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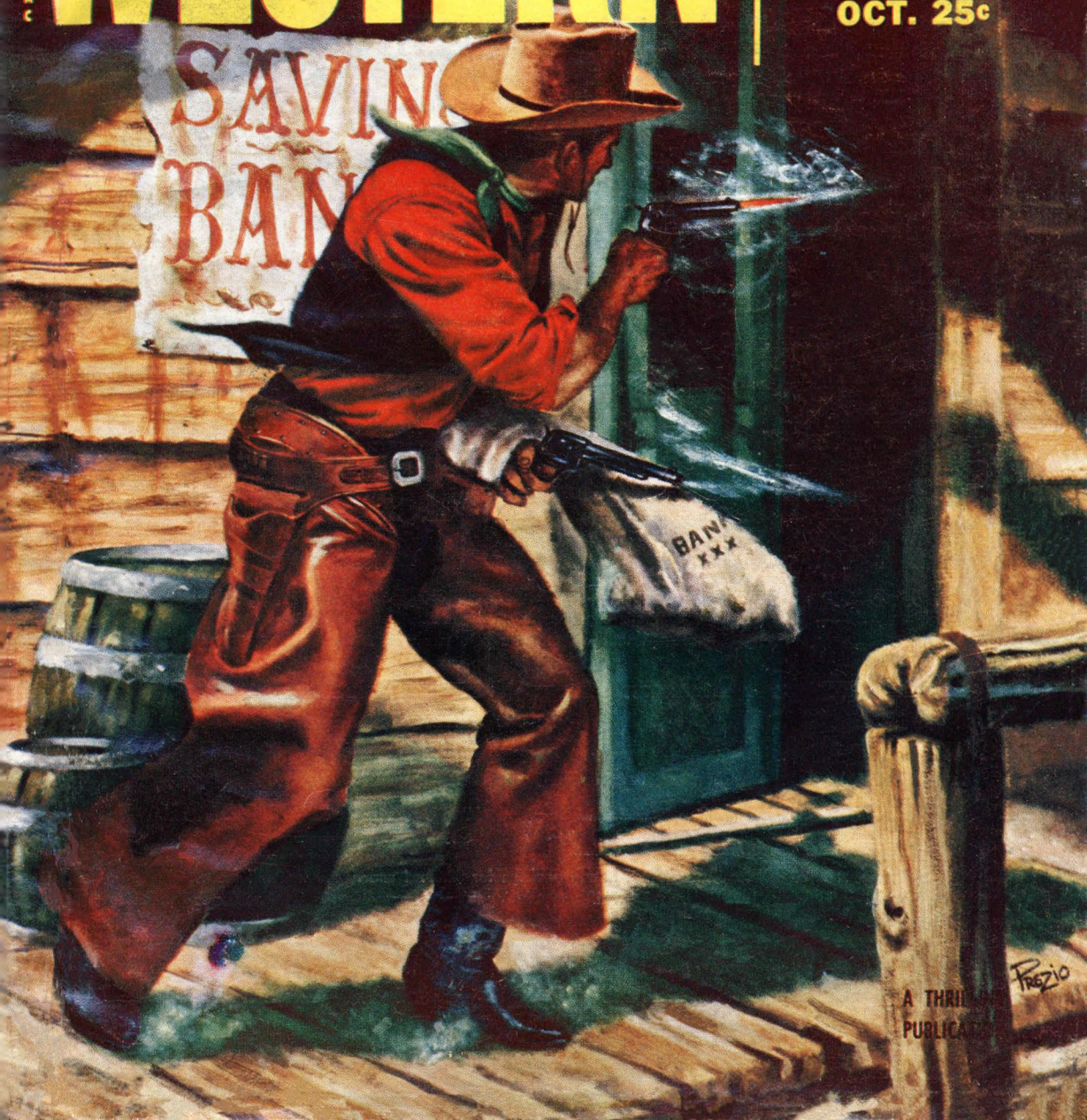
DANCEHALL GAL

By LEWIS B. PATTEN

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**THE SIDEWINDER
WAR**

By BEN SMITH

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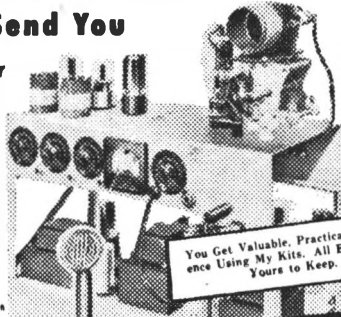
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EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. 26, No. 1

OCTOBER
1953

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor

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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey



The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be bumming Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it fast or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count

above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

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WHEN Geronimo was supposed to surrender at John Slaughter's border ranch, but fled again when a white bootlegger sold his men whisky, General George Crook had had enough of the Apaches. He had spent nearly eight years of what he called "the hardest work in my life" as head of that Arizona department, and so requested of his superior in Washington, General Phil Sheridan, that he be relieved from its command.

The request was granted by return wire and General Nelson Miles, at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, was ordered to Arizona to take command of the department. As a soldier and Indian fighter, Miles had no equal in America. He had whipped the Sioux and Cheyennes into submission after the Custer slaughter. He had, against his personal wishes, subdued the Nez Perces, most honorable of all tribes. He had gone into the Staked Plains of Texas in the dead of winter and ripped the Comanches apart. Now his final job was Geronimo's renegade Apache band. General Miles went at it with the thoroughness of a typically great soldier.

His first act was to set up fifty-one heliostat stations on mountain tops in Arizona and New Mexico Territories, flashing messages up to thirty-five miles by use of mirrors. He then scoured the entire Department of Arizona for the two men he needed, and found them both at Fort Huachuca. They were Captain Lawton and Lieutenant—later General—Leonard Wood. Both had the outstanding quality of believing that in a showdown of strength and endurance they could beat the Apache at his own game.

Miles then selected the finest packers to be found anywhere, the best and most trustworthy Chiricahua Apache scouts, and took

the cream of infantry soldiers from all posts in both territories. Just as they set out, Geronimo started the ball rolling with a murderous, bloody-handed slaughter in a village in Northern Mexico—and the chase was on.

As usual, Geronimo and Natchez, son of the now dead but great Cochise, hit straight for the rock crags of the Sierra Madres, leaving behind their horses with throats cut when the terrain became too rough for animals to climb. Like monkeys the raiders climbed, and like monkeys Lawton and his men followed. He marched his men up to thirty-six hours without food—and on one occasion they opened veins in their arms and drank their own warm blood. Their moccasins wore out and their feet bled, but Lawton never let up. When the Apache scouts themselves began to play out, Lawton grimly drove on the harder, certain the end was near.

But the wily Geronimo swung north again and Lawton doggedly followed him back into New Mexico, replenished food and other supplies and kept right on going. He had himself lost fifty-five pounds of weight, thinned down to a mere hundred and eighty. In the various clashes with the band he afterward counted every empty cartridge and every full round left to make certain his scouts had not, as on previous occasions, sold their bullets to Geronimo for one dollar per round.

He was, however, getting results. Wounded began to come in first, followed later by weaker Apaches who knew when they were licked. But Geronimo and Natches grimly hit for the Sierra Madres again and Lawton just as grimly followed once more and brought him to bay.

Finally, one day, a worn-out Apache woman staggered into camp and said the two chiefs wanted to talk. Tom Horn, the interpreter and scout—later hanged in Cheyenne as a hired killer for the big cattle interests—sent back word that one of the officers, Captain Crawford, would talk to them in two days.

Then came the tragic attack upon Lawton's camp by Mexican troops, who saw the Apache scouts and thought them members of Geronimo's band. In that fight Captain Crawford was shot through the front of the head. Lawton found him sitting with his back to a tree, but still alive. With victory in his grasp and a dying fellow officer on his hands, Lawton was forced to start the trek back to his pack train many miles away. He was out of ammunition.

Captain Crawford died on the second day. His last conscious act was when Captain Maus, holding him in his arms, assured him



take care of his affairs, and then begged him to try to speak. Crawford lifted one hand weakly to signify that he couldn't, but that he understood. He never regained consciousness, passing away while slung in a travois between two mules, the army system of transporting wounded.

Lawton carried him until the body began to decompose and had to be buried in a small Mexican village near the border. He then marched to the nearest base of supplies and, with fresh mules and more fresh scouts, turned right around and went back after Geronimo and Natchez, who had been resting.

[Turn page]

He Asked Permission to Stay



Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

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by *Tex Grady*

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by *Jack Barton*

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At the end of a five-month campaign, after more than a thousand miles on foot under almost intolerable conditions of heat and cold and suffering from hunger and thirst, the once-invincible Geronimo was ready to quit.

He sent word to Captain Lawton that if they could run him down in the Sierra Madres, as they had done, there was no other place he could flee to.

He had been beaten at his own game—out-fought, out-marched, out-endured. Lawton had proved beyond a doubt that a trained soldier was superior to the Apache when the chips were down.

Geronimo came in, insisting on surrendering only to General Miles in person, and fully expecting that he and all of his men would be shot immediately—proving how desperate was his frame of mind. Natchez, however, remembering he was the son of Cochise the great, still held out.

The dogged Captain Lawton was already getting his worn-out, footsore soldiers ready to go back, when a fortunate occurrence took place.

Geronimo happened to see one of the heliostat blinkers and asked General Miles what it was. When it was explained that Miles could contact Fort Bowie, his headquarters, where Geronimo's brother was held as a hostage, and receive an answer in four hours the Apache was incredulous. To prove it, the general ordered a message sent to Bowie for Geronimo, asking about his brother, and received the reply that he was well and waiting for the others.

That was enough for the raider! He muttered something to one of his men, who jumped on a horse and raced away toward the mountains. "He said," the interpreter told General Miles, "for Natchez to come in quick. That there is a thing here he is afraid of and does not understand."

He had seen the heliostat flashes many times, thought them evil spirits and carefully avoided the places!

Four days later Captain Lawton, now a mere forty pounds underweight, and recently promoted Captain Leonard Wood, a much smaller man who was then thirty pounds underweight, stood at tiny Bowie Station and watched the train disappear eastward, carrying Geronimo to exile in Florida. Sheer guts and doggedness had ended the Apache wars for all time.

—William Hopson

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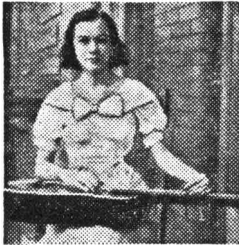
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Fighting Camels of the Frontier

By D. HATFIELD



NOWADAYS we modern Americans snap a knob and our television flashes on. Miraculously, it seems, we have a wrestling match right in our own living room. But in frontier America, in 1856, an even more exciting event inspired a wrestling match.

The odd wrestlers of the frontier were shaggy and ugly and humpbacked. They slobbered and cried and wrestled with amazing dexterity. The dusty baked lands of the Southwest were their arenas and their audiences were entertainment-hungry frontiersmen. These odd wrestlers went down in history, but they have been almost entirely forgotten.

In 1856 a strange cargo—34 ugly camels and 3 foreign camel drivers—was unloaded at Indianola, Texas. These camels were to be tested as beasts of burden in the arid Southwest where the scarcity of water and grass rendered other animals unsatisfactory. The camel experiment, being pushed by Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, was hoped to be an answer to the snarled transportation problem.

A base of operations was appointed at a frontier outpost, Camp Verde, Texas, about 60 miles from San Antonio. The fort was a calvary post and the calvarymen soon developed a dislike for the invading ships-of-the-desert because their horses and mules would bolt and stampede at the sight or scent of a camel. Although the camel proved he could travel many miles carrying heavy

loads and required less water and food than horses or mules, many horsemen spat in disgust at the mention of the camel's good points.

But the skeptical Texas frontiersmen soon learned that some of the camels had an interesting attribute—they could wrestle! The Turk caretakers, who emigrated with the camels, had taught them this sport which was a delight in some Oriental countries. Trained to throw its opponent by getting its grotesquely long neck under the opponent's foreleg, then violently wrenching that leg to one side, the attacking camel would often spill its opponent hard.

Disdainfull calvarymen of Fort Davis, Texas, once matched a huge army mule against a champion wrestling camel, and the betting ran high. The mule acted first by kicking the big camel in the side and (it was later discovered) breaking several of the camel's ribs. It seemed as if the camel bettors had just lost a month's wages. Then, in true Oriental fashion, with one dexterous twist the camel threw the mule to the ground. The camel leaped on its opponent and was finally called off by the animal's Turk trainer. The mule's back had been snapped and he had to be shot.

The colorful drama of the camels in our Southwest was destined to failure, thus ending what certainly must have been the strangest wrestling ever seen in this country.



*Tom Otis knew he shouldn't
trust this girl with the gleaming
black hair, but somehow he
couldn't seem to help himself . . .*

Dancehall Gal

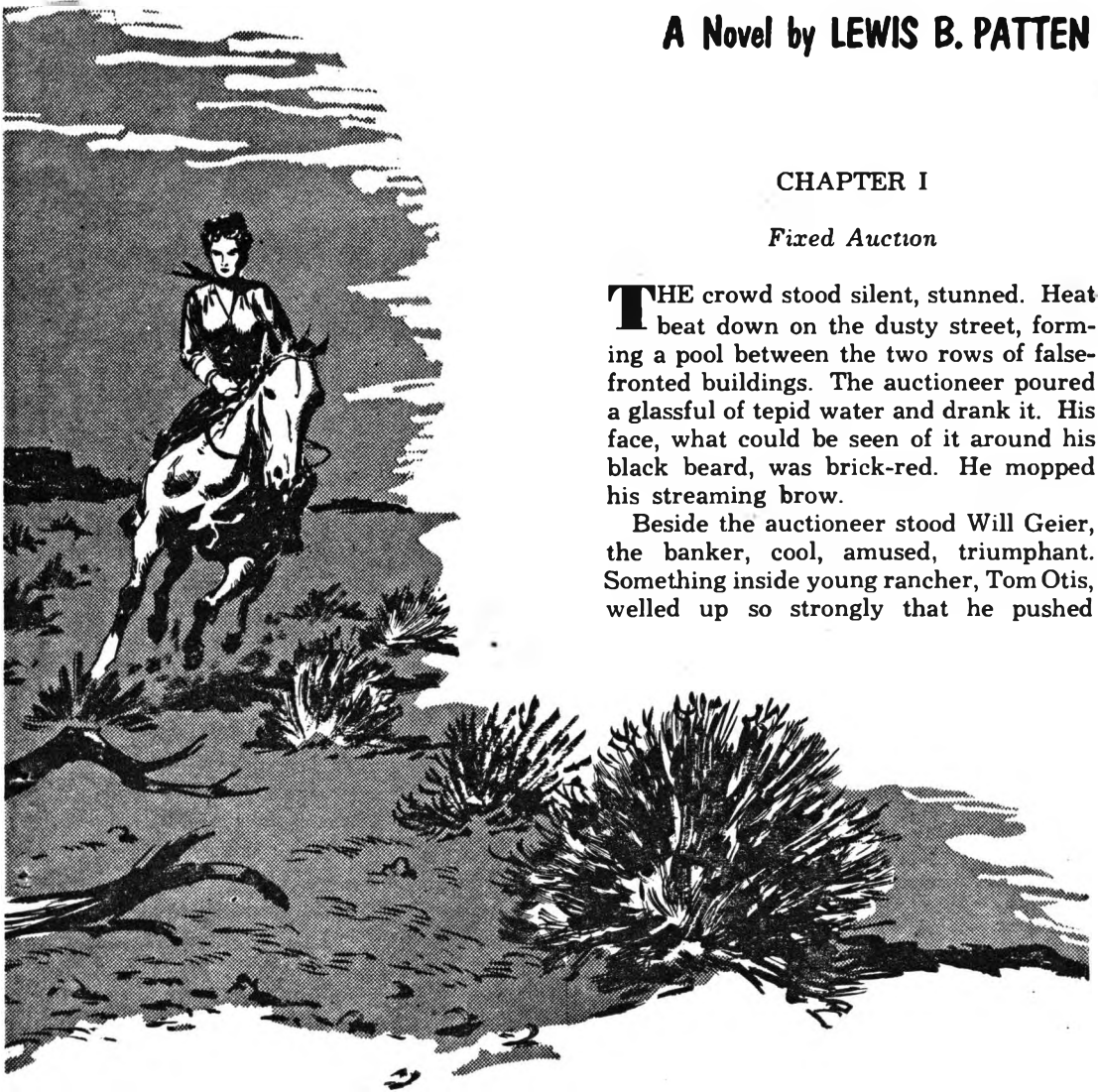
A Novel by LEWIS B. PATTEN

CHAPTER I

Fixed Auction

THE crowd stood silent, stunned. Heat beat down on the dusty street, forming a pool between the two rows of false-fronted buildings. The auctioneer poured a glassful of tepid water and drank it. His face, what could be seen of it around his black beard, was brick-red. He mopped his streaming brow.

Beside the auctioneer stood Will Geier, the banker, cool, amused, triumphant. Something inside young rancher, Tom Otis, welled up so strongly that he pushed



through the crowd toward the auctioneer's raised platform. The crowd made way for him. He went up the two steps and stopped before Will Geier.

What does a man say to another who has just stolen the best ranch in the country from him? What does he say when he holds only a busted flush and the other man a handful of aces?

There was nothing much Tom Otis could say. But there was one thing he could do.

He said, "Geier, get your hands up! I'm going to beat you to a pulp!"

His words were clear, and they halted the crowd which turned, watching. Geier took a step away, and Tom Otis's left whistled through thin air close to the banker's head. But Tom's right, following through, made a sodden, solid crack against Geier's jaw. Geier fell back, tripped on the edge of the platform and sprawled into the street, yelling:

"Sheriff! Sheriff!"

Tom was after him, running. An outstretched foot tripped him, and he sprawled on top of Geier. His hands were reaching for Geier's throat when a gun muzzle dug savagely against his ribs, and a wild voice yelled:

"Get off him! Damn you, get off him!"

Tom Otis came to his feet. Geier, surging up full of rage, swung a left and right into Tom's face, driving him back again to the platform. Sheriff Yarbo held a gun on Tom, yelling:

"Let him alone, or by hell I'll kill you!"

And a certain decisiveness in the lawman's voice told Tom he really would. Tom came to his feet, debating between Yarbo and Geier. A couple of men from the crowd seized Geier's arms. Then Lily Street, from the Colorado dancehall stepped between Tom and the sheriff deliberately.

Yarbo spoke from behind her. "Get out of town, Otis! Get out and stay out!"

THE wildness in Tom Otis urged him to take Yarbo, take Geier, take the whole town, now while the mood was on him. Instead, he whirled and broke back

through the crowd, hurrying his steps. He had to get away—had to, before he lost what little judgment remained to him.

He heard Lily call his name, but he did not slow his swiftly striding pace. Sympathy was one thing he couldn't stand right now. He heard her running behind him, and curbed his impulse for further speed. He'd been robbed blind today. He'd been robbed and he'd stood and taken it. But he would not let the town see him running from a woman.

He turned to face her. His face was white, even in this heat. He was a big man, lean as whang-leather and almost as brown. His hair was yellow, his eyes an odd shade of blue—a light blue. Eyes that caught the attention and held it. Right now, they were like two blue marbles, cold and hard.

Behind Lily he could see the crowd beginning to break up. Forming into small groups, they gave vent to their indignation in low whispers, whispers that died as Will Geier put his red-eyed, furious gaze upon them. The banker stuffed a bunch of papers into a leather briefcase and, with a short nod to the auctioneer, strode toward the bank.

There was sympathy in Lily Street's brown eyes, but she had the good sense not to mention it. She said, "Well, that's over. What will you do now, Tom?"

He shrugged, and his hard-planed face settled into lines of bitterness. "I know what I want to do, and if I don't get out of town, I'm likely to do it."

She said, "Will you wait until I can change my clothes? I want to talk to you."

Refusal was on the tip of his tongue. Lily touched his arm. Her hand was soft, but her grip was firm. "Please, Tom."

He shrugged. "All right. Hurry up."

Lily ran lightly across the street and into the hotel. Tom looked downstreet. The crowd was spreading out, some of the men coming toward him. With anger and frustration boiling in him he crossed the street and stood in the shade of the hotel. Fishing in his shirt pocket he withdrew a sack of tobacco and rolled a cigarette with shaking fingers.

Impatiently, he turned and stared through the hotel window. There was the handbill, pasted against the inside of the window.

AUCTION!

Below that in smaller letters was the announcement:

August 27th. The Anchor Ranch will be auctioned to the highest bidder. 27,000 acres deeded, 64,000 acres in state leases. To satisfy mortgage held by the Union Bank of Adams City, Colorado.

There was some small print at the bottom of the sheet, listing livestock and equipment. Tom didn't read that.

And now the auction was over. Tom Otis looked north, away from the river. Everywhere he saw the rims, the towering, massive borders of rimrock that marked the boundaries of Anchor range. No one could look north out of Adams City without looking at the Anchor. Now it belonged to Will Geier—to Banker Geier who had stolen it legally for less than a quarter of its value. And Tom Otis himself was a drifter, without even a job. A gun and a small handful of silver coins. That was all he had left to show for having owned the Anchor.

Anger was like a core of glowing coals in his brain. Anger because of the way this had been done. A couple of men approached him, seemed about to speak, but his scowl drove them away, made them veer off toward the open doors of the saloon.

The stableman came around the hotel from the stable at the rear, leading Lily Street's dainty chestnut gelding. Tom Otis took the reins. Lily came out of the hotel, and he helped her up into the side-saddle.

Lily wore a straight riding skirt and a checkered shirt waist that was like a man's shirt. Her gleaming dark hair was piled up atop her head. She was pale. Tom mounted and followed her north along Main to the edge of town.

NEITHER spoke until they cleared the limits of the town. Tom, as though realizing that he was riding by habit

toward the Anchor, veered away from the road, heading around town toward the river.

This was the town dump, littered with scrap lumber, old plaster, tin cans and bottles. The horses picked their way daintily through the rubble.

Lily asked, "What was it you wanted to do in town, Tom?"

His laugh was harsh. "Don't be a fool, Lily. I wanted to kill Will Geier. Maybe I'll do it yet."

Lily remained silent.

At the edge of the dump, something bright orange in the bottom of a shallow wash caught Tom's eye. His glance flicked away, darted back involuntarily. Something about that color was familiar. He had ridden almost past when a breeze stirred, stirred the orange something at the bottom of that wash. He reined aside, looking down.

What rage he had felt before was puny compared to the fury that tore through him now like a holocaust. But his voice was still, tight.

"Lily. Come here."

Her horse ranged up beside his. She looked down. She said, "Tom! Oh, no!"

Tom swung to the ground, climbed down into the wash. When he came back out, he held a handful of paper handbills, only a part of the bunch that lay in the bottom of the wash.

He said, "This is why there were no big out-of-town crowds in town today. This is why there weren't any bids besides Will Geier's."

The handbills announcing the sale were supposed to have gone upriver to all the towns for a hundred miles, and downriver as far as Moab, Utah. If they'd gone where they'd been supposed to go, there'd have been a dozen bidders for the Anchor, bidders who knew the worth of the Anchor's lush grass and fat cattle, and who had the cash to back their bids. If these handbills had gone out as they were supposed to, Tom Otis would be richer this afternoon by forty or fifty thousand dollars, maybe more.

He said, "I thought Geier was rushing

this auction. Now I know why. He didn't want word of the auction to get noised around by word of mouth."

Still holding the handbills, he swung to saddle. His mouth was a thin, straight line. There was murder in his eyes. Their lids narrowed dangerously.

He reined his horse around, leaned forward preparatory to touching spurs to the animal's sides. Lily Street's voice was almost a scream:

"Tom! Wait!"

He looked at her. She rode over and caught his horse's head. Fright stared at him out of her eyes. Her lips were blood-

She cried, "Tom, I don't blame you! I don't blame you for wanting to kill him. But what will it get you? Everybody knows how you feel, but killing him is no solution. It won't get the Anchor back for you. You'll go to jail and they'll hang you. Geier's no saddlebum you can kill in a fight. Tom, please!"

His face didn't relax, but the resolution drained out of him. She was right, of course. Will Geier was a big man in western Colorado. A moneyed man, one with a lot of political influence.

Tom's voice held the essence of bitterness. "So I just forget about these? So I just sit back and let him steal the Anchor?"

"I don't know. Oh, Tom, I don't know! But don't do anything today. Promise me that. Promise me you won't do anything today."

Tom Otis felt like a man who has been struck by a rattlesnake, then asked to spare the snake. He could feel tightness building up in his nerves, pressure on the increase in his tortured brain. Too many things had happened in the past two weeks.

First, his father, old Bob, had been thrown, and dragged to death on the way to town. As though that were not enough, Geier had immediately demanded payment on Bob Otis's note, already overdue.

TOM had started a cattle roundup, but Geier had stopped it. A roundup and

drive, he'd said, would take a month and a half. He couldn't wait that long. His bank, he'd claimed, was in serious financial difficulties. The bank had notes of its own to meet. He'd said he had planned to borrow what he needed from a Denver bank, using the Anchor mortgage as security, but with old Bob gone the Anchor had become a bad risk for a bank three hundred miles away. He'd been regretful, but behind that mask of regret and reluctance, Tom had sensed Geier's smiling triumph.

Maybe eventually Tom could have reconciled himself to losing the Anchor. But he would never reconcile himself to this—this stealing the Anchor for a ten-thousand-dollar mortgage simply because it had been rigged so that no competing bidders had been present.

Also, Geier's story that he was desperate for cash was now a proved lie. For if his story had been true, he would not have been interested in bidding on the Anchor himself.

Tom was slowly being forced to the conclusion that it had been a steal from the beginning. A carefully engineered steal.

He growled savagely, "I'll get it back. I'll never quit until I've got it back."

Lily was insistent, pleading, "Tom, think it out before you do anything. Please, Tom!"

He nodded shortly, reluctantly. "All right."

He turned in his saddle and stuffed the handful of handbills into his saddlebags. Lily reined her horse toward the river, not looking back. After hesitating a moment, Tom followed.

The sun was like a hot iron against his neck. Heat waves rose shimmering from the gray-green sagebrush that covered the land. The river was a broad, sluggish ribbon of muddy brown.

Lily dismounted in the shade of a giant cottonwood and dropped her reins. Her horse wandered off and began to crop grass. She looked up at Tom, her eyes telling him nothing of her feelings, her desires. She sank down on the ground, bracing herself with her hands behind her.

Tom glowered out at the sluggish river. Lily said, "Sit down, Tom," and he turned to look at her.

She was a small girl. Standing, she came just to the hollow of Tom's throat, but her body was full-rounded. Just now, the top button of her tight shirt waist came unbuttoned and he could see the full, lush ripeness of her breasts. She had brown eyes, dark hair, skin that was white and smooth and unblemished. The eyes were wise, too, much too wise for her years. She knew men and what it was that drove them. Though Tom could not know it, right now she was thinking of one thing that drove men, that could make them forget.

She said again, "Sit down, Tom," and he sank down beside her. She hitched herself closer to him, until one of her thighs touched his.

Something stirred in him besides the anger. Her fragrance was sweet. She put her small hand on Tom's arm and he understood that she was offering him something.

Swiftly he turned. His arms closed about her. Her own arms went about him, and she fell back. Tom put his lips down savagely against her, hungrily.

There was neither hesitation nor retreat in Lily. Burning fire ran in Tom Otis's veins. He drew away, breathing fast. Lily had always been friendly toward Tom, but this was the first time she had shown any special interest in him. He knew a nagging suspicion.

He asked harshly, "What was that for?"

Lily's eyes were cool. She said, "Maybe I thought you'd had enough taken from you today. Maybe I wanted to give you something. But you spoiled it." She didn't meet his eyes.

Before he could stop her, she sprang to her feet. Lightly she ran to her horse, as lightly mounted to her saddle.

Tom said, "Wait a minute!"

He tried to catch the bridle of her horse, but she whirled the animal around and drummed her heels against his side. She left Tom staring after her, his heart thumping wildly. He scowled and cursed.

He kicked a rock and hurt his toe.

For the first time today, a light grin twisted his long mouth. Yet his eyes were puzzled. Perhaps her reason for wanting to had been sympathy for him. But she wanted something from him, too. Of that he was sure.

He mounted and rode back toward town.

CHAPTER II

Friends?

RIDING slowly, Tom Otis came back into Adams City. Lily's actions had puzzled him, but she had stirred him as well. He was no different from other men in the country, and they all wanted Lily. It was hard for Tom to put out of his mind the incontrovertible fact that she had offered herself to him. Why? Because she felt sorry for him? A consolation prize?

He laughed, and the laugh was not pleasant.

He dismounted before the Ringold Dry Goods Store and looped his reins about the rail. As he climbed to the shady walk, he was conscious that the sun was sinking fast in the west. He went past Ringold's and mounted the outside staircase that led up to Phil Wickware's office.

Wickware was Adams City's only lawyer. He was a friend of Geier's, but he had also been a friend of old Bob Otis's.

His office door was open. Tom stepped off the high landing and into the dimmer depths of the room which was furnished with an oak roll-top desk, a swivel chair and a long, leather-covered sofa. A huge brass spittoon sat beside the desk.

Wickware sat in the swivel chair with his booted feet on the desk. He didn't look like a lawyer. He looked more like a lawman, or a well-to-do cattleman. He was getting bald, paunchy, but there was sharp intelligence in his eyes.

He said, "Pull out a chair, Tom."

Tom hooked a chair with his boot and

pulled it toward him. Straddling it, he sat down, leaning his arms on its back. He said, "Geier didn't post a single handbill except in Adams City. They're all laying in a wash out on the dump. That's the reason there weren't any bidders but him."

"The hell! You sure?"

"Uh-huh. Now what do I do about it?"

Wickware scratched his nose. He grunted regretfully, "Not a damned thing. Geier discharged his responsibility when he posted notices in Adams City. You can't touch him for not covering the country with them."

Tom snorted, angered, "Now's a hell of a fine time to tell me that!"

"You didn't ask before," Wickware said gently, then went on, "Normally, nobody has to worry about it. The bank should have seen to it that it was done in their own interest as well as yours. The auctioneer should have seen to it that it was done, if only from the standpoint of his commission. Somebody slipped up, I guess."

"Yeah. Somebody slipped up, all right. Somebody slipped up and I'm out the difference between what the Anchor's worth and Geier's lousy mortgage. Hell, Wickware, I don't know about these things. I've been raised as a cowman, not a lawyer. I've been going crazy ever since old Bob died. I couldn't seem to think of anything until the funeral was over. Then Geier came around and told me there was a past-due mortgage on the Anchor. I tried to get a drive started, but he stopped me. You know all that."

As Wickware nodded, Tom heard steps ascending the outside staircase. He said bitterly, "There's nothing I can do then, legally?"

"Not a thing. Not a damned thing, Tom."

"Then I'll do it some other way."

A short, stout, tightly corseted woman came from the landing outside into the office. She was breathing hard. She gave Tom a reserved smile as he offered her his chair.

She said to Wickware, "I was down at Ringold's, and I thought I'd come up and wait until you were ready to go home." Her eyes flicked Otis. "How are you,

Tom?" She sank into the chair.

He said, "I'm fine, Mrs. Wickware," thinking that her tone was considerably less cordial than it had been the last time he'd seen her.

"What are you going to do, Tom?"

He shrugged. "Haven't had time to think about it." He could feel anger stirring again, an anger all the more violent because it was so helpless.

NORA WICKWARE saw the resentment in his twisting face and said sharply, "Nothing foolish, I hope."

Tom said sourly, more so than he intended, and sarcastically, "No, of course not. Nothing foolish. Let him take the Anchor away from me, but don't do anything foolish. What do you mean by foolish, Mrs. Wickware? Killing Geier?"

Wickware said reprovingly, "Tom!"

"I'm sorry. But why is everybody so damned worried about Geier?" Tom Otis knew he was getting nowhere here, and admitted that it was probably his own fault. He went to the door. "Good-by," he said, and stepped out onto the landing.

As he went down the stairs, he was conscious of the uneasy silence behind him. His wild rage of the afternoon was gone, but his anger was not gone. Nor was the desire to do something, anything, to lessen the shock of realization that he was helpless.

At the bottom of the stairs he paused, fished his tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette. He touched a match to it.

The sun was full down now, but the clouds above the mesa in the west were red-gold, flaming. A girl came out of Ringold's and started toward the stairway. She was a younger, slimmer edition of Mrs. Wickware and because of her youth was prettier, but in twenty years she would look as her mother looked now. She saw Tom, and for an instant the smile froze on her face. She recovered and turned to him.

"Tom!" Lucy Wickware exclaimed. "I had hoped I'd see you. Will you come to supper tonight?"



"I'll kill you if you won't okay this shipment!"

He could not have explained the reluctance he felt. He ought to appreciate this evidence that his losing the *Anchor* made no difference in the way this girl felt toward him. Yet there was something wrong, and he couldn't put his finger on it.

Lucy said, "Well?"

Tom Otis smiled a little. That gentle, impatient tone. Just like her mother's. He said, "You sort of took me by surprise. I guess I've had too much on my mind this afternoon."

Suddenly he had it, what had bothered him a few minutes before. It was Lucy's mother. At another time she would have asked Tom to supper herself, but she hadn't. Well, why should he blame her for

that? Wasn't it natural for a mother to want security and plenty for her daughter? Maybe Mrs. Wickware was waiting to see what Tom would do, how he would take what had happened to him.

He said, "Some other time, Lucy. Thanks just the same."

She could hardly conceal her relief. Tom's lips tightened. She stood for just a moment more, plainly uncomfortable.

At last she said, "Tom, we're all so sorry for what happened this afternoon. Have you any plans?"

He shook his head. He had no plans. All he had was anger, and resentment. Maybe that would be enough. Maybe plans would come later.

He said, "I haven't had time to make any plans. But I'm not going to tuck my tail between my legs and slink out of town, if that's what you mean."

Lucy put a hand on his arm. "Don't do anything foolish, Tom."

The repetition of her mother's caution suddenly angered him more. But he said nothing. Lucy gazed into his face a moment longer, then turned and ran up the stairs to her father's office.

Tom had been going with Lucy for more than a year. Almost everyone had taken it for granted they'd be married. He had accepted the idea himself, with some pleasure if not with outright enthusiasm.

Now the complexity of his own feelings puzzled him. The Wickwares, mother and daughter, had made it plain enough in their indirect way that he was no longer particularly eligible. Perhaps he should have felt relieved, but he did not. Instead, he knew a combined feeling of hurt and increased resentment. It was hard to face the knowledge that his position and possessions were the main reasons for the liking and respect that his friends had for him.

HE TURNED toward the river, feeling the need for a drink. Down, at the end of town, he could see the big black and white sign of the Ute Saloon. Color faded from the clouds as he walked, and by the time he reached the saloon, purple dusk lay over the town.

The heat of the day lessened, and became the pleasant warmth of a summer evening.

The saloon was almost deserted. One man stood at the bar, the big, black-bearded auctioneer. He turned to look at Tom, but instantly glanced back to the bottle before him.

Tom stepped up to the bar ten feet away from him.

The proprietor, Noah Shults, white-aproned and clean-shaven, moved along the bar, bringing a bottle and glass. He poured a drink and set it before Tom.

He said in a low tone, "That was a

damned dirty steal this afternoon, Tom. What you going to do about it?"

Tom shrugged. "What can I do?" He was beginning to recognize the extreme danger of giving vent to his feelings. A man did not go around making threats if he had any sense. He drank the whisky at a gulp and Noah poured him another, clucking sympathetically.

At a movement to his right, Tom glanced toward the auctioneer. A sudden thought struck him. He picked up his glass and the bottle and moved along the bar.

The auctioneer's eyes widened with something that looked like fear.

Tom said, "Friend, I'd like to discuss the matter of your commission on that sale this afternoon. I found about a hundred handbills up at the dump on the edge of town. That means Geier didn't advertise the auction properly. It means that instead of your getting a commission on forty or fifty thousand dollars, you got a commission on ten. What do you think of that?"

The man wet his thick lips. He stood a full inch taller than Tom, weighed a full fifty pounds more. But a lot of that was fat.

He mumbled, "I'm not complaining. I guess such things happen." Hastily he tossed off his drink and turned toward the door, saying lamely, "Well, I've got a long ride to make."

But Tom caught his arm. His grip was savage.

He said, "Damn you, don't walk away when I'm talking to you!"

The auctioneer began to bluster. He yanked away, and as Tom moved to close with him again, the auctioneer's fist made solid contact with his jaw. The man's whole two hundred pounds was behind the blow, and Tom staggered back.

The pain of the blow went unnoticed, though, in the sudden surge of triumph that he felt. He began to grin, and stepped in close. Here was something a man could fight.

And when the fight was over, there was something here to be learned.

CHAPTER III

Better Than Bail

NOAH SHULTS yelled, "Hey!" but it was a futile protest. Tom's left smacked cleanly against the auctioneer's bearded jaw. His eyes were narrowed, and action seemed to release all the pent-up tension in his tight-strung nerves in one glorious instant. He bored in, taking the flurry of the big man's blows impartially on his shoulders and head. His right cocked up and smashed solidly against the big man's cheekbone.

The auctioneer staggered back against a table. Tom followed, but the big man felt the back of a chair with his hands behind him, and was raising it as he brought it around. Tom tried to stop, but when he saw he could not he raised his arms, and took part of the blow's force on them. His right arm went numb as a chair rung crashed against it.

The chair drove his arms down, and shattered on his head. Tom went to his knees. Immediately the big man came on, his knee raising to smash Tom's jaw. Tom dived aside, rolled back and with both arms took the auctioneer's feet out from under him.

He got up, still staggered by that blow from the chair. The big man lumbered to his feet. As he straightened, Tom moved in and delivered a slashing flurry of blows to eyes and jaw. Blood welled from a gash over the auctioneer's left eye. Blood streamed from his nose.

Tom ducked one of his wild swings, and came in again. His fists drove like steam pistons, with lightning regularity. There was no pausing and no hesitation in Tom Otis now. The smack of his fists was like the rolling of a drum. The auctioneer tried to put up a defense, but Tom kept him off-balance, driving him back, forcing him to cover up, with no retaliation.

