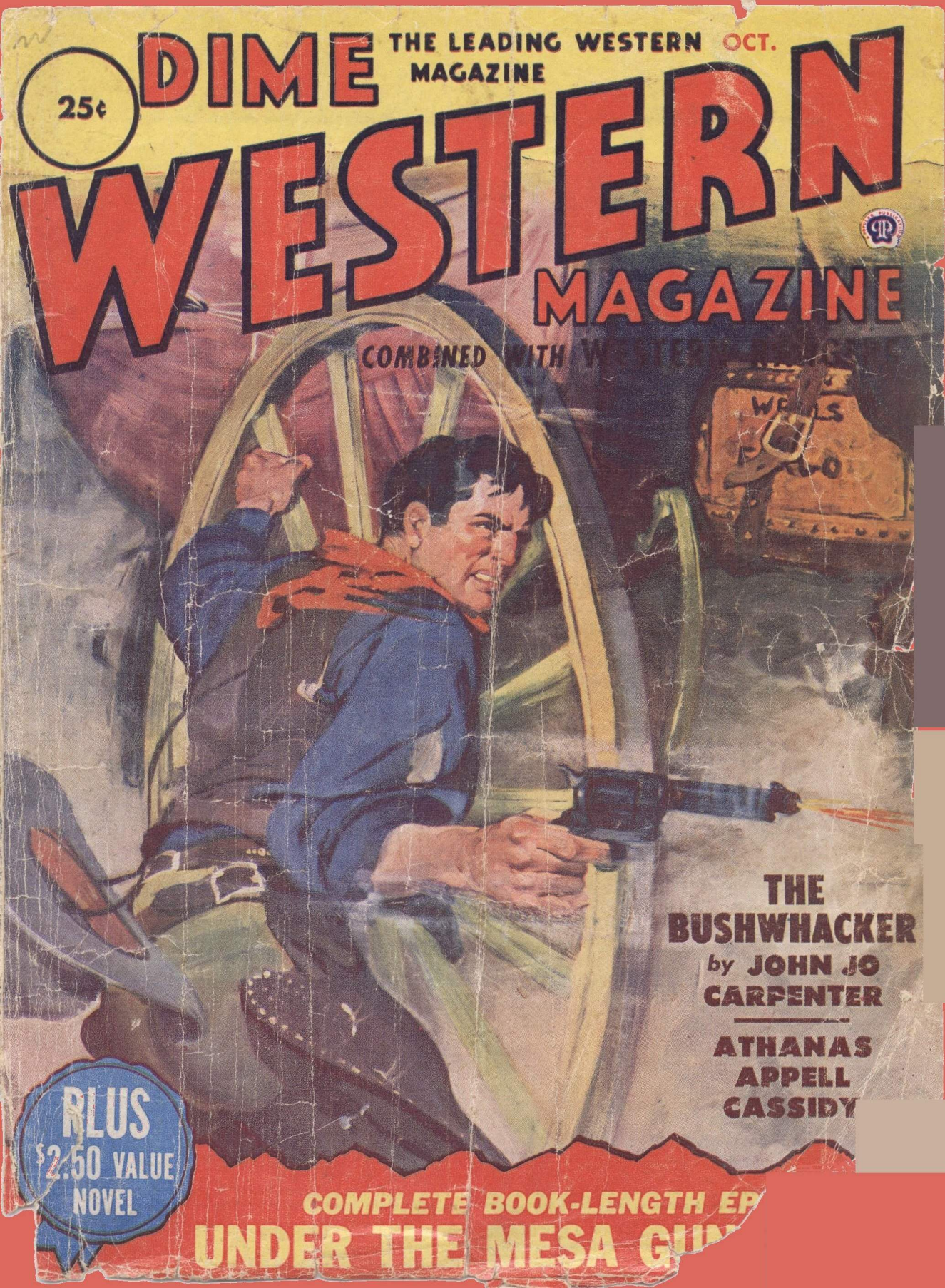
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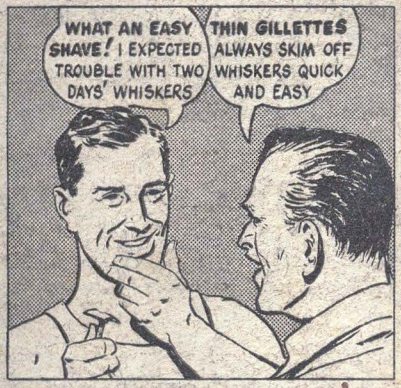

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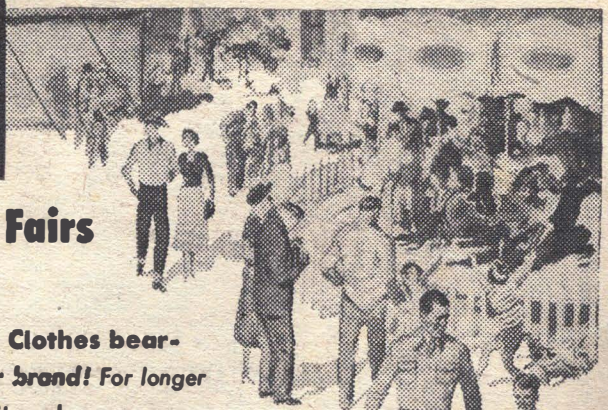

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Three Great Frontier Stories

Thrilling Border Short Story

ALL STORIES COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

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IN THE SADDLE

WHAT makes a Frontiersman? That question has been asked plenty of times and answered satisfactorily in almost as many ways as the question has been asked. A rugged, brawny physique was generally held to be one of the chief requisites. Certainly a bedrock foundation of strong character was even more necessary to carve one's mark in the raw, lawless cattle country, and remote boom towns.

It took physical courage, spiritual stamina, a determination to fight one's own battle to the bitter end, without asking for help; an ability to play the game straight across the boards according to the hard-bitten code of the West, and usually a personal discipline that would allow you to look any man in the eye, and tell him to go to hell.

There were many men in the turbulent history of the West who perhaps were not noted as builders, whose favorite tool was the business end of a Colt .45, and who might have been riding pretty often on the wrong side of the law fence. Nonetheless, many men of that type, by virtue of their personal color, by their cold steel nerve in times of crises, and their ability to gamble their lives on the turn of a card and pay off with a grin, deserve their place in the annals of the frontier greats. Such a man was Doc Holliday, of whom L. C. Davis gives us below an interesting character portrait:

Of all the gunmen who helped make frontier history none has been more grossly misrepresented than Doc Holliday, "the coldest blooded killer in Tombstone." He has been variously pictured as robust, dark-visaged—even swarthy, when the exact opposite was true. Neither did he die before flaming guns—with his boots on—as popularly supposed.

Doc Holliday was born in Valdosta, Georgia, the son of a fighting man—a major in the Confederate army, and his ancestors were plantation owners. Thus, by nature and heredity he was a curious admixture of gentleness and violence, and at an early age the latter instinct got the upper hand when be became involved in a boyhood shooting scrape and fled from Valdosta, never to return.

His gentler breeding asserted itself again when he studied dentistry, and even practiced it for a while in Dallas, Texas, where he had drifted for his health. As proof, he carried his "shingle" in his trunk wherever he went. It was a tin sign which read:

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Dentist

But filling an "inside straight" was more exciting than plugging a cavity, and Doc laid aside his forceps for the pasteboards and became a lead-poison specialist. Almost immediately his life pattern was cut out for him. His violent

(Please turn to page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

nature again asserted itself at a game of cards in Jacksboro, Texas, when he killed a man.

He disposed of another in like manner in another Texas town. This time, however, it was a soldier, and Doc was forced to "hit for the tall tules." He didn't stop until he arrived in Denver, Colo., after an eight hundred-mile horseback ride through Indian country. This was in 1876.

One scrape after another followed. He slashed Bud Ryan almost to death with a knife, and jumped from Denver to Trinidad, where he shot Kid Kolton and seriously wounded him. Las Vegas was his next stop. Mike Gordon fell before his flaming sixgun after a quarrel there, and then Doc drifted over into the Texas Panhandle. It was at Fort Griffin, in this section, that he met and threw in with Wyatt Earp, ace lawdog of Dodge City.

It seems that Doc had, by this time, acquired a lady friend also. Kate Fisher was her real name, although she was known locally as Big Nose Kate. According to Earp, who was down in Texas on the trail of cattle thieves, Kate wasn't a bit hard on the eyes, in spite of her name. He took a liking to Doc, too. The tall, slender, ash-blond, gray-eyed gambler was witty and companionable when he wasn't quarrelsome—a cynical philosopher who was reconciled to tuberculosis, but took comfort in the fact that his emaciated body afforded a poor target.

"I'm willing to bet that a bullet will beat T.B.," he grinned.

The Dodge City peace officer had to go to Fort Clarke for a short time, but on his return learned that his new found friends had been giving an account of themselves. In a poker game with another card sharp named Ed Bailey, Doc took exception to Bailey's penchant for fingering the deadwood.

"Stop monkeying with the discards, mister, and play poker!" Doc rumbled through clinched teeth, and his usually pallid face colored.

A little later Bailey triumphantly laid down three kings. Doc said nothing, but nonchalantly tossed away his hand and

(Continued from page 10)

A TRUE I. C. S. STORY *taken from an actual letter*

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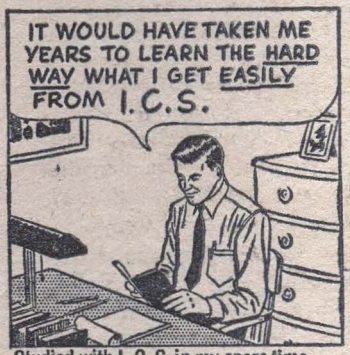

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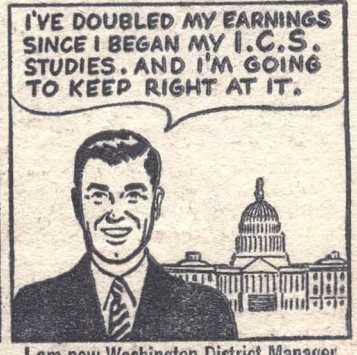
I. C. S. sent reports to my employer . . .



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(Continued from page 8)

raked in the pot as Bailey just stared.

"Hey!" Bailey gagged. "I won that pot. Fork it over!"

"Like hell I will!" Doc retorted and knocked the other's hand away. "I saw where one of those monarchs came from."

Bailey up-ended the table and went for his gun but before he could thumb hammer, Doc unslung a long knife from inside his coat and ripped Bailey's brisket wide open.

Doc was placed under arrest. While the town marshal and two policemen guarded the hot-tempered gambler in the hotel office, a mob began to form.

"Get a rope! Let's string up that tinhorn!"

Something had to be done, and that pronto, or it would be curtains for Doc Holliday. So reasoned Big Nose Kate when she heard about the scrape. She hurried to the hotel.

The officers admitted her long enough for a brief confab with Doc, after which she departed. Soon afterward a couple of freshly saddled horses appeared, as if by magic, in an alley. By a strange coincidence tongues of flame began shooting from a shed at the rear of the hotel at about the same time.

"Fire!" screamed Kate, as she ran into the street, and when the crowd departed, she walked in and freed her lover-boy with a pair of drawn sixes. A few moments later they were riding hard for Dodge City, the cries of the infuriated mob mingling with the galloping hoof beats.

It was in Dodge City that Earp found the pair, comfortably settled in a hotel after their four-hundred-mile ride. A short time later the erstwhile dentist saved Earp's life when the town marshal was surrounded by friends of a dangerous character he had just arrested. Seeing one of the hardcases level a gun at the peace officer, the gambler shouted a warning and punctuated it with a timely .45 slug as his sixgun spouted flame. And that was the beginning of a life-long friendship that was to endure through two smoke-filled years in Tombstone.

IN the brawling Arizona mining town Holliday was Earp's right hand man. The new deputy United States Marshal, known as the Lion of Tombstone, and the former practitioner of painless dentistry, rated as "the coldest blooded killer in Tombstone," stood side by side and back to back throughout Earp's career there as the chief exponent of law and order. And whenever fighting of any kind was to be done, the immaculately dressed Doc was Johnny-on-the-spot.

He was equally as handy with a sixgun as he was with a sawed-off shotgun that he carried suspended from a strap over his shoulder and beneath his coat. However, he was also famous for another type of gunslinging—handkerchief duels.

And the versatile gunman was always ready to oblige anyone in that particular, no matter how much of a rep the challenger might have, as witness an incident that occurred one day in 1881 on the streets of Tombstone.

John Ringo, taciturn member of the Clanton gang of outlaws, decided to settle the long-standing feud with the Earp clan in a "David-and-Goliath" fight, and so he whipped out a handkerchief and extended it to Holliday.

"That's just my dish, Ringo!" the doctor responded cheerily. "I'm your man."

As he grasped the extended handkerchief two hands stabbed for sixguns just as Mayor Charles N. Thomas stepped between them. And that was the end of that affair.

But it didn't settle the ill feeling between the Earps and the Clantons. Holliday was accused of participating in the Benson stage robbery in which two men were killed, and the Earps were alleged to have connived with the outlaws.

When the long-smouldering feud burst into gun-flame at the O. K. Corral the following October 25, Doc Holliday was in the thick of it, with six and scatter-gun, and his thin, wasted figure stood him in good stead when he stared death in the face.

Frank McLowery had thrown down on Doc, but just as he squeezed trigger Holliday turned sideways and received only a graze as the bullet creased his ribs.

It was the beginning of the end for the Earp faction in Tombstone. More killings followed, one of Earp's brothers was killed and another badly wounded, and the law-

(Please turn to page 39)

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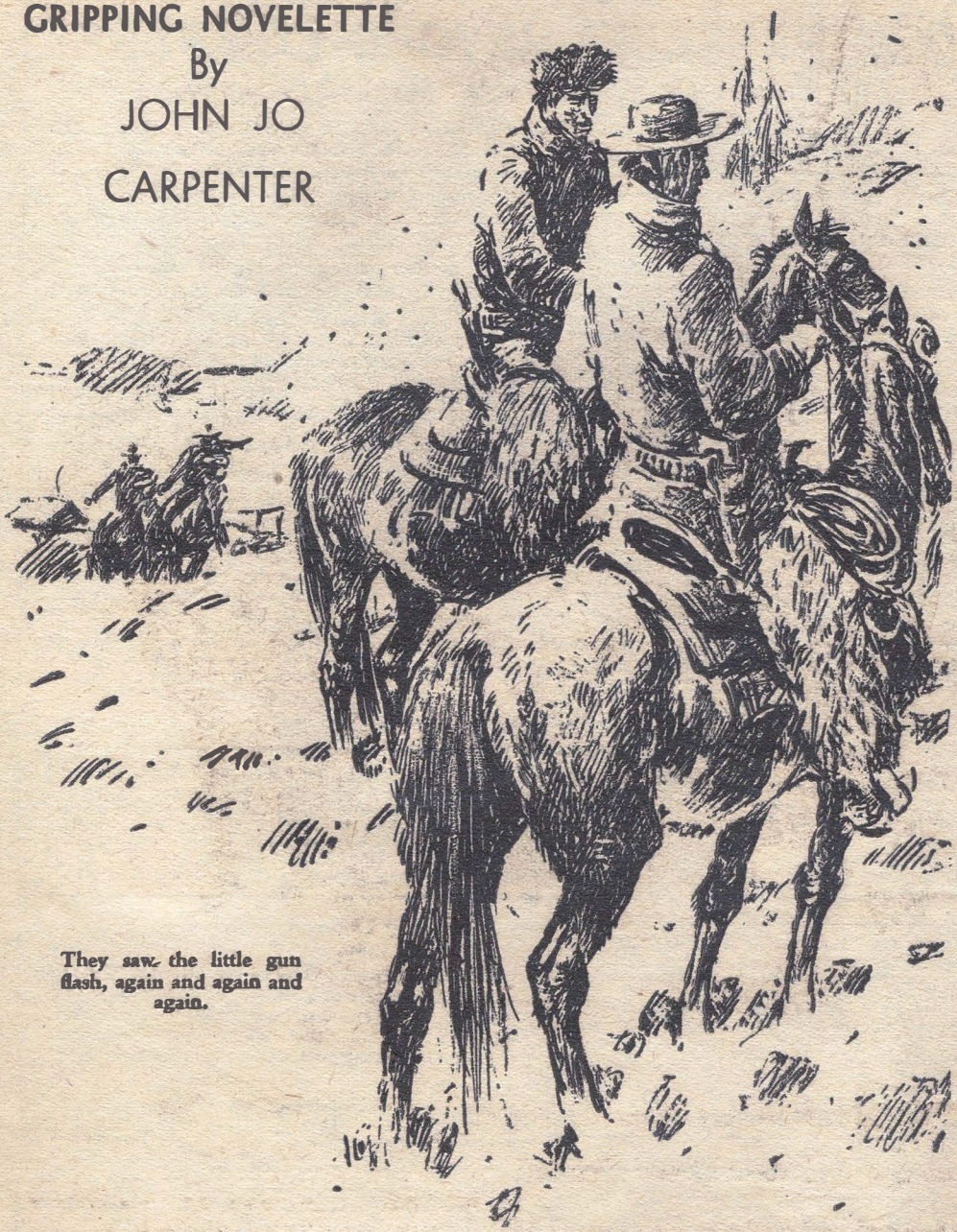

They saw the little gun flash, again and again and again.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Cruisers

IT WAS cold, colder than Jud Sherrill had ever dreamed it could be. The sun was a cheerless brass ball whose rays gave the frozen white land no warmth at all. In two hours it would be dark, it would become colder still.

Jud shivered. "How come a man lives in a country like this?" He nudged his tired horse with his heels and the big,

jug-headed bay broke into a trot that made Jud sting all over as his blood pumped faster.

The horse was covered with a thick crust of frost. So was Jud's horsehide jacket. So were his mittens. And when he stopped at a high place in the trail and stood up in the stirrups to look out over the desolate butte country, the frost on his eyelashes obscured his vision.

"Yonder must be a river," he decided, picking out a line of black that looked like a growth of trees. He shivered. "Listen to them varmints yowl!"

All day they had been following him, and they weren't the timid little coyotes with which Jud was familiar. These were "Saskatchewan cruisers," big, gaunt, smart, powerful, dangerous timber wolves. They didn't yap, they howled. They didn't drift along wistfully behind him, they stayed out of sight, following him in a pack. They meant business.

Sound carried a long way in this frigid air. How far behind him were they? He shrugged. What difference did it make? Yet his hand dropped instinctively to the big .45 on his hip, under the horsehide jacket. When he felt it there, he was somehow more at ease.

"Well, Big Bones," he drawled to the horse, "if we're ever goin' to find old Petherly and that job—"

On the cold, still, carrying air came a sound, a flat, sharp, barking explosion that meant one thing to him. A big rifle! The horse heard it too, and seemed to share its rider's sudden, instinctive apprehension.

Jud hauled the horse back on its haunches and stood up. It was when he looked westward, straight into the declining sun but below it, that he yelled a startled oath and turned his horse.

Down there, half way between him and the trees that meant a stream, a rider was swaying in the saddle.

"Hit hard!" Jud snarled, as he saw the horse bolt, as the rider swayed, let go the reins and groped desperately for the saddle-horn.

Big Bones, the jug-headed bay, shot down the slope. He was a sure-footed horse, a smart horse though; he had more sense than his rider at times.

Jud saw the other horse run free and wild as its rider toppled from the saddle, pitching headlong into deep snow. He cursed.

Then Big Bones threw up his ugly head. His ears shot forward to the left, and Jud saw another horseman on a long-maned bay horse, which strained itself under a deep spur to lurch and jolt and clamber up the steep slope.

That tall, angular man in the saddle was just then ramming his rifle back into its saddle boot. Jud swung Big Bones to follow him. Nothing could be done about that one lying down there in the snow-bank.

The bushwhacker vanished over the hogback grade. As Jud came over the same rise, something snatched at his cheek and he heard the scream of a heavy slug inches away.

Then came the belated, booming crackle of the gun. Jud yanked Big Bones to a halt, twisted sidewise and threw himself out of the saddle as another slug came buzzing his way. He clung to the horse's reins; Big Bones wouldn't run, and he'd be too easy a target for the bushwhacker, standing there with dragging reins.

The sun wasn't in his eyes this time, as he ran stiffly on numb, burning feet for the shelter of a ridge, tugging Big Bones behind him. He could see the man clearly. He was a cool one. He had ridden out onto this flat mesa, dismounted, rolled a cigarette, and waited calmly for Jud to come over the rise.

Now he knelt again, took deliberate aim with the cigarette-smoke curling over his head. He fired just as Jud and Big Bones reached safety.

There was a way out of here, afoot, Sherrill thought. But the hell of it is, he'll know I'm coming, and all he has to do is double back here and kill my horse. Then he can get me in his own sweet time. Jud nagged himself, wishing he had a rifle of his own.

The bushwhacker waited coolly. He stood up and stamped his feet and swung his arms. He had the range and the advantage, and he knew it.

JUD studied the man's horse, so he'd know it next time. Gaudy bay, small, fine-bred head that always looked so showy with a long, wild mane and forelock. Short-coupled horse with a deep chest and long legs. There was a lot of money tied up in that nine hundred pounds of riding meat.

And then as Jud remembered to stamp his own feet and swing his own arms he heard a blood-curdling sound behind him, a high-pitched scream that was like nothing else on earth. Big Bones heard it too. He threw up his ugly head and fluttered his nostrils, showing the first fear Jud had ever seen in the stubborn brute.

Down there that riderless horse was streaking across the snowy flat, running hard, tripping now and then on its dragging reins. Behind it coursed seven lean gray shadows that ran belly-down, hugging the ground. They made no noise, showed no exultation as they neared their kill.

It was a hunger-run, it was all business and no pleasure—and how those big cruisers could run! Unthinking, the skin on his back crawling with horror, Jud slid into the saddle and turned Big Bones down the slope.

Behind him the rifle barked again, but the move had been too sudden. He drove home the blunt spurs and Big Bones grunted and threw away his good sense and ran like a fool.

The fleeing horse screamed as the nearest wolf leaped at his hind legs, seeking the hamstring. He tripped again on his reins and went down, and Jud's heart fell. A man who has been raised around horses, who has lived on top of a horse a good part of his life, hates like hell to see a good horse lose his last fight.

But the accident was a lucky one. As the horse went down the treacherous rein snapped. The horse rolled in a flurry of snow, screamed as he reached his feet. He lashed out with his whole hindquarters and one of the lean cruisers broke silence with a sharp yelp of agony.

The sound stopped the other six, just briefly, just long enough for the horse to break free again. That one cruiser was done for. He never moved after he tumbled backward in a heap. The other six seemed to know they could never catch up with the horse now.

They turned back purposefully, led by the smallest of the pack. A female, a smart old she carrying pups, who knows better than to waste her strength, Jud surmised, feeling better now that the good horse had made his escape.

Horror returned suddenly as he remembered that bushwhacked rider lying in the snow. He veered Big Bones, yelling hoarsely, goading the horse again and again and again.

The wolves seemed to know it was showdown. They turned to meet him when they were scarcely a hundred yards from the fallen man. They fanned out with almost military precision and crouched in the snow, drooling jaws agape and unblinking eyes measuring him yellowly.

He yelled as he drove the jug-headed bay at them. Somehow he had remembered to put his right hand inside his shirt, in his left armpit. It wasn't warm, but at least he could move it. At least he could get his fingers around his gun.

He fired three times. The old she was

getting heavy on her feet, and hunger of the long winter had robbed her of her tough strength. He caught her in the neck. She died hard.

He got another in the ribs, missed a third. But they let him alone. They seemed to smell gunsmoke, or maybe they just had the instinct that told them to a hair's breadth how far they could push their luck.

He hit the ground on a dead run and let Big Bones do the best he could, and the horse was smart enough to dog his heels like a puppy. Jud knelt over the fallen rider and his heart thudded as he saw it wasn't a death wound after all. The rider lay face down, half buried in the snow.

Behind, the wolves grumbled at one another as they tore at the bodies of their own dead. They'd let him alone now.

"Hit in the shoulder. A bad one but not too much blood lost. Now, let's just turn you over, old-timer—" The words stuck in his throat as he turned the rider over.

"A woman! A girl!" he said hoarsely.

SHE couldn't be a day over seventeen or eighteen. Under her man's hat she had tied up her short, tell-tale curls under a good wool scarf, a piece of goods that was thin but warm, and which had cost a good bit of money.

She was small, well-rounded, and if color ever came back to her deathly-gray face she would have an olive skin and a large, red-lipped, mobile mouth. She'd be a good-looking girl if the graveyard pallor left her. She'd be warm and soft and sweet. She'd fit into a man's arms like—

As he lifted her she moaned, and her eyes opened—velvety black ones, deep as sixty feet down a drilled well in the middle of the night. Terror swept over her face as she saw the whiskery, frosted face of a stranger this close to her. But the color came back, too. The pallor faded.

"Take it easy, kid," he told her gruffly. "Bleedin's stopped, but you could start it again easy. I'm a pretty good horse doctor and you don't look ready to shoot for mercy yet."

Rough talk but the kind she needed to bring her back to reality. She still didn't know what had happened. Jud looked furtively over his shoulder. The cruisers were still mangling their own dead, scarcely a hundred yards away. But with their bellies full, with the smell of gunsmoke still in the air, they'd let him alone.

It was the bushwhacker, the tall man on the showy bay, who worried him. Him and his rifle. . . .

The bushwhacker, mounted again, showed suddenly on the rim of the rise.

"Don't move," Jud cautioned the wounded girl. "Lay like you're dead. If he thinks you're done for, maybe he won't bother to come after me."

To make it look good, he stood up and shook his fist at the rifleman. The bushwhacker didn't bother to answer. He seemed to have seen all he wanted to see. He turned his horse without haste and disappeared.

That told Jud all he needed to know about him. Shoot a human being in the back, shoot another who tried to square things, and then go off and leave one alive and one dead for the Saskatchewan cruisers. . . .

He knelt again beside the girl. She was weak and sick and in pain and terror, and she seemed to look on him as her last hope in this world and the next.

"I was just heading back," she whispered, "and it seemed like something hit me on my whole right side—my whole side! I hurt all over. I don't remember—"

"You was dry-gulched—shot in the back," Jud interrupted her. The black eyes flew wide open. She would have asked questions but he went on curtly,

"Don't talk. Save your strength, lady, because you're goin' to need it. I seen it all and I won't have no trouble pickin' out the man that did it if I see him in a crowd."

He packed the wound with clean snow and used his own neckerchief to tie it in place. Best he could tell, no bones were badly damaged, but that arm would be useless for weeks. He stood up and looked around.

The sun didn't have long to finish out this way. The girl was easier as the snow bit into her pain and checked it, but she'd pass out again in a minute.

"Where's the nearest house?" he asked. "You've got to have a doctor—quick."

Lying on her back that way, she had a hard time orienting herself.

"Find the creek," came her faint, far-away voice. "Down it, not up. If you go up . . . town . . . stay away from town. . . ."

The grayness returned and she lost touch with the world, but it was a mercy this time. He picked her up while she was still unconscious and pain could not reach her.

Big Bones had sense. The wolves made him nervous but he knew his safety lay in the man. He behaved perfectly as Jud, breathing hard, lifted himself slowly into the saddle, cradling the girl's small form in his left arm.

She wasn't heavy. Most of that was thick winter clothes. What a little bit of a thing to take a bushwhacker slug!

He rode toward the trees, his left arm growing numb as her small weight told on it. In a little while the girl's horse came out of nowhere behind them and followed.

JUST as they reached the creek and the gaunt, hard-frozen willows, Jud heard the girl's horse scream. The sun was down now but enough light remained for him to see what was happening when he stood up and looked over his shoulder. They pulled the horse down in plain sight. They didn't really kill it. They tore it to pieces while it still lived. And to Jud Sherrill, Tennessee-born, Texas-raised, it seemed there must have been some kind of an instantaneous telegraph to notify the whole Montana country.

Or maybe those yowlings and snappings had carried to other ranging, starving cruisers. Maybe the smell of blood carried as far as did sound in this cold air.

Other shadowy shapes came sliding across the snow until he counted twenty at the dead horse. The sight sickened him. Not until then did he realize that, in his whole day's ride, he had not seen a single beef animal.

What kind of country was this, anyway? He was a cowman, and what did a country offer to a cowman when it had no cows? Get out of here fast! Head back where a man's blood didn't turn to slush in his veins; where wolves didn't tear a horse to pieces under your very nose; where a handful of olive-skinned girl couldn't be shot down from behind.

Yet this was only an inner seething, and he was cool enough as he tried to measure the hard-frozen, snow-covered creek. He turned down the creek, and the girl slept so peacefully that now and then he had to put his bearded cheek down to her face to make sure she still breathed. She breathed, all right. The touch of that soft, breath, the womanly scent of her, made him think, Long time since I've kissed a woman. . . .

Jud Sherrill was a one-drink drifter nearing thirty and looking forty. He'd sowed his wild oats as a teen-age colt. A wise old man, broken and diseased and happy to eke out a living as a camp cook, had taught Jud wisdom in time.

He had money in three banks, two in Texas and one in New Mexico. He drew top wages wherever he went. He could trust his own judgment because only

now and then had it failed him. He could buy and sell, because he had the money and the judgment.

A man didn't get ahead, working for other men. But a colt who didn't even know his own parents had no other way to start. Well, he'd started that way. He had his course measured out ahead of him. In a few more years he could afford a place of his own.

He hadn't figured on a woman in the picture. He'd set his sights for three things—land, cattle, independence. But holding this little, broken chit of a girl in his numb left arm taught him that land, cattle and independence weren't enough. That kind of a life could be mighty lonesome and unrewarding.

This, too, was only an inner seething. He remembered to keep an eye cocked back over his shoulder, lest the man with the rifle take a second think and come after them. He was pretty sure he wouldn't. He was in a hurry to get someplace, the way he shoved that horse over the ridge. . . .

Jud was glad when the shadows of night locked tight around him, nevertheless. Now and then dark shapes broke through the willow-brush and stood, stamping and snuffling, as he passed. He felt better, recognizing cow-critters. He was getting into tame country fast. This was more like it.

Haystocks loomed up ahead to his left, but he stayed with the creek because it was a pitch-black night and once he left the course the girl had set for him, he might have a hell of a time getting back to it.

Then his arm grew so numb it was powerless, and he had to stop the horse and shift her weight to the other arm—his gun arm, a thing he didn't like to do. She awakened and whimpered with pain, and he cursed as he remembered the sealed pint of whiskey in his saddlebag. That would help her.

CHAPTER TWO

The Empty Scabbard

A SMALL drink did a lot for her. On second thought, he could stand one himself. It took some juggling to get it and replace the bottle, but Big Bones had sense, and so did the girl.

"Who are you? You're mighty good to me," she whispered.

"Save your strength, lady," he said awkwardly. "Any man would do it."

"You say I was shot. I—I can't believe it."

"Well, I saw it."

"But—"

"Save it, save it!"

Suddenly a hound bayed near at hand, and he heard the distant shout of a man.

The girl stirred in his arms. "That would be Bill," she whispered. "Good old Bill!"

Why did he resent her calling anyone good old Bill? But he turned toward the sound, and a huge hound showed up out of the shadows of nowhere and leaped at him silently. He kicked at the dog in sudden terror until he realized it was only trying to get close to the girl.

Her dog, then, and he cursed it, thinking, Where the hell was it when she got shot in the back? Riders came pelting toward him—three of them, a burly old man in the lead. He pulled Big Bones up and shouted a warning.

"Hold it! Don't spook my horse! I've got a wounded girl here and I'm dead all over."

The burly old man looked sixty-five at least, but he came out of the saddle like a young man and ran like one to Jud's side. Jud saw the dull glitter of of a gun in his hand.

"I'll take her," came his gruff, edgy voice. "Ease her down to me, fella, and don't make no moves I ain't sure of."

One of the other riders said, "Take it easy, Bill. He fotched her back, didn't he? Lorraine, how are you, and what happened?"

"I'm all right, Dodie. My shoulder, I guess. . . ."

Her voice grew faint, and the man called Dodie ran to help old Bill lower her to the ground. The third one stayed on his horse, and Jud knew it was a habit with this outfit to play it safe, to keep one man in reserve for whatever happened.

"Lorraine, Lorraine, now what the hell!" Jud recognized pure Texas in the rider's voice.

"She's been shot in the shoulder, from behind. Don't monkey with it. Get her to a doctor," Jud said.

He got down to shake some blood back into his arms, and they kept an eye on him. He told them what had happened. Old Bill struck a match and held it up to Jud's face for a moment.

"Who the hell are you?"

Jud could have asked the same question, but he held it back. He told them who he was, what he had seen, and what he thought of Montana.

Old Bill blew out the match and nodded. "Feel the same way myself, only a man can't lay up a dime to go nowhere else," he said. "My name's Bill Shade—I run the Dot and Diamond, the Petherly outfit. This here is Dodie Luback and yonder's Bob Cowan. Bob, you can unclimb your horse and warm up."

"Good enough suits me," the man called Bob murmured. "I sized this pilgrim up as agreeable some time back. You're getting tetchy in your old age, Bill."

"Old age, hell!" Bill roared.

"I could eat," Jud reminded them, "and I was looking for the Petherly place, for a job. And the lady needs a doctor. We can jaw about things any time."

"Job, hell!" Bill said, still in the same bullying voice. "Name your fee, boy, and make it big! When old Zeb Petherly hears about this there won't be nothing too good for you."

"Even," came Dodie's Texas drawl, "unter half of his kingdom. I move we pack her in on foot. Tain't more than an hour and it'll be a sight easier on the pore kid."

That it was cold and dark, that they were hungry and tired and working far past bedtime, did not seem to occur to any of these three. That's the kind of a girl she is, then, Jud thought, with odd satisfaction.

They walked, and because it warmed his weary body it was better than riding. It seemed to go on and on and on, but it was just a matter of putting one foot down and then the other one.

THEY were in a tame country now. They took turns carrying the girl—first Bill and Bob, then Jud and Dodie. Now and then one man would have to mount his horse to chase back a belligerent range steer who took offense at anyone on foot.

The hound ran ahead of them and brought back other riders; the Dot and Diamond seemed to be a big outfit. Jud hadn't realized how nearly all-in he was until other men took over the job of carrying Lorraine Petherly home.

Willing hands, and enough of them. . . . Then who had shot her in the back, and why? It didn't make sense, but he stumbled on.

Old Bill sent two men—not one, but two!—to bring back a doctor. He sent another back for a team and buckboard, but they were in sight of the place before the rig got there.

An old man stumbled down the steps of the big, sprawling stone house, supporting himself on a cane. He was cleanshaven and except for his boots and big hat, was dressed for the city. He had sharp blue eyes and a stubborn chin;

he was giving into extreme old age unwillingly, as though he thought the Lord owed it to him to let him live forever.

A proud man, a hard-grained, haughty one, old Zeb Petherly. But he broke down and let the tears stream down his face as he caught the girl's little hand in his.

"I'm all right, Pop," she told him.

It didn't make sense, that young a girl the daughter of that old a man. Bill Shade made it clear to him as they ate in the kitchen afterward—while the girl slept in her own big, comfortable room, while they waited for the doctor. It seemed that Bill was something special in the way of a ranch foreman. In his own words, he ran the place.

"Old Zeb has failed a lot," he explained. "Don't want to let go of things, so I just go ahaid and do as I dad-gummed please and we both pertend what I'm doin' is on his orders. He's got more money than China's got tea, and he cain't bring himself to believe he cain't take it with him. Old Zeb allus had his own way in everything else, and he plain hates to haul off and die.

"That's why he adopted these kids—too bull-haided ornery to marry, thought he was too good for ary woman. The boy's been a disappointment; you'll unnerstand when you see him tomorrow. Bill is his name and I ain't proud he was named for me. Zeb catched him wild in a lumber camp, about a four-year-old; his mammy had died and them lumberjacks was tryin' to bring him up on sowbelly and beans and pancakes, not even knowin' his name.

"The girl he sent off for to some orphanage. Zeb, he reckoned he'd need a girl to mate with young Bill. He kind of orders things that way. He don't know the first thing about kids so it was me that practically had to raise them—me, and three-four no-account women he hired to nuss them as young'ns. It's me that—"

THE thud of Zeb Petherley's cane cut the old man's bluster short. No doubt was in Jud's mind that Bill Shade did run the Dot and Diamond, as he said; still, old Zeb ruled his own roost when he chose to.

He came stumping in, old age personified except for the deathless fire in his glittering blue eyes. His string tie was neat, his shirt front white, his black suit neatly pressed.

"How much?" he said abruptly. "I pay my debts. This old windbag has probably told you what that child means to me. No need for you to work the rest of your life, cowboy. Would ten thousand dollars—"

"How," Jud cut in, with his mouth full of Zeb Petherly's food, "would you like to go straight to hell?"

Old Zeb's head went back on his thin neck, and color flooded his transparent, old man's skin. Bill Shade gave a startled grunt and let his fork drop.

But Zeb only nodded courteously. "Sorry, sir. Until you're ready for it to be otherwise, consider this your home."

He stumped out, and Bill Shade relaxed. "Don't remember I ever heard anybody talk to him just that way," he said, uneasily. "Even in town, where they hate his guts, they 'sir' him."

Jud went to see the girl once more, after the doctor had dressed her wound. The medical man was small, plump, scared to death, but to Jud it seemed he knew his business.

"Bad wound, but she'll be all right," he chattered. "You did exactly the right thing, my man. Fortunately little blood was—"

"Get out!" old Zeb snarled. The doctor fled.

The girl's eyes were dull with opiates, but she looked up gratefully and tried to raise her tiny hand. Jud Sherrill took it awkwardly, thinking, Lord, I'm a goner. This is the one. It sneaked up on me, sort

of . . . . but I know my own mind, and she's the one!

Her eyes closed before he could drag out even a clumsy greeting. He was a single-minded man who had set his sights on a goal a long time ago, but he could stand off and study this sudden hunger in him, and know what it meant. Yes, and what it would take to cool it, too.

Old Zeb's low voice startled him. He looked up and met the old man's eyes.

"I'm afraid," Zeb said, "that your price is one I can't pay, cowboy. I've got other plans. Had them for a long time."

Jud nodded. "So have I got plans, sir," he said. "Just made 'em. I don't reckon they'll jibe very well with yours."

"Probably not."

"Just so we understand each other, sir."

Outside a hound began barking delightedly. The old man's face brightened. "That's my son getting in. Wild little heller," he said, affectionately. "Stay a few more minutes if you like, cowboy."

Jud followed him out, and they stood together on the dark porch as Bill Shade and Dodie unloaded young Bill Petherly from his horse. The boy was gloriously drunk; Jud knew the feeling, knew that not until tomorrow would he really begin paying for this, too.

Bill was a slender youth who liked good clothes and a good horse. He kept singing after they brought him into the house, and even then old Zeb did not trouble to remind him that there was an injured girl down the hall.

Bill got him to bed eventually, and old Zeb stayed with him until he went to sleep. Bill came out, his face angry and exasperated. "The damned old fool!" he snorted. "That kid's been in some kind of trouble in town. Got his pockets full of poker or crap chips from the United States Casino—big yellow chips, twenty dollars apiece. And Zeb thinks it's funny!"

"Do I bunk with the dogs, or where?" Jud reminded him.

He slept in a big, warm room with its own fireplace—luxury he had never before experienced. The girl's lovely little olive face stayed sharp and clear in his mind. The house was quiet, but before he went to sleep he heard a man with spurs walking along the flagstone veranda that surrounded the house.

Patrolling. The Dot and Diamond kept sentries on its own house! But Jud could weigh things, could put off a puzzle until it needed solving worse than he needed sleep. He slept.

MORNING brought slightly warmer weather and a sudden, blinding fall of snow. Jud and Bill Shade were at breakfast when Dodie Luback came clumping in the back door, moving in a hurry as he beat the snow out of his clothes.

"Somebody coming. That United States gang, I'd judge," he said.

Bill gulped down his last bite and said, as he stood up, "Sherrill, you'd better stay out of this. Dodie, roust the boys out. Tell 'em to be quite so they don't wake young Bill."

"Zeb still asleep?"

Bill grunted. "Awake for hours. The old don't need sleep. But he's still in his room."

"How's Lorraine?"

"Sick, but thrivin'."

"Whatever that means." Dodie went out.

Bill Shade turned to Jud. "It ain't much of a town when a gamblin' hall is the biggest business in it, but we still need a town. Zeb and that young pup don't seem to think so. I won't say Bill's a card cheat but I shore won't say he ain't, either. He's been told time and again to stay out of there, but keeps goin' in. The United States has got the law on its side, usually.

Jud followed him out on the porch. Five men were dismounting at the hitch rail. None of the Dot and Diamond men were in sight, but he had no doubt that they were where it would be handiest.

Then he stopped breathing for a long moment and studied one of the horses at the rail. No, it wasn't that short-coupled, wild-maned bay with the black stockings, but that tall man getting down looked familiar.

He nudged Bill. "Who's the beanpole with the black hat?"

"Roy Kagel. Used to own the United States but he couldn't keep his nose out of his own liquor. Now he just works there. He's got a sister Bill used to fancy, but he's nobody. Why?"

Jud couldn't be sure. "Thought maybe I'd seen him before."

"It ain't likely. He's been around here twelve, fifteen years." To the five who came clumping up through the snow, he said in a low voice, "Be quiet. Lorraine got shot yesterday—in the back. And right now there ain't nothing so important to us as to find out who."

The leader of the five was obviously a professional gambler. He was dressed as Petherly dressed, in a black suit with string tie, but with boots and big hat. He might have been thirty-five or fifty, and if emotion ever showed on his face, he put it there for a reason.

"Oh? We hadn't heard," he said. "Sorry. Is she bad?"

"Bad enough," Bill growled, "but she'll make out. What's your business, Bing?"

THE gambler shrugged. "The usual, but it can wait in view of what you tell me. Oh—maybe it was a little worse than usual this time. He came in drunk, complaining about the usual—that Dot and Diamond wasn't welcome. If I had been there—"

"Good thing you wasn't," Bill cut in. "Anything happens to that boy you'll keep on payin' for it in the next world."

Jud kept his eye on Kagel. Kagel had a lusterless eye, the slack-muscled face of the habitual drinker. He just listened, taking it in and keeping his dull thoughts to himself.

If I could be sure. . . . Jud studied him, trying to see in this slow-witted wreck of a man the bushwhacker who had ridden off and left them both at the mercy of the wolves.

"Come on, boys. We'll come back some other time, when there's not a lady in the house," said the gambler.

He turned back toward the horses. They mounted, and Jud watched as Roy Kagel turned his horse. The gambler touched his hat in Bill Shade's directon.

"Name's Bing Smith," Shade explained, out of the corner of his mouth. "Pretty much of a man, if he wasn't on the wrong side of the fence. Can only be one or two money-makers in a country like this, and he's the other one."

"Sorry," Bing called again.

"Just a minute." Jud spoke more loudly than he had intended, as he stepped down off the porch. He walked through the snow to Roy Kagel's side.

There was a rifle boot on Kagel's saddle—empty now, but the only rifle boot among the five. He began shivering and choking inwardly; he had to keep telling himself he still wasn't sure.

"Don't start nothing!" Bill Shade warned him. Bill had come down off the porch too. The gambler's men automatically filled in around them. "Don't start nothing! Don't disturb that girl-kid and don't fetch old Zeb out here!"

