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ACTION NOVELS

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- ACTION TRAILS Action Novels' Readers . 123**
The writer-men don't know how to stay in one place.

Cover Design by GERARD DELANO

Story Heads by GEORGE WERT

This magazine is
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For advertising rates, address:
Rhodes, Weed and Company,
Graybar Bldg., New York, N. Y.,
or Rhodes & Leisenring Co., 307
N. Michigan Blvd., Chicago, Ill.

Published Bi-Monthly by
FICTION HOUSE, INC.

J. W. Glenister, Pres. T. T. Scott, Sec. J. F. Byrne, Editor
220 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y.

Entered as Second-class matter October 9, 1928, at the Post
Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of March 3, 1879

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Feb. ACTION NOVELS on the stands Jan. 10th



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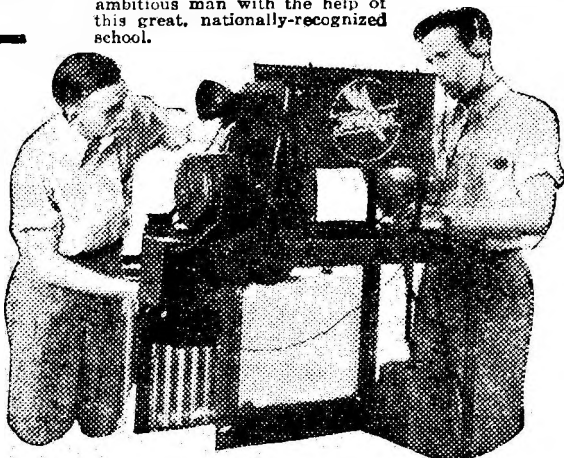
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The Editor



Bob stopped to scan the effect of his shots. The bullets were scattered over a wide area and only two had struck the figure of the man. A queer tingle ran suddenly down the boy's spine. The hairs at the back of his neck stiffened. Someone was behind him!

SUNDOG KING

What if he was just a button? He packed a orace of powder burners big enough to make him man-size in any owl-hoot haven, and he picked pards who swallowed buscadero gun-smoke without coughing.

By J. T. WELCH

THAT was to be a curious hanging. A hanging worthy of the devilish ingenuity of Blue Peter Farley. Blue Peter himself led the prisoner to the front of the man's own barn. He pointed up to the roofbeam, which projected as a windlass some four feet from the eaves.

"There's two ways of hangin' yuh, Soames," Blue Peter boomed. "an' we're gonna let yuh take yore choice." He partly turned to face the men around him, that none might miss the grim humor of his words.

"Now Soames, either we-all can toss a coupla cow ropes over that beam an' haul yuh up slow an' gradual; or yuh can climb up there yoreself, tie one end of the rope around yore neck an' the other end around the beam, an' jump when I give the word." Blue Peter chuckled. "Reckon I sorta like that last way myself. Ain't nothin' pleasant about watchin' a man's face turn purple when his toes start reachin' for the ground!"

John Soames looked at Blue Peter Farley with eyes that were twin pools

of hate. "I'll take yore choice, Blue Farley," he said; "an' may yore lousy soul rot in Hell!"

Blue Peter smiled sardonically. "Any way you'd rather, Soames. But don't yuh go a-cussin' me an' the boys, 'cause we might get mad an' shoot yuh. An' that'd spoil the fun!"

Blue Peter's men untied John Soames' hands then, and boosted him up onto the low sloping roof of the barn. Blue Peter handed him a coiled lariat. Rope in hand, John Soames walked steadily up the incline of the roof. Halfway up, the pitch steepened, and he was forced to go slowly forward on his hands and knees.

Soon he was astride the beam, looking down calmly—almost pityingly it seemed—on the upturned faces of Blue Peter's men. Rare entertainment for them indeed! Watching a man hang himself.

No one can know what strange thoughts raced through John Soames' mind as he sat there on the beam, tying and testing the knots that were to kill him. But men do know that a smile illumined his face as he slipped the noose

over his head and tightened the rope back of his ear.

For a hushed moment he sat there, staring straight ahead. And then, without waiting for Blue Peter's signal, he cast himself from the beam and hurtled headlong to his death.

THERE came a sickening *thud-d* as the rope jerked taut; and all that was left of John Soames swung gently, twisted and misshapen, fifteen feet above the ground.

Blue Peter flipped his short-gun, and the body spun as five bullets tore through it. The roar of the shots, hammering back from the barn wall, broke the awed silence of the man who had sent a fellow being to his death. They seemed to come to life all at once, like spellbound figures suddenly awakened.

Perhaps that was why Blue Peter had fired his Colt. Blue Peter had had a vast experience in these little dramas of life and sudden death. The shots seemed to climax an unfinished scene; to end the play.

Blue Peter turned now, reloading his Colt; and his glance under black beetling brows, sought the boy who was watching him with wide and horror-stricken eyes.

This boy was a slim, dark-haired lad of sixteen, with shoulders that promised much when he should attain his growth. He was dressed as a rider, but without a gun. Two men held his arms behind him; and his face was white beneath its tan. John Soames had been his father's best friend.

For an instant Blue Peter stared full at the boy. His eyes, under their dark overhanging brows, began to blaze like two black windows of hell heated from within. His voice, that had been silky and suave even when addressing Soames, took on a harsher, rougher tone. A tone cunningly calculated to inspire terror in the boy.

"You, Warrington," he grated. "You saw what happened, didn't yuh! Yuh thought we wouldn't dare, didn't yuh! Let me tell you, the law has come to

Oso Basin. John Soames an' yore father have killed their last man!"

"He was stealin' our calves!" flared the boy, tears of red rage welling in his eyes. "Stealin' our calves, an' John Soames an' my dad shot him like he deserved!"

The boy took a deep breath. His face worked with anger. "Law! You talk to me of the law! Why you dirty bunch of lynch lawyers! You damned hangin' vigilantes! Talk to me of the law. . . . My father an' John Soames *made* Oso Basin! Fought Injuns for it! Then you—you dirty thieves—try to steal it from them! Steal their land an' their cattle an' call it law! . . . You ain't men enough to stand up to them! You have to crawl in a mob, callin' yoreselves a 'Citizens' Committee' an' *hang* them! Hang better men than yoreselves! Hang men like John Soames an'—an'—my dad!"

The boy stopped on something like a sob. His body was tensed, straining forward, trembling against the two men who held him. His eyes were brimming, yet blazing red through their tears. Flushed streaks like finger marks stained the white of his face.

"Yo're murderers, that's what you are!" shouted the boy again. "Murderers! You hung John Soames, an' you were goin' to hang my dad! But he got away from you, didn't he? Got plumb away, an' now you'll never find him! You'll never find him. But he'll find you. He'll come back an' blow you all to Hell!"

The boy's mouth shut with a snap, and his eyes blazed at Blue Peter. Bluff—sheer bluff—but a magnificent one. The gallant white lie of a thoroughbred. For the elder Warrington had gotten away from Blue Peter's "committee," it is true, but he had collected lead in the escape. He lay now in an abandoned miner's shack in the mountains, his thigh bullet-punctured.

And his son was fighting to make these men believe his father had ridden out of the country! Fighting for his

father's life; matching his sixteen-year-old wits against those of Blue Peter and his sanguinary committee.

But the cards were stacked against him. Blue Peter knew the boy was lying; knew that the elder Warrington was wounded. Blue Peter himself had fired that last shot; had seen Big Bill Warrington flinch in the saddle. Blue Peter knew that the man he sought lay hidden somewhere in the hills. And he meant to make the boy tell him where.

Blue Peter watched the boy steadily, eyes narrowed, blue stubble of his chin thrust forward. And then craftily, with that guile of which he was the devil's own master, he led his trumps.

“YO'RE partly right, boy, an' partly wrong, like most of us are,” he said soberly. “Yore father an' John Soames were old-timers in this country. They made the first laws, an' they couldn't see why they shouldn't go right on livin' by them. . . .

“Now mebbe in the old times, cattle stealin' was a capital offense. That was good enough for them, an' they were the law. But today, we-all say that cattle stealin' ain't a killin' crime, an' today we-all are the majority. We warned yore father an' Soames. And when they shot pore Clem Laughton, the Citizens' Committee decided to act. We decided that John Soames an' yore father should hang!”

“Hang for shootin' a man they caught stealin' calves!” blazed the boy again. There was contempt in his tone. Blue Peter's palaver sounded fine, only . . . he neglected to state that Clem Laughton had been a member of that self-same “committee”; and Clem Laughton had been putting Blue Peter's own brand on the stolen calves when he was shot.

Blue Peter affected not to hear the interruption. His eyes had turned from the boy, seeking the hanging body of John Soames.

“A life for a life,” he said musingly, “that's the way the old sayin' goes.

'Pears to me it's been satisfied in this case. John Soames hung for the killin' of Clem Laughton. No sense hangin' another man for the same crime!”

Blue Peter spun on his heel, faced the other members of his “committee.”

“What you say, boys, ain't there been enough killin'? Don't yuh reckon we ought to take back that death sentence against Big Bill Warrington? One man's paid the price already!”

The boy, straining eager at the men holding him, could not see the wink that accompanied Blue Peter's words. Could not see the sudden gleam in Blue Peter's eyes. Blue Peter's back was toward him.

But the members of the committee saw the wink; guessed the thought behind Blue Peter's words.

“Shore,” they chorused. “Go on, Pete, yo're the leader! We-all's behind yuh. We'll foller yore play!”

“Then I vote that we revoke the death sentence against Big Bill Warrington! All in favor say 'Aye'!”

“Aye!”

“That settles it!” Blue Peter turned again to the boy, a smile creasing his blue-jowled face. “It's all fixed, boy!”

“You mean,” the white-faced youngster was incredulous, “you mean that—that you won't hang dad, even if you caught him?”

“Just that, boy!” Blue Peter spread his palms upward in a curious gesture. “Yuh heard with yore own ears the vote of the committee! Even if we caught yore father right this minute we couldn't hang him! . . . Now yuh better get word to him right away, before he starts gunnin' for us, 'cause if he shoots any more men in Oso Basin, even I couldn't save him!”

Blue Peter paused before that last sentence, for effect. Then he nodded to the two men holding the boy.

YOUNG Warrington took one step toward Blue Peter, his gaze searching Blue Peter's eyes.

Not yet could the boy believe his own

ears! There was something deadly here, some unsuspected trap. He was like a wary animal, sniffing cautiously at poisoned meat.

But Blue Peter's eyes had a strange, opaque sheen over them, as if a blanket had been dropped just behind their pupils. He was smiling. Experts had tried to read Blue Peter's inner thoughts, and had failed.

Baffled, the boy's glance strayed from Blue Peter's face. It roved over the men of the committee and up to the slowly turning gruesomeness hanging from the barn beam. Here it rested somberly. Try as he might, the boy could not bring himself to believe Blue Peter and his murderous committee. The men who had hanged John Soames were his enemies, and instinctively he distrusted them.

Sadly the boy shook his head, his eyes again on Blue Peter's face.

"Reckon it's too late to stop dad now," he stated tonelessly. "He came from Texas, yuh know, an' I reckon he headed back that way. I've heard him talk about some of them old time Texas gunfighters that was his friends. . . . Damn you skunks! I hope he brings back a heap of 'em an' cleans out the whole crawlin' lot of yuh!"

The boy turned sharply on his heel and stalked away. He found his pony, mounted, and rode off without a backward glance. Bluff! It was well done. Even Blue Peter Farley, devil's master of cunning, smiled his approval. Blue Peter admitted to himself that even he might have been fooled had he not known the truth.

But Blue Peter knew! Knew that Big Bill Warrington, wounded, lay concealed somewhere not far from the Warrington ranch. And so Blue Peter, gazing after the retreating form of the boy, could afford to smile. . . .

Late that night, when even the crickets had stilled, a slim, tense figure stole cautiously from a lonely ranch house and disappeared into the shadows of the hills. Young Bob Warrington

had gone on foot to seek his father's advice.

Which was just what Blue Peter had figured he would do.

CHAPTER II

DOUBLE-CROSS

BIG BILL WARRINGTON came awake with all senses alert. His hand gripped the butt of his Colt, naked by his side. The first gray light of dawn made the inside of the tiny cabin seem ghostly and indistinct. Big Bill lay without breathing, body tensed.

Again came the sound that had awakened him, softly sibilant: "Dad!"

Bill Bill relaxed. His hand loosened on the Colt butt. His voice was a welcoming whisper:

"Come in, son!"

The door opened, a gray slit in the gloom, and closed again. A tense, eager figure slithered across the floor and dropped to its knees alongside the big man's bunk.

"How are yuh, dad?" This man-boy that had told off Blue Peter's committee was now all boy. Father and son were very close. Young Bob had never known his mother.

Big Bill Warrington smiled upward, the smile erasing the lines of pain that had etched the corners of his mouth.

"I'm gettin' along fine, Bob. The laig's a mite better'n it was. Done stopped bleedin', even when I move it promiscuous. Three-four more days now, an' you an' I can haid up over the ridge. Once I git well, an' a good hoss under me, we'll show this Blue Farley an' his gang!"

"Dad, they—they hung John!"

The big man's fists clenched.

"One more!" he gritted. "But they'll pay, son! Let me jest git healed up, an' they'll pay! The murderin' swine!"

"Dad, why did Blue Peter want to hang you an' John?"

Big Bill lay silent for a moment.

"Son," he admitted finally, "I don't rightly know. Peter Farley came into the Basin six years ago. He was a gambler then, but unlike most of his kind, he saved his money. He got popular with the lawless element, an' 'specially with them thet thought they had a grievance. He became a leader. His committee is nothin' more or less'n a gang, organized for plunder."

Bob nodded, eyes wide, and Big Bill went on:

"Sher'f Jennings tried to bust it up, an' was shot from ambush. One of his deppities disappeared. The other joined the committee. . . . It isn't like the Vigilantes, son. *They* was organized by the better citizens for the suppression of lawlessness. This committee of Blue Peter's is organized for lawlessness. It's a mob, son. A mob ruled by a shrewd an' cunning man."

"Mebbe Blue Peter wants our ranch!"

"I figger it's partly thet, an' partly private vengeance. John an' myself were the only two men in th' Basin strong enough to stand against Blue Peter. He hated us!"

"He'd like to hang you, too—like he hung John?"

"I'm shore he would!" Big Bill smiled upward at his son.

But Bob had arisen, fists clenched, tone fierce.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "I knew I couldn't trust him! . . . Dad, Blue Peter made me watch John bein' hung. Then he tried to scare me into tellin' where you was hid. But I told him you had went to Texas, to get some gunmen. Then he said that hangin' one man was enough; an' he voted to let you go free. He promised that you were free! . . . But I didn't believe him, dad. That's why I sneaked up here to tell you!"

Big Bill's face had gone gray as Bob neared the end of his recital. All too clearly, the man saw the motive back of Blue Peter's move.

So Blue Peter had outwitted Bob.

Had used his own son to betray him! For a breathless moment Big Bill lay still, while the blood seemed to choke up in his veins. His heart pounded, stifling him. Yet he would not worry Bob. Fate had granted him, at least, the last few hours with his boy.

"You did perfectly right, son!" Big Bill uttered. And he smiled, though he knew that he was a man condemned.

BOB WARRINGTON got breakfast for his dad. Out of cans. He wanted to cook something hot, but Big Bill wouldn't let him. Already Big Bill had visions of Blue Peter's trackers following Bob's trail. Lighting a fire would be like giving them a personally conducted tour to the cabin.

"You didn't leave a plain trail comin' up last night, did you, son?" queried Big Bill as he scraped cold beans from his plate. "Them fellers might be lookin' for you, you know."

"Huh! I'll say I didn't! Come up over ol' Baldy, where th' rocks are thicker'n the blades o' grass! Take a Injun to foller my trail, less'n he knew where I was goin'!"

Big Bill sighed. Once Blue Peter got the direction of Bob's trail, he would not have to follow sign. The miner's shack was visible from ridges all around. Blue Peter might even know where it was. In that case, it wouldn't be long now.

"You needn't wash them dishes yet," Big Bill said gently. Bob had stacked the tin plates, was going out to the creek to scour them with sand. Now he laid them down, and stood close to his father.

"What's the matter, dad? You look sorta peaked-like."

"Nothin' son. Guess it's jest my laig botherin' me ag'in. Set down hyar, an' let me sorta look at you."

Bob did as he was told. He felt his father's rough hand close over his own. For a long time neither of them spoke. Bob thought his father was acting very strangely.

Then Big Bill cleared a slight huskiness from his throat.

"Allus remember, son, thet yo're a Warrington. An' a Warrington is allus—white. I've been a good father to you son, but I'm hard. Yore mother now, son—would to God that she had lived!—she was gentle; gentle, but strong as tempered steel! Sometimes I see her in you. If I've made you half the man she was a woman, son, I die happy!"

"But shucks, dad! You ain't a-goin' to die! That laig of yore'n is a heap better! You was a-tellin' me so yore-self!"

Big Bill forced a smile.

"Thet's right, son. But jest you remember—if anything ever happens to me, don't you get any fool notions 'bout revenge! You get plumb away, an' stay away till you learn wisdom!"

"Keno, dad! You'll do to take along! . . . Huh! What was that?"

"Sounded like it was at the door, son. Better go see. But take it easy!" A tiny spasm of agony passed over Big Bill's face. So it had come then. His hand clutched the butt of the Colt. and then relaxed. He could not use a gun so long as Bob was in the cabin.

Bob was at the door now. He opened it just a crack. "Who's there?" he whispered.

The answer came with explosive force. The door of the shack flew inward from a driving kick. A rifle barrel poked through the opening, drove with crushing force into the pit of Bob's stomach, doubling him up.

Blue Peter himself was at the other end of that rifle. His sardonic blue visage, chin thrust forward, appeared in the doorway.

"Drop yore gun, Bill Warrington!" he snapped. "Drop it, or I'll blow the livin' spine out of yore boy!"

BIG BILL WARRINGTON fell back with a sigh. The game was up as far as he was concerned. He wanted to go out to the tune of thundering guns, powder smoke acrid

in his nostrils and flame spouting from his hands. He wanted to die in the last high thrill of flaming battle, hot lead in his heart and enemies dropping about him. But he could not, so long as his boy was in gun range.

Not so Bob. A blinding, insensate fury shook the boy like an invisible giant hand. The room swam in blood-red haze before him. Only dimly he realized that he had been tricked. But he sensed that his dad was in danger.

His was the primitive anger of the wild beast protecting its own. Something exploded within him, cut his brain from control, so that he fought instinctively, without knowing what he did. He was berserk. And the blind fighting fury gave him wild animal strength.

Bob jumped before he thought.

He seized the barrel of the rifle with both hands and pulled it hard toward him, twisting to one side as he did so. The move threw Blue Peter off balance, jarred his trigger finger. The rifle exploded with a deafening crash, but the boy heard it not. He leaped forward like a wild thing, striking blindly at his enemy's eyes.

Blue Peter staggered back before the ferocity of the attack. He screamed a curse and dropped the rifle. His left hand flung up wildly to protect his head. His right hand flashed downward to his Colt.

Half a second more would have seen the end of Bob Warrington. But a burly, black-haired giant from the group behind Blue Peter dashed forward. His huge, knotty fingers gripped the shirt collar at the back of Bob's neck. Muscles heaved, and Bob was jerked backward, still hitting blindly at Blue Peter.

Then the giant's grip shifted; he whirled Bob around . . . and drove an iron-hard fist smashing into the boy's face.

The room went to pieces before Bob's eyes like the bursting works of a smashed clock. He fell backward heavily, crashed against the wall of the cabin

with a bone-shuddering shock, and slumped limply to the floor.

He lay there dazed, unable to move but not quite unconscious. He could not think, but he saw and heard everything that happened, like swift chaotic scenes from an inferno.

Bob heard his father give a great cry: "My son! My son!" He saw him leap from the bunk, a superhuman effort that took no thought of his wounded leg. . . . Then from inside the doorway Blue Peter's Colt flamed, wicked crashing red and bursting power smoke.

Bob saw his father falter, driven back as though by the blow of an unseen fist. His hand reached down to the bunk, and came up gripping gun metal.

Now other men were firing from the doorway. The powder smoke swirled halfway across the room. Curiously, Bob saw little puffs of dust leap from his dad's breast. His father was suddenly pale. Deathly pale and tired. He swayed backward, leaned against the wall behind him for support. It seemed to give him strength. His Colt came up level and exploded.

Then Bob saw his father smile. He saw his eyes tremble queerly. They turned upward, and the lids closed over them. His father gasped once; and a thin froth of blood bubbled from his lips. Then he slumped downward in a heap against the wall.

But as his dad fell, Bob saw another man, the black-haired giant who had hit him, pitch forward from the doorway and plunge upon his face. The blue-gray powder smoke eddied up swirling from his fall. And strangely enough, there came to Bob the last words of an old cowboy ditty.

"One more soul would howl in hell!"

EVEN after he had seen him fall, Bob could not believe his father dead. It had all happened so swiftly, as in a dream. A dream in which he could see, but neither think nor feel. He was like an actor watching someone else play his part.

Blue Peter and his committee paid him no attention. Acting under Blue Peter's orders, the men lifted the body of Big Bill Warrington and carried it outside.

Someone brought up horses. They tied Big Bill's body across an empty saddle, looping a lariat around wrists and ankles under the pony's belly. At a word from Blue Peter the committee mounted, started to ride away. . . .

The numbness lifted from Bob's brain. He scrambled to his feet and ran outside. Straight for Blue Peter he ran, shaking his fist.

"Where you goin' with my dad?" he screamed. "What you goin' to do with him? You're takin' him away, an' you promised you'd let him free! You an' yore committee voted! You promised to let him go free!"

Blue Peter grinned down at the lad. A demonic grin.

"We're takin' yore father home," he snarled. "The doctor says he needs shakin' up an' stretchin'!"

Blue Peter dug spurs then, and his pony bounded forward. But Bob ran alongside, clutching at the saddle horn. His blood-streaked face was turned up imploringly to Blue Peter.

"You promised!" he said.

"Let go that horn!"

A very devil seemed possessed of Blue Peter. He rose in his stirrups to get a better swing. His gloved hand smashed down full in the boy's face. Bob dropped moaning to the ground, hands pressed to his head.

It was late afternoon when Bob came to. His head hurt him horribly. The whole front of his face was swollen.

Dazedly he collected his thoughts. He remembered Blue Peter riding off with his father. His father was wounded badly too, for he had lain limp across the saddle. Bob would follow Blue Peter, get to his father. . . .

Now he was stumbling down the trail, falling often, hardly knowing when he picked himself up. Always going forward. His legs ached, his lungs ached,

his face ached. His whole body was stiff with bruises. Something was wrong with his head. Yet still he kept onward; staggering, stumbling, floundering down the trail. Following Blue Peter and his dad.

The sun was just going down when he came in sight of the ranch. The buildings and corrals were picked out sharply in the red glow. The broad, whitewashed expanse of the barn reflected the sunset's fire like some huge, Cyclopean eye.

Yet something marred the smooth, glowing surface of the barn front. Something dangling, twisted; that swung gently to and fro, as though stirred by a breeze.

Bob Warrington saw it, and his heart stopped: while his nerves drew up within him like shrinking rawhide. Then the tension relaxed, and something let go within his brain. He ran forward screaming—screaming mingled prayers and curses. Calling down the wrath of the heavens on Blue Peter and his men.

For Blue Peter had kept his oath. He had hanged Big Bill Warrington to his own roof-tree, though the life had mercifully fled from the body up there in that tiny cabin in the hills.

CHAPTER III

SUNDOG KING

A COLT'S .45 leaped and roared. One, two—six times. Dirt flew from a clay cut-bank, where the rough figure of a man had been drawn with a pointed stick. A slim, dark-haired boy stepped out of the cloud of powder smoke, scanned eagerly the effect of his shots.

The bullets were scattered over an area a yard square. Only two of them had struck the figure of the man in a vital spot.

The boy's expression did not change. Patiently he reloaded. A casual observer might have been led to smile by the wide

cartridge belt sagging across the boy's right thigh almost to his knee. The big single action gun looked funny in the boy's thin hand.

But a thoughtful man would not have smiled. He would have noticed first the grim, purposeful set of the boy's face. A face already lined with sorrow despite its youth. And the thoughtful man would not have smiled. . . .

Steadily for a half hour the boy practised drawing the gun. Practised till his right arm ached at wrist and shoulder and the joint of his thumb was sore from grasping the hammer.

Finally he was satisfied. He walked to the clay cutbank and scratched another figure in the sun-baked earth. Then he stepped back, thirty yards this time. He stood for a moment poised, balanced on the balls of his feet: facing his target. Then his right hand flashed down, and the big Colt flicked up and exploded.

Six times he practised this draw and shoot. He scored three hits. Disappointing to this boy who knew what expert short-gun work should be: who had seen men split their bullet on a knife edge at twenty paces. But no sign of discouragement showed in the boy's face. Only the resolute patience of an Apache who has scented blood.

Bob Warrington had practised for four days with his father's gun, and he was improving.

A queer tingle ran suddenly along Bob's spine. A feeling as if someone had tickled the nape of his neck with a feather. The short hairs at the back of his head seemed to stiffen at their roots. He whirled like a flash, Colt at shoulder level before him.

A horseman sat at the edge of the little clearing behind Bob, motionless as a statue. The sun, filtering through the pines, glinted from his chestnut's coat as if from polished bronze. Leather chaps were darkish brown, shiny and almost black with use. A gun holster, which Bob could see tied down on the man's left thigh, was black.

But the man's shirt was brown, and seemed to merge with the deep tan of his face. That was the first impression Bob got of this man—brown. But tawny and glistening as a mountain lion. He might have been a cast bronze statue except for his eyes, which were curiously blue and alive, visible even at that distance.

The stranger made no move, yet his horse came forward as though of its own accord. Bob could see now that the man wore two guns. Two guns in black, shiny holsters, tied down; and the walnut gun butts were sweat-darkened with use.

"That looks like a Colt yo're holdin' thar, son," the stranger smiled, glancing at the gun Bob was pointing at him. "An' if'n it's a Colt she's shore enough empty after them six shots. Hyar, you can use one o' mine if you don't feel safe!"

There was a deft movement, and Bob found himself staring at the stranger's left-hand Colt, held butt foremost toward him.

SHEEPISHLY Bob put down his gun.

"Reckon I didn't mean it that-away," he murmured. "You sorta startled me, I guess."

The stranger smiled again. That is, his lips smiled, thinly. But Bob noticed that his eyes didn't seem to get any pleasure out of it. They remained hard and blue and cold, like frost on steel.

"Wal now, that's queer-like son, 'cause you don't look to me like yuh was easily startled. Yuh look sorta like a Injun, son—a lotta thoughts all tied up inside yoreself. That goes with gun-play sometimes, too. Hope yuh get the feller thet put them black an' blue marks all over yore face!"

The stranger's tone was casual, friendly. He was hardly prepared for the transformation of hate that stiffened the boy at his words. The boy's jaw clamped. Strange fires, such as this man had often seen in other men's

eyes but never before in a boy's, seemed to flicker and leap far back in the depths of his gaze. His voice came in a hoarse, guttural whisper.

"I'm a-goin' to get him—some day! But not for hittin' me! I've forgiven thet. I'm a-goin' to shoot him for hangin' John Soames an' my dad!"

The stranger pursed his thin lips as if to whistle, but no sound came.

"Then yo're Bob Warrington!" he exclaimed. "I heard about the affair over to Corbett, an' come over to have a looksee. Mind tellin' me about it? An' mebbe I can help you . . . hit thet target six times outa six!"

The stranger was not smiling now. His mouth had set grimly, his jaw was square. Bob, looking into his eyes, felt again that queer, tingling thrill along his spine. The stranger's eyes were frostily blue, but there was a peculiar hardness back of them that Bob could not understand.

And then suddenly he knew. This man was a killer!

Bob was astonished — astonished that he should know a killer when he saw one. Yet he took it quite calmly. Here was a man to help him; a man he trusted instinctively. A man like his father had been, except for that cold, thrilling gleam in his eyes.

The fierce repression Bob had shut within himself burst forth, and he poured out his story to the stranger in a dry, passionless voice.

When he had finished, the stranger took Bob's hand in his own.

"I reckon, son, you'll do to ride with," he said gently. "This Blue Peter Farley now, reminds me o' someone I been lookin' for fer a good many years. Mebbe we can sorta tie in on this deal!"

Bob Warrington nodded acquiescence. Then smiling grimly, he said:

"If Blue Peter is the man yo're lookin' for, I shore hope I see him first!"

"Wall, if we're together, an' we both see him, you'll shore have to beat me to him! An' the only way to do that is—practise!"

THE stranger swung down lithely from the saddle as he spoke. He was much taller than Bob had imagined; due no doubt to the height of the horse he rode. He hadn't looked so big topping horseflesh. Black chaps and gun belts glistened in the sun.

He turned to Bob as if by afterthought: "Oh, an' if'n you should want to holler at me, why jest call me 'King'!"

"'King'." mused Bob. "Is that yore first name or yore last?"

"Wal now, it might be either, mightn't it?" smiled King. "Sort of a handy name thet fills in all 'round. Matter of fact, though, it's my last name. Pretty well known some places, too. Folks got a lot of funny first names for me: 'Pecos' King, an' 'Panhandle' King, an' 'Tex' King; an' even Mister King. An' one place I could tell you about where they calls me *the* King!"

King chuckled over this, his laughter bubbling infectiously. He was trying to take Bob's mind from the tragedy that had darkened his life. Trying to take him out of himself.

"Howsomever," he went on, "my real name's funnier than any of those. It's Sundog. Sundog King! But you see, I don't go 'round advertisin' thet!"

King led his horse close to the pines, where the grass was shaded. He slipped the bit from the chestnut's mouth; chuckled as the pony's muzzle sought the cool grass.

"A sundog, yuh see, is one o' them cussed freaks o' Nature they get down Texas way onct in a while. It's a sign of a blue norther. Looks sorta purty an' innercent, like the sun lookin' at itself in a mirror; but it's shore follered by howlin' hell!"

"Wal, thet's me. Thar was a sundog the day I was borned, an' a blue norther the day after. My mother died 'cause my dad couldn't get a doctor to her; an' my dad was plumb nigh ruined 'cause all his cows drifted half way to the Gulf . . .

"An' it's been thet way ever since! Trouble shore follers wherever I go. The only way I can grab aholt o' peace is to find out where trouble's goin' to be, an' then get thar ahaid of it. Thet way I gen'rally get a *hl* quiet."

"I reckon I'll call you King then, 'stead o' Sundog!" grinned Bob.

"Yeah. It *was* sort of a tough name for my ol' dad to hang on me. But I figger he thought mebber my friends would hang some purty nickname on me, like mebber 'Sunny'." King chortled; hard blue eyes chill as death; jaw grim. "Can you picture anybody callin' me 'Sunny'?"

In spite of himself Bob chuckled, and the chuckle broke the last barrier of reserve. Henceforth these two, man and boy would be friends.

And now Sundog King went to work in his professional capacity. He eyed Bob's gun rig critically. He tilted the big holster dragging on his thigh so that the gun butt slanted backward, just under and behind the hip joint.

"Yo're long-armed, like myself," he explained, "so you'll find it easier wear-in' yore gun pointin' hack a mite. Short-armed folks likes 'em forward. . . . Now, I saw yore draw from behind. This time I want to watch you from in front.

"Don't telegraft me when yo're a-goin' to throw! Yore eyes wanta look as though you was a-seein' a blank wall in front of you. Yore left-hand oughta be natural an' flat against yore side. Yore shoulders relaxed. . . . Shore thet gun ain't loaded? All right then, make believe I'm Blue Peter. Now!"

CHAPTER IV

BOB MAKES A PLAY

IN Oso Basin, as throughout all the West, a two-gun man who actually looked for trouble was generally certain of finding it. That was the way with Sundog King. He had been

born in adversity, cursed with a temperament that held the principle of right higher than human life, and christened with a name that was a very omen of trouble.

Being peculiarly gifted with nervous reflexes faster than most, and a certain coordination of eye and muscle that enabled him to hit whatever he shot at, he had become a killer, rather than among those killed.

During nearly a quarter of a lifetime he had championed many causes, always those of the weak and righteous against the strong and reprehensible; but never had a cause so appealed to him as did this of young Bob Warrington.

Sixteen years old, alone and friendless, shocked to the uttermost fibers of his being by the hanging of his father and his father's best friend; yet imbued with a fighting spirit that warmed King's heart toward him. That was Bob Warrington.

Gradually, during the course of their gun instruction, King wormed the full tale from the boy. How Blue Peter had risen in power in the Basin. How his father's outfit and John Soames had been threatened and then frightened off—King frowned darkly at that! How Sheriff Jennings had been killed, and how one of his deputies had gone over to Blue Peter. And then, finally, the catastrophe.

For a week King and Bob Warrington camped in the hills. At the end of that time King knew more about the inhabitants of Oso Basin than did Blue Peter himself. And at the end of the week, King, restless, his very name prophetic of trouble, decided to act.

What young Bob Warrington could have done against Blue Peter and his murderous committee is problematical. What Sundog King did made history.

TOGETHER Bob and King rode down to the Warrington ranch. "If Blue Peter's really makin' a play for yore ranch yore leavin' thisaway is jest stackin' the cards in

his hand!" growled King. "He figgers you'll leave, an' then he can buy in at auction. Wal, if you don't leave, he'll send one o' his men out hyar to buy from you. But don't you sell, son!"

"I won't!" promised Bob grimly. "Not till Blue Peter's shovelin' coals in hell!"

King made as if to ride away then, and Bob called him.

"An' what you goin' to do?"

"Me? Wal, I gotta make a trip to town. Gonna buy you a pair of thirty-eights, for one thing—thet .45's too heavy for yuh. Be surprised how a lighter gun will sorta jump into yore hand after handlin' a .45 . . ."

"An'?"

King smiled.

"Gettin' sorta sharp-like in the last week, ain't yuh?" He chuckled. "Wal, if you must know, I'm goin' to town to send off a couple telegrams. We need a outfit on this ranch, an' we need one pronto. If Blue Peter can't buy yore ranch he may take a hankerin' after the stock on it. So we not only need a outfit, pronto, but we need one we can trust.

"Now thar's a couple ranchers west o' hyar thet I figger will be glad to loan you four-five men. I did both of 'em a favor onct, an' they ain't the kind to forget."

Bob started to protest about wages. King silenced him with a laugh.

"Why shucks, son! You got thousands o' dollars tied up in this ranch, an' I reckon some cash in the bank, if you could get at it. I reckon them riders can trust you for a month or two! . . . Now, you let me do the worryin' for a while. I'm sort of a expert on trouble!"

King kneed the big chestnut around and trotted off toward town, a tawny-brown figure yielding to the motion of his horse with the lithe grace of a mountain lion. Even from behind he radiated an impalpable aura of danger. Sundog indeed!

The hours passed slowly for Bob with King gone. Barns and corrals

were devoid of stock. The ranch house was lonely, haunted with terrible memories. Bob hoped that King would return soon.

The sun was dropping swiftly westward before a cloud of dust marred the townward trail. But it was not King. Too much dust for that. Bob gripped a .45-70 Winchester and waited grimly at a window. He hoped Blue Peter was among the approaching horsemen.

THE riders came on apace. There were three of them, and Bob saw with a tiny pang of disappointment that Blue Peter was not with them.

Fifty yards away, Bob halted them; rifle thrust through the window, body out of sight. The riders hunched. The foremost, evidently the leader, dismounted and advanced on foot toward the ranch house.

"Don't shoot, boy!" he called gruffly. "I got a order hyar from the Sheriff's Office of Oso to take over this yere ranch. But. . ." he hastened to add as he saw the fury in Bob's face ". . . I'm also bringin' yuh a bill of sale for ten thousand dollars! All yuh have to do is sign the bill o' sale, an' ten thousan's your'n!"

He stepped forward confidently, taking a slip of paper from his vest pocket. Bob saw now that a deputy sheriff's badge was pinned to the left lapel of his coat. Evidently this was the deputy who had sold himself to Blue Peter.

The deputy's face was bloated, streaked with tiny purple veins. His nose was flat, as though it had been mashed. A six-days' growth of whiskers, reddish brown and stiff as wire, reached from thick lips to his round pig eyes. "Damn a man with pig eyes!" King had once told Bob.

Bob hated the man on sight; hated him the more the closer he came; hated him most because he had been one of those who had hanged John Soames and killed his father. Yet Bob contained himself, dissembled his hatred. He

even opened the ranch house door so that the deputy could enter.

That last was a mistake. The former deputy sheriff kicked the door closed behind him, and Bob did not trouble to open it again. Unseen by him, therefore, the other two men climbed down from their ponies and walked silently toward the ranch house.

But if Bob did not see that menacing approach, another figure, following a dust cloud hellbent from town, did. King had already guessed their sinister mission. Now for the first time he drove spurs into his chestnut, and the ranch house seemed to leap toward him as Redfire bounded forward.

INSIDE the ranch house Bob turned to face his unwelcome guest. He was sure now that he hated this man, and the sureness sent little pleasureable thrills running up and down his spine. His father's big gun rubbed gently against his thigh. It gave Bob a feeling of confidence.

Sundog King had said—somehow Bob always thought of King as "Sundog"—that his gunplay could stand up to an ordinary gun toter, but not to a gunman. Bob wondered whether this renegade deputy was a gunman.

The purple-nosed, bewiskered committee man came forward and stood against the table. He laid a slip of paper down on the table top. He searched in his vest pocket with a grimy finger and produced a stub of a pencil.

"Indelible!" he grunted. "Now all yuh have to do is sign this yere paper. The ranch an' livestock goes over to us then, an' you get the ten thousand dollars, cash! Purty neat sum, I thinks it! A young feller like you can do a heap with ten thousand dollars. Why, I know girls thet'll . . . but yere, yere's the pencil!"

"An' if I don't sign?" Bob's voice was very soft. He had stepped back from the doorway, away from the window. He was in a space free from furniture. He wanted room to move about. To

feel his gun arm free. He forgot all about those two men outside the ranch house.

"If you don't sign? Why man alive, what you mean, if you *don't* sign?" The deputy registered surprise. "If you don't sign the property goes over to the sheriff's office for auction. It'll be bid in, an' the highest bidder'll get it."

"An' you think the highest bidder'll give more'n ten thousand dollars—more'n the ten thousand rotten dollars Blue Peter Farley is willin' to pay? Why listen you!" Bob's voice was contemptuous. "Two years ago, when prices were poor, I heard my dad refuse an offer for sixty thousand for this ranch! Now go back to yore boss, Blue Peter Farley, an' tell him that. Tell him that so long as I have one hand to hold a gun with, an' one eye to sight by, there ain't nobody but a Warrington goin' to run this ranch! Sabe? Now get out o' here, you renegade!"

The erstwhile deputy drew himself up. He stepped back from the table. His right hand hooked in the gun belt above his holster.

"I see you're wearin' a gun!" he sneered.

"Yes, I'm wearin' a gun. My dad's gun." Bob's voice was soft, yet his veins were singing; his body atremble. A red haze was creeping across his vision: He heard again the dull *thud-d* of the rope as John Soames died. Dim in the red haze he saw his father fall, slumping down against the cabin wall. . . .

The red haze thinned. In its center, sharp and clear, was the figure of the renegade deputy. And suddenly Bob was cool. His nerves were taut, his brain working at lightning speed.

Bob remembered all that King had told him. About seeing a blank wall before his eyes . . . muscles relaxed—the relaxation of the mountain lion that adds speed to its spring. Unconsciously Bob's eyes narrowed. His lips lifted in a fighting smile. He was going to force

the issue. To bring death flaming in powder smoke. To send his own soul, or another's, whining 'round the devil!

Yet all the while it seemed as though he were watching himself in a dream.

"My dad's gun," he said again, tonelessly. "You can go back an' tell yore boss that. Tell Blue Peter I'm wearin' Big Bill Warrington's gun!"

The renegade licked thick lips furtively. He settled into an ominous crouch.

"Blue Peter ain't my boss!" he snarled.

"Yo're a liar!"

TWO guns flamed with the words, the double explosion like crashing thunder in the room. Came a third shot; a sudden flurry of smoke as a body fell . . . and Bob stepped backward out of the spreading gray cloud, his gun smoking gently in his hand.

But now Bob experienced a curious let-down. His nerves relaxed like loosened rope. He was suddenly trembling, apathetic. He didn't even hear the rush of booted feet across the porch.

There was a crash of flame from the doorway, and the Colt was blasted end over end from Bob's hand. The two companions of the renegade deputy tumbled through the door, six-guns covering the white-faced boy. The foremost, the man who had fired, dropped to his knees beside the dead deputy.

"Lookit!" he exclaimed. "He got Dutch Gus!"

He turned the grisly object over onto its back. "Reg'lar gunfighter play—belly an' heart! But yuh didn't give him a break, did yuh?" He looked up at Bob. "Shot him when he was explainin' this bill o' sale, didn't yuh?"

"Take that gun off me an' I'll call you a liar, too!"

Now the other man, a thin, weasel-faced townsman, broke in. "Reg'lar Billy the Kid!" he sneered. "Plumb lucky yuh shot that gun outa his hand, Mike, or he mighta got us, too! Wal,

I reckon we'll take him along to Blue Peter. He knows what to do with pot-shooters!"

The man called Mike rose slowly from beside the renegade's body.

"Yo're wrong, Jamison. A pot-shooter woulda blowed Gus's brains out first crack. This was gunfighter's play. The kid give Gus the break an' beat him to the draw!"

"Have it yore own way!" Before this unexpected opposition the man called Jamison backed down. "But we'll take this kid back to Blue Peter just the same. Reckon it don't make much difference to him whether it was fancy shootin' or murder. He's locoed about rope work anyway, an' he shore wants this ranch! . . . *Sabe* kid? It's the noose an' a toe-stretchin' jig for you!"

But Bob was not looking at him. Bob's eyes had gone past the two committee men to the door. A figure stood there, a tawny, pantherish figure. The worn leather chaps glistened darkly; the wide-brimmed Stetson was pulled low. There was a smile on the thin lips, the merest twist of an ironic grin. Two black Colts were held breast high; and behind them were two frosty eyes, gleaming now with a light which but few men had ever seen . . . and lived.

"Sundog King!" yelled Bob triumphantly.

And the outlaws whirled to that magic name.

CHAPTER V

BLUE PETER'S MESSENGER

SUNDOG KING himself stood there in the doorway; grimly confident, master of himself. Waiting to be discovered, to see what steps these two outlaws would take against him. His courage had been proved in a hundred such situations; each one different, but each ending the same. He had gone against greater odds before, and come out unscathed. Now he

waited for what the next moment was to bring, and Death lay in his finger-tips.

"Jest drop yore hardware gentlemen, an' step two paces to the front!" was what he said.

Odds were two to one, yet Blue Peter's committee men had no heart to tackle this grim and powder-cured two-gun man who smiled at them; but whose frosty eyes belied the smile. They had no heart to dare the flaming magic of leveled Colts whose fame was known wherever cattlemen congregated. Short-guns were in their hands, but these they dropped as though the metal scorched their finger ends. They did as King directed.

Bob, crouching low, picked up their loaded short-guns.

"Goin' to tie them up, King?"

"Tie them?" King's eyes held Blue Peter's men spellbound like rabbits before an approaching snake. "Tie them—no. I know a trick worth two o' thet. An' we want to catch some sleep to-night."

While Bob held guns on the two captives King went out to the barn. There he found two two-by-eights and in the opposing edges of these he cut four V-shaped notches. One of the boards he nailed across the end of a horse stall, the notches up.

Now he had the prisoners take off their boots. He made them lie on their bellies on the floor of the stall, their ankles resting in the notches of the board. On top of this he laid the second board, and its notches gripped their ankles so that their feet protruded through like old-fashioned stocks.

"Yo're fairly comfortable," King told them. "A lot more so than if I hog-tied you-all. You might get loose from ropes, but jest try an' get out o' this!" And he nailed both planks to the stanchions of the stall with twenty penny spikes.

