the bunk and went out. Toby heard him ride away. And Toby again squirmed and wrenched at his bonds until every muscle in his body cried out in agony.

Puckett returned at nightfall, disgruntled and surly. He wolfed some food and washed it down with whisky. Then he squatted in front of the fire, smoking. The flickering light shadowed his hard-lined face. He kept listening. Once he went to the door, peered out.

Later, Toby heard a rider pull up outside. He knew that for him the end was drawing near. Puckett, six-shooter in hand, went to the door. His gun lowered when he heard the man outside call his name. Then the man stepped inside, slamming the door at his back. And shock, like a mighty physical blow, brought Toby's head up off the bunk.

"Caples!" he cried, stunned.

Banker Ab Caples' fur cap and heavy coat were wet with snow. His heavy-jowled face, red from the cold, was deep-lined. His eyes were on Toby, as coldly speculative as the beady eyes of a coiled and deadly rattler. He was his true self now—greedy, merciless.

He grinned savagely at the prisoner.

"Men have tried to buck me before, Toby," the banker said. "All of 'em failed. You're dying tonight and your old man is going to the gallows. I'll see to that. And Ike Taggert is broke, washed up. In a month's time I'll have both the Bent T and Tomahawk in my name. You begin to understand now?"

Toby's voice was a ghostly whisper of hate. "I think I savvy a lot of things now, Caples. And somehow I'm goin' to live to kill you!"

"You won't see me any more, Toby," Caples boasted. "I'm going back to town. Everybody there thinks you've jumped your bond, leaving Ike Taggert holding the bag. Tonight young Greg and Lem Bullard are due back with the money that Ike's beef herd brought in San Antonio. At the gorge you and Puckett are going to hold 'em up. Puckett will get away, but they'll find your body there."

Toby felt no fear; only on all-consuming enmity for the man who was behind all the trouble in Mustang Valley.

Caples took Puckett outside. Then the banker rode away and Puckett reentered the shack. In the lanternlight the gunman's eyes glowed redly. He had killed men before, but never one who was bound and helpless. He came up to the foot of Toby's bunk. Slowly he drew his six-shooter.

"Kind of hate to do this, kid," he said uneasily.

Toby held his breath. He knew this was the end. Wide-eyed, he watched Puckett pull back the hammer of the six-shooter. Horror filled him. The muscles in his legs swelled and he tensed, measuring his chances. Then he kicked!

With strength and speed borne of panic his bound feet streaked upward—and out! Out with the terrific drive of a flashing piston, catching Puckett in the stomach, bending him double.

Puckett's pistol exploded when it struck the floor. Pained surprise and agony etched his face as he smashed back into the wall and fell. Squirming, rolling, Toby was on him before Puckett could rise, pinning him to the floor. Though his arms were bound, Toby's fingers found the gunman's throat. He didn't feel Puckett's blows as the gunman struggled to extricate himself. No living force could have torn loose Toby's viselike grip.

It seemed a long time to Toby before Puckett quit struggling. At last Puckett's face was purple, his eyes rolled whitely. Toby slackened his grip then. Puckett drew in life-giving air, moaning and whimpering like a wounded coyote.

"Don't—kill me—Connor," he panted. "I didn't want no hand—in fetchin' you—into this deal. I can clear you—and your old man. Get Caples—and Lem Bullard. They're the ones."

Puckett was suddenly a whipped, craven thing, begging for a chance to live. While he talked and pleaded for mercy, Toby rolled quickly across the floor, snatched up the six-shooter. He kept it poked in Puckett's middle while the gunman cut him loose.

Once free, Toby staggered to his feet. It took a long time before he had any feeling in his legs. He stood reeling, six-shooter clenched in his white-knuckled fist.

"Maybe we can make it to the gorge in time, Puckett," he gritted. "Maybe we can't. Just remember this though—I'll kill you if you make a wrong move!"

* * * * *

The railroad siding was three miles north of Jamul. It was surrounded by brush and hills. Corrals and a loading chute had been built along a spur track, for since the advent of this nearby railroad most of the Mustang Valley ranchers had driven their cattle here, penned them, and shipped by rail. Daily train service made it a quick run into San Antonio.

Tonight, when the train stopped, Greg Taggert and Lem Bullard swung down from the coach steps. Greg, bundled in a big coat, glanced hastily about in the darkness as the train pulled out. Worry freighted his eyes.

In the darkness, Bullard grinned crookedly.

"I figured the train might be late, Greg," he said. "Before we left, I told Ike just to meet us at the Red Heart Saloon. Guess we'll have to walk."

Greg struck out along the brush-flanked wagon road that led over the hills to town. The frigid wind whipped at his and Bullard's bent bodies. Their boots made crunching sounds in the snow. Greg felt for the heavy money-belt beneath his coat.

They had gone only a short distance when the gorge loomed up ahead in the night. It was a narrow pass through the hills, barely wide enough for a wagon to travel. Stunted trees and huge boulders flanked the trail. Greg, peering into the murky gloom, didn't see the Bent T foreman come up behind him.

Greg was halfway through the gorge when the whinny of a horse stopped him. He whistled, startled! Too late he saw the trap he had walked into. From atop a nearby boulder he glimpsed the vague shape of a man's head and shoulders.

"Don't move, Taggert!" the man yelled. "All right, Bullard, take his gun and money."

Bullard's gun barrel flashed down, crashing against Greg's head. Greg's knees buckled. Then Bullard was over him, ripping the money-belt loose. He strapped it about himself, beneath his heavy coat. His cold hands trembled.

Fear began gnawing at him. It was a dangerous game he was playing. Big stakes were the payoff—more money than Lem Bullard had ever hoped to get. But thoughts of the hangnoose haunted him.

"Have you got Toby's body with you, Puckett?" he quavered.

"All set, Bullard!" came the reply from behind the rock.

"And Toby's horse?"

Toby, crouching behind Puckett, jabbed his six-shooter deeper into the outlaw's back.

"Yonder by that boulder," Puckett said.

BULLARD spotted the two hidden horses, off to one side of the trail. He

ran to one side of the animals, swung astride. Greg's body lay sprawled in the middle of the road nearby. Bullard hesitated, trying to bluster to hide his growing fear.

"Finish him like you're supposed to, Puckett. Dump Toby's body close by. Then hightail it and blot your trail. We'll meet in Caples' quarters a week from today."

"Sure, Bullard."

"What's the matter, Puckett? You sound scared."

"I am, Bullard. We'll all get the rope for this."

Bullard cursed and spurred down the road. He hadn't gone a hundred feet before he heard the crack of a six-shooter behind him. He knew then that Greg was finished. He tried to tell himself that everything was all right. But as the lights of Jamul dotted the night ahead, his dread and fear mounted.

He galloped into town. From the jail window Jeff Connor saw the wildly riding figure. A dozen other people saw Bullard curb cruelly and light running in front of the Red Heart Saloon. He burst through the door, trembling and pale.

"Ike!" he cried shakily. "They got the money—knocked Greg out and killed him!"

The bar was lined with men. All eyes were on Bullard as he fairly stumbled farther into the room. Big Ike stood like a man with a knife in his back.

"Who did it, Bullard? Where?"

"Toby Connor did it, Ike! At the gorge, just now."

Bullard gulped out his story without a flaw. He and Greg had just reached the gorge. Toby Connor and another man had shoved guns in their faces. Bullard had gone for his gun. In the shoot-out he had killed Toby. But the other man had got Greg's money-belt and had escaped.

Big Ike's faith in man and his Maker tottered in that instant. He stood paralyzed, a white-faced, tragic figure. Close by him stood Sheriff Cordon and Banker Ab Caples.

Bullard gulped down a drink that someone handed him. Then everybody was talking at once.

[*Turn page*]

From outside came the frantic clatter of hoofbeats. The moaning wind suddenly rose to a screaming wail, as if in warning of death. Inside the saloon no one saw Ab Caples' fat-jowled face pale, and they didn't notice the terror in Bullard's eyes as the door swung open.

Big Ike's lips moved, but no sound came out.

Toby Connor stood framed in the doorway, a leveled six-shooter in his fist. Blood streaked his face and his eyes were feverish. His brown hair was tousled and his clothes were muddy. He looked like a young man who had been through a terrible ordeal.

"Greg's out on my horse, Ike, holdin' Shag Puckett a prisoner!" he called. "Bullard's got your money. He and Caples yonder—"

Caples, snarling like a cornered beast, suddenly had a derringer in his hand. Toby fired first. Through the swirling gunsmoke he saw Caples totter and fall, a bullet-hole in his forehead. Instantly Toby, crouched and deadly, was facing Bullard. And by a breath Toby won. Bullard was dead before he hit the floor. Then out of the gun echoes rose Big Ike's amazed bellow.

"Greg! Greg!"

Toby walked out of a side door. He paid no attention to the confusion in front of the saloon. Trembling and weak, he started toward the jail.

He found the sheriff's office unlocked. Jeff was clutching the bars of his cell door when Toby came up.

"Toby!" Jeff cried out. "What's happened?"

"Charlie will be over here in a few minutes to turn you free, if my guess is right, Jeff. Ab Caples and Lem Bullard are dead. Shag Puckett is still alive, spillin' everything he knows. Caples got Puckett to frame you and me on that bank job. Puckett meant to kill you that night, but he only nicked you. He'll hang plenty high for killin' the cashier. I lost my spur in front of the side street saloon. Puckett spotted it and figured that'd be a good way to ring me in on the deal. He planted it outside of the bank door.

"Caples, Bullard and Puckett have been workin' in cahoots. All three men knew one another in Mexico years ago. Caples sent for 'em to come to Jamul to carry out his scheme. Caples has the thirty thousand bank money hidden in his room. He was to split it and Big Ike's beef herd money with Bullard and Puckett. By gettin' us out of the way, and smashin' Big Ike, Caples saw a chance of grabbing both ranches. Savvy, Jeff?"

It was bewildering to Jeff. But he managed to grin. "Tell Ike—"

He stopped as the front door burst open. Big Ike and Sheriff Gordon barged inside. Big Ike had the money-belt that he had taken from Bullard's body. Shag Puckett had talked, Charlie Gordon said.

Greg and some other men were holding him at the saloon, getting a full confession.

IT TOOK several minutes before the two men's talk made sense to Jeff Connor.

"Only one thing, Ike," Jeff said then, a choke in his voice. "That brockle-faced heifer—"

"Jeff, you cussed old mulehead, we're goin' to find that heifer and have a barbecue. Will you come?"

"Come?" old Jeff said, his eyes wet with tears. "Ike, blast your onery hide, I'll be the first man to get there and the last to leave."

They tried to make a hero out of Toby. There were a dozen questions they wanted answered. But Toby figured they could wait. Men were already jamming inside the jail when Toby went outside.

Before anything else happened he wanted to see Molly. He wanted to tell her there would be peace in the valley now. He wanted her to know for certain that he had changed.

She was rushing across the dark street toward him, calling his name. When she came into his arms, he saw the tears of joy and thankfulness in her eyes. He saw there all the devotion and loyalty a girl can bestow upon a young man of nineteen.

He bent and kissed her. When he released her, she drew back. "I do love you, Toby," she whispered. "I do! I do!"

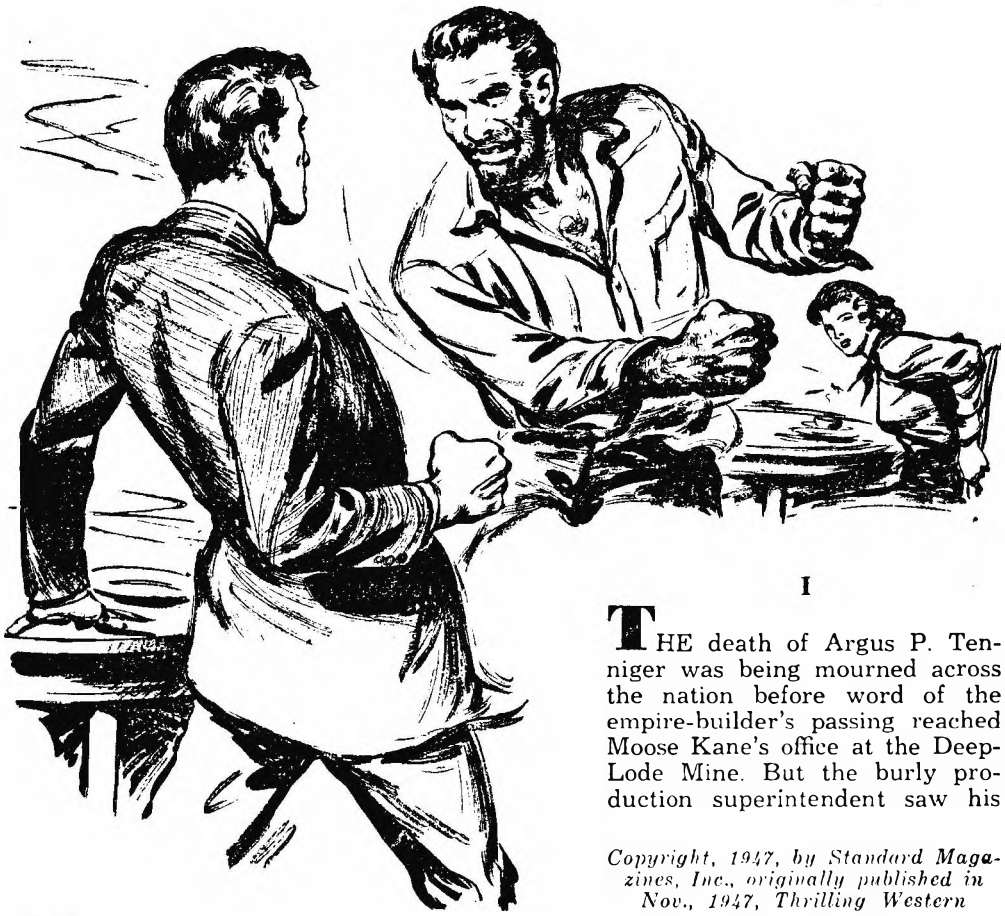
Toby grinned boyishly. He felt good inside. His happiness was too great for words.

"I'm glad, Molly," he managed. "Things will be different now."

And they were, from that time on, in Mustang Valley. • • •

The DENVER DUDE

A Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS



I

THE death of Argus P. Tenniger was being mourned across the nation before word of the empire-builder's passing reached Moose Kane's office at the Deep-Lode Mine. But the burly production superintendent saw his

Moose Kane ruled the Deep-Lode Mine by sheer brawn—until he tangled with a horn-rimmed eyeglassed lad from Colorado

own destiny crumbling under the impact of the message which an Overland Telegraph courier brought up from town.

A massive, ruthless giant of a man, Kane sat behind his rolltop desk and stared at the papers and ore samples before him without seeing them, waiting for Colleen Farrell to bring Gurd Gessel over from the shafthouse. Only Gessel, foreman of the underground mucker gangs, would appreciate the import of Tenniger's passing on the destiny of Milehigh.

Kane opened and shut his big hands, recalling the years not too far past when he had come to Milehigh as a jackleg mucker. He had quickly established himself as a power in the hell-roaring boom camp by jumping the claim of a Chinese on the upper creek. Not that a Miners' Court could prove it.

He had throttled the Oriental with these big, work-calloused hands. And he had fought his bloody path up to his present job as super of the Deep-Lode with these same two hands. It galled him to realize that not even his brute strength was enough to cope with the changes that were heralded by this telegram from Denver. Every scar on his knuckles, every knob under the flesh that told of a badly knitted bone fracture, was a memento of Kane's climb from obscurity to his present position of unchallenged supremacy over the camp's legion of treasure-hunters.

There was a stiff breeze blowing through the open window that overlooked the Tenniger yards and the roofs of Milehigh, strung out along the Tuolumne below the mines. Moose Kane stirred out of his trance long enough to remove a Colt revolver from a drawer and lay it on the telegram, to keep the message from being blown off the desk.

Waiting for the girl to get back with Gurd Gessel, Moose Kane stared at the six-gun abstractedly. It would be impotent against the tide of events about to ebb against him. Even when this man Copeland arrived to take over the job he, Moose, had held so long, there would be no point in bucking him with guns or fists.

IT WAS galling to realize that all he had worked for, all the men he had broken on his greedy climb to power, all were nullified by the death of a puny old millionaire, bedfast for the past decade in his Denver mansion.

Colleen Farrell had draped some crepe over the oil portrait of Argus P. Tenniger which hung opposite the super's desk. One hung in all the offices of Tenniger enterprises throughout the West.

Kane stared at the philanthropist's portrait, obsessed with a blind impulse to rip it from its frame and shred the canvas to bits. But for the accident of birth, Moose Kane might have amassed Argus P.'s wealth, built Argus P.'s railroads, controlled Argus P.'s vast empire of mining enterprises.

Kane kicked back his chair and stalked over to the window overlooking the canyon-built wildcat camp. Argus P. Tenniger had made the original strike here on the Tuolumne a generation ago, when he had been a restless Argonaut from the original goldrush of '49.

For the last ten years, Tenniger had entrusted the running of the Deep-Lode Mine to this towering, black-bearded giant the muckers knew as Moose.

The nickname fitted the super. His heavy shoulders were covered by a red flannel shirt which had to be tailor-made to fit him. His corduroy pants and hobbed boots likewise were built on out-sized dimensions. In his middle forties, Moose Kane was in prime physical condition and his ruthless nature was manifest in the outthrust of his shaggy jaw and in the smouldering green eyes which were rarely still under his craggy brows.

Kane's savage reaction to the fates had spent itself by the time he heard Gurd Gessel's knock on the door. The super returned to his desk as the mine foreman entered, his heavy features thick with the grime picked up hundreds of feet underground.

Gessel's eyes held a question as he shut the door behind him and strode over to the desk. He got a blunt answer:

"Our picnic's finished, Gurd. You heard that Tenniger kicked the bucket?"

Gessel rubbed his stubbly jaw with a scarred knuckle.

"Sure. It had to happen some time. With Tenniger gone, we ought to have smoother sailing than before."

Kane jerked the Overland telegraph message out from under the six-gun and thrust it into the foreman's hands.

"Read that," he grunted. "Straight from the home office."

Scowling puzzledly, Gessel deciphered the almost illegible scrawl of the Milehigh telegrapher:

PRODUCTION SUPT.
DEEP-LODE MINING CO.
MILEHIGH, CALIFORNIA.
AS A RESULT OF ARGUS P. TENNIGERS DEATH OWNERSHIP OF DEEP-LODE NOW VESTED IN HIS HEIR DELLA BURNS STOP NEW OWNER BELIEVES DEEP-LODE PROFITS HAVE FALLEN TO CRITICAL POINT AND IS SENDING NEW PRODUCTION SUPERINTENDENT TO CALIFORNIA TO TAKE YOUR PLACE STOP NEW SUPERINTENDENT IS GIFFORD COPELAND RECENT GRADUATE ROCKY MOUNTAIN SCHOOL OF MINES STOP OWNER WILL APPRECIATE YOUR ACQUAINTING MR. COPELAND WITH LOCAL SITUATION UPON HIS ARRIVAL
HOLLIS J. FARRADAY,
VICE PRESIDENT.
TENNIGER ENTERPRISES

"Della Burns," Gessel grunted, bending a glance at Moose Kane. "You mean old Argus P. willed his millions to a woman?"

Kane slipped a cigar from his waistcoat and bit off the end with savage vehemence.

"What difference does it make?" he demanded. "Whether the new owner is animal, vegetable, or mineral ain't the point. What riles my dander is losing my job to a slick-ear kid fresh out of a mining college. This Copeland will fire me the day he gets here, Gurd."

Gessel's face sobered as he reviewed the full implications of the shake-up which was in the office. He had been Moose Kane's right-hand man at the Tenniger holdings here in Milehigh throughout Kane's rise to power.

"I figure it this way," Kane went on. "This Copeland may feed me a sop by giving me your job, Gurd. If he don't, I can always cross over the ridge to Bonanza Syndicate and handle the super's job over there. Whatever happens, this don't mean our high-grading has to stop. Not so long as one or the other of us has charge of the ore hoist."

MORBIDLY Gurd Gessel stared at the telegram.

"Don't underestimate this Copeland feller," the ore boss warned. "Maybe he's a college-bred miner, but if he gets to poking his nose around our shafts and crosscuts he's liable as not to lay his finger on why Deep-Lode's ore is fetching some cheap prices at the stampmills, Moose."

Kane masked his face behind a formidable screen of tobacco smoke. He rose from his chair to pace the floor like a caged tiger.

"We'll play this close to our chests till Copeland shows up," the super remarked. "Maybe this Della Burns herself will drop in for a look-see. Unless she's an old hag over fifty, I ought to be able to handle her. Providing this Copeland ain't a pet of hers."

Gessel stood up to leave.

"I won't pass this on to the muckers," he said. "When Copeland arrives he'll find that deep-level mining ain't the soft snap it was in schoolbooks. I got a hunch you won't be out of this office for long, Moose. Copeland will—"

Gessel broke off as a knock sounded at the door. Colleen Farrell, the bookkeeper, stuck her head through the office door. Daughter of a miner who had been crushed in the Tenniger yards by the collapse of an ore hopper years before, at twenty-one the orphaned girl was now head accountant at the Deep-Lode.

"Pardon me, Mr. Kane," Coleen said apologetically, "but there's a gentleman here from Denver to see you. He says its urgent."

Moose Kane pulled himself out of his absorption in graver matters to smirk at the girl. Gessel was peering over her head into the front office.

"An owl-eyed dude, Moose," Gessel reported. "Reckon it could be the new—reckon it's Copeland?"

Kane straightened his massive shoulders nervously.

"A Denver dude, eh?" he repeated harshly. "Send him in, Colleen. Gurd, you hustle back to the shaft. I'll see you at the hoist room at noon."

Moose Kane was seated behind his desk, ostensibly engrossed with the previous day's production sheets, when Colleen Farrel ushered the stranger into the office.

Kane's eyes narrowed appraisingly as he sized up the tall, whippy-built dude who stood hesitantly at the far end of the room. The stranger from Denver wore owlish horn-rimmed spectacles which gave a studious appearance to a sun-

tanned, athletic countenance.

Wearing a gray tweed business suit which stamped him as alien to this California scene, the dude clutched a carpetbag in one hand and a flat-crowned beaver hat in the other.

"You'll be Gifford Copeland?" Kane asked gruffly, waving his hand toward a chair. "Set down. I'm Moose Kane."

The Denver dude crossed the floor and set his carpetbag and beaver on the edge of Kane's desk. He reached into a pocket of his waistcoat, drew out a leather case and extracted a card from it.

"My name doesn't matter," the dude said, "as much as the reason for my calling on you, Mr. Kane."

Kane accepted the card, brows arching as he read the embossed name:

BERT ARLINGTON

"My mistake—I thought you were someone else," Kane said, scaling the card into a waste basket. "What's on your mind, Arlington? I'm a busy man."

Bert Arlington's steely blue eyes regarded the mining super steadily from behind polished lenses. He opened his carpetbag and drew out a furbished bronze cylinder which looked like something between a trophy cup and a tobacco humidor.

"I just arrived in Milehigh on the morning stage from Sacramento, Mr. Kane," Arlington explained. His voice was deep and oddly virile for his appearance. "When I was preparing to leave Denver two weeks ago to come West for my health, friends of mine at the Tenniger Enterprises asked me to deliver this urn to you in person."

KANE accepted the octagonal bronze container in his hairy hands, rotating it curiously. On a gold-plated oval across one facet of the cylinder was engraved in flowing script the name:

ARGUS PENNING TENNIGER JR. 1787-1888

"What in the devil is it?" Kane demanded. "A cigar box?"

Bert Arlington shook his head.

"That urn contains the ashes of your late employer," the dude said gravely. "According to Mr. Tenniger's dying request, he wants these ashes scattered in the Tuolomne River, where he prospected in his younger years. He wanted his dust to remain forever in his beloved California."

Kane's jaw dropped.

"I'll be teetotally damned!" he muttered. "The old codger's been dead for over two weeks and I don't hear about it until the day his ashes show up."

Arlington snapped shut his carpetbag and picked up his hat.

"That was the message I was asked to deliver upon my arrival in Milehigh, Mr. Kane. Thank you for your attention."

Kane was still staring at the bronze urn when Arlington moved unobtrusively across the room and departed.

Heaving to his feet, Kane picked up the urn and carried it into the front office. He walked over to Colleen Farrell's desk, depositing the urn on her ledger.

"This can is full of old Argus P.'s ashes," announced the super, giving the girl a playful chuck under the chin. "He wanted 'em scattered up and down the crick. Toss 'em in the incinerator when you go out to eat, honey. I got no time for such fol-de-rol."

Colleen Farrell looked up at her employer, her blue eyes suddenly misting.

"Please don't call me honey!" she protested. "And don't—don't ask me to throw this urn away like that, Mr. Kane. Mr. Tenniger was a dear old man. I'll be only too glad to—to dispose of his ashes myself."

Sudden anger blazed in Kanes' eyes. Then he shrugged.

"Do anything you want with that thing," he snapped. "Only get it out of here. It gives me the creeps."

II

FROM the main boiler room of the Tenniger mines, the noon whistle was shrilling when Colleen Farrell completed her solemn mission of scattering the empire-builder's ashes into the turbulent river which bisected Milehigh.

Overcome with emotion, the girl sat down on a rock at the creek's edge and buried her face in her hands, weeping.

Old Argus P. Tenniger had been like a godfather to this orphan of the gold fields. Tenniger himself had given her a job in

the mine office following the tragic death of her father in that mining accident five years before.

"This is too beautiful a day for tears, ma'am," a man's voice said gently.

Colleen started, lifting a wet-stained face to stare at the man in tweeds who stood on the riverbank trail beside her, hat in hand. She came to her feet, dabbing her eyes with a sleeve as she recognized the dude from Denver who had visited Kane's office an hour ago.

"Oh, Mr. Arlington," she said, clutching the empty urn to her bosom. "I—you see, Mr. Tenniger was a dear friend of mine. I just finished carrying out his wishes."

Bert Arlington took a briar pipe from his coat pocket and packed it with tobacco.

"That was kind of you." He smiled down at her, wiping a match into flame across his trouser leg. "And now perhaps you could befriend a stranger in need, ma'am. I've come to California for my health. I came as far back into the Sierra Nevadas as Messrs. Wells and Fargo could bring me. Now I'm looking for work. Could you help me?"

Colleen found herself smiling, despite her sadness. Her eyes ranged up and down Arlington's lean figure with impersonal interest.

"You are a mighty sturdy-looking specimen to be seeking your health in a mining camp, sir," she said.

Arlington removed the urn gently from the girl's fingers and glanced out over the burbling cascades of the Tuolumne rapids.

"I suggest we—uh—dispose of this gruesome receptacle, miss," he said. "It has served its purpose, and keeping it around would only revive old griefs. May I?"

The girl nodded, making no move to prevent Arlington as he hurled the bronze urn far out into the churning river.

"There," he said. "Now, about a job for an ambitious young invalid. I'd prefer something underground, in the gold mines."

The girl smoothed her skirts with slim palms.

"I'm Miss Farrell—Colleen Farrell," she said. "We're not formal out here."

"A fine old Irish name direct from County Cork," Arlington answered pleasantly.

"About a job," she said hurriedly. "There are only two mines working in Milehigh now. The Deep-Lode yonder, or the Bonanza Syndicate, on the other side of the ridge."

Arlington ran splayed fingers through a shock of thick black hair and replaced his beaver hat on his head.

"I thought, since you work at the main office of Deep-Lode," he said with disarming frankness, "that you might be in a position to—that is, if you could introduce me to the foreman in charge of the crews—or would that be Mr. Kane? I overheard him describe me as the Denver Dude. Perhaps he thinks I'm not rugged enough for a miner's life."

The girl laughed and linked her arm through Arlington's as they moved down the trail. She pointed ahead to where hordes of grimy, sweat-streaked miners were emerging from the Deep-Lode shafthouse, having been hoisted up from the underground workings for their noon meal.

"A Mr. Gessel is the man who hires and fires the muckers," she said. "You saw him in the office this morning. I'll take you to see him, Mr. Arlington."

Ten minutes later Gurd Gessel was intercepted by Kane's bookkeeper as he was leaving the main shafthouse.

"Looking for work, eh?" growled the underground boss. "Well, you seem husky enough, Arlington. You haven't got enough savvy to grub ore, I don't reckon. How about being a mule-jockey?"

"Mule jockey?" Arlington repeated vaguely. "I haven't seen any livestock around the mines."

GESSEL pointed straight down with a grimy finger.

"Our mules work in the crosscut five hundred feet below decks," he said. "They haul our ore cars on rails at the bottom of the shaft. I can give you a job driving the mules and stabling 'em at the end of the day's shift. Thirty a month and your board and found."

Arlington grinned. "You've hired yourself a mule-jockey," he said.

Gessel turned on his heel.

"Report to Miss Farrell at one o'clock and put your name on the pay-roll," he said. "Go down below at one-fifteen on this hoist here. I'll be there to show you your job. And get into some working duds or the boys will hooraw you into the dump

pit before night."

Colleen Farrell accompanied the Denver Dude to the main gates.

"My baggage is down at the Wells Fargo office," he said. "Would you point out the bunkhouses?"

The girl laughed.

"The mess-hall is crowded by now," she said. "I always eat at China Charlie's place down on the main street. If you wouldn't mind tea and chop suey, we'll go there."

"My favorite dishes," Arlington chuckled. "Lead the way. I've got to go downtown, anyway, to buy some work clothing."

China Charlie's eating house was an unpainted false-front hemmed in by saloons and gambling halls. A grinning Celestial ushered them to a table by the windows fronting the street porch and took their order.

"I was hoping you would be—that is, we're getting a new superintendent to replace Mr. Kane," the girl said vaguely. "A Mr. Copeland of Denver. Would you know him?"

Arlington traced a design on the red-checkered tablecloth with the tines of his fork, avoiding Colleen's eyes.

"Giff Copeland," he said musingly. "I know him casually. Fine boy. Just got his degree in mining engineering from Rocky Mountain. Do I detect a dissatisfaction with the way Mr. Kane has been operating the Tenniger diggings, Miss Farrell?"

Arlington looked up suddenly and surprised a trouble frown between the girl's brows.

"It would be disloyal for me to tell tales out of school," she said. "But I'll be glad when a new super takes over. Things haven't been running as well as they should be running at Deep-Lode. I keep the records, so I know. We've been running in the red for over a year."

Arlington nodded impersonally.

"I've heard of Deep-Lode, 'way back in Colorado when I was attending the School of Mines myself," he said. "A substantial part of Mr. Tenniger's millions came out of the ground here at Milehigh, they say. Is the ore running low-grade now?"

The girl's reply was interrupted by the arrival of China Charlie with a platter stacked high with steaming Oriental food.

"My father used to say Deep-Lode would be the richest producer in California for years to come," she said. "But during the last few months our output has been running inferior to the cheap stuff that Bonanza Syndi—"

Arlington was offering Colleen Farrell a carafe of soy sauce when he saw the girl break off, falling back in her chair as she stared up at someone who had halted beside their table.

Glancing up, the dude from Denver saw the towering figure of Moose Kane looming above them, arms akimbo on his elephantine hips, raw anger glittering in his gooseberry orbs as his glance shuttled between Arlington and his bookkeeper.

"Since when did you take to talking over the company's private business with strangers, Colleen?" he demanded.

The girl's hand shook as she poured herself a cup of tea.

"I—I said nothing that the whole camp doesn't know, Mr. Kane."

The super turned to Arlington and jerked his head toward the street door.

"Get moving and moving fast, bucko. Colleen here happens to be my girl. I don't cotton to her gossiping while she eats with some slick-ear dude."

Kane's breath was freighted with the smell of whisky, and it was obvious to Arlington that the man's unreasoning jealousy was inspired by the bottle. An ugly-tempered man even when he was not in his cups, Moose Kane was in a dangerous mood now.

BERT ARLINGTON came slowly to his feet, sliding back his chair and resting his fingertips on the table. He was aware that a gelid hush had gripped the restaurant, that men were edging away from the vicinity.

"I'll leave when I've finished eating," Arlington said softly. "You're welcome to join us."

He turned toward the girl and saw terror in her white face.

"You'd better go," she whispered. "He's drunk. Don't cross him, Mr. Arlington."

The Denver Dude thrust thumbs under his belt, his lips twisting in a crooked grin as he returned Kane's glowering stare.

"I'm not looking for trouble," he told the mining boss. "And I'm not running away from it."