"Not even if this is the bushwhacker that shot her in the back?" Jud said. "He shapes up like the man I saw."

Bill hesitated. He pushed back his hat and stared up at Kagel.

"By the Eternal, if I thought—" he rumbled.

Bing Smith pushed his horse between

them. "I'll handle this, Bill," he said, crisply, "and tell your men if there's trouble, they'll have to start it. My back itches."

He spurred close to the trembling Kagel, whose mouth had dropped open, whose face had turned ashen.

"What's this, Roy?" he said softly. "Let's have the story. I sure wouldn't like to hear you'd shot Lorraine in the back."

Kagel lifted a shaking right hand and licked his lips.

"I don't know what you mean, Bing," he whimpered. "So help me God, you know I wouldn't do nothing like that."

Bing slapped him. The slap cracked out like a pistol shot. Dodie Luback came loping from the Dot and Diamond bunkhouse, carrying his gun. Bill Shade waved his hand, and Dodie stopped. And then, from bunkhouse windows, from corners of the big house, Jud saw other Dot and Diamond men emerge, to stand there uncertaintly, unconscious of the blowing snow, as Bill Shade waved them back.

Kagel reeled in the saddle. Bing Smith leaned forward deliberately, took off his glove, drew back his bare hand.

"Aw, don't you do it—don't you do it, now!" Kagel pleaded.

Bing slapped him again across the mouth, bringing blood. Kagel turned still whiter. His mouth worked.

"Speak up!" Bing gritted. "You wasn't around town yesterday. You showed up late for work last night. If you back-shot a girl—"

THE front door slammed, and they heard old Petherly's cracked voice railing at them.

"Bill! Chase that United States trash out of here! Dodie, Rip, Collins—run 'em out!"

The gambler turned impatiently in the saddle.

"Don't do it, Bill," he said in a low voice. "We're leaving—unless you try to hurry us. I'll take Roy along, twist the truth out of him. You know if anything has happened to Lorraine—"

He was having a hard time holding it in, and Jud thought to himself, Why, he's crazy about her too! He admired old Bill Shade, who seemed to know the right thing to do. Bill just stood there, paying no attention to old Zeb's yells. The Dot and Diamond boys took their cue from him.

The gambler had been at the head of his men when he rode into the yard. Going out, he was last, and Jud knew why. Partly it was defiance of the Dot and Diamond, to show them his back in no hurry to leave. But mostly it was to keep an eye on Roy Kagel.

"Ah, go back in the house, Zeb!" Shade said at last, losing his temper a little. "And take that whelp with you, afore I tan him myself."

Unnoticed, young Bill Petherly had come out on the porch beside his foster-father. He was unsteady on his feet, bleary of eye. His hand shook as it hovered, too ready, over his gun.

"You don't talk to me that-away," he said thickly.

Old Bill turned his back contemptuously and motioned to his men. "Some work to do!" he shouted. "This ain't no winter resort. Cut into more stocks, beat the damn snow, get feed out afore we lose more cows!"

Jud started down toward the corral at a run.

"I just thought of something," he said, remembering that look on Bing Smith's face.

He saddled in a hurry and told old Bill about it, and old Bill said, "I'll go with you. It should be young Bill's job, but it ain't. Yes, Bing's been in love with her since she was a little handful, thirteen, fourteen years old. He was wel-

come here then. It's young Bill's fault he ain't welcome now."

Bill sighed.

"Because Bing's twice the man that kid is!" he suddenly erupted, as they swung up into the saddle. "Gambler or no, he'd make Lorraine a husband. But old Zeb's childish, and that whelp set him against Bing—"

They rode out on a hard gallop, and a mile from the house they saw Bing and his four men clumped together. They weren't riding, now. They had pulled up in the snow, still on Dot and Diamond land, because Bing couldn't wait any longer.

They were too far away to yell, too far away to see details. But they saw enough.

They saw Bing reach over and take a gun out of one man's holster and toss it to Kagel.

They saw Kagel deliberately close his hands and turn his back, rather than catch it. They saw him shake his head and stand up in the stirrups and put both hands out to plead.

"I knew it!" Jud moaned. "I should have sized up that look in his eye!"

They saw Bing reach into the pocket of his coat for the little gun he carried there, and they understood the significance of it. This wasn't a shoot-out. He wasn't killing a man, and it didn't take the manly .45 he wore in a holster against his lean leg.

THEY saw him take the little gun out and press it against Kagel's side. Kagel drew back a foot, trying to fall out of the saddle so that his horse was between him and the gambler.

They saw the little gun flash, again and again and again. Kagel's hoarse scream, muffled slightly by the falling snow, came to them. He twisted, threw up both hands, groped blindly toward the gambler.

Bing pulled his horse back coolly, out of line of those groping, clutching hands. He had let the gun-hand drop, but he raised it again and fired straight into Kagel's face—twice. He kept the hand raised, and Jud knew he was pressing the trigger on empty chambers in blind, crazy, unreasoning passion.

Kagel died hard. His horse tried to bolt but one of Bing's men caught it and held it, impassively. This man turned his head, rather than look at Kagel or the man who had killed him. He knew his place and he kept it.

Kagel crumpled over his horse and twitched there, and in a moment he rolled off into the snow. Bing dropped the little pistol back in his pocket. The man holding the horse gave him a warning of Bill and Jud's approach. He turned to face them.

"A hell of a thing to do!"Bill choked. "We seen it. You'll swing for that job."

The gambler shook his head impatiently. Sweat covered his upper lip and his eyes still glinted with something that wasn't quite normal. He seemed to be trying to talk without being able to master his own tongue.

He jerked his hand down toward Kagel's body and found his voice. "Load him up and tie him on," he said thickly. "Bill, you don't honestly think there's a jury in Montana that would convict me, do you?"

The man got down and loaded Kagel's bleeding body on his horse. Bing wiped his face with his sleeve. He seemed calmer. "Go on home and forget what you saw. I square my own accounts, Bill." He even smiled a little. "You don't think I'd let a Dot and Diamond man get at one of mine, do you? And you don't think I'd let him shoot Lorraine, either, do you?"

Jud said, "You still don't know for sure, do you? He never did admit it, did he? That's why you lost your head. When a man keeps shooting after his man's dead. something preys on his mind."

Bing Smith twitched in the saddle. "You talk too much," he said shrilly.

Jud shoved his horse closer. "But he never did admit it, did he?" he yelled. He turned to the gambler's three stolid, white-faced followers, who seemed uncertain, stubborn, more than a little afraid. "Did he? I was almost sure at first. Now I ain't! If he executed the wrong man, he's in a bad box."

Old Bill Shade again knew what to do. He pushed closer and took the bridle of old Big Bones, forced him backward.

"It's four to two, Sherrill, and that's two to one when you cipher it down to a personal proposition," he said. "From now on it's between Bing and his Maker, anyway. Come on."

And on the way back to the house, he asked Jud, "Why do you think Roy didn't do it?"

"I didn't say that! I just said I ain't sure. There's something that don't figure."

Old Bill shrugged. "He's been crazy ever since he found out Bill didn't have no intention of marryin' his sister. See, it's a straight cash proposition with Bill. Him and Lorraine has to make a match of it or he loses this property."

Bill swore. "Why can't he let 'em mate up to suit themselves?" he complained. "Who does he think he is—the Lord A'mighty?"

"So Bill don't really care about Lorraine?"

Bill shrugged. "They growed up together. Never did get on too well. No, I reckon he favored the Kagel girl."

"And if Lorraine was killed, he'd inherit the property alone, wouldn't he?" Bill nodded, and Jud went on, "Then why should Kagel kill Lorraine? Unless you think—and Kagel thought—that young Bill would marry the Kagel girl after he came into the property."

Old Bill shook his head thoughtfully. "No, he wouldn't. He won't ever marry anybody so long as there's light women that will give him their time. I see what you mean! It's a puzzler. It don't figure."

CHAPTER THREE

The Bushwhacker

HE WAS silent all the way back to the house. The crew had scattered to break out stacked hay for storm-weakened cattle—all but trustworthy Dodie Luback.

"Stick around, Dodie," Bill told him tersely. "Warm your haunches while you can. I got a bad feelin' and I need that soothed worse'n I need the work done. Let's go see how the girl-kid is, Sherrill."

They went into Lorraine's room, and Jud got his first good, close-up look at young Bill Petherly. The youth was just leaving. He was handsome but his thin face lacked strength, will, purpose. He was not a manly man, and never would be.

"Bill," old Bill said shortly, "here's Jud Sherrill, down Texas-way, that saved

your sister. We owe him a lot.

"Hi-yah," the youth said, and stalked out without offering his hand.

The old man's eyes narrowed, his fists clenched. He murmured, "Some time I'm a-gonna fergit he's only half a man!" He turned to the girl. "Honey, how's it feel to be all shot up?" He was a different man when he looked at her.

Lorraine was still under opiates. Her eyes opened drowsily.

"Not good, but better," she said, "than being wolf-bait."

"I'll leave you with this feller."

Old Bill went out. Jud, ill at ease, sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed, where she indicated. So she remembered the wolves. Well, she could face things. . . .

"I'll never forget this," she said suddenly. Her small hand found his wrist. "You took your chances, too. It would have been easier just to ride on, wouldn't it?"

"I dunno," he muttered, and wondered if he sounded as clumsy as he felt. Then he found the words: "Miss, I don't want to pester you now, when you feel bad. But when you can listen, I'll have some things to say."

Her eyes had half closed. They fluttered open—big and dark, deeper than ever.

"What kind of things?"

"I make up my mind fast, lady. I'm not just a raggedy-pants saddle bum. I've got money in the bank, I'm a worker, never been fired, never done anything real bad. You're what I want to fill out a hand I've been fixin' to draw."

She smiled. "That's straight enough."

"Well, I'll say more when you can listen."

The eyes closed. "Makes me feel good, knowing it," she whispered, squeezing his wrist. "Pop says I rush into things, too. Maybe I wouldn't be good for you."

"You would be."

She laughed a little, and winced at the pain. She murmured, "Old Bill says I think like a man, talk like a man. But damn it, I don't *feel* like a man, and I like to have people like me. Men, that is. And Pop says you're pretty much of a man. He wants to gun you out of Montana, but he still rates you a man."

He cleared his throat, wondering uneasily how much of this was fever, how much Lorraine. He said, "I don't reckon you've got any ideas who done this to you?"

"Not ideas. Just suspicions. We're pretty well hated around here. It could have been anybody. I was riding Bill's horse. Maybe they thought I was Bill."

He laughed, because for a moment he thought she meant Old Bill. Then: "You mean your brother's horse?"

"Yes."

"You're about of a size, at a distance."

"Yes. I've seen times I could shoot Bill in the back myself."

"You go to sleep. I ought to be horsewhipped, botherin' you."

HE WENT OUT, thinking, Maybe there's a fever, but she thinks straight. She had it right, all right. No one would want to shoot her in the back. But Young Bill. . . .

"Kagel?" he asked Old Bill, after telling him Lorraine's surmises.

Old Bill shook his grizzled head. "Why? So long as the whelp is alive, there's a chance he'll marry Roy's sister. A mighty slim one, I grant you—but this is a big property, and worth the wait. No, Roy was murdered for nothing, on a mistake."

"For nothing," Jud said, "but not on a mistake. I think I'll see what that town looks like, but first I want you to hear me say something to old Petherly."

Bill groaned and threw up his hands. "Why rush, why rush? Or air you in a hurry to come into the Dot and Diamond, too?"

But he followed Jud to the old man's room. Zeb was smoking a cigar by the

window, gazing out at the falling snow.

"Winters take me back," he mumbled dreamily as they came into the room. "Make me remember things I—" Suddenly he lost the old, childish look, became sharp and watchful and suspicious. "Now what is it? Clear out, Bill."

"No," Jud said. "I want a witness. Bill, you stay. Mr. Petherly, I've got near three thousand dollars in the bank. I've got prospects. I fancy that girl of yours. I'm goin' to drift now, but I'll be back when it's warm."

"She'll be married to my son!"

"I don't reckon she will," Jud said, growing more confident, seeing things more sharply in his mind. "And you don't reckon so, either. So I'll be back. That's all."

"Why, you impudent tramp—" old Zeb sputtered. He seized his cane and stumbled after them. "Throw him out, Bill! Drag him on the end of a rope. You heard me, Bill—you heard me!"

They escaped outside, and Bill grumbled, "No need to bait the old devil thataway. Sherrill, he was a hell of a man in his day. I get impatient, until I remember him twenty years ago. I guess this ain't a pleasure trip you're takin' into town."

"Not exactly."

"I allow you'll show up at the United States."

"I might."

"Me and the boys will go along with you."

"No."

"Just me, then."

"Don't try it, Bill," Jud said. "I ain't sure yet, and I don't want to make the same mistake he did, and pot the wrong man. If you turn up you'll touch off a big row, and I just want a little one."

"You think Bing done it. Sherrill, Bing wouldn't do a thing like that! I know it!"

"Not in his right mind, he wouldn't. And he wouldn't shoot an unarmed, innocent drunk in his right mind, either. But you and me seen him shoot one!"

He saddled old Big Bones and headed for the creek. Up-creek lay the town—that much he knew, and no more. It was getting colder, and the big, wet flakes of snow were turning to biting grains of sleet.

The wind was howling out of the northwest as he turned a butte suddenly and saw the huddled group of shanties before him. Was this a town? Maybe it passed for one here, but it was no place for a big time. He'd seen prairie soddies not half as lonely-looking.

Yet there was the big, slatternly frame building with the huge, leaning sign over the doorway:

UNITED STATES BAR & CAFE—GAMING & SPORTS

Maybe it made money, but Bing Smith certainly hadn't put any of it back into the business.

In a blinding snowstorm he found the horse shed back of the casino and put Big Bones away. They had a rope strung from the shed to the back door of the casino, so a man wouldn't get lost between the two in a blizzard. He'd heard of these ropes and he used it gratefully.

IT WAS HIGH noon, but so storm-dark that the big lamps had been lighted inside. He had seen only three horses in the shed, but a dozen men slouched around a crap table, betting dimes and quarters and listening to the drone of the dealer.

"Now he needs a ten. A big ten. Two fives will do. Can he throw a ten? Can he find that ten? A ten will do. Get your bets down, gentlemen. Will he come? A ten will win. A four and a six will make the fix. Now ten, points ten, need ten."

The bored gamblers looked up curiously as Jud came in by the back door. He unbuttoned his coat and stamped the snow off as he waited for his eyes to get used

to the light. Then he went in.

Without interrupting his patter, the dealer cast a swift look over his shoulder and then nodded toward a closed door across the big room. He was a pasty-faced man with false teeth. The man who started across the room in response to that nod was a weak-faced, chinless cowboy who probably had lost all his money here and had to work as a porter for his cakes and coffee.

"No need," Jud said. "I knock on doors for myself."

The chinless cowboy stopped. The dealer cut his patter short, leaned over to spit between his feet, and said, "Suit yourself, but you're expected if you're from Texas. And to judge by your gab, you are."

A pot-bellied wood stove blazed in a corner. Now that he was here, Jud felt no need to hurry things. It seemed to him he had all the time in the world. Maybe Roy Kagel wouldn't feel that way, he thought; yes, maybe a dead man would want accounts squared as soon as possible, so he could start the long sleep in relative peace.

But I'm not fightin' Roy Kagel's battle, he thought coldly. This is because of the wolves. I heard 'em tear that horse up and it could've been her. Or me!

He warmed his hands at the stove, flexing them over and over and remembering that Bing Smith would have had plenty of time to get his hands warm. In a minute, the gambler looked out of the office door.

"Did you want to see me?" he asked.

"In a minute, if you don't mind," Jud returned. "Soon as I warm my hands."

He took plenty of time warming his hands. He took off his coat and got warm all over, and when finally he started for the office door the dealer at the crap table abruptly cupped his hand over the chimney of the lamp and blew hard.

"Game will resume in thirty minutes, gentlemen," he said.

JUD WASN'T particularly afraid as he clumped across the floor. He rapped gently on the door, and he still was not afraid.

"Yes?" came Smith's voice.

"Like to see you, Mr. Smith."

"Come in."

He pushed open the door. It was a small room, with just space for a big iron safe and a small wooden desk and a soft swivel chair. Bing Smith stood up and leaned his knuckles on the desk, his .45 bumping against it.

"Understand you expected me," Jud said.

"I thought you might come."

"My name's Sherrill—Jud Sherrill."

"I remember you."

"I was the one that brought Miss Petherly in after she was bushwacked. I seen it all. The same feller took a crack at me with the same rifle."

He thought maybe Bing whitened along the nose and around the corners of his mouth, but he only said gently, "I didn't know all this. The Dot and Diamond is always hiring new men."

"The feller was about your size. Could have been Kagel. On the other hand, it could have been you. Kagel had a rifle boot on his saddle. Have you?"

"Yes. You're accusing me?"

"Well," said Jud, "not yet. Not quite, anyway. You're pretty crazy about that girl. Like me, you're a direct-action man, only you're a little off in the head and I don't think I am. Young Bill Petherly is a kind of a pup. He likes to cause a ruckus anywhere, knowin' old Zeb will back his play, but maybe he gets a p'ticular pleasure out of it here. Maybe he's the kind of a sneak that don't care for the girl himself, only to devil a man who really wants her."

Now he was sure that Bing was whitening. He had aged.

"Say what you mean, Sherrill, and cut out this—"

Jud stepped back and closed the door behind him and cut in stridently, "You think far enough ahead to know that with Bill dead, old Zeb wouldn't last long, and with the girl alone you'd have a good chanst. And maybe you would—if you was right in your mind.

"But you're not, and you couldn't wait. You've got a crick in your brain and Young Bill knew it. He tantalized you, pushed you over the edge. You followed him out of town and half-way home, until you could get behind and above him, and then you—*ah-h-h-h!*"

He didn't get afraid until the last split second, when he saw Bing go for the .45. He needn't have been afraid, even then.

He hit his gun with the palm of his hand, knocked it out, and let his fingers lock easily around the big, cold butt.

He blasted three times. Smith's gun thudded to the floor. He twisted, dead on his feet, and fell over the desk. Jud reached behind him and clutched the door-knob, in case anyone tried to come in.

But no one tried. The little room stank of sour gunsmoke. He listened, but no one came running to Smith's rescue.

HE TURNED softly and opened the door. The dealer was the first man he saw.

Jud came out, and not until then did he remember to holster his gun.

"I didn't hear Bing's gun," the dealer said, facing him.

"That's right," Jud said, "you didn't. He tried but he was a mite slow. Anybody want to take up where he left off?"

The dealer leaned over his fat stomach to spit between his feet.

"Prob'ly not," he said. "We heard what he done to poor Roy. Serves him good and right, stranger, and if you need us, we'll testify."

As Jud went out into the storm he heard the monotonous drone begin again, "Ten's the point. He needs ten, amen!"

Big Bones hated to go out into the storm again, and Jud had to iron-jaw him out of the shed. As he rode down the street past the United States, he saw four men fogging toward him.

Old Bill Shade was in the lead, and behind him streaked Dodie Luback, Bob Cowan and Young Bill. Old Bill reined in sharply when he recognized Jud.

"Well?" was all he said.

Jud shrugged. Killing a man was a sickening business; he'd see that pasty-faced dead man for long nights to come.

"I guessed right."

"You—got him?"

Irritably, Jud said, "What's it to worry you? I don't work for the Dot and Diamond! You run your crew and I'll run mine. I'm fed up with this country. I'm headin' south."

"For good?"

"Not for good," he said. "Tell old Zeb I'll be back, come spring."

His hand shot out, and he grasped Young Bill by the wrist. The youth let out a yell and clawed for his gun.

"I wouldn't, boy," Old Bill said quietly.

"And you're comin' with me," Jud said. "I don't know whether I can make a man of you in sixty days or not, but I can sure try!"

"I'll see you in—" Young Bill began. Then his face crinkled in a grin, and it was after all an attractive face. Weak, but it had its good points. "All right, I'll go with you. Like to see a warm place again, anyway."

He shook Jud's grip loose.

"Tell Pop," he said, "that it's Belle Kagel. Tell him to take care of her until I get back."

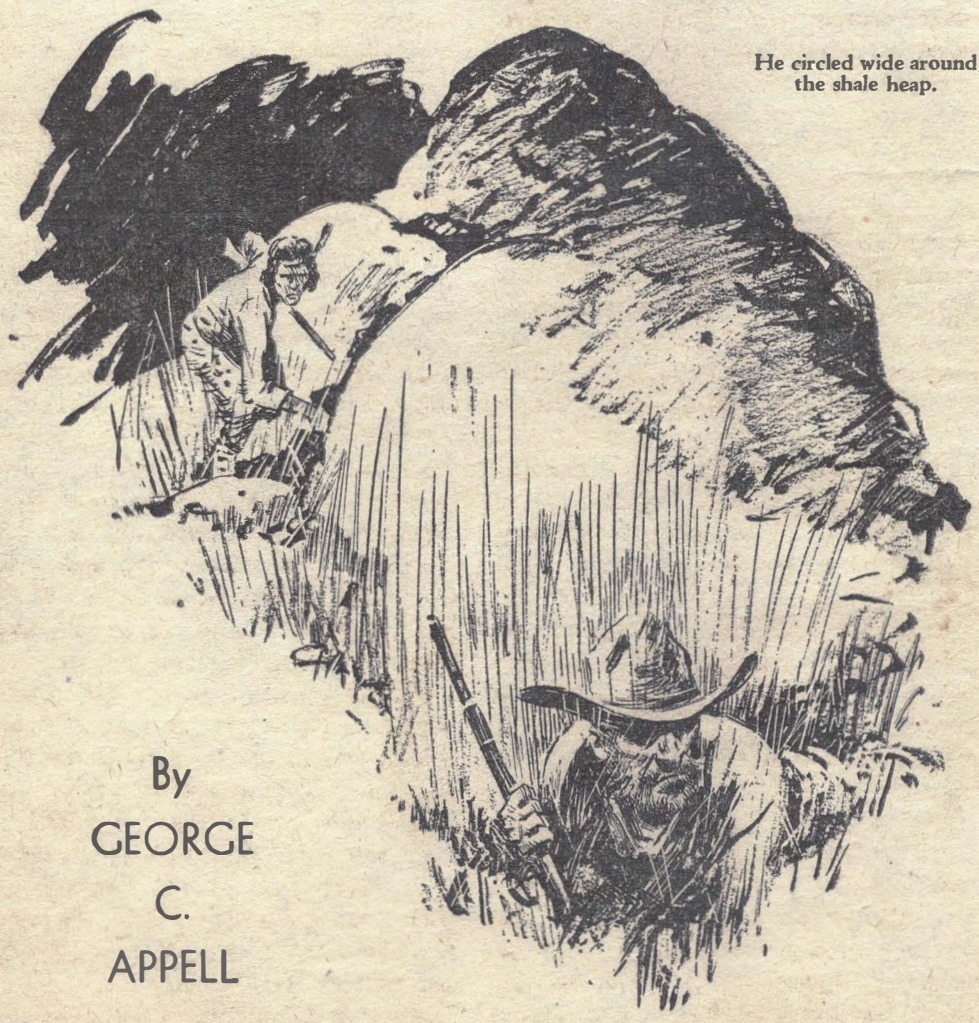
Old Bill sighed heavily and stuck out his hand. Jud shook it briefly. The wind carried a sound he didn't like, and Big Bones was yearning for warmer country, too.

THE END

WARRIOR'S WORD

When the traders who spoke with forked tongues tangled with Robert White Eagle, that Mission Indian had to use a skill never learned from the white man's Bible. . . .

ROBERT White Eagle sat his clay-bank loosely on the down-trail, giving the animal its head and paying full attention to the lead-line he gripped in one hard fist. Behind him, on the nether end of the line, came a seventeen-hand maroon stallion with questioning white eyes and a wild flare to its scent-stiffened nostrils, a stallion such as had not been seen on the savannas since the time of Robert's grandfather, when Colonel Chivington had ridden his own



He circled wide around the shale heap.

By GEORGE C. APPELL

blooded stock to the Sand Creek Massacre and drawn the guiltless warriors into their own trap.

A catch for any man, was the stallion, sleek now and polished from the lush pasturage of the reservation at Fort Peck; a catch for any warrior, though already this warrior had pledged the horse to a dealer in Greysville, after which he would return to the reservation and take his bride at Dr. Abernathy's Mission. He was a Christian, this Robert White Eagle, one who had given his vows to the white man's God in the Moon of the Red Sky, which Dr. Abernathy had told him was autumn. He must learn that, as he had learned most of the language. Nia-tith-i, soon to be his wife, had studied the calendar lore, and a man's woman cannot be permitted to best him.

The claybank picked its way around the loops of the rimrock trail and came, presently, to a flat shelf overlooking Punished Man's Creek, so-named by generations long gone who had believed that its strength snatched at the souls of errant braves and sucked them into the bowels of the earth turtle. Quicksand, they called it at Fort Peck—stay away from it. Robert intended to.

He backed the claybank to a stop and took up slack on the lead-line. When you've spent a whole season tracking down and cutting out and breaking one horse, you become very careful of his welfare, even though you've pledged him for sale. Or perhaps because you have pledged him. The deal, as concluded under the watchful eye of Dr. Abernathy at the Mission building, was delivery of the stallion in exchange for forty of the white man's five-dollar bills. That would be two hundred dollars, the good doctor had explained; and with two hundred dollars, you could marry with ceremony, buy acreage, get implements and start farming. Most of Robert's people were farming now, and had been ever since the dismal affairs at Wounded Knee and White Cedar the snow before, when the pony soldiers had blasted the Ghost Dancers to pieces with rotating guns and ended the prairie wars forever. Pick up a plow, Indian. Till the land, don't soil it.

Down in the small, bowl-shaped valley, nothing moved. The shadows of late afternoon lay purple across the distances beyond, and Robert wanted to clear the valley by nightfall and reach Greysville the next morning. It was an isolated valley, known to be treacherous to those not familiar with its bottoms, and few men used it any longer. A herd guard or a fence rider might slip in occasionally in search of strayed stock, but most men rode the railroad, twenty miles to the west, or else took the long way around, eastward. Robert was using it because it was the shortest distance between two points, and he had to get back to Fort Peck by Sunday to get married.

THE DEEP, hat-high grasses were motionless down there, and the muddy trace of Punished Man's was a brown blur bi-secting the bottoms north to south. The trail dropped from the shelf and flanked the west bank of the creek and rose abruptly half a mile beyond and disappreared south toward Greysville. Robert White Eagle would be in Greysville next day, would take two days to return, and on the fourth day, the white man's Sunday, he and Nia-tith-i would be joined in marriage according to their newly-taken vows.

For that marriage, for that girl, Robert had gladly renounced the creed of his ancestors and adopted the ways of the Mission. You did not kill, the doctor had taught—even for revenge. Nor did you steal, and you tried to see good in evil, even though you secretly believed that most of the evil on the land was the work of whites who frequently but not strangely ignored their own laws.

It was in recognition of that secret be-

lief that Robert White Eagle carried a seven-shot Spencer in a leather ring socket on the claybank's saddle. True, it held only four bullets now, he having fired a test burst over the stallion's head the day before, back on the reservation. That had been part of the deal made with the dealer from Greysville—that the stallion be thoroughly broken and not gun shy. That part of his word, Robert had kept; soon he'd keep the other part, collect his dollars and ride home.

The claybank jerked its head and the bridle snapped and Robert tightened his knees. Then he laughed and swung off the saddle and dropped to the ground. "Water? You cannot have water from down there." He secured the stallion's lead-line with an extra coil around his wrist, rested the Spencer in the bend of his arm and peeled the claybank's reins forward. "Come walk without my weight, thirsty one."

He walked down the trail with an easy glide, head erect, eyes alive, carrying his twenty-two years with the sensitive pride of uncrossed blood. His fine black hair was cut short, after the manner of the Mission men.

But the rest of him, on this last outing before his Christian wedding, was all Indian. His chest and rib muscles were barely concealed by an unfringed buckskin shirt that was open to his waist; his leggings were stained with the stars and swastikas and dotted moons prescribed by tribal custom, and his moccasins were the footgear of a plains rider, not of a plowman.

The prospect of becoming a farmer had worried him, at first. He had gone sullenly into the timber above Fort Peck and taken a sweat bath to cleanse his soul, and after that he had made a fire and burned green twigs and had sat for long in the mountain silence, seeking an answer from his new God. And from somewhere in that silence, the resolution to act had come to him and entered him. He knew as he scattered the fire and covered the embers, that the right thing to do was to take up the new way of living, as the land gave it, and become affluent enough to marry and raise children and, maybe—if his new God was kind—send them east to the schools where they could learn all about this nation that no longer belonged to him or to anyone else, but to everybody.

That's when he'd gone southwest into the mesa country to select a horse that would be a worthy basis for a Mission marriage.

The claybank stopped suddenly, nose in the air; the stallion skidded and wrenched sideways and belled the silence with a stuttering, soprano whicker. Robert yanked on the lead-line and, instinctively, crouched on one knee. The whicker fluttered away on an echo, and the valley took back its silence.

Robert rose from his knee and shortened the lead-line until the stallion's bridle was at his shoulder. He drew the claybank up to his other side and held them that way, hoping the tamer horse would calm the wilder one. He counted his heartbeats as he stared down the last stretch of the trail to the grassy bottoms. He counted to one hundred, using the fingers of one hand to help him, and the mounting totals of five reminded him of the forty bills awaiting him in Greysville.

Then he counted the days from next Sunday back, still watching the bottoms. "Sunday . . . Saturday . . . Friday . . . Thursday . . . today . . ." That made him feel better, made him feel more secure. The words were a link to his learning, and in the learning he had found strength.

THE INITIAL defensive instinct of fear had left him, and he moved toward the bottoms with watchful eyes and a raised rifle. There were no searchers after strays down there, but there might be something else. The trail found the valley

floor and trenched through the grasses along the western wall. On an impulse that puzzled him, Robert threw off the safety of the Spencer. There was something chanceful in the air, an uncertainness that he couldn't explain to himself. He was forbidden to kill, of course, and he had no cause to kill. But men or animals who remain hidden in protective foliage present a problem to be approached with caution.

Then the dry grasses rattled apart and a man with an immense red beard was standing in the narrow trail. He had a rifle braced on one hip and his eyes were suspicious slits.

"Stop there," he commanded. He wore a weather-punched sombrero and a patched linen smock caught at the waist by a heavy cartridge belt. His high-heeled boots were a horseman's boots, which told Robert that he rode for a living, whatever it was, and didn't sluice streams for gold or set traps or work in a town.

Robert said, "Hullo." He had a strange feeling that this man had been watching him for some time.

The man's eyes raked Robert up and down, then darted to the stallion and over to the claybank. "All right, Flint," he grunted, and a second white man appeared from the grasses. This one was short and unshaven and wore a wrinkled canvas coat that bore the smears of many, many camps. He carried a blue-barreled rifle with a carved stock. He looked tough.

Redbeard asked, "Absaroka?" There was a slice of mockery in the word.

"Yes," Robert told him. "I am a warrior." And thought, Or I was.

"Speak English, huh?" Redbeard stepped closer, moving on the soles of his boots. "Your horses?"

"Look out, he looks tricky." It was the man Flint, and he lifted the rifle with both hands.

Redbeard asked, "You a Mission Indian?"

"I am." Robert said it proudly.

Flint spat into the trail. "Cute, ain't he? I'm a back-slidden Methodist myself, and I aim to stay one."

Robert never looked at him.

"Where'd you get the stallion?" Redbeard caressed the animal's satin neck and knuckled the broad shoulders.

"In the mesas. With a riata."

Flint asked, "When?"

"Last..." Robert had to think of the white word for the season..."spring."

Flint sniffed. "Indian with two horses, he's a pretty rich Indian."

Robert peered through the break in the grasses where the two had come out. There was a heap of weed-speared shale in there, and in the shattered slate was a dead pit fire. A pit fire, in the windless weather of early fall, meant that its makers did not wish it to be seen. Scattered around the pit were two saddles, a couple of limp

bridles and a dirty half-opened bedroll.

"Got any food?" Redbeard wanted to know. He stepped away from the stallion, eyes greedy.

"Tack. Some tack, some water. Enough to reach Greysville."

"Why Greysville?" Redbeard was studying the trail Robert had come down. "Got business there?"

"I sell the stallion." Robert couldn't resist the smile that leapt across his lips and he added, "To marry."

"Cute," Flint observed. "How much?"

"That is my affair." A warning wire was glowing in his brain, though he was still puzzled and quite curious.

Redbeard took his eyes from the up-trail. "You alone?"

"Yes."

"The horses for sale?"

"No."

"How much?"

Robert shook his head. "It is pledged, that stallion. The claybank is mine."

"What's the difference who you sell it to?" Redbeard narrowed his lids and lowered his rifle. "We'll buy 'em both."

Robert inhaled until his lungs felt tight in his chest. "They are not for sale. Now I go. Please move."

"I like it here." Redbeard picked up the rifle and held it across his middle. "How much?"

Impatience racketed through Robert's being like a live thing. He swallowed three times, deliberately, before he said, "Neither animal is for sale."

REDBEARD pondered that. He tilted his head to hear the whisperings of Flint, then rubbed his beard and looked full at Robert White Eagle.

"You a Christian?"

"Yes."

"Well, we two heathen need help. How about giving some?"

"Help?" Robert slid his eyes once more at the dead fire and the scattered gear. He saw no animals. "Help you?" He was irked with his own hesitation. He wanted to leave the valley by twilight and reach Greysville the next noon.

But he had, in truth, adopted a new code in this new country, what Dr. Abernathy called The Word, and he was bound in his soul to observe it. It included, among other things, aid to the stricken, no matter what their station. That last phrase, or condition, had often been impressed upon him by the doctor, who feared that Robert might miss the point, which was that an Indian convert might be presumed by some whites to be lower than themselves, though still deserving of aid—despite his station.

"Y'see, Chief, we lost—"

Redbeard shoved Flint aside. "Shut up." He faced Robert, rifle high. "You gonna get married? Fine. How about a present for the bride?"

"A gift?"

"Uh-huh." He licked his lips with monstrous anticipation. "We turned from beaver to pannin'—prospecting. But we got some pelts left. How about a beaver skin or two for the bride?"

Robert warmed to that. It would be nice, coming home with a present for Nia-tith-i, and no doubt the doctor would be pleased too.

The uneven shadows on the valley's eastern wall were darkening and sliding toward the bottoms, but still he hesitated. "That would be fine," he said.

"Come on in," Redbeard invited. "Better pin your stock first."

Robert put the claybank on a hobble and the stallion on a picket, then followed Redbeard through the grasses to the camp. Flint came last.

"See?" Redbeard was holding up a small, sloppily-tied bale of clotted pelts. Robert guessed there might be a dozen, and all were old and thin of hair and badly cured.

His upper lip tightened against his

teeth. He asked harshly, "You took those?"

He didn't believe that they had; he had heard of men who pirated plews to undersell the mountain market—men who would turn a gun toward any loose dollar—but he'd always assumed they had an eye for quality. These pelts were mangy. Rancid.

"Sure, we took 'em. Didn't we, Flint?"

"Sure we did."

Redbeard thrust them at Robert White Eagle, but Robert didn't accept them. "I got the price of a horse in my hand, Mr. Christian. Wanta swap?"

"No."

"No gift for the bride?" Redbeard's smile was hard.

"No."

Flint tried to explain: "Y'see, usually we wouldn't pack 'em with us, we'd leave 'em hid an' get 'em later. But these days, y'never know when some loot-happy buck'll come along an' lift 'em."

Robert flushed and felt the blood burn all the way to his ears. He was not a thief, it was forbidden by his religion to steal, as it was forbidden to kill. Yet here stood these men accusing him.

"Your pelts are safe."

Redbeard's smile sank to a frown. "Don't want 'em, hey?"

"No." Then he added, "Thank you." He took a long step backward; the man Flint was too close.

REDBEARD tossed the bale into the grass and shrugged. "Okay, Mr. Christian, we still need help. We got business across the border. Urgent business, see? Last night we come in here an' turned the horses loose to water." He hooked a thumb toward the creek. "They're still under the mud, an' it's a safe bet they'll stay there. Now, we plan, Flint here an' me, to ride out of this valley tonight." He winked. "Get it?"

Robert glanced from Redbeard to Flint and back to Redbeard. "You can walk, can't you?"

"We don't walk in the open, not in our business. We ride."

In the twilight the four moist globes of the animals' eyes reflected like jewels. The stallion *whuffled* startlingly, and Flint jerked up his rifle.

Robert hesitated, this time on purpose. "No pack?" He had to have a plan, a way out. Without a way out, he'd never be able to keep his word to the dealer, which was the same as keeping it to Nia-tith-i and Dr. Abernathy. "No mules?"

"We pack on the horses we ride." Redbeard was sounding weary, as if sick of a game he'd played too long. "Take the pelts, you. We'll swap for the horses."

Flint blurted, "Even swap." But he didn't make a move toward the trail. The Spencer in Robert's hands was large in the dusk.

Suddenly Redbeard put his rifle on Robert and leveled it. "We got two on you, Mr. Christian. You do something foolish, an' the Mission'll hear about it. You shoot one of us, an' the other'll drill you." His voice roughened with temper. "Who'll ever prove you didn't try to steal those pelts, and we had to stop you?"

Rage howled through Robert's head and left his skin wet and his mouth dry. He clutched the Spencer to his side to prevent it from shaking.

"Don't shoot that thing," Flint growled.

Redbeard's bulk was immense in the darkness, was a huge blot against the crystal chips of the stars. "Pick up your pelts."

A dreadful calm settled through Robert's muscles. His skin was cool in an evening breeze that clicked the grasses and brought a brackish stench off the flats of the creek. He found his tongue and his mouth grew damp again.

"You do not do this to me," he told them quietly. "You do this to my wife who will be. You do this to Dr. Abernathy,

and you do this to the dealer at Greysville. Is it right that you should do this thing?"

Redbeard's answer was foul.

Flint snarled, "Who gives a damn if it's right or not? It's necessary."

"Pick up your pelts!" Redbeard's rifle tipped toward the ground.

WHITE EAGLE whirled upward and to one side and landed on running feet and bounded over the shale and hurled himself into the grasses. Two rifles crashed and a bullet rapped off the rocks and richocheted away in a whine of spent agony.

"Don't let him outa the valley!" Redbeard was hoarse with anger. "Cover the trail down there, Flint!"

Canvas scraped on grasses; a boot squeaked. "He won't get away."

"I'll cover this end!" Redbeard's voice was more distant in the night.

For the intake and outlet of a breath, for one delicious second, White Eagle had Flint in his sights. Then he threw the safety shut, lunged to his feet and raced for the western wall.

Flint's rifle rang loudly and a bullet slocked into the rocks ahead. White Eagle threw himself down at the base of the wall and lay gasping, his mind confused. And he was hurt, deep inside him, with a hurt he could not name. He was trying to comprehend what had happened and what was happening now, but nothing seemed to fit into place.

The horses were nervous on the trail two hundred yards away; the bumping of the claybank's hobbled hoofs was erratic for awhile, then stopped. Canvas rasped on grass and White Eagle saw sallow starlight glimmering blue on the barrel of Flint's gun. A shot stabbed the darkness, searching for its quarry. It ripped into the grass twenty feet away.

From up the valley, Redbeard's voice cried, "Save your shots! He won't get out! We've got him nailed down!"

Flint moved down the valley, paralleling the trail, and White Eagle lost the sound of his passing.

Gradually, dully, he was beginning to understand: he had been honest with these two so far as he had dared, so far as his concept of Christian duty would allow. These two had not been honest with him. They had sought his help, strangers on the trail; and they had turned on him and tried to steal from him and now were trying to kill him.

He lay still, fighting off the images that danced through his brain, trying to make them dissolve, go away. There was Niatith-i with her warm, happy eyes; and there was the approving face of the doctor, and behind him was the snug Mission chapel that soon would be filled with flowers for Sunday's ceremony.

But this was not the moment nor the place for images, however sweet. He was cut off in both directions, north and south; scaling the walls would be impossible, even with a rope and hook. Come dawn, Flint and Redbeard would come softly-stepping into the bottoms and flush the quarry and snuff the life from it. They would have to do that, because a Mission Indian was a tallied Indian and had to be accounted for as long as he walked the land. But if he vanished from the sight of men forever and without trace, nothing could be proved and all questions would remain unanswered until the end of time.

So they would have to do that—kill him, and commit his body to the quicksand.

The moon rose regally from the east, spreading its smoky light across the valley and tipping the grasses with silver. White Eagle wondered if it would be the last moon he'd ever see; and decided that it would be unless a miracle occurred.

White men! They did not live by the code they preached, and because of these two a man would be left alone in the mountains without food or water or horses,

and the dealer in Greysville would remember him as a thief, and Dr. Abernathy would brand him as errant, and Nia-tith-i would spurn further memory of him and, eventually, turn to another mate.

Forgiveness, they preached at the Mission. To forgive is Christian. But would he be forgiven for this failure, no matter how harsh his punishment? The question hung in his mind like a challenging sword, but try as he might he could not grasp it.

The moon wheeled higher, soaking the valley in a white haze.

A way out . . . a miracle. He remembered that other time that he had lain long in the silence of the mountains, seeking an answer to his fears; and he remembered that the answer had come.

THEN an idea came to him with the soundless clarity of a vision. It left him without breath, and the slugging of his heart was loud in his head. The idea, the way out, presented itself from a past known only to old men—his grandfather, in this case. It was something the pony soldiers had done to his grandfather's village long, long ago, though on a larger field and with many more men. It would be fitting, in a way, to return the trick to these two white men who waited in the night to kill him at dawn. And it would be Christian, if executed properly, which was more than the pony soldiers under Chivington had been.

Slowly, gently, he wriggled south through the grasses, hardly disturbing their tips; eel-like, he slid along the base of the wall on oiled muscles, scarcely making a sound. Often did he pause, rise to his knees and inspect the moon-rinsed bottoms for a sign of Flint. Then he saw him, squatting in the shorter grasses where the trail left the valley and disappeared toward Greysville. The canvas coat was an irregular blotch in the vertical pattern of grass. The gleaming barrel of the rifle caught a sliver of moonlight and held it motionless. Flint was waiting.

Pushing with moccasined feet, timing his advances, holding his breath, White Eagle propelled himself to within fifty paces of Flint's immobile figure. The man moved once—fingered his nose and wiped his mouth, then was quiet again.

The stalker brought the Spencer to his cheekbone and worked it back and forth until he had clearance through the brittle grasses. He took a breath, curved a finger around the trigger, opened the safety and moved the front sight a foot off the target.

The shot smashed the stillness and the breech-spang cut the echo.

Flint sprang backward and dove into the higher grass and fired. The bullet went wild.

White Eagle waited for a full minute, waited until Flint's uncertainty made him start creeping noisily toward the trail. Then he slipped back along the base of the wall, weaving his body magically around the root clumps, the infrequent rustle of his progress matched by the playful night wind.

He avoided the tense horses and circled wide around the shale heap, cat-like with his stops and starts.

Redbeard's Stetson was level with the grass tops between the trail and the west wall, where the trail spiraled north out of the valley toward Fort Peck. The Stetson rose slightly, and the stalker could see the spreading fringes of the beard.

He aimed, estimated a safe miss, and fired his second shot.

Redbeard dropped from sight.