The prisoners were silent, and King and Bob went out to bury Dutch Gus. Night had fallen now, and the stars were popping out like winking lights

above the deep blackness of the Basin.

Bob offered to fetch a lantern, but King vetoed the suggestion with a sad shake of head.

"Better jest as it is, in the dark," he said. "You'll see the face o' that feller you shot often enough for the rest o' yore life. It'll come to you around campfires, an' sometimes in the middle o' the night, an' you'll wake up cold an' sweaty like from a nightmare. Reckon it's the price we pay for takin' human life. . . . But remember, if'n it gets to hauntin' you son, thar's one way to fight it off. You saw yore dad die, didn't you? Wal, think of *that!*"

And again later, when they were resting wearily on their shovels, King spoke: "Reckon I'm sorta cold-blooded about death, anyway. But if a man's gotta die, this is the way I like to see 'em pass out. I can look at a man wing-shot; an' I can look at a daid man. But a pore feller all shot to pieces . . . wal, that stops me. I'd rather see 'em daid!"

They cooked supper after that; and surprisingly enough, Bob found that he could eat.

"Sleep good tonight, son," said King gently, as they cleared up the dishes. "We got work a-plenty tomorrow. We're gonna take them two fellers in the barn clear over the ridge on the trail to Corbett. An' leave 'em thar without hosses, or guns—or boots. That'll keep 'em outa mischief for quite some time!"

WAR had been declared, but Blue Peter didn't know it yet. Two of his bloody-minded gentlemen had been captured, and put safely out of the way. A third had slid, like Whisky Bill, across the Great Divide.

Bob Warrington had enlisted the aid of one of the West's most famous gunslinging arbiters of justice. And from somewhere over Corbett way two ranches were sending their best men to take the place of his dead father's outfit.

It was to be war to the death, but

Blue Peter didn't know it yet. Blue Peter still believed he was dealing only with a sixteen-year-old boy. A defenseless lad half-crazed by grief and loneliness.

Blue Peter rubbed his hands at the thought. The Warrington ranch was a nice piece of property to acquire for ten thousand dollars.

Ten thousand dollars? Blue Peter smiled. Already, even before the money had been paid, he had laid his plans for its recovery. Two of his gunmen would take care of that. Blue Peter's smile broadened.

But Blue Peter didn't realize that he was breaking one of his own most rigid rules of gambling. He was counting his chickens before they were hatched! . . .

Afternoon of the second day rolled around, and still Dutch Gus had not returned. Blue Peter was irritated. Not actually worried, because he could conceive of nothing that could possibly have happened to Dutch Gus and his men. No, Blue Peter was just irritated.

Nevertheless, his eyes flashed darkly, his smile had changed to a scowl, and his voice had lost a good deal of its boom. He strode into the Oso Hotel bar, and the barkeep there recognized the symptoms and guessed their cause.

"Mebbe the boy got scairt an' Dutch Gus had to round him up," he suggested.

Blue Peter grunted. His scowling gaze wandered around the room and lit on a lean, hungry-looking individual half asleep in a corner.

"You, Joe Hoskins!" he barked.

Joe Hoskins gulped, and his prominent Adam's apple traveled up and down his long and stringy neck. He unscrambled himself from his chair and came forward. He was something over six feet in height, with bulging brown eyes that seemed always just one thought behind.

"Huh?" he said.

Blue Peter surveyed him coldly.

"Yuh know where the Warrington place is?"

"Ahuh."

"Well, that's something, ain't it? Listen now! . . . I want you to ride out to the Warrington place an' find out what's delayin' Dutch Gus an' them two men o' his'n. Take little Fred Chaca with you, an' hit the trail *pronto!* Sabe?"

Joe Hoskins nodded, hitched up gun belt and jeans, and shuffled out of the saloon.

NOW it was unfortunate for Blue Peter's plans that Joe had to pass a restaurant on the way to get his horse. Next to drinking, Joe Hoskins liked eating best. He was an artist at both.

A sudden twinge at his stomach, coupled with the pleasing odor of frying steak, stopped Joe Hoskins in his tracks. He recalled the long ride ahead of him. Might be, too, that Dutch Gus and his men were short of grub. Joe believed they might be. . . . He glanced inside the restaurant. The two men eating there were strangers to him. Joe heaved a sigh of relief and slid quickly through the open door. Blue Peter had said *pronto*; but shucks! a man couldn't starve himself to death!

"Jest a few waffles, an' coffee," mumbled Joe, easing himself onto a stool at the far end of the counter. "An' . . . wal, mebbe I *could* eat one o' them steaks . . . Yep, thet big one, an' *fried* spuds. Got a long ride abaid o' me!" he added apologetically.

"Thet so?" the restaurant man busied himself with waffle batter and inch-thick steak. "Goin' far?"

"Clear out to the Warrington ranch! Seems thet Dutch Gus an' a couple o' his men got themselves lost out thar, an' o' course the boss has to send me out thar to locate 'em!"

Joe said this proudly. He never minded telling people about himself. Once started, he rambled on regardless. He rolled a smoke while he talked, and laid it, unlit, on the edge of the counter. He might have noticed that except for the sound of his own voice there was a

sudden stillness in the café. The two strangers farther up the counter had ceased talking. They were eating very, very slowly, their eyes centered on their plates.

Then the huge beef steak and double order of fried potatoes—with four waffles as a side dish—was planked down in front of Joe, and he dug in up to his ears.

Joe had demolished the steak and German fried, and was half way through his waffles and syrup when he became aware of the intent scrutiny of the two strangers. He jerked his head up to look at them.

Both men had twisted around on their stools, were looking at him in solemn awe. The larger of the two—he was taller even than Joe, with a long, humorous, horsey-looking face—nodded in friendly fashion.

"Don't mind us, neighbor," he said gravely. "We was jest admirin' the noble way yuh attacked them vittles. Does a feller's heart good to see a real tophand dig in proper to his chow."

His pardner, the smaller man, who wore goatskin chaps and two guns, nodded in silent approval of this viewpoint. Joe could see that his eyes were shining—with admiration.

"I guess eatin's about the best thing I do!" grinned Joe, and turned again to his food. He finished the waffles, drained the last of his coffee, and picked up the cigaret he had rolled beforehand. "Eatin'—an' drinkin'!" he admitted expansively.

"Shore now!" The little man with the goatskin chaps smiled. "A top hand oughta enjoy his likker an' vittles. Ain't really much else for him! But if you think yo're a expert with likker, I'd shore like to see yuh stack up with Slim hyar!" He fished around in his pants pocket as he spoke, and drew out a shining twenty-dollar gold piece. "What yuh say, Slim? Reckon we got time for jest one li'l drink?"

"I reckon!" agreed the solemn faced Slim. "Better join us, neighbor, in a

short one! Shorty hyar's treatin', an' his treat's shore roll around seldom enough. He gits mad an' goes on the prod if'n yuh don't accept!" And Slim chuckled good-humoredly at his own wit.

Better men than Joe Hoskins have fallen before that invitation for "just one li'l drink." Joe guided his new found friends to one of the smaller saloons on the outskirts of town. One drink led to another; the other to several . . . topped off with a little side bet as to whether Joe Hoskins could, or could not, drink a full pint of red-eye without drawing breath.

Joe could. He did. He won the bet . . .

And awoke the next morning in the hay loft of a livery barn, an emptied bottle beside him. Dimly he wondered where his new found friends might be.

Yet if Joe had known, he would have climbed up on his pony *pronto*, dizzy as he was, and ridden away from Oso Basin for ever and ever.

Which it's a pity he didn't, for Joe Hoskins, with all his faults, was a likable gent.

CHAPTER VI

GUN SLINGING OUTFIT

AT about the time Joe was awakening from his whisky induced coma, his new found friends, Shorty and Slim, were riding up to the Warrington ranch house. This they did warily, as strangers in a strange land should. For coming toward them along the line fence were two riders of a remarkably businesslike aspect.

Slim glanced at Shorty, and Shorty glanced at Slim. Imperceptibly their ponies moved apart. Shorty appeared to tighten his belt buckle, but in reality he shook his holsters to loosen the two guns at his thighs. Slim seemed to have trouble with a fly on his right side.

Yet neither man took his eyes from

the approaching riders. They saw that one was blond and plain, and wore two guns. The other was small and dark and wiry. These men too, seemed to be having some difficulty with their gun holsters. And their horses moved apart as they approached, so that one man could hardly watch both of them with ease.

Shorty and Slim grinned, but they hid the grins. If these were friends, they met with their complete approval. If they turned out to be enemies, it surely would be some fight!

The four men met by the gate, and the four horses stopped dead, facing each other.

"Howdy, neighbors," greeted Slim genially. "This the Warrington place?" He began slowly rolling a cigaret, watching the small dark man the while.

"Just," returned this rider, "w'at my frien' an' I were about to ask you!"

"You fellers lookin' for it too, huh?" chuckled Slim. "Wal, I guess this must be it, all right. Let's all ride in an' make shore!" He backed his pony from the gate, so that the other two could enter first.

"Oh, but pl-ease, my frien'!" expostulated the little rider, "you two gentlemen must take the pre-cedence!"

Slim was stumped. He admitted it cheerfully, and gazed with fond regard upon the dark little man who had out-generated him. Yet Slim did not propose to be the first one through that gate, and perhaps have a six-gun stuck in his short ribs. Shorty and the two-gun stranger were regarding each other thoughtfully, friendly as two bristling bulldogs.

Slim let the cigaret he was rolling dribble through his fingers.

"Aw shucks!" he lied calmly. "I never can seem to l'arn to roll them things on hossback! Joggin' or some-thin' disturbs my aim! Now you three fellers will jest have to ride on ahaid, while I set hyar by my lonesome an' roll myself a smoke!"

What might have happened then will

never be known, for at that moment all four riders caught sight of a tall, bronzed cowpunch walking toward them from the ranch house, his swinging hands brushing lightly the black butts of twin Colts tied low on his thighs.

THE two-gun cowpunch came closer, paused to read brand.

"Z-Upsy-Down an' Oakleaf!" he greeted. "I reckon you-all are Tom an' Frenchy; an' if'n my eyes don't deceive me, thet's Shorty an' Slim over thar! Light, boys, an' rest yore mud-hooks! Ride in together?"

Slim caught Frenchy watching him enigmatically.

"Wal, no-o-o. Not ex-actly . . ." he said.

But King was hustling them into the ranch house.

"Meet Bob Warrington! . . . Bob, this is Shorty, an' Slim, an' Tom, an' Frenchy. Th' outfit I borried for you!"

Bob took each man's hand in turn. Shorty and the genial Slim he liked on sight. Frenchy was amusing, bubbling over with good spirits like old champagne. Tom fascinated him.

Blond and plain, Tom was. Almost too plain, until you saw his eyes. There was nothing plain about them. Pale blue, cold and opaque, they had in them that same indefinable quality that characterized the eyes of Sundog King. A killer.

King himself had smiled when he first saw those eyes of Tom of the Z-Up-Z-Down. Smiled even as he smiled now glancing down at Shorty's gun rig. Evidently his friends had read between the lines of his telegrams!

Shorty and Tom—gun slinging artists! Slim and Frenchy, cautious, level-headed fighting men who would hold down their fiery sidekicks' more reckless inclinations, and thus double the value of the hand.

Bob sensed something of the character of these men, too; though not, of course, as strongly as did King. Yet Bob was glad that these men were to

work for him; glad to know them man to man.

"King," he asked, "before we put the outfit on the payroll, don't you reckon we ought to tell them that there's liable to be trouble? My dad's outfit was driven away, you know!" he added to the others.

King turned to the four.

"Bob's right," he said gravely. "Thar'll be powder smoke a-plenty burnt on this ranch right soon. He's plumb kerrect about warnin' you rannies! The smell o' powder smoke makes some folks cough!" He smiled then, and smiling, looked straight into Tom's blue eyes.

Those pale orbs twinkled innocently.

"No!" exclaimed Tom, in surprise. "Does it now? Sho' I never noticed!"

And on either side of him the other three laughed.

And suddenly King felt a fierce surge of exultation pulse through his veins. He was top rod of a gun-slinging outfit! Blue Peter had started something; Sundog King would finish it! The dead committee man out yonder was but the beginning.

QUICKLY King laid his plans. Between the ranch house and the barn, a hundred yards from the former and half that distance from the latter, was a square, ugly adobe hut that had formerly been used as a blacksmith shop.

For years now all the blacksmithing had been done in town; yet the hut remained, for it was too sturdy for a bunch of cowpokes to tear down. It had a heavy plank door, narrow windows, and loopholes that had been put in during some early Indian scare. It was used now as a storehouse for odds and ends.

Into this blacksmith shop King moved his own and Bob's bedding, with grub to last them a week and a rain barrel filled with water. Cartridges for rifle and Colt were already stored there.

"I figger," King explained, "thet Bob

an' I could hold down this adobe against Blue Peter an' his hull committee. We'll draw their fire in thar, an' they'll circle, plumb hellbent on exterminatin' us. Now if you four boys"—he nodded to the outfit—"was to be lyin' hid up on top o' thet p'int behind the barn . . . until Blue Peter an' his men got comfortably settled in their shootin' positions . . . why you might be able to cause 'em some trouble. Reckon so?"

"I reckon!" said Slim, with twinkling eyes. "If'n they surrounded you at night, we could pick 'em off one at a time, an' their pardners would never even know what happened. An' if'n it was in the daytime, we could charge down the hill, a-whoopin' an' squibbin' off ca'tridges, an' they'd think the hull U. S. Cavalry was attackin' 'em from the rear!"

"Keno!" agreed Shorty. "An' onless I'm done mistooked, right hyar's where the fun begins. That dust line comin' up the trail wobbles back an' forth like a drunken Injun on a grazin' cayuse. What'll you-all bet it ain't Joe Hoskins, come to report on us to Blue Peter?"

"Nary nickel," Slim grinned.

JOE HOSKINS rode through the front gate and around the ranch house to the rear porch. He saw Dutch Gus' pony in the corral, so he knew everything was all right. Nevertheless, Joe resented not having anyone meet him. His head ached horribly; and he felt hungry, too.

He raised his voice in a stentorian bellow:

"Gus! Dutch Gus! Whar the hell are yuh?"

There was no answer, but Joe's quick ear caught the sound of something frying; his nose told him they were beans. Joe sniffed once and swung down from his horse. His sense of smell led him like a homing pigeon to the kitchen door. He pushed it open . . . and was half-way across the floor before he became aware of the gaping menace of nine long-barreled Colts.

Joe gulped, and his prominent Adam's apple bounced up and hit his chin.

King grinned, and spoke up:

"Hungry?"

"Why, why . . . why, ya-as, I am!" said Joe.

"Rustle yoreself some beans, then, an' climb in!"

Joe didn't think of disobeying. When it came to the question of food, Joe was never the one to argue. He dug in with vim and vigor. The beans had been cleaned, the coffee pot drained, and Joe was rolling himself a smoke before he realized that he had been captured.

Chuckling, the outfit led Joe into a bedroom of the ranch house, gagged and hog-tied him with commendable thoroughness. They laid him on the bed, passed a lariat through his bonds and knotted it beneath the springs. If Joe Hoskins wanted to go any place now, he would have to hump along on his nose, carrying the bed with him.

King straightened to his full height after the last knot had been tied.

"Blue Peter will shore start somethin' when Joe Hoskins don't get back," he said. "Reckon I'll ride in an' find out what it is!"

"Shore, I'll go with you!" Tom and Frenchy and Shorty and Slim stepped forward all at once.

"Nope boys, it's a one-man job! I've been in town before, an' won't be suspicioned. But two of us . . . wal! An' anyway, I'm savin' you boys for the surprise party!"

Now Bob spoke up.

"But King, if anyone in town suspicioned you came from out here . . ."

"Ahuh! They might mistake me for a mountain sheep!" King smiled. "Don't you worry none. It's been tried afore in other towns. The truth is, I'm a-gettin' nervous as a mossy horn sniffin' the brandin' fire. I'm sufferin' right painful to know what hand Blue Peter's holdin'. With luck, I might surprise him into tablin' his cards!"

The men about him nodded, and swallowed their visions of a hell-ripping

trip to town. King was right again, first crack.

But King had one other reason for riding into town. He had written out the true history of the Warrington case, along with a summary of conditions in Oso Basin, and he meant to send this to the United States Marshal at Corbett City. Then, if anything happened to him or the outfit, the U. S. Marshal might arrive in time to save Bob Warrington.

King shook hands with the men now; then went out with Bob to saddle up.

He led the big chestnut out of the barn, swung up into the saddle.

"Wal—" he nudged Redfire. "Hasta noches, Bob!"

"Vaya con Dios!" came the boy's voice from behind.

THE big chestnut took the trail with an eager thud of hooves. For four hours they pounded thus, and the sun was westering when they came at last in sight of Oso.

The town lay like a squat gray ex-crescence on the unbroken gray-yellow sweep of the Basin. Two things raised Oso above the common cow town of that day. The first was a water tank, that reared its two-hundred-gallon head proudly above the one-story shacks that made up Oso. The hotel bar and the Oso restaurant boasted running water, and a negro massaged a hand pump six hours a day to keep the tank filled.

The second great attraction was the railroad, stretching shining silver rails interminably on either side of town. Trains stopped only by request at Oso, and even then they snorted impatiently for departure. Nevertheless, the whole population turned out twice a day to watch the passengers rush by. Freights passed in the night, so Oso didn't bother about them. At night Oso had attractions of its own.

Strangely enough, King feasted his eyes upon neither of these much-boasted features of the town. King was watching a thin dust cloud far down the trail

ahead of him. And King's eyes had narrowed to thin triangular slits of frosty blue.

He had followed that dust cloud for two hours now. The rider had cut into the trail from broken country to the west, malpais where no honest man had good right to be. He was fogging it, too, for King's powerful chestnut was no slouch on a trail, yet Redfire had not noticeably gained on the rider ahead.

Therefore the esthetic possibilities of Oso were lost on King; and well might they be, for at that moment the rider who was causing him concern was looking for Blue Peter, and looking for him eagerly.

CHAPTER VII

BLUE PETER ACTS

THE rider on the trail ahead of King swung a sweat-and-dust lathered pony into the tie rail before the hotel bar, and dismounting, stamped hastily inside. He caught at once the bartender's eyes, and following the direction of their gaze, spied Blue Peter and three committee men at a table near the window.

The rider walked that way.

Blue Peter, shaven jowls darkly blue, looked up as the rider approached.

"Well, Chaca!" he said coldly. "It's about time yo're back. Where's Joe Hoskins?"

Chaca, chunky but nervous—a rare type—dropped into an empty chair at the table. His haggard eyes sought those of Blue Peter's.

"Pete," he stated solemnly. "Thar's hell to pay!"

"So?" Blue Peter poured the rider four fingers from the bottle on the table, smiled thinly as he watched the man toss it down. "So?" he said again. "Spin yore yarn, Chaca, an' let me be the judge of this hell-payin'. That's my job—thinkin'!"

Under Blue Peter's calmness, and the

encouraging effects of whisky straight, Chaca shed most of his nervousness.

"Yuh know yuh told Joe Hoskins to take me with him," he began. "Wal, about half way to the Warrington place, Joe, he gets to worritin', for no reason at all, fur's I could see.

"'Et's bin three days sence them fellers with Dutch Gus went out to the ranch,' says Joe, 'an' it 'pears to me thet they shoul'da showed by now. Now mebbe this is onct the boss figgered wrong, an' somethin' happened to 'em. Thet bein' the case, et'd be a fox-like idee ef'n you took to the hills above hyar an' watched my dust!'"

Chaca took time out to reach for the whisky bottle, and Blue Peter observed very softly to himself: "Joe Hoskins is the last man on this earth I'd trust for brains, an' yet he shore had a brain-storm this time!" . . . Blue Peter, you see, believed all this had happened the day before. He never did know that it was Joe Hoskins' hangover that had made him want to be alone, and had caused him to send Chaca up into the hills!

But aloud Blue Peter said coldly: "I see. Joe Hoskins was thinkin' again. An' o' course you followed his lead!"

Chaca started to squirm; then, remembering he was in the right, he became truculent.

"You betcha life I follered his lead! An' dam' glad I am of it, too! I'm a-sittin' right hyar, a-tellin' yuh this—but what happened to pore Joe, I don't know! . . .

"I took to the hills as Joe said, an' squatted me down on a p'int whar I could see the ranch house. I see Joe ride around to the back porch—an' thet's the last I seen o' Joe Hoskins!"

"A stranger, a tall feller with two guns, he comes out o' the ranch house after a while an' leads Joe's hoss down to the corral. He th'ows down the saddle an' turns the hoss loose. An' danged if thar ain't Dutch Gus' clay bank bronc cavortin' around the corral too, along with a couple cayuses thet looks a heap

like them the fellers thet went out with Gus was a-ridin'!"

The narrator paused dramatically, and reached again for the whisky. This was free liquor, and he proposed to make the most of it, no matter the importance of his tale. Blue Peter sat like a dark stone image, his eyes narrow, malign. The other three men at the table leaned forward, attentively.

Chaca resumed: "The stranger, he goes back to the ranch house, an' perty soon, who should I see comin' out with him but young Warrington!"

"Warrington?" echoed Blue Peter.

"Shore as I'm sittin' hyar! He an' the stranger haided toward the barn, talkin' amiable-like. Right friendly, they seemed."

"But yuh never saw Joe Hoskins again?"

"Nope. Nary again. I lit my shuck when I seed young Warrington an' this two-gun stranger was friendly."

"An' yuh didn't see signs o' anyone else around the ranch?"

"Nary a soul!" Chaca started to raise the whisky to his mouth, and then suddenly paused; the glass half way to his lips. His eyes opened wide, bulging like marbles nearly out of his head.

"Thar he is now!" he yelled. "The stranger thet captured pore Joe!"

DOWN the single street of Oso came a coolly upright figure, jaunty on a high-stepping chestnut. Narrowed frosty eyes appeared set straight ahead, yet actually they were shuttling from side to side of the dust-covered street, searching for a probable ambush. Danger seemed attendant with this rider, a danger as real as the two black guns low on his thighs.

Blue Peter leaned over his committee men so that he could see through the window.

"Yuh shore thet's the man?" he demanded of Chaca.

"Shore as hell's hot thet's the feller. He musta left jest after me!"

For a hushed moment Blue Peter studied the approaching horseman. Then he turned to the three committee men at the table.

"Catch me thet hombre!" he barked; and rising swiftly from the table, added: "Come on back, all of you, an' I'll tell yuh how I want it done!"

Over at the bar a lean, lanky old-timer watched with interest the exit of Blue Peter and his four men. Then, leaving his filled glass on the bar, he ambled casually to the window, to see what had caused their hasty retreat.

What he saw seemed to satisfy him. He stepped back to the bar, downed his drink, and called for a fresh bottle and a deck of cards. He picked up both and strolled to a vacant table in the front corner. Here he could watch both front door and the rear exit through which Blue Peter and his men had departed. It was a table pleasantly remote from possible bullets, yet close enough to be considered a ringside seat.

"Huh!" grunted the old-timer, settling down. "Sundog King! Wal, et's about time somethin' excitin' happened to this hyar town!"

But King did not immediately come to the Hotel Bar. He rode past, down to the railroad post office, to mail his letter to the U.S. Marshal.

Then he came back, stopped at one of the smaller saloons for a single drink, and by a few apparently casual questions learned all that he wanted to know about the town and its inhabitants.

It was dusk when he entered the Oso restaurant for supper; dark when he emerged. With the rest of the populace he gravitated toward the railroad, to watch the night train pull through.

It came, a bright light far down the roadway, and a hum of rails. Then a screeching whistle, and a thundering rush as the train went by, baggage and two coaches, a blurred line of yellow-lit windows. It disappeared into the darkness like it had come, a pin point of light far across the Basin, and a faint clicking of the rails.

The townsmen turned now, began straggling back to the saloons. King waited a little apart until the last of them had gone; until the street, lighted in dim yellow patches by the kerosene flares from four saloons and a restaurant, was clear of their moving figures. Then he too, walked up the street, but now his movements became swift and purposeful.

King had left Redfire in the Oso Liv-
ery Barn, paying the man in advance. Now he headed for the stable, saddled up by himself. Blowing out the lantern, he led Redfire outside, and closed the door behind him.

From where he stood he could see the Hotel Bar, a line of ponies before it, black silhouettes against the lighted windows. The Hotel Bar stood slightly apart from other buildings, and at its left side was a second tie rail, as King well knew from his inspection of it earlier in the day. He mounted now and rode across to it.

This tie rail on the side of the saloon was deserted, as King had hoped to find it. No sane puncher would walk all the way around the corner of a building when he could just as well tie his pony in front!

It was dark there at the side of the building, and King, dismounting, tested each gun by ratcheting the cylinder under the hammer. Then he filled the empty chamber in each, thereby making each six-shooter live up to its name. Sundog King did not expect trouble, nevertheless he had hopes. A hunch was working again.

He patted Redfire's nose and stepped around the corner. From inside the saloon came the subdued murmur of many voices. It was early yet. Later that subdued hum would become a noisy roar.

King stepped through the swinging door, quick and silent on his feet as a cat, and moved one pace sideways to the left; back against the wall. Here he stood, tall and straight against the wall, thumbs hooked in the crossed belts above

his guns, eyes glittering steely blue even in that dim and smoky light.

MEN looked up at his entry. King saw the quick jerk of heads, the sudden gleam of eyes. Some questioning; others fearful. King met them all with one swift sweep of his frosty eyes, narrowed now against the light. Hostile glances held his for the fraction of a second, then lost interest and turned away.

No known enemies here. King felt a sudden pang of disappointment. Impassively he stepped toward the bar.

It was a situation by no means new to King. For years he had followed a blood trail. He had entered a thousand cow town saloons in just that way—quick flip of door and side-step to the left: guns ready, eyes searching. Yet the man they sought was never there.

King's face showed disappointment. He shrugged, gave his order.

King turned now to Bob Warrington's business. The barkeep slid him a bottle, and he poured himself a drink whose slimmness was concealed by the three fingers encircling the glass. He tossed it off and leaned back against the bar, his gaze roving over the partly filled card tables.

Behind a table against the rear wall sat a blue-jowled man conferring with three others. He was dressed in smooth black broadcloth that lifted him apart from the other men in the saloon. Broadcloth in those days denoted either the professional gambler or "con" man; the hair-trigger peace officer; or the real Southern gentleman. This man was neither of these, unless he belonged to the first type. King did not like the close set of his eyes, nor the sardonic smile that twisted his blue-shaven jowls. Instinctively King knew that this was Blue Peter.

King poured himself a second, and then a third drink, the tiny quantity in each hidden by the fingers of his left hand.

Now Blue Peter rose leisurely from his table and sauntered toward the bar. As he walked he sized up Sundog—or he thought he did.

"Howdy!" he greeted King amiably. "That's an all-fired fine hoss you ride, stranger. Saw you come in this afternoon. Been in Oso before?"

"Wal, yes." King's face was expressionless. "Bought a li'l ammynition hyar two-three days ago."

"I see—goin' huntin'!" Blue Peter chuckled good-naturedly.

King's glance seemed to leap toward him.

"Mebbe. Only I bought Colt ca'-tridges."

Now there is but one thing, outside of mountain lions, that you hunt with a Colt, and that is man. Blue Peter either did not hear King, or did not want to hear. He signaled the bartender, and that individual, responding to his signals, planked down a labeled bottle in front of him. Blue Peter twisted out the cork, filled King's glass and his own. His face was a blue, smiling mask.

"Try this, my friend," he invited. "You'll find it a leetle better'n that rot-gut yuh been drinkin' . . . How!"

He raised the glass as he spoke, and King followed his example. The bartender regarded them smilingly.

If it had not been for that bartender, Blue Peter's ruse in capturing King might have been successful. But King had early learned that, in dealing with men he did not trust, it paid well not to watch the man speaking, but to watch the speaker's friends. So now King, closely observing the bartender without pretending to do so, saw the fellow's eyes shift to a point directly behind him. He saw them gleam with sudden interest. And in that same heartbeat he caught the soft shuffle of advancing feet.

King did not need to be told what was happening behind him. He exploded into action with the suddenness of gunpowder . . . even as Blue Peter's three committee men rushed upon him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CITIZENS' COMMITTEE

THE whisky glass in King's right hand flipped backward over his shoulder. Its contents struck one of the charging men squarely in the face. It fazed him for a split second, and his Colt barrel, swishing down, missed King's head, although it carried away his sombrero.

Now the other two men leaped for King's guns; but their clutching fingers tore loose as King hurled himself forward.

His left hand, lying idly on the bar, balled into a fist even as it shot upward. It landed flush on Blue Peter's jaw. A staggering blow, delivered with the weight of King's whole body behind it. It should have felled an ox, but it hardly jarred Blue Peter. Nevertheless, it delayed his draw for the thousandth of a second, which was all that King desired.

King dove for Blue Peter's swinging gun hand. The hurtling impact of his shoulder smashing into Blue Peter's short ribs drove that gentleman back gasping. King caught Blue Peter's hand with both his own just as the fingers touched walnut. He whirled then like a flash, twisting the arm upward behind Blue Peter's back.

Hammerlock . . .

It had all happened almost in the short space of time it took King's whisky glass to fall to the floor.

Blue Peter was between his own men and King now, unwillingly shielding him from them. The three committee men were crouched four feet away, on the spot where King had been when their first wild lunge had missed. Their Colts were leveled in their hands, hammers drawn. Yet for the short instant he could hold Blue Peter in front of him, King was safe.

He did not waste that instant. Maintaining a punishing hammerlock on

Blue Peter with his left hand, he reached down and drew Blue Peter's gun with his right.

Suddenly releasing his hold, King stepped back, gun in hand. Blue Peter stood for a moment tottering, uncertain of his balance. And King, drawing up his right knee almost to his chest, planted the heel of his boot into the small of Blue Peter's back and catapulted him forward like the kick of an army mule.

Blue Peter crashed headlong into the center of his trio; carrying one man backward, knocking the other two aside like ten-pins in a flying tangle of arms and legs. A Colt exploded somewhere in the middle of the *mêlée*, its bullet splintering the bar. And as if the shot had been a signal, every non-combatant in the room dropped to table level, seeking protection behind flimsy chairs, and at the same time trying to see all that happened.

Now King was the only man on his feet in the room. He raised Blue Peter's peacemaker and fired it four times with unspeakable rapidity. The four lamps on the wagonwheel in the center of the room went out like one, leaving the saloon in darkness.

Hell with the hinges off broke loose in that darkened room. There was a pandemonium of curses, and a rush toward the door. One of Blue Peter's deputies, staggering to his feet, shot at a figure that appeared between the swinging doors. The crowd saw the man fall, and yelling crazily, broke in a solid mass toward the street.

Somehow, Blue Peter got there first. Braced against the mad onrush of the crowd, he lit a match. The face of the dead man on the threshold seemed to leap up at him, ghostly in the sputtering light. The crowd behind swore.

"Hell!" snapped Blue Peter. "This ain't him! It's Jed Lambert!"

Then from somewhere on the side of the saloon, came the swift drum of a racing pony. A rider, a dark blob against the night, shot like an arrow into

the center of Main Street and sped away.

"There he goes!" shrieked a townsman. And Colts flamed with the words.

"Get 'im!"

Instantly, as if in echo, came the double blast of a sawed-off shotgun from the darkness of the street. Both windows of the saloon crashed in, and men grunted and cursed as hot buckshot tore through flesh. The crowd shrank back inside the saloon, glad of the protection of four walls.

Colts, yes; but buckshot, no!

And Sundog King, dropping a warm scattergun into the dust of Oso's street, grinned into the darkness and gently urged Redfire onward. So far, King had not even pulled a gun of his own. He had just used what weapons he found handy.

FOR as the lights in the saloon disintegrated into broken glass and dripping coal oil, King had leaped backward to the end of the bar. Here, behind oak plank, he crouched for a breathless moment, while the yells of the crowd swelled to an angry roar. Here, Blue Peter's Colt in hand, he saw a man push through the swinging doors and drop as a gun flamed from the darkness of the room. Instantly then King was on his feet, making for the door—the rear door.

He had figured his escape beforehand. In all that jostling, struggling mass of cursing humanity there was but one clear lane to the rear of the saloon. That was behind the bar. King went swiftly, left hand outstretched before him, right drawn in at the hip, holding Blue Peter's Colt.

Halfway along, King's outthrust left hand came into violent contact with the bartender, rushing toward him in the darkness. The barkeep yelped, but his startled cry was lost in the medley of noise from the crowd. Besides, it was cut short suddenly. King's right hand flashed up and down in a short, swift arc; and a forty-ounce Colt, held side-

ways, smacked against the barkeep's bald head.

The drink dispenser dropped, and something clattered to the floor beside him. King stooped quickly, and picked it up. A sawed-off double-barreled scattergun!

"Bloody-minded cuss!" grinned King to himself; and stepped swiftly over the sodden body on the floor.

He made the back door without interference then, and running quickly on high-heeled boots, found Redfire waiting for him. An instant later he was leaning far over to the left as Redfire took the turn into Main Street.

Somebody behind him yelled; flash of Colts lit the front of the saloon. Bullets screamed by overhead. King grinned again, half-turning in his saddle. The scattergun sprang to his shoulder, and the double report hammered back into the night.

Colt bullets were meat and drink to brave men; but buckshot—they all drew the line at buckshot!

King dropped the empty shotgun, and leaning forward in the saddle, put his mind seriously to throwing distance behind. He had reached the outskirts of Oso, was pounding up the rise back of town, when he heard behind him the deep-toned *bong-g* of a steel triangle struck with a sledge.

Three times the triangle sounded; then three times again. It was a wild alarm that could be heard for miles. The notes seemed to hover in the air about King, somehow menacing.

Yet King rode on, tight-lipped; his frosty eyes boring into the darkness ahead. He knew what the thunder of the triangle meant. . . . It was Blue Peter calling together the members of his bloody "Citizens' Committee."

TWELVE men answered Blue Peter's summons. Most of them had heard the shooting, were already on their way when the ringing of the triangle thundered through the night. They lined up under the

water tank in the smoky light of lanterns, a hard-bitten outlaw crew that would dare anything—for fun or money.

Blue Peter addressed them briefly.

"It's that Warrington brat again," he snarled, his face a darkly working mask of hate. "A pity we didn't string him up along with his father. He's hired hisself a gunman now, a desperado from the border who'll stick at nothin'!"

Blue Peter pointed dramatically toward the Hotel Bar, where new lamps had been lit.

"There's pore Jed Lambert over there. The gunman shot him down without a chanct. Couple days ago I sent Dutch Gus and two other boys out to the Warrington place. They ain't come back yet. Mebbe they was dry-gulched, too!"

"Today, Joe Hoskins an' Chaca rode out to see what had become o' them. Chaca here, got away; but the killer captured pore Joe. . . . He's out at the Warrington ranch now—still alive!"

Under Blue Peter's cunning persuasiveness, a swelling murmur from his twelve men grew to a throaty growl of vengeance. They surged toward their horses, eager as wolves at the kill.

But again Blue Peter's voice lifted, held them yet another moment while he poured powder on the mounting flames of wrath.

"We're a-goin' to get Joe Hoskins tonight, boys! We're a-goin' to catch the fellers that captured him an' string 'em up, or trail 'em down till they drop in their tracks! We're a-goin' to even the score tonight, boys, and no mercy shown!"

His voice rose to a booming shout:

"Twenty beeves apiece for every man that rides with me tonight . . . an' one hundred more for the man or men who brings me Warrington's scalp! Now, dam' yore souls, straddle leather, an' ride!"

At the head of his committee Blue Peter thundered down the main street of Oso. His coldly calculating brain thrilled to the pound of hooves that were

every moment bringing him nearer to his heart's desire—undisputed control of this section of the Oso Basin. Hidden in the darkness, his face was a cruelly smiling mask. The sardonic grin set on his blue jowls like a painted sneer.

The moon came up, a thin crescent behind him, as the hard-riding group reached the top of the slope back of town. It bathed the wide reaches of the Basin in a pale, ghostly light; silvered the high ridges far to the northwest. The rise Blue Peter's men were on thrust a long black shadow ahead of them into the Basin. And just emerging from the paint of that shadow, something over a mile away, was a lone horseman, vaguely black and silver in the moonlight.

"*There he is!*"

Blue Peter's men let out one exultant yell and spurred down the long slope on the first lap of the blood trail.

To King, riding far ahead, that yell sounded like the excited bay of a hunting pack. He looked over his shoulder. Blue Peter's men near the top of the rise were like tiny moving blots silhouetted in moonlight. Their trail dust drifted upward, a tiny tinted cloud against the crescent moon.

King smiled grimly.

"Blood on the moon! . . . Wonder if Blue Peter knows that thirteen is a unlucky number?"

IT was three hours to daylight when Redfire pounded past the Warrington ranch house. King's Colt raised in the air exploded twice, then a third time. The reports were echoed from the hilltop behind the barn, where a blanket screened Colt flashes. Shorty and Slim, Tom and Frenchy, were up and moving.

King kicked the smoking shells from his six-shooter, hastily reloaded. Bob came out of the blacksmith shop to greet him, a Winchester in one hand, while with the other he rubbed sleep from his eyes.

"Trouble?" he asked, just the tiniest

tremor of excitement thrilling in his voice.

"Trouble with a capital T!" boomed King; and laughed. "Blue Peter an' his hull committee's on my trail, bayin' like bloodhounds! Blood on the moon, son! But shore I almost forgot something . . ."

King whirled Redfire, dashed toward the ranch house. Bob saw the flare of a match in the kitchen; then the glimmer of a coal oil lamp turned low. In half a minute King was back.

"Jest to show 'em where we *ain't!*" he chuckled. He slapped Redfire into the barn, raced back to the adobe. The roll of hooves was plainly audible now. "A hossback charge first off would be plumb annoyin'. Give 'em a chanct to get afoot an' they'll be more cautious!"

King led the way into the blacksmith shop. His hand touched Bob's in the dark, and Bob felt himself holding a small square of matches.

"Phosphorus matches," King explained. "Rub 'em on yore front sight for this night shootin'. Now you take th' left winder an' loophole. An' be shore you got plenty ammynition stacked beside you. The devil hisself knows we're gonna be plenty busy tonight!"

CHAPTER IX

THE BALL OPENS

BEYOND the ranch house appeared thirteen riders, spread fanwise and fogging dust, vague shadows in the dim moonlight. One hundred yards from the ranch house the two center men slowed and piled off horseflesh; came forward on foot, seeking cover. That was to be the first point of attack.

The wings, dividing left and right, swept around the ranch house, galloping single file in an encircling crescent.

"They see the light, an' figger we're in the ranch house," muttered King, in low gutturals that carried less than a whisper. "They'll circle, an' look for

cover. An' shore as shootin' some son with a eye for detail will spot this adobe an' use it. Thet's when the fun will begin!"

But not yet did that happen. A single command—Blue Peter's voice—rang out on the night air. The dim silver-black phantoms plunging past on either side of the building whirled as if drilled to the maneuver, and charged headlong toward the ranch house. They gained the shadows of the walls, flung themselves from leather. Colts in hand they circled the building, watching each door and window with wary eyes.

Again Blue Peter's voice boomed.

"Warrington! Yore game's up. You an' yore hired killer throw out yore guns, an' foller yoreselves, reachin' for the moon!"

No answer but his own echo. But at that precise moment the lamp King had lit in the kitchen sputtered once, its coal oil exhausted, and went out.

Blue Peter thought he was defied.

"Yuh hear me, Warrington? Three seconds to come out, or we'll set the buildin' on fire an' burn yuh out like rats!"

A hundred yards away in the blacksmith shop, Bob heard King quietly chuckle.

"Wonder how Joe Hoskins likes that, hog-tied an' gagged inside the ranch house?" he murmured.

Three seconds passed—four—five. Blue Peter spoke again. There was a scrambling rush among the black figures in the shadow of the ranch house. Gathering dry grass, paper, stuff to make a fire.

Bob Warrington divined, rather than heard, a Winchester hammer slide back to full cock next him. King was holding down the trigger so it would not click. Over by the ranch house a match struck, flared. Its meager brilliance threw three men into black relief. The committee man holding the match cupped it in his hands, stooped down to touch off the tinder.

That fire was never lit. The Win-

chester in King's hands flamed from the door of the adobe, a wicked crashing stream of red. The single report burst in the night like the very crack of doom. Echoes hammered from the wall of the ranch house, doubled from the barn behind; lost themselves muttering in the high hills.

The man holding the match came upright slowly, like a bent twig straightening. He turned halfway around to face the blacksmith shop. The burning match threw pain contorted features into sharp relief. An instant he stood, while the match went out in his cupped hands. Then he fell, toppling sidewise into the tinder he had meant to fire.

And on the heels of his fall came a yell—a hoarse angry yell . . . from inside the ranch house. Followed by a stream of acid-proof profanity.

Joe Hoskins had swallowed his gag. "Can't blame him," King chortled, "for not relishin' th' idee o' bein' toasted alive by his own pards. But it's one down, son, an' th' score's still thirteen!"

NOW the real attack began. The committee men led their horses out of sight, tied them to the front porch of the ranch house. Blue Peter placed four men with rifles in the kitchen and pantry. The others were to surround the blacksmith shop.

From the shadows of the ranch house crouching shapes sped erratically, like mice from a disturbed nest. They ran weaving and dodging, vague silver-black figures dimly indistinct in the moonlight. Two of them as they came to cover—an old wagonwheel on the ground; a rusty plowshare where it had no right to be—dropped behind it, disappearing from sight as if by magic.

Six others scattered in bunk house, barn and two wagon sheds.

King and Bob tried futilely to stop that scurrying rush. They did their best, but the light was too poor for wing-shooting. Their bullets merely lent the sprinters frantic speed.

Now each time they fired, a half-

dozen rifles answered the flash. The four men in the ranch house were playing havoc with the door. They had fired at the first flashes of King's rifle, and their bullets kept pounding through the planks long after King had moved to the window.

It was the first time Bob had been under fire, and he could not say that he liked the sensation. There would come first the sharp *smack-k* of a bullet against the door, the beginning of a shrill whine cut short, and a dull *thud-d* as the flattened lead dug into the adobe of the rear wall.

It was a little medley of three sounds merged almost—not quite—into one. A song of death.

Bullets came through Bob's window, too, driving past him with vicious *zip-ps*. The wind of one fanned his face, and involuntarily he drew back, nerves tensed.

He glanced around at King, busy as a beaver at the other window. King was silent, enjoying himself; comfortably at home in the smell of burning powder. As Bob looked toward him he gave a low chuckle.

"Winged one, sartin!" he murmured. "Shootin' from the other side o' his hideout now, an' shootin' mighty slow! How you comin', Bob? Like the sound o' them bullets slappin' yuh in the face?" he asked.

King's tone was kindly. It acted like a tonic on Bob. More people died in bed than from swallowing lead, anyway! . . .

"Them bullets are just whisperin' me to sleep," said Bob, and grinned at himself in the dark. "If they didn't come so blamed fast, I could maybe call 'em by their pet names!"

Powder smoke went to King's head like old brandy. But he wasn't the only one who liked its acrid odor. Up on the hilltop back of the barn four gun waddies crouched in eager attentiveness. The battle was spread out below them like a scene from a play.

"See, what'd I tell yuh?" grunted Slim, as two flashes in quick succession

sputtered from the bunk house. "Thar's two o' the skunks in thar!"

"An' two others in the barn," added Frenchy. "I been watchin' ver-ry close."

"I make one each in each o' them two wagon sheds," drawled Shorty; "but boy howdy! ain't ol' Sundog King an' the button burnin' powder noble-like? Reminds me of a reg'lar Fourth o' July celebration! . . . What you say, Tom?"

"I said that made six we got spotted, an' there's two more by their lonesome in open cover to the left o' the adobe. Thet's eight altogether—leavin' five in the ranch house, which is where most o' the hullabaloo is comin' from anyhow. Anybody see any sense in waitin' any longer?"

"I don't," Slim heaved his long length up from the ground. "Let's get movin'. We got work to do!"

SHANG Gifford and Timberline Thompson, two of Blue Peter's smokers, crouched by the wide, open window of the Warrington bunk house and did their best to make sharpshooting a pleasure.