With an oath, Moose Kane reached out

his mammoth hands and seized Arlington by the collar. With sheer brute power he jerked the dude out from behind the table and sent him staggering against a hatrack, cocking his right fist for a haymaker that started from his bootstraps and traveled in a blurring arc toward Arlington's jaw.

No one in the place was exactly sure what happened next. They saw Moose Kane's murderous punch miss, to go pistoning into empty space as the dude rolled away from the blow and ducked under the super's guard.

The next instant a right uppercut exploded against Kane's whisker-matted jaw and rocked the Deep-Loder back on his heels.

Bawling low in his throat like a groggy bull, Kane shook his head to clear it. He swung into a crouch, heading for Arlington behind flailing fists.

But Kane, schooled in the rough-and-tumble style of saloon brawling, had never been matched against a target as shifty as the dude from Denver. Blood spurted from Kane's pulped nose as Arlington landed a left cross with blurring speed. A second punch with every ounce of Arlington's one hundred-and-seventy pounds behind it caught Kane below the left ear before he could recover his balance. The big super went down with a crash that jolted the floor puncheons.

Rubbing a bruised knuckle on his pantleg, the dude stared down at the fallen giant. Then he relaxed. Moose Kane had been knocked out for the first time in his career as a mining camp bully. Incredibly short as the fight had been, Kane was down to stay.

Arlington turned to see that Colleen Farrell had pushed back her dishes and got to her feet.

He dropped a gold coin on the table to pay the Chinese for their untouched food and took the girl's arm. They stepped over Kane's prostrate bulk and headed for the street door.

"I hope this won't result in you losing your job, ma'am," he said regretfully, as a hundred pairs of eyes witnessed their exit. "I didn't realize you were Kane's girl."

Colleen fought back her tears.

"I'm no one's girl!" she said indignantly. "As for my job, that isn't important. But you've got to leave town, Mr. Arlington."

It Happened Out West

It seems like the mechanical age has finally caught up with Flagstaff, Arizona. Teen-agers there planned a hayride and everything went all right until the night of the party. They couldn't find a hayrack.

•

Who says the West still isn't rugged? Pete Peloff, Denver, made himself a suit out of 2500 tiny square pieces of cloth.

•

A goat at Muskogee, Okla., started giving milk the day after it was born.

•

Cathryn Benson, Murray, Utah, began walking at the age of 3 weeks.

•

Victor Borge, the comedian pianist, was bragging about his California ranch. "It's a 200-acre one," he boasted. Then added, "That is, it was 200 acres until last week when my neighbor put up a fence. Now it's 20."

—William Carter

The dude eyed her curiously.

"I like it here," he said simply.

"Kane is a merciless man—a killer," she said desperately. "He's marked you for death, Mr. Arlington. He'll never let you live to be pointed out as the first man who ever bested him in a fight. Please go!"

III

BERT ARLINGTON knew by the respectful scrutiny he received from the other miners at the Tenniger shafthouse that the news of Kane's whipping had preceded him via the grapevine.

Except that he wore his horn-rimmed glasses, Arlington bore little resemblance to the spruce tweed-clad dude who had alighted from the Sacramento stage three hours previously. He had outfitted himself in miner's hobbed boots, as yet virgin to the scuffs and wear of jagged rock and rubble. His bibless denim levis still carried their store creases and his red flannel shirt exuded the odor of mothballs from the shelves of the mercantile store downtown.

Sandy McDougall, the burly Scot hoist-tender and timekeeper, checked off the burly muckers as they filed aboard the hoist platform to begin the afternoon shift. When Arlington reached the shaft the first load was already on the way down, steam hissing from the big winches which unwound from the cable drums.

The delay in waiting for the hoist to return from its subterranean destination gave the remaining muckers a chance to size up the muscular, bespectacled stranger as he turned over his new time card to Sandy McDougall and received an oil-burning headlamp in return.

"Heard ye had trouble with the super, son," McDougall remarked drily. "There's precious little law in Milehigh and what law there is rests in Kane's fists and holsters. Take the advice of an unbiased outsider and move on while you can, Arlington."

The dude let the hoist-tender adjust the headband of the miner's lamp for him.

"Thanks," he said. "But I aim to stick around until Gessel fires me."

There was none of the good-natured jeering and hoorawing which these case-hardened quartz miners usually reserved for tenderfeet from the East. Arlington might wear glasses, and his clean-cut features were as yet unpallored by the mole-life existence far underground where yellow treasure was gleaned from the country rock, but they respected him.

Dude he might be, but there were iron thews bulking large under Arlington's sleeves and his neck was as corded and muscular as that of any veteran mucker in the line.

The grapevine had it that this dude from Colorado had dropped the mighty Moose Kane with his chopping fists, over in China Charlie's place an hour ago. The muckers set him as a man apart before they so much as knew his name.

Pretending to be busy lighting his head lamp, Arlington overheard the remarks being whispered along the line behind him, the gist of it ominous.

"The kid signed his death warrant, that's for sure. Big Moose would kill any man who looked twice at the Farrell girl, even if he hadn't been flat-whipped."

"The dude won't last long, regardless. Gessell will send him packing with the first load of paydirt."

The platform loomed up from the Stygian well and the Scotsman unchained the gate barrier. Booted feet thudded out over the elevator planking, and in a moment the hoist was plummeting into the rock-walled shaft.

Arlington saw eyes regarding him sympathetically in the guttering lamplight. Dank air sucked at his flesh as the hoist glided past the black maws of crosscuts, boarded over now that their veins had been depleted.

Two hundred feet down the air pressure became a tangible, throbbing thing on the dude's eardrums. It seemed an interminable while before the hoist cables vibrated under the pressure of brake shoes and the platform came to a halt above the sump at the bottommost level.

Gurd Gessel was waiting beside the string of loaded ore cars as the men filed off unto the tunnel, his face like a skull under the glare of a lantern swinging from the entrance of an overhand stope. He beckoned as Bert Arlington alighted from the platform.

"Heard you mixed it up with Kane since I hired you."

Arlington nodded, making no comment, his eyes owlish behind his spectacles as he

studied the ore boss' inscrutable countenance. Colleen had told him that Gessel was Kane's right-hand man.

"I won't refuse you a job on that account," Gessel said. "But I'd draw my time on your way out this evening, if I was you. Milehigh's too small to hold the two of you after what happened at that eating place." The ore boss made a gesture down the tunnel. "Follow these rails to dead-end. Hitch up the mules you'll find there to the ore cars and trundle 'em back to the conveyor here. We sort the ore at this stope and send her up to the hoppers for shipment to the stampmills."

ARLINGTON pondered the note of respect evident in Gurd Gessel's voice as he followed the iron rails down the tunnel. He gained the vague impression that Kane was not without his enemies below decks. Unless Colleen Farrell lost her job in the bookkeeping department as a result of his altercation with her employer, perhaps the episode had not been as serious as the dude had believed.

The new mule-jockey was not conscious of the passage of the hours as he toiled in the humid darkness of the rock-bottomed drift. At the far end of the tunnel, crews of half-naked muckers toiled at the gold-bearing veins with pick and shovel, loading ore on the rusty, battered iron cars which Arlington trundled back to the sorting stope at the bottom of the main shaft.

He pondered the passing hint which Colleen Farrell had given him at the Oriental's place that noon, regarding the fact that Deep-Lode was heading for bankruptcy.

Even to his college-trained eyes, it seemed incompatible with the high grade of ore he saw being mined before his very eyes. Yet if Tenniger's mine at Milehigh was not paying a profit, it was because this high-grade ore was failing to reach the stamping mills further down the Tuolumne.

Every muscle and sinew in Arlington's body was throbbing from his unaccustomed labors by the time a signal-bell clanged at the shaft hoist, notifying the muckers that their day's work was finished.

Back above ground, he blew out his headlamp and placed it on its rack. He followed the weary miners out into the westering rays of the California sun, now dipping below the lofty crowns of the sugar pines down the river canyon, to tint Milehigh's window panes with gold and crimson.

The miners ignored their new mule-jockey in their haste to report at the yard gate and return to their bunkhouses to wash up for supper and another evening at the camp's saloons and honkytonks.

Bert Arlington detached himself from the exodus of sweat-grimed muckers toward the main gates. He slanted off in the direction of the Tenniger ore hoppers, where conveyors carried the gold-bearing rock out of the shaft and dumped it.

Ore wagons driven by buckskin-clad skinners were loading the hoppers as he strolled up. Keeping himself inconspicuous in the shadow of a powderhouse, the mule-jockey studied the bustling activity at the hoppers with keen interest.

It was difficult for him to believe that the low-grade ore he saw going aboard the wagons was the output of the mine he had just left. His mules had transported tons of rock which glittered with seams and flecks of yellow gold, as rich as any specimen he had ever studied at the college museum. Yet the ore which would soon be on its way to the stampmills, accompanied by armed guards, ran second and third rate.

Arlington started as someone rounded the powderhouse and brushed his elbow. He turned to see Sandy McDougall, the hoist tender. The dour old Scot regarded the dude with candid blue eyes.

"I'm not a verra bright man, but I got brains enough to guess that you're Giff Copeland, son," McDougall said. "If I come to that conclusion, you can bet your last chip that Kane has done the same."

Arlington's brows arched in startled amusement. He said nothing to affirm or deny McDougall's comment.

"Know anything about ore, son?" McDougall asked, removing a corncob from his toothless gums and beating out the dottle on the heel of his boot.

Arlington swung his eyes back toward the hopper wagons. "Some. I'm new to the game so far as field experience goes. But not new enough that I don't wonder what became of the highgrade ore I saw being mined below decks this afternoon. It isn't going into those mill wagons, that's certain."

McDougall's seemed to be taking the dude's measure through purling wisps of smoke as he got his corncob going again with vile-smelling kinickinick bark.

"It's your business if you choose to stay incognito, Copeland," the Scotsman remarked, "but you'll have to work fast if you find out anything before Kane tallies you."

"Is there anything going on that the new super wouldn't approve of, Sandy?"

McDOUGALL pointed his pipe-stem at the hoppers. "You said yourself that the ore yonder don't tally with what the muckers shoveled into your mule cars this afternoon."

A vein pumped faster on Arlington's temples. He watched the ore-laden wagons move off toward the lower gates where rifle-toting guards on horseback awaited them for the trek down-river.

"That ore won't assay for enough to pay the cost of mining it," he said. "What became of the quartz that was filthy with color, McDougall?"

McDougall shrugged, but his eyes took on a bright, calculating look.

"I'd suspect high-grading," Arlington went on, "but none of the miners carried any rich ore out in their pockets when they left the shaft. You'd catch them if they did, or the guards at the main gate would. That isn't the answer. No large-scale high-grading is being smuggled away by the men."

The old hoist-tender started to move off. "I've talked too damn much already, Copeland," he said evasively, "but I'll tell you this much. Deep-Lode's output assays as rich as it ever did. But the high-grade stuff ain't getting out of the Tenniger gates. Figure that one out, before Kane sticks a knife in your back, son."

IV

A STRAINED tension pervaded the bunkhouse to which Bert Arlington had bee asigned as the passing dyas rounded into a week. But nothing untoward arose to break the monotonous routine of the Tenniger yards.

Muckers debated over saloon bars and poker tables about the reason why Moose Kane allowed the Denver Dude to remain on the Deep-Lode pay-roll. Finally it was decided that stubborn pride kept the super from bringing his quarrel with Arlington into the open.

When the crisis came, it would not be in the form of a discharge slip at the pay line, the muckers decided. More than likely Bert Arlington would die mysteriously in some mining accident below decks, engineered by Gurd Gessel, and impossible to lay at Moose Kane's feet.

As for Arlington, he saw Kane only at a distance during the week which followed, usually of mornings when he passed the administration shack on his way to the shaft-house to report for work. He saw Colleen Farrell at her desk by the bookkeeping office window on several occasions, and that was good.

Gurd Gessel ignored his new mule-jockey underground. Sandy McDougall ticked off his name morning and night with the same bored detachment he bestowed on the other muckers.

As Arlington's muscles hardened to the rigors of his new job, he had more time to concentrate on checking the disposal of the mine's high-grade ore. The procedure for conveying the fruits of the muckers' labors above ground each day was simple. Ore was graded inside the overcast stope at the bottom of the main shaft by men working directly under Gurd Gessel's supervision.

Bert Arlington saw tons of high-grade ore start its journey up the shaft—that much he was sure of. Yet he saw but a small percentage of high-grade ore leave the hoppers above ground by way of the stampmill wagon trains.

He convinced himself that his fellow miners were not indulging in the pirating of high-grade ore as they left the Tenniger yards, for subsequent sale to outlaw fences in town. Such high-grading, common as it was throughout the Mother Lode country, was not being practiced at the Tenniger mine.

On the evening of his seventh day in the employ of the Deep-Lode, Arlington saw Sandy McDougall go into a gambling house on the main street known as the Casa del Oro. From gossip he had picked up in the Deep-Lode bunkhouse and mess-hall, Arlington knew that the Casa del Oro was closed to Tenniger men, catering exclusively to muckers from the rival Bonanza Syndicate.

The reason for the Casa del Oro's boy-

cott involved a long-standing quarrel between its owner, Dutch Breeden, and Moose Kane. According to the grapevine, Breeden had caught Kane and his henchmen cheating in a card game and Breeden, who prided himself on running a straight house, had banned all men on the Tenniger pay-roll from entering his place. It was strange, then, that Sandy McDougall should have entered the Casa del Oro.

Arlington paused under the glare of the kerosene flares which burned at the eaves of the Casa's wooden awning. Then he shouldered his way through the batwings without being challenged by the burly floorman at the entrance.

He spotted the Deep-Lode hoist operator across the room, watching a group of Bonanza miners playing roulette.

McDougall caught the dude's eye and moved over to the side wall where Arlington was standing.

"I'd like to buy you a drink and have a few words in private with you, Sandy," the Denver Dude said, pointing toward a wall booth.

The Scotsman nodded without looking at Arlington.

"Figured you would. That's why I come in here. I knew Breeden would let you in, knowing you fist-whipped Moose Kane. I'm the only Deep-Loder he lets inside the Casa."

Arlington ordered a bottle of Scotch at the bar and carried it over to an enclosed booth where McDougall was waiting.

"Sandy, I think I know how Tenniger's mine is being high-graded toward bankruptcy," the dude said without preliminaries.

McDougall downed a dram of liquor and eyed Arlington.

"Figured you would, if you lived long enough. You got brains behind them cheaters, Copeland."

THE DUDE removed his horn-rimmed glasses and wiped them with a bandanna. He was grinning with obscure humor.

"Why do you call me Copeland?"

"Who else would be risking his neck to spy out Kane's operations at the Deep-Lode? The new owner's a woman named Della Burns, the grapevine says, and you don't look like a woman to me."

Arlington made a link of wet chains on the table top with his whisky glass.

"Sandy, what's the chances of getting into the shafthouse tonight without anybody knowing it?"

McDougall's eyes kindled with excitement. He rummaged in his mackinaw pocket and exposed a ring of keys.

"I can arrange it. We couldn't trust the night watchman at the main gate—he's one of Kane's gunmen. But I got keys to the shafthouse and boiler room."

Arlington tongued his upper lip thoughtfully.

"I want to run down into the mine tonight and have a look around, Sandy. I want to prove a theory of mine before I brace Moose Kane for a showdown."

Sandy McDougall finished his second drink and rose to his feet, wiping his whiskers.

"Meet me at the northwest corner of the yard fence at ten forty-five," he said. "You got a gun?"

Arlington tipped back the lapel of his jumper to reveal the stock of a Colt .45 holstered under his armpit.

"Good." McDougall nodded. "I wouldn't run you down the shaft if you weren't heeled."

Arlington remained seated at the table while the old Scotsman pushed his way through the batwings into the night.

The clock on the brick tower of the Milehigh brewery was indicating 10:45 when the dude from Colorado arrived at the northwest corner of the Deep-Lode yards. Just up the hill from his rendezvous place was the brush fence marking the boundary between the Deep-Lode property and the Bonanza Syndicate's claim beyond the ridge.

The stars were obscured by scudding clouds. Arlington could barely make out the looming bulk of the Tenniger shafthouse on the opposite side of the high board fence.

He was beginning to think that McDougall had backed out of his agreement in the saloon when the brewery clock struck eleven. Then he saw the old hoist-tender's head poke over the fence above him and a rope thudded down at his feet. When he looked up again McDougall's head had vanished.

Arlington got a grip on the rope, pulled the slack taut, and climbed hand-over-hand up the ten-foot wall of pine planks,

to straddle over the top. Sandy McDougall was waiting for him in the darkness when he slid down inside the Deep-Lode yard.

"I told Kane's watchman at the main gate that I had to clean out some flues in my boiler tonight," McDougall explained tersely, as they headed toward the shafthouse. "Far's I know, we're the only people inside the yard."

McDougall groped for the lock of the shafthouse door. A warm blast of air struck their faces from the banked fires of the furnaces which generated steam for the powerful machinery.

"Does Kane have access to this hoist?" Arlington wanted to know, as he took his headlamp from the rack. "After working hours, I mean?"

McDougall's whisper reached the dude from somewhere up on the control platform ladder.

"Kane's the boss. So far as I know he's never worked the hoist when I was off duty."

Arlington shook his head lamp to make sure the tank contained fuel, then straddled over the chain barrier onto the elevator platform.

"Yank the signal rope twice when you want to stop," McDougall called down from the operator's platform. "Or once to come back up."

Arlington located the signal rope in the darkness. Everything was in readiness. The six-gun made a comforting bulge under his armpit. He checked his pocket, feeling the supply of sulphur matches with which he would light his head lamp when he got below the level of the shaft combing.

"One more thing," Arlington asked the Scotsman. "Are Tunnels One and Two open?"

"No. They used them worked-out crosscuts for unloading goaf tailings from the lower levels."

"How about Tunnel Three?"

"That's the one they're using for waste rock now."

"Good. Run me down to Tunnel Three, Sandy."

CABLE drums spun noiselessly on their greased bearings as McDougall set his levers and sent the platform plummeting swiftly into the depths of the shaft.

Arlington lit his head lamp in time to see the boarded-over mouth of Tunnel One flash by. Number Two followed and the platform glided to a smooth halt at the level of Tunnel Number Three, four hundred feet below the ground.

Covering the lens of his head lamp with his fingers, Arlington allowed a small beam of light to study the massive gate of whipsawed logs which closed the entrance of Tunnel Three. To save the extra labor of transporting tons of goaf, or excavated country rock, to the tailing dumps above ground, it had been Deep-Lode's practice to fill up the worked-out tunnels and open casts with waste as mining operations went deeper.

The gate of Number Three was closed with a massive padlock but there was an opening at the floor level wide enough for Arlington to crawl through.

Flattening out on his stomach on the platform floor, he squirmed under the bottom of the gate onto the bedrock floor of Tunnel Number Three.

Getting to his feet, he transferred his six-gun from its holster to the pocket of his jumper. Then, masking his lamp so as to emit only a slender pencil of light, he headed down the tunnel.

Lamplight revealed a dwindling V of small-gauge iron rails spiked to wooden crossties along the floor ahead. The rails were shiny with recent use, where tons of broken goaf had been transported to Number Three's dead-end.

Arlington struck a match and blew it out. The smoke which fumed from it moved ahead of him instead of being sucked back into the main shaft.

"Number Three isn't a dead-end crosscut," Arlington thought. "It's got an outlet to open air somewhere!"

He doubted if Number Three had been dug clean through the mountain ridge to form a tailing dump outside, for this would entail digging through Bonanza Syndicate property on the opposite slope. Yet the passage of air moving through from the shaft proved it was not a blind passage abutting on a granite fault.

Counting his paces, Arlington estimated he had walked over a hundred yards from the vertical shaft when his nostrils caught an odor of tobacco smoke in the air, a cloying armo. He blew out his light and collapsed the head band, stowing the lamp in in his jumper pocket. Then, gun palmed,

he groped forward through the darkness, following the ore-car tracks.

Fifty feet from the spot where he had first detected tobacco fumes, Number Three Tunnel took an S-turn to the left, curving off to the right to enter another crosscut. Beyond the second turn, a row of ore cars were illuminated by an unseen source of light.

He knew the truth then. This crosscut of the Tenniger diggings connected up with a tunnel on the same level from the Bonanza Syndicate's mine on the other side of the ridge!

Arlington came to a halt as the rumble of wheels on iron rails sounded dead ahead. Before he could duck back around the bend of the tunnel he found himself blinking into the white eye of a headlight fixed to an ore car which was being trundled around the far curve by three miners.

He froze, shoulder blades prickling under his shirt. Hiding was impossible.

A hoarse oath came from one of the workmen behind the tandem-hitched string of ore cars.

"It's the dude, by hell!"

That was Moose Kane's bullish roar. It was followed by a gunshot.

V

KANE'S six-gun exploded again as he saw the Colorado dude fling himself prone to the floor of the tunnel ahead, out of the direct glare of the headlight.

Arlington's own .45 blazed in answer. A bullet smashed the lens of the headlight, sending glass spraying against the mouldy shoring timbers.

Gurd Gessel, standing on the opposite side of the car, was silhouetted by the glare of work lanterns in a stope around the corner. Before he could follow Kane's example and duck behind the shelter of an iron car, Bert Arlington's six-gun thundered a second time.

Gessel's guns hammered lead into the crossties under foot as the ore boss pitched forward in the rubble, his hobbed boots kicking a rataplan on the crossties.

Moose Kane tripped gun-hammer in rapid succession as he saw Arlington leap to his feet and vanish in the gloom toward the Tenniger crosscut. Kane was on his feet as burly miners from the Bonanza Syndicate's crew raced around the bend of the tunnel, drawn by the spate of gunshots.

"It's that snooping super from Colorado!" Kane shouted. "He's headed back toward the main shaft. I'll pay his weight in bullion to the mucker who tallies him!"

Hauling guns from leather, the Bonanza high-graders charged past Gessel's corpse and hammered into the darkness, throwing aside their headlamps. Somewhere in the gloom up ahead, Bert Arlington was trying to grope his way down Number Three Tunnel. Disaster loomed for Moose Kane's men if the dude succeeded in reaching daylight again.

Gunshots volleyed down the connecting passageway to numb Kane's eardrums. The Deep-Lode super snatched up a lantern and sprinted back into the Bonanza Syndicate's workings. He was drenched with sweat when the Bonanza hoist carried him to the surface in response to his frantic signals from below decks.

"What's the trouble down there, Moose —mutiny?" demanded the Bonanza hoisttender, as he saw the super of the rival diggings claw at the latch of the hoist door. "I thought I heard shooting."

Kane's face was bone-white as he faced the hoistman.

"Have my horse saddled and ready on the rim trail, Keith!" he panted. "This is the time I have to clear out of Milehigh for good. That dude from Denver has spied out our connecting passageway from Number Three. He's sure to be tallied by your men, but it means finish for me regardless of everything else."

Kane raced out of the Bonanza shafthouse and headed up the slope. Unlocking an unguarded gate in the boundary line fence on the ridge crest, he slogged down a foot trail toward the Tenniger office building.

His partner at the Bonanza would have a fast horse ready for his getaway. He had laid his plans well against such an emergency as this one.

He had an errand to accomplish before he left Milehigh forever. Cached inside the Tenniger's safety vault in his office was a fortune in paper money, his cut from years of secret high-grading, currency hoarded against the hour when a speedy departure from Deep-Lode became necessary. Only he, since Argus P. Tenniger was gone, knew the combination that

opened the safety vault.

He slowed to a walk as he approached the main gate. The watchman on duty flashed a lantern in his face, recognized the super, and opened the yard entrance.

Without pausing to give the watchman any explanation for his night visit, Moose Kane ran up the front steps of the administration building and unlocked the front door.

Inside his private office, he drew down window shades and lighted a ceiling lamp. His big hands were trembling as he spun the combination of the huge safety vault which formed one wall of the room and pulled the thick steel doors open.

Working with feverish haste, Kane unlocked a steel compartment inside the vault and drew out a pair of leather saddle-bags, stuffed to capacity with bundles of greenbacks. Plans were racing through his head as he shouldered the bags. His craggy brows were knotted in thought. On horseback he could reach Sacramento by back trails inside of three days. By river boat to San Francisco. There he could board a steam packet for Panama or perhaps hole up a few months, then head East by the overland route.

Argus P. Tenniger's framed portrait regarded him benignly as Kane started to close the vault doors from force of habit. Then he froze, as he caught a sound of footsteps crossing the floor of the front office.

HE LET the saddle-bags slip from his shoulder and his hand closed around the rosewood stock of his Colt. The door opened and Colleen Farrell entered, blinking in the light. She was accompanied by a tall, blond stranger wearing a black astrakhan-collared overcoat and carrying a bulky portmanteau.

"The watchman told us you were in your office," the girl said apologetically. "Your successor just arrived on the night stage and he wanted to meet you, Mr. Kane. This is Mr. Gifford Copeland of Denver, Mr. Kane."

The tall stranger set down his bag and smiled in an embarrassed way as he nodded acknowledgment of the girl's introduction.

"The new owner telegraphed you that I was on my way, didn't he?" Copeland inquired. "Mr. Burns said you would show me the ropes when I arrived."

Kane stared, knuckles whitening over the butt of his gun.

"*Mister* Burns?" he echoed hoarsely. He glanced at the telegram which lay on the desk beside him. "The new owner is a woman, according to the wire I got. Della Burns."

Gifford Copeland laughed apologetically. "That must have been a mistake on the telegrapher's part, Mr. Kane," he explained. "His name is Delbert Arlington Burns—the nephew and sole heir of the late Argus P. Tenniger. He usually signs his name Dell A."

Colleen Farrell's tense whisper broke the stillness of the office.

"Delbert Arlington!" she gasped. "Then the new owner must be—"

She broke off as she found herself staring into the muzzle of Moose Kane's Colt .45. Giff Copeland's mouth sagged open in alarm as he saw the gun shift to cover him.

"I—I don't understand!" exclaimed the new superintendent. "Surely—"

"Get into the vault, the both of you!" Kane's voice was a strangled whisper. "Get into the vault or I'll shoot! I got no time to waste."

Copeland and the girl stood rooted to their tracks, stunned by Kane's sudden transformation into a white-faced maniac. Kane's thumb eared back the knurled hammer of his gun as he saw Copeland take a faltering step in the direction of the open vault. He swung his Colt toward Colleen.

"The Denver Dude was killed down in the mine tonight," he grated. "You could be going with me if you'd played your cards different, Colleen. It ain't too late to change your mind."

"Drop the gun, Kane! You're covered."

Kane glanced around at the door. His hand was frozen to the six-gun as he saw the spectacled Denver Dude move into the room, a Colt jutting from his fist. The dude's shirt was stained with blood where a slug had grooved his shoulder, but the hand which held the gun was rock steady.

Behind the dude was Sandy McDougall, a big Dragoon cap-and-ball pistol in his grasp.

"I'm taking you with me into the grave!"

Moose Kane's gun bucked and roared in his fist and Delbert Arlington Burns staggered under the impact of a point-blank

slug raking his side. He sagged to one knee as he tripped his own gun-hammer. Then darkness swept him into a vortex of pain before he could know whether his shot had gone home.

Blood spurted from a bullet hole punched through Moose Kane's forehead just below the hairline. Toppling like a hewn tree, the Deep-Lode super collapsed over the bulging saddle-bags at his feet.

"Mr. Burns!" Giff Copeland found his voice with an effort as he moved away from the vault entrance. "Mr. Burns is shot! He's dying!"

Sandy McDougall turned to the girl at his side.

"Fetch the medico, Colleen," the Scotsman said. "And don't you worry about the dude. He managed to signal me to hoist him to the top when he was full of high-graders' lead, so I don't reckon Kane's slug will finish him off."

When Colleen had fled from the building to bring the mining camp doctor, McDougall turned to Copeland.

"Your new boss came out ahead of you to see why Deep-Lode was losing money, Copeland," the Scot said. "He found out what was going on, too. Kane here and Gurd Gessell was smuggling our high-grade ore through Tunnel Three instead of the waste rock I thought they were dumping in the old cut. Bonanza Syndicate marketed our high-grade output and split the profits with Kane and Gessel. It was an air- tight piece of thievery as long as old Argus P. was letting Moose Kane run the Deep-Lode. . . ."

DAYLIGHT was streaming through the windows of a bedroom in the camp doctor's cottage down the ridge when the Denver Dude opened his eyes. His body was swathed in bandages and Colleen Farrell held the hand which lay on the coverlet.

"Dr. Sampson says you'll be all right—in a few weeks, Mr. Burns," the girl sad, her eyes shining. "Mr. Copeland says I'm to take time off to be your nurse while he takes care of the bookkeeping."

The Denver Dude grinned.

"I'm sorry I had to masquerade under false colors," he apologized. "But I wanted the Deep-Lode to produce high-grade ore before our new super took over. And I reckon it will, after we take care of these Bonanza high-graders."

An awkward silence fell between them.

"You know," Argus P. Tenniger's heir finally said, "I hope I don't get back on my feet too soon. I want time to persuade you to go back to Denver with me—and not as a head bookkeeper for Tenniger Enterprises, either."

Colleen Farrell's Irish eyes were smiling. "I love California, but they say Colorado is wonderful, too," she whispered. "Any place would be wonderful where you were, Mr. Burns. I mean, Bert."

Ex-West Pointer Justin Kinney, with a hankering to see the rangeland, has his eyes opened when he plays nursemaid to a tough, miserly rancher!

LANTERN-LIGHT

I

ALL AFTERNOON Justin Kinney had ridden across the blackened, ruined mesa, his pony's feet kicking up a cloud of feathery black ash with each step. There was no heat left, for it had been two days before when the fire had sped through the grass, leaving only the sullen, dark, trackless waste of ash. The horse was stained all over with it, the rider almost as bad. There were white circles around his eyes, and another around his mouth, and each jog of the horse showed a white ring around the man's wrists.

He wore a battered army hat, cocked sideward. Under his denim jacket was what was left of an officer's tunic, its blue faded now, its gold buttons long since replaced with nails and twine ties. He sat his saddle with a hint of soldierly erectness, too.

Kinney had left the army a year and a half ago. He could jingle three half-dollars and two Mexican pesos together now, and he could count the cartridges left for his gun. Beyond that he had only his horse and saddle for riches. The gun was perhaps the most distinguished-looking piece of equipment about him. Once it had been a fine, bone-handled Service-type .45. The side of the grip next to his leg still had the bone, but on the outside there was a piece of hand-whittled wood. Loving hands had formed it and riveted it there.

For two hours he had been riding toward the little town, dry-mouthed and hungry, anxious for a wash. It was a small

He grabbed the cartridge belt and brought it up over his head

SHOWDOWN

A Novel by JOHN JO CARPENTER

town, a tiny cluster of false-front frame buildings on either side of the stage road. It vanished from his sight now and then, to reappear, vanish, and reappear once again.

JUST BEFORE DARK he reached the stage road. The soot-stained pony swung willingly toward the town, breaking into an eager trot. Soon Justin could read the signs on the buildings, and count five horses tethered lonesomely at a hitch-rail, heads down.

"That'll be the saloon," he murmured, licking his lips. His youthful face suddenly lightened under the soot. "Grass fires breed thirst and short range, and short range makes short tempers. Horses been standing there all day, whilst their riders down their woes. Brownie, here's a tip-top place to speak softly."

Brownie tossed his head and broke into a gallop. At the edge of town there was a livery stable, with wide double doors, big enough to admit a team and wagon. There was a water trough in front of it, and alkaline water bubbling up from an artesian well. A short, red-faced man came to the double doors and leaned there, snapping his suspenders, as man and beast drank. Justin did not try to rinse off the dirt. Time for that later.

"You come a far piece," said the liveryman, in a deep-South drawl. How far's the burn? See any hay or feed for sale?"

"It's burned for thirty miles south, farther than that west, I reckon," Justin said. "A long haul for feed, if there's any beyond. How's jobs around here?"

The liveryman spat. "Same as feed, cowboy," he said. "Burned out."

He turned his back and went inside. Justin saw him sit down and pick up a faded, tattered Sacramento paper. His face had a hopeless look.

"All right, set there and wait for spring!" Justin muttered. "Glad I'm not tied down. Glad I can just ride on. I wonder how far is she burned the other way? How far to a job?"

He led his horse on down the street and tied it beside the others. All, he noticed, were stained like his own. The fire had swept through the town too fast to do much damage, or else the inhabitants had broken its grip quickly. Paint was blistered here and there, and a saloon window had cracked, and there was not a blade of grass visible anywhere. Justin could see where it had been burned off at the level of the plank sidewalk, although in the cracks the stubble stood deckhigh yet.