With the man's back against the bar,

Tom paused for the briefest instant, cocking his right back and bringing it forward and up with all the strength of his shoulder and back behind it. It landed on the side of the bearded giant's jaw with a crack that could have been heard in the street. The auctioneer's eyes crossed, and glazed, and he slumped down against the bar.

Tom was panting hard. He leaned on the bar for a moment, drawing great, gasping breaths of air into his lungs.

The auctioneer stirred, and groaned. Tom yanked him to his feet. Beneath his sweaty shirt his muscles corded and bulged with the effort. He propped the auctioneer against the bar and spoke, his words clipped and short.

He said, "You act like you were in on the whole thing."

The man shook his head dumbly. Tom shrugged. "All right. We'll try it again. Only there won't be any knockout blows. I'll just beat the rest of you to a pulp."

The auctioneer's eyes were watching him with a kind of dazed, animal cunning. His hand snaked under his coat for his gun. Tom caught the hand as it came out, swung around, bringing the hand up over his shoulder. He stooped, bringing the hand down violently. He felt a crack as he dislocated the elbow, then the auctioneer flew over his head and across the room. The gun, a two-shot derringer, clattered to the floor at his feet.

Walking easily, Tom crossed the room. The auctioneer stared up at him like a whipped dog. His eyes were red, slitted and venomous.

Tom said, "Ready to talk about it now?"

For a moment defiance lingered in the auctioneer, but when it went, it went with a rush.

Tom asked, "Geier took care of you on the commission deal, is that it?"

The man nodded.

Tom asked, "How much did you get?"

"A thousand dollars."

"What do you usually work for on a deal this size?"

"Two per cent."

Tom looked toward the bar. He said,

"You heard him. Noah. He got a thousand dollars for a ten-thousand-dollar sale. But a thousand dollars is two per cent of fifty thousand. That's what the Anchor should have brought. That. and more."

SUDDENLY Tom had a feeling that someone was watching him. His back was to the door, and he swung around uneasily. Don Yarbo, the sheriff, stood just inside the batwings.

Tom said "You heard it, too, didn't you, Sheriff?"

The sheriff nodded. Tom swung back to the auctioneer. He said, "Get out of here! Ride while I feel like letting you."

The auctioneer slunk out of the saloon. The doors closed behind him. Tom thought, I'm getting somewhere now.

Yarbo's eyes were cold. He was a small man, cocky as a banty rooster. He wore a single gun low on his right side, tied to his thigh. His gold-plated star shone brightly in the lamp glow as he stroked his long brown mustache.

He said, "You pull anything more like this and I'll throw you in jail. You're a sorehead about the Anchor, but you better slow down unless you want to stretch rope."

Yarbo's words were like coal-oil dumped upon the smoldering coals of Tom's anger. It flamed into raging fury. Blood crimsoned Tom's face. There was no restraint and no caution left in him. Only blind, savage rage. All he could think was, Geier's even got the law in his pocket.

He came across the saloon floor in a foolish, furious rush. Yarbo stepped back. His hand snaked down after the gun, fast as light. The gun was out and raised when Tom Otis came within range. It glinted dull blue as it flashed downward.

The barrel cracked hard against Tom's skull. Before his eyes, light flashed briefly, crazily, and then the darkness came.

When he came to, he recognized the sharp, unpleasant odor of disinfectant. And he knew immediately that he was in jail, for that was the only place around where that odor could be found. Tom had

never been there before himself, but he'd bailed out Anchor punchers often enough after a pay-day drunk.

He was lying on a bare cot. The wire springs of the cot bit cruelly into his flesh. He sat up, swinging his feet to the floor. A thousand sledges began beating against his skull, and his vision blurred. He dropped his head into his hands.

Across the cell, on the other cot, another man was snoring softly. Tom raised his head and looked at him, but didn't recognize the man. He'd never seen him before. He was a big man, red-haired, unshaven and dirty.

Tom thought, saddle tramp, and dismissed the fellow from his thoughts.

He got up and wandered to the window. From the position of the sun, he judged that it must be near ten o'clock. He'd been out cold for over fourteen hours! That was some whack Yarbo had given him.

Gradually the events of the past day began to come back. The auction, Lily, the auctioneer. Last night he'd thought he was getting somewhere. Now he doubted it. How could he get anywhere when the man who had robbed him had all of the law on his side?

A chair squeaked in the jail office, and Tom heard the door open. He heard a low murmur of voices—Yarbo's, a woman's, another man's. He couldn't distinguish words.

But after a few moments of that, Yarbo came to the cell door and unlocked it. He asked sourly, "Drunk all slept off?"

Tom scowled at him. He said, "Damn you, you know I wasn't drunk."

Yarbo only shrugged. He grunted, "Come on," and stood aside while Tom staggered from the cell.

Tom went through the open door and into the sheriff's office. Lily Street stood there watching him, and just behind her was old Doc Willis.

Lily said, "Sit down, Tom. Doc wants to look at your head." There was compassion in her eyes, but there was anger, too, lurking in their depths.

Tom began to understand. Lily had

missed him this morning, and had made some inquiries. Noah had probably told her about what had happened. Lily had come to the jail to see him and he'd still been unconscious. So Lily had gone after the doc.

IT WAS as simple as that, but Tom looked at Lily with something different in his eyes.

Doc Willis said gruffly, "Sit down. You're damn near six inches taller than I am. How can I see your head 'way up there?" Tom sat down.

Yarbo slumped down into his swivel chair, scowling fiercely.

mustache. "Well, hell, if it's that important. Well, sure, Lily."

Tom was becoming increasingly puzzled as Lily said to Yarbo, "Get him his gun and whatever else you took away from him last night."

The sheriff shuffled across the office. He got Tom's gun and belt down off a board and took a pocket knife and some keys and small change out of a drawer. He handed these to Tom with a surly scowl on his face.

Tom shoved the knife and coins into his pocket. He belted on the gun and followed Lily out into the blinding heat, into the dazzling sunlight. Again pain



Sagebrush Sam Says:

The Lord sure made a mistake when he didn't fix it so's a man could kick his own pants

Doc Willis probed at the bump on Tom's head with gentle fingers, but even so, it hurt like hell. It made the flashing lights reel around in front of his eyes again. Doc opened one of Tom's eyes with thumb and forefingers and stared into it.

He straightened. "Concussion. Bad one." He turned to the sheriff, his voice accusing. "Tom could have died in there last night. You're damned lucky he didn't." He looked back at Tom. "Think you can walk over to the hotel?"

Yarbo sprang to his feet. "Wait a minute! I didn't say he could go. He jumped me last night. I'm going to hold him a while."

Doc snorted. Tom stood up. He looked from the sheriff to Doc and back again.

Doc said, "Release him to my—"

Lily interrupted, "Wait a minute, Doc." She walked over to the sheriff's desk. Her voice was soft, silky, as she said, "I'm not asking you to release him, Sheriff. I'm telling you to. Don't you understand that?"

Yarbo flushed and began to tug at his

shot through his head. He blinked his eyes, held them slitted to let in a minimum of light.

Getting to the hotel was a kind of nightmare. His thoughts fuzzed and blurred. But once there and in a room he remembered Doc clipping hair from his skull, washing and bandaging the gaping wound there. He recalled Lily leaving the room while he slipped out of his clothes. Then he was on the bed, and sinking into the intoxicating, cushioned void of sleep.

He dreamed of Lily Street, the dancehall singer, warm and tight against him. He dreamed of Lily Street with the hardness of steel in her voice. He dreamed of Lily Street, whose unsuspected influence could make the sheriff, against his will, release a prisoner.

In his dreams, she was all human qualities assembled in one person—compassion, love, gentleness, guile, power and ruthlessness. And when he awoke at dark, it was with Lily Street in his mind.

He lay and thought about her. Her con-

cern for him was not based on either love or simple compassion. He was convinced of that. Lily wanted something, something that only Tom Otis could give her.

And what was that? He shook his head, surprised that it no longer ached. He hadn't an answer to his question, but he had a feeling that it would not be long in coming.

CHAPTER IV

Not Broke—Not Beat!

TOM OTIS lay on the bed, reluctant to move for a long time. It seemed good to be still and quiet. He heard the night sounds begin out in the Adams City streets. He heard a bunch of Anchor punchers come whooping into town, recognizing their voices. He heard the bell on the courthouse toll seven. It occurred to him suddenly that this was Saturday night.

He got up cautiously, but except for an odd, light feeling in his head, everything seemed normal. He pulled the shade and touched a match to the lamp wick. The chimney was sooty, but he didn't try to clean it.

He went over and stared at himself in the cracked mirror. Thick yellow stubble covered his face. His eyes were bloodshot. He grinned when he saw the way his head was swathed with bandages.

Slipping into his trousers and boots he poured cold water from a pitcher into a basin and washed. He was drying his face when he heard a knock on the door. But before he answered it, he belted on his gun. Then he flung the door open quickly, ready.

Lily stood there, smiling. "Still alive?" She stepped inside, closed the door behind her. "I was getting worried about you."

"I think I'll live."

Lily's beauty, in spite of the worldly-wisdom in her eyes, was lively and strik-

ing, vivid. Her lips were full and red, her teeth gleamed white, her eyes were bright. She was dressed for work in a low-cut satin gown. Her shoulders and the exposed part of her breasts were creamy and smooth. Her breath came just a little fast, probably from the climb upstairs.

When a woman wants to be kissed, it is unmistakable. Tom Otis reached for her, and she came to him willingly, eagerly. Instead of stirring Tom, though, the kiss angered him. He bore down harder, bruising her lips, crushing her against him with all his strength.

When he released her, he looked down at her and said harshly, "You've been in Adams City for more than a year. In all that time I never got closer to you than five feet. Isn't this kind of sudden? And kind of unusual? Most everybody else I know seems to have sort of lost interest in me since I lost the Anchor. Odd, but you didn't want much to do with me when I had the ranch. Now, all of a sudden, you're about the only friend I have, and you're interested in hearts and flowers, too. What's the deal?"

He had acted brutally and he had spoken brutally. But Lily only smiled. She stepped over to the mirror and patted her hair into place. When she turned back, her eyes showed him her approval.

She said, "Geier's the deal." And suddenly, her eyes lost their softness and became hard and hating.

Comprehension began to come to Tom. Lily hated Geier, too. Lily had her own ax to grind, and she wanted Tom Otis to turn the grindstone. Refusal was on the tip of his tongue, then he recalled the calm way Lily had ordered Yarbo to release him this morning. Had it not been for her, he'd still be lying in that stinking cell.

Also, he had got a pretty good glimpse of the way the cards were stacked against him. He had glimpsed failure for himself plainly enough in the way Geier had the steal of the Anchor rigged. An ally could do him no harm, and might make possible what he could not accomplish alone.

He began to grin. "You hate him too,

then? Mind telling me why?"

Lily shook her head. Her eyes were as hard as agate. "You don't need to know that. It's enough that, for the moment, our interests seem to be the same. I help you, and you help me. Is it a deal?"

He shrugged. "All right." He crossed the room and got his shirt, slipped it on and tucked it into his pants. He went back to Lily and stood looking down at her. "Maybe I won't be as much help as you expect. Right now, I'm wandering around in a box canyon. Damned if I can see the way out."

LILY smiled enigmatically. "There's a way." She turned and opened the door. "I've got to go to work. I'll meet you down by the river where we were yesterday a little after midnight. Then we can talk about it."

"All right." He watched her go, hips swaying slightly, shoulders straight. He scratched his bearded face.

He got his hat and tried it on. He couldn't pull it down over the bandages. Shrugging, he sailed it onto the bed and went out, closing the door.

In the hotel lobby he passed half a dozen men who were supposed to be his friends.

Four of them studiously avoided seeing him. The other two nodded shortly.

Outside, he paused long enough to roll a cigarette and light it. In the match flare, his face was somber, bitter. He dropped the match and crossed the street to the barber shop.

There was a man in the chair, his face hidden by a steaming towel, and two men were waiting on the long bench. One was Hal Boyd, foreman of the Anchor. He threw down the paper he was reading, and a broad grin suddenly spread over his face.

"Tom! Boy, how you making it?"

He moved aside to make room and Tom sat down beside him. Tom shrugged, smiling. Boyd's steadfastness gave him a warm feeling he had not felt since he'd lost the Anchor. It restored a good bit of his faith in human nature, lost so completely these past two days. It told him that all friendship was not based on what a man owns.

"What you going to do, Tom?" asked Boyd.

"Get a job, I reckon. I haven't thought about it too much. I've been trying to figure a way out of the fix I'm in." He told Boyd quickly about the steal that Geier had rigged, and ended, "I'm flat broke, except for what's in my pockets. Dad let what we had in the bank dwindle down to nothing. He was operating on credit altogether just before he was killed."

"Did Geier take on the Anchor's debts?" Boyd inquired.

Tom laughed bitterly. "What do you think?" He shook his head. "No. That'll be up to me, I reckon. But I'm damned if I know how I'll ever get them paid on a puncher's wages."

Thinking of the Anchor's debts, of his own wealth—the few coins in his pocket

[Turn page]

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—suddenly made Tom think of something else. He said, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I just thought of something!"

"What?" Hal Boyd was puzzled.

"My T O brand. Hal, I've just remembered my T O cattle. They're mine, and they don't go with Anchor."

When Tom had been fourteen, his father had begun paying him wages, and he had begun doing a man's work on the Anchor. During the summer months when he hadn't been in school, he'd drawn wages. Only old Bob had given him his wages in cattle. A yearling heifer for every month he worked. And Tom had branded them T O, the initials of his name.

As the years had passed, his small herd had increased. He'd traded his bull calves to his father for heifer calves. They were his own, those T O cattle, yet he had never really considered them his own. He'd thought of them as part of the Anchor, just as he himself was part of the Anchor. They had eaten Anchor grass and had run with Anchor herds.

Tom said thoughtfully, "Geier's never going to agree that they're mine."

Hal Boyd agreed, grinning. "No, sir. Not Geier."

"Then I'll take them. If I try to go through the courts to get them, it'll take ten years and by that time, Geier'd see to it that there weren't any left."

Boyd laid a hand on his arm. "Don't talk so damned loud. You know how fast news travels in this town."

TOM said, "You're right," but he wasn't thinking about that. He was feeling a sudden, soaring, searing excitement. He'd been in a box canyon and hadn't seen any way out. But this changed things. A man who wasn't broke, wasn't beat!

The man in the barber chair got up and went over to the mirror and began to put on the tie. Harvey Reuter, clerk in Ringold's store. He nodded at Tom as he went out. Hal Boyd took the chair.

Tom sat staring at the floor. The more he thought about it, the less question remained in his mind. He had thought of

the cattle more as Anchor cattle than his own. But they weren't Anchor cattle. They were Tom Otis's cattle, taken as wages for his work through the years. He tried to remember what the T O count had been last year. Something over four hundred, he remembered.

Damn it, damn it, damn it! Why hadn't he thought of the T O cattle before? Then he remembered that Geier had refused to allow him time for a drive. He couldn't have got the T O cattle any quicker than he could the Anchor cattle. Even if he'd thought about them, he would still have been unable to save the Anchor.

But the T O cattle gave him something to fight with. He was frowning with concentration when Hal Boyd got out of the chair. The other man who had been waiting had left, apparently tired of waiting.

Tom told Hal, "Wait for me." and as he got into the chair he was thinking that if he could round up a crew on promises, he could start tomorrow to gather his T O cattle. They were scattered from one end of the Anchor to the other, and it would take either a damned good crew or a lot of time to get them. He'd never get them all, but he'd probably get most of them.

The barber dropped the chair back and began to lather his face. He put steaming towels on it, took them off and lathered up again. Boyd had gone back to reading his newspaper. The barber shaved Tom quickly, expertly. He put stinging bay rum on Tom's face, and Tom got out of the chair.

When Tom went out of the shop with Hal Boyd, the street was busy. It was not yet eight, and Ringold's was still open. Tom sat down on the bench in front of the barber shop. Boyd sat down beside him and began to roll a smoke.

Tom said, "How many of the crew will quit the Anchor and pitch in with me?"

Boyd was thoughtful. He was apparently shuffling the members of the crew in his mind. Finally he said, "I think I can count on four of them."

Tom smiled. Four wasn't many out of twenty. But it was a hell of a lot more than none. And it was enough. He said,

"I won't be able to pay any of you until the job's done. So it's kind of speculative."

Hal Boyd shrugged, grinning. "When do we start?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Boyd got up. He was almost a head shorter than Tom, was broad and squat. Nearing forty, he was beginning to put pounds over the lean, tough rawhide of his muscles. But the muscles were still there. His face was broad and cheerful. Except for a little hair at each side of his head, he was bald.

He took off his hat, scrubbed his bald pate with his knuckles, and said, "I'll be riding, then. Where you want to meet us?"

"At the head of the Ute trail. We'll start there and work back toward Blue River. We'll take 'em out on that side. We can drive to the railroad at Arnolds-ville."

"We'll be there."

Boyd strode off in the direction of the livery stable. Tom sat watching the crowd stream past in the street. He looked across at the darkened windows of the bank. He didn't know exactly what he hoped to accomplish by this roundup and drive, but he knew that at least he'd be doing something. He'd be getting something that belonged to him, perhaps even the means of striking back at Geier.

He got up and strolled across the street toward the Colorado Saloon where Lily Street worked, unaware that a man was watching him from a dark passageway between the Colorado Saloon and the saddle shop next door.

CHAPTER V

Shot From the Dark

AT LEAST twice as big as the Ute, the Colorado was the fanciest saloon in Adams City. It was the only saloon in town that boasted both gambling tables

and dancing girls. On Saturday night, it filled up about nine and kept running that way right up until one in the morning, closing time. But Lily got off at midnight.

As Tom stepped into the light that shone into the street from the windows of the Colorado, an odd feeling of uneasiness assailed him. He glanced quickly to right and left, seeing nothing. But as his eyes flicked back to the door of the Colorado, he caught the gleam of light on metal from the corner of his eye.

Instantly his full glance went to that spot. The glint was gone, but a shadow figure that lurked there between the two buildings was not.

It took but an instant for his mind to realize that a man who would lurk in darkness like that was potentially dangerous. And with that realization came the memory of that glint of light on metal.

Feeling foolish, but somehow compelled, Tom jumped quickly to one side, drawing his own gun. A flash blossomed in the dark passageway, and sharp pain seared along Tom's side. His gun centered on the passageway, and he triggered two fast shots at the flash. Then he jumped aside again, quickly.

He heard the sound of running feet from the mouth of the passageway. Though reluctant, he ran into the passageway. Behind him he heard a shout. A quick, over-the-shoulder glance showed him a group collecting in the mouth of the passageway. Ahead of him, the footsteps were receding. He stopped and went back to the street.

Lily was there, and Mike McGill, owner of the Colorado. There were a dozen or more other people, too—ranchers, punchers, storekeepers.

Tom said, "Somebody took a shot at me."

He'd been calm enough during the shooting, but now his hands began to shake. He holstered his gun, felt of his side, and grimaced with pain. Lily pulled him into the Colorado. She took him back through the saloon to Mike McGill's office, sat down and pulled out his shirt tail as though she owned him. She got a towel

and mopped at his bloody side.

Tom yelped, "Ouch! Damn it, be careful!"

Her voice was sharp. "An inch to the left and I wouldn't have to be careful."

She dampened the towel and sponged off the blood, poured whisky on the wound and put a clean towel on for a compress. Then she tucked back his shirt tail to hold the towel in place.

She was smiling now. "Painful but hardly serious. Who did it?"

"How do I know? He got away."

"What've you been up to since I saw you last? Why should Geier want to kill you?"

"Who said it was Geier?"

"I said it was." And she repeated, "What's happened since I last saw you?"

Tom stared at her. He glared, growing angry, and not quite knowing why. Maybe it was the way she talked to him. Maybe it was her cool assurance. Maybe it was only his own confusion.

He said, "I went to the barber shop for a shave. I ran into Hal Boyd there, and we got to talking."

"What about?"

"T O cattle."

"What brand is that?"

He told her, "My own brand. Geier can't claim my T O cattle belong with the Anchor. Hal and I decided to make a gather and drive all the T O stuff we could find to the railroad at Arnoldsville." Lily was frowning, so Tom said somewhat defensively, "They're mine. There's around five hundred of them. They'd bring me close to ten thousand in Denver."

"And you decided all this in the barber shop?" Her tone had become contemptuous. "Who was there besides you two?"

TOM'S anger increased, but he forced himself to speak quietly. "Harvey Reuter. The barber. Another hombre—" He frowned.

Lily asked, "What's the matter?"

"That one got tired of waiting and left."

"Who was he?"

Tom frowned. "I don't know his name. He lives downriver about fifteen miles.

Got a two-bit outfit and runs his cattle along the river bottom."

Mike McGill came in. He was a scrawny little Irishman with a head of bushy white hair. His eyes were blue and guileless. When he wanted them to be. Right now they were sharp and shrewd.

"You know who shot you?" he demanded.

Tom shook his head. He stood up. "I'm all right now." He went to the door and Lily walked with him. In the hallway outside, she whispered, "Midnight," and Tom nodded.

He went on out and found a seat at a table next to the wall. Lily Street came on for her first number about ten minutes later. She sang *Susanna*, and afterward, *Gentle Annie*. Her voice was sweet and throaty. She was animated during the *Susanna* number, dreamy and sad as she sang *Gentle Annie*. As always, the applause was thunderous.

Tom puzzled about her for a few moments, then his thoughts returned to the Anchor and to Will Geier. There was only one believable explanation for the shooting tonight. The man in the barber shop had run to Geier with the news that Tom intended to gather T O cattle. And Geier had sent someone to kill him.

This was the first indication that Geier's position was not unassailable.

Either Geier felt shaky, or he simply hated to lose the T O cattle to Tom. It was one or the other, or a combination of both. Geier would know that Tom Otis, broke, could hardly be any particular threat to his security. But Tom Otis, with ten thousand dollars in his jeans could be a considerable threat.

Either way, it added up that Geier would not stop with this single, abortive threat against his life. There would be other attempts. It was up to Tom, then, to walk carefully and see that none of them succeeded.

The saloon door banged open. Tom glanced toward the sound. He saw Will Geier standing there before the doors, searching the room with his black-browed, restless glance.

Geier did not look like a banker. He was younger than most bankers, for one thing. He was big, for another. His shoulders bulged against his black broadcloth coat. He wore a small mustache and his smile could be affable and winning. Just now it was not. It was cold and angry.

He saw Tom and wheeled toward him. Tom leaned back in his chair. Without waiting for an invitation, Geier came up to him, pulled out a chair and sat down.

He said, "So you're sore about the Anchor. Yarbo says you're making some wild accusations."

Tom grinned. He could not remember ever having seen Will Geier before when

Geier took a moment to digest this. Then he stood up, glaring down at the rancher. He started to turn away, but his anger was too much for him. He swung back and said in a low voice: "Don't try to take those T O cattle, Tom Otis!" But his eyes showed his instant knowledge that he had gone too far.

Tom said, rising, "So that fellow in the barber shop did run to you. And you sent someone to kill me!"

He moved out around the table, wanting more than anything else to smash his big fist into Geier's mouth. Geier backed away a couple of steps.

Tom didn't quite know what stopped



Sagebrush Sam Says:

When a cowpoke gets so lonesome he starts talkin' to the lizards, he still ain't crazy. But when the lizards start answerin' him, he'd better look out.

he was not confident and sure. Geier was neither just now.

Tom said, "Wild accusations?" accenting the "wild."

"Yes, wild. I hired a man to take these handbills downriver, and I hired another to take them east. I paid each of them twenty-five dollars and their expenses to do it. Tom, it's not my fault they didn't do what they were paid to do."

Tom grinned tightly. "No, it isn't, is it? But it saved you close to forty thousand dollars. A good break for you, wasn't it?"

Geier flushed. He leaned forward, his eyes narrowed. He said, "Don't push me too far, Tom."

TIS grinned again. There was a tight feeling in his stomach, a tingling feeling in the back of his neck that he found oddly pleasant.

He said softly, "Geier, I'll push you right off the Anchor."

him. Some native caution, perhaps. Some remembrance of Yarbo and of Yarbo's stinking jail. If he started a row with Geier now, it would be just what the man wanted. So he held himself still, saying only:

"You're afraid of me, aren't you, Geier? So afraid, you'd hire a man to kill me."

"You're crazy! You haven't got anything I want. Why should I want you dead?" Geier scowled, whirled around, marched to the doors and banged through them. Tom watched the doors swing for a moment, then he followed.

He walked slowly through the Saturday night crowd toward the livery barn. He supposed someone had put his horse up after he'd been thrown in jail. Noah Shults probably.

There was a kid on duty at the stable. A kid of about thirteen. His voice was a kid's voice, but changing, and every once in a while it broke and gave off a couple of deep notes. Whenever it did, the kid

would flush painfully.

He said, "Sure, Mr. Otis. Your horse is here. Noah Shults brought him night before last. I'll get him for you."

He went back into the gloomy stable and after several minutes returned, leading Tom's horse. Tom mounted and rode out into the street.

He didn't have anything particular to do between now and midnight, and he didn't feel like drinking. He didn't much feel like company either, so he decided to ride down along the river a way.

He was heading down a side street toward the edge of town when a call came out of the darkness to him.

"Tom!"

A woman's voice. Lucy Wickware's voice. He was passing the Wickware house. Lucy must have been sitting on the porch. He reined over.

Lucy came down the walk to the gate. Out of courtesy and not because he wanted to, Tom dismounted. He pulled his reins through the brass ring on the hitching post.

Lucy waited until he reached the gate before she spoke. "Tom, Dad says you've been seeing Lily Street."

"Seeing her?" He laughed. "She got me out of jail, if that's what you mean."

"Are you in love with her?"

Suddenly this struck Tom Otis as ridiculously funny. Lucy had been relieved the other night when he'd refused her supper invitation. Her mother had made it rather plain that without the Anchor he was not a particularly desirable catch for Lucy, so far as she was concerned. Yet an overtone in Lucy's voice now was plainly caused by jealousy.

Tom said, "No, I'm not in love with her, nor she with me. Although I can't see why that should interest you."

Lucy was silent for a moment. Then she asked, "Aren't you being unnecessarily cruel?" Tom shrugged, and Lucy said, "I hear you're going to get your own T O cattle."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Dad was talking about it. He said he heard it in Ringold's store."

Tom felt a surge of resentful anger. He said, "Lucy, don't straddle the fence. Get on one side of it or the other and stay there." He turned away, and untied his horse.

Lucy pleaded, "Tom, wait!" but Tom swung up to his saddle without answering. He rode off into the darkness without looking back.

Her about-face was occasioned then by the belief that he was still reasonably well-fixed. A man with ten thousand in cash was not a total loss so far as the Wickware women were concerned. His sudden understanding of Lucy and her mother left a bitter, sour taste in his mouth.

He cursed softly and kicked his horse into a crazy run.

CHAPTER VI

The Puzzle of Woman

ON THE stroke of midnight, Tom Otis was at the appointed spot for his rendezvous with Lily Street. She came riding through the sage about fifteen minutes later. He got to his feet to help her down, and she let him. His side was still sore, and the soreness was spreading, but he forgot pain in the excitement of Lily's nearness.

As she stood close to him, her elusive fragrance made his blood leap. Bitter and sour as his thoughts had been for the past couple of hours, he forgot them all when his arms closed about her.

It was obviously what she had wanted, for she came closer with a little cry. He lowered his lips to hers, and it was like a match touched to dry powder. Her body was soft, pliant, but strong with her desire. He picked her up in his arms, carried her toward a grassy spot on the bank.

Her voice was small, frightened. "What are you going to do?"

"Just what you think I'm going to do." He laid her down on the grassy bank,

lowered himself beside her. He found her stiff, resisting.

She said, "Tom, don't rush me. Please!"

His voice was harsh. He was tired of being pushed back and forth by the women in his life, pushed like a pawn on a chessboard. Lucy Wickware had rejected him, then tried to get him back in the course of forty-eight hours. Lily had played up to him deliberately for some selfish purpose of her own because she hated Geier.

He said, "I suppose you're going to tell me you've never—"

She interrupted, "That would be funny, wouldn't it? That would be a scream! A dancehall girl who has never slept with a man?"

Tom growled, oddly disturbed, "It'd be damned unusual. Are you trying to tell me it's so?"

Lily pulled away from him and sat up. "No, I'm not telling you that. You wouldn't believe it anyway, would you?"

He started to shake his head. But he didn't. Puzzlement made him frown. "I don't know. Maybe I would."

He told himself that he was a fool. But there had been a ring of truth in Lily's voice. He fished out his tobacco and shook flakes of it into a tiny trough of paper, rolled it carefully.

He said, "What the hell do you want from me, Lily? Tell me what you want. Maybe you don't have to buy my help."

Lily was silent for so long that he thought she wasn't going to answer. He touched a match to the cigarette end and in its flare looked at Lily. She was crying silently.

He said, "Is my gathering the T O cattle going to upset your plans?"

"Oh Tom, I was going to use you! I was going to egg you into helping me. But I can't do it. I can't!"

"What did you want me to do?"

"I was going to get you to rob Geier's bank. I was going to get you all worked up, then suggest it. After that I was going ahead with my plan."

"What plan?"

Her voice was almost inaudible. "Do

you mind if I don't tell you, Tom? Can you trust me now? Nothing I'm planning will hurt you. Honest, Tom. Go ahead and sell your cattle. Bring the money back. If I'm lucky with my plan, you'll get your ranch back."

"Mind telling me how?" He was fankly skeptical, faintly suspicious.

"I can't tell you, Tom. It isn't that I don't trust you. But if even a hint of what I'm planning gets out, it won't work. You go ahead and sell your cattle. You'll have most of what Geier's mortgage amounted to. I think it will be enough."

"What are *you* going to get out of it?"

Lily shrugged. In the faint starlight and the glow from his cigarette, he could see the light, sad, enigmatic smile on her full lips. She said, "Nothing now. I had hoped to get revenge against Geier."

"Revenge for what?"

He could sense the stiffening of her body. "It's a long story. I won't bore you with it. Geier swindled my father out of a ranch almost as big as yours, a ranch that my grandfather started from nothing soon after the Civil War. It broke my father, and he killed himself."

SHE sat staring moodily out across the whispering river. For a moment, Tom sat utterly still. Then he said, "You're a strange girl. You know you've got me puzzled, don't you?"

"You won't be puzzled long."

Tom thought of Sheriff Don Yarbo. He said, "You made the sheriff turn me loose. How'd you do that?"

Lily's answer was listless. "Blackmail. I know of a killing that Yarbo is wanted for. He hasn't always been a lawman. He used to be a cheap tinhorn gunman. It's probably not the only place he's wanted."

Tom was puzzled as to what Lily's plan could be, and how she intended to go about recovering the ranch. To him it seemed impossible, yet she seemed to be sure. He said, "So you've been kicking around trying to make a living since your father's death. You've had it pretty rugged, haven't you?"

Lily shrugged, smiling. She stood up.

No, it hasn't been too bad. You get used to things."

She walked back to where her horse was standing. Tom helped her up to her saddle, then found his own horse and mounted. He rode beside her toward the scattered, dim lights of the town.

When they reached the hotel they dismounted together. The street was nearly deserted now. The Colorado would be closing in a few minutes. Tom was again wondering what steps Geier would take to see that he failed to gather and ship his T O cattle, when he said mechanically:

"I'll take your horse around to the stable."

Lily stepped close to him. Subdued and quiet, she looked up at him for a long time. It was as though she were searching for something in his face. At last she said, "Will you kiss me good-by, Tom?"

He gathered her in his arms. When he stepped away, his pulses again were pounding, his face was flushed. He said, "Lily, when I get back—"

Lily said, "All right, Tom. When you get back." She ran lightly into the hotel.

Tom stared after her for a moment, wanting her. Then he caught the reins of her horse and, holding them, mounted his own animal. He rode along the side of the hotel, through the weed-grown vacant lot toward the stable at the rear of the hotel.

His mind was concerned only with Lily. But as he rode this short distance, he cooled, and abruptly became uneasily alert. Geier had planted one killer to-night. And while Tom did not believe he would try the same method again so soon, he nevertheless did not relax his vigilance.

Reaching the stable, he handed the reins of Lily's horse down to the hostler. He returned the way he had come to the street, and headed at a slow lope out of town toward the Anchor.

He had a long ride, an all-night ride ahead of him if he was to be at the head of the Ute Trail at daybreak. But his spirits began to lift as he rode. This was action, movement, doing something.

This was a relief after the waiting, the

helpless brooding. And when this job was done, he could come back to Adams City and begin the final battle toward regaining the Anchor.

What he did not know was that Will Geier, driving a buggy, had left Adams City for the Anchor nearly two hours before. What he did not know was that Geier, suspicious and frightened, would now go to any lengths to see that Tom Otis failed to load a single T O steer on the train at Arnoldsville. . . .

AS THE hours of the night wore on, and Tom Otis drew nearer and nearer the Ute trail, even through the darkness he could note the difference in the terrain.

The land atop the high mesa was like a different country compared to that around Adams City. Here, aspen groves laid a dappled shade on the lush grass. Springs bubbled up in the draws and ran until they spilled off the rims. In the valley below, they fed the waters of Clear Creek which ran to its confluence with the river at Adams City.

Deer bounded away at Tom Otis's approach as he climbed up through the rim in the first gray light of dawn. He found Hal Boyd and his crew of four loyal Anchor punchers squatted around a fire, brewing coffee. A couple of pack-horses grazed nearby under full pack.

Tom rode close to the fire and dismounted. Hal rose, grinning, and handed him a tin cup of coffee that steamed in the early morning chill.

Tom looked around at his crew. There was Johnny MacIntosh, the Anchor's oldest rider, stiff and sore with rheumatism and the early morning cold. There was Pete Fisk, a tall, good-natured Texan. There were two others who had been with the Anchor as long as Tom Otis could remember—Eric Northcutt and Jack Lea.

There were no heroics or exhibitions of any kind. The men greeted Tom as they had greeted him every morning for over ten years, and they asked no questions. They did not even comment on the job they were to start today. It was as though

the Anchor had never changed hands, as though this were simply another task to be worked at steadily and without pause until it was accomplished.

Tom finished his coffee and dumped the dregs on the fire.

Hal Boyd yelled, "All right—let's get moving," and scattered the embers of the fire with his boot. With no confusion, the crew mounted.

Johnny MacIntosh was sent on ahead with the pack-animals. At first, he grumbled, considering this a menial chore, until Hal told him, "The quickest way for Geier to stop us is to steal our grub. That's why I'm sending you with the pack-horses, Johnny."

The mesa was shaped like a hand with the fingers spread. Each finger was a ridge, varying in length from five to ten miles. All Anchor range was fenced naturally by the rims, except for the back end, which was fenced with aspen poles. In some places, the rims were only forty or fifty feet high, but in others the sheer rock barriers dropped away for five or six hundred feet.

From the trail, the five rode southward to the point of the ridge, beginning their gather there. They would work perhaps halfway back on this ridge today, driving T O stock ahead of them as they went. Tomorrow, they would finish this ridge and start the next.

The ridges were easy. The main body of the mesa would not be so easy. Tom hoped that if Geier intended to hit them, it would be while they were working the ridges, and not after they got strung out and separated on the main plateau.

CHAPTER VII

T O Gather

PETE FISK and Tom worked the eastern side of the ridge, Hal and Eric Northcutt the west. Jack Lea rode down the center, taking each man's gather as it

was brought in, six or eight head at a time, holding them in a slow-moving bunch.

Tom liked this work. He liked the feel of his horse under him, working with him. He liked the charging rush of the cattle as they broke out of the brush and tore off ahead of him. He liked the neat way his horse could cut a single T O animal out of a bunch and push it ahead.

He forgot Will Geier for a time, almost forgot Lily Street. He forgot that the Anchor was no longer his. He forgot the danger that Geier presented.

They nooned a mile and a half beyond their morning camp. Tom looked at the morning's gather with satisfaction. Nearly thirty head. A much better gather from this ridge than he had expected.

He found firewood while Pete shaved a stick and started the fire. A hail brought Johnny out of the timber with the pack-animals. Inside of fifteen minutes, coffee was boiling over the fire. Steaks from the hindquarter of a deer Johnny had killed were frying in a skillet. Biscuits were baking in a Dutch oven.

Hal Boyd and Eric came in with three more head. They all squatted around the fire then and ate quickly and with relish. Afterward, they lay around and smoked and finished the coffee.

Tom tilted his hat over his eyes and lay back on the ground. He drowsed. He was awakened by the drum of hooves against the ground, by Hal Boyd's shout:

"Tom! Company!"

He sat up. They were camped in a long, shallow draw. Down the slope from the south galloped ten men, Geier at their head. Geier reined up fifty feet short of the fire, his horse plunging and fighting the bit.

He shouted, "All you men are fired! You're trespassing on Anchor property the same as Tom Otis is. If you drive that bunch of T O cattle another mile I'll have Yarbo after you for rustling!"

Tom Otis got to his feet, walked slowly and deliberately toward Geier.

He drawled, "You better start for Adams City, then. Because those T O cat-

tle are headed for the railroad at Arnolds-ville." He grinned, hoping he showed more assurance than he felt, as he added, "Don't bring Yarbo up here. I owe him something for that knot on my head. I might pay it back if he tries to mess into this."

A few of the men behind Geier began to grin. Tom felt sure that Geier would be able to count on but little support from them. They were Anchor men. While they might not want to risk their jobs by helping Tom Otis, they would still be reluctant to fight him. Geier was looking around, weighing the support he commanded.

His face flushed with anger, he turned back to Tom Otis, his anger fading rapidly. At last he smiled. But the smile was not pleasant. It was dangerous and threatening.

He said, "All right. You win the first hand. I can't stop your roundup now. But I know how long it takes to cover Anchor range. Before you're through, I'll give you a surprise. Keep a man or two on guard, Tom. Sleep light and keep your eyes open. I'll be back."

Without another word and without waiting for Tom to reply, he whirled his horse and dug in his spurs. Tom got a wink or two from Anchor's punchers before they whirled to ride after him.

Tom turned back to the fire. Hal Boyd's face was grave. The others were smiling.

Tom said, "He won't have to go far for a crew that will fight us. We can count on a week. After that, anything can happen."

Hal Boyd nodded. "We'll make the most of that week. Then we'll see. We'll see."