Directly across from them was the dim bulk of the adobe blacksmith shop, from which red rifle flashes stabbed toward them at intervals. Both Shang and Timberline were intrigued by the fact that these bullets were passing through the roof well above their heads. But not being of an analytical mind, they took this as a special gift of the gods. With their mind on the cattle bonus Blue Peter had promised, they bent their energies to getting in as many shots as possible before the opposing rifleman should discover his mistake and begin to make things unpleasant.

"Sights must be knocked off kilter," grunted Timberline, firing rapidly at a flash from the adobe.

"Naw, prob'bly sightin' along his bar'l, an' throwin' up too far. We got a good chanct to get him now. Come daylight an' he'll begin to smoke 'em closter."

So engrossed were they in this comparatively safe pot-shooting, that neither noticed a tinny clatter behind them. Two dark shadows, one long and one short, had upset a bread pan as they scrambled through the cook shack window.

Another bullet whacked through the boards above their heads, and Shang and Timberline chuckled in glee as they emptied magazines at the flash that sped it. Under cover of their firing, the cook shack door opened and two shadows, one long and one short, slipped into the bunk house.

Timberline was aware of a startled gasp from his companion. He looked over that way, curiously. And at the same instant, something prodded him in the short ribs. Something hard and cold, remarkably like a gun muzzle.

"Hey!" yelled Timberline. "What you think yo're doin'?"

"Drop it!" a strange voice hissed in his ears. "Shut thet yawp o' yore's or I'll grease yuh into Hell with lead smoke sticks!"

Timberline shut his yawp. And thereby submitted to several indignities, the first of which was losing his gun.

Presently came another voice out of the darkness.

"Okay, Shorty?"

"Acey-deucey!" chuckled the short shadow. "But it'll be aces an' eights, dead man's hand, if this long hunk o' sheep herder don't quit wigglin' whilst I'm tryin' to tie his hands! Nigh as overgrown as you are, Slim!"

"Huh! Smart alec, huh? Wal, when yuh get through hog-tyin' thet feller, yuh might let off yore Colt three times through thet winder. Sorta let King know we've been hyar!"

With hands tied behind them, and a figure-eight hobble around their ankles, the prisoners were led back through the cook shack, out the window, and in a circuitous route to the barn.

Here they found Tom and Frenchy awaiting them, with the two men who had been in the barn.

Without a word the four prisoners

were roped side by side to the corral fence. Their bound wrists were raised behind them and lashed to the second rail of the corral. The hobbles were tightened on their feet and drawn back to the lower rail. Finally they were gagged with their own neckerchiefs.

Slim stepped back as the last knot was tested.

"A nice row o' jail birds!" he grunted. "First they made a orphan out of a boy, an' then they try to rob him!"

"Very bad fellows," grinned his pal, showing white teeth in a grin.

Frenchy was left to guard the prisoners. Shorty was despatched to the bunk house to keep up a slam fire so that Blue Peter might not suspect what was happening. Tom and Slim set out to capture the men in the wagon sheds and in the open.

They came back with but half their quota.

"Them's the last," said Tom simply, as he helped Frenchy tie the two committee men up. "They was the fellers in the open."

Frenchy nodded wisely. He had heard a little flurry of Colt shots from the wagon sheds. He knew what Tom could do with a Colt. And Slim, standing silently by, looked just as capable.

SUNDOG KING smiled as enemy fire ceased on a three-quarter circle around the adobe. Crouching at an angle of the heavy door plank, he pounded lead in a steady stream at the ranch house. Blue Peter must be kept busy enough so that he wouldn't notice the slackened fire of his committee men.

Now from the bunk house a rifle began cracking again. Soon its fire was supplemented from two places in the barn. King heard the bullets thump into the thick adobe walls. He noticed with a grin that none came through the windows. Friendly hands were tooling those rifles.

King called Bob to him.

"Keep them fellers in the ranch house

huntin' cover for a minute," he directed "I'm gonna try something."

He hastened across the cluttered floor, and his Colt flashed twice, then a third time, from the rear window.

Instantly an echo came nine shots, fired in the same rhythm. Three from the bunk house; three each from separate places in the barn.

King laughed aloud.

"Reckon Blue Peter must think we all belong to the same lodge! But it's all I wanted to know. The way's clear out thar, an' I'm goin' out to join the outfit. You keep steady in hyar, Bob. Keep plantin' bullets wherever you see flashes, but remember to keep 'em high. It's an hour till daylight, which gives me jest sixty minutes to bust into yore ranch house! So long now! An' listen for some two-listed shootin'!"

"An' I'll be doin' some, King," the boy said.

King dove out the window, rolled over headforemost, came to his feet, and sprinted toward the barn. The bulk of the blacksmith shop behind him screened him from Blue Peter's riflemen. Tom met him at the door.

"Thet you, Tom?" King jerked. "Got all them fellers safe?"

"All but two, who ain't worryin' none no more!"

"Fine! Our luck's holdin'! I figger to circle the ranch house an' get inside while it's still dark. Come daylight an' we'll deal Blue Peter a new hand!"

"Reckon you'll need me for thet job, too!" interposed Slim, pushing forward.

"Yo're already elected for another job!" King waved him back. "I'm appointin' you leader o' this hyar expedition case'n Tom an' I bite off more'n we can chew. Get Bob Warrington outa thet adobe if yuh have to, an' run for Corbett. Meantime, better let Shorty an' Frenchy know what's happenin'."

Slim shook his head dolefully.

"Thet's a awful task to wish on one man," he said sadly. "You jest don't ee-magine how mad Shorty'll be when he hears he missed this scrap!"

DAWN was breaking over the Warrington ranch. The bright flashes of rifle fire were losing their vividness against the dull gray background. Fifty yards on the townward side of the ranch house, two figures materialized as if by magic from the ground.

Silently, on high-heeled cowboy boots, they sprinted toward the ranch house.

"Watch out for them hosses!" breathed Sundog King.

"Hell with the hosses! Watch them winders!" panted Tom in return. Both his guns were out.

The thirteen cow ponies tied to the front porch snorted and reared, as cow ponies will . . . then, like dim phantoms seen but not believed, the two men were across the porch and crouching in the big living room.

In breathless silence they waited there, Colt hammers drawn, while seconds lengthened into minutes. From the rear of the building came the murmur of men's voices, punctuated by intermittent rifle reports.

Gradually the light grew stronger. The room took shape before the punchers' eyes. Dim objects became clear. The east window shone pinkly translucent.

King gripped Tom's arm. "Let's go!" he whispered.

Stealthily, four long-barreled Colts outthrust before them, the two men crossed the room.

The Warrington ranch house was a low two-story affair, with but a single bedroom upstairs. The large living room in front opened at the left into a tiny office; at the rear into the dining room. Left of the dining room were two doors, one leading into a bedroom, the others inclosing the stairway to the upper floor.

Behind was the kitchen, with its pantry, half-sunken store room and wide rear porch extending the breadth of the house.

King and Tom, moving on silent feet through the dining room, examined the

bedroom at the left as a precautionary measure. It was empty. They passed on.

The stairway door was closed, but King opened it softly to peer upstairs. But the stairs turned to the left a short way up, running along the side of the house, and he could not see into the room above. Nor had they time to investigate it. King knew from experience that those stairs creaked, and high-heeled boots on the bare boards made a racket like a drunken clog dancer.

Time was precious, and King waved Tom onward.

Shoulder to shoulder the two gunmen pushed into the kitchen. And stepped quickly apart, left and right of the door.

And almost in that same instant, as his glance swept the room, King knew that he had made a mistake.

No time to back out now, though.

FOUR men were crouched by windows against the farther wall. Four pairs of startled eyes flashed toward the door. Wind-browed faces went suddenly white under their tan, and gun hands started toward Colt butts.

Hard men those gunmen of Blue Peter's. They had lived their life by the law of the gun. They had met death face to face a hundred times, and laughed in its grinning jaws. Yet never had they been closer to death than they were at that moment—and they knew it. If ever they had seen death in the icy flame of a fellow man's eyes, they saw it now.

Pale blue, opaque eyes of Tom; frosty blue depths of Sundog King's. Yet both scintillant with a strange luminosity as chill, as vivid, and as mysterious as the northern lights.

Blue Peter's men reached for their guns . . . and stopped abruptly, as with a jerk. Just for an instant they hesitated, but he who hesitates in a gun battle is lost.

"Elevate!" snapped Sundog King;

and four pairs of brawny arms went sullenly up.

Yet the battle was but half won. Those four gunmen, desperate now, needed but the fraction of a second to flash into action. And—the thought was churning in King's mind—where was Blue Peter?

King dared not shift his eyes for the hundredth of a second from the men before him. He knew he must not show the inner tension he felt. Seconds were precious now; yet outwardly he was as impassive as sun weathered stone, except for his blazing eyes.

"Will you collect the gents' hardware, Tom?" he drawled; and smiled even as he spoke the words.

Tom nodded, started forward.

And in that same heart beat, Tom's right shoulder jerked as a report rang out in the front of the house. He staggered; his right arm went limp; the gun dropped from his nerveless fingers.

And before it ever touched the floor Blue Peter's four gunmen had leaped apart with their gun hands flashing downward. And hell broke loose flaming in the room.

CHAPTER X

GUN THUNDER

BLUE PETER felt an oppressive and sharply distinct sense of danger hanging over him where he watched the adobe blacksmith shop. It was a sort of "sixth sense," a highly developed frontiersman's impression of coming trouble. Blue Peter valued it highly. It had saved his hide on numerous occasions.

Lying upstairs in the Warrington ranch house, across what had been Bob Warrington's bed, Blue Peter listened with all his physical senses alert, and that insistent sixth sense warning . . . warning.

Blue Peter heard the door of the stairway below him open softly—too

softly—and as softly close again. He left his rifle poking past the window sill and came upright slowly, careful not to make the bed springs creak, and felt for his Colt's.

Then he slid out of his boots and on stockinged feet, gun in one hand, boots in the other, Blue Peter stole silently down the stairs. Through the closed door he heard Sundog King's sharp command.

He waited then for the crash of gun shots, but none came. The game was up . . . but not yet had Blue Peter played out his string!

Through the open door into the kitchen he could see a shoulder, a right shoulder with a gun at the end of the arm. He thought at first that this was King; then he heard King speak from the right of the door.

Two men, then; two or more . . . and four of his own fighting men facing them! Blue Peter smiled faintly. He raised his triggerless Colt, and sighting carefully so as to get his bullet as far into the shoulder as possible, he let the hammer fall.

For an instant he waited, peering through the smoke with leveled gun. Then from the kitchen burst such a crashing hell of gunfire that rocked even the iron nerves of Blue Peter Farley.

Blue Peter knew now the ranch house was no place for him. He backed swiftly through the dining room, whirled, and crossed living room and front porch on the run. Then he was in the saddle, spurring his pony straight out into the Basin, headlong away from the Warrington ranch.

And behind him the explosions of many Colts swelled to a staccato roar, thundered for three heart-stopping seconds, and died away as suddenly as they had begun.

FOR the tenth part of a second, as Tom staggered forward with his shoulder shattered, King's glance flashed toward him. Almost instantly it was back on the four men be-

fore him—but that fraction of an instant cost three lives.

Blue Peter's men, knowing that their chief was somewhere in the house, were tensed for sudden action. When the break came they were ready for it. At the crack of Blue Peter's Colt they flashed into action as one man, with the swiftness of a wounded puma. Short-guns flamed from holster tops, and spurting puffs of blue-gray smoke burst swirling in the room.

But fast as those four gunmen were, Sundog King and Tom were faster. Blue Peter's men were dealing now with a two-gun artist who shot as if the devil had been his teacher; and with a wolverine-eyed killer who took grim toll for a bullet-shattered shoulder.

Their three guns blazed as one in a crashing salvo of flame. Smoke blossomed around them, and death flickered through the blue-gray cloud like the darting tongues of angered snakes.

The first committee man went down like a pole-axed steer, twisting as he dropped from the shock of hurtling lead. His gun went off as his fingers clenched in the death grip, its bullets splintering the floor at King's feet.

A second man collapsed like a half-filled sack of grain. His knees went out from under him, he loosed one burbling scream, and plunged forward to the floor, his Colt exploding as he fell.

The third man had his chance. His Colt came up level and fired. Its bullet sped true, low down toward the center of King's chest. But the luck that had carried King through a hundred gun fights saved him now. Outlaw lead flattened on the frame of his left Colt, smashed it back against his chest. But even as it struck, his right-hand gun exploded, and the third committee man's outlaw career was ended in a stream of flame and smoke.

Long-barreled peacemakers swung on the fourth man. But the fatal shots never came.

Over in the corner lanky Joe Hoskins had thrown down his gun, and with

fear written whitely on his face, was stretching trembling arms above his head.

"Don't shoot, boys!" said Joe.

The fight in the ranch house kitchen was over.

But from outside, curiously dull in ears deafened by gunshots, came the swift thrum of a racing pony's hooves.

BLUE PETER was seventy yards away when King gained the front porch. He fired twice at the fleeing figure—all the shells that were left in his gun. Then, raising his voice in a lung-splitting shout, he bellowed:

"Get him! It's Blue Peter!"

Almost instantly, it seemed, came three rifle shots—one from the blacksmith shop, one from the bunk house, and one from the barn.

Blue Peter's pony crossed its forelegs and went down like a sledged steer. Blue Peter himself hurtled forward from the saddle, somersaulted on the ground, and lay still.

King leaped down from the porch, raced toward him. But another figure, a slim, dark-haired boy of sixteen, reached Blue Peter before King. Bob Warrington jerked the Colt from Blue Peter's holster and tucked it in his belt.

Now Blue Peter moaned. His eyes flickered; opened to narrow slits. His right hand leaped by instinct to the empty holster at his side. Not by any facial sign did Blue Peter betray the dismay he must have felt. His eyes opened wider, focused on Bob and King. His lips twisted upward in a thin, sardonic grin.

Blue Peter would die as he had lived. He would wear that grim smiling mask until the end.

"Yuh've got me," he said. "Where's all my men?"

"Three of 'em cashed jest now when you wingshot Tom," said King, very slow and distinct. "Yo're responsible for thet, Blue Farley. Two cashed last night—them thet was in the wagon shed.

Joe Hoskins is left in the ranch house; the other six are hog-tied behind the barn."

"Any more of yuh beside that feller in the ranch house?"

"I don't see any, do you?" Somehow King still distrusted Blue Peter. Even now he did not wish to show the true power of his hand. Evidently Blue Peter thought that Bob alone had killed his horse.

"Yo're a fool for luck!" he growled, and slowly strove to boost himself from the ground.

He came upright gingerly, as though fearful of broken bones. His black suit was dust-covered, his hat gone, his hair matted. His right leg seemed stiff, for he groaned as he tested it. But the smile was still on his face, and, resting his weight on his one sound leg, he stared defiantly at King and Bob.

Now Bob stepped close to him. Bob's face was very white. His eyes had a feverish glitter.

"Blue Peter Farley," he said. "you hung John Soames, and you hung my father. Yore men will go free. But you . . . there's only one thing we can do with you."

It was a simple statement, a sentence of death. Blue Peter acknowledged it with a tiny flicker of his eyes. Then they masked, narrowed, became opaque behind their lids.

"Yo're startin' early to hang men, boy," he said. "Better let me take charge o' this here lynchin'."

He hobbled to the dead pony, stooped grimly and picked the rawhide rope from the saddle. He turned then, took one step toward the barn . . .

Suddenly his injured leg gave way beneath him. He staggered forward, hands outflung to catch himself. Falling, he crashed heavily against Bob. And then turning, twisting with a lithe speed that would have done credit to a cat, he came upright again. And the forty-four he had snatched from Bob's belt was pressed into the center of the boy's spine.

"Hold it!" Blue Peter snapped, as King's Colt leaped to cover him. "You'll get me, but I'll get one shot! And that one shot will kill the boy here!"

Hammer down, the barrel of the triggerless .44 pressed into Bob Warrington's back. Even a bullet through the brain—instant death—would relax Blue Peter's thumb on the hammer, and send lead crashing through Bob's heart.

Slowly, reluctantly, King holstered his gun and let his gun belt drop.

"You win now," he stated grimly, "but if you harm that boy, I'll get you if I have to drag yore body clear from Hell!"

Blue Peter turned his back. His Colt prodded Bob viciously.

"Drop yore gunbelt an' get goin'," he said, "toward them hosses by th' ranch house. An' take it easy, 'cause my leg *does* hurt me a mite!"

IN the bunk house a hundred-odd yards away, Shorty, his good-humored face serious for once, fingered the Winchester that lay across the window-sill before him.

Shorty's eyes were narrowed calculatingly; his brain weighing odds and chances. One hundred yards was long range. But in a match once, Shorty had shot the head off a live turkey at the same distance.

Now his forefinger stole toward the trigger; his cheek nestled against the stock. The rifle kicked back against Shorty's shoulder, and for an instant a spreading cloud of smoke obscured his vision. . . .

Bob Warrington felt a sudden glancing blow where Blue Peter's gun muzzle pressed his back. A Colt exploded with a deafening report at his side, its flame searing his left arm. Instinctively Bob leaped to the right, turning in mid-air as he did so.

Before him he saw Blue Peter, blood streaming from the curled fingers of his half-raised gun hand. Beyond him the forty-four lay in the dust, smoke trickling gently from its muzzle.

Again the rifle in the bunk house cracked. Bob saw a dust puff leap from the side of Blue Peter's broadcloth coat; heard the *thud-d* of the bullet, and the whine of flattened lead.

Blue Peter jerked to the impact of hurtling lead. He rocked on his feet, and his whole body trembled. He raised his bloody right-hand palm outward toward the bunk house, as if to tell the rifleman there to cease, because his work was done.

His hand dropped then. His head fell forward on his breast. His knees shook; he swayed—and crumpled forward to the ground.

FIVE shots from a six-gun shattered the afternoon peace of Oso, and sent its citizens on the jump to door and window. The quickest of them were just in time to see the steel triangle of the Citizens' Committee fall from its place at the top of the water tower, bounce from the platform, and drop thirty feet to the street below.

A lean, bronzed cowboy, mounted on a big chestnut whose red coat flashed in the sun, calmly kicked the empty shells from his gun and reloaded. He seemed to do this without looking, for the watchers of Oso felt his frosty blue eyes searching them out even behind their doors and windows. It made them extremely uncomfortable.

Alongside this cowpuncher was a slim lad whom Oso recognized collectively as Bob Warrington. And flanking these two, and a little behind them, were two gunmen whom Oso decided they would not like to meet—just then.

Behind these four—and now Oso began to count noses and gasp—came Joe Hoskins and six other mournful looking men, with their wrists tied to their saddle horns. And riding drag on the whole colorful procession were two other capable appearing punchers with rifles at the ready across their saddle bows.

Through the quiet, deserted street of Oso rode the silent parade. And on

down to the telegraph station by the railroad. Here the prisoners were taken from their ponies one by one, and lashed together in the meager shade of the depot.

For three hours Oso wondered. Then far down the tracks appeared a train, where no train was due. It was a special; locomotive and caboose. Two United States deputy marshals alighted. They loaded the seven prisoners into the caboose and climbed in after them. The locomotive tooted twice, as if in derision at Oso; then snorted its way back to Corbett.

The six riders mounted and rode leg-to-leg back through the dusty town. And Oso, craning dirty necks eagerly, saw them disappear over the rise behind the town.

* * * * *

But here, out on the wide, lonely stretches of the Basin, the six riders paused. Four of them moved silently apart. King and Bob were left alone.

"So long, son!" said King; and gripped Bob's hand.

Bob hung onto that hand as though he would never let King go. His eyes were pleading; his voice had a tiny break in it.

"Shore, King, you don't have to go now! *Please!*"

King, looking at him over their clasped hands, smiled; but it was a smile that somehow laid his heart bare.

"Yep, Bob," he said gently. "Trouble's over—yore trouble. But somewhere thar's a man I have to meet. I've been searchin' for years; an' somewhere, sometime, I'll find him!"

"Yore troubles are over, son. But remember, always, *yo're* the Warrington now! Carry on! . . . an' sometimes think of Sundog King!"

The chestnut leaped forward. King was gone.

And behind him, the five members of the Warrington outfit drew close together and watched him until he was but a thin dust line on the far gray-yellow sweep of the Basin.

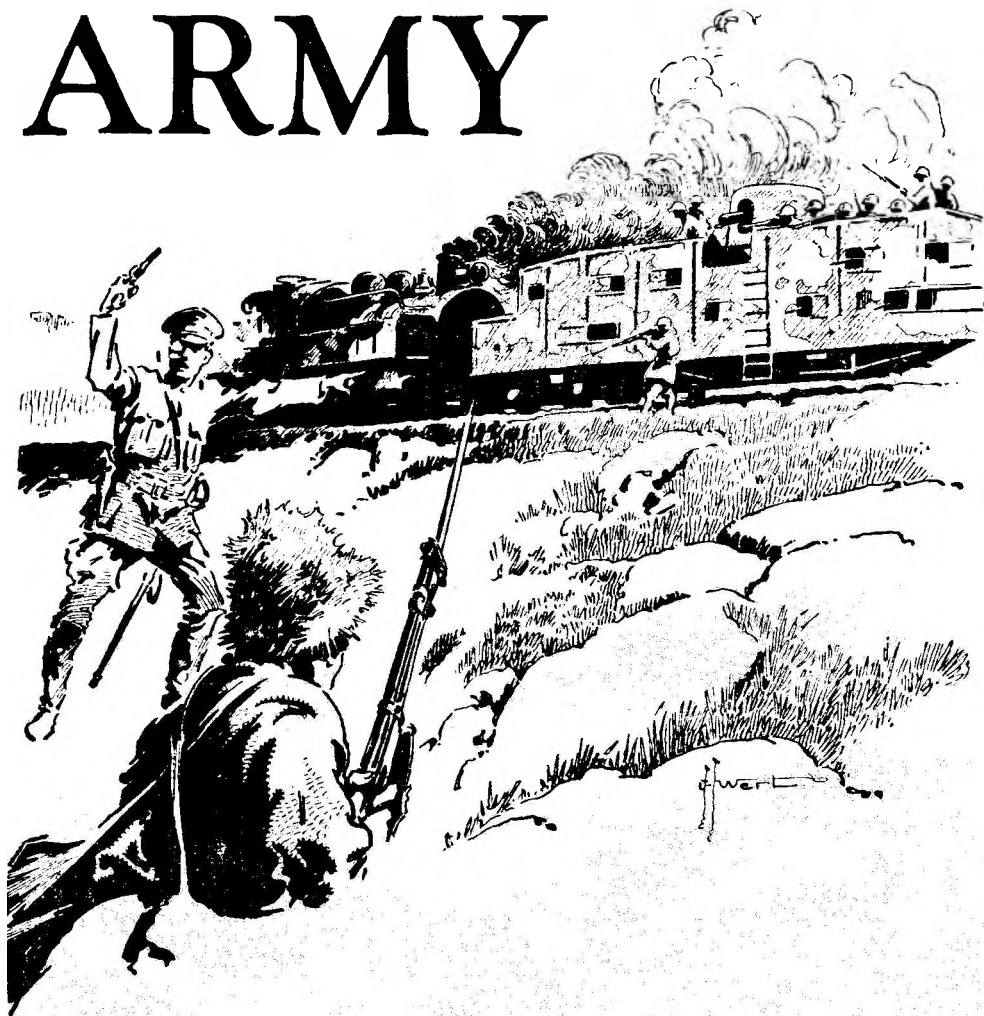
THE END

TOY



All he wanted was a Sam Browne belt and a fancy sword. But they stripped him down to a pair of tights and gave him six-ounce gloves for decoration.

ARMY



By FRANKLIN H. MARTIN

TERRANCE GALLANT was on his knees. His left cheek bone was swollen and his left eye completely closed. A red smear was his mouth. Sweat matted his black hair and ran down his face. Breath came in gulps. And yet, as he pushed the ground away from him with stiff arms, and struggled to his feet, the look he gave the man who was beating him to a pulp was one of absolute and utter contempt.

Private Terrance Gallant was taking

the beating of his life. But the man who was dishing it out was Sergeant Billy Magin, heavyweight champion of the United States Army. Sergeant Magin couldn't understand why Gallant's disdainful expression persisted. Magin had hammered respect into more than one recruit. It bothered him to have a man, whom he was beating unmercifully, look at him that way. The excited ring of soldiers watching the scrap couldn't get it either.

"That's the fourth time Gallant's been knocked down—yet he looks at the Sarge

like he was dirt under his feet," said one of them.

"That's how the fight started. Gallant goes round with a sneer on his pan. He thinks he's Jehovah's kid brother. He's always in a scrap," a corporal answered. "I'm glad to see him takin' a lickin' for once."

"Well, I ain't. Gallant's okay, soldier. These snotty noncoms burn me up."

"Meanin' me, soldier?"

"Yeah, meanin' you. If you ask me, I think they had Magin transferred here on purpose to lick Gallant. The big slob outweighs Terry twenty-five pounds—Eeeyay—Lookit that! Slam him Terry! . . . That guy should be in the ring!"

Terry Gallant had weaved to his feet. He put one hand out, as if to steady himself. Then he slammed the other straight at Magin's chin. Groggy as Terry was, the blow sent the big sergeant staggering backward. Profane and hearty applause burst from the soldiers who wore no chevrons on their sleeves. In a bare fist grudge fight a man is never licked while he has the heart to stagger to his feet—and the strength to throw a punch.

"Kill the big ringer, Terry. Leave him have it."

Magin recovered his balance and rushed furiously. His two big hands worked like pistons. Straight hard punches. Magin was good. He was the best enlisted man with his two mitts in Uncle Sam's Army. Gallant's knees came together. They started to buckle. He threw a hard punch, lost his balance and went down again.

From the top of a pile of baled hay, Lieutenant Watson had been watching the scrap. Officially, he should have stopped it long ago. But Lieutenant Watson loved a good battle as well as the next man. And he had been watching a honey. Gallant had given the big sergeant plenty before the other's weight and skill had worn him down.

Lieutenant Watson decided it was time to stop it.

He slid down from his perch and walked around to the back of the picket line, where the crowd of howling soldiers ringed the fighters. Gallant was struggling to get up again. Someone saw the officer.

"Attention!"

The spectators stilled their shouts and came to attention. Sergeant Magin straightened from his crouch and stood with fingers lined on the seams of his breeches. He didn't even stop to wipe the blood from his mouth. Terrance Gallant was a trifle uncertain on his feet but his heels were together and his chin was in. Only his knees trembled a little. They wanted to fold again.

Surprise was on the faces of the assembled men. As a rule, officers ignored these affairs of honor. They knew that the soldiers settled their differences behind the picket line. Something new for an officer to interfere. But then Terry Gallant had been taking an awful shellacking.

"At ease," Lieutenant Watson said. Then to the combatants, "That's enough, you two. I won't take any official notice of this, but don't let it happen again." He had to say that. It was expressly and officially forbidden for soldiers to hold grudge fights behind the picket line. It was even more serious for noncoms to fight with privates.

"I'm sorry the lieutenant stopped it," Gallant said through puffed lips. He used the third person when speaking to the officer, as all good soldiers are supposed to do.

Lieutenant Watson looked surprised. "Why," he said, "Magin was knocking hell out of you!"

"I didn't think so, sir." Gallant answered.

Watson colored angrily. Here he was, arguing with a buck private. Then, too, Private Terrance Gallant was looking at the lieutenant as if he were an old G.I. can. His tone was respectful enough, but his manner was somehow arrogant, contemptuous.

"Report to your first sergeant under

arrest, Gallant," Watson snapped. "Break it up, you men. Go back to your quarters." He turned to Terry again. "You belong in the ring—not the army."

Gallant remained at attention until the officer had left. The others had started to walk reluctantly away. "Want to finish it now, Magin?" Gallant asked.

"You heard what the looney said," Magin answered. He wanted to shake hands with the game lad who had kept coming back for more. He was about to stick out his hand when the expression on Gallant's face halted him. Gallant's battered countenance was twisted into a smile of derision. He still thought he was a better man. He still looked as if he thought that Sergeant Billy Magin, heavyweight champion of the United States Army, was so much dirt under his feet.

"Any time you want any more, soldier," Magin said, "I'll give it to you."

"How about right now?" Gallant said.

Magin glared at Terry for a minute. Then he turned on his heel and walked away. Terry Gallant sat down, suddenly—right on the ground. He might not know when he was licked, but his knees did. They had folded up under him.

LIEUTENANT WATSON had instructed the first sergeant to give Private Terrance Gallant company punishment, and Terry went on the wood pile. The officer didn't want any charges to appear on Gallant's record. He knew that Terry was studying for admittance into the United States Military Academy at West Point. Terry had enlisted in the army for that purpose. He had worked and studied hard. Every officer in the regiment was willing to help him with his studies. But they all agreed that a couple of darn good lickings wouldn't hurt him. They were getting a bit tired of seeing their best noncoms going around with black eyes.

Terry Gallant stood five feet ten in his issue socks. He stripped a lean,

hard, hundred and seventy-five. He was a good soldier, and could figure firing problems quicker and more accurately than any section chief in the Ninety-eighth Field Artillery. His hair was as black as anthracite and his eyes as blue as a summer's sky. But he had a red-headed temper and was as cocky as a fighting rooster.

The corporal at the ringside had said that Terry went around "with a sneer on his pan." That wasn't exactly so. He aspired above all things to be an officer in the United States Army. It was hard work. He had no friends in Congress to give him an appointment. His marks in high school had been good, but he couldn't afford to go to college. After trying every possible source for an appointment, he had been advised to enlist in the army and get an appointment from there. His spare time he spent with his books. The officers who helped him were encouraging—they said he'd make it. Terry was going to realize his ambition. He was proud, confident. It showed in his walk, and his manner. He looked a man in the eye, with his head up. He had high, arched eyebrows, a straight nose, and a slightly jutting chin. He exuded self-reliance.

Of course, if any man mistook his confidence for arrogance, if someone thought his pride in himself was contempt for others—and they wanted to call him on it—that was all right, too. The Gallants hailed originally from County Mayo. They were born knowing how to use their own two mitts.

It's an old army custom, too. If a fellow doesn't like another's expression, and thinks he's man enough to change it, then it's strip to the waist behind the picket line and settle it with bare fists. A black eye or a split lip soon heals, and there's the thrill of smacking a hard fist against another's chin. And no bad feelings afterward. Of course there are the regulated bouts, sanctioned by the officers and held in the regimental canteen, with regulation gloves and three-minute rounds. But the real scraps are

the ones behind the picket line. Terry Gallant had had his share of them.

He'd won most of his scraps hands down. Then Sergeant Billy Magin had been transferred to the Ninety-eighth Field Artillery. To every other soldier on the post, Magin was a hero, the heavyweight champion of the army. But to Terry Gallant he was just another noncom who thought buck privates were born to be booted around. Those two were bound to tangle—and they did. They'd had their fight, and it was settled. And the only man who didn't think that Gallant had been bested was Terry himself.

He offered no alibis. He made no excuses. He simply repeated that the fight had been stopped too soon. Hadn't he been on his feet? Wasn't he still in there throwing them when Lieutenant Watson broke it up? Well then?

Soon the others began to agree with him, even those who had seen him battered to his knees again and again. Even the victor, the great Sergeant Billy Magin began to have his doubts. Maybe the kid had more stuff in him. He had been willing to go on. And he was ready to try it again at any time. Some birds don't begin to fight until they have been half killed.

So Terry Gallant walked around with his head up, looking the world in the eye and inspiring in every other man he met, a strange desire to make a pass at his chin.

"They'll take that out of him when he gets to the Point," the officers told each other. "At the end of a few months, he'll just be another youngster with a lot to learn."

So Terry soldiered and worked at his books. He was going to West Point. He was going to be an officer, and a good one. He was going to be Lieutenant Terrance Gallant, of the United States Army. He was going to stand in front of the company, straight as a ramrod, and take the first sergeant's report. He was going to take his battery out on the range and blow paint barrels to bits

a mile away, by indirect fire. He was going to wear a Sam Browne belt and shoulder bars—and be a credit to them.

And in the meantime he'd walk around with his head up. Any man who didn't like it could come behind the picket line.

CHAPTER II

CRAWLER

TERRY GALLANT'S chest was out to the point where it threatened his shirt buttons. He was no longer Private Gallant. He was Cadet Gallant. Less than half an hour ago he had registered, together with a long line of other young huskies. It was July first. True, he would be officially known as a "beast" for the next three months, and his unimportance would be impressed upon him by every ranking cadet whose path he crossed. But the first step in his life's ambition was realized.

The Plain was emerald green, except where the trees cast darker shadows around the edges. The cadet chapel reared its castellated towers above the tree tops. Terry named the buildings to himself as he caught sight of them. Washington Hall, Cullum Hall, Central Barracks, North Barracks. He'd seen pictures of them all. Heroes of the past had learned to soldier here. Grant, Lee, Sheridan. The place where the finest fighting men in the world are made. West Point—a dream come true.

The heavy bag in his big fist swung like a pendulum as he walked along. He was on his way to report to the "Beast Barracks."

"Hey," a voice hailed him. "Hey, Mister Dumjohn, where are you bound?" It was a cadet. One of the cadets who had been assigned to the beast detail, whose business it was to hammer discipline into the boys from Podunk. He was about the same age and size as Terry.

"I'm reporting to the barracks," Terry answered.

"Say, 'sir'."

"Sir."

The cadet looked hard at Terry. Most of the new men were nervous and scared. They jumped when they were spoken to. But this bird had a half-derisive grin on his face, as if it were all mildly amusing. He carried himself like a soldier, too. Probably some guy from a military academy, who thought he knew what it was all about.

"Lie down!" he snapped.

Terry sprawled prone on the grass.

"Get up!" Terry complied.

"Pick up your bag and run."

"Where to—sir?" Terry took his time before adding the "sir." His expression was still decidedly sardonic.

"Run in a circle, around me," he was ordered. He lifted his bag and started a solemn dog trot around the other cadet. After several minutes he was ordered to stop. He put down his bag and faced the other.

"Funny?" the cadet asked.

"Sort of," Terry answered.

"Pick up your bag and run some more."

"Where to—sir?"

"Around me!" The cadet's face was getting red. He had picked up a sure enough wise baby. A lad who could stand plenty of crawling. A real B.J. Eventually he commanded Terry to stop.

"Alright," he said.

"May I ask a question, sir?" Terry said.

"What is it?"

"How long will it be before a fellow can take a punch at a man who is riding him?"

The cadet glared at Terry in silence for a minute. "Listen, Mister Dumjohn. You'll take a whole lot more before you're man enough to lift your hands to anyone here. Pick up your bag and run some more. This time run fast."

"Where to, sir?" Terry asked innocently. . . .

THAT night Terry slept like a tired farmhand. Already he had been marked as a B.J., and the gentlemen assigned to the beast detail had decided to sweat it out of him. In the regular army, Terry had learned just how far a man could go with his superiors without being accused of a breach of discipline. He would be almost insolent, nearly to the point of open defiance—then he would obey, with exaggerated meekness.

There was no malice in the riding of Terry by the upper classmen. It was part of the system, as old as the academy itself, that a new man learn about discipline at first hand. Colloquially speaking, they were taught to take it before they were allowed to dish it out.

There wasn't a cadet that was prouder of belonging to the corps than Terry Gallant. From the clear bugle notes of first call in the morning to taps at night he loved every bit of it. The hikes, the drills, the lectures, were all the breath of life to him. When classes opened in September his grades were better than average. But every time a third-class man stopped him to put him through his paces his eyebrows went up and he regarded his tormentor with a sardonic air of amusement.

He was given a typed piece to memorize by heart. Any third-class man was apt to call upon him to recite it. It went like this:

Third Class Man: "How long, Mister Dumjohn?"

Gallant: "One year, sir."

Third Class Man: "Till what?"

Gallant: "Till I'll be a human being, sir."

Every time he went through this routine his answers had a more ironical edge. His eyebrows had a more supercilious lift, and his smile was a shade more contemptuous. Long after the class became full-fledged plebes, and most of the others were permitted to go their ways in comparative peace, Terry was made to go through his little bit.

"Listen," his room-mate said, "why don't you snap out of it? These birds don't want to crawl you all the time. You go around asking for it. They don't know you're a good guy. Stop acting so damn superior and they'll lay off you."

Terry wanted to tell his room-mate that he didn't mean to act cocky. He wanted to tell him that sometimes he was so blue that he had to go off by himself and walk in the woods. He wanted to say that he had promised himself a hundred times to take the crawling humbly and in the right spirit. But at the first shout of "Mister Dumjohn," his head went up and chin challenged the whole cadet corps.

He wanted to break down and tell his room-mate that. But instead he raised one eyebrow and said: "Oh, yeah?"

His room-mate flushed angrily. No use talking to a guy who's too smart to learn.

"Keep it up then," he snapped. "I hope they crawl the hide off you."

Terry went out to walk. It was ten minutes before mess call. He decided to go back and explain to his room-mate. Tell him how he'd sort of been alone most of his life, and had to keep fighting to get where he was, a West Point cadet, instead of a soda jerker. He wanted to tell him how he'd worked and studied for two years, as an enlisted man in the army, to get the appointment. He wanted to tell him how proud he was going to be when he wore the uniform of an officer in the United States Army. He had started from scratch and was damn proud of it. Maybe his room-mate would understand.

His reverie was broken by a strident call. "Hey, Mister Dumjohn!"

It was Willis, the cadet who had stopped him the first day, back in July, and many times since. Gallant's head came up. A contemptuous smile twisted the corner of his mouth. It was a habit. He was hardly conscious of it.

"How long, Mister Dumjohn?" Willis asked. The old routine again. De-

spite his look of arrogance Terry had been feeling very blue. Resentment flared. Instead of the prescribed answer he said:

"About two minutes—sir."

Willis looked surprised. "Till what, Mister Dumjohn?"

"Till I take a swing at your chin—sir."

Willis started to grin. Then he remembered his position. His face hardened.

"Tomorrow in the gym, Mister Dumjohn."

Both men were on the training table. Both were out for the boxing team. Willis' answer meant that, the next day, they'd put on the gloves to spar—and they wouldn't be fooling.

THEY were alone in the corner of the gym when they started. They hadn't exchanged ten blows before a half-dozen cadets were watching them. Something in their tense movements, their grim, unsmiling faces telegraphed the fact that this was a grudge fight. Willis was as tall as Terry but lacked his breadth of shoulder. He was fairly fast, but not fast enough. His punches didn't have the snap nor the force of Terry's. And Terry was smarting over five continuous months of crawling. He beat Willis to the punch. He clinched and put his entire weight on the other, holding Willis' arms to his sides.

Then he went to work to batter Willis down. He'd learned a lot of stuff in those fights behind the picket line. One was to keep the other man coming to him. He pushed Willis away with a left jab. When Willis came back he crossed the right. Blood trickled from Willis' nose, and the corner of his mouth. Terry had his number. He could have knocked him cold, even with the big training mitts, and he knew it. He was deliberately giving Willis a beating. He kept thinking to himself, "A year before I'll be a human being, huh?"

He hooked a fast right to Willis' chin

—and Willis went down. Up again, Willis started to circle the crouching Terry. Gallant remembered the first day, back in July, when Willis had made him run around in a circle. He laughed.

"That's right," he said. "Run around me—sir."

Willis threw caution to the winds and lunged, right into Terry's stiff left. As he started to sag, Gallant crossed his right viciously. Willis went down—and out.

Gallant stood there for a minute, looking at the other's form with raised eyebrows. Several of the cadets lifted Willis to his feet. One of them said: "Look at the smug face on him. He thinks he's good."

"He should be in the ring—not West Point."

The others walked away, leaving Terry alone. He couldn't understand their attitude. It hurt him, but he wouldn't show it. Hadn't it been a fair fight? What was the matter with them? Why did they keep saying he should go into the ring? He didn't want to go into the ring. He wanted to be an officer in the army.

His head was high, and his expression more scornful than ever as he walked from the showers alone. If that was the way they felt—the devil with them!

The next day a husky, blond-haired third-class man named Brooks asked Terry if he cared to box a few rounds. Terry knew what he meant. He wanted revenge for Willis. All right, if he wanted it—he could have it too.

Brooks was the rushing, mauling type. All Terry had to do was to side step the other's rushes and slam the side of his head as he went by. At the end of three minutes, Brooks was glassy-eyed. The next time Brooks rushed, Terry didn't side step. He met Brooks' charge head on. His right hand shot out, leather crunched on bone. Brooks' head snapped back—and he went down.

In the next month Terry handed out beatings to four other third-class men his weight. With each victory he became

more unpopular. It wasn't the fact that he had beaten the others. In the gym, all ranks were even, and no favors asked or given. It was the conviction that had become deep rooted in the minds of the upper classmen, that this plebe was an arrogant pup who didn't have the grace to be sportsmanlike in victory.

Even his own classmates seemed to want little of his company. Terry wanted to ask them what the trouble was. He wanted to make a bid for their friendship, but his stiff-necked, pig-headed pride held him aloof. He was a man alone, without one friend in the cadet corps. So he held his head higher. His expression was more disdainful. The few remarks he addressed to his fellow cadets were more caustic. But in his heart, Terry Gallant was hurt and lonesome.

A COLD wind was whistling up the Hudson River. The cadet chapel could be plainly seen through the bare limbs of the great oaks and maples. The two trees on either side of the entrance to Cullum Hall looked like skeleton sentries. A wan sun had thawed the ground just enough so that the entire area was coated with ooze.

First call for retreat. Terry's shoes glistened, his belt buckle and buttons sparkled. The fried egg on his tar pot, otherwise known as the insignia on his hat, was like the setting sun—and his rifle was so immaculate that one could take it apart with white gloves and keep the gloves spotless. Terry was a good soldier.

He came out of the barracks on the double, collided with another cadet—and dropped his rifle with a plop, right in the mud. The rifle he had spent hours cleaning and rubbing. Both stepped back with a mumbled, "sorry." Then the other recognized Terry. He was a second-class man, a cadet corporal in Gallant's company. He saw the look of dismay on Gallant's face as he reached down to retrieve his gun. This was the

B.J. who thought he was too good to be crawled by his seniors.

"So," the corporal said, "the superior *Mister Dumjohn* dropped his gun in the mud."

Terry knew it was his own fault. He also knew that it meant plenty slugs, demerits, when he lined up with mud on his rifle. He'd never be able to get it clean in time with his handkerchief. His temper flared. For a second he stood there with blazing eyes, glaring at the corporal.

Then he smashed the corporal a terrific clip, right on the chin. The corporal sat down in the mud, sat down on the tails of his neat, form-fitting dress coat.

"I'll see you tomorrow, without gloves, behind Delafield Pond, *Mister*," the corporal grated. Terry nodded. The corporal meant that he wasn't going to turn him in. They would fight it out as a personal matter, settle it unofficially. Just as they used to settle them behind the picket line in the Ninety-eighth Field Artillery. Terry wanted to say he was sorry. But if he said that now it would seem as though he wanted to get out of it, avoid fighting this man with bare knuckles. After the fight he'd apologize.

But an officer had seen it. He walked up to Terry. "Go to your quarters. You are under arrest." He turned to the corporal. "You are excused from this formation. Both of you report to me after mess."

Terry went back to the barracks. He took off his dress coat and automatically got out his cleaning rags and went to work cleaning his gun. He could hear the commands from company street, the brisk tones as the cadets counted off. A very empty feeling came over him. Nobody knew better than he what the outcome would be. There is no excuse for striking a superior. He had enough demerits right now. Even the corporal he had struck couldn't make it easier for him. The officer had seen it all.

When his rifle was once more spot-

less, he put it in the rack and lay down on his bunk. Sound of marching feet, a little swishing undertone in the even cadence, as feet churned the mud. The sound died away. His company. Somehow he knew he'd never line up with them again. The clear tones of *Retreat*, then the band.