From the saloon came no sound of merriment. It was a dead oasis in a dead town. He slapped his leg in a vain effort to beat out the clinging black filth, and stepped inside.

There were five men at the bar, all soot-stained like himself. Only the bartender was clean. All six faces turned with hostile curiosity at the sound of his feet. Then a voice shouted:

"Jus! Justin Kinney, you gold-braid, salute-snapping, discipline-hungry, spoilt brat of a second lieutenant, you! If you ain't a sight for sore eyes!"

A big man had stepped back from the bar and was staring at him. Justin would not have known him, because of the dirt, but he knew the voice.

"Anson Deal! Sergeant Deal, the last I heard of you."

"No more. Me and the army was both glad to part company."

"No more I'm a lieutenant. Well, well, it's a long trail that has no kink in it here and there, eh?"

They pounded each other's backs jovially, their soot-stained faces showing the first merriment the town had heard since the fire. The men at the bar watched with puzzlement. Kinney was half a head shorter than the powerful ex-sergeant, but Deal slouched and Kinney stood with such ramrod straightness that the difference was not noticeable. They were almost the same age, both in their early twenties.

"What got wrong with you and the army?" Deal asked.

"Oh, I just got a hankering to see some of the West you're always talking about, and I give you my word the colonel did not object."

DEAL grinned and said, "Kicked out, eh? Or practically. Don't worry, I won't hold it against you. Fraternizing with the enlisted men again, wasn't you? West Point didn't take, did it?" He turned to the crowd at the bar and dragged Justin forward. "Boys, you heered me tell many's the time about Jus Kinney, the only second lieutenant in the army I'd care to meet sociably. Everybody keep their

hands in their pockets. It's my buy!"

"It'll have to be, Anson," Jus said, coloring. He showed his five silver coins. "There's my fortune until I find a job."

"Job!" Anson laughed harshly, but there was a twinkle of fun back of it. "I've got two-three weeks yet where I am. Most everybody else there has been let go already. We'll ride on together, if you say so. In the meantime—drink! It ain't our grass that was burned."

"It's easy for you to say that," the bartender offered, in a whining voice. "It's easy, and that's a fact, when you haven't got an investment to worry about."

"Make mine beer," said Jus, flushing again. "That's right—beer. I haven't unlearned that habit either."

They drank. Deal talked volubly, telling the others of army life, of dull weeks at the post, of duller patrols, and of patrols which suddenly flamed with brief peril and excitement. He praised Kinney so lavishly that it was embarrassing.

The talk brought back a vague feeling of regret, made Jus somehow anxious to be riding on. It was good to see Deal again; he had always liked the big sergeant with the loud voice and rollicking, happy-go-lucky recklessness. But it also made him restless again, reminding him of the thing he had sought so fruitlessly in the army, and with even less success out of it. What was he searching for? He could not put a name to it yet.

A horse stopped outside. A saddle squeaked, and they turned to see the door open again. A big man came in, one almost as powerful-looking as Deal. Like the rest of them, he was soot-stained and filthy. He came toward them, tearing open the knot in his scarf with thick, impatient fingers. His checked shirt showed clean under it.

"Whisky!" he said thickly.

Jus Kinney noticed the man's severe nervousness and bad temper, and turned his back. When a man wanted to be left alone with his drink—well, he had a right to be left alone.

Anson Deal stepped around and touched the big man on the shoulder. Seen from behind, they were as alike as two peas in a pod, but their faces in the bar mirror were startlingly in contrast. The new arrival had a heavy, beefy face, blinking eyes, a tight, hard mouth.

"Blackie, I want you to meet an old friend of mine," Anson said.

Somehow, Jus knew it was coming, even before the man called Blackie turned. He wished he could have warned Anson. He did not want to be the cause or focus of any unpleasantness. With sudden sharpness, he wanted only to ride out of this burned-out town and never come back.

Blackie whirled violently and threw off Anson's arm.

"Keep your hands to yourself!" he growled. The bartender set out his drink and stepped back quickly, wiping his hands on his apron. Blackie tossed off his whisky, set the glass down, and looked sullenly at Anson. "If he's a friend of yours," he went on deliberately, "he's no friend of mine."

Justin Kinney touched Anson on the sleeve. Anson shook off his touch as Blackie had shaken off his own, and said, out of the corner of his mouth:

"Never mind, Jus. He needs a lesson in manners on general principle. Blackie, I'm telling you again, I want you to shake hands with an old friend of mine—and by the Eternal, you better shake!"

Kinney stepped swiftly between them, pushing them apart. His voice rang with the old crispness of a commissioned officer. He used the trick deliberately.

"Deal! Keep your place! I shake hands with nobody under duress." He turned to the man called Blackie and looked him in the eye. "I have taken no offense, sir. I respect your desire for privacy. Forget it."

IT ALMOST worked. Deal instinctively stepped back and came to attention, but the other big man had not had his training in obedience. Jus saw his mistake, too late. Blackie lunged forward from the bar, clutching and clawing with both hands, his small eyes full of resentment.

Jus dropped back a step, shifted to get his left out, and moved in between Blackie's arms, leaning against the man's huge chest while he pounded fist after fist into the midriff. He felt the big arms lock around him and compress agonizingly, but he kept on beating against Blackie's stomach. Then he felt the big man relax. Blackie threw back his head, dropped his arms, and stepped back, panting and choking for breath.

Jus measured him carefully and sent over a short, accurate right. Blackie

turned his head slightly to avoid it. Jus felt his knuckles split, but he caught the big jaw under under the ear. Blackie went down on his face and lay there, and Jus skipped back, facing the bar, squinting, and rubbing his sore hand.

"I had to do it," he said. "Man my size must end a fight when he's got the upper hand, because if it starts again he might not have another chance."

II

THE men at the bar stared at Jus Kinney, mouths open. Then Deal's stained face widened in one of his famous lightning grins.

"Blackie," he said, with a sweeping gesture toward the fallen man, "I want you to meet an old friend of mine, Justin Kinney. Jus, this is Blackie Crawford. Lord, Lord, Jus—I'd plumb forgot how you can handle them there patty-cakes of yours!"

Blackie stirred and rolled over, moaning. The dazed, bestial unknowingness went out of his eyes swiftly. He locked glances with Jus, and Jus saw the rage come back, and this time there was shame in it. He had whipped big men before. He knew how it galled them to be knocked down by a smaller man. He pitied Blackie, and again he felt a longing to be back on his pony and heading out of town.

Blackie whirled over suddenly and kicked out. His foot caught Jus on the ankle, tripping him, and his big hand clawed at the gun at his side. Jus went down on his right arm and kept rolling until he could get his hand on his own gun.

Anson Deal sprang at Blackie, shouting, "No you don't!" in a loud, frightened voice. He kicked at the gun-hand and missed. Blackie, still on his back, swiveled around toward Anson. Anson kicked again, grazing Blackie's big arm just as the gun roared. The slug tore into a rafter with a shock that rattled the windows. Then Anson was down on top of Blackie, wrenching the man's gun-arm back.

Blackie yelled and dropped the gun, then reached for it with his left hand. Anson grabbed him by the hair and began pounding his head on the floor. Blackie grew limp. Anson stood up, weaving on his feet and swearing under his breath. All the fun and deviltry had gone out of his face. He looked over at Jus, who was just getting up.

"I catch on now," he panted. "Funny Blackie would take such offense, I thought. I know—he's been fired from his own job. Old Porter Strickland sent him on his way. Jus, let's you and me mosey on." He pitched Blackie's gun to the bartender, who caught it awkwardly. "Give it to him tomorrow, if he's sober. And boys, you know I didn't have anything to do with him losing his job. I wouldn't work for the devil for a deed to the Territory."

The five men at the bar looked down at Blackie uneasily. Then they turned back to the bar.

Anson and Kinney paused on the sidewalk outside, and looked at each other. A buckboard came rattling down the stage road, drawn by a handsome gray team. On the seat sat a humped old man, wrapped in a blanket, Indian fashion. He looked neither to the right nor left, but sped on down the street.

"Speak of the devil," said Anson. "There goes old Porter Strickland. Crippled—hurt in a fight with a cattle buyer two-three years ago. He's prob'ly the richest man in the Territory. Blackie worked for him. I couldn't, and Jus, I was just funnin' when I used to tease Blackie I was going after his job. A man's got to be a slave to work for Port. He's got to be lower'n the dog that crawls under the porch. He's got to tote old Port around, and put him to bed, and get him up, and take him to meals. Port's got his place leased out, and he's moved to town now. He buys and sells cattle."

He pointed a long forefinger at Jus, and the angry look on his face grew angrier.

"And, Jus, this fire's right to his liking. It will ruin a hundred men by taking their fall feed, but it'll make Porter Strickland a fortune. He's got the cash to buy, and he'll buy at his own price, and he'll sell at his own price in train-load lots. Another reason I couldn't work for him, Jus. Me, I don't pick my neighbors' bones. Comes something like this fire—well, me, I just ride on."

"Let's ride, then," said Jus, "or I'll ride alone. I don't like your town, Anson. I'll not let the sun rise on me here."

THE door of the saloon was flung open and Blackie Crawford staggered out,

his hand locked over his empty holster. He had not even tried to get his gun back from the bartender, but had swallowed his shame. His eyes were bloodshot and his clothing disarranged, but otherwise he showed no effects of his beating.

He stood there a moment, leaning against the wall and reeling slightly. Then he gathered himself together, walked over to Jus, and said:

"Mind you, don't let me see you around town again. You had your fun. Next time it's my turn. Mind!"

He walked away. Anson shook his head.

"It'll be his ruination," he murmured. "He ain't too bright. He let old Port take him in. Pshaw, Jus! You wouldn't believe it, but old Port never paid him but fifteen dollars a month. Fifteen a month, for the kind of a dog's life you and me wouldn't stoop to for a hatful of gold eagles. Old Port, he tells Blackie he'll will everything to him, and Blackie believes him. Port

shows him the will, and the rest of us can't make Blackie believe that Port will use him until he's through with him, then tear the will up. That's the kind of an old skinflint he is, Jus."

The gray team reappeared suddenly, coming toward them. It veered with equal suddenness and turned smartly into the livery stable. The old man on the seat looked somehow lonely and pitiful. Jus looked the other way, and saw Blackie Crawford shambling along with his arms dragging at his side, swinging loosely.

He grinned. "How long before you're through with your job, Anson?"

"Two weeks, or two minutes," said Anson. "Makes me no nevermind. Hey—where you going?"

"Meet you here in two weeks, and we'll ride," said Jus. "Seems I was told not to let the sun rise on me here. I don't think I've ever been told that before. I guess I'll try for that job with Strickland."

"Hey!" Anson said again in alarm, striding along to argue. "You can't stand that kind of a life, Jus. He's worse'n any colonel ever could be, son. You'd be just a dog—a slave, like I told you. And Blackie ain't to be fooled with. You won't get to him with your fists next time."

Jus patted the gun and said, "I can take care of myself, Anson, thanks just the same. See you two weeks from tonight, right here."

Anson shrugged and turned back.

"I don't want to meet that old devil," he complained. "Porter Strickland and me never did get along. Well, hope you like your job, boy."

Jus turned in the livery stable. The short, red-faced proprietor was nervously tying the gray team.

"Hurry up, Jim, you fool! I don't want to sit here all night. You got to get somebody to pack me over to the house. I fired that worthless Crawford. I don't want ever to lay eyes on him again."

"Yes, Mr. Strickland," the liveryman said. "You bet, Mr. Strickland!"

Strickland had been a powerful man at one time—indeed, he still had the frame for it, with wide shoulders, long arms, and a long, tapering torso. He had big, craggy features under a shock of snowy hair, and bushy eyebrows that met over a hawk nose. A proud man—yes, a vain man, one who hated being crippled as badly as Blackie Crawford hated being whipped, Jus Kinney thought. He would not be easy to work for, with the twin worms of money-avarice and that hatred in him.

Jim Welsh, the liveryman, cried out and his red face showed alarm as Jus stepped up and took hold of Strickland's arm.

"Here we go!" Jus said, calmly but confidently, and ran his arm under Strickland's legs. He had the old man in his arms before Strickland knew what had happened. "Now, where do you live?"

STRICKLAND flushed angrily, and his head went back. He began swearing. He was a heavyweight, but Jus waited patiently for a few moments, then shifted himself suddenly. Strickland threw his arms around Jus's neck involuntarily. Jus grinned.

"Put me down!" the old man grated. "Set me back up there or I'll have you horsewhipped out of town."

"No you won't," said Jus. "I'm an army man, and I don't horsewhip worth a darn. I'm going to work for you, Mr. Strickland. Name—Justin Kinney. Age—twenty-three. Accomplishments—I can handle

a horse, play a little on the harmonica, and I had considerable mathematics in my engineering course at West Point. It didn't take very well, but I still get four every time I add two and two. Now, where do you live?"

Strickland glared at him. He turned to look for the liveryman, but Jim Welsh had already vanished, slipping away to safety while Jus talked. Strickland turned back.

"Ordinarily," he said, "I have my man drive me home, then bring the team back. I just fired the man. You tote me home, young feller, and there's a dime in it for you. A dime—that's all! I don't want no renegade soldiers working for me. Take me thataway, the big yeller house back of town."

Jus carried him across blackened town lots to the big house. It had been almost a mansion once, but it had been allowed to run down lately, either through neglect or stinginess. As they approached the front door, a man came around the side of the house. He ran to open the door for them.

"Got your feeding done, Clem?" Strickland snarled at him.

"Purty near, Mr. Strickland," Clem said. "I'll be through in no time."

He was a typical cowtown handyman, Jus saw, one of those worthless individuals who eke out an existence doing odd jobs. He bowed as he opened the door, bowed as he closed it, and bowed himself away afterward.

The inside of the house was even more littered than the outside. Whatever else could be said for Blackie Crawford, he was not much of a housekeeper, if that had been part of his work, too. Jus felt his flesh crawl. The army had taught him cleanliness.

He was secretly pleased when Strickland said nothing further about the dime. The cripple pointed to a huge, high-backed, leather chair, on casters.

"Set me there," he said. "Bought that from the old courthouse. Don't see no need for one of them new-fangled wheelchairs. It's got wheels, ain't it? And they'll do in the house. Outside I need to be packed around anyway." He shot a bitter, searching glance at Jus from under his shaggy brows. "Army man, hey? Know anything about cows?"

"A little," Jus admitted.

"Wheel me into the kitchen. Thataway."

III

RELUCTANTLY Jus got behind the big chair and pushed it to the kitchen door. He looked out over Strickland's shoulder. The slope back of the house was littered with shabby buildings, haphazard corrals. The handyman, Clem, was forking hay over the fence to a dozen lean steers.

"Pens are empty now," Strickland said. "I shipped last week. I drive down to railhead every two-three weeks. Got a couple of hundred head coming in tomorrow—bought 'em today from a burned-out feller. The fool! Didn't have no fire guards around his haystacks, lost nigh onto three hundred tons. That's the kind of business I do, soldier. What use would you be to me?"

"Fire never sneaked up on me," said Jus. "I won't touch a pitchfork like Clem, there, and if I work for you, I'll police up this hogpen a little, and no doubt you'll miss some of the dirt. But if you catch me napping, I give you license to hit below the belt."

Strickland studied him coldly a moment. Then he flicked one of his big hands toward the pen of steers.

"That red one there with the white dewlap—how much do you make him?"

"Oh, say nine hundred and twenty pounds," Jus said instantly. "No, he's big-boned and deep-chested. Make it nine thirty-five to nine forty-five."

Strickland snorted.

"What use would you be to me?" he repeated. "The weight of a critter is money in your hand or money out of your pocket, depending on your eye. Now that one there I bought for a little over a thousand pounds."

"Then you cheated yourself."

Strickland reddened and leaned through the window to shout:

"Clem! Cut that one with the white dewlap out and run him onto the scales."

They waited while the handyman hurried to weigh the steer. He balanced the beam carefully.

"Nine-forty, Mr. Strickland," he called.

Strickland settled back in his chair.

"You'll have trouble with the man I had here," he said. "He's big. He's mean. He hated to lose this job."

"I have already met him."

Strickland paused a moment. "Fight?"

"A little," Jus admitted.

"Whip him?"

"I knocked him out, He's not a quitter."

"No," said Strickland softly. "Blackie aint' no quitter. Well, soldier, if you think you'll like owning this place some day, I'll try you. I'll give you two weeks' trial —yes, sir—and if you're the man I want, I'll change my will in your favor."

Jus came around and faced the old man.

"Look, Mr. Strickland," he said, "I don't work that way. I don't want your property, and I don't intend to stay here any longer than it takes me to get a little stake. I can ride over the horizon, and in two days have a winter job that pays twenty dollars a month. The work I'll do for you is worth fifty. That's my price."

Strickland snorted. "Fifteen!"

"Fifty, sir."

"Fifteen, and everything I own when I'm gone. I've got neither relatives nor friends. I make money because I enjoy making money. I don't give a hang what happens to it when I'm gone. It's fifteen or nothing."

"Fifty!"

"Fifteen," said the old man, adding, "and ten per cent of the profits. I'll throw that in, soldier. It's a long time since I had my hands on a critter, and I've lost the feel. And when you lose the feel, you lose the eye. I cleaned up eleven hundred dollars last month. That's a hundred and ten dollars for you, plus fifteeen is a hundred and a quarter. And I'll still change my will, soldier."

HE PUT his hand on Jus's arm, and it was astonishingly strong and steady.

"Maybe you're the man I need," he said, in a softer voice. "Maybe you're exactly what I been looking for. That Blackie wasn't no good. You watch, I'll do the right thing by you."

Up to now, Jus had felt a strong sympathy for the old man. He remembered a huge tree he had cut down once, and how wasted its strength looked, fallen. He remembered a bull buffalo his troop had shot for meat, and he remembered an Apache sub-chieftain, and how he looked as he died from a bullet through his stomach. Tree, buffalo and Apache had all been strong—the last of their kind.

Up to now, old Porter Strickland had given him the same feeling. But the sudden change of heart did not quite ring true. Jus thought he heard the clink of coin beyond it. Instinct warned him to beware of trickery. He knew he should hold out for fifty dollars, and that if he held out for it he would get it. The ten per cent would be harder to collect.

Then he thought of Anson Deal, and his eagerness to be away from this black, ugly, burned-out country came over him afresh. Two weeks at fifteen a month would give him six or seven dollars, anyway. Enough to see him on to another job somewhere else. And maybe, with Anson, he could somehow, some day find the thing he was looking for.

"All right," he said. "You win. Fifteen it is."

Strickland suppressed a smile of triumph.

"Wheel me back to the front bedroom. That's where I sleep, and it's my office, too. Your room is the back one. I got a cowbell rigged up on a rope to jangle you out when I need you. After supper's over, you can go out until ten o'clock. But you got to be back here by ten-fifteen."

Again Jus felt like rebelling. But then he remembered an old saying of Anson Deal's "A half-hour for lunch is plenty if you take an hour." Rules were made to be broken. Ten-fifteen taps? Jus grinned.

The front bedroom was a litter of junk, the bed merely a blanket-littered cot. A roll-top desk occupied one corner. Strickland motioned toward it, and Jus wheeled him up to it. Strickland reached into the waistband of his trousers and pulled out a .45 revolver, which he put in the desk without turning the key in the drawer.

"Hardly expected to see you carrying a gun," Jus offered.

"What you expect is none of my business, and what I do is none of yours," Strickland snarled. "Go fix us some supper. I like fried eggs and fried potatoes. Clem puts the day's gathering of eggs on the kitchen table. I'll jangle the cowbell when I'm ready for mine."

"I'll bring it when I'm ready," Jus said serenely, "but you go right ahead and

jangle that bell, if you like the sound. It won't bother me!"

Their eyes locked again, and he wondered if Strickland would force the issue. He did not, but neither did he give up. He pointed to Jus' gun.

"We usually hang up our arms in a white man's country, soldier."

"Everybody I seen around here is pretty smudged-up," said Jus. "No, thanks, I'll wear mine."

"I notice the bone handle's gone. Careless about your things?"

"A man shot that off," said Jus. "I couldn't help it. I give you my word he was the careless one, it turned out. Now, sir, if you're comfortable here I'm going to run back and get my horse and put him up in your barn."

"What about supper?"

"A man should take care o. his beasts first. When your horse has eaten, then you eat. Work yourself up an appetite, Mr. Strickland. If it makes you feel any better, jangle that bell!"

STRICKLAND was still sputtering when Jus went out, but it had ceased to be funny. Jus had been on his new job less than an hour, but already his patience was wearing thin. Strickland's rudeness and bad humor were not the ordinary unhappiness of a cripple. No, there was something more, something that even the man's penny-pinching greed could not explain.

"Wish I could take to Blackie Crawford," Jus sighed, "but I expect that's going to be impossible."

Jus deliberately violated Strickland's curfew that night, staying out until almost one o'clock in the morning. He was glad he did because he got into a poker game in the saloon and won twenty-eight dollars. It gave him a feeling of independence, to be able to clink five gold pieces together in a handful of silver.

Anson walked part of the way back to Strickland's house with Jus, leading his horse. It was a wild, windy night, with clouds scudding over a full moon, letting fugitive patches of eerie light sweep over the spooky black ground.

"For two cents more, I'd get my horse out of the old devil's barn, and head west," Jus said, as they stopped.

Anson swung up on his horse. His rollicking laughter came through the dark.

"Stick it out, Jus," he advised. "I don't think anything like this has happened to Port since he got hurt. It's good for his soul, to rub up against someone that's nastier than he is."

"How did he get hurt?" Jus wondered.

"A quarrel over money," Anson said. "Port and a buyer for the Mexican army were both bidding on a bunch of steers. The Mexican didn't care what he had to pay, and Port did. Mexican bid 'em up higher than Port could pay and still make anything, and old Port got sore. Called the Mexican a dirty name—and Jus, you can't talk to those high-bred Mexicans that way. Well, they had a fight, and old Port figured the Mexican would be another fizzle with his fists. But he wasn't! Jus, that little devil stood right up to old Port and whipped him—whipped him good!

"But Port kept coming back for more. They fought in the livery stable there, and I guess Port got knocked down two-three times, and came back for more two-three times. Last time the Mexican knocked him down, Port fell with the small of his back across a manger. When he came to, he couldn't move his legs. He's been paralyzed ever since. Lost the beefs, lost the fight, lost his legs."

"I'd like to shake hands with that Mexican," said Jus. "A stranger in a strange land, yet he had sand enough to stand up to the town's rich man and whip him on his own grounds."

Again, Anson's laugh.

"Where he went, there's no handshaking. He was killed that night, shot in the back not three hours after old Port was paralyzed. Blackie Crawford found him laying out behind the saloon. At first they thought it was Blackie, but he drug up witnesses. It couldn't have been old Port, because he was laying up there at his house with both legs paralyzed, and some doubt he'd live at all. Personally, my candidate for the killing is still Blackie. Even then, he was trying to curry favor with old Port."

Anson turned his restless horse.

"See you in two weeks," he called. "Give it to old Port hot and heavy. Most men have a streak of rattlesnake somewhere in 'em, but old Port works at it."

AT THAT moment the moon came out then, and Jus saw the brawny ex-sergeant of cavalry pounding away toward the stage road, leaning low over his horse and riding hard. Deal had been the best horseman in a troop of good horsemen, but too independent and light-hearted to be a good soldier.

"I wish I fitted in this world just half as well as he does," Jus thought. "He wasn't happy in the Army, but he is happy out of it. Me, I'm not satisfied in or out. So long, Anson!"

Clem, the handyman, was waiting for him by the front gate.

"Psst, Kinney! I left the back door unlocked so you could slip in without Mr. Strickland knowing. You won't tell on me, will you? I just wanted to save everybody a big row tomorrow."

"Thanks, Clem, but I'll go in the front way," said Jus.

"Oh, gosh, there's going to be trouble!" Clem moaned.

He scuttled away as fast as he could run. Jus went up and tried the front door. It was locked. He hammered on it mightily.

"Who's there?" came old Strickland's snarl, from inside.

Jus identified himself, adding, "The back door's unlocked, I hear, but I'm a front-door man, Mr. Strickland. Let me in!"

"Hightail!" Strickland snapped. "You know the rules. No drunken saddle-bum can come stumbling in here after ten o'clock."

"Suit yourself," Jus said. "If you hear anything out back, it's just me getting my horse out. Good-by, Mr. Strickland."

"Wait a minute!"

There was an odd scraping sound inside, then the latch was pulled, letting the door swing open. Jus stepped inside. A complicated pulley arrangement had been strung up so Strickland could operate the latch by a string, from his room. Jus closed the door after him and adjusted the string again. Then he went into Strickland's bedroom, clinking his winnings in his hand.

"Had a good night, Mr. Strickland. Won myself some money, so I can travel in style if I get mad at you. I expect to be in bed before ten o'clock most nights after this, because I don't want to risk losing my stake. But if I take a notion to stay out later—why, Mr. Strickland, I guess you'll have to let me in again."

Strickland was sitting up in bed, the blankets pulled over his useless legs. Near at hand lay his loaded .45. He had a candle burning, and in its flickering light he looked malevolent and strange. He stared at Jus.

"I jangle that cowbell at six in the morning," he snapped suddenly. "I s'pose you'll tell me to go ahead and jangle it, hey?"

"That's right, Mr. Strickland. You just jangle it to your heart's content, because I won't hear it. I'm an early riser, and I'll have my horse attended to a half-hour before that. Breakfast is five forty-five tomorrow. Good night!"

He went to his room, leaving Strickland staring after him open-mouthed.

The next morning, he walked down to the livery stable and brought up the grays and the buckboard. The liveryman walked part of the way with him.

"I liked to died, when you lifted old Port down yesterday," the red-faced man confessed. "Maybe it's what the old skinflint needs—somebody to scare him back. The town's plugging for you, cowboy. We put up with old Port long enough."

"Thanks," said Jus.

"All but one, that is. You'll get no good wishes from Blackie Crawford. A word to the wise, cowboy. I lived a long time because I got eyes in my back. I don't see any peep-holes in the back of your shirt. It might be a prime idea."

"Thanks," said Jus. "But do you tolerate back-shooters here as a regular thing? The town won't prosper."

"A word to the wise," the liveryman repeated. "Another reason I lived long is I don't usually mix in other people's

troubles. Blackie's my friend! I wouldn't say a word against Blackie Crawford—no, sir! But a word to the wise, cowboy, is friendly to you, and unfriendly to nobody."

HE TURNED back. Jus tied the team by the gate and went in and carried Strickland out to the buckboard. Instead of getting in beside him, he went back and got his horse. Strickland complained that he did not like to handle the team.

"Go on!" said Jus, scornfully. "You handle 'em like a pair of old house cats. I'm not a coachman, Mr. Strickland. I've got a percentage interest in the business, and I want to be able to ride out and see what we're buying from up close. Let her rip!"

They went through the town that way, Jus riding beside the buckboard and talking cheerfully. Strickland did not answer. He never did give his approval to the arrangement, but Jus was sure the old man did approve it secretly.

"But he won't give me the satisfaction of saying so."

Before the day was out, he found himself heartily disliking his job. He had not realized then what a vise-grip Strickland had on the community. In three hours riding eastward, they got out of the burned-over range. Bent grass lay thick and dry here, and would make feed even under a foot of snow. A little farther on they came to hayfields, with literally hundreds of fenced-in haystacks. This lush area extended to the foothills, some ten miles away. The foothills themselves were barren, and beyond that lay the desert. Strickland pulled up and pointed with his whip.

"This here's my range. It's what we're going to winter three thousand head on." He cackled. "Fools think I ought to sell 'em hay. Sell 'em hay! Why, it's a seventy-mile haul if they don't get it from me. You can't haul feed that far and come out on it. Remember, I don't sell feed—I buy cows!"

"It's not very neighborly," Jus demurred.

"How much will you make on your percentage, if we deal in neighborliness?" Strickland shot back. "Let's go!"

He seemed to know the district intimately—who was overstocked, who was short of money, where to go to buy cheaply. It was sickening to watch, and his haggling brought a flush of shame to Justin Kinney's face. He saw men surrounded by their families—five, six, or seven small children and a worried wife—stand up and try to beat a better price out of old Strickland. And they failed. Of course they failed!

"Wait until the buyers from the cities come in!" one haggard man threatened. "We'll get our price then."

"What buyers?" Strickland laughed. "Everybody knows we had lots of rain, good range, through here. The fire is local. There'll be no buyers because no one knows about it. Well, that's my best offer—Get up!"

Jus would never forget the look on the rancher's face. Strickland's team started up. The rancher turned white and started running after it. Jus sat his horse and watched until the man caught Strickland. The two argued a moment, Strickland shaking his head emphatically.

Jus swore and touched Brownie with his heels and cantered up to the buckboard.

"I think we can sweeten that about four bits a head, Mr. Strickland," he said. He was aware suddenly that his shame and anger showed, but he did not care. He would gladly have choked the old man. "On three hundred head, that's another hundred and fifty dollars. We can afford it."

Strickland found his voice to grate, "We can afford it! Why, you busted-down, ten-dollar saddle soldier, you—"

"So long then, Mr. Strickland. Here's where we part company."

He rode away. As he expected, the buckboard soon came rattling after him. He slowed the pony down and let it catch up. They rode in silence for a while. As they neared town, Jus spoke curtly, without looking around.

"I've got to know whether to make arrangements to move that stock."

"I bought it," Strickland said, "and gave away a hundred and fifty dollars. Move it tomorrow, Kinney, before it loses any more weight."

Jus turned around then, intending to speak his appreciation, but old Strickland only said coldly, "Don't ever do that again, cowboy."

JUS felt his anger returning. He picked his words carefully.

"We look at things differently, old-timer. I was hunting for a job when I found this one, and I'm not married to you. I speak when I please and I don't scare worth a darn. Just keep that in mind."

"Don't ever do that again," Strickland repeated. His eyes glittered balefully. "Don't you do it, cowboy!"

Jus said nothing. That evening he waited in town, hoping Anson would show up. Sure enough, the big, happy-go-lucky ex-sergeant came in. Jus proposed that they ride out that night. He was fed up already, he said. But Anson shook his head unhappily.

"I'm plumb sorry, Jus," he said, "but only today I promised I'd stay until snow flies. Boss busted a bone in his ankle and he does need a dependable man." His expression changed. He grinned. "Aw, what do you want to move along for? Give old Port a couple more weeks of the lash."

"It will never change him," Jus said. "Something more than his leg is deformed. That man's twisted in his mind, too."

"Well-l-l," Anson drawled, "catch hold of him with that second lieutenant's look you used to use on me now and then, and untwist him. Son, you owe it to the country whose West Point beans you et and whose army you bereaved, to make a Christian out of that old bull bison."

"All right," Jus sighed. "But I'm thinking he needs the rough handling of a good top sergeant more than he needs the handling of an officer and a gentleman."

"There!" Anson yelled. "There, you admit it! You own up right in broad daylight, you're a plumb gentleman! I always knowed there was something lacking in you."

"Oh, you go drown yourself!" Jus said.

Anson looked around at the scorched prairie and said, "How far do you reckon it is from this edge to the middle of that place, Jus?" And Jus said, "Shut up and buy me a beer." Anson hit him in the chest unexpectedly, a blow that was like the kick of a horse. They clinched and wrestled, and Jus made Anson yell for mercy with a hammerlock.

Then they went and had their beer. No, it hadn't been like this when they had been in the army. . . .

Shipping time was a nightmare. By the end of the week, they had collected over fifteen hundred head in Strickland's pens. The old man fought over the number of men it would take to get them to railhead. He fought over what they should get paid. Jus overruled him on both points. He hired a dozen riders and started the herd moving.

Two miles out of town, Strickland in his buckboard caught up with them. He said nothing. Neither did Jus, although he felt like turning back. By evening he wished he had. Strickland made life miserable for him. At every stop, he insisted on being lifted out of the buckboard and carried around. The riders, strange cowboys Jus had picked as they drifted through on their way south for the winter, grinned up their sleeves to see him ordered around so.

V

NIGHTS, Jus had to sleep next to Strickland, who said he feared robbery or even death in his sleep. Strickland insisted on sleeping with his .45 inside his blanket. Two or three times a night, Jus would have to get up and bring him a drink of water or do some other menial errand. By the time they had the stock loaded again, the hands paid off and had started back, he was ready to wring the old man's neck.

He had not believed it possible to hate a cripple as he hated Porter Strickland.

A week after they got back, Strickland again brought up the subject of Jus' pay. He began talking about it at supper, speaking in a whining, ingratiating voice that made Jus suspicious from the start.

