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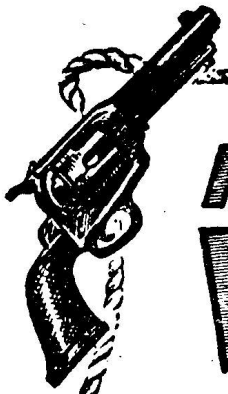

FAMOUS WESTERN

ALL STORIES NEW--NO REPRINTS

Volume 16 October, 1955 Number 5

Featured Novel

Novelet

Short Stories

Features

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MILTON LUROS, *Art Director*
MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.* CLIFF CAMPBELL, *Asso. Ed.*

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Tad waved his hat with his upstretched hand, yelling, "Men! Men! Listen! Don't..." But it was too late...

★ *Featured Novel of Bitter Rivalry*

SLAP LEATHER, PILGRIM

by RUEL McDANIEL

FOR THE first time in all his twenty-four years, Tad East stirred with a strange hunger for the companionship of human beings. The prairie waif of him had grown up, and the man and the human wants of a man awakened in him. He wanted the sound of voices, the laughter of children. Yes, he hungered even for the smile of a woman.

All day he had ridden toward Mesa Verde. A long time ago, as a homeless waif, eking his livelihood from the wastelands, he'd been through Concho Valley and its imprint had been strong upon him. If ever he embraced the confines of civilization, he had promised himself, it would be in Concho Valley.

He shrugged his tight-built shoulders and touched the roan. The warm April sun seared his eyes and the clank of horseshoes on the soft shale stirred a methodical dust along the two-rutted wagonroad. As he neared Mesa Verde a fear rankled him.

"People mean trouble," he told himself many times. "No people, no trouble." He thought of that now, and he thought of Hood McGonigal, and he wondered if the star-toters of Mesa Verde had heard. McGonigal had confirmed Tad's philosophy about people and trouble, if it needed confirmation.

The graveyard was the first marking of the town. The little plot was rimmed by a low limerock fence, and tender hands had planted evergreens to give life to this place of the dead; and he noticed how the little shrubs showed the struggle against the dry and the wind of the desert and he thought of them as brave.

Near the road was the brown sod of a grave and fresh blooms of an early desert flower-garden set in two blue vases, one at each end of the long mound. Two women stood silently by the grave, one thin and weary, the other small and young and sad.

When he rode alongside the fence by

Tad East had lived alone most of his life, and what little contact he had with people hadn't given him a very high opinion of them. And now, when he finally decided to see what life was like in a town, he found himself in the midst of a hair-trigger feud between the cowmen and sheepers!

the grave, the young one looked up at him and when his eyes joined with hers he felt a strangeness, a restlessness and a longing foreign in his life.

He lifted his cap, and the girl blushed and looked away. He felt her look upon his back as he pressed the roan on into Mesa Verde. She couldn't have been much over five feet, he kept thinking, and weighed maybe a hundred five at most. He stirred the vision around in his mind and he finally decided it was the startling blue of her eyes, and maybe the saddle-leather brown of her hair with the sun shining through it, that had captured his imagination.

He couldn't understand why he kept thinking of this girl, and because he couldn't understand, vague fear mounted. He had seen only a few women in his life and they were people; and people meant trouble.

The first houses and false-fronted stores of Mesa Verde were scattered along the road broadened wide enough for three wagons to pass abreast. Johnson's Blacksmith Shop, Henderson & Company, furniture and undertakers; Kelly's Emporium; Mrs. Sorrel, board: day or week. It was the pattern of any small Texas town, but towns had not laid across Tad East's path in the past, and all the signs intrigued him.

He probed his reaction and wondered if this was it. If this was where he should settle down and become one of many people, and cast his loneliness upon the heap of the emotions that bore out of the thoughts and characters and wants of a thousand human beings. A man can't forever roam the lonely trails, he had decided, with the rustlings of Spring pressing for a hearing upon his consciousness.

Concho Saloon was the next storefront that commanded his notice and it reminded him of the desert-dryness of his throat. Six or seven saddled horses drowsed under the two pecan trees in front of the *Concho,* and Tad kneed his roan to a hitch-ring that hung from the trunk of the smaller tree.

He sensed a tenseness in the faces of the few men and women he had seen and he wondered if this was the way of all people. He caught the eyes of many upon him.