Cadet Terrance Gallant rolled over and buried his head in his arms. It was all right. Nobody was there to see him. He knew he was through. He'd be B.Boarded. He had it coming to him. Terry Gallant would never stand in front of his company, straight as a ramrod, and receive the first sergeant's report. He'd never wear a Sam Browne belt and gold shoulder bars now. It was all right for him to lie on his bunk and hide his head in his arms. It was only when others were around that he had to pretend that he didn't give a damn.

When he marched over to report for a hearing after mess, nobody could tell from his straight back, his high head and the set of his chin that he was going to hear the sentence that would blow taps to all his dreams and hopes. You'd think he was stepping out at evening parade, wearing the chevrons of Cadet Captain of the Corps.

CHAPTER III

ON THE BUM

DOCTOR BYRON CHILDS was sitting in front of a great wood fire. It was very cold on the plains of Manchuria, fifty miles northwest of Taonan. Around him squatted a hundred, more or less, murderous looking Chinese bandits. The leader, *Tsu Pei-ying*, sat beside the learned white man. *Tsu* was very pleased. He had been going to ask ransom for Doctor Childs but he had decided to keep him for a while. The doctor knew a great many things. He was teaching *Tsu* and his band English.

Childs had more letters after his name

than in it. He had given up a chance at a chair in Harvard to come to China to study. He wanted to find out at first hand whether the stoical calm with which the Chinese go to their death was the result of a philosophical fatalism or just plain dumb animal ignorance. He had been wandering in the provinces when Tsu Pei-ying had picked him up and taken him prisoner. Now Byron Childs, who was a Doctor of Science, a Doctor of philosophy, and of medicine, was teaching English to a gang of unwashed cut-throats. He had no choice in the matter.

Tsu Pei-ying had been a colonel in the Chinese army, but had gone in for banditry as being more lucrative and exciting.

The doctor looked up. A crowd of fifty or sixty bandits were approaching the fire. They were shouting and jabbering excitedly. They were armed with everything from kitchen knives to high-powered hunting rifles.

In their midst walked a tall young white man. His hands and arms were securely bound. He walked with his head up and his chin out. The expression on his face was one of absolute and complete contempt.

"Oh, I say," Doctor Childs said, "hello, there."

The young prisoner regarded the doctor coolly with raised eyebrows. "So," he said. "A white man is the leader of this filthy pack!"

"No, indeed. You're wrong. I'm a prisoner—just as you are."

"Then ask them what the idea is."

Doctor Childs spoke with Tsu Pei-ying in Chinese for several minutes. "He says that his men could tell that you were a person of some importance and they are going to hold you for a big ransom."

The young man laughed shortly. "They guessed wrong. I'm Terry Gallant, a tramp, from the States. I came over here with a tobacco company and heard there was some excitement up this way. So I hopped a train to Mukden.

From there I came up to Ssuping kai and took the Chink railway. Every time the train stopped, a flock of heathens came running out and hopped on. Nobody bothered about tickets. The train stopped this side of the Nonni Bridge and this gang got on," Terry indicated the crowd that had brought him in. "All of a sudden they hopped on me and dragged me off. We've been walking ever since."

Doctor Childs told Tsu Terry's story. The Chinese bandit leader smiled and shook his head.

"He doesn't believe you're a tramp," Childs said. "He too, thinks you are an important person. You don't look to me like a tramp either. You look like a soldier."

"I *was* a soldier," Terry said. "Now I'm a tramp. Tell them to untie these damn ropes."

Tsu gave an order to his men and they removed the raw Yak hide bindings.

Terry stretched and rubbed his arms. He flexed them several times, working his fingers. Then, suddenly he lashed out and slammed the nearest bandit flush on the chin. The bandit went down and Terry smashed another. They reached for their weapons and started to close in. Terry stood there, hammering away with both hands, bowling them over like knocking the pickets off an old wooden fence.

Tsu called an order and the commotion stopped. The Chinese leader was smiling as if tremendously pleased. He barked another order and the bandits laid down their weapons. They came at Terry with bare hands. Every time Terry struck, a yellow face receded from his vision, and another took its place. His arms became weary, sweat poured down his face. The bandits howled and yelled, then backed up. They didn't want any more of it.

"Tsu Pei-ying is very pleased," Doctor Childs told him. "He is sure now, that you are a great warrior."

Terry glared at the bandit leader as though he were a crawling worm. The Chinaman smiled. "We will get a huge

ransom for this man. He must be a prince, at least."

THAT night Terry shared the hut of Doctor Childs. They rolled up in smelly, half-tanned yak hides. The wind outside made the walls of the hut tremble.

"Are you, by any chance, a pugilist?" Childs asked.

"No. Just a tramp."

"You really should be a pugilist."

Terry Gallant bristled. That was the last thing he heard when he left West Point. In fact he had been hearing it for a long time. Every time he'd get in a fight someone would say, "You should go in the ring." Just like at a party when some parlor humorist would do his stuff, everyone would laugh hilariously and say, "Oh, you should go on the stage!"

Gallant had heard that stuff before, too often. He had come thousands of miles, across the Pacific, hundreds of miles into the interior of China. And the first thing to greet him was a little guy with glasses, pulling that, "you should go in the ring," stuff. Just because he'd knocked over a couple of Chinks.

He didn't want to go in the ring. He had wanted to be an officer in the army. That was out now. And he didn't care much what he did. But he wouldn't tell that to Doctor Childs. He'd keep his head up, and his mouth shut.

"When I was a young man," the doctor went on, "I used to box. But I wasn't very big. And I didn't know then what I know now. Why," his face lit up, "I traveled thousands of miles to see that marvelous fighter, Stanley Ketchel, fight the giant negro, Johnson. There was a fighting man, Ketchel. . . . And I saw the great John L. in his prime. How he loved battle! He used to walk the streets with that same jaunty air that you have. . . . I spent more than a week's salary to be at the ringside when the man-tiger, Dempsey, beat Firpo, and broke the big fellow's heart." The doc-

tor smiled a bit self-consciously. "I'm not the physical type you know. But, if I can raise the money I will conduct experiments that will make all men fine physical specimens. A healthy, strong body is a glorious thing. . . . Tom Sharkey, tearing into the great Jeffries. . . . Little Jack Dillon blasting down huge white hopes, ah, those were sights to be remembered."

In spite of himself Terry was interested. But maybe this doctor was just a fan who had gone slightly soft, living out here in the desolate bandit camp.

He murmured a polite, "Yes?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "Now, you have something that those men had. You have the cut of a fighting man. The way you walk, the way you carry your shoulders. I know men. I know a fighting man when I see one."

"Yeah," Terry answered. "Just because I clouted some Chinks you think I'm a cross between John L., Stanley Ketchel, and Jack Dempsey."

"You may not be now," Doctor Childs said. "But I have a few scientific theories that I have always wanted to try. They deal with reflexes and muscular coordination. I have an opinion they could be applied to pugilism."

"Tell them to the Chinks, when you hold school tomorrow. They'd eat that stuff up, I bet."

"But you would be an excellent subject," the doctor insisted.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. And when we get back to civilization I will use my share of the proceeds to equip my laboratory. You will be doing a service to humanity. You will use your splendid physical strength to the end that my experiments will make it possible for more men to be perfect specimens."

"Hooray," Terry said sarcastically. "Here we are, waiting for a bunch of Chinks to use us for target practice—and you're all steamed up about making a race of supermen. How about using a couple of theories to get us out of here?"

"We shall get out, some time. And then, just think. . . . You fighting the pick of the world. Beating the best of them, to the thunderous applause of the multitude. And making money so that I can equip my laboratory. You, a champion—and I, a benefit to humanity!"

"No foolin'." Terry said. He was dead tired. He was going to sleep, even if the hides did stink. This bird with the heavy eyeglasses and the screwy theories was probably crazy, anyhow.

"The way you knocked those men down reminded me of it. You are no giant, but you are strong enough to knock down any man in the world, provided you strike him hard enough in the right place," the doctor said.

Terry Gallant yawned. "If that's your idea of a brand new theory I'll take plain vanilla."

"That's only part of it," the doctor went on. "It all deals with reflexes and coordination."

"What? No calculus?"

"No," the doctor said solemnly, "no calculus."

"What a pity!" Terry jibed.

"Not at all." The doctor edged over and became animated. "You see, it's all a matter of—"

"Yeah," said Terry. "I know. Reflexes and coordination. Good night, Doctor. If that boss cut-throat is going to amuse himself by having me use his gang for punching bags I need my sleep."

"I'll explain it to you in the morning," the doctor said.

"No hurry," Terry yawned.

BUT he didn't go right to sleep, tired as he was. He lay there thinking. If the bandit wanted ransom he was out of luck. There wasn't a person in the world that Terry could turn to for a thin dime. And just because he held his head up, and walked as a good soldier should, this bandit leader thought he was some kind of a big shot. He remembered a

line from an old show. Something about, "Damn clever, these Chinese." He smiled to himself in the darkness. "Not so smart, at that," he amended.

He went to sleep to the accompaniment of the bitter wind howling outside the hut, and the smell of the dirty shack and the half-tanned hides in his nostrils. He dreamed he was out in front of his own company, wearing a Sam Browne belt and gold shoulder bars.

When he awoke it was gray dawn. Oriental voices squeaked and chattered outside. It was bitter cold, almost zero. He stuck his head out of the shack and bellowed:

"Shut up, you yellow monkeys!" They had been changing the guard. The new guard had had to wake the old one up. They didn't know what he said, but his tone was one of unmistakable authority.

The guard made an awkward salute, nodded and grinned. Terry Gallant scowled at him and went back into the hut. The doctor was sitting up.

"My theory is this," the doctor began. Terry was impatient. But as the doctor went on he became interested. The doctor drew the shape of a human head on the dirt floor. He pointed with his stick to a spot on the jaw.

"At this point," he said, "a nerve, the name of which is unimportant, crosses over the jaw bone. If you strike a man exactly on that spot, you short circuit that nerve. In the ring I believe it is called the button. And the effect of striking it exactly right is known as a knockout."

"Yes," Terry agreed, "that's right."

"When the eye sees the opening in your opponent's guard, it transmits the message to the brain. The brain dictates the muscular action that delivers the blow. Often it is too late. The opening is gone, or the vital spot covered. The blow lands somewhere. Many of them will wear a man down. But one blow, delivered in the proper spot at the right time, should be enough."

"And?" Terry prompted.

"I shall train you so that your reflexes will be instantaneous. Then you will develop speed so the blow travels fast enough. You will learn just where to hit, as a surgeon knows where to place his knife. It will be very interesting. You have the qualifications. Youth, strength, and most important, a natural combative instinct."

"That's what I have, is it?"

"That, and a very supercilious manner, that makes a man want to thrash you," the doctor snapped.

"I'm sorry, doctor," Terry said. "I didn't mean to be cocky." Somehow he could talk to this mild man with a flock of degrees. It didn't seem the same out here in the frozen wastes of Manchuria, with hundreds of cut-throats outside. He told the doctor how he had been in the army, how he had gone to West Point, and been B. Boarded out.

"Even if I got out of here, I wouldn't know what to do," he ended.

"We shall figure that contingency when it arises," the doctor said. "In the meantime I have an idea that I shall try out on Tsu Pei-ying."

"Ideas no end, eh, Doctor?" The doctor looked annoyed for a minute at Terry's bantering tone. Then he smiled. "As they say in the vernacular, 'and how!'"

Terry shook hands with Doctor Childs. He felt that, for the first time in his life, he had a pal.

DOCTOR CHILDS returned from his interview with Tsu Pei-ying, smiling broadly. "My idea was well received," he said.

"Yes?"

"Yes. China is in bad shape right now. Revolutions have torn it part. The war lord of this section sanctions armed bands, such as this. He may have to call upon them to take sides with him. Broadly speaking, they are, in a way a kind of militia. I told Tsu Pei-ying that you would train this rabble, and make real soldiers out of them. He is

an old soldier himself, and the idea appealed to him. I said you liked him so much you wanted to stay. Of course, you don't have to. The alternative is to have your head chopped off—when no ransom is forthcoming."

"All right," Terry grinned. "Tell him I'll hold inspection today."

At noon, some two hundred unkempt, savage Chinese plainmen lined up for inspection. Through Doctor Childs, Terry gave his commands. He had them open ranks. He marched up and down, looking at their equipment. He snatched at a rifle here and there, gave it a quick and scornful scrutiny, and threw it back at the man. All the time, his face was eloquent of contempt and derision.

Then he faced his new command. He made a short speech, which Doctor Childs translated. He said he was going to teach them to shoot, to march, and to use cold steel.

Tsu Pei-ying was delighted. Any man, thought he, who had such a commanding and arrogant bearing could certainly do all this.

Many of the rifles, Terry found, were Russian made copies of the English Enfield army rifles. There was not a bayonet in the lot. And Chinese were at their best with cold steel.

Terry whirled on Tsu Pei-ying, "Get two hundred bayonets, at once!" He said it as though he had snapped an order to a rickshaw coolie. The leader smiled. He would get the bayonets promptly, he told Terry, by way of the doctor.

In the meantime, he had sent for a man whom he wanted to see Terry knock down.

The man was a gigantic Chinese who made his living by a unique sort of banditry.

He made a practice of standing in the roadway, outside of small towns. If travelers didn't pay him tribute, he would thump them heartily. His only weapons were his two great hands, bound with leather thongs. He weighed

nearly three hundred pounds, and could, so rumor had it, break the neck of a yak with one blow. Sometimes he hit a man too hard, and killed him.

Tsu smiled proudly as he announced that he had sent for this man. The doctor and Terry went into a huddle. "From his description," the doctor said, "this man's jowls will be well covered by fat. Maybe it will be harder to get him that way. But he, no doubt, lives largely on a diet of rice. He will have a tender stomach. So," the learned doctor ended, "I would advise you to hit him, hard and often, in the pit of the belly."

Cold as it was, Terry stripped to the waist. Clothes would hamper his arm movements and tire them. He would have to use speed. The road bandit had arrived, dressed in a padded skin coat. He didn't deign to remove his fur hat. The bandits gathered around in a circle.

Without preamble, the big Chinaman swung at Terry's head with a leather-bound fist. The fist that was alleged to have broken a yak's neck with one blow. But Terry was no yak. He watched the spot on the point of the jaw that Doctor Childs had marked on the chart. When the Chinaman lunged, Terry banged at that point. Fat jowls, or no fat jowls, it hurt. The big bandit halted in his tracks. His belly stuck out like an old-fashioned bay window. Terry sunk his left hand into it, almost to the wrist.

Then a fast right to the button. The yak killer went down—and stayed there.

Tsu Pei-ying was disappointed. He thought the road champion should have put up more of a battle. "Never mind," he said. "In a few days I will send for a man in the region of Solun. He is so strong he bends the barrel of a rifle in his two hands. He will be more sport."

Terry grinned wryly when the doctor told him what Tsu had said. "I wonder if that guy is kidding us. He'll have every strong man in China up here."

"Never mind," Doctor Childs said. "We will beat them scientifically."

"Or else," Terry said.

CHAPTER IV

COLONEL FU

THE bayonets for Terry's "army" arrived. Tsu Pei-ying had gotten them from the war lord of the province. Gallant had bundles of sticks made up to represent the enemy. He taught the men how to lunge, and drive the bayonet at a vital spot. He taught them how to thrust and parry, and how to swing the butt of the rifle to the chin, if the point should miss.

He had them oil up the rusty sights on the guns so they could be used. Tsu Pei-ying howled about the ammunition that he wasted in target practice, but Terry raised his eyebrows and said, "Get more. What good is a gun if a man doesn't know how to shoot?"

They learned his commands for simple maneuvers so they could obey them without translation. He made them keep step. He abused them, and sneered at them. But they were warriors at heart, and eager to learn. The bayonet drill especially intrigued them. That was what they wanted. . . . Cold steel. Terry was secretly a little proud of them. Terry Gallant, who had gone to West Point with dreams of commanding a crack company in the United States Army, had his first command. His men were a choice pack of Oriental villains who cut each other's throats for practice.

He was called Colonel Fu.

Regularly, Tsu Pei-ying had some huge bandit, who had gained renown through his feats of strength, visit the camp, for the purpose of seeing Terry Gallant beat him down. Terry didn't know there were so many big Chinamen in the world. Doctor Childs was his second and manager. He advised as to the probable weak spots of the different opponents. And always he drilled Terry in speed. Instantaneous reflex, he called it. He made Terry practice till he could pick a fly out of the air, on the

wing, as a juggler picks off a flying dumb-bell.

If there were no visiting strong men to use as punching bags, Tsu Pei-ying picked the hardest in his pack and smilingly told Terry to practice on them. There was, strangely enough, no resentment. Their Colonel Fu was a very great man. They were proud to be in his command.

Doctor Childs regulated Terry's diet. He insisted that the proper edibles were obtained.

"Colonel Fu must have green vegetables," he would tell Tsu Pei-ying. Gardens, a hundred miles away would be looted. Or, "Colonel must have cow's milk and fresh beef. Rice is not good enough." The next day, a squad of choice cut-throats would be dispatched, with orders not to come back until they had captured a live cow.

It was for Colonel Fu. That was enough.

"It seems," Doctor Childs told Terry, "that we can have anything we want, except our liberty."

"Maybe we can get a leave of absence—and not come back," Terry suggested.

"Not the remotest possibility," the doctor said. "You are too valuable to Tsu. He'd never let you go. Your fame has traveled throughout the province. Tsu is afraid you'd go over to another leader. He'd kill you rather than let you go."

"Then," Terry sighed, "I'll never be able to find out how your theory of instantaneous reflex works against a real opponent."

A messenger rode up to the camp. He was well dressed, clad in expensive furs. His mount was a shaggy pony. A rifle was in a saddle boot and a pistol hung from a well filled cartridge belt.

He asked for Tsu Pei-ying, and the two of them went into the leader's hut. After a short time the messenger came out and rode away. Tsu called Terry and Doctor Childs to his hut.

"I have received word," he said, "from

the war lord of this province, that the Japanese are sending troops to take over the railroad from Ssuningkai to Toanan. I have been ordered to proceed there and hamper them as much as possible. Tell Colonel Fu he will take command immediately."

TERRY GALLANT stood in front of his company. He was dressed in a fur coat and cap. Strapped to his belt was a cavalry saber of ancient make. The sword, to the Oriental, is the token of command. He drew his saber, brought it up to the salute and barked a command. The bandits liked that stuff, the flourish, the imperious tone of his voice.

"Count off!"

In their own language, the Chinese shouted their numbers. Terry dressed the line once more. The uniforms were heterogeneous, but the rifles were in good shape, and each tipped with a glistening bayonet. They were held by men who knew how to use them.

"Squads right—march!"

They swung into a column of squads, with the platoon leaders singing, "hey, hey," to keep them in step. Terry's head was erect, his eyes alight. He was leading his command into battle.

He threw a glance back over his shoulder. Not exactly what one would expect to see at evening parade at West Point, but a column of fighting men, just the same. Moving down the road to the old familiar "hey, hey," sung in a strange Oriental manner.

Terry glanced sidewise at his friend, second, advisor and aide-de-camp, Doctor Childs. "You'll soon have a chance, Doctor, to see more about Oriental fatalism at first hand."

"Do you know," the doctor answered, "they are very proud of you. Proud as hell, to be exact."

On the second day the column neared the railway. Other bands of lawless, armed men were making their way toward it, evidently with the same purpose. They looked curiously at Terry's

military column. They jabbered conjectures. Soldiers, perhaps? No. Not soldiers, for they wore no uniforms. But they marched like soldiers. And they had nice shining bayonets on their rifles. This, they told each other, looked like a good outfit. Behind Terry's marching column, they fell in by the score, like small boys following a parade. Terry Gallant's cut-throats looked back at them scornfully.

A bunch of untrained mugs trying to crash Colonel Fu's crack super-regiment!

That night Gallant deployed his men along the railway. He wouldn't let them light fires. The enemy could spot them too easily, and the enemy was reported to be on the way. Terry's men appointed themselves unofficial M.P.s. They made other bandits extinguish their fires. These men who kept step and had bayonets on their guns awed the others into obedience. Colonel Fu had said no fires. So there were none that night.

In the darkness, Doctor Childs whispered to Terry. Most of the men had gone to sleep on the ground, except for the sentries who had been posted to the south and along the railway.

"This might be our chance to make a break," he said.

"Maybe later. I want to see how my army acts under fire."

"The Japs are good soldiers."

"So are my men."

"If you are taken prisoner, you'll be executed. Your status is only that of a bandit leader."

"I won't be," Terry said. "If you want to make a break, go ahead. It's your funeral."

The doctor laughed shortly. "I go back with you, or not at all. After all the time I've spent training your reflexes to be instantaneous, I want to see you try it in a prize ring."

"Well—we're a long way from a prize ring now."

"Let's forget it then, and get some sleep."

IT was just breaking dawn when a sentry shook Terry Gallant to wakefulness.

"The Japanese soldiers—they are coming!" Terry didn't understand the words but he grasped the import of the message from the man's excited manner. He jumped to his feet and buckled on his saber. Doctor Childs interpreted his commands for his men to cover both sides of the railway. The chug of a locomotive could be heard. The Japs were riding the train.

It pulled slowly round a bend and came into view. Behind the locomotive was a passenger coach, then three flat cars loaded with small brown men in uniform, armed with rifles and machine guns.

A shot rang out and one of the little brown men toppled from one of the flat cars and fell to the road bed. Bullets whined and ricocheted from the cab of the locomotive. The train stopped. The Japs leaped from the flat cars and deployed along the rails. Machine guns were hurriedly set up and started to chatter.

Terry Gallant's men were sniping from both sides of the track. The ammunition that had been used in practice, back there in the bandit camp, had not been wasted. Terry's men were shooting straight, and holding the line.

The Jap machine guns were taking a heavy toll. They raked the ranks of the Chinese bandits with staggering results. One machine gun had been set up by the step of the coach. As fast as the Chinese snipers picked off the crew others crawled out and took their places. Railroad ties and seats from the coach were piled around this gun.

Its nose sprayed red fire and destruction. The machine gunners were safe behind their barricade. Terry Gallant wanted that gun.

He jumped up and shouted a command that every bandit in his outfit knew, the one they loved best, and had been waiting for.

"Charge—bayonets!"

With blood-curdling yells, the Chinese leveled their rifles and charged. They fell in swarms before the lethal spraying of the gun. Others kept coming. Six or seven reached the machine gun nest at once. Their rifles, tipped with glistening steel, rose and fell in time to their own shrieks.

The gun was silent.

Terry turned it on the gun farther down the track. Before the Japs could cover that flank, the second gun was stopped. Gallant had his men haul the captured gun back to the side of the roadway. Only three extra belts were in evidence. He would have to use those sparingly.

The Japs held their line along the railway, making no attempt to advance. Terry kept his men off to the side. Intermittent firing kept up, with neither side moving. The Chinese were ordered by their Colonel Fu to dig fox holes for themselves. Their numbers had been sadly depleted. Their ammunition was low.

Suddenly the train whistle emitted a long blast. The Japs scrambled back on the train, most of them gaining safety of the coach. The train started to move backward. With fiendish yells, the Chinese ran from cover and fired as fast as they could work the bolts of their rifles. The train gathered speed and backed around the bend.

The Japs had retired.

When Terry Gallant mustered his men after the battle, he had exactly nineteen. All the others had been killed, wounded, or scattered. Off to one side he saw a road and, perhaps a half mile down this, a fenced-in compound and several small buildings.

He formed the sad remnants of his army into a column and marched toward that. If the Japs returned it would not be directly, and they would come in increased numbers. Like all good soldiers, Terry Gallant decided to reconnoiter. As he approached the compound, he saw a score of other Chinese, armed men, not of his band. They were mill-

ing around the enclosure excitedly.

Something warned him to break into double time. His men followed him. Some of their bayonets were clouded with a red film. Those were the men who had taken the machine gun.

The strange Chinese had battered down the gate and were inside the compound. Around the bend, Terry saw a small village. Women and children were running down the road to witness the excitement. Terry ran in the gate at a dog trot, Doctor Childs panting at his side. Then he stopped short in amazement.

STANDING before the principal dwelling was a white man, tall, gaunt and gray haired. Beside him was a woman, evidently his wife. A number of Chinese children were gathered around, sniffing with fear at the mad horde of bandits. When the woman saw Terry Gallant's detachment, with their fierce faces and red smeared bayonets, she fainted.

The man caught her in his arms and held her.

The bandits were pulling at the old man's arms, telling him to come with them. He stood speechless, looking from one to the other. His eyes focused on Terry Gallant, with his weird outfit. He saw the great saber at his belt.

"Can you speak English, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," Terry said, "of course. What's the matter?"

"Then I suppose these are your men. They want to take us away. I'd much rather you'd have us shot here, together. Although what a white man is doing with this horde of savages is beyond me."

"Never mind that now," Terry said. "Doctor, tell my men to chase these other birds to hell out of here."

The doctor spoke a few words in Chinese and pointed to Terry Gallant. His men gathered around him in a circle, bayonet-tipped rifles held at the "ready."

All that was needed was the command of "Charge—bayonets!" from their great Colonel Fu, and the compound would be turned into a shambles. Some of the strange bandits had seen Terry's men take the machine gun at the railway. Others didn't need any demonstration. Mumbling and jabbering, they backed out of the gates.

The gray haired man looked his amazement.

"My name is Miller. I'm a missionary. This is Mrs. Miller. I heard that a number of Chinese bandits from miles around had concentrated to fight the Japanese. Then we heard the sound of firing. We were getting ready to move when those men came in and ordered us to go with them."

"Let me attend to Mrs. Miller," Doctor Childs said. "I am a physician."

They carried the missionary's wife inside. In a few minutes she opened her eyes. Doctor Childs smiled at her reassuringly.

"I say, Terry," he said, "let's throw in with the Millers and see if we can get back to civilization."

Terry Gallant nodded soberly. "I guess," he said, "this is where Colonel Fu delivers his farewell message to his troops."

He and the doctor went out on the small porch. He called the small remnant of his evil-looking army together. "Tell them," he said to Doctor Childs, "that Colonel Fu is going to leave them. Tell them to go back to Tzu Pei-ying and say that I said they are real soldiers."

The nineteen survivors of the battle looked at each other in wonder. They began to mutter angrily. Terry barked, "Attention!"

They straightened up and fell in line. Terry smiled a little grimly. He unbuckled his huge saber and belt and handed them to the first bandit in line. Then he stepped back smartly and dressed the line. He gave the command to count off. This was the stuff they liked. Colonel Fu, giving orders.

"Present arms!" The rifles came down with a snap.

"Order arms!" Butts thudded against the hard ground.

"Squads right—march!" Rifles came to shoulders and the bandits swung into a column of fours. Straight for the gate, they marched. The bandit to whom Terry had given the sword took up the chant, "hey, hey."

Terry stood there and watched them go. Colonel Fu watched what was left of his army march down the road. He was very proud, and strangely, a little sad.

Mr. Miller was standing there, watching the procedure. "You," he said, "are a very remarkable young man."

Doctor Childs laughed. "You should see his instantaneous reflexes," he said.

"If we can reach Ssuningkai, we can go from there to Mukden by rail, and from there to Tientsin," Mr. Miller said.

"And if we are stopped by Japanese patrols," Doctor Childs said, "please forget that this tall young man with us is the famous Colonel Fu, late of the Chinese unofficial army."

CHAPTER V

HEY—HEY

A GALA crowd packed the Cosmopolitan Arena in Shanghai. Tonight's boxing show would be a welcome diversion from the constant rumblings of war that rolled down from Manchuria. Rumors had spread through the European and American quarters of strange happenings. One was that all the Chinese bandits had been grouped together under the leadership of a giant white man. That they marched like West Pointers, and were invincible in battle. That they were even now, storming the Great Wall, ready to swoop down, as they had under Attila, centuries ago.

The fights tonight would help take people's minds off the appalling conse-

quences if the rumors were true. The main attraction was the fight between Gunner Walsh, heavyweight champion of the American Pacific fleet, and a young man named Terry Gallant. Young Gallant was a confident looking lad, managed by a college professor. Some said they had met when both had been prisoners in Manchuria. Others called that another wild rumor. The fact remained that Doctor Childs, who was never known to take an interest in things pugilistic, had offered two to one that his man would win.

China does strange things to people.

The preliminaries were over. Gunner Walsh jumped into the ring to the applause of his shipmates. A number of important people were at the ringside. Army and navy officers of five countries. Diplomats and their wives were there, and hundreds of gobs from the Pacific fleet.

Terry Gallant stepped between the ropes. He was brown to the waist, as if he had been working at some hard outdoor labor. He held his head high, and looked scornfully at his opponent. Walsh weighed one hundred and eighty-five. Gallant was four pounds lighter.

One of Walsh's handlers said: "Look at the cocky look on that guy!"

"I'll wipe that off his pan for him," Gunner Walsh grinned.

Doctor Childs whispered, "Spar with him the first round."

Terry nodded.

"I want to watch your reflexes. Hit him in the right places, but lightly."

"Right."

THE bell brought Gunner Walsh out with a rush. He stuck his left into Terry's face and looped over a hard one. Terry let it bounce from one brown shoulder. His left popped against the sailor's ribs and he saw his opening. The spot Doctor Childs had marked on his chart. He tagged it with a light right cross. Gunner Walsh grinned and slugged both hands to Terry's body. Again the "spot"

was unguarded for a fraction of a second. Again Terry tagged it. It bothered the sailor not at all. This guy with the stuck up mug, Walsh told himself, was a cream puff puncher.

At the end of the first round, Doctor Childs rubbed his hands delightedly. "Now," he said. "This time hit him, lightly, mind you, in the solar plexus. You know just the right spot?"

"Yes, I know the spot," Terry said. "But in the meantime, he's giving me some stiff punishment."

"Never mind," said the doctor. "You are strong enough to take it. This is my experiment, you know."

In the second round, Gunner Walsh rushed Terry around the ring, accompanied by howls of glee from his shipmates. Terry ducked and weaved and tapped the Gunner lightly again and again in the place in the belly that Doctor Childs had pointed out as the vital spot. It was more fun fighting the wild men from the plains of Manchuria. The doctor didn't make him stall with them. He let Terry walk right in and finish them. This sailor was fast and he hit hard. It was an effort to hold back. Terry wanted to tear in and slam with both hands.

When Terry came back to his corner, Doctor Childs' eyes were shining behind his double lensed glasses. "According to my calculations you have technically scored seven knockouts, by hitting your opponent exactly right in points that would prove virtually paralyzing, if you used your full strength."

Terry wiped the sweat from his face with a forearm. "Tell that to them," he said, indicating the audience who were begging the gunner to finish Terry off.

"Well, then," the doctor said, "if you must insist, you may knock him out this time."

Terry rinsed his mouth out with water, and nodded. He had already made up his mind to do just that thing, experiment or no experiment. He wanted to *fight*. Instead of tapping and

dancing away. Slug, slam and tear . . . every instinct in him craved it.

Gunner Walsh shuffled out to finish his job. There wasn't any use toying with this bird any longer, to his way of thinking. It was time to rock him to sleep. He jabbed his left at Terry's head, then crossed his right.

The "spot" was unguarded for a fraction of a second. And Terry's reflexes, to use the doctor's expression, were instantaneous. His right hand whipped over hard and fast. It crashed against the gunner's button. Walsh stiffened, a look of amazement was on his face. He toppled face first on the canvas.

The audience was stunned. The sailor, who so far, had the best of it, had been knocked cold by one punch. One fast, hard smack on the button.

He was still sprawled out when the referee finished his count. Terry stood in a neutral corner regarding the fallen man coolly.

"Look at him," a sailor in the audience growled. "He knocks the gunner out with a lucky punch an' he stands there lookin' at the gunner sprawled out on the deck like he was a push-over."

"Yeah," another agreed. "A lucky punch, that's all it was."

The doctor was very pleased. He walked back to the dressing room behind Terry, smiling broadly. "As soon as we can get back to the States," he said, "we shall engage in contests with the very best pugilists in the business. My theory will prove a big success."

An United States Army officer walked into the dressing room. He shook hands with both men.

"Gallant," he said, "Mr. Miller cabled an account of your service in Manchuria to Mrs. Miller and himself, to Congress. They accorded you a rising vote of thanks from the floor. And hearing that you had served in the United States Army, they offer you a reserve commission as first lieutenant."

Terry Gallant snapped to attention. He said: "Thank you, sir."

"Sir, hell," the other grinned. "I've

been out of West Point two years and I'm still a second lieutenant. You rank me. Incidentally, I was at the Point in my last year when you were a plebe. When Mr. Miller was filing his cable I remembered what a good soldier you were, and I stuck that on. Hope you don't mind. You see, I have an idea that it doesn't hurt for an officer to be something of a scrapper."

When the officer had left, Terrance Gallant, First Lieutenant Reserve, looked at Doctor Childs, and somehow a lot of the old cockiness was gone from his expression.

"Say, Doctor," he said, "when we go back to New York to fight some of the big boys, do you think it would be all right if I wore an American flag around my waist?"

SHIPS reporters who met Terry Gallant and Doctor Childs in San Francisco were a little disappointed. Cabled accounts of the young man who had been officially thanked by Congress, and given a reserve commission for valor, had described him as a swashbuckling, fire-eating lad with a cocky, arrogant manner. His friend, Doctor Childs, had been called an adventurer, scientist, and strangely enough, an astute fight manager. An unusual combination certainly.

They discovered that Terry was a tall, husky lad with bright blue eyes and a rather diffident manner. Not at all cocky or arrogant. The now famous Doctor Childs was a quiet little man who spoke in a thin, high voice, seemed to know little or nothing about boxing, and looked, more or less, like a near-sighted mouse.

Their background made them colorful figures, and the ring needed a native born American contender. Fans wanted one. Not many years ago the cry had been for foreigners who could make it interesting for the Yankee sluggers. But the tables had been reversed. Of the three leading figures in the pugilistic

world, two of them were foreigners.

Terry's first fight was satisfactory, but not very exciting. With Doctor Childs in his corner, he had appeared before a large crowd, drawn by the desire to see the oddly mated team who had adventured together in China.

For two rounds Terry had boxed carefully and expertly, but without dash or fire. In the third round young Gallant had clipped his opponent on the button, and stepped back, almost apologetically, while the referee counted the man out. Most of the spectators thought it looked like a lucky punch. Terry was not their idea of a two-fisted salamander. But he was a new figure on the horizon—and he drew a good crowd.

Doctor Childs seemed out of place in the training camp. He found it difficult to understand the colloquialisms of Terry's sparring partners. He walked around, staring in a bewildered manner through his heavy lensed glasses. But he never told anyone what was worrying him.

He was deeply concerned about Terry's change of attitude.

With every victory, Terry seemed to become less pugnacious. He boxed more, and fought less. He developed the habit of visiting his opponents in their dressing rooms and chatting pleasantly with them. Gone was the lad with the chip on his shoulder—the lad who used to strut around like the great John L. himself, itching for someone to start something.

Doctor Childs knew that quality was needed in the make up of the man who was to help him with his experiment. A champion contender must be aggressive, dynamic. The type of man who doesn't know he's licked. . . . The kind the crowds like.

And the crowds had to like Terry if the purses were to amount to enough to enable Doctor Childs to equip his laboratory. The laboratory that was to help men become stronger and better specimens of humanity.

The competition so far had been easy enough. Terry's strength and the doctor's skill had been sufficient. But the doctor feared that, against a top notch fighting man, Terry would need that extra something that he seemed to have lost. The spirit that makes a man tear in, regardless of consequences. That makes a fighting man regard the winning of each fight almost a matter of life and death—the only thing of importance. As in the days in Manchuria, where Terry had to beat some savage strong man to the punch, or have his neck broken. . . . Contempt for the whole world—ready to trade punches with them all.

More than ever would Terry need that now. He had been matched with the Italian man mauler, Pasquale Proto. Proto, who growled when he fought, who broke his opponents' hearts by his vicious animal-like attack. Whose sparring partners had to use every conceivable contrivance to keep the big fellow from knocking them silly—even with the big sofa pillow training gloves.

If Terry didn't snap out of it, Proto would take him. Childs knew that. And if Proto beat Terry, Doctor Childs' dream of a great health laboratory would be shot.

Pasquale was bellowing for a crack at the champion. He promised to make short work of Doctor Childs' polite boy.

Probably the only man who had ever been qualified, and taken the time, to study Terry Gallant was the doctor. He knew that as long as Terry was standing alone against the world, he was cocky and pugnacious. It kept his combative spirit to the fore.

Now that he was acclaimed a hero, and crowds followed him, he had dropped that protective mask. Doctor Childs didn't like it. He wanted Terry to stay confident and self-reliant. It was necessary to the success of Doctor Childs' experiments. But Terry was like a big, pleased kid, who had just been given a room full of toys.

He had lost most of that "to-hell-

with-the-lot-of-you," attitude that had carried him through bare knuckle encounters with Chinese strong men, and made him Colonel Fu, leader of a pack of outlawed heathen warriors.

As Terry punched the bag and sparred with his mates, and smiled, the good doctor scowled. Instantaneous reflexes or not, Terry would have to revive some of the old ruthless killer instinct to stay on his feet against the great Pasquale Proto.

If they had come back to the States unknown, with Terry carrying his head high, and his chest out, ready to spit in the world's eye—then the learned doctor would have put his choice library in hock to bet on his boy.

The Doctor of Philosophy, Science, and Medicine shook his head sadly. All of a sudden Terry had changed. He loved the whole world.

With his experiment at stake against real opposition, Doctor Childs was not the man to trust to luck. He took his profound knowledge of human nature for a walk and thought it out.

TERRY GALLANT is grinning like a school boy as he walks down the aisle. His house to a man!

"Yea, Terry. Take the big Pepper!"

A debutante in a sable wrap, sitting at the ringside, gasps audibly, "Why he's just a big, good-looking boy!"

What a favorite, this Terry Gallant! A hero in Manchuria, an officer in the United States Army—a knockout artist, takes 'em all. No fuss, no faces, shy and bashful—everybody's pal. Going in there to fight the terrible, bone-crushing Pasquale Proto. Smiling and waving to friends. Luck to you, lad. It's your house. They're all with you.

Proto yanks his bathrobe off the minute he enters the ring. That is a stunt of his. He turns his magnificent back to Terry and gasps the ropes, flexes his knees, and make great bunches of muscle knot out all over his body. He comes out to shake hands with a fierce scowl,

black eyes glaring through bushy brows.

Terry smiles and says he hopes the best man will win. Proto says sure, he'll win, all right. Gallant only smiles again.

"Listen, Terry," Doctor Childs is telling him, "this scientific training I've been giving you. Don't think it makes you invincible. It's an old story to these top notch fighters. You'll have to use every ounce of your fighting power . . ."

Terry Gallant isn't listening. He is waving to friends in the audience!

Doctor Childs is anxious as he whispers again. "This fellow maintains a crouching posture. In the first round, find the button several times. Don't try to knock him out the first round. Wait until you are sure that your reflexes are working perfectly, and you are warmed up. You understand?"

Terry grins. Doctor Childs glowers behind his glasses. Oh, for the lad who used to go around with his fists doubled, and his combative spirit simmering near the boiling point!

Gallant is barely on his feet before Proto is upon him with a pair of fast, heavy hands. The Italian is as shifty as a welterweight, and as strong as a bull. And he wants to do a quick job, so he can get a crack at the champion.

"Look out, young fella!" The fans want to see Terry take him.

No chance to pick the spots the doctor had marked on the chart. Duck and weave and jab, and try to keep from being cornered. Two fast jabs don't slow down Proto one bit. His crouch protects his belly. His two great forearms cover his chin, and his best defense is a slashing, tearing attack.

Terry tags him twice on the button. His reflexes are instantaneous all right, but then so are Proto's. Big Pasquale doesn't know what the expression means—but he has it. And he is throwing weight with his punches. A bull elephant running amuck.

Gallant weaves and taps, lands lightly, and dances away.

"Aw heck," groans a ring bug, "the kid's on his bicycle already."

"Yeah. The big Eytalian will murder him."

Doctor Childs dabbs frantically at Terry's sweating face with a towel at the end of the first round. He leans over Terry, his round spectacles three inches from Terry's face. "Remember you are big and strong enough—and you know *just* where to hit him. You have beaten stronger men. This round hit him, *hard* on a vital spot. You cannot fail."

The lad's grin is a bit tired. All right for old four eyes to say that. He isn't in there taking Proto's terrific punches. Anyhow, it isn't a matter of life or death. He'll do his best. Yes, he'll try.

He nods.

Out with a rush. Proto's left bounces off Terry's shoulder. An opening. Hit it! A little high, but it rocks big Pasquale. Just for a second, it rocks him. First blood for Terry. First blood for the kid. It's trickling from the corner of Proto's mouth.

"Get him, Terry. . . . Take him, boy!" His crowd.

A girl at the ringside shrills, "Oh! He's magnificent!"

Proto doesn't think so. Proto is going to prove it. Slam—a left! Crash—a right! What good is the lad's perfect left? What use his rapier-like right? Proto doesn't care. What's a face full of leather? Let the kid stab and sharp shoot. What's a little blood on the chin! He's throwing both hands. . . . He has Terry cornered!

"Hold on, Terry!"

"Duck, kid. Oo-ooo—what a smack!"

Terry is grinning gamely. He is cool, slipping punches when he can, ducking, stabbing at every opening. And backing up—backing up. A hard belt to the side of his head throws him against the ropes. Proto is a terror. He's on top of the lad. Looks bad for Terry. . . .

The fans see it. Big Proto is tearing the kid apart. The kill! They want a kill. A knockout! That's what they want. A guy stretched out cold and

bloody—that's what they're screaming for. Either one—who cares? It's a fight. . . . They want a kill!

"Finish him, Pasquale!"

"Smash him, Proto!"

A terrific left hook above the ear. Terry is down. The kid is down! The referee has to push Pasquale back. The kid is on one knee.

"Smear him, Pasquale!"

Your house, kid. It was your house. They're for Pasquale the killer now. The charging, slashing, two-fisted Proto. They're yelling for him now. Terry is puzzled. He can hear them all yelling for Proto. Yeah? They think he's licked! Yelling for that big baboon. That big hairy clown. The hell with them. The hell with Proto!

"Eight," the referee is saying. What's he doing on one knee at the count of eight? He's all right. Damn right he is. The crowd's against him? Who cares? Old stuff to the kid who's been booted around. Old stuff, having the world turn thumbs down on him. He thrives on it.

HE comes off his knee like a sprinter starting from behind scratch. He's across the ring, on top of Proto, slamming with both hands. The referee didn't get a chance to wipe his mitts? He's wiping them on Proto's pan.

Out? Yeah? Stop that one, Proto. You're terrible, you big baboon. . . . You're lousy, and the crowd likes you. Fight, you big ape. This is Terry Gallant, the guy the crowds don't like. Block that with your big mouth—slob! You're hitting me? Sure—but you're a punk. . . . You're a punk, Proto. And you're backing up. I'm Terry Gallant, and you're just another heel that the crowd likes. . . . Slam!

The bell! Damn the bell!

The kid won't sit down. He pushes the doctor away. Never mind the towels, sponges and smelling salts. Save them for the likes of that big monkey across the ring. . . . Ring the bell. Look at

the big clown stretched out on his stool. He'll be stretched out, all right!

Terry Gallant looks across at Proto. On the lad's face is a look of utter contempt. Contempt for Pasquale Proto, who knocks sparring partners silly, and had the kid down for the count of eight. Head high—battered features wreathed in a perfect expression of derision. The crowd is shouting for him again. Let them. . . Nuts to the lot of them. . . They wanted to see Proto win. . . Yeah?

He pushes Doctor Childs' hand aside. The doctor is trying to shove smelling salts under his nose.

"Take a sniff yourself, Pop." And he throws the famous Doctor Childs a look of withering scorn. The siren. . . It's the bell soon. There it is! He's crazy; wading into Proto like a man trampling through wheat with a scythe.

Proto's tough. He's fast. He's a killer. Yeah? Well, here comes Terry Gallant, who doesn't give a whoop in Hades for man, bug nor beast.

They can't stand it. One of them is going to go! The ropes burn Proto's back as Terry's punches drive him around the ring. Big Pasquale is fighting desperately. He drops his chin behind a bulging shoulder. He throws everything behind a terrible left. Terry isn't ducking. . . He sees an opening—slams a soggy mitt at Proto's button.