"Maybe I was a little too hasty with you, boy," he said. "You been a first-class help to me. Maybe you're worth fifty. Shoot! Why should I fight with you over a few dollars? Tell you what I'll do, Kinney—I'll go back and rewrite our deal from the word bang! Fifty a month it is!"

Chewing slowly, Jus thought quickly. What had inspired this sudden change of view? Then he remembered seeing the stage driver come to the house that afternoon, and something clicked.

That was it, of course! Strickland had received his payment for his last fifteen

hundred head of cattle.

"No, thanks," Jus said, grinning. "I couldn't let you cheat yourself that way, old-timer. I'm just naturally not worth fifty a month to you. When you come right down to it, I'm nothing but a worthless soldier who barely earns my salt. No, I can't do it to you—I just can't!"

They argued, and Jus wished Anson Deal could have heard them. Defeated at last, Strickland had Jus wheel him into his bedroom-office. On the table lay a canvas money bag, empty, and folded flat. Jus wondered where the money was, but only for a moment. Strickland's anxiety to make sure a certain drawer was closed showed him.

"Come on, Mr. Strickland," Jus shot at him. "How much was it? We might as well figure my share now."

"How much was what? I don't savvy, Kinney."

Jus moved toward the desk and reached for the drawer.

Instantly the old man was on him, swarming over him like a monkey. Jus had never felt such powerful hands in his life. Blackie Crawford's grip was weak in comparison. Strickland's legs might be without strength, but his wrists and fingers made up for it.

Jus came back with his elbow and caught Strickland in the pit of the stomach, winding him and knocking him back in his chair. They glared at each other, Strickland fingering his breathless solar plexus and Jus shaking his aching wrists, to get the blood and feeling back in them.

"All right, old-timer, how much was it? Net profit, I mean!"

"Thir—thirteen hundred and sixty-eight dollars," Strickland quavered. "Here, I'll show you the book. Here's what they cost on this page and here's what they sold for. I'm a fair man, Kinney. You'll see I'm a fair man. I wouldn't try to cheat you!"

All the fight had suddenly gone out of him.

"That gives me a hundred and thirty-six dollars and eighty cents," Jus marveled. "No wonder you wanted to pay me fifty a month! Why, you skinflint old devil you, I made two-thirds of that myself! A dozen times I saved you from making mistakes on critters."

"I'll pay you, if you insist," Strickland whined. "But cowboy, the other's a better deal. Fifty a month, and you inherit everything when I die. Look—I had the will made out this afternoon, all witnessed and everything. See? Everything I possess goes to you, Justin Kinney, whom I designate as my friend, partner, assistant and 'standing in the stead of a son.' I'm worth a hundred thousand dollars, Kinney."

"Less a hundred and thirty-six, eighty!" Jus interrupted. "Count it out, please, and let's light our cigarettes on that document."

"No, no! I'll put the will away, in case you change your mind. I like you cowboy. I'll—All right, all right! Hold out your hand!"

FOR a while there was nothing but the slow, unwilling clink of the gold pieces into Jus' hand. Strickland counted a hundred and thirty dollars in gold, then seven silver dollars. Then he waited for Jus to give him twenty cents change. He held both dimes up to the light to make sure they were good before putting them in his pocket.

Jus spent the evening in the saloon, hoping Anson Deal would appear. He was light-hearted and hungry for fun, but Anson never did show up. Jus bought drinks for too many strangers and played too much stud poker, and at ten minutes after eleven was twenty dollars poorer.

"Boys, I'm away past taps," he said then. "I'll have to call it a night."

They looked at him enviously. Word of his wealth had spread around town, which was already agog at his brusque treatment of the village tyrant.

"Heard he made his will out to you, too," said one. "Is that so?"

"Sure it's so!" said another. "Old Port had Jim Fletcher and Charley Boyd go up to the house and witness it."

Jus clinked the money in his pocket and said, "This is about the 'steenth will he's made out, and he'll make another hundred before he dies. He's too poison mean to die in season, but will live forever, like a Joshua tree or a jackass with a stripe down its back."

"Unless somebody kills him," the bartender murmured.

The door suddenly opened, and Blackie Crawford appeared in it. Seeing Jus, he

hesitated, scowling. It was the first time the two had met since their fight. Apparently Blackie had been drinking heavily and working hardly at all. He wore the same clothes, and they showed it, and his beard had been allowed to grow carelessly.

Yet, somehow, Jus suddenly felt any enmity go out of him. Crawford looked so forlorn and disappointed.

"He's not much of a man, and he did take a lot of punishment from Strickland," he thought. "Now his chance at that hundred thousand-dollar estate is gone, and all he's got left is bull strength and awkwardness. The poor devil feels he's been cheated—and the great horn spoon, he has!"

Jus had seen men like Crawford come into the army. Some of them could be whipped into shape, and they made mighty good soldiers. Others disgraced themselves early. What could a good company commander do with a dull-witted giant like Blackie?

There was an air of hangdog shame about Blackie, as though he felt he had disgraced himself by getting fired by Porter Strickland. Under his whiskers his face reddened, but he stood his ground, half in and half out of the door. Cold air moved in around him, chilling the room quickly.

Jus had been about to leave. These others knew it. He dreaded another fight with Blackie, but he could not have them think he had to back down.

"Good night," he said, and started for the door.

Blackie almost moved out of the way, but caught himself in time. His eyes narrowed, and he swallowed, holding his position in the doorway. Jus stopped in front of him.

"Excuse me, Crawford."

Blackie lunged at him. Jus sidestepped and started a swift left jab at Blackie's face.

His dread of a fight vanished. Blackie would be easier this time than he had been before.

But halfway there, the fist stopped. He happened to meet Blackie's eyes, and the big man had such a look to him that Jus could not hit him. He realized suddenly that Blackie dreaded the fight more than he did, but was under the same compulsion to go through with it. It would be shorter, bloodier, more merciless this time. It would be a memorable fight, not for its violence but for its scientific brevity.

And Blackie would never be able to live it down.

"Excuse me!" he said again.

BLACKIE, ducking away from the fist, threw up his arms with a hoarse cry. Jus put his head down and ducked under the huge arm, brushing against Blackie and knocking him slightly off-balance. In a twinkling their positions were reversed. Jus was standing in the door and Blackie was inside the saloon, trying to recover his equilibrium and brandishing his fists at thin air.

"Good night!" said Jus.

He let the door swing shut behind him. They would think he had dodged the fight but—well, let them! He'd be out of town in a matter of days and never see any of them again. Blackie had to live here.

"I just couldn't hit him!" Jus said to himself. "They'll always think that first fight was a fluke, that I was afraid to try it again. They'll never believe a man his size could fear one my size. But I just couldn't hit him. Oh, well!"

The wind was cold. He turned up his denim collar, pulled his hat down over his ears, and headed for Porter Strickland's place. He hated the thought of entering, of waiting for Strickland to pull that latchstring, of spending a night in the bitter loneliness of that house. That's what an evening of jovial companionship did. He wished Anson had not promised to stay. He wished Anson's boss had not broken his ankle.

Candlelight glimmered through the heavy blinds that covered Strickland's office window. Jus knocked, and waited. There was no answer. He knocked again, more loudly, and shouted, "Hey!" Still there was no answer.

Startled, Jus shook the door. The latch was notched in; it did not move. He shouted again, and again there was no answer.

Then he thought he heard a noise around the corner of the house—a furtive, panicky scuffling and the ring of something solid against glass. He leaped down the steps and ran around the house, draw-

ing his gun as he ran. His skin prickled, and his shoulder-blades itched.

There was nothing—no sound, no sight, no sight—at the other window. The shade was tightly drawn, but candlelight twinkled through its tiny pores.

VI

JUS STRUCK a match and looked at the ground.

"Boot heels!" he muttered. "High-heeled cowboy boots, and fresh tracks, too. Somebody was tampering with the window!" He straightened up, the tingling more acute all over his body, and rapped on the window. "Strickland! Are you there? Are you all right? Hey!"

After a second came Strickland's quavering voice.

"Is—is that you, Jus?" It was the first time he had ever used the Christian name. "Is that you? I—I thought somebody was after me! Wh-why don't you come around by the door!"

"I did!"

"But not first! You come to the window first!"

"Let me in! Are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Kinney." His voice was stronger, more sure of itself. "Come around by the door and I'll pull the string. Watch out as you come in."

Jus ran back to the door and rapped, but Strickland made him identify himself again before pulling the string. He was certainly taking no chances, Just thought. When the door swung back, Jus stepped inside and slammed the door shut behind him. He stood there a moment, listening carefully. Then he went into Strickland's room.

The old cripple had hoisted himself into his bed, but he had taken his money and his gun with him. The blankets were drawn up over his useless legs, and the gold was spilled on them in little twinkling circlets of yellow light. Strickland's face was white and haggard, but his eyes burned fiercely.

"See there!" he shrilled. "See why I don't want you out after night? Anything could happen to me—but no, you don't care! Sure, let the old man be killed! You got the will in your favor."

"Shut up caterwauling and keep your gun cocked," Jus interrupted, "while I look through the house. Give me your candle."

"No!"

Jus swore as the old man yanked the candle stub out of reach. Strickland feared the dark like a child. Jus whirled and went through the big echoing old house, trying windows. Apparently nothing had been disturbed. He returned to the office.

"What happened, anyway? Tell me about it."

"I—I was just goin' over my books and my cash, when I heard someone at the front window. Then I heard him at the side window. The next thing I heard you on the porch, but I didn't reckognize you and I was too scared to holler."

Jus stared at him.

"You old devil, you're not afraid of anything that lives," he said shortly, for the moment feeling it was true. "You just let on you didn't hear, hoping you'd get a chance to shoot some poor, luckless prowler. Why, I believe you hoped you'd get a chance to shoot me!"

"Kinney, you shouldn't prod me, when I'm all wrought up this way," Strickland pleaded. "This is what comes of leaving a defenseless cripple home nights. Don't ever do it again."

Their eyes locked. Strickland cocked his head sideward. But all the time his powerful hands were busy gathering up the gold pieces, collecting them skillfully into neat little piles. Jus jammed the gun savagely into his holster and went out, slamming the door behind him. The draft blew out the candle. He could hear Strickland still swearing five minutes later. . . .

It was gray dawn, and the light through the window had a three o'clock look in it, when he was awakened by a pounding on the front door. Jus came awake at the first rap, and by the third one had swung his feet out of bed and was reaching for his gun and matches.

"Just a minute!" he called.

THE FLOOR was icy. He stopped to slip on his socks and trotted to the door in his underwear. As he passed through the barren front room, he heard Strickland stirring.

"What is it?" he snarled. "Who's raising all the damned ruckus?"

"Shut up until I find out!" Jus snapped.

He threw the latch and let the door

swing open a couple of inches. The face of the livery stable proprietor, ruddy as ever but wearing an unaccountable look of horror, met his gaze. Jus realized then that he had stuck the barrel of the gun out before peering out himself. He withdrew the gun and opened the door, motioning the liveryman inside.

"No, I don't want to wake old Port and raise a fuss," the man whispered. "You was a friend of Anson Deal's, wasn't you?"

A chill of apprehension went through Jus.

"Was?" he said roughly. "What kind of gab is this?"

"Anson's been killed. Shot in the back!"

Jus threw the door back and yanked the startled man inside.

"What are you trying to tell me?" he grated. "Anson Deal's dead?"

"Hey, you're a-breakin' my arm!" the liveryman wailed. Jus let go of him and the man went on, "I found him in my own livery stable, my place of business. I s'pose that's why nobody heard the shots. I got in four big loads of hay, don't you see, and until I could get it h'isted up into the loft I had it stacked around the walls on the down-wind side, and it muffled the noise, I reckon. You wouldn't hear anything on the other side, because the wind would carry it to the other."

"Get to the point, get to the point! Who did it?"

"Hey! Why, I don't know who did it. Leastwise, I couldn't prove nothing. I figure Anson had just got in, had just put his horse up before heading for the saloon. He was shot twice. He wasn't there at nine o'clock, when I was last through the stable. He must of come in not long after that, because he's cold by now. Shot in the back. I thought I'd come to you, Kinney, because you was his best friend. Seems like he was a pretty good boy, and well-liked, but after all he was just another stray rider here. Maybe you'd want to do a little more for him, I thought."

"What's this—what's this?" Strickland kept calling. "Somebody answer me! What's this? What's this?"

"Oh, shut up!" Jus said mechanically. It was hard to think or feel, even, and harder still to put up with the malevolent old cripple's petty complaints. "Wait here until I get some clothes on. Or go on in and tell Strickland about it." He turned, raising his voice. "It's the livery stable man. My best friend's been killed. Jim's coming in to tell you about it. Keep that cannon of yours turned the other way."

He pushed the liveryman toward Strickland's room and ran to his own to dress. He heard the liveryman's voice begin, "Hello, Mr. Strickland. I sure didn't aim to wake you. Well, it's like this, see? I was just taking a look at a sick horse about a half-hour ago, and—"

More than a dozen men had collected by the time Jus and the liveryman got to the stable, despite the hour. The saloonkeeper was there, and two of the loafers who apparently made their living gambling in his place, and the fat old Dutchman who kept the general store. They had not moved Anson. Jus pushed them aside and went to his partner's body, and two men held lanterns for him to see. He knelt down and touched Anson's hand. It was like ice.

The big cowboy would laugh no more. He had unsaddled his horse in an empty stall and come through the central alleyway here to hang up saddle and bridle. He had got the saddle up, and it hung by one stirrup from a wooden peg, but he had dropped with the bridle in his hand.

The first slug had been low, probably because he was standing on tiptoe to place the bridle. It had caught him in the spine, just over the kidneys. Low, but fatal. Still, the killer had tried again. The second shot had come before Anson could fall. Again it had hit the spine, between the shoulder-blades.

JUS LOOKED around the stable.

"Shot from over there, through the back window, and right between Strickland's two gray horses," he said somberly. "The wind carried the sound away from the window, and the hay, yonder, muffled it from the street. Good shooting, because the light is worse in here than it is outside. The killer couldn't have seen more than a shadow, a shape, yet he managed to center two slugs. Who around here can shoot like that?"

He stood up. No one answered him.

"Who handles a gun like that?" he repeated grimly. "Don't be afraid to tell on him, because he's not going to handle it that way any more. Come on, let's have it!"

He seized the shirt-front of the man nearest him and yanked. Their two faces almost touched, and he let go with his right hand to jab his forefinger into the man's solar plexus. Then the others laid hands on him and pulled him away from the squirming man.

"Don't act thataway, Kinney," the saloon man said firmly. "Nobody wants to hide no killers, but nobody wants to speak out on suspicions, neither. The sheriff's been sent for. It's only twelve miles if he's to home, and he's a good man."

Three of them still held Jus. He looked from face to face and saw no hostility. They were on his side. They had liked Anson Deal, too. Liked him? Why, nobody had ever disliked him—that is, if you didn't count the old bull-headed colonel. He shook himself free, and they saw his changed expression and released their grips.

"All right. You don't need to tell me. But if I was to mention Blackie Crawford's name, every man here would jump." They did start uneasily, and glance at the window, where gray light showed over the two gray horses. "I hung around town until eleven-ten last night, waiting for this boy. While I was waiting, he was riding into your town, and putting up his horse here. Just before I left, Blackie Crawford showed up. Some of you saw how he acted. I wonder if one of you would be man enough to say what happened after I left. I think I know what happened before he came to the saloon."

Again it was the saloon man who spoke. He had always seemed to be an affable nonentity before this, but Jus respected him now for speaking his mind.

"Don't jump your horse before you reach your fence, Kinney," he said doggedly. "I'll tell you what happened! Blackie took a pint over in the corner and got drunk. Time was a pint wouldn't do it, but Blackie can't drink lately, since he's so wrought up. Then he went upstairs, in the old batch-room I used before I was married, and went to sleep. For all I know he's there now. And, friend Kinney, you're not going to brace him until he's had a chance to get on his duds and come down."

At the saloon man's gesture, the men took hold of Jus again and held him firmly. Jus struggled to get loose, and struggled to get at his gun. One of them took it.

"Look at the chance he gave Anson!" he raged. "Then you want me to give him a chance. How you town boys hang together! You home guards do hate a man who rides through!"

"We liked old Anson!" the saloon man protested.

"Sure, you liked him, but still you'll back your own!" Jus shouted.

"Until you prove it was Blackie—yes," said the other man firmly. "Maybe we got some ideas, too, Kinney. But we don't know. Neither do you. Prove it was Blackie and you can shoot him in his sleep. Otherwise—" He jogged the liveryman with his elbow. "Jim, go stir Blackie out of the hay. Scare holy hell out of him, so he wakes up sober. We'll meet you two out in front of my place in—well, say five minutes. And Jim, make sure he's there! I'd take a gun, I believe."

VII

OUT of his office, the liveryman got a revolver and set off for the saloon at a dead run. The saloon man took out his watch and held it up to the window. The light was still insufficient. He held it to the lantern.

"Three-twelve, right in the brisket," he announced solemnly.

The silence that followed let them hear the steady, relentless ticking of the big watch. The long row of horses blew softly and muzzled their hay and stamped and looked out of their stalls curiously. Jus saw the gray team reaching over the manger toward him. He had handled them so much lately that they had come to know him, and liked him. He went over to scratch their noses. Two men followed him, trying to look unconcerned.

"Three-seventeen and a half," the saloon man announced. "Just to be on the safe side we'll give him—oh, pshaw, why give him anything? All right, Kinney. You can go see him now."

"Thanks," said Jus. They handed him his gun. He examined it with meticulous care by the light of the lantern. Then his eyes met the saloon man's.

"I mean that, Mr. Whisky. I was brought up on army justice and I'd be sorry to violate it. A man could trust his life to you, Mr. Whisky. So—thanks!"

"Oh, shucks!" said the saloon man.

"Man flies off'n the handle easy, I guess. I just spoke my piece, that's all."

"A man could trust you, nevertheless."

He holstered the gun and stepped out into the street. The liveryman was sitting on the step of the saloon with his arms folded. He got up and backed through the door.

Blackie Crawford might have been drunk when he was first awakened, but he was stone sober now. A cartridge belt sagged around his big hips, and a .45 was heavy against his huge leg. He did not reel or weave or tremble. He stood half-facing, his thick body twisted, his right knee bent toward Jus, and his right hip protruding.

Blackie moved only slightly as Jus approached. He had been holding his big hands chest-high, the fingers slightly curved. Now, with a sigh, he lowered his hands and tilted forward. Jus felt his own palms tingle and itch for his gun.

When they were less than twenty feet apart, he saw Blackie go into motion. The big man's right hand swept down. Jus went for his own gun.

The weapon was in his hand and half out of the holster when he saw Blackie's face change. The big man's poise and bravado went. His hand came away from his gun and he held it out, palm upward, in a plea for mercy. Jus stopped, fingering his gun, and stared.

"No—no." Blackie mumbled. His face worked. "I didn't do it! I didn't do it! You can't do this to me, Kinney. You can't kill me in cold blood. It wasn't me that did it. No—no, I didn't do it!"

Jus dropped his gun back into the holster. He found it hard to shape words with his angrily stiff mouth.

"Draw! Draw your gun, Blackie Crawford! Because if you don't, I'm going to execute you. I'll shoot you right between the eyes, Blackie. I'm giving you three seconds to draw your gun, Blackie—"

"No—no, you can't do it to me, Kinney!"

And Jus saw then that Blackie was right. He couldn't shoot a man in cold blood. He couldn't make Blackie draw and he couldn't shoot him unless he did draw. Blackie sank to his knees on the sidewalk and covered his face with his hands, moaning over and over, "I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't do it! Honest to God, Kinney, I didn't do it!"

JUS jammed the gun back into its holster and paced deliberately to the kneeling man. He took Blackie's gun out and threw it away. He unbuckled the holster from around the huge trunk and was about to throw it away, too. Something happened in his mind, then. The length and weight of the heavy, cartridge-studded belt reminded him of Anson Deal's. Anson always had to have the biggest equipment in the company.

After that, he did not remember clearly what happened. He brought the belt up over his head and down over Blackie's head. Cartridges went flying and the flat holster slapped against Blackie's bearded cheek. Blackie moaned and tried to cover himself but he did not fight back. Again and again the belt rose and came down. Lower and lower Blackie crouched, until he was stretched out face-down on the sidewalk. Jus continued to beat him.

After a while, it seemed that the limp belt was hateful to his hand. He threw it into the street with the last strength in his arm. Despite the early morning chill, he was exhausted, wet with sweat.

On the faces of the saloon man, the livery stable man, and the others was blank horror. They parted silently as he came toward them, but over his shoulder he saw them following, silently, as he returned to the big yellow house.

As he reached the sagging gate, Clem, the handyman, appeared, rubbing his eyes and yawning. His weak chin dropped and he scuttled around the corner of the house, babbling alarm. From inside the house came Porter Strickland's petulant voice.

"Clem! Clem! Go get Kinney. Damn it, are you going to leave me helpless here? Clem! Get Kinney. I want my breakfast."

Jus turned and looked at them from the porch. To his somewhat dull surprise, he saw that Blackie Crawford had followed, trailing along a hundred yards behind, to pause safely back out of gunshot. The big man was pitiful to behold. The belt had cut and bruised his face until it was barely recognizable as a face, yet out of the welted mass his two eyes were clearer, cooler, steadier than Jus had ever seen them before.

"Go back," said Jus. "What I'm going to do now won't be pretty to see. I made a mistake. I whipped an innocent man, a man with nothing on his conscience but a

weak will to be decent—and bad luck! You won't like what comes next."

"Kinney!" came Strickland's voice. "Is that you? Come heft me down. What's the ruckus about? Kinney, by the Eternal, I want you!"

"Go back," Jus said.

"No, cowboy," the saloon man said. "This is our town and you haven't done yourself proud so far. We'll set in for one more card."

"Kinney!" Strickland wailed. "Come h'ist me into my chair. Kinney!"

"Go back!" Jus said. They did not budge. He shrugged. "All right! But don't anybody make a move. I'm sure in my mind now of what's wrong—and I think Blackie Crawford is, too."

By the look on Blackie's face he knew the big man agreed with him, was overjoyed to see the thing that had troubled him so long come out into the open. Blackie had hitched his gun around his middle again. He took it out now and covered the crowd, nodding over their heads to Jus.

"Nobody will make a move, Kinney," he said, in a surprisingly strong voice. "I'll see one more card myself—and I think I can call its color!"

Jus nodded. He turned and tried the door. It was latched. He heard Strickland pull the string. The door came open, but he did not go in.

Instead, he took a match from his pocket and knelt down. He struck the match and looked about for something to ignite. Dried grass that had been missed by the fire grew up between the porch floor planks. He touched the match to the grass and it flared up brightly, caught a pine knot, and began to sputter with a bluer, hotter flame.

AS A curl of smoke began to rise from first one crack and then another, the crowd in front stirred restively, and the saloon man cried out. But when the hand of any man started to move toward his gun, Blackie shouted a warning. There was the kind of look in Blackie's eye that backed them down.

The smoke hid the front door. A tongue of yellow flame, three feet high, licked at the wall. The glass in the front window cracked with the heat. Jus turned his back and walked off the porch, holding his breath against the smoke.

"Kinney!" came Strickland's terrified voice. "I smell smoke! Kinney. The house is afire! Oh, you're going to let me burn to death here! Kinney!"

Hoarsely the voice kept calling. Clouds, early morning fall mist, had crept over the first pinkish clues of sun, and the rapidly rising pall of smoke darkened the air.

"Kinney! Kinney! Please help me. Please don't let me burn to death. Oh—Kinney, Kinney, Kinney! I'm choking. There ain't no air! Kinney! Help—help!"

Then the voice ceased for a minute. There came a curious clinking sound. It came again, and again, and again. The saloon man made another move, but Blackie Crawford had come up closer. He took the saloon man's elbow and twitched, and the man sprawled on the ground. The clinking noise came again, then the window in Strickland's bedroom broke and a gold piece came out. They realized then what had made the clinking sound.

Porter Strickland, in an effort to get air, had been throwing gold pieces at the window!

But the sudden inrush of air sent the flames roaring higher and filled the room with more smoke than ever. The whole front of the house was a mass of fire now. The seconds dragged out like minutes. Jus waited somberly. Again and again old Strickland called:

"Kinney! Kinney! Kinney!"

And, from the ground, the saloon man screamed, "You can't burn a cripple to death! I'll—" Heedless of his own danger, he scrambled to his knees, striking at Jus.

Blackie pushed him down, growling, "Wait a minute, wait a minute and stay healthy, friend."

Suddenly a figure appeared in the smoke-wreathed front window—a gaunt, white-haired figure bearing a lantern aloft in a futile, hopeless effort to see through the smoke. It was Porter Strickland, who seemed to have been lifted by some strange force to man-height. He waved the lantern, searching for landmarks, gasping and choking.

He saw them, gave a strangled cry, and tumbled out of the window, still clinging to the lantern. He fell sprawling on the ground and lay there a moment, crying, "Kinney—Kinney—Kinney!"

The saloon man moaned with horror.

VIII

STRICKLAND suddenly stood up and threw away the lantern. It was incredible, but there he was—tall and strong and rangy and powerful, standing on his own legs with no appearance of weakness.

His face had changed, too. Gone was the crafty helplessness, the somewhat pitiful look of appeal. Instead, the bushy eyebrows drew close together in a scowl. The eyes glittered with purposeful ferocity. His big jaw was clenched, his mouth a cruel, clamped line.

Jus remembered those two deadly accurate slugs which had shivered Anson Deal's spine, and the old man's easy familiarity with a .45. His own body went slightly cold, and his feet were like lead as he picked up first one and then the other, walking with tremendous effort to meet Strickland. By the crackling yellow flamelight, he saw the .45 at Strickland's hip.

The old man emerged from the pall of smoke and paused, squinting and leaning forward in a half-crouch. His clawlike right hand flexed, closed, opened—curved downward with dizzy, flashing speed.

The shock and pound and deafening crash of the two guns came together. Jus felt his own gun recoil again and again, against the heel of his palm. His hand felt damp, the gun slippery, his muscles flaccid, but he bit his lip and crouched and squirmed and shut his mind to everything except the deadly need to keep shooting —and shooting—and shooting—

Strickland was hurled backward, but he fought for balance, flailing his arms. His eyes closed, opened, showing white all around. His gun crashed again at arm's length, the slug burying itself in the burning house, sending up a shower of sparks.

And Jus Kinney kept on shooting after Strickland had crumpled on his face, kept shooting until his gun went empty, and he realized he had been firing blindly into the roaring blaze. Then he holstered his gun and ran forward. He seized Strickland by the shoulders and, covering his face against the intense heat, dragged the body away from the fire.

He dumped the man down in front of Blackie Crawford and said, "There!"

Blackie nodded, but could not speak.

"I guess that proves everything, answers everything," Jus went on dully. "You suspected it from the first, didn't you?"

"Yes." Blackie whispered. "I thought I saw him running away from where that Mexican cattle-buyer was shot in the back. But how could that be? He was laying in the house, paralyzed from the waist down! Since then it's been like a nightmare."

Jus turned to the others. There was nothing to explain to Blackie. The big man's confidence seemed to have returned completely. He was cool, sure of himself, a different man altogether. The saloon man, the livery stable man, all the others, seemed still to doubt their senses.

"I should have known when I saw those boot tracks under the window last night," Jus said. He went on to explain about the prowler who had caused the excitement when he returned home the evening before. "They were the tracks of a big man. I thought first of Blackie, but I didn't say anything. "I should have known down there at the livery stable, because the shots were fired from between those two grays of Strickland's. The killer came up to the open window behind them, leaned in with his gun between them, and shot my friend.

"That's a spirited team, almost a wild one. I've wondered lots of times how old Strickland could handle them. I don't care how much strength you've got in your arms if you can't brace yourself with your legs to use it. Yet he drove them like a bronco-buster. It was partly that he used his legs, partly the fact that the grays knew him! No other man could have leaned in between them last night without getting his head kicked off!"

The saloon man whispered incredulously, "He wasn't crippled at all! He faked it all along."

"Not all the time," Jus contradicted. "At first he probably was temporarily paralyzed when he was knocked back over the manger, with a two-by-four in the small of his back. But he was knocked out, too, you remember. I'm told he was carried back to his house, where he came to and discovered his legs were lost to him.

"Then he had himself locked in his room! That's understandable. No man wants a crowd around when he first discovers himself to be a cripple! While he was locked in, the feeling and strength

came back to his legs, no doubt.

"But there was one ruling passion in Porter Strickland's life—gold. He hated the Mexican more for outbidding him than for beating him. While the door was locked, while everyone pitied poor old Port Strickland who had lost a pair of strong legs, he opened the window, slipped out and killed the Mexican. Then he got back through the window.

"But after that he dared not recover! Blackie Crawford had seen him, and so long as he remained a helpless cripple, he could count on the possibility of confusing Blackie. But if ever Blackie saw him walk again, he'd remember the gait and shape and a hundred other little characteristics of the man he had seen fleeing from the scene of the Mexican's death.

"That's why he hired Blackie! He had to have him near at hand, to watch him, to browbeat him, to dangle a hundred-thousand-dollar inheritance before his eyes, to convince Blackie he was a hopeless cripple, by a dozen means to keep him silent."

He turned to Blackie.

"Crawford, why did he fire you? What happened to bring that about?"

Blackie could barely talk, so shapelessly swollen were his lips.

"I—I got the suspicion too strong for it to be downed," he said. "Sometimes when I carried him, I thought I felt his legs twitch. I'd throw him off balance in my arms, kind of, and he'd jerk himself back, with his legs! I guess he didn't dare let me carry him any more."

Jus nodded. "You're big enough to do as you like with his weight. That's why he hired me, a smaller man. But so long as you had a suspicion in your mind, he wasn't safe. That's why he killed Anson Deal. Anson's about your size, and Anson must have seen him and he knew he had no chance with Deal.

"After I left the house last night, he slipped out of the window, leaving the door latched, and prowled the town. He saw Anson go into the livery stable and shot him. Then he went home, but I got there before he could slip through the window. That's the noise I heard. He must have just made it inside before I got around the corner. He had to have time to get his boots off and get under the covers before he let me in.

"But he still had to explain the candle, which he'd left burning. So he got his money out and began 'counting' it. After a moment he let me in. That's why he insisted his hired man had to be in bed by ten o'clock. Strickland had to use his legs now and then, or go crazy. He couldn't risk meeting his own man about the place, or between it and the town."

Jus was suddenly so weary he was almost sick at his stomach. The empty gun at his hip weighed him down like—well, like Strickland's body once had weighted him down. He could almost feel the malevolent old man's "useless" legs swinging against his own.

"Sheriff'll be here soon," the saloon man said, uncertainly. "He's a good man, Kinney. And you've got witnesses. You'll like the sheriff if you still favor justice, Kinney. He's square."

The roof of the house collapsed inward, sending up a geyser of embers. Clem, the handyman, appeared at the edge of the crowd, goggle-eyed. Jus jerked a thumb at him. "Clem, get my horse out."

CLEM darted away. Jus turned to Blackie and put out his hand.

"Blackie, I understand Strickland turned over to you the will he made in your favor. You've still got it?" Blackie nodded. "Well, there was a later one, but it went up in smoke. You're a hundred-thousand-dollar man. You've got it coming, Blackie. Money couldn't square what you went through, if it was me."

They clasped hands and Blackie muttered, "'Taint my place, really, Kinney. Everybody knowed about the later will. You've got witnesses. I'll settle for peace of mind."