TOM swung up to his saddle, the others following. Johnny MacIntosh stayed to put out the fire and clean up the camp. The cattle already gathered grazed slowly down the center of the ridge, loose-herded by Jack Lea.

They quit at dark and, bone-weary, ate and flopped beside the fire in their blankets. Two men loose-herded the horses with the cattle. A rope corral at camp held a couple of jingle horses. The watch changed at midnight.

The next day and the several that followed were of the same pattern. Only now they had a man less to work with. Johnny MacIntosh and Lea held the main herd. The other four worked the ridges, nooning in the saddle, bringing their day's gather in to the main camp each night. At the end of a week, they had a hundred and fifty head.

Roundup went on. One by one they cleaned out the finger ridges and moved onto the main plateau. Another week passed. Three hundred head. But now they had to watch. Now they expected attack daily, nightly.

Rations grew short, but neither Tom nor Hal were willing to spare a man long enough to go to town for more. They ate venison, and more venison.

And then, one night, the attack came. With no warning at all, half a dozen men hit the herd an hour after the watch had changed. Shooting, yelling, they stampeded the herd, then whirled to attack the camp.

Tom, only now relieved as guard, was just drowsing off. The first shot brought him wide awake. The second brought him to his feet. He had built up the fire upon coming into camp, but now he scattered it hastily with a booted boot, stamping out the glowing embers. He could hear the sibilant stir of the camp around him.

A man asked sleepily, "What was that?"

Hal Boyd said sourly, "Geier! He'll be here as soon as he gets them cattle to running. Find yourself a handy tree, boys, and let's give 'em a warm reception."

They waited ten minutes, ten dragging minutes. Tom Otis thought about Jack Lea and Johnny MacIntosh, out there with the herd. He felt a stab of fear for their safety.

Jack might have sense enough to yield to superiority in numbers, but Tom doubted if MacIntosh would show that much judgment. Johnny'd be so damned mad he wouldn't think of anything. He'd see two weeks' hard work melting away and he'd go berserk.

Tom heard another flurry of shots, and a ragged, angry shout. Then they came. Galloping, shouting, they ran over the

camp. The night was like pitch.

Hal yelled, "Shoot 'em out of their saddles!"

Tom shot at a looming shape fifteen feet away from him. The horse catapulted forward with a crash. Tom ran past him, fell over the downed rider. He flopped down on the man, found his head by feel and chopped down with his gun-barrel. The man stopped struggling and lay still. A horse lifted directly over Tom as he

from where Tom lay. Hal Boyd had killed one.

A FEW more shots came, but the raiders were moving away. Raw anger suddenly blazed in Tom. He didn't know how many more were out there. He didn't care. But he knew that every minute of delay meant more time to expend rounding up the scattered cattle.

He roared, "Hal! You and Pete take the

Steer Serenaders



THE romantic singing cowboy pictured in present-day Western films would have been regarded as a queer pilgrim indeed on the oldtime range. Hard-bitten cowpokes of the period serenaded cattle, not pretty Eastern girls visiting the ranch. And they sang for one practical purpose: to keep restive steers quiet when the herd bedded down for the night.

To prevent the flighty Longhorns from spooking off on dangerous and expensive stampedes, the night watchers rode slowly around and around the herd singing *Hell Among the Yearlin's*, *Saddle Ole Spike*, *Cotton-Eyed Joe* and *The Dying Cowboy*. When the boys tired of singing the same old songs over and over again, they invented ribald new verses unfit for the ears of any females except those of fool cow-critters. About the only songs about girls included in the range-rider's limited repertoire were the salty sagas of *Wooden-legged Dinah* and *Sally Gooden*. Both these hell-roaring dames were far, far removed in looks, character and habits from the sweet, blushing Western movie heroines of today.

And as for any veteran brush-popper plunking a guitar and looking soulfully into a girl's eyes while he sings *Along the Sunset Trail with You* . . . well, pardner, start ducking fast when you accuse him of indulging in that particular brand of Hollywood foofuraw!

—Norman B. Wiltsey

got up, one hoof tipping his shoulder and sending him sprawling again. Almost in his face a gun flared. Concussion from the muzzle blast set his ears to ringing. He fired at the flash. A man screamed, and a horse ran away riderless.

Somewhere near, Geier's voice was yelling, "Give it up, damn you! Yarbo's with us! Those of you that resist will hang!"

Tom laughed hoarsely. The sound drew a couple of shots from the brush nearby.

Tom yelled, "Come on in, Yarbo! You too, Geier! Come on in. You've got to get us before you can hang us."

The mounted attack had failed. Tom had knocked one man from his horse and he could hear the man slinking away through the brush, whimpering about pain in his arm. Another lay unconscious not ten feet

jingle horses and see if you can catch a couple more!"

Boyd and Fisk scurried toward the rope corral. A moment later Boyd came back with one of the attackers' horses. A little later, Fisk came back with the other. Tom mounted, and the four rode out, leaving their camp behind, unguarded.

They found Johnny MacIntosh dead, twisted brokenly on the ground, shot in the chest. His horse grazed unconcernedly nearby. Tom wanted to stop long enough to bury him, then remembered what Johnny had died for. He had died to keep the cattle from being scattered. The least those that remained could do for him was to find the cattle again, bunch them. There would be time for Johnny's burial then.

Dawn came crawling up over the rim,

gray and cold, gloomy and discouraging. But at least now there was light. The cattle had not run far, but they had scattered, right and left, down into the draws.

Tom, knowing every inch of this range, sent a man alone to each watered draw within a radius of five miles. And he began to hear their shouts almost immediately, the slapping of reins on chaps, their whistles as they urged cattle before them.

Apparently, Geier and Yarbo had pulled away to lick their wounds. At noon, Tom tallied two hundred head. At day's end, they had all but a dozen of those that had stampeded.

At their camp, they found what few supplies had remained scattered on the ground. Coffee and sugar and flour. Blankets had been slashed, pack-saddles and panniers destroyed. The man Tom had clubbed with his revolver was gone.

He said, "One dead, one wounded, one with a headache. How many were there altogether?"

Jack Lea grunted, "I tallied six. There might have been more than that, but I don't think so."

"Then they've got four left. Three that feel good. I've got a hunch the one I clipped is going to be sick for a day or two."

They buried Johnny MacIntosh and the dead raider, salvaged their cooking utensils and a couple of cups and plates, and went on. In the next week they gathered enough to make a herd of just over four hundred, and went down through the rim into the valley of Elk River. They drove east then, until they reached Arnoldsville and the railroad.

It was here that Tom Otis hit his second snag. Geier had preceded him. Geier and Yarbo. They'd talked to the brand inspector. The man, a slow-moving fellow with a long mustache, met Tom as he drove the cattle into the pens beside the tracks.

"What brand?" he asked.

"T O."

"Thought so." The brand inspector gave Tom a fishy, suspicious glance. "Whose brand is it? What's it registered under?"

Tom, who had been uneasy, began to

feel better. His father had insisted that the brand be registered in Tom's own name.

He didn't feel better long. Not when the brand inspector said, "That brand and the Anchor brand was foreclosed by the Adams City bank a month ago."

Tom stared at him for a moment. He began now to see how this had been rigged. Geier had talked to this man. He had arranged to have the cattle tied up here in the pens at Arnoldsville.

He said, "The hell! The bank foreclosed on the Anchor. Wasn't nothing said in any of the papers about T O. That's *my* brand."

The man shrugged. "Can't let you go," he said. "Got to hold you up awhile till it gets straightened out." He shifted his cud of tobacco from one cheek to the other and spat.

TOM yanked his gun out of holster and dug it savagely into the man's belly. If he gave in now, he faced charges of rustling, killing. He'd just as well face charges of intimidating a brand inspector.

He said, "I don't know how much Geier paid you, friend, but you're going to okay this shipment."

The man's breath had been driven from his body by the force of Tom's gun muzzle. His face was pale and he looked sick. His glance would not meet Tom's.

He growled, "And if I don't?"

"I'll kill you."

Tom's voice was almost conversational, yet some quality in it made the man look at him uneasily, and at that moment Tom realized with a shock that he meant exactly what he said. He'd fought the crooked sheriff, Yarbo, in Adams City, he'd been stolen blind by Geier, he'd lost Johnny MacIntosh up on the mesa, and had had his cattle scattered. He'd had enough. Now he'd go whole hog or none. Now, he'd fight!

The brand inspector stared at him for a moment. The blood drained slowly out of his face. His eyes turned flat and scared, and he began to shake.

"You won't get away with this!" he shouted, his voice shrill.

"Maybe not. But you'll pass this herd. Won't you, my friend?"

The man sagged. He nodded dumbly. With Tom following him, he went into the pens and the job of checking brands began.

All were T O. All bore a single brand. When it was done, the brand inspector handed Tom his inspection sheet, signed and approved, and started to go. Tom shook his head.

"Huh-uh. We'll load 'em first. Then we'll take a little ride back into the hills. When my check clears with the commission house in Denver, we'll come back to town."

By night the cars were loaded. They pulled out behind a slow, puffing engine, heading east. Tom and his crew, herding the brand inspector with them, rode out of town.

After settling upon a place to meet, Tom returned to town. He telegraphed a commission house in Denver, giving instructions that his money was to be mailed to him at Adams City, the sale confirmed by wire to Arnoldsville.

Then he got a room at the hotel and settled down to wait.

Cattle all sold. Specie in the amount of \$9147.85 mailed to you Adams City, Colorado, today. Many thanks.

Tom got his horse from the livery stable. In the early morning sunlight, he took the trail out of town that would lead him to his crew's hideout. By noon, they were on their way home, and a disgruntled brand inspector was on his way back to Arnoldsville, swearing vengeance.

It was near midnight when Tom Otis arrived in Adams City. He went immediately to the hotel with his crew, showed the telegram, and arranged rooms for them all. Then all of them headed for the Colorado Saloon.

There was an odd feeling in the air in town tonight. It was as though something had happened, something of which Tom had no knowledge.

Lily Street was singing as he walked into the Colorado. She spotted him immediately as he came through the door, shortened the chorus of her song, stepped down from the stage, and came toward him. Her face was alight with genuine relief and gladness at seeing him. She was wearing green satin tonight, a gown that sparkled with sequins. A low-cut, daring gown that showed a lot of Lily Street, all of it beautiful.

Tom was conscious that he was trail-dirty, that he needed a shave. He was also conscious of a pleasant, overpowering excitement.

Lily whispered, "Back here. In Mike's office. I've got to talk to you."

With a whispered word to Hal Boyd, Tom followed her down the dim corridor to Mike McGill's office. They went inside, and Tom kicked the door shut behind him. He was remembering Lily's promise, "When you get back, Tom."

But there was a wide-eyed, frightened look in Lily's face now, and he smiled. How could fright be so inexplicably combined with anticipation? Yet here it was. Lily was afraid of him, yet it was plain that she wanted him to take her in his arms, wanted that desperately.

He crossed the room and took her in his arms. From a frightened woman she

CHAPTER VIII

Bank Run

WHEN a day had passed, and another, the marshal of Arnoldsville, a big, slow-witted man in his early thirties, came to see Tom Otis. Tom disclaimed all knowledge of the brand inspector's whereabouts. The marshal didn't believe him, but he went away, grumbling.

Another day passed. On the morning of the fourth day, Tom's visit to the telegraph office got him a thin, yellow envelope. He tore it open, standing on the station platform. It was from the commission house with which Anchor had always dealt. It was dated the day previous and read:

turned abruptly into a passionate one. Her arms came up about his neck, her body molded itself to his. Her hands drew his head down and her lips met his.

For this endless moment, there was no Anchor, no Geier, no plan. There was only Lily. Tom's blood became liquid fire, coursing through his body, heating wherever it passed. Her body was soft under his hands, yet there was an unsuspected strength in her.

A dancehall girl? Perhaps. But Tom knew in this moment that here was more woman than he had ever known before. Here was more woman than he was ever likely to know again. A woman strong of body, strong enough to meet and cope with the harshness of living in a harsh and violent land, yet also a woman with a world of woman's softness and gentleness in her.

Her kiss was like drowning. Tom sank down, down, his head reeling, his blood racing and pounding.

His voice was hoarse when he broke away. Lily's lips were parted, and there was something new in her eyes, something he had not seen there before. Defenseless, utterly helpless, she stared at him as if begging him to go on. And he wanted to, more than anything else, but not here. Not in Mike McGill's office.

He said, "The check for the cattle is on its way. It should be here tomorrow. But it was smaller than I had hoped. A little over nine thousand."

STILL she looked at him, and suddenly the Anchor was no longer important. There was only one thing in life, and it was this slip of a girl. This girl whose eyes knew too much of life, of men and what drove them. This girl whose eyes had forgotten in this moment all their worldliness, that were now like a schoolgirl's eyes gazing at her first love.

Tom said, "To hell with the Anchor! To hell with Geier! All I want is you, Lily. Will you marry me?"

Trouble came to her eyes. Tom turned bitter. "Then revenge is more important to you than anything else?"

Lily was shaking her head. Tears sprang

into her eyes. "No, Tom. No! That's not it at all. But I'm not your kind of woman. I'm a dancehall girl."

Tom laughed harshly. "And I'm a broke cowman. What the hell do I care what you are, Lily? What do I care what you have been? I know how I feel and I know what I want. I want you raising my kids, and keeping my house and sharing my bed as long as I live. That's what I want, and all the rest of it will be hollow without that."

She came to his arms again then with a little flurry of movement. It was as it had been before. Lily said, "Thank you, Tom."

"Then you'll marry me?"

She nodded, wordless.

Tom began to grin. The grin widened and he began to laugh. From sheer exuberance and happiness.

He said, "Then I'm ready for Geier. There's only one place I know of in this country that's good enough for you, and that's the Anchor. I want it back and I'll get it back!"

Lily was smiling now, too. "And I'll help you."

"How?"

"It's really rather simple. I've started it already. Tomorrow, Mike McGill and Noah Shults and a few of the other businessmen in Adams City will withdraw their money from Geier's bank. The word's already out."

"What word?"

Lily smiled more broadly. "Why, the word that the bank is insolvent. By ten o'clock tomorrow morning, there'll be a line three blocks long in front of it. And you know, I don't think Geier will have money enough to pay them all. . . ."

Tom Otis was up at seven. He washed and went downstairs and across the street to the barber shop for a shave.

All evening, after he had left Lily, Tom had sat in the Colorado and listened to talk about the bank. News of a bank's insolvency travels like wildfire. Mike McGill had started the rumor as a favor to Lily. Started it in the Colorado. Noah Shults had started it in the Ute as a favor to Tom Otis.

Punchers and cowmen who were in both

saloons carried the rumor out over the country when they left. Already buckboards and buggies were beginning to roll into Adams City. Tom wondered if Geier knew what he was in for yet.

The morning stage rolled into town, and Tom got up out of the barber chair and walked down to the postoffice. He signed a receipt for his money, counted it, and put it into his pocket. Then he headed for a restaurant.

Everywhere, even at this hour, small groups of men were discussing the bank. Tom ate a hasty breakfast, then took a chair on the hotel veranda. He sat down

edge of town. He stared at the line forming before the bank with obvious puzzlement. A shout reached Tom.

"We want our money, Geier! Open up and give it to us!"

Murmurs grew in the street as the man's demand was repeated. Geier smiled and waved his hands expansively.

"Sure—sure. Any of you who want your money can have it." But there was doubt in the way he turned into the bank door; doubt and hesitation.

Lily said, "Even if he is honest, even if the bank is as sound as can be, he's still beat. No bank can stand a depositor's run



Sagebrush Sam Says:

Cowboy talk is like brown sugar:
not refined, but plumb flavorsome

and watched the growing excitement, a small smile playing across his face.

Geier had had no warning at all. If he'd been in the Colorado last night, he might have known. Instead, he'd been at the Anchor and hadn't got back to town until this morning.

Hal Boyd and the other three punchers who had helped Tom with the T O cattle, came out of the hotel, grinned at Tom and headed for the restaurant. Lily came down, dressed in a demure, red checked gingham dress, and sat down in a chair beside Tom. She was smiling, and her hand slipped across the space between the two chairs and took Tom's own.

LILY said, "I gave all my silk dresses away last night. All I've got left are a few like this one." Her glance surveyed him with teasing mockery. "You're hooked, my friend. Now you've got to marry me."

Geier came along the street from his two-storied white frame house over at the

on it. Too much of the bank's money is out on loan."

She got up and went into the Colorado. A moment later she came out with Mike McGill. The two of them began to circulate among the crowd, talking, exhorting, spreading doubt and distrust.

Still Tom did not see how all this would help him to regain the Anchor. And he knew Geier, knew the man would fight sooner or later.

Slowly, as the morning progressed, the line before the bank grew. The temper of the crowd began to change. It turned ugly and threatening. Mike and Lily found places in the line and kept talking, fanning the crowd's temper to a fever pitch.

Tom heard Mike shout, "Sure! Everybody in the front of the line'll get their money. But how about them 'way back there? I'll bet you ten to one all they get is a bunch of lousy promises!"

"Promises, hell! We'll have our money, or we'll have Geier's hide!"

And so it went. Tom smiled when he

saw Mrs. Wickware and Lucy up at the head of the line.

At eleven, Geier locked the bank door, leaving Mike McGill and Lily only a few paces from it.

Mike shouted, "What did I tell you, friends? You've had it! You're hooked, just like I am. Geier's got your money, and he'll be leaving town pretty soon!"

The murmurs of the mob rose to roars. "Like hell! He'll decorate a cottonwood limb! Around to the back, boys. Bottle him up! Don't let him get away!"

Sheriff Yarbo came across the street at a shambling run, waving his revolver excitedly.

"Get back! Get back, all of you. I'll have no breaking into the bank. You hear? You hear me?"

Lily started across the street toward Tom. Her glance said, "Now, Tom," and he got up. He sauntered toward the bank, shoved his way through the pushing crowd. Yarbo scowled at him.

"Is this your doing?" the lawman demanded.

Tom laughed. He took the money out of his pocket and waved it before Yarbo's face. He said, "There's over nine thousand here. I've got a notion Geier might be interested in seeing me."

CHAPTER IX

The World in His Hands

YARBO was scared. His weathered, narrow face was pale, and his hands shook. He tapped the barrel of the gun on the door, and after a moment it was opened a crack.

Tom Otis shoved, hard. As the door was flung open, he whirled, closing it in Yarbo's face and shooting the bolt.

Geier stood beside him. The man was raging, but he was frightened, too. Tom said, "They're beginning to talk about a rope and a cottonwood limb." He grinned at Geier, tasting his victory.

Geier scowled. His right hand rested on the Colt's revolver in its holster at his side. He snarled. "Damn you, Otis, you're to blame for this!"

Tom nodded. "Uh-huh." He riffled the crisp bills in his hand. "But I'm offering you a way out."

"There ain't no way out. The bank's money is all gone."

Tom said, "There's nine thousand here. If you want to take it, I'll go out there and start calming that crowd. This thing can stop as fast as it started if something restores their confidence."

Geier squinted at him suspiciously. Geier would obviously rather have killed him than have asked for an explanation. But he controlled himself with an effort and said, "And what's the price of that nine thousand in cash?"

"The Anchor."

"I won't do it! Damn you, I won't do it!"

"Then you'll hang." Tom grinned tightly, dangerously. "Take your pick."

Geier whirled from the door and stalked back across the lobby toward his office. His neck was brick-red with his fury. His whole body shook with his effort at controlling himself.

At last he said, "All right. Count it out."

Tom shook his head. "Uh-huh. Suppose you make out a deed for the Anchor first. I'll call in Mike McGill for a witness."

For a long moment, Geier hesitated between this and the gun at his side. Finally he sagged. "All right. Bring him in."

He went back to his office, got a deed blank and began to fill it in. Tom went to the door, opened it a crack and called for Mike McGill. Yarbo yelled for him, and Mike came forward quickly. He came into the bank and Tom bolted the door behind him.

Geier signed the deed, scowling blackly, and McGill witnessed it, grinning. Tom counted the money out onto the desk. He stuffed the deed into his pocket.

He felt as though a whole new world had opened up before him, but he knew this was not the end. Geier would not give up this easily. Still, it was enough for now. He went back and opened the door.

He yelled, "I've bought back the Anchor! There's plenty of money here now, for all of you."

The lines formed again. Crowding lines, anxious lines at first. But as time ran on, confidence increased. Tom and Lily and Mike McGill drifted back and forth through the crowd, talking calmly, instilling confidence.

Noah Shults dropped out of the line, shouting, "Hell, if there's plenty of money, I'm damned if I know what I want mine for!"

That slowed the crowd, made them think. More began to drop out of line. Still others began to form another line to redeposit their money.

Soon the deposit line was longer than the withdrawal line, and not long after



that, the withdrawal line was gone. Tom, grinning with irrepressible good humor, relaxed. The bank was saved.

It was not that Tom cared about the bank, nor about Geier, either. But if the bank went under, it meant that a lot of people would lose their money. It meant that a lot of people's life's savings would be gone.

HE FOUND Lily at the hotel. Unnoticed, the day had slipped away. The sun hung low on the western horizon now.

Tom said, "Come on. You and me are going to the parson's house to get married."

"In this dress?" She laughed happily. "Wait till I change. I won't be a minute." He grabbed for her, but she eluded him, laughing, and ran into the hotel.

Tom walked across to the Colorado. He thought he'd like to have Mike McGill and Hal Boyd for witnesses. He found them and started them for the parson's house, then went back to the hotel.

Lucy Wickware had been waiting for

him in the lobby. She was nervous and ill-at-ease. She came forward hesitantly, and when Tom looked at her he realized that he was not seeing Lucy, but her mother. Her mother was there, in her facial expression, in the compressed set of her lips. He thought, she's heard that I've got the Anchor back.

Lucy intercepted him and said, "Tom, I'm so glad for you! I'm so glad you've got the Anchor back!"

He said gravely, "Thank you, Lucy."

"We'd like to have you for supper, Tom. Mother's baking your favorite pie—blueberry."

Tom found it hard to repress a cynical smile, but he managed to do so. He felt sorry for Lucy.

He said, "I'm sorry. I won't be able to make it. I'm getting married this evening."

He could see the hard lines in her face now. They had always been there, but this was the first time he had seen them. Her voice was sharp. "To that—to that woman, I suppose. Tom, you're a fool. She's nothing but a—"

Tom said, "Lucy!"

Defiantly Lucy cried, "Well, she is! Mother says so. She's only after your money!"

"I wouldn't have the Anchor now if it hadn't been for her," he reminded gently.

There was no particular point in discussing this with Lucy. Lucy would never understand. In her own heart, she believed herself to be right, to be a woman unjustly jilted and wronged.

Tom murmured, "Lucy, will you excuse me? I've a lot to do."

He watched her march to the door, back straight and defiant. He felt a fleeting regret that dissipated with his thought, she'll find someone who suits her better than I ever would.

He gave her time to walk the block and a half home, then went out onto the hotel veranda.

The sun went down behind the mesa. The orange glow faded from the clouds. Dusk settled down over the town. People moved along the street on their way home for supper. And still Tom waited, impa-

tiently tapping his boot against the porch rail.

The street was almost dark when Lily came out. Tom scrambled to his feet, catching his breath. She was radiantly beautiful, smiling. Silent, adoring him with her eyes, she took his arm and walked down the steps with him. Along the walk they went, past the Colorado.

The parson's house was over at the edge of town right beside the church. Tom felt a sudden chill travel down his spine. He frowned. What the hell was the matter with him? He had the world. He had the Anchor, and he had Lily. He had everything he wanted.

It was an animal sense, that chill. An age-old instinct of warning. He tried to explain it away in his mind. He told himself that Geier hadn't the guts to try anything tonight. But he couldn't get rid of the uneasiness, the foreboding. He stopped.

"Lily, go back. Go back to the hotel. Quickly."

She caught his mood instantaneously. Fear widened her dark eyes. Her lips parted, and she wet them with her tongue. Her glance said, No! No! Not now!

THE shot came from between two buildings. It caught Tom in the fleshy part of his thigh, took his leg out from under him with its force. He collapsed to the walk. Lily bent toward him.

He got to his knees and gave her a vicious shove. Her heel caught in a knothole in the walk and she sprawled into the gutter.

The second shot cut the air where she had been standing an instant before.

Tom realized with a sinking feeling that they were entirely exposed. There was no shelter closer than a doorway thirty feet away. Geier, frantic, insane with fury, would shoot Lily, too, because he knew he could hurt Tom by shooting her. There was only one way to protect Lily, then, and that was by exposing himself.

Exerting his will against the pain in his leg, Tom lurched to his feet. His gun was in his hand, hammer thumbed back. The

shots had come from across the street. But it was dark there—dark. Tom stumbled off the walk and into the street. The gun, Geier's gun, flashed again. Tom triggered a shot at the flash, but knew it went wide. Glass tinkled as it smashed a window a couple of feet from where Geier stood.

Tom kept on, staggering, swaying. His leg would scarcely support his weight. He could feel the warm blood running down his thigh.

Again that hidden gun flashed. Tom forced himself into a run. Behind him he heard Lily scream.

He reached the far walk and he could see Geier now, could see him as a dark, bulky shape between the two buildings. He lifted his Colt and thumbed back the hammer. He had to stop, or he'd never hit the man. He knew that. His running movement was too lurching, too jerky.

He pulled himself to a halt and shoved the gun out before him. Pain blurred his vision, and he felt nausea and lightheadedness.

He knew he had but an instant before the walk came up to meet him.

Geier's gun flashed again. Something struck Tom a smashing blow on the shoulder, but it came too late to stop his shot. His gun had flashed even as Geier's bullet hit him.

And the shot was right. Tom knew that even as he loosed it.

He felt himself falling, but his eyes were glued to Geier. The man dropped his gun and his hands flew to his chest, as though to tear that bullet out. They clutched and tore at his coat for an instant, then he pitched forward onto the walk, motionless.

There was a flurry of running steps, of frantic, woman cries, and then Lily was kneeling beside Tom. A man came running up, and Tom looked at him, grinning.

"Get Doc, quick. I need some patching, and then I'm going to get married."

Lily was laughing, and crying, so he pulled her face down and silenced that with his kiss. Hell, he had the world. He had the Anchor and he had Lily, and nothing could take them away from him ever again.



Art fired again
at the outlaw



Bullets for Two

By SETH RANGER

ART RAND sat in the express car, sixgun in holster, sawed-off shotgun loaded with buckshot across his knees, guarding a shipment of gold bound for Sacramento. The swaying oil lamps cast eerie, moving shadows over the floor, walls and express packages. He looked at the locked door and felt the satisfying weight of his weapons.

He said, "Pete, I don't see how it's possible for outlaws to rob an express car unless—"

Art Rand was not old enough to know when he was licked

"Unless what?" Pete Quinn, the Wells Fargo Express man asked. Then he finished, "Unless the express man and guard are bribed? That's because you're young. Outlaws contrive to get the drop on you."

Well, he *was* young. Twenty-two, dark, medium build—vital.

"Then the lawmen should contrive to trap the outlaws," he insisted.

"That's the idea," Pete Quinn agreed, "but that doesn't always work, either. The outlaws with brains, the ones who not only plan their action, like Indians planning a raid, but who rehearse their plans are the winners. Rehearsing develops weaknesses in their plans, and they can correct flaws, so—"

He broke off suddenly and listened. Art Rand had seen him do that before. It reminded him some of a wild animal's instinct for sensing danger.

The locomotive was crawling up the switchback toward the summit, and Art knew the sweating fireman was pouring on the coal to keep up steam.

"Thought I heard something *different*," Pete Quinn said. "You get used to the regular sounds. Then when they're different you wonder."

"Outlaws have to come through the door," Art said, pointing his gun muzzle toward it. "And here I am with my shotgun."

"Outlaws figure that," Pete said.

The engine drivers slipped on the track. The engineer closed the throttle and used sand until the slipping stopped. But the train, losing some of its momentum, moved more slowly.

"I don't like it," Pete said. "Keep an eye on that door." He caught up his own weapon, eyes on the door.

He heard a different sound then all right—above his head. He looked up. A stick of dynamite, with a spluttering fuse, was coming through the ventilator! It dropped among the express packages, gray smoke marking the spot.

ART dropped the shotgun and yelled, "Pete, open the door a crack."

He threw himself on the express pack-

ages, reached down, grasped the dynamite stick with some wild notion of pinching out the fuse. But in a flash he realized that this was a well-planned trick to get the door open. And the planners had guarded against pinching out the fuse! It was spluttering away inside a wire coil attached to the dynamite. There was no getting at it.

Pete, realizing Art's problem, opened the door wider. He didn't want the hurled explosive to miss the opening. There would be no second chance to pick it up. But as Art threw the explosive into the black night a dozen other sticks, each with burning fuse, came from the darkness and scattered over the floor.

Peter turned gray with desperation, and Art could feel his own face drain white. This meant instant death, or at best a horrible mangling. Frantically both picked up the sticks and were tossing them out when Pete dropped suddenly as a sixgun cracked. Then a vicious stab of flame came beyond the open door and Art went down. The train stopped and three men heaved themselves from the roadbed into the express car.

As in a nightmare, Art heard one say, "By hell, Wolf, it worked!"

"Figure things out, Dolph, and they usually work," the bandit called Wolf answered. "Wells Fargo man and guard both dead."

Art Rand thought, maybe I'm deader'n a door nail and don't know it.

Their voices were remote. He was in the way of their operations and one of them grasped his collar, dragged him almost the length of the car and let go. His head struck with a thud and fog enveloped him.

When Art opened his eyes again, he felt terribly sick, and his head pounded. Pete's body lay a couple of feet away.

Dully, Art thought, this is the Wolf Darby band. No train robber plans like Wolf. Plans—strikes—disappears.

Through almost closed eyes he watched the outlaws at their work. They were masked, but Art tried to retain a picture of their physical characteristics to aid law-

men to apprehend them—if he lived that long. Or for his own use, if he ever got a chance to go after them. It didn't look as if he would, right now.

Wolf's right shoulder, Art noticed, sagged slightly. His hair was black, too long, and curled at the ends along his neck. He had a slim waist, but a big rump. The other outlaw, Dolph, was about Art's size, and sandy-haired. He had a trick of scratching the lobe of his right ear, then rubbing his mask over his left eyebrow. He was so nervous that his hands jerked instead of moving easily, as did Wolf's hands.

Dolph went to work on the safe. He tied dynamite sticks together, dug out the end of one with a knife blade, inserted a length of fuse in a cap, and crimped it with his teeth. He thrust the cap into the stick, secured it with a bit of torn cloth and attached it to the safe door.

"What about the bodies, Wolf?" he asked.

"Dead man can't feel a mangling," Wolf assured. "It'll just make a tougher job for Timmons, the Kelly City undertaker." He laughed. "He can stick the families for more dinero."

Dolph slapped wet clay over the dynamite to direct the explosive force against the safe, and piled express packages against the door. When he'd touched a sulphur match to the fuse the two bandits jumped from the car.

Art Rand tried to crawl behind a trunk. He couldn't move. His body felt lifeless, like lead, and as heavy. He reached for a package that had been well roped, pulled it down on his body, and several other packages cascaded over him. He was sure their impact must have hurt his chest, hips and legs, but he could not feel any pain.

He watched the gray smoke curl from the fuse. He had never felt as helpless. It was odd that he wasn't afraid, but he decided that must be a fatalistic resignation to death. He had done what he could, and either it was enough, or it wasn't. He closed his eyes, put his hands over his ear, and waited. . . .

THE voice of a girl, a vaguely familiar voice, reached Art Rand's ears.

"He's regaining consciousness, Doctor."

Art tried to identify the voice, futilely, and thought, the hell with it! The hell with everything!

A man who must have been a doctor rolled back his eyelids and Art saw piercing black eyes, and a black spade beard.

"Improvement," the doctor said. "Keep a close watch, Kathy, and let me know if there's a change."

"When's Pete's funeral?" the girl he called Kathy asked.

"They're waiting for a brother to come from Sacramento," the doctor told her.

"Who did it?"

"Sheriff thinks it was the Wolf Darby band," the doctor said. "Wolf plans and executes well. As usual, there was a trick. Tricks are Wolf Darby's trade-mark, Kathy."

"What was the trick?"

"Sheriff Mentone didn't say," the doctor murmured. Then he was gone and the room grew quiet.

Art thought, Kathy should mean something. I know the name and the voice, but can't figure them. Hell, I feel sick all over. Can't think straight.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again it was night, and an oil lamp was burning on a table. The wick was too high, and the smoke was sooting up the lamp chimney on one side.

The doctor came in, turned down the lamp and said, "Hello, Art."

"Hello, Doc." He spoke thickly, and with an effort.

"That's better," Doc said. "Can you move your toes?" He pulled back the sheet. "Good. You're going to get well. May take time."

"What happened to me?"

"We'll talk about that later," Doc said.

"I'll keep wondering," Art said. "That might be bad."

Doc looked at him thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right," he agreed. "You've been wounded. Pressure against the spine caused paralysis from the waist down.

When the express car safe was blown, heavy packages and boxes fell on you. You were under it all until a train came and men cleared away the stuff."

"I remember," Art said. "I couldn't drag my body, but I could pull things down. Fellow called Dolph lighted the fuse. Then Dolph and Wolf jumped. I put my hands over my ears. I was afraid the blast might break my ear drums."

"And a good thing you did," Doc said. "Did you say—Wolf jumped? Wolf?"

"That's what Dolph called him," Art said. "They figured I was dead. They talked."

"Well, Wolf made his first mistake when he didn't make sure you were dead," Doc said. "No matter how good they are, they make mistakes sooner or later."

"I'm going to live to get him," Art said. "I was hired to guard Pete and the gold. Pete's dead and the gold's gone. I failed, just as some of them said I would."

"Take it easy," Doc admonished. "So far, older, more experienced lawmen than you have failed where Wolf Darby's concerned. Three express car holdups. Each with a different trick, but all successful."

"The trick, Doc?" Art asked.

"Let's go into that later," Doc said. "You're getting better. Suppose you rest."

"I can take anything now that I'm going to get well and get a chance at Wolf," Art insisted. "They threw a dynamite stick through the ventilator. Pete opened the door a little so I could throw it out. Wolf and Dolph were waiting. They threw a bundle of sticks into the car. Fuses spluttered all over. I'll never forget it. That's the trick they used to get the door wide open. We had to get those sticks out or be blown up. That gave them a chance with their guns. We were setting ducks."

"Yes, that was the trick," Doc said. "Now go to sleep."

After he was gone Art thought it over. He knew Doc had put him off. Throwing dynamite sticks into the car had been only part of the trick. . .

DAYS dragged by, and except that Art felt weak, and his arms weighed a

ton, he considered himself in fair shape. The brain fog was gone and Kathy was no longer only vaguely familiar. She was Kathy Fremont who had changed him from a young fellow, who had been drifting through the West, working when he felt like it, drinking and gambling within reason, to a man why was willing and eager to take root and accept a citizen's responsibilities.

Kelly City, Art had felt, had a future. The placer mines would play out in time, but that would not happen for years. When red tape was untangled then the Government range would support cattle. That meant Kelly City would never go the way of many other Western mining communities—become a ghost town of weed-grown streets, sagging doors, leaking roofs and broken windows.

He had first seen Kathy Fremont one day when she had dashed past the little Kelly City hotel, where he'd been staying. She had been riding a spirited horse, her blonde curls flying in the wind, obviously enjoying the fight to keep the animal under control. Her cheeks had been flushed, and the glimpse he'd caught of her eyes—deep blue and bright—had been enough.

"This is where I take root," he had said to Lem Ballard, the hotelkeeper. "Man can never tell when he'll see his future wife for the first time."

"She's got five brothers, and the runt of the bunch is six feet three and weighs two hundred pounds," Ballard had told him. "As soon as you take root you'd better get some manure from the livery stable and dig in around your feet. And you'd better hire somebody to pour water over your head. You've got to grow, Art, before you can belong to the Fremont family. You've got to grow."

"Maybe she's tired of great big lum-moxes," Art had said, "and might like a medium-sized, durable man around for a change."

He had met Kathy at a dance that Saturday night, and she had taken him home for Sunday dinner. Anse Fremont, the "runt," had called him Pee Wee in rough good humor, but it had stung. The sting was

still there when the talk had got around to express hold-ups.

Art had said, "I've been a lawman a couple of times. I'd sure like a crack at express robbers."

He was not by nature boastful, and the words had been prompted by a desire to loom man-sized in the eyes of these hulking men. Kathy had sensed it, and had smiled softly.

"I can fix it up, Pee Wee," Runt had said.

Kathy had protested, but Art had insisted he be given a chance, explaining he liked the country and might settle down. The brothers had exchanged knowing glances as if that were highly humorous.

A day later he had been told to see Mr. Middleton at the express office. Mr. Middleton hadn't considered bulk a necessity in hiring an express guard. Possibly he'd recalled that some mighty famous lawmen and outlaws had come in modest sizes. But he had asked numerous questions that apparently had no bearing on the subject.

On reflection Art had realized that Middleton's questions brought out Art's ability to think quickly, improvise when things went wrong, and to test his integrity.

He had made three trips as guard, but Runt Fremont had said, "You can't tell how far a frog can jump till he leaps, Pee Wee. Same way with an express guard. Wait till they try to rob the car."

The others had nodded and Art had declared, "When they show up, I'll be there. If there's a robbery, I'll be ready. If there are two bandits, I'll have bullets for two."

He now thought bitterly, well, they came. And there were bullets for two—Pete and me.

KATHY came in that evening with a breathless, "Darling! You really are better!"

She kissed him twice, then pulled up a chair and smiled. He hoped she wasn't talking to make him feel better, because her words and expression were those of a girl in love, meant for the man she planned to marry. And Art hadn't proposed,

because he had wanted to make good in Mr. Middleton's eyes before asking Kathy to marry him.

He remembered saying, "After I've been a guard awhile, I'll go into something else here. Maybe be an agent for ranch supplies. That's this country's future, and a man who gets in on the ground floor should do well."

Now he and Kathy talked awhile and he finally asked her, "What does Mr. Middleton think?"

"Well, your job is ready for you when you want it," she answered. "The company is paying your hospital expenses, and your pay goes on just the same. That's what Mr. Middleton thinks."