The valley was a-wash with moonlight, the breezes were dying down, and from somewhere up on the walls a night bird cawed shrilly. A hoof stamped and the drying leather of the claybank's saddle whimpered as it contracted.

White Eagle snaked his silent way back south, doubling in his path, and finally found Flint. Flint was on his hands and knees by the trail-side, facing north to-

ward the sound of the last shot. Flint was puzzled.

The stalker could hear the fast shucking of the other's breath.

He lay the Spencer to his cheek, centered the sight blade six inches above Flint's head and fired.

FLINT plunged upward and flopped into the grass and cursed. His bullet ripped through the growth and was gone in the night. When the echo had rattled to nothingness, he commenced to reload.

White Eagle took advantage of the metallic noises to retreat north. At fifty paces he stopped, grabbed a fistful of stalks and crushed them together until their splintering was clear and constant. Then he released them and pressed his body to the ground.

Flint sighed coarsely. White Eagle heard the *snick* of a hammer, heard Flint working his way north toward where the splintering had come from.

Then he rose off the roots and bellied his way northward. Flint's next bullet slashed the grasses ten feet from his head.

Minutes later he saw Redbeard crouched behind the bedroll on the shale heap. The stalker judged Flint's steady approach from the rear, aimed toward the shale and sent his last shot into one end of the bedroll.

Redbeard flipped from view and Flint stopped approaching.

The stalker crushed more grasses; he scooped up a palmful of earth and slung it over his shoulder.

Redbeard's rifle exploded and the bullet tore the ground a foot in front of White Eagle.

He used a white man's gesture then, a gesture made by placing the thumb to the nose and flapping the fingers. After that he cradled the empty Spencer across his arms and inched his way toward the darkness of the west wall. He heard a shot from the shale heap and stopped, breath in his throat.

Flint replied with two quick shots and Redbeard gagged in pain. White Eagle made himself comfortable against the rocky base of the wall.

Flint fired again and hitched farther north, toward the shale.

A shot barked out from behind the bedroll.

White Eagle saw Redbeard crawl south away from the shale, crabbing along on his unhurt side. His hat was gone and his face was twisted into a rutted mask.

Flint fired at the bare-headed shape.

Redbeard jounced once, and choked. He tried to keep his face off the ground as he squeezed off his last bullets in the direction of Flint's dark figure, but there was no strength left in him and he never did see the shot that pierced Flint's chest, nor did he hear the scream.

Flint only screamed once. He was moaning as White Eagle bounded toward him, and he was dead when the stalk r arrived.

* * *

Robert White Eagle trotted south down the trail through the damp grayness of dawn. He wanted to make a water halt at the first stream past the valley, then get on to his destination before it was too late.

At the top of the trail, he reined in and looked back and felt sad for the two men down in the grasses. He had forgiven them, because by their self-punishment good had come from evil. And he felt clean in his soul, knowing that he had kept strictly within the meaning of what Dr. Abernathy called The Word, for he had neither stolen nor killed. Too, he was soon to be married, and what man can deny forgiveness to his enemies when he has love in his heart for all?

Robert cantered on toward Greysville, the stallion at his side.

(Continued from page 10)

dogs rode out of Tombstone the following spring, never to return.

On the out-trail the lawmen had a brush with Curly Bill Brocius' outlaws, and Doc had his first, and perhaps his only, wavering of courage, when he seemingly fled and left Wyatt Earp to his fate. Perhaps Doc had become fed up with the whole thing. Be that as it may, it was a close call for Earp and his friends, but they escaped with their lives and continued on their journey.

Doc Holliday lived for fifteen years after that and finally succumbed to tuberculosis at Cottonwood Springs, Colo., his frail body having wasted away to a mere shadow.

"What a laugh!" he whispered cynically in his last fitful moments. "I would have offered odds that some hombre would beat me to the draw and I'd cash in my chips that way."

Dimly he saw the Grim Reaper extending a handkerchief. Game to the end, Doc accepted it and breathed his last.

We like to think that there is a little bit of Doc Holliday's gameness in most of the fiction characters who are portrayed each month in the pages of DIME WESTERN. It is our job, and our privilege, to bring you, with each issue, the high drama, adventure and salty characters typical of the times long gone, when the West was hard to curry below the knees. Flavored with the high seasoning of man-to-man conflict, we think these stories will help re-awaken the spirit of independence, of neighborliness and of hard-won accomplishment which marked that shining era of our history.

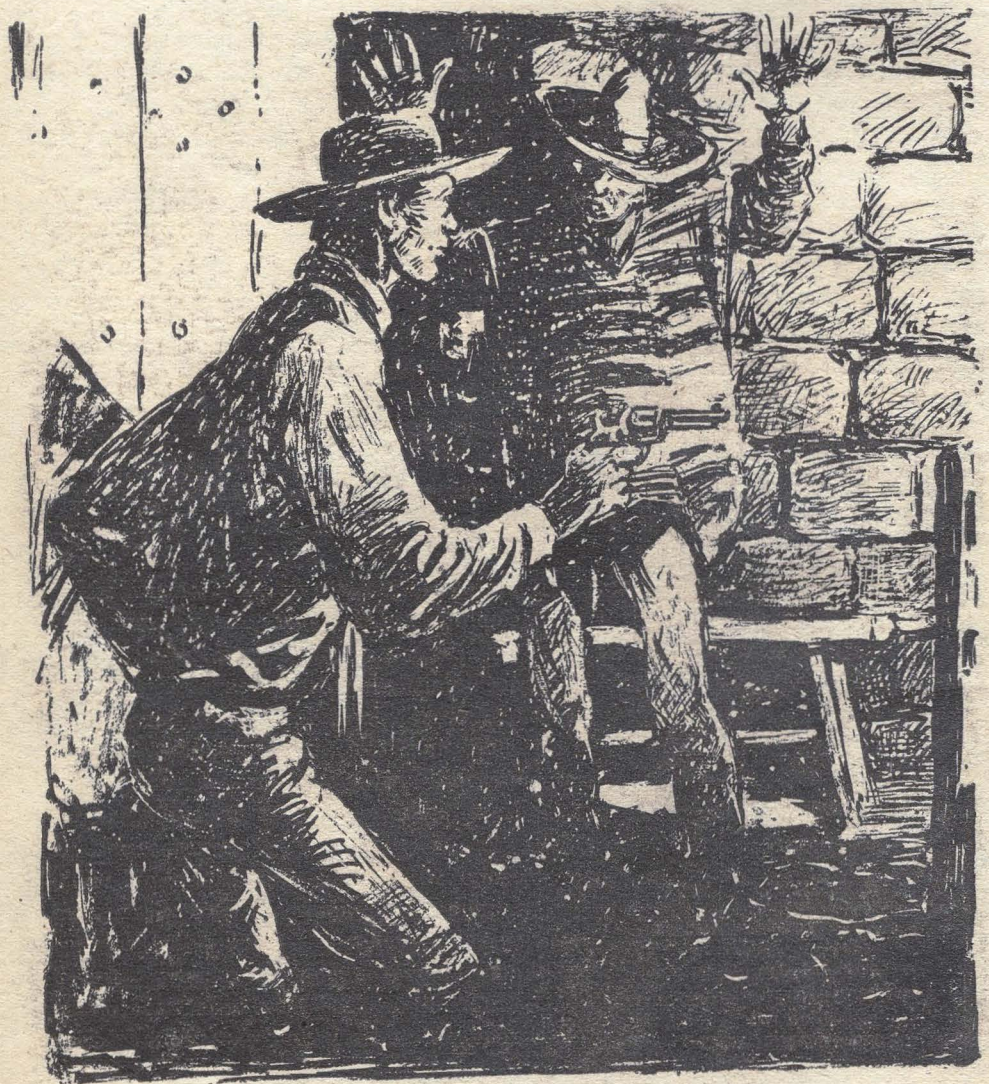
You will find all that in stories by such masters of Western fiction as Norman A. Fox—in his splendid book-length novel called *Gun-Rider,* in another range-feud epic by Dan Cushman, and in some unforgettable short stories by George C. Appell, Thomas Thompson, and others.

We will be looking forward to seeing you with this package of hard-hitting fiction at your newsstand October 4th.

Meanwhile, happy reading, amigos!

THE RAWHIDE KID RETURNS

Who would you fight beside? The lovable old cuss called Holy Joe Moran, who had the courage to battle an entire nation; his partner, the kid who prized above all things women and gold—or the girl, Panchita, who could betray them both!



By T. T. FLYNN

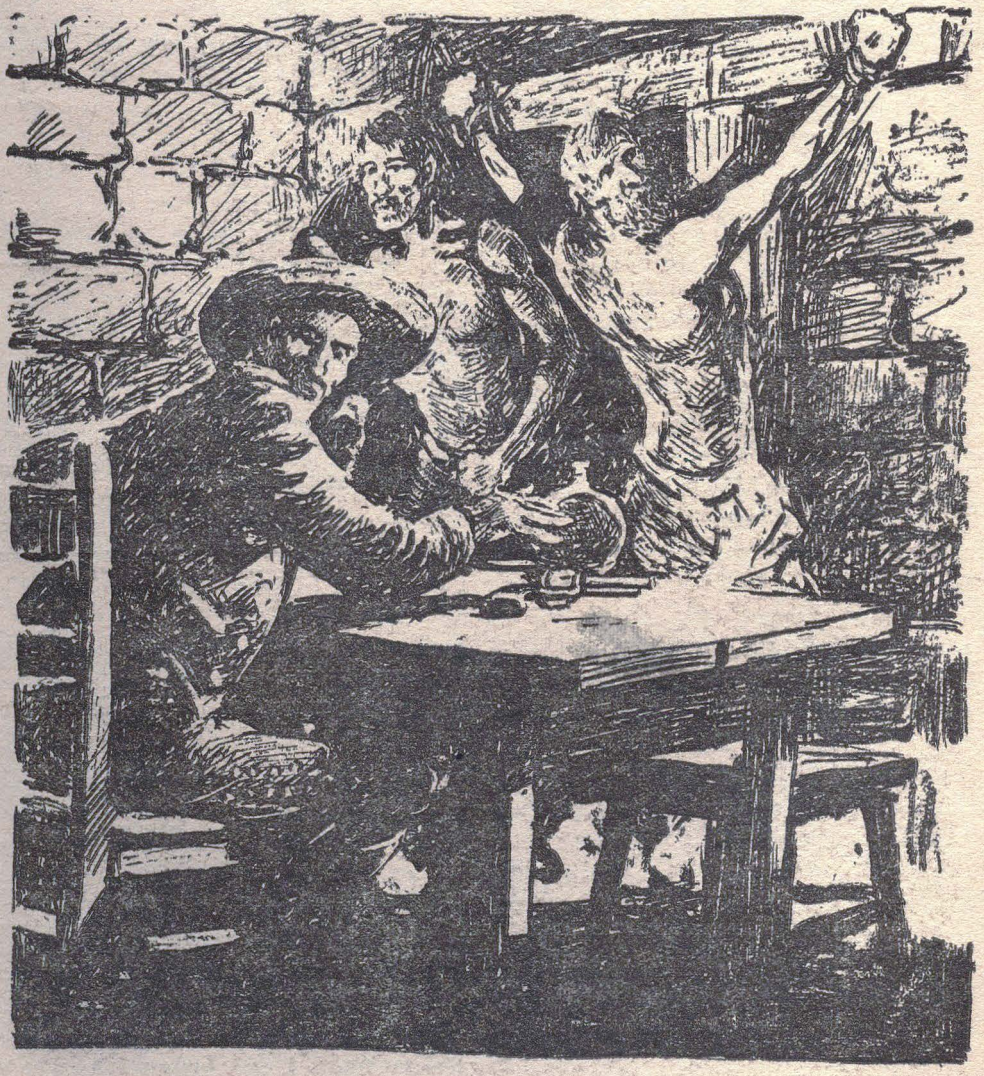
CHAPTER ONE

The White Beard

LARAMIE SCOTT sighted carefully along the rifle barrel until the front sight was squarely on the silver conocho breast button of the first rider. The bright mid-day sun of old Mexico glinted on the polished surface of that metal button. A bullet smashing into the chest there would knock the big, gaudily-dressed man out of the saddle, killing him instantly. Then the other five men—those five scantily-dressed peons, barefoot and shabbily outfitted except for their rifiles and bandoliers of cartridges—would probably turn back when their leader fell.

Laramie's finger began to squeeze the

Ibarra saw Laramie's gun covering him from one side of the trembling servant.



trigger. He moved the rifle barrel gradually to keep up with the target's slow advance.

Then Laramie slowly took his finger off the trigger. His thin, freckled face screwed up in a frown. Lying there behind two big boulders on the ledge up the canyon's side, Laramie was an unbelievable figure to be in this wasteland south of the border. Small, thin, shabby, his patched and ragged levis at least three sizes too big for him, he looked like a wizened scarecrow. He was not more than sixteen. Only a Yankee kid, from north of the Border.

The six armed men riding down there in the canyon were puzzling out the trail of a single horse. Half a mile on up the canyon those tracks struck up a narrow, steep trail and came out on bare rocks at the top, and vanished. At least for all practical purposes they vanished. A Yankee from north of the border could not follow them.

A cross-breed peon, with veins running full of Indian blood, eyes uncannily sharp, trail sense acute, might be able to puzzle out where the tracks of that shod horse had passed two days before. A scratch here, a chip there. It could be done, perhaps.

So, slowly, carefully, Laramie drew his rifle down out of sight and lay quiet, motionless while the clatter of hoofs on stones and the occasional murmur of voices passed on up the canyon.

When the six were out of sight around the next turn, Laramie wriggled to his feet, clapped his big flop-brimmed hat on his head and tilted it jauntily over toward one eye. He was perspiring and panting when he reached the top of the cleft.

Whipping off the hat again, he took half a dozen steps to the shelter of a great rock which balanced on two smaller rocks. Peering around the rock, he watched the six men ride up out of the canyon, half a mile away. They stopped there and looked around.

There, the weather of ten thousand years had scoured and worked the barren rock into fantastic slopes and ledges, into gloomy barrancas with sides deep and sheer.

Laramie grinned faintly as he saw the futile efforts of those six men to find the trail. The waving arms of their gaudily-dressed caballero leader scattered them out. They searched on foot like eagerly questing hound dogs. For an hour their search widened; finally they drew together again and talked. Then they rode slowly back down into the canyon.

Laramie walked to the canyon edge, wriggled close on his belly and looked down at them as they passed out of sight the way they had come.

HALF an hour's brisk pace brought Laramie to the edge of another canyon, deeper, wider than the one he had left.

No trail led down into this canyon. A ten-minute search along the edge brought Laramie to a spot where a rider might get down, by angling his mount along the side and picking a careful way. Descending, Laramie followed the canyon down until it widened suddenly into a great bowl-shaped space between rocky walls.

Here, for a hundred yards on each side of the rocky bed, carried down from the higher lands to the east, grass had lodged and taken root.

A saddle, a pack saddle and a small pile of gear lay in the grass. Farther down the canyon two horses lay dead, where they had been struck by a small rock slide.

Laramie turned to the saddle, the small pile of gear on the grass. He carried them, an article at a time, to the nearest rocks.

He could barely lift the two heavy leather sacks which had been lashed to the pack saddle. Opening the rawhide thongs which closed the tops, he dumped half the contents of each sack on the ground.

Since the first human foot had trod the ageless rock of this deep barranca, no man's eye had ever beheld a more astound-

ing sight than the bright yellow streams of gold Laramie poured out of those ancient leather sacks. Gold coins of Mexico, they were stamped: *Maximilian—1866.*

Laramie lugged the two half-empty sacks to the rocks, cleared a space, dug into the soil as deeply as he could with his hands, and dumped there the remainder of the gold in the sacks. Going back, he scooped the first pile of coins into the now empty sacks and carried them over with the others. When Laramie finished, no eye could have told that human hands had shifted the rocks to cover the articles beneath.

Laramie surveyed the spot critically, picked up his rifle, smoothed over his footmarks as best he could and started back up the canyon.

LARAMIE plodded along the trail which the six men had taken. When night came, he munched some jerked meat he took from a pocket, laid down and slept. Toward morning the bitter cold brought him up shivering.

Sunrise found him emerging from the canyon into a low, bleak valley. Late in the afternoon he came to low hills, trees, stretches of grassland. Before nightfall he struck a trail and followed it and came to a small hut built of upright poles chinked with dried mud.

A man stepped out as Laramie came up. Short, stocky, part Indian, he spoke with the grave courtesy of his kind. "You are lost, señor?"

Laramie answered in Spanish not too fluent. "I look for the village of Tres Angeles."

"It is the ride of half a day, señor. At night it is not good for a stranger to walk. The way is crooked and hard. But this house is your house, señor. Enter and eat with us. It is little but you are welcome."

When you were starved, giddy from hunger, it was hard to eat slowly. Laramie forced himself to do so, and stopped eating before he had enough. There was not much food, and the man, his wife and five black-eyed little ones to eat it.

"You have a horse to sell perhaps?" Laramie asked casually in Spanish at the finish of the meal.

Regretfully the man shook his head. "No, señor. But four days ago another man, a *viejo*—an old man—tall as a mountain tree, with his beard long and white, rode by on a horse that limped, and offered gold for horses. We have no horses; only goats. But in Tres Angeles you will find—" The man waved a hand, implying that in Tres Angeles one could find anything.

"Did the *viejo* go to Tres Angeles?"

The man shrugged. *"Quien sabe?"* He hesitated, cast a surreptitious look at his wife. Something was on his mind. "He did not return past here, at least."

"You have not heard of him?"

Again that uneasy look between husband and wife. The man stared at Laramie. "The *viejo* was a friend?"

"He is from my country—*uno paisano* —a country man—I would see him."

The man nodded understandingly. He picked up a fragment of tortilla. "I think it is not good for him in Tres Angeles, señor," he said slowly.

"Manuel," the woman warned sharply.

He ignored her. "But yesterday," he said to Laramie, "Señor Don Antonio Ibarra rode this way from Tres Angeles, asking for news of this *viejo's* passing."

Laramie's face remained blank. "You told him?"

"Si," the man assented, spreading his hands, palms up. "It is not good, señor, for a poor man to bite his tongue when Don Antonio Ibarra, a *rico grande,* and the *jefe* of Tres Angeles as well, asks questions."

"What did this Don Antonio Ibarra want with the *viejo?"* Laramie asked.

A shrug, another *"Quien sabe?"* was the answer to that.

Laramie stood up. He was tired, wanted to sleep. He was welcome here, he knew, but it occurred to him that this man, who could not expect favors from Laramie Scott, might value the good will of Don Antonio Ibarra.

"Please have the goodness to show me the way to Tres Angeles," Laramie requested politely.

He left a silver coin for his food. A few minutes later he was following a rough trail. . . .

THE night was dark, moonless. An hour Laramie walked, then turned off the road, found a level spot, lay down and slept again. Only this time, with a full stomach, he felt better. When the false dawn gave light to see the trail, Laramie walked on.

Twice more Laramie sighted adobe huts near the trail, and tried to buy horses, and had no success. But he asked no more about the *viejo*—the old man, tall as a mountain tree, with a white beard long and wild.

The old man was Holy Joe Moran, who had left Laramie behind in that forbidding landscape of rocks and deep barrancas. When the rock slide had killed two of their horses, lamed the third and last, Holy Joe Moran had said, "I'll ride over towards Tres Angeles an' try to pick up some hosses. Stick here with the gold, kid. You got food; you'll be all right. If I don't show up in three or four days, you better mosey on north to the border."

Laramie had waited, casually, then anxiously. Holy Joe Moran knew this northern Mexico as only a man could who had wandered the length and breadth of it for over forty years. But Holy Joe had been wounded when men had died over those old leather sacks of Maximilian's gold.

Holy Joe had not returned. And a caballero called Don Antonio Ibarra from Tres Angeles had come back along Holy Joe's trail with armed men.

News of Holy Joe then, must be in Tres Angeles. So Laramie trudged on toward the town, lugging the heavy rifle. It didn't occur to him that he would be safer by following Holy Joe's advice and heading north toward the border.

Around noon Laramie stopped at a small stream, ate the last scrap of jerked meat in his pocket, and rested. He was smoking a cigarette when four uniformed riders galloped up the little valley. Guns were slung on their backs.

The riders were almost abreast before one of them sighted Laramie. He called, pointed; the four reined up.

"Buenas dias," Laramie greeted them politely. The man who had pointed was a young officer. His colonel's uniform was new, smart; he rode a fine black gelding; his silver-trimmed saddle and handsome leather boots were elaborate, expensive.

The officer ignored Laramie's polite greeting. "By the Holy Virgin, what is it?" he sneered in Spanish, looking down disdainfully.

Laramie flipped his cigarette end away and started to roll another.

"This is the trail to Tres Angeles, *mi Coronel?*" he asked politely.

The officer ignored the question. "What rascal are you?" he demanded sharply.

Laramie's thin face remained expressionless as he lighted a cigarette. "Señor Laramie Scott," he replied calmly. "And you, my colonel?"

The colonel laughed. "This boy calls himself a man!"

"Señor, I *am* a man."

Before Laramie could dodge he was answered by a slash from the colonel's quirt. The hard leather lash stung like the brand of a sizzling iron. Laramie staggered back, clapping a hand to his cheek.

A stain of blood came away on Laramie's fingers. The men sat there on their horses, laughing. The colonel was smiling around at his men.

Laramie drew out a dirty handkerchief and wiped his cheek in silence. His eyes stayed on the officer's face. He would know this man if they met again.

"Where are you going, *cabron?*" the officer demanded.

Laramie's jaw muscles tightened. A brother officer would have killed the man for using that term. But an attempt at it now would only mean suicide; and somewhere Holy Joe Moran needed help.

"To Tres Angeles," Laramie answered woodenly. "Perhaps there is work there."

The nearest soldier said something in a low tone. The officer stopped smiling, looked at Laramie sharply. "Tell me," he asked curtly, "have you crossed the trail of an old man with a white beard?"

"What does this *viejo* look like?" Laramie asked.

The officer swore at him. "An old man; a *Yanqui viejo!* He rode a horse that limped. A horse that limped badly."

"I have no horse, *mi Coronel.* A *Yanqui viejo* would have helped me get one."

The officer reined his black horse around, swearing under his breath. Water splashed as he galloped across the small stream. His men followed, and they took the trail toward Tres Angeles.

Laramie's thin, freckled face was stony as he watched them go. Slowly he wiped the bleeding mark on his cheek again; and then picked up the rifle and trudged on toward Tres Angeles.

CHAPTER TWO

To Save a Partner

THE afternoon was waning when Laramie came to a wide, lush valley and looked down the slope at Tres Angeles below. There was a mine, just north of town, ringed by the scattered adobe houses of the miners. Dirt roads angled out across the valley. In the center of town a church raised two tall spires crowned with crosses; and the town itself was a sprawling clutter of adobe houses with a plaza in the center, before the church.

Dogs yapped, children called shrilly, people stared curiously as Laramie walked toward the plaza. He had hidden his rifle outside of town.

In the plaza were big ore wagons, sleepy burros, several two-wheeled carts drawn by oxen, and saddled horses. In a cantina a man was playing a guitar and singing.

Laramie saw a small place to eat, and went in and ate chili, beans, meat and tortillas. Feeling better, he grinned at the dark-eyed young girl who had waited on him, paid her and walked out onto the plaza again.

For an hour Laramie moved about Tres Angeles. Several times he asked men if there was work to be had, and received no encouragment. At the mines, perhaps,

when times were better; but the work was hard. The man who said that looked askance at Laramie's thin, bony build.

The massive-walled barracks interested Laramie. A force of soldiers was stationed here, headed by a Colonel Juan Ramiriz. From a distance Laramie saw the dapper, handsome colonel emerge from the fort-like barracks and cross a corner of the plaza, big-roweled spurs jingling, and enter the nearest cantina.

Don Antonio Ibarra, Laramie found, was the *jefe,* the owner of the mine, many houses, a cantina and several stores. Ibarra lived in a style almost feudal in a big adobe, palace-like structure on high ground beyond the plaza. A wall surrounded with fragments of sharp glass surrounded the place. An armed guard stood at the gate.

Twilight was falling when Laramie walked past the end of the barracks building for the third time. The windows in this end were fitted with iron bars. It was the carcel, the jail, for civil and military prisoners alike. Armed sentries were on duty on the flat roof.

Laramie had passed the fifth barred window from the end when a hoarse, "By the holy jumpin' judas tree! What yuh doin' here, kid?" stopped him in his tracks.

Behind the bars of that fifth window were visible the vast white beard, the fiercely hooked nose, the glinting eyes under bushy brows which could belong to no one else but Holy Joe Moran.

Laramie backed over against the wall and began to roll a cigarette with shaking fingers. "What happened to yuh, Holy Joe?" he asked huskily.

"Huh!" Holy Joe snorted. "What didn't happen? I come in tuh Tres Angeles here lookin' fer hosses, kid, an' played the gosh awful damn fool! Had me a drink of tequila to wash the dust outa my throat, an' had a couple more fer luck; an' wound up with a couple bottles an' a fight. I had tuh lick half a dozen Mexes—an' by that time half the town was hot tuh get at me. They called out the soldiers. I tried tuh lick the army too, but couldn't quite make it. A little soldado got me behind the ear with a rifle butt—an' here I was."

"Ought tuh be able tuh fix that. How much'll yore fine be?"

Holy Joe looked almost embarrassed. "Never yuh mind about the fine, kid. Best thing for yuh tuh do is hit the trail north for the Border, pronto. Don't worry about me."

Laramie was standing with his back to the wall, apparently paying no attention to the barred window. "I ain't leavin' till yuh git out an' come along."

Holy Joe Moran held his voice low, but it was fierce. "I'm tellin' yuh tuh git out! The *jefe* here is a bad hombre. Yuh'll be in trouble before yuh know it!"

"Him? I seen Don Antonio Ibarra follow in' yore backtrail up the canyon with five armed men lookin' for the gold. They lost yore sign up at the top on rocks an' came back."

Holy Joe swore. "I figured somethin' like that was goin' on. You git out now! I'll come along soon as I get outa this, an' meet yuh in Tucson. We'll git ourselves all fixed up an' sneak back an' get that gold, if it's still there."

"It'll be there. I hid it."

"What's that slash mark acrost yore face?"

"Colonel Ramiriz cut me with his quirt. I met him an' three of his men out a-ways. They was lookin' for yore back-trail too."

Holy Joe was silent a moment. "So Ramiriz is greedy for gold too?" he muttered. "I mighta knowed it. It's wuss'n I thought, kid. Get the hell away from this window an' make tracks outa town! With Ramiriz an' Ibarra after that gold, yuh won't have a chance if they find yuh know anything about it."

"I ain't talkin'."

"They got ways of makin' yuh talk.

They'd take yore skin off in patches if they thought they'd find gold underneath. Start travelin' kid."

A sharp voice spoke overhead. One of the guards up there on the roof had looked over and seen Laramie standing below.

"Vamos!" the guard called roughly in Spanish. "What you do down there?"

Laramie spoke under his breath to Holy Joe as he walked off. "I'm stickin'."

From behind the bars Holy Joe's hoarse whisper followed him: "Damn yuh, kid! See Panchita at the Holy Ghost!"

DARKNESS was falling fast. The air was fragrant with the smell of cedar smoke from cooking fires. A small knot of soldiers stood in front of the barracks arguing loudly. Laramie paused to let a string of half a dozen patient burros file past with their towering loads of cut wood. He hardly saw the burros. Something was wrong, far more wrong than having Holy Joe behind bars. Laramie couldn't decide what it was; but Holy Joe had been too anxious to get him out of town.

Why see Panchita? Who was *she?* What was the Holy Ghost?

Laramie stopped a man in the plaza, spoke in Spanish. "Where's the Holy Ghost?"

The man pointed to the south side of the plaza, where the windows and doorway of a cantina already were glowing with light. That part of the riddle was simple enough at any rate. The cantina of the Holy Ghost had seven or eight customers drinking at the bar when Laramie entered and looked about curiously.

The place was larger than it looked from outside. The room in front ran off to right and left in the back in a T-shaped extension. The center and left wing of the T was a dance floor. Curtained booths were placed around the walls of the left wing. In the right wing were gambling tables, deserted at this early hour of the evening.

The bartender looked at the ragged stranger, frowned and spoke impatiently.

"What is it!"

"Beer."

The bartender drew a foaming glass and slid it along the bar. Laramie slid a silver peso back. He had only three more silver pesos and several smaller coins.

A money belt next to his skin—a belt which he had taken off a dead man after the fight for Maximilian's gold—was fat with gold. But that wealth was no help now; worse, it was dangerous. Gold coins stamped with the name of Maximilian were a passport to death in Tres Angeles now.

As a customer, paying with good silver, Laramie ceased to be regarded with suspicion. But curiosity remained. The bartender wiped the top of the bar with a

damp towel and asked abruptly, "Where do you come from, señor?" The bartender was short, thick-set and fat under his dirty white shirt rolled up at the sleeves.

The other men were staring as Laramie wiped foam off his lips with the back of his hand.

"I'm a wild horse-breaker," Laramie said. "Have you any horses to ride?"

That made them laugh. The bartender slapped his wet towel on the bar and wheezed, "*Dios!* A breaker of wild horses, eh? I think maybe you're a wild horse yourself." He chuckled as he looked at Laramie's freckled face under the huge, old hat.

Laramie grinned. "Who knows? I ain't so tame."

The customers began to drift out. It was time to eat again. Laramie returned to the place where he had eaten once already and ordered food again.

All the tables in the low, dim-lit room were filled. Two girls were serving food. The same girl who had waited on Laramie earlier tossed him a flashing smile of remembrance. She was young and pretty, in a dark-skinned, sultry way.

Laramie lingered over his food; as some of the tables began to empty, he found a chance to talk to the girl. "The Holy Ghost is the best cantina?" he asked her.

She agreed that it was.

"Who is Panchita?"

THE saucy little waitress tossed her head. "That Panchita!" she said scornfully. "Bah!" She drew a forefinger across her throat to show what should be done to Panchita. "All the men are monkeys when she smiles."

"Must be some woman," Laramie grinned.

Fingers snapped contemptuously. "If it were not for Don Antonio and Colonel Ramiriz, Panchita would be a common woman!"

"Colonel Ramiriz' girl, huh?"

"Don Antonio would not like to hear that. She works for Don Antonio, who owns the Cantina of the Holy Ghost."

Laramie cleaned up the gravy in his plate with a piece of tortilla. "Don Antonio an' Colonel Ramiriz are rivals?"

The little waitress lowered her eyes and spoke with sudden caution. "Who am I to know what Don Antonio and Colonel Ramiriz are? They are the *gente fina*—the fine people. I am only a poor one. Their business is not my business." The little waitress flounced off.

Laramie paid for his meal, wandered outside. He wondered if he'd understood Holy Joe right. What good would it do him to see a girl whose suitors were Ibarra and Ramiriz? It looked like quick trouble.

Full dark had come now. Laramie drifted by the end of the barracks building, stopped under the fifth window, felt around on the ground for pebbles and tossed them through the bars. Nothing happened. He did it again. Holy Joe's hoarse whisper did not answer.

Slowly Laramie moved off into the night. Holy Joe wasn't in that cell. A long life with danger ever at his elbow had made Holy Joe Moran as wary as a wild creature. The sound of those pebbles striking the floor would have brought him out of a sound sleep.

Laramie loitered about the dim-lit plaza, and then he walked toward the Cantina of the Holy Ghost.

Inside all was different now. The bar was crowded. The booths in the back were beginning to fill. Gambling had started at the tables. A man was playing the piano, and in a few minutes four more men with guitars joined him and started to play. Couples began to dance.

Presently the music stopped; the dancers drifted off the floor, smiling, talking, looking toward the back as if expecting something.

Laramie saw a door back there open.

A girl stepped in. The people began to clap and call, "Panchita! Panchita!"

Laramie stood rooted to the floor at the end of the bar. Perhaps it was the two steins of beer he had drunk; perhaps it was the fact that he was worried over Holy Joe—and Holy Joe had told him to see this girl. Whatever it was, Laramie was struck dumb with admiration.

Panchita was small, slender, young. She couldn't be over eighteen, probably was younger. Her dark hair was piled high on her head and held a huge Spanish comb set with brilliants, which threw back the light in little dancing glints as she bowed to the applause.

She wore a long, fringed white silk shawl; and as the orchestra struck an opening chord, Panchita flirted the shawl from her shoulders and walked forward slowly. The orchestra started to play and Panchita began to dance.

Every eye was on her. But Laramie didn't know that. He stood alone with his thoughts, watching the slender grace of that black-haired little beauty. Laramie had seen dancers, many of them, and girls galore. But none had ever made a lump rise into his throat and held him spellbound as this Panchita did. And as he watched, Laramie had a queer feeling about her. Panchita didn't look Mexican despite her dark hair and Mexican costume. Her skin was blonde, her features too Anglo-Saxon; once when she whirled near him in the dance, Laramie could have sworn her eyes were blue.

And another thing. Panchita seemed to be smiling, gay, happy—but after watching her for a few minutes Laramie could have sworn she was not happy at all. Behind her laughing face he could see or sense a taut strain, very close to tears.

When the music stopped, Panchita bowed, laughing, and ran off the floor to the orchestra. Amidst wild applause and shouts, Laramie came out of the spell and realized he was acting like a fool.

What did that girl have to be sad about? She was a favorite here. There she was at the piano holding a small impromptu court. One caballero in tight fitting trousers, a silver-buttoned jacket and sleek black hair brought her a glass of wine and presented it with an elaborate bow. Panchita took the glass, thanked the man with a laugh, touched her lips to the edge and returned the glass.

The caballero bowed, laughing and ostentatiously turned the glass rim and drank from the spot Panchita's lips had touched.

When he had drained the wine, he smashed the glass on the floor against the wall and said something. Panchita hesitated, then stepped forward into his arms and danced away with him.

"So that's how it is," Laramie muttered to himself. "Yuh git a dance if yuh act pretty. Reckon that's how I'll have tuh see yuh, lady."

CHAPTER THREE

Honkytonk Girl

LARAMIE hung his old hat on a wall peg and edged forward. When the music ended, Panchita left the young dandy, laughing, shaking her head as he begged for the next one. She was returning to the piano. The music was starting up again. Laramie pushed past several couples and reached her side while she was yet alone.

"I'd shore like tuh have the next dance, lady."

Panchita cast a startled look at his thin, freckled face, his ragged old clothes. Laramie knew he wasn't much to look at, but he hadn't counted on the emotion that flashed over her face as she looked at him.

"You're an American, aren't you?" she asked hurriedly in English—perfect English. "Don't look so flabbergasted."

"Holy Joe Moran told me tuh see you,"

Laramie gulped. "Holy Joe Moran."

"Quick!" she urged under her breath. "We'll dance. Come!"

She was breathing rapidly. A small pulse was pounding in her smooth white neck. Her eyes *were* blue—and in Laramie's arms she was light as a bit of thistledown floating on the wind.

Panchita smiled at someone she knew; but her voice wasn't smiling when she spoke to Laramie, for his ears alone. "Who are you?"

"Holy Joe Moran's partner."

"You're—you're only a boy!"

"I'm a man," Laramie said with the stubborn insistence of one who had to say it a lot.

Panchita did not argue. "Holy Joe did not tell me about you."

"No reason why he should, I reckon. He didn't want anyone to know he had anyone with him. I came here after Holy Joe, tonight."

"After him," Panchita repeated with a choked laugh; and shifted into Spanish with the ease of one who used it as a second mother-tongue. "Mother of God! You come after him *now!*"

"What's wrong about that?"

"You should have come before he got drunk. Now it's too late. He—he is going to be shot!"

Laramie forgot he was dancing, stumbled and almost fell. He wasn't conscious of the eyes that were watching them; did not know that more than one person had been smiling at the sight of Panchita, who could have had her pick of any man on the floor, dancing with this ragged kid.

"Goin' tuh be shot!" Laramie gulped. A knot had balled up in his middle. He felt sick at the thought of it. Strangely he didn't doubt Panchita. Holy Joe—gigantic, loud-talking, wise old Holy Joe Moran—going to be shot! Laramie hadn't realized until this moment how much the old man really meant to him.

"Who's gonna shoot him?" Laramie swallowed the lump in his throat. "What for?"

"He started a fight. Before they could stop him, a man was killed. Holy Joe didn't fire the shot—but in Tres Angeles that doesn't matter. Don Antonio has decided Holy Joe is guilty, and will be shot. Don Antonio is the *jefe.*"

CASTING about for some hope, Laramie asked hoarsely, "Ain't this Don Antonio yore sweetie? Can't yuh do somethin' about it?"

Panchita laughed; it was a despairing laugh, almost hysterical. "Perhaps I could do something," she said, and her voice quavered near to tears. "I've been on my knees in the church all afternoon praying to the good God to show me the way. Don Antonio will listen to me—but he has his price."

"What's that?"

"I go to live in his house."

"Yuh mean marry him?"

"He has daughters older than I am," said Panchita. "His wife is living—but not in Tres Angeles."

Laramie's thin corded arm tightened about her small shoulders. Sometimes a girl was up against things worse than powder and lead.

Panchita went on talking in a voice that had gone dead and flat. "I talked with Holy Joe before he got drunk. He promised to help me get north, over the border."

"What're yuh doin' here anyway? Yuh don't have to stay."

"My mother was Mexican," said Panchita. "I was raised in California. I came to Mexico as a dancer. Our show went broke. I was offered good money to dance here in the Holy Ghost cantina. It had sounded good. I came. And then Don Antonio decided he wanted me to stay. His word is law here in Tres Angeles. I can't leave. Don Antonio is like a cat playing with a mouse. Waiting. . . ."

"Won't Colonel Ramiriz help yuh?"

She shivered in Laramie's arm. "You've been listening to them talk! They are laying bets on who win me. Ramiriz is as bad as Don Antonio. They're both waiting, hating each other, demanding that I make my choice."

"Yuh pore kid!" said Laramie, and tightened his arm again. "I'll help yuh."

"What can *you* do?"

"I don't know," Laramie confessed. "I'll think of somethin'. Where yuh stayin'?"

"With the sister of the priest, in the little house behind the church. I am safe with her, for a time. But not even the priest can go against the anger of Don Antonio or Colonel Ramiriz for too long."

"I've got a little account tuh settle with this Ramiriz," Laramie muttered.

"You've met him?"

"Look at my cheek."

Panchita looked; in her blue eyes quick pity glowed. "Ramiriz *would* do something like that. He's cruel."

"I got a cure for that feelin'," Laramie promised. "I aim tuh cure him before I leave."

The music stopped. Laramie spoke very rapidly under his breath. "I seen Holy Joe in his cell just before dark. He ain't in it now. They've moved him. What do yuh reckon that means?"

"I don't know," said Panchita hopelessly. "Perhaps he is dead now."

Sudden fright leaped into her eyes. She gave Laramie's arm a push. A hand now slapped his other shoulder and spun him around.

COLONEL Ramiriz was standing there, red with anger. *"Pelon!"* Ramiriz said furiously. "You dare to put your dirty hands on her! For a *centavo* I would have you shot! Get out!" A fist knocked Laramie staggering into another couple. Laughter burst out as the man shoved Laramie aside. Ramiriz stood glowering with a hand near the gun he still wore.

Laramie straightened. One hand was in the pocket of his levis. The raw furrow on his cheek was flaming with blood. Panchita had caught Ramiriz's arm and begged him to come away. Ramiriz pushed her back. "Get out!" he ordered Laramie angrily.

Laramie gulped. His shoulders were slumped. The hand came out of his pocket. He walked off the floor, staring right straight ahead. As he took his old hat from the hook and walked out of the Holy Ghost, laughter followed him. The music had started again; when he turned and looked around, Ramiriz was holding Panchita's slender figure close and they were dancing.

The night air cooled Laramie's hot face as he walked blindly to the middle of the plaza.

Everything was a tangled mess. Holy Joe was going to be shot! Panchita was smiling to hide despair. In Tres Angeles no one but Laramie could help. He didn't even have a revolver. Laramie knew he was a man. He was ready to fight to prove it—but right now it took a fierce effort to keep a lump down out of his throat. After all, he was alone, the border was a long way north and the odds were heavy. He didn't even know where Holy Joe Moran was.

* * *

Laramie was smoking a second cigarette when a slender figure in a dark cloak came hurrying under the plaza trees toward him. Panchita had his arm and was speaking before he recognized her. "Quick! Over here it is darker! I ran out the back way! I have to get back quickly!"

Panchita had taken off her gay shawl, her big comb, had thrown a black shawl over her head and put on the dark coat. She spoke rapidly as they walked in the darker shadows near the middle of the

plaza, with the huge old trees towering over them.

"Don Antonio has taken your Holy Joe to the big house on the hill. Just before dark Don Antonio sent for him. Colonel Ramiriz could not refuse; but he is furious. Never have I seen Ramiriz in such a rage. It is a wonder he didn't shoot you. He wants to hurt something—anything. Even me," said Panchita desperately.

"What's the *jefe* want with Holy Joe up at his house?"

"I don't know. I think Ramiriz knows, but he won't tell me. But Ramiriz says in the morning Holy Joe will be shot—and his men will do the shooting. I think Ramiriz would like to kill Don Antonio too."

"He ain't the only one," Laramie retorted bitterly. "I got a pretty good idea what it's all about. Holy Joe come to town with some gold money. Don Antonio an' Ramiriz figger there's a heap more where it came from. They're tryin' tuh find out. Both want a whack at the gold, an' neither one's havin' any luck, an' each one's scared the other'll beat him to it. Each one's about ready tuh kill Holy Joe tuh keep the other'n from havin' any luck with him. I reckon yore Don Antonio's havin' the last whack at Holy Joe tonight tuh see if he'll talk. Holy Joe won't last tuh get shot by Ramiriz."

"Not *my* Antonio!" Panchita protested fiercely. "I hate him, hate them both! And at Don Antonio's house you can do nothing. Armed men guard it day and night. Don Antonio knows many men would like to kill him."

"I'll look around," Laramie said.

"I think," said Panchita unsteadily, "that tonight you are going to die too. Poor little boy!"

"I'm a man!" said Laramie gruffly. "Watch yourself. Yuh'll be cryin' in a minute. Just like a girl. Go on back an' keep the burrs outa yore hair."

"Good-bye," said Panchita. She said it in the manner of one bidding farewell for good.

Before Laramie knew what was happening, Panchita stood on her toes, threw her arms around him, kissed him full on the mouth. A fierce, moist, warm kiss. "Good-bye!" she said again. "I will always remember you, so young, so brave!" She slipped off through the night.

Slowly Laramie lifted a hand and then rubbed his mouth. "Gosh!" he said gruffly. "What'd she go an' do that for—the little fool!" But Laramie's eyes were smarting, and down inside he didn't feel as gruff as he sounded.

TEN minutes later Laramie trudged up the steep grade which led to the residence of Don Antonio Ibarra. The gate in the high adobe wall was open. Through it he could see light in the big windows of the house, and an armed sentry who stood before it.

Laramie did not try to hide his approach. As he advanced, he could see the man peering toward him, holding the rifle at the ready.

In Spanish the guard called sharply, "Who is it?"

Laramie continued on, said meekly, "I want to see Don Antonio Ibarra, with your permission."

Laramie stepped into the lantern light, and the guard's vigilance relaxed somewhat as he saw what manner of person he was dealing with.

"I have a surprise for Don Antonio," Laramie said.