Both punches land with a single smack. Proto's catches Terry on the side of the head. . . Terry is going down. . . So is Proto. . . They are both down. The crowd, howling insanely, begs one of them to get up. Terry is on his hands and knees. . . Proto glares at him from half a dozen feet off. . . Both men on their knees staring, glassy-eyed at each other.

The referee has started to count—for the two of them.

From the ringside comes a weird, sing-song chant. "Hey, hey—hey, hey

. . ." sung in a strange, Chinese fashion. Sung as Colonel Fu's great army of outlawed heathens used to sing it. The marching chant of Colonel Fu's terribles.

Terry is on his feet, looking around, a bit bewildered. It must be a trick of the imagination. His dirty, cut-throat army's marching chant—as taught them by their great Colonel Fu.

Proto is scrambling to his feet. A great hairy forearm wipes his face. Strong as a bull, is Proto, a fighting man who fears nothing, and has never known defeat. But Terry Gallant is glaring at him with absolute contempt. His look says plainly, "Come on, punk, don't let a few slaps stop you—get up and fight!" Terry waits for him to get up—waits with scorn written large on every feature. The kid who has been booted around is remembering. The weird sing-song. "Hey, hey," is sending chills down his spine. His head is up, and his fists are ready.

Proto must have seen it. But it is too late. A fast *swish*, a crack. Right on the button. A cloud of powdered resin, as Proto's big body ploughs into the canvas.

As the referee calls the count over the great fighting Italian, Terry stands there with his head up—as if the tearing, battling Pasquale Proto had been a push-over.

Doctor Childs is rubbing his hands delightedly. His eyes beam behind his thick-lensed glasses. It had been a lot of trouble, getting those three Chinks to learn that chant, and he'd had to pay them to leave their laundry and sit at the ringside.

"Come on, Pop," Terry snaps to the famous Doctor Childs, "let's get out of here before these chumps start to flock around."

As he throws the bathrobe around the victor's shoulders, Doctor Childs is smiling and saying softly, "Hey, hey—hey, hey. . ."



OVER THE RIO

By JACK SMALLEY

There are lots of ways to stretch hemp. Hanging a dude is one. Or maybe a Spik kidnapper will do just as well . . . if you can catch him!

I ALWAYS says if drinkin' interferes with a man's business, why give up the business. That's one reason why I ain't got nothin' better to do than run horses across the Rio Grande from Mexico intuh Texas. The other reason is that it's excitin'. And nobody ever said that ol' Whit Redmon side-stepped a drink, a bet, or a fight, even if the combination kept him broke and in hot water all his life.

Wet and weary, I'm settin' my horse on the north bank uh the Rio, with the moonlight dappling the sand under the cottonwoods, waitin' tuh gather in the

wet ponies my boys is hazin' across. Ben Gore rides outa the river and gets off his horse tuh empty the water from his boots.

"How they makin' it?" I asks him.

"Texas Jack and Lafe told me tuh watch the drift," Ben says. "The ponies passed the current all right, so I humped myself ashore. Lafe and Tex is in the rear, takin' the dust."

Two uh the ponies is nearin' land by now, some ways ahead uh the main bunch. Spreadin' back from their heads is a ripple like a V that catches the moon in sparkles.

"I got six bits that says the white

makes it first," I remarks to Ben.

"Yore chicken feed never said nothin' above a whisper," Ben declares. "I'll take yuh, though. That blaze-face black against the white yo're backin'. And if the black wins, I get him for my string. Is it a go?"

Well, I never backs down on a bet, no matter how the other fella hedges, so I nods. Besides, that big black is a head behind the white while we're talkin'. Then Ben picks up a piece uh gravel, and runs down tuh the water's edge. He threw the pebble neat enough, and it bounced off the black's heaving rump. Wow, but that water did churn then!

"No fair, you young idjit!" I sings out. But it's too late. The black heaved through the water, scrambled out, and shook hisself like a dog right in the face of the white gelding.

"You kin keep your six bits—you'll need it for a drink," Ben laughs. "I reckon I done got me a horse."

I DIDN'T say nothin', bein' as I'm plumb busy lookin' over this black. He's a beauty, standin' there with feet spread, though his barrel is hardly heaving after that swim. His hide looked like silk, glistening in the moonlight. We had picked him up with about six others, which was grazin' in a irrigated valley over in Coahuila, but I hadn't noticed nothin' stupendous about him. That is, not until this minute, when I saw the brand on his hip.

It looked like a oval with four bent legs under it--the Spider's brand!

"Ben," I says real cheerful, "you kin have that horse. I don't begrudge him none, cause the fella what rides him south of the Rio is apt to be a shore dead hombre!"

My trail hand give me a look and rode over. The black swung around, edgin' away, and Ben saw the brand. His face was shadded by his sombrero, but I'd swear I seen a shudder twitch his shoulders, and his hand tightened into a fist.

Funny neither of us had noticed that mark; but then again, we was pretty busy, having to ride fast on our business and mostly by night. Daytimes we was a good piece away from the ponies, leaving 'em up some ravine, and layin' low ourselves just in case—

Well, we sat our horses, just lookin', when I heard a rifle go off. It was acrost the river, and it sounded like somebody slappin' a horse's rump at that distance. I could see Texas Jack's white Sietsen on the down current side of the bunch of swimming horses, but I couldn't see Lafe.

"Hold them as they come out," I shouts to Ben, diggin' it for the river bank. "Hello-o-o, Tex! Where's Lafe?" I sings out.

"Comin'," I heard him answer.

And comin' he was! The bright moon made it plain as day. I could see Lafe, a black and gray blot, streak out of the mesquite 'way across there on the other side, and hit the water. Then I lost him.

It wasn't no use to swim back on my fagged-out mount, and by the time I could swap horses the show would be over. Ponies was coughin' and shakin' theirselves as they clumb out all around me. I yanked the rifle out uh the boot under my leg and tried to make out what was goin' on. Then out uh the mesquite came a bunch of riders, and I began to see spurts of plenty hot rifle fire.

Texas Jack pulled out uh the water some ways below and scampered up. "Lafe thought he heered a yell, and rode back to take a look-see," Tex said. "Reckon he found somethin'."

"Reckon he did," I says short and quick. "Help Ben, and get ready to move that bunch pronto."

"I'll bet—"

"I'm doin' the bettin', an' I'm winnin', this time," I cuts in. "Lafe'll make it."

I kept my eyes on that movin' blur in the river. Lafe was off his horse, swimmin' to one side, evidently, and

holdin' the reins or a stirrup. Those across the way had rid into the water by now, and didn't have much time for sittin' up above the water-line to draw a bead. It seemed as long as a Sunday sermon, but finally Lafe pulled ashore. His hat was gone, and his long yella hair was plastered to his scalp, and the dang scamp was grinnin'."

"Let's ride, Whit," he sings out, soon as he gets his breath.

I cast my eyes back over the river to see if we've got time to change mounts. A glance tells me we're one jump ahead uh sudden death, and I humps over the horn.

"Come on," I yells.

BEN GORE and Texas Jack was already under way with the bunch. Lafe and I caught up pretty soon, felt the wet spray flung off by flyin' legs, and let out a holler. We headed north with the bunch, toward Bill Spreckle's place near Eagle Pass. If we could reach Bill's corral we could put up an argument. But havin' a good bunch who the riders behind us were, I didn't figger none on stoppin' to argue over wet ponies and international lines just then.

Five miles this side uh Carrizo Springs they got close enough to start smokin' bullets after us. Our horses was tired, and so was the bunch we was hazin' along, for we hadn't stopped to graze 'em much the last few days. Ben rode alongside uh me, for a ways, and put his hand to his mouth to shout over the thunderin' uh them hoofs.

"Looke that blaze-face!" he yells. "He's only walkin'!" Sure enough, that black was leadin' the bunch, without hardly exertin' hisself. "I gotta idear!" Ben shouts next, and pushes his horse ahead.

It was about the last his pony had in him. I see him waver as Ben reaches alongside the black, and hazed him to one side. The next minute I see Ben atop a ragin' eruptin' volcano uh black smoke and brimstone—his horse has

gone down just after he's hopped the blaze-face.

That would have been the last I'd ever see uh Ben if that black hadn't been rode before. Ben came streakin' after us in a minute, his knees clamped tight to those glossy sides, guidin' the horse once in a while by brushin' the geldin's cheeks. He loped alongside uh me, and calls out:

"Hack off some uh yore riata and pass it over."

I done so, and he rigged up a hackamore, leaned down, and caught the noosed end around the muzzle of the black. The horse with the Spider's brand didn't fight back at all, and I knew right away that Ben Gore was in for it. He was ridin' the Spider's personal saddle horse.

"Now yore gun," Ben says, neck reinin' close again.

He took the Winchester, caught the cartridge belt I flipped him, and wheeled off. We was poundin' down a slope and headin' into a draw then. For a little while the pursuit was out uh sight.

I paid no more attention to my trail hand, bein' busy with a coupla ponies that is tryin' to shag off. Then the shadows of the coulee closed in, and a breath of cool air met me, air that told me we was headin' into a canyon.

Texas Jack cut across to me, lookin' back kind uh worried. "Where'd that fool kid go tuh?" he demands.

I jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "He had a little tech uh religion," I explains, "and he's goin' tuh give 'em back that blaze-face horse."

Tex grunted. "Yuh ol' grayback, yuh gettin' so ossified in the j'int's yuh let a kid do yore fightin'?" he shouts, real angry. He starts to swing his horse around.

"You git back and tend that bunch," I says, ridin' alongside. "That's yore job till I give diff'rent orders." I'm real hot under the collar by now, and besides I knows Ben can take care uh hisself.

"Tend hell!" Tex explodes. "I'm goin'."

Lafe, who's been at the head uh the bunch, drops back at the noise we're makin', and I says:

"Keep 'em headed through the canyon. Lafe. Hold 'em when yuh gets over the rim."

The poppin' uh guns tells Lafe what's up. For a minute he looks as though he's goin' tuh tell me where tuh go also, but he changes his mind. Lafe was a ranger, and knows how tuh take orders.

"All right, Whit," he says. "Three guns ought tuh do it."

WHEN Tex and I reached the mouth uh the draw the battle was on. They had Ben behind a rock, and was blazin' away from three sides, tryin' to clear him out. Ben had tied up the works, because there was no goin' around him in that narrow gorge. But the whoppin' idjit had left that precious horse behind, and was goin' to stay and get plugged! I'd read his plan as intendin' tuh hold up the works till we got a start, and then chase hisself out uh there. But I bet the losin' end.

We came poundin' along the trail pretty fast when we see what's up, and come off our horses with a whoop. Leavin' them beyond range, I took one side uh the canyon and Tex the other. Me with only a six-gun, I was thankful that the pursuers had closed in like they did, because I had a chance to knock two greasers into the front hall uh hell before they backed off.

Texas Jack blazed away from a ledge up tuh one side, and a fella that had been crawlin' up the rocks to get Ben intuh a cross fire, went slack and slid back where he'd come from. Ben cut away from the rock, and ducked low as he ran tuh me. I see a glitter uh brass shells where he'd been squattin' with the gun.

"I tallied nine greasers," he said, pantin' a little. "Their horses is back there with a wrangler."

I clumb a little bit higher and spotted

the bunch. A silver mounted saddle sent little flashes of light back from the moon.

"Gimme back my gun," I says. Then I cuddled the old fire wagon under my clin and makes a quick guess at the right elevation.

That rifle is nearly as old as me, and we knows each other. She did the trick first shot. There was a squealin' and a wild holler. A fella runs out uh the shadows to get clear uh kickin' hoofs as one uh the horses went down. Then I cut loose again.

"Judas priest—they're stampedin'!" says Ben.

"Why didn't yuh do that in the fust place?" I asks him, real severe. "Instead uh makin' us come all the way back tuh haul yuh out uh this blasted jackpot!"

Ben grins, for I'm afraid that youngster knows me too well tuh take me serious. "It's a wonder yuh didn't wait till yuh was tucked in yore bunk before yuh remembered tuh look me up," he says.

Texas Jack came scramblin' up to us, swearin' at his spurs when they caught in a root. "Yuh ought tuh see 'em light out after them saddles," he says. "Gosh!"

"That bunch uh greasers is mighty worried," I remarks. "It won't be no picnic if they get picked up before they kin cross the Rio."

"Well, we won't see no more uh them," says Tex, and he starts back for our mounts.

I ain't so sure uh that, and neither is Ben Gore.

"Yuh know, Whit, I'll bet that bunch hates tuh go home now," he states slowly, thinkin' things out. "They yelled for me tuh give up the black and they'd let me off. Yep, I'll bet—"

"I ain't bettin'," I puts in. Then we got our horses and rode after Lafe. Ben didn't seem tuh mind that he was sittin' on top uh sure death—if the Spider ever caught him aboard that black horse.

CHAPTER II

BISCOCHA

WE was all four sittin' in a little back room in Nigger Joe's *cantina* at Eagle Pass. Three of us was stony broke, and wishin' we was as wise as Ben Gore. That youngster hadn't dropped a nickel in Nigger Joe's joint, beyond the times he'd stood treat for drinks. But me and Lafe and Tex had fed enough kitties in the stud and faro games tuh keep an old ladies' home supplied with pets.

All of a sudden Ben pricks up his ears. He stood up, watchin' the people through the open door. And the three of us watched him like three dogs and a bone.

"I'm goin' out fer a while," Ben says in a low tone, not turning his head from the door. "That fella looked like Pete Graham, Whit."

"Let's take care uh yore wad, Ben," says Texas Jack kind uh hopeful. "Somebody might knock yuh on the haid."

Ben didn't hear. He went through the door, and I saw him thread the crowd, peering at faces as he made for the door.

"Who's this Pete Graham?" asked Lafe, curious-like, tryin' tuh get interested enough in somethin' to take his mind off his empty pockets.

"Yuh want tuh know, or are yuh jest askin'," I demands.

Lafe puckered up his blue eyes and looked at me hard. "That tone uh voice tells me there's a hen on," he says. "What's up, Whit?"

I got out makin's, and hung a brown paper cigaret tuh my lip before I answered him. I didn't know just how tuh go at it, or what foot to start off on.

"You recollect when Ben Gore throws in with us, some six months past?" I asks. "Well, he done it cause he was broke—like the rest uh us. Run-

nin' wet ponies was about the easiest way tuh keep the old tobaccy bag filled and keep the wrinkles out uh his belly. But this Gore hombre was pretty well off before that. He'd spent it all a-lookin' for this here Pete Graham."

"Shoot a friend uh his?" Texas asks, when I stopped for a minute.

"The way Ben told it tuh me, odd moments here and there, this Graham married Ben's sister, and then beat it. He done her out uh her farm, too, and left her with a baby comin'. She and Ben had been raisin' onions down near Lomas—"

"Say, I heard somethin' about that," Lafe broke in. "This fella had robbed a bank and a lot uh other things—"

"Uhuh," I says. "Ben ain't the only one as wants to get hold uh Pete Graham. This snake turned the farm intuh cash and lit out. There's some sort uh yarn down there about Graham misusin' the girl. Tattooin' her face, or somethin'. Ben never said nothin' about it. Maybe so it was wild talk. Anyway, he's still lookin' for this Graham."

"I'd like tuh help him," Lafe remarks, and them blue eyes was cold and bleak. Nigger Joe brought in some drinks and set them on the table, scarin' away the flies. "On the house, *señores*," he says. "You play some more, heh?" He was a big meztizo with a wicked black eye, and he had a bad rep even in Eagle Pass.

Tex shook his head, and I didn't answer, for I ain't learned how to talk while swallowin'. While I got my head tilted back, I see Ben Gore come back through the door, his chin down, and lookin' weary. There's a Mex standin' by the bar, in line with my view, readin' a piece uh paper. I noticed him because the guy next tuh him nudged this Mexican's elbow as Ben entered. I set the glass down and watched.

"Ho, thou beadless *biscocha!*" this greaser sings out to Ben, talking border Spanish. Ben heard him, and understood. He turned his head sidewise.

"Where's the black horse you stole?" the Mex says, loud enough for all to hear. I heard chairs scrape behind me; Lafe and Tex stood up.

BEN started to draw, but the greaser's hand had been within an inch of his gun butt all the while. His gun was out in a flash, and I tightened up all over waiting for the crash that would send Ben tuh Boot Hill. Instead there was a streak of flame tuh one side, and the Mex's gun fell intuh the sawdust.

The greaser followed it, writhing. One uh his boots kicked over a cuspidor and sent it rolling. The first to move was a fat little fella in an alpaca coat who stepped intuh view of the door. He had a long barreled Colt in one pudgy hand. A wisp uh smoke trailed up from it, and he shoved it, still smokin', into the side pocket uh that wrinkled long coat.

Ben and a couple others had stooped over the fallen greaser. Nigger Joe woke out uh his trance and left us; and we three weren't far behind.

"I'm afraid I killed him," the fat little fella was sayin' in a mild voice.

"Looks that way," Ben said, straightening up. He shifted a bit uh paper to his left hand and shook with the stranger. "Thanks heaps," he remarked, his voice sort uh shaky.

We three hazed Ben intuh the back room, away from the crowd that gathered around. Nigger Joe's bouncers was haulin' away the body when I shut the door after Ben, and found that the short 'un in the alpaca coat had somehow come in also.

"My name's Dan Pryor," he said, smilin' all around. "I'm a traveling man."

The humor of that remark struck us all kind uh funny, after the tension uh the past five minutes, and we didn't need much tuh set us off. Pryor, the traveler, grinned back at us, and pulled out some black stogies from his front coat pocket.

"Have one, gents," he says. "I smoke 'em myself." One pull at that five-cent seegar, and I begins to think Pryor has a stronger constitution than he looks.

Ben sat down in a chair, appearin' kind uh peaked, and dropped the paper he'd held. It lay before him on the whusky stained table top, and I took a pasear around behind tuh look at it.

"Where'd yuh get this, Ben?" I asks. "Off'n that dead greaser."

The paper had a few scrawls uh Spanish script on it, and I had tuh figger some tuh make it out. This is what it said:

"Manuel did not return with my horse. He is dead. See that thou dost not fail also, else Maria burn candles for thy black soul. And discover for me the wealth of el Señor Wayne at the Hotel Emperado."

At the bottom of the scrawl was the picture of a tarantula—the spider's mark.

"Tex, did yuh recognize that greaser?" I asks. "The one Pryor plugged?"

He shook his head. "Hell no, they all look alike tuh me," he says. But Lafe allowed he'd seen the fella somewhere.

"He looked powerful familiar," Lafe declares. "I think I seen him south uh the Line—mebbe it was at Enrique's place. But then, Moreno has a powerful lot uh help hangin' around, and I might be mistook."

Dan Pryor had got hold uh the paper, and he puzzled through it, havin' put on some dinky little spectacles. He pushed 'em down on his nose, peerin' at me over the tops, and said:

"This Manuel must have known where the horse is, or he would have found out first and shot afterward."

"By thunder, yo're right," Lafe says, jumpin' up. "And if he knows, then somebody else does too. The Spider don't carry all his bad eggs in one basket, from what I know uh him."

Ben roused hisself. "I'll go and put him in Jake Henderson's stable," he says.

"Nope, my horse is with yore'n, and I'll move 'em both. Set still," Texas Jack says. He got up and went out the back door.

CHAPTER III

HIZZONER, JOHN LAW

DAN PRYOR pulled up the skirts uh his alpaca coat and sat down at the table alongside of Ben. He reached intuh one uh the pockets of his seersucker pants and hauled out tobacco and a knife.

"Hope I'm not intrudin', gents, but this mention of Enrique Moreno interests me. He's very wealthy, is he?"

"He owns a big place in the Salado Valley," I explains. "Lives there like a king. He's got some sort uh drag with the Mexican gov'ment. Why, yuh interested in him?" I asks, not very mindful uh border etiquette since Pryor ain't a regular citizen.

"Oh, I'd like to show him my line. I sell lightning rods," says Pryor.

"Huh?" I couldn't believe him, thought he was funnin' me.

"Yes, I do a very profitable business on both sides of the Line," he says. "And now, one other question. Do you know the party named in this note Mr. Gore found in the dead man's hand?"

"Wayne? Never heard uh him."

Ben spoke up then. "I do. Saw him over at the Hotel Emperado." He looked at me and adds, "While I was trailin' that fella, Whit. Lost sight uh him in the hotel." The kid began to show interest in life again, for he starts to tell Pryor about the Waynes. "They's a kink in this business I can't figger out," Ben says. "How come the Spider mentions 'em? Did he want this Manuel to find out where they kept their dinero hid?"

Pryor pursed up his lips and shook his head slow, from side tuh side.

"I felt kinda sorry for this Wayne," Ben went on after a bit. "He's green

as grass. Come from New York, somebody said. His sister was with him, awful pretty kid in a picture hat, and they was four long-nosed, fat-bellied dudes with the party." Ben smiled, and tilted his chair back. "Gosh, they was baitin' this Wayne boy! Cuthbert, his name is. He asks a cowboy what they got those things fer, and pointed out the winduh tuh a windmill. They tol' him that was a fan tuh keep the town cool!"

Pryor chuckled, and wiped his specs. He put 'em away careful in one uh his pockets—he seemed tuh be pockets all over—and stood up. He looked at me, and Ben, and Lafe, who's been sittin' tuh one side with a far-away look in his blue eyes. "Gents," says the travelin' man, "I presume you will be going into Mexico again?"

I hunched my shoulders, and pulled my pockets inside out. "I reckon so," I says. "We gotta eat."

Lafe looks at Dan Pryor and frowns a little. "How come you figger we'd be goin' south?" he says, kinda cold like. "Yuh seem tuh know too dang much about—" Then he stopped. "Hell," he goes on, "don't mind me, Pryor. I'm forgettin' how yuh helped out our pard here," and he jerks a thumb at Ben Gore.

"Then you have no objection if I come along with you?" asks Pryor, beaming.

That kinda put me back, and I started to knock that idea loose, when I remembered how easy Pryor handled his six gun. He wa'nt no babe in the bushes.

"No, come along," I says. "That is, if yuh ain't skeered uh Yaquis, gila monsters, and—"

The door tuh the saloon flung open, and Nigger Joe filled the opening. His thick lips were drawed up over them big teeth, and he was grinnin' unpleasant.

"Sheriff wants tuh see you folks," he says. His eyes roved over tuh Pryor, and he adds: "Reckon you all got bail with yuh?"

Pryor looked a bit flustered, and glanced hopefully at me. I shook my head and so did Lafe. Ben hauled his share uh our latest proceedin's from his pocket, but yuh can't talk bail with seventy-five iron men. Not in this man's town.

Nigger Joe sneered and turned his back on us. We didn't interest him any more when he couldn't smell dinero on us. I went over tuh the door and saw Nigger Joe talk tuh a Mex over by the bar. The greaser ambled off down the street.

"The law doesn't act very fast here, does it?" murmurs Pryor.

"Not until Nigger Joe gives it the come-on," Lafe said. "There wouldn't be no trouble now, but he's sore for some reason. Wants us tuh clear out."

"Yeah, and if we don't the sheriff will pay us a call. Nigger Joe has plenty orders tuh give from this dive uh his, I'm thinkin'," I said.

The ugly grin on Nigger Joe's face stayed with me, and I begins to get worried. There was a chance that the dirty greaser might be in with the Spider, and when that thought hit me, I got up pronto.

"We're clearin' outa here." I says, headin' for the back door. Ben and Lafe hopped up quick at the tone uh my voice, and Pryor wasn't far behind. "It wouldn't be so dang cool in jail, if the sheriff wants to make it unpleasant."

I was openin' the door as I said that, and I almost bumped intuh a long-legged fella with a star on his caved-in chest, and a six gun in his hand tuh make it mean somethin'.

"The jail's jest whar yo're goin', folks," he says. "Line up thar while I collect me some hardware. Naow, forward, march. Yo'll find the hoosegow plenty cool, Mr. Whit Redmon."

DAN PRYOR perched on a bench in the jail, smokin' the last uh his fumigators. He was the only one uh us that wa'n't worried. From one uh his un-

endin' pockets he'd produced a pack uh greasy cards that stuck together when yuh shuffled 'em, and we was playin' pedro. But my mind wa'n't on the game, and neither was Ben's nor Lafe's.

Dusk was comin' on, and we hadn't had nothin' tuh eat, for one thing. Nobody had come near us, and it looked as if we'd have tuh wait until the next day for a hearin', if not plenty longer. There had been mention uh the fact that we was bein' held as material witnesses against Pryor, which was all poppycock. Somethin' crooked was back uh this fiasco.

"You said Wayne was down here looking for ore concessions?" Pryor remarks, trying to revive a conversation between him and Ben of some half hour back.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, that's what I heard at the hotel," Ben said, as he flipped down the wrong card. "He's waitin' for a man from this here Enrique, down in Salada Valley. He and his party was plannin' on goin' down there tuh look over the ground and make a deal with the Mexican Government, through Enrique."

Pryor prods around with more questions, but that's all Ben knows.

"The pore, damn' fools, goin' down intuh that country," explodes Lafe, suddenly. "Didn't nobody tell 'em what they'd be up against?"

"Too busy laughin' at 'em," Ben says shortly. "Hope they don't figger on takin' that girl along."

We played along for a while, glum, and chewin' our own thoughts till the ends was frayed, waitin' for things tuh happen. The two-room adobe jail was empty, but I could hear the drone uh voices outside where a deputy was chinin' with a fella. Lafe got up and went tuh the barred door between the cell and the front office. He hollered once or twice, but there was no answer from outside.

"How about some chuck!" he yelled, louder. When the echoes died down in the room, I heard them voices still

growlin' away out front. We might as well been barkin' at the moon.

"Aw, hell," says Ben.

"I used to be a locksmith. Maybe I could open this door so we could go out for a while and get a bite to eat," Pryor said.

While we was grinnin' at this, the feeble light from the back window was blotted out.

"That you, Whit?" Texas Jack's voice sounded good to us, and we crowded over to the window. "I heard yuh was here," Tex went on in a low tone. "Yuh know what's up? Nigger Joe found that note, and is goin' tuh see that the Spider's orders is carried out."

"How do you know all that?" I demands.

"I choked it outa the barkeep when he went off duty. He's layin' up a alley with a awful sore throat."

"Well, how we goin' tuh get outa here?" I asks.

"Just hold yore shirt on. I'm goin' after—Damned box is givin' way," Tex said, and I heard a splinterin' uh boards as he dropped out uh sight.

I thought sure that would bring the deputy hot-footin' it in here, but that guy must uh been deef, or drunk. Tex didn't come back, and pretty soon I heard steps movin' down the board walk in front uh the jail.

Ben and I dragged a bench over tuh the window, and I looked out. There was a cluttered backyard behind the jail, and a high board fence beyond. A little shed was in one corner of the yard, and a rickety wagon stood by it.

Then I see Texas Jack coming out uh the shed leadin' a big raw-boned mule that was fightin' the halter and swishin' his broom tail like he was mad clean through. The after glow uh the sunset was goin' fast, and it would be dark soon, but I could make out the wide grin on Tex's face.

"Now, what the hell?" I says.

Tex comes closer and calls out softly, "Did yuh ever see this one, Whit?" He backs the mule up tuh the wall, and

holds tight on the halter, close to the big brute's nose. "Reach yore arm down and see can yuh tickle this here mule by the tail," Tex says.

The window is dinky, and high up, but my arms is long, and by standin' on the bench I managed it. My finger suddenly poked intuh the mule.

WHHAM!

A earthquake hit that adobe jail—no less. Another one followed, and then once more. That mule had let go both hind legs intuh the adobe, and kept on kickin' when the mud bricks begin tuh fly. I got jarred off the bench, in spite uh the fact I'd grabbed hold uh the iron bars in the window, and I lit on Lafe, who was runnin' for the opposite side uh the room. Pryor was yellin' fire, murder, and help. When I rolls over and sat up on the floor, there was a hole in the adobe wall big enough tuh throw a steer through.

Ben had already tumbled tuh what had happened, for he was crawlin' for that hole as fast as his shin bones could scrape, and I yelled to the rest. Texas Jack stood outside the jagged hole, kickin' away the wreckage. He half pulled me through, he was that excited.

"Three cheers for the mule," he says. "That animule ought tuh be ground up and used for dynamite!"

A couple Mexican women and a man poked their heads over the high board fence tuh see what was the excitement, and they started tuh yell when they see us. A six gun started poppin' in the street, and a fella come runnin' around the corner uh the jail. He stumbled over the loose adobe, and sprawled out flat.

Ben and Lafe piled on him, and for a minute there was nothin' to make out in the dusk but arms and legs and cusses. By the time I joined in, that fella wasn't interested any more in what was goin' on. Lafe had his gun and belt, and I borrowed his bowie knife. We let him keep his deputy star.

Then we lit out. Texas Jack had everything workin' as smooth as a end

man in a minstrel show, and we didn't have tuh run more than a hundred yards before we saw our horses lined up and waitin'.

Somebody had got out a shotgun, and was blazin' away, but the buckshot pattered against the wall uh the barn nearby, soundin' like rain, and doin' as much damage. Lafe and Ben gets goin' tuh lead the way, and I took Dan Pryor up behind me for the wildest travelin' he'd done, I reckon, since he wrote his famous book. We didn't draw rein until we hit the banks uh the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER IV

FRIEND OR ENEMY?

THE Spider must uh set a heap uh store by that black horse Ben Gore appropriated. That's the only way I can explain the trouble he went tuh after we crossed the line. Nigger Joe or one uh the Spider's gang at Eagle Pass evidently took him word that the man who had his horse had got away a second time, because—

But I'm gettin' ahead uh the yarn, and I'll have tuh quit fightin' the bit and proceed.

After we crossed the Rio, the only thing left tuh do was go back tuh the trade again and round up some ponies. We never had many qualms about runnin' stock over the line—it's just evenin' the score and maintainin' a balance—and we thought even less about it now that the job had been thrust upon us, so tuh speak.

Ben financed the outfit at the first Mexican hamlet we come across, and we loaded a pack-horse with grub and acquired some artillery here an' there. We was all old hands at foragin', except Ben, and Dan Pryor turned out tuh be as slick as any watermelon-stealin' coon.

So we dropped down through Coahuila, workin' south, and gatherin' a fat bunch uh ponies as we went. We was

campin' in a arroyo one day, lollin' in the shade uh some brush, with the horses cached up in a box canyon not far off.

"Too bad yuh didn't bring along some samples so yuh could sell a few lightnin' rods," Lafe Swenson says, chaffin' Pryor a bit. "Never can tell when it'll rain here."

Pryor, who'd hardened up considerable and lost some uh his paunch, looked at him sort uh surprised. "Lightning rods? What for?"

It was Lafe's turn tuh lift his eyebrows, and I begin tuh wonder some myself. Pryor had said that was his line, when we first met up with him, and now he seemed to uh forgot all about it. Pryor seemed tuh get on his guard all tuh once, and the wheels began to buzz in that fat, bald head uh his.

"Oh, yes, of course," he says. "I'd got so interested in this—ah—business, that I had forgotten my own," and he smiles at Lafe.

The tow-head rider uh mine was satisfied, but my curiosity begin tuh get its back up, and I eyed this fat little man pretty close. I sits there in the shade thinkin' about him, and tryin' tuh figger him out. Why, f'rinstance, had he been so blame anxious tuh come along with us? From the first he'd angled for that, and the jail break had give him his chance. And then there was his pröddin' uh Ben about the Waynes, and with questions here and there tuh Lafe about Spider.

Well, I figgers it'll all come out in the wash, and I lays a bet with myself that friend Pryor has some dirty linen in it. So I promises myself tuh keep a eye on Pryor and let it go at that.

IT bein' Tex's turn tuh cook, he started tuh get the pack off'n the horse. Ben groaned and rolled his eyes mournful. "If we ain't poisoned this time, it's because Tex ain't hisself," Ben says.

"You ain't much better," Lafe objects. "I ain't got the taste uh your flap-jacks out uh my mouth yet."

"Well, gents, I was once the proprietor of a restaurant—and also the cook," Pryor says slyly, for we been kiddin' him a good deal about the many accomplishments he's boasted about. "How would you like a fat roasted chicken?" and he perks his head toward the Mexican shack we'd passed before makin' camp.

"Now that's somethin' like," Lafe says. "I s'pose yuh didn't know I used tuh be the best chicken thief in Matamoros County." And even Pryor laughs at that.

"Well, that's one thing I haven't been yet," he smiles. "You go after the *pièce de résistance*, while I fix up a dutch oven."

When they've both gone, I asks Ben what he thinks uh this Pryor hombre.

"Why, he's all right ain't he?" Ben says. "Kinda curious little feller, but that's all."

"What's he been curious about lately?" I wants to know, but not makin' it seem important.

"Oh, nothin' in particular. Come tuh think uh it, he got the story uh my troubles outa me."

"About Pete Graham—and yore sister?"

Ben nods slowly, breakin' a dry twig intuh little bits and ponderin'. "I told him the yarn—just tuh sort uh get it off my chest for a while," he says.

"An' what else?"

"Oh, that just natchully led tuh other things," Ben says slowly. "We got tuh talkin' about runnin' wet ponies, and shootin' scrapes, and—"

"Did yuh notice how easy he read that note in Spanish," I broke in, "that note that the Spider wrote tuh Manuel?"

"Yeah, but what—"

"Well," I says, real sharp, "I got that bozo smelled out right. Yes, sir, I got him spotted now, Ben. He's a rattler without rattles and he's gonna strike one uh these fine days plumb without warnin'."

Ben leaves off breaking up sticks an'

drops his jaw at me. "That fat little runt? Oh, hell, Sep, yo're crazy."

But now things begins to gather speed like a avalanche in the Mogollones pickin' up the landscape on the way, and I savvied a heap uh things that hadn't occurred tuh me before. I'd puzzled over 'em, mind, but I hadn't figgered 'em out.

So for a half hour I hashed the thing over with Ben, and finally he come around tuh my way uh thinkin'. There was Pryor's lies about who he was, his infernal questionin' about what we was up tuh and all, and finally his pushin' his way in so we'd have tuh take him south with us.

"And there, I repeats, is the hull thing in a nutshell. Dan Pryor got the dope on who's been runnin' wet ponies below the border and gathered us in like babes in the wood, tuh turn us over, kit and billin', tuh the Spider."

"But what about his shootin' that greaser and savin' my hide?" Ben objects.

"Manuel would uh only got one uh us," I points out. "Pryor had a plan tuh rope us all in."

"Sep, I guess yo're right," Ben finally says. There's still a little doubt in his mind, I can see, but it wasn't long before Fate stepped in and showed Ben I was right. And the proof was wrote out plain with hot lead and smoke.

All at once I puts my ear tuh the ground. "Somebody's comin'," I says. "Hit the bush."

We scuttled into the bushes, and lay low, watchin' down the trail. Texas and Pryor was up the gulley, fussin' around out uh sight, and I didn't call tuh 'em. If it was an enemy, he was screened, the horses was out uh sight, and we could let 'em go by.

PRETTY soon a horseman come around a bend and intuh sight. He had on a huge Mexican cone hat, and the conchas on the band flickered in the sun as he turned his head

this way and that tuh watch the trail. After him come three more fellas, their horses on the trot like the Mexican's. Only they bobbed up and down, hangin' tuh the horns, and flappin' their elbows. Right behind 'em was a team uh mules, pullin' a buckboard, and three more horsemen swallowin' the dust uh its wheels.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" Ben's face was a study when I looked at him as he spoke. He pointed toward the buckboard. "That's the Waynes, and them four dudes with 'em!" he declares.

I took his word for it, never having seen the outfit before, but it looked reasonable as they got closer. I could make out the girl on the seat beside the driver, and on the second seat was a lone hunched-over fella who might have been her brother.

"I'm goin' tuh say howdy," Ben announces, gettin' tuh his feet.

"Come back here, yuh danged idjit, yuh'll be shot," I says, but Ben walks tuh the middle uh the road.

The Mexican in the lead, who's cradlin' a rifle in his elbow, reins in and draws bead on Ben. "*Quien es?*" he calls.

"*Amigo,*" Ben answers. The outfit halted, and Ben walked past the greaser tuh the wagon. I couldn't hear what he said, but the girl's face was in the sun, and she smiled as though she recognized him.

I figgers it'll look funny for me tuh stay where I am, and as the lay looks harmless, I circled through the brush and came out by the wagon.

"How strange we should meet again in this place," the girl was saying. "You didn't give me a chance to thank you for your kindness at the hotel," she went on. "You really risked your life, you know, telling that big bully with the revolver to go about his business and stop bothering Robert."

So Ben had done that! He don't tell us nothin' about stoppin' punchers from raggin' this city dude.

Ben turned around at my step, and

pulls at his hat brim. "Mr. Whitlock Redmon, Miss Wayne—my business partner," Ben says.

The girl smiles at me right pretty. She shore is a picture, with that big hat framin' her face. Her cheeks is this peaches-and-cream complexion the dime novel boys rant about, but her nose is peelin' a bit from the sunburn.

She introduced me tuh the rest uh the bunch. Robert had on a white collar and nose pincher specs, but he had a good jaw. His collar was wilted some, and I sees the poor fella don't know enough tuh wear a celluloid halter that'll keep clean and won't wrinkle. The other four hombres was dressed about the same, and all pretty red-faced under their derbies.

"And Señor Sanchez," Miss Wayne finishes. "Don Enrique sent him and his friend there to guide us to his estate. It's been so thrilling, Mr. Redmon!"

I looked over this Sanchez boy and he gave me a flash of his big teeth that wasn't very hearty. As a smile it was about as friendly as a knife in the back. "We hev the long treep, Señor Redmon," he says. "We must make the hurree."

"Oh, don't go," Ben says. "Stay and have chuck with us. "Supper's about ready." This Gore boy, it was plain enough, was plumb taken with the girl. But the hard looks he give tuh the rest uh the party give me a hunch he had somethin' more tuh say, and wanted a chance tuh make his little spiel, away from Sanchez. The girl was tired uh ridin' in that buckboard, and she was glad enough tuh have Ben help her down so she could stretch a bit.

Lafe come ridin' over the hill, his rifle in his hand, and with a bunch uh chickens danglin' from his saddle horn. He'd taken in the lay and seen that all was friendly, but he wasn't takin' no chances. We all traipses up the coulee and everything was gay on the surface. But under the surface it was different, with the Mexicans givin' us black looks

and Ben's laughs soundin' kind uh forced.

Lafe had found chickens aplenty, and the danged soft-hearted cuss had *paid* for 'em. Says the greasers looked kind uh poor, so he boughta lot, figurin' on cookin' the bunch up for a couple cold meals. Dan Pryor done hisself noble; he was a good cook, all right, even if he was figgerin' right that minute to leave us in the ditch.

AFTER we'd all wiped our fingers clean uh chicken grease, the Wayne girl included, we watched the sun go down and talked.

"This is all very new to Betty and myself," says Robert. "We are having a huge time with this excursion. We'll have some adventures to relate when we get back to N'Yawk, won't we, Betty?"

Before the girl could answer, Ben cuts in with "If you ever do get back!" Ben had chose his opportunity carefully. Sanchez was over by the embers uh the fire, gassin' with Pryor, and my boys was showin' the dudes how tuh roll cigarettes one-handed.

"Never fear, we'll—"

But Ben cuts him short. "Mr. Wayne, I want yuh tuh cast off this greaser and his side-kick, and turn back," Ben says. "We'll see yuh tuh the border."

"My dear chap, you are mistaken. There are dangers, but we have protection, and Don Enrique—"

"He might be as big a crook as the Spider," Ben declares, gettin' a little warm as he goes on. "We know this country. You should not take your sister no farther."

"Thank you, Mr. Gore, but we are quite all right," the girl says, trying tuh smile off the tension. "We have four friends with us, you know, and we are bringing a big opportunity to Mexico in our plans for developing—"

"I'm shore sorry tuh disappoint yuh," Ben says, "but the only way yuh can develop this man's country is with lead."

Robert smiled knowingly. "Not lead, my friend, but silver. We have practically been assured of a concession by Don Enrique."

At that Ben flared up. "Listen tuh me," he says, "yo're a dang fool and bughouse besides tuh bring this girl down here. If you had the sense yuh was born with—"

The girl jumped tuh her feet, her little hands clenched. "Don't you dare! Don't you dare speak to my brother that way, you impudent young upstart!" That's the way with wimmin. Speak plain tuh 'em, and the game's off. They'll shy at the unvarnished truth if they see it a mile off.

Wayne had got up too, and he wasn't no midget when he raised tuh his full height and put his arm around his sister. "We'll bid you good evening," he says, and stalks off, the girl with him.

Sanchez had seen this last play, and he lost no time movin' off with 'em, hazin' the dudes before him. When he passed us his teeth flashed, and this time his smile was plumb happy.

The rest uh us stood and watched 'em drive off. It wasn't no beer out uh my bottle. Ben looked cut up about it all, and the muscles on his jaw kept workin', but he'd said his say and was through. Nobody felt like travelin' that night, so we bedded down where we was and went tuh sleep.

CHAPTER V

RED RAIN

THE next mornin', when we counted noses, Dan Pryor was gone. So was his horse. And so was our spare rifle.

"The dirty, yella-bellied lizard," Texas Jack says, when I explained tuh him and Lafe how we'd doped Pryor out.

"Who'da thunk he was one uh the Spider's men?" Lafe puts in, real down-

cast. "And I had him figgered for a real good scout, and harmless as—"

"As a diamond-back!" I snaps.

Ben hunched his shoulders. "Well, good riddance," he said, as if that finished it.

"I got a hunch we'll see him again," Lafe says. "Did yuh see him palaverin' with Sanchez?"

The four uh us was kind uh glum and there was a lot uh onery cussin' goin' on when we saddled up, and went after the horse herd. We had about thirty head in the bunch by now, and we didn't want tuh handle many more, with everybody feelin' low and discouraged. Ben was blue about Betty Wayne, and between Dan Pryor and the Spider, the rest uh us felt as sore as boils.

Just the same, I led the outfit farther south from the Rio, trailin' through the benchland on high ground. A lot uh little streams, some uh them dry, had their start up here, makin' down through the valleys toward the Rio Grande, or meetin' the Rio Salado that joins the Grande south uh Laredo. By sundown we'd come quite a piece, and picked up ten more head, a few mares and some mighty nice geldings. When the long shadows uh the Sierra Madre reached us, we was still far from a good place tuh camp.

"I'd say push on tuh the next creek," Lafe declared. "I shore hate a dry camp. San Benificio Valley begins along here somewheres."

"I've heard that name afore," Texas opines.

"Shore, it's the Spider's stampin' grounds." Lafe says casually.

We kind uh halted at that, but the horses scemed tuh be smellin' water, and was restive, and none uh us had much agua left in our canteens. The upshot uh the matter was that we pushed on. Lafe, who knows this country better'n the rest uh us, had tuh answer some few anxious questions as we rode along in the dusk.

"No, I ain't sure where the Spider

lives," he says tuh Texas, "because nobody ever traced him or follered him home on a dark night. But it's somewhere hereabouts, and I reckon that Don Enrique's *estancia* ain't more'n fifty miles from here, down on the lowlands."

We let our horses take the bits in their mouths as it got darker, and slouched in the saddles talkin' about the Spider. It was like tellin' ghost stories, almost. Lafe got tuh describin' him as "a fella what allus dressed in black, with a black sombrero, and a black scarf what he tied around his nose and jaws while makin' his grandstand plays."

"Ever see his face?" I asked.

"No, and I never want tuh," Lafe said.

We begins to come through manzanita bushes and the ground sloped under foot. The horses nickered and trotted faster. Pretty soon a dark blot uh trees loomed against the inky sky, and we heard the horses splash intuh water.

"Well, reckon we're there." Texas said.

Not a star showed, for the sky was as black as a inkwell with low rain clouds. Danged little uh that rain would ever get beyond the mesa land, though, and reach the dry valleys below, except through them native irrigation ditches and dams.