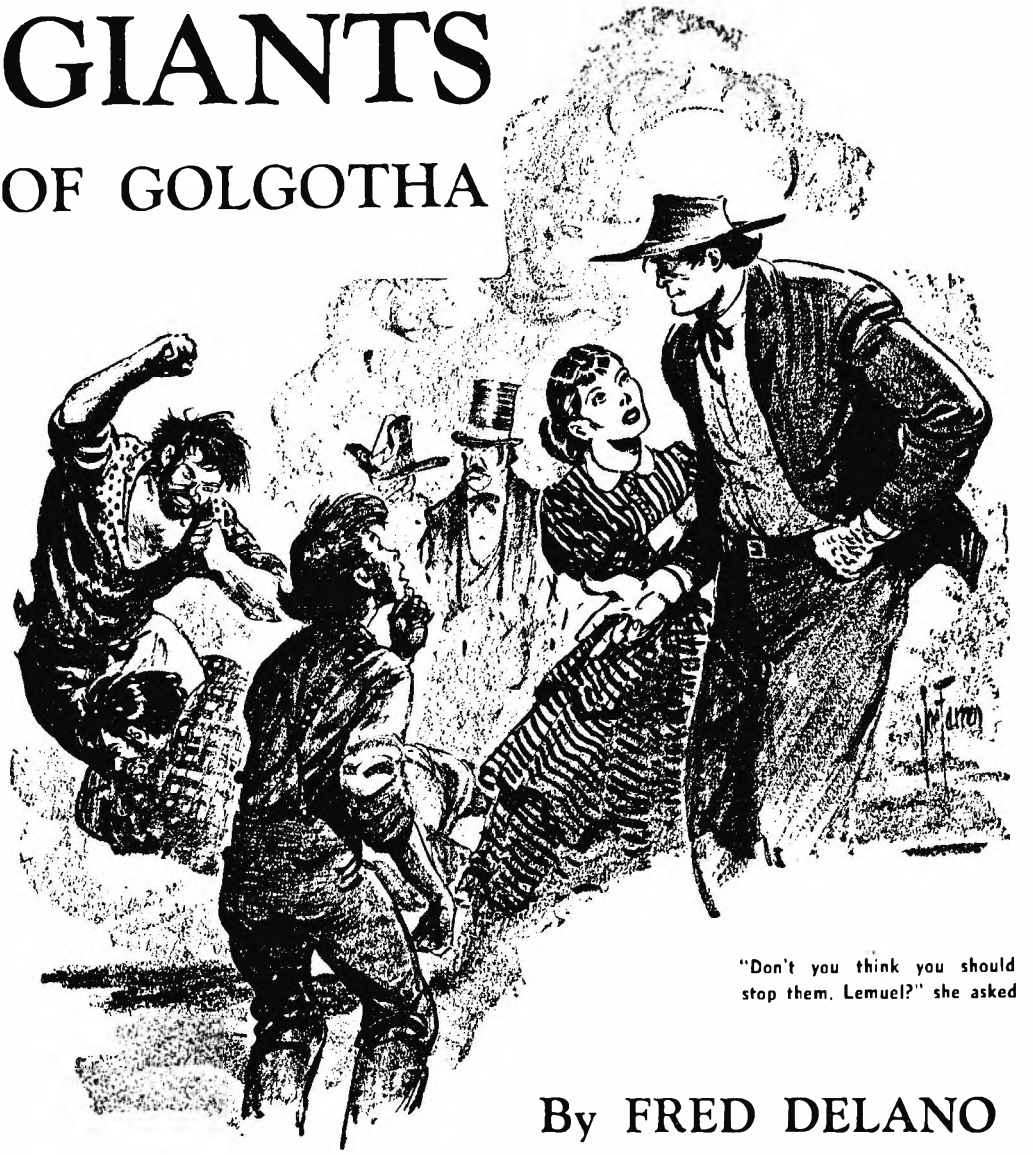
"No." Jus shook his head. "The will went up in smoke. I'll not wait for the sheriff. Will you do one thing for me, Blackie? Will you see that Anson Deal gets decent burial, and a headstone?"

"I'll do that," said Blackie. "Anything you want."

Clem came up with the brown pony then, and Jus swung up into the saddle. He waved at them, and his money chinkled and tinkled in his pocket as the pony stirred restively. There was still over a hundred and twenty dollars.

By noon, he had ridden out of the burned-over mesa and was in green grass again. • • •

GIANTS OF GOLGOTHA



"Don't you think you should stop them, Lemuel?" she asked

By FRED DELANO

I WAS about ten years old, and in the third reader, when Beth McCurdy come to teach at Golgotha school. I'll never forget that third reader. It was one of the old McGuffy kind, and had a story about some dwarfs who lived in a coal cellar. Now I didn't think much of them dwarfs—them being so little. I don't reckon they amounted to much, because I've always claimed you got to be mostly heman to get anywhere in this world.

But to get back to Beth McCurdy. She wasn't a timid thing, like they usually are in storybooks. She'd come from Deadwood, knew one end of a horse from the other, and was strong enough to knock

There Were Three Men of Might—and a Mite of a Girl

the kids for a loop when they needed it, which was frequent.

You see, Dad run the store at Golgotha and believed in education. He always said a man ought to have something above the whiskers besides eyebrows and bone, and he thought a man who signed his name with an X was too lazy to live and worse than a heathen. Anyway, he drove all the way to Basin after Beth McCurdy, and that was no mean chore, the round trip being 130 slow miles.

I'll never forget how Beth looked the first time I seen her. Dad got in town with her just as Mom and me was setting down to supper. He brought Beth into the kitchen, and with the first squint, I almost busted my hackamore.

She was sort of round and smooth and darkish, and I said to myself, "Sonofabuck, if Dad ain't brung us an Indian for a teacher!" But when she got unwrapped I found out different. Brother, was she pretty! She had the blackest hair and the whitest teeth and her eyes was like a pair of big, black chokecherries. I reckon she must have been about twenty years old.

As soon as word got around that a new teacher had hit town, Dad did a good business in hats and scarfs and fancy shirts. It seemed all the young fellows in the country went on a duding-up spree. The hitch-rack in front of the store was lined with saddle horses every evening.

THE boys would set around and smoke and tell jokes and spit at flies, like they had nothing on their minds at all, but everyone knew why the other fellow was there. Only one or two of 'em ever had nerve enough to get farther than the store except on special occasions, like when there was a dance in the hall above the store, or when they put on a Sunday rodeo at the old roundup pens north of town. Anyhow, most of 'em lost heart and drifted away when they found Uncle Long Lazard and Baker Boone was paying court to the teacher.

Names is funny things. Now, Uncle Long's real name was Henry, but when he was a kid someone called him "Long Ton" on account of his size, and the name stuck. But it was so long they finally shortened it to "Long," if you get what I mean.

Uncle Long had a big, black beard, and he must have weighed nearly 300 pounds, and he was so tall he had to stoop for all the doors in town to keep from batting his head off. He was the town blacksmith, and mighty strong. He could lift the biggest horse in the world—one end at a time—and he could make curlicues out of horseshoes with his bare hands, and stand on his head with his arms folded. He was the most accomplished man in Golgotha, or in the whole country for that matter.

Baker Boone was just as big as Uncle Long, and just as strong, but I wouldn't admit that when I was a kid.

They was always in a contest of some kind—like lifting houses by putting their shoulders under the tops of the door frames, or throwing big rocks, or seeing which could drink the most without getting the weaves, and it seemed they always come out about even. Then they would shake hands and start all over. They got along pretty good till Beth McCurdy showed up.

You see, this here Boone was a sort of saddle bum. He rode the grub line most of the time, and lived in a little cabin on the Twenty Mile, near where the CZ home ranch now is. But when Beth arrived, he began setting in Dad's store a lot, so he could get a glimpse of her now and then. Uncle Long had the edge on Boone there because Beth boarded with us and Uncle Long, being Dad's brother, could come to the house without any excuse.

Well, Beth didn't encourage either one of them, and she had a twinkly way of looking at a fellow, so he couldn't be certain if she was laughing at him or with him.

After a while Boone got kind of sore at Uncle Long because he was a privileged character and Boone wouldn't speak half the time when they met. But Uncle Long didn't mind. He was easy-going.

But with Beth it was different. It had her plenty worried. I noticed sometimes at school she didn't seem to have her mind on her work, but being a kid I didn't know what the trouble was until one night I heard her talking to Mom when she was drying the dishes.

"I didn't come here looking for a man," she said. "All I wanted was a job. But those two elephants seem determined to change my mind, either by finesse or force."

I didn't savvy what finesse was, but the force I could understand. Uncle Long and Baker Boone had plenty of that.

"Don't take it too seriously, Beth," Mom said. "Maybe they'll kill one another off some day." Mom sounded real hopeful.

It was plain to see that they'd tangle sooner or later, but things drifted along through the winter, and vacation time finally came without anything happening.

Beth stayed on at our place that summer, because she didn't have any folks and it was a long way to Deadwood. Everything considered, staying in one place was the easiest thing a woman could do.

WELL, one day in July, I was snaring gophers on the hills above the schoolhouse when I saw a man ride into town leading a red horse. He stopped at the store and went in, and then after a while he come back out with Dad. They took his horse to our barn and then went on to the house. Thinking maybe it was another uncle of mine, who'd been living on Ten Sleep Creek in the Big Horns, I rolled up my snare string and ran for town.

When I got to the house, Dad had gone back to the store and this man was setting in the parlor with Beth McCurdy. I saw I was mistaken about him being my uncle. He was a stranger, dark as a Mexican, and smooth-shaved, and just as big as Uncle Long or Baker Boone. I stared at him for a minute, and I guess my mouth fell open far enough to have held a cue ball. I could hardly believe it!

Mom made me come in and meet him. I pulled back like a locoed horse, but after a tussle she got me through the door.

"Bob," she said, "this is the Reverend Lemuel Brown. He's going to hold some meetings here at the schoolhouse."

I ducked my head and tried to get back outside but Mom hung on to the neck of my shirt.

"Where have you been?" she asked, looking at my dusty pants.

She'd bawled me out more than once for what she called "choking gophers," so I lied a little out of the first stuff that come to mind.

"I've been up on the hill—looking for Indians," I said.

Mom got red in the face because she knew I wasn't telling the truth, but Preacher Brown just winked at me.

"Good idea," he said. "I've heard they're getting restless on the reservation, and you can't tell what they'll do."

I got away from Mom and went back up on the hill, but I didn't figure on snaring any more gophers. If Preacher Brown thought it was the thing to do, then, by cripses, I'd watch for Indians all the rest of the summer.

Well, Preacher Brown began his meetings the next night. I'd never been to church, and I didn't know what it would be like, but I soon found out. Brown had brought some songbooks with him, so they passed them around and everybody sang, while Beth McCurdy played on the little organ.

Brown read some stories out of the Bible and told some of his own. Then he began to preach, and when he got warmed up good he would beat with his fist on the table at the front of the platform. Brother, I never saw such energy and lung power! He preached hell-fire and damnation, and hit the table so hard it shook the school house and rattled dirt down from the roof. And he talked so loud you could hear him clear to the creek ford, a mile away. I couldn't see no reason for yelling like that, but I was strong for Brown, so it was all right with me.

It must have been all right with the rest, too, because the crowds got bigger all the time. Most of the townspeople went, and riders I hadn't seen since beef roundup the year before began drifting in to the meetings. Even old Duke Wellington, the town soak, went every night to see the sinners get sprung loose from whatever it was that made 'em lie and cheat and steal and believe in a easy heaven and a cool hell. Yes, and that Old Crow was good for rheumatism if it was rubbed on the inside.

I believed most everything Brown said, but when he was preaching one night about David and Goliath he told us that size didn't count. If it did, he said, a cow could outrun a rabbit. I couldn't swallow that, not even from Brown, and I know Beth McCurdy couldn't either. All the men I knew that amounted to anything was all good-sized, including Dad. And as for Beth, well, the giants of Golgotha was sure causing her a lot of worry, and their size alone had chased away a lot of smaller men.

Uncle Long and Baker Boone would set by the water bucket on the bench in the back of the room because the other seats was too small for their frames. After preaching, they'd both hang around, hoping for a chance to walk Beth home, but Brown soon took over that part of the show. Neither Uncle Long nor Boone liked the way things was going, and that was partly what caused the big fight.

THE second Sunday night, after the meeting, Beth had left with Brown. I was running down the hill when I come up behind Uncle Long and Boone and heard the beginning of their quarrel. I don't know what Boone said first, but I heard Uncle Long say: "Brown's all right for my money, bud." He said it so sharp that Boone snorted like a hot stud and hauled up short.

By that time they'd reached the street. The moon was bright and I could see them pretty plain, tall and black like a couple of mountains and making big shadows on the ground, but them being so near the same size it was hard to tell which was which.

"Brown's nothing but a bum," Boone said, "and I bet he never done a day's work in his life. Soft-soaping ladies ain't no man's job."

"I ain't never seen you do much of anything else," Uncle Long said. "Maybe you better quit soft-soaping Beth McCurdy."

That touched off the fireworks. Boone yelled: "I'll talk to her whenever I damned please!"

"Not after tonight, you won't," Uncle Long said.

Then the two dark mountains come together. There was a noise like someone slamming a barn door and one of the mountains fell down.

"Come on, get up," I heard Uncle Long say, kind of gritty like. "Your knees weak or something?"

That's how I knew the mountain on the ground was Baker Boone.

Uncle Long pranced a circle around Boone, waiting for him to get stood on end again. I yelled "Fight!" and the other kids yelled "Fight!" and people ran into the street, and some of the riders just leaving town come loping back to see the excitement. Dad and Mom was in the crowd, and in a minute Preacher Brown and Beth showed up.

After he got the fuzz out of his brain, Boone scrambled to his feet and him and Uncle Long pitched into one another. They sure raised the dust and sounded, with their heaving and snorting and pawing around, like a couple of bulls in a gravel pit. All of a sudden one of them was on the ground again and the other stood there, weaving around and breathing like a windbroke horse.

"Come on, get up," he panted. "Your knees weak or something?"

It was Boone talking, so I figured the one on the ground must be Uncle Long. I didn't think that could ever happen, but there he was, flat as a pancake. Then Uncle Long lunged at Boone's legs, pulling him down, and then they went roping around in the dust, rolling over and over.

I heard Beth McCurdy say: "Don't you think you should stop them, Lemuel?"

"Heck, no," Brown said. "One of 'em's got to get licked, sooner or later."

He talked kind of low and easy, and the thought hit me that maybe he was scared to get tangled up in the scrap. Somehow, I had an idea that Beth was thinking the same way, because she shut up and didn't say no more.

Uncle Long and Boone finally shook apart and got up. They leaned over with their hands on their knees, gasping like a couple of grounded steelheads, watching for a good opening. They kept edging closer and closer and after a bit they were batting away again at arm's length.

Man alive, they hit hard! They hit so hard that the blows jarred the ground when they landed. Not even Uncle Long or Baker Boone could stand that kind of punishment forever, because I reckon any one of them licks would have paralyzed a steer. Their footwork slowed up and their arms hung down and they staggered around, walloping nothing but thin air most of the time and falling over each other when they failed to connect.

AT LAST Dad walked in and caught Uncle Long around the waist from behind. Uncle Long tried to hit him, probably thinking it was Boone grabbing him.

"Take it easy, Henry," Dad said. "You'll have to quit for a while."

"Yeah," Uncle Long mumbled. "Yeah, I guess so. I can't see the sonofagun any

more. But you tell him I'll get him tomorrow."

Well, Dad opened up the store and lit the lamp so the boys could patch Boone up, and Uncle Long went to our house. Mom had a piece of beefsteak left from Sunday dinner, and Dad put some of the raw meat on Uncle Long's eyes. Then he gave him a whisky and put him to bed.

I kept running back and forth between home and the store, comparing the damages and trying to get Uncle Long on the winning end. That wasn't hard for me to do, but maybe I cheated a little.

Some of the riders put Boone on his horse and took him to his cabin on the Twenty Mile. Boone also swore he'd get Uncle Long the next day, so the fight was just warming up good.

Of course, Beth McCurdy knew the fight had started over her, but Uncle Long didn't say anything about it, and I wasn't talking either. Preacher Brown wouldn't make comments, one way or the other, and I noticed that Beth kept watching him, like she remembered him not wanting to mix in the fight and maybe wondering about that some.

I got up early the next morning, and while I was dressing I heard Dad and Uncle Long arguing on the back porch. Dad was trying to talk him out of riding to Twenty Mile after Boone, but Uncle Long was as cross-grained as a tired steer.

"But don't take any guns," he said. "Promise me you won't."

"I don't need a gun for that knothead," Uncle Long said. "All I want is to get my fist on him in the right place."

Uncle Long looked plenty bad, all battered up like he was, but he could see all right in a sort of slit-eyed way, so after breakfast he saddled up and rode north.

Beth McCurdy cried when he left, because I reckon she expected one of them would get killed before they finished their argument.

I wanted to go along and see Boone get lambasted, but I knew there was no use asking, so I went back to my Indian lookout and watched Uncle Long ride away.

I was getting fed up with watching for Indians, and I'd about decided to try my string on the gophers again when suddenly I heard a gunshot, kind of ropy and worn-out with distance. It had come from the north, so I jumped up and took a look.

Uncle Long was so far away I could hardly see him. His horse had wheeled and was coming back toward town at a run. At first I thought Uncle Long had fallen off, but I finally made out he was all bent over and spurring his horse.

About then I noticed another rider on a gray horse come out of a coulee about a quarter behind Uncle Long and make off in the opposite direction. It didn't take me but a second to figure out what had happened, because the gray horse was familiar. It belonged to Baker Boone.

Believe me, being keyed up with the fight and everything, I felt like I'd been stung by a bumblebee. I began making jumps for town, and squealing with every jump. When I went running across the street, Dad and Preacher Brown was standing in front of the store.

"Murder!" I yelled. "Uncle Long's been murdered!"

Dad just laughed and tried to feel my head. "You've been sitting in the sun too much, kid," he said. "You'll go dippy if you don't cut it out."

"It's true, Dad," I said. "Baker Boone dry-gulched him out in the hills. Anyway, he tried to, and Uncle Long's coming back!"

ABOUT that time we could hear Uncle Long's horse and in a minute he hit the end of the street, coming as hard as he could.

"Hey!" Dad said. "Maybe the kid's right."

"Could be," Brown said.

Uncle Long hauled up in front of the store and climbed down, holding his left arm tight, and with a funny look on his face. He'd been shot, sure enough, for his shirt sleeve was all soaked with blood.

"What happened?" Dad asked.

"That's a fine question!" Uncle Long yelled. "What does it look like happened? That Boone was waiting for me out along the trail, like I might have expected. You and your 'Now don't take any guns, Henry!' Boone brought his, you notice. Ed, you ain't got as much sense as a baboon!"

"Maybe not," Dad said. "Come on to the house and we'll see about that arm."

It was sure exciting. Mom and Beth was fit to be tied. Well, Dad got Uncle Long's shirt off and found that the bullet had only plowed through the fleshy part of his shoulder. Except for losing a little blood,

he wasn't bad hurt. When he saw how it was, he got mad again, and after he'd had a snort of liquor, he was ready to start back.

"I'll take my thirty-thirty this time," he said, "and I'll give Boone a dose of his own medicine."

"I don't think you'd better," Brown said. "You stay here. I'll go out and see him."

Well, Brown had a way of telling people what to do as if he expected it done.

Beth McCurdy looked at Brown kind of funny, like she was surprised, and I was sure then that she'd made up her mind that Brown didn't have no stomach for a tussle, even if he was as big as a beef.

After Brown left, Beth kind of simmered down, and Uncle Long cooled off, too, and went to have another drink to ease the pain in his shoulder, so he said.

I thought he was pretty much of a hero, being all shot up like that. I reckon Uncle Long thought so, too, for after a couple more drinks he began to show off. Dad couldn't keep him still at all. He kept strutting around, and every little while his shoulder would get hurting again and he'd need another shot of pain killer. By ten o'clock he looked less like a hero and more like a sponge.

Dad and Mom was ashamed of him. But Beth was just plain disgusted, and mad, because I reckon she felt that she was being pushed around. When Uncle Long saw how they all felt, he wouldn't talk.

Time dragged along kind of slow and Dad got restless, and it seemed as if Mom was beginning to worry a little. By two o'clock things did look bad. Barring all accidents, Brown should have been back.

Some of the town people, including Mom and Beth, gathered at the store for a powwow, and there was a lot of talk about trouble on the Twenty Mile. Boone had already tried to kill Uncle Long and there was no ground to think he'd be very chummy toward Preacher Brown, especially since Boone felt the way he did toward Beth McCurdy. He was in a killing mood.

BUT while they were talking about it, Brown come riding into town, just poking along with his head hanging down, like he hated to come back at all. And I'll never forget how awful sad he looked when he got off his horse there in that crowd. He had a couple big bruises on his face, one eye was almost shut, and his hands was all bunged up. He just stood there for a while and didn't say anything.

Finally, Uncle Long said: "Well, what's the word? Where's Boone?"

"I don't know where he is," Brown said.

Then Uncle Long got mean. "You don't know," he sneered. "I'm going out there."

Right then, Preacher Brown moved over in front of Uncle Long and spit in the dust and looked Uncle Long right in the eye.

"Brother Long," he said, "you're not going anywhere unless you lick me first. After that you can go shoot Boone if you want to—if you can find him. I got all messed up trying to keep you men from killing each other. I don't want to do it all over again, but I will if it's necessary."

Uncle Long kind of backed up and said: "Well, now, I don't know about that."

And Reverend Brown said: "Well, I do. Believe me, brother, I do. I've done the best I could and I intend to make it stick. Being a minister, I don't like to mix into fights, but I went out there just as I said I would and talked with Boone. He got his gun, and I took that away from him. Then he wanted to argue, so we argued. After that, I poured cold water on him till he come to. Well, I persuaded him to move to a new range, and I know he's gone."

Well, sir, Preacher Brown stared around at everyone for a while and then he said: "Folks, I'm sorry I lost my temper like that, and I want you all to forgive me. You see, we big men have to sort of stick together and help one another out, because —well, because it's no kid's job." He spit on the ground again and then looked at Uncle Long. "Brother Long," he said, "my horse has throwed a front shoe. I'd appreciate it if you'd fix him op, when your arm gets better."

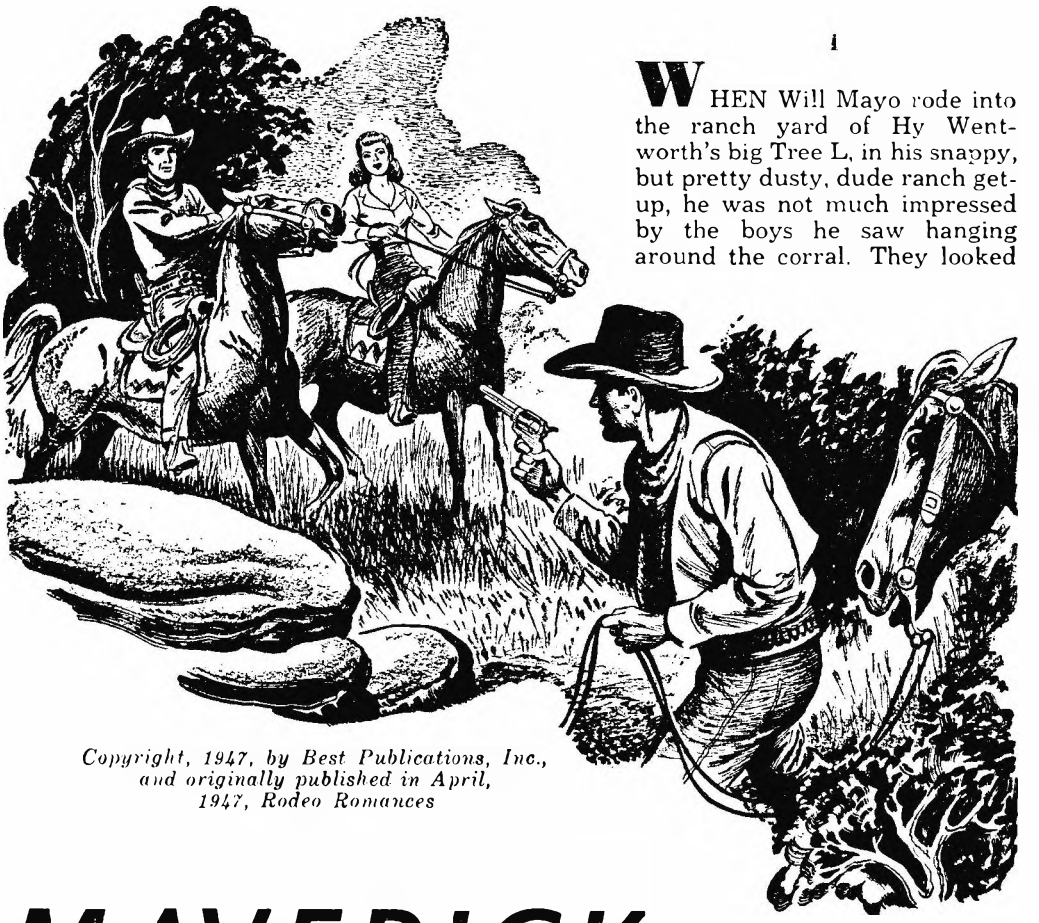
And Uncle Long said: "Why, now, I'd be glad to, Parson."

Later that night, I heard Preacher Brown and Beth talking on the front porch in the dark, and Beth said to Brown, "You know, Lemuel, after you wouldn't break up that fight last night, I wondered for a while if you were just a big windbag or a regular giant."

"And what did you finally decide, my dear?" Brown asked.

Well, I couldn't make out a darned word from there on. All I could hear was Beth McCurdy saying: "M-m-m-m—M-M-M!"

A bronc buster with a stigma upon him proves to the sheriff and the girl he loves that he's as honest as a man in love can be!



I

WHEN Will Mayo rode into the ranch yard of Hy Wentworth's big Tree L, in his snappy, but pretty dusty, dude ranch get-up, he was not much impressed by the boys he saw hanging around the corral. They looked

MAVERICK BUCKAROO

A Novel by JOE ARCHIBALD

like a right salty lot, and none too friendly, but Mayo had to take a chance.

He had ridden a long way, was tired, and believed he had never been hungrier in his life. Besides, this was a big place, and there ought to be a job of some sort here.

As he rode up to the corral gate, he shot a sidelong glance toward the big ranch house porch, and was distinctly impressed by what he saw there—and at first sight. At least he was by one of the three people who sat there drinking tall glasses of cold lemonade—a girl with dark hair and bright, dark eyes.

Mayo's one swift glance told him that she was appraising him from top to toe, and he wished for an instant that he knew what she was saying to the elderly man and woman who sat beside her, obviously the owner of the place and his wife. Then he was glad he didn't know what she was saying, because he had an idea it was not complimentary.

He kept his eyes steadily ahead until he reined in beside the Tree L cowhands clustered around the corral. He couldn't even make a guess about what the girl thought about him. He shrugged. It didn't matter.

What did matter was a job—and some chuck, pretty pronto.

What the girl on the ranch-house porch —she was Janet Denning, who had ridden over from the Cross C that morning to visit Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth—had said, at first sight of the tall stranger on horseback was:

"A real cowpuncher doesn't have to advertise himself, Hy. Take a look at that big fuzzy hat that man's wearing. And I'll bet his belt is a good six inches wide."

Hy Wentworth's pipe made a gurgling sound as he drew on it hard. That was one way he had of expressing himself when things did not please him.

"Seems like good hands are gettin' extinct, Jan," he sighed. "Like them dinosaurs you read about. Reckon pretty soon the cattle'll disappear from the range for want of men to handle 'em. Ridin' and ropin' is soon to become a lost art."

Mrs. Wentworth made a gesture toward the Tree L foreman, Roy Kane, who was sauntering toward the rider.

"Kane'll handle him quick enough," she said. "Finish your lemonade, Hy."

WILL MAYO dismounted and walked toward the waiting men. Roy Kane towered over them all, and the expression on the foreman's rugged face was one of mingled scorn and contempt as he looked the dusty rider over, his glance lingering longest on the dude or rodeo cowboy clothing.

Aside from his gaudy garb, the man who had ridden into the Tree L was not much different from the ordinary run of cowboys—about twenty-five, and with good features, though his skin was pale for an outdoor man. He had bluish-gray eyes, and was about six feet tall, but lacked the weight to go with it.

"Maybe he's a contest man," a Tree L puncher remarked. Kane had asked the rider's business and Mayo, giving his name, had told him.

"Maybe I am," Mayo said, and as he glanced aside he saw the dark-haired girl, who had run across the yard to hear what was going on.

Kane grinned as he saw her, and tipped his hat. He hooked a thumb toward the tall uncertain young man standing beside his trail-beaten horse.

"Says he wants a job, Jan," Kane drawled. "Rough string, he tells me." Kane looked at the other punchers and laughed.

Will Mayo was quick to see that she didn't laugh, though, and he saw the look in her eyes change from scorn to puzzlement. He thought he knew the reason for that. For he was well aware that his eyes probably were veiled with the caution which had become habitual, and were like those of a man who had long since forgotten how to smile. They were harassed eyes, belonging to a much older man, one who had had more time in which to become bitter.

"I never had much use for a contest man," Kane growled, when he saw that Janet did not laugh with him. "Cattle is the main issue in this business. I like a man who puts on levis and works right out in the mud with the cows."

"I've handled cattle," Mayo said. "If you don't aim to find out what I can do, I'll be ridin' along. There are other outfits." He turned away.

"Wait a minute," Kane said. "I'll give you a chance."

Will Mayo swung toward Kane. "You

mean you got to be shown I can ride the rough ones?"

"Got a pair of broncs here, Mayo," Kane said. "I'd say the top-horse was Blizzard. Wouldn't you, Nolley?"

The short puncher to whom he spoke grinned. Janet Denning took a step forward, seemed about to say something to Kane, but caught Mayo's look and stopped in her tracks.

"Get your rope, Mayo," Kane said, "and I'll show you the black over there in the corral."

Mayo calmly took the rope off his saddlehorn. He followed Kane to the corral, nodded when the foreman singled out a horse. He climbed over and walked toward the black, shaking out his noose. A loop, perfectly formed, began to spin, and it was like a halo over Mayo's head. All of them held their breaths as the loop floated forward and dropped lightly over Blizzard's head. Mayo drew it snug.

"That's using a rope, Roy," said Janet Denning, who had followed to watch.

The foreman nodded, his jaw muscles bulging.

"So far, so good. Wait'll he gets in that saddle."

"He also knows how to put one on," Janet said. "Wonder why he dresses the way he does. Like a dude rancher. Look, Roy—don't you think you're putting it on a little too strong at the start? That horse threw good men at the Stampede last fall. Isn't a man anywhere who has really tamed Blizzard."

"When a man talks big, I like to see him back up his talk," Kane said.

A Tree L puncher held Blizzard by the bridle and one ear while Mayo prepared to mount. He disdained the stirrups, placed one hand on the pommel and swung neatly into saddle.

The Tree L hand dodged away as if his life depended on it, and the black jumped violently into the air. With a spine-chilling squeal, the gelding blew up and nearly threw Mayo clear of the saddle.

"He's already grabbin' leather!" Roy Kane yelled. "Look for a soft place to land, contest man!"

Blizzard came down on stiffened forelegs with terrific jolts that seemed to be snapping Will Mayo's neck. The horse changed ends and screamed with rage. But Mayo had his feet in the stirrups again and was raking the animal with his spurs as it bucked the length of the corral and back.

"Ride him, cowboy!" Janet yelled. "Ha-a-a-ng to him!"

"I never saw the devil act any worse," the puncher whom Kane had called Nolley said.

"You helped smooth the blanket under the saddle, didn't you?" Roy Kane said, and grinned.

"I sure did," Nolley said, and grinned back.

BLIZZARD was pivoting, sunfishing and bawling. He changed ends in midair again and shook himself like a wet cat before he came down again. It seemed that nothing human could stand the spine-crackling jolts when he hit the hard ground on stiffened legs. Just when it seemed Mayo had him tamed, he went through a repertoire of tricks he must have learned from a mustang out of perdition.

Janet Denning clutched at Kane's arm.

"He's bleeding from the nose, Roy!" she cried. "That horse will kill him!"

"He wanted rough-string," Kane said, and grinned at Nolley again.

When everything else had failed, the gelding screamed with rage and flung himself through the air, crashed down on his neck and shoulders, and rolled.

Will Mayo was clear. When Blizzard struggled to his feet, he was in the saddle again. The gelding began to show signs of quitting a few minutes later, made one last desperate attempt to unseat the rider, and failed.

Blizzard stopped dead in his tracks, stiff-legged, and looked down at the ground. Will Mayo slipped out of the saddle, took several steps forward and almost fell. The blood was running freely from his nose and his face was deathly pale.

Roy Kane did not say anything. Mayo looked at the girl, and his lips twisted.

Abruptly he turned and went back to the spent Blizzard and ran his right hand under the saddle blanket. He found nothing, seemed puzzled until he sniffed his gloved hand. Then Will Mayo walked over toward the fence again, reached up suddenly, and yanked the cowpuncher, Nolley, off the top rail.

"Carbon bisulphide, mister!" he said.

"Drives a bronc crazy when it gets against its hide!"

He slammed his fist into Nolley's face, and spun around.

"And you, Kane," he accused, "you put him up to it, you skunk!"

He started another punch, but it failed to land. He reeled and fell forward on his face.

II

LATER, when Will Mayo came alive, he found himself in a bunk. The girl he heard called Janet and a white-haired man were looking down at him.