The guard, staring from narrowed eyes, said, *"Yanqui!"* He held his rifle so that the bayonet was at the ready. He had also a .45 revolver holstered at his waist.

"Si," Laramie agreed. "I am a *Yanqui*. Where is Don Antonio?"

The guard showed bad teeth in a smile. "Don Antonio is busy with another *Yanqui*. He has no time for now. *Vamos.*"

"Bueno." Laramie assented obediently.

He started to turn away. Grinning, the guard had lowered his rifle—and Laramie whirled back. His hand came out of his pocket. A blade flashed in the dim light. Before the guard knew what was happening he was against the wall with the blade at his throat.

"Inside!" Laramie ordered."

The guard backed through the gateway. Laramie followed, keeping the knife edge hard against the throat, guiding the man inside the wall, where the lantern light did not reach.

In the darkness there the quiet pressed heavily. Laramie could hear the man's breath hissing softly through his clenched teeth. The throat muscles quivered under the knife blade. Laramie's whisper was hoarse with the strain of it. "Where's the *Yanqui?"*

Stiff lips answered. "In the house, señor."

Aloud Laramie muttered in English, "I oughta slit yore gullet—but I reckon that wouldn't help."

Laramie released his grip on the man's sleeve, felt for the revolver in the side holster, got it, and struck with the barrel. The guard collapsed on his rifle and stayed there.

Laramie took the revolver, gun belt and rifle and left the man. Don Antonio's house was easily the largest in Tres Angeles. Inside the adobe wall, behind the main house, were some smaller buildings. Lighted windows in the big house suggested life within, but when Laramie stepped close to the windows he heard no voices inside.

He walked to the side of the house, caught the smell of a stable, saw a lighted window or so in the smaller buildings, heard a woman crooning a song, a man laugh. But that was back in the darkness. Laramie drifted close to the main house.

Holy Joe was inside. Servants and armed men would be in there also. How much chance did one man have against all that?

Behind him a door opened, letting out a square of dim light. A man stepped out, closed the door and turned toward Laramie, who had plastered himself up against the side of the house.

The man's padding steps were almost inaudible. He drew abreast of Laramie—and stopped suddenly as the revolver muzzle jabbed hard into his back.

One startled gasp, and the man froze.

"Where is the *Yanqui?"* Laramie was gritting.

"In the house, señor. *Por Dios*—have mercy!"

"Take me to the *viejo."*

The man edged carefully around and started back to the door. He was shaking as he opened the door and stepped inside. A lamp in a wall-bracket shed light along a low-ceilinged passageway. Near the end

of the passageway the man paused before a heavy door. Before the door he hesitated, still trembling.

"Señor," he gulped. "I cannot! Don Antonio does not wish to be disturbed!"

Laramie cocked the revolver. Words would not have carried the threat that the sharp click conveyed. The prisoner opened the door and advanced like a man going to his execution.

They descended a flight of steps that went down, down, deep under the house. Laramie grew wary for a trap; he was more wary when he saw the gloomy, low passage into which they came. A damp stone wall rose on their right. On the left was a row of barred cells.

Here under his house Don Antonio had his own private *carcel,* his own jail. One single lantern hanging from a hook in the wall shed faint light.

"Where's Ibarra? Laramie whispered.

"Here, señor."

Another thick door closed the end of the passage. A thread of light was visible under it. The prisoner stopped again, seemed to nerve himself, opened the door soundlessly. The whistling stroke of rawhide whip, the dull, sodden impact of the lash on flesh covered their entrance. A voice ordered lazily, "Stop for a little, Pedro."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Three Horses Are Ready"

THE ROOM was longer than it was wide, and low-ceilinged, as was the passageway. A lamp on a wooden table and two wall lamps lighted it brightly. At the table a man sat with his back to the door. A revolver lay by his hand. A whiskey bottle and a glass stood near it.

Against the end wall Holy Joe Moran stood stripped to the waist, lashed to a wooden framework with his back to the table. The peon who had been plying the whip was breathing very heavily.

On Holy Joe's naked back long red weals glistened with fresh blood. The whip wielder stood stolidly watching Holy Joe's back. He did not turn his head as the man at the table put his cigarette down, reached for the whiskey bottle and spoke politely.

"Perhaps, my friend, your memory improves?"

Holy Joe answered without turning his head. "My memory's all right. I said, 'to hell with you,' Ibarra. I'm still sayin' it."

Ibarra drank the whiskey he had just poured, smacked his lips, and drew deeply on the cigarette. Through the blue smoke he spoke sadly.

"If the whip does not kill you, you will be stood against a wall and shot. That would desolate me. Speak about the gold and I will fill your pockets and give you an escort north of the border. On my honor as a gentlemen, I swear it."

"Yuh wouldn't know a gentleman if you saw one, Ibarra."

The *jefe* steeled himself comfortably in the chair. "It is sad to see a man so stubborn," he sighed. "Pedro, ten lashes this time; lower, where the skin is not so much cut."

Pedro lifted the whip. . . .

"Never mind, Pedro. Sit still, *Chivo!*"

The last Laramie snapped at Ibarra who, with an oath had whirled quickly in the chair, grabbing for the revolver on the table.

Ibarra saw Laramie's gun covering him from one side of the trembling servant. He snatched his pudgy hand back from the weapon on the table.

Twisted half around in the chair, he blustered, "Carlos, what is this?" His voice was not too steady.

Laramie's prisoner wailed, "Patron, this *Yanqui* would have killed me!"

"Shut up!" Laramie ordered. "Get away from that table, Ibarra! Tell your

mazo to free the *viejo*—and damn' quick!"

Holy Joe had turned his head; he spoke now violently. "Yuh damn fool, kid! I told yuh tuh get outa town! Yuh've jabbed yore head into a trap now!"

"I ain't in any hurry tuh leave," Laramie said. "Move fast, Ibarra. I'm itchin' tuh see if a *jefe* dies like a *mozo.*"

BITING his lips with impotent anger, Ibarra lurched away from the table. His voice shook as he ordered the man with the whip to free Holy Joe.

Holy Joe staggered as he stepped back from the wooden framework. His wrists were swollen where the cords had cut deep. He had to massage his hand for a moment before he could pick Ibarra's gun off the table. With the gun in his hand, Holy Joe seemed to swell, to tower and grow more huge as he turned with the white beard sweeping down over his naked chest.

Ibarra dropped his eyes from the terrible look Holy Joe fastened on him. But when Holy Joe spoke, his words were as soft and polite as Ibarra's voice had been.

"You will be pleased to try it yourself." Holy Joe gestured with the gun. "Tie him up," he said.

"Wait a minute," Laramie was saying. "There's hosses in a stable on back. Make him order three of 'em saddled an' held at the gate."

"Three?" said Holy Joe.

"I seen Panchita."

Holy Joe grunted approvingly. "Three it is, Ibarra. Open the door a little and order three horses at the gate."

Holy Joe gripped Ibarra's coat collar from the back and held the *jefe* while Ibarra's shouts through the slightly opened door brought a man running down from above.

Ibarra gave the order for the horses, and when the servant had left, Holy Joe spun the *jefe* over to the wooden rack and closed the door. "Tie him up, strip his back and use the whip," Holy Joe ordered grimly.

Ibarra did not struggle. He feared death more than the whip. And his servants feared Holy Moran's terrible quietness more than they did their master. Ibarra stood three strokes of the lash, then began to whimper, groan, struggle.

Holy Joe gulped a stiff drink, pulled his shirt on over his bleeding back, donned his coat on top of that, and watched grimly. Ibarra suddenly went limp and hung on his wrists.

"Enough," Holy Joe ordered. "I want him to live and remember."

A knock sounded on the door. "Patron, the horses are ready!"

Holy Joe opened the door a little, keeping behind it. "Come in," he said mildly.

But the man retreated from the door. "Don Antonio!" he called.

Swearing, Holy Joe opened the door wide. The prisoner was already bolting down the passage, shouting an alarm. Holy Joe fired twice, cursed, and called over his shoulder:

"Come on, kid! I plugged him, but he got up the steps! We'll have tuh shoot our way out now!"

They left the two servants there with Don Antonio Ibarra and ran along the passage.

The man Holy Joe had shot lay sprawled at the top of the steps, half way through the open door. Holy Joe burst out past him with white beard flying and gun cocked. Two female servants who had ventured into the hall screamed and ran. Men shouting, feet running.

"They'll have the hull damn army out again!" Holy Joe rasped as he ran out into the night. "Which way's which to them hosses, kid?"

Laramie took the lead in the darkness, skirting the house to the front, where the horses should be.

"The hull damn place's like a hornet's

nest!" Holy Joe panted and raced past Laramie.

They reached the front of the house, saw the gate still standing open in the dim glow of the lantern outside. Saddled horses were standing inside, the gate held by two men.

The uproar in the house was audible out here. The man took one look and tried to stampede the horses by slashing them across the faces with the rein ends before he ran. The other man closed in with a drawn knife.

Holy Joe's long arm lashed out. His other hand scooped at the reins.

Holy Joe was still struggling when Laramie's revolver jammed in the face of Holy Joe's assailant. The man dropped the knife and turned to run. And at that moment the frantic voice of Don Antonio Ibarra rose on the night. "Kill them! Kill the *Yanquis!*"

Soldiers and Don Antonio's men came running from the front of the house.

Holy Joe mumbled disgustedly, "I mighta knowed he'd get loose in a hurry. I shoulda kilt him."

Back in the night beside the house a gun barked; other guns joined in as they swung up into the saddles and pounded through the gate and down the steep road toward the houses of Tres Angeles.

Holy Joe swore in his beard. "We'll never got into the Holy Ghost an' get Panchita outa that crowd! She was a cute kid, too, an' I promised tuh help her."

Out of the houses people were running also. Laramie swung his horse into the dark street at the left. "Maybe she's home," he called, and rode hard.

The little one-storied house where the priest lived was not difficult to find. Snuggled back of the larger mass of the church, it was dark and quiet.

The high warning cry of a girl came from inside the house. "Look out! Ramiriz is—"

Panchita's warning was cut short by the crashing report of a gun in the doorway. Other shots followed.

Laramie felt the first bullet slap through the crown of his old hat. But only that one. The real licking flashes from the gun were erratic; each following shot came from a different position, as if the gunmen were struggling with someone.

Laramie had snatched his gun and cocked it at the first shot. Then the truth hit him. He couldn't stop his shot, but he managed to twist the muzzle aside and down, throwing the bullet to one side of the doorway, and he dropped the gun and plunged forward, reaching into his pocket.

The fifth shot was delayed an instant. Two struggling figures were barely visible in the doorway.

Panchita had caught Ramiriz's arm as he opened fire, was struggling with him. Any shot intended for Ramiriz might hit her. Laramie moved so fast he was entering the doorway as his hand came out of his pocket. His thumb pressed a button in a knife handle and the sharp blade flicked out.

Panchita cried out with pain and stumbled back. Ramiriz's gun was invisible—but Laramie knew what was coming. He dodged as best he could, entering the hallway in a twisting plunge. And the sixth shot, and the last shot in Ramiriz's gun, blasted almost in his face.

POWDER particles burnt the skin. Laramie felt the shock of the bullet in the muscles of his left shoulder. Blinded by the flash, he lunged against the gun muzzle. Swearing, Ramiriz stumbled back, clubbing the gun, striking down. The blow fouled on the high crown and broad brim of Laramie's old hat, and ended on his shoulder, not too hard. Ramiriz caught him by the throat.

Helpless, Laramie knew Ramiriz would brain him in another moment. He plunged the knife high into Ramiriz's throat. . . .

Panchita was sobbing. Holy Joe charged

into the doorway, shouting cuss words.

Holy Joe saw Ramiriz's body. "My god! Yuh used that knife! Makes me cold every time yuh take it out an' start practisin'! Is the girl here?"

"I've got my arm around her," said Laramie in the darkness. "Can't yuh hear cryin'?"

"Great red-eyed rattlers!" Holy Joe exploded. "Git yore arm away from her! Toss her on a hoss! Them shots was heard all over town!"

Panchita gulped, "Ramiriz followed me. Father Martinez and his sister are away for the night. He—he wouldn't leave, not even when he heard the trouble. I was s-scratching his face when you came."

"Never mind about that! Here we go!"

The horses stood where Holy Joe had left them. Laramie swung into the saddle. Holy Joe gave Panchita a quick boost up, and then swung on his own horse. From both ends of the street men were shouting.

"This way!" Holy Joe yelled.

In the lead, kicking his horse into a wild gallop, Holy Joe gave a shrill cowboy yell. Across the saddle, in front of Laramie, Panchita clung tightly as they followed Holy Joe. Ahead of them the tumult grew. Holy Joe's fierce yell cut the night again. His gun blasted and they rode furiously through an angry crowd scattering on both sides.

Bending low over Panchita, Laramie raced after Holy Joe. They turned sharp down a darker street, rode between houses where lighted doorways showed watching figures. But no one tried to stop them. No shots followed them down this dark street. Only dogs barked and were left behind. And in a few minutes Tres Angeles was behind, and they were riding through the open night, following a dirt road off which Holy Joe soon turned.

They rode half a mile off the road, stopped, listened and presently heard pursuit drumming along the road off which they had turned. No one swung over toward them. Holy Joe made sure of that, grunted with satisfaction, and rode on toward the hills to the east.

"We'll stay off the roads, an' be outa their district by morning," Holy Joe said. "It'll take more riders than Tres Angeles has tuh pick us up by them. How's the girl?"

Panchita was still clinging to Laramie. She was not so tense now.

"I—I think I'm all right," Panchita said. "But I am still afraid."

Holy Joe snorted. "Yuh needn't be, with that young wildcat carrying yuh! Tres Angeles'll be talkin' about him when the babies has grandchildren," Holy Joe chuckled. "Ain't he some kid?"

"I ain't a kid," Laramie said stubbornly.

From the crook of his arm, Panchita helped him. "He is a man, Mr. Holy Joe. I didn't think so when I first saw him—but I know now."

Holy Joe Chuckled. "Shore; I know it, but I gotta be reminded of it. He fools me same as he does everyone else. Laramie, yuh sure that gold is hid good?"

"Plenty."

"We'll leave it lay for a little an' get her across the border," Holy Joe chuckled again. "We hit these parts with a mule load o' gold—an' we're going out with a pretty gal. It shore is a joke on someone."

"I'd rather be taking her out th-than the gold," Laramie stammered.

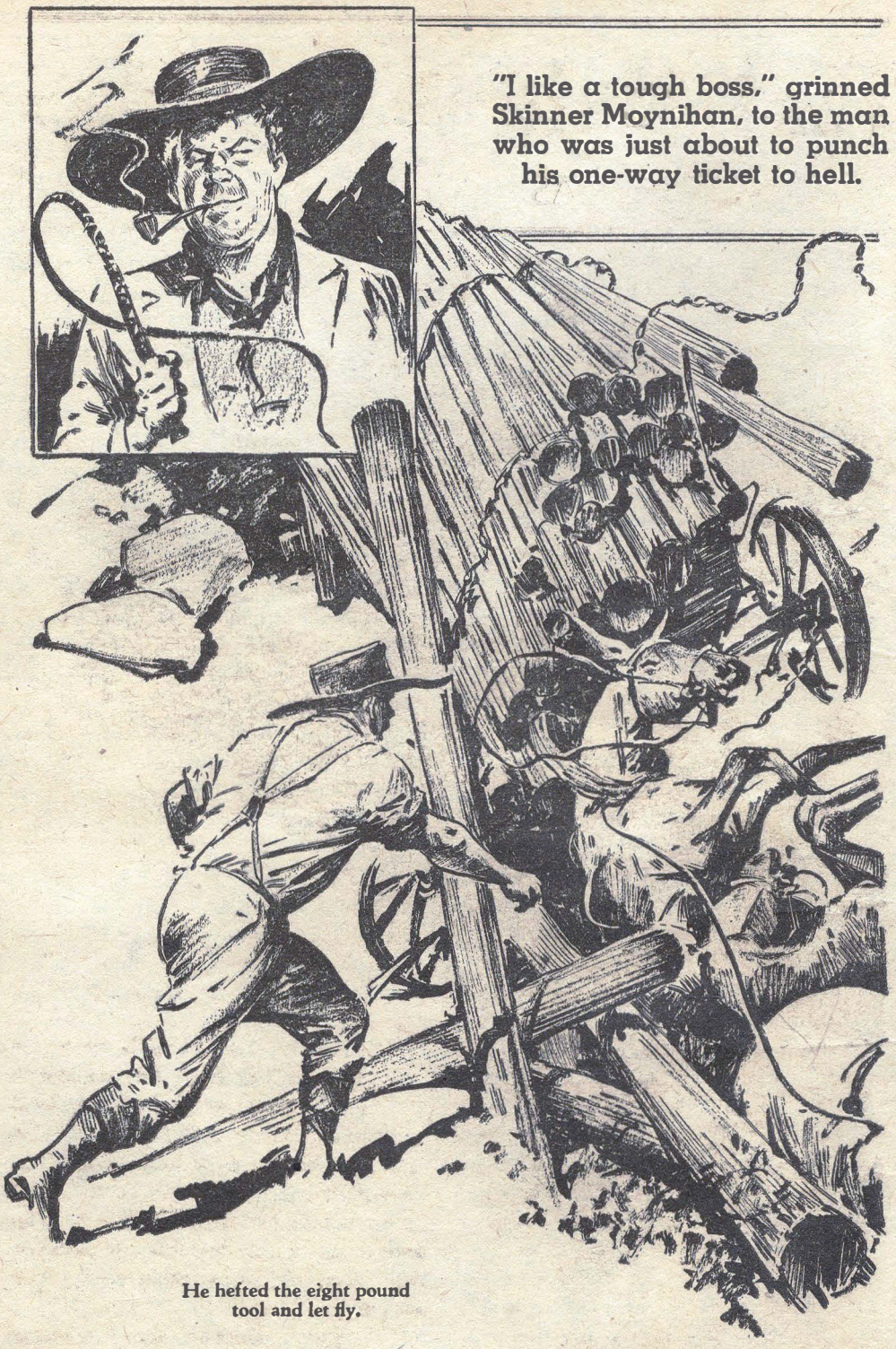
"Shucks," said Holy Joe. "Takes a man tuh talk like that. I reckon yuh are a man. Hold her tight, kid. We got some hard ridin' ahead."

Laramie did not answer. But Panchita did, promptly.

"He is holding me tight, señor. Very tight." The darkness hid Laramie's burning face as Panchita added contentedly, "And I like it."

Laramie continued to hold on tightly.

THE END



"I like a tough boss," grinned Skinner Moynihan, to the man who was just about to punch his one-way ticket to hell.

He hefted the eight pound tool and let fly.

That Mule-Drivin' Man

By VERNE ATHANAS

The trailing hand rapped him sharply on the temple

CHAPTER ONE

Orders From A Rawhider

SKINNER MOYNIHAN heard the voices in the office, and stopped at the corner of the shack, not wanting to interrupt. He looked idly around the camp, a collection of slab buildings, corrals and barns, hemmed into the hot clearing by the surrounding woods. A rising note to the voices brought his attention back, though he had no intention of eavesdropping.

"All right," said one voice, "so you've got the whole caboodle sewed up in a sack.

We both know I can subcontract and move the logs or the cross-ties and make us both some money."

"No dice." This last voice had a tone of arrogant smugness. "Your two-bit one-wagon outfits have been getting in my way long enough. I have the contract and I see no need of cutting you in. You had your job here, why didn't you keep it?"

"That's funny, coming from you, Hubbard. You rawhided me hard enough to get me out of it when I had the job. What's more, there's something fishy about this whole deal, and I'm—"

The second voice cut in. "All right, I've had enough. Get out. Don't let me catch you on Blake and Moffat property again."

There was a short silence and then a young dark-haired man came quickly out the door, and his eyes came hard on Skinner for a moment. Then he mounted his horse and spurred him across the clearing and into the swamped-out road.

On the one hand, Moynihan told himself, 'tis not the proper time to brace a man when he's just had a bit of a brawl. On the other hand, there's no time like the present. He trudged to the door and entered.

Mr. Hubbard looked up with annoyance. He stopped the scratching of his pen, but he did not move from his writing position.

"Yes?" he said.

"Would you be the head augur here?"

Mr. Hubbard nodded distantly. He did not seem impressed by what he saw. He had seen a hundred like him. A solid, keg-like body, topped by a face cured to the semblance of well-worn leather, sturdy legs in heavy cow-hide boots, wool pants held up by suspenders fully two inches wide. And coiled carelessly over the right shoulder a long whip of work-polished braided leather.

"Well," said Mr. Hubbard, and the question implied he didn't give a damn, "just what can I do for you today?"

"Moynihan is me name," said his man unabashed, "and I'm a teamster. I'm inquirin' for a job."

"Where have you worked?"

"Name the place," retorted Moynihan promptly, "and I've been there. I've hauled muck for the levees in Mississippi, and ore in Wyoming. Oak timbers in Maine and cypress lumber in Louisiana and purpleheart and ironwood in Brazil wid bitsy little mules no bigger'n dogs. General freight for the army and carbonates in Leadville."

"How big a string do you handle?" Mr. Hubbard did not seem impressed.

Moynihan gave him a wide merry smile.

"How many mules would you have here?" His eyes slid over Mr. Hubbard's shoulder. A fly was circling in the bright sunlit room toward the back of a chair.

Mr. Hubbard pursed his lips in slight exasperation.

"There are probably a hundred mules in the corrals right now," he said.

"Hitch 'em up," said Moynihan casually. *Whap!* The fly, ten feet away, exploded into a burst of tiny droplets, and the wear-shiny whip fell back into its loops about Moynihan's shoulder.

MR. HUBBARD sat up straight in his chair suddenly. Something was clicking into place in his memory.

"Would you be the one they call Skinner Moynihan?" he inquired.

"The very same," was the cheery answer. "Do I go to work?"

"I've heard a lot of stories about you, Moynihan," said Mr. Hubbard, "and not all of them are to my liking. I've heard you are a wizard with mules. I've also heard you are a trouble-maker. And that most of your wages go for whiskey."

"I do what I please, and me pleasure is whiskey. I drink on me own time, and if I'm not the first man out in the mornin' I'm crowdin' the first man's tailboards."

He turned for the door. "And I niver begged for a job in my life," he added over his shoulder.

Mr. Hubbard growled in exasperation. "Moynihan, you micks are all alike. Touchy as the devil. Here." And Mr. Hubbard scribbled a few hasty lines on a blank. "Take this to the barn boss, and then check in at the bunkhouse for your bed. Supper is at six, and you go out with the pole crew tomorrow morning. Ready to roll at six."

He handed Moynihan the paper and added, "But don't forget one thing. I'm the boss, and you will damned well know it. We are not so hard up for mule skinners that we can't get along without you. Understand?"

"'Tis understood," said Moynihan, "that the man who pays the wages gives the orders. On the job." And he gave Mr. Hubbard his wide Irish grin and left.

Skinner Moynihan trudged sturdily to the barns, the protective squint of his merry blue eyes keeping the glare of the afternoon sun at bay. No shoestring outfit, this, he decided. Three great sprawling barns hulked over the corrals, and the wagon yards were packed with equipment, ranging from high-sided ore-wagons to pole wagons which were nothing but two sets of heavy wheels sketchily hooked together with skeleton stretchers.

He bore off at the corrals to cast his expert eye on the stock. A couple of snuffy mules wheeled skittishly away from the poles at his approach, and he automatically pursed his lips in a soothing whistle as he climbed to perch on the top rail.

"Suit you, do they?"

Moynihan twisted to see a gnarled little man who had come up behind him. He broke off his whistling.

"Nice bunch of creatures," he said. "Can you tell me where at I might be findin' the barn boss?"

"You're lookin' at him," was the reply.

"Goin' to work? Hubbard just hire you?"

"The very same, and on the pole crew tomorrow. Do you draw my string, or do I pick 'em?"

"You pick 'em. Out of this corral, though. Them in that one over there is restin', and them over there is the gradin' mules." He squinted up at Moynihan, and seemed to be studying his blunt features.

"Would you be Skinner Moynihan?" he ventured.

Skinner cuffed his hat over his eyes. "I see me name has traveled before me," he said genially.

THE barn boss spat in the dust disgustedly. "Where they's mules," he said, "and haulin', they's stories about how Skinner Moynihan did this and Skinner Moynihan did that. Yes," he added drily, "your name has traveled before you." He looked up and squinted.

"Is it true," he pursued, "that you killed a barn boss with a single-tree for mishandlin' your pet team?"

"'Tis a damned lie," protested Skinner virtuously. "I did but beat him to a pulp, and wid me fists only. He lived," he added regretfully. The barn boss grinned at him in perfect understanding.

"Pick out your animals," the barn boss said, "and we'll stable 'em. You can draw your runnin' gear in the mornin'."

Skinner nodded. He pursed his lips in his gentle whistle and looked at the mules, then threw in a casual question. "What would it be takin' to keep this Hubbard happy?" he asked gently.

The barn boss gave him a sidelong glance. "*Mister* Hubbard," he said, "to his face. He insists. And he's a rawhider. He's only a few months on this job as superintendent, and he's out to make a rep. Blake and Moffat is about the biggest outfit in the business, and this is just one of the jobs. General logging and a fat contract for ties and timbers with the new railroad. I know my job, and he knows

it, so he leaves me alone. But there ain't nothin' but the wages holdin' me here."

"I like a tough boss," grinned Skinner Moynihan, "and I guess I've worked for the most of them. But I do dislike a mean boss. By the bye," he added casually, "who would be the lad who just busted the door off yon office in his leavin'?"

"Johnny Lawrence. Worked here once. Wagon boss, and a good one. Him and Hubbard didn't mix, and he finally pulled the pin. Got a half-dozen wagons and a few span of critters, and went in business for himself, countin' on gettin' part of this railroad contract. Hubbard out-gunned him though, and I hear Johnny is plumb bogged down. Hocked to the ears for operating expenses."

"Interestin'," said Skinner, "but sad. But that's the way it goes sometimes." He slid off the corral fence. "Let's be pickin' us a team," he suggested.

IN THE crimpy dawn Skinner Moynihan shook the ribbons out over his three span of mules and amplified his clear tenor whoop with a splitting crack of his long whip. The skittish mules surged into their collars and he swung them about and took his skeleton pole wagon out of the cluttered yard at a brisk trot, threading his way through minute clearances with a magical ease. Hubbard was coming down from the office and he raised an arm to hail Moynihan.

"You will follow that wagon over there," began Mr. Hubbard without preliminaries, "and keep your turn in line. We've been getting out four loads per day, per wagon, and we don't get them on reputation. I don't keep a skinner that can't hold up his end. Roll out when Ed's ready."

Skinner Moynihan spat carefully between the near mules' heels. "Let's have it understood, Mister Hubbard," he said softly. "Me reputation means not a punched farthin'. Nor does yours. If I don't roll me loads in just a bit faster than your best skinner, I'll not be here for breakfast in the mornin'."

Mr. Hubbard's eyes came hard on Skinner and then slid past him. He turned on his heel and stalked back to the office.

"See that you do," he said over his shoulder.

* * *

A flat turning place had been scraped out at the woods landing. As Ed's wagon pulled in at the rollway, a man hopped down and spun the T-bolt loose on the rear wheel assembly, and chocked them with a short chunk. Ed pulled ahead with the front wheels until the log cabin between the two sets of wheels came tight.

The wheels were now some eighteen feet apart, and two men with peaveys rolled the poles off the rollway onto the transverse bunks of the wagon. The poles were uniform in diameter and length, being about ten inches across on the butt and twenty-four feet long. Timbers really, they were destined to become trestle material for the railroad.

Two rows they put on, and then cinched the load about the middle with a chain. Then another layer, centered on the wagon.

"Load," Ed called, and walked up to cinch the load with another binder chain. He walked all the way around the wagon, took up a link of slack in the brake chin, then mounted to the top of the load.

"Hay-up!" he yelled at his mules. "Roll it out, you jug-bellied knotheads!" *Whap!* His whip made a rifle-shot explosion in the air between the leaders' rumps.

Skinner swung his own rig into place as Ed's load cleared the rollway with a lurch and a groan of rubbing timbers. The procedure was repeated until there were four poles on the third tier.

" 'Tis a load, boys," he said, and turned to pick up his front binder chain.

"Just a minute, there. Put a load on that wagon."

Skinner turned to see Hubbard riding to the rollway on a bay mare.

" 'Tis a pretty fair load right now," said Skinner mildly.

"We don't make this haul just to exercise the mules, Moynihan. This is a pole hauling job." Hubbard turned to the peavey men. "Finish out that row," he said, "and put two more on for a peak. That's no more than a bunk load."

" 'Tis load enough for that grade, yon," repeated Skinner.

"I told you, Moynihan. Your rep means not a damned thing to me. I'm running this show. If you can't haul a load, I'll get a man that can."

Skinner regarded him slowly, his round cheeks bland and cheerful. He shrugged. "Just as you say, Mister Hubbard. You are the boss."

Hubbard gave him a grim smirk and threw a hard look at the peavey men, who went silently to work. He saw the load go up to his satisfaction, and then reined his trim little mare about without another word.

SKINNER MOYNIHAN as silently set up his brake rigging. The long hickory brake lever came up the side behind the front bunk, and operated the front wheel brakes directly. The rear brakes were activated by the same lever by means of a chain, clevised to the brake lever, so that the requisite amount of slack could be taken or given, according to the space between the front and rear wheels. Skinner took up the last possible fraction of an inch of slack, and threw his weight on the chain to assure himself that there was no more.

Then he mounted his load and gathered up the ribbons. "Hup!" he said. "Hi-yup, there laddies, an' pay for your hay!" He laid a brisk volley of whip cracks about the straining animals.

The four-inch iron tires sank soggily into the fresh earth of the landing, and twenty-four straining legs shook with strain as the mules surged loyally into their collars.

"Good lads," Skinner crooned softly. His trained fingers on the reins pulled the swing span an inch back into line. "Hup! now." He could see Mr. Hubbard sitting his mare to the side of the approaching crest of the hill, and ignored him.

The leaders tipped over the crest, and the swing and wheelers. Skinner waited until the front wheels dropped the line of the load, and then threw his stubby weight on the brake lever. Almost instantly came the gratifying squeal and grind of the rear brakes.

"Be-dad," marveled Skinner to himself, "it might just be we'll be gettin' away wid this."

The timbers under him groaned as they sought to adjust their bulk to this new cant, and they surged against the binder chains with an alarming thrust. Skinner pursed his lips and whistled softly at the sound, then gave his mind over to the task of piloting six skittish mules and some six or eight tons of green timbers down the pitch.

He kept the ribbons tight on the wheelers, setting them solidly into their breech straps, and again he threw his weight on the brake lever, forcing it up into the last notch.

All four of the brake shoes were shrieking on the ironshod wheels now, and the groaning and squeaking of the load was a steady orchestration. The road was rough, little more than a sketchy effort to take out the biggest of the stones and roots, a raw gash through the timber, and the wagon lurched over and up and down, each wheel coming down with a solid crash on every low spot.

It was going to be a race. Every rod they traveled brought more and more of

the load onto the wheelers, and Skinner could feel their unease telegraphed up the ribbons to his wise fingers.

As his fingers sent their reassurances back to the mules, so did the soothing rumble of his voice remind them of his presence.

But if his tone was reassuring, his words were not.

" 'Tis an evil black-hearted beast," he crooned sweetly. "That would take out his arrogance on his mules. 'Tis the body of yon Hubbard I'd like to be usin' for a drag, and wid a slipknot about his nasty neck. Easy wid it, me fine lads, we'll bring it down yet."

Then the brake chain parted with a pistol crack.

THE sudden surge of the released load drove the near wheeler to his knees, but he was up again in a cat-like scramble as Skinner came to his feet on the load.

There was no holding it. Within three revolutions of the wheels things were out of control. Skinner whooped shrilly and the mules took off like scared rabbits.

It was sheer wizardy then, that kept them going. Skinner played the ribbons like the strings of a harp, letting them run free, but not allowing a pound of pull to come on the double-trees.

The front wheels took a driving lunge over a rock, threw Skinner to his knees, and the tongue lashed sidewise and nearly yanked the wheelers off their feet. Their eyes flattened in panic and they surged into the bits. Skinner Moynihan knew in that instant that they weren't going to make it.

He spat blood from his bitten tongue, and shot a lightning glance down the steep pitch. There was a curve ahead where a gully debouched from the hillside above him. Not much of a gully, more of a fold in the ground, choked with brush and losing itself rapidly in the hillside.

"Here goes nothin'," he muttered, and threw his weight on the left hand cluster of reins. The demoralized leaders fought the bits. The slender length of his shiny whip leaped out and the searing lash bit at their necks. It maddened them, but it turned them, and the swing span followed.

Skinner pealed out his high tenor yell and his merciless whip tore hide and hair from the laboring rumps of the wheelers.

They turned it, with the aid of the bolting lead and swing spans, and the tongue came around. But the wheels were cramped at an impossible angle to the line of momentum.

The right front wheel buckled in a crash of overloaded spokes, and the tongues snapped off short.

The rear of the load came up in a vast pinwheeling motion, and as it reached the top of the arc the binder chains snapped and the timbers took on independent and deadly life.

One hurtled through the air like a gigantic lance, clear over the shoulder of the lead, to drive itself into the ground a good three feet. Another snubbed itself into the roadway to take the brunt of the wagon and load, and a huge splinter from it, six feet long and eight inches deep, spun high in the air to land fifty feet down the road. And one log pinwheeled sidewise into the running legs of the near wheeler. The mule screamed and took its span mate down in its fall.

CHAPTER TWO

The Skinning of the Moynihan

SKINNER made his leap as the rear of the wagon came up. There was no time to balance or time it; it was simply a heedless lunge to clear the ruck.

He struck almost immediately on shoulder and neck, and his feet went on over in an irresistible roll from the momentum of his body. A sapling caught him across the ribs and stopped him, and the breath

came out of him in a painful gust.

"Whoosh!" he said, and lay on his side, blinking the sky back into focus. He heard the scream of the crippled wheeler then, and he scrambled to his feet and stood swaying.

The high brush had stopped them, that and the dead weight of the two downed animals. Skinner clawed through the brush and came upon the wheeler with the smashed legs.

"Ah, poor lad," he said, and turned hastily away.

He trudged to the wreck, and found the smashed carryall box in the mess. He pulled out the short-handled maul used for pounding chain hooks free, and scrambled back to the animals.

He blindfolded the trembling animal with his own torn jacket, and quickly struck the necessary merciful blow. He stood a moment, soul-sick, trying to stop the trembling of his knees. A rapid rata-plan of hoofs on the road roused him.

Mr. Hubbard came down the hill on his little mare at a quick clip, and he cast a brief and comprehensive glance at the wreckage. Then he brought the mare up through the trampled brush to Skinner.

"You damned fool," he thrust out violently. "Look what you've done!" He was fairly shaking with anger. "It'll take half a day or better to clear that road." He leveled a finger at Skinner.

"You're fired, you crazy bog-trotter!"

Skinner gazed at him dumbly for a moment, trying to absorb the rank stupidity of the thing. Then, as calmly as if he were swatting a fly, he hurled the maul. He hefted the eight pound tool as casually as a toothpick, balanced it over his shoulder and let fly.

It was a very near thing. The smashing weight of the head went over Mr. Hubbard's shoulder, and the trailing handle rapped him sharply on the temple, and knocked his hat off.

It loosened him in the saddle, and it knocked the spiteful anger out of him.

"Git!" said Skinner through his teeth. "Git, damn you, before I kill you. If I see your face again so help me I *will* kill you." His voice was deadly soft, and his hands made claws in the earnest desire to tear Hubbard from his saddle.

Mr. Hubbard, chalk-faced, reined the little mare about and took her down the slope at a heedless pace. He turned his face again to Skinner as the mare picked her way around the wreck, and then he put her down the slope again at a gallop.

Skinner Moynihan had already dismissed him from his mind. He walked softly to the trembling mules, tangled in the brush.

"Ah, laddies," he crooned. "Ah, laddies. Fine lads you be." He let his tongue ramble with any words that came to mind.

He kept his rumbling monotone going, and leaned over the dead animal. He grasped the hames with calloused hands, braced his thick short legs and rolled the carcass clear with one smooth heave. The downed wheeler lay for a moment, then realizing it was free, scrambled stiffly up. Instantly he was at its head, with the bit firmly in his hand, talking to the animal until he was sure the panic was gone.

One by one, he soothed them down, straightened out the tangled harness, worked them clear of the brush.

THE barn boss came out to meet them, and his eyes went round with surprise and he let a little whistle at the sight of the ripped harness and the gashed legs of the animals. Skinner answered the question in his eyes.

"Sluiced the other wheeler," he said bitterly. "I let me damned pride kill a fine animal."

The barn boss gave him a quizzical glance, but wisely said nothing.

They worked in silence stabling the animals, and the barn boss fetched out his

ointments and bandages to doctor the cuts.

"Must have been a hell of a load," the barn boss ventured finally.

"It was," said Skinner shortly.

"That's Hubbard for you. Log-hungry. Got to put one more on to make a load."

" 'Twas me own fault," said Skinner stubbornly. "I'm no green hand to take it like that. 'Tis a skinner's dooty to say whin a load's a load. I should have quit at the landing."

Said the barn boss angrily, "I've half a notion to quit with you."

" 'Twould do no good," said Skinner. "A man like Hubbard must be beaten at his own game before he learns."

"Speak of the devil," said the barn boss, squinting out the barn door, "and there he is. Big as life and twicet as ugly."

Mister Hubbard swung down from his mare and strode into the barn, blinking against the semi-dark as he came out of the sun. He was wearing another hat, and he had a gun on his right hip.

"Jake," he cried impatiently, "has that crazy Irish— Oh, there you are, Moynihan!"

He stepped sideways, so that the brightness of the doorway was no longer silhouetting him and laid a hand on his gun.

"Get out," he said softly. "Get off Blake and Moffat property." His voice was the icy edge of a new-whetted knife.

"If you make a move at me, I'll shoot you like a mad dog. You'd have killed me quick enough, if your aim had been good with that hammer."

"I only wish it had been better," said Skinner bitterly.

If Hubbard's voice had been icy before, it dripped pure venom now.

"Get out, you drunken bog-trotter! Get out or I'll kill you in spite of myself. Damn your strutting soul, you'll never hold another job where my word will carry. You smashed equipment and killed your animals on a haul that green teamsters have broken in on. You, the great Skinner Moynihan! You're a drunken tramp!"

Moynihan growled deep in his throat, and stepped forward. Hubbard flipped the gun up level and clicked the hammer back to full cock. Moynihan took another step and then the barn boss' hand slashed across Hubbard's wrist as the hammer fell. He shouted above the pounding of the stabled mules earnestly endeavoring to climb out of the stalls at the explosion.

"Moynihan, for God's sake get out!"

He struggled with Hubbard a moment, and then sprang back with the gun.

Moynihan said softly, "Now 'tis even," and stepped forward eagerly. The wiry little barn boss threw a shoulder into him and bucked him back.

"Dammit," he shouted, "get out!"

"Jake," yelled Hubbard, "you're fired."

"I'll tell you when I'm ready to quit," retorted the barn boss. And then to Moynihan he repeated, "Get out, or I'll bust you myself."

"All right," said Skinner Moynihan. "But Hubbard. Remember me. You will be seeing me again. And you will wish you had not."

JAKE waited until Moynihan was well out on the dusty road. Then he punched the shells out of the gun and handed it back to Hubbard.

"You nearly killed a man just then," he observed.

Hubbard was master of himself again, but there was still a vicious anger in his voice.

"You're fired, Jake," he said. "Get out of here."

Jake regarded him with a sardonic amusement. "I told you I'd quit when I'm damned good and ready," he said. "And I've got news for you. I'm still the best damned barn boss in this country, and if you think you can keep a hundred mules in shape on a tight contract like you got, without me, you say that again. Don't

tempt me again, or, by God, I'll quit."

Hubbard absorbed the impudence—and the truth of it—for some moments. Then he turned away and strode to his office.

Jake stepped out the barn door, picked up the trailing reins of the forgotten mare and stood a moment watching the short and sturdy figure of Skinner Moynihan trudging away on the hacked-out road to town. Jake pursed his lips in a gentle whistle, then grinned.

"You know," he confided to the mare as he led her to a stall, "your boss made a mistake when he hit that Irishman in his pride. That's a bad place to hit a man like the Moynihan."

And truly Skinner Moynihan's thoughts were a black festering in his mind.

He was worried not at all about Hubbard's threat that he would find no work. Where there were loads to be hauled by mules, Skinner Moynihan would work, would be begged to work. But he could not stand that jab at his pride, the thought of the snickering delight with which envious and less talented teamsters would tell about the time the great Skinner Moynihan was fired for sluicing his wheelers.

For the word would spread, he knew, and the thought was a knife twisting in his vitals.

Sluiced me wheeler, his hurt pride jibed him. Me, Skinner Moynihan, who ain't so much as bruised a bone on a mule these ten years past. He pursed his lips, but there was no lilt to his whistle.

HE STEPPED into the Blue Ox and took in the crowd. There was a scattering of riders at the bar and at the tables, a few calk-booted timberbeasts from the camps and a milling, bellowing mob of construction men off the railroad; the graders and spikers and tie-trotters and steel-heavers.

End of steel was ten miles out, he knew, and these boys rode the work trains to town, to drink and whoop and buck the tiger, and like as not go to work in the morning without an hour of sleep.

They played as they worked, with a drive and a swing and a frantic expending of their strength. He knew the half of them, and they bellowed a robust welcome to him. They bought him a drink, and another, and as the whiskey warmed him, he dug into his pocket and came up with a single silver dollar.

" 'Tis me last cartwheel, lads," he said. "Let's be giving it a ride." He stumped to the roulette table and dropped the dollar on the black and hit it.

He let it ride for two more spins and shoved the pile onto the red. Ten minutes later he scooped five hundred twelve dollars off the table, and solemnly stuffed the original dollar back into his pocket.

"Now, lads," he chortled, "we'll paint it pink wid purple spots!"

They whooped and surged back to the bar in a wave.

They toasted him, and he drank to them. They drank out their welcome at the Blue Ox, and made a tour of the town. At the Ponderosa Pride a fight started, and it turned into a glorious brawl. Skinner put his back to that of one Red Callahan, and they held off all comers and recognized no friends.

The lights went out and he heard the bar go in a thunderous crash of splintering wood, and then the front windows. He felt the back of Callahan leaving him, and he half-turned to catch an exploding wallop on the chin.

"Ah, the divil," he muttered, and automatically pulled his arms about his head as he fell.

He came half-awake as half a bucket of water sloshed across his face. He whooshed in breath and scrubbed a hard hand over his face. The ground lurched under him, and he was a moment realizing that he was on a flatcar of the work train.

His eyes felt like a pair of hot coals in

his head and there was a ringing in his ears that faded in and out like a distant shout against the wind.

The rest of them on the car were a hard-used lot. Their eyes were as red-rimmed and weak as his own, and there were mottled bruises that showed through the dirt and beards. There were torn sleeves and buttons missing, and two shirts gone complete. Callahan sat near Skinner Moynihan and worked the puffed skin over his knuckles.

"Belike," said Skinner, " 'twas you that brought me out in the clear?"

"It was," returned Callahan. "But not for your hospitality alone. I'm short a scraper teamster on the grade. You are hired as of last night."

Skinner craned his neck and massaged it with a gentle hand.