I got chuck and coffee ready while the boys ran the horses intuh a draw and rigged a rope corral. They come back pretty soon, stumblin' around in the dark, and pegged out the remuda with grazin' ropes. Our horses never feel hobbles in Mexico—they're too damn slow for a getaway tuh try tuh slash hobbles in the dark.

A PATTERN uh rain came down when we finished eatin', and we hauls our saddles and saddle blankets over tuh the clump uh trees. What looked like a old wagon road led past the grove, and we got tuh speculatin', when we made out what it was, if the road led down tuh

the valley. If so, it might make a good route home, providin' it didn't take us intuh the Spider's hangout.

I'd got all settled under the trees, with my head on my saddle and tryin' tuh keep warm under my leather chaps and a slicker so full uh holes it might uh been the Lone Star Flag after the Alamo. And then I begins tuh notice a steady drippin' beside me. The leaves uh the trees was thick, and should uh shed the light rain, and I finally decides tuh move farther in toward the tree trunks. I dunno what made me do it, but I stuck out my hand tuh see, I s'pose, how steady was that trickle.

It didn't feel like rain. I shut my hand, and the wetness was sticky. When I held my palm up tuh my eyes, I saw a dark blot there. The danged stuff was blood! With a yell fitt'n tuh wake the dead, I flung off my slicker and left that place real sudden.

"Come here, quick!" I shouts. Ben run up, and then Lafe and Texas, all uh 'em with their guns out. I struck a match and cupped it in my hands. "Look!" I says.

"Jumpin' Jehosephat, did yuh cut yoreself?" Ben asks.

I points tuh where I been layin'. "It's rainin' blood!" I says.

Well, the four uh us finally screwed up courage to pad through the dark tuh the spot, and strike matches. Swingin' from the branches was four bodies, and one glance told us who they was. Them funny shoes, the striped pants, and the derbies smashed down on the lolling heads, the four dudes with the Waynes!

They'd either been shot and strung up, or hung and then plugged—I reckon it didn't matter tuh them much which was first. We built a brush fire and heaped it high, and with the light it gave we felt a little less hoogery. Ben climbed up and cut down the corpses by slashing the riatas where they was all four tied around the tree trunk. We drug the corpses off up an arroyo and come back to the fire.

"The girl and her brother are in

mighty hot water right now, I'm thinkin'," says Lafe.

Ben had his head propped on a elbow, lookin' all tuckered out.

"I done saw the tracks uh the wagon by the fire light," he remarks, after a silence. "They must be takin' the girl tuh the Spider's place—and the Lord knows where that is. S'pose we could foller right now, Whit?"

The poor kid watched me shake my head, and then he turns tuh stare hopeless toward the fire. All uh us knew there was nothin' tuh be done in the dark. If the clouds passed and let the stars out, then it would be different.

Suddenly Ben hopped up and took a few steps forward. He picked somethin' up and held it tuh the firelight. I got tuh my feet and joined him. The thing he held was the spectacles belongin' tuh Dan Pryor.

"Hell," says Ben. "The low down, hypocritical, hydrophobia skunk!"

"Said he'd been a cook, didn't he," mused Lafe. "Reckon his tongue slipped. The little murderer shore meant tuh say crook."

We didn't sleep under the trees that night.

IT'S hot enough tuh fry eggs in yore hats, and there ain't hardly a breeze ripplin' the grass as we stopped for chuck the next noon. Ben sits over by a big rock, starin' at the faint impression uh wagon tracks that had passed along the trail there.

We hadn't wasted no time followin' them tracks. Come light, Ben had been the first tuh rout us out, and he had coffee ready even though it wasn't his turn tuh cook. Nothin' was said; we just took the trail and rode. Somewhere in the valley below that trail would end, and we'd find the girl—perhaps. If the Spider didn't find us first.

We'd left the mesa top well behind, and was gettin' down toward a more hospitable climate, too hospitable, from the way the sun was workin' overtime

tuh warm us up. The stream that scutered along was gettin' a little bigger, and if it kept up it'd soon be deep enough tuh wash yore feet in, if yuh went in for that sort uh thing. Ahead uh us was a long drop that lost itself in a blue haze toward the Rio Grande and the lowlands. We'd stopped in a little wallow in the center uh quite a level piece, maybe a mile or so wide, and pinched at both ends by the canyon and walled at both sides by rough rock.

That was the set uh the scenery when it happened. Down by the lower end uh the draw, toward the canyon, comes a yell like I'd heard Billy the Kid give when it was his night tuh howl.

"Yee-ipp-ee!" Only there was a gurgle in it, and a mountain lion's scream, and the agony uh sudden death.

Ten—fifteen horsemen skittered out uh the rock and begins tuh circle us, with the whole bunch takin' up the yell. At the same time the other end uh the draw livened up. I thought at first it was echoes, but a quick glance back showed a dozen riders pouring in from that direction.

Ben and Lafe was already hazin' the horses down the bank and holdin' 'em there. They was expert horsemen, or the whole bunch and the remuda tuh boot would uh been off gally-west. Texas and I flung out the lariats and run 'em around the bushes, pennin' in the bunch. Luckily, all them horses is rope broke; they might jump a fence, if there ever was such a thing in their lives, but a rope—no thanks! They know what a rope feels like.

"You hold the upper end," I yells tuh Ben and Lafe. Texas and I crawls up on opposite banks uh the creek at the lower end uh the wallow and stays tight.

Once or twice I heard Lafe answer the fire uh the circling riders, but none uh them comes close tuh my end just yet. I can make out who they are by this time. One or two is Mexicans, but the rest is howlin' Indians with bands

around their long black hair and not much more on than that.

From the way they fired and reeled in the saddles, I judged those Indians was primed on tequilla, and primed plenty. The two Mexicans rode straighter, bawlin' orders as they circles in safe distance, and takin' careful aim. But it wasn't the two greasers that worried me. The Indians would get wilder as the fever burned up their caution, and then would come the finish.

After whoopin' and ridin' around a while, the whole outfit drew off tuh one side, out uh range, and held a pow-wow. Then one uh the greasers came out uh the bunch, wavin' a white flag. He come up within fifty yards, and halted.

"*Hablas español, gringos?*" he yells.

I bellers "*Si,*" and he went on, explainin' that three uh us could back trail, but we had tuh give up one.

"Which one?" I asks, with the answer already in my head without lookin' it up in the back uh the book.

"The man who rides the black horse of *El Tarantula!*" says the Spik.

"Ben, did yuh hear how famous you is?" calls out Texas Jack.

Ben Gore come trottin' up, his face kind uh white. "I heard him," he says. "Listen, Whit, I'll just take the blaze face and amble, out tuh see what they want. While I'm doin' that, you fellas hit for the upper end, and I'll—"

"You'll go plumb tuh hell," I says, real short. "You got intuh a jam down by the Rio when yuh promised tuh jest amble back and take a look-see. I ain't aimin' tuh let yuh out uh my sight, no ways."

"This is all damn foolishness," Ben explodes. "The on'y way tuh beat that bunch uh Injuns is tuh be foxy. They's twenty-five uh the jiggers, and we sure can't out-shoot 'em."

"Me and Lafe and Whit is the out-shootin'est fellas there ever was, boy," says Texas. "You go back where yuh come from and sit tight. I got a hell-bender of an idea. Now vamoose!"

Ben went back tuh Lafe, for he

knowed there wasn't nothin' else tuh do about it. I jabbered a few minutes with the greaser, till he bust out swearin' and give it up. They passed a jug around some more times out there, and then started circlin' again. All the time they kept workin' in closer, tryin' tuh get near enough tuh shoot over the bank intuh the horses and start a stampede.

The barrel uh my rifle began tuh send up heat waves uh its own, and the black powder got down intuh my lungs and stung my eyes. There's several horses runnin' this way and that out on the level, their riders spilled off. Behind a big bay horse what has one leg stickin' up in the air like a flag post, is a Indian what's trying tuh get revenge for a dead nag.

Then that tequilla starts tuh get its work in, and the yells is louder and more blood-curdlin'. Clouds uh dust float up from the merry-go-round out there, and the slugs hum through the air or chuck intuh the bank too close for comfort.

I could almost see the whites uh one Indian's eyes when he rode up closer than the rest. I jumped up and slung a lead pill at him, just as I felt my hat sort uh lift on my head. My dose uh medicine reached the Indian and cured him uh any murderous intentions he had then or ever would have.

"I'll show the lousy drunks!" shouts Texas, and when he starts cussin' I know he's hit. Sure 'nough, he's tryin' tuh operate his rifle with one hand.

"If yuh got a idea, now's the time tuh try it," I says. "Otherwise yuh can whisper it tuh Saint Peter."

I LOOKED up toward Lafe and Ben and see 'em both at their posts. Somehow they wasn't firin' very often, and I guessed the reason. They had tuh make every cartridge count now. Then Tex jumped down the bank and run tuh me.

"Grab yore horse and do what I'm goin' tuh do," he says.

He runs tuh the bunch uh snortin'

horses, his left arm danglin', and yanks the rope off'n the bush. I couldn't hear above the noise, but he must uh give orders tuh Ben and Lafe, cause they ducked low and run tuh him. Suddenly they was all in the saddle, Ben astride that big black, and Texas leadin' my horse.

"Climb aboard," Texas yells, grinnin'. "Last through train tuh hell!"

"Here's yore rope—grab a spare horse," Lafe says, and I does as I'm told, takin' a dally on the horn tuh be ready for such emergencies as a dead saddle horse.

The Spider's Indians, under the lead uh one Mexican, is makin' the rounds when we come thunderin' up ontuh the level, the whole bunch uh wet ponies in full flight, and us four ridin' low in the center. That's where *El Tarantula*, as the Mex called the Spider, had made his second mistake. He hadn't sent men after us what was quite good enough.

"Ride for the lower canyon," Texas yells, "and ride low!"

We did. The Indians was massin' in front uh us, shootin' and yellin' tuh cover their surprise. And we rode straight for 'em. A horse went down at the outside uh the bunch, and then another, but the bunch was followin' Ben Gore's big black, and they kept their noses tuh the leader's tail and humped it.

I felt a lunge on my saddle, nearly pullin' it sidewise, and the rope tuh my spare horse snapped. The end flipped back and stung my cheek so hard it drew blood. I looked over my shoulder and saw the horse I'd roped tryin' tuh pull itself along by its front feet, and squealin' like all get out.

Then we hit the Indians. I brought up my forty-five, which hadn't been shot yet, and plugged the remaining Mexican. I hope I plugged him good, but I never waited tuh see.

There was a crash uh men and horses, and then the line parted. We was through. I looked around and saw Lafe ridin' bareback, with a riata coiled up

neat as a pin in his fist. He grinned at me, and then the grin faded.

"Pore old Rosy," he says, "she's done her last stretch. I had tuh hop the horse I'd roped, and if he hadn't bucked so hard them Injuns couldn't draw aim, I'd be layin' back there with the finest little horse that ever stole oats."

We took it easy, for there wasn't no pursuit. I judged that the Indians was under orders from the two Mexicans, and those greasers weren't givin' any commands at that moment. By sun-down we'd reached the first uh the little lakes in the hills above the Salado Valley, and there we called a halt.

CHAPTER VI

LAUGHIN' GAS

WHILE our little fire of twigs is makin' the coffee pot boil, Ben tries to take his mind off his troubles by giving the black a rub down. Finally he comes over tuh where I'm sittin'.

"Whit," he says, "I ain't hungry. I'm goin' tuh ride ahead. My black's fit, and he kin go faster'n you and the ponies we're drivin'—"

"Yore hurry won't get yuh there any faster'n us, Ben," I tells him then. "I done learned tuh make haste slowly in this man's country."

The kid was white around the gills, and his eyes was bloodshot. There's no use augerin' with him, that's plain.

"Yuh see, Whit, I'm sort uh—well, I'm interested some in the Wayne girl. I—damn it, I can't wait a minute!"

"All right, kid," I says. "Don't forget it's a wolf howl outside, and a cricket chirp at close quarters that means 'friends.' Keep yore ears, eyes, nose an' throat open for a trap. It's the Spider yo're goin' against. And we'll be close behind yuh."

"Thanks, Whit," he says, and gives me a hard grip. His blaze-face is already walkin' as Ben reaches his side,

and the kid is in the saddle the next second for a flyin' start. There was a clatter uh hoofs, and then the black horse and its rider is lost in the canyon.

"The hot-headed little devil," Texas says, blowin' on his black coffee. "I shore hope he don't get his feet tangled up down there. But that girl will give him a jolt. She ain't fallin' for no cowboy."

"I ain't so sure," Lafe declares. "I seen her lookin' at him once in a while as if she's wonderin' what kind uh mess he'd make around a house, and if she'd have tuh make him take his smokin' down tuh the barn."

"Hell," I puts in, "yo're seein' things then, Lafe. I'll bet she wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole."

Lafe took his sombrero off his yeller hair and squinted at a bullet hole through the crown. "Bet me a new hat?" he says. And I takes him up on it then and there, and I begins tuh figger in my mind whether tuh take a brown beaver or another gray Stetson.

Texas Jack breaks in on these pleasant meditations by spillin' some uh his hot coffee on my wrist. "Get down, everybody," he says. "Listen."

A horse is trottin' across gravel, by the sound. Then the noise quit—or the animal had stopped or some tuh sand. Peekin' through the brush, I sees a slouchy Mexican ridin' along the trail, half asleep in the saddle.

"*Alto!*" I sings out.

That Mex woke up in short order, and flung his arms over his head. The horse gave a snort and a jump, and spilled the greaser off onto the ground.

When the three uh us reached him, the Mex was sittin' up, with his arms raised, lookin' as if he expected tuh eat lead any minute. But he sees we ain't goin' tuh shoot, so he calms down some. He didn't have a gun on him, but Lafe pulled a long knife out uh the sheath at his hip.

"*Como se llama?*" I says, and he answers that his name is Luis. But when I pumps him about where he's goin' and

where he's come from and he gets ornery.

"*No sabe*," he says, his eyelids droopin' as he watches us.

"Well, string him up," I says tuh Tex, and I repeats it tuh Lafe in Spanish.

We hustled Luis over tuh a tree and got out a rope. Still the fella won't start talkin', and I begins tuh wonder why. Usually these here low class greasers will loosen up on a lot less than the prospect uh kickin' air.

Pretty soon I finds out, though, why Mr. Luis ain't willin' tuh talk. If he talks, and we let him live, he's got a damn' sight worse fate in store than we could give. That's what we learned when we give him the laughin' treatment.

THIS here treatment is my pet standby for stubbornness and general ornery ideas. We ties a rope around one uh Luis' wrists and heaves the loose end over a branch. Then we pulls him up so his toes touch ground, and ties the other wrist. This is a dang uncomfortable position, but the best is yet tuh come. We pulls his shirt off, and I got out a rope that had one end pretty well frayed. Maybe-so all this looks like a waste uh good time, but there's several things I want tuh find out that'll mean quicker results in the end. We could uh plugged the Mex and lit out after Ben, but as I says, haste makes broken bones.

One thing I wanted tuh know, and that was—where the Spider had Betty Wayne and her brother. The other things was—where we'd find Pryor, and pay him back for sicin' the Indians on us and turnin' traitor thataway. The Mex gritted his teeth when I comes at him with the rope, but not a peep out uh him.

"Now," I says, pullin' my best Spanish, "did you see a man pass you on a black horse?"

Luis said that he had, but my next question brought no answer.

"Did you see a girl with gold hair brought to the *casa* of the Spider?"

Well, when he'd mumbled a few lies, I begins the treatment. The frayed rope has little prickly hemp hairs stickin' out from the end, and I wiggle this on the greaser's bare ribs. The skin is stretched tight, and it tickles.

Tex and Lafe is grinnin', and I smiles, too.

"Did you see that girl?" I asks again. And I begins ticklin' in earnest. Some says there's worse things than bein' tickled, but when yuh make it a fine art, and go intuh particular details tuh get the full benefit from it, personally, I'd rather be fried in oil.

"Wow! He-he-he-Yow!" yells the greaser as that frayed rope finds the funny spots. Then he begins tuh find out how much more painful it is tuh laugh than tuh cry. Finally I lets up a minute, and gives him time tuh get his breath. He tells me he's seen the girl with the gold hair, and more, he says he saw a yellow haired man with her. So he's not lyin' this time; he's seen Betty Wayne and Robert.

"At the *casa* of the Spider?" I shoots at him.

I have tuh give him some more laughin' gas before he'll answer that. When I quit, he's ready tuh spill his guts.

"No more of that, señor, *por el amor de Dios!*" he stutters. "*Ai!*" and the tears run down his cheeks. He's be-ginnin' tuh have visions uh laughin' hisself tuh death, and they ain't pleasant. Then he tells us that Betty and her brother arrived that morning at the Spider's hangout, where they were bein' held for ransom. "*El Tarantula*, he asks for ransom the week past," Luis says. "He knew they could not get away. But no ransom has come yet, señors."

Evidently this Spider wants his money quick when he wants it! Askin' for ransom before he has his captives. But as Luis says, the Waynes were prisoners from the minute they gave them-

selves intuh Sanchez's keeping and crossed the line.

"And if the money is not here soon?" I prompts him.

"It is sad, señor, but the time was up today," Luis says. "Even so, the Spider has waited a day longer than was promised, and they must die."

"Bosh," says Texas. "He'll wait a while longer. A week ain't long enough for the money tuh get tuh him."

Luis fidgeted on his toes and shook his head. "He will not wait," he said.

This gets me more worried than I cares tuh show, but I speeds things up.

"Quick," I declares, "where is this place where the Spider hides. Is it near the *estancia* of Don Enrique?"

Luis opened his eyes wide as I come at him with the rope again, and he spat out his Spanish as fast as he could roll it off his tongue.

"*Por Dios*, señor it is down this same valley, below the dam. Does not the Señor know that *El Tarantula* and Don Enrique are *el mismo*—the same man?"

That flabbergasted me. One and the same man—the Spider and Don Enrique! Hell, if I ain't dumb! Uh course they are, come tuh think uh it!

I used the greaser's knife tuh cut him down with, and we was in the saddle in another minute, hazin' our ponies before us and riding hell-for-leather down the trail. But if I hadn't been in such a rush, I'd have thought twice about lettin' Luis go free.

CHAPTER VII

BLOOD ON THE MOON

I DIDN'T have much time for thinkin' as we pounded along that old wagon trail, fording the creek a half dozen times, skittin' around boulders, with only the moon tuh show the way. But I did figure out a few things. Now I knew why the Spider had asked how much money the Waynes had, in that note Ben found on the dead

Mexican. He must uh been in Eagle Pass right then, or else hidin' out near there. Maybe he went tuh see the Waynes at the hotel. He had enough nerve, though there was plenty uh men, includin' the law, what would uh liked tuh meet up with him.

Livin' a double life, so tuh speak, he could keep his stand-in with President Diaz at Mexico City, and parade in good society while he planned tuh pilfer his rich friends later as the Spider. All in all, it was a slick hombre we had tuh deal with. We'd have tuh play our cards close tuh the belt if we wanted tuh win.

There's gobs uh white foam, like a beaten egg white, on my chaps, when I hears Lafe call a halt.

"We got tuh go easy, from here on," Lafe states. "I been through here only once before, but I reckon I can remember how the land lays. We're close tuh the place now."

"Tex, you and Lafe run these ponies intuh the first draw yuh see," I says. "No use in losin' all this good dinero." Which the two uh 'em did. I stood watch by the trail, and when they come back we rode over the tracks until they all looked as though we'd come straight along. Only a pretty close study would give away where the ponies was hid.

Around the next bend we come across as pretty a sight as you'd hope tuh see. The gorge pinched together down at the lower end, and then widened out intuh a broad valley. The big moon, with a ring uh red at the bottom, showed up the country almost plain as day, and made a path across the water uh the lake formed by the dam at the end uh the gorge. Blood on the moon! I could smell a fight comin'.

It must uh been a sizable dam, for there was plenty uh water here tuh irrigate the whole valley below durin' the dry spells. We rode along the edge uh the lake, keepin' a wary look-out, until we reached the dam. There we slipped off our horses and tied 'em in the brush up a little ravine.

About a hundred yards below the dam, on a level piece above the rocky pass, was the long, one-story building where Don Enrique, the Spider, hung his hat. Texas Jack jerked a thumb at the dam, where a gush uh water comes through the gates at the bottom, and says:

"Too damn' bad that house is on high ground, or we could drown 'em out."

"Yeah, I s'pose yuh kick over the dam," Lafe says, sarcastic. "Or maybe you'd back a mule up against it, like yuh did tuh the jail."

Texas laughed, low and kind uh amused, and we studied the adobe buildin's below us. The side toward us is in the shadows, so we can't make out much, but there's two slits uh light comin' from places in the walls. I figgers the place is pretty well planned for defense. Maybe those slits are for rifles, and most likely there's a patio inside with stables.

So far as we can see, there's no one on guard, but we didn't take any chances. We clumb the rocks behind the house, and come at it by the rear, through a grove uh peppers. We gets almost tuh the building when a rifle bolt clicks.

"*Quien es?*" demands a sleepy voice.

WE held our breaths and said nothin'. Pretty soon there's a sound like a broad yawn, and the snap uh teeth. Inch by inch I crawled forward, pullin' myself by my elbows diggin' intuh the ground. I almost crawled on top uh the guard. My gun barrel put him tuh sleep for the rest uh the night, before he could let out a peep. Lafe and Tex came up when they heard the sound uh my rod on the fella's skull, and we sat hunkered on our heels in the shadows, listenin'.

So far, it looks as if there ain't another guard on this side uh the place. I tilted back my head so's tuh give my windpipe plenty room, and let out a low howl. If I do say it myself, there

wasn't a wolf within hearin' that wouldn'ta said there was a lobo yowlin' at the moon from back in the hills. If Ben was around, he'da heard it. But there wasn't no answer. I tried it again, givin' my special quaver, and still nothin' happened.

"He's gone and done it," Lafe says mournfully. "Tex, yuh'll have tuh unlimber the cricket in yore gullet. Ben is in that house."

That's the way it looked tuh me, also. But I didn't see how we could follow. There's a big oak door here in the rear, as solid as the Rock of Ages. And no windows, only rifle slits. We decided tuh take a chance, and slipped across the open space tuh the building. Then we lost no time in turning the corner and getting' intuh the shadows on the side toward the dam. The rifle slits on this side showed yellow. They was high up, over my head, anyway, so that riflemen on ledges inside could have a wide range.

"I'm goin' tuh look in," I says. "Tex, you and Lafe give me a boost. All right, now!" I whispers, and up I went, with the two uh 'em holdin' me so I could hardly move.

At first I saw only the bright lamp and its reflector on the wall opposite, that naturally attracted my eye and just as naturally blinded me for a minute. Then I blinks a few times at what was goin' on in there.

Under the lamp was Betty Wayne, bound tuh the chair she sat in. Along the wall stood a row uh the meanest lookin' border scum ever herded together under one roof, watchin' the show. Standin' at one side uh Betty is a dark handsome fella all in black. His black shoes glistened, he had a black serape around his body and flung over one shoulder, and from the looks uh his face, he's black clean through.

Not a word was said in that room. Betty stared at this man and he stared back. I craned my neck and looked toward the rear uh the room. Robert Wayne sat on a chair, bound hand and

foot, and beside him, just as helpless, was Ben Gore.

Yes, sir, that fool kid had just put his foot intuh it. On the wall back uh him was a great shadow that looked like a spider, and the man who cast that shadow was the one facin' Betty Wayne. The fellas holdin' me began tuh waver, for I'm no feather-weight tuh hold all night. So I touched Lafe's shoulder, and they eased me down.

"We'll hold Tex up next," I whispers. "They got Ben in there. Give him the signal, Texas—my lips was too dry."

WE hoisted Texas up, and he chirped a couple uh times. Then he give me a jab, and we let him down.

"Goshamighty!" he whispers. "Dan Pryor is there, too—I just seen him walk over toward Ben! I dunno whether Ben heard me or not, but he kind uh grinned when I chirped the second time."

"Well, we got a fine chance tuh get him out uh there," Lafe says. "How d'yuh s'pose we can kick these walls down, Tex?"

"We can't get in tuh 'em," Texas Jack remarks real calm, "but maybe so we can make 'em come out tuh us."

That fella is always pretendin' a lot uh ideas in his head, and I admit he's usually got some tuh brag about, but this time the situation looks a mite hopeless. The walls is too thick for any mule tuh dent, and we can't burn 'em out for the simple reason that adobe won't burn. The best we could hope tuh do is throw one shot at 'em through the slot. After that we might as well take tuh the tall timber.

"I got tuh see what's goin' on," I says, and since there wasn't much else tuh do at that minute, they give me another lift.

The scene inside the room had shifted a bit. I see the Spider walkin' up and down, his heels tappin' the floor. Somewhere in there a gong sounded, like a clock had struck the hour. At that the

Spider wheeled and turned tuh Betty Wayne.

"The money has not arrived," he said, speaking good English. "I have waited, as I promised, until the hour struck." He motioned to an old, shriveled-up Indian I hadn't noticed before. This old he-devil shuffled forward, holdin' a bowl uh some sort uh dark liquid, and a pointed piece uh steel caught the lamp light.

"Give her the sign of the Spider," said the man in black, speaking Spanish. He stepped up to the girl and with his two hands opened the front uh her dress. I knew then what was comin'. The stuff in that bowl was the juice uh mesquite leaves, and he was goin' tuh tattoo a picture of a spider on the girl's breast. That was the mark the Spider put on his property. After he had tattooed Betty Wayne . . . it wasn't anything a man could stand tuh think about.

I pulls my gun up slow to the slot. There'd be time for one shot—maybe two. One uh those slugs I expected tuh send at the Spider, and the other at the Indian. But something happened first.

There was a commotion in the rear, and I almost upset Tex and Lafe tryin' tuh see what it was. Evidently Ben Gore had tried so hard tuh get free that he'd fallen over in the chair. Dan Pryor was settin' him up as I turned. The others in the room gave a glance that way, and turned back tuh the main show. Bein' above their heads, they couldn't see what I did. Dan Pryor had cut the ropes that bound Ben's hands! I was sure uh that, even though Ben looked as helpless as before. Then Dan Pryor, the bald spot on his head glistening, padded intuh the darkness toward the rear uh the room.

THE Spider had waited a minute when Ben kicked over. Now he resumed the main business uh the evenin'. Both Ben and Robert could see what he was doin' tuh the girl;

that was part uh the Spider's plan for entertainin' 'em.

The Indian reached out his pointed steel, drippin' with the mesquite juice. It would have tuh be him, instead uh the Spider, that I got first. I pulled back the hammer uh my single action, and let it slip.

Wham! The Indian clawed the air and fell, and before I could throw down on the Spider, men had come between him and me, and the whole place was a mad house.

I dropped down beside Lafe and Tex just as a fat man, wheezing and yelling, rushed intuh us. I threw up Lafe's gun in time tuh save Pryor from gettin' salivated, and sang out. "It's all right—he's on our side!"

"Follow me, gents," yells Pryor. "We got tuh work fast as hell—" The last words trailed over his shoulder.

"He's got one notion; I got another," declared Tex, and he slunk back intuh the shadows with his six-gun out. Lafe and I took after Pryor fast as we could go.

By this time the adobe house is vomitin' men. They're runnin' in every direction, howling mad and shootin' promiscuous. Pryor had panted up the slope and I see him hop ontuh the dam and run toward the center.

"We'll need our rifles, Lafe," I says. "Duck after 'em while I help Pryor."

I sprinted after the little fat man, and found him sweatin' at a big round pole, tryin' tuh bear down on it. I threw my weight on with his, and the pole sagged. There was a gurgle and then a roar, and a great gush uh water started from where the gates below had been pulled wide open.

"See!" declares Pryor, leanin' back against the dam. "we got 'em out uh the house where we can get at 'em. This water is life and death to the whole valley. They won't rest until they get these gates shut again."

"I savvy that, all right," I says. "But they'll brush us off'n her like flies on a fish."

"Will they?" Pryor demands. "Wait and see! I got this all figured out, my friend. They can come at us only one at a time, and while we're keeping them busy, Ben will have a chance to do some shooting. I cut him loose, and stuck a gun in his pocket when I set his chair up. He'd kicked it over, you see, and my opportunity came in the scuffle."

I already knew about that, so I was thinkin' uh other things while Pryor was talkin'. This funny little fella, who'd fooled us twice now, has certainly showed he had a head on his shoulders. And I was sorry I'd misjudged him as bein' a traitor.

Lafe came runnin' along the dam then, with three rifles in his long arms, and plopped down beside us. The yells uh the men in the gorge and by the house was frantic now, as they sees their precious store uh water goin' tuh waste.

And they can't do much about it. The dam is built with a shelf behind the face of it so the gates could be handled from different levels uh water. No doubt there was other shelves below, under the water, like the one we stood on. Between us and the Spider's men was a pretty thick mud and stone wall, which bullets wasn't likely tuh perforate. This dam is a clever contraption, but they made one mistake when they built it. Nobody figgered, evidently, on its bein' used as a fort. Bein' made horseshoe shape, they couldn't shoot around the curve, and get us that way from the ends. They couldn't get us from above, cause the dam is level with the top uh the gorge. The only way tuh rout us out was by swimmin' down the lake and poppin' us off from the water, but we weren't worryin' about that much.

WE stuck our rifles over the top uh the dam and answered the rifle-fire, takin' it slow and makin' the cartridges pay.

"What the devil is goin' on down

there by the house?" I asks, suddenly.

For a minute the truth uh the matter didn't dawn on me. Behind every rock and gully in the gorge where the water was pourin' through the pass tuh the valley, was the Spider's men, pepperin' away at us and waitin' for somebody tuh lead a charge on the dam. But now they had turned their guns on their own fort!

"He's done it! He's done it!" Pryor shouts, jumpin' around excited. "He's shut the door on 'em!"

"Who?" Lafe asks, grabbin' Pryor by the arm.

"Ben, of course! You see, when they rushed out, Ben had a chance to fight the men that stayed behind. He's won, because the door is shut. But how could he do it single-handed?"

"He didn't," I declared. "Texas was right there in the shadows, and he must uh ducked in after the first break the Spider's men made for the outside!"

A dark blot uh men, firing and shouting, rushed the front uh the building as we was talkin', and we got busy throwin' slugs intuh them at long range. The bullets took effect, too, or else the flashes uh fire that come from the loop holes uh the adobe buildin' was too hot for 'em. Anyway, the charge broke up, and I caught a glimpse uh the Spider leadin' the retreat tuh the rocks in the gorge.

That set my mind at rest on one thing, the Spider had been booted out uh his nest with the others. It would uh been too much tuh hope for tuh have him inside and dead by this time, but it was better by a long shot tuh have him outside where we could see him, than rootin' around in there with Ben and Tex and that poor girl.

The Spider had no intention uh leavin' things at a deadlock, though. By the light uh the red-dipped moon, I can see two forces bein' formed. One bunch uh men takes tuh the sides uh the gorge and tries tuh find a way tuh throw lead at us on the dam. But the

larger force spreads along the gorge in front uh the house, and starts a systematic fire at the wooden door. They're protected from the house by the bank uh the stream, and from us by the rocks in the channel.

"I sure wish we could open these gates a mite wider," I said tuh Pryor. "Then we'd see them greasers scramble intuh the open!"

"They are open as wide as we can get 'em," Pryor replies. "And that's considerable more than those fellows like. They know well enough there'll be a mighty slim crop of corn and grass down in the valley if they don't get us out of here."

But they didn't try tuh rush us, and their pepperin' away at the dam didn't faze us at all.

CHAPTER VIII

HOT LEAD AND COLD WATER

THE sun climbed up and chased the shadows out uh the valley, raisin' little clouds uh vapor over the cool lake, and warmin' us all. We three on the ledge behind the dam was beginnin' tuh feel the pangs uh hunger, so we starts smokin' tuh kill our appetites.

Down there in the gorge is a stir uh activity. Some greaser has made coffee beyond range, and the greasers slip out one by one and get chuck by turns. No good for us tuh waste shells on 'em, but it's powerful hard on us tuh watch 'em.

"Looks as if they were going to fight it out on these lines if it takes all summer," Dan Pryor observed.

"Well, I don't figger we can accommodate 'em on that," I says. "I got about twenty rounds left for my rifle, and only a couple more loads for Judge Colt."

Lafe spoke up and says he's about in the same fix.

"I don't know whether I can give

you some cartridges or not," Pryor says, fishin' around in his pockets. He hauls out some cut plug, and matches, and a two-dollar bill before he has dug deep enough. Then he fishes out a handful uh cartridges—and a gold badge. Dan Pryor kind uh squints sideways at me, and sees that I've noticed the badge. It's the gold shield wore by United States Marshals, and no mistake. I've had plenty cause in my day tuh recognize one uh them things when I see 'em.

"Yes," Dan Pryor says, "I used to be a marshal and I still am, I guess, because I've always neglected to resign."

"Well, I'll be dog-goned," was all Lafe said. "We'll come peaceful, Pryor." The fat little fella laughs and wipes his bald head. "I guess I've got some explaining to do," he remarks. Gettin' no answer, he goes on. "I was afraid you gents would shoot me on sight, when I gave you the slip back there."

"I didn't tell him that's just what we would have done, if I hadn't seen him cut Ben loose in the Spider's place. I kept still and let him talk.

"I found the spot where they'd hung the four men with the Waynes," Pryor said slowly, "and that confirmed my fears."

"We found your spees there," Lafe put it quickly. "We figgered you had helped."

Pryor shook his head vigorous and emphatic. "No sirree! I got there too late."

We laughed, and he hurried on tuh explain. "I mean, I got there too late to stop 'em. So I caught up with them after a hard ride, and managed to convince Sanchez that I was coming to warn him about you and your three friends. I told the Mexican you were planning to attack the Spider. I had to talk fast with him, and spin a lot of tales for the Spider, but they finally let me hang around. Thought I was a bit harmless, I guess."

"Were you after us—or the Spider?"

Lafe asked him. "Why did yuh stick tuh us so close't?"

"Boys, I assure you I had no intention to bother you, or your—ah—horse business," Pryor says, grinnin'. "I was after the Spider, whom I suspected of being also the famous Don Enrique Moreno. And I decided the best way to catch him was to follow him home. In that respect you gents fitted right in with my plans."

We'd been talkin' and listenin' tuh Pryor, with the roar uh the water in our ears, and we didn't notice the greaser that was takin' aim at one end uh the horseshoe dam. Lucky for him this greaser's aim is about as bad as the rest uh his sort who are more at home with knives. The bullet chunked intuh the wall uh the dam and before he could shoot again, the Spider had lost a man.

We run along the shelf and found we was just in time. The Mexicans had formed a charge and were on their way, after sneakin' up on us from the side. At this end uh the dam, on the side uh the spillway nearest the house, was a clump uh brush, and those greasers had sneaked through these. They had tuh climb a dozen steps up tuh the shelf, and squeeze past the little shanty built there for the dam watchman, so that was in our favor.

But twenty-five men can do plenty against three. We got behind the shack and pumped lead intuh them as they climbed the steps, but still they come on.

"Give me a couple of shells," Lafe sings out.

"I only have a few left," says the marshal, but he forks over some, and we give it to those dark complected gents hot and heavy.

THEN they swarm up those steps, steppin' on dead bodies and still comin'. The fear uh the Spider is still back uh that charge, and they don't dare falter. I clubbed my rifle and knocked two men off the top step at once. But I had tuh retreat

through the little alley between the shack and the top uh the dam, givin' back foot by foot. There's a hot flash by my head, and Pryor has potted a lean Mex swingin' a machete.

Lafe is usin' his fists, and there's a splash as one uh the greasers takes a dive intuh the lake. A knife has ripped my shirt half off my back, and I'm bothered by havin' tuh wipe blood out uh my eyes from a nick in the temple. And they got Lafe the next minute. I see the fella what done it, too— a big buck Indian wearin' the army pants taken from some murdered patrol.

"Damn yore filthy hide!" yells Lafe. "I'll get yuh—" But he keels over. And he left the gettin' tuh me, which I did with my six-gun. I pulled the trigger again tuh make sure, but only a click came uh it. The danged thing was empty.

If there'd been any more fresh greasers climbin' those steps, we'da been done for. But there wasn't. Pryor and me, fight'n' fools because uh what's happened tuh Lafe, couldn't be stopped. We tore intuh the few left on the shelf and waded over 'em. The last turned and ran.

"I reckon I'm a dead rabbit," Lafe managed tuh say when I bent over him. There's a hole in his chest, and he's bleedin' bad. Pryor tore his own shirt tuh pieces, and used the rags left uh mine for bandages, but still the spot uh red kept on spreadin' through the cloth.

"We'll get him in here out of the sun," Pryor directs, and we carried Lafe intuh the dinky little shanty. "You go see what's going on," Pryor tells me. "I'll get cold water for his wound; maybe I can stop the bleeding."

He hopped down to the next shelf, spry as a flea, and got Lafe's hat full uh water. I noticed that the lake had dropped a foot below the next shelf. I give Pryor a hand, and he went back tuh the shanty, leavin' a trail uh water that leaked through the hole in Lafe's sombrero.

Peerin' over the top uh the dam, I

sees why the Spider didn't send more men after us. They've got the door tuh the buildin' pretty well shot away, and it won't be long before they can rush the place. I can see the Spider hoppin' around, yellin' and motionin', and gettin' his men worked up for the charge.

I haven't got another cartridge left for my rifle, but I reloaded the six-gun and tried tuh pot him. The range was too long. I turned around tuh go back tuh the shack and see if Lafe is still alive, and out there on the lake, bearin' down as fast as they can paddle, is a scow full uh men.

The end of Whitlock Redmon ain't far off, I thinks tuh myself. And the worst uh the matter is I gotta die with my back against that dam, with nothin' tuh fight with but five cartridges.

Pryor came out uh the shack just then and his face was white. "He's unconscious. I'm afraid—"

He saw the boat load and stopped. They're gettin' within range now, and bullets begin tuh whine over our heads, or chunk intuh the wall. I took a step toward Pryor, and halted short. Between me and Pryor was a wide crack in the dam. It grew as I watched it— six inches—a foot. The dam was goin' out!

The huge pressure against the sluice in the middle had been too much for the dam. The crack had run right up through the wall above the gates, and spread. I had tuh jump the crack, which was gushin' water, in order tuh reach Pryor. I'd gone maybe ten feet along when the whole dam shook, and the center section went out with a crash. We run for the end uh the dam, but the rest uh the wall held. Only that big hole was lettin' the lake through with a noise like Niagara Falls.

I POKED my head over the top. A wall uh water was rushin' through the gorge and bobbin' on the surface. I could see men and rocks and timber and brush. The flood couldn't reach

the house on high ground, because the builders had had experience before with dams, but it had swept most of the Mexicans away.

There's only a dozen or so that escaped, and these were makin' for the house. A man dressed in black was leadin' 'em—the Devil still took care of his own.

A thud of lead against the wall made me turn. The boat was headin' straight for that hole in the dam, goin' like all get-out. It's filled with howlin' Indians that are scared tuh stay in the boat, and scared tuh jump. In the front of the boat, near enough now tuh be within easy range, is Luis, the Mexican I should uh hung and didn't. With him is one of the Mexicans that led the Indians in their raid on us. He's got a bandage around his head, which means I didn't aim low enough.

They're too occupied with watchin' that terrible fall ahead tuh shoot. I didn't need tuh waste a slug on 'em. They was done for. As the boat rushed at the openin', a man jumped and went under. Then the boat upended and was sucked below, going down like a bobber on a fish line. Above the roar of the water I could hear the awful shrieks of those men.

We could do nothing for Lufe by staying with him, so Pryor and I ran down the steps of the dam and headed for the house. The crowd of men outside the door didn't see us comin'. They had battered down the wood, and as we turned the corner they swarmed inside.

We jumped the wreckage of the door and stood inside. For a minute I had tuh let my eyes get accustomed tuh the gloom before I could see. At the end of the long room is Ben Gore and Texas, their backs tuh the wall, pumpin' lead into the Mexicans. Robert Wayne, his nose pincers gone and his clothes hangin' in tatters, is usin' the only thing he knows how tuh handle, a Colt automatic, but he's doin' his share of damage.

Then Pryor and I let loose the last of our cartridges into the backs of the Spider's men. Texas is slidin' slowly tuh the floor, goin' down fightin', and now there's four of us against the Spider and maybe six big greasers. I didn't count Betty Wayne, her face covered with her hands, as she stood off tuh one side. A dead Mexican lay at her feet.

The barrel of my six-gun lowered the odds by one more, and Pryor did the same. Then it was hand tuh hand, and no holds barred. I'm throttling a greasy-faced hombre that tried tuh pry my ribs apart with a knife, when I sees the Spider lunge at Ben with a long blade.

That strike never went home. There's a crash that filled the room, and the Spider toppled backwards. I give the Mexican in my grip another shake and threw him down. By the wall stood Betty Wayne, a smokin' gun in her small hand, starin' white-faced at the Spider.

SENOR DON ENRIQUE MORENO isn't dead yet. He pulled himself up on his elbows and then straightened his arms. His face, twisted and black with congested blood, is turned toward Betty, and he puts every ounce of his strength in trying tuh crawl to her tuh get his revenge. For a second I thought of the horse that had been shot by the Indians in our dash for the open; his spine had been broke, too.

Ben Gore staggered away from the wall, one arm hangin' and a leg draggin', and his six-gun whirred down. Betty screamed and covered her eyes, but I never saw anything pleasanter than the way the Spider squashed under that blow.

I looked around, and finds I been so taken up with seein' the Spider get his, that the rest of the show is over without my knowin' it. Mexicans are groanin', and Texas Jack has fainted. Pryor wipin' a machete he'd picked up, flips the blood from the blade off'n his

fingers, and then absent-minded like, wipes his bald spot until he's a sight tuh behold.

"Gosh, that was hot work," he murmurs.

"Uhuh," says Ben, droppin' intuh a chair. "We ain't had water all day."

He stuck out a toe and nudged the Spider's body, and I saw a frown pucker the kid's blow. He speaks tuh himself, but I caught the low words.

"Mary Lou, I done what I said I would. I killed him."

Mary Lou! That was his sister's name! The girl that Pete Graham—

"That's Brown?" I asks, the whole thing beginnin' tuh percolate through my skull.

Dan Pryor answered me. "Yes, that's the name he used in the States." He sighed. "Too bad we didn't chase him across the line and then get him. There are a lot of rewards out for this man back home."

I turned tuh Ben, tuh ask him a question, but somebody else is takin' all uh his attention. Betty Wayne is cryin' with her head in his lap, and her arms around him. And Ben is pattin' those gold curls uh hers with his one good hand.

We was patchin' each other up, Betty scurryin' around from one tuh the other uh us, like a butterfly in a brier clump, when the noise uh gallopin' hoofs

comes to us through the opened door.

"My God! Ain't we done enough fightin'?" Texas says weakly, tryin' tuh set up.

I run tuh the door and picked up a gun off'n a dead Mexican. About a dozen men come poundin' up through the draw from the valley and reined in at the house.

"Skeeter!" I yells. The leader is a ranger at Laredo!

"Whit Redmon, yuh old crow-bait," he says. "Come on, fellas, the fight's over. Whit's here!" The bunch dismounted and crowded intuh the room. "Well, I reckon the war's over," Skeeter remarks, bitin' off a plug of tobacco. "But I'd shore like tuh've been here!"

He and the men with him help us tuh bind up the boys, and then we hit out for the dam.

"Lafe is the only one we lost," I says. "He's up there."

"Ishaw! Can't kill him," says a cowboy that's with the posse. "He tries tuh pound my brisket with a gun—when we rides in."

Skeeter explained as we went up the trail tuh the dam, that he'd got word the Spider's holdin' the Waynes for ransom, and so he organized a posse.

"Was yuh bringin' the ransom?" I asks.

Skeeter tapped his gun. "Damn' right I was," he says.

THE END



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POISON GOLD

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

A ghost slid out of the ice shadows to bargain with Constable Conroy . . . to swap a pot of dead man's gold for a chance to live again.