"Got strength to leave now, I figure," he said. "Like to shake the dirt of this rotten spread off my feet and quick. Generally the worst of 'em ask a man if he's had grub before they half kill him!"

He sat up, and thrust the girl's restraining hand roughly aside.

"You mean you haven't eaten?" she demanded.

"Last square meal—when was it, now?" Mayo said. "Can't rightly remember, ma'am. Just let me out of here!"

"Why didn't you say you hadn't any grub?" Kane snapped. He was standing behind the two beside the bunk. "You've got a tongue in your head!"

"A man with any pride at all don't ever ask, mister," Will Mayo said.

He got up, walked out of the bunkhouse, and across the yard to the corral. There he loosened his bronc's reins from the rail, got into saddle, and rode out of the yard.

"That was a rotten thing to do, Kane," Janet said tightly.

"Reckon it was," old Wentworth said. "If you and Jan, here, wasn't goin' to be married right soon, I'd fire you off this place, Kane."

"Go ahead, Hy," Kane said. "Anyhow, that jasper looked a little familiar and I sure would like to know his past. Hey, where you goin', Jan?"

Without bothering to answer, she hurried over to the corral, and got her horse. Mounting, she galloped through the gate, her eyes on a puff of dust that rolled lazily off the top of a knoll a good half-mile away.

Mayo had reached a fork in the road and had stopped to consider the direction he would take, when he heard hoofbeats behind him. As he swung around in the saddle, he seemed needlessly wary.

"Followin' me, ma'am?" He grinned, but there was a grayness around his mouth. "You always take these chances?"

"I don't believe I'm running any risk," she said. "Don't tell me you'd shoot me? Let's be sensible, Mayo. You got a rough deal back there, but that doesn't mean you'll get it everywhere. You're hungry, and I belong at the Cross C ranch, not the Tree L. I'm Janet Denning. We have a good cook and he's broiling pork chops for supper. I'm inviting you over to have some."

"I don't aim to eat for nothing, ma'am," Mayo said. "Maybe you got a woodpile there—or another bronc that needs bustin'. I'm no saddle tramp!"

Janet nodded. "I know you're not, Mayo. Not many men can ride as you do. You could name your price at any ranch I know of, yet you have an empty stomach."

"That was kind of a question, ma'am?" Mayo said. "I'm not answerin' it."

"We better ride, Mayo," the girl said. "There'll be work at the Cross C."

But even as she lifted her reins, he caught her glance at his clothing. Likely, he thought, she had never seen such garb in the Whispering Hill country.

"Can't figure these clothes out, can you, Miss Denning?" he said quickly. "Happens I went away from my regular stampin' ground for a spell and when I got back, these were all I could find."

"Show-window stuff," Janet said, trying to draw him out. "Rodeo performers wear clothes like that."

"I'm sure hungry, ma'am," Mayo said. "I'm takin' you up on that invite."

Janet suddenly decided to become less subtle about satisfying her curiosity.

"You've ridden that bronc and yourself too far in one day, it is plain to see," she said. "And you came from somewhere in a hurry, Mayo!"

"You're a smart girl," Will Mayo said, and the look that abruptly came into his eyes frightened her. "Look, I can't sit this horse much longer!"

"I'm sorry," she said. "Come on."

When they had ridden a little further on, they reached an eminence from which they could see the roofs of a town.

"Palomar," Mayo said. "I stopped there for a few minutes. Heard some talk about trouble hereabouts. A weak sheriff, they say. Cattle missin' in the hills and nobody ever gets caught."

Janet's lithe body seemed to jump in the saddle and she turned her anger against the man.

"The sheriff happened to be my uncle," she snapped. "Do you generally sound out the strength of the law before you pick your spots, Mayo?"

HE SWUNG his eyes toward her and his lips thinned.

"If you want to believe it, ma'am," he said.

He pulled in on his reins when they passed an old barn with a swayback roof. He cuffed his big black hat over his moist chestnut colored hair to see better. There was a big poster pasted on the barn's rotting side that said:

SINCO COUNTY STAMPEDE OCT. 6-7
ALL CONTEST HANDS INVITED TO PERFORM
CHUCK BYERS, BULLDOGGING CHAMPION
WILL POSITIVELY APPEAR! ALONG WITH
OTHER FAMOUS RODEO PERFORMERS
SEE JOEL PARKINSON, PALOMAR, REGARDING
ENTRY FEES!

Will Mayo's eyes changed. A hunger that was not physical showed crystal clear in their depths, and the tenseness went out of his body. He sat loosely in the saddle, seeming to forget he was not alone.

"Interests you, doesn't it, Mayo?" the girl said.

His head snapped up and around. "Like to look at them," he said, a change coming over him again.

"Will Mayo," she said abruptly, "you've been a contest man and a good one! But I've never heard that name. I must ask Joel Parkinson. He knows the name of every contest man who ever put down an entry fee."

"Is that all he has to do?" Mayo ground out, and for a moment Janet thought he was going to wheel his horse around. "All right," he said then. "I can't argue on an empty stomach, ma'am."

She didn't say anything more until they rode into the yard of the Cross C.

"This man's Will Mayo," she said then to a short, fat man who waddled out to take her bronc. "See that he gets chuck and plenty of it, Doby. Then send him up to the ranch house."

A beatific expression was on Will Mayo's drawn face as to his nostrils came the smell of sizzling pork chops and freshly baked biscuits. Then he abruptly walked at a fast gait toward the bunkhouse.

A half-hour later, his stomach filled, new life in his eyes, he stood looking at Janet Denning as she was framed in the doorway of the stucco and log ranch house.

"Come in, Mayo," she said, pleased to see the color coming back into his face. "You feel better?"

"Almost a new man," Mayo said, and then Mrs. Denning appeared.

She was a powerfully built woman, but not ungainly. There were a few strands of gray in her hair, and her smooth bronzed skin was practically without lines usually left by middle age. Will Mayo was immediately impressed with Janet's mother.

"Mother does the hiring, if you want a job," the girl said.

Mrs. Denning looked him over carefully.

"I'll give you the facts quickly, Mayo, all you need to know," she said then. "This ranch has been going down steadily, and there have been some months my hands have had to wait for their pay. We expect just a little more from our men than a day's work. You're not strong-looking, Mayo."

"I could change soon enough, ma'am."

He smiled a little now, and his eyes softened. The smile somehow managed to quicken the beat of Janet's heart and that angered her, drove words to her tongue that had scant thought behind them.

"You're taking a chance with him, Mother. Haven't we lost enough stock without deliberately inviting a stranger to walk in?"

"Janet!" came Mrs. Denning's sharp reproof. "You have no right to say that!"

Mayo got up. "Reckon she has, ma'am. Thanks for the grub and now I'll be ridin' along."

He put on his big hat and headed for the door. Janet followed him quickly, touched him on the arm.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean that! I wish you'd stay on!"

"I've got to think it over," Mayo said, and left the ranch house.

Forty-eight hours later, a tall slat of a puncher named Orbie walked up to the porch of the ranch house where Janet and her mother were looking over the weekly newspaper.

"Just wanted to say you hired a real hand, ladies," he told them. "Nothin' that puncher can't do on a cattle spread. It's mighty soothin' to watch him ride that bronc of his. He's beginnin' to fill out, too. And once in awhile he breaks out with a smile. Seems to me he's had a rough trail up to now."

"Thanks, Orbie," Janet said.

When Orbie walked away, her mother handed her part of the newspaper.

"An advertisement for dresses there, dear," she said. "Isn't it time you were finishing up with your wedding clothes?"

IT WAS as if the girl's mother had reminded her of something she had forgotten. Again she was conscious of a subtle change that had come over her, one she had first noticed when subconsciously she had compared Mayo and Roy Kane—to Kane's disadvantage.

"I still have time, Mom," she said, and feigned interest in the ad.

A bewildering, frightened feeling assailed her for the first time since she had promised to marry Roy Kane. Even the dress pictured in the paper looked ugly.

Without a word she got up, went into the house, closed the door of her room behind her. She had to think, had to drive wild, crazy thoughts out of her mind. She was no giddy schoolgirl who believed in knights who came riding, and who could change the tune in her heart from day to day. She was grown up, knew what she wanted, and had made her choice.

Janet rode out to Lobo Springs the next afternoon where the Dennings had a winter camp. She came through a thin swatch of timber, out onto benchland, and saw "Two-Bit" Smith, his leg thrown over the saddlehorn, talking earnestly with Will Mayo. Two-Bit, the other cowpunchers maintained, had a tongue hung in the middle.

Suddenly Mayo saw her, touched his fingers to the brim of his hat, and rode away from Two-Bit at a fast trot.

"Howdy, Miss Jan," Two-Bit said, a little embarrassed. "Was just takin' a breathin' spell."

"How could you ever?" Janet smiled. "I suppose you've told Mayo just about everything about this ranch and the owners, and about the stock we've lost and how Ben McClune is the laziest, no-good sheriff for miles around."

"Now, ma'am," Two-Bit protested. "I might've talked more than I figured, but you know I'd never do nothin' or say nothin' agin you and your ma."

"Forget it," Janet laughed. "He'd find out everything for himself sooner or later. You like the man, Two-Bit?"

"He's a tophand every which way with me, miss. It's gettin' around about him ridin' Wentworth's Blizzard. Don't remember but one other man ever doin' that, and he took first money at Cheyenne last year. Mayo could get to be a big man around here if he stayed on."

"He doesn't aim to stay, Two-Bit?" Janet asked, trying to be casual.

Two-Bit shook his head. "Awful restless, Miss Jan. And a little scared, seems to me. Only one thing holds him here. Guess you heard they're bringing Fury Creek to the Sinco Stampede?"

Janet stiffened in her saddle.

"Fury Creek? That killer, Two-Bit?"

"Mayo wants to ride that hellion, Miss Jan. Only reason he ain't lit out."

"Fury Creek killed Boone Ackerman at Cheyenne less than a week ago, Two-Bit," Janet said quickly. "No man's ever tamed that outlaw!"

Two-Bit grinned. "Figure I better get back to work or Mayo'll skin me. . . ."

Two full weeks on the Cross C caused the hollows in Will Mayo's cheeks to disappear. The sun burned the unhealthy color out of his skin and there was a spring to his step and a growing brightness in his eyes.

Janet stopped him one night on the way from the corral to the bunkhouse. He tipped his hat and smiled a little.

"You've been working too hard, Mayo," she said. "Why don't you get a little fun for a change? Why don't you go to the dance in Palomar tonight?"

"Fun?" Mayo said. "Forgot there was such a thing."

"I hope I'll see you there," Janet said,

and hurried toward the house.

She would be going with Roy Kane, she remembered—and also remembered that Roy hadn't been much in her thoughts of late.

III

PALOMAR was filled with sounds of gaiety as early as seven o'clock. An orchestra already was tuning up for the dance in the big hall over the hotel lobby. And everywhere there was rodeo talk. Men spoke excitedly of Fury Creek. But so far, Will Mayo, the person most deeply interested in the outlaw horse, was nowhere in evidence.

A man came out of Ben McClune's office and the sheriff's angry voice followed him.

"You attend to your job, Kel, and I'll do mine!"

"Sure, Ben," the other man called, "but mine ain't a public trust, and hasn't a star pinned on it!"

"Ben'll naver make it, come election," a man on the street said, and his companion nodded.

The dance was well under way when Mayo finally entered the dance hall. He seemed uncertain, and ready to run, but paused as he saw Janet Denning dancing with Roy Kane. When the music stopped, Kane maneuvered her toward the refreshment table. She broke away and touched Mayo's arm.

"Our next dance, Mayo," she said, smiling. "I half-promised you, you know."

"I always figured a woman waited until she was asked, Janet," Kane said, his temper on edge.

"Kane," Mayo cut in, "I don't reckon Miss Denning needs your advice when it comes to correct behavior!" He took her arm and gently swung her behind him. "Kane, remember I said I liked the goin' rough!"

"You're gettin' too big for your breeches in this country!" Kane lashed out. "Has anybody found out what you ran away from yet?"

"It wasn't you, big mouth!" Mayo said tightly. "You want proof of that, Kane?"

"Let's go outside, Mayo!" the Tree L foreman blazed. "Come on!"

"A pleasure," Will Mayo said, and bowed to Janet Denning. "I'll be back in a little while for that dance, ma'am."

He walked hurriedly toward the door, and men politely excused themselves and followed.

"This had to come, Miss Jan," Orbie whispered, as he passed her.

Outside, in the middle of the street, Will Mayo peeled off his coat and shirt. By the light of the street lamps, the muscles of his back and shoulders were strongly defined. His teeth were showing white, but he was not smiling.

Roy Kane, stripped to the waist, moved forward slowly, measuring his slighter adversary. He was taller and more solidly built than Mayo, but already the sweat was glistening on his skin. Men formed a wide circle around these men.

"Ten dollars on Kane!" somebody yelled.

"You got yourself a bet, mister!" another man called.

Kane rushed and swung a mighty fist up from his knees, but Mayo danced aside and brought his own left hand in. His knuckles raked Kane's face and put the Tree L foreman back on his heels. Mayo whipped his right in but Kane came in under and drove his head into Will Mayo's stomach. Mayo backed up, half-bent over, pain written on his face. Kane now was trying to batter his guard down and the thud of his heavy fists reached almost to the edge of town.

Will Mayo dropped to his knees and Roy Kane dived for him. But Mayo lunged forward and Kane yelled from the torment of a tall body crashing him in the stomach. He tumbled over Mayo, and the Cross C puncher was first on his feet. Kane came up out of the dust and drove at Mayo's legs like a wild bull, but missed, sending up a cloud of dust.

"Come on, Kane," Mayo mocked him. "You fight like a locoed calf! Stand up to me and fight!"

Roy Kane was up again and charging, driving his punches straight from the shoulder. He suddenly straightened when Mayo's right fist uppercutted him. Then he spun around and dropped to his knees in the dust. Blood trickled down his chin and he was breathing heavily.

"Twenty dollars on Mayo!" a man shouted, when the Tree L foreman struggled erect and braced his feet wide apart to stem Mayo's rush.

Kane bent his head and covered up, and the sounds of Mayo's fists were like hammers hitting against a sack of cement. The Cross C puncher was slowly, but surely disabling his antagonist.

Roy Kane was driven against a bronc at the hitchrack and he clung to its mane as it stamped and snorted. An instant later he whirled with a rifle he had snatched from the saddle-boot. But Orbie leaped at him and tore it loose from his grasp.

"Go out there and be a man, Kane!" the Cross C hand yelled, and drew his own six-gun.

"All right, Kane!" Will Mayo cried. "Look out!"

HE THREW himself forward, then seemed to slip, and Kane made his bid, only to run into a right uppercut that snapped his head back and brought his feet off the ground. He hung in mid-air for a breathless moment, then crashed to the ground and lay still.

Will Mayo was handed his coat and shirt, but as he shrugged into them, he became conscious of the tall man who was leaning against a post, studying him carefully. The man had already been pointed out to him—Joel Parkinson, the rodeo expert.

Parkinson was a tall man with snow-white hair but an ageless face. He had rodeo records filed away in the back of his head, and the names of the men who had made them. Probably, thought the bronc buster, he was wondering if he, Will Mayo, could ride Fury Creek.

Abruptly Parkinson nodded, turned, and walked hurriedly along the plank walk. Looking from a window, Janet Denning saw that, and her heart grew cold and heavy.

She ran to the cloak-room and got her coat, and pushed her way through the crowd to a door that led to the dark areaway behind the hotel. The stairway was hazardous and unlighted, and once she nearly tripped and fell headlong. Groping her way, she at last pushed open a door and found herself in the mealy blackness of the narrow back street. But she had to find Joel Parkinson, know what it was he had suddenly remembered.

As she came out into the dimly lighted street she saw Parkinson go into her uncle's office and knew her fears were justified. Ben McClune was listening to him intently when she stepped in through the door.

"It's him, Ben," Joel was saying. "Saw him in Montana the time he rode a bronc called Fireball. He was just a kid, and his name was Cole Price. That horse had tossed six good riders. This Price got in trouble up in Oregon and killed a man, Ben. He—"

Parkinson spun on his heels when he saw McClune's warning glance.

Janet closed the door behind her, the strength drained out of her.

"Will Mayo," she faltered. "Killed a man, Joel? You just saw him fight Roy Kane and who tried to kill first? You've been studying him, Joel, and you ought to know, if he ever killed a man, there were circumstances connected with it we know nothing about. Cole Price! I think I've heard that name or read it somewhere. Father never missed the rodeo news, and maybe he read it to me. What do you mean to do?"

"Notify the authorities, Jan," Ben McClune said. "What else you think I'd do?"

Parkinson nodded approval, but Janet vigorously shook her head.

"No, not yet! Why do you think he's risked his liberty to stay here, Uncle Ben? He could have been across the Border by now. He's staked everything on the chance of riding Fury Creek! Will it hurt to wait until he's had his try? You realize that the man who rides that horse can ask for just about everything he wants? Even a parole.

"Every cattleman in the West will back him up! Big men in the cities will help him put up a fight! It's Mayo's chance, Uncle Ben. You can see that, Mr. Parkinson. Such heavy pressure will be put on that they'll have to review his case, and it's sure to be full of holes! No man, not even Harry Born, has ever ridden Fury Creek! It's the outlaw that killed Boone Ackerman at Cheyenne! Fury Creek's owner has offered any man who can ride that bronc a thousand dollars in cash and a hundred head of prime stock!"

Joel Parkinson's eyes were gleaming.

"Never would forgive myself if I missed it, Janet," he said. "Nothin' human can ride that devil, but I sure'd like to see this

Cole Price, who calls himself Will Mayo, try it. Ben, we can hold off for a while."

"Would you mind leavin' me and my niece alone, Joel?" McClune asked then.

"Not at all, Ben," Parkinson said. "But remember now, I'm for giving the man his chance."

For several charged minutes after Parkinson went out, Sheriff Ben McClune looked at Janet Denning.

"There's a thousand dollars reward out for that man, Jan!" he said, his voice strangely harried. "This gives me a chance to look somethin' like a man again after all the talk that's gone around about me. You know what you're askin'? To tie my hands again!"

"Again?" Jan asked, plainly puzzled. "What do you mean, Uncle Ben?"

"I don't know what I mean, I reckon," McClune quickly replied. "Just that here's my chance to do somethin' in this office to warrant my stayin' here. But I never denied nothin' you ever asked of me from the time you was in a cradle, Jan. You want this man to get his chance, all right! What does he mean to you, besides your feelin' sorry for him?"

JANET hoped her face was not saying what she could not bring her tongue to admit.

"He's young, Uncle Ben," she finally said, "and he's been in prison. You realize what that means to a man like Will Mayo? He's worked hard for us at the Cross C for no pay, and he's been kind to Mother, Uncle Ben. And she's your sister. Isn't that reason enough?"

"All right, Jan. All right. Mayo, or Price, or whatever his name may be, gets his chance. Figure I see what you mean. Better for him to get stamped into the dust by Fury Creek than spend another five or ten years caged up and lookin' out at just a patch of sky." Ben McClune passed a hand over his eyes, and he suddenly looked very old. "Reckon if he tames that outlaw, he'll get a new hearin' right enough."

Janet went over, dropped on one knee behind her uncle's chair, picked up his hand and held it close to her cheek.

"You'll never be sorry for this, Uncle Ben," she murmured. "Never! All my life I'll love you more and more!"

"See here, Jan," Sheriff McClune protested. "You've growed up, so stop that cryin'. Are you sure you didn't forget to tell me something else about this bronc buster?"

She shook her head, wiped the tears from her eyes and hurried out of the office. She did not dare look back.

Roy Kane had left Palomar, and Orbie met Janet in front of the hotel. "Thought you'd gone home with Kane, ma'am," he said. "He looked everywhere for you, and I figured he'd finally found you."

"Where's Mayo?" she asked quickly.

"After he whipped that hombre, Mayo went upstairs to see about a dance you promised him." Two-Bit Smith said, shuffling up. "Figured you'd run out, so he rode on back to the spread. I'll drive the buckboard for you, Miss Jan."

All the way to the Cross C Janet thought of what her uncle had said about her tying his hands once more, but could not find a reason for it. She was as weary in mind as in body when she reached the ranch yard.

Two-Bit helped her from the buckboard, tipped his hat, and said good night. She stood on the porch for a moment and looked for a sign of Mayo. Finally she saw the bright red tip of a cigarette near the corral, and made out the shape of the man who was smoking it. He threw the smoke away, walked away from the corral, and toward the porch. Jan waited silently.

"Won't do much good to apologize about what happened in town, ma'am," he said. "Kane had it comin'. He'd have got it before if he hadn't been the man you're goin' to marry."

"We won't discuss that—Cole Price!" she said abruptly.

The man jumped as if a lightning bolt had struck the corner of the house. A muscle in his face twitched, and the old wild, fearful look returned to his eyes.

"Who told you?" His voice sounded like that of another person.

"Parkinson recognized you, Mayo," Janet said, the assumed name slipping naturally from her lips. "Only he and the sheriff know. They won't do anything yet. They gave me their word, said you'll have your chance to ride Fury Creek!"

"I want no favors!" he snapped. "Before I go, I'll tell you what happened to me. I was in Kolima the night before a

rodeo, and in the hallway of the hotel I saw a man trying to force his attentions on a woman. I stepped in and we had words, and they led to a fight. I gave him a hard punch and he crashed against a stair-railin' that needed fixin', went on through it and down on the floor and fractured his skull. The man had friends in town and I was a nobody. They said we fought over the woman, ma'am. It was a lie, because she wasn't that kind, and I'd never spoken a word to her in my life. I had little chance, and a jury give me five to ten years for manslaughter. I broke out after servin' three, and lived like an animal until I rode into the Tree L that afternoon."

"I believe you, Will," Janet said softly.

"Thank's, ma'am," he said and put his hands on her shoulders. "You're trembling," he said.

"It's chilly out here, Mayo," she said in a small tight voice. "Come into the house for a few minutes."

IV

IN THE living room, Will Mayo—or Cole Price—told Janet Denning of the nights of terror behind him, of those that had to come. He told her he was weighing the chance of riding Fury Creek against months of torment back in a prison.

And she told him the things she had told the sheriff and Joel Parkinson, about how great a man would become if he rode Fury Creek, and of the good chance that man would have to get his freedom.

"I don't guess there's anythin' in the world I'd rather do than ride that outlaw bronc, ma'am," Cole Price said, his voice low and earnest. "Unless—" He got up quickly. "Let me sleep on it, Miss Denning. Tomorrow I'll tell you for sure if it's the chance I want to take."

"All right," she said. "I hope I'm not wrong about you."

Just after breakfast the next morning, Two-Bit came to the ranch house and told Janet they needed barbed wire to fix fence.

"Have to have some nails, too," he said. "Ought to get some tar-paper to put over the henhouse roof, Miss Jan."

"Hitch up the dead-ax wagon and go and fetch what we need," Janet said.

"Yessum," Two-Bit nodded, then abruptly changed the subject. "Say, that Will Mayo never slept a wink last night. Got up around four this morning and took hisself a walk. Got a hunch he's aimin' to move on, Miss Jan."

"That so?" she said, and bit her teeth into her lower lip. "Did he go out with the others this morning?"

"Yep," Two-Bit said, and hurried away.

The garrulous puncher did not return from Palomar until the middle of the afternoon. He was chewing on strong peppermint lozenges when he dropped to the ground at Janet's feet. He tried to keep his eyes even with hers, but gave up.

"All right, ma'am," he said. "I ain't foolin' you a bit. Didn't aim to stay long in that bar, but I see Parkinson and Kane drinkin' together and pretty soon they went into the back room. I waited till they come out and Kane come up to me lookin' mighty pleased about somethin', and said things to me I don't like the sound of."

"What were they?" Janet asked, a sudden fear gripped her.

"Kane said to tell Mayo he was comin' out tonight and ask him a question or two. Kind of a surprise he had for the contest man, he said."

"All right, Two-Bit," Janet said. "Unload the stuff." She walked thoughtfully toward the house.

Parkinson she knew drank only periodically, but when he did drink, there was no secret he was unwilling to share. Kane was as aware as the next man of Parkinson's uncanny memory when it came to cataloging rodeo performers and he had more than one reason to want to rid the Whispering Hill country of the man calling himself Will Mayo. The bruises on his face would still be fresh and painful, and words dropped here and there would have told him that Mayo had made too deep an impression on the owners of the Cross C.

She sat on the porch, wondering if she had built her hopes too high, hopes that centered on Fury Creek. Of course she could beat Kane's move by riding out and warning Cole Price, or Will Mayo, as she still thought of him, and give the bronc rider a chance to go free.

But by now she knew how his going would hurt her. It would make the future empty and intolerable. So she let her

selfish interests keep away from the corral.

She was still sitting there at supper-time. Her mother came out to call her, just as Sheriff Ben McClune came from up the road and came in through the gate, sitting clumsily in his saddle.

Her uncle nodded when he came up on the porch.

"Parkinson did some of his drinkin', Jan," he said, "and he's plumb sick of himself. Remembered what he told Roy Kane. Well, I'm ready for 'em."

Ben McClune was wearing two guns and in the sheriff's eyes was the urge to use them. Janet had started to say something when six Cross C riders spilled down the long slope at the end of the meadow across the road. She made out Will Mayo—or Cole Price—by the way he sat his horse.

"He's coming in, Uncle Ben," she said. "Don't let on Kane knows who he is."

THE Dennings and the sheriff had finished supper when Roy Kane knocked on the door. Janet let him in, took a kiss from him that was bitter on her lips.

"Somethin's changed you," Kane said with a sharp edge to his voice. "We'll change you back again before long. I been keepin' away too much. Where's the contest hand?"

"Out in the bunkhouse," Ben McClune said, coming out of the kitchen. "Kane, you and me are takin' a ride."

"A gun on me, McClune!" Kane said. "You tinhorn sheriff! I ought to take it away from you and use it on you!"

"Don't try, Kane!" McClune said, and the Tree L foreman saw an expression in the lawman's eyes old Palomar residents had not seen in years. "After you and me have a little ride, if you feel like comin' back later and makin' your play, that's up to you."

"Let's take the little ride, McClune," Kane said.

Janet looked at her mother and slowly shook her head.

"What's got into him, Mom?"

"Ben wouldn't kill in cold blood, Jan," her mother assured her. "We'll have to wait and see. So many things been goin' on under my nose I can't see that one more matters."

She looked steadily at Jan, and then when it seemed the girl could no longer hold close to what was in her heart, Mrs. Denning swung around and began gathering up the supper dishes.

Time seemed endless. Janet kept going out into the yard to listen for sounds she hoped she would never hear. Three hours passed, and neither McClune nor Roy Kane returned.

Janet was at the gate, leaning there watching the dark road when she heard steps behind her. She knew they were made by the man who was really Cole Price.

"Been watchin' and thinkin', ma'am," he said soberly. "Kane here—and the sheriff. Figure Two-Bit is quite a talker, especially when he brings a bottle back with him from town. It won't work out, Miss Denning. Kane'll never give me the chance to ride Fury Creek. A man who has a reason to hate like Kane does, ain't got any good feelings."

"My uncle has taken care of Kane, Mayo," Janet said. "I don't know how. But they never came back."

"You don't know how it feels, ma'am," he said. "I ain't afraid of death or Fury Creek. You don't know what it is till you taste it—standin' in a little cell lookin' out over a little stretch of ground showin' outside the walls, eating your heart out for a horse, and to feel the wind and sun in your face. I'm goin' now, ma'am. I can't go back there."

He turned and ran toward the corral. He had his bronc saddled and ready before Janet could muster the strength to cross the yard.

"Will!" she called to him, using the name that was so familiar. "Don't go!"

He was in the saddle and looking down at her.

"I'd be crazy not to," he said. "It's just my luck I found the best there is in life when it was too late. I have every reason to go and not one reason to stay!"

He spoke to the horse and it moved away, but Janet Denning clung to the rider's stirrup.

"You do have a reason to stay, Cole Price!" she said, half-hysterically. "I love you!"

He slipped off the horse, took her by the shoulders and shook her fiercely.

"If this is a game—" he began, then looked into soft, dark eyes — eyes that

were bright and shining and eager too.

HE BENT his head and kissed her lips, half in awe, but he knew as the warmth of them answered him that she was playing square.

"I got no right to do this, Jan," he whispered. "Now everything will be harder to take. What am I going to do?"

"You'll ride Fury Creek," Jan said confidently. "The first ever to tame him!"

"I've been doubtful about that," he said. "But I haven't any doubts left now. Better go in tomorrow and put in my entrance fee—as Will Mayo. Then I'll fight it the rest of the way! The courts, the whole world."

"And I'll fight with you!" Janet Denning said, and clung to him. When she drew away she asked: "Would you ride out and see if you can see anything of Ben McClune? Something may have happened. He and Kane—"

"Kane," the man said. "No regrets, Jan?"

"None!" she said firmly. "I knew it was you the night you came here with me. I fought against it, but it was no use."

Mayo kissed her again, got back into the saddle, and rode out of the ranch yard. When Jan went back to the house, her mother was standing in the doorway. "I'm glad, Jan," Mrs. Denning said. "I'm happy for you, dear."

Cole Price, who still was Will Mayo to them, came back to the Cross C an hour before midnight.

"Rode all the way to town," he said. "Saw Ben McClune. Never put a gun on Roy Kane, he told me."

Janet couldn't understand that. What, she wondered, could have kept Kane from making a play, except a six-gun? But it looked as if her Uncle Ben McClune must have used an even more powerful weapon. McClune, the weak sheriff of Palomar.

Mrs. Denning asked Mayo in for a cup of coffee.

"To your taming of Fury Creek!" she said, when she poured the hot liquid in the cups.

But Janet said not a word about Fury Creek. In her mind's eye she could see Boone Ackerman lying in the dust at Cheyenne, white and still, and she felt a chill. Her coffee spilled when she brought it to her lips and she hurriedly set it down. Flinging her arms around Will Mayo, she sobbed softly against his shoulder. Her mother went out and closed the door.

THE day of the opening of the rodeo at Claiborne, the county seat of Sinco, dawned bright and clear. Will Mayo, whom only a few as yet knew as Cole Price, rode out of the Cross C ranch yard with Janet just as the sun was climbing out of the east. They took a short cut over the meadow and through a woodland heavy with glistening dew to the Claiborne road.

"I'll ride that outlaw!" the man said proudly. "Don't figure I'd ever rest easy if I knew there was a bronc somewhere I couldn't ride, Jan."

She laughed, fighting to keep her voice light. "If there is a man alive who can do it, I'm in love with him!"

They had come out of the timber and dropped down over a juniper-studded hillside toward the road when a voice called out:

"Wait! I got things to settle, my friends!"

Roy Kane was sitting loosely in his saddle under a great overhanging rock. He rode out to meet them, stopped close.

"You've kicked the props out from under me, Cole Price," he said coldly. "There's nothin' to stop Ben McClune sendin' me to jail now you got my girl, and so I've got nothin' to lose makin' my play." He looked at the girl. "I'm driftin', Jan, but before I go I'll make sure this man never rides Fury Creek! It takes a whole man to do that. With a bullet through your leg or through your arm, you double-dealin' skunk, you won't do it!"

Cole Price's face became deathly pale. "Takes quite a man to use such words—backed up by a gun, Kane," he said. "Can't stand up to a fair fight again?"

"What did you mean?" demanded Janet. "How could Ben McClune send you to jail?"

"Why, he knew all the time I was stealin' your ma's cattle, Jan," Kane drawled. "The idea was to buy her place when I married you, wasn't it? So I figured to drain it of stock to get the price down, and sell the stock to be sure I had enough to make a down payment. Ben figured it

would break your heart if you knew."

"So that's why he said I tied his hands again!" Janet choked. "You mean, low-down— Oh, *what* are you?"

Kane got off his horse, his gun ready. He backed away until he was twenty yards from Price.

"All right, bronc rider," he growled. "I'm goin' to fix you so that you'll never forget—give you something to remember me by while you're in jail! Get off your bronc!"

"I ought to have carried a gun, Jan," Mayo said.

He dismounted, but instantly dived to the ground and rolled to the shelter of a boulder as Kane fired. Rock chips flew and stung Janet's face. She leaped from her mount and ran toward Kane. Cursing, he drove to meet her, caught her by the arm and flung her off her feet. Then he ran toward Cole Price. "Maybe I'll even kill you!" he shouted.

He stopped and took careful aim at Cole Price's exposed shoulder. But before he could press the trigger a gun off to the left roared. The bullet knocked him forward on his face.