"Me thanks for the offer," he said, "but I've another job in mind."

"Well, if that isn't but the gratitude of a parlor-pig Irishman! I drag the likes of you, like the side of beef you are, the length of the street, from out of the jaws of those town clowns, and you turn me down whin I'm short-handed. You'll be thin of the ribs before you get another job off Red Callahan!"

"Now, Red, me lad," said Skinner Moynihan conciliatingly, " 'tis not that I'd not like to work for you. 'Tis just that I've a debt to pay a certain gintleman wid a name like a squash. And I think I know how. I'm goin' to work for a young bucko wid the name of Johnny Lawrence."

"Now I know you're the daft one," moaned Callahan. "Yon Lawrence cannot pay his feed bills, let alone the likes of you. You'll whistle for your wages, Moynihan."

"I'll call the chune, then," grinned Moynihan. "And I've a hunch I can whistle up a lively bit of a jig."

"More fool you," said Callahan.

"More fool me," agreed Skinner Moynihan cheerfully.

THE work train stopped at Empire siding to pick up a couple of cars of ties, and Skinner Moynihan dropped off there. An hour later he caught a train of empty flatcars going back to Buffalo Flat.

He took the opposite side of the street from the Ponderosa Pride, and grinned widely at the sight of workmen putting new sash in the smashed front windows.

"Ah, but 'twas a bonny frolic," he murmured.

He found his man talking to the man at the Square Deal feed lot. The feed lot man was shaking his head slowly but firmly to and fro, and his beard wagged a negative half a beat behind that of his head. Johnny Lawrence turned away from the man with a stubborn pride on his face.

Skinner Moynihan caught him as he came through the gate. "I'm looking for a job, Johnny Lawrence," he said.

Johnny gave him an impatient glance. "We can't talk here," he said curtly.

" 'Tis all right, Johnny," said Skinner. " 'Tis out of the bag now, complete."

"No," said Johnny, and stopped dead in his tracks.

"Yes," retorted Moynihan. There was apology in his tone. "I did me best, Johnny, but 'twas not good enough. I lost me job before I was well settled. I did not find out a blessed thing."

Johnny looked at him searchingly. "Did he catch on? Does he know your connection with me?"

"Sure not," said Skinner positively. "From the minnit I got your letter to now, I've niver spoken your name like I knew you. No, 'twas like this." And he sketched in the story of the wild ride and the wrecking of the pole wagon.

Johnny took it silently, but the lines at the corners of his wide mouth deepened. He thrust his hands deeply into his trouser pockets and started an aimless stroll down the street.

"That does it," he said in a tired voice. "That does it good."

"'Tis sorry I am," said Skinner, and all the apology in the world was in his voice. "'Tis sorry I am to fail you, Johnny. But we are not licked yet."

"None of it is your fault, Skinner," replied Johnny. "I'm just a damned fool for not knowing when I'm licked. I should never have brought you into it." He brought a breath from the bottom of his lungs. "I'll look around for offers on my equipment and animals, and hope I clear enough to pay my bills."

Skinner Moynihan halted sharply and put his hands on his broad hips.

"Johnny Lawrence," he said, and his voice was full of honest wrath, "did I not make a skinner of you when you were but a snotty-nosed, big-eyed sprat follying me about on the grade in Missouri? Did I not warm your britches for you when you would not understand? Did I ever teach you to run from a fight? I've half a mind to turn you over me knee this minnit!"

Johnny grinned half a grin, and threw an arm over Skinner's shoulders. "Skinner," he said. "What would I do without you?"

Skinner snorted indignantly and jerked away.

"None of your soft soap now, lad," he warned. "I came out here just to be giving you a hand, but now I've a stake in it meself. I'm a bit like an old mule meself, Johnny. Little pride in ancestry, and no hope of posterity. All I have is me pride, and damned little of that, if I do not shut the mouth of yon Hubbard. And here you stand, wid tears as big as horse-apples rollin' down your cheeks, and talk about quitting. Begorra, lad, I'm not whipped, and neither are you, if you will but quit groaning and listen."

Johnny said shortly, "I'm a tramp teamster, and you're another. What have we got to buck Hubbard and the biggest outfit in the mule business?"

"Just what they had to start, lad. Guts and brains."

"Hah!" snorted Johnny. "I suppose you pull rabbits out of hats too."

"No, laddie, but if you'll but gamble a load of ties wid me, you will be wearin' a silk hat yet."

Johnny grinned suddenly, and thrust out his hand. "I'll go you," he said. "It's a deal."

"Then let us be gettin' on wid it," said Skinner Moynihan simply.

SKINNER MOYNIHAN brought the heavy wagon snugly alongside the waiting flatcar at Empire. His quick eyes appraised the fact that there were only two loaded cars on the siding.

He raised a casual hand in greeting as the crew came out of the bunkhouse to transfer the ties from the wagon to the car.

He strolled about casually as they worked, checking the harness of his animals, and devoting a lot of stooping and squinting to the axles.

"Two hundred and eleven," said the foreman of the loading crew. "Does that check?"

Moynihan nodded. "Would that be the clerk's office there?" he inquired.

"Right next to the bunkhouse," replied the foreman.

Skinner Moynihan swung the empty wagon out and up to the side of the office.

"Two hundred and eleven ties," he said. "I'd like me receipt."

The thin spectacled clerk looked up from the desk.

"I'll make a note of it in the scale book," he said. "That's all you need."

"I'd better have a receipt," replied Skinner with a mild stubbornness.

"But you don't need a receipt. I enter it on the books, and they can check that against the woods tallies at the end of the month."

"Look," said Skinner Moynihan. "I was haulin' freight whilst you were wet behind the ears, laddy, and when I deliver a load, I want the paper to prove it."

"Oh, all right," snorted the clerk. "I'll give you a receipt. But just this time, understand? I've plenty to do without writing out a ticket every time a load comes in."

He drew a pad of paper to him and started to write. Skinner leaned on the counter watching with interest.

"Make it easy on yourself," he suggested with the generosity of a man who has won his point. "Just write that J. B. Moynihan delivered two hundred and eleven ties to Empire siding, and the date and your name. Just so I have something to show I delivered the stuff."

"I guess I know how to write a receipt," snapped the clerk with outraged dignity, and scratched away furiously.

Skinner grinned behind his hand, and forced a straight face when the young man tossed the slip of paper to him.

" 'Tis sorry I am to bother you," said Skinner pacifically. "It is just that I like to do things right. Now I can show this to my boss and prove that you have accepted my load and that it checks out right on the button."

"But what the hell," cried the clerk, only half mollified. "Don't we always accept Blake and Moffat's timbers and ties? It's their contract."

"Ah," said Skinner in innocent surprise, "but these are not Blake and Moffat ties. These ties belong to the Lawrence Freighting Company."

The clerk goggled.

"What?" he said. "But—but. . . Here now, what is this? Not Blake and Moffat? Of course it's Blake and Moffat. They have the contract. We take only Blake and Moffat material. We. . ."

" 'Tis perfectly all right," soothed Skinner, and his blue eyes twinkled wickedly. "I have your receipt in me hand this very instant, accepting the ties, and now it's up to me boss to put in his claim wid the company."

"But," shrieked the clerk, "it isn't all right. I have no authority to accept ties from you. I thought you were Blake and Moffat. Give me back that receipt!"

"Not a bit of it," retorted Skinner virtuously. "You accepted me load, and I've the paper to prove it." His blue eyes were suddenly sharp and frosty.

"And if you try to wiggle out of it," he threatened, "me boss will sue from hell to breakfast. He'll slap an injunction on this railroad that will tie up every foot of it from here to St. Louis. Don't you go getting gay wid me, young feller."

HE STALKED from the office and swung into the high seat, and as he trotted his mules out of the loading yard he glared sternly at the forlorn and deflated clerk.

He looked back once, to see the clerk sprinting to the telegraph shack by the track.

"All hell will be poppin' now," he told the near wheeler, and he whistled with a sweet and great content.

He kept the mules at a spanking trot, and then a mile from Empire swung them into a dry wash. The rocking tie wagon crashed and groaned over the litter of rounded rocks, and he slowed them to spare the wheelers the lashing of the tongue. He pulled in under the shade of a clump of cottonwoods and grinned at Johnny, who sat smoking in the seat of a buckboard, with a team already harnessed.

"The pot is boiling," he crowed to Johnny. He swung down and outspanned the mules from the tie wagon.

"How did he take it?" inquired Johnny.

"Wid his mouth wide open. He did but get his wits about him only after I had cleared the dock. He was headin' for

the telegraph office in a dither whin last I saw him." Skinner Moynihan was rooting out nosebags from the box slung under the wagon, and he tethered each mule and gave it its grain.

He gave the buckboard a sweeping inspecting glance and swung up to the seat. Johnny moved over to make him room. Skinner shook the ribbons out over the span of fleet mules, and reinforced his whoop with the splitting crack of his whip.

The trim-legged mules took the bank in a scrambling rush, nimble as deer, and the buckboard began to leap and twist as they found their gait on the level prairie.

Skinner's flop-brimmed old hat dropped the front of the brim over his eyes, and he cuffed it up to ride flattened against the dented crown. Johnny made a desperate grab to salvage his own, and then reached frantically for anchorage. A hummock lifted the near wheels off the ground, and for fifty feet they rode canted on two wheels, with the other two spinning idly a foot off the ground.

"Slow down, you crazy mick," shouted Johnny above the rush of the wind. "Let's live to get there!"

"We've no time to waste," replied Skinner Moynihan.

Johnny was silent while they bounded through another hair-raising mile. Then he leaned toward Skinner again.

"If I've risked my neck like this for nothing," he shouted, "I'm going to shoot you three times before you fall, and twice after you're down."

"If it don't work," retorted Skinner, "you'll be pawning your gun for beans." And he loosed his shrill whoop and cracked the long whip between the jack rabbiting mules. The buckboard took another twisting leap and Johnny swore and clamped his aching fingers tighter.

They made that twelve miles cross-country in a trifle over an hour, and the mules still had run enough left in them to bring their trotting knees high as Skinner swung them in on the fresh grade past end of steel. They located their man in the pall of dust that overhung the grading teams, and Skinner whistled shrilly at him.

"Red Callahan," he called. "A couple of words wid you." Callahan strode toward them and Skinner and Johnny swung down off the seat.

"Well?" quoth Callahan, and put his hands on his hips.

"You've met me boss?" inquired Skinner politely.

"I have," retorted Red Callahan, and there was no friendliness in his tone.

"Ah. . . yes," said Skinner Moynihan, and scratched under his hat. "Red Callahan, 'tis a favor I'd have of you."

"Hah!" snorted Callahan. "Favors, is it? And after you turned me down, and me short-handed on the grade here? And why should I favor you?"

"Now Red Callahan, 'tis a double-action favor, so to speak. You scratch me itchin' back, and I'll do as much for you."

"Me back don't itch," retorted Red sourly.

"Ah, but it does," retorted Skinner Moynihan softly. "'Twas no more than three days ago you told me that you were the saddest construction boss in the wide world, what wid too many hands on the tie gang and not enough on the grade."

"That's been taken care of," said Callahan, still sourly. "Ties is scarce. It would seem," he added nastily, "that between crazy drivers smashing up equipment, and sore-headed ones quitting, Blake and Moffat are a bit slow on deliveries for a few days."

"Ah?" said Skinner Moynihan. "Then I'm just the man you want to see. Excuse us a moment, Johnny." And he took Callahan's arm and half-pushed him along until they were out of earshot.

"NOW Red, me lad," he said swiftly. "I can get your ties. You've squawked to Riddle, the purchasing agent, have you not? Good. Now look then. As construction boss, you send a telegram to the brass collars in Kansas City. Cry your eyes out for more ties. Then Johnny here wires an offer to deliver ties and gets a sub-contract at least. That puts him in the clear wid his debts, and at the same time it squares accounts for me. I'd like to be on hand when Mister Hubbard gets a lacing from headquarters for falling down in his contract. I'll be happy, Johnny'll be happy, and you'll have your ties. Besides which, you'll have the best mule-skinner in the world pushing the beasties about on your grading job."

"And where does that leave you?" inquired Callahan suspiciously.

"Happy," retorted Skinner Moynihan virtuously. "I wish to but put a kink in the long nose of Mister Hubbard." He considered it best not to tell Callahan about his connection with Johnny. 'Twould but make him the more doubtful about me own pure motives, he consoled himself.

"Well," said Red Callahan slowly. "I've no love for Riddle. Nor for Hubbard either. Two of a kind, if I ever saw them. And I need the ties."

"Then let us go on over to Lodge and send the telegram to the brains in Kansas City," said Moynihan.

"What's the matter wid Empire?" protested Callahan. " 'Tis a long ride to Lodge."

Skinner Moynihan was ready for that one.

"Not Empire, Callahan," he said. "Nor yet Buffalo Flat. Riddle's in Buffalo, and a telegram from Empire would be picked off the wire by his man. We'll have to by-pass thim both and make it from Lodge."

"Well, what of it?" demanded Callahan. "I'm not giving a good damn whether or not Riddle hears me words."

"Ah," said Skinner Moynihan, " 'tis just that I'm a man of peace, and would not like to borrow trouble. Let us save it as a pleasant surprise to Riddle that we have arranged for more ties."

Callahan regarded him with suspicion. "Moynihan, what in hell are you cooking up? I've a strong hunch not to touch any part of this."

"All right then, Red Callahan, and be damned to you. I'm no one to be beggin' from you." He let a little indignation creep into his voice. " 'Tis over the hill for me, to the timber-haulin' over in Grand County. To hell wid you, Red Callahan."

"Now just a minute," said Red Callahan hastily. Skinner could see the thoughts chasing around in his head, as his face wrinkled in concentration. *On the one hand . . .* his expression said. *But on the other . . . and I do need the Moynihan, crazy man that he is . . and besides, I've no love for Hubbard or Riddle. . .* "Be-dad, Moynihan, I'll go you this once."

"Then climb right into yon buckboard," invited Skinner Moynihan promptly. "There's a pile of sacks that will keep the hardness of the boards from the end of your spine." He let out a shrill whoop. "Johnny, lad, come on wid you. I can see the kink this will put in Hubbard's nose already."

CHAPTER THREE

Irish Ground

IT WAS seven miles to Empire, and eight more to Buffalo Flat, and they had fair road most of the way. Skinner Moynihan kept the mules alternating between a fast trot and a gallop all the way until they were well past the town of Buffalo Flat.

Then he slowed the mules to a walk and pulled off the road, keeping an eye on the telegraph wire as it swooped from pole to pole alongside the track. He found his spot, where the wire took a short-cut away from the track and crossed a little creek.

"Whup," he said to the mules and reached back into the buckboard for a length of chain. He twirled it around his head and flung it in a sweeping throw across the wire, letting go of the chain altogether. It curled over the wire, sagging it dangerously, and one end of the chain dangled in the creek.

"You damned fool," protested Callahan, "you've shorted the wire!"

"Go to the head of the class, Callahan," retorted Skinner, and refused to make any other answer to questions.

"Just keep your bonny blue eyes peeled," he said comfortably, "and you will see how a smart man operates."

"You see?" said Callahan helplessly to Johnny Lawrence. "He's pure daft. I knew a man oncet who swore his left ear was an Irish potato, and he was as sane as a barber alongside this crazy Moynihan."

"Pay no attention to him, Johhny," grinned Moynihan, and he reached ten feet to the side of the road to pick a prairie flower with his whip. They rode on to Lodge in silence.

The operator at Lodge swung around on his swivel chair, and greeted them, recognizing Callahan.

"Say, what the hell is going on west of here?" he demanded. "I get part of a reading from Empire to Buffalo about some ties, and then Buffalo cuts off so I don't get all of it. Then he opens the wire again, and right in the middle of a word the line grounds out. Did you birds see any ground west of here?"

"Ground?" inquired Skinner Moynihan innocently. "What do you mean, ground?"

"Was the wire down, or—"

"No, I saw no wire down, did you, boys?"

Callahan stared a moment and opened his mouth. Skinner Moynihan's cowhide boot contacted his shin a bit more vigorously than what might be considered a caress.

"Erp!" said the Callahan. "No. No wire down."

"And you want to send a message," prompted Moynihan.

"Ah . . . yes," said Callahan. "To Headquarters in K.C. Gineral Manager. Say 'Must have more ties immediately. Will need three more cars within twenty-four hours and three cars per shift thereafter. Otherwise, will have to pull one crew off shift, noon tomorrow.' Sign it Pat Callahan, Foreman of Construction."

The operator looked up in puzzlement.

"Why didn't you send this from Buffalo or Empire?"

"Well," said Skinner Moynihan quickly, " 'tis that we are covering for the operator at Buffalo. He was took suddenly drunk, poor lad, and if he got on the wire in his condition, 'twould mean his job. Not wanting to do that to him, the Callahan here came wid us, and here we are."

The op looked at him sharply. "Ed's not one to drink on the job," he said doubtfully.

"Not usually," said Skinner with sudden inspiration, "but wouldn't you get drunk too, if your wife had just presinted you wid twins?"

"Well, I'll be—hey, wait a minute! Ed ain't married!"

Skinner Moynihan heaved a slow sigh and leaned his elbows on the railing.

"NOW listen," he said confidentially, "and let it go no furder. Ed's married, all right, but only a short time

ago, and he's kept it quiet. You understand?"

A wide grin spread on the op's face.

"No fooling? The old sonofagun!" He lowered his voice to match Skinner's. "Who was it? The section boss's daughter? He was spending a lot of time with her."

Skinner Moynihan almost nodded, and then thought fast.

"No," he said swiftly. "You wouldn't know her. Just let it drop."

He breathed a sigh of relief and uncrossed his fingers as the op swung back to his key, still chuckling.

The op pulled the switch west and chattered out the message on the line east.

"Have the answer for you in a few minutes," he told Callahan. "I sent it like it was coming from Buffalo, so Ed's protected."

"Good," said Johnny, prompted by Moynihan. "Now send one for me. Paid wire. To the supply manager at K.C. 'Can supply ties in any quantity up to seven hundred per day at going rate delivered to Empire siding'. Sign it Lawrence Freighting Company, J. Lawrence owner."

The operator scanned their faces slowly.

"Now just what is this?" he inquired. "What the hell is going on here?"

" 'Tis a paid message," retorted Skinner Moynihan promptly. "Do you want to take it, or shall we get ahold of the chief?"

The operator shrugged.

"Paid wire is paid wire." And his skilled fingers set the key to stuttering.

The replies came within five minutes of each other. The one for Red Callahan said succinctly: ALL SUPPLIES CHANNELED THROUGH PURCHASING AGENT. NO TIES IN HEADQUARTERS OFFICE. SUGGEST YOU SPEND MORE TIME ON JOB AND LESS IN TELEGRAPH OFFICE. J. C. KILGORE, GEN'L MGR.

Red Callahan read the message slowly and put a hard look on the operator, who kept his carefully expressionless gaze in a neutral corner. He roused only to the chattering of the sounder, and he scribbled out the reply to Johnny Lawrence's message.

L. J. RIDDLE PURCHASING AGENT FOR ALL CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS. PLEASE CONTACT HIM WITH ANY CONTRACT OFFER. NO DIRECT PURCHASING DONE THROUGH THIS OFFICE. A. JOHNSON, SUPP. MGR.

Johnny read it through twice and then handed it to Skinner with a bleak expression.

Well," said Skinner, " 'twas worth a try."

Johnny swung away toward the door.

"Yes," he said bitterly, "and it leaves us right where we started. Except that they have a carload of our ties. To hell with it."

" 'Tis not that bad," Skinner said quickly. "We're not whipped yet."

"Maybe you're not," returned Johnny, "but I know when I'm licked. Maybe I can get enough out of the equipment and animals to pay off my debts. Then I'm going back to popping a whip for wages. I'm done."

"But Johnny lad, your outfit is worth ten times what thim robbers will give you."

"I know that. What else kept me at it so long?" Johnny's mouth was tight with defeat. "Do you suppose I enjoy the idea? It took me five years of sweating to get lined out. Now I'm up to my ears in debt, and Hubbard has blocked me off from making a cent hauling freight. No, Skinner, I'm just plain licked."

Why, the lad's really serious, was Skinner Moynihan's darting thought, and he cast about frantically for a loophole. He opened his mouth, and then closed it as Johnny continued.

"Don't be dreaming, Skinner. The

feed lots and the wagon-wrights have a claim on me. They want their money, and I can't blame them. I won't try to wiggle out of my debts. Those people loaned me feed and money in good faith."

"But," said Skinner Moynihan desperately, "there is a way out of this. Give me but a minute to think."

"You've thought enough," interrupted Red Callahan shortly. "Let's be getting back on the job. I've gained nothing but a long ride and a cussing from the brains in Kansas City. Yott and your thinking."

IT WAS dusk when they rolled into Buffalo Flat, and the cheery lights of the saloons were blooming along the dusty street. Red Callahan swung down out of the back of the buckboard with a weary grunt and started away.

Then he wheeled back and stopped by the front wheel.

"You'll report for work on the grade tomorra mornin' at six, Skinner Moynihan. And Johnny Lawrence, if you've really a mind to work for wages again, I'm thinking we can work in another man."

Johnny mustered up the best grin he could, and said with a tired gratefulness, "Thanks, Callahan, you're a white man."

" 'Tis a plain offer of a job and no more," said Red with dignity.

"Thanks again," said Johnny. "Let's go get the tie wagon and the mules, Skinner. . . ."

It was nearing midnight when they finished outspanning at the feed lot. Johnny slapped the last mule on its narrow rump as it went through the gate, and swung the pole gate until the latch bar clopped into the socket.

Skinner Moynihan stumped around in a small full circle, the restlessness in him making it impossible for him to stand still. Johnny swung away from the gate and they fell in step down the main drag of Buffalo Flat.

Callahan was in the Blue Ox, not drunk, but mellowed, watching the slow-turning surge of the crowd that filled the room. He made room for them beside him, and lifted a hand to the bartender. They had their drink in silence, and then the crew spotted Moynihan, and began to crowd him with drinks. The whiskey glow began to mount to his head.

He cuffed his battered hat to the back of his head. He had to shout to Johnny, no more than six feet away, to make himself heard above the din.

"The boys wonder that you are not drinking with them, Johnny."

Johnny shook his head and tried to smile. He moved in closer to Moynihan so he could speak. "I don't know how you do it, Moynihan. I've got to have me something to eat, and a bed for a few hours."

Skinner Moynihan grinned widely and hoisted a bottle with a sweeping gesture.

" 'Tis just what separates the men from the boys, Johnny," he said grandly. "Whiskey is food and drink, and home and mother, and the cure for all ills. Four drinks of this stuff, and you can whip any man in the crowd. Five, and you can blow him over wid your breath. One more, and there's no need of it, for you've not an enemy in the world."

"All right," said Johnny. "But I've got to have a steak and some coffee."

Skinner Moynihan waved grandly around and struck a pose, the harsh lamplight making a pattern of laughter on his seamed leather face.

"Boys," he cried, "here is Johnny Lawrence. A fine lad, and a good boss. I've worked for him but three days, and I'll niver get me wages. But he is a fine lad. If I take him under me wing, he'll grow into a fine, upstanding man. Wid me he'll learn to eat a steer for a steak, and toss off a hogshead for a bottle. He'll. . . ."

Johnny grasped him by the arm. "Come

on," he said. "You're drunk, and you haven't eaten all day. Come on."

"You see," crowed Moynihan. "Isn't he already learning to think? I tell you boys, 'tis a fine lad he is. . . . All right, Johnny, don't be shoving. I'm coming."

THERE was no eating place open on the main street at one o'clock in the morning, and they crossed over at the upper end, and headed for the railroad.

A street paralleled the tracks here, following along by the stock loading pens, the scattering of warehouses and the buildings that housed the railroad's equipment and men. A lone switch engine made a racketing as it made up a train, and a few lights in the buildings showed that the railroad worked the clock around.

A horse cantered briskly past them as they crossed the street, and the rider flung himself impatiently off at the office where a light showed in the back room.

"Well, now," said Skinner Moynihan wickedly. " 'Tis none other than our mutual friend, Mister Hubbard. What might he be in such a swivet about this time of night?"

"I wonder," echoed Johnny slowly. His eyes were hard and bright for a moment as they followed the straight-shouldered shape of Hubbard into the office of the purchasing agent, Riddle. Then he shrugged and turned away.

"None of our business any more," he said with tired resignation. "We've shot our bolt. Let's see about that steak."

They had coffee while they waited for the steaks. Johnny sat staring at the counter, blunt fingertips worrying the thick mug to and fro on the varnished pine counter. Skinner took a great gulp of the scalding brew, burped gently and smiled fuzzily at the counter girl.

Johnny said finally, "I don't think I'll be going to work this morning, Skinner. It will take most of the day to settle up my accounts. I've got plenty!"

"Work," returned Skinner grandly, "is a last resort of the brainless."

"Sure," agreed Johnny absently, and fished a stub of pencil out of a pocket. He slapped himself about the chest a moment, looking for paper.

"Would you have an old envelope or something on you, Skinner?"

Skinner Moynihan went through his pockets with slow patience.

"No, lad, I . . . oh, here we are." He pulled the wrinkled sheet from his pocket and dusted it off on the edge of the counter.

"By the powers, 'tis the note I got from Hubbard to the barn boss. There is but a few squiggles on the back of it. Will it do?"

"Sure," said Johnny, and reached for it.

But Skinner suddenly pulled it back and was studying the thing closely.

"Johnny," he said softly, "what is the going rate for ties?"

"Oh, in carload lots, sixty . . . sixty-five cents apiece. If you've got a good big contract, you could whittle it to nearer fifty cents. Why?"

"Siventy cents would be a fine price then?" The dancing glow of Skinner's eyes was changing to a frosty glint.

"I'd like to have had a contract like that for a couple of weeks."

Then Johnny was watching open-mouthed as Skinner whirled off his stool.

"Come on lad!" Skinner's voice was jubilant. "I'm thinking we've got our club!"

"But," said Johnny. "What? What is—"

"Just you follow me play," said Skinner, heading for the door.

"Hey," cried the counter girl. "What about these steaks?"

"Just you be keeping them hot, darlin'," Skinner called over his shoulder. "We'll be back for them."

RIDDLE was slapping a meaty hand on a paper on his desk. His chins quivered indignantly as he talked. Hubbard sat on the edge of his chair, and made placating motions with his thin hands. Thus they sat as Skinner and Johnny came through the door without knocking.

Riddle's little eyes glinted in their pouches as he turned angrily.

"What the hell do you mean, coming in here?" he bellowed. "This is a private business office."

"Keep your shirt on," advised Skinner. "How are you, Mister Hubbard?"

Riddle's reinforced chair creaked as he swung back to Hubbard. "Do you know these men?" he demanded.

Hubbard came to his feet. "I know them," he said, and his voice was a vicious snarl. "The one there is Moynihan, the crazy Irishman I told you about. And you should know the other one. That's Johnny Lawrence."

Riddle turned his little bright eyes on them again. "Get out," he said, almost pleasantly.

Skinner Moynihan pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. He stumped across the floor and hiked a broad hip onto the corner of Riddle's desk.

"A little more respect in the tone, if you please, Mr. Riddle. If you strike me the right way, I might see about letting you stay on here, counting spikes for the steel gang."

Riddle's jowls swelled as he absorbed the impudence, and his chair groaned as he started to his feet. Skinner reached out with a heavy, calloused hand, and Riddle sat down again with a grunt.

"I'll speak me piece first," said Skinner with a deadly softness. "Then you can have the floor. If you want it."

He switched his frosty blue gaze to Hubbard, who gazed back with a bitter twist to his lips.

"It had better be good, Moynihan," he said. There was a threat and a promise in his voice.

"It will be," promised Skinner Moynihan. "And it involves a couple of bitsy pieces of paper. Mister Riddle, the agent at Empire gave me a receipt for a load of ties, for which there has been no pay. Do we get the money or do we sue?"

"Sue and be damned," Riddle roared. "You can whistle for your money! Who

in hell do you think you are, to get away with a penny-ante stunt like that? Sue and be damned, and get the hell out of here!"

"Not yet," said Skinner. His smile was wide, but there was little humor in it. He swiveled a little on the hip that rested on the desk and his hand flicked out to snatch the paper from beneath Riddle's hand.

"Mmm-hmm!" said Skinner Moynihan, and then read the telegram aloud.

EXPLAIN WIRES FROM FOREMAN OF CONSTRUCTION DEMANDING TIES. ALSO CHECK ON LAWRENCE FREIGHTING CO. REGARDING OFFER. NEED NOT REMIND YOU THAT BLAKE AND MOFFAT CONTRACT IS MOST SPECIFIC REGARDING DELIVERY DATES. WILL HOLD YOU PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY DELAY TO MATERIALS. J. C. KILGORE, GEN'L MGR.

"What is the delay?" inquired Skinner of Hubbard. "Why is it that ties are short, and still Johnny here could not get a smell of the job?"

"None of your damned business," retorted Hubbard shortly.

"Now see here," shouted Riddle. "I'm not going to stand for any more of this. Ante up or get to hell out of this. You're sticking your nose into something that can get you into trouble."

"I'm not in trouble," said Moynihan, still softly. He slowly pulled the folded paper from his shirt pocket and tapped it gently on the desk.

"When I first hit Mister Hubbard here for a job, he wrote me a note to the barn boss, so I could draw a team. He used a scrap of paper that he had been using to draw up some figures. Very interesting figures." He shot a quick glance at Hubbard's suddenly white face.

"Ah," he said. "It adds up already, does it not, Mr. Hubbard?"

Hubbard said through his teeth, "I should have shot you, Moynihan!"

Skinner Moynihan waved a careless hand. Then he started grinning again.

"I could say the same, Mister Hubbard. Which is neither here or there. The point is just that you, Mister Hubbard, as manager of Blake and Moffat, showed your company a different contract than the one that Riddle, here, showed his railroad boss.

"On this paper here, you've been totaling up the difference between siventy cents a tie and fifty cents—split two ways. It adds up to a very tidy sum. It—"

"Damn you!" cried Hubbard wildly. "Damn you to hell! I knew I should have killed you!" His hand went under his coat, and Johnny let out a full-throated yell as Hubbard brought up the gun.

"Don't move," warned Hubbard, and kicked the chair away from behind his knees. "Riddle, get that paper. . . ." *Whap!*

THE shiny length of the whip licked out like a striking rattlesnake, and the gun spun away from Hubbard's numbed hand. Working tendons showed through the four-inch slash on the back of his hand. Mister Hubbard screamed like a woman.

Riddle bucked back in his chair and his hand flashed into a drawer as Johnny left his feet in a driving lunge over the desk. He took Riddle, chair and all, with him, and the whole office danced and rattled as they crashed to the floor. Johnny went on over in his roll, and when he came up, he had the gun.

Hubbard stood half-crouching, whimpering and nursing his slashed hand against his chest. Riddle was still sprawled on the floor, and Skinner Moynihan still sat with one hip on the desk.

"Laddie," quoth Skinner Moynihan approvingly, "you move wid a good easy motion."

"What'll we do with 'em, Skinner? Kill 'em, or just maim 'em for life?"

"No," retorted Skinner, the milk of kindness pouring from his soft-spoken

words. "You, Hubbard, are going to crawl the first train out of here. Don't be back." He emphasized it with an ear-splitting crack of his whip an inch from Hubbard's throat.

"You, Riddle, are going to write a check right now for those two hundred and eleven ties. Then you're going to draw up a contract wid Johnny here. One contract, wid no monkey business in it. And mind you, I'll have an eye on you, and the first time you slip, the railroad company is going to find out about all that money you split wid Hubbard here. Move!"

Riddle heaved his bulk off the floor, and did as he was directed.

"Now," suggested Skinner Moynihan, "supposing you sign that check over to me, Johnny. Your credit will be A-1, what wid the contract and all, and this check will about cover you wid me. We'll call it square."

"But," said Johnny, "you'll get your percentage out of the contract. Sure, you can have this check, but you've more coming than that."

"A bird in the hand," quoth Skinner Moynihan, "is worth three on the tailboard. I'll take the check and let the rest go. . . ."

The faintest of red streaks showed that dawn was near as Callahan herded his battered crew onto the waiting flatcar of the work train. He counted noses and swore feelingly.

"Where in the name of the pink-toed saints is the Moynihan?"

He swung down off the car and strode up the dusty street, looking in at every saloon and deadfall along the way.

"There you are," he roared as he shouldered into the Blue Ox. "Get out of this, man. There's work to be done."

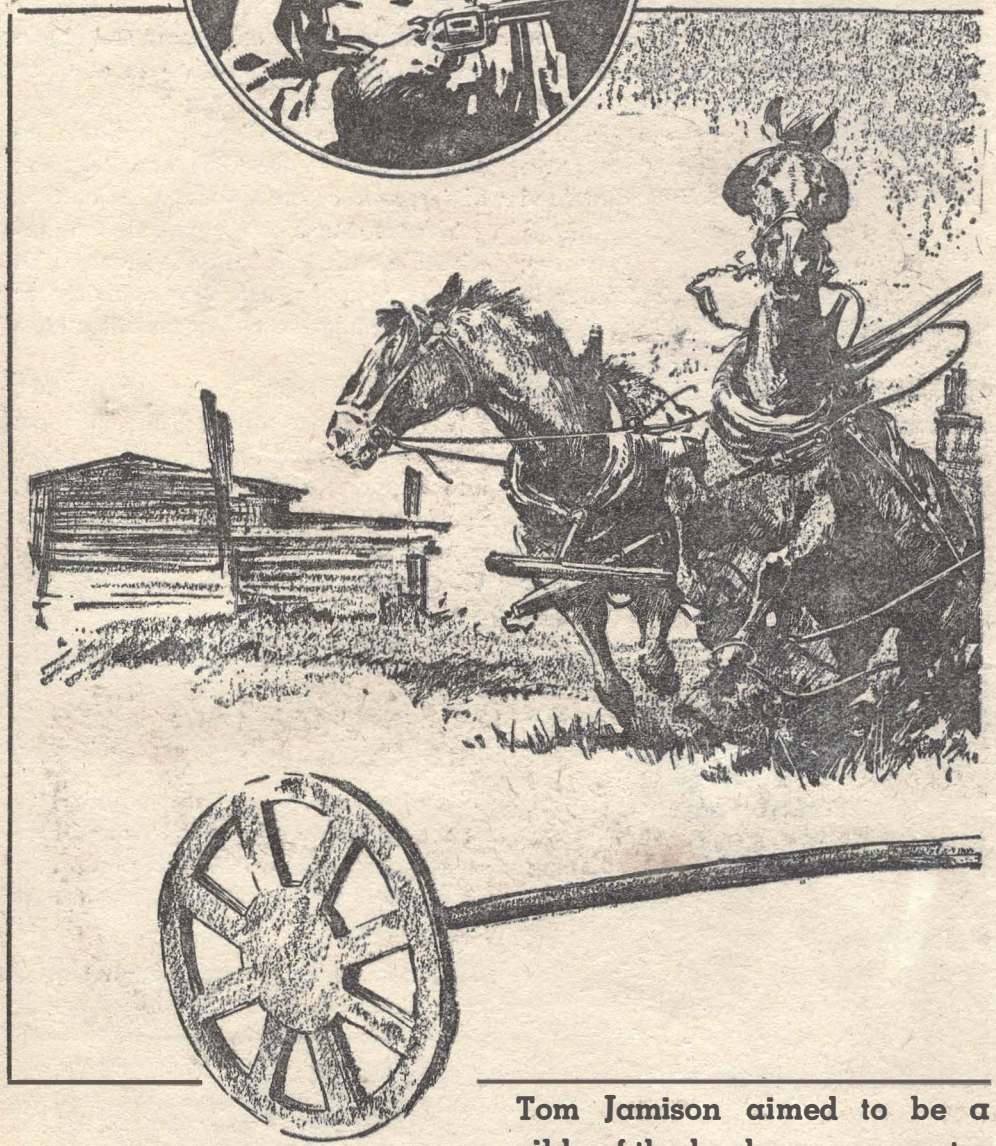
Skinner Moynihan regarded him fuzzily. He cuffed his hat to the back of his head and reached ten feet down the bar with his shiny lash to fetch a bottle to his elbow.

"Get on wid you," he advised kindly. "'Tis only mules and the daft ones that works for just their meals." He reached into a pocket and spilled a handful of double eagles on the bar.

"Get along wid you, Red Callahan. I'll work for you another day."

THE END

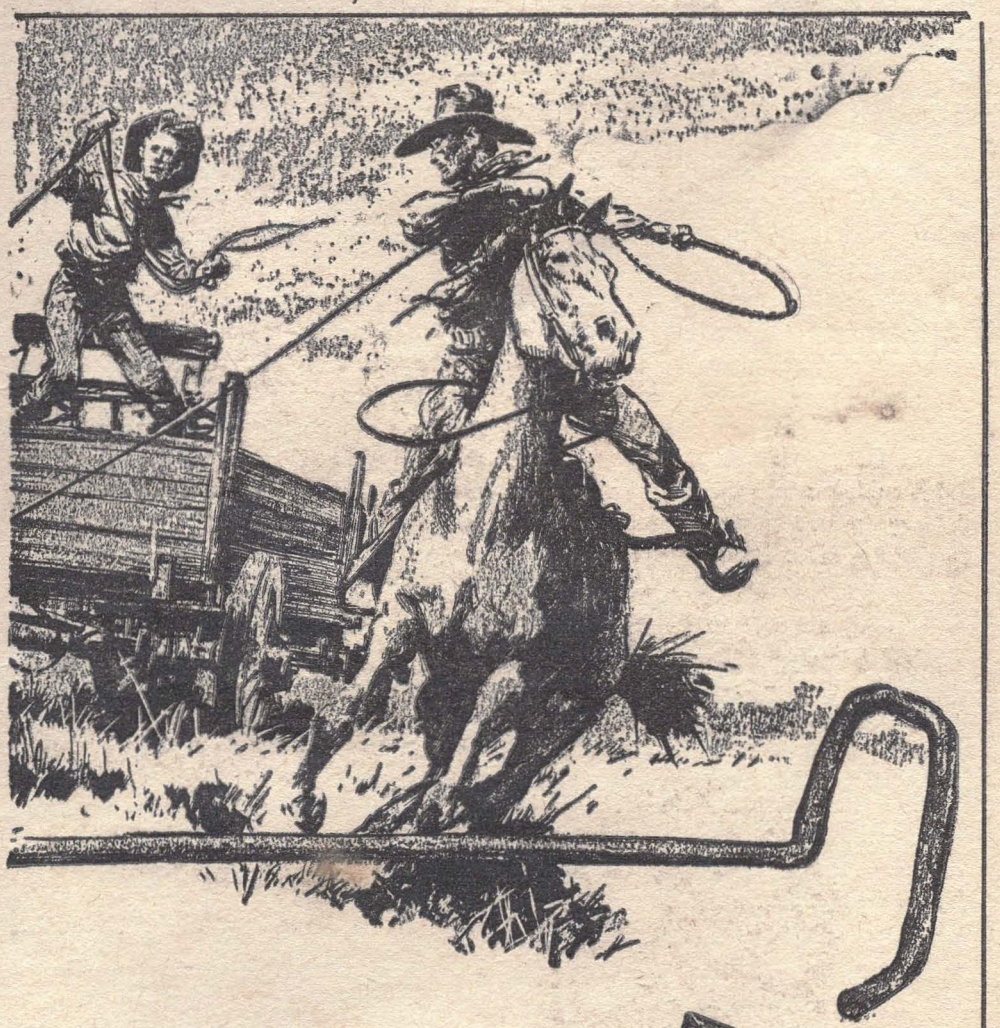
UNDER



Tom Jamison aimed to be a
cible of the lawless cow-country
and loyalty

THE MESA GUNS

By DEE LINFORD



BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL $2.50 VALUE

man—and only in the fiery cru-cible could the mettle of his courage be tempered!

Plenty From Missouri

TOM JAMISON had heard it said that when it came to hiring yourself out in the cow-country, the word 'man' was reckoned to mean a man and horse. So his first act in Amity was to rig a deal with the livery corral operator to trade a month's work for an old mare the stableman kept around for the town girls to ride. And the very morning that his month was up, Tom saw a big cow herd angling off across the flats.

"So you still hanker to be a cowboy, hey?" old Hitch twanged when Tom hit him up for ownership papers to the mare. "We'll, you're big for your age, an' know it, an' I don't doubt you'll make somebody a hand. But that's a Hub herd yonder, an' I wouldn't apply there if I was you. Ol' Grent pays top wages an' takes his pick o' men. Don't know as I ever did hear o' Grent hirin' a boy."

Tom knew he meant it kindly. And, when you got right down to cases, Tom wasn't but a coming eighteen-year-old, less than two months from hog-herdin' on his mother's farm outside of Kansas City. But he didn't approve of being called a boy.

"I'm from Missouri, Hitch," he said.

"Yeah, you're plenty from Missouri," the old stableman conceded glumly. "But ol' Grent, he's from Showtown. Go ahead an' tackle 'im, if that's what you want."

But all the while he grumbled, the old man was writing out a bill-of-sale, and five minutes later Tom was riding out of the corral, straddle of the old McClellan army saddle Hitch had sold him for a dollar and a half.

"Ride 'em, cowboy!" Hitch hooted after him. "Here comes a buckaroo!"

Tom blushed a little, figuring he didn't look like much, what with the mare so old and decrepit she squeaked when she walked, and him stuck up on that kidney pad saddle like a bump on a log. His old slouch hat was a couple of cuts too big, and his matted red hair was down over his collar behind. His clothes were out at the elbows and knees, and his flat-heeled walking shoes were too big for the saddle's strap-hung, iron-ring stirrups. But he didn't owe Hitch a dime, or any other man.

Just where the high-stepping team of bays came from, Tom would never know. He was still looking back at Hitch, thumb on his nose, when the rattle of harness and a warning yell broke against his ears. Instinctively, he pulled the mare over to one side before he looked. But it was the same side taken by the swerving team, and the next thing Tom knew the floundering old mare was so entangled with the shiny bays that Tom was not wholly clear as to just which horse of the three he was riding.

Surprisingly enough, the mare kept her feet, and once the team had stopped he was able to extricate her without appreciable damage to either side. But all the while he sweated at his task, a raging voice was dressing him down profanely for not watching where he went.

WHEN he had the horses unscrambled and could get around to it, he looked at the source of the profanity, and found a youngish man not much older than himself, with a red sulky face and clothes like a sport. His rig was a red-wheeled buggywagon with the seat stripped off, and the sport was standing up near the front endgate, shaking a buggywhip as he yelled.

"Aw, dry up," Tom advised, willing to own to half the blame for the accident, but no more. "My mother wasn't no dog. You ain't got to bark at me."

"An' don't give me none of your lip!" the other warned. "You ain't too big to whip, sonny!"

High on the list of people that Tom could not abide were those his same age and younger who called him "sonny." But he was in a hurry and could see no advantage to be gained by continuing this particular conversation. So he saluted the sport as he had done Hitch, and turned the mare to ride on. The instant his back was turned, he heard the whip whistle in the air, and flinched in expectation. But the blow fell on the mare.

Old and stove up as she was, Tom would not have believed the mare could have any buck left in her. But he had misjudged her, just as he'd misjudged the sport. When the whip's poppers first bit into her bony rump, she froze in her tracks and bunched her back in anticipation of a second whack. When this came, she chinned the sun and swallowed her tail, throwing Tom so high he could see blue sky below him.