Art said, "I told Doc that the bandits' throwing of sticks of dynamite into the car so we'd have to open the door wide enough to get rid of them—and so give them a chance to shoot us — was the trick everybody is talking about. Doc said it was, but something in his voice makes me think it was only part of the trick."

"You might as well know the truth," Kathy said. "There were no caps on the dynamite fuses. A stick might have exploded because it landed hard, but it was hardly likely."

Art was silent a long time, and she anxiously watched his face as it revealed his changing emotions.

"Sure," he finally muttered. "I should've known they wouldn't taken a chance on getting blown up when we tossed 'em back. Any damned fool should have known that."

"Don't be silly, Art," Kathy said sharply. "Everyone agrees that if they'd have been in your place, they'd have done the same thing you and Pete did."

"Even your brother. Runt?" he asked.

"Runt said, 'If a stick of dynamite, with a lighted fuse comes your way, and there ain't no water to throw it into, you don't stop to wonder if it's a trick. You get rid of the damned thing, pronto.'"

"But it makes the law a laughing stock," Art said. "The dangerous ones like Wolf Darby smile and boast. But the tinhorn outlaws feel their oats and try their luck."

My bet is, Wolf will lay low awhile and let the lawmen capture or kill a few of the tinhorns."

Kathy diverted the conversation away from outlaws, and to Kelly City's future. When he began tiring, she kissed him, paused at the door, made a face, then hurried to the street.

He lost no time in reviewing the holdup. Everyone was excusing him, but Art wasn't excusing himself. . . .

The hospital where Art was recuperating was typical of those in smaller Western communities. Originally a private home, it had been bought by a Mrs. Emery, who had had nursing experience and could "help out" when the doctor needed someone. Usually people spent money on hospitals only when they were doing to die. Even then more died in their homes than in a hospital.

But there were those—like Art—who had no real home, and even a make-shift hospital was the answer when they needed care.

Mrs. Emery came in, brought a basin of water and towel and helped him wash. Breakfast would be brought in later.

This morning was different. "I'll eat at a table," Art said, and when she brought his breakfast, he swung his feet to the floor. She pushed a small table within reach, poured his coffee, and went out in the backyard to feed the chickens.

Art had several dizzy spells, but he finished his breakfast before he flopped back onto the bed, dog-tired. He was asleep again almost at once, and awakened to band music. The breakfast dishes were gone and he was surprised to hear a clock strike ten.

He listened to the band, then said, "Funeral march."

ART reached a chair, pushed it to the window, and looked out. The band, of twelve local musicians was marching by.

Art thought sadly, Pete's funeral. Pete, I didn't protect you. Damn it to hell, Pete, damn it to hell! But I'll get even for you Pete.

The black horses, with black crepe net covering them, walked slowly past the window. Timmons, the undertaker, in black, and wearing a high black silk hat, drove the hearse. Art could see Pete's coffin behind the glass. Mr. Middleton and Pete's brother were in the first carriage behind it.

People across the street were standing with their hats off. It was a good custom, Art thought. A man could take a little time to honor the dead, and not go on his way hell-bent as the funeral procession passed. Art counted. Twenty-nine rigs, including the two occupied by the Fremont clan, were in the procession.

"That's how people feel about Pete," Art murmured aloud.

He went back to bed and watched the ceiling swim, and thought, I'm still not in good shape.

Mr. Middleton and Pete's brother came in that afternoon. "Kathy says you're taking this to heart, Art," Mr. Middleton said. "Please don't. Everyone, including Pete's brother here, agrees you did your best. You hadn't a chance."

"It's when you haven't a chance, but do something just the same, that you're cutting the mustard," Art said. "All I ask is this—when I'm up and about let me take Wolf Darby's trail."

"Got any ideas?"

"Yes," Art answered. "All I have to do is think what a sucker I was, and to figure it all out. Somebody lets Wolf know when there's a really big shipment."

"It would seem that way," Middleton said. "Someone has inside knowledge and gets the word to Wolf. We've tried hurrying the last two shipments, but he was ready."

"His band scatters pronto," Art said. "Except for Wolf and maybe Dolph, the rest of them could be men you see on the streets Saturday nights, people you might know. That's a guess. How was this last holdup worked?"

"Two men crawled over the coal car, or tender as some folks call it, and got the drop on the engineer and fireman," Middleton said. "They made the engineer stop

at a certain place. When the conductor came up to see what was wrong, he was bound, gagged, and dumped into the brush. You and Pete had already been taken care of. The express car was unhooked after they blasted the safe, and the engine hauled it up the track half a mile. The gold was transferred to saddlebags. Some of the gang opened the boiler blow-off valve until water and steam pressure were down, then they mounted and disappeared. It was sometime before the engineer and fireman could work free from their lashings, help you out of the express

Coroner's Verdict



AN ITEM in a old Tombstone newspaper says that the coroner performed ASSESSMENT WORK on the corpse of a shooting play. He was found RICH IN LEAD BUT TOO BADLY PUNCTURED TO HOLD WHISKY.

—Fred Harvey

car wreckage, then get up steam and go down the track to where the train had been left stalled."

"They have to get the drop on the engineer and fireman," Art commented. "That's the Wolf Darby way. The rest varies—like tricking the express man and guard to open the door." Middleton nodded. "Well," Art said, "It gives me an idea."

"It will be weeks before you're your old-time self," Middleton predicted. "You can work out something—maybe."

"I'll work it out and rehearse it, just as Wolf does," Art assured. "And you might let it get around that I've had all the express guarding I want. The word will get to Wolf Darby."

"I'll do it," Middleton promised. "Doc says you can leave here in a few days. The Fremonts are going to take you in. That sounds first rate, doesn't it?"

"It couldn't be better," Art said, grinning widely.

IT WAS perfect—with Kathy around most of the time. Slowly at first, then increasing the distance as strength permitted, Art took walks. He leaned against buildings and watched people walk past. Some stopped and congratulated him, or asked questions.

"Can't remember a thing," he told Eddie Post, foreman of Kelly Creek Placer Company. "We threw out what we thought was dynamite ready to blow up the car. The next thing I knew I was in the hospital."

"You had a mighty close shave," Eddie Post said. "Too bad you can't remember anything. You might spot Darby or one of his men."

"Right now, I'm listening to voices," Art said. "I'll remember Wolf Darby's voice if I ever hear it again."

"Well, good luck," Eddie said, and walked slowly away, scratching the lobe of his right ear. Then he rubbed his left eyebrow.

Art stared in amazement. He told himself, I don't want to go off half cocked, but I hope to kiss a pig if Eddie Post isn't Dolph! When I said I was listening to voices, it gave him a jolt!

Art wanted it known he was listening to voices in the hope someone might be tricked into betraying himself by suddenly becoming unnaturally quiet. Now he realized Eddie Post had been checking on Art's memory of the holdup in sheer self-defense. And Eddie Post of course, would know when shipments were to be made.

As for Wolf Darby, he had never been seen in Kelly City as some other known badmen had. Though Art admitted the man might actually be well-known in town, but not as Wolf Darby. Wolf was supposed to have drifted into the country only in recent months.

Art gazed after Eddie Posts's retreating

figure, noting that, like Dolph's his hair was sandy. And Art drew a long, hard breath.

The mining company delivered two small shipments of gold to the express company which sent them under guard to Sacramento without incident. After that successful shipment Art dropped in on Mr. Middleton one afternoon to comment on the new guard. "This Bendix," he said, is green as grass, but he's trying."

"That's right," Middleton agreed. "But the mine's all set for a big clean-up, and we want you to go out with that shipment."

"A big shipment, guarded by a green man like Bendix, is a plain invitation to Wolf Darby," Art said. "Let's play it that way. I've a scheme. I've taken a leaf from Wolf's book and rehearsed it, that is, as well as a man can rehearse a plan he's handling alone."

"When did you rehearse, and where?"

"Nights," Art said. "In the railroad yard."

"One more thing," Middleton continued. "You've been seen at the cemetery frequently. You aren't brooding, are you? "That's bad."

"No, I'm not brooding," Art declared. "People let down. You spur a horse when it eases up at the wrong time. I go out to Pete's grave and—"

"A spur, and a sharp one," Middleton said. "Go ahead with your plan. Don't tell me what it is. I might let something slip. . . ."

It was night when Art Rand slunk through the railroad yards. He watched the locomotive there for several minutes, and listened to the talk between the engineer and fireman. Steam was up, and the locomotive was ready to replace the engine that had hauled the train to Kelly City.

Art watched his chance, crawled to the tender, removed the water tank cover, dropped inside, and pulled the cover in place. The sun had beat down on the tender most of the day and the water was warm. He had hung his holster around his neck to keep the guns dry. The water

surged as they started, stopped, backed and hooked onto the train with a clanking of metal.

His body, partially buoyant, had a tendency to bang against the tank walls. He checked this with his hands, but it was tiring work. He thought, my rehearsal should have included a couple of trips in this damned thing. Good thing they aren't going downgrade or I'd be black and blue. He swore savagely as he banged his elbow.

WISELY, Wolf Darby never held up the train twice at the same point, avoiding possible traps. The train was a mile from the summit and Art was resigning himself to failure when he heard boots scraping on the tank top.

He thought, two men crawling over the tender to the engine.

He gave them ample time to get set, then cautiously moved the cover, grasped his weapons and squeezed through. With only head and shoulders exposed he presented a relatively small target.

The fire-box door was open as the fireman poured on the coal, and the glare sharply outlined the two outlaws who were crouched and waiting until the fireman returned to his seat in the cab.

"Drop your guns!" Art yelled.

One outlaw leaped from hands and knees like a frog. Art's bullet caught him just as he cleared the tender. He screamed as he struck the roadbed clinkers. The engineer and fireman, afraid of flying lead, dived into the night.

The remaining outlaw whirled and fired at Art's gun flash. The bullet whined by so close that tiny metal fragments stung Art's cheek. That cold, silent man could only be Wolf! Art fired, the man grunted, and his gun clattered onto the coal as he fell, rolled over and dropped down onto the roadbed.

Art could have no idea how many outlaws were on the job. But a third one, on the express car's top, hearing shots, looked down and saw Art's gun flashes. He fired, and missed. Art's answering shot was a clean miss, too, but the man jerked his head back. Hastily Art pulled his own

head and shoulder back into the tank.

He thought, as two bullets thudded on the metal and dropped into the night, I'm like a damned turtle. But I can't play safe any longer. Got to throw a scare into that cuss. He's crouched up there waiting for a pot shot at me!

Art fired again, without showing his head, forcing the outlaw to crouch lower until he couldn't be seen at all. Art could see only the swaying roof and the stars. The man must be getting away!

Scrambling out of the tank, Art dropped down between tender and express car and saw the man jump to the roadbed. Art jumped, rolled over as he struck, got to his knees, and fired again.

"I quit—I quit!" the outlaw yelled.

"Hands up! Any other move and you get it!"

As Art closed in he saw that the outlaw had lost his guns in his leap from the train.

"Take off your clothes!" he ordered. "Everything!"

A couple of minutes later the man stood there, naked.

"Your body's white—a nice target on a dark night," Art said. "Head down the track. And if you try to jump into the brush, I'll fire."

Swearing as the clinkers cut into his bare feet, the bandit obeyed. Art shed his wet clothes, donned the man's dry garments, and felt better. The train was coming to a stop, for lack of fuel. Art listened, reasoning the outlaw had made his leap at this spot because the gang's horses must be near. He nodded as he heard a stamping of hooves, and snorting.

Following the sound, he found five saddled horses tied to trees. He picked out the best, got into saddle and gave the animal its head. The horse was off at a gallop. When it slowed down to a trot, Art recognized the signs of a horse heading for home. The going was mostly downgrade, with brief stretches where the animal took to a creek bed.

When the horse at last slowed down to a walk, a cabin and a corral loomed into view. A man carrying a shotgun came out of the shack.

He called, "How goes it, Wolf? Where're the boys?"

Then, as if abruptly warned, he raised his gun. Art was already on the ground. He rolled over and fired as the shotgun roared. The man dropped, and Art crawled to the nearest cover. When the man he had shot did not move, he warily circled the cabin. Convinced there was no chance of ambush, he came back to the fallen man.

"Dead," he muttered. "Hell! It's Sam Bushell!"

SAM BUSHELL was reputed to be a solid citizen who made a modest living trapping, washing gold from gravel bars, and packing in supplies to miners. Art's suspicion that local men made up Wolf Darby's outlaw band was beginning to pan out.

Daylight revealed a hole dug under the roots of an old apple tree in a small garden where fruit and vegetables were growing. Art reached into the hole and hauled out several tin boxes containing placer gold.

Art reasoned, Sam must have been all set to receive the gold and cache it in case Wolf was pursued.

It would have been an easy matter to dump the loot into the hole and cover it with dirt from a cultivated garden. Typical Wolf planning.

"And the damned skunk would have met a posse and said he heard mounted men passing the cabin, but hadn't investigated," Art growled aloud. He had to admire Wolf's resourcefulness in enlisting men like Eddie Post and Sam Bushell.

Deciding to head for town, he lashed Bushell's body on a packhorse, loaded the gold on one horse he took from the corral, and saddled another to ride.

It was noon when he reached town. An engine, black with men, was just backing into the station, and people were running to the depot. Art saw Kathy Fremont run down the porch steps of her home and yelled:

"Hey—Kathy!"

She ran toward him and he dropped from the saddle to meet her.

"Darling—darling!" she sobbed. "I've been frantic with worry! Early this morning last night's train backed into the station. When Mr. Middleton heard the engineer's story, everybody knew you had killed Wolf Darby and wounded Eddie Post. Imagine! *Eddie Post!*"

"Wolf's secret of success was lining up men with good reputations," Art said. "That's Sam Bushell on the pack-horse."

"No!" she exclaimed. "Another man we respected and trusted! Eddie Post is in your old hospital bed, Art. Doc says he'll live to be hanged. Eddie had been high-grading at the mine, and Wolf found that out and forced Eddie to join up with his owlhoot band. My brothers and some other men went out this morning to round up the rest of Wolf's gang and bring in your body. Eddie said you didn't have a chance! Now I know how a widow feels. I think.—Art, where on earth did you get those filthy clothes?"

He told her, and said, "Now you're talking like a wife." He lifted his head, listening, "I don't like that crowd's temper, Kathy. Hear them? Hear somebody yelling, 'Let's string 'em up?'"

The Fremont brothers and other citizens were hurrying three men through the crowd. Two were known locally, and it was this that infuriated the crowd. The third man, wearing Art's clothes, was a stranger.

Guns appeared as the crowd's anger grew. The prisoners and their captors were forced against a building and trapped. Art forced his way through and climbed to a window ledge.

"I've got something to say about this," he yelled. "I spent one hell of a time in an engine tank. I winged Eddie Post, and I shot Wolf Darby. And I had to shoot Sam Bushell, too! He's on that pack-horse. I've brought in part of the stolen gold. And I've had to wear that outlaw's dirty clothes."

"I'd've killed him, but I recognized Art's duds in the nick of time!" Runt Fremont yelled. "So I held my fire and he quit."

"I rate some consideration!" Art shouted. "Am I right? You're damned right I'm right." He lowered his voice. "I hate to talk like this, but we can't have a lynching."

The Fremont brothers growled agreement, but others were not so reasonable. Art glanced at the angry faces.

"Dan Nelson," he shouted, "get the hell away from here with that rope! Any hanging will be in the courthouse yard after these men are convicted. Jud McGee! A family man has no business yelling for an outlaw's blood. Your wife will give you seven kinds of hell when she hears, and you know it. And another thing. You boys demanding blood—why didn't you join the posse and take a chance?"

ART'S face was white with controlled anger, and his eyes were cold flames. The crowd gave way as he led the way to the jail and waited until the barred door clanged shut.

He began to undress. "You," he growled to the man wearing his clothes, take off my duds and shove 'em through the bars."

But when he began dressing, his fingers were shaking so he couldn't button his shirt and pants. He shook his head and looked at the Fremont brothers, expecting them to laugh. However, they were grimly silent.

"I'm a damned fourflusher," he confessed. "I was scared stiff from the first, and now I'm shaking like a leaf."

"Only damned fools don't get scared," Runt growled, as he buttoned Art's shirt. "And a real man don't let his scare scare him. Pee Wee, you're the biggest man in this here family. But don't get too big for your britches. Or Kathy will cut you down to size."

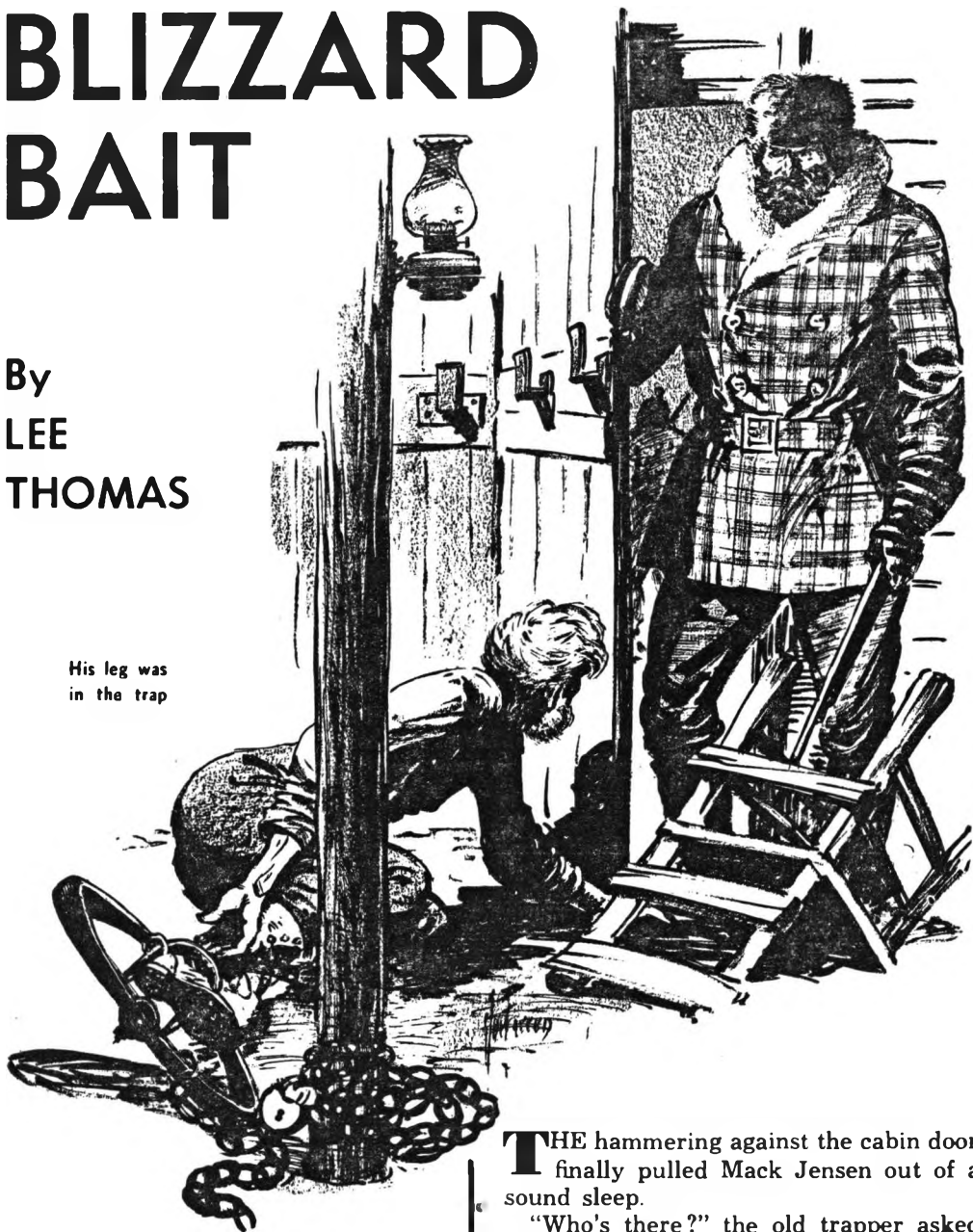
Coming in the Next Issue

TOO TOUGH, an Action Novelet by GEORGE KILRAIN

BLIZZARD BAIT

By
LEE
THOMAS

His leg was
in the trap



*Old Mack Jensen was on his
last leg, and his future
looked as bleak as the
cold Montana landscape*

THE hammering against the cabin door finally pulled Mack Jensen out of a sound sleep.

"Who's there?" the old trapper asked sleepily.

"I'm lost. I saw your cabin— Open up, or I freeze to death!"

Grumbling, the old man swung his legs over the edge of the cot, pulling on his heavy pants. Again the hammering started.

"Hold your malemites, feller. I'll open up right directly I get a lamp lit."

His trembling hand found the lamp chimney. Another hand found the matches. The second match flared up, showing the interior of the log cabin. The match found the wick and the lamplight was yellow.

Still sleepy, Old Mack looked at his clock. About two in the morning, and what was a sane person doing out at this hour, in a blizzard like this? With the wind howling, with snow falling, and with the thermometer standing around forty below.

"Lemme in! I'm freezing!"

"Wait'll I get on my boots. This floor is full of slivers and ice cold."

"Not half as cold as it is out here!"

The old trapper hobbled to the door, slipping into his red suspenders. Probably some tenderfoot heading out for the gold diggings down in Landusky. Most of them never had sense enough to stay out of the Montana blizzards, let alone know gold when they saw it.

They could search for their gold, while he trapped. He'd had his share of gold-hunting up in the Yukon. A man could grub in the creeks, freeze his hands and legs, and still not find gold.

Like he had done, in the Yukon.

"You opening this door?"

"On my way." Impatient fellow, this hombre.

Ought to have sense enough to settle down and run a trap line, not to look for gold. Just like he ran a trap-line himself.

Old Mack almost bumped into the heavy post in the middle of the cabin. The post held up the sod roof and it was buried deep into the ground. As it was, he bumped his head on one of the bear traps, hanging from the post.

"Ouch!"

"What's the matter?" called the man outside.

"Bumped my head on a bear trap." Old Mack opened the door. Moonlight glistened across the snow. The snowfall had ceased but the wind was still strong and cold. "Come on in, and—"

A fist hit him in the mouth!

STARTLED, almost out on his feet, the old trapper staggered back, bumping into the post again. Three men, all wearing long sheepskin coats, came into the shack. Another fist hit the old trapper in the face, knocking him down. Two boots roared in and kicked him in the ribs.

"What the hell?"

The three stood around him. Lamplight showed on their faces. Bearded men, big men, and all strangers. Old Mack, lying on the floor, blood flowing from his mouth, stared up at them, stunned and surprised.

The biggest man, evidently the leader, said, "Watch him, boys." Then he looked carefully around the cabin. "Rifle in the corner. You get that, Ike. Smitty, search the cupboard and his foot locker there—might have a short-gun in it. I'll take care of this old bugger."

Old Mack sat up, wiping blood from his mouth. "Wh—what'd you want, stranger?"

"Your mink furs."

Old Mack knew a moment of deep despair. Trapping had been good here on Beaver Creek, which came out of the Montana Little Rocky Mountains, and he had hit a bunch of mink. In fact, he had around a hundred mink pelts in a small cave, back along the creek. But how had this outlaw found out about them?

"I—I don't understand what you mean, feller," he said slowly, his broken lips bothering his speech.

"You know damn well what we mean!" The man spat at him and Old Mack ducked just in time. "You got mink—lots of mink—and you got them cached. We've scouted this country for days now, watching you with field-glasses. We've seen you take prime mink pelts out of your traps."

"Them was muskrats," the old trapper protested.

The other two outlaws had returned, one with Old Mack's .30-30 rifle, the other with his .38 Smith and Wesson pistol, which had been on the table.

The leader glanced at them. "Got all his weapons?"

"We got them, Joe."

"Good. Now we make him tell us where he's hid his mink hides. Then we get the hides and drift out of the country pronto."

Old Mack tried to get to his feet. The man called Ike hit him back of the left ear—a stunning blow—and dropped him. Old Mack Jensen decided to remain on the floor. He did not want to be beat up any worse.

Again, despair surged through his wiry old body. One hundred mink pelts—prime pelts, too—at twenty bucks a throw. Around two thousand dollars. Enough to buy that acre down in southern California, where he'd build a cabin and fish and loaf, working out now and then to keep himself in beans and salt. Down there where there was sunshine all the time, where there were no cold winters. All his life he had fought biting cold winters.

The man called Joe squatted beside him, ugly face a few feet away. "Old man, you might as well tell us where them mink furs is hid. We either torture you until you die, or you can tell us and miss a lot of punishment."

Old Mack studied the homely, bearded face. These were tough men. Each had probably killed a man some time in his life. And they would torture him to death if he did not disclose the hiding place of his pelts. He didn't have too much of a choice at that.

He decided to play it foxy. "What's in it for me, if I tell you?"

A smile touched Joe's whiskery lips. "Good talk, old man. Smart talk. You tell us where them furs is hid and we let you keep on living, savvy?"

Ike cut in, "If we leave him alive, he'll get word out to the law, Joe. And we can't afford that."

"That's right," the one they called Smithy, chimed in.

Joe stood up, rubbing his hands together. For a moment nobody spoke, and the wind made its noise in the eaves. Finally Joe's eyes fell on the bear traps hanging from the heavy post in the middle of the cabin.

OLD MACK JENSEN saw his eyes light, the reflection wicked and mean in the light of the kerosene lamp.

"He won't foller us, boys," Joe said.

"Why not?" Ike demanded.

Joe's eyes glistened. "See them bear traps?"

"Sure, but what—"

Joe cut in, "We put one of his legs into one of them bear traps. Then we chain the trap to the post and lock it with one of them padlocks he's got over there on the table.

Old Mack Jensen listened, eyes somber.

Ike said, "Good idea. He won't be able to get the trap off his leg because no man can spring one of them big traps without a lever. Them big prongs on that trap will cut into his leg and hold him. He's way out here in the wilderness, miles from anywhere. He might starve to death, and he might not if somebody rescues him—but they won't be nobody this way for weeks, I figure."

"Not in this blizzard weather," Smithy said.

Joe looked at Old Mack. "We should kill you," he growled. "Dead men can't talk."

"Dead men can't tell where mink furs are cached either," Old Mack reminded.

The three exchanged glances. Joe looked back at the old trapper. "We'll bargain with you. We'll put a bear trap on you and chain it to the post."

"And what do I have to do?"

"Tell us where that mink cache is."

Old Mack cocked his head, hiding his eyes. A sudden plan had come to life somewhere in his skinny old frame. Maybe he'd own that farm down in California yet.

"What if I don't agree?"

"We'll burn your feet to the bones with that kerosene lamp. If we have to, we'll kill you."

Old Mack looked at the floor. "But I can't get loose, chained to that post. I'm no beaver. I can't gnaw down that post, men."

"There's an outside chance somebody might come and rescue you. We're mak-

ing it easier on all of us—you and us, old man."

Old Mack studied the post. He looked at the big bear trap. He knew these men would kill him if he did not reveal his secret. He kept his face glum, his voice low.

"I'll deal with you. You'd kill me if I didn't talk. I'm no fool—I don't aim to get burned bad. My carcass is worth more to me than some mink hides."

"Good thinking," Joe encouraged.

Ike wet his lips, hunger in his eyes. The other man rubbed his hands. Joe watched Old Mack.

"Only one thing," the old trapper asked.

Joe asked, "What's that?"

"Put the trap on my leg slow-like. Them big meat-hooks on them jaws'll go deep into my leg. So ease it down slow-like, eh?"

"Sure," Joe said, grinning. "Sure."

Ike got a length of chain from the corner, where it hung on a hook. Old Mack used that particular chain as an extension on traps when he trapped beaver, for a beaver hole needed a longer chain, since the trap went under the thick ice.

Ike wrapped the chain around the post about six times. Each time he ran it through the loop at the end of the bear trap's chain. He pulled the deal tight and snapped a padlock through it. He pulled on it, feet braced, cheeks expanded. The chain was solid. So was the big log upright.

"Now, put the bear trap on his foot," Joe ordered.

"How do we spring it?"

Old Mack said, "Lever over there in the corner."

THEY got the lever. It was made out of whisky and women, and some hell together. One bar went under the spring, the other came down on top of it. With such leverage, the spring could be flattened.

"Another one over there," Joe said.

With a man on each lever, the springs were flattened, and the jaws were spread—wicked with long spines that would

bury deep into the trapper's leg.

Old Mack screamed, "You — you'll break my leg!"

He got to his feet, and tried to run. Joe caught him. Old Mack, who was over sixty, was putty in the giant's grip. Joe pulled him around, with Old Mack's boots scuffing, digging for a hold.

"Get his leg in that trap!" Joe panted.

Old Mack jerked around, but they had his right leg in the trap. The levers were unlocked and the jaws went slowly shut. They tore through his unlaced hightop boots. With sickening certainty, the jaws bit into his leg, about six inches above his ankle.

The old man screamed, then fell to the floor. He tore at the trap with his bare hands, fingernails raking cold steel.

The three outlaws watched.

Finally, the old trapper's screaming stopped.

"All right," Joe said, "where are the furs cached?"

"If I tell, will you let me loose?"

Joe shook his head. "I'll make a deal with you. If you tell, tomorrow morning we'll stop in at that trapper's cabin thirty miles away, over on Wilson Creek."

"Len Miller's place. Len won't be home. He's out on trap-line. He'll be gone for two days."

"We'll leave a note," Joe said.

Old Mack bowed his head, teeth clenched. "Only way out, I guess. Might be alive—when Len comes. All right, I'll tell you."

He told them the location of the cave.

Ike said happily, "Figured it was around that locality, but we wasn't sure. Never could see you clear through the glasses at about that spot. Let's go, boys, and get them mink."

"Take them levers with us," Smithy said. "He might get to them and use them. We'll throw them outside in the snow."

Joe said, "We'll be back—if you ain't telling the truth."

"Let me loose! My leg—it's bustin'! I'm telling the truth. Let me loose!"

Joe snarled, "Good dreams, you old fool."

He blew out the lamp, plunging the small cabin into darkness. At the door he glanced back. The old man sat huddled, sick and groaning. Joe smashed shut the door. Behind them the screams died as distance claimed them.

They had no sympathy for the old trapper. Small matter to them that the terrible claws of a bear trap gouged his skinny old legs. They wanted furs—mink furs.

They found the cave easily. Mink furs hung on wooden stretchers. They took them off the stretchers and packed them in their pack-sacks. Gnarled and covetous hands stroked dark, soft fur.

They went south, heading for Miles City.

For three days they traveled. The first night out, Joe and Ike murdered their companion, Smithy, leaving his carcass in the snow. Only two cuts into the pie now. Ike was vigilant, but not vigilant enough. On the second night, his body was crammed into the Musselshell River. Through a hole in the ice went his carcass, and his furs went into Joe's pack.

There would be no cuts in the pie.

Joe was happy. He had two thousand dollars on his back. In Miles City he would sell them to an old friend of his, a fur dealer who dealt in poached furs. Joe knew the man well. He had sold him many other stolen furs. Fox, beaver, mink. The man would stroke these furs and smile and Joe would get his money.

THEN to the red light district and some whisky and women, and some hell. Joe did not think of a man dead in a snow drift, a bullet through his brain. He did not think of Ike, rolling in the icy waters, tumbling end over end, catfish and pike nibbling on him.

Nor did he think of old Mack Jensen, chained to a log with a bear trap tearing at his leg, blood frozen around the trap. Forty below in that cabin, and Old Mack would be dead—frozen stiff.

The short day was changing to dusk when Joe came out of the foothills and saw the enticing lights of Miles City

across the Yellowstone River. Warm food, whisky, women.

He followed a road packed hard by bobbled runners. The road ran through the brush along the river bottom.

Suddenly, he stopped. His eyes widened, his mouth opened.

Out of the thick brush had come an old man bent with age. He carried a Winchester. Joe's heart was a triphammer pounding his ribs.

It couldn't be Old Mack Jensen! Old Mack was dead—frozen! Old Mack was dead, bear trap around his skinny leg, chained to that post!

But the voice belonged to Old Mack. And the voice said, "I've trailed you since you left my cabin, Joe. I've seen you murder your two pards—"

"How did you get loose?" Joe wondered if that hollow, distant voice was really his? Was he snow blind, seeing ghosts? "You had a rifle cached, too?"

"I got loose, feller. Now throw away your gun. I'm taking you into Miles City to turn you over to the sheriff, and you'll hang."

Joe shot without putting his rifle to his shoulder. He let the hammer fall, the barrel pointing at Old Mack. But Old Mack had shot first. His bullet smashed into Joe's belly.

Joe fell, screaming. The old man was on him. His boot kicked the rifle out of reach, skidding in the snow.

Joe clutched his belly. "You shot me—through the belly!"

"Had to shoot low so I'd not shoot through the furs in your pack." Old Mack Jensen chuckled. "Mink furs ain't no count with bullet holes in 'em!"

He kicked Joe, and the outlaw got to his feet, bent over. "How did you—get loose, old man?"

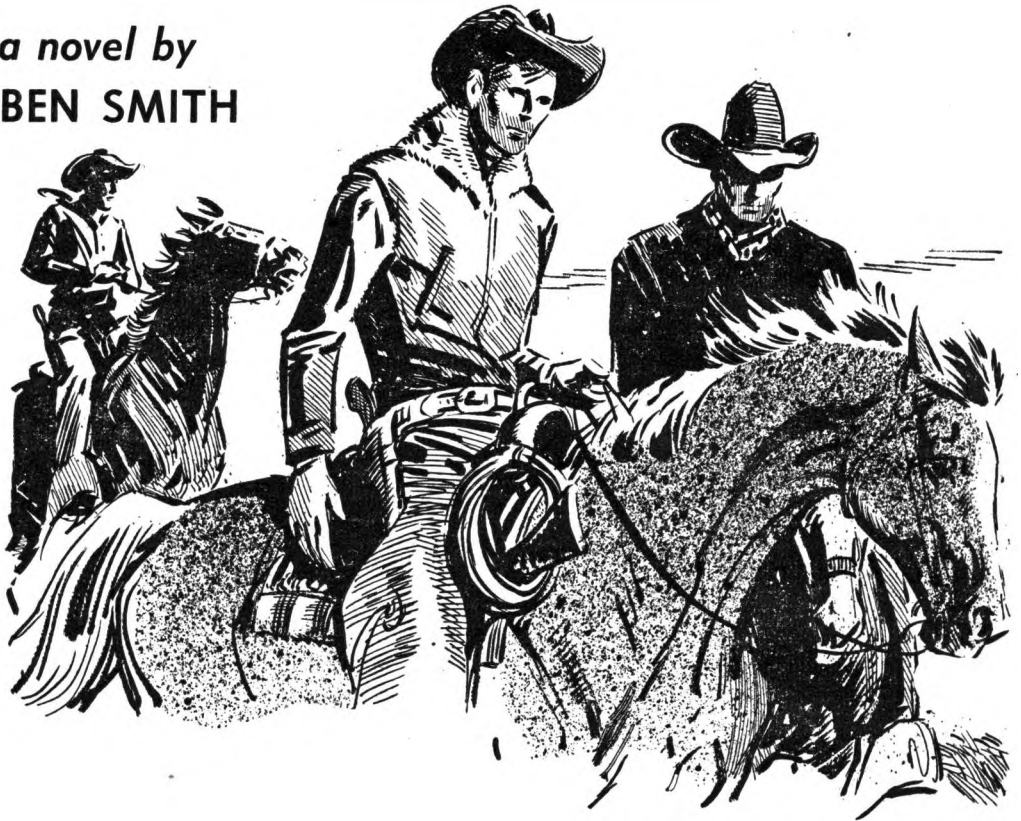
Old Mack's chuckle was dry as death. "Me, I was in the Gold Rush, back in Ninety-eight in the Yukon. 'Round sixty below, and I froze my right foot. Doc took it off to about eight inches above my ankle. That was my game foot you put into the trap. Never hurt me a bit."

Joe stumbled on.



The Sidewinder War

a novel by
BEN SMITH



*There were men who'd stop at nothing to break
the power of the great Spade brand, and nobody
knew it better than young BoJo Spade himself*

CHAPTER I

Bushwhacked

THE AIR, here at timberline, was like iced wine and BoJo Spade slipped his sombrero to his shoulders and checked the amble of his bay gelding. It was a beautiful morning, filled with the impious conversation of bluejays, the frisk and chatter of a fox squirrel that scolded from his upside-down perch on the rough bark

of a mossy oak. BoJo eased his shoulder muscles into a slouch and his rather square face softened into a half grin. Rolling a brown-paper cigarette, he whistled softly between his teeth, his eyes upon the out-pricked ears of his gelding.

It was no morning for work. Just because some pip-marked cow had been



As they approached town, they knew that a showdown was due

found, lowing its discontent in the scrub pine of the upper Spade range, was no sign that hide thieves had done away with her calf. Still, John Spade, although nearly seventy and white of hair, still held the reins of the outfit and everyone, even if he happened to be Big John's son, still took orders.

BoJo whistled a few bars of a dancehall ditty and kneed his bay into a walk again. Even if the depredations were real rather than imaginary, and, even if old Sim Smalley of the S-In-A-Box was behind it all, as big John vituperatively imagined, it was no reason for Big John to get a burr under his crupper. . .

There was no warning. The disappointed scream of the distorted rifle slug was the first intimation BoJo had that he was not alone. Close behind the noise of the ricochet came the thunder of a heavy rifle. But BoJo was off-saddle and crouched behind a low screen of sumac, his gray eyes restlessly searching the rocks that marked the timberline a hundred yards away. A thin spear of black powder smoke pointed upward in the quiet sunshine and there was the thin whisper of disturbed rocks.

BoJo flipped his .45 against the heel of his hand and scattered dirt with a pair of quick shots. Out of accurate sixgun range, he saw the movement behind the boulder, caught a glimpse of a faded linsey shirt sleeve. BoJo waited until the chattering squirrel told him that his bushwhacking friend was gone.

He punched the spent shells from his Colt, swung one leg around the horn of his saddle and pondered. Could be, of course, that hide and beef thieves were working the timberline, picking up an unguarded calf here, a solitary cow there. Could be that Big John was right. Still, Sim Smalley, while not as rich a range-holder as the Spade. . . .