Struggling painfully to his feet, he saw Sheriff Ben McClune standing near a big rock. The lawman's hat was off and the sun gleamed on his white hair.

"Been keepin' close to you, you thievin' coyote!" McClune yelled at him.

Roy Kane had not let go of his Colt. Before the sheriff's last word was out of his mouth, the Tree L foreman whipped up his weapon and matched lead with Ben McClune—and lost. The sheriff's second shot put Roy Kane flat on his back.

"Just grazed my shoulder, girl," McClune said, when Janet ran to him. "You and Price hurry along."

The rodeo rider laughed. "Weak sheriff, huh?" he said. "I'll always be eatin' those words, McClune."

Years had dropped off McClune's shoulders as he took Cole Price's hand. His eyes were clear and bright.

"We'll put up a fight, if you will, Cole. Your chance rests on Fury Creek! And good luck, son!"

Janet looked back when they reached the road. Ben McClune was leaning over Kane, but she was sure Roy Kane was dead.

"Mighty close call," Price said. "He had me plumb to rights!"

"A lesson for me, Cole," Jan said, riding as close to him as possible. "I won't be nice to rattlers again."

V

THEY rode into Claiborne where the dust had been churned up by hundreds of wheels and hoofs and was boiling high. The town was full, and hundreds of tents had been pitched on the outskirts. Concessionaires yelled their stereotyped ballyhoo, and itinerant gamblers coaxed the gullible with every kind of bait known to the trade.

The name of Fury Creek seemed on every one's lips. Fury Creek, the man-killer, champion of his kind.

The grandstand was nearly filled when the man who had entered the contest as Will Mayo rode up to the gate with Janet Denning. Both of them unconsciously thrilled to the sounds of the rodeo—the bawling of the bull-dogging steers, the eager whinnying of horses, and the shouts of men and women riders. The smell of stocks, the swirling dust, and polished leather drove deep into her and stirred Cole Price's blood, and he breathed deep of the part of life he had to have to live at all.

He left Jan there, after tying her bronc to a long temporary hitch-rail just beyond the high fench. She went to a ticket window, paid her way in, climbed high and found a seat. There was a prayer on her lips as she watched the infield clear, while she looked for a flash of a familiar blue shirt.

The big crowd's noise thinned a little when a man riding a white horse circled the track, a revolver ready in his hand. He raised it and fired a shot. The stagecoach rattled its old wheel spokes around the track, with a score of painted savages pressing it close. Blank shells made small snapping sounds; then the cowboys poured through an area-way and dispersed the howling savages. The Sinco County Stampede was under way.

Most of the talking still was about the outlaw bronc. Fury Creek! He killed Boone Ackerman at Cheyenne!

The Roman standing race came on, and the men's relay race in which Tree L

punchers took first money. Then a booming welcome suddenly rocked the stands. The announcer was reminding the spectators of "Chuck" Byers' past performances. Byers sat straight in the saddle and waved his hat to the crowd. The best bulldogger in all the land!

The crowd, however, kept talking about Fury Creek even while Byers and his hazer got ready to perform. A weathered man wearing a great ten-gallon hat wormed his way to a seat and said loud enough for many to hear:

"I been down there talkin' to Val Angevine and Lou Kemp. Neither one figures to ride that devil this afternoon. Kemp said he tried the bronc a couple months ago at Boulder and he near got his back broke. Aims to set back and watch this Mayo, who's a new man around these parts."

The yells of encouragement to Chuck Byers drowned out the rest of what he said, as well as other sounds. Chuck was putting up a beautiful exhibition. He left his saddle at just the right time, threw his arm over the brute's neck, the hand of that arm clutching at the steer's loose neckskin. With his left hand he seized the bawling beast's left horn, and when he was clear of the ground, Byers lunged his body downward against his left elbow and twisted the steer's neck.

Man and beast were obscured in a cloud of dust for a few breathless moments and rodeo cognoscenti screamed:

"Bite his lip, Byers! Bite his lip!"

Chuck Byers got up and banged the dust off his rodeo shirt. The announcer consulted the timekeeper, then informed the crowd that Byers had simply equalled his own record.

The voice of the leather-skinned man in the ten-gallon hat cut through the great round of applause again.

"Angevine can't ride that nevil—nobody can! Ackerman was just about the best bronch buster I ever saw. Who is this Will Mayo? He want to die young?"

It was time now. A significant silence gripped the packed stands. Janet Denning tore a handkerchief to shreds and felt a terrible dryness in her mouth.

Cole Price was standing near the chutes with a group of riders. He knew that buzz in the stands meant that everybody was talking about Fury Creek, the raven-black beast that had never allowed a man to stick to its back for more than a few seconds. Fury Creek had killed three men, and had maimed as many more. He was the wildest thing on four legs.

The announcer was sending his stentorian voice through the megaphone:

"Ladi-i-i-i-ies and ge-e-e-ntleman! Your attention, please!"

All eyes were on Cole Price — "Will Mayo"—who was sitting his horse a few feet away from the announcer, looking up into the stands.

"Introducing Will Mayo, Cross C ranch, who will attempt to do what no other bronc buster has ever done, and what experts claim won't ever be done. To ride Fu-r-r-ry Creek!"

THE big assemblage gave the unknown rider a terrific blast of verbal encouragement. But only a prayer was on Janet Denning's lips, and a cold hand was closing over her heart.

Will Mayo lifted his hat, rode over to the chutes and dismounted. Over there a black horse kicked and snapped and blew defiant blasts of sounds through his nostrils. The crowd emanated a tenseness that seemed to have body when Will Mayo climbed up the boards and got into saddle.

They let Fury Creek loose. When he drove out of the chute, he was a beast gone stark, raving mad. He changed ends three feet off the ground, lashed at the rider's legs with his teeth, came down with a crash, and rolled.

"Good-by, cowboy!" a man roared.

But Cole Price cleared the saddle with the finesse of a ballet dancer, and while the crowd roared, he got into saddle again when the black came up out of the dust.

Fury Creek waged battle, bucked the length of the arena, spun around and went into the air again, using every devilish trick he had fallen heir to from a long line of four-legged ruction-raisers. He went up time and time again, to come down stiff-legged, jolting the rider around in the saddle as if he had been a thing stuffed with sawdust.

The seconds passed and the black's hide glistened with sweat.

There was no talk now. The spectators seemed to realize they were lucky to be on hand when a miracle threatened to take place before their eyes.

Fury Creek screamed with rage and raced the length of the infield, whirled, and drove for the rail, and tried to tear the rider loose against the boards. There was a crashing splintering sound that drained the blood from thousands of faces.

"That'll finish him!" a man roared.

But they could hear Will Mayo still taunting the black devil. They saw him drive his spurs mercilessly, and fight the horse away from the fence. Fury Creek screamed and crashed to the turf again, and again Will Mayo came up out of the cloud of dust with him, sitting leather nice and solid.

A great concerted gasp of amazement poured out of collective throats.

People started screaming now. They sensed the miracle. They implored Will Mayo to stay with the outlaw. They were becoming a little crazy.

The black called on everything it had left. He went up high and twisted his aching body in midair, came down to the hard turf and planted his four feet so close together they could have covered a spread bandanna.

Will Mayo's head snapped back and when he come loose from the saddle his face was toward Janet for a brief instant. It looked as if it were smeared with blood.

That stiff-legged smash is an outlaw's chief stock in trade. It almost shivers a man's spine and nearly tears his head off his shoulders. For an instant the onlookers stopped breathing as it seemed Mayo was ready to be thrown clear.

But he grabbed leather, got a boot back into the stirrup. Then he was giving Fury Creek the spurs again and riding him toward the main exit, taunting him all the way.

Janet Denning found her voice at last, was up and screaming with the others. Fury Creek went up and changed ends again, screamed with what rage was left in his flattening lungs, and came down to buck the length of the arena.

He crabbed toward the rail, sensing that it was his last chance, but the man in the saddle raked his spurs into the black horse's flesh and Fury Creek swerved away and sun-fished once more.

Will Mayo was sitting solid when the black had finished his desperate bid. He rode Fury Creek around the track, then pulled the horse's head up and spun him around swiftly in a small circle.

The outlaw was through. He stopped and put his proud head down. Lather dripped from his sore mouth, and his sweat-soaked sides heaved with his painful breathing.

The man entered as Will Mayo slipped out of the saddle, and one leg buckled under him. He put a hand on Fury Creek's neck and let it slide along the sweat to the withers. Men gathered around and held the outlaw. While the arena shook with mighty blasts of sound, the conqueror of Fury Creek stumbled and fell. "He's hurt!" Janet screamed, and fought her way to the aisle.

She went down the wooden steps, roughly thrusting aside those who blocked her way. Men were helping Cole Price onto his own bronc when she forced her way into the infield. A man caught her arm. "Lady, you can't come out here!"

"Will!" Janet cried, and tore herself loose.

MAYO saw her then and rode quickly toward her, leaned out of the saddle and kissed her. The thousands stepped up their crazy racket. Janet was crying and laughing, and he smiled and sleeved the blood from his face.

The announcer came up and led him away, and Janet stood there, her heart singing, watching the greatest bronc rider in all the land get the ovation he deserved.

Two men stood near her. She recognized their tanned faces, had seen them limned in lithographs more than once. Lou Kemp and Angevine, famous performers.

"I guess that puts us a little in the shade, Val," Kemp said. "We're lookin' at the best rider who ever lived. And I've seen him before—sure. Will Mayo. Don't seem that was the name he used the time I saw him, though."

Under the stands there was a long low shed used for riders and their equipment. Will Mayo limped in there with a dozen men. Joel Parkinson and two other men were already there, and Parkinson's eyes were troubled. Janet Denning came in through the door, shaking herself free of two men who had tried to bar her way, just as a tall slate-eyed man got up and said:

"Well, Price, I figure this isn't much of

a surprise. Where else do you figure we'd look for you?"

"The Law." Cole Price, no longer Will Mayo, grinned and he fell into an old chair. He dug his fingers into the knee Fury Creek had nearly smashed. "All right, mister. I've done what I figured to do. Worth breakin' loose, wasn't it?"

"It will be all right, darling!" Jan cried, as she dropped beside him and buried her head against his knee.

Men who had been rabid rodeo fans for years came into the long-ceilinged room to shake the winner's hand. Big men wearing expensive clothes and diamonds in their ties. The Governor of Colorado, bankers and millionaire mining and cattlemen. The press threw a hundred questions at Cole Price while a doctor worked on his knee. A writer from San Francisco promised Price his paper's support.

"I have a friend in the Oregon legislature!" the governor said. "Where are you from, Mayo?"

"Price is the name. Born in Oregon."

"A native son, the greatest bronc buster in all this world!" a Portland scribe yelled. "They'll give you a new trial, Price, or recommend a parole. Look at him, gentlemen! Does he look like a killer?"

"You able to leave tonight?" a lawman asked him.

"Reckon," Cole Price said. "Better to get it all over with." He caught at Parkinson's sleeve. "Take her home, mister. Take care of her, you and Ben McClune."

Janet told him again and again that she would wait for him forever, and an hour later, when his knee had been bandaged and he had been made as comfortable as possible, she rode out of Claiborne with Joel Parkinson and Two-Bit Smith.

Sound from the big arena pounded after them until they were seven miles nearer home. Janet hardly heard Two Bit's steady flow of talk. She wondered if men would forget Cole Price as soon as the fanfare had died, would let him eat his heart out in the prison cell in Oregon. Fame, she knew, was generally fleeting. Waiting for release might be endless.

She wondered if her love would compensate for the lack of the sun and the wind in his face, for the sight of only a little patch of earth and sky.

"I'll bet my last few years of life they'll turn him loose, Jan," Parkinson said when she began to cry softly. "You just keep your hope and faith, and you'll see. . . ."

WEEKS later, Ben McClune rode into the Cross C one afternoon with an Oregon newspaper. The authorities, it said, were investigating the case of Cole Price. Influential citizens were behind the move. It was certain that his trial would be reviewed.

"Be quite a ranch he'll come back to," McClune said. "Cattle buyer who did business with Kane is going to make a settlement. We've got that thousand dollars and a hundred head of prime stock from Fury Creek's owner. Be a great day, Jan!"

It happened one night at dusk when she least expected it. She was sitting in the shade of a clump of cottonwoods on a little knoll back of the Cross C haybarn when she saw two riders come into the yard.

One, who stayed there, looked like Ben McClune. The other kept on coming toward the cottonwoods. And she knew, even before he called her name, that Cole Price had come home! She stood up, her hair blown by the wind, and stardust brightening her eyes as she waited for him to take her in his arms.

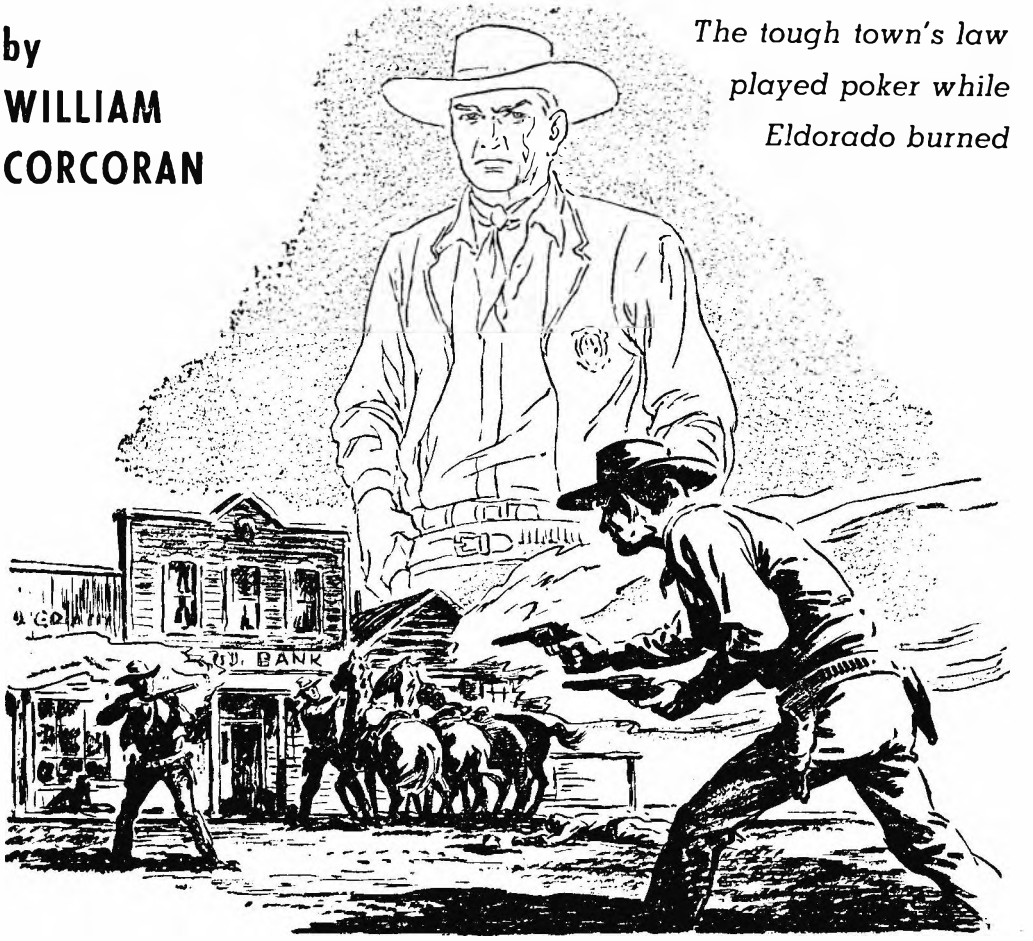
"Free as a bird, Jan!" he said, holding her tight. "Folks remembered, and changed their minds about things that happened. Go on and cry, honey. Some tears should be saved like petals from a rose."

He didn't tell her then, but he knew as he held her that there was something else they had to have. Fury Creek. The outlaw had made his dreams come true. And he knew that Fury Creek would be waiting for him, too.

KILLER MARSHAL

by
WILLIAM CORCORAN

The tough town's law played poker while Eldorado burned



TOWN MARSHAL Evan Linkerman strolled his usual course this summer evening along the hollow plank sidewalks of Front Street, up one side and down the other. Stroll seemed hardly the word. If there was any danger—and well he knew there was, every minute of that walk—he gave no sign.

He passed the time of day with a knot of loungers on a saloon porch and with a merchant in his doorway. The golden twilight was seemingly full of peace. There was nothing here right now to tell a stranger that Eldorado was known the nation over as the toughest town in western Kansas—or that Evan Linkerman was the toughest law officer that the town in its brief and violent history had ever hired.

But this was early evening; by mid-

night that stranger would have learned plenty.

On the veranda of the Panhandle Hotel a man got up from a rocking chair and leaned importantly on the railing as the marshal came by. There was an ominous, calculating look about him, and the clothes he wore, black, severe and expensive, seemed a little out of place in this frontier country. He was Sam Baldwin, banker, politician, and a power in town.

"Marshal," he said bluntly, "I'll want to have a few words with you tonight."

"Sure thing, Sam."

For no particular reason there had never been any liking between these two men. Linkerman simply could not warm to the other's high-handedness, his secretive ways. At bottom, he didn't trust him, or any man like him. But he was always willing to listen. He added mildly:

"All right, Sam. What's on your mind? I reckon there's no time for talking like the present."

"Sorry. Not in this case. There'll be a few others on hand later. Swanson, Wilmot, Bell. We all aim to have a talk with you."

The marshal's eyes narrowed. "All the city fathers, eh? Sounds important, Sam. What's up now?"

"You'll hear in good time. Baldwin made an impatient gesture. "It's private business; I don't hanker to go into it here. We'll have a private room inside. You ask for me at the bar in about an hour."

"I reckon I can do that." Linkerman was nettled, but still mild of tone. "Just so you don't make it too long-winded. I have a mighty important engagement with a stack of chips at the Palace in about an hour."

The banker stiffened and started to speak sharply, but there came an interruption. Out in the deep dust of the roadway, big-eyed, scared-looking, a man was coming in haste. Linkerman knew him—a faro dealer at one of the smaller saloons.

"Marshal, you're needed damn bad up to my place right away," the man said breathlessly. "One of those Johnny come-lately Tejanos is on the prod, and I figure he'll pretty soon be shooting if he ain't stopped."

"What's prodding him?"

"Hell, plain common cussedness. The boss told him no more drinks, he'd had enough, and that galled him plumb raw. He ran the boss out of the place. Then he made the bartender give him a bottle. You know what that'll mean."

Linkerman glanced up the street. His eyes altered slightly, grimly. "Sam, I reckon this looks like the beginning of a busy evening. But I'll manage to see you later. So long."

He set out for the scene of trouble.

There was, as always, a sense of keen satisfaction coursing through Evan Linkerman's veins as he strode up the street on his mission. This chore was merely routine, but not the less satisfying for that. It was part of the life he relished, with the great, hearty relish of the born fighting man, the born gambler.

He liked that life, this town, this town especially, the whole world of courageous men and women among whom he played so dominant a role. He liked the sense of consequence and importance he enjoyed, because he knew it was real, and of deadly importance and consequence to the town itself.

He was an egotist, of course, but no fool. He trod a stage in a constant drama, but with art, with endless care, with the conviction that this queer part he played was ordained by the great God of frontiers from the beginning of time. Some day it all would pass, he knew—perhaps, for him, in the flash of an instant. And lacking fear, he preferred the thought of that to thinking of other days, other years when all of it would be old and gone forever.

EVEN before he pushed through the swinging doors of the saloon, Linkerman heard the loud voice of the

Tejano troublemaker. The man was in an ugly mood, that was clear. The others, angry and sullen, but unable to see any least sense whatever in fighting a stranger and a drunk, kept warily quiet.

Linkerman glanced over the top of the doors. He placed the fellow—one of a tough bunch that had come riding into town that very morning. Linkerman liked to look them all over as they rode in, the hard-bitten, hard-riding Texans whose weeks and months on the great trail had earned them their brief violent holiday. He liked their kind, but he knew them too well to overlook anything.

Quietly Linkerman stepped into the place. His hands hung idle at his sides. The cowboy stood at the bar not far from the door. His gun was in its holster, and he had only the whisky bottle in one hand, but he was cunning enough to keep his frozen audience squarely before him. And dangerous enough to keep them quite cowed.

"By Judas," he declared furiously, "I taken my liquor without any man's allowance ever since I was able to choke the neck of a bottle. I taken it where I wanted, and no ring-tailed rangatang anywhere is going to learn me different now!"

Linkerman made not a sound. That took art, a cultivated art. He stopped at the bar almost directly behind the other. He said sardonically. "Is this a strictly private shindig, Texas, or can a stranger horn in?"

It took the gunman altogether by surprise. He whirled, hand on gun butt, to stare balefully. He was a lean, mustached man with dark, bloodshot eyes. He snarled, "This here's a plumb public ruckus, hombre. Why ask me? The more horns in hell, the merrier."

"Then count me in, Texas."

Texas had already counted him in. It looked too easy. He had only to jerk that gun and get the drop, left so wide open, disarm Linkerman and chase him to the back with the others.

But something happened, something agonizing and sudden. The Texan's gun, halfway out, fell from his paralyzed hand as Linkerman's heavy gun barrel suddenly appeared out of nowhere and cracked down on his wrist. Then excruciating pain almost doubled him up, but the pain did not half equal the hatred that flashed in his livid eyes.

Linkerman calmly picked up the gun. He slid it down the bar to the bartender. "Put that away, Jim. He can have it back when he's sobered up." To the cowboy, his tone was hard and cold. "I reckon we'll call it a day, Texas. You're a lucky man. Got a camp in the neighborhood?"

THE cowboy's face became an evil mask. "Yeah, I got a camp."

"What herd?"

"A McClellan herd. Uvalde County."

"You delivering here or heading north?"

"Bound north for Ogalalla. We're just laying over for supplies."

"Good. There are two things you can do right now, Texas, and you can have your pick. Either you come along with me to the lockup, or you fork your horse and light for camp—and stay there."

"Camp? The hell! It's coming dark and the moon ain't out yet."

"You can take your pick," Linkerman repeated, softly, but with finality.

The cowboy glared. Or tried to. Defiance was in his eyes and on the tip of his tongue, and in all of his inflamed feelings. But no man could face down Evan Linkerman. No one ever had so far, anyway. The cowboy at last said sullenly, "I'll ride."

Linkerman smiled. "Now you're getting smart, Texas. I doubt mightily you'd like our jail. Come on, now."

At that very moment a rider charged in the door in great alarm. He was a small, quick figure of a man with a kind of pinched, crafty look about the eyes. The look changed to sudden, almost

cringing fear at sight of the pair. Then he flew into a rage.

"Hondo, you plumb fool! What in hell you been messing into now?"

The liquor hadn't improved Hondo's feelings for friend or foe.

"None of your damn business, Jocko," he snarled coldly.

"You're clean maverick-loco, if you think it ain't." The newcomer frankly sized up Linkerman, speedily decided to appeal to him. "Look, *amigo*, I just heard there was some trouble starting over here. The fellow said it looked like one of our boys. I come a-running to see if I could do anything."

"That so? To hinder or to help?"

"Hell, to hinder. Or help, according to how you look at it. I don't want no part of any trouble with you, marshal. This is a pardner of mine I'd admire to steer shy of trouble."

Linkerman studied him. Studied him with the cold, all-knowing gaze of the Recording Angel. Something left him faintly dissatisfied, but trouble with drunks was a nuisance, and the fellow seemed earnest enough.

"Brother," he drawled, "if you're set on hindering some real grief, you get this fellow out of town. And I mean clean out of town. I'm allowing ten minutes."

"Ten minutes? Jumping Jupiter, we'll be halfway to camp." He took his partner's arm. "Come on, Hondo. Come on —hell, get a gait on. You damn fool, don't you know who that is? That's Evan Linkerman!"

Hondo gave the marshal one final, icy look. It was a queer look, queerest because all at once it didn't look so very drunk at all and there seemed to flash a promise of settlement later.

Linkerman gazed wryly after the pair. Something still left him more than dissatisfied. He called for a drink and mulled over what had happened.

ABOUT an hour later Marshal Evan Linkerman knocked and walked in a door at the rear of the bar in the Panhandle Hotel. It was a room usually reserved for private sessions of poker at high stakes, with one large round table and a number of chairs. Five men were seated around the table in sober, even solemn discussion. All conversation stopped as they glanced at Linkerman. They were probably the five most important men in Dorado. Their gravity told plainer than words the weighty nature of this moment.

Sam Baldwin presided. The others looked important—and slightly embarrassed. Baldwin waved the marshal ceremoniously to a chair without meeting his eye. The preliminaries were few. Sam Baldwin behaved like a man with a duty he deplored, but must carry out.

"Evan Linkerman, this may sound to you like bad news. I reckon you'll understand just the same. Maybe it would be bad news for the average run of men, but I misdoubt it in your case and your high and considerable standing. We've done a right smart spell of thinking and feel sure you'll appreciate there's no bad feelings, and no reflections on you, leastwise as a man or a peace officer."

A sudden cold feeling shot through Evan Linkerman. They were all up to something, and he was to be the goat. Well, he was a good poker player. He lit a cigar. "Go on, Sam."

"Well, the fact is," Baldwin glanced at the others, "the fact is, Evan, as man to man, we want to ask you for your resignation."

Linkerman eyed him, gimlet-like. "I thought that was entirely in the mayor's hands."

"So it is—officially," the other said impatiently. "But we didn't want this official. No need of it at all. This will look like your own decision, private and entire. That'll be better all around, certainly."

Linkerman snorted. "Hell, yes. For me, I reckon. Hardly for the town."

"For the town and for you both. I'll explain."

Now that the ice was broken, all hesitation was gone and more than a touch

of the banker's professional ruthlessness appeared. He said that no man questioned Evan Linkerman's prowess as a fighting man. No man charged he had not kept the peace in Dorado. His grim reputation had spread far and wide. That was exactly the trouble. His reputation was backfiring now; it was bringing to the town an alarming number of badmen and gunfighters from over half the frontier.

"I reckon you can see it as well as the next, Evan," he said. He was sure of his case. "You've killed three men since we hired you. You've shot up others, driven plenty out of town, arrested some of the worst specimens that ever came over the pike. But still they come. And everyone of them comes with the idea of being the one to take the measure of Evan Linkerman. Everyone of them wants that feather in his cap. And now the papers the nation over are taking notice. The town's got a bad name, and getting a worse."

Linkerman agreed. "And all on my account?"

"You'll have to admit that. You've got to. Look at us. We're business men, family men. Our stake is in this town. Every dollar. We've got our investments and property and wives and children to think of. We've talked it over, and even though it's with damned real regret, we've come to the final opinion that we must ask you to step aside."

Linkerman nodded reasonably and pondered. He had never liked Baldwin so little, or believed him less. But this game must be played through. "Have you hired anybody in my place?"

That was surrender. Baldwin could not conceal a certain glow of triumph. "Well, not just yet. But here's what we figured. We had no mind to act in haste. We wanted to talk to you. We'll get a good man for the job. When he's ready, you'll quit. We'll make up a purse of a thousand dollars over and above what's due you. Then—well, then you'll leave town, and everything will be jimdandy."

"Won't it, though!" Linkerman agreed with ironic emphasis. "Sam, have you got a slip of paper on you?"

Baldwin found a small piece of paper in a pocket. Linkerman wrote out a few words in pencil, signed the paper.

"You know I wouldn't argue this business with you for the world, Sam," he said with a kind of hard geniality. "This is your town, and you can do as you please with it. But this here's my resignation, and it goes into effect right now."

They all stared. Resign? Now. That was not part of their terms. Consternation seized them. Three of them protested all at once. Baldwin cried angrily, "But you can't up and quit like this, man!"

"Why not?"

"That thousand-dollar purse for one thing. It'll be plain forfeit. And for another—there ain't a fit man ready to replace you."

"That's just what I was thinking," Linkerman said with complete agreement.

Another member of the committee, Jackson Bell, dealer in hay, grain and hides, pleaded, "Evan Linkerman, think twice before you do this. We're treating you fair and square. We've laid all our cards on the table."

"Your cards are no good when I hold all the aces. I think this is the most plumb foolish idea I've met yet in Eldorado."

He got up, and the tone of his voice belied the smile. "Gentlemen, if you can afford it, I sure can. And since you've all paid my salary for some time, I feel I should tell you all, sort of, just what makes the mare go. You figure to get along without me. So you could—if I was on the losing end of a gun argument. I'm not the only peace-officer in the nation. But fire me—and you'll never get another like me to come within a mile of the place. I'm good here, or I'd never be alive. Get a small man, and in two weeks he'll be killed, or act like a dummy in the job."

"But, Evan—"

"You'll hear me out, Sam Baldwin. You've talked of wives and children. Tonight no drunk or stranger dares go near them. You've talked of property. What's your property? Front Street, Beale Street, the Swamp territory. You make your money by the hell that goes on. I was hired to keep that hell in bounds, away from all your wives and families. I've done it. I've taken my chances for your hire, and I'm still here. That means I must be good."

"But nobody questioned—"

"I certainly don't question, just for one." Linkerman smiled inscrutably. "Gentlemen, the hell with it. And since I'm now relieved of all official duties, I'm going over to the Palace for a drink and to get a game started that won't stop at least this side of twenty-four hours. It's a whale of a time since I had a chance at anything like that. Good luck—and let me say, may the good Lord save you all!"

He gave them a sardonic salute and strode out of the little room. He left them stunned. No man had dreamed of such an outcome.

IT WAS an easy matter to get the poker game started, at the Palace. Evan Linkerman's mere word that he aimed to play on through the night and a day, and perhaps beyond, was taken in the light of a challenge far too good to be missed.

There were six: the marshal, a Texas cattleman, a cattle buyer from Kansas City, a local commission man, a whisky salesman, and the railroad land agent. They were all well heeled with cash.

Linkerman chose a table against one wall at the Palace, in full view of all the great, garish room, and once the news of the game had traveled, the Palace bar began to do a record business. Games like this made legend in that country, and it was a thrill to watch a legend taking shape before one's eyes.

But the question that no man could answer was—just what lay behind this? Something mighty queer was afoot. What about Linkerman's job, and the peace of Eldorado? No one dared to ask him outright, and he told no one.

"I haven't had my teeth into a man's-size game of poker in a monkey's lifetime," was all he said. "I've got a hunch that this is my night, and I'm backing it. Right to the limit. Run the cards, dealer."

The cards were run. . . .

The game was still young when Sam Baldwin, plainly both worried and indignant, came to the Palace. He waited his chance and spoke in Linkerman's ear. What he told him, unheard by anyone else, was that the committee had agreed to double the bonus if Linkerman would resume his office. Linkerman laughed and showed the banker his hand.

"Sam, you plumb fool, you ought to know better than to come horsing around me when I'm playing cards like these. Watch this."

Baldwin's eyes bugged a little but he watched. What happened was one of those very things that go to make legends out of poker games. There was a tussle for that pot. There was enough gold piled in the center of the table to make any man's head swim. And Linkerman, bull-like and overpowering, drove out all competition. The last hand dropped without calling. When he raked in the money, he had netted himself something close to two thousand dollars.

Linkerman's only comment was the look he gave Sam Baldwin. There was ice in that look, and contempt, and dismissal. And Baldwin took himself away with beads of sweat on his brow, saying not a word. He hadn't a word left to say. He had seen the hand with which Linkerman had made himself two thousand dollars in five minutes' time. Its strength was—a pair of deucés!

That was one hint for the town. There were others. Mayor Tom Schuyler rushed into the Palace in a great state and begged his marshal for a word in private. Linkerman had no quarrel with

the mayor. Tom Schuyler was an honest man. Linkerman understood—the committee had confessed their bungling to the mayor and begged his help. But his final word was still a firm refusal. The mayor left the place a pale and desperate man. He knew too well what he was in for.

One hint followed another. The showdown was bound to come. It came, after a fashion, when Lily the Lummox showed up.

NOW THAT is an unelegant name for a lady. But Lily was neither a lady or elegant. Her youthful prettiness was long past, she weighed about two hundred pounds, and was hardboiled as any man in Orlando. She ran a dancehall on Front Street.

"Evan," she said in her forthright, chesty voice, "there's hell a-raising down to my place. I hate to butt in on your game, but a bunch of them unreconstructed railroad hands has taken over my floor and my gals, lock, stock and barrel. They're wanting a little quieting."

"I'm damned sorry, Lily," Linkerman said bluntly, "but it ain't my place to interfere."

Lily stared. "Ain't your place? The hell it ain't! They're chasing out the cowboys and rough-housing the gals. Where do you think that's heading for?"