Tom came to earth standing up, so he lost no hide in the deal. But he struck so hard his hips seemed driven all the way up to his armpits.

Standing there, hunched and shaken, Tom had a confused impression of a jeering laugh, of a sun-browned face split wide open with merriment. Then the buggy wagon was moving on, circling back to the roadway, the whip cracking in the air above the horses' backs. Tom then saw his mare standing a short way off, looking embarrassed and guilty, and his first impulse was to hammer her head in with a rock. Then he took a look at the bloody welts across its bony croup, and he knew that the hammering was due someone else.

"Why, that ornery cuss!" he muttered, suddenly bitter at such senseless and uncalled for brutality. "Why, if I had a whip—"

He glared after the rig as he spoke, seeing the sport had righted his team and was heading on into town, the whip held out at shoulder height above the near front wheel, the poppers snapping to keep the bays stepping high and give him an impressive entrance. Tom's hot gaze settled on that outstretched leather stock, and he didn't bother to finish what he was saying. Instead, he grabbed a handful of mane and vaulted to the saddle without touching stirrup, and kicked the old mare to a run, toeing his shoes into the metal rings as he went.

The nag's floundering lope cut the buggy wagon's lead, and the rattle of harness and rig together must have drowned the sound of her approach, because the sport didn't turn as Tom came up. Didn't pull in the whip.

Tom was vaguely aware of old Hitch's scolding shout as he pounded past the livery corral. But Tom wasn't granting any interviews right then, and didn't dare take his eyes off the whip ahead, for fear the sport would pull it in.

The buckboard was just entering the canyoned main part of town when Tom overtook it. The driver turned as he drew alongside, but Tom already had both hands on the whip. One hard tug and he was in complete possession.

The sport yelled something, and got both hands on his lines, as if expecting Tom to lash up his team for spite, and maybe cause him a run-away. But Tom's intentions didn't involve any innocent horses. Tom laid the whip on the sport instead.

THE man on the buggy-wagon cried out as the poppers bit into his hunched shoulders, and turned to grab at the punishing goad. But two quick cuts across the hand discouraged him in that, and he shook the team up to a run, seeking to pull away from his tormentor. But Tom's old mare had her blood up now, and seemed to find revenge as sweet as Tom did. She wouldn't be pulled away from.

She stuck like a burr beside the flying rig while Tom laid the lash across the sport's shoulders and haunches, again and again.

Halfway down the narrow street, the sport had got enough, and threw his lines away and unloaded. He missed his footing in coming to earth, and disappeared in a cloud of dust. By the time Tom had sawed the old mare down and got her turned, the whip-handy youth was back on his feet again, racing for the shelter of the Red Dog Saloon, and Tom didn't get close enough to burn his britches a final time, as he'd hoped. So, instead, he reversed the long stalk in his hand, and—standing in his stirrup—hurled it like a spear.

The long missile flew straight as a javelin, and just as the running man hit the batwing doors, the heavily leaded butt struck him at the base of the neck. It must have given him quite a jar, because he fell forward with such force that his hat flew off backward and rolled out into the street.

At that instant, Tom heard a prolonged grating crash somewhere down the street, and turned to see that the run-away team had collided with a freight outfit, down in front of the blacksmith shop. Already, people were pouring out of the stores and houses to investigate, and there was promise of hell to pay in general. So Tom didn't linger, and he didn't take the road in making his departure. Chances were good that the sport would be able to borrow a gun in the bar, and Tom thought it wise to put a building or two at his back. So he sent the old mare loping down the alley between the bank and Click's harness shop, and then headed her out across the flats.

He didn't look back until he had the river between him and the town. Then, no pursuit being in evidence, he eased the mare's gait to a gut-squeaking trot, and struck off toward the cow herd. The world at the moment seemed kind and just, rosy with promise to a budding cowboy from Missouri. After a time, Tom eased the mare to a walk, and lifted up his voice in song.

The ballad that came to mind belonged to the country of his adoption, and was as sad as remembered childhood, full of pathos and love of mother and home. And although Tom had no home deserving of the name, and scarcely any mother even, since his widowed parent had married his uncle Jack, he poured his soul into the mournful melody, imagining himself to be its romantically unfortunate principal, luxuriating in its exquisite melancholy.

"I am an ol' cowpuncher, an' now I'm dressed in rage.
I used to be a tough one, an' take on great big jags.
Now when I left my home, boys, my mother for me cried,
She begged me not to go, boys. For me she would have died...."

AT THE pace he held to, Tom was almost an hour reaching the herd—the long dusty line against the horizon that coiled and twisted like a crawling snake, stretching thin and flowing wide again, like a restless river, with a mist of shining horns above.

It was multi-colored aggregation: Roans and reds and blacks and blues. Brindles and ballies and brockos and spots. As Tom came closer, he saw that all were big steers, high-headed and big-horned, marching along like soldiers. All had a circle mark well forward on their ribs with short lines radiating out, like a child's drawing of the sun. But a month's residence in Amity had given Tom sophistication in the ways of the West and its vernacular. He recognized the iron as the Grent Hub-and-Spoke.

Closing in alongside the column, Tom

smelled the sweat and dust and the strong cow smell. He felt the heat generated by the collective bodies, and heard the muted clashing of horns above the bawling and the muffled grind of hoofs. And if he hadn't known before, he knew now what kind of work it was he had hoboed a thousand miles west to do.

The man up on point was along in years, with graying broken-wing mustaches and a sour, knocked down mouth. He was riding a short-coupled horse that was a horse, and made Tom's old mare look like the crowbait she was, in comparison. The man eyed Tom up and down as he came in to side him. Then he looked straight ahead and kept on riding, as if Tom did not exist.

"You Mister Grent?" Tom inquired, using his huskiest voice.

The man continued to ignore him for a time, then made the no sign with his head.

Tom took in a long breath. "Well, who I see about a ridin' job?"

The man turned then to look at him again, a quick sardonic flash of measuring eyes. "You want men's work, or boy's?"

"I'll take what you got," Tom told him, his jaw coming out. "If it's men's work, I expect I'll grow into it."

The man faced ahead again and went on ignoring him for a hundred yards or so. Then his tall-hatted head jerked backwards.

"You'll have to see the next man back," he said. "He does the hirin' an' the firin'."

Tom thanked him and wheeled his mare, pointing her toward the rider on swing, barely visible through the dust. He decided, coming nearer, that the point man must have erred, because this one didn't look like any straw boss. Tom thought at first he was only a boy, but when he was within speaking distance he could see that the head on the boy's body was white-thatched and wrinkled.

Tom put his question, politely. But this informant didn't speak at all. Just turned in his saddle and pointed at the next rider back, with his chin, like an Indian.

In any other circumstances, Tom would have actively resented such pointed lack of sociability. But, in his lights, such men as these would be privileged to look down their noses at the President himself. So he nodded his thanks and acknowledgment, and rode on.

THE herd was strung out for more than a mile, and Tom kept working back, each rider passing him on to the one behind. By the time he'd arrived back at the drag, he had started to suspicion that it might just be a game. But, if game it was, Tom couldn't see the point. And he reckoned that someone in authority must be along. So he accosted the lone drag rider and put his question again.

Tom Jamison

"Man that hires an' fires?" this man

repeated, lowering the neckerchief he wore bandit-fashion over his nose and mouth. "Wa'al, let's see."

The dust-rimmed eyes left Tom and combed the country all around. Then a hand came up and pointed back in the direction of town.

"I reckon there he comes, yonder. Been to Amity to fetch out grub an' dust-cutter. You're in luck. Usually, he drinks the dust-cutter in town, an' don't make it back."

Tom by now was openly skeptical. But the rider in the distance was leading two packhorses, so that much squared. Anyhow, he couldn't see that he had much alternative. So he thanked this man, too, and turned back toward the far-off horseback er.

His skepticism mounted until he was well within sight of the lone horseback er. Then he started to believe that here was his man, after all. It couldn't be Grent, for certain. But the man did fill all Tom's notions of what a top screw should look like. All Tom's notions of what he wanted to be, himself.

The rider was tall and red-haired, like Tom. But there the similarity ended. The other had a mustache, and a wealth of crisp red hair bristled from the open collar of his new blue army shirt. His pants and boots and spurs were as good as money could buy. His saddle was silver-mounted, and his horse was a lustrous-stockinged Mexican sorrel that Tom would have given his right arm to own.

He wore two pistols in heavy crossed bullet belts, and the rifle in the saddle boot looked new. The two packers behind him would have made bankers' Sunday horses back where Tom was from. The panniers and crossbucks all were dandies.

The man pulled up as Tom did, and returned his nod cordially. The tawny gray eyes went over Tom and his mare and outfit, and Tom had the feeling he was being smiled at. But, except for a brightness in the gauging eyes, the smile did not show.

"You the man that hires for Hub?" Tom asked, thinking that he'd seen the man some place before.

The cowboy looked startled. "Me?" he said, pointing a thick finger at his chest, as if anxious to eliminate all chance of error. "Me? Hire for Hub? Now what ever put a notion like that in your red head?"

Tom sat silent a minute, assailed by rising impatience and frustration. Then he spoke sharply. "They said—back there at the herd—"

He checked it there, clamping his teeth down tight, feeling his face turn red. But he'd already said enough for the cowboy's comprehension. The gray eyes swung off toward the cow herd and returned, and the hidden grin came out into the open, spreading the mouth so wide it closed the eyes.

"So they run the ol' ranickboo on you, eh? Had you ridin' all over the county, just to find out there wasn't no job!"

Tom sat writhing in mortification, wishing he could somehow recall his words, or else just dry up and disappear into thin air. He still wasn't absolutely clear as to the point of the joke played on him, but he sensed he'd been made a roaring fool of, and he'd had to go and let this cowboy know it. For some reason, this cowboy's knowing seemed the worst part of it all.

Tom's face was hot, and there was a burning sensation in his stomach.

"Now, don't take it too much to heart," the cowboy advised, his grin lessening. "They're all great jokers, down at Hub. You ain't the first that's learned that, the hard way. Why, wait till they help you break your laig or neck—somethin' real hee-larious. Then they'll bust a gut!"

An edge crept into the cowboy's tone when he mentioned Hub. A sawing edge

of antagonism that said he had no love for the Grent layout. And Tom started feeling a grateful kinship with him from that moment. Because Tom wasn't feeling any affection for the outfit, either.

THE cowboy pushed back his hat to show an unruly forelock of sorrel red, only slightly lighter than his eyes. The tawny eyes went over Tom again, and the grin came up again. "Anyhow, I like your guts," he said. "Whippin' Ollie Grent through half the town, with a buggywhip—then hittin' his old man's outfit for a job!"

Tom stared at him blankly, not understanding. Then his embarrassment and frustration both fell in front of numbing comprehension. "Ollie Grent?" he said hollowly. "You mean that sport on the buggy-wagon? Good hell, I didn't know Grent had a son."

"He ain't," the cowboy said punitively, savoring his words. "Ollie was borned twin to a polecat, an' Ollie died, whereas the polecat lived. But ol' Grent wasn't one to notice—havin' stripes an' a powerful stink himself!"

Tom went on staring, scarcely hearing what was said. Thinking back, he didn't see where he could have behaved other than he had. But the fact remained that it was a bad thing he'd done. From all he'd heard, Grent owned the county and all the people in it. And there went Tom's chance for a job. Likely, there wouldn't be anybody in the county hire him now.

"I seen the whole thing, in town, an' it was sweet," the cowboy was saying exuberantly. "Ollie's had that lacin' comin' for fifteen years, an' you're my candidate for pres-i-dent an' Injun Chief! But take a piece o' good advice, an' git a lot o' country in between you an' Hub. Quick as Ollie gits his dignity back, he'll hunt you down with dogs!"

Tom sat desolated and stunned by the unfair blow dealt him by grinning, sardonic fate. He wondered dully where he would go, and what he would do after he had got there. Almost, he wished the fall from the old mare's back had broken his neck.

"Now I got a little place, up on Hurricane," the cowboy went on, as if reading Tom's thoughts. "Just a little cap-an'-ball, muzzle-loadin' rancho up under the mesa—vest-pocket size for convenient concealment about the person. But it's out of the way, an' any man that pours the silk to Ollie Grent like you done is welcome to put up with me.

"I got ridin' work, too, if that's the kind o' job you want," he went on, when Tom hesitated. "Don't know what I can pay, but I eat good."

Tom's spirits snapped back like a stretched rubber band, at the prospect of working for a man like the cowboy. But then they dropped again. "I could use the job," he said, finding the words hard to speak but speaking them anyhow. "But I don't know if I should like it. I wouldn't want to git you in bad with Hub."

The cowboy laughed through his nose like a stud horse that's hot and rearing to go. "I'm already in bad with Hub, kid. Hub's no hide off me!"

"Well," Tom said, so happy he wanted to yell, "I guess you've hired a hand. Tom Jamison's the name."

"Glad to know you, kid," the cowboy said. "You can call me Sam."

The cowboy must have strained his vocal chords by then, because for a couple of hours thereafter, he said nothing more. Just watched the country and grunted once in a while in answer to Tom's attempts at conversation. But when they came to a little badlands creek whose lower banks were glistening bars of shifting sand, he spoke shortly.

"That branch is called Hurricane Crick. Heads up on the mesa. Any one o' them bars you see would swallow an empty sack. But the water's gravely an'

clear, up at my place. It's good water."

Saddle weary and hungry, Tom looked over the broken landscape and hoped to see the ranch. But Sam led him into a deep cut in the breaks where the country was so wild and stood on end that he couldn't see fifty feet in any direction but straight up. Here the stream was a slow-moving flow of liquid mud, and the only growing things were rabbit brush and lizards.

TOM was about done in when, along about sundown, they came to some bars across the trail. Once they were through the pole barrier, the breaks opened suddenly onto a small meadow valley about a mile long and half a mile wide, all ringed in by broken chalk bluffs and buttes. As Sam had said, the creek here was clear as glass. The lush bottom grass looked sweet and fat.

"This here's some spot!" Tom exclaimed "How'd you come to find it?"

"It's right cozy," Sam agreed. "Only two trails out, an' I got bars acrost them both. Fencin' ain't no problem here."

Nigh onto a hundred head of cattle grazed the meadow, and a big band of horses came trotting up to snort at them. The cows all wore a big wheel brand up on the ribs, but Tom couldn't make much out of the horses. There were fine looking saddle animals and heavy draft creatures with harness scars and work-bent legs. There were fine-looking coach horses and scrawny, wild-appearing scrubs with coyote heads and long broom tails that swept the ground.

Only about half the horses wore brands, and Tom noticed that no two brands were the same.

"All this stock yourn?" he asked, allowing in his mind that Sam must be well set up.

"An' the nice part of it is," Sam said, "it's hard to find. Ain't many even know it's here."

Tom rode a time in silence, feeling his face turn warm again. "Well," he growled at last, "pardon me, all to aitch. I only asked a civil question."

"Kid," Sam said mildly, "the only civil question I ever heard was how-de-do."

And Tom resolved firmly in his mind right then that his employer's business would be his own from then on.

The cabin sat in some breaks above the creek on the far side of the valley. It was part dugout and part cottonwood log, with one window and a door of split cedar. It smelled something like a cellar inside, and wasn't very clean, having dirt for a floor and part of the walls. But there was a tin campstove for cooking and cupboards made of packing boxes. There was a rough plank table and benches to match. In a big windowless room off the kitchen, there were bunks enough to sleep a dozen men.

Half a dozen questions crossed Tom's mind as he poked around, but they remained unasked. All he could figure was that his employer kept a big crew that was out somewhere. None of the bunks but one had been used lately.

When they'd unpacked and stowed the stuff they'd fetched from town, they took the horses on up to the stable, which proved to be just a cave in a big mud butte, faced with logs and doored with cedar like the house. Around it, in the breaks, were three natural corrals, with pole bars separating them.

"That ol' stick horse looks used up," Sam said when they'd swung down. "Lean 'er up agin' the butte there, an' straddle my sorrel an' fetch the cavvy in, so's I can rope us out some night horses."

Tom was so weary that the thought of night riding left him weak. But he did as he was told. Later, he helped store the gear and rustled wood and water while Sam fried pan bread and beef, and boiled coffee.

The cabin's only window had an inside wooden shutter that worked on wooden hinges, and Tom thought it strange when Sam lowered it carefully before lighting the old barn lantern that did as lamp. As far as Tom knew, the nearest neighbor was twenty miles away, and he couldn't see where they had anything to be modest about. But he reminded himself it was Sam's house, to do in as he pleased.

Eating restored him somewhat, and when the wrecks were washed, he could think about the night riding without his knees buckling. But presently Sam yawned and started getting ready for bed, and Tom was glad to follow suit.

He was too tired to worry about the night horses that evening. But he did find himself wondering about them on other nights, as time went on, and they never turned in of an evening without horses in the corral.

The saddle had spanked him raw, but he hadn't touched the horn again

2

Hurricane Mesa

IT WAS daylight when Tom awoke, and Sam was making breakfast in the kitchen. Tom was dressed, lacing up his high-topped shoes, when Sam looked in on him and tossed him a pair of old run-over high-heeled boots.

"Try them there, for fit," he instructed. "Save them thirty-minute moccasins for herdin' sheep with."

"Thirty minute moccasins?" Tom repeated, puzzled.

" 'Pears to take that long to lace 'em," Sam observed laconically.

So Tom slid his feet into his first pair of cowboy boots, and found the fit was fine. When he said so, Sam fetched a better hat and an old single-action .38.

"Better take some more advice," he said, "an' learn to use that equalizer. Bible says the race ain't to the swift nor the battle to the strong, but time an' chance happen to us all. Well, out here, I've noticed time an' chance usually happen to the man that's caught short."

Tom thanked him gratefully, and when he sat down to breakfast, he was feeling wild and woolly. But, time they'd finished, Sam had changed his mind about the hat.

"On secont thought," he said, "better just leave that ol' louse cage hang. You wear it, an' you're goin' to look a mighty lot like me."

Tom couldn't very well remark that to

look like Sam was the height of his ambition. Nor could he very well argue about it, the hat being Sam's. But he did wonder why, from Sam's viewpoint, such a similarity in appearance would be a calamity. He let the hat hang.

Sam ran the horses in while Tom washed up. And when Tom got down to the corrals, Sam was waiting for him, a coil of rope in his hands.

"Kid," he said, "you ride for me, you're goin' to need a horse. Now, that little bangtail blue yonder by the wall don't claim no man that I know of. Rope 'im out, an' top 'im off. Let 'im know he's yourn."

Next to the stockinged sorrel, the blue was the best looking animal in the bunch, and Tom was starting to feel plenty set up. But, when he tried to swing Sam's rope, he didn't catch much but himself.

"Here," Sam said patiently. "Git a loop a mite bit smaller than the corral. Git it to movin' through the air, then throw where you're lookin'."

He made it look so easy that Tom wanted to take the loop off the blue's neck and try his own hand again. But Sam had different notions.

"We got work to do, kid. There's a rope in the stable you can have to practice with when you ain't doin' nothin' else. There's a saddle there, too. Fetch it, an' give that ol' postage stamp back to the cavalry."

Tom fetched the saddle and adjusted the stirrups to fit. When he'd cinched it on the blue's flinching back, Sam showed him how to blindfold the pony with his scarf and hold its near front foot off the ground with his rope, until he had settled in the saddle. But Sam couldn't show him how to stay up on the hurricane deck, once he'd removed the blind and rope, and Tom only lasted for three short jumps.

"Lend me the loan of your spurs," he told the grinning cowboy, picking himself up and spitting out a mouthful of horse dust. "He might stack me again, but I'll peel 'im from his tail end both ways, before he does!"

"There's spurs in the stable, too," Sam told him. "But spurs ain't to make horses buck. Buckin' is foolishment, for horse an' rider both. Thing you got to do is convince the horse."

Tom got the spurs, and the next time up Sam had the corral bars down and was on his sorrel, a riding quirt in his hand. When the blue started his pitch, Sam laid the quirt across his rump, and the buck ended in a wild run that carried Tom out of the corral and down across the meadow.

SAM stuck close alongside, and each time the blue started to unwind the main spring, Sam quirted him again, straightening him to a run. One time, Tom grabbed the horn and Sam quirted his hand instead. That time, Tom made a one-point landing in a patch of prickly pear.

"Now there's a proposition," Sam said gravely, coming up with the sweating blue in tow. "You hear a lot o' reasons talked for the high degree to which rough-ridin' has been advanced, here in the woolly West. But you put credit where credit belongs, an' honor the lowly prickly pear. No man that lights in it once will ever git shucked a secont time!"

"Hell with that!" Tom lashed out, removing another thorn from his flesh. "I wouldn't of got shucked that time, if you'd kept that quirt to yourself. You an' Ollie Grent! Git down here with me, an' I'll honor you!"

But Sam let his grin come out, and Tom long ago had learned he couldn't stay mad at Sam when Sam grinned.

"I done it for your own good," Sam said. "You won't learn to ride, chokin' the apple. You ride with your laigs an' haunches."

Tom didn't argue the point. But the next time he got on the pony's back, he held the quirt himself. Inside of half an hour, the saddle had spanked him raw. But he hadn't touched the horn again, and there wasn't any jump left in ol' Blue.

"Handle him right, an' he'll make you a horse," Sam promised. "He's still bronky an' full o' snorts. But you've topped him off, an' he'll settle down. Be low-headed an' quiet an' willin', without you spoil him."

The fairgrounding done with, they rounded up the cattle and pushed them off the meadow and up onto a mesa, along the upper creek trail that led through the second set of bars. Sam remarked in the course of the ride that Hub claimed the mesa as its private cow pasture, but said it was public domain and the claim didn't stand up with him, even if Hub did have most of it under fence. Said that he grazed the cows out most of the time, except when he figured to be away, and saved the meadow graze for horses.

When they got back to the meadow, it was coming on for noon, and a strange horse band was stringing up out of the breaks, down the Amity trail. There looked to be sixty or seventy of the hardest set-up skates Tom had ever seen. Skinny and rough-coated and so sore-footed it was all they could do to hobble along.

THE seven drovers that Tom counted looked as hard-used and bad off as the horses, and he figured it must be some wild bunch, trailing through. But Sam looked the outfit over and seemed halfway pleased.

"More customers," he announced, "with more switchers to fatten an' twist out. An', from the looks of 'em, we got our work cut out, this go."

"You mean you break horses for other people?" Tom couldn't help asking.

"I ain't got cows enough to keep me busy," Sam nodded. "So I do this other as a business. Why, outside the sorrel, I don't own a horse. An' I don't need him, actual. Not long as other people are willin' to pay me to use their'n."

Tom pondered his employer's words, and decided they solved the riddle of the conflicting brands among the bunch on the meadow. The question came to mind if Sam had owned the blue he'd given to Tom. But it didn't seem the kind of question that could be asked, and Tom just let it go.

None of the new brands seemed to jibe with any in the bunch already at the ranch. But the men all greeted Sam warmly and complimented him on the looks of the others, so Tom reckoned them to be old customers.

Sam introduced Tom all around. The names he heard didn't sound like names he'd ever heard before. Dabs and Slim Pickens. Bad Water. Sundance and Hard Pan. Bitch Crick. Montan.

None of them paid much attention to Tom until Sam had told them of his run-in with Ollie Grent, with some of Sam's imagination added. Then they made so much over him that Tom wished his boss had kept quiet.

"I tell you," he overheard Sam bragging to them, "that boy will do to take along. He's tough as bullneck rawhide, an'll fight at the drop of a hat. There's a heap he don't know about horses, but he ain't afraid to learn. He's goin' to make us a hand!"

They hazed the new horses into the corrals and all went up to the house to eat. Tom found the talk they made more fascinating than anything he'd ever heard before. But Sam didn't seem to like him listening to it. Sam fed him early, then told him to ride up on the mesa and check on the cows.

It didn't make a lot of sense, when they'd only left the cows that morning. But Tom did as he was told, and dusk was falling when he got back to the

meadow. A big fire was going down on the creek bank, and what looked to be a yearling critter was roasting on a spit. Two stone jugs were circulating, and when Tom joined the party, the man called Sundance sought him out.

Of all the seven drovers, Sundance seemed to be the only one previously unknown to Sam. He was tall as Sam, with yellow hair, white eyes, and the thin transparent kind of skin that burns and reburns, never tanning. The long horse face just now was raw from the sun and wind, the long tongue thick from whiskey.

"Well, here's m'boy!" he greeted, offering Tom a jug. "Drink up, pardner. Sam says you're a he-wolf. This here is your night to howl!"

Tom hadn't yet tasted hard liquor, and didn't know. Feeling Sam's eyes on him, he looked over and saw Sam's head shake. His own head made the same motion at Sundance.

"Thanks, Sundance," he said, grinning to show he meant it right. "My ma told me likker was for snake bite an' coffin varnish."

"You been weaned from your ma," the tall man said, turning ugly. "You're on the bottle now. Any son of a dog tough enough to horsewhip Ollie Grent is tough enough to drink hard likker."

TOM had noticed that hard names were not looked on as insults in this group, so he let that pass. But the rest of it couldn't be passed. Sundance kept coming, and Tom tried to back off. But one powerful arm encircled his neck, while the other brought the jug up and jammed the neck against his mouth. The smell of mash and stale body sweat filled Tom's nostrils, and fear and rage lashed him to action. His sudden burst of strength broke the arm's hold on him and sent the tall man reeling back. When he fell, he spilled the jug's contents.

"Kid," he warned thickly, getting his feet under him again, "you spilled good likker. Ain't p'lite to spill good likker. Kid, I'm goin' to learn you how to do."

Setting the jug carefully upright on the bank, the drunken rider straightened again and lurched forward, hands balled to strike. Tom stood his ground, but didn't like to hit him, for fear of causing trouble. He put out a hand, thinking only to push the other off. But a fist smashed against his cheek, knocking him down. And, before he could rise, the tall man jumped for him, spurs slashing down to rowel his face.

Tom rolled to safety and regained his feet. And when Sundance came at him again, Tom was finished with gentle pushing. He smothered a kick that had death in it, and got a fist against the pointed jaw with a drive so vicious his arm was numbed. That time Sundance took more ground to fall in, and ended up in the creek on his back. He emerged gasping and dripping, and seemingly sobered. And when he moved in a third time, a knife flashed low in his hand.

Tom backed away from him again, eyes searching for some kind of weapon, but finding none, wishing for the pistol he'd left hanging in the house. Sundance was moving into striking distance when a voice Tom had never heard before sawed through the silence that had fallen on the meadow.

"All right, Sundance. You've had it now."

The tall drover's eyes cut to one side, and his hand dropped the knife. Tom dared look away from him then, and saw Sam walking down, slow, from the fire. It occurred to Tom that moment that Sam was the only sober one in camp besides himself. He was the only one wearing a gun.

"The kid said he'd pass the jug," Sam went on, in the voice Tom had never heard before. "You can't take his word, take mine. Take mine on somethin' else,

an' straighten up—or you'll git straightened out!"

Sundance stood swaying, his crushed mouth sagging open. His little pig eyes fixed themselves on Sam, and malevolence looked out of them. The sallow, burned face was hateful, yet somehow craven.

"Sam," he whined, drawing a fist across his nose, "I ain't heeled."

"Well, you by God better be, next time you come up against me!" Sam told him. Then, deliberately, he turned his back and returned to the fire. Tom followed him, so as not to appear to gloat, after he'd had to be rescued. At the fire, he tried to thank Sam for intervening. But Sam silenced him with a scowl.

"I told you about time an' chance, kid, when I give you that hoglaig," he reminded scoldingly. "If I hadn't been here, time an' chance would have fixed you good. Maybe now you'll wear that gun."

THE moment's unpleasantness had a depressive influence on their festivities, and for a time the atmosphere at the fire was strained and uneasy. But the others took pains to let it be known they stood with Sam, and Sundance drew off by himself with the jug, and after a time things started picking up.

At Sam's bidding, Tom went to the cabin and fetched eating tools, and they went to work on the barbequed beef. Tom had no notion as to where the animal had come from. The stringy texture implied that it was newly killed, but the flavor was the best. And when he commented innocently on its goodness, the old man known as Bad Water grinned crookedly at Sam.

"Ever noticed, Sam," he said, "how much better the other fella's beef tastes than your own?"

Sam's glance touched Tom, then slid quickly away. Tom was surprised to see that he looked bothered.

"I hadn't noticed, Bad Water," he said thinly. And, for an instant, the air was still and dead again. Then, suddenly, Sam was grinning his eye-shutting grin.

"Hell, I don't never remember tastin' any my beef!" he said.

And Tom laughed hard as any.

"Now, hit's a fact that down in the hill country o' Texas, a man is reckoned to be plumb shiftless, if he eats his own beef," the man called Hard Pan informed them. "I mind the time a neighbor invited pa to supper, an' fed him some o' pa's own meat. Pa was dog-sick, when they told him."

"My ol' man was just the same," another contributed. "But he got cured. We homesteaded in ag'in' the L-C outfit, up on Montan', an' pa started him a herd, brandin' a I-C-U. Then one day, he found one his brands tampered with, to read I-C-U-2. After that, we et elk an' left the hides out in sight.

"You git it?" he asked, nudging Tom. "I-see-you-too!"

Tom allowed humorously that he did, and the yarning went on. Tom could have listened to it all night. But Sam didn't seem to find it entertaining. Pretty quick Sam stood up and stretched. "Me an' the kid got plenty work, tomorrow," he said. "Rest you Injuns got quite a piece to ride. We better ring this down."

So they all turned in, and next morning the drovers got off early, taking the fat, trained horses with them, leaving the eyesore skates behind. They left Sundance behind, also. And when Tom hit Sam up about that, Sam just shrugged.

"Says he got into a jam with a deputy sheriff, in Casper, on the drive down," Sam said carelessly. "Said he'd like to lay low for a while, an' offered to help twist these outlaws out, till the boys show up again. I didn't like to boot him out. I told him he could stay."

"I wish you had booted him," Tom said fervently, forgetting whose ranch it was. "I don't like the big panther. He's

bad medicine. That man will make trouble."

But Sam still looked uninterested. "Hell, kid," he said, "he ain't my notion o' good company, neither. But he can handle horses, an' we can use his help. He gives trouble, we'll run him off."

THE trouble was, the white-eyed drover was crowding trouble from his first hour at the ranch, and Sam seemed not to notice. Not that Sundance ever braced Sam or let on in any way that he was harboring a grudge for the happening at the barbeque. On the contrary, he walked soft and talked soft around Sam. But around Tom he was always snooping and nosing and prying into things that Tom knew nothing of. Always leering and hinting at things Tom took no stock in. Always trying, it seemed to Tom, to drive a wedge between him and Sam.

"We'll have to let that bunch rest up an' put on a little flesh before we work 'em any," Sam announced the morning after the other riders all pulled out. "But

Tom flushed a poddy calf out of some brush

they's a dozen or so colts that need alterin'. I reckon we can tend to that."

There were more stud colts than Sam had estimated, and the surgical alterations filled most of three days. Sundance did most of the roping, and Sam the knife work. Tom helped with the tying and kept the fire and handled the cauterizing iron—watching the other procedures to pick up know-how.

Then, when each colt's destiny in life had been changed for all time, it also was Tom's function to bang the tail off square, just below the bone, to show the wearer was a geld.

When the doctoring was done, there followed several days of idleness, in which Tom got considerable riding done, along with considerable practice with rope and gun. After a week or so of this, he could put the blue past a fence post or a clump of brush and drop a loop over it three times out of four, while holding the blue pony to its choppy, short-strided run. By the same token, he could shoot off the blue's back without him boogering, and when standing on the ground he could throw a tin can up in the air and put three out of five slugs through it before it came to earth.

Sam watched the progress he was making, and applauded in his way from time to time. "You got the knack an' hang of it, kid. Keep workin' at it, an' you'll be good. Work hard enough, you'll be damn' good."

Sundance watched, too, and said nothing, at least where Sam could hear. But his little white eyes held no approval, and whenever he caught Tom out away from Sam he would ride him about his target shooting and all else in a way that was so malign Tom couldn't figure what was up.

"Practicin' up to be a reg'lar he-wolf, just like Sam, ain't you, kid?" he said one afternoon down on the meadow when Sam was not around.

"What's wrong with practicin' to be like Sam?" Tom challenged, meeting the caustic gaze and wondering exactly why he hated the man so.

"Why, nothin's wrong with bein' like Sam," the other said, shrugging with exaggerated disconcern. "Sam's a he-dog, with the curly side out. All heart above the waist, all guts below. But dogs like Sam an' me, we're hell-bent. You're hell-bent, too, kid, an' you hang around here. You're smart, you'll skin out o' this, while skinnin's good."

"Skin out o' what?" Tom countered, feeling a big hairy spider crawling up his spine.

"Out o' this whole damn' country, kid," the white-eyed man said, waving a hand at the horizon all around. "You're gittin' yourself a bad name."

Then, before Tom could rally his wits to say more, the white eyes leered again and a smile bared the pointed yellow teeth below, and Sundance rode off at a lope, leaving Tom to wonder more than ever at the nature of the game the man was playing.

AT ANOTHER time, Tom was riding up on the mesa alone, checking on Sam's cattle and killing time, when he flushed a little poddy calf out of some brush, and just to be doing something he shook out his lariat and gave chase. The dogie raised his tail and scampered frantically across the broken ground, but Tom's thrown loop settled beautifully over the small muley head, and Tom felt a great upsurge of triumph. It was the first moving target he had ever caught.

Dallying the rope furiously to his saddle-horn, the way Sam had shown him to do, Tom sawed the blue down to its haunches with its forelegs braced stiff in front, and let the calf run the rope's slack out, busting himself at the end.

When the rope snapped taunt, the calf left the ground and switched ends up in

the air, striking the ground with a bleat of protest that brought a big old proddy cow up out of a draw near-by, slobbering and shaking her horns at Tom and the blue. Tom was just beginning to wonder how he would recover the rope and stay whole-hided when he saw Sundance riding up out of the same draw the cow had emerged from, mounted on his big ridge-runner roan, the tallest horse Tom had ever seen.

For once in his life, Tom was glad to see the white-eyed man, thinking he might help him recover his rope. But when Sundance reined up some ten feet from him and looked him over, Tom began to feel the spider at his spine again.

Sundance was wearing the same grin that he always had for Tom when the two of them met privately. But there was something else about him now. Something that made Tom burn and chill at once.

Staring into the lashless, colorless eyes that looked at him, Tom had the fantastic feeling that the other had come there to kill him. That in another instant he would draw his gun and blast Tom out of his saddle, without speaking a word.

"Well," the twangy voice said mockingly at last, proving that Tom's hunch was at least partially wrong, "don't just set there. Git off an' tail 'im over. Where's your iron, an' fire? Or are you usin' acid?"

"What iron?" Tom blurted, finding his tongue. "What acid? What you ravin' about?"

His accoster laughed easily. But it was not a humorous laugh. The sound of it only sent Tom's apprehensions higher.

"Hell, you an' Sam don't trust nobody, do you? Well, you'd might as well trust me. I know what you two are up to. I ain't blind."

Tom sat in silence, thinking of nothing that seemed appropriate to say.

"I expect you're just up here ropin' Hub calves for practice, eh?" the sneering voice went on. "Well, it ain't no hide off me, one way or the other, long as you two hog everything yourselves an' won't let nobody else in for a cut. But take an old hand's advice, an' do your maverickin' in the draws an' gulches out o' sight. Supposin' I had been ol' Grent, or young Ollie, or ol' Jesse Hasten, the Hub ramrod. Just where you reckon your address would be the next ten-fifteen years?"

RAISING one hand before his face, he spread his fingers and peered at Tom between them, as if they were iron bars. And Tom boiled over finally.

"Who the hell cut you in to worry about my welfare?" he burst out. "What kind o' game you playin' around here, anyhow. What's it to you what I do? An' why don't you buy some spectacles? This calf sucks a Wheel cow. What's it to you, or the Grents either one, if I rope it?"

"Better look again, an' see who needs the spectacles," Sundance told him. "If that's a Wheel cow, I'll eat 'er, hide an' all."

Tom turned for another look, and was mortified and confused to see that the brand in reality was the Hub. He'd never seen any Hub stock on that end of the mesa before, and had only glanced at the cow in passing. And the brands, he noted now, were very similar. Very easily mixed up. But he still couldn't see where his actions concerned the long-nosed predator in front of him. He still couldn't divine the other's game.

"Ain't no such brand as Wheel, nohow," the white-eyed man went on, poisonously. "Wheel ain't nothin' but the Hub-an'-Spoke, with a ring burnt on around the spokes. Ol' Grent would grab you as quick for dabbin' a rope on a Wheel critter as a Hub. Kid, if you're as mutton-headed as you let on, you'd better be a-wisin' up. If you're not, you still better be wisin' up, b'fore it's too late."

"You're a liar, by the sun!" Tom told him hotly. "Sam's no thief, an' neither am I. You wouldn't darst to say to Sam what you've said to me. He'd just about bust you in two!"

"Shore I wouldn't," the other admitted. "Sam's a no-good citizen, just like I am. It's plumb too late to salvage Sam. But you're young. I was only tryin' to set you right. You don't know what the hell it's all about yet."

Tom started to tell him he would do the worrying about Tom Jamison himself, without any help from others. But Sundance turned his big roan and rode away, leaving him, too, to work his rope free of the caught calf, while avoiding the angry cow's repeated charges. Leaving him to ride back to the ranch alone, pondering the enigma of the long-nosed meddler's conduct. There was something damned strange going on on this range.

Somewhere in the course of the ride, Tom resolved that he would go straight to Sam and tell him the whole story, to see what Sam could make of it. But when it came to repeating Sundance's charges that Sam was a thief, and all the rest of it, Tom found he couldn't do it. It might have been that he feared his friend and idol would own to his guilt if confronted with the accusation. Or it might only have been that the memory of Sam's touchiness over prying into his personal affairs still weighed heavily with Tom. Whichever, Tom kept silent, without knowing exactly why. And he took to sticking close to Sam, so that Sundance didn't catch him out alone again and give him a going over.

* * *

Anyhow, they started twisting out the horses the next morning. And, for a week or so, Tom was too busy to do much worrying about the actions of the white-eyed man.

The Killer Comes

SAM took over the breaking of those animals they'd marked for harness, with Tom to help him, leaving these destined for the saddle to Sundance's brutal handling. And when it came to rough-riding, the white-eyed man was qualified. He was shorter-waisted and higher crotched than any man Tom had ever seen, and when he wrapped his snaky legs around a bronco's belly, bucking was a waste of time. He used the stomping method that was calculated to break a horse's spirit and instill in it so great a fear of man that it wouldn't have the courage to buck thereafter.

Sam's methods with the work and driving animals were gentler. His way of getting them accustomed to handling was to snub them up short, place a gunny-sack over the head to blind them, then tie one front and one hind foot up, so they could neither kick nor strike without falling down. When they had stopped fighting the ropes, he would slap them around a bit and throw harness on their backs and jerk it off until they'd found it wasn't going to hurt them.

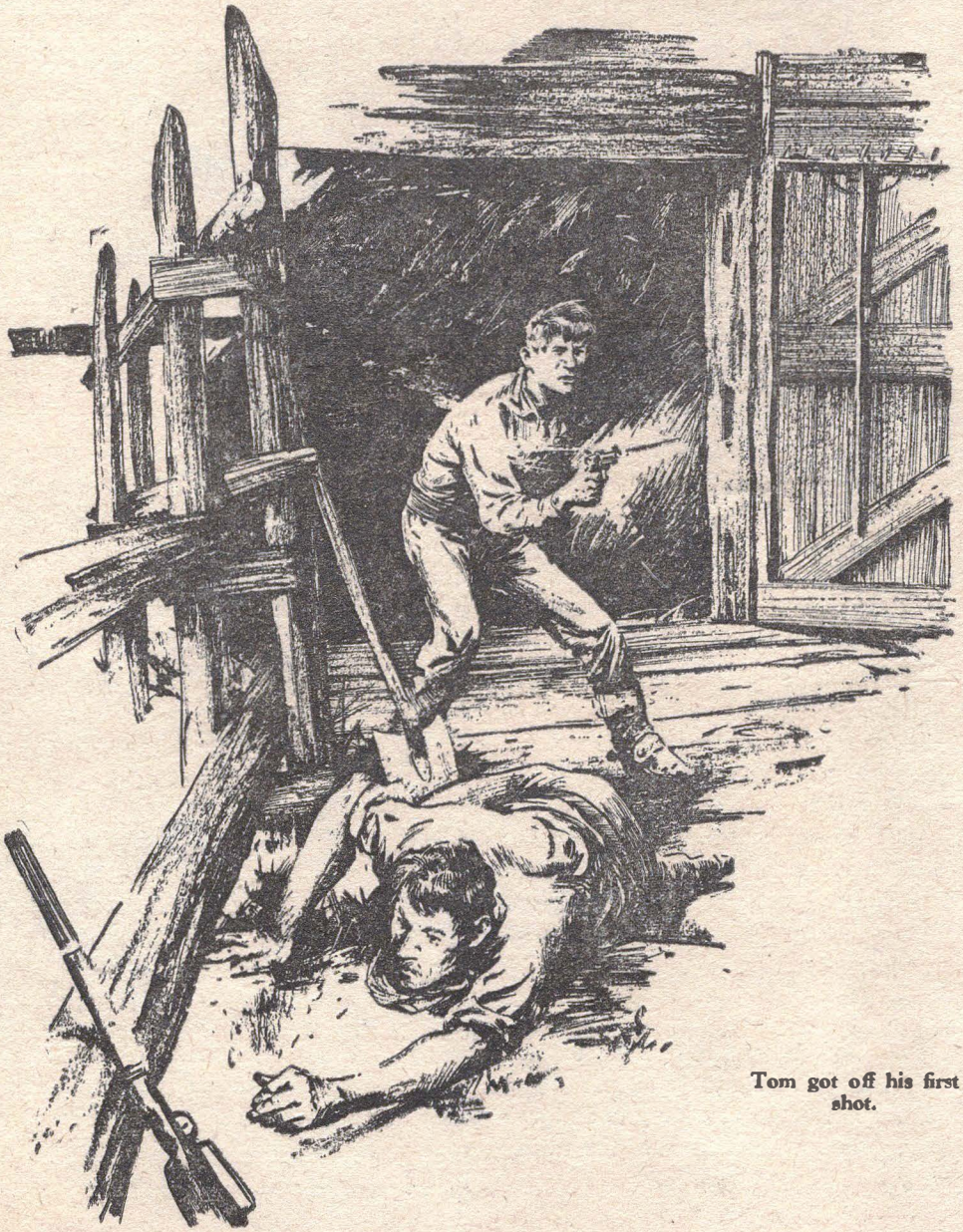
When they'd quieted down sufficiently, he would remove the sack and leg ropes, and lead them around the corrals with the harness tugs dragging and loose straps flapping, till they took it all in stride.

Then, when a handled colt was ready for it, it was hitched along with a gentled work horse to a light cart Sam had packed in to the place piece by piece, at sometime in the past. Then Sam produced a rope device which he called a running-w that joined all the colt's feet in a kind

of loose hobble that let it walk free but was so contrived that one tug on the guide rope would jerk both front feet from under it and throw it to its knees.

When it came to driving, Tom held the lines while Sam worked the trip rope. At first, the hitched colt would usually sulk and balk, but the gentle horse would crowd it with the tongue, and when it lunged in an effort to bolt, Sam would bring it to its knees.