BoJo shrugged wide shoulders and walked his horse to the edge of the trail, looking across the blue-shrouded valley. In the distance were the whitewashed buildings of the Spade; nearer, the silver line of Sugar Creek. Over there, west, lost in the haze, was the S-In-A-Box. Where the feud had had its beginnings, only a few remembered. Water, maybe, since the Sugar was the only major stream in the basin. Could have been graze; the S-In-A-Box was restricted to a narrow valley while the Spade spread like a blanket woven of knee-high grass.

There was a third angle, however, and BoJo gave it some consideration: Buckeye Pope, the tobacco-chewing, lantern-jawed odd-jobs man who spent his free days nosing into every rock-lined crevice in the Arrowheads. Could be that he was prospecting, as he claimed. Or, he could be working for Smalley. And, equally as possible, Buckeye could be doing a little work

in wet beeves on his own.

BoJo shrugged away the problem for the moment, returning to his mood of a few moments before. Whoever had fired the shot, it had been meant as a warning. Few of the men around Basin City, and none of the cowmen along the Sugar, would miss a man with a propped Winchester, even at three hundred yards.

BoJo rode on, his gelding working downhill to cut the course of three men who were working upward toward timberline. Although the distance was too great for recognition, BoJo assumed that they were Spade riders, sent by Big John on the same errand as BoJo's own.

EVEN as he raised a hand in silent greeting, however, BoJo Spade had his first premonition of disaster. Even the rude termination of the peaceful morning in the warning thunder of a bushwhacker's shot had not brought the icy chill that did Sheriff Halsey's colorless eyes. Halsey had been elected to office on his reputation and had kept peace by his ability to put three shots into a circle that could be covered by a silver dollar.

Now he sat, slip-hipped in the saddle, his wind-browned face emotionless. One of his deputies, Sig Hollister, nervously rolled paper around tobacco, forming a twist-tipped quirly.

"Looking for your dad," Halsey said quietly.

"You try the Spade house? BoJo stilled his mount by the pressure of his knees—the gelding had taken an impatient step away from Halsey's big black.

Halsey down-tipped his Stetson, shading his eyes. "Big John left Spade just after sunup. Ain't been back." He paused, his face thoughtful. "You ever seen this?" Halsey jerked his dark-maned head. "Show it to BoJo, Sig."

Sig Hollister lifted the ear of one saddlebag, held out something that winked in the sunshine. It was an ugly, short-rumped gun, six bull-dog barrels around a spindle.

BoJo said, quickly, "Could be two like this, Halsey."

"Not likely." Halsey turned his emotionless eyes, gave the third man a quick jerk of the head. Instantly, a Frontier 44 was centered upon BoJo's belt buckle. "This the gun you gave your Dad, BoJo?" Halsey's tone was flat, and his face as emotionless as that of a stone image.

BoJo held out his hand, but Sig Hollister shook his head, showing tobacco-stained teeth in a grin. "It's a doorjamb pistol, Halsey, .31 Caliber, North and Couch. I brought Dad one like it when I came back from the East. But, Simeon North makes a lot of guns. . . ." BoJo came to an awkward halt, cursing under his breath. Halsey, though sheriff, was another man who was a bit envious of the Spade. Now, in the form of this six-barrelled pistol, Halsey held an ace.

Halsey said, flatly, "Sim Smalley's dead, BoJo. Way I see it now, he went to his timberline camp for some reason or another, don't matter much why. The trap was set. When he opened the door, three barrels of this North and Couch caught him in the face." Halsey paused a moment, watching BoJo. "We'd like to see Big John, BoJo. He hated Sim Smalley. They been beating wings like game roosters all these years. Maybe Big John's guilty of murder!"

BOJO rode numbly, aware that each step of his bay brought him closer to the Spade Ranchhouse and, also, that each passing moment carried him closer to the certainty that Big John could never have set the trap gun for Sim Smalley. They hated each other, those two old-timers, openly and fiercely, but it was an above-the-belt hatred, with the rules known and understood. Big John, BoJo knew, might, in a moment of unruliness, beat the thunder out of Sim. But the Spade owner was not the skulk and dodge kind of fighter that Halsey had branded him.

For, despite his own feelings to the contrary, BoJo knew that the doorjamb pistol was deadly evidence. It had been a curiosity when BoJo had first seen it back East. Finishing two years of college at Big John's insistence, BoJo had given him the North and Couch as a peace offering.

Big John had promised BoJo's mother that their boy would be something better than a cowhand. That the heir to the vast Spade holdings would be educated above and beyond his job-to-be. The pistol had been the gift that had taken the sting from BoJo's decision to remain on the Spade. Two years in the ivied halls of an Eastern university had been all the range-bred BoJo Spade could stand.

However, Big John had been relatively tractable about the suggestion. He would never admit, old firehorse that he was, that the nights on Spade had been lonely for him; that in his advancing years he was even more needful of the woman who had been taken from him and drawn closer to the son she had borne him.

As BoJo rode into the ranchyard, Moses Luck slouched out of the shadow of the carriage shed. Moses was a slow-spoken Missourian who had been with the Spade for fifteen years and had, upon certain occasions, liberally dusted the seat of a younger BoJo's levis with the slack of a saddletrap. Now, as the white sunshine brought out the wind and age wrinkles in his face, BoJo saw that Moses was deeply concerned.

"Seen Big John, BoJo?"

"No," BoJo shook his head, leading his bay to the shed. "Saw Halsey, though. He been here?"

Moses thoughtfully cut a slab from a plug of Horeshoe. "Right early. Him and Sig and that trash, Clete Rangle. They snooped around, cut Big John's sign where he rode south from Spade and left."

Moses stopped, chewed thoughtfully. "Big John didn't do it. BoJo. I'll walk twenty and fire at will with the man who says he did. A dozen men could have been around here and we not knowed about it. They's half that many in the valley and in Basin that could have picked up that North and Couch. Trap-setting just ain't Big John's way."

BoJo slung his saddle to the top pole of the corral, stood a moment, wiping his face upon his bandanna. As full of concern as he was, he was loath to admit it to Moses. In the first place, the old Spade hand was

of unpredictable temper. There had been a time, not too many years ago, when an edgy word would have been enough to send Moses Luck single-handed against any twenty men that could be put in Basin. But that was before Halsey and his deadly guns.

"Halsey hasn't found Big John yet," BoJo reminded Moses, but his own blue-gray eyes were quick with worry. He built a smoke, sunlight cascading from the brim of his hat, marking the planes of his cheeks. "And, when he does, there ain't much he can do for a while. All he's got against Dad is finding the pistol in Smalley's timberline camp."

COULD be." Moses interjected, "that'd be enough. Big John hated Smalley, somewhat. And, I got the feeling that Halsey ain't fond of your dad, neither. The sheriff's backed himself with a couple of queer hole cards, Hollister and Rangle. It's a bigger thing than we think, BoJo, 'cause just a couple hours after Halsey and the rest of them rode south, Buckeye Pope came by here and he was looking for Big John, too."

BoJo flipped his cigarette away, his face tight with interest. "Say what he wanted, Moses?"

"Nuh, but I kind of figure, BoJo, that Buckeye knows something too. He pokes and pries around back in the hills, don't tell no one his business and acts like a day-old calf with a touch of sun. But, maybe, that's just a hooraw trick. He might of seen someone earlier this morning, either with a Spade calf or mixed in with the shooting at Smalley's timberline camp. Either way, Big John could have got it out of him."

But BoJo was shouldering his saddle. "Bring around the buckskin, Moses. I'm heading for the timberline camp. There might be something there to be seen. And I might cut Buckeye's trail. If I do, and he knows anything, I'll get it out of him. If Dad comes in, tell him to stay tucked away until we can get all this straightened out."

BoJo kicked the deep-bottomed buckskin into a fast canter as he rode from the

ranchyard. Looking back once, he saw that Moses Luck was walking toward the corral, carrying his own saddle. For a moment, BoJo wondered where the Spade segundo might be going. Moses should stay at the ranch, watch for Big John, and try to keep the Spade owner from riding into Halsey's loop. But BoJo threw the question aside with a shrug of the shoulders. First thing was to take a look around the timberline camp and try to find Buckeye Pope. The man who had taken the bushwhack shot at BoJo had worn a blue linssey shirt. And Buckeye invariably wore shirts of the wind and sun-washed homespun.

CHAPTER II

Death Trap

IT WAS late afternoon when BoJo reined in at the edge of the clearing that marked Smalley's old timberline camp. Once, the area had been cleared, but now, around the log cabin, the slope of the hill was covered with knee-high second growth. BoJo left his buckskin out of sight and worked his way slowly toward the building, keeping in the shade. His plaid shirt, although wind-faded, would be clearly visible to a rider along the mountain above. And, if the cabin held a secret, it would be watched.

There was no sound except the nervous clomp of the buckskin's hooves and the swish of his tail as he fought a trickle of gnats that rose from the wet grass. Looking back over his shoulder, BoJo could see the descending ranks of the forest and, farther away, deep in the valley, the Spade ranchhouse. Here, several thousand feet above the Sugar basin, the air was absolutely transparent and had an effervescent sparkle that caught at hard-working lungs.

A rabbit thumped from a thicket under BoJo's feet and BoJo caught himself, gun in hand and holding his breath. Although startled, BoJo recognized the presence of

the rabbit as a favorable sign. No one else had disturbed the brush around the camp for some hours.

He worked his way to the back of the leaning building, cautiously thrust his head around a corner. There was a thin screen of remaining trees, mostly scrubby pine, then the harsh outlines of the granite above timberline. The rocks were white in the late sunlight, and broken by the pools of deep shadow. In any one of those pits of blackness, there could be an armed and watching man.

BoJo walked slowly around the corner of the cabin, feeling the clamp of his stomach muscles against his spine. There was no movement, no sound.

Colt in hand, BoJo looked into the dim interior of the cabin. There had been an opening cut for a window, but no glass had ever been fitted to it. It was, normally, covered by a divided board shutter, which now swung half open. A thin shaft of light, flecked with dust motes, spotted the earthen floor. BoJo squatted, carefully avoiding the touch of his hands or knees to the ground, and studied the sign.

There were the scuff marks of two or three sets of boot heels and twin furrows, as if something had been dragged from the cabin. Into the rough lintel of the door a rusty spike had been driven and from this hung a short length of pigging string. Here, evidently, the doorjamb pistol had been suspended. BoJo thought of the viciousness of the trap and wiped the sweat from his upper lip.

DESIGNED as a crude sort of burglar protection, the North and Couch had no trigger. All six barrels, if fully loaded, would be fired upon pulling the spindle that thrust from the center of the forepiece. The pistol was designed to be fastened to a door facing, a cord strung from the spindle to the door itself. All six barrels firing at once, or any part of them, would strike an area no bigger than a silver dollar.

BoJo stood up, again studying the ground. There was a flattened place, as if the trod earth had been scraped with a

flat board. The raw spot was about three feet inside the door and roughly centered, about the spot where an injured man's head might strike, providing he was shot as he entered the door. An injured man, BoJo thought, or, remembering the six yawning barrels of the trap pistol, a dead man. . . .

He backed out, still watching the inside of the cabin, trying to fit some of the pieces of the puzzle into place. Say Sim had been killed by the blast from the North and Couch. He had fallen, head foremost, into the camp shanty. And, where his head had bled, there was now new earth.

Why?

Had Halsey or one of his men removed the blood-stained earth for some reason? To prevent the digging up of the dirt floor by rats or the bobcats that prowled in the mountains? Not likely; Halsey would not worry about such slight damage to another man's property. But—why?

BoJo backed into the sunlight, conscious of the fact that it was late and that he had been without food since breakfast. He stood in the knee-high thicket outside the cabin, building a smoke and watching his buckskin swish gnats. As he touched his tongue to the edge of the brown paper, he saw the horse's ears flick.

Instantly, BoJo was on his knees, screened from view, listening for the give-away of the touch of a steel hoof against rock. The buckskin was range-trained and obedient. Only the presence of another horse, or a man, would cause him concern.

Peering through the underbrush, BoJo could see the bareness of the timberline; from the corner of his eye watch the behavior of his gelding. He was certain now, was BoJo, that a horseman was working upward through the timber, toward the rear of the line camp. Angrily, BoJo worked toward the corner of the cabin, trying to reach a position where he could overlook the slope to the Sugar basin. A thicket of aspen quivered, as if agitated by the passage of a body, and BoJo caught a glimpse of a blue-shirted back.

Buckeye Pope!

It was more than coincidence, Buckeye

being so near the scene of Sim Smalley's death in one day. Buckeye moved far and fast, morning might see him in Basin, and darkness of the same day could well cover him miles into the Arrowheads.

"Pope!" BoJo's call shattered the stillness, bouncing from the bare granite behind him. The answer was the flat snap of a shot and the spat of lead against rock.

"Buckeye! Hold your fire. It's BoJo Spade!"

A GAIN came the thunder of a rifle and BoJo hit the ground, cursing as his mouth filled with earth. Then, as he waited, there came the receding thud of hooves. Twice, in the same day, a man wearing a blue shirt, a man BoJo was certain was Buckeye Pope, had fired upon BoJo and had escaped. And, from first glance, there appeared to be no reason. Buckeye, taciturn, thinking only of some faint show of color he had discovered, or was about to discover, back in the vastness of the Arrowheads, would have no reason to take a hand in the game. Many times Buckeye, exhausted after a long spell of working in the hills, had rested and had been fed at Spade. True, the Spade riders were inclined to play tricks on the old man. Even Moses Luck had, at one time, cooperated with the others in giving Buckeye a bath in the horse trough.

But that was just range tomfoolery and no cause for a man to start a shooting war. What, then, had aroused Buckeye's anger against Spade and BoJo?

By the time BoJo reached his buckskin, the sounds of hooves had vanished and he knew that Buckeye was gone. The old man could hide in the hills like a pack rat and could remain hidden, against the concentrated search of an army.

More certain than ever that Buckeye, along with Halsey and his shifty-eyed deputies, had more knowledge than had so far been brought to light, BoJo swung

aboard his horse and started downslope toward the Spade. There was time, now, for a man to eat and, after eating, to smoke a cigarette in quiet thought.

Darkly sober, BoJo rode into the Spade yard under the cover of night. Looking for Moses Luck, he remembered that the old Spade hand had probably ridden away from the Sugar basin only moments after BoJo himself had left. Some of the hands might be about, although Big John had been adamant in his decision to completely cover the herd with riders in order to try to stop the depredations.

BoJo ate a lonely meal in the quiet of the lamp-lighted kitchen, but the food was



"Get ready," BoJo said softly, as he dug his spurs into the bay's flanks

tasteless to his mouth. Question one was the continued absence of Big John. Where had the old ranch-owner gone? What business had he that would keep him away from Spade for an entire day? Had he ridden into Basin, the sheriff would know of the fact and would, even now, be hold-

ing him and questioning him.

Once, as he ate, BoJo thought he heard a sound outside in the ranchyard. He stood in the doorway of the kitchen, allowing his eyes to adjust themselves to the new moonlight. The corral, the carriage shed and the water trough were thrown into deep



contrasts of silver and black. Out there, nothing moved.

Moving back into the kitchen, BoJo gave some thought to question two. Who had shot Sim? As a matter of fact, was the S-In-A-Box owner dead? Halsey had said so and his deputies had agreed. But, even the sheriff would lie, perhaps, if it served some purpose of his own.

Also, and as a minor irritating point, why had the earth been scraped clean in Sim's timberline cabin?

There was a sound. It was a low rattle, almost a groan. BoJo was out of his boots and across the kitchen floor on silent feet. Cupping a hand over the lamp, he blew it out and the moonlight from out in the ranchyard flowed in the windows.

HE SHUT the screen silently behind him, felt the coolness of the earth strike against the soles of his feet. At the corral, he paused and listened again. Gun in hand, BoJo swung his legs over the top pole and worked his way forward. Should there be a man, alert and armed, hidden in the patch of gloom, BoJo would be an excellent target as he crossed the yard.

There was no helping that.

"BoJo." There was the clatter of hooves striking packed earth and Moses Luck slid from saddle, short legs churning as he ran to hold his balance.

But BoJo was not listening. He was on his knees, gun back in holster, as he reached long arms under the edge of the trough. A hand fell as the body turned, and the cuff of a shirt sleeve was visible in the moonlight. The color was indistinguishable, but the material was linsey.

"It's Buckeye," BoJo said slowly. "Give me a hand."

They dragged the limp figure into the open yard. Lying on his back, Buckeye opened his eyes for a moment and his mouth worked slackly. "Let me—let me—"

"BoJo!"

"Wait, Moses, Buckeye knows something."

Buckeye Pope struggled and his words were a throaty murmur. There was a

bleeding cut over one temple and a bullet-hole high in his chest that, even as BoJo watched, began pulsing blackly.

"Tell you—about—the—gun—"

But Buckeye Pope was unconscious.

"Got to get him to Basin to the doctor," BoJo said, getting to his feet. "Run out the buggy while I get my boots. Buckeye knows something and if he dies—"

Moses Luck interrupted. "You got to go to Basin, anyways," he said. "Halsey's got Big John. Found him about four o'clock, riding in a circle about halfway between Smalley's timberline camp and Basin. He wasn't hurt, or nothing, but he had blood all over his shirt."

The old Missourian paused. "Won't do no good not to say it, BoJo. Big John's in jail and, around Basin, they're getting pretty riled about it. BoJo, we got to get him out.!"

CHAPTER III

Midnight Visit

MOSSES LUCK drove the rig with a skill that could have been learned only by years of handling the reins of a drover's wagon. At the edge of the town, Moses cut sharply to the right and entered an alley, driving more by instinct than by actual sight, cutting the buggy short behind the general store and hauling the span of trotters back on their heels at the back door of Warford's.

"Come in this way," he said, giving BoJo a hand with the inert Buckeye Pope. "You don't want the whole town knowing your business."

"I don't," BoJo admitted, swinging Buckeye to his shoulder. "You go on and rouse up Warford, I'll get Pope in."

Doc Warford, indistinct in the shroud of his long nightgown, held open the kitchen door. "Here, on the table." Then, "Martha, get a light."

They turned Buckeye on his back. The old prospector was breathing shallowly

now and the rasp of it was loud in the room. Warford gave a professional touch at the injured man's wrist, then fingered open an eyelid. "Shot nicked his lung, I should judge," he said, finally, rubbing his bald head. "Might live. These old guys are pretty tough. Fever's what we got to watch. Martha, get me some hot water, my bag out of the bedroom. Work to do. You," Warford looked at BoJo and Moses, "one of you will have to help me. T'other one get out of the way."

"Me," Moses Luck said, "I'll stay. BoJo, you got to talk to Big John. Maybe you can get some sense out of him."

"Keep an ear bent," BoJo told Moses. "Buckeye might have something to say."

Aware that Warford was still glowering, BoJo asked him. "Seen another gunshot case today, Doc?"

Warford rubbed his bald spot even more vigorously. "Yes," he snapped. "Sim Smalley. And he didn't have the chance that Buckeye has. Shot three times in the head; you could have covered all three bullet holes with watch."

"Shot with a .44 or a .45?" BoJo's voice was casual but his mind was toying with a new idea.

"No." Warford thrust out his chest, unaware that he cut a ridiculous figure in his cotton nightgown. "Spade. I've been a doctor a good many years. Longer, for that matter, than you been alive. Smalley was shot with something smaller than a .44. About a .30, I'd say."

"You saw the gun Halsey had?" BoJo was insistent, still loath to give up this new thought.

"I did that," Warford's tone was emphatic. "It could of easily been the gun." He gave BoJo a severe glance over his hastily donned glasses. "Now, one of you get out of here and leave me room to work."

OUTSIDE, in the stillness of Basin's main street, BoJo paused, undecided. It was late; already the moon had set and the doors of the saloon were closed. Down at the jail a single lamp burned and BoJo knew that Halsey had left a guard over

Big John. Still, if he went at it right, there might be a chance.

He crossed the board sidewalk, choosing the dust of the street rather than the noise, and cut behind the general store coming up to the east wall of the jail. Here, on this side, were the three cells. The other side of the jail was a blank wall overlooking a small exercise yard. There was a small office in the front of the building, opening into a hall that faced the cells.

Thus, should the door that led to the cell block be open, the guard would be able to hear anything above a whisper, even if it came from as far as the last cell. Big John was a light sleeper, but BoJo had his doubts about awakening his father without speaking aloud.

Springing upward, he caught the bars of the window of the last cell with his hands. Hanging there, he whispered, "Dad, it's me, BoJo." He waited for what seemed the space of several minutes, finally dropping again to the dust.

BoJo moved on down, opposite the second cell and repeated the maneuver without success. At the first cell, and the one nearest the guard, whom BoJo could now see dozing in the office, BoJo was rewarded with a grunt. A face appeared in the darkness of the cell window and BoJo could see the silver of Big John's handlebar mustaches.

"Damn it, BoJo, get me outa here."

"Halsey . . ."

"That stupid yearling. BoJo, this whole country's gone loco. Saying now that I set a trap for Sim Smalley. The whole thing's got not a mite of sense to it. Me and Smalley hated one another enough that we'd of stood back to back and fought to a finish any man who said we didn't."

"Dad," BoJo quieted the old man with an urgent whisper, his eyes going beyond the cell block and fixing themselves upon the back of the still motionless guard. "How did that door jamb pistol get into Smalley's shack? Where did you see it last?"

"It was in the drawer of that desk in the Spade ranchhouse," Big John mut-

tered. "I put it there right after you gave it to me. Looked at it a time or two, maybe."

"Was it loaded?"

Big John retorted drily. "'Spect it was. Wasn't never no hand to keep a gun around me with its fangs drawn. Anyway, the stuff to load it with was in the same place."

But BoJo was already working on another problem. "You left Spade at daylight, right after me," he said. "Where did you go?"

"South," Big John said slowly. "Buckeye Pope told me that a pip-marked cow was in a bogdown on down-Sugar. Said he tried to pull her out but had no rope. I went down there, followed Sugar Creek for maybe fifteen miles. Passed one bog-down but didn't see anything except some Spade stock east of me. Could be the cow was already sucked under, could be Buckeye lied."

"Buckeye's been shot," BoJo told his father. "Creased in the head and the top of one lung's nicked. So he can't tell me anything. But there's something that goes farther back than a day or so ago, Dad. You and Sim were at one another's throats for years, like a couple of roosters in the same flock, but there never was any open trouble. Here, in the last six months, it's come to open war. Now, Sim Smalley's dead and they're blaming you. Any ideas?"

WHEN Big John Spade replied, his voice was so low that BoJo had to catch again at the cell bars and hold himself close to the window.

"It was forty years ago I came out here," Big John said, "young and single and full of hell. Sim Smalley came with me. For a while the two of us run high, wide and handsome. We worked some, when we was broke. Gambled some. There was a couple girls up at Independence we used to see when the herds trailed north. It was there, twenty-some-odd years ago, I met your ma. Sim knew her, too, and seems like he took a shine to her, big as I did. Only, after two-three trips up there, it was me she chose. Sim, I reckon, always

held that against me because we fell out right after that.

"When she died, it seemed to him like, maybe, it was my fault. Thing like that could make a man mighty queer and that's what Sim, was, plain queer.

"Outside of that, BoJo—well, your mother gave you a lot of things besides that name. Rightly, it was Robert John Spade she named you, but she always called you BoJo—like I said, you was to grow up into something. The Spade would be yours and there was my pledge to her to make it as big as I could. Man goes to make a thing grow, he don't always go about it the gentle way and I stepped on a few toes in the Sugar basin.

"People hate anything big, BoJo, that's something they couldn't learn you in college. They's a lot that hates the Spade just because it's twenty thousand acres from one end to the other. And, if they hate the Spade, they hate me and you."

BoJo dropped to the ground and rubbed the aching muscles of his arms. After all, he reflected, that was about all a man was born with, two arms. If anything worthwhile was made by him or given to him, a man must fight to keep it.

BoJo crossed the street, walking quietly in the heavy dust, intending to go back to Warford's and see about the wounded Buckeye. As he passed the shadow of the false front of the general store, he heard the quick clump of a boot heel. Sheriff Halsey was behind him, one hand close to the black butt of his Peacemaker 45.

"Hold up a minute, BoJo."

BoJo Spade waited, feeling the touch of ice at the nape of his neck. Halsey was dangerous, a man who delighted in killing. In addition, he was adept at his chosen work. He had studied his guns as a lawyer studies his Blackstone. His Colts were merely extensions of himself, a projected part of his own body and personality.

"Don't try anything, Spade," Halsey said quietly. "Don't get any ideas about Big John. Because if you do, the first place I'll look is where you might happen to be. Big John will stay in my jail until we

work this thing out. At that time—well—”

BoJo said easily. “Tell me one thing, Halsey. Who found Sim Smalley?”

“Buckeye Pope.”

BoJo was silent, considering. More and more Buckeye was being woven into the web of deceit and death. “Halsey, why did Sim go to the timberline camp?” BoJo’s voice gave no indication of the importance of the question.

“He got a note,” Sheriff Halsey replied slowly, “telling him that if he went to the timberline cabin just after daybreak he’d find out how the beeves were being stolen from Spade. So you see,” BoJo could almost see the sheriff’s sardonic grin in the darkness, “Smalley was killed while he might have been trying to help your father. He was trying to find out about the Spade losses.”

“He got a note,” BoJo interrupted, and there was the tensing of the muscles along his spine that told him the answer even before he asked the question. “Who signed the note?”

But Halsey didn’t answer the question, not at that moment. Instead, he asked, “Where did Big John go this morning, BoJo?”

“South. Buckeye Pope told him that a cow was being sucked under in a bog of Sugar. Dad rode down to see if he could do something about it.”

“Anyone, by any chance, see him down that way?”

“I don’t know. Why?” There was some purpose to Halsey’s questioning. Every word simply tightened the noose that was close to Big John Spade’s neck. Halsey said, “It might be that Big John rode south. Could be, too, that he rode up to timberline to see if Sim Smalley would ride into his trap.”

BoJo snorted. “You’re a damn liar, Halsey.”

Halsey’s laughter was gently mocking. “I don’t think anyone else will believe that, Spade. You see, Big John signed the note that Smalley got. A half-dozen people have seen it and sworn to the fact that it’s Big John’s signature.”

CHAPTER IV

In the Lion’s Den

HE’S RESTING easy,” Moses Luck said, biting a fresh chew from his plug. “I told Doc I ought to stay with him but Doc said no, that whoever shot Buckeye don’t know where he is and figures him dead anyway. Guess he’s right.”

BoJo was guiding the buggy back toward Spade. In the first place, he had to return to the ranch to pick up a saddle horse and in the second place he didn’t want a strange rig to be seen and remarked on in the alley behind Warford’s. And, probably, Doc was right. Only rest and quiet could help Buckeye Pope. If Buckeye should defeat the odds against his recovery, Doc Warford would be there to hear what the wounded man said. And Doc played the game strictly fair.

In the meantime, it was only a few hours until daylight.

“What you aiming to do?” Moses queried as he spat expertly over the off wheel.

“Backtrack Dad,” BoJo replied slowly. “First, see if I can cut his sign south along the Sugar. He says he went down that way and I believe him. But Halsey don’t. Could be that someone saw him. Could be too, that I could meet up with someone who knows where Buckeye was early yesterday morning.”

“What good is that going to do?”

BoJo explained patiently. “If Buckeye was south along the Sugar, he could be telling the truth about the bogdown cow. But if he was in Basin, or up in the Arrowheads, then he lied about the whole thing. If he lied, he had a reason and I’d mighty well like to know what it is.”

“That makes meaning,” Moses said, thoughtfully, looking toward the east where the false dawn painted the sky. “I’ll ride along. Two of us can read more sign than one.”

His voice trailed off even as BoJo caught

up the slack ends of the reins and smartly slapped the sleek rumps of the trotters. There was the creak of harness leather as the team broke into a run. Over the grit and rumble of the buggy wheels, came the sound of continuing gun talk. From across the flat land that extended westward to the valley that held the S-In-A-Box came the sound of rapid fire.

Moses was running for the saddle shed, even as BoJo braked the buggy and slid from the seat. "Unhitch the team while I saddle up two horses," Moses called over his shoulders. "What you reckon the shooting's about?"

"It's the second move," BoJo said grimly. "First Sim Smalley is killed and Dad gets the blame. Then this." The team unhitched, BoJo was drawing the cinch tight upon his own bay. "This is supposed to keep us busy while someone drops the noose around Big John's neck."

"Halsey?"

BoJo said, "Maybe. But I don't know. What could he gain? He has no reason for hating the Spade." But even as he spoke, he knew that, in their minds, many men might have reason enough. It could be that men hated what they feared and they feared the power of the Spade. Anyone could be the planning mind behind the stroke; what mattered was that the Spade be driven to its knees. Halsey, jealous of his own authority as sheriff, with no power except his uncanny skill with a gun. . . .

Buckeye Pope, an old man who had spent a lifetime looking for the color of gold in the Arrowheads. Suppose, somewhere back there in the vastness of the mountains, Buckeye had found his lode? Would he be afraid that the Spade could take it from him? BoJo paused, lost in a new thought. Suppose Buckeye had made his strike and it was on Spade-owned land? That could well be the key to the whole thing.

But, if that were the case, why had he been injured? Why had a bushwhacker shot at him and shot to kill. For the two slugs that had been aimed at Buckeye Pope were with murderous intent. Those that had been snapped at BoJo had been

a warning.

Carrying the line of thought further, though, BoJo could explain the situation. Buckeye, after all these years of fruitless searching, had made his strike. Somewhere, in the lost land behind the Spade, Buckeye had stumbled upon his wealth. The man who had fired the warning shots at BoJo had worn a blue linsey shirt, such as Buckeye wore. It could have been Buckeye, then, who had gazed with cold eyes down the barrel of a rifle, warning an intruder away.

And someone else knew, now, the secret. Perhaps by following Buckeye, could be by cold reasoning, someone had discovered Buckey's strike. And had bushwhacked and perhaps killed the old prospector in order to take over the wealth Buckeye had found.

There were holes in the reasoning, BoJo knew, but it was a far more reasonable theory than any other that presented itself at the moment.

"Let's go," Moses Luck said, and BoJo realized that he had been standing in the corral for some moments, his hand upon the horn of his saddle. From across the Sugar basin the gunfire had finally ceased.

THEY galloped across the Sugar and the first daylight caught the scattered waters of the creek in a shifting rainbow. Even as they pulled up the far bank, one of the Spade riders came out of the low-hanging ground mist.

"It's Shorty," Moses said, his keen eyes recognizing the man from his general outline. "There was four of them out there, Fiddlefoot Hayes, Lucky, I think, maybe, Charlie. Shorty. . . ."

Moses' voice lifted in a shout and the Spade rider, who was bearing northward, headed his rangy paint their way. "All hell's busted loose," he shouted. "About ten of 'em jumped us just before light and scattered Spade cows all over the basin. Ain't nobody hurt bad, but Fiddlefoot's got a leg that's doing some leaking. Lucky took out after them, to cut their sign and find out where they're headed. Charlie's taking care of Fiddlefoot."

BoJo cut off the stream of words. "Cattle gone, or just scattered?"

"Don't rightly know," Shorty was rolling a cigarette, his fingers shaking. The Spade riders were able men, competent at their trade, but they were not gunmen. "Could be both, BoJo. They might have had their eyes on some feeders and veals and cut them out. It was still dark



Suddenly BoJo felt himself stumbling

and this ground fog just started to lift. Mighty murky shooting out there."

"Shorty," BoJo again interrupted, "you got a rifle in your saddle boot. Give it to me. Moses, ride along while Shorty goes back to help Charlie. We'll check up on Lucky and the missing stock."

Shorty's round face was mournful as he handed over his Winchester. It was evident that he, too, wanted a chance to burn some powder with something in his sights.

From beyond the bed ground came the frustrated bawl of a few cows who had lost strayed or stolen calves. Moses and BoJo passed them, their heads down in restless clumps of ten, fifteen or twenty. As they rode by, an old mossy horn snorted and took a dig with his head at BoJo's leg. BoJo responded by booting him on the end of his nose. The mossy horn gazed at them from reddened eyes but backed away.

The ground fog was gone now and the dew-laden grass sparkled under the sunlight. Here and there, beyond the bed-down, appeared the signs of moving cattle: hoof marks, occasionally thrust deep into the loam, and cattle droppings. Then, more frequently as the riders dropped back to drag, the mark of a steel-shod hoof.

Moses, his old eyes ever searching, remarked, "Shorty's right, there's about ten of them. Haven't seen a sign that could be Lucky."

"Ride up," Boo said, holding Shorty's Winchester across the saddle. "They can't move fast, not if they're driving beef. We can catch them."

They rode at a canter across the flat and almost to the gentle slope that marked the approach to the valley of the S-In-A-Box. Here the cattle and horse sign bunched and the hoofprints became hopelessly intermixed. "They're moving on in," Moses Luck judged. "Either to or beyond the S-In-A-Box."

"Watch your flank," BoJo warned. "In this cut, three men could drive a thousand cattle. The rest of them may be fanned out in an ambush." He noticed that Moses pulled his own saddle gun from its boot and levered a shell into the breach.

The cut grew narrower, now scarcely wider than the main street of Basin, and the advantages of Smalley's spread could be seen. A fence, or a rider, one at the north and one at the south, could hold cattle forever in this canyon. And, inside, BoJo knew, the box in the hills widened into a flat land of lush grass. If a man had water . . . But Sim had been dependent upon a part-year seep that fed from the Arrowheads. Late summer would find his cattle spread strung out a'll along the basin,

working steadily on for Sugar Creek.

IT WAS at that instant that the cut erupted into a fiery hell about them. First a rider came precipitously around the bend, sliding his horse into an abrupt stop. It was Lucky and, even as he fired his sixgun into the air to warn them, the ambush closed its paws. There were men screened in the brush at both rims of the cut, methodically pumping shells into rifles, criss-crossing the defile with a cutting fire.

As BoJo flipped up his Winchester and began to answer the challenge, Lucky slumped in his saddle and BoJo saw that his shirt was stuck soddenly to his back. He toppled from the saddle, his horse running a few steps before it, too, crumpled under the deadly fire.

"We can't help him," Moses shouted. "Let's get out of here." They swung about, still answering the fire from the valley rim, until rifle pins fell upon empty chambers. As they booted Winchesters and resorted to hand guns, the crossfire increased and BoJo saw that they were boxed. During the excitement a couple of men from the ridges had worked down into the canyon and were securely entrenched behind boulders. To ride back to the basin of the Sugar would be to ride into pointblank lead.

BoJo stood in the stirrups, his sombrero swung about his neck, his long black hair flowing in the wind of his passage. "This way," he shouted. "On to the S-In-A-Box."

Surprised by the sudden move, the ambushers held their fire for a precious instant and that moment spelled the difference between the success and failure of BoJo's plan.

They broke free and into the open valley, leaving the riflemen behind. The ambushers had dismounted and had left their horses well back out of danger. Their forethought now worked to their own disadvantage. In the precious moments it took them to run to horses and mount, BoJo and Moses were lost in the second growth that rimmed the small valley. They

worked northward, after a half-hour, stopped to breathe their mounts.

"We got by the lion but we're in his den," Moses Luck said. "Two men can watch that cut forever and keep us bottled up."

BoJo shook his head, mopping his face with a shirt sleeve. "Not necessarily. There's another way out, to the north. And a man on foot can scale this slope either east or west. But I don't want out, not right now."

"You may be crazy," Moses retorted, "but I'm not. I got no more business in here than a one-legged grasshopper in a chicken yard. I aim to go, getting the chance."

"What about the Spade cattle?" BoJo asked. "They're up here somewhere. I want to see who's behind this. If we wait, sooner or later we'll see someone. That man can tip us off as to who's masterminding the whole thing against Spade. This ties in with Sim's being killed, Buckeye's getting himself shot. Now Lucky. . ."

"Yeah," Moses replied soberly. "Now Lucky. Okay, BoJo, I'm with you. We'll stay and try to figure out the whys and wherefores. But if we wind up shot, don't tell me I didn't warn you."

"If we get shot," BoJo reminded him, "you won't be able to tell me you warned me."

CHAPTER V

The Missing Link

BOJO SPADE lay on his back in the sunlight and dozed. Moses Luck, restless, moved along the lip of the slope and watched the S-In-A-Box ranchhouse. Men moved under the trees down there, perhaps eight or ten of them. Of the Spade cattle there had been no sign. But, BoJo reasoned, that meant nothing, for, if his hunch was correct, the cattle had been choused off the Spade bed-down merely to create a diversion. Someplace along

the line, BoJo had touched the fresh trail of the man who had planned all this. And, for that reason, BoJo Spade had to be occupied with other affairs. Remembering what Big John had told him, BoJo was prepared to discard some of his previous thinking and view the killing of Sim Smalley in a new light.

Smalley had been slain with the door-jamb pistol. The North and Couch had belonged to Big John Spade. Ergo, Big John had set and baited the trap, even going so far as to write the note that had carried Sim to his death. But suppose someone had managed to steal the odd pistol, which might not be too hard to do. Someone else could have set the trap for Smalley. But who could have signed Big John's name to that note?

Without knowing the contents of the note, of course, BoJo had no way of knowing just what inducement Big John had offered Sim to prompt the S-In-A-Box owner to see him. But some such inducement must have been offered. Sim had come, in good faith, to his own timberline camp.

Boo sat up abruptly, his mind racing. There, just for an instant, his conjectures had presented another possibility. But there was the missing single link; find that and the entire puzzle would fall into orderly focus.

"Moses," BoJo called quietly and the old Spade rider left his lookout point.

"They're leaving," he said, jaws working on his chew. "By twos and threes, they're riding down canyon. Means only one thing, BoJo. They're going to let the Spade cows wander back home."

BoJo stood up, stretched. "Recognize any of them?" he asked.

Moses shook his grizzled head. "Nary a one. They're new hands. None of the S-In-A-Box regulars is down there."

"Then," BoJo mused, "if I'm right, they'll head into Basin, a few at a time. There's something building in Basin and we ought to be there."

"Ain't nothin' much to keep us away," Moses muttered. "There goes the last of 'em. We can go down, take a look around

the S-In-A-Box, by that time all of 'em will be out of the valley."