EIGHT or nine men supported the polished cedar bar with their elbows and Tad noticed that a hush rode their conversation the moment he entered. He eased into a space between a big man with gray beard and a short, stocky man about Tad's age. The men watched his walk and they graced his cap with their glances. Years of stalking wild game out of grim necessity had taught him to walk with the easy stealth of a mountain cat, and the roll of a man long in the saddle combined to make him appear to move more in a rolling glide than a walk. McGonigal had remarked about it the first time they met.

The blond short man at Tad's left began talking again, and he powered his voice to carry all down the bar. He gave Tad the impression of a little man trying to appear big. When he turned to say something to a man three or four places down the bar, he lifted one foot and Tad saw that he wore extra caps on his bootheels.

Tad said "Beer", when the barman wiped the cedar in front of him.

The short blond man cut his eyes up at Tad then and fixed them on his snuff-colored corduroy cap. He said, "Sod-buster or sheepman?"

The stein was moving toward Tad's lips when the short man spoke and it kept moving. Tad drank in extravagant leisure, then set down the half-empty vessel, removed a blue handkerchief from his pocket and touched it heavily to his lips, then moved it on over his face.

When he returned the handkerchief to his pocket and exercised his eyes, he saw the man, who was nearly six

inches shorter than his own five feet nine inches, withering him with an impudent glare.

The short man said with an unnecessary loudness, "I'm Bandy Gates, get it? And I asked you a question!" His short, powerful arm flashed out and the hand clasped Tad's shoulder, near his neck.

Tad thought, "Well, it's come to me already and I didn't want it," and then his right fist shot out. It moved with the deadly viciousness of a Summer rattler's strike, and it made a crunching sound as it thudded against the short man's chin. The fellow fell down on his face as though someone had hit him on the back of the neck with a spike-hammer.

Tad finished his beer and he said softly to the gray-bearded oldster on his right, "Ain't a sod-buster; ain't a sheepman. Pilgrim, maybe." He could have explained the cap, but that would have required a lot of words and he had a philosophy about words. Words were like the years of a man's life. There were just so many, and once used they were gone and they could not be brought back and used again, to better purpose. Words were not to be wasted in idle talk.

He could have said he wore a cap because a man he once knew always wore a ten-gallon Stetson, and one day he robbed a stage and in making his getaway, he dropped his hat. That hat led to his hanging. If he'd swallowed his pride and worn the cap of an humble man, he might be living today. But that would have brought more questions and then he would use more words to explain things that shouldn't concern these men.

The barman handed Tad a pitcher of water and he made a shower of it on the fallen man's face. "Bandy Gates," Tad said, "who's he?"

The man groaned before the bartender answered, and then Tad saw his feet draw up and his knees arched and he finally made it to his hands and knees. Tad caught him under one arm and helped him up.

Bandy Gates brushed the helping hand away and beat the water from his doeskin jacket. He shook his head and without looking at the men, he aimed his short, tight body at the door. As he reached it, he turned and said, "Sod-buster, the sun better not set on you in Mesa Verde!"

THE LUXURY of a second beer pushed the desert from Tad's throat and the rising hum of bar talk cast a confusion upon the serenity of his pleasure. It was as he always believed. People made trouble. He wondered in this moment if he should not have chosen the out-trail around Mesa Verde. And then he knew that sometime he must come in and live like others, and any town would be the same. If he demanded the comforting hand of civilization, he must bear the slap of the other hand.

He elbowed the double doors of the saloon and they winced as he moved through. He stood on the dirt sidewalk in front of the Concho, in the shade of the pecans, and he moved his gaze upon the serrated face of the town.

A woman stopped in the street opposite him and she sat mannish astride a large dapple-gray mare. She said, "Cowboy!"

Tad saw and heard but he followed her gaze over his shoulder and saw that nobody else was present. "Me, Ma'am?" he said with a halting voice and a finger at his chest.

"You." She beckoned with her index finger. "Come here."

Tad really saw her now for the first time and what he saw made his eyes shutter momentarily then widen. Her light gray cowboy hat, pinch-crowned, snuggled soft blonde hair tossing loosely on her shoulders. She sat her saddle cool and erect, as though she were molded into her tight-fitting red-and-gray checkered vest and black corduroy riding breeches, then lifted into the

saddle. The half-inch leather strap of her sombrero snuggled under her strong chin.

Tad looked at her eyes, and the hidden questions he saw there made him feel naked in her sight. He eased his cap from his head and moved toward her in a slow stealth and he saw her watching the way he carried his body.