At first, this method, too, struck Tom as cruel and severe. But Sam was patient, and the meadow ground was soft and easy on the knees. Pretty quick, the colt in question would discover it could keep its feet so long as it behaved. And, in the same way, it soon learned to stop when



Tom got off his first shot.

Sam yelled whoa. The method was good.

"They shore do ketch on fast," Tom observed one day, impressed at how well the system worked.

"Horses ain't cussed, like people," Sam answered. "Let a horse know what's expected of it, an' give it a chance to come through, nine times out o' ten it will. Let a man know what you want, an' without you pack a club, nine times he will do the opposite. An' I expect that's where we got the sayin' you hear about horse sense. I sure don't remember ever hearin' much said about man sense."

WITH all three of them working, the training progressed rapidly, and for a week or so Sundance behaved so well that Tom almost got over feeling edgy and snorty in his presence. But as time went on, and as Tom managed not to be thrown in with him alone, the white-eyed trouble-maker began to dig and insinuate around Sam the way he'd previously done with Tom. Not so openly or poisonously, but plainly baiting and prying. Seemingly unable to stop picking at a sore.

For a time, Sam ignored his digs and implications, and turned the talk each time to other things. But Tom sensed that antagonism and resentment was piling up inside his easy-going soul, and he knew that a blowup was bound to come.

One day Sam snubbed up a little brown quarter-horse mare that Tom had figured would make a dandy saddler, and he asked an innocent question.

"Sam," he said, "why break an animal like that to harness? Why not twist 'er out to ride?"

"Mares ain't suited for ridin' in this country, kid," Sam answered. "Out here, on your cow round-ups, you sometimes git five an' six hundred horses all together, from twenty-thirty different outfits. All that many switchers is hard enough to hold in one band, without havin' mares around to keep the geldings stirred up."

"I thought you took care the geld's feelings when you cut 'im," Tom objected.

"You take care some of it," Sam conceded, grinning on one side of his mouth. "But you don't never git it all, without you cut his throat."

"An' they's another reason, too," Sundance put in, having come up in time to hear most of the conversation. "Take a look at the Mule Shoe iron mark on that mare's front shoulder. Conspicuous as hell, ain't it, kid?"

Tom had to nod his agreement, and the white eyes glinted. "Well, now, put a saddle on her back, an' the brand stands out just the same. But under harness, it's some different. Draft work changes a horse's lines, an' harness marks 'em up. Why, roach that little digger there an' work her in harness two months, an' I could drive her right past the man that put that iron on her, an' he'd never give her a second look."

Tom tried not to look at Sam, remembering how he always reacted when somebody made a crack about stealing in Tom's hearing. But after a minute's silence, he did look, and found his employer glowering.

"Sundance," Sam said finally, his voice flat and steady, "you talk too damn' much. An' that ain't the worst o' your faults."

"Well now, tell me, Sam," the other leered. "Tell me about the worst o' my faults."

"I'll tell you," Sam flared hotly, "an' tell you plain. You're too damn' nosey, around other peoples' business. You asked to stay here to keep out o' sight a while, an' I let you do it. But, you want to go on stayin', you better git some shutters for that big mouth, or it'll be talkin' you into trouble!"

"Why, now, what's the matter?" the white-eyed man protested, looking puzzled. "What'd I do, to bring all this on, but tell the button there a thing that was so? Hell, Sam, he's old enough to

know the facts o' life, ain't he now?"

"You're the one that's goin' to learn the facts o' life—if you don't put a bridle on that tongue!" Sam told him. "You been warned now, an' I'm through talkin'. You don't believe me, you just keep on, an' put it to the test."

Sundance simmered down in the face of a direct threat, and for several days he sulked, saying no word to anyone. Tom rejoiced secretly in the word-slapping Sam had given him, and found considerable satisfaction in the trouble-maker's silence.

BUT that silence didn't last for long. The thought had come to Tom already that Sundance could no more stop talking than a crow could stop cawing. He seemed almost to be courting trouble deliberately. Crowding a showdown with the man who had forced him to sowbelly and take water a half dozen times already.

"Sam," he said one morning down at the corrals, "I been thinkin' we could increase our operations here by quite a bit. I notice they's three or four bunches o' Hub brood mares, runnin' up on the mesa. Wilder'n chicken hawks, too. But we could run some these skates out there, for a decoy bunch, an' pull some them in. I'd split with you, even up."

Tom held his breath, remembering Sam's warning of several days before. But Sam just stood looking into distance, as if he might be studying the proposition. And the persistent meddler talked right on.

"You might not want Hub horses brung here," he said. "You might not want to tamper with branded stuff at all. But the colts ain't branded. What's to keep us from roundin' up a band an' shovin' 'em off to the mountains. We could locate 'em in some big canyon, rope the mares an' rasp their feet down so's they couldn't travel. That way, they'd stay put till fall. Colts would be ready to wean an' drive off then, an' no risks run."

"Sundance," Sam answered him finally, his voice surprisingly mild, "I expect you just come to the wrong place to hang out. You got the notion this is a Robbers' Roost, an' it ain't. So maybe you had better pack up an' move on."

The white-eyed man looked at him a time in silence. Then the long face sharpened. "You undertakin' to run me off, Sam?"

"I'm not only undertakin' it," Sam said in the same mild tone. "I'm a-doin' it. I'm sick o' you an' your everlastin' yawp. Git your stuff together now, an' drag it, or I'll shut you off, for keeps."

Sundance stood motionless, and Tom backed away from them, thinking it was coming then. But Sundance started caving.

"Sam," he whined, "you an' me got no quarrel. I only wanted in on some the business here."

"You'll git the business, if you're not off the Hurricane inside o' ten minutes," Sam said flatly. "I ain't sayin' any more."

Sundance started to say something, then thought better of it, and was quiet. He tried to smile, but the smile wouldn't come up. Tom fancied he could see the sunburned skin turn yellow right before his eyes. After a while, he turned and slouched off toward the house, reappearing shortly with his bed and warbag.

All the while he readied his horses, the predator moved like a man walking on eggs. When he was mounted and ready to leave, he turned his sneering eyes on Sam again.

"What do I tell the boys, about these skates?" he wanted to know.

"Tell the boys to come an' git 'em, an' never fetch no more!" Sam told him roughly. "When they took you into their company, they let me out."

"I'll tell 'em," Sundance said softly, shrugging. "But I guarantee they won't

like." Not a damned little bit!"

TOM stood alongside his employer, watching the intruder cross the meadows on his long roan geld, leading his bed horse behind him. For weeks now, Tom had been thinking what a great day it would be when Sundance pulled out. But now he hated somehow to see him go. He didn't understand his feeling entirely, but he kept wishing Sam had killed him while he'd had the chance.

Sam said no word whatsoever, until the rider and his horses were out of sight down the breaks. Then he turned on Tom. "All right, kid," he said harshly. "It's your turn now. Saddle up your blue, an' drag it out o' here. You been here too long, too!"

If he had turned and hit Tom unexpectedly with a club, the blow would not have staggered him as this one did. And when Tom turned to look at him, his tawny eyes were waiting, hard as bullets. The hard eyes stared Tom down, and he began to realize then that Sam was serious in what he said.

"Sam," Tom said finally, "are you goin' to give me a reason?"

"I ain't got to give you no reason!" Sam snapped. "Maybe you just plain wore your welcome out." But he didn't look at Tom as he said it, and Tom took hope from this.

"Look, kid," Sam said after a minute. his voice a little kinder, "you've done yourself all right here. You got a horse to ride, an' I'll give you one to pack. You got a saddle an' a gun. You've learnt how to ride an' shoot an' rope, an' you've picked up a pile o' know-how about handlin' horses. Way I look at it, I've set you up. So why not git off my back an' walk on your own laigs a while?"

He had shifted ground so fast that Tom was left off balance. He'd started out abusing Tom, much as he'd done with Sundance. But now he was practically pleading with Tom to leave. Tom couldn't get the lay.

"I'll throw in a pack outfit, an' grub to last you a week. Take it, an' drag it out this country—so far you'll never hear o' Hurricane Mesa no more. Git you a job somewheres, breakin' horses. You're qualified now. Save your wages, an' git a place your own someday. Git you

He got two more slugs in the body before it struck the ground.

a plump, blue-eyed girl an' settle down to raise hell an' fat horses on your own. Pay me back for what I done by makin' somethin' of yourself."

He was talking more like the Sam that Tom had known before that day, at this point. But it was still plain that he wanted Tom to leave. Tom still was puzzled, and half scared.

"Sam," he said, "what's eatin' you? What did I do to bring this on?"

"You didn't do nothin'," Sam answered, the harshness in his voice again. "It's what I done, lettin' you git mixed up in this thievin' outfit. But I'm fixin' it now, kid. I'm sendin' you packin'."

"Aw, you ain't no more a thief than I am," Tom said stoutly.

"Don't talk stuff an' nonsense," Sam snapped. "You got eyes an' ears. You ain't as thick in the head as you let on."

He looked at Tom again as he spoke, and this time it was Tom who couldn't stand to a meeting of eyes. Tom knew now that he *had* known, but hadn't wanted to know he knew. Sam had been his idol and only friend. Sam was still his idol and his friend.

"Thievin' is my trade," Sam was saying, his tone both apologetic and defiant. "An' why in hell shouldn't it be? Ol' Grent branded me a thief, the minute I settled on this patch o' public ground. Blacklisted me with the cow association as a rustler b'fore I'd looked at any cow as wasn't mine—to keep me from registerin' a brand or workin' for any outfit in the territory."

NOW that he'd started to talk, it didn't seem as if he could stop talking. It struck Tom that he was trying to justify a thing to himself as much as to Tom. And words flooded from his throat in an angry torrent.

"Grent's notion was to starve me out—same as he starved out every other man who's tried to homestead in the valley. It worked with the others, an' it damn near worked with me. Then I found there was cow buyers around that wasn't too finicky about brands. I found a brand didn't have to be registered as long at it didn't leave the territory an' come up agin' the association inspectors, an' the railroad gradin' camps up north use plenty beef. Then I got next to that horse thief layout that needs a place to fatten up an' break horses after every drive from Montan'. So long as Grent barred me from honest work, I let 'em drive the horses here. An' I got me an iron that Hub would work over into, an' I went to raisin' cows."

It was the longest speech Tom had ever heard him make. Tom heard him out, then laughed in sheer exhilaration.

"Hell, Sam" he said, "for a while there, you had me worried. I thought it was somethin' serious. Somethin' I had done to rasp you."

"It's nothin' you done, an' I ain't rasped," Sam told him. "But it's serious. I wasn't goin' to show you. But I will."

Reaching up to his shirt pocket, he fished out a piece of folded brown wrapping paper and forked it over. Tom took it and spread it in his hands. An unartistic hand had sketched a crude skull and crossbones on it, with what looked to be a piece of common charcoal. Down below the death's head, the same rough hand had scrawled the numerals

3 — 7 — 77

"It was tacked to the stable door, when I got down here this mornin'," Sam said.

Tom stared at the paper in puzzled silence. Then he looked up and met the watching eyes. "What's it mean?" he asked. "What's the connection with them numbers?"

Sam smiled, but not at anything funny. "The standard grave, as I recall, is three feet wide, seven feet long, seventy-seven inches deep. That's the connection, kid."

Tom continued to stare at his companion in silence, trying to comprehend

that the paper in his hand was anything more than a clumsy joke.

"It's the same valentine the vigilantes used to send just b'fore they closed somebody out, up around Virginia City," Sam's voice went on, a drag in it that grated oddly on the ears. "I wasn't there, but I've talked to some that was. I been told ol' Grent was there. One of the big wheels in the companies, an' the exterminators, too. I heard it said the committee was hardest on them that got in ol' Grent's way."

Tom glanced over the stable door, as if expecting to find there a clue to clear up the mystery. "Who you reckon left it?" he asked.

"I purely wisht I knew," Sam said fervently.

And all at once Tom was remembering Sundance, the baiting and the digging he'd done around. The way he'd looked and the things he'd said when he caught Tom with the Hub calf in his rope, up on the mesa. All at once, Tom felt the spider at his spine again.

EXCITEDLY, he blurted the whole thing, while the paper rattled in his hand. He described the incident up on the mesa, and all other incidents leading to it, repeating all the conversations as he remembered them. Sam watched him intently, and when Tom had finished, the muscles were standing out along Sam's jaws.

"I reckon he's the one—a range detective or somethin'," he said, the drag back in his voice. "That's how them buzzards usually work. Ride into a man's camp, posin' as somethin' they ain't, whinin' for help an' favors. Eat your grub an' sleep in your bed, then watch their chance an' shoot you in the back. They're a brave an' moral lot, them!"

Tom said nothing. Tom was still trying to realize the thing was bona fide. Sam went on talking, staring at him moodily. "That's the lay, sure as hell. I couldn't find no tracks around. So I thought of him, right off. But I couldn't believe he would fool Bad Water an' them other boys that fetched him here. That bunch, they're ol' hands."

Tom shook his head, not understanding all he knew about the setup. "But if he's one o' them, an' was here to git you, why did he leave without?"

Sam laughed through his nose, sounding like a stud horse again. "I expect he was like the Hinglishman that went huntin' bear. Followed a track all day, then quit an' went back to camp—'cause the track was gittin' too fresh. I expect Sundance figured he had found a bear track!"

"But he had plenty chance to git you from behind," Tom insisted. "Why didn't he try it?"

For answer, Sam picked up the Winchester that leaned against the bars. A wide-winged marsh hawk was floating in big lazy circles above the meadow, and Sam sighted carefully, then squeezed the trigger. The rifle *spanged,* and the hawk jerked up in flight, then started a crazy dive for earth, streaming feathers behind it.

"I expect maybe that's why," Sam said.

Tom stood a time, trying hard to think. What with everything considered, leaving the country didn't seem like a bad idea. If Grent were out to get them, and if Sundance had lost his nerve, Grent would be sending someone else. The way Tom saw it, if a man like Sundance couldn't be trusted, arriving as he had with the gang, then no man could be trusted. Living there would be hell for both of them, from that day on.

"Well," he said finally, "you say I should haul my freight. What about yours? You ain't tied down."

But Sam just laughed his stud horse laugh, and took the paper back, crumpling it savagely in his hand. "I'm stayin' where

I goddam am!" he said. "Damn right I am."

"All right," Tom nodded. "Then I stay, too."

"That's just what you ain't goin' to do!" Sam exclaimed. "This is my place, an' I'm stayin' on it. It ain't—"

The high, whiny snarl of a bullet cut him off. He made a lunge for the rifle that leaned against the bars, but an invisible force struck him and knocked him back, off balance.

Quickly, he righted himself and made another grab for the rifle. But once again the squealing buzz struck him.

By that time, Tom had gained the shelter of the stable door, and was peering out, pistol cocked in his hand. Sam was reaching for his rifle again when Tom's eyes caught a movement on top of the mud cliff across the corral, and the movement was Sundance, kneeling at the cliff's edge, firing a third shot at Sam.

Tom got off his first shot just as the smoking rifle barrel swung toward him. And his long hours of practice with tin cans thrown into the air paid off a thousand times over in the space of one long breath.

His first two shots brought the killer down off the cliff top, long arms flapping like the wings of a great ungainly bird. And he got two more slugs into the writhing, twisting body before it struck the ground, not twenty feet away.

On the soft corral floor, the striking body made a sodden, crunching sound.

4

"O Bury Me Not . . ."

SAM had reached his rifle by the time Tom got to him. He'd got to it finally, and was sprawled on top of it, face down on the ground, his mouth open against the powdery dry manure that carpeted the corral. Tom made certain that the killer was beyond threatening them again, then knelt beside his employer and turned him over gently. Blood had stained his shirt and was standing in three small red pools where he'd lain. But the tawny eyes were open and life was still in them.

"Did you git 'im, kid?" Sam asked in a hoarse whisper.

"I got 'im," Tom said a little crazily, feeling light-headed. "My target-shootin' set me up, Sam. I got four slugs into him. Four out o' five. That's better than I ever done with a tin can."

"Good stuff," Sam said, between clenched teeth, "I was 'fraid he'd git us both."

"He would of," Tom said, commencing to feel choked inside, "if you hadn't kept him busy tryin' to stop you. You was the one he was scairt of, Sam. You was hard to stop."

Sam's eyes were closed now. He was breathing in the way Tom had heard hurt animals breathe, in short, shallow gasps. Tom ripped open his shirt, and found three ragged wounds, all in the chest—two on the right side, one on the left, just under the heart. A piece of pinkish rib bone was protruding from the hole below the heart, and the flesh around it was whitish, turning blue. All three holes hissed and bubbled red as the hairy rib cage rose and fell with breathing. Sam was on the way out.

"Sam," Tom began uncertainly, trying hard to chart a course of action, "I'm headin' for Amity, to fetch a sawbones. You want I should git you up to the house before I go?"

Sam's eyes opened. His head shook faintly. "Sawbones won't help me, kid. I'm done for. Just leave me be. In a minute it won't matter. I just want to rest."

"Hell," Tom said, his eyes smarting,

"you're goin' to be all right. You're too damn' tough to kill."

"In a hog's eye!" the hurt man said with a ghost of his former vigor. "One them slugs must of got through to my spine. I'm dead from the ribs down right now. K d, that son of a dog drove my tack. Go through 'im, an' find out who he is. I'd kind of like to know."

Tom turned, momentarily glad to escape the pain-glazed eyes, the feeling of awful helplessness that went with doing nothing. But when he approached the killer's body, grotesquely sprawled at the foot of the cliff, he would rather have touched a live rattler. Sam was watching him, however, and it had to be done at any rate. So he turned it over with his foot, and saw the blood-matted clothes, the head that lolled flat against one shoulder, the twisted gargoyle features—frozen for eternity in a snarling grimace. The lifeless, colorless lumps of jelly that had been eyes were upturned.

Standing over the obscene thing, staring down, Tom began to realize for the first time that he had killed a man. The thought of touching it with his hands, of smearing his hands with the cooling blood, started his stomach to straining at its moorings and he wanted to shut his eyes and be sick. But Sam was watching, and Sam was dying. Tom stopped breathing so as not to inhale the smells, and made a quick but thorough search.

All he found was a jackknife, a tobacco sack, and a whetstone.

"Look under his belt," Sam called to him. "Must be one them animals like we think, or they'd be somethin' on him, showin' who he is."

So Tom unbuckled the belt, and pinned to its under side he found a small metal shield. It was so worn he had to look close to read the raised lettering: WYOMING LIVESTOCK ASSOCIATION—BRAND INSPECTOR.

"I figured that's what he'd be," Sam grunted, loosing a dismal stream of invective upon all the dead man's kind. "Kid, I wisht you hadn't killed him. I would like to kill 'im now, knowin' what he is."

The sun was hot, and Sam was sweating bad. The bleeding had eased, and there seemed nothing else to do. Tom knelt and wrestled the hurt man up into his arms.

SAM swore at him and begged to be left alone. But Tom staggered down the path to the house, shoved open the door, and got him onto his bunk. Then he found a shirt and started tearing it in ribbons for bandage. But Sam protested again.

"You're wastin' time, an' shirt too, kid. I ain't goin' to be here long enough to bandage. Listen to what I say. They's a syrup can, down in the grub box in the kitchen. At the back. Fetch it."

Tom left what he was doing, and found the can. Back beside the bunk, he opened it at the dying man's bidding. Underneath some rags on top he found considerable money. Gold pieces and greenbacks too.

"There's twenty-five hundred there, kid, an' some change," Sam said, talking behind clenched teeth again. "It ain't goin' to do me no good. I ain't got nobody else to think of. I want you to have it. Take it, an' skin out of this damned country, like I said. You're life ain't worth a nickel now, kid. Not in this man's county. Jury down in Colorado 'quitted a fella couple years ago for killin' one them animals like you done. 'Quitted him an' handed him a vote o' gratitude for renderin' a public service. But this ain't Colorado, kid. You could tell 'em I done it. But they'd still stretch you. Do like I say, an' don't let them git hold of you."

"Hell with that!" Tom said, his voice harsh with the strain of fighting back the tears that formed beneath his eyes. "I

ain't leavin' you, Sam. I'm stayin' here."

"You ain't got long to wait for me," Sam answered him.

Words of protest and assurance welled in Tom's throat. But he left them unspoken. Sam's face already was white and sinking in around the bone. His voice was hoarse and whispery, so faint Tom had to listen sharp to hear it. They both knew what the situation was, and it seemed craven not to face it.

"I'm sorry I didn't git 'im quicker, Sam," he said, impotently. "If I'd got 'im right off—if I hadn't ducked inside the stable—"

Sam smiled a smile that Tom would never forget, and shook his head. "If the dog hadn't stopped, he'd of caught the rabbit. You done all right, kid. You got the buzzard. You're still my candidate for gov'nor an' Injun chief."

Partly to hide his eyes, partly to give his hands something to do, Tom found a tobacco sack and built a cigarette. It wasn't fancy, but it held. But when he went to put it in Sam's mouth, Sam turned it down.

"Listen, kid," he said in sudden urgence. "You're goin' to have to do somethin' with this carcass when I'm finished with it. You'll have a little time, b'fore that animal down in the corral is missed. You can't take me to town, without makin' yourself a lot o' trouble. I never wanted to be stuck in no crowded, rottin' bone yard, nohow.

"I'd like it, kid," he said with something like eagerness, "if you'd put me under down at the head o' the meadow. I always liked it there, better'n anywhere. You could move the salt trough up, to kind o' hide the hole, once you git it filled. There's nothin' like a salt lick to hide a grave.

"An' kid. If you git 'round to it, put that piece o' dung, Sundance, under down there in the corral, with all the rest of it. You can move the manure pile a bit, an' nobody'll never find him, neither.

"You better do it, kid," he went on, with rising, desperate insistence. "Hide both graves, an' git rid our horses, somehow. Give it out that we left here together, an' without they find us, nobody can prove any different. If they ever find that thing down in the corral, they'll follow you to the end o' the world.

"The arm o' the law is long, kid...."

The strained, whispery voice thickened and stopped, and the tawny eyes brightened with urgence as final tension filled the ruined body. Then the tension passed, and the eyes were eyes no more.

Tom stood a long while, looking down. Then he choked back a sob and walked to the open door. There was a shovel within reach, and he picked it up and headed for the corral, grateful that there was work to do. Urgent work that left no time for futile thought.

THE sun was low by the time he'd scattered the last dirt from the hole he'd dug down in the corral, exactly three by seven by seventy-seven, and moved the manure pile some ten feet over to hide the tell-tale scar.

The corral at the moment looked suspiciously stirred up. But Tom knew that manure weathered rapidly. He figured that one day's sun would erase all sign of his digging.

From the corral, he went straight to the head of the meadow, and dug another grave. Later, there was a moon, and in its pale illumination he hauled Sam's tarp-wrapped body down, cross-wise of his snorting blue, and lowered it as gently as he could into the damp, sweet earth. Then he made another trip up to the stable for Sam's saddle and bridle and guns, and placed them Indian-fashion in the tomb. Then he covered everything up, tamped the loose dirt down solidly, and scattered the surplus thin enough that it wouldn't be noticed.

By the time he'd dragged the salt trough up from the old lick and placed it over the oblong scar on the ground, it was getting light enough to see. There still was evidence of digging, there on the meadow's green turf. But, here as in the corral, a day of weathering—a day in which the horses could trample the fresh earth at the new lick—would make all the difference.

"If they'll only give me a day," he said bleakly, to anyone or anything that might be listening.

His next task was to locate Sundance's horses, and it was no trick to follow their tracks into a long ravine just off the meadow, where the killer had left them tied. Both animals were gaunt and nervous from their long wait, and after puzzling a problem a time, he untied them and led them back up to the meadow.

Up at the stable, he gave them each a bait of grain from the small supply that Sam had kept on hand. Then he caught Sam's sorrel, and transferred his saddle to it, from the blue. Down at the cabin, he shoved some cooked meat and bread in a sack, and was ready to ride.

The sun was just setting, dipping into the breaks at his back, when he emerged from the Hurricane cut, out onto the flat lands that footed in against the buttes. He was riding the sorrel and led the blue along with Sundance's two horses, saving it for the ride back.

Sam's sorrel wanted to do the familiar thing, wanted to follow the trail on to Amity. But Tom bent off to the north.

The country here was strange to him, but Sam had told him that the Platte country lay off to the north, with easy country in between, and Tom had the stars to navigate by. Anyhow, it didn't matter so much where he wound up, so long as it was far enough from Hurricane Mesa.

By changing off riding the sorrel and Sundance's roan, and by holding to a business-like trot most of the night, he reckoned he had put fifty miles between him and the ranch by the time daylight overtook him again. Off in the distance, he could see a serpentine line of trees which he reckoned to be the Platte. Nearer at hand was a small clear branch where he watered the horses. There was grass for his blue, and a brush-filled ravine where it was likely that Sundance's gear would never be found.

So he called a halt there, and threw the gear in the cut, staked the blue out, and turned the other horses loose to stray.

It was hard just to drop a horse like the sorrel on the country, but the geld could not be seen around Hurricane Mesa again, and Tom figured that he wouldn't want for an owner very long. So he spooked the three animals away from his camp, then swallowed some of the beef and bread he'd fetched, and curled up in the shade of some bush to sleep.

IT WAS late afternoon when he pitched his saddle back on the blue and turned his face back toward the table lands. It would be several hours yet before darkness would conceal him. But the chances of being observed by human eyes in that wild, foresaken land were small, and he was anxious now to get back to the ranch and face up to whatever was coming.

The return trip was slower, having no relief horse to switch to, and the blue already weary from the hard go of the night before. The sun was up behind him when he hit the breaks again, and the sight of fresh horse tracks on the trail leading to the ranch sent his heart sliding down into his stomach.

"Somebody's there already," he remarked aloud—a habit he had slipped into just in the last three days. "Whatever's comin', it's started."

Panic knifed at him, and the only thought in his mind was to turn and spur the blue away, to ride as long as the

blue held up, and then hoof it as long as he lasted. To get away, go anywhere, so long as it was far away from that place of murder and threatened murder.

But something stayed him. Some tie, some pull, was drawing him back to the meadow. He didn't know what it was. All his intelligence told him he was a fool not to have taken Sam's last advice before this, and lit a shuck for some distant part of the country. But he hadn't gone, and he knew now that he couldn't go. He couldn't say why. A part of it was the conviction that if he started running now there would never come a place at which he could stop. But the rest of it was not so easily defined. It had to do with a grave under a salt lick on the meadow, and a tyrannical uncle who'd made his mother's home a hell. It had to do with a man he'd killed and another he'd whipped through the streets of Amity. It had to do with old Hitch, as well, and the horse he rode and the clothes he wore.

It had to do with a meadow and a dug-out cabin that had become home to him as no other place in the world had been or ever would be home. It had to do with a pair of tawny eyes and a stud horse laugh that still rang in his mind.

"Why, hell," he remarked aloud, examining the tracks more closely. "There ain't but two of 'em. I expect we can take care ourselves against just two. Sam wouldn't of run from twenty-two!"

As things worked out, the two were just leaving the meadows, by the upper trail that led to the mesa, when Tom emerged from the lower breaks, out into the valley. Another minute, and they would have been gone, and he would have missed them completely.

But, things happening as they did, the two riders saw Tom just as he noticed them, and they swung their horses and rode toward him.

Tom still could have ducked back into the breaks and eluded them by leaving his horse and running on foot. But the same inner push that had brought him on to the ranch in spite of the tracks, the same inner stubbornness that had blocked an earlier turnback still prevented retreat and carried him up across the meadow to meet them, his hand on the butt of his pistol.

"Here goes for nothin'," he announced, to no one in particular.

But he hadn't gone far when he began to congratulate himself for not spooking. The two were still several hundred yards distant when he recognized them as old friends of the horse running ring. One was old Bad Water, and the other he remembered as going by the name of Dabs.

Recognition eased his smothering apprehension, and his hand dropped away from his pistol. But, drawing nearer, he was put back on edge by sight of their drawn, hollow eyes and dust-caked faces. They were riding horses that had been grazing the meadow, and two jaded, sweat-caked horses Tom had never seen before stood off by themselves, broken-winded and done in, heads resting almost on the ground.

"Howdy, kid," Bad Water greeted, coming up. "Where's Sam? Where's Sundance?"

THESE were questions Tom had prepared himself to answer. And back of his preparation lay a feeling of vast triumph and relief. These two had been around the place, apparently some hours, and hadn't spotted the graves.

"Sam an' Sundance rode over towards the Platte, to scout some horses Sundance located," Tom told them steadily. "I been in to Amity, to check on Sam's mail."

The two riders exchanged a look. A long, slow look that could have meant anything. Then both looked back at Tom.

"How long they been gone?" Bad Water asked.

"Couple days, if they ain't back," Tom answered, calculating time.

"Kid," Bad Water said, his expression peaked, "I got hard news. I reckon, if Sam went off with Sundance, he won't never be readin' his mail no more.

"Kid," he went on, a clawing urgency in his voice, "we found out, a couple weeks after leavin' here, that Sundance was a law spy. Had a posse waitin' for us, up in the Big Horn. Killed Bitch Creek an' Pickens, when they wouldn't surrender. Hard Pan an' Montan sowbellied an' give up. Dabs here an' me was on night herd, an' skun out. We took one the possemen along, an' sweated him some. He give us the dope on Sundance. Sundance's real name is Hapgood. He spies for the cow association, an' he is workin' for Grent."

Tom stared, hardly hearing. He felt he should react by showing surprise and horror at the revelation. But, with all that had happened in the last three days, he was beyond even a pretended reaction. He sat motionless, staring blankly.

"It's a rotten, hellish business, kid," Bad Water said, mistaking Tom's vacant look. "But I don't see no benefit in holdin' it from you. I know how buzzards like Sundance—or Hapgood—work. If Sam's been gone a couple days, he ain't goin' to come back. I expect he's buried in a gulch someplace by now."

"Sundance acted awful queer here," Tom said finally, seeing the necessity for saying something. "But Sam didn't notice."

"Sam was too damn trustin'," the man called Dabs put in, his voice bitter. "He was big hearted, to a fault."

"Sam didn't bring Sundance here," Tom said sharply. "Sundance wasn't Sam's mistake."

Neither of the horse thieves had anything to say to that. And Tom suddenly felt a great weariness.

"Well," he said, "I'm tired o' this saddle. An' you two look done in. Let's go to the house, an' fix a bait."

Bad Water shook his head. "We ain't got the time, kid. When we lost the horses an' found out what the deal was, we headed down here, hopin' to find Sundance, an' warn Sam. But part of the posse is trailin' us. We pulled every trick we know. But they wouldn't lose."

"They swung off to Hub, when we got in this country," Dabs added. "But I expect only to git fresh horses, an' maybe to notify the local sheriff. I reckon they'll be right along."

The news gave Tom a bitter cud to chew on. He had fixed things here at the ranch so that he might have faced things through, with a little luck. But these two had to go and bring a posse in on him.

He looked at them a moment, hot words of anger and bitterness forming behind his teeth. But his anger and bitterness both broke against the knowledge of why they were here.

They could have been in Montana or maybe Canada by now, if they'd thought only of themselves. But here they were, down where things would be the hottest for them, all on account of their loyalty to Sam.

THE thought moved Tom, and confused him. And he realized at last that—thieves or no—these business associates of Sam's lived by a code as rigid as any that existed among other men. Loyalty was the thing here, the same as anywhere. Inside the law or out, the same rules applied. Only here, it seemed to Tom, the rules applied a little more.

"Well," he said, "if there's anything around the place you want, help yourselves." Then he remembered to add, "I'm sure it will be all right with Sam."

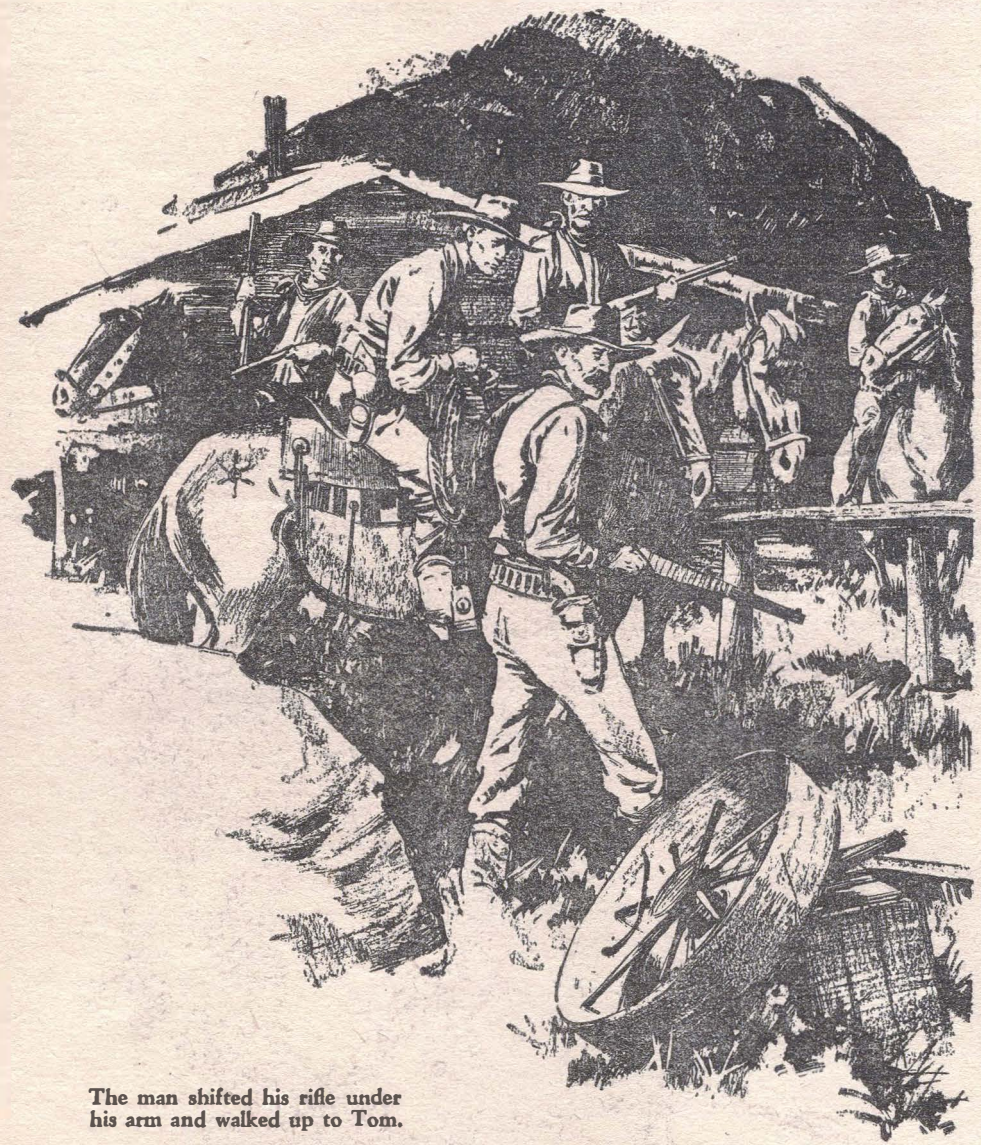
"Ain't you comin' with us?" Bad Water demanded. "Things likely will be gittin' hot around here."

"Ain't nobody after me, is there?" Tom countered faintly.

"Don't talk like a fool," Bad Water told him bluntly. "I told you Hard Pan an' Montan' sowbellied. A pair o' deuces like that will talk, same as they throwed up without any fight. I don't doubt but what the posse's got a line on us all by now. I don't doubt they know about you, the same as the rest of us."

"I never stole nothin'," Tom objected. "If Sam did, I never did see it. Law's got nothin' on me."

"Law will have, if you let 'em git close to you," Dabs told him. "They'll have a rope on you. An' that rope will be tied around your neck. You ain't got to be guilty o' nothin' in this country to git stretched. You only got to git caught with the wrong people."



The man shifted his rifle under his arm and walked up to Tom.

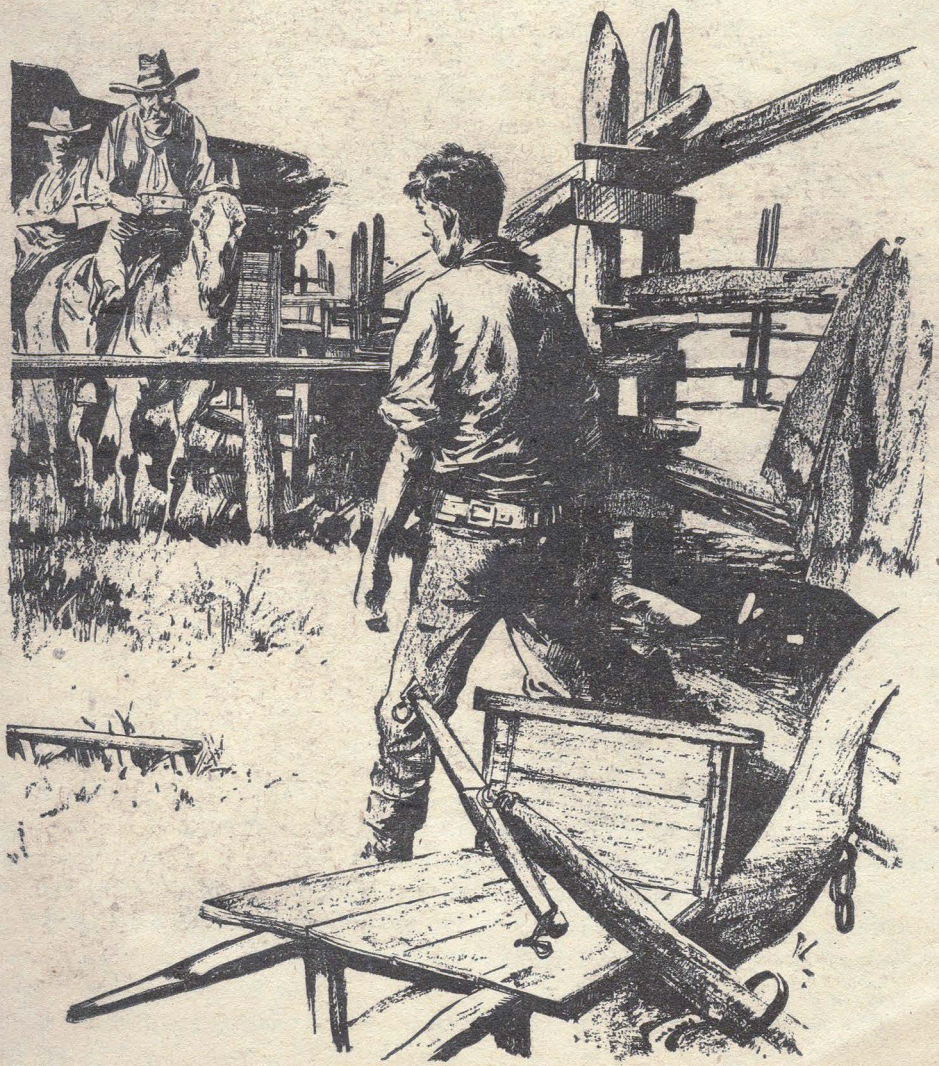
"Dabs is about right," Bad Water put in, more kindly. "Better look at it slow, kid. The finger's on you, same as the rest of us. An' it goes some father'n that. You got the Grents down on you. An' you're squattin' on this ground, with Sam.

"Kid," he went on in rising urgence, "this little piece o' ground is what stirred the whole ruckus up. We never did touch a Hub horse. It's Sam that Grent is after. The rest of us just blundered into it. Grent's after Sam on account of Sam took up this piece o' ground, an' Grent hasn't been able to pry him off, though he's tried every trick in the book.

"You're on this ground with Sam, kid. So you can expect the same kind o' treatment Sam will git, if you let them ketch up with you. But you got to be decidin', kid. We can't hang around here any longer."

Until that moment, Tom hadn't even

Tom had fought his arms so long to keep them steady in his captors' sight that they ached from the strain of it.



asked himself what direction his long-range plans would take. He asked himself now—asked himself what Sam would have done, had Sam been here. And it was Sam's answer, in the end, that he passed on to the waiting riders.

"I'm stayin' where I goddam am," he said.

The riders turned, shrugging, to leave. But Tom's voice overhauled them. "Don't forgit your switchers, boys. There's no place here for 'em, no more."

"We ain't got time to fool with no horses, kid," Dabs said to him. "We got to be ridin'."

"You ain't ridin' nowhere, without you take these skates," Tom said, drawing his pistol. "You brung 'em here, an' you'll take 'em away. An' you won't bring no more here. Understand?"

Both looked at him wide-eyed, in surprise. Then Dabs' face darkened. "You undertakin' to talk for Sam, kid?"

"I'm undertakin' to talk for Sam," Tom told them. "He told Sundance to tell you that, when he thought Sundance was with you. I stand with Sam, an' you ain't leavin' here without them horses."

Dabs shot a questioning look at Bad Water. Dabs' face was still belligerent, and he was looking to his partner for support. But Bad Water was grinning ruefully.

"I guess the kid's justified, Dabs," he said. "We did bring the switchers here. 'Tain't right we should leave 'em on his neck. Long as we're travelin' anyhow, we'd might as well take 'em along. It gits to the point where they hold us up, we'll drop 'em an' go on alone."

Tom roped the old mare he'd got from Hitch and staked her, and helped the two horse dealers round up the cavvy. He rode with them as far as the bars, then waved them farewell, and rode back to his ranch.

By then he was out on his feet for want of sleep. But the thought of the cabin without Sam in it desolated him. He flopped in the stable, instead.

5

Vigilante Visit

IT WAS afternoon before the posse put in an appearance. Tom was lying in the stable manger, dozing, when he was aroused by the sound of his blue pony whinnying, down on the meadow where he was out to graze.

Tom was up instantly, the drug of weariness and sleep gone from his mind. Out in the corral, he crept to the bars and peered cautiously through. Ten horsemen were stringing up across the meadow, two of them leading pack horses. Spade Wilson, the sheriff from Amity, was riding up on lead. His head deputy, a man by name of Harper, was on one side of him. On the other was an old man with a crooked back and a thin, bird-like face. Tom had never seen this person before, but he remembered Sam's description of old Grent, and knew who he was looking at.

"Hidebound ol' scissorbill, with his back twisted into the shape of a dollar sign," Sam had described his arch-enemy. "Face like a knife, an' a bullet where his heart ought to be. You'll know him, if you ever see 'im, kid."

So, Tom knew him. And Tom knew the sullen-faced youngster who rode just behind the old man, on a bright palomino horse. With old Grent and Ollie both in the posse, it looked like rough sledding for Tom.

The men with the pack horses stayed down on the meadow, and the other eight came on up the trail. Tom hadn't yet

been seen, and the possemen pulled up at the house. Wilson and his deputy rode with rifles across their pommels. The deputy pulled in at the window, and Wilson rode to the door and kicked against it with his toe. The rifle at rest upon his pommel was held in such a manner that its muzzle would be pointed squarely at anyone who might answer the rude summons.

When the door didn't open, Wilson repeated the kick, with such force that the door swung open by itself. A tight silence followed. Then Wilson's voice boomed out. "Better show yourself, in there. We'll come after you, if we got to."

When there was still no response, the sheriff nodded at his deputy, and Harper swung down and stepped cautiously into the cabin. After a minute, he reappeared in the doorway, and shook his head.