BoJo was already walking swiftly toward the spot where they had tied their horses. Astride, he guided the bay down the slope, cutting back upvalley toward the knoll where the ranch house stood. Warily, guns in hand, Moses and BoJo rode up under a spreading cottonwood and reined in, eyes searching the thickets around the log structure. Here, as at the timberline cabin, Sim had built for utility only and the unglazed windows gaped like the eyes of a skull.

In the sumac, a cricket chirruped.

BoJo swung a long leg from the stirrup, slipped to the ground, leaving his gelding ground-tied. Moses followed close to BoJo's heels, Winchester freshly loaded and at the ready. BoJo stepped into the open house door, stood, allowing his eyes to adjust themselves to the gloom. In the center of the room was a rowel-scarred oaken table and four cane-bottomed chairs. An old highboy stood at one wall, the door gaping drunkenly. Inside hung a moth-eaten bearskin vest. There were two other rooms, one a bedroom Sim Smalley had used when alive, the other the kitchen.

BoJo stepped inside, his nose savoring the odor of a recent meal. There were some cold biscuits still in a pan in the oven of the spraddle-legged range and BoJo and Moses munched on them, chasing them with a drink of water from the rusty bucket.

EYES moving idly about the room, BoJo noted one spot in the corner where the dirt of the floor had been recently disturbed. There was a slight mound, and the earth was a different color, as if moist. Something had been recently dug up, or buried, at that spot. There was a bent and rusty shovel by the range and BoJo used that to scoop away the loose dirt.

Moses watched him interestedly, his jaws working rhythmically upon the last of the biscuits. "What d'you expect to find?" he queried.

"I don't know." BoJo straightened and rested. "Whatever it is, it's bound to help.

I couldn't dig up anything that would make this mess any muddier." He continued to dig and worked until the tip of his shovel struck something hard. Using his fingers, he dug below and around the object, bringing it into the light. It was oddly shaped, and wrapped in oiled silk. A fold of the silk fell away and the blued barrel of a pistol gleamed dully.

"I'll be durned," Moses muttered thoughtfully.

"It's a Navy Colt," BoJo said. "Don't you see, Moses?"

"Not rightly."

"Never mind," BoJo was impatiently spading earth back into the hole, patting it down with booted feet. "Let's get out of here, Moses, we've got urgent business in town."

With a last look around, BoJo left, his long legs moving him swiftly. Astride his gelding, he was down valley in a ground-eating lope. Moses, cursing around his chew, kicked his pony into life and followed.

They stopped at the Spade to change horses and it was nearly dark when BoJo and Moses reached the outer edge of Basin. Lamplight fanned across the sidewalks and the tinkle of a piano came from the saloon. "Go to Doc Warford's," BoJo directed, "and check up on Buckeye. If he's able to talk, maybe we can get to the bottom of all this."

"Where you going?" Moses wanted to know as they ground-hitched their horses in the alley.

"To the jail to talk to Dad. Then, maybe, BoJo's eyes had a queer gleam in them, "maybe I'll have a talk with Halsey. If Buckeye's all right, meet me at the jail in ten minutes. No," he paused, thinking a moment, "meet me across the street from the jail. I'll be in the mouth of the alley."

HE LEFT Moses standing there in the darkness and walked toward the fan of light that marked the corner of the saloon. Across the street, near the liar's bench in front of the general store, a small knot of men stood, talking low-voiced. Although the darkness hid their faces,

BoJo gave them a wide berth in the suspicion that they might be the same men who had ambushed the Spade riders at the mouth of the S-In-A-Box canyon.

No one looked his way as he quartered across the street and made his way toward the side of the jail, but there was the ominous rumble of a man's voice raised in argument. BoJo kept his back to the group and slowed his walk. No need to rouse their suspicions by haste.

Big John Spade was standing at the cell window, looking over the quiet town and, while his face was in shadow, there was something about his manner that told BoJo his father was worried.

"There's something brewing, BoJo," he said, pulling at his silvery mustache. "I been watching here since just before dark and at least ten strange riders have come into Basin. Damn it! Got me cooped up here like a steer at the block, can't get out and do anything for myself."

"Moses is with Buckeye," BoJo said, his eyes still upstreet at the knot of men gathered there, watching their shadowy forms mill restlessly in the darkness. "Maybe Buckeye can talk by now. Dad, all the old S-In-A-Box hands are gone. Some strange riders jumped the Spade bed-down early this morning and cut out a bunch of feeders. Moses and I trailed them to the canyon. They had set an ambush in the neck and got Lucky."

"Dead?"

"Yeah. They cut him off his horse and the horse from under him at the same time."

"The stinkin' sons . . ."

BoJo went on, determined to reach a more favorable part of his story. "We watched the S-In-A-Box from the rim; they all pulled out and left the Spade cows to wander back home."

BoJo could see his father's eyes glint in the dim light. "Why, BoJo?"

"To cover up something else, Dad. To draw the Spade riders away for the day, at least me and Moses. You see," BoJo swung about, looked again at the growing knot of men, "either Buckeye found something back in the Arrowheads that

someone wants awful bad, or someone is after the Spade. It could be both. Halsey says that Sim Smalley had a note asking him to meet you. That right?"

BIG JOHN thought back. "No, I never —wait, BoJo. Couple months ago, I sent Fiddlefoot to the S-In-A-Box with a note to Sim to meet me at Spade. Thought maybe we could patch up our quarrel. Nothing never came of it."

BoJo grinned mirthlessly. "I don't think it ever got to Sim. Not then. Later, just before Sim was killed, someone could have changed the body of the note, left your signature under it, and invited Sim to

Buckeye ain't come to, yet. Warford says maybe in the next hour, maybe tomorrow, maybe never. But that ain't the main thing." He paused, as if searching for words. "BoJo, we got to get your daddy out of here, tonight. There's a bunch of hotheads, egged on by the men who were at the S-In-A-Box this afternoon, and they're all oiled up to do some lynching!"

Big John snorted again, his mustaches quivering with rage. "Halsey . . ."

"Halsey don't give a damn!" Moses interjected. "Just him and his two deputies against twenty-thirty men? He won't worry too much about it."

BoJo's mind worked swiftly. "Anyone



Sagebrush Sam Says:

A heap of fellers think they're so important that all they got to do is spit twice to stop a drought.

the doorjamb pistol party at timberline camp."

"Makes sense," Big John admitted. "But who? Who could want Spade that bad? Or, for that matter, the little bit of color Buckeye might stumble over back in the hills. Sim Smalley and I both worked those hills over thirty years ago. There's nothing in 'em but rock lizards and bob cats."

"Sure of that?" BoJo insisted.

"Sure, I'm sure," Big John snorted. "Ain't a cowman in the basin that ain't spent months on end in the Arrowheads and none of 'em ever found gold trace. It ain't gold, BoJo."

"Can't be but one thing, Dad. Someone wants the Spade bad enough to kill anyone that stands in his way. Could be Halsey, could be Buckeye, maybe some of the Spade riders. Hell, even Doc Warford."

BoJo whirled at the quick shuffle of booted feet. "Moses! I told you . . ."

"I know what you told me, BoJo." Moses Luck spat in the darkness. "But, listen.

see you come down here, Moses?"

"Don't reckon."

"Get back in the alley and bring the horses. Cross the street up aways and come down behind the jail."

But Moses was gone, his feet silent in the thick dust of the street. From the liar's bench, the murmur of voices grew louder and someone shouted.

BoJo then understood the strategy behind the day's activities. The raid against the Spade had been a token raid, designed to draw off Spade power, hold it in the S-In-A-Box valley until mob sentiment had been thoroughly aroused in Basin. There were a chosen few, a nucleus of violence that had been earmarked to spearhead the attack. All a lynch party needed was ten men, and twenty more would follow and help in the excitement and mass hatreds of the moment. Whoever had engineered the affair, however, had missed on one count. Assuming that BoJo and Moses and the balance of the Spade riders would spend the night round-

ing up the dispersed herd had been a mistake.

"Sim Smalley," Big John said slowly, "is somewhat nearer a saint now than he ever was alive. That mob has him built up into the greatest man that ever lived."

"We'll get you out of here."

"BoJo," Big John gripped the bars of the window and brought his face close, "don't try to buck Halsey. Remember them guns of his and the way he uses them. Anyway, break me out of here and you're on the wrong side of the law, BoJo, 'cause Halsey is the law."

"And the law will let a man get lynched?" BoJo said fiercely. He was holding his Colt in one hand, checking the loads. Should they succeed in releasing Big John, Spade would be on the dodge. What of it? There were a thousand places in the Arrowheads where a dozen men could hide forever. Hidden valleys where the water ran clear and cold from underground springs, where rabbit, partridge and squirrel had not learned to be afraid of man.

Yet, from the wrong side of the law, could Spade ever fight back?

CHAPTER VI

Jail Break

LISTENING for the touch of a horse's hoof against ground, the sign that Moses Luck had returned, BoJo found himself again thinking in a circle. If only Buckeye would come out of it. The old prospector had something to tell them; his few incoherent words had been proof of that. Something about a gun. What gun? The North and Couch pistol? The Navy Colt that now rested in BoJo's saddlebag? Or was there still another gun that figured in this weird puzzle?

"BoJo, back here!" Moses Luck peered around the corner of the jail, his eyes going instinctively toward the knot of men upstreet. "They're getting ugly, BoJo.

Drunk ugly. Won't be long."

"See Halsey?"

"Him." Moses' tone was deprecatory. "He won't show up till it's all over."

BoJo slipped away from the cell window, fingers tearing at the tie of his rope. "Moses, you get out of here. Get back to Spade on one of Warford's horses. We'll need you later and no one must remember seeing you in Basin tonight. I'll handle this end."

"How? Look, man—"

"Get away from here!" BoJo heard Moses' disgusted grunt and knew that the old *segundo* had counted heavily upon being in the fracas.

"Dad! Here!" BoJo tossed the coiled end of his rope toward the barred window. "We'll only take out a couple, just enough so you can squeeze through. When I yank the bars, get through and drop. The horse will be under the window."

There was no sound from Big John. His thick fingers, fingers that had tied the pigging strings on many a yearling, caught and knotted the stout lariat around the bottom of his cell bars. BoJo took a dally around his horn and kned the big bay into a walk. Feeling the tightening rope, the well-trained horse put his shoulder to the task and heaved. Taut rope sang in the quiet, there was a slight grating as bars shifted in concrete.

BoJo backed his gelding. It would take a quick, hard pull, a noisy pull. Should the first pass fail to take out the bars, all of this end of Basin would be alerted. Well, no help for that.

"Get ready," he said softly, not turning his head, and drove his spurs into the bay's flanks.

The rope whipped and there was a crashing sound as if the whole side of the jail had been ripped from the foundation. At the same instant a warning gun was fired from upstreet, BoJo heard the slap of leather and knew that Big John was upsaddle. With a whoop, Big John reached his side and took the proffered Peacemaker BoJo held out for him.

"Ride, Spade!"

It was Big John's battle cry. There was

an angry shout from the mob in front of the darkened general store as Big John's leathery lungs split the night.

"Ride, Spade!"

Hooves thundered, punctuating the rattle of short guns as Big John and BoJo split the dust of the main street, driving south directly through the running mob. Then, for furious seconds, all sanity was lost in the red haze of the fight.

A hand caught BoJo's leg and he cut downward with the barrel of his sixgun, felt the steel crunch into bone. The hand relaxed and the hold was gone. A shotgun thundered from the walk and the charge passed across BoJo's chest, a few of the shot creasing the skin. He was unaware of the sting. Flipping his Colt into action, he saw the shotgun pitch into the street, followed by the stumbling figure of a man.

Another gun opened up, this one quartering from the corner of the saloon, and BoJo knew that despite orders Moses Luck was buying a hand in the game. He was conscious of a warm regard for the oldster, coupled with his anger. There was no use in all of Spade being involved. Yet, on second thought, were they all not involved in the beginning? For the picture began to take pattern now and BoJo, looking back down the dim trail of the years, could see the start. Then, later, plans had been laid that grew and became more involved until the man who had first prompted the evil dream was dead of his own responsibility.

There was no way of proving it yet, but Sim Smalley was the cause of his own death.

THE DAWN found Big John and BoJo far from Spade, deep in the fastness of the Arrowheads. There had been a desultory pursuit, in the first half-hour following the jail break, but BoJo knew that no serious attempt would be made during darkness. Halsey, if Halsey were indeed interested in pursuing the fugitives, would be content to make a day trail of it, cold-tracking slowly, knowing that there was no place beyond the mountains for his

quarry to go.

"Hold up," Big John said. "Either we'll have to light and walk a while or they'll have to pry me out of the saddle with a elm pole."

BoJo ground-tied his bay and allowed the animal to graze along a seep of clear water. He spread his fingers under his head and watched the sunlight play through the sparse limbs of a new pine. After the first disturbance of their arrival had passed, a squirrel came inquisitively around the trunk of a black oak and Big John knocked him in the head with a rock.

"Forty years ago," he said, "everything we ate we got this way. That basin where the Spade is was so full of buffalo in the fall of the year that, one time, we branded for three days before we found that we hadn't branded a single steer. But buffalo for three generations wore the pip on their flank."

BoJo grinned and relaxed. Should pursuit ensue, the chatter of the crows in the valley behind them would serve as ample warning.

Suddenly BoJo sat upright. "Dad, did you ever stop to think that Sim Smalley might be alive?"

"You crazy, son?" Big John was coaxing a tiny fire from dry twigs and had spitted the squirrel on a green willow shoot.

"We've been too busy to see him buried. All I know is that Warford is supposed to have seen him. Doc told me about the bullet holes in his head."

BoJo paused, lost in a new train of thought. Big John said indulgently, "Trouble with a college education, son, is that it puts too much spirit in your imagination. Smalley is dead. Doc wouldn't lie about it."

"Maybe," BoJo replied. "Maybe not." He closed his eyes and Big John slowly shook his shaggy head. Boy was young, yet, full of the nonsense of books. Let him ripen; let the sun of the basin drive the foolishness out of his head and strength into his muscles.

But BoJo was talking, almost to himself: "Smalley was first, Dad. He hated you and hating, all those years, ate into

him. But all through that time Smalley didn't see any way of getting the best of you. Spade was too big, too strong. And the more Smalley hated, the bigger Spade grew. Until . . ."

He stopped talking, carrying his thoughts in his own mind, working his way through the tortuous threads of the maze.

Then a man named Halsey had come along and stepped into the middle of a situation that must have been made to order for him. Seeing his opportunity, Halsey had worked on Sim Smalley, playing on the man's hatred of the Spade. Some way, somehow, Doc Warford had been infected with the desire for power, too.

There was the plan, then. Using Sim Smalley as a wedge, the power of the Spade could be broken by the death of Big John. What would be more plausible than Big John's guilt, should Smalley be reported dead?

Let Smalley die, then, if only in fancy. Die with his head blasted to a pulp by the killing thunder of the doorjamb pistol. For, by using that odd weapon, the crime could be laid directly at Big John's door. His ownership of the North and Couch was common knowledge. Chances were rare that there would be another such gun in the Sugar Basin country.

BoJo rolled over, digging his elbows angrily into the sod. If Sim Smalley were in on the scheme, it would all be simple. It would account for Halsey's having the note signed by Big John.

But it didn't explain the Navy Colt that had been so well hidden in the ranch house at the S-In-A-Box. . . .

Disgustedly, BoJo wrinkled his nose. It was like trying to carry water in a lass rope.

"S'good," Big John said, "if you like squirrel."

"You eat it," BoJo said. "I'll make out."

"Not hungry?"

BoJo grinned, shelving for the moment his anxiety.

"I ate at Spade last night," he said, "before Moses and I came into town.

Besides that, I filled one of my saddlebags with biscuits and bacon."

DARN you!" Big John threw a bone in BoJo's general direction. BoJo expertly dodged the missile and went to forage in his saddlebags. When he came back, he was holding a sack in one hand and in the other the oilpaper-wrapped Navy Colt.

Big John looked up in interest. "What you got, BoJo?"

"That .36 Colt. Just wondering why it was buried in the first place." BoJo paused, a speculative look in his gray eyes. "Unless it was to cover the fact that a small-bore was ever in this neck of the woods. Everyone around here uses Peacemakers and Frontier Models, heavy calibers. None of them would be caught dead with this sea-going lead-squirter."

"Lady's gun," Big John said disgustedly. "Hide it before someone sees it and my reputation is ruined."

BoJo stood, looking down at him. "For the life of me," he said belligerently, "I can't figure. You got your neck in a noose and everyone in the basin, seems like, is ready to help Halsey tighten the rope. Do you worry about it? You set around like a Digger on a manure heap, throw bones and make jokes. Darn it, Big John, you got me worried."

Big John's hard eyes softened and a muscle twitched at the corner of his mouth. "BoJo," he began. "BoJo."

"You're trying to chew some words. Spit them out."

"Well," Big John got to his feet and BoJo saw that he was looking back over the hills as if, by trying, he could see the vast holdings of the Spade. "I learned a long time ago, son, that worry is just rust on the sharp edge of your knife. Worry less and do more. For forty years, I've been building something out there in the basin of the Sugar. Son, I don't rightly know what it was, some kind of urge, I guess, that wouldn't let me rest until I had as much to offer you as I could gather."

He paused, lowered his head, and there

was something in the slump of his shoulders that reminded BoJo of a stag that he had once seen at bay, weary from the continued snapping of the hounds at his heels.

"All I gathered around me," Big John said finally, "was more to worry about. More to lay awake at night, scheming out some way of gathering still more. I wonder if, when I give you Spade, if I'll really give you anything. Or will I be taking something away?"

There was no answer, and BoJo knew that Big John expected none.

Big John rose then and went to his horse. "Time to move on," he said. BoJo followed, his almost carefree moment gone. Moving, ever moving, away from one kind of men at their heels, toward more of the same nature in the valleys and years ahead. True, with power came trouble and sometimes the trouble was greater than the power.

Big John topped a rise, pulled his horse into a clump of scrub. "Sign," he said, pointing downward. A horse had stepped into the soft ground near a seep and the indentation was only now filling with



water. After the first quick search of the hillside, BoJo was on his knees. "Spade horse," he said. "Recognize the shoes."

Big John grunted. "Spade horse don't mean Spade rider. Halsey is smart. Go slow."

They worked their way into the bottom of the defile, leading their horses. With the presence of another human being, the original threat and insecurity returned.

This was what the years could be like, BoJo reflected grimly, always running, eyes on the trail, hand on gun-butt. He shook his head, dropping his sombrero to his neck. This was the thinking of an old woman; Spade would win.

CHAPTER VII

Unwelcome Meeting

HOLDING his Colt in his hand, BoJo wormed his way through the screening thicket to the top of the hill. Down the slope, the cedar and scrub oak lay like a carpet under the noon sun. A crow wheeled from a lightning-blasted hickory and, cawing dismally, flew down-valley. A sumac shook, quivered again, and was still.

Breathing deeply, BoJo caught the scent of the mountain violets that sought the shady places beneath his feet. The earth smelled warm and rich; there was the tang of pine and the hay-like pungency of the drying grass.

A twig snapped.

Instantly BoJo was alert, sixgun covering the thicket before him. A long moment spun itself away and the hillside was quiet in the sunshine. BoJo moved forward slowly, conscious of the fact that Big John was behind him, saddle gun alert as Spade covered Spade.

It could have been for the space of a heartbeat, it could have been an eternity that BoJo stood there, waiting for death to come out of the clump of underbrush. For a rider had crossed their path, and the seeping water gave evidence that it had been only minutes before. Now, a man and a horse were hidden, perhaps behind the next clump, perhaps making their way over the next hill. An innocent rider or a man with the desire to kill deep within him.

Which?

BoJo knew that there was only one way an answer could be had; he snapped a shot into the thicket and went to his knee, Colt again on the ready.

"Hold your fire, Spade, I'm wearing your brand." Moses Luck peered through the parted bushes, jaws working rhythmically.

BoJo sat down weakly, waited for Moses

to lead his horse from its place of concealment. "You could get yourself shot," he said.

"Chance," Moses agreed. "But I was on to you when you cut my sign, only I didn't know who it was. Thought I'd better sit a spell an' wait. Been looking for you since sunup, lost your sign two-three miles back and was circling to pick it up again."

"Let's move on," Big John spoke up. "What you did that bunch from Basin can do as well."

"Agreed," Moses replied. "Only I got news. When I left Doc's last night, Buckeye was still goofy as a headless chicken. After you and BoJo made a clear get-away, I went back to check up."

He paused, spat reflectively at a rock. Doc heard the gunfire and left his house," Moses went on, and for a spell was busy patching busted heads. Well, when he got back, Buckeye was gone!"

BoJo asked, "Walk away, or was he taken?"

"Don't know." Moses eyed the surrounding hills with suspicion. "Only thing is, if Buckeye knew anything he was fixing to tell us, he'll have a hell of a time doing it now!"

FOLLOWING BoJo's reasoning, the three of them had decided that if Buckeye were being held prisoner a logical place would be at Sim Smalley's timberline camp. There was the possibility, too, that Buckeye had come to during the gunplay in Basin, and had simply wandered off in delirium and might, even now, be back at Warford's.

There was the additional possibility that Buckeye's leaving Warford's, providing he had not left in a moment of unbalance, was another play designed to draw Big John and BoJo into a trap.

Halsey was definitely involved in the plotting against the Spade, of that BoJo was sure. Regardless of who had done the original planning, Halsey was working along the same line, that of breaking the power of Spade. If Sim Smalley was dead, as Halsey had claimed, then

another might be involved. But, if the whole Smalley affair had been a sham, a trick of the left hand while the right was busy with something else. . . .

"Take it easy," Moses said quietly. "We got to look this thing over good. There might be a dozen guns covering that timberline clearing."

"Makes sense," Big John agreed and BoJo found himself wondering anew at the drive that kept the old man going. Despite his years, he was as fresh in the saddle as a youngster. While BoJo's shoulders and legs were shrieking with weariness, Big John appeared to suffer not at all. It was then that BoJo realized that there were two years out of his life. The time he had spent in the east had sapped his range-bred strength.

He moved slowly, easing a cramp from his legs and wiping his dust-stained face upon the sleeve of his checked shirt. He was a few steps ahead of Big John, Moses bringing up the rear, and BoJo dropped back.

"Over the next rise, to the left."

Through the screening trees they could see the bald side of the slope that marked timberline. Somewhere near, perhaps within earshot, was Sim Smalley's cabin.

BoJo slipped off-saddle and ground-hitched his bay, listening as Big John clumped to the earth behind him. Moses Luck came up, still leading his own sorrel. "We'll walk from here," BoJo said. "Spread out. If it's a trap, break and run for it."

Big John grunted and pulled his Winchester from its boot. Moses was cutting a fresh chew from his plug, stuffing his cheek. "If'n it's my number that shows on the book," he said wryly, "I want to walk up them stairs with a full jaw." With a broad thumb he punched fresh shells into his Colt, spun the gate shut.

Fanning out, twenty feet between each of them, BoJo, Big John and Moses worked up the rise that separated them from the cabin. BoJo went to his belly just behind the last screening brush and wormed his way upward. To his left he could hear Big John grunt as the Spade

owner followed suit. BoJo saw Moses' wrinkled face once as the old man crossed a tiny clearing. Then he was gone.

The spot in which the cabin sat was quiet and a yellow-winged butterfly worked busily above a flowering bush. A lizard ran from the knee-high bramble and stopped, regarding BoJo with tar-black eyes. BoJo stood up. A rock lizard would not go for hours where a man had walked.

KNOWING that Big John and Moses were covering him with saddle guns, BoJo walked to a spot within forty feet of the cabin. The door still hung drunkenly ajar, just as it had on his last visit here and the shutter at the window was still open.

"All quiet," he said, and Moses and Big John worked their way down the slope behind him. BoJo stepped to the door of the cabin and took a searching glance inside. Everything was as before, except that the fresh-scraped spot on the earthen floor had dried to the same color as the rest of the dirt. BoJo pointed out the spot to Moses, adding: "Made me wonder if Sim was really dead. Could be that the dirt was disturbed to conceal the fact that there *wasn't* any blood there."

Moses looked at him but said nothing. Big John said disgustedly, "We're no nearer the answer than we was ten miles ago. Where do we ride from here?"

BoJo looked at him, then at the slanting sun. "To the Spade," he replied, "when sundown covers us. Could be some of the boys have heard something."

"Kinda risky, that," was Moses' opinion.

"Breathing's risky," Big John grunted, absently feeling in his shirt pocket for his pipe, then watching mournfully as BoJo built a cigarette.

They rode slowly down the canyons that led to the basin of Sugar Creek, for they still had two hours to kill before sundown. It was a quiet trip, for each of them was occupied with his own thoughts. BoJo found his mind again worrying

around the edge of the problem, questioning and answering, knowing that the answers didn't satisfy him. Much of the pattern was plain. It was now becoming clearer that, as were most vicious things, the attack on Spade had sprung from a relatively unimportant beginning.

The first shot fired in Sugar basin had started it. It had been, BoJo was beginning to realize, the result of a petty anger. But, once down, the sound of the blast had echoed and re-echoed until the single explosion had become a fusillade.

Dusk covered the trio as they crossed the Sugar, horse kicking icy water high into the air. BoJo's gelding, as though realizing the nearness of home, hastened his pace and BoJo was obliged to hold him back. A half-mile from Spade, they slipped from saddle and walked on, leading their mounts. The sun was gone now, and no moon had risen although a faint flush above the mountains told BoJo that they had only about an hour of complete darkness left.

A quarter of a mile from the ranch house, BoJo looped his reins about the horn and slapped his bay upon the flank. The animal, smelling the presence of the familiar corral, broke into a canter toward the dark hulk of the barn.

MOMENTS later they heard him nosing at the corral gate and BoJo relaxed. "All quiet," he said finally. "If a trap had been set, I think a horse cantering up would spring it. We'll walk in, though. Anyone shooting will aim for a man on a horse."

"Moses said, 'Maybe.'"

Moses Luck was definitely not an optimist.

BoJo reached the corral fence, listened to the contented snuffle of the horses inside. There was no light in any of the Spade buildings, but that might be easily explained. All of the crew might be out at the bed-down for, in Big John's absence, the Spade riders would follow to the letter his last orders. Or, more reasonably, the night crew was already out and the day riders sacked in. They were

working twelve-hour shifts, and, range-hardened though they were, a day in the saddle could be fatiguing exercise.

BoJo walked easily toward the house, keeping his knees flexed, his boots silent in the dust. It was only moments until moonlight now, and the glazed windows of the ranch house looked back at him like the eyes of a dead man.

An unfamiliar odor reached BoJo's nostrils and he paused to analyze it. Then, shaking his head at the faintly sickening, sweetish smell, he stepped forward and struck something yielding. His high-heeled boot turned, wrenching his ankle, and he went to his knees, feeling with spread tense fingers on the ground before him.

At that moment the moon broke over the Arrowheads and BoJo knew the reason for the tint in the clean night breeze. A dark pool spread on the hard earth before him, an irregular circle from the body of the dead man.

"It's Buckeye," BoJo said quietly, "and he won't tell us anything, ever, it appears to me."

Moses muttered an excited grunt and knelt beside BoJo. "In the back," he said.

"Yeah." BoJo rocked back on his heels, giving an experimental pat to the dead man's hip pockets. There was something hard and round in one of them, not unlike the bulges tiny pebbles might make. BoJo probed with his fingers and something rolled into his palm.

"Golly!" Moses said. "There's three holes in him, BoJo. And you could cover all of them with a dollar!"

BoJo was grinning, but the mask of his face resembled the grimace of death. His eyes glinted dully in the moonlight. "That's all we need to know," he said. He walked to his head-dropped bay and felt in the saddlebag.

"You don't make much sense," Big John interjected.

"Not yet," BoJo said, grimly. "But we won't have to go far now to find the man behind all this."

"Halsey?" Moses muttered.

"Did I hear someone call my name?"

Halsey stood in the shadowy entry to the carriage shed, the moonlight reflecting from the six-pointed star upon his shirt. Without being able to see, BoJo realized that the deputies were behind him, backing his play. A sixgun barrel moved out of the darkness, waving suggestively.

BoJo backed away, hoping that neither Big John or Moses would start the play. For under the cover of gloom, Halsey and his deputies could make short work of any attempted gunplay.

"KINDA thought," Halsey said softly, "that you'd be back."

Big John began a growl deep in his throat, but BoJo silenced him with a shake of his head.

"Play it smart," Halsey advised, moving quietly into the open yard. "Get your horses, all three of you. After you pile your guns." He waited patiently as BoJo, Moses and Big John piled their Colts in the yard.

"Sig," Halsey motioned with his hand, "get the saddle guns." Sig Hollister slouched over to the three standing horses and pulled Winchesters from scabbards, pitching them, barrel foremost, over the corral fence.

"All right," Halsey said. "Get aboard."

Sig Hollister chuckled, and it was the hollow mirth of death. "All three of them going in?" he asked.

"Starting in," Halsey corrected. "Big John's got a date in town. The other two will be killed trying to help him resist arrest."

"How long do you think your hand will last, Halsey?" BoJo swung into his saddle, hoping that the sheriff would not see the Navy Colt he had thrust in the hip pocket of his pants.

"Long enough," Halsey replied grimly. "This wasn't my idea, to begin with. But it looks good now and I think I'll play it out. Sig, go get the other prisoner."

BoJo waited in amazement as Sig led a bound man from the depths of the carriage shed. Dr. Peter Warford was tightly wrapped, from waist to shoulders, with a rope.

CHAPTER VIII

Ride, Spade!

NOW that it might be too late, BoJo had the key to the entire puzzle secure in his back pocket. He could almost visualize the original planning and the point where that planning had gone wrong. For Sim Smalley had started it all many years ago when disappointment had first begun to turn to hatred. What had ended in Sugar Basin, had begun in Independence in the days of the long trails and the moving herds. A girl had fallen in love with a man and it had all become as the seed from a maple that the wind carries to the warm earth.

Sim Smalley's disappointment had snowballed and now the man was dead because of it. For BoJo had no doubt now that the S-In-A-Box owner had been dead from the beginning. But the North and Couch pistol, the threatening weapon that had left its imprint of fear, was guiltless. Still, without being fired, it had served its purpose and the result was just as deadly. BoJo shifted his weight and the Navy Colt, hidden in his hip pocket was a hard lump against him.

Halsey rode ahead, confidence in the sway of his broad back, Sig and the other deputy bringing up the rear, Moses, BoJo and Big John strung out in a line between.

They recrossed the Sugar and the hoof-kicked water was silver in the moonlight. Gravel gritted as the horses made the crossing; all was quiet again as they struck the loam of the high bank. It reminded BoJo of a bothersome point.

"Dad."

"Yeah?"

"Did you really ride south that morning when you left the Spade? Was Buckeye telling the truth about the bogged cow?"

Sheriff Halsey laughed grimly. "He thought he was," he said. "I passed him

south of Spade and told him to hightail it to Big John and tell him a pip-marked cow was down. He believed me."

"Why, Halsey?"

"Won't hurt none now, I reckon. I had an errand at the Spade."

BoJo interjected softly, "To pick up the North and Couch pistol?"

Halsey laughed and lapsed into silence. So, BoJo reflected, that was it. Big John had been sent on a fool's errand. Most of the Spade riders could be counted on to have begun their day's work. A man took a slight chance under those conditions. BoJo glanced back, caught sight of Warford's bound form, riding between Hollister and Clete Rangle, Halsey's other deputy. Where did Doc figure in? Why had Halsey held him prisoner? Because of Warford's attempt at helping Buckeye?

At the thought of the old prospector, BoJo was again saddened. The kindly man had seen something, of that BoJo was sure. He had seen something and had brought away the proof in his own pocket, spare ammunition for a .36 caliber Navy Colt.

Instantly, BoJo bent over, throwing his arm across his stomach. Halsey, looking back, reined in suspiciously.

"Just a bellyache," BoJo said, straightening again.

Relaxing, Halsey turned and continued uptrail toward Basin, and BoJo, still bending over the saddle from time to time, knew that the play must be made soon. Not much farther along the way to Basin, Halsey would stage his own interpretation of this ending of the drama.

BoJo kept on, alternately bending over, as if in the grip of pain, then relaxing, until the movement caused no suspicion. Any moment now. . .

WORKING swiftly, fingers uncertain in the darkness, he loaded the gun. Then, raising his head, he looked at Halsey's back and began to chuckle.

The sheriff looked around, puzzled, but made no move to ride closer to BoJo. Big John, just behind, looked at BoJo for a sign but received nothing but the shake

of the head. He relaxed in the saddle, confident that, whatever the plan behind BoJo's strange behavior, he and Moses would have ample warning of action.

"*Ride, Spade!*" The shout came from the rim of a low hill that followed the trail and instantly BoJo kicked his bay into motion. He knew that Moses and Big John were spurring out of the line of fire, even as sixguns began to wink from behind the screening brush.

Fire lanced the night as Halsey and Hollister, immediately followed by Rangle, got their Colts in action, answering the fusillade from the trailside. Hot lead zipped by BoJo's ear, and in an instant of stress, he almost pulled trigger on the Navy Colt.

"*Ride, Spade!*"

It was Shorty's high-pitched cry and, followed by Fiddlefoot and the Spade riders, he came over the brow of the rise, low in the saddle. From behind him came the throaty bark of a saddle gun and BoJo knew that someone was covering.

Even as he rode to safety and turned to see Halsey's men riding hard toward Basin, BoJo heard the hoarse scream and saw Warford, still bound, reel from the saddle.

BoJo slipped saddle and was beside the old doctor, holding his head from the dust.

"It was a good idea," Warford said, the blood welling in his throat, "and it would have paid for the years of living in this hole in the world." He coughed and his shirt-front was covered with crimson. "Damn Halsey," he said, and died.

"What now?" Big John wanted to know.

"On into Basin," BoJo replied grimly, brushing the trail dirt from his knees. "Time to clean up the mess."

"Warford was in it, too?" Moses Luck was again sawing away at his plug of tobacco.

BoJo nodded. "Afterward," he replied. "You see, three men had the same idea and it might have been a good one. But like the thieves you read about in the book, they fell out."

Big John shook his head. "Only Halsey is left?"

BoJo nodded. "Halsey and Sig Hollister and Rangle. The last two will quit when Halsey does. Shorty!"

"Yeah, BoJo?"

"Send one man back after the buggy. We have to get Warford's body back to town. The rest of us will ride along slow until he catches us. We'll hit Basin together."

"Ride, Spade?" Big John queried softly and there was the light of pride in his eyes.

"Ride, Spade!" BoJo replied quietly.

THE lights of Basin were strung out before them and BoJo, riding ahead, motioned for a halt. Behind him were Big John, Moses, Shorty, Fiddlefoot and two more Spade riders. A small group to go against the eight or ten that Halsey might muster.

"Any plan?" Big John's voice was casual. Secretly, he was proud of his son and of the range that had been bred into him. The Spade was part of his life, part of the lives of all of them, and Big John was aware that BoJo had done much to prevent the loss of the empire.

Now that BoJo had carried the battle thus far, Big John was prepared to relinquish the reins of Spade to him altogether. For the knowledge of the East, plus the hardness of the West, had made a man of this son of Spade.

"Down the main street," BoJo said. "I'll lead. Moses, you cover my back, and the rest of you ride flank. Halsey will be at the jail and, in my mind, will try to run the bluff out. Because, as far as we know, very few people in Basin know the truth and he thinks he can count on them if the play gets hot." BoJo shrugged. "Maybe he can. That's the chance we take."

He prodded his tired bay into life and rode through the first fan of lamplight that bathed the street. The town was silent, as the high grass is quiet just before the first touching breath of the storm. It was an eerie hush that covered the

dull footfalls of the horses like a smothering blanket.

The saloon was lighted, but only silence spread from under the batwing doors. A dog canted into the street and paused, ears lifted, then, with a desultory bark, vanished into an alley. Almost beside BoJo, Moses and Big John rode, faces grim, hands on sixgun butts.

It was showdown time, and win, lose or draw, the Spade would go down fighting.

CHAPTER IX

Showdown

SHERIFF HALSEY stood arrogantly in the fanlight from the open front door of the jail. His hawk-like hands were hooked in his gunbelt. Behind him, indolently leaning against the doorjamb, was Sig Hollister.

"Hello, Spade," Halsey said quietly.

"This is it, Halsey," BoJo replied just as calmly, and sat his bay regarding the sheriff.

"Yes." Halsey looked about him and BoJo was aware that the square was filling with men and women. Halsey said, "This is the judge and jury, Spade. They'll decide whether Big John killed Smalley or not. And after they decide, they'll hang him, *tonight!*"

His voice cracked flatly and there was an answering murmur from the gathering knots of men. A woman walked from a house farther down the block, looked curiously in their direction. Then, her eyes gleaming with fear, she backed again through the doorway, and the yellow light that had revealed her was gone.

BoJo stirred restlessly in the saddle, his mind racing along the twisting trail of the deceit of men like Smalley, Warford and Halsey and realized that, even now, the burden of proof rested upon Spade.

"We've beaten you once tonight," BoJo

began evenly. "When Buckeye was shot, and for no reason because he was probably dying anyway, the Spade riders at the bed-down heard the pistol talk. But they rode in slow, in time to catch your play at the corral. That's the reason they passed us on the Basin trail and set a trap."

Halsey laughed. "And they fired upon an officer of the law who was executing his duty. What about that, Spade?"

"I'll go back to the beginning," BoJo said, aware of the enmity that rose like a cloud from the listening knot of townspeople. It would take straight guessing and good talking to sway them from their present opinion. In their minds, Big John had killed Sim Smalley in a moment of overpowering irritation. But, instead of the stand-up and shoot-out gun battle that they would have preferred, Big John was guilty, in their minds, of a more serious crime. He had set a trap for a fellow man, a trap against which there was no defense.

"A good many years ago," BoJo said, his eyes upon the faces around him, "Sim Smalley and Big John Spade came to the end of their friendship. No reason, now, to tell why; some of you know, anyway. But it's easy to hate and Sim Smalley was eager to hate the man who had beat him in a fair game. . . ."

He paused, swallowed, realizing that many of his words were falling on deaf ears. Halsey stood quietly, a mocking light in his eyes. Behind him, Sig, now joined by Clete Rangle, watched warily.