As he drew to an erect stance a few feet from her and looked up, he saw a smile clinging to the corners of her small, tight mouth and it gave him a sense of discomfort. Her lips parted and the smile matured. She said, "I hear you're quite handy with your fists." Her eyes showed him the amusement back of her words, and somewhere beyond the startling brown of them he read a mild challenge.

He grinned and his dark half-closed eyes showed the wrinkles that converged around them. He kept running his fingers around inside his cap. His sensitive lips parted but he said nothing. He was not accustomed to make words hurriedly. On the prairie, alone, he had little use for words, and those he did use, he took his time about framing.

"I can use a good rider," she said. "I'm Lila Cunningham."

Tad saw her wait, expecting recognition. He supposed that called for something. So he said, "Yes, Ma'am." He saw by the quick shuttering of her eyes and the sudden tightness of her mouth that he had said the wrong thing, or had not said it in the right tone.

"Lila Cunningham," she repeated. "I own the Two-C ranch, you know."

Tad sensed the impatience in her, and he hastened to cover his ignorance. "Howdy," he grinned. "I didn't know. First time in Mesa Verde; rode in no more'n a hour ago."

Her impatience was plain now for she made no effort to conceal it. "Then fork your horse—if you have one. You'll ride back to the ranch with me now." She said it as though the whole matter was settled. It was her wish and that was that.

He grinned up at her again and he guessed that she was around thirty but could pass in some eyes for twenty-five and in others at forty—in the eyes of women who did not like her. It was on the tip of his tongue to put her in her place—to tell her she might own Two-C ranch but not Tad East. But he looked at her again—the way she sat her saddle, the way the tight vest fit her, the tilt of her chin—and he swallowed the words on his tongue and replaced them. He said, "That suits me, Miss Cunningham. That's my horse there—the piebald roan."

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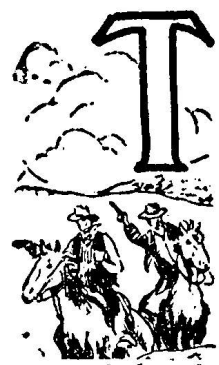

TAD FORKED his roan, Oscar, and guided him by the pressure of his knee until he rode beside the big gray ridden by Lila Cunningham. Tad saw that men stopped on the sidewalk to look at them as they passed, and now and then he saw a woman's head in a door or window. He sensed an even stronger tenseness now and he wondered why his riding away with this woman should make it so.

They followed for several blocks the shale-dust street that had brought Tad into town. The girl with the violet blue eyes and hair with a tinge of copper in it stood on the porch of Mrs. Sorrel's boarding house and Tad felt a strange inward glow as he realized she was watching him.

Lila Cunningham said, "She's quite pretty; name's Judith Sorrell. She and her mother run the boarding house."

Tad saw the tight smile again tagging the corners of Lila Cunningham's mouth. Heat moved up his neck and he tugged at the collar of his wool shirt.

He hoped his face did not show the red it felt.

"But she's poison!" the woman added.

Tad somehow felt a personal affront. The red feeling drained from his face and neck and his mouth set in a tight line. He did not look at Lila Cunningham for a long time; he was beginning to wonder if he was going to like to work for this woman. Yet he had cast his lot with Mesa Verde. It was time he settled down. Now this was his country. If this job was not to his choice, there would be other jobs.

They rode mostly in silence and Tad felt that she sensed his silent way and respected it. They turned off the road on the outskirts of town and took a country road, and the horses jogged abreast in the paths made by years of use by teams. Between these parallel paths and the wagon-ruts, tufts of grass or young ragweed grew where the ground was low and moist. Tad saw the hills stretching ahead, wearing fresh Spring coats of green and he knew the lonely out-trails still held a powerful pull upon him.

On a steep hillside on the left of the road he saw sheep clipping the short green grass and some of them spread out all the way down to the road.

An old ram stood in the road and raised his head and looked at them. The powerful, gnarled horns pointed a challenge. Tad glanced at Lila and he saw a fierce hardness in her face.

"Damned woolies!" she snapped. "Damn any man that owns them!" Tad caught the vehemence in her voice and the set of her chin. Here, he knew, was one he'd avoid crossing if possible. He began to see how a mere woman ruled a ranch. He imagined she bent men to her will; and those who did not bend, she broke, in one way or another. That's the way she struck him. He shrugged. Maybe he was wrong.