"Trouble, I reckon." Linkerman shrugged. "Maybe you'd better hunt up the new marshal."

"*New* marshal?"

"That's right. I can't name him, but I'm through. I resigned the job this evening. This game is by way of celebration, and I'm here for the night, come hell or high water."

And there he stayed, despite Lily's entreaties. And from there, after a first shocked moment, the news spread like wildfire. Just the bare news, lacking reason or explanation. Evan Linkerman had quit! It had all the effect of an earthquake in Eldorado. It lifted the lid clean off the town, and turned loose all the boiling hell beneath.

It took a man of iron determination to sit there in the Palace playing cards in the face of all that followed. No man could pretend to ignore what was going on. You could hear that lid coming off. The staccato bark of .45s and the hair-raising rebel yell told the news to the very stars.

Then there were the friends who came to the ex-mashal, interceding. The business men and dive-keepers, hungry for profit but scared of anarchy. The formal delegations, frightened out of their wits. . . .

None of them got anywhere.

"Mighty sorry, gentlemen. Damned sorry. I'm a private citizen now. I reckon to take care of my personal interests, but can't legally step outside that."

But the voice grew more harsh and the face more grim, hour by hour. It took a man to sit there and keep his mind on the game—on both games being played out to the limit through that night.

Then the rider named Hondo walked in.

He merely strolled in and up to the bar. He was cold sober, now, and a wisp or two of hay suggested to the knowing that he had never left town, but had likely slept off his drunk in the livery loft. He poured out a drink and then stood there, glass in hand. It was at that point that Linkerman glanced up and saw him.

The game stopped dead. The other players simply saw Linkerman stiffen and his eyes grow icy cold. They were nervous and spooky enough already; now the thought of sudden death came unbidden.

At the bar the man named Hondo raised the glass with a sneer. It was a toast to Linkerman—as insulting a gesture as one man ever gave to another. It had an unexpected effect. Linkerman laughed. Not pleasantly, but he laughed. He turned back to his cards and resumed the play. The others asked no

questions, but they all felt little comfort in that laughter.

Linkerman had a question for them after that. "Have any of you come across a Texas herd the last couple of days owned by a man named McClellan?"

The commission man said, "McClellan? What's the brand?"

"I don't know. It might come from Uvalde County."

The Texas rancher spoke. "I reckon I know most every brand of any consequence in Uvalde County. I hail from Maverick County myself, and that touches on Uvalde. I never hear of any man by name of McClellan running cattle thereabouts."

Linkerman nodded. "That's exactly what I thought. It's no matter now. Three cards, dealer."

However, it did matter, and remained on Linkerman's mind. His faint dissatisfaction of the early evening came back again, and the more he thought about it the more it grew. And midnight came and went, and the game became more tense as the hours passed, and the stakes larger and more reckless.

THE TOWN enjoyed that night. That is, Front Street did, after its fashion. The rest of the town was in the grip of plain dread. Once, when a dozen yelling riders raced their horses the length of the street with a thunder of hoofs and gunfire, a bullet streaked in the Palace door and demolished a coal-oil lamp hanging from the ceiling close by Linkerman's chair. He merely shifted the chair a little to catch the light from another lamp. The devil's own luck was with Linkerman tonight. Steadily the tall stacks of gold before him grew. The hours passed.

It was just dawn when they heard the explosion.

Not a single person in the Palace could guess at first what that sound might mean. It was a terrific blast. Behind the bar bottles and glasses danced on the shelves. A couple of stacks of gold on the poker table toppled with a little crash. The players looked at one another in wonder, then stared out the front at the graying day. Every man in the room stared out there. There was nothing to see. But they all felt, like a presence touching them, the invasion of something menacing beyond words in Eldorado.

The bartender was the first to move. He swore and swung around the end of the bar and made for the door. A small stampede followed. The cattle buyer from Kansas City suddenly shoved back his chair.

"Stay right where you are!" Linkerman commanded.

The buyer blurted, "But, Marshal—dammit, man, something's been dynamited!"

"Never mind. It's not our concern. Sit down and play your cards."

The man reddened, but sat down. The local commission man, a frightened look on his face, said sharply, "It may be serious, Evan. Hell's bells, I've got a safe with a lot of cash in it."

"That wasn't your safe. Not that. Who'd blow down a building, when a good can-opener would turn the trick?"

"It may even be the bank," exclaimed the cattle buyer.

Linkerman gripped the edge of the table and a fury was suddenly riding him. "By Judas, I hope it was the bank! My money bets it *is* the bank. But we're here to play poker, and by God, that's what we're going to do. Deal the cards."

Linkerman's money would have won his bet, if there were any takers. It was the bank, all right. A rattle of pistol shots punctuated his angry command, followed by the deeper bark of a shotgun. The stampede outside stampeded back inside, then crowded warily about the windows, gazing downstreet. Some one running headlong pounded the plank sidewalk, coming nearer. The swinging doors burst open.

"Evan Linkerman!" the man shouted. "There's a raid on the bank. They've blown up the strong room."

Linkerman looked at him coldly. "What's that to me?"

"How the hell do I know?" the man raged. "Don't sit there asking me questions. They've got Sam Baldwin there. He's hurt or wounded."

"Sam Baldwin?"

"That's what I said. They caught him at the bank. He slept the night there, to guard the place. They must have got the drop on him. They've blown out the brick wall of the strong room, and they'll be riding hell for leather in another minute."

Linkerman put down his cards.

"Sam Baldwin!" he said. His voice held a new note of wonder, of disbelief. Of anger—and compassion. "The damned old fool." He got up, kicked back the chair. He was debating something in his mind.

"Tim Nolan," he yelled to the barkeeper. "Tim, look after my cash here. I'll be back for it later." And easing the guns in their holsters he made for the swinging doors.

The five left at the table stared after him. That sudden reversal of mood only piled mystery upon mystification. Yet it was not to be held surprising. They knew they had no way of knowing this man Evan Linkerman—neither the man, nor his scorn of half measures, nor his quick pride and instant response to the need of another man in great trouble, be that man his worst enemy and the danger a fearful one. The five saw him disappear through the doors and suddenly to a man they were on their feet and after him as far as the door.

FRONT STREET was empty in the dawn. Empty but for the two men standing grim and ready in front of the small frame bank building. One had a shotgun, the other held the reins of the four horses bunched together in the road. Nearby sprawled a still, mute figure on the sidewalk—the one citizen who had not taken to cover but had been rash enough to stand and fight. For this brief dread space of time while the bandits rushed through their raid, Front Street was paralyzed.

Linkerman stepped into the road and started running.

Now a shotgun is a terrible thing to face at short range. Linkerman drew both guns and fired as he ran. It was a hard thing to do, but necessary, and the ruse worked. One of the horses reared, squealing, and the fellow holding the bunch yelled desperately as he tried to hold them. It was too far for a running man to fire on human targets, but that bunch of horses was hard to miss. The man with the shotgun raised it in fury to his shoulder and fired—first one barrel, then the other.

That was just what Linkerman wanted. He felt a couple of the widely scattering pellets strike him, but the hurt luckily was slight. Those loads were not buckshot. He came to a sudden stop and from a standstill fired with all the sureness that had been born and bred into his expert eye. The man with the shotgun, hastily reloading, stopped, let the gun slip from his grasp, and pitched forward on his face. The horse guard shouted frantically into the bank.

Linkerman ran again. This small period of grace was all he asked.

The rest was a gamble, pure chance that he took without further thought to strategy or guile. The odds were against him—but the odds against Sam Baldwin inside the bank were greater.

Then two men came boiling out of the bank, and Linkerman halted a second time, close now, very close, to his goal.

It was a small shock, but no real surprise, to see the rider named Hondo in the lead. Hondo had a potato-sack full of loot slung over one shoulder. His gun was in his free hand, and he came firing. The man behind him went into action with his two guns. It was impossible in the drumbeat of that gunfire to hear what Hondo was shouting, but his hate-filled eyes told plainly enough—it was the cursing of a killer in his moment of triumph.

This might have been, by all odds should have been, that moment when Evan Linkerman's prowess, his pride and his life would pass from this earth in a flashing instant. It was not. He was too coolly reckless, too deadly sure. The bandit with the two guns was the first to drop, his cartridges not half spent. Death came to Hondo with his last wild shot. Dying, he let fall the potato sack, tried to throw his empty gun at Linkerman, and dropped lifeless in his tracks.

Linkerman held his fire. The abrupt silence was almost agonizing. The last man, the little fellow who was horse guard, stood with hands high over his head, white-faced and terrified, beseeching mercy. It was the late Hondo's partner, Jocko.

There was a sudden shouting and a swarming of men into Front Street. Linkerman put away his guns. The holdup of Sam Baldwin's bank was over.

The story of Sam Baldwin was almost over too. It took the little man Jocko to finish it. Sam Baldwin himself was dead, shot in his bank as the first act of the raid. Jocko poured out the story in a frenzy of fear and hope of reprieve.

"It was all Hondo's idea," he insisted. "We didn't come here for that, but it took Hondo's fancy, and there being no marshal, and the town running wild and all—well, he made up his mind, and ours too. He'd have killed any of us that walked out on him, so we went ahead and did it."

"Where'd you get the dynamite?" Linkerman demanded.

"Hondo had it. I don't know where he got it. He had it when I threw in with him in Kansas City. I figure he's used it before on jobs like this. Hell, Marshal, I ain't no real cowboy—I'm a jockey that got disbarred and blacklisted, and I drifted West and was dead broke when I met Hondo, and I threw in with him."

"Threw in with him for what?"

"To take over your job. That's what we come here for."

Linkerman stared at him. The others, Mayor Tom Schuyler, Jackson Bell, the foremost men in town, all stared in consternation and disbelief.

Linkerman said very quietly, "You come here to take over my job, eh? Who sent for you?"

"Sam Baldwin sent for us."

It turned out that Baldwin's story was a devious and guileful one, hard to believe yet not to be denied. Baldwin wasn't there to explain his motives, but in the end they explained themselves. What he wanted was more power and more money.

Baldwin either owned or had an interest in most of the wildest resorts in Eldorado, and in the property they stood on. He came to look on Marshal Linkerman as a hindrance to their chief stock in trade—that very wildness and lawlessness which shone like an inviting beacon over a thousand miles of frontier. Linkerman stood in the way of greater gain. Remove him, and the profits, illicit or otherwise, would jump. Better, install in his office a creature of Baldwin's own choosing, and the entire town would be in Baldwin's hands.

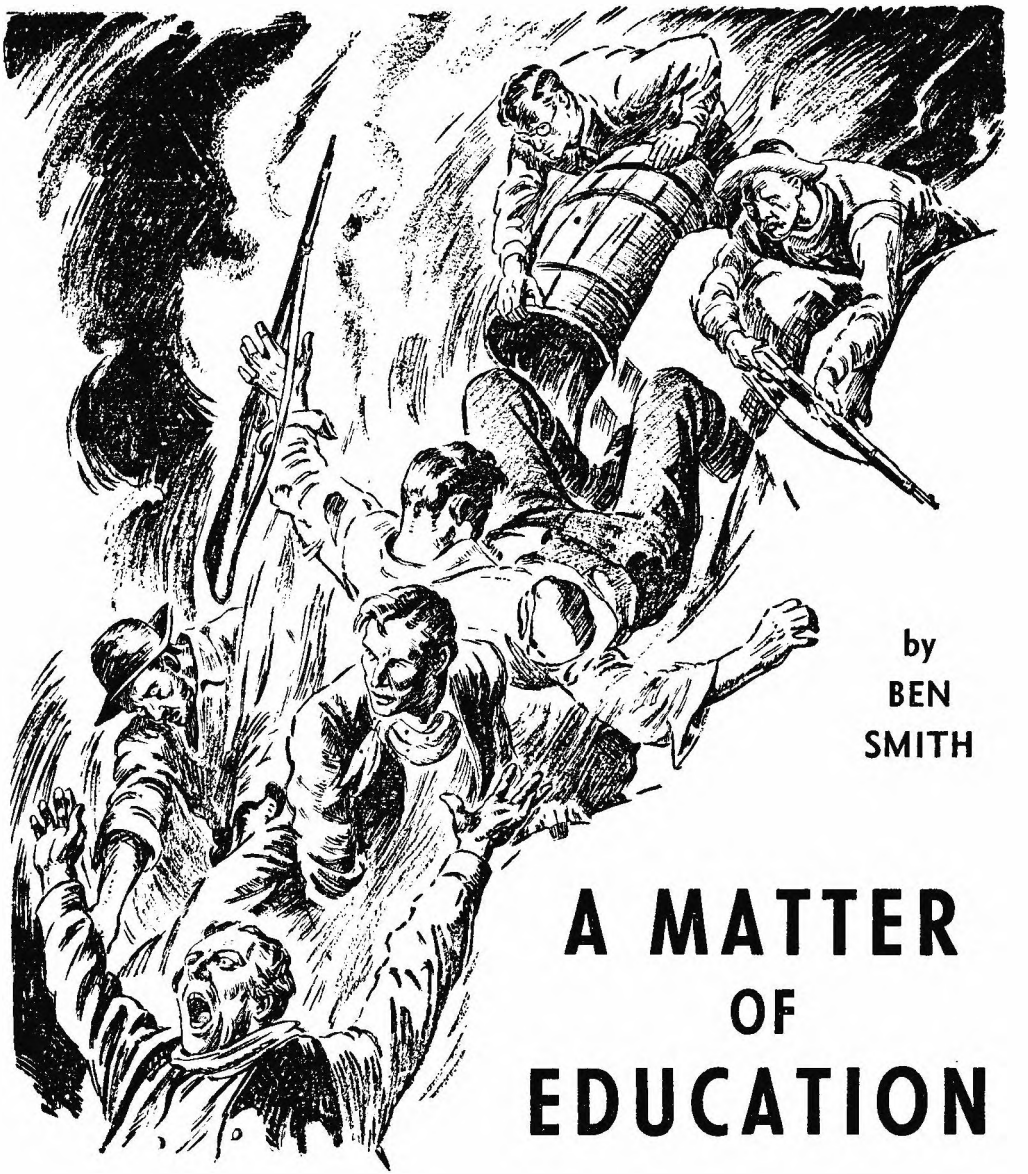
He had never counted on Linkerman's defiant resignation on the spot. That exposed his play, left him flatfooted. He couldn't call on his man, with his man that day drunk and disorderly. And he had never counted on Hondo preferring an easy bird in the hand in the form of the bank's cash. So he had failed and died, ingloriously and unmourned.

"Evan, I hope this brings us one benefit," the mayor said.

"What's that, Tom?"

"That your resignation's withdrawn." Then, almost wistfully, "And—well, that we can count on your help till the last Texas herd comes up the trail."

"Hell, when that time comes I reckon I'll be more than ready to cash in my chips." Linkerman grinned. "But until then, Tom, until that day comes, I reckon you can go right along counting on me to play those chips for you—to the limit. Town marshal, till I die."



by
BEN
SMITH

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

Professor Charles knew history, but nothing about six-shooters!

WOOL Head Wilson teetered back in the hickory chair in the shade of the sheriff's office and watched the afternoon stage pull in. There just wasn't any justice when a guy like Morg Sloan could run rough-shod over the peaceable people of the Silver Creek range and not get his come-uppance.

"Hell," Wood Head muttered. "You could do sumpin' about it if you wanted to."

Sheriff Bob Horner shook his grizzled head in exasperation. "Cowman or sheepman," he allowed, "they're all the same to the dignity of this office. It's just that we gotta have proof."

"All you gotta do is ride out and see."

Horner shrugged. "Suppose we find Sloan's Lazy S cattle feedin' on your land? They could have strayed."

"Strayed, my aunt Minnie's knee! They were driven."

Wool Head's pelican-like neck convulsed with the abrupt joggle of his Adam's apple. Brown tobacco juice sprayed into the white dust at his feet. "Anyway," he finished defensively, "I ain't no sheepherder."

"You got woolies!"

"Hell, yes. Three milk goats. So, I don't smell like a cowman."

Sheriff Horner plopped his booted feet to the ground. "Maybe," he said, "you oughta quit ranchin' and go back to diggin' sulphur."

Wool Head's derisive snort was his answer. The previous owner of the little valley where Wool Head was now grubbing out a living, one Dutch Heimy, had grubbed for sulphur in the limestone of Broken Bluff. There had been a few pockets, about enough, as Wool Head often said, "to mix with molasses and cure one good batch of the spring heaves."

NEEDLESS to say, Dutch Heimy was long gone. Taking what little money the sale of his barren land had brought him, he had sought out likelier ranges. Outside of the water, the perpetual spring that fed Silver Creek, Wool Head Wilson's land wouldn't have supported a self-respecting lizard. Wool Head had a few steers, a small rock-grown garden and the control of Silver Creek. Trading on that, he managed a living.

But Morg Sloan, whose cattle grazed in the lower valley, wanted water. With Wool Head, perched like a trap-door spider at the live end of the creek, Sloan's fat steers could very well go thirsty. Hence, the beetle-browed Sloan's attempt to oust Wilson.

The stage, Wool Head noticed, had shrilled to a stop in front of the hotel, wooden brake shoes grating on steel rims. Out of the billowing dust, a man emerged.

He was tall. Even at the distance, he appeared taller than Wool Head, who was six-one in his bare feet. One shoulder, as bony as the hip of a starved cow, hung down under the load of a fat, leather suitcase. His arms were long, the wrists prominent.

"Garramighty," Wool Head gasped. "What's them things a'straddle his nose?"

"Them's spectacles." Sheriff Horner stretched, his heavy shoulders threatening the seams of his shirt. "They help you to see."

Horner got to his feet, turning to reenter his office. "They's nothin' I can do," he stated, "unless you got evidence."

"Sure, sure." Wool Head rejoined absently. "I'll bring you one of Sloan's steers and a chunk outa his britches next time."

The stranger had approached Wool Head, looking at him nearsightedly through thick lenses. Wool Head spat again into the dust but said nothing. There was something familiar about this rawboned tenderfoot, even wearing a hard hat and shiny serge suit. Wool Head let his mind wander through his rather checkered past, trying to remember.

"I beg your pardon," the stranger said.

"Huh?"

"I'm looking for a man named Lucimer Wilson."

"Garramighty," Wool Head ejaculated. "That's me!"

Sheriff Horner, almost out of earshot, doubled with laughter. "Lucimer," he gasped, gripping his sides. "No wonder he didn't say nothing when everyone called him Wool Head."

"I'm Homer C. Charles," the tenderfoot said, extending a hand that was just a bunch of bones. "Remember your sister, Carrie?"

"Sure, I do," agreed Wool Head who didn't do anything of the kind.

"I'm her eldest son," Homer Charles' voice was even, his speech a string of words following each other over his thin lips like a herd of sheep.

"Welcome," said Wool Head dumbly. "Welcome to the lovin' bosom of your drinkin' uncle."

I sure don't remember as good as I used to, Wool Head told himself. Maybe I have got a sister Carrie. With Morg Sloan watchin' me like a red-bone hound, drivin' his steers onto what grass I got left, I'm apt to lose my mind. In the middle of this worry and woe, this!

"I'm terribly forgetful," Homer C. Charles admitted, as the pair walked toward Wool Head's decrepit buggy. "I may not have told you my name. It's—"

" 'Salright." Wool Head held up a protesting hand. "I know."

WOOL HEAD watched moodily as Homer threw his suitcase into the back of the buggy, next to a keg that was lashed to the tailgate. "Don't bother that barrel," Wool Head cautioned. "It's all I got to drink for the next month."

"Dear me," Homer replied, climbing awkwardly onto the high seat. "Do you have to haul your water?"

"Water, hell. I said drink, not wash."

Glumly Wool Head reined his team into the middle of Silver Bow's main street.

The newcomer babbled incessantly as they drove into the first rise of hills behind the town. He was a school teacher, a professor, he called himself. The meat of his life, if his words were to be believed, was ancient history. In that field, Homer Charles admitted, he was not unknown.

During the last few years, his lungs had given him some trouble and his doctor had recommended a few months, at least, in the West. It was all very confusing, to Wool Head. The professor had a disjointed, emotionless manner of speech that was hard to follow. In the midst of his recital, Homer Charles would start all over again, forgetting at just what point he had begun.

Gradually, Wool Head's tired mind drifted away from the mumble of the professor's voice and into his own affairs.

A showdown with Sloan was coming, of that Wool Head was sure. Not for much longer would the brow-beating Morg permit Wool Head's holding of the spring that fed the Lazy S water supply. Only the fact that Dutch Heimy had decided to leave the Silver Bow range in somewhat of a hurry and, since Wool Head was an old friend, had sold him the bit of land quietly, had prevented Morg Sloan from buying in himself.

Naturally, the burly Sloan resented the fact that Wool Head, a man considered addle-pated from consuming too many barrels of whisky, had beaten him to the draw.

None of Sloan's riders were sighted as Wool Head guided his buckboard down the slope toward Silver Valley Spring. Neither were any of his red, Lazy S steers grazing along the creek, among the few

[Turn page]

head of cattle Wool Head owned.

That, in itself, was ominous. It was, Wool Head felt, the lull before the storm. Morg Sloan was up to something. He was waiting.

Wool Head shook off his feeling of depression as he carefully unloaded his grub, and the barrel of whisky, moving it inside the two-room shanty that was his home. Behind him, lugging his heavy suitcase, came the professor.

He put his grip on the rough floor and gazed about with a kind of child-eyed wonder that amused Wool Head. It was plain that, never before in the professor's life, had he been in such surroundings. The rusty iron stove with one leg missing, the fire box propped on a rock; the two boxes that served as chairs; the crude, rope-spun bunks along the wall.

"How nice," he repeated. "How nice."

Wool Head banged the stove lids. "Gotta rassle up some grub," he said. "You can take the bucket an' get some water, if you want."

AFTER having the spring pointed out to him, the gangling professor took the tin syrup pail and started up the slope. Behind him, Wool Head watched, feeling some misgivings.

In a moment, he went back inside the shanty and opened a can of beans. Setting the rusty skillet over the fiery eye of the roaring stove, he slabbed off bacon. In the midst of his chore, he paused, the long butcher knife motionless in his hand.

A queer sort of groan came from the direction of the spring. Then the clatter of tin against rock. There was a wild threshing of water and a low voice mumbling.

Running outside, his high-heeled boots skittering on the gravel, Wool Head saw!

The professor was shoulder deep in the icy water, flailing about with a battered syrup pail. He had, it seemed, with his customary ineptness, fallen into the spring.

Cursing, Wool Head sprinted up the slope. "Garramighty," he shouted, "how did it happen?"

"I think," Homer Charles said weakly, "someone discharged a weapon at me."

"Hell, no," Wool-Head stated, looking at the jagged hole in the bucket. "It was a forty-four."

"O lord!" Wool Head thought frantically, as he led the shivering professor back to the shanty, "here I am, a lamb among Morg Sloan's wolves, up to my neck in trouble, and you inflict me with this. Take him back to my sister, Carrie, in Des Moines, or Dubuque, or wherever in hell she be."

The professor, having finished his meal, sat and dripped quietly as the last bite of bacon and beans went down Wool Head's stork-like neck.

"This gentleman," he finally faltered, "this Sloan, is trying to force you to give up the spring?"

"Yeah," Wool Head mopped the bacon grease from his plate with a biscuit as hard as a boot-heel, then he turned the plate over, ready for breakfast.

Outside the shanty door, the purple of the early dusk was spreading across the narrow Silver Creek valley. Somewhere, in the dimness, a meadowlark called.

"Aren't there laws?" Homer Charles stumbled for words. It was evident that he was still badly shaken. "I mean—the police?"

"We got a sheriff," Wool Head admitted, "but he says his hands is tied without evidence. Course, he's eatin' out of Sloan's hand, thet's the answer. If we ever get the sure-fire dead-wood on Morg's devilment, maybe Horner will have to get off his tail and move. I don't know. Anyways, he'll give Sloan the benefit of the doubt."

"Somewhat comparable," the professor said, "to the autocratic form of authority exhibited by the tribunes, even the centurions themselves, after Caesar's demise."

"Huh?" asked Wool Head brilliantly.

The rifle slug thumped through the stove pipe before the flat snap of the shot reached the shanty. The pipe promptly collapsed, filling the still-hot skillet with soot. Smoke began to boil from the three-legged stove.

"Get down," Wool Head shouted, grabbing his six-gun from the holster he had hung on the end of a bunk. "It's Sloan, and he's a-shootin'."

HOMER CHARLES cowered behind the iron stove as Wool Head scouted under the window.

"Hey, Wool Head," a stern voice called. "We've waited long enough. Now, we're closin' in."

It was Morg Sloan. Of that Wool Head was sure. He'd recognize the bull-like voice anywhere. Tired of playing, the Lazy S owner had decided to move in and take the water away from Wool Head Wilson.

"Go to Hell," Wool Head shouted back. The rattle of small arms fire was his answer. A dishpan, long unused, banged from its nail on the wall and lighted, rim down, on the floor. Cow-whoomp, cow-whoomp, it went. Then as it spun faster, slither, slither, slither. Another slug ploughed a furrow across it's rusty bottom.

"Damn 'em," Wool Head said quietly. "Only dishpan I had."

The professor was looking wildly about him as if he had lost his teeth in the dimness of the shanty. "Perhaps," he said in his halting fashion, "there is something I could throw."

"Give me strength," Wool-Head muttered. "Give me the power to handle this feeble-minded idjit."

The six-gun fire went on, desultorily, as the shadows grew deeper. From time to time, Wool Head would snap a shot back, just to let Sloan know that he wasn't sleeping. But the odds were well on Morg Sloan's side, Wool Head knew. The battle could have but one outcome. Hindered by the useless Homer Charles, he might not even find refuge in flight.

"We'll have to make a break for it, come dark," Wool Head told the professor. "You game?"

"Certainly," Homer Charles replied, breathing on his glasses and polishing them carefully before replacing them on his thin nose. His hair in a mess, his clothes wrinkled from his dip in the spring, Professor Homer Charles was a sight to behold.

But he was steadying under fire. Wool Head could see lines of determination forming in the narrow face. There was something almost belligerent in the jaw.

"Maybe," Wool Head mumbled, "he'll be of some good after all. Ain't no man, I reckon, plumb useless."

"Here," he said, in a louder tone. "Take my six-gun. It's dark enough now to run for it."

"Surely," the professor agreed, grasping the long-barreled Colt as if it were a spewing adder. "What will you carry?"

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"My barrel," Wool Head replied. "If you think I'll run off and leave Sloan all thet good whisky, you're loco crazy."

Under cover of the enveloping darkness, Wool Head and the professor slipped away toward the Broken Bluffs, leaving Morg Sloan quite the master of all he surveyed.

"He'll be after us." Wool Head cautioned in a whisper. "He can't let us go now. But we'll be holed up and hard to flush."

It was an arduous climb, and the professor was gasping like a hogtied steer when they reached the ledge. Behind them, under the overhang of the rock, a darker opening loomed.

"Old sulphur diggin'," Wool Head explained. "Dutch Heimy, who used to own this land, prospected for the stuff all the time."

The professor left Wool Head propped against his precious whisky keg and reconnoitered into the shaft. In a few minutes he came back, stumbling in the loose shale. "There are several hundred pounds of it," he informed Wool Head, "back in that hole."

"Well," Wool Head said philosophically, "we can't smoke it or eat it, so we'll let it be." He pulled a sack of tobacco from his shirt and rolled a slender cigarette. A smoking match lighted the darkness about them.

A gunshot was the immediate answer.

"Damn Sloan," Wool Head said bitterly. "He guessed which way we was headed and he's got us boxed. Now, there's merry hell to pay."

His companion said nothing but Wool Head felt him stir restlessly. The silent seconds spun themselves out as they waited. A rock clattered in the wash below them as one of Sloan's men changed position.

"We'll have to do something," Wool Head muttered. "They'll sneak up on us like a gopher after a field mouse. In the dark, we'll never even get a chance to see 'em."

The professor's voice came softly from the inky black. "The Siege of Troy," he said. "The Siege of Troy." He got to his feet and half-fell over the prostrate Wool Head Wilson. "Give me that keg of whisky," he said loudly. "I have a wonderful idea."

SILENTLY, Wool Head helped him roll the oaken keg in the direction of the shaft. Inside, the professor worked quietly in the darkness.

"What are you doin'," asked Wool Head. "Wotinell you up to?"

"No questions," Homer Charles said primly. "Kindly stand outside and keep the gentlemen below from bothering me."

Completely mystified, Wool Head did as he was told.

After what seemed most of the night to the jumpy Wilson, the professor came out of the shaft, his progress marked by the low rumble of the rolling keg. Poising it on the brink of the outshooting rock, he waited.

From below came the slither of a trouser leg against the limestone. Morg Sloan and his men were moving up!

"Quickly," Homer Charles whispered, "one of your matches."

Wordless, Wool Head passed him the bit of wood, feeling the professor's trembling fingers against his own.

A boot heel made a grating sound, just below them.

Straining his eyes in the darkness, Wool Head could see nothing. But just a few rods from them, he knew, Sloan's men were bunched, waiting for the word to clamber over the last jut of the rock.

Another lifetime of silence went by.

Wool Head heard a loud thunk, then a sustained glug-glug. After a moment, he heard the rasp of the match and the whole hillside seemed to spring into weird, greenish fire. Sloan's men, even Morg himself, caught in the trap, yelled hoarsely and ran for the bottom of the wash.

Bits of the flaming stuff, sticking like grim death, clung to their clothing. Beating at the fire, hoarsely shouting with pain and surprise, Morg Sloan's men were in complete rout. . . .

"The sheriff will have his evidence now," the professor's voice was calm, though still halting. "He will have my word, and yours, and the blisters on those gentlemen who are making the night hideous with their noise."

"But," gasped Wool Head Wilson, "what was that stuff?"

The professor's laugh came in a cool tinkle. "Greek fire," he replied. "Its invention has been credited to Callinicus of

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Heliopolis in the year Six Sixty-eight A. D. It was used by the Byzantine Greeks against the Saracens. Hence, the name."

"Yeah, bub-b-b-" Wool Head stammered.

"It's chemical properties? It burns fiercely, with a weird flame which you have already witnessed. It is a simple mixture of sulphur and alcohol. We imagine the Greeks used naptha. But, lacking that, your keg of whisky had to do."

"Sulphur!" Wool Head said wonderingly, as they started back to the shanty. "Just sulphur!" Then a thought struck him. "And my whisky!"

"Hiccup," went Homer Charles gently.

"Hey!" Wool Head exclaimed. "Sure you used all my likker in thet mess you cooked up?"

"There wash a li'l left," the professor admitted. "Never ush the stuff. Could learn to like it."

He hiccuped again, belched and sat down abruptly. Like a wet sock, he folded, limp on the flat rock. By the time Wool Head reached him, the professor was fast asleep.

"Larn to like it?" Wool Head inquired wonderingly as he squatted beside him in the darkness. The professor smelled like a distillery. "I reckon you could," he admitted. "It's just a matter of edjication."

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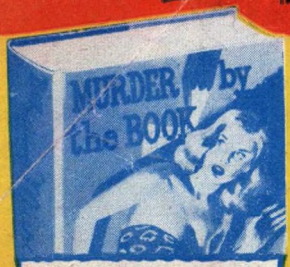

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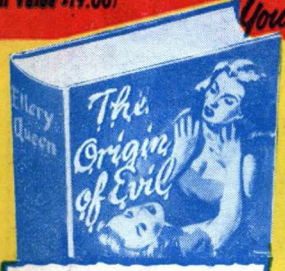

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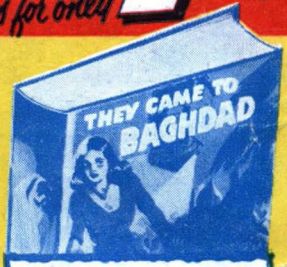

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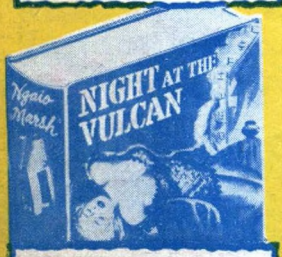

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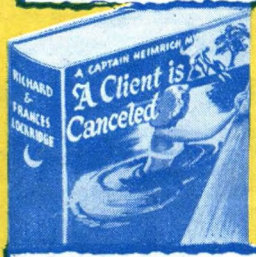

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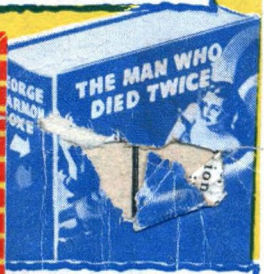

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