BoJo continued. "Sim Smalley first had the idea of revenge and he talked it over with another man who was dissatisfied with the kind of a life he had. Doc Warford. Warford came here from the East, not because he wanted to, but because he had to.

"He admitted as much, in talking to me. At the time, I didn't catch his drift but now I can see it. He said, 'before I lost my mind and came out here,' and went on to tell a yarn about some man who had killed himself with a doorjamb pistol. Only, I'll bet that somehow Warford figured in that, too. We'll never know."

"Doing a lot of guessing, Spade," Halsey said mockingly. "Make it good, you'll only tell it once."

"You should know it's true, Halsey," BoJo retorted. "It was Warford who got in touch with you and was the reason you came out here. Because he and Smalley realized that, to break the Spade, they'd have to have help. And you had quite a reputation with your guns. In fact, it's been said that you can place three shots so close they can be covered by a silver dollar. How many of you have heard that?"

AN ASSENTING murmur arose from the people standing close to the jail, but no further encouragement.

BoJo said, "Buckeye Pope, and he's in a buggy not a hundred feet from here, has three bullet holes in his back. Someone take a look."

There was an excited bustle and a man called, "S'truth, so help me. The slugs almost hit the same place."

"But I didn't do that," Halsey shouted and BoJo nodded his head. "No," he agreed. "Warford did. It was easy to do. Buckeye was still unconscious and all he had to do was stand close and take his time. Anyone can put three shots that close together if they aren't rushed."

"We've listened to his yarn," Halsey said loudly. "Do we have to hear any more?" Sig Hollister moved forward impatiently and BoJo saw that he held a length of new rope in his hands. BoJo shook his head, giving sign to the Spade to sit easy in the saddle and ride it out.

"Warford took Buckeye to Spade," he continued, "and shot him. *Because he wanted to have you, Halsey, blamed for it.* Because, after he was in this thing so deep he couldn't back out, he realized that you had killed Smalley and would eventually kill him!"

"Another lie, Spade!" But Halsey's voice was growing thin and BoJo could see that the sheriff was laboring under a tremendous strain.

"No lie, Halsey. Your claim is that Smalley was killed by three shots, fired

at once from a North and Couch door-jamb pistol? "

"That's right. And Big John Spade—"

"A .31 caliber North and Couch?"

Halsey lowered his voice. "Sure, a .31. The one you gave your own father!"

"Then," BoJo said quietly, but aware that his voice carried to the extreme edge of the crowd, "any objections to some of these people seeing Smalley's body? We can get another doctor, one who won't lie for you, Halsey. Let him probe for the bullets and check the caliber. Are you willing?"

Halsey tilted back his head and BoJo found the time to marvel at the man's complete assurance. "Sure," Halsey said again. "If any of them want to."

"They'll want to," BoJo replied shortly, his eyes passing swiftly from Big John to Moses and then to the rest of the Spade. Big John was poised, Moses was imper-turbably chewing his cud. They were ready.

"Everyone thought," BoJo spoke softly, "that Smalley was killed with the North and Couch because the bullet holes were so close spaced and so small. Because no one around here knows of the existence of another small-caliber gun. But I do."

HOLDING out his hand, he cradled the Navy Colt, letting the lamplight play on its barrel. "Recognize this, Halsey? It's a .36 caliber Colt, the only one I ever saw in this country. It's the gun that killed Smalley!"

BoJo was conscious of the fact that Halsey's eyes were fastened unwinkingly upon his. The sheriff's face still wore its sardonic smile, but something animal crouched beneath the surface. Then the smile broadened and BoJo allowed the small gun to slip across his palm until his finger rested close to the trigger guard. As Halsey broke and went for his twin Peacemakers, BoJo shot him once, squarely between the eyes.

Instantly the square was in pandemonium. Those of the crowd who had had time to reason and had no stomach for the fight faded into convenient doorways.

BoJo was aware of the Spade battle cry and saw Sig Hollister take a faltering step onto the porch in front of the jail. With his guns in his hands, the right bower of Halsey went to his death.

But Clete Rangle was gone, long legs carrying him into the safety of the jail. Over the lowering gunfire, BoJo could hear the clump of his boots. Grabbing a saddle Winchester from Moses' outstretched hand, BoJo was off horse and running, cutting around the corner of the jail. But as fast as he was, Rangle was even faster, and by the time BoJo reached the narrow gateway that led to the exercise yard, Rangle had swung the iron barrier shut and was secure out of the line of fire.

A Winchester slug struck brick, driving a spray of dust into BoJo's eyes as he came to a sliding halt.

"You may as well come out, Rangle," he called.

"Go to hell!" The gunman's voice was a snarl, not unlike the cough of an angry cat. "I'll stay in here until I starve, Spade. Long enough to take some of you with me."

BoJo stood there panting, thinking over the situation, as Moses Luck came up. "Let me go in, BoJo, I can't live forever, anyways."

"No, Moses."

Big John joined them. "If anyone needed any proof," he said, "Halsey's play gave it to them. Only thing, why didn't he bluff it through?"

"Man can only stand so much," BoJo replied. "Remember, he'd been going through a strain, too. First, he and Smalley fell out and Halsey had to kill the S-In-A-Box owner. Then he worked you into the frame, using Warford as a prop. But Doc was making plans of his own. As soon as we got out of town, he took Buckeye out to Spade and shot him, thinking that he could throw the blame on Halsey. All in all, it was a complete fall-out and all of them lost."

"Except Rangle," Moses interjected drily.

"He will, too," BoJo replied. "If you've

got a bear in a hole, you let the dogs run him out, don't you?"

"What you thinking, BoJo?"

"Clete Rangle's coming out because I'm going in after him. . ."

"You're an idiot."

Moses chuckled. "Maybe not, if there's a plan."

BoJo laughed grimly. "There is. Moses, get some of the Spade riders and work up on the roofs of the store and the saloon. You can't see down into the exercise yard, but you can get your fire inside the walls. Throw lead against the brick, try to keep Rangle dodging the bouncing slugs while I go over the gate."

"Will it work, Moses?" It was Big John's question.

"Sure, it'll work," Moses replied, but he had stopped chewing on his tobacco. Then he was gone, working his way back around the jail to where the Spade riders were waiting. Once, to kill the monotony, BoJo bounced a shot into the yard and was rewarded by an answering bellow from Rangle's rifle.

CHAPTER X

Home to Stay

IT SEEMED to him that Moses was taking years to get his men placed in the proper spots. BoJo was bone weary and hungry, and he wished, more than anything else, to go back to Spade and sleep for a week. But there was a part of the job still undone and something deep within him insisted that he, alone, must do it. There was an odd light in Big John's eyes as the old Spade owner watched his son. There was something of pride in the glance, and something of wonder.

"I thought of something," he said suddenly. "What was it Buckeye Pope saw that made him so dangerous to Halsey?"

"I think," BoJo said reflectively, "that he saw Smalley killed. Because, somehow, Buckeye managed to get the rest of

the ammunition for the Navy Colt. He had it in his pocket when he was killed at Spade and Warford didn't take the trouble to look for it. Buckeye lived in the hills, and could travel like an Indian. I think he saw the shooting and, after that, someone saw him. Anyway, he saw too much."

BoJo was silent for a long moment, thinking of Buckeye Pope.

"Spade didn't really do much to beat Halsey," he said, finally. "It was the three of them all plotting against each other."

His words were cut short by the heavy sound of firing from the rooftops. Moses and the Spade riders were laying a hail of lead into the walls of the exercise yard and BoJo knew he would have to move swifly before the covering Winchesters were empty.

With a long running leap, holding his own Colt in his one hand, he set his foot against the cross-member of the gate. As he swung up, lead struck the iron and splattered. As busy as Rangle was, he had enough time to aim and fire his Winchester.

BoJo climbed swiftly, empty hand reaching for the top of the gate. As his fingers touched the iron bar, a streak of fire touched his thigh and he almost fell. One of Rangle's slugs had nearly made a hit. He was astride the gate, looking into the yard. The firing from the roofs was diminishing. As he leaned, searching the last corner, the Winchester bellowed again and a slug tore across the iron rod to which BoJo held, stinging his fingers.

But he had Rangle in his sights and flipping the Colt into action, he fired once, then again.

"Hold!" It was Clete Rangle's coarse bellow. "Hold fire, Spade, I'm coming out." And Rangle, his hands in the air, crossed the exercise yard under the noses of Big John's guns as BoJo half-climbed, half-fell from the gate.

"It's washed up?" It was Moses Luck, below, who caught the stumbling BoJo.

"Yes," BoJo replied slowly. "It's all over."

BOJO, Big John and Moses Luck reined in. BoJo breathed deeply.

"You'll be going back?" Big John asked.

"East? To college?" BoJo laughed. "I thought that was settled for good. No, I'll never leave Spade."

"It's a good place to be," Big John answered quietly, "and a man can learn a lot here." He paused, pondered a moment. "Y'know, can't see why a man would want to tear up all this peace and quiet just to gain a little more land. Take Smalley. 'Course, he was grugged against me from the early days at Independence, but that wasn't all. He hated the Spade because it was so big, I guess.

"Then Warford, he was mad at himself, mostly." Big John continued watching Moses Luck as Moses took a fresh cut at the brown plug. "And Halsey. If he hadn't been so kill crazy . . . well."

Big John rode slowly away, not looking back until his sorrel topped a slight rise. Then, "You're the boss at Spade from now on, BoJo. I'm kinda tired. Think I'll take a rest."

He was gone, riding behind the trees that screened the bank of the Sugar. Moses made a move as if about to ride after him, but hand on bridle, BoJo stopped him. They sat their horses for a long moment, then BoJo reined his bay in the direction of the ranch house.

They recrossed the creek and the water made rainbows in the sun.

"Reckon he wants to talk to her," Moses said, "wants to tell her that Spade is all right."

BoJo looked toward the first gentle slope of the Arrowheads where his mother's grave overlooked Sugar basin.

"But," Moses Luck concluded, "I reckon she knows that anyways."

Another silence spun itself out and they neared the ranch house.

"Figured," Moses said at last, "that when you went to college you was ruined."

"Now?" BoJo Spade asked smiling.

"Now?" Moses Luck pondered. "Reckon I was wrong. Anything you want done today—boss?" And he spat at a rock, and missed.



Billy Hobbs had never gotten through that dark alley

Law of the GUN

By GEORGE KILRAIN

Tagged as a killer sheriff.

*Ed Brand had a tough row
to hoe in Carver City!*

SHERIFF ED BRAND of Carver City swung down the plank walk, his steps resounding hollowly through the empty night street. There was a scowl on his face as he moved past the store fronts, closed for the night. Two men here in town had sworn to kill him for something he had not done. The prospect was not pleasant.

Yesterday, he'd thought he'd found the place he'd been looking for all of his life. Twenty-four hours ago Carver City had been the town in which he wanted to live, and the girl in the lunchroom opposite the sheriff's office the girl with whom he'd wanted to spend his life.

Grimly Brand went over the past

twenty-four black hours, and the more he thought of them the less he liked them. He wished they could be erased the way a child erases words and numbers on a blackboard. They were over the bridge, however, but they could not be forgotten.

He'd come up from Texas looking for work a month ago and he'd found it. The citizens of Carver wanted a man unafraid; they wanted a sheriff who wouldn't hesitate to use his six-shooter when the occasion called for it. Now they thought he'd overdone the thing. They were calling him a "killer sheriff."

Billy Hobbs, youngest of the Hobbs boys from the Bar Q, was lying unconscious in the back room behind the barber shop. Young Hobbs had been shot through the body and Sheriff Brand had been accused of the shooting.

Billy had been drunk and the sheriff had laughingly urged him to call it a night and start back to the ranch. He'd hauled the puncher out the door and up an alley toward the livery stable.

Billy Hobbs had never got through that dark alley behind the Palace Saloon. There had been a single shot, then Sheriff Brand had been running out of the alley carrying Billy in his arms.

"He shot himself," the sheriff had said simply, and the residents of Carver City wondered. Ed Brand had come north with the reputation of a killer. He'd cleaned out Sprague and Twin Rivers, and Carver had hired him on his name.

"How'd it happen?" John Billings had asked coldly. Billings was the owner of the Palace and an influential citizen.

The Hobbs boys from the Bar Q were popular in Carver. Ed Brand was still an unknown quantity—a lean, thin-faced man in a swallowtail coat and flat-crowned black hat. He carried a single .44 caliber gun on his right. The men of Carver, seeing the bulge of it, had known he'd used the weapon before—plenty.

"He was all right when we started for the stable," Brand had explained. "Then he wanted to go back. But he'd been arguing with Matt Sloan and there'd have been a fight."

"Nothing wrong," Billings had growled, "with a man having a drink in my place."

Brand's gray eyes had been cold when he'd repeated, "I said he was having an argument with Matt Sloan. There could have been trouble."

He'd stared around at the crowd in the barber shop. Doc Hemsley had been in the back room with Billy Hobbs, digging the slug from the young fellow's body.

"I didn't know he had a gun in his hand," the sheriff had gone on to explain. "We were wrestling in the dark when it went off."

He'd seen they weren't sure; he'd read the doubt in their eyes. Later in the night when he'd stopped in the lunchroom he'd read the same thing in Mary Creighton's eyes.

"I'm sorry it happened, Ed," the girl had said. She'd been behind the counter, and he'd stared at her stiff back.

He'd been eating all his meals in the little lunchroom which was across the road from the Palace Saloon. At first he'd been quiet; he'd eaten at a corner table and spoken little. She'd drawn him out as the days had gone by. The previous Sunday afternoon he'd hired a buckboard, and they'd taken a ride into the country. Sheriff Ed Brand had been thinking strange things.

"I have a bad name," he had told her slowly now. "I've killed men who needed killing." He had known she was thinking of that; she'd known him only a short while and she wasn't sure, either.

"Billy is pretty wild," she had said simply.

"But he didn't deserve to be killed?" the sheriff had asked ironically. He felt the tightening in his throat. He hadn't known young Hobbs was drunk enough to pull a gun on him. He had felt Billy's body go limp in his arms; his hands had come away covered with blood.

He hadn't seen the other two Hobbs boys, Johnny and Buck, but he'd heard things from his deputy, Pat Willard. Pat had spoken with Billy's older brothers. They had sworn to get even with Sheriff Brand.

"Buck's a bad man with a gun," Willard had advised. Buck Hobbs was the oldest of the three. Brand had seen him in the Palace. Willard had added glumly, "They think a lot of that kid, Ed. I hope he don't die on us . . ."

The morning after the shooting in the alley behind the Palace, Duke Malloy, a man Ed Brand had once sent to Yuma, rode into town. Brand half rose from his table in the lunchroom as the Duke and two saddlemates came down the center of the street. Their horses kicked up the dust in the dry road.

Brand watched the three men tie up their horses at the Palace rail. He saw them disappear inside the saloon, then he stood up. Duke wasn't forgetting that stretch he'd done five years back. Now he had come for his revenge, as he had promised he would.

"I'll be seeing you, Ed." Malloy had said simply when the judge had passed sentence on him. Malloy had been going up on a rustling charge Ed Brand had pinned on him. The Duke had squirmed through the trial, but the sheriff had had the facts.

NOW, inside the Palace, the Duke looked up at the sheriff of Carver City when the tall lawman came toward him. Malloy was leaning on the bar. His companions, dark, hard-looking, heavily armed men, studied the sheriff casually. Malloy hadn't looked surprised to see Ed Brand, which made it certain to the lawman that Malloy had come looking for him.

"We meet again, Brand," Malloy said coldly. "It's been a long time. You do a heap of traveling."

"I move around." Brand nodded. "I like to see different places." He'd seen all the places he wanted to see, and until yesterday Carver had been the place where he wanted to stay.

He studied the short, squat ex-con. Malloy's sallow complexion set off the peculiar turquoise of his eyes. He had a solid chin, and his mouth was a thin line.

The door opened and the town banker, Fred Towle, came into the saloon. The

sight of him gave Brand an idea—and a jolt. He guessed now why Malloy had brought company with him. These two hadn't come along to help hunt down Ed Brand. Malloy wanted that special pleasure for himself. The other two men had other game in mind. Carver City had a new bank—and Malloy intended to kill two birds with one stone.

"While you're staying in Carver," Brand told Malloy, "we won't expect any trouble, but if it comes I'll be waiting for it."

He turned his back on the three and walked toward the door. He felt the stares of the Carver citizens in the place, and knew they were thinking of Billy Hobbs, lying in the little room behind the barber shop, with nobody knowing whether Billy would live or die. The sheriff had said that Billy had shot himself, but Carver men were not forgetting that Ed Brand had been hired because he wasn't afraid to use his guns.

And what Brand himself was not forgetting was what the saloon-keeper, John Billings, had said grimly after the affair—"He was only a boy. I reckon you could have handled it some other way, Sheriff."

Brand had turned on him slowly. "There was no other way," he'd explained quietly. "It was an accident." If they blamed him, he couldn't help it. He knew they were sorry they'd hired him.

Leaving the Palace, the sheriff went out into the night to make his usual rounds. He saw the light in the barber shop and paused outside the door. Behind the glass he could make out the forms of two men, recognized their sombreros. Johnny and Buck Hobbs were staying in town with their kid brother. If Billy died, those two men would come looking for the sheriff the instant Billy's last breath was drawn.

Brand drew a hard breath himself. He pulled the coat closer around his neck and tugged at the brim of his hat. In twenty-four hours his entire outlook on life had been changed. He'd been thinking of asking Mary Creighton to marry him. Now he was in no position to do it.

He was fifty yards from the Palace Saloon when he saw a flash in the alley

across the way. Instinctively he ducked. A shot roared through the silence of the night and echoed up and down the quiet street.

Jerking out his .44 Colt, the sheriff snapped a quick shot into the alley. He slid into a doorway, waiting tensely in the darkness for another shot.

Men tumbled out of the Palace and stared up the road. The Hobbs brothers barged out of the barber shop, and Ed Brand saw metal gleaming in their hands. And he had not forgotten that Buck Hobbs was reputed to be a bad man with a gun.

There had been a moon minutes before but it was gone now and the buildings loomed up across the road, indistinct and blurred.

Brand straightened up and ran across the street. He ran lightly, and knew that in that light neither the men from the saloon nor the Hobbs boys could see him.

HE SPRANG into the alley, gun in hand, and heard the pound of boots dying away at the other end. He raced after the fleeting man. Many times before, men had shot at him from ambush and always he had reacted in this same way. He gripped the gun tightly and anger choked his throat.

Out in the open, at the far end of the alley, he paused to listen, but heard no more footsteps. Realizing there was no use in chasing a shadow in this darkness, he retraced his steps. But he waited in the alley until the Hobbs boys and the men from the Palace had gone back inside the barber shop and saloon.

From his position in the alley, he saw a man hurrying down the street and darting into the Palace. Quickly Brand crossed over and went inside the saloon. The light blinded him for a moment, then he saw Duke Malloy standing at the bar with his two comrades. Malloy was gulping down a drink, but the gunman's chest was heaving from his heavy breathing. Malloy had been running!

Slowly Brand crossed the room to the bar. There had not been much time to reload a gun. If Malloy had shot at him, then

the man had only five cartridges left in the cylinder of his gun.

The former cattle rustler stared as the sheriff came toward them. There was a cold smile on the man's sallow face, and his peculiar blue-green eyes were burning with hatred.

Malloy turned on him squarely as he waited for Brand at the bar. The gunman's ivory-handled Colt swung loosely at his side, his hand dangling inches above the butt.

That the customers in the saloon sensed trouble Brand knew by the sudden silence. The men must have guessed that what might happen now had some connection with the shots they'd heard outside.

Sheriff Brand braced himself, a short distance away from the ex-convict.

He said slowly, "Somebody took a shot at me from the alley. I'd like to look at your gun, Malloy."

Duke Malloy grinned. His comrades shifted away a little distance. Plainly those two-dark-skinned men were going to back up Duke's play if the sheriff started anything.

Malloy ran his tongue along his thin lips. "When I take my gun out," he drawled, "I use it."

Brand heard the mumbling of men behind him. They didn't like this. To their minds he was again forcing an issue, looking for another man to kill. No one there knew Malloy nor his companions, and as far as they were concerned, the gunman was a passing cowboy who had been quietly having a drink when the lawman had confronted him. Sheriff Brand had no right to make such accusations.

John Billings spoke from the door of his office off the main floor.

"If there's going to be any killings, Brand," he snapped, "take it outside."

Malloy said slowly, "Any time you want that gun to come out, say so, Brand."

The sheriff heard the door open and shut behind him. He heard Buck Hobbs's cold voice.

"I'm in this deal," Buck said quietly, as he approached the bar. He looked at Malloy. "If it's all the same to you, strang-

er, I'd like you to wait till morning."

"How's the boy, Buck?" someone called.

Hobbs paused, a lean, sandy-haired man with gray eyes. He did not at once answer—just stared at the sheriff and went on to the bar.

"We'll know more about the kid in the morning," he said then. He's still unconscious." And then, grimly, he exploded his verbal bombshell. It left Ed Brand weak and gasping. "We just thought to

position, could have caught the slug.

Buck Hobbs downed a drink and turned on the sheriff. "Whatever I'm thinking, Sheriff," the cowboy said coldly, "I'm keeping to myself, but if anything happens to that boy—"

Duke Malloy laughed. His thin mouth was twisted in a sneer.

"Reckon you're in a heap of trouble, Sheriff," he drawled, grinning. "There's a lot of guns pointing at you."

"When the shooting comes," Brand said dully, "I'll be ready for it."

He stalked out of the place, bewildered. If Billy Hobbs hadn't shot himself, who had shot him?

He saw a dim light in the lunchroom and went across the road. Finding that young Hobbs's gun hadn't been used made matters bad for the lawman who'd been with him. It seemed to point clearly to the fact that the sheriff had shot Billy with his own gun. No one seemed to realize that he had no earthly reason for killing young Hobbs, and there must be some motive for murder.

The Sheriff felt the full impact of the thing as he placed his hand on the knob of the lunchroom door. Everyone now considered him a killer—and a killer needed no motive. He killed because of pure lust for murder!

Now it would be believed that Billy Hobbs *had* had a scuffle with Ed Brand all right—and that the sheriff had tried to kill him on that slight provocation.

In the lunchroom Brand sat down heavily on a chair near the window. Mary was coming through the kitchen door. She hadn't heard of this new evidence, but she would know of it in the morning. The word would spread like wild-fire through the town. Young Hobbs's gun hadn't been fired! And Buck Hobbs would have Doc Hemsley to prove it.

"I heard a shot awhile ago," Mary said quietly.

She was a small, grave girl with blue eyes. She was not exactly beautiful, but Ed Brand had always felt uncomfortable in the presence of beautiful women. There was an air of serenity about Mary, though,

Fluctuating Floor

DEATH VALLEY is the lowest area in the western hemisphere, with a ten-mile area which is roughly 280 feet below sea level. The elevation of the valley floor varies from time to time, because the rough surface of salt is floating on brine that is ordinarily no more than three feet beneath the outer layer. The floor of Death Valley therefore may rise and fall slightly with the condition of the water table.

—Harold Helfer

take a look at Billy's gun," he announced flatly. "There are no used shells in it."

THE wind outside the saloon moaned as it swept up the deserted street. "You think I shot him then?" Brand asked coldly.

He remembered the scuffle in the dark alley. A gun had roared and he had felt the powder burn his hands. It had been too dark to see anything, so he had made no attempt to draw his gun. When he had let Billy Hobbs slide to the ground, there had been a gun in the cowboy's hand. He had assumed young Hobbs had tried to use it and it had gone off. The slug had gone upward through Billy's side and lodged in the base of the skull.

From the path of the bullet, Doc Hemsley had hinted that it was almost impossible for Billy to have shot himself. But if they had been scuffling, the gun could have been turned inward and Billy, in a twisted

that soothed him.

"That shot was intended for me," he told Mary. "He missed."

She sat down opposite him at the table. "You've been wondering how I feel about all this," she told him. "I could read it in your eyes. You needn't worry about me. I think it was an accident."

The sheriff's mouth opened. He *had* been worrying for fear she felt as the rest of the town did. Now she must know all of it.

"They found out that Billy Hobbs's gun hadn't been fired," he told her hoarsely. "They think I shot him and made up a story."

"You didn't shoot him, Ed?" she asked.

"No, I didn't, Mary. I heard the shot and I thought it was from Billy's gun. It couldn't have been more than a foot away."

"Did you hear or see anyone?"

SHERIFF BRAND shook his head. "It was too dark. I could scarcely see Billy right beside me. We were walking to the livery stable. If there was someone in the alley, he must have been close to us. He could have been no more than a few feet away and I wouldn't have seen him."

The girl nodded. "And all the time you thought it was Billy's gun that went off. You wouldn't have been looking for anyone else."

Brand stared at the table in front of him. "I'm through, in Carver," he said grimly. "They don't want me here." In this town he had liked, all the cards had been coming out wrong from the start.

"It'll work out all right in the end," Mary assured him. "Don't worry about that."

As Sheriff Brand left and walked down the street he thought about that. One man tonight had taken a shot at him from ambush. Buck Hobbs and his brother Johnny had sworn to get the sheriff if Billy died. Duke Malloy was in town with two gunhands, and the Duke meant business.

When the sheriff swung briskly past the bank, he saw the old watchman, Tom Hal-

liday, seated on a box outside the brick buildings. The old man wouldn't cause much trouble if Malloy and his men meant to break into the bank. He wondered when the Duke would make his move. He hadn't got the sheriff out of the way, of course, but Malloy was not a man to dally when there was a job to do—like looting a bank, say.

The jail-house was at the other end of town and it took a little while for the sheriff to reach the place. When he neared he saw that the light was out, which meant that Deputy Pat Willard had gone home.

The sheriff stumbled along in the darkness to the doorway. He was going up the steps when he fell over something yielding on the landing. Quickly he slipped the Colt from holster and bent down. His fingers touched the hand of a body on the top step, and it was getting cold.

He listened a moment, then struck a match and held it close to the face of the dead man. It was Pat Willard. Brand stood up, and felt the breath leave his body. The last flicker of the match had shown blood on the back of the deputy's head. Willard had been murdered! Shot in the head from ambush as he had been coming out the jail-house door.

With his own key, Brand unlocked the door and dragged the dead man inside. Willard had been his friend. He hadn't known the deputy long, but still bluff, joking, gray-haired Pat had been a friend.

Limply, Ed Brand dropped down in the chair by the desk as the truth suddenly hit him. And there could be no doubt about it. Pat Willard had been mistaken for the sheriff! Pat was the same size, and when he had come out of the dark office, his assailant had fired at him point-blank, probably from a short distance. Maybe from the foot of the three steps leading to the street while Pat had had his back turned locking the door.

The sheriff studied the body on the floor. If Duke Malloy had done this killing, then the gunman must have planned on getting into the bank that same night. Malloy would realize he'd be suspected of murdering the sheriff, since they had had a little

trouble in the Palace Saloon, and the Duke would want to get away fast.

Quickly the sheriff blew out the light and stepped outside the door. As he moved down the street he carried a gun in his hand. He was remembering having seen old Tom Halliday sitting outside the bank door. The bank was locked, but Malloy would find a way of breaking in. Robbers could blow in the door with a stick of dynamite, if necessary, and rifle the place while two of them kept guard outside with deadly guns.

MOVING swiftly, Sheriff Brand came down the plank walk on the side opposite the bank, staying in the deepest shadows. Across the way the dim outline of the brick building loomed out of the night.

The sheriff saw someone dart around the corner of the bank. He stepped into the doorway of the saddle-maker's shop and waited. From the other direction, up the street, he heard the light tread of boots on the walk.

A man loomed up out of the night and the sheriff saw a cowboy in a sombrero swing by. Ed Brand pushed back into the recess of the doorway and held his breath. He didn't want any interference now. Somebody had just shot his friend, Pat Willard. The men who must have done that now were robbing the Carver City Bank. As sheriff, he had to stop them.

The cowboy was almost past when suddenly he whirled on the man in the doorway. Brand saw the gleam of metal and he felt cold steel pressed against his ribs.

"Maybe," Buck Hobbs rasped, "you were going to put a slug in my back. eh Sheriff?"

Brand looked down at the silver star gleaming on his coat and he knew the badge had given him away in the darkness.

"You got it wrong, Hobbs," he whispered. "I'm making a play in the other direction." He nodded across at the bank.

Hobs stared through the darkness. Then he, too, saw the men outside with waiting guns. "Who are they?" the cowboy whispered curiously.

"One of 'em," Sheriff Brand said slowly, "is a man I should have shot down in the Palace tonight. He's a bad hombre. I sent him to Yuma to do a stretch years back, and he's out to get me. He has two gunmen with him. They just shot Pat Willard through the head—from behind."

Buck Hobbs gasped, "Willard?" The deputy had been a popular man in Carver City.

Brand nodded. "They've probably done the same to old Tom Halliday. I'm going over." He pushed the cowboy's gun away.

He was halfway across the road when the waiting gunmen saw him. They saw the star gleam and opened fire.

Slowly and deliberately the sheriff walked toward them, gun in hand. A bullet suddenly grazed his right arm and he opened fire.

One of the two guards jumped and screamed. He went down on his side but his gun was still flaming. Brand felt the bullets whistle past him. Another slug clipped his hat and a third caught him squarely in the left shoulder.

The bullet spun him around and he almost went to the ground but braced himself and kept coming. The man on the ground was rolling out into the gutter, his gun silent now, but the other was down on one knee, taking careful aim.

Brand flashed a quick shot, heard him grunt, the man then swore. A shot from the wounded man's gun smashed through the sheriff's leg below the knee. He gasped from the pain and went down.

He had two more slugs in the cylinders. The wounded guard was up now, standing unsteadily and taking aim at the sheriff who rolled over and brought up his gun.

From the center of the road another gun roared suddenly and Sheriff Brand grinned. Buck Hobbs had decided to take a hand. The guard's gun flew into the air as the cowboy's bullet caught him in the body. He plunged off the curb and lay in the gutter beside his comrade.

From the doorway of the bank, Brand saw the flame and he heard the roar of a six-shooter. Behind him, Buck Hobbs caught a sharp breath. The sheriff heard

the cowboy fall heavily into the dust.

Raising his gun, Brand poked a shot at the man in the door. The bullet smashed the glass and the figure disappeared inside.

The sheriff raised himself painfully. Lights were going on in the houses along the street. There were confused shouts. Men had rushed from the Palace to stare up the street at the shooting men but no one had come near.

BRAND heard Buck Hobbs breathing heavily. He turned his head. "All right, Hobbs?" he asked. Blood from his own shoulder wound, crawling down his body, made him sick. He could scarcely use his left arm. His knee was numb from pain. "All right, Buck?" he called again.

The dark figure was in the bank doorway again, and the sheriff flashed another shot at the man. If that man was Duke Malloy, then he was trapped in the bank, because there was no other exit. A rear door was padlocked from the outside. Brand knew the procedure of Fred Towle, the banker.

The man in the doorway swore, then darted back inside. Brand grinned. He had recognized Malloy's voice, and Malloy didn't know how badly he was injured. The Duke would be afraid to come out.

Buck Hobbs was still breathing heavily but he hadn't answered. Slowly Ed Brand crawled back to the injured man. Beads of perspiration stood out on his face as he pulled his left leg along the ground.

He felt around in the dust and found the cowboy's gun. Hobbs had taken one shot with his six-shooter, so five slugs would be left in the cylinders.

From one of the barred bank windows, Duke Malloy had smashed the glass and was shooting through the opening. Brand heard the bullet whine past him as it kicked up the dust.

He crawled up close to the curb and squeezed his body against the plank walk. Duke Malloy again shot through the window, only yards away. The bullet smashed into the wood close to the sheriff's head.

Brand suddenly sat up and shot directly through the window. He heard glass

break and trickle to the floor inside. With a great effort, the sheriff lifted himself up on the plank walk, rolled over twice, and was in the doorway.

As he hesitated there a moment, he saw men running down the street toward the bank. Inside the bank there was no sound, but Duke Malloy would have heard the shouts and would know the entire town was awake. The gunman had to make his play—now Ed Brand waited for him.

He heard the footsteps on the floor, then saw the glint of a gun in the shadowy darkness. Flame spouted, and Ed Brand shot at the flare. He heard Malloy grunt. There was a metallic clank as the robber's gun clattered to the floor. Then he heard Duke Malloy pitch to the floor himself.

Brand could just see him lying a few yards away from the entrance. Warily the sheriff lowered his gun. He was still sitting in the doorway when men swarmed up from the street.

John Billings, the Palace proprietor, was up in the lead of the running men.

"Reckon there's been a little shooting, Sheriff," Billings panted.

Brand said painfully, "Look around for old Tom. He may have been hurt."

They found the old man in the rear of the bank, unconscious from a blow on the head. He sat up weakly after awhile.

The wounded men were carried into the Palace Saloon, including one of the bank robbers who was still breathing. But Duke Malloy was dead, as was his other gunman pard who had been shot through the heart.

Brand lay on the floor on a blanket and listened to the wounded robber moaning. He had been shot through the body, but Doc Hemsley said there was a chance for him.

"How's Buck?" the sheriff asked the doctor.

Hemsley grinned. "I just get his kid brother out of trouble, then I got to take him over." He paused, then said, "Buck has a skull wound, but it's not serious. The bullet caught him on the side of the head and knocked him unconscious. He'll be over it in a few days."

"Billy's all right?" the sheriff asked. Hemsely nodded. "He'll pull through now. He was conscious for a little while before this shooting fracas started."

Brand saw Mary Creighton coming through the door of the saloon then. When she saw him on the floor her face lost color. He grinned. She dropped on her knees beside him.

"I reckon you'll have a nurse from now on," the doctor said reflectively. "You should get well quick when I get those bullets out of you."

Buck Hobbs moved, and tried to lift himself. Doc Hemsley placed a hand on his shoulder. The cowboy turned his head and stared at Ed Brand.

"You got sand, Sheriff," he whispered.

Doc Hemsley moistened his lips. "Billy had something to say when he came to," he said.

"Spill it," Buck growled.

"Billy saw a man in the alley that night Ed Brand was trying to get him to go home. He said he saw a gun in the man's hand and he was pulling his own weapon out when Ed thought he was trying to get away. They were wrestling when the

stranger stepped up close and pulled the trigger."

"I reckon I can tell you who that stranger was," a voice said, a little distance away.

Ed Brand turned his head. The wounded bank robber, a hatchet-faced man with small black eyes, was speaking.

"It don't matter now." The gunman grinned weakly. "The Duke's dead. The night before we came to Carver, Malloy rode on ahead to look you up, Sheriff. He was probably waiting outside the Palace when you came out with the kid puncher."

Doc Hemsley nodded. "In the darkness of the alley Malloy couldn't have seen clearly. Billy Hobbs and the sheriff are about the same height and the Duke had to shoot quick and get out. He shot the wrong man."

Buck Hobbs nodded grimly. "Billy will pull out of it, Doc?" he asked.

Hemsely shook his head affirmatively.

Sheriff Ed Brand looked up at the girl kneeling beside him. "I reckon Carver's my home town," he said softly.

"I was hoping"—Mary Creighton smiled—"it would be."

VANISHING BANDITS

THE four bandits had planned their getaway well. Once inside Colossal Cave, they knew no sheriff's posse would ever overtake them.

Colossal Cave, about twenty-five miles southeast of Tucson, is an awe-inspiring maze of countless connecting rooms; and for days the bandits had explored them, carefully laying down a route of retreat through an unknown exit.

Then came the day for action. The Southern Pacific R. R. would be carrying some \$62,000 in cash, and somehow the bandits knew it. The holdup was easy, the getaway easier, for they merely vanished into the cave.

The sheriff's posse, however, successfully trailed them. For three weeks they stood guard there, building fires inside the cave in hopes of driving their quarry out. At last, they gave up.

Then, sometime later, the desperadoes were recognized in nearby Willcox. In the ensuing gun battle three of them were killed, the fourth captured. This lone survivor was sentenced to twenty-eight years in the penitentiary, refusing to lighten his sentence by divulging the hiding place of the loot.

In 1912, the remaining bandit was released. Trailing him was an agent for the Wells-Fargo Express. When the bandit disappeared into the mysterious recesses of Colossal Cave, the agent followed.

Once again, the bandit slipped out that secret entrance. And the agent, caught up in that hopeless maze, gave up the chase. However, in one of the dusty rooms of the cave, he found several empty money sacks, the very ones which had contained the \$62,000 so boldly taken twenty-four years earlier.

Later, when the other entrance to the cave was found, the mystery of the vanishing bandits was solved. But the surviving desperado and the outlaw treasure were never seen or heard of again.

—Norman Renard

THE NON-MILLIONAIRE

By HAROLD HELFER

NELLIE tried to be nonchalant and casual, but she just couldn't shake off the funniest feeling inside her. She felt almost as funny and excited as she had on a night ten years ago when Slim Dandelion was on the verge of proposing to her.

It was a mile and a half from the station to the big Bar XX ranch, but Nellie didn't

mind walking. She was unconscious of any physical exertion anyway, the excitement just propelled her along. She hadn't even bothered to take a quick dip into town and The Silver Spoon, the old "hash house" where she'd handled trays and plates for some twelve years.

Of course, she fully intended to drop by her old place of employment before she

*The worst thing
a man can do is
take a chick at
her own word...*



"Maybe, who know, I be a millionaire"

left. But first she just had to see Slim. Or find out about him anyway. For, it stood to reason, there was a good chance that Slim was no longer a hand at Bar XX but had drifted off somewhere. She could still see the hurt, awfully solemn look in his eyes when she turned him down that last night she saw him—how his shoulders had drooped as he'd turned around and walked out of the Silver Spoon!

It was a perfect occasion for reminiscing anyway. Coming back here after so many years and without having corresponded with anybody. And then it was dusk too, the purple sun was disappearing over the tumble-weeded plains, a perfect time for reverie.

Quite a bit had happened since the last night she'd seen Slim. Including, of course, the fact that she'd got married. To Dick Fowler, a plain, ordinary hardware salesman. That was what was so ironic. She, Nellie Tankersley, who'd always vowed she'd marry only a millionaire—finally winding up as the most routine and ordinary of housewives. A nobody, haggling with vegetable venders and keeping a weather eye on the butcher's scales.