CORPORAL JIM CONROY of the Royal Mounted finally caught up with the man he was hunting. At least it looked like the trail's end. For far down at the end of Peace Lake he could see a thin spiral of smoke curling toward the sky. Someone was living in the old

miner's cabin. And that someone was the fugitive Ralston. Conroy was pretty sure of that.

Three years before Conroy had started out on the man-hunt with a team of dogs, three months' supplies, and the expectation on the corporal's part of bringing back his man before winter. But the team of dogs with which Cor-

poral Conroy had started north had long since died, by accident and starvation. For three years Conroy had trailed Ralston about the barren reaches of the Northwest, replenishing his scant supply of provisions at traders' shacks or isolated police posts, becoming more and more a nomad, and living with the sole purpose of fulfilling the first law of the police, "Bring back your man!"

Constable Thomas Ralston, an Englishman of good family, had murdered another Englishman, a mysterious recluse, in a lonely shack, in the hope of discovering a hoard of gold which he was supposed to have washed from a rich placer deposit.

Ralston had subsequently joined the police. At the time there was no suspicion that he had committed the murder. But almost a year later the possession of certain effects identified as the property of the dead man placed the guilt on Ralston. He had been tried, and sentenced to hang. Three days before the date set for his execution he had tunneled his way out of prison.

One might think it simple to evade pursuit in the vast spaces of the North. But one must follow certain definite trails and portages. The epic chase that followed had been like a game of chess, with all the strategy of false trails and tricks of woodcraft.

The first winter Conroy thought he had Ralston cornered on the Great Fish. He doubled back along the maze of portages between Baker Lake and the Kazan, and summer found the two playing hide-and-seek along the eastern shore of Lake Athabasca. It was a gang of free traders that saved Ralston the next winter. In their gasoline boat he had slipped past Conroy's camp when the ice went out.

The third winter an Indian advised Conroy that Joe Camp was running hooch between the Peace and the Hay rivers. He told him that Camp, Ralston, and Pierre Labrecque, the half-breed, were in the shack at the end of Lake Peace. During the ensuing week

Conroy, grimly following the trail, had hardly slept.

NOW at last, as he crouched shivering in the cold of evening, Conroy saw what he had been waiting for. Three figures, hardly distinguishable in the failing light, appeared around the bend of the portage, coming on snowshoes over the ice. They entered the cabin. And then the watcher saw the tiny flicker of a light spring up within.

Three figures! That third made his hopes almost a certainty. It meant that Ralston was one of them. In another hour, when it had grown dark, the long pursuit would be at an end.

Conroy arose, shivering as much from anticipation as from the cold, for the finish of his three years' chase could hardly leave him unmoved. He adjusted his parka, fidgeted with the thongs of his snowshoes, ascertained that his Colt was fully loaded, and that the catches of the handcuffs were in working order. At last he made his way over the snow in the direction of the shack.

As he drew near it he could hear the drunken shouts of the three men within. They seemed to be engaging in a free-for-all-fight, an inevitable result of liquor when three such men are shut up in one another's company throughout a northern winter.

Well, that made the capture easier and Conroy was in no hurry. He made his way leisurely toward the door. The fighting seemed to have been temporarily suspended and he heard Joe Camp speaking.

"Yeah," he jeered, "you tried to double-cross us, but we got you where we want you, Ralston. You come across with that gold or you won't never leave this part of the country alive. You know where that feller hid it, and you don't pull no wool over our eyes. Jest a tip from us and that feller Conroy will know where to find you."

"*Oui, oui, zat's so!*" came the jeering

voice of the half-breed, Labrecque. "You no get away from Conroy, Ralston. Maybe you hang in jail before the summer come if you don't come across with it."

"Wrong again, the pair of you," came Ralston's clearly modulated English accents. "For a fairly intelligent man, Joe, your diagnoses are really off the trail, you know. Conroy is following a blind trail up the Hay at the present moment, and I'll be in England with the spring, punting up the Thames and picking primroses."

A scornful bellow from Joe Camp came in answer.

"Putting up at my club and stepping into the family inheritance and you'll be nothing more than a rather unsavory memory, Joe. As for that gold, I've told you time and again I couldn't find it. You fools, if I'd found it, would I have joined the police and slaved two years in barracks?"

"Sure you would because you was waiting for your chance to get away with that gold you buried," blustered Joe Camp. "When that feller Conroy had you cornered east of Lake Athabasca, you told us there'd be gold for the picking if we'd help you make your getaway. And we fell for it."

"We got you away, and you been stalling ever since. You're a clever feller, Ralston, but it don't go down with Pierre and me, and you're going to take us where you hid that gold, or you don't leave Canada alive."

"By gar, zat's the truth, Meester Ralston!" shouted the half-breed. "I guess you fooled us long enough. Everybody knowed zat crazy Englishman had found a mine and was washing there two, t'ree years, and nobody never found the gold. You're going to cough up, Meester Ralston."

"Wrong, wrong," shouted Ralston scornfully. "Here's where we part company, Joe and Pierre, and I guess you know better than to try to stop me. Um kissing Canada goodbye. I'm on my way to England now, and you can

hunt for that gold yourselves. When I'm taking my ease I'll laugh to think of you fellows sweating here and running your dirty hooch up and down these trails."

"I guess not, Ralston," said Corporal Conroy quietly, as he pushed the door open, and showed himself in the entrance. "Hands up, everybody, wrists together, and touching finger-tips."

FOR an instant a comical consternation succeeded the angry snarling of the three. Conroy saw the fat, bestial face of Joe Camp, mouth open, eyes widening with apprehension as they fixed themselves upon him. He noted Labrecque's expression of terror, and Ralston's clean-cut features registered stupefaction as his hands went up mechanically above his head.

Conroy had not reckoned with the half-breed's panther-like quickness. Suddenly a bullet hurtled past his face. Next moment the clubbed weapon struck him a glancing blow. As Conroy staggered, Joe Camp knocked the lamp over.

Fortunately the revolver butt only grazed his head, stripping off an inch of scalp, and descended with numbing force upon the point of his left shoulder. In the dark Conroy leaped and grabbed Ralston.

A few moments' savage tussle and the corporal succeeded in putting his prisoner to sleep with a lucky blow on the head. Joe Camp and Labrecque were rolling over and over, locked in each other's arms, each under the impression that he had possession of Conroy. By the time they had realized their error, Conroy had the advantage.

The overturned lamp had set fire to the hut, which was beginning to blaze. Labrecque fired again at the corporal as he sprang to his feet, aiming at his silhouette against the blaze. He missed a second time. Conroy's bullet, fired simultaneously, struck the half-breed in the hand.

Labrecque's revolver dropped to the

floor. With a howl of agony Labrecque fled into the darkness. He continued howling until the sounds of the pain-crazed man died away in the distance.

That left only Joe Camp. The fat outlaw had no stomach for fighting. But now Conroy stood between him and the door. Lowering his head, he charged him like a battering-ram, his impetus sending them both sprawling upon the snow without. Joe Camp, a mass of fat and flabby muscle, seized Conroy in a grip of sheer terror that bade fair to strangle the life out of him.

Unable to reach his gun, Conroy managed to get the handcuffs out of his pocket, an old-fashioned type connected by a short, stout chain of forged steel. Gripping one cuff, he brought down the other on Joe Camp's head. With a grunt, the hooch-runner subsided in the snow.

Conroy staggered to his feet. He fought his way to the hut, which was now a mass of flames, and carried out Ralston's unconscious body. Next he dragged the fat hooch-runner to safety out of the reach of the flames. Joe Camp was breathing normally, and already showed signs of returning consciousness. The heat of the fire would keep him from freezing until he was able to shift for himself.

Conroy picked up the revolver Labrecque had dropped and found another on Camp. He had a strong suspicion that after the encounter, and with their injuries, Joe Camp and Pierre Labrecque would not be inclined to risk their lives by any attempt to follow and rescue Ralston.

He hoisted Ralston upon his shoulders and carried him back to the place where he had camped. Half an hour later Ralston opened his eyes under the stars. He glared at Conroy.

"Got me, did you?" he sneered.

"Looks that way, Ralston," answered the corporal. "Want me to read the warrant to you?"

"No, damn you!" answered the fugitive.

"There'll be plenty of time on the journey," said the policeman. "We've got a long trail before us. Soon as you feel better we'll be starting. In the meantime, just put your wrists out."

The handcuffs snapped on Ralston's wrists.

CHAPTER II

FOR A WOMAN

CONROY'S term of service in the Royal Mounted had expired more than a year before, and he did not intend to rejoin.

A silent man by nature, and grown more solitary by reason of the long patrols in the wilderness, he had pre-empted a little valley to which he planned to retire and breed cattalo after he had brought back his man.

It was some ways off the main northward trail, and had apparently been visited by only one white man, the recluse who had been murdered for his gold. Conroy had pre-empted the valley before he discovered the recluse's shack under the lee of the next hill. He had been one of the patrol that had discovered the skeleton.

His term had ended, but a job has to be finished, so he had remained on active service. During those three years, as he had learned from an occasional meeting with another man of the Mounted, the service had been totally reorganized.

The old Northwest Mounted had become the Royal Mounted and his own detachment no longer existed. Until he reported back, with Ralston, he remained merely a name at Ottawa, an unattached policeman with accumulating arrears of pay, chasing an elusive criminal through the northland.

Corporal Conroy was correct in his surmise that Camp and Labrecque were not going to risk their lives on behalf of Ralston. He forced his prisoner to start as soon as he had recovered from the

concussion of his blow, and having covered nearly a dozen miles by daylight, he felt himself reasonably secure.

It was not an easy matter to take Ralston several hundred miles southward to the nearest police post, where Conroy would deliver him to the authorities. He had to sleep. To prevent Ralston's escaping while he slept, Conroy was forced to tighten the handcuffs at night and to lash Ralston to a tree with a length of rawhide. When he was awake, however, he allowed his captive a reasonable amount of liberty, having no doubt of his ability to keep the upper hand over him.

The nearest post was Fort Wilson, where a sergeant and two policemen had been stationed during the preceding winter. There existed, however, a Moravian mission about a hundred and fifty miles southward, and about twice that distance from Fort Wilson, on the Athabasca. It was connected with the world by telegraph, and from here Conroy planned to wire Divisional Headquarters, asking for instructions as to Ralston's disposition.

Conroy had searched his prisoner and taken a bundle of papers from him. He was surprised to discover that he still carried his service papers. There was also an amount of correspondence from England, mainly from Ralston's sister, Ellen.

Conroy's duties as sole government representative in the district forced him to glance through these. The letters, which he barely skimmed, were couched in loving terms. It appeared that Ralston had left England when a boy, fifteen years before, and that the sister, who hardly remembered him, had always idealized him in her heart. She wrote of family reverses, alluding to the death of a father, and hinted several times at coming out to join him. The latest letter was written three years before.

Ralston's attitude was one of sullen defiance. He jeered at Conroy and the three years' chase he had given him.

"I guess I'll have to cash in, Conroy."

he said. "I'm ready to die. Life's one damn thing after another. After all, I had the fun of killing Rogers. Wish I'd got you, too. The only thing troubles me is being caught by a swine like you, instead of a gentleman of my own class."

Conroy let him rave. Nothing the renegade policeman could say to him had the power to ruffle him.

"But you're a fool, Conroy," Ralston continued. "That gold they were looking for and never found. Well, I've got it cached, and I'd divvy up with you if you weren't such a fool. There's pretty near a hundred thousand dollars' worth. Nice pickings if you say the word, Conroy. Otherwise it will lie where I cached it till the Judgment Day."

"Conroy," Ralston said at another time. "I guess you've found out from my letters that I've got a sister over in England. The great servant class, to which you essentially belong, Conroy, invariably imagines personal letters to be public property. I'd like her not to know. But she's not likely to find out. The government always reports 'death by misadventure' to the next of kin, when it hangs one of its men."

CONROY had a week's supplies of dried meat, flour, tea, and sugar in his pack. He eked out these provisions with his prisoner, himself subsisting on practically nothing, and on the tenth morning the mission buildings appeared on the flats beside the broad Athabasca.

Conroy knew the old German priest, Father Holtz, in charge. He found instead, however, a green young German, just out from Europe, knowing hardly a word of English, to assist him in his duties. He opened his eyes wide at the sight of the constable with his prisoner, and managed to convey to Conroy's mind the idea that Father Holtz had gone out to try to secure some caribou, which had been seen in the vicinity, but would return at sundown.

There was also the word "fraulein," which Conroy knew meant "miss." This puzzled him for a while, but he came to the conclusion that one of the sisters from the Convent of the Sacred Heart, who often traveled in mid-winter, was stopping at the mission.

Taking his captive with him Conroy went into the telegraph office and dispatched a wire to Divisional Headquarters, announcing his capture of Ralston and asking for instructions.

After that followed a dreary wait through the afternoon, Conroy never for a moment relaxing his vigilance, while Ralston sat sneering beside him, the handcuffs on his wrists. The sun was dipping toward the west when the assistant came to them and began chattering in German and pointing.

Stepping to the door, Conroy saw Father Holtz and a woman coming toward the mission behind a sledge with four dogs attached. What looked like the body of a caribou was on the sledge.

The woman turned into one of the huts some little distance away, and Father Holtz, having unharnessed the dogs, left the meat on the sledge and came toward them. His eyes lit up with pleasure at the sight of Conroy, then he looked inquiringly at Ralston, handcuffed upon the seat from which the corporal had just risen.

"That's Ralston," said Conroy in a low tone. "I'm bringing him down. I sent a wire to Headquarters from—"

But he paused at the look of consternation on the priest's face. Father Holtz seemed struggling with violent emotion. He looked from Conroy to Ralston, then, taking Conroy by the arm, led him toward the other.

"I must say what I have to say to both of you," he began, while his features worked violently. "Miss Ellen Ralston is with me at this mission. She has been here since the beginning of the winter, trying to obtain news of her brother. No one would tell her that—"

"That Tom Ralston is a convicted murderer who has cheated the gallows

and may do so again," sneered Ralston.

Something that sounded like a German oath burst from the priest's lips.

"You do not understand," he cried. "She is a little thing only twenty. She barely remembers her brother, but she has always idolized him. He has been like a god to her. And she has come to this country to join him. She is so good, gentlemen," he babbled. "If she knows, it will kill her. Only yesterday she was saying that as soon as the ice goes out she will go farther up the river to try to obtain news of her brother.

"You see, they—everybody told her that he was a member of the police no longer, and has been trapping or mining in the farther North. That is all that anybody has dared to tell her. And she thinks that she will find him, and that they will make their home together. But when she learns the truth she will die. She—she must not learn."

Conroy, overcome with horror at the situation, was staring into the priest's face. He was thinking that, with Ralston's connivance, he might pretend he was taking him down on a minor charge. But he dared not trust him without the handcuffs. No, that plan would not do.

"We'd best be mushing right away," he said, "before—"

At that moment they saw the young assistant crossing the open space in front of the mission. As he passed the huts the girl emerged, and engaged him in conversation.

"Yes, that is the only thing," said Father Holtz. "She is not likely to suspect anything, and she will not speak to you. She is shy."

THE ticking of the machine in the telegraph office came to their ears. Father Holtz made his way quickly inside. He had hardly disappeared from sight when they saw the assistant turn around and point toward them. Simultaneously a startled cry broke from the girl's lips, and she came running toward them.

She stopped in front of them, panting.

A little thing, not more than five feet two or three, with pale brown hair and big gray eyes opened wide with wonder and anxiety as she fixed them alternately upon the face of Conroy and that of Ralston.

"Is—is either of you two gentlemen my brother, Tom Ralston?" she panted. "He, that young man, was telling me that he heard one of you address the other as Ralston."

Conroy could have killed the fool of a German if he had been there just then.

"Please tell me," the girl went on. "My brother—" She was looking at Conroy now, hope in her eyes. "I'm Ellen Ralston. I came out last autumn to find him. I—"

Father Holtz came quickly out of the telegraph office, a slip of flimsy paper in his hand. His advent distracted Ellen Ralston momentarily. All three turned as the priest came quickly up to them. He handed the slip that he had just scribbled to the corporal.

"Escort Ralston to Fort Wilson and see that he is detained there until the sentence of the law has been carried into effect. Fort Wilson has been notified to have everything in readiness for the execution upon arrival. Report to Headquarters afterward."

Conroy crumpled the slip and thrust it into his pocket. He turned back to the girl, whose features reflected her growing alarm.

"Nell," he said, "I'm your brother Tom."

CHAPTER III

TRAILING BACK

HE did not know afterward what impulse had led him to say that. But the situation had become impossible. He knew he could have done nothing else.

And she had flung her arms about his neck and cried and laughed till, fearful of his prisoner's escape, he had had to push her from him. Then she had looked at Ralston again, and seen the handcuffs.

"Who—who is this?" she had gasped.

Conroy told her that he was a prisoner whom he was taking down on the charge of violating the liquor regulations. And Ralston had looked on with a cynical smile and said nothing.

"Then you are still in the police?" Ellen had inquired. "They told me you had taken your discharge."

Conroy had explained that he had re-enlisted, wondering how it was that the words came so pat from his lips. Then he had told Ellen that they had to be separated for a little longer, while he was taking the prisoner Conroy down to Divisional Headquarters for selling liquor to the Indians.

"But is that a serious crime?" asked Ellen in wonder. "And do they make you policemen travel in such weather as this, just to arrest a man for selling a little liquor? And must he wear those horrible things on his wrists as if he was a desperate criminal?"

"Well, you see, the Indians are not allowed to have liquor," stammered Conroy. "And as for the cuffs—why, he might try to escape."

"The cuffs, as our friend calls these metallic implements, are considered an inevitable concomitant of such a condition by minds like that of our friend the corporal," said Ralston, in the bee-haw manner of the stage Englishman.

Ellen looked at him in bewilderment, and Conroy ground his teeth savagely.

"And what will they do to this poor man?" asked Ellen.

"Oh, just a little fine," jeered Ralston. "They'll tell me to be a good boy and not do it again."

Ellen, as if sensing that there was something more in the situation than appeared, kept looking anxiously from one man to the other. Conroy's heart was in his mouth throughout the interview,

but Ralston had subsided into a surly silence.

"And are you starting today?" asked the girl.

"Right away, as soon as we've had something to eat," said Conroy. "The quicker it's over, the sooner I—I shall be back here. Father Holtz will take good care of you."

"And how long will that be, Tom?"

"Oh, you can look for me inside of a month," Conroy answered.

"It seems dreadful that we should have to be parted for a whole month, just when we have found each other," sighed Ellen. "But I am so thankful that I have found you, Tom, dear." Her mouth quivered. "I was afraid that—that I should never find you, and nobody seemed to want to tell me anything about you somehow."

"Ralston, I've put up some supplies for you," said Father Holtz, "and supper's ready. You'd best come now, if you're meaning to start this evening."

"You couldn't wait till morning?" asked Ellen eagerly.

But she said nothing when Conroy told her that would be impossible. They went in to their meal of sourdough and caribou steak. While he ate Conroy had to listen to the girl's description of life at home, and details about people who were only names that he had seen in her letters to her brother. All the while Ralston listened and leered at Ellen and grinned cynically at Conroy.

When the hurried meal was finished, Conroy shouldered his pack with the supplies that the priest had put up for him. The young fool of a German, who had been the cause of the dilemma, had been kept out of the way, for which Conroy was devoutly grateful. Ellen clung to Conroy and kissed him fondly.

"Come back, Tom, safe and sound," she said. "I shall be so anxious about you."

She glanced at Ralston.

"Please don't keep this poor man's handcuffs too tight," she said.

"Good-bye, good-bye," shouted the

priest. "Keep away from any of the Indian camps," he warned Conroy. "There's a plague of smallpox in the district. I'll take good care of your sister. Good-bye, my boy, and God be with you."

THEY took up the trail. Conroy was conscious of something almost like gratitude to his prisoner that he had not betrayed himself to Ellen.

They camped that night a few miles out of the settlement. The worst part of their journey still lay before them, the passage of the Desolation range, culminating in Little Wolf pass, at an altitude of some two thousand feet. It was not difficult to negotiate in mid-winter, but dangerous now in late March, when the snow was soft, and avalanches were apt to start. That night Ralston taunted Conroy with all the invective that he had at ready command.

"Quite sweet on that little sister of mine, aren't you, Conroy?" he jeered. "Pretty little thing she is, too. I respect your taste, Conroy. I'd have thought it would have run along more plebeian lines."

For the first time Conroy lost his self-control.

"Damn you, shut up!" he shouted. "If you've got any instincts of a man hidden away somewhere in you, shut up and keep quiet."

Ralston chuckled.

"Got under your hide there, Conroy," he went on. "Seems as if my guess was correct. Conroy, I'm going to have an annoying, perhaps a disturbing, time when I get to Fort Wilson. But I don't envy you the job you're going to have explaining things to her. Or perhaps," he went on, "you'll decide, having my letters and all, that it might be as well to let her think you're me. Only in that case you won't be able to marry her, you know."

Ralston said nothing more, but Conroy could hear him chuckling now and again as he lay handcuffed and strapped

to the tree to which the corporal had bound him. Ralston was going down to his death, but he had Conroy at his mercy.

Conroy hardly slept. At the first break of dawn he was up, shivering and preparing coffee. Ralston was still asleep. What kind of man was this that could sleep in the shadow of the gallows? He awoke when coffee was ready and sat up, stretching out his wrists to have them freed of the handcuffs.

"Little sister begged you not to fasten this poor man's cuffs too tight."

Conroy snapped back the lock.

"Hurry up, Ralston," he said curtly. "We've got to get through Little Wolf pass by evening."

Ralston ate, grinning at his own thoughts. When he was through Conroy fastened his pack on his back, and the two started off, Ralston a little in the lead as always. Conroy never relaxed his vigilance or allowed the other to come too near. His loaded gun, in his unfastened holster, was ever at his finger-tips. Ralston had thus far made no move to gain his freedom, but Conroy maintained his perpetual watch. The strain was telling on him, and his nerves were rasped raw by the events of the day before. To add to this, a sudden storm sprang up out of the west, increasing as the day wore on.

TOWARD mid-afternoon they were threading the trail over the Desolations. Beyond that ridge, not very high or arduous except at that particular season, lay comparatively level land. They would strike the Athabasca again and follow its course to their destination.

The snow lay deep, and on the slopes of the mountains the wind blew it into their faces with hurricane force. As the day waned it became almost impossible for Conroy to observe his bearings and keep watch on Ralston, too. A little short of the pass Conroy hailed Ralston, a dim figure hardly visible in the snow swirls.

"Halt!" he rasped. "Halt, Ralston, or I'll shoot!"

Ralston stopped and Conroy toiled up to him.

"I've told you before to keep your proper distance ahead," shouted the corporal. "Think you're going to put over one on me like that?"

Ralston snickered.

"Guess your nerves are frayed raw, Corporal," he taunted him. "Still worrying over little sister?"

Conroy smothered an oath.

"Just put your hands above your head, Ralston," he ordered. "I'm going to fasten us together. I'm not taking any chances with you on these slopes."

Ralston snickered again, but said nothing. His silence, though, was more maddening than any taunt. Holding his prisoner covered with his Colt, Conroy quickly looped the rawhide about both their bodies, allowing a distance of about twenty feet between them.

"Now mush, Ralston," the corporal ordered.

Ralston started off again. The summit of the pass loomed ahead of them, not far away, but it was near sundown, so far as could be guessed through the swirling blizzard and growing dark fast. They must hurry to find shelter on the other side where they would be comparatively free from the wind. Ralston struggled on, Conroy almost upon his heels. He wondered whether it was his nerves, or some true presentiment that Ralston was planning to play some trick on him. Suddenly he stopped.

"We're off the trail," he announced.

"Looks that way," said Ralston.

What they had thought the trail proved now to be a blind passage stopping almost at the crest of the divide. Peering out through the snow, they saw a vertical cliff before them, extending around to their left. On the right there was a vast slope of snow, studded with projecting rocks. Behind them was the long slope up which they had toiled, pitted with two irregular lines of footprints.

"Trail's over there," said Ralston, indicating a break in the serrated crest of the summit.

"Why the devil didn't you say we were wrong?" Conroy shouted.

"I thought you knew so much, Corporal," answered Ralston, with mock humility, "and I wasn't sure myself."

"Mush back!" snapped Conroy.

Ralston turned. Suddenly a warning cry broke from his lips. From the slope above a vast field of snow seemed suddenly to detach itself and come gliding toward them with rapidly increasing speed. As it advanced it seemed to rear itself like a gigantic wave. One moment the two men cowered on the slope of Little Wolf pass. The next a hundred tons of snow had swept them into nothingness.

CHAPTER IV

CHEATED

CONROY felt himself sucked up into the maw of the avalanche which enveloped him like a soft, cold cloud, sweeping him away. In front of him lay the precipice toward which he was being hurried with irresistible impetus. Mentally he calculated that drop in terms of feet and impact. He wondered whether it was true that men flung from a height heard but never felt the shock of the descent. And he awaited what seemed the inevitable end.

Then he realized that the movement had stopped. The snow still enveloped him, but he could breathe through the dry particles and underneath him he felt the solid ground.

For an instant it flashed through his brain that he had fallen, lost consciousness, and was now lying at the bottom of the gorge. But he quickly discovered that he was able to move his arms and legs. Throwing out the former, he encountered a jagged rock, around

which he flung them, bracing his body against it.

Then, with a struggle, he succeeded in dislodging the pile of snow above him. And to his infinite joy and relief he saw the welcome face of the moon riding through the sky overhead.

Quickly he took his bearings. He soon discovered that he was lying, clasping the rock, almost upon the edge of the precipice. He could see down into those dizzy depths beneath him. The dry, powdery snow was heaped up in billowing masses all about him, the remnant that had been held by the rocky ledge after the bulk of the avalanche had fallen over the gorge. Above him was a bare tract of mountain side.

Then Conroy made another discovery. Something was looped about one arm, cutting into and bruising it. It was a rope. But how did a rope come to be about his arm? His mind, still benumbed by the shock of the descent, went searching back. Something very important was connected with that rope which he could not afford to forget. Something important. . . . Ralston!

With that, memory became complete again. Ralston had been at the other end of that rope and Ralston must be lying at the bottom of the ravine, buried under tons of snow. He would have to go back without his man after that three years' chase.

True, under such circumstances he would be exonerated. No policeman was expected to prove stronger than the forces of nature. But to return without his man meant an undefinable stigma in the force, where "Get your man!" was the first law, written and unwritten.

Still, perhaps when day dawned, it might be possible in some way to descend the precipice and retrieve Ralston's body.

As he tugged at the rope to free his arm, Conroy realized that the other end was caught in something. Half-relaxing his hold of the rock, he crawled a few

inches to the edge of the precipice. He pulled again.

And then he saw Ralston lying on a narrow ledge and clinging to a small sapling that protruded from that six-inch shelf, with the rope still fastened about his body.

"Ralston!" he called.

"Hello, Conroy, old scout! Thought you were dead!" came up to him.

"Are you hurt, Ralston?"

"Don't think so. How are you, Conroy?"

"I'm all right. Can you hold on for a few minutes? I think I can pull you up from there. The rope's not frayed at your end, is it?"

"No," answered Ralston, "the rope's not frayed."

"Loop it around you, Ralston, and I'll wind it around this rock. I can get you up."

"Just hold your horses, Conroy." Ralston's sardonic chuckle came up over the ledge. "I'm not in such a hurry as you seem to think I am."

"What d'you mean, Ralston?"

"Meaning that, if it's all the same to you, Conroy, or if it isn't, I'd rather lie here till I get tired holding this rock and let myself go, rather do that than go down to Fort Wilson to be hanged."

Conroy was silent. Without Ralston's aid he knew it would be impossible to haul him over the edge of the precipice, and from Ralston's point of view he could find no fault with the decision.

"Conroy!" Ralston's voice floated up, bland and insinuating. "That little sister of mine's got money. Not very much, but enough to start two people nicely with a little ranch somewhere in the prairie provinces. How about hauling me up and letting me go, and reporting ex-Constable Ralston captured and killed by an avalanche?"

"Shut up, damn you!"

"It's been done, Conroy. Every policeman knows it."

"You can save yourself wind, Ralston. I'll get you up or I'll wait here till one of us is dead."

Ralston's chuckle came up again.

"I'll save myself wind. Didn't expect you'd do it, old scout, but I had to have some fun with you. You're easy, Conroy."

Conroy was silent.

"No need to wait till one of us kicks the bucket, Conroy. I've got a knife. I've just a few words to say to you before I use it, Conroy. You wouldn't look on me as exactly the kind of egg to have a conscience, would you? Well, in a way I have. I was sorry for that poor fish Rogers I shot. As I tried to tell you, it was a private quarrel between us, the sort of thing gentlemen never speak about. You wouldn't understand."

"I'm sorry for that kid girl, too. I hardly remember her, but it is tough luck for her, coming out to meet her idolized brother and finding him ready to dangle at the end of a noose. Conroy, when I'm gone, why shouldn't you be Tom Ralston?"

"You've no connections, I understand. You've got the letters, and they'll tell you everything you need to know. Of course," the sardonic chuckle again, "you can't marry her, Conroy. But maybe the time will come when you'll be able to let her know the facts. How about it, Conroy?"

"You devil!" gritted Conroy through his teeth. "Ralston, I'll see you hanged for that if I lie here till all eternity."

"Oh, no, you won't, Conroy, because I'm going to cut this rope in a few moments. Just got to have a little fun with you first. Conroy, you poor egg, all you've got to do is to go down to headquarters with the report of my death, take your discharge, and then go back to where little sister is waiting for you. You can be Tom Ralston for the rest of your days, a man of birth instead of what you are and with your own savings and little sister's, your future's made. She's the sort of trusting, innocent little thing that will never ask inconvenient questions. How about it, Conroy?" the insinuating voice went on.

"Think it over, Conroy, because it's damn cold lying here and I'm due for a warmer place in about ten seconds."

AND Conroy, leaning over the edge of the cliff, saw Ralston draw a knife from his boot.

It was only a little pocket-knife, but still Conroy could not understand how he had managed to secrete it after the thorough searching he had given him.

"Ralston! Don't be a fool!" Conroy shouted, as the man on the ledge began to hack at the rope.

But he knew in his heart that Ralston was no fool. He was only doing what he himself would have done in his place.

"Ralston!" he shouted again, as he saw a strand of the rope, at which Ralston was hacking, fly back.

Ralston stopped in his operations to look up at the man above him.

"Think it over, Conroy, that's my last word to you," he chuckled. "You and little sister, in love with each other, and the dear child wondering why you don't say the fatal words that will make you man and wife. Conroy, ex-corporal, torn between the promptings of love and his notorious sense of duty as a former member of the force. And the alternative of telling little sister that she isn't really little sister, and that her brother dropped over a ledge to avoid stretching hemp. Oh, it's a great situation, Conroy. If there's anything to this spirit-return business, I shall be watching you and chuckling over it. The good man struggling against adversity, you know. Here goes, old scout."

Conroy saw Ralston's hand hacking vigorously at the remaining strands of the rope. Again he shouted, conscious of the futility of it. And then, with a sudden jerk, the rope parted. The severed end flew violently back. Ralston's body disappeared abruptly down the precipitous slide below the ledge, the echoes of his last mocking words ringing in Conroy's ears.

Conroy crawled to the extreme limit of the precipice edge and tried to peer over the shelf below. He could see nothing. Then, managing to gain his feet, he toiled painfully back until he struck the trail leading through Little Wolf pass.

Until he was on the other side of the Desolations he hardly realized that the pack was still strapped to his back. He warned himself at a fire, and crouched over it till morning. Then he attempted to work his way over the snows to the foot of the precipice over which Ralston had fallen.

He found the ledge, but it was impossible to reach the gorge beneath it, into which the body had descended. It was plain enough, however, that Ralston's death had been instantaneous. Buried beneath the tons of snow that filled the depths of the gorge, and crushed by the terrific fall almost beyond human semblance, it seemed clear that what remained of Ralston would lie there until the crumbling bones had dissolved under the scorching suns and bitter frosts of ages.

CHAPTER V

PRISONER!

A WEEK later, by dint of forced marches Corporal Conroy reached Fort Wilson on the Athabasca. He found a number of policemen posted there in preparation for a proposed extension of police jurisdiction northward in the spring. Inspector McCoy, who was in charge of the district, had also arrived there a few days before.

Stables had been constructed and the whole fort enlarged with the purpose of turning it into a divisional post. But the most grisly evidence that Conroy's arrival with his prisoner had been expected consisted in an enclosure that had been constructed in the prison yard.

Inside this was a gallows and trap,

with a two-hundred-pound bag of meal suspended from a new hempen rope.

Jim found not a single man at the post with whom he was acquainted. During his three years in the Arctic the entire personnel of the Force had changed or had been redistributed throughout the length and breadth of the Dominion. Conroy was known only as a name, listed as on patrol in search of Ralston.

Inspector McCoy, also a new figure in the Force since Conroy's time, was on a journey to a nearby mission and was not expected back until after sundown. Conroy, even after he had shaved and drawn new clothing from the store, felt strangely embarrassed in the company of his fellows after nearly three years of almost unbroken silence. Speech had become difficult for him, and he found himself groping for familiar words to express his thoughts.

Sergeant Timmins, the chief non-commissioned officer in charge, a lank, sandy-haired Irishman, to whom Jim reported, was inclined to be bitter, and did not conceal the fact when he learned that Conroy had made his capture and that the captive had been lost in the avalanche.

"Some people have all the luck and don't know how to use it," he growled. "If 'twas me had taken that murderin' hound, and won the promotion that's past due coming to me, you can bet your boots, Conroy, that Ralston wouldn't have got away from me."

CONROY took the slur indifferently. All his mind was pre-occupied with Ellen Ralston. How was he to make known the truth to her? Or should he ever make it known?

Inspector McCoy, a tall, monocled officer of the conservative type, received Conroy's report better than Sergeant Timmins had done.

"Well, I'm sorry you lost your man, Corporal," he said, "but you were not responsible for that. You've done good

work, and it will be reported at Ottawa. Of course you're in line for promotion, and there's a sergeantcy vacant. You'll be thinking of rejoining?"

"No, sir, I'm going to hand in my papers," said Conroy.

The inspector's eyes narrowed.

"Had enough of the service, Corporal?" he asked. "I guess those three years in the Arctic must have been pretty bad, but you'll have your pick of a soft snap after what you've been through."

"It's not that, sir. I've decided to take up a ranch," said Conroy.

"Very well," answered the inspector stiffly. To his mind, any man who left the Force was a fool. Conroy would be back to re-enlist later, with his chance of a sergeantcy thrown away, he was certain. "Make yourself at home around here until your discharge comes through from Ottawa," he said.

"That will be a matter of weeks, sir."

"No pressing engagements, have you, Conroy?" drawled the inspector ironically.

"Nothing very particular, sir, but I'd like leave of absence to go up to the Moravian Mission. Father Holtz and I are old friends."

"Ah, well, then I've bad news for you Conroy," said the inspector. "Father Holtz died two days ago of malignant smallpox."

Conroy was stunned by the news. With the passing of the old priest there was not a man anywhere in the divisional district who knew him.

"Oh, by the bye," McCoy continued, "you didn't happen to meet little Ellen Ralston when you passed through the mission?"

"Yes, sir, she—she didn't get stricken?" Conroy almost gasped.

"No, I guess not. You didn't let her know, of course, that the man you were bringing in happened to be her brother, did you, Conroy? Everybody here has been particularly careful."

"No, sir."

"Well, when he discovered that he

was suffering from the disease, Father Holtz sent Miss Ralston down to Fort Wilson in the Mission motorboat, in charge of a young German assistant of his, a fellow named Green. He arranged with one of the natives, who stayed by him, to signal on the telegraph key in a certain way, in case he died, and that happened. There's a clear channel down the Athabasca, so Green and Ellen Ralston ought to be here any time now. I'm glad you kept the news from her. We'll hide the facts somehow. Now about that leave of yours—"

"I won't apply at present, sir," said Conroy.

He was thinking that he could best protect Ellen from the knowledge of her brother's past by being on the spot when she arrived. It was not likely the girl would stay longer than the night at the fort, and he could accompany her down-country. Of course he would have to explain the deception to the Inspector.

He must get Ellen Ralston out of the district as quickly as possible, or, sooner or later, someone would blurt out the truth to her. Conroy wished afterward that he had taken up the matter with McCoy then and there. Much would have been avoided.

WITH the sudden cessation of his months of patrolling and the advent of the spring, an immense lethargy had come to him. He slept the greater part of two days and nights. Thus it happened he was lying on his cot in the barracks on the second day when an orderly came in, shouting his name.

"You're wanted in the office, Corporal," he said. "Father Green and Miss Ralston have just come in."

Jim leaped to his feet, adjusted his uniform, and hurried across the barracks square, past that grisly enclosure, above which the top of the gallows, with the cross-piece could be seen, and to the Inspector's office. Ellen and Father Green were standing, facing McCoy,

who was looking at them with a puzzled air. Near the door Sergeant Timmins was standing.

As Conroy entered, Ellen turned and ran to him with a little cry of gladness. She flung her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"Oh, Tom, I'm so glad you've arrived here safe," she cried. "I was so afraid for you, taking that horrible man with you as a prisoner. I feared he might get the upper hand of you on the way, and do you some harm, perhaps kill you while you were asleep."

Father Green advanced and shook Conroy warmly by the hand.

"Goot to see you, Mr. Ralston, goot," exclaimed the stupid young priest.

Over his shoulder Conroy saw that Sergeant Timmins was staring at him in an extraordinary manner. And the same expression was on the face of Inspector McCoy. Instantly he understood what that expression meant. They supposed him to be Ralston! A stupid mix-up, but readily explained. Only—how could Jim explain it in the presence of the girl?

Sergeant Timmins moved quietly a pace or two toward the door. McCoy had moved back to his desk, and stood there, one hand closing about a partly opened drawer. Beneath the fingers Conroy could see the outlines of an army pistol.

He almost laughed at the absurdity of the situation. He heard McCoy speaking:

"Miss Ralston, you identify this man as your brother, Thomas Ralston?"

"Why—why, of course!" The girl was staring in bewilderment at the Inspector. "Of course I do. We met up at the Mission."

"You didn't remember his face?" he asked her.

"No, but I'd have known him in a moment from an old photograph. Why? Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter, Miss Ralston, but—"

He pressed his bell, and instantly an

acting-corporal appeared at the door from the orderly-room.

"Corporal Jones, please escort Miss Ralston to my quarters. I shall see you a little later, Miss Ralston."

The girl went out in bewilderment, partly reassured by Conroy's nod. The moment the door had closed behind them McCoy turned to Conroy again.

"Well—er—Corporal, have you any statement to make upon this subject?" he inquired.

Conroy found it difficult to keep his face straight.

"Why, sir, I see what you mean," he answered. "The fact is, when we found Miss Ralston at the Mission, Ralston and I agreed to exchange identities for her benefit, so that she should not know the truth. I meant to explain that, sir."

"You mean you pretended to be Ralston for her benefit, and he pretended to be yourself?"

"Exactly, sir. I told her I was bringing him in for a breach of the liquor regulations."

"You can substantiate this, Father Green?" asked the Inspector.

Father Green was beaming.

"Ja, ja, dot iss Mr. Ralston," he insisted. "Father Holtz, he say Mr. Ralston, he know him und--"

"Wait!" thundered McCoy. "Did these two men exchange identities at the Mission?"

"Why, dot man, dot iss Mr. Ralston," persisted the blockhead. "De corporal was bringing him in mit handcuffs on him."

Inspector McCoy's voice became as chill as steel.

"Ralston!" he thundered.

But it was not at Jim that he was looking. He was nodding at Sergeant Timmins, who had been reaching quietly up to a cupboard on the wall. Suddenly Conroy felt his arms pinioned from behind. The bracelets snapped upon his wrists.

"Well, Ralston, we've got you at last," McCoy smiled softly.

CHAPTER VI

THE NOOSE

STILL stunned and dumfounded by this development, Jim Conroy paced the narrow confines of his cell. It was a single cubicle of stone, the only cell in the post, just large enough to contain the army cot placed there to accommodate some occasional offender against barracks regulations, yet strong enough to hold the most desperate criminal.

It faced a narrow passage with a door at the farther end, where there was a small room for the guard. In the darkening twilight Conroy could hear the shuffle of the guard's feet as he lounged against the wall, glancing over a newspaper. Occasionally the man, a young recruit, would march along the length of the corridor, his rifle in his hand, and peer into Conroy's cell with eyes wide with interest. To him, the capture of the badly wounded murderer, who had so long evaded justice, was the most thrilling event that had happened in the whole period of his military service.

Conroy had not yet quite succeeded in piecing events together in his mind. It was only slowly that the damning nature of his situation came home to him. He had been identified as the fugitive murderer, Ralston, by the blockhead of a priest, Father Green, and, more damning feature still, by Ellen Ralston. His protests had been contemptuously dismissed. And what appeared to clinch the matter was the existence of Ralston's correspondence upon him.

From the beginning of the grueling inquisition that had taken place in the office of Inspector McCoy it had been assumed for granted that he was Ralston. McCoy had granted one concession. He had told Jim that he would wire to Ottawa immediately for instructions.

The click of the outer door, at the end

of the passage, startled Jim from his reflections. There came the sound of voices. Through the grille in the cell door Conroy saw Inspector McCoy and Sergeant Timmins appear in the corridor. Then the door of his cell was unlocked.

"Shun!" shouted the sergeant, and Jim automatically obeyed the long unheard command.

McCoy held a paper in his hand.

"Ralston, I've just received a wire from Ottawa in answer to my communication about you this afternoon," the Inspector began.

"My name's not Ralston, sir."

"Silence!" shouted Timmins.

The sergeant's vindictive feeling against Jim, whom he considered to have played a dirty trick upon himself personally by lying to him, had inflamed his feelings almost to the murder point. "There exists no doubt whatever as to your identity, Ralston," McCoy continued. "Had you succeeded in your scheme, you would have been immune for the rest of your days. A clever trick and a daring one. However, that's neither here nor there. The Dominion authorities have ordered that the execution is to proceed as scheduled. You will be hanged at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. Father Green will be permitted to attend you tonight. And I'm damned sorry for you, Ralston. I shall now read you the warrant for your execution."

HE read, but Jim heard not a word of the involved phraseology. His mind was casting over the situation feverishly and he could see no way out of it. Dominion justice does not favor stays of execution once sentence has been passed. And the sentence of death had been passed on Ralston nearly three years before.

If Jim's enlistment papers, hidden away somewhere in the pigeon-holes of the much confused headquarters of the Police at Ottawa, could be unearched,

there might be a chance of clearing up the situation. But Conroy quickly realized the futility of this hope. No fingerprints of recruits were taken. The descriptions were perfunctory. Conroy and Ralston were about the same height; each of them had brown eyes, was of medium coloring, and possessed no distinguishing marks. There was in either case an immaterial past history that would never be verified pending a stay of execution. No, the trap was proof.

McCoy had gone and Jim was pacing his cell again. Later the guard brought him his supper. He could not eat. For himself, he could face the death that was inevitable sooner or later. But a hideous death upon the gallows. . . . And then Ellen. What would become of her? What would she believe? Had she turned from him in loathing? He hoped so. She must know the truth. They could not have managed to conceal the sordid business from her.

Again the cell door clicked. This time Jim heard Ellen's voice. And he shrank back into his cell instinctively. He had hoped to be spared that. But again the door was opened. Sergeant Timmins stood there, with the girl beside him.

"You can have ten minutes with the prisoner," Timmins announced gruffly, "but you must keep six feet away from him."

Jim was amazed at the girl's appearance. She had seemed such a little, helpless thing, but now her eyes were bright and tearless and defiant.

"Tom, I know all now," she said, "and I want you to understand that you mean just the same to me as ever. I know you couldn't be guilty of the horrible crime that they say you have committed, and I never will believe you did it. I love you, Tom, dear, and always shall."

Should he tell her the truth? Would she believe him? Jim decided that this was no time for explanations.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know, Tom. There's hope," she whispered feverishly as Timmins glanced aside at the guard for an instant. "Don't give up hope."

IT was her lips rather than her voice that said it. Next moment Timmins had turned toward them again, and the girl was speaking about persons known only to Jim through the letters.