"This is natural sheep country," Tad said, and he watched her face; "sheep are here to stay."

She shot a sharp glance at him, out of eyes brilliant in their clearness. He marveled again at the sharp firmness of her chin and the tight set of her lips. She snapped, "That's fine talk for a cattleman!"

Tad embraced a moment of secret amusement. His remark had been deliberate, to show her that she did not yet own him and that he had a mind of his own and could speak it if he wished. Her reaction revealed a weakness and he felt better. He feared people—men or women—who maintained a cold sureness under all conditions. That tight exterior was a mask, he decided, and it covered many hidden emotions.

"I'm no cattleman; no sheepman," he finally remarked. "I never cared, one way or the other, whether the land had cattle or sheep. I ranged where wild game was plentiful. I just know some country is sheep country, and some is not. This is good sheep country. When nature says sheep, it's beyond the reach of a man—or woman—to say it is not."

He saw she held her temper with effort and it pleased him. Finally she asked, "Who are you? Where'd you come from? Perhaps I made a mistake in you, after all."

Tad thought awhile, for words still came with measured effort. Finally he said, "Well, Ma'am, I don't rightly know just who I am. I come in from the prairie."

He saw her face color and he knew exploding anger was near to the surface. "And I don't like smart-alecs!"

TAD LOOKED at her with serious eyes. He said, "I don't aim to be a smart-alec. I was dropped somewhere on the prairie; Kansas, I think. My ma died right after. I don't remember my pa a'tall. Some folks in a covered wagon, headin' Texas way, found me by a tent on the prairie and picked me up. I couldn't've been more than a few months alive then. I barely remember the folks, because I guess I was about

five when the Injuns raided us. I was asleep under a saddle-blanket and the Injuns missed me. Some cowboys come along and they got me and asked me questions. They called me Tad, 'mebbe account of I was little and skinny. When they asked my name and where I come from, I remembered the woman of the family always beggin' the man to go back east. So I said east to the cowboys. Somehow, I got the name of Tad East.

"Some of the cowboys pieced things together along the trail and one of 'em told me four-five years later my pa was killed robbin' a bank."

He grinned over at Lila Cunningham and he was a little confused that he'd spoken so many words without stopping. That was the most talking he'd done at one time in all his life, and it sent an emotion through him. He was glad he was fitting into the talk and life of people, and yet he was a little frightened, for he knew too much talk was a dangerous thing. He wanted never to be a wind-sifter. Talk made trouble.

Lila cut disturbed eyes on him and she said without smiling, "And I don't like cock-and-bull stories."

A hurt touched Tad. More words than he'd ever spoken in a row in all his put-togethers, and now he was doubted. Obviously the hurt reflected in his eyes, for she added more pleasantly, "I'm sorry. It's your story; stick to it, if you wish."

Tad's firm lips tightened. This woman still doubted his words and he was surprised that he cared. He went on, "I made my way since I was mebbe around nine. The cowboys that picked me up kept doin' things I didn't like and fin'lly I run off one night. I lived mostly on the prairie. I had to stalk wild game and cook it myself or starve—or hitch up with people. And I didn't like people. There was a streak of meanness in nearly every man I knew.

"I lived on the prairie and slept on the prairie. Two bear-hides stitched together with calf-hide strings kept me warm Winters. When it rained or snowed real hard, I holed up in a cave or under a ledge. It was a lonesome way, but I was out of reach of people. I learned a heap about wild things, and they taught me 'bout all I know. Guess I ain't slept in a house more'n three times since I was nine. Housewalls and roofs give me a sort of smothered feelin', like maybe it would be in jail.

"But I'm grown now. The country's settlin' up. I got to learn to live with people. I got to settle down and quit bein' a varmint."

He sighed after another long flow of words and he saw the woman looking at him with a different light in her eyes.

Finally a queer smile touched her lips—the kind of smile Tad had not seen before, and she said, "Perhaps I was hasty. I'm sorry; I'm so used to blanket-stretching from range liars." She shook her head slowly from side to side and shot a quick glance at him. She laughed suddenly. "Have to throw you a bunk under a water-oak, maybe."

THE HEADQUARTERS house of the Two-C was one of the biggest Tad ever had seen. It's gray limestone walls shone dully in the late sun and its width stretched nearly a hundred feet, facing down the green slope and overlooking Concho Valley. Grass covered the acres in front of the house and an elm and three oaks stood sentry over the yard. Great glass windows reflected the sun and sent sharp rays upon the valley. A wide hall divided the house into wings, and through the open hall Tad saw some of the houses in the back.