Not that Dick hadn't treated her well. And he was still kind of handsome in that wavy-hair way of his—although the hair was beginning to thin out now. If only the mid-summer Chicago heat would abate in that small boxed-in near-the-roof flat of hers that sometimes felt like a Turkish bath.

Here it was July, but there was the usual evening coolness about these high western plains. There was something so wondrous about all this space. You could actually breathe as deeply as you wanted. It seemed fantastic that all this could be and that she could have once been a part of it. And, of course, what seemed equally as far-fetched now was the notion that she had had then—that she would never marry anyone less than a millionaire.

And perhaps the oddest part of all was how firmly she'd made up her mind to that—and how it seemed to make a certain amount of sense, then. After all,

there weren't too many eligible women out that way, and every now and then some cowpoke did strike it lucky. In the oil fields, or coming across a new gold vein.

Nellie sighed. All that had ever happened to her was Slim. Oh, any number of lonely cowpokes had proposed to her. But only Slim had ever, well, stirred her. Funny that it should have been him, an Indian. But there was something about his dark eyes, the way he looked at her, so deep and solemn-like. There was something so quiet and simple and dignified about him. He never got fresh or loud or show-offy, not even on Saturday nights.

That time he'd asked her to marry him as they walked along the edge of the mesa. It was about the same time of day as now—the beginning of evening. Just as now, the twinkle of lights from the Bar XX could be seen in the distance. She could almost remember word for word what she'd told him, that she liked him a lot but had made up her mind to marry a millionaire. How thoughtful that had made Slim! "I can ask Mr. Barstow, he give me more money," the slim, bronze-skinned cowhand had said when he finally spoke up. "Maybe he give me \$10 a month more. But still won't be millionaire." How her heart had gone out to him! But she'd remained staunch in her determination to capture a millionaire. "It may not sound quite nice, it may be crazy, but it's just something I've made up my mind to, Slim," she told him. "I'm just not going to compromise. I've always told myself I was going to marry a millionaire and that's the way it is going to be."

OF COURSE, she'd been even more deeply touched by Slim the next day, when he came around to the Silver Spoon to tell her he'd decided to go oil prospecting. "Maybe, who know, I be a millionaire," he told her.

And Nellie remembered his return so vividly too. About a year later it was. Slim's face had been so long, he looked so tired and his eyes were so solemn as

he watched her behind the counter. "Nellie," he'd blurted out as soon as she'd come over to his table, "you sure you not change your mind about man you marry have to be millionaire?" Nellie had reached over, playfully wriggled an ear of his and her voice had been quite husky as she replied, "Gosh, it's nice to see you again, Slim—but, no, on the other matter, Slim, my mind's made up as firmly as ever." His face suddenly seemed to have grown even longer. "I—I—" he began, clearly on the verge of asking her to marry him anyway. "Sorry, Slim," she told him quickly, "I'm not compromising, it's got to be the way I said it had to be." Maybe she'd broken in the way she did because she was afraid if Slim had ever got out his proposal she would have accepted.

Slim had disappeared from sight after that. It was funny that it should have been only about a month after that Dick Fowler, the curly-haired hardware salesman should have come along. Almost before she knew it she was Mrs. Fowler—and a very ordinary, down-to-earth, butcher-scale-watching housewife.

She tried to tell herself she was happy enough. But she'd never quite been able to forget her dream of being a millionaire's wife and all that it implied—or Slim. She'd always have a soft spot in her heart for him.

She'd tried to tell herself she was taking this vacation just to see the old home town, but all the excitement she felt revolved around a lean, bronze-faced figure.

Of course, it might be that Slim was nowhere around. She could still see his drooping shoulders so plainly as he left her that night. He'd taken it pretty hard. Just knowing that she'd probably find out

where he was, was enough to give her a glow.

She didn't stop at any of the bunkhouses, but went straight to the main door of the handsome and fabulous Bar XX ranch house. Was Slim still on the Bar XX? Well, Mr. Barstow or one of his righthand men probably could tell her where he might have gone.

Her heart beat kind of wildly, and her knock on the door was timid and self-conscious. After awhile, the door opened.

And there he stood. Slim Dandelion! They just stood there staring at one another across the threshold. Slim, as lean, bronzed and handsome as ever, spoke up first, saying, "Nice see you again, Nellie, won't you please to come in?"

When Nellie found her voice, she said, "Mr. Barstow—won't he get mad?"

"No Mr. Barstow."

"Well, who is boss?"

"I boss."

"You!" Nellie gasped. She looked around her, at the array of bunkhouses, the blacksmith quarters, the corrals, the great rolling land in all directions.

"You—you must be a millionaire!" she gasped.

"Indians have saying, everything work out for best," said Slim. "I have fine wife, three fine sons. I hear you get married, live in big busy much-doing city."

"You—you must be a millionaire—" Nellie repeated, her voice engulfed with awe, almost as if mesmerized by the stupendous horror of the thought.

"Not exactly," spoke up Slim. "Tried to tell you that night in Silver Spoon, but you say no compromise, millionaire or nothing. I find big oil field all right, sell out in big deal, but not quite become millionaire, only have \$885,000. . . ."



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JINGO and the *Señorita*

By DE WITT NEWBURY



Jingo couldn't believe his eyes when he saw her

Miranda won Jingo in a game, so when the town tried to hang him—she had to protect her property!

HOORAW VALLEY had always been a good camp, ever since the first prospector found color and raised such a cheer. But now it was filling

up quickly, getting crowded.

Settlers had come in with their families and they were a different breed from the free-and-easy miners. There were town promoters, business men among them. Why, the latest comer was a gospel slinger!

That was why Jingo McCall felt so disgusted.

He was in his shanty, throwing blanket roll and grub pack together when Black Ferris strolled in. A big fellow, Blackie, with broad cheeks and mouth smothered by a bushy beard.

Black leaned one meaty shoulder against the log door frame. "Hear you're aiming to prospect the high gulches," he said.

Jingo sat back on his heels and scratched his roan-whiskered jaw. "Sure do," he allowed. "Need some air."

"Preacher's called another meeting," Black said with a grin, "to talk about building a church. Figure on dodging that?"

"You bet!"

Black laughed. "And miss all the praying and glory-shouting? Oh my, Jingo! If a pretty lady like the preacher's gal wants to save me, I'll let her."

Jingo got to his feet; he was as tall as the other when he stood up, though leaner. "This here camp is going to hell!" he declared. "Of course, the boys stack up at them meetings—they like to sing and holler—but they're slipping further every time! We already got an *alcalde* instead of a camp boss, a marshall instead of a vigilance committee. And now there'll be a church! Yes sir, I gotta ramble. This part of Californy is too damn sanctified!"

Ferris squirted tobacco juice. "We-e-ll," he drawled, "that ditch of yourn looks promising."

"'Twon't run away while I'm gone," Jingo said.

"Can't tell. Our old Vigilantes used to come down hard on a claim jumper, but things are diff'rent now."

Jingo shrugged. "My guns ain't no different." He squatted again to fit fresh caps on his two Colt dragons.

"Reckon you're right, there." Blackie cleared his throat. "Tell ye what! My diggings are about played out. Just you gimme a writing to fix it with the new law, and we'll go pardners. I'll move in here and work your claim good while you're a-rambling. Whack up, even Steven, when ye git back. Mebbe I can hire Daffy Ellison, or some other broke galoot, to help cheap."

Jingo considered. "Sounds fair, Blackie. Only don't go hiring any of the riffraff that's drifted in with the pilgrims."

"No, no!" Black assured him.

The agreement was scribbled with a pencil stub on the back of an old envelope and duly signed. Then the new partner went off, whistling, to shift his tools and camp gear while Jingo went on packing.

JINGO felt satisfied as he slogged down the valley. His cabin would be safe, and yellow dust would be piling up. Maybe he'd make a strike in the hills, too!

He'd have room to stretch in, anyway, and that was what he needed. The gold camp was all right and so were the boys who were swinging picks and shovels, digging trenches, sloshing wash-pans by the creek, but downcreek a town was growing up. There were tents and cabins on regular, laid-out lots. There were fenced patches of garden truck. There was a store where they even sold calico for women's dresses.

There was also a staked-out place where the church would be built, and that was right where Jingo met the three people who, above all others, made him feel crowded.

The preacher saw him first, and greeted him with outstretched hands. "Good day, Mister—er, ah—may I call you one of my congregation?" He was slight and pinch-faced, and had an eager manner.

"Can if ye want," Jingo said, nodding. "But 'twon't be so."

The marshal had mean eyes and a rocky chin. A Hangtown man, he'd been brought in by the settlers to keep order. He gave Jingo a hard look, noted the slung pack. "Leaving town, hey?" he greeted. "P'raps

it's just as well for everybody concerned."

The *alcalde* was both mayor and magistrate, Spanish fashion. This one was a fat rooster in a stovepipe hat, a bulging black coat, and a cravat that squeezed his wattles. "Harumph!" he trumpeted. "One of our most troublesome citizens. A very violent man!"

Jingo grinned cheerfully. "I ain't being run outa town, gents. I'll be back."

The little minister looked bewildered. "But you will attend the meeting, my friend? To plan the erection of our tabernacle?"

Jingo shook his head. "Nope. Gotta ramble." He hitched his pack higher and tramped away.

Near the outskirts of town he passed a neat tent that stood beside a half-finished cabin. At least, he meant to pass it. He saw the girl sitting under the open flap and hoped to get by her.

She was a slender girl in white muslin, stiff and unrumpled, a girl with pale hair and pale cheeks. She caught sight of him and called out, "Mister McCall! Oh, Mister McCall!"

He stopped, ducking his head awkwardly. "I'm just Jingo, Miss."

She rose and came to him. "You're one of Father's friends," she smiled. "You'll vote for his church, won't you?"

Jingo sighed. "Seems like I hafta tell everybody! Can't, 'cause I'm on my travels."

Her eyes sank to the two big cap-and-ball revolvers in his belt. "Those terrible pistols!" she shuddered. "Don't you know it's wrong to shed blood? He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword!"

"No swords around here," Jingo reasoned. "If that goes for guns, too, I'll live longer with 'em than without 'em."

The girl clasped her hands. "Father does such splendid work, converting the wicked and saving souls. I help when I can. Will you promise three things?"

He shifted from one foot to the other; his pack was growing heavy. "What sorta things?"

"Not to harm your fellows, not to drink liquor, and not to play cards for money!"

"Whoosh!" Jingo exhaled a long breath. "I never plug a galoot that don't need it. Got no whisky, and my cards are wore out." He turned on his heel and started off.

"You haven't promised!" she wailed after him.

"Ain't going to!" he shouted back.

So that was over, and at last Jingo was heading for the space and solitude he craved. He was quit of too much godliness, too much law, too many people.

BUT NO—he wasn't altogether quit of people, not yet. He spied Daffy Ellison lounging near the trail. The tow-head, twiddling his thumbs, stood just outside a rough brush shelter; and under the shelter were four lazy, sprawling shapes.

Jingo swore and spat in the dust. What was young Ellison doing with such a bunch? Damned lousy drifters who loafed and begged, sneaked and stole. In the old days, the miners would have pranced them out of camp in no time. Now the law protected them!

"Want a job, Daffy?" he called. "Go and see Black Ferris, up at my shebang."

"Sure I do, Jingo," the boy answered with his friendly, vacant grin. "Sure I will!"

One of the sleepers sat up, a tattered scarecrow with matted, greasy-looking hair and whiskers. "What about me?" he bawled. "Any more jobs?"

"Oughta have your choice," Jingo growled, "either making tracks or weightin' a rope."

He went on a little further and where he changed direction, looked back. Greasy Pete had stepped out on the trail to watch him out of sight. The drifter lifted a ragged arm, but Jingo didn't wave back.

His way was eastward now, up the lowest part of the timbered ridge. He was taking the long way 'round because the shorter way was too steep for a man with a heavy pack.

From the crest, he looked down into the next gulch, a narrow one. Beyond it rose another ridge, and another, and still

more. Each was higher than the last and each hid a gulch.

He crossed the first ravine. It was dry, no good for placer work. He knew it well, had hunted pot-meat there.

Some fellow was hunting now. Jingo had climbed to the farther crest and stopped to breathe among the sparse pines, when he heard a cracking sound. A rifle shot, fired below him or on the rise he had just left.

Nothing to notice, of course.

He remembered it, though, when he shucked his pack at sundown. The brown canvas cover was sliced across, as if by a knife.

Jingo whistled. "A bullet done that! The damned idiot took me for a deer, up agin the skyline there, and creased me. Lucky he couldn't shoot no better!"

Only two days later Jingo found his new location. It was just the right place to work in peace and quiet, a sweet little mountain pocket with a thread of water curling through. There was a sandy bank on the east side, washed up by spring floods, and behind that a bristle of young pines.

He tried out the dirt and got color. Could make better than day wages, he judged, without straining himself.

After trying it, Jingo let the dirt wait while he knocked down some of the pines with his old axe. An open-fronted shack would be good enough. Blankets inside and a fire outside would make it snug.

He meant to take it easy but got excited when he started work next day. Panned out forty dollars before noon. So then he knocked off to cook bacon and beans, take a rest, and a smoke.

Lying comfortably on his blankets after dinner, Jingo was at peace with the world. For a little while.

It couldn't last! Suddenly he reared up, dropping his pipe. Disturbing sounds had come to his ears—the rustle of bushes, the crunch of feet on gravel, the mutter of voices.

He peered out of the shack, down the bank, and there they were!

Four men had straggled into the gulch.

A sorry lot of prospectors! Two carried battered wash-pans, one a rusty pick another a shovel. Old flour sacks were slung to them, here and there, to hold grub, and their blankets were rolls of filth.

They were the drifters, the worthless yahoos that had been hanging around town, and as they stood there, dirty and evil-faced, they seemed an offense to the clean sand and bright sunshine. They were certainly an offense to Jingo. He got to his feet, shoved his two shooters into his belt, and went striding down the bar. The dirtiest and ugliest, Greasy Pete, called a greeting: "Howdy, McCall! Found any color here?"

Jingo brought up, feet apart, hands on his guns. "What do you care?" he asked. "You ain't staying!"

THEY SQUEEZED together, as if for protection. "You don't own the gulch," a broken-nosed scamp protested. "Bet ye ain't filed on your claim, even!"

"I'm on it," Jingo told him. "That's enough! How'd ye get here?"

"Followed along, knowing you had a nose for gold. Spotted your smoke."

"Then follow your crooked snoot somewhere else!"

"Look here, McCall!" Greasy Pete argued. "There's plenty room above your location. You got no right to hog the whole bar!"

"I ain't, hey?" Jingo countered. "I'll show ye!"

He pulled his guns and fired two shots. The first spattered the drifters with stinging sand; the second cracked close over their hole-hats.

They skedaddled, pushing each other, splashing in the water, tearing and blundering through the bushes. They disappeared down the gulch, and after a time the noise of their flight died away.

Jingo belted his guns and started up the bank. Then he stopped short, as if suddenly frozen. His mouth and eyes opened wide.

He couldn't believe his eyes at first, had to blink them three or four times before he could believe that there was a girl up

there by the shack! She was leaning on a rifle and laughing down at him! She was dressed in buckskin, like a Nez Percé or Flathead squaw, and her hair hung as black as two crow's wings. Yet she was white. She had blue eyes and a freckled nose, and her laugh was no squaw's giggle.

"Neighbor," she said, "you surely stampeded those hombres!"

Jingo forgot to be polite. He chucked his hat on the ground and swore. "Damn it, can't a feller find some some peace and quiet? Why does everybody crowd me so? Where in hell'd you come from?"

Her freckled nose crinkled as she laughed again. "I'm not a crowd. Didn't come from anywhere in hell but from my daddy's camp."

He picked up his hat. "Beg pardon for cussing thataway. I been jolted! Thought I was all nice and lonesome, until just now. Where's this camp you mentioned?"

She jerked a thumb. "Over the next ridge. You see, a lion jumped our mule. My father got the lion, but it clawed him some. We've been forted up since, and he's run out of smoking, so I thought maybe you could spare some. I'd scouted your camp already."

"Everybody spots my smoke!" Jingo grumbled. "How come I ain't spotted youn'?"

"We make an Injun fire, that doesn't smoke."

"Wish I knew how! Well, I got a extry plug or two—always go heeled with tobacco. Say, reckon I'll take it to your dad myself! Mosey along with you for a visit."

The girl crinkled her nose. "I thought you didn't like crowds?"

Jingo glanced at her sidewise. "You ain't no crowd. Said so yourself, didn't ye? I bet your old man ain't, either."

She turned and led the way on padding moccasins, cradling her rifle like an old hunter.

Their tent was made, Indian fashion, of weathered canvas stretched over poles. Its owner sat before it, with a buffalo robe under him and a pack-saddle propping him up. A rifle lay handy, an old Hauken flintlock.

Jingo eyed the gaunt frame and leathery face, all knots and creases and gray beard. This was a mountain man, he saw. He dropped the tobacco plug on the robe and said, "Howdy, Buckskin! How ye making out?"

The mountain man grinned. "Doing fine, thank'ee. I'll soon be able to get up and get." He slapped his right leg that had strips of blanket wound around it instead of a legging.

"Fixed for grub?" Jingo asked.

The other waved a hand. There were parfleches, skin-wrapped bundles, hanging on the nearer trees. "Jerked meat. We jerked the mule—and the critter that kilt him. Only my daughter's too finicky to eat 'em!"

The girl tilted up that freckled nose. "Shot a deer for myself, that's what I did."

"She's a good shot and a good gal," the man said. "Half Irish—my half—and half Spanish. Name's Miranda. Me, I'm Tim Donahoe."

Jingo named himself as he bowed to Miranda. "Did ye raise her in the mountains?" he wondered.

Tim shook his head. "Not from the start. My wife was a real Santa Fé lady, and her folks took the baby when she died. Trouble was, Randa wouldn't stay put. Last time I went to see her, she cut loose. Run after me! I never did get 'round to taking her back."

"And ye've come all the way from Santa Fé?"

"Not all to once. We lived in one or another of the forts while I was trapping. But the Rocky Mountain country is plumb ruined! Beaver gone, pilgrim trains a-dragging through, and all the Injuns hopping mad. We give up and headed west. Mebbe we'll find gold if we can't find beaver."

YELL FIND the pilgrims here already," Jingo warned. "That's why I quit Hooraw Valley. Settlers are running everything now. They're down on a playful ruckus, yet they let all kind of scum run loose. Some rapscallions even trailed me, so I had to season 'em."

"I saw it," Randa told her father. "They didn't like pepper."

Jingo had an idea. "Why don't you stake out a claim on my bar? It's good ground, and ye'll keep crowd'ers out."

"I'll do that," Tim agreed. "soon as I can stagger that far. Now tarry with us and take a bait of jerked lion. Randa stews it up real tasty."

Lion meat wasn't half bad, Jingo allowed when he tried it.

After supper, Donahoe reached into the tent and rolled out a small keg. "Taos lightning." He winked "I got mauled saving it. Mule fell on it when the varmint dropped him."

Jingo drank and whooped. "Wow-oo! No snakes in it, unless they're all pickled!" He settled himself comfortably on his half of the buffalo robe. "A game would be nice if you had the cards."

"Got something nigh as good," Tim said. "Chuck me my warbag, gal."

Randa brought him the otter-skin pouch. He took out three small turtle shells, worn and polished, and a bit of bone dark with age. "Injun game," he explained. "This here is the finger-bone of a Cayuse chief. He was foxy when living and tries to fool ye yet."

"I've played," Jingo nodded, "with little-nut shells."

"Not our game," Tim chuckled. "Randa works the shells—I taught her—and you and me bucks each other. If we both lose, she rakes in the stakes. Of course, there won't be no real stakes, because we can't afford to lose nothing."

"Beats three-card monte!" Jingo admired. "The juggler don't risk a thing, yet he cleans up. Say, I want to learn them shells! Just for fun, let's bet."

"All right. Keep your eyes skinned!"

Miranda knelt, turned back a corner of the robe, and set the turtle shells in a row on the tanned side. She showed the bone in one small palm, then began to shift the shells, murmuring in a sort of play-talk.

"I am Turtle Man, chief of the Cayuse. My enemies, the Blackfeet, are hunting me. I will hide in the tepee of Father Turtle—or Uncle Turtle—or Grandfather

Turtle. In which can they find me?"

Jingo pointed. "In the middle one!"

"No, in this end one," Tim insisted.

Smiling mischief, Randa lifted the two shells. Nothing under them. She snatched up the third shell, and there was the bone.

"Beats all!" Jingo marveled. "Sure as shooting, I seen ye shove it under the middle one. Let's try agin!"

They tried again and kept on trying. When finally it grew too dark for playing, Jingo pulled a little buckskin bag from a pocket.

"That was a sociable time," he declared beaming, "and I'm glad to drop my poke."

Randa's blue eyes opened wide. "Why, we weren't in earnest! It was only pretend!"

"Then let's keep on pretending. You take charge of this poke. I'm such a careless cuss, I might mislay it." He thumped the heavy little sack down on the robe and strode away into the dusk.

He panned more dust next day and left it with Miranda in the evening.

As the days passed, he found he couldn't stay away from the Donahoe camp and the Indian game. He persisted in naming his stakes and in pretending he had really lost them.

"I'll win it all back," he boasted, "when I learn them shells!"

Jingo tried hard enough to learn. The visiting and game playing grew into a habit. Every afternoon he would wash up in the stream, run combing fingers through his long hair and whiskers, then head over the ridge. There was always a welcome for him, a bowl of stewed jerky and a drink from the keg, and afterwards a session with the turtle shells.

Sometimes he and Tim bet against each other while Randa managed the shells. Sometimes Jingo himself rigged them. But it seemed as if he never could win! He never fooled the girl, and she always fooled him.

She had stopped protesting when he dropped a poke on the buffalo robe. She would accept it now with her mischievous, freckled smile.

Tim seemed satisfied, too. He would

wink and say, "Be foolish if ye want, son. Randa knows what she's a-doing, if you don't."

Jingo grew more and more reckless. When all the ready gold was used up, he staked his prospects. He staked his new claim, his old claim—everything.

AT LAST, after a week of evening games, there came a time when he grinned sheepishly "Nothing more to bet but my outfit and guns. Well, I gotta stick to them things! If they go, I go with 'em."

A little later he whooped with laughter. "By the holy joker! Reckon nothing like this ever happened afore. I've heard of a feller winning a dance-hall gal in a gamble, never of a gal winning a man!"

Randa gave him a bright-eyed look. "It's only make-believe!"

"Sure, sure! We'll go on make-believing just for the hell of it. And I might as well keep working the claim, since that's yourn and I'm yourn too."

"You might as well. Your luck will change, I know, and you'll do all the winning. Turtle Man told me!"

Old Tim chuckled. "My leg's mended so, we'll be over to boss ye purty soon. Or likely you'll be bossing us."

Next day, while Jingo was swinging his pick, he wondered how Randa would fix it. Maybe he had been a tarnation fool, but that didn't bother him much. She hadn't cheated at the game, anyway. She'd just been too smart for him.

It was a thundering joke, he thought, to be owned by a little black-haired, freckle-nosed girl. She could own him, all right, just as she might own a runaway horse that was cavorting over the hills!

Perhaps she'd be smart some more and rig the shells so he'd guess right. He was all-fired curious to know what she did have up her buckskin sleeve!

He'd find out pretty soon. . . .

Jingo was digging a test hole, high up on his bar. He had paused to knuckle away the sweat, when he suddenly stiffened, cocked an ear. Somebody coming!

He heard a stone roll down the opposite slope, the rustle of dry undergrowth.

Booted feet slithered and slipped on pine litter, and a body fetched up against a tree. Was it another pestering bunch of crowd-ers? His guns were back in the shack; he'd better jump for them.

But only one man came out of the timber, a gawky figure, topped by a tow-colored mop. Young Ellison hopped over the water, waving his ragged hat.

Jingo forgot his guns and stepped down the bank. "Hi, boy!" he shouted. "What ye doing here?"

Daffy looked around the diggings, grinning. "Got a good location, Jingo? I hope so, to make up for your bad luck."

"Bad luck?" Jingo asked, puzzled. "What bad luck?"

"I come to tell ye. Black Ferris struck it rich—powerful rich—on the claim you sold him."

Jingo scratched his whiskers. The youngster was addle-headed, got things twisted. "Now look a-here, Daffy," he said. "That ain't bad luck, it's good. I didn't sell the claim. Black is only workin' it. We're pardners."

Daffy's watery eyes goggled. "He says diff'rent. Says he's got a writing that turns it over to him, lock, stock and barrel. This strike's so big he's selling shares. Why, even the *alcalde* and the marshal are going in with him!"

Flabbergasted, Jingo could only say, "Either you're wrong or something else is. Mighty wrong!"

"It's so!" Daffy insisted. "I was working for Black when he hit the pay dirt. Greasy Pete was, too. So Greasy said I better tell you, 'cause you'd oughta have a share. He knowed where you was, and he brought me up here."

"That drifter?" Jingo frowned.

"Him and his friends. The fellow I been bunking with." Ellison pointed behind him. "They're afeared to show themselves—you shot at 'em the other time. But rats, you wouldn't shoot at me."

Somebody would, though!

Smoke puffed from the bushes, a gun spoke with a thudding crash. Daffy fell on his face, coughing and choking.

Jingo hunched down, pawing his empty

belt. There was no second shot, no shot for him. In a moment, he was up and away. In another, he was back, a pistol in each hand.

HE HEARD the running and climbing, the frantic scrambling up the western rise. He sent futile bullets into the timber. Then he had to help the wounded lad, try to stop up the hole in his back.

No use. Daffy grinned—a friendly grin, in spite of the blood—and died.

Jingo carried the limp body to the shack, laid it straight, and covered it with a blanket. That was all he could do now, except hunt the bushwhackers.

He would juggle no turtle shells that night. He had a grimmer game to play.

He couldn't quite catch them. They had the start and must have strained their soggy carcasses to bursting. He camped on their trail that night, afraid of losing them in the dark, while they kept on.

But that didn't matter so much. Foolishly, as it seemed, they were heading straight back for Hooraw Valley. Jingo was almost at their heels when he loped in, late next day.

Jingo had been racking his brains on the way, but couldn't make head or tail of it. Had that bullet been meant for him? No, it was a close, well-aimed shot; it had done its work. Then why had poor Ellison been dropped in cold blood?

"To stop him," Jingo surmised, "from blabbing about the strike? But Greasy—if 'twas him—shot too late for that. But he'd talked Daffy into telling me, too. Led him right to me!"

Another thought popped into his mind—the bullet that had grazed him that first day. Maybe no wild-shooting hunter had fired it, after all. Black Ferris had a rifle! Black knew he would cross that dry gulch and could have taken a short cut, himself, by shinning up the nearer cliff. Now Blackie was up to some claim-jumping shenanigan!

Yet if somebody had tried for him then, Jingo wondered why another try hadn't been made again later, instead of nailing Daffy Ellison? He was still wondering,

though not wasting any time, when he hit town.

There was a crowd in the *prado*, as they called the open space before the new store that was now used as a town hall. A lot of miners seemed to have quit work to bunch up there; along with the greenhorns and the town-builders in their cleaner shirts.

They were all looking pretty savage. One or two spotted Jingo as he panted up, then more. A growl ran from man to man. They turned hairy, scowling faces and opened up for him to pass.

Had they learned about the shooting? Was that why they were so mad? Daffy had been a sort of favorite; everybody had liked his friendliness and pitied his foolishness. If these people knew how he had been killed, they must have learned from the bushwhackers, must have nabbed them!

Jingo wondered why nobody hailed him with the news but was too winded to ask questions or to tell his story right then. He stood there, heaving and blowing, trying to get back some breath. Then his eyes turned toward the store, and he didn't have to look any further.

The four drifters were squatting on the high gallery. Greasy Pete, the broken-nosed one, the two others. They were sweaty and dirty, exhausted and starved. Hadn't been there long, hadn't had time to rest.

In the doorway, behind them, stood the new *alcalde*, stovepipe hat, bulging paunch and all. At one side hovered the skinny preacher, peering around with anxious, spectacled eyes. His daughter clung to his arm, cheeks paler than ever, fair hair hanging limply.

They all stared at Jingo, and he stared back. Before he was able to speak, he felt something hard jammed under his left shoulder blade. A gun muzzle!

He heard the marshal's voice croak in his ear, "Hoist your hands, McCall! I'm holding you for murder."

Dazed with astonishment, Jingo lifted his hands. He was still fighting for breath and couldn't do anything else. The mar-

shal stepped around, jerked his pistols away, and stuck them in his own belt.

UP ABOVE the crowd, the *alcalde* swelled and crowed like a rooster. "Swift and impartial justice is my motto. We'll have no lynch law, gentlemen, but we'll have a quick trial and execution. Some of you can fetch a rope while I choose a jury."

The minister moaned. "Where is the *corpus delicti*? The dead body? You must prove a crime before trying the accused!"

"I'll send a party to bring in Ellison's body. No need to wait for that. We've got four witnesses!"

One of the miners, Hosstail Hank, an old-timer with a tremendous, drooping mustache, asked, "Jingo, is Daffy really dead?"

Jingo had recovered his breath. He wanted to let out a roar, but instead answered quietly. "He's dead enough."

"Did you plug him? I've knowed ye to be handy with your guns, sometimes too handy. Never knowed ye to be pizen mean."

The roar came now. "By the holy crow, I never shot Daffy! Didn't even have my guns! He was downed from cover, plugged in the back!" Jingo lowered a hand to point. "And those lousy yahoos were hiding in the brush! Soon as the shot was fired, they lit out!"

"He's lying!" Greasy squalled. "We stayed hid because we was scared of him. He'd let fly at us once a'ready. But Daffy aimed to fix it so's we could locate in that gulch. We seen it all! He went out to talk, and McCall got mad and dropped him!"

"These guns have been fired and reloaded," the marshal put in.

Jingo swore disgustedly. "Sure as hell, they been fired! I shot after them skedad-dling skunks and didn't stop to clean 'em."

"That's enough," the *alcalde* blustered. "We've got the rope now, and I've chosen the jury—six respectable citizens. What's the verdict? . . . Guilty? We'll string him to a rafter in the store here."

So this was the new law, Jingo thought.

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He didn't feel anger now, or fear, or anything much. He eyed the group on the gallery. The drifters were cringing as if they were the ones to be hanged. The *alcalde* was swelling and puffing. The little preacher was holding his crying daughter. Somebody was missing, he thought, somebody who ought to be there.

Why, Blackie, to be sure! Where was Black Ferris?

Suddenly men closed in on him from both sides, gripped him hard, men of the settler faction, the law-and-order crowd. They rushed him up the steps to the gallery.

There he pulled back, twisted around. He didn't mean to be stretched. Not by a jugful! He'd make some kind of a fight.

For a moment his eyes swept the mob below. It was a silent mob, glum and doubtful. Those rough, tough, hairy miners were his friends—or had been. Would they let him die?

They were pulled two ways—for him and against him. Daffy's murder had worked them up, and now the *alcalde* was trying the high hand. It wouldn't take much to start them moving one way or the other.

The very thing needed right then happened.

A voice sang out across the Prado, from behind a half-built cabin. "Take it easy, boys! I got my rifle laid on that fat feller's belly. Don't nobody move, or it'll go bang! It's an old buffer killer and drills big holes!"

Another voice spoke. A girl's voice, though it sounded hard. "And my sights are laid on that other hombre's shiny star. He'd better reach for the sky, or—adios, amigo!"

Jingo recognized both voices, though he had forgotten their owners for a while. They belonged to two people named Donahoe.

In less than a minute everything had changed!

The *alcalde* shrank surprisingly, even

his paunch going flabby. The marshal half-raised his gun, saw nothing to shoot at, then dropped it and stuck both hands in the air. The half dozen armed settlers just milled around uncertainly.

JINGO grabbed his guns from the marshal's belt. He heard a great hullabaloo behind him, a racket of whooping and laughing. Turning, he saw Tim and Miranda crossing the *prado* as if taking a stroll, while the miners spread out for them.

Tim halted, waving his rifle for silence. "We seen this killing," he bawled, "me and my gal, from the ridge over Jingo's bar! We was going down to pay a friendly call, and we seen the young feller get bushwhacked like Jingo says!"

He looked around, sure of attention. "Jingo didn't have no guns. He fetched 'em, though, and was gone afore we could scabble down the mountain. So we come after him as fast as a lame man could limp!"

"Bully for you, old Flintlock!" a miner roared. "Bully for Missy Flintlock! Bully for Jingo!"

The rest took up the shout. "We knowed he never done it!" "We wouldn't a seen him stretched!" "Hooraw! Now for the fun!"

A wave of cheering men swept up the steps. They pounded Jingo's back, punched his ribs, roughly pushed the others there. Then a new howl rose. "Here's a gun on Greasy! Shoved down his dirty pants leg! Here's the scut shot Daffy!"

Part of the wave washed back off the gallery, taking with it the drifters, the marshal and *alcalde*.

Jingo was laughing. "So you all come to your sense! Well, there's one more fellow I wanta see here—Black Ferris!"

The babel rose again. "He's here somewheres!" "In the store!" "I seen him go in with a rope!" "Come out, Blackie, or we'll fetch ye!"

A minute more, and Black stood in the doorway. His chest heaved under his

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beard, his eyes shifted this way and that, then settled on Jingo.

"So it's all cleaned up?" he asked hoarsely. "I'm sure tickled to have things turn out thisaway! I wanted to keep outa the mess, being your pardner—"

"Certainly!" Jingo interrupted. "Now I'll tickle ye some more. Won't ask what sorta cahoots ye was in with Greasy Pete, the marshal and the *alcalde*, or who tried for me with a rifle when I started rambling. No, sir, I'll only ask ye to hand over that writing!"

"That writing?" the big fellow mumbled. "Ain't got it. I lost it, I swear!"

Jingo narrowed his eyes, pointed both of his long-barreled dragoons. Hastily Black pawed a shirt pocket, dug out the old envelope with the pencil scribbling on it.

Jingo thrust the guns in his belt, took the crumpled paper. "Of all the damn foolish games! Ye just rubbed out the partnership agreement and wrote in a bill of sale over my name."

He tore up the paper. "Mighta won, at that, if ye'd kept the boys bluffed and rushed the hanging. Wouldn't buck the new law too much yourself, would ye? So after missing that pot shot, ye figgered to snag me into it, knowing the boys would be more riled about Daffy getting shot than about anybody else."

Black's bearded mouth opened and worked, but no words came out. Slowly he backed through the doorway into the room behind him. He had only one gun in his belt, Jingo noted. The other? Found on Greasy Pete, of course!

Old Tim spoke then, pleadingly. "Lemme get him through the window!"

Jingo waved the flintlock away. "He can have one more play."

He stepped after Black. The first thing he saw in the big room was a snaky thing that dangled from the roof. Beyond it, Ferris was still moving away.

"So ye had the rope all rigged!" Jingo said. "I oughta sling the noose around your own neck, but—*pull your iron!*"

He waited the split second until Black's gun had cleared leather. Then he whipped out his right-hand dragoon.

The shots were deafening in the shut-in place. Their flashes lit up the surrounding boxes, barrels, and shelves, before the blue smoke began to eddy.

Black Ferris was down under that smoke, floundering and gasping on the floor. Jingo peered through the reek. He hadn't been touched. Black's bullet had struck the beam overhead where the rope still hung. When the sounds of Black's struggling stopped, he turned and went out into clean air.

"Ye can dig a hole for him, boys," he said.

MIRANDA was shaking the preacher's daughter who had fainted. Old Tim was slapping the preacher's back, urging him to "buck up." Both turned relieved faces as Jingo went to them.

"Gotta thank you two," he grinned. "The fellers needed that push the right way. 'Twas sure luck, you showing up!"

Randa smiled up, tilt-nosed and freckled. "Luck nothing! It was me! Do you s'pose I'd lose the only man I ever won?"

Before he could answer that, a gang of miners came stamping up the steps.

"We been busy," Hosstail Hank announced. "Swung Greasy from the reg'lar hanging tree and kicked his mates outa camp. They'll run fer a week. As fer the *alcalde* and the marshal, we're goin' to ride them out on fence rails from a green-horn's truck patch!"

The others couldn't hold back any longer. "No more new law!" they bellowed. "The old law's good enough!" "We'll have a camp boss again, Jingo, and you're elect-ed!"

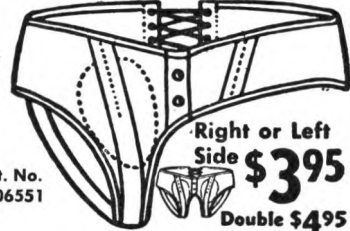
But Hosstail hadn't quite finished. "What about this here gospel shark?" he asked, jerking his thumb. "Shall we invite him to vamoose?"

Jingo looked at the minister, an honest, anxious little man, who was clutching his pale-haired girl. "Hell, let him stay," he said. "We'll even build his church for him." He looked at the other girl, the black-haired minx in buckskin. "Reckon a preacher might come in handy!"

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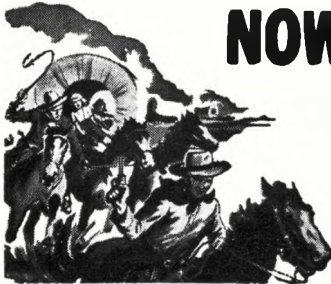
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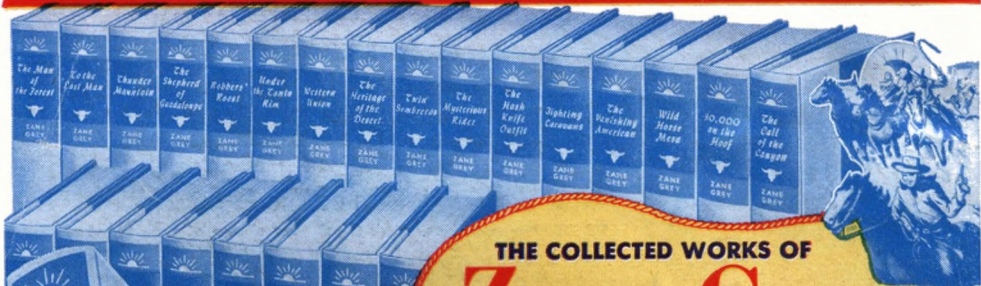
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