He never remembered afterward just what they talked about during the remainder of that interview. All the while he had the sense that Ellen was bidding him hope, though he could not imagine how it was possible to hope, or from what source aid could come. Then the sergeant intimated that the time was up. She flung her arms about his neck with a wild cry. And in his ear was that whisper of hope again.

Then Sergeant Timmins had intervened and Ellen was going down the corridor.

Much later, when it was already the day of his execution, Jim was informed by Timmins that Father Green was ready to see him.

"I'm ready for him," said Jim. "And Sergeant, I want to make a will and have you two witness it."

"I'll witness it for you," replied Timmins sardonically. "That's just about the best thing you can do, Ralston."

Even under those circumstances Sergeant Timmin's malice was suppressed with difficulty. He would not let Jim have paper and pencil, but wrote down from his dictation:

"I leave everything to Ellen Ralston."

"You want to say, 'My sister Ellen Ralston.' That will be clearer," observed Timmins, pausing, with his pencil in the air.

"Just write down what I've said."

"Still keeping up the game that you're Conroy, are you? Well, that won't help you, Ralston," sneered the other.

He wrote as ordered and Father Green was summoned. It was with some difficulty that he was made to understand what was required of him. In

the end, the will was signed and witnessed, though the sergeant balked at first at witnessing the signature, "James Conroy." Jim gave the will to Green.

"I guess that'll be all," he said. But Father Green had already preceded him into the cell. He stood there, looking at Jim with an expression of extraordinary concern upon his face.

Jim was about to decline his ministrations. Then that expression of the young Gerinan's checked him. He went into the cell. Sergeant Timmins withdrew, leaving the guard in the corridor outside the unlocked door.

The priest began a prayer. The guard walked slowly up and down the corridor. He passed the cell, repassed, while the German continued chanting.

But was this a German prayer? Between the words of it queer English words seemed to be forming. Then Conroy realized that Father Green was delivering a message to him:

"We save you. . . . We made our plans. . . . I must stay here und nod know noddings, because of my flock. . . . We save you, ja. . . ."

As Conroy listened, stupefied and hardly able to believe his ears as he looked into Father Green's stupid, vacuous face, the sentry passed again. He grounded his rifle, and leaned back against the wall. From the clock in the office sounded the hour of three, clear, melodious, bell-like tones that pierced through the silence.

To Jim's amazement, the priest's hand, which had gone under his loose cloak, came out, clutching something which he slipped into his own. It was a revolver. Mechanically Jim slipped it inside his tunic. The priest's chant still continued, but Father Green seemed to be listening for something.

It came, the clicking of the outer door. Ellen's voice sounded once more, and Jim, now keyed up to the highest pitch, felt himself trembling with anticipation. What was the girl doing there? But he was free. Whatever happened, he was free, while he was in possession

of that weapon. If he had to turn it upon himself, at least it would save him from death upon the gibbet.

Then the voice of Sergeant Timmins came to his ears:

"It's dead against orders, Miss Ralston, but I guess I can let you see your brother for just one minute to give him your last message. It must be one minute strictly, though."

"Only for one minute, Sergeant Timmins, and I'll be grateful to you all the rest of my life," Conroy heard Ellen's clear voice in answer.

All the while Father Green had been chanting. Now he stopped, and as the footfalls sounded along the flags of the external corridor he glanced at Jim sharply. Jim understood that the moment for action had arrived. He drew the weapon the priest had given him from his tunic, gripped it and, spinning the cylinder, discovered that all the chambers were loaded.

Next moment Sergeant Timmins' key grated in the lock, and Father Green had resumed his chanting again. Then Timmins appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the full moon that hung over the barracks yard.

"Your sister's got something to say to you, Ralston," he announced harshly.

All that happened after that seemed to pass instantaneously. Behind the sergeant, Conroy saw the girl standing in an attitude of tense expectancy. Then she took a single step between them, and whipped a revolver from her dress and thrust it into the sergeant's face.

"Hands up!" her voice rang out, vibrant, shrill, and fearless.

CHAPTER VII

FLIGHT

PARALYZED with amazement, Sergeant Timmins made no move of any kind. Jim saw that the hand that held the revolver was as steady as a rock.

"Please put your hands up," came the girl's restrained, quiet voice once more. "I shall not warn you again."

Her finger was perceptibly tightening upon the trigger. There was no mistaking Ellen's determination to shoot and on the instant. And slowly Sergeant Timmins' hands went up over his head.

There followed a moment or two of utter silence. Then the guard, who had been standing in the corridor outside the cell, with his rifle grounded, uttered a strangling sound and began to raise it. As he did so, Jim Conroy recovered his self-possession. He took command of the situation. Before the rifle had come up to a horizontal position he had the constable covered with his revolver.

"Put 'em up!" he said quietly.

The constable obeyed, letting his rifle clatter to the stone flags of the corridor.

And again there followed a moment or two of silence. It was strange how deliberate the whole proceedings appeared to be. Father Green was still standing motionless in the shadows of the cell. Sergeant Timmins still remained with his hands above his head, Ellen's revolver thrust out toward his face. Jim caught the girl's eyes for an instant. The resolution, the fire in them astounded him. She seemed to be possessed of superhuman courage, for all her fragility and timid aspect.

"Not a sound or I shoot," said the girl very softly to the sergeant. "Get into that cell!"

In all his years of service Sergeant Timmins had never blanched in the face of an enemy. Now his expression was a picture. Perhaps it was sheer surprise rather than the fear of death that led him to obey. But mechanically at the girl's words he entered the cell that had housed Jim, in which the priest was still standing motionless.

"Now you!" Conroy ordered the recruit.

The young constable, seeing that his superior officer had yielded to discretion, made no bones about following his example. He stepped into the cell. Jim

hesitated just a moment, for Father Green made no movement to effect his escape. Then he remembered what the priest had said to him, and realized that he meant to appear to have been taken by surprise. He could not afford to outlaw himself, with his Indian charges at the mission. Jim glanced at Ellen, who made an almost imperceptible motion indicating assent, and clanged the door upon the three, shooting back the bolt outside.

"Now, quick!" whispered the girl, turning toward him.

NEXT instant the two were running through the outer doorway. Before they had emerged into the yard of the barracks they could hear their two captives shouting at the top of their voices. But the sounds were cut off abruptly as Jim closed the outer door behind him. Had the prisoners' shouts been heard by any of the detachment asleep in barracks? It seemed improbable, for the men's sleeping quarters were some little distance away, and there were two doors for the sounds to penetrate.

They did not stop to think but ran into the yard, which was flooded with moonlight.

"This way!" panted Jim.

He caught Ellen, who seemed confused as to her bearings, and drew her into the shadows cast by the barracks.

They ran on. The post was built around a small quadrangle with the enclosure, over which protruded the top of the gibbet. Jim hoped that Ellen had not understood the meaning of that grisly thing, horrible in the moonlight. On their right lay the quarters of the inspector and the office. On their left was the barracks structure. Ahead of them were the stables. They could hear the horses shuffling in their stalls. But they were useless, either for flight or for pursuit, owing to the snow, which still lay deep upon the ground, covered with a frozen crust that made it impassable. Between the stables and the bar-

racks ran the road toward the river.

They were nearing the further end of the quadrangle when suddenly a constable on sentry duty appeared around the angle of the barracks building. He was moving stiffly, carrying his rifle at trail, muffled to the ears against the cold. At the sight of the two he stopped. He stared at them and directly blocked their way. In an instant, he appeared to take in the situation. He shouted in warning and raised his rifle.

Before he had time to aim or fire, Conroy had hurled himself upon him. They grappled. The sentry was a little Welshman, built like a barrel. The two men fell writhing into the snow. The sentry could not use his gun, which Conroy held fast with one hand. But he clutched the corporal in a grip like a vise, from which it was impossible for Conroy to detach himself. And all the while he never ceased to yell.

Even when Ellen, running up, thrust her revolver into his face, he refused to relax his grip and only yelled the louder. Jim knew that the girl would never fire. Everything seemed lost. He did not know whether he would have shot the sentry, but he could not get his hand to the revolver, his wrist being caught tight in one of the Welshman's sinewy hands. But as the other shifted his grasp for an instant in order to seize him more securely, Jim, with a violent effort, succeeded in wrenching back his right arm. He delivered a terrific short-arm jolt to the point of the jaw.

The constable's head sagged backward. His grasp relaxed. His body grew limp. It was only for an instant. But in that instant Conroy succeeded in detaching himself from the other man's grip. He struggled to his feet. But now a new antagonist was upon the scene. Inspector McCoy, aroused by the sentry's shouts, was standing in the doorway of his quarters, a revolver in his hand. With a cry, he aimed and discharged it.

Jim felt the whip of one bullet as it grazed his cheek. He flung himself at

McCoy. By a miracle he escaped injury as the remaining bullets hissed through the air. He bore the inspector heavily to the ground, tore the revolver from his hand, and sent it hurtling across the barracks yard into the snow. McCoy lay still. He was momentarily stunned. Without more than a glance at his face Conroy caught Ellen by the arm and the two resumed their flight.

THEY were only just in time, for already the half-a-dozen men who comprised the detachment were appearing at the door of the barracks in various stages of undress. From the cell came faintly the sound of the voices of the two prisoners who were continuing to shout at the top of their lungs. The Welsh sentry was already sitting up, and trying to take in the situation. But the whole picture was a mere momentary blur on Jim's mind, for now he and Ellen were clear of the yard, and racing down the single street of the little settlement in the direction of the Athabasca.

Jim followed the girl's lead blindly without inquiring what her plans were. It was evident from the certainty of her movements, that she had made them. They raced on, hearing the shouts behind them.

Here and there the snowbound shacks of the little settlement loomed up on either side of them. Dogs barked. They struggled on. Then the river came into sight, the lordly Athabasca, glutted with great floes that sailed majestically down on its slow current. And in the middle was a broad band of black water.

They ran on, the breath hissing through their parted lips, until they were among the brush that fringed the river. A little distance from the settlement the forests began. Sheltered by the shelving bank, Ellen began to run at the water's edge toward the scattering outposts of trees. Once within their shelter she stopped.

"We came down in the Mission motorboat," she panted. "Father Green

tied it somewhere along here. I—I'm trying to remember. If it's gone—"

Behind them they heard their pursuers in full chase. The police were beating to and fro, temporarily thrown off the scent. In the deep shadows of the trees the trail of the fugitives was not immediately visible.

"It's this way, I'm sure," gasped the girl, starting off again.

But of a sudden Ellen uttered a little cry, and pointed through the trees. There at the edge of the water, Conroy could see the motorboat, a small craft with a tiny roofed cabin.

The little craft was high and dry above the waves. A frost, succeeding the thaws of early spring, had lowered the level of the flood water.

JIM untied the rope that fastened the motorboat to a tree.

With a mighty heave he sent the boat splashing into the water.

"Jump in!" he pleaded.

Ellen obeyed, crouching in the thwarts. Jim stepped into the boat, kicking it into the ice that fringed the shore. The floes parted, the current seized it. He bent over the engine, attempting to start it.

"There's plenty of gas," whispered Ellen. "We filled the tank when—we knew this was the only chance for you."

The boat was drifting into mid-stream. But now their pursuers were gathered upon the bank. Jim heard their shouts to surrender. There followed a fusillade. For the most part the bullets passed overhead, but one buried itself in the thwart at Jim's side as he bent over the engine.

Suddenly, with a cough and a splutter, the chilled engine started. Another moment and the current had carried them behind the shelter of a tangle of willow at the water's edge. Another volley followed, but the shooting was wild, the fugitives all but invisible. The engine was running smoothly, and the little boat forged her way into mid-stream.

Straggling, irregular firing followed. As the craft gained momentum the police, scattering through the trees, kept up irregular volleying. But the dark held. With a final spluttering chug, preparatory to settling down to her regular speed, the engine drove the little boat around the curve of the shore. Hoarse shouts of anger greeted her disappearance. Then nothing was audible but the sounds of the night, nothing visible but the dark forests beside the stream.

Ellen leaned over Jim.

"We've beaten them, Tom," she whispered exultantly.

"I guess so," Jim acquiesced.

The girl put her hand on his shoulder and withdrew it wet. A cry of terror broke from her lips. Jim's shirt was soaked with blood, running from the wound in his neck made by one of the random bullets of the last fusillade.

CHAPTER VIII

RALSTON AGAIN

"THAT'S nothing, Ellen. Just nipped me, I reckon." Jim crouched over the wheel, while the girl began unfastening Jim's shirt at the throat and trying as best she could to sponge away the blood. The wound was a slight one through the fleshy part of the neck above the collar-bone, but a small artery had been severed and it was bleeding profusely. At last Ellen succeeded in making a compress and placing it over the site of the injury and bandaged it. All the while Jim steered the boat down the Athabasca.

"Tom, let me take the wheel. Father Green showed me how to run her."

"I'll steer her, Ellen. I'm feeling fine."

Ellen peered anxiously into his face, but she could not see how blanched it was. She yielded to Jim's insistence reluctantly.

And the hours began to slip away. Jim drove the little boat at her full speed, sometimes miraculously escaping the great flocs that choked the river, but ever on and on under the towering pines and spruce. All the while Jim was subconsciously listening for sounds of pursuit.

It was certain that there was a police motorboat, but there was the chance that she required calking, the chance that the spring gasoline supply had not arrived—a score of chances on which their lives depended. All the while, too, he was turning over in his mind the possibilities of escape. It was a novel position for him, the grim tracker of men, to find himself an outlaw.

"Tom, where are we going? To the Mission?"

"I guess I'll take you there, Ellen, if we can make it. You'll be safe there. I guess it's the only chance. I don't think you'll be prosecuted for what you did. The police will want to keep that part of the business dark. They'd be a laughing-stock throughout the country. Held up by a girl! I'll take you there and then I'll go—"

"Tom, I'm going where you go!"

A thrill of joy ran through him.

"You mean—?"

"Did you think I was going to leave you, Tom? I'll share whatever dangers you must face. Did you think I'd leave you, even if you were not wounded? Never say that to me again. We'll face everything together."

"Will you share the life of a hunted man, one of those men whom the police always get in the end? That's their boast. They always get their man, however long—"

"We'll share the same life, Tom. We'll fight together. And we'll win!"

Her voice rang out clear and vibrant, and Jim Conroy was silent in sheer astonishment.

"Then, Ellen, I tell you what we'll do. As like as not they're on our trail in another boat already. I've got a little valley about a hundred miles away from

the river. They'll never think of looking for me there. And I've built a shack and got some supplies in it. We'll make for it, hide there and plan our next move when we're there."

"Very well, Tom," answered Ellen.

HE let her take the wheel for a while, and rummaged through the boat. It was stocked with a week's food, a supply ample to enable them to reach the valley. There were snowshoes and a small supply of ammunition, which fitted Jim's revolver, as well as an old army carbine. But the latter was useless, since there were no shells for it, at least Jim could find none. He was satisfied that they could make the valley. Weak though he was, his wound had ceased to bleed. He must make it. And then . . .

Well, he would not speculate on that. Reassuring Ellen as to his condition, he took the wheel again. They drove on through the bitter cold of the night. Fortunately there were blankets in the boat. Crouching over the wheel, wrapped in these, Jim tried to figure out his future relationship to Ellen. If ever he had planned to tell her the truth, the night's events had made it impossible.

It was not far from dawn when the faintest throbbing murmur came out of the distance. At first Jim was not sure. Ellen leaned forward.

"Tom, did you hear that sound behind us? What is it? It sounds like—another boat."

There was no need to answer her. Ellen understood. She shuddered and crouched down beside him, her cheek against his.

"It's five or six miles away," said Jim. "Sounds travel very far along the water. And five miles from here there's a creek runs into the Athabasca. We can make it. We'll run the boat ashore and strike along the bank toward my valley. Get the things together into a pack. Food, snowshoes, everything we'll need."

He drove the boat on around the bend of the river. The sounds of pursuit died away. But soon that throbbing began again, louder, more insistent, then terribly loud. Once they were sighted there would be no chance of escape for them. The last mile was a torture, with the rhythmic chugging of the boat behind them. Jim scanned each inch of the shore for his goal.

At last he found it. A little creek, almost indistinguishable, even in the dull gray of dawn that was beginning to spread across the water. He whispered encouragement to Ellen. It was almost a certainty that their motor had been heard, but he estimated they would have an hour or two of leeway. Their route could not be discovered till it had grown light, and the police boat would overshoot its mark by at least two miles. None of these new men was likely to know of the creek and every square mile of the surrounding territory was mapped out in Jim's mind.

He drove toward the entrance. The boat pushed through the overhanging branches, her motive power shut off. Taking a paddle, Jim began to push up the little stream. After a while he halted. The police boat was almost opposite them, to judge from the sounds she made. They waited, and heard the chugging grow fainter.

Ellen understood. With a glad little cry she flung her arms around Jim's neck.

"We're safe," she whispered.

Jim said nothing. He paddled furiously, reckless of the danger from his wound. Four or five miles he covered, till the creek widened into a small lake. He drove the boat ashore into a tangle of undergrowth. He took the pack that Ellen had made up, and helped the girl ashore. They sat down and put on their snowshoes. It was light now, and through the trees appeared the red rim of the risen sun.

Ellen ran to Jim and kissed him.

"Are we safe?" she asked.

"I guess they'll never find the place

where we stepped off. Yes, we're safe—for the time."

THEY started along the trail. The snow still lay thick in the forest and progress was difficult. Encumbered with his pack, weak from loss of blood, Jim found it needed all his will-power to keep up the march. The first few miles he managed to conceal his plight from Ellen, though the girl's anxiety for him betrayed itself in her frequent uneasy glances. She begged him to let her carry the pack, but Jim insisted that it was no burden for him.

After the first halt, however, Jim knew that it was touch and go whether he ever reached the valley. And there was no possibility of concealing his weakness any longer.

"We must get on," he kept repeating.

But he no longer resisted when Ellen took the pack from him.

The country grew more open. They struggled on through the afternoon. Jim's wound was growing painful, and throbbing badly, but he forced himself to keep the pace he had set. When they camped that night he dropped exhausted. It was Ellen who built the fire and cooked the meal of coffee, bacon, and cakes baked in the ashes. And Jim could swallow only a few gulps of coffee.

"We must get on," was all that he could say.

He let her dress his wound, noting the look of fear in her eyes as she inspected it. All through the night he tossed uneasily beside the fire. All the past was growing vague, jumbled. Sometimes he was hardly conscious. And everything was submerged in that throbbing pain that seemed to engulf one side and arm in liquid fire.

The dawn brought back full consciousness. His arm was badly swollen, and Ellen was in despair.

"Tom, we must camp here till you are better," the girl insisted. "We can't go on."

"We must go on," he answered, and doggedly took up the trail again, the new trail that they were making through virgin land, over rock and marsh, straight toward the well-known landmark of low hills upon the horizon.

By noon he was half-delirious again. By middle afternoon he was leaning on Ellen's arm. But still he kept the pace that he had set.

That night he babbled ceaselessly, yet, even in his delirium, he kept a guard upon his tongue. Ellen must never know the truth. Let death seal his lips if need be; she should never learn from him.

At dawn he struggled out of a gulf of chaos. He was only faintly aware how Ellen clung to him and tried to dissuade him, and how he pointed toward the nearing hills. And all that day only a flicker of consciousness supported the mere mechanical motions of his limbs.

Ellen seemed to realize that their only hope lay in pressing on, for she no longer attempted to dissuade him. Sometimes when consciousness flickered back, Jim would press her hand and smile, or stammer words of gratitude, and feel her arm about him.

At evening they were entering the pass that ran into the valley. And there, beside the little icebound stream, was the shack that he had built before and the cache where he had stored his little stock of supplies, untouched.

That was the last Jim knew. He came back to consciousness days later, after an interminable period of almost unendurable pain, to find Ellen at his side.

"Oh, Tom!"

Tears of happiness gushed from the girl's eyes as she bent over and kissed him.

Only her ceaseless attention had pulled him through the attack of violent fever. Now the crisis was past, the wound had begun to heal; the swollen arm was returning to the normal.

There followed days of convalescence while the winter relaxed its clutch upon

the land, the ice left the stream and grass appeared. They were safe from pursuit. But how long? Sooner or later the police would follow on their trail, would find the valley. Well, he must get strong before he made his plans. And now he found a new zest in life, with Ellen always at his side.

Would the day ever come when he could tell her? Perhaps, he thought, if ever they got free. For the present he was content to feel the strength returning to his limbs with the advent of the spring.

They had food enough to last well into the summer. And before winter they would have disposed of their problem one way or another.

THEY explored the valley where Jim had planned to raise his herd of cattalo. The only thing that troubled Jim was the fact that the recluse whom Ralston had murdered had occupied the shack just beyond the range of hills. Still, the fact that the adjoining valley had once been occupied, and that Ralston had visited it, did not argue that any other intruders were likely to enter it.

They had been exploring the edge of the valley where it began to ascend toward the pass which ran through the hills one afternoon. Ellen was a little distance ahead of Jim, gathering some of the wild anemones that had begun to dot the slopes. Suddenly Jim heard her call:

"Tom, come here! What's this tunnel place? It looks as if someone had been here before."

Jim hurried up. In the side of the hill, almost hidden by a tangle of budding undergrowth, was a low tunnel, quite clearly made by human hands.

Jim stooped and entered it, followed by Ellen. It narrowed, then widened. The roof fell back. They found themselves in a little glade whose presence would never have been suspected from the outside. A stream ran through it and on the sandy bank was an old, rusty

pick. Here was a washing cradle, half-rotted away. Here, under an overhanging ledge, were footprints. Conroy felt his heart leap with dread as he followed them to their source in a small cave under the hillside.

Upon the limestone floor were several large bags of strong burlap, still in good preservation. One of them gaped; a stream of fine, yellow particles had issued out upon the cave's floor.

And suddenly Jim understood.

"Ralston's gold!" he shouted.

He started and laid his hand to his belt as footsteps sounded on the limestone interior of the cave. *A figure was emerging from the darkness. Ralston!*

CHAPTER IX

TREACHERY

THE sight of this man, whom he had imagined buried beneath hundreds of tons of snow at the foot of the precipice, struck Conroy dumb, so that he could only stand staring at him. Ralston advanced, a sneering smile upon his lips. Ellen clung to Jim in terror at this apparition. All the while Ralston was walking easily toward them.

"Well, Conroy?"

Jim remained silent. Was he a policeman still, and was it his duty to arrest Ralston and take him back a second time, himself to face the gallows in consequence? He was trying to collect his wits. Ralston halted two paces from him, an amused, sneering smile still flickering about his mouth.

"For a member of the force, Conroy, I cannot compliment you on the possession of more than the average amount of gray matter of a moron," he said. "Let me clear up that perplexity in your mind which, I see, is troubling you.

"While I was lying on that ledge at the end of the rope, I saw that it formed the mouth of a small cave extending in

under the overhanging rocks. It was the simplest matter in the world to hold on to the edge of the rocks with my left hand while I cut the rope with my right. You thought I had fallen to the bottom of the precipice, Conroy. In fact, your mind reacted in precisely the way that I intended it to."

"What does he mean by calling you Conroy?" whispered Ellen. "Why did you say 'Ralston's gold'? Who—who is he? And who are you?"

The girl was trembling violently. Ralston had overheard her whisper to Conroy. He grinned again.

"Explanations seem to be in order," he said, never for a moment relaxing his pose of the man of superior breeding. "I know all about that little mix-up you got into at the Fort, Conroy, and I guess you don't propose to try to bring me in again. Even if you did, they'd be likely to hang you first for that murder and to inquire into my status afterward, you know. So I guess we stand here on an equal footing.

"You fool, Conroy, there was no need for you to have gone back to the Fort at all. You had little sister here, and you could have gone back to her. Well, I learned what was happening, and how she held up the police and rescued you, which, of course, has very much enhanced the opinion I had of her. And I've been on the job here for quite some time, getting my gold together. I'm going to take Ellen away with me. I've got our line of flight pretty well doped out. The question is, what are you going to do, Conroy?"

"Who is he? Who is he?" whispered Ellen in agitation.

"Why, I'm your brother, my dear Ellen," answered Ralston easily. "You see, when you came into this country looking for a man who was sentenced to be hanged, there was a chivalrous conspiracy on the part of everybody to keep you in the dark.

"This dull-witted policeman and I agreed to change identities for your benefit. If I had died under the avalanche,

or swung at the rope's end, he was to have taken you away in the guise of your brother, and you would never have known. But fate ordered things differently, and I take it you will now transfer that remarkable loyalty of yours to me, instead of to this policeman who has really no claims upon you."

SHE understood in spite of his sneering, casual manner, and the look of anguish in her eyes as she turned them from one man to the other made Conroy wince with pain.

"Is that true?" she whispered hoarsely. "Did you—did you deceive me?"

And Conroy bowed his head.

"I—I must think," said Ellen, turning and moving out into the sunlight.

She spun about.

"Promise me you—you won't fight or hurt each other till it's all settled," she pleaded. "A truce till we know where we stand. Is that agreed?"

Conroy nodded assent. Ralston indicated his agreement with a slight inclination of his head. The two men followed Ellen out of the cave and back toward the shack.

Once she turned.

"We must find a way out," she said in a quiet voice.

But her head was bowed as she walked. Conroy knew that the hurt was like to be a mortal one. Her faith in him, that faith that had been so complete, was broken.

Outside the shack she turned and faced them.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered. "Are you really my brother, Tom?" she asked Ralston. "Then—you did kill that man, that man who lived here, to get his gold?"

"I killed him in self-defense. The old man had sheltered me. I worked for him. I happened upon his mine by accident. He had tried to keep the knowledge of it from me. He drew his gun to shoot me and I fired in self-de-

fense. That's the whole truth, Ellen."

Again that doubtful look from the one man to the other. Ralston went on.

"Your discovery of me this afternoon has only precipitated the inevitable. Conroy, you and I have fought a long-drawn-out battle for three years, man against man, wits against wits. Well I've won. But you can congratulate yourself that it was fate, not skill, that gave me the victory."

For the first time he seemed to throw off his mocking manner.

"Conroy, it is for the winner to dictate the terms, and here are mine.

"I shall take my sister away with me, and of course the gold. Maybe I'll leave you a few nuggets, enough to pay your way to wherever you are minded to strike for. If you refuse—well, I'll put the police on your trail."

"A risky business, Ralston," answered Jim. "I don't think the situation is as clear as you think it is."

A mocking laugh burst from Ralston's lips.

"My dear Corporal, do you suppose I haven't made my plans for all contingencies?" he asked. "Good-night, Conroy. Good-night, little sister. I shall call for my answer in the morning. If you have come to care for this dull-witted policeman—" he cast a shrewd glance at the girl. "I guess I can foretell what your decision is going to be."

HE strode from the shack in his airy way, leaving Jim and Ellen sitting in the ruins of their hopes. For a long time neither spoke. Then Ellen said:

"He's my brother, the brother I came so far to find. Mr. Conroy, I—I have felt that you were like a brother to me. I don't know how I can change feeling that way, or if I shall ever change. I don't know what to do. You see, the memory of that brother of mine has been with me all these years."

"You must go with him if you feel that way," said Jim quietly.

"Oh, I don't know what to do!" cried

the girl wildly. "I'll tell you in the morning."

"Try to sleep," answered Jim. "Whatever it is to be, I'm ready for it. But you must sleep."

"Yes, I'll try to sleep," she answered, and, turning, groped her way into the shack.

The sun was dipping into the west. Neither of them had thought of supper. Neither thought of it now. Jim went to the little shelter that he had constructed for himself a short distance from the shack, wrapped his blankets around him, and sat down, resting his head in his hands.

Better a thousand times the constant apprehension of arrest than this. He knew that he loved Ellen with all his heart. He would never cease to love her. He realized the fatal mistake that she would make if she went away with her brother. And yet he had no right to speak the word that might restrain her.

Well, he would know in the morning. And, as the dark descended, he rolled himself in his blanket and tried to sleep.

But for hours sleep would not come to him, and he lay there, hearing the night sounds about him. It was dark as pitch. The moon would not rise till midnight. And when at last its globe appeared, a ball of white fire in the east, Jim still lay sleepless.

But gradually his eyelids grew heavy. He was falling into a doze, a confused dream in which he, Ralston and Ellen were still threshing out the situation. Suddenly he was on his feet, even before he knew the thing that had awakened him.

Someone had screamed. The cry rang out again. Ellen's cry, as if she was in mortal peril.

Jim grasped his revolver and ran full speed toward the shack. Again he heard the girl cry. He saw dark figures darting in and out of the structure. Two of them were bearing something, Ellen, in their arms.

Treachery on Ralston's part! He had

decided to anticipate the girl's decision. Jim rushed forward, shouting. He emptied his revolver into the midst of the forms that came rushing out of the shack, broke through them, rushing on toward Ellen.

He had almost reached her when a stunning blow upon the head swung him around. He staggered, fell upon his knees. The world was going black about him. He tried to rise, to force his way to the girl again, but he was conscious only of the grinning faces of Joe Camp and Labrecque peering into his, and then everything went out in blackness.

CHAPTER X

CAPTURED!

JIM could not have been unconscious for more than a few minutes, for when he next opened his eyes he found himself in the shack, and outside the risen moon hardly illuminated the darkness.

He was lying on the cot bed. By the light of a single candle on the table he saw Joe Camp and Labrecque poring over some papers which they had taken from his pocket.

"Yeh, that's so," he heard Joe Camp saying. "The police took this feller Conroy fer Ralston and he bruk away before they could hang him. Two queer birds this policeman and Ralston, but we got the one, and I guess the other ain't far away. We'll finish the pair of them and divide that gold, Labrecque. Jest you and me, you understand, and kiss the rest of the gang good-bye."

The half-breed's cracked laugh rang out. Dazed as he still was, Conroy was able to realize the situation. He had supposed that Ralston had led the gang of hooch-runners into the valley for the purpose of dividing up the gold, but now he realized that they must have followed him there in order to discover where it was concealed.

As this thought flashed through his mind there came back the memory of Ellen. With a groan, he tried to sit up on the cot, only to discover that his wrists and ankles were securely fastened to it, while his body was furthermore bound to one of the main beams of the shack by a rope around him.

His movement arrested the two hooch-runners' attention. Joe Camp came grinning toward him.

"Well, we got you this time, Corporal," he chuckled. "I guess we returned you what we got from you and there's more coming to you. Kick him fer me, Labrecque. I'm too stout to reach him with my foot."

The half-breed, snarling, dealt Jim a succession of violent kicks as he lay bound and helpless. Jim saw that his wounded hand was still in a bandage.

"Guess you're wondering how we found this shebeen of yours, Corporal," grinned the fat outlaw. "Jest luck, that's all. We got on Mr. Ralston's trail after you took him away, and found he'd given you the slip. Trailed him here, that's all. He's hiding somewhere, but we got our fellers camped in the pass and there ain't no way fer him to get away.

"Then we found you and the girl. Wasn't looking for no women, but I ain't the feller to turn up my nose at a good thing when I see it. And I guess Joe Camp'll prove a winner with that gold, arter I've divided with you, Labrecque, I mean," he continued, giving his confederate an uneasy glance.

Jim strained madly at his bonds. He struggled till the ropes bit deep into his wrists, causing the blood to start, but he could not budge them. Joe Camp and Labrecque stood looking on, the fat hooch-runner convulsed with laughter, but the half-breed's face was twisted into a savage scowl.

"Say, Labrecque, it's great to see a policeman getting his bit," grinned Joe. "But that ain't nothing to what's coming to you, Corporal. You might have guessed we ain't planning to let you get

away. Ain't leaving no witnesses behind us. We got a long row to hoe, and we're cleaning up behind us. Guess it's time we was going, Labrecque."

"Jest before we go, Corporal, I'll do a little more explaining," said Joe Camp. "This here business is going to be a fair and square clean-up, so fur as you're concerned. Ain't going to leave no policemen up here with bullet holes in what's left of them. But fire—that's different, now. Any feller might fall asleep and get burned up arter he'd been drinking. Fire's clean, Corporal, so that's the way you're going. Think of the girl, Corporal, while you're warming up this valley."

DELIBERATELY he set the candle in a corner of the shack where the unpeeled bark hung in strips from the dry logs.

Instantly a little blaze shot up, ran up the line of bark, and caught the bone-dry moss with which the interstices between the logs were packed. Within a minute that corner of the shack was blazing.

Satisfied that his work would not miscarry, Joe Camp turned to Jim and waved his hand in mocking farewell. He and Labrecque left the shack.

For a moment or two after the pair had gone Jim lay still, paralyzed with horror at his situation. Still, it was Ellen's fate that horrified him far less than the thought of that imminent death. A policeman is schooled to be prepared for whatever may befall him.

His fears lent him renewed strength. Again and again he struggled in his bonds. He succeeded in loosening the rope about his ankles, but that about his wrists could not be budged, nor the strong, knotted bonds about his body.

At last he desisted and lay back, panting, hopeless, watching the progress of the flames with fascinated eyes. The shack was catching fire swiftly. The whole corner of the structure was blazing, and the smoke was filling the interior, and choking him.

Another desperate, hopeless effort to free himself. He was trussed helplessly. The smoke was drifting down and the flames advancing with a crackling roar. Already the heat was beginning to scorch Jim's clothing.

Half-conscious, he shouted again and again at the top of his voice, as though there was someone near to aid him. His struggles smashed the cot, precipitating him to the floor of the shack. But the rope about him pulled him up sharp in the middle of his fall, so that he remained dangling, the middle of his body straining against the rope, while his head and heels hung down, entangled in the débris of the cot.

The whole side of the shack was now ablaze. Sparks were smouldering upon his clothing. His lungs felt bursting. Once more he put all his remaining strength into a desperate attempt to free himself.

His struggles broke the cot into fragments. The rope about his body slipped down to his waist. He hung head downward in the blazing débris.

SUDDENLY he heard a voice in his ears. Jim was vaguely conscious of hands that lifted him, that slashed the ropes, that bore him through the blazing interior of the shack. After a few moments he opened his eyes, to feel the cold night air blowing on him. Over his head the large, full moon was sailing through the skies.

Ralston was bending over him. Jim struggled to his feet, groaning. His head was reeling. He groped with outstretched arms. Ralston caught him as he was falling.

"Just in the nick of time, Corporal," he said.

Jim straightened himself.

"Where is she?" he cried hoarsely.

"We'll get her. I thought I'd outwitted you, but I didn't reckon on that gang. They've got her in their shack."

"Where?" Jim cried.

"In the next valley, the place where I had my unfortunate altercation with the

recluse, that started things. Think you can walk, Conroy?"

"I'm—all right," Jim gasped.

"Then listen. We've just got time. They won't harm her, not till Joe Camp gets there anyway, and I passed him ten minutes ago, on his way back from playing this little trick on you. He's fat, and can't walk fast. First, what are the terms, Corporal?"

"Save her. That's all I care."

"Righto. We'll save her, if we can, and let her choose which of us she's going with. And we'll split the gold."

"Damn the gold!"

Ralston laughed in his well-bred way.

"I'm less altruistic than you suppose, Corporal. That gold's too heavy for one man to get away with it. It would fill my canoe twice, and I don't propose to come back on a second trip. Maybe we'll make our getaway together. Time to arrange that afterward. Here's a gun for you, Conroy.

"They're drinking together in that shack. There's seven of them. I counted them. Seven, including Joe Camp and Labrecque. If we hurry, maybe we can get there ahead of them, and reduce the odds. Anyway, it'll be a case of getting the drop on them, and wiping out the lot. Think you're game, Corporal?"

"Hurry, for God's sake," whispered Conroy.

Ralston cast a glance at him, and nodded. He led the way. The valley, studded here and there with stunted birch and willow, afforded cover enough. It was not likely Joe Camp and Labrecque would see them. The two outlaws were in the lead and well on their way toward the recluse's hut.

Conroy felt his head clearing as he staggered after Ralston through the night. The fire had only singed his hair and clothing, and the effects of the blow he had received were wearing away. The thought of Ellen in the hands of those wretches banished all thought of pain. He followed close on Ralston's heels, urging him to hasten.

They followed the course of the little stream to the dividing ridge, skirting the tunnel where the gold was hidden. They crossed the pass. A light flickered in the distance. Presently the outlines of the hut came into sight. Then they began to hear the outlaws' drunken shouts.

They stopped under the lee of the substantial cabin. The interior was ablaze with candles. The first voice they heard was Joe Camp's.

"Made quick time," muttered Ralston. "I'll give the signal, Conroy."

"Yeh, I wish I'd stayed to see him frying," the outlaw hiccupped.

He had evidently had time to get drunk during his return, for all the speed he had made.

"Must be a juicy crisp by now. We'll go back in the morning and view the remains. Where's the girl? Bring her out, damn you!" he shouted.

There was no window through which to look on that side of the shack, but they heard the inner door open, and then Camp's voice again.

"Well, kid, you don't know me, so I'll jest interdooce myself. I'm Joe Camp, the millionaire. I got gold to blow on you, so what you say to a little trip together, starting tomorrow evening, if we can get our share of the gold on board? It'll be Montreal for us, and then maybe Paris, if you're a good kid and kind to Joe. What you got to say about it?"

"Where's Mr. Conroy? What have you done with him?" came Ellen's voice, steady but strained.

There was a high, breaking note in that voice of hers, as if she was upon the point of madness.

"Corporal Conroy?" hiccupped Joe Camp. "Say, don't you worry that pretty head of yours about him, kid. Still, if you want to know, he's turned into steak by now, fine, juicy porterhouse. Yes, I burned him up in that shack of his so's to get you, kid."

"You—?"

Suddenly, with a scream of laughter that sounded demoniacal to the two lis-

teners without, the girl rushed at him. There came an oath from Joe, a scuffle, shouts of drunken laughter from within.

"Damn the little wild cat!" shouted Camp. "Tie her up, Labrecque. We'll give her a taste—"

But Jim could listen no more. Ignoring his companion, with a bound he was at the door, and flung it open wide.

CHAPTER XI

SAVED!

THE outlaws were grouped about Joe Camp and Ellen. Camp had the girl by the arms and was holding her fast and trying to force her backward. She was fighting like a wild cat and screaming. Upon the man's face was a streak of blood. Labrecque was laughing at his side.

The table in the center of the fairly large room was littered with cards. Candles in the necks of bottles were guttering grease. A bottle, overturned, was disgorging a stream of liquor whose pungent stench filled the place. The air was thick with smoke.

As Jim burst in, the eyes of Labrecque were the first to meet his own. For a second the half-breed stared at him, stupefied. Then he ripped out an oath. Joe Camp, glancing around, saw the man he had thought dead. Releasing Ellen, he uttered a yell and instinctively sought cover behind one of his followers.

That instant of hesitation spelled doom for Labrecque. Jim's first bullet found his brain. The hooch-runner toppled to the floor, dead before he reached it. His fall tipped over the table and sent bottles and candles flying.

The room was plunged into darkness, but not before Jim had emptied his revolver into the midst of the gathering. Ralston was at his side, firing, too. Shrieks and howls reverberated through the darkness. And in the welter of dead

and dying men the living grappled with the still living.

Almost by instinct Jim found Joe Camp, as the last glimmer of light illumined the room. The fat outlaw, in an agony of rage and fear, flung his arms about his enemy, bearing him to the floor with him. Jim's fingers closed about the throat, heavy with rolls of flesh and buried themselves in it. The fetid breath hissed in his ear. The hooch-runner, for all his weight, had been of prodigious strength in his earlier days. Jim felt his ribs cracking under that deadly grip.

Instinctively Joe Camp was trying to crush his opponent's body, as a bear might do, and instinctively Jim was trying to break the head from the shoulders. With one elbow on the floor for leverage, he succeeded in pinioning Joe Camp's neck in the clutch of his hand, and turned the great head backward. Back and back! But he heard one of his ribs snap as the great arms hugged him. His lungs were bursting.

Back and back he forced the head, while the arms still tightened. Bright lights flickered before Jim's eyes. He felt his senses leaving him. Putting all his force into a last effort, he twisted back the head. A howl that rose above the pandemonium in the hut broke from the outlaw's lips. And, even as he felt consciousness leaving him, Jim managed to wrench Joe's head down to the floor.

HE opened his eyes in brilliant daylight. He was lying in the open, under a cluster of willows in tiny leaf. Ellen was at his side. As he tried to struggle up she drew his head upon her shoulder, looking into his face with streaming eyes.

He tried to move and found himself enveloped in bandages. He glanced about him. Some men in a well-remembered uniform were at work in the near distance, with spades and picks. One of them strode toward him.

Jim recognized Sergeant Timmins. He looked from him to Ellen, and back again.

"So they found us," he began.

"Oh, hush, Jim, dear, it's all right," Ellen whispered.

The sergeant came up and stood looking down at Jim.

"How're you feeling, Conroy?" he asked.

"Pretty rotten. Am I hurt badly?"

"Only two broken ribs and two bullets through your leg and shoulder, Conroy. The medical officer we brought along thinks you'll have to stay in the shack here a while till you're well enough to travel."

"Well," said Jim in a matter-of-fact way, "I guess you've got me this time."

"He doesn't know," cried Ellen. "Tell him, Sergeant."

Sergeant Timmins looked a little sheepish.

"Why, Conroy, I guess this business has straightened out pretty well," he answered. "We struck your trail a few days ago, and planned a night attack on that bunch of outlaws that was gathered

here. We thought, of course, that the gang was yours. We were camped a ways down the valley when we heard firing. Got here to find that you and Turner had wiped 'em up clean, but Turner was dying, and you were looking pretty sick.

"Turner?" asked Jim, puzzled.

"That fellow known as Ralston. Well, he made a sort of confession before he went, and it was supplemented by some papers he left behind. It appears he'd known that recluse he killed, in England. Met up with him here again, and, after shooting him for his gold, decided to take his name and some day step into his shoes. Ralston, this little girl's brother, was the gold-miner whom Turner killed. Turner took his name. The gold, of course, is hers and yours, seeing her brother mined it on your land."

Sergeant Timmins was a stupid man, but the deduction that followed was perfectly correct.

"I guess," he said slowly, "you and she ain't going to go to law about the question of ownership."

THE END

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COCOS ISLAND in the Caribbean Sea has always been a prime hunting ground for treasure hunters. For a long time now it has been rumored that about \$60,000,000 or more in bullion and a fabulous quantity of jewels were buried there by pirates years ago. But so far none of the treasure has been discovered and the hunters have gotten nothing out of their expeditions but high adventure.

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YOU may be one of those hombres who's leary of strangers. Or you may be the kind of a chap who'll back a long shot, who'll take a chance on any man's bet. But whatever you are we have a new kick for you. Step up and meet a couple of strangers: J. T. Welch, cowboy author, writer of salty tales of the old West, and Franklin H. Martin, man of the world, traveler of far places.

J. T. Welch, whose "Sundog King" opens this issue, is no overnight marvel. He's been in the writing game for some time now, but this is his first yarn in *Action Novels*. If you are an old reader of *Action Stories* you've met him before. If not, maybe you'd like the lowdown on him.

J. T. was born out in the country he writes about. Most of his characters are taken from real life and most of his situations are of things he's seen or been told about. Many a night he's heard the coyote howl, and many a time he's seen the red flash of gun-powder settling some difference of opinion. Welch has lived the frontier life, he knows it from the first streak of dawn down to the last glow of the camp-fire. Ask him in. Get him to tell you one of the great yarns of his home country. His tales pack a real kick, you'll be camping at the door of his cabin begging him for more.

Franklin H. Martin, alias Pete, is a stranger to *Action Novels* also. He didn't get the same brand of breaks

that his good friend J. T. did. Pete got a pretty slow start on the adventure trail. He was born in the city and his mother used to doll him up in pretty corkscrew curls and a Buster Brown collar. But a couple of little tough mugs down the alley nearby took to reforming him by busting him one in the nose and calling him a sissy. That was the beginning. Pete came back with a fast one to the button. His fancy clothes were no handicap.

And Pete, who is a little shrimp, has punch and slammed his way through life ever since. His two fists have lugged him all over the world, have thrown him into strange places that most of us never heard about, and have brought him adventures that set the hard-boiled birds back on their heels.

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