"Ain't nobody here," he announced. "But somebody was, not too long ago. Stove was cooked on today."

The watching eyes left the house to look at the corrals and the surrounding bluffs. The sheriff started giving orders in a voice Tom could not hear and once again he was caught up in a wild impulse to flee into the breaks. But, instead, he stepped from the corral to show himself, thinking it better than being caught like a rabbit in a hole.

Every face below swiveled toward him as he came into sight. Three rifle muzzles moved carelessly to point at him, and the coldness in the watching eyes put a sickness in him.

"Howdy, men," he greeted, knowing that he must not let his fear be seen. Knowing that his fear would not be real, unless he let it be seen.

"Somethin' I can do for you?"

No one answered. It seemed to Tom that no eye even winked. The eyes were probing and prying, as if looking for his fear. Except for a single pair, the eyes were uniformly unfriendly and wary. The excepted eyes were hot and hate-inflammed, and Tom fought his own glance away from them.

Tom would have to hide his own hate, as well as his fear, if he were going to have any chance of coming out of this. Maybe in a while he would look at Ollie and see the whip scars on his neck. Just now, it was easier to look at the cold, disinterested eyes.

"This must be the hobo kid they told about," Wilson was saying, his steady blue eyes never leaving Tom.

"Yeah," another confirmed. "He's the one. I seen him around town, when he was hustlin' for Hitch."

"Looks ornery enough. Kind of like he might steal a horse."

"Wouldn't be here, if he wasn't, would he?"

IT WAS an eerie business, standing there and hearing them discuss him as if he'd been a horse or a cow that didn't know what was being said. He had a premonition of what they were going to do with him, and it gave him a strange feeling of being outside his own mind and body—of watching all this happen, on a stage.

He felt sorry for the boy in the borrowed boots and the too-big hat. But he could see the justness of the others' plans. He couldn't even take sides in the thing that was happening. The curious impotence of the spectator held him helpless.

A scratchy, cawing voice was speaking. A voice that set Tom's nerves on edge, just to hear. "He's the drifter you had the trouble with?"

The way the voice pronounced *drifter*, it was another word for him, for shoddy thief. But the voice was wrong. Tom hadn't drifted. Tom had stayed put, when drifting might have saved his life.

"He's the one." The sullen voice that answered was edged with triumph and a boast. Tom could no longer keep his eyes

from the hot black ones, and once he'd met them, he was inside his mind and body. It wasn't someone else who stood there then. It wasn't a fox he'd seen once, back in the fields outside of Kansas City, ringed around with clubs and pitchforks. It was Tom Jamison, looking at an enemy.

"Howdy, sport," Tom said. "Where's your whip today?"

"This'll do," the dark face said. And noticed the others' hands were unstrapping the rope that was coiled on the saddle.

"Harper, take his gun," the sheriff's voice came in.

The man in the cabin doorway shifted his rifle up under his arm and walked up to Tom. Tom had fought his hands so long to keep them steady in his captors' sight that his arms ached from the strain of it. He had to fight them harder to keep from drawing the gun himself and fighting while he could.

His mind told him it would be better to take it fighting than to suffocate helplessly later at the end of Ollie's rope. But something not his mind held his hands still while the dismounted lawman lifted the gun with which he might have made a fight.

"Now, punk. Where's Sam Colt?"

Tom looked blankly at the sheriff. "Sam Colt?" he repeated.

He knew well enough who was meant. His mind was simply caught up in the novel sound. The novel notion of Sam having a last name. To Tom, the word *Sam* was large and generic and stood by itself—like grass or water or wind. It struck Tom as somehow grotesque and libelous, this tying Sam down to a limiting last name. There'd only been one Sam. There'd never be another. Tom didn't know any Sam Colt. It stuck in his mind that Sam Colt was the man who made pistols.

"You know damned well who I mean," the lawman said in sudden ire. "The curly wolf that runs this"—he raised one arm and made a circle around his head—"this stinkin' Robber's Roost."

"Sam's gone," Tom said steadily, oddly pleased to think it was no lie.

"Gone where?"

Tom shrugged. "Didn't say. Him an' Sundance took off together. Didn't say when they'd be back."

"Sundance?" the sheriff questioned.

Tom nodded. "A long-geared horse thief that put up here a spell. Him an' Sam didn't git on."

"Horse thief?" the lawman repeated, as if surprised Tom would use the words.

"I guess he was," Tom said, still feeling it a triumph over his inquisitors to tell the truth. "He was always after Sam to run horses in here off the mesa—or whoop Hub brood mares off to the mountains an' hold the colts."

The sheriff grinned faintly. "Sam ever do it?"

"Not any," Tom said, sticking with truth. "He told Sundance this *wasn't* no Robber's Roost."

That brought a general guffaw. The sheriff shot an inquiring glance at Grent, and the old man nodded sharply. "Hap good was usin' the name Sundance," he said. And Tom stared lingeringly at the man who by his words confirmed that he had hired Sam killed.

"You see two men come through this way the last day or two?" the sheriff resumed. "Little dried up geezer on a buckskin horse, an' a short complected monkey on a bay?"

"Sounds like Bad Water an' Dabs," Tom said. And he saw the faces sharpen with interest.

"You know 'em, do you?"

"Why, sure." Tom's voice was cool. "They brung horses here for Sam to twist out."

The statement brought another laugh. Another question. "Which way they go?"

Tom pointed up the mesa trail. The tracks were there for them to see, any-

how. The truth still held for Tom.

"They git fresh horses here?"

"About seventy head," Tom told them. "Stuff we'd broke for them."

"They got nerve, anyhow," the sheriff said wryly. "Makin' a drive when they know we're behind 'em." He looked over at Grent. "Well, what do you think?"

"I don't know what to think," the old man growled, his eyes beady-bright, like a snake's. "I'll bet a dollar he's lyin', though."

"We can damn soon tell," the sheriff said. "Light down, you fellas, an' have a look around. Look for gear that might be Hapgood's. Watch for places a man could be hidin'—alive or dead. Harper, you stay here an' keep your eye on the kid."

WITH the exception of young Grent, the possemen all moved off to search. Even old Grent swung down and walked around, poking inquisitively about the place he evidently had not dared to visit until that day. But young Ollie did not stir his shiny palomino geld. Ollie sat right where he was, whistling softly and fiddling with his rope. It was a soft roll lariat, and Ollie was building a noose at one end of it. Tom watched him from the corner of his eye, and counted the warps he made above the noose. The turns numbered exactly thirteen.

Tom turned his back on Ollie and watched two of the riders dismount up at the corrals. One of them shouted something, and Tom's knees went too weak to hold him. He sat on the chopping block and tried to engage Harper in some kind of talk. But Harper wasn't talkative. Ollie was the one that talked.

"It's a sure pleasure to find you still around, Red," he remarked at first, his tone almost cordial. "I was afraid I was maybe goin' to be disappointed about not seein' you any more."

As he spoke, he tossed the noose he'd tied down to the ground at Tom's feet, then flipped it back up to his hand. But Tom was watching the corral where the two riders had disappeared.

"You got your hoss thief, an' you got your rope, Ollie," Harper said jocularly. "But where in hell you goin' to find a tree?"

"Don't require no tree," Ollie said, tossing the noose down in front of Tom again. "Just tie the rope to your saddle horn an' feed the horse your spurs. It's maybe harder on the horse that way, but ain't no harder on the thief."

Tom went on watching the corral. Went on wondering what the men were finding. Ollie kept on tossing the noose down to the ground and jerking it back, and there came to be a kind of hypnosis in its regular fall and pull.

Then the searchers began to come stringing back. The pair emerged from the corral, and shook their heads at Wilson.

"Nothin' much around, Spade. No gear but a couple saddles an' some harness. Nothin' that looks like Hapgood's."

They didn't remark that the manure pile had been recently moved, and Tom's breathing began to ease a bit. But then the sheriff returned to the cabin, and Tom's chest muscles tightened again. For the lawman looked at the noose in Ollie's rope and looked quickly away. He seemed not to like it, but he didn't say anything. Tom comprehended with a shriveling of hope that the sheriff wasn't in position to say anything. It was a vigilante posse that had called on him, and the sheriff wasn't the man in authority.

Old Grent was in the cabin now, rummaging noisily around, apparently unable to take Harper's word that there was no one hiding inside. The other men were idling about, looking anywhere but at Tom. They weren't joshing with Ollie about his hangknot, either. The air all around Tom had gone stale and dead.

"Kid," Wilson said finally, sounding like a man who makes talk just to ease a

silence, "how do you figure in this setup? How come you're mixed in this mess?"

"What mess?" Tom countered defiantly. "I work for Sam. I'm a horse-breaker, an' Sam handed me a job."

"You *did* work for Sam," Ollie Grent corrected. But the sheriff paid him no heed.

"If we was to let you off, you bein' young an' all, would you light a shuck out o' this country an' not come back?"

TOM'S heart gave a leap. This was the first hint of hope they had offered him. The first faint indication that they didn't mean to string him up on the spot. But Ollie was in it quickly, agitating for the end he wanted.

"Why drive our coyotes over into the next county, Spade? What if everybody in this country done business that way? Only way to handle coyotes is for every county to clean up its own."

"What about it, kid?" Wilson pressed. "You ain't answered me."

Tom wanted to say that this time he would leave, if they would only give him the chance. But his eyes were on the new salt lick again, and he knew he couldn't say it.

"I got to look after things for Sam," he said finally, hopelessly. "I got to stay till Sam comes back."

Wilson let his breath out in a sigh and looked at the others, as if calling on them to witness the fact that he had done his best, and failed. Ollie Grent was grinning and started to say something more. But his father reappeared in the cabin door and cut him off.

"You can coil that rope up, Oliver. We are law-abiding citizens here, with one possible exception. There will be no lynching of suspects by this posse."

Spade Wilson looked as relieved as if he had been the one reprieved. "That's the word with the bark on it, Ollie," he said, suddenly authoritative. "We're not lynchin' nobody. Harper, you take the kid in to the lockup. Rest of us will hit that trail."

"Why lodge an' feed every hobo that comes through—at county expense?" old Grent challenged, from the cabin doorway. "He says he don't know anything about this, an' I'm inclined to believe him. He'd have skipped out with the others, if he had. We've wasted enough time here, while the men we want are getting away."

Tom found it hard to believe that it was old Grent talking up for him. The old man with the knife for a face and a bullet for a heart, offering Tom his life and feedom when the others were set to take them both away.

Tom's throat filled with a great and humble gratitude for his enemy's generosity, and he turned, fumbling for words that would express his feeling. But when he looked into the old man's face, the feeling congealed into a hard and heavy stone, down deep in his viscera. For there was nothing of kindness on the sharp and wizened countenance, no generosity in the acrid, beady eyes. The enmity they showed Tom now was venomous and brutal, soulless as the enmity of a snake.

"You mean we just ride on an' leave 'im set?" Ollie protested hotly. "Let 'im off to go on squattin' on this meadow, pickin' off our calves like that wolf of a Sam Colt done so long?"

"I mean we've wasted a lot of precious time, baiting a puppy, while the wolves we want are getting away!" the old man snapped. "We'll tend to the boy later, if we have to. Now get your horses, and we'll ride."

With that, the old man swung up on his mount and headed off across the meadow at a trot. Ollie was black and sullen, and handed Tom a wide, insolent stare.

"We'll be seein' you, Red," he promised. But he swung his horse and rode

after his father, like a dog called to heel, and the others followed after him.

Tom held his breath again as they strung down past the salt lick, to take the mesa trail. But none of them gave the wooden trough a glance, and it was only then that Tom began to know that he would keep on living.

But, even then, he was too puzzled and too disturbed by old Grent's behavior to feel any easiness. The feeling was on him that old Grent, not Ollie, was the enemy that he would have to deal with ultimately. Ollie was loud and a bully, all on the surface. But when Tom remembered the look in the old man's eyes, it set the hairy spider to crawling at his back again. Yet the old man had interceded in his behalf. Tom wondered why.

The question was still in his mind, urgently demanding answer, when he stepped back into his kitchen to get a drink. Halfway to the water bucket, he stopped short, staring at the table. On its bare, slivery surface, someone had sketched a rough representation of a skull and crossbones, using a lump of charcoal from the stove.

Down below the death's head, in the same cramped scrawl, were the familiar numbers: 3—*7*—*77*.

Under the Gun

TOM WAS still standing by the table, still staring down at the death warning left by the man who had handed him his life minutes before, when his ears caught the sound of furtive footsteps coming down the stable path. A gong of warning struck in his head, and his hand went automatically to his belt, only to freeze in nullifying realization that he was unarmed. The sheriff had taken his gun and not returned it.

A moment dragged in which he stood paralyzed, panic tearing at his throat, eyes combing the cabin for any object that would serve as a weapon. But there was nothing. He had buried all the guns but his own .38. Even the axe was out at the chip pile. As far as Tom was concerned, it might as well have been in Amity.

Belatedly, he remembered Sam's little meat cleaver that hung on a nail behind the stove. But before he could reach it, the sun had laid the shadow of a man across the open doorway. Then Bad Water was standing there against the light, grinning faintly in enjoyment of his surprise.

"What's the matter, Tommy?" the old man said. "Wasn't expectin' me back? Hey, snap out of it. You look like you'd just seen the devil."

"I reckon I did," Tom breathed, weak with relief. "His name was Grent. I thought you'd be one his angels, come back for me."

Then, things righting themselves in his head, he looked sharply at the old horse-thief. "What are you doin' back here?"

Bad Water grinned and removed his hat, showing the red band of sweat where his white forehead joined his brown face. "Dabs an' me decided to split up. The gang was busted anyhow, an' that posse was lookin' for tracks that went in pairs. Dabs lit out for Nebraska, but I couldn't think of no safer place than this—once them bloodhounds was gone."

"You could be wrong about that," Tom told him, waving a hand at the table where the vigilante warning was. "Cast your sun-burned eyes on this!"

The fugitive walked to the table, and his grin faded as he looked down. Tom could see that the warning's meaning did not have to be explained to him. But he couldn't help stressing its deadly significance.

"Sam found the same thing, up on the stable door, the day he got—the day he left here with Sundance," Tom said, catching himself just in time.

The faded eyes left the table to search his face carefully, and Tom became uneasy about the slip he had made. But when Bad Water spoke, his reference was to the warning on the table, not to Sam.

"Who drew that valentine?"

"Ol' Grent, I expect," Tom said. "He was the only one in here long enough to

Bad Water

do it. But I don't make no sense of it. Ollie an' some the others was for hangin' me, right here. But the ol' man spoke up for me an' headed it off. Why would he do that, then leave somethin' like this for me to remember him by?"

"That's easy," Bad Water pronounced. "Lynchin' is agin' the law, even when sheriff's posses pull the rope. Might be, Grent is gittin' foxy."

"But he wouldn't even let Wilson arrest me," Tom objected. "Wilson told Harper to take me in to the lockup, an' Grent put the kibosh on that, too."

"That's almost as easy as the other," the old man said easily. "You lock people in jail, the time comes when you got to bring them in front of a judge, an' let them talk. Maybe Grent don't want to give you no chance to talk to any judge."

Tom considered the possibility, then shook his head. "I don't know nothin' that would interest a judge. Nothin' that would hurt Grent."

"Could be," the other admitted. "But maybe Grent don't know that. Maybe he thinks you know more'n you're tellin' about Sam droppin' out of sight. Maybe he don't want that told in court."

NOW that the talk had got back to Sam, Tom began feeling his uneasiness again. The old man's faded eyes were sounding him, and the suspicion was born in him that Bad Water suspected at least part of the truth and was trying to dig it out of him.

"It still don't make any sense," he insisted. "Supposin' somethin' has happened to Sam, an' I know it. How would that be any threat to Grent? Sam was an outlaw, wasn't he?"

"Was?" The old man pounced on the word like a hawk. "You mean Sam's dead—an' maybe Sundance, too?"

Tom's eyes dropped from the prying blue ones. He felt the blood leave his cheeks, and to cover his confusion he walked to the door and looked out across the meadow. The old man's persistent digging about Sam reminded him of Sundance, and thoughts of Sundance put his nerves on edge again.

He tried to tell himself that the snoopy old man was just a friend of Sam's, trying to learn what had happened to his pal. But, remembering Sundance again, he couldn't believe it. Remembering Sundance, remembering the warning on the table, he started to wonder if maybe Bad

Water was a second spy, come to carry out the terms of the second warning.

"I didn't mean to rasp you, kid," the old man said at his back. "I only figured to ask a civil question."

"The only civil question I ever heard," Tom said bitterly, unaware that he was quoting anybody, "is how-de-do!"

Then, finding the other's society to be unbearable, he left the house and walked slowly up to the stable, alone. Coldly considered, the thought that the old horse thief might be a second Sundance seemed fantastic. Yet, all the way up to the corrals, Tom's back felt naked and vulnerable.

He had gone to the corral with the half-formed plan of moving the manure pile again, and digging up a gun. But now that the task lay before him, he knew he couldn't start it until night. Then he thought that he might not be put to the task at all. Might be, if he watched his chance, he could get hold of the old man's gun. If he opened the grave, he would risk being found out, even at night. Then his neck would be in a noose for sure.

He didn't mean to sleep when he lay down in the manger. But weariness had numbed his fears, and when he awoke, chilling, night had fallen. He stood a while, debating whether to take the shovel and go to work, but decided he had better check on Bad Water first.

He thought at first that the cabin was in darkness, and the possibility that he might catch his unwelcome guest asleep excited him. But when he came nearer, he saw a crack of light beneath the shuttered window. Crowding open the door, he found the old man seated at the table near the lamp, reading from a black-covered book.

Bad Water seemed embarrassed to have been caught reading, and it did appear a strange pastime for a man such as he was supposed to be. He closed the book as Tom came in, and covered it with one arm. For long seconds he sat staring at Jamison. Then:

"Tommy," he greeted, "I been thinkin'. We're about due for an understandin', you an' me. Sit down."

There was an odd ring of authority in the voice. Tom looked at him guardedly, and what he saw put the black bile of fear into his mouth. For the difference in the voice extended to the man. Something in the set of the head, something in the carriage of the thin shoulders, changed the oldster's stature completely—made him seem a bigger man.

Tom searched the wrinkled face carefully for some sign of malignity, some hint as to what was coming. Search as he would, he could see nothing but continuing good will. But he knew when he sat down that the other was something quite different from the dissolute old horse thief he'd set himself up to be.

"I expect we should start by knowin' each other, Tom," the changed old man went on, still kindly enough but dismayingly business-like. "Then we got to trust each other. You got any notion who I might be, Tom?"

Tom Jamison shook his head, unable to speak.

"I am an officer of the law, Tom. An officer o' the federal law, which gits kicked around considerable, out here in this country. My job is not to worry small-bore rustlers an' horse thieves, but to apprehend big land thieves. An' I'm havin' some success.

"Now, I can see you don't believe me. So, as you say, cast your sun-burned eyes on this."

Reaching to his shirt pocket, he unpinned a small metal shield from the under side of the buttoned flap, and tossed it over. Tom caught it and held it to the light. The circular, rainbow shaped line of graven letters at the top said UNITED STATES LAND OFFICE. The word at the bottom was INVESTIGATOR.

TOM raised his eyes and stared into the waiting china blue eyes, and was more incredulous than ever. Tom had heard much talk of land detectives since coming to this country—from Hitch and Sam and Sundance, and others as well. But he'd never talked to any man who'd ever actually seen one in the flesh, and he had inclined to write them off as products of the country's fancy, along with the antlered jack rabbit and the hoopsnake. Along with white Indians and windigo wolves and the Lost Cabin mine.

"An' now, you're wonderin' why I let in to steal horses, an' otherwise break the local law," the old man went on, half-humorously. "Well, I'll tell you, Tom. A land detective's life ain't worth any more than a range detective's in this man's country, if he's known. Even the people you are tryin' to help will freeze up an' duck you—maybe even send a bullet your way—if they find out you're connected with the law.

"Well, I needed a way to git around the country, unnoticed. A way to see things an' talk to people—the kind o' people who are bein' crowded by the big land companies that yell 'thief!' all the while they're stealin' the ground out from under them that own it, in the eyes o' the law.

"Now, Tom, it's a sad commentary that we have two kinds o' law, out here in this country: The local law, which is packaged by the big companies an' handed to the legislatures to make official. An' the federal law, which is slanted the other way—an' tries to regulate things a bit.

"It's sad commentary, Tom, that a federal officer that's honest an' tryin' to do right has got to keep his name an' mission secret from local officials, or run the risk o' bein' shot in the back an' left to the buzzards. It's sad that you got to pose as a horse thief, to stay alive. But that's the way it is, An' I found that throwin' in with that horse thief outfit got me around, an' got me in touch with the people I had to git in touch with, to do my job."

Tom listened, fascinated, not knowing whether he was being fed a line of bull or not.

"I been out in this country almost a year," the speaker went on, his tone faintly boasting. "My job is to pick up evidence on land frauds committed by people like Grent who think the world was made for their personal use an' profit. People that enclose public land with fences, without acquirin' title, holdin' it from them that have legal claim to it.

"This journal," he said, touching the black book he had been reading, "contains testimony from people scared or moved off their ground by mobs on horseback an' paid sharks. I've talked to survivors of men shot down in their corrals an' in their fields. Quite a few pages have to do with Grent an' Hub. Sam's story is here, as much as I know of it. Dabs' story is here, an' plenty others. I've even got a fairly accurate description of all the ground that Grent has fenced unlawfully.

"The long an' the short of it is, there's enough in this book to fine Grent down to his last dollar, an' send him to jail for life. Now, you think you can trust me, an' tell me what happened to Sam?"

Tom sat a moment, trying to straighten out his thoughts. He didn't have much luck. "What's that got to do with anything?" he asked uncertainly.

"Got a lot to do with everything," the other said strongly. "Kid, Grent was tipped off that he was bein' investigated. But he couldn't find who was doin' it. Finally, I hear, he narrowed the field down to that horse outfit I was with. An' that's why he sent for Sundance an' sicc'd him on us. Gave him orders to find the Land Office spy an' salt him away.

"But Sundance didn't suspicion me. He suspicioned Sam. I got that from the posseman we persuaded to talk. That's why I rode down here, to warn Sam. But

I'm thinkin' I got here a little too late."

TOM'S face was a blank. He wanted to believe what he was hearing. But he couldn't shake the suspicion that here was another Grent man, scheming to trap him into confessing he'd killed Sundance. Tom said nothing.

"I halfway suspected you of bein' with Grent, after I talked to you today," the old man went on. "I got away from Dabs, quick as we'd hit the mesa, an' hid my horse, an' come back here on foot. I was up on top the big bluff back o' the house here when that posse came up. I couldn't hear all that was said. But I heard enough to convince you was the McCoy. That's why I'm talkin' to you now.

"Don't you see, kid, what the picture is?" he pressed. "Grent still figures Sam is the government man. He don't know what's happened to him, or his gun-hands, either. That's why he wouldn't risk puttin' you on the witness stand. Killin' government people is murder, even out in this neck o' the woods, an' Grent don't know how much you know.

"He wouldn't let them boys hang you today, because Sam might still be around, an' a public hangin' could kick back. But he's warned you to leave, an' you're still here. He's goin' to shut your mouth, one way or another. You're under the gun, kid. Throw in with me, an' I can maybe help you."

"All right," Tom blurted, unable to hold out any longer against a setup that promised to see his friend's murder avenged. "I'll tell you.

"Sam's dead," he admitted. "So's Sundance. Sam got suspicious o' Sundance, an' run him off. But Sundance come back an' laid for us, up at the corral. Had us both like settin' ducks. But Sam was hard to kill. All the while, he was reachin' for his rifle, an' Sundance knew what'd happen, if Sam got hold of it. So he kept shootin' Sam. That give me time to git my gun. He was just cuttin' down on me when I blasted 'im!"

"Case o' self-defense, eh?" the land detective said promptly.

Tom nodded and rattled on. Now that he'd started talking about it, he couldn't seem to talk enough.

"Sam lived a while. Told me Grent would hang me high, if he found out what happened—an' to hell with any story I told. Told me to plant Sundance down there in the corral, an' him down on the meadow. That's what I done. Then I—"

"Hold on now," the detective broke in, putting up a hand. "That is stuff for the record. Let's git it all down, from the first."

So Tom sat silent while the other took a pen from his pack and made ink by mixing water with blue powder he carried in a little tin. When all was in readiness, the chronicler of the land wars painstakingly labeled a page in his book *Testimony of Thomas Jamison, Associate of Sam Colt, Deceased.*

"Now," he said.

Tom sat a moment, collecting his thoughts. Then, under shrewd questioning, he told his story, slowly, while the other dipped and wrote and dipped and wrote again. The hour was late when they had finished.

"That's quite a story, Tom," the old man said, waving the book over the lamp to dry the ink on the last page he had filled. "An' now that I got proof Sam was murdered, I'm ready to move agin' Grent. I'll ride into Amity tomorrow an' swear charges. You'll be my star witness, an' clear yourself, all in one hand, eh?"

Tom was nodding and about to speak again when a furtive, scuffing sound outside the window brought their eyes together. Then Tom started to rise. But the land detective put out a restraining hand. An instant later the old man was on his feet, moving toward the door like a cat. But, instead of opening it, he soundlessly

shot the bolt. He stood silent a moment.

"Well," he said then, his voice surprisingly natural, "we got a big day tomorrow. Let's hit the hay."

Then he raised the lantern's pumpkin shaped glass globe and blew out the flame, plunging the cabin into darkness.

"Why not go out an' see what's there?" Tom asked in a whisper. "We can't stay in here forever."

"We can stay here till daylight, when we might have a fightin' chance," he was answered in a wisp of a voice. "We don't know how many guns are out there. We're both under the guns now, kid . . ."

7

Murder Mesa

THE waiting wasn't easy. But neither was it long. For dawn still came early, and they'd heard no other sound to alarm them when the dark of the room began to lighten, and the old man remarked that whoever was outside was waiting for them to come out, instead of trying to come in after them.

The transformation in Bad Water had been astonishing and, to Tom, reassuring. The shoddy, self-effecting old horse thief was gone, and in his place was a competent representative of government—confident and resourceful, calm and unperturbed in the crisis that faced them.

"We're a couple o' feather merchants, Tommy," he whispered once. "Here we set an' spill everything we know, an' let them longhorns slip up outside an' hear it all. Hell, we deserve to be boxed in."

"Wonder who it is," Tom answered. "Both Grents was with that posse. They shouldn't be showin' back here unless they found your trail."

"They didn't find my trail, because there wasn't none to find," the old man told him. "It's my notion that whoever it is come back to salt you away for Grent, without a bunch o' sheriffs lookin' on. Seein' the light, they slipped up close to rubber. An' we shore did give 'em a earful. They can't afford to let us git away this time."

Tom could only nod agreement, into the darkness. They were in a tight place. But, next to Sam, he didn't know of anyone he'd prefer to the old man.

"Now turn your head, Red." Turn and yell for your partner to come out!"

"I'm the one they'll be after hottest," the detective said another time. "So, I'm goin' to commission you deputy investigator an' let you take the book, just in case. You pocket that badge on the table, an' I'll write you a commission when we can see . . .

"If you git through an' I don't, you git that book to a post office, an' mail it to the Land Office in Washington, registered, in care the Commissioner. Don't let any these local sheriffs or judges git hold of it, or it won't never be seen again. Once you git it in the mail, you better git on the stage yourself an' ride it to the railroad, just to make certain shore the stage ain't stopped somewheres an' the package taken off. I tell you, they won't stop at nothin', now they know the play."

It wasn't long before the thin, reddish light of dawn began to filter through the cabin's cracks. When he could see to do it, the detective got out pen and ink once more, and tore a blank page from his journal. The pen made scratchy sounds against the paper as he wrote. His voice made scratchy sounds as he talked.

"I'll just date it back far enough that it will cover you in killin' that dog of a Sundance. Your defense, if you find you'll need one, will be that you had to kill him in line o' duty, tryin' to save a witness's life, as well as your own. That won't be far from the truth, neither, even if you didn't know it at the time."

By the time the document was in Tom's hand, it was light enough that he was able to read it, by holding it to the crack in the window shutter.

To Whom it May Concern:

In accordance with powers vested in me by Congress and the Commissioner of Public Lands, I hereby designate Thomas Jamison to act as Deputy United States Land Office Investigator & authorize him to act

for me in all matters pertaining to policing the public lands.

J. A. Lass
Land Office Investigator

"Well, I thank you, Mr. Lass," Tom said, pocketing the commission along with the badge. "I'll sure try to live up to it an' do the best I can."

"I know you will," the other said, his voice a little grim. "But we ain't out o' the woods yet. Till we are, you better jist call me Bad Water."

BY THEN it was fully light outside, and Tom raised the window shutter, while the detective stood with his pistol in hand. There was nothing in sight that didn't belong. No men or strange horses. But there in the dust below the window fresh boot tracks showed plainly.

"Well, we didn't imagine it," the detective said, staring down. "Question is, how many of them are there, and where are they ditched. Watch that ledge straight ahead, between here an' the meadow. They'll sure have somebody there."

Tom watched but saw no one, nothing. Hope began to take shape in him. "Maybe there was only one man here," he said, trying to believe in his own optimism. "Maybe when he heard what we said, he took off to find Grent an' tip him off."

The detective shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Listen. The only birds chirpin' are down on the meadow. You don't hear nothin' up here around the house. Somethin's out there. An' just one man wouldn't have all the birds scared. Place must be surrounded."

Tom stood listening for just one chirp that would refute the other's premise. He heard nothing.

"Now it's me they'll want worst, kid," the old man said in a minute, his faded eyes going over the landscape outside. "If I step out there, first, they'll open up. But

if you went out, say with a water bucket in your hand, like you was goin' down to the crick for water, I got a hunch they would hold back—for fear o' warnin' me. Now, if you could make it to that ledge, say, an' if they did hold back, playin' it cute, you'd have a chance at whoever is behind it. If it works out there ain't nobody behind it, you could take it over an' cover me when I come out. Right?"

Tom's heart was squeezed by an icy hand as he considered the prospect of walking out alone. Of being the first target for the hidden guns. But his mind followed the logic of the old man's reasoning. He had to nod his agreement.

"The hell of it is, I haven't got a gun," he said. "The sheriff took mine."

"Take this hogleg," the detective said, unstrapping his pistol. "I got a rifle in my pack. But don't wear the belt. Shove the thing inside your shirt, to make it look like you don't suspect nothin'. You're just out o' bed, an' goin' for water."

Tom took the proffered gun, tried the action, then pushed it inside his shirt as instructed, down low against his belt. Next, he removed a dozen cartridges from the belt loops and shoved them into a pocket. Then he picked up the water bucket.

He tried to grin. "Well, here we go—on the red dog's back!"

The old man nodded, and did better at managing a grin. "It's high, low, jack, an' the goddamn game! Good luck, kid. Wait till I git my rifle. I'll cover you from the window, good as I can."

Tom waited the minute, then pulled open the door and waited an instant, half expecting a bullet from the ledge. No bullet came, and no gun was visible. .

"Here goes," he said tightly again. Then he was out in the open. He was making himself walk slowly, as a man might, on his way to the creek to get water.

Once again, as when the posse was there to hang him, Tom's mind and body felt far away. It was somebody else who stepped calmly out of the cabin, inviting the same tearing death that had struck Sam. But it was someone Tom knew well, and understood. The someone was canny, too, and had guts. For the benefit of unseen watchers, he stopped a short way from the cabin, and stretched, throwing a casual glance around him, as a man will do when first stepping out into the morning. He even put his free hand inside his shirt and scratched his belly, leisurely. No one watching would have guessed that the scratching hand held a pistol.

SLOWLY, Tom moved on, down toward the meadow. Casually swinging the bucket. Casually scratching inside his shirt. He was drawing abreast of the ledge, and someone was behind it. But Tom fought his eyes away from it, and kept on walking, until a voice spoke, quietly.

"Stop there, Red. Stop right where you are. Leave your hands like they are, an' don't yell."

Tom stopped, and looked at Ollie Grent. He looked at the rifle in Ollie's hand. Its muzzle was trained on Tom's chest, and Ollie's eyes were looking down the sights.

"Hullo, Ollie," Tom said, thinking of nothing else.

"Stand right there," Ollie repeated, and Tom saw that he was scared. More scared than Tom was.

"Now, turn your head, Red. Turn an' yell to your pardner to come out. Don't tip 'im off. Just act like you found somethin' here to show 'im."

Tom turned his head, as commanded. Along with his head, he turned his body, so that the pistol under his shirt was pointed at Ollie.

"Hey, Bad Water," he called, hoping the man in the cabin would be smart

enough to see the play, "Come see what I found."

From the tail of his eye, Tom saw Ollie's gaze swing off toward the cabin, and he squeezed the pistol's trigger, firing through the shirt. The bullet missed, but it flew close enough to rattle Ollie, and Ollie's shot was high. Tom's second was good, and knocked Ollie over backward. And Tom was leaping for the shelter of the ledge.

Then he was behind the shelter.

Ollie reared up, blood staining his shirt, and tried to lift the rifle. Tom swung the pistol against his head, then took the rifle in his own hands.

Two guns were firing from the bluffs just down the valley from the cabin. But their lead was no longer directed at Tom. The land detective was kneeling outside the door, shooting at the cliffs as fast as he could work the lever of his gun.

It was the most spectacular exhibition of gunmanship that Tom had ever seen. But he had no leisure in which to remark on it. A man was edging around the corner of the cabin, at the detective's back, pistol leveled to shoot. Tom recognized old Grent just as he fired the shot that brought him down.

They were all running, then.

Silence came down over the meadow then. Tom stayed in the shelter of the ledge, watching the bluffs for someone else to show. But the silence continued, even after the land detective walked cautiously from the cabin.

"Looks like that's all, Tommy," he called. "Looks like our hand was best. An' you sure played it sweet. You'll do to take along. How'd you like to keep that badge, an' work with me from now on?"

But Tom scarcely heard him. Tom's knees had gone weak, and he was sitting on the ground. It was ground he'd fought for, and killed for, and his eyes were on the salt lick.

"If you can help me git title to this place," he said, "I think I'd rather ranch."

"I'll git you title to it," the land detective said, "an' wages while you worked. Right now, I better ride into Amity to report this fuss an' git the coroner—if you'll take charge o' things here."

WITH both Grents dead and the Land Office investigator there to direct proceedings, the legal formalities were formalities only. Before leaving town, Tom stopped by the livery corral to see old Hitch.

"Well," Hitch exclaimed, eying him quizzically, "some folks have come up in the world!"

"Yeah," Tom said, a sudden sadness in him. "Considerable happened."

Before he left, a bright bay pony clattered up to the stable, bearing a trim rider in blue habit, sitting sidesaddle. The rider leaped lightly to the ground, and handed Hitch the bridle. As she turned, Tom had a vision of eyes blue.

The blue eyes took note of Tom, and he thought they registered interest and approval. When she left the corral, walking down toward town, Tom stood looking after her.

"Kid," Hitch said sternly, in answer to his question, "that's Toni Minton. An' they's no percentage in gittin' yourself hot an' bothered, like the other young bucks around here are doin'. Her pappy runs the Midas mine, down to Sunset, an' you stand about as much chance with her as a white-faced bull stands o' bein' presi-dent. You cut a fat hawg around here. But not that fat."

"Maybe," Tom said. The sadness gone out of him and a vast new disturbance in its place. "Maybe not. I'm from Missouri."

"I'm thinkin' maybe you're too damn' much from Missouri!" the old stabler growled, aggrievedly. "You're ridin' high,

but you could be due for a fall. How you figure you can hang on an' ranch in this country, after what's happened? You put the Grents out o' business. But they's other big layouts around, friends o' Grents. An' you got yourself a bad name, turnin' up as a Land Office spy. What makes you think you ain't goin' to git run out of this country, fast?"

A tin can lay in the dirt at Tom's feet. Facing away from town and the corral, he picked the can up and tossed it into the air. Drawing his pistol, he pulled the trigger five times, and put five holes through it before it came back to earth.

Then he looked into the old man's startled eyes.

"I expect that's what," he said . . .

* * *

The next spring, returning from Chicago with a Hereford bull and twenty white-faced heifers purchased with the hoard turned over to him by Sam, Tom stopped off in Cheyenne to buy a tombstone and to see if he could register a brand.

He ordered Sam's name and outlaw Wheel brand engraved on the stone, and Wheel was the iron he requested, in filling out his application in the state brand office. But the registrar vetoed it.

"We've a Hub-and-Spoke brand in that same territory," he remarked. "The two would be too similar. You'll have to think of something else."

Tom pondered the problem, then erased the Wheel and sketched in its place the rough outline of a revolver. The registrar inspected it, and nodded approval.

"That should be satisfactory," he said. "Should make you a good iron, too. Easy to read, and hard to alter. What you aim to call it, the Pistol Brand?"

Again Tom pondered.

"I'll have it called the Sam Colt," he said.

THE END

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT

HAIR LOSS

ITCHY SCALP, DANDRUFF, HEAD SCALES, SEBORRHEA, EXCESSIVE FALLING HAIR

The following facts are brought to the attention of the public because of a widespread belief that nothing can be done about hair loss. This belief has no basis in medical fact. Worse, it has condemned many men and women to needless baldness by their neglect to treat certain accepted causes of hair loss.

There are six principal types of hair loss, or *alopecia*, as it is known in medical terms:

1. Alopecia from diseases of the scalp
2. Alopecia from other diseases or from an improper functioning of the body
3. Alopecia of the aged (senile baldness)
4. Alopecia areata (loss of hair in patches)
5. Alopecia of the young (premature baldness)
6. Alopecia at birth (congenital baldness)

Senile, premature and congenital alopecia cannot be helped by anything now known to modern science. Alopecia from improper functioning of the body requires the advice and treatment of your family physician.

BUT MANY MEDICAL AUTHORITIES NOW BELIEVE A SPECIFIC SCALP DISEASE IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE OF HAIR LOSS.

This disease is called Seborrhea and can be broadly classified into two clinical forms with the following symptoms:

1. ***DRY SEBORRHEA:*** The hair is dry, lifeless, and without gloss. A dry flaky dandruff is usually present with accompanying itchiness. Hair loss is considerable and increases with the progress of this disease.

2. ***OILY SEBORRHEA:*** The hair and scalp are oily and greasy. The hair is slightly sticky to the touch and has a tendency to mat together. Dandruff takes the form of head scales. Scalp is usually itchy. Hair loss is severe with baldness as the end result.

DESTRUCTION OF HAIR FOLLICLES
Caused By Seborrhea

A — Dead hairs; B — Hair-destroying bacteria; C — Hypertrophied sebaceous glands; D — Atrophic follicles.

Many doctors agree that to NEGLECT these symptoms of DRY and OILY SEBORRHEA is to INVITE BALDNESS.

Seborrhea is believed to be caused by three germ organisms — staphylococcus albus, pityrosporum ovale, and acnes bacillus.

These germs attack the sebaceous gland causing an abnormal working of this fat gland. The hair follicle, completely surrounded by the enlarged diseased sebaceous gland, then begins to atrophy. The hair produced becomes smaller and smaller until the hair follicle dies. Baldness is the inevitable result. (See illustration.)

But seborrhea can be controlled, particularly in its early stages. The three germ organisms believed to cause seborrhea, can and should be eliminated before they destroy your normal hair growth.

A post-war development, Comate Medicinal Formula kills these three germ organisms on contact. Proof of Comate's germ-killing properties has been demonstrated in laboratory tests recently conducted by one of the leading testing laboratories in America. (Complete report on file and copies are available on request.)

When used as directed, Comate Medicinal Formula controls seborrhea—stimulates the flow of blood to the scalp—helps stop scalp itch and burn—improves the appearance of your hair and scalp—helps STOP HAIR LOSS due to seborrhea. Your hair looks more attractive and alive.

You may safely follow the example of thousands who first were skeptical, then curious and finally decided to avail themselves of Comate Medicinal Formula.

A Few of the Many Grateful Expressions By Users of Comate Medicinal Formula

"My hair was coming out for years and I tried everything. Nothing stopped it until I tried Comate. Now my hair has stopped coming out. It looks so much thicker. My friends have noticed my hair and they all say it looks so much better." —Mrs. R.E.J., Stevenson, Ala.

"Your hair formula got rid of my dandruff; my head does not itch any more. I think it is the best of all of the formulas I have used."—E.E., Hamilton, Ohio.

"Your formula is everything you claim it to be and the first 10 days trial freed me of a very bad case of dry seborrhea." —J.E.M., Long Beach, Calif.

"I do want to say that just within five days I have obtained a great improvement in my hair. I do want to thank you and the Comate Laboratories for producing such a wonderful and amazing formula."—M.M., Johnstown, Pa.

"I have found almost instant relief. My itching has stopped with one application."—J.N., Stockton, Calif.

"My hair looks thicker, not falling out like it used to. Will not be without Comate in the house."—R.W., Lonsdale, R. I.

"I haven't had any trouble with dandruff since I started using Comate."—L.W.W., Galveston, Tex.

"This formula is everything if not more than you say it is. I am very happy with what it's doing for my hair." —T.J., Las Cruces, New Mexico

"I find it stops the itch and retards the hair fall. I am thankful for the help it has given me in regard to the terrible itchiness."—R.B.L., Philadelphia, Pa.

"The bottle of Comate I got from you has done my hair so much good. My hair has been coming out and breaking off for about 22 years. It has improved so much." —Mrs. J.E., Lisbon, Ga.

Today these benefits are available to you just as they were to these sincere men and women when they first read about Comate. If your hair is thinning, over-dry or over-oily—if you are troubled with dandruff with increasing hair loss—you may well be guided by the laboratory tests and the experience of thousands of grateful men and women.

Remember, if your hair loss is due to Seborrhea, Comate CAN and MUST help you. If it is due to causes beyond the reach of Comate Medicinal Formula, you have nothing to lose because our GUARANTY POLICY assures the return of your money unless delighted. So why delay when that delay may cause irreparable damage to your hair and scalp. Just mail the coupon below.

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☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman $5.00 plus postal charges.

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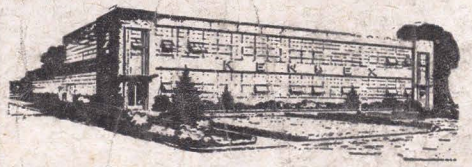
Man or woman — young or old, YOU can easily earn steady income, spare or full time. No money or experience needed. We supply EVERYTHING free and set you up in business at OUR expense. Nothing to buy or deliver. Write orders, we deliver and collect. Big advance pay plus huge cash bonus that increases your earnings up to 40%! Your name and address on postcard will bring you sample nylon stocking; samples of lingerie, hose, robe materials; self-selling sales books with FULL COLOR illustrations; 36-page sales manual showing you easy steps to success; color cards, free "door openers" worth $1 each but which you give away free; special plan to have others sell for you etc., etc. You can start making money the minute you receive the complete FREE outfits!



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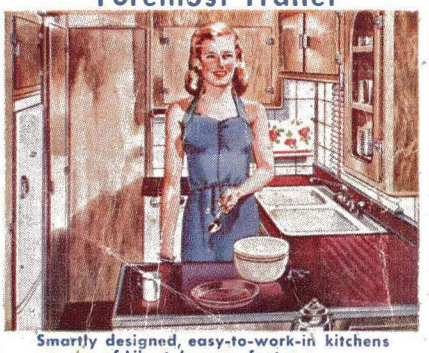

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