They rode on around to the corral, fenced with stout limestone rock, and a substantial rock and mesquite picket shed stood in the center. Off to the right stretched the bunkhouse, a solid-rock walled structure sixty or seventy feet long and maybe twenty feet wide.

The chuck shack sprawled at the south end of the bunkhouse. The wealth of the Two-C opened Tad's eyes.

Tad knew a sheep could walk between the knees of the oldster who waddled out to meet them. Lip lines broke the rough outline of gray and black hair that flourished from his nose to the second button of his blue shirt. Tad catalogued a grimness about the old man.

He held the reins of the dapple-gray and Lila swung her right leg around over the skirt of the saddle and dismounted. Tad saw that she was shorter than she had seemed in the saddle and that there was a definite shapeliness to her hips.

"Rufus, this is Tad East. A new rider."

The old man extended his hand and it felt limp in Tad's grasp. He mumbled, "Meetcha," and shifted his eyes to the woman. "Hank got it awhile ago; a slug through the thigh. Pete's rode for the doc."

Tad watched Lila and he saw the fierceness in the lines of her mouth. "Bushwhacked?"

"Mebbe yes; mebbe no. Sort of runnin' fight, I'd call it." Old Rufus searched for a target and sprayed it with snuff-juice. "Several of our boys flushed a gang near a bunch of beef along the north creek. Us and them started shootin' the same time, there 'bout, the way I heered it."

Tad untied his duffle-bag from behind his saddle and started following Rufus toward the bunkhouse. The thud of pounding hoofs made him stop short and the rider he saw rounding the outcorner of the main house was punishing his mount. He saw white patches of lather on the bay and he noted the rider wore a high-crowned, pinched black hat and Tad sensed a familiarity about him.

"Hold it!" the rider demanded. His eyes aimed at Lila Cunningham. Tad saw him leap from the bay and he saw Lila stiffen and stand cold and erect.

"That sod-buster!" he snarled, his voice high-pitched with anger. "He's not ridin' for the Two-C!" And Tad saw that the ired cowboy was Bandy Gates, the little man with the big noise, whom he had clouted in the saloon at Mesa Verde.

Lila Cunningham turned slowly and faced the cowboy, and Tad saw now that the fellow's eyes were shot with red and that he swayed a little. The owner of the Two-C said calmly, "You're drunk; and while you were lapping it up in town, one of our riders got a slug. A good tophand would've been with his men. Get in there and sleep it off!" A steady pointing finger indicated the bunkhouse.

Bandy Gates stiffened and drew himself up. A hand shoved his hat far back on his short forehead. "Don't ride that high-horse with me, Lila Cunningham. You ride out of town with this tramp, right before ever'body; but won't even be seen with me. How you get that stuff! Me—Bandy Gates—the bes' tophand in Concho Valley—best in Texas, by Gawd! An' you give me the runaroun'!"

He appreciated himself with a pounding of his chest and went on, "I do your dirty work an' I'm all right. I'm a great guy. Now I'm tellin' you a thing er two. That Pilgrim-bum goes, or else. Now!"

The owner of Two-C looked at the raving top-hand a long time and Tad saw the fire growing in her eyes and the jut of her chin, and the fierceness of what he saw shook him. Finally she said, "Gates, pack your duffle; your check'll be ready in ten minutes." Her voice was low and even, but it reminded Tad of sleet on a shale bed. She turned and strode to the main house.

"Well—" Bandy Gates snapped his mouth closed. He watched her straight, slim back for a second and then whirled toward the bunkhouse. Tad watched the woman as she went on to the house and she reminded him of a picture he saw one time of a young queen and her

regal beauty and in that moment he thought Lila Cunningham was like her.

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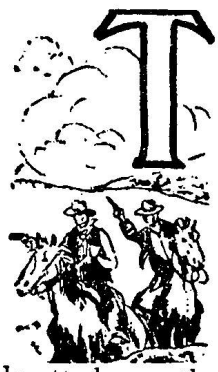

TAD AND Rufus followed Gates on into the bunkhouse and Rufus indicated a nail, and a bunk built into the wall. "Yores," Rufus said grimly.

Tad pitched his bag on the bunk and stooped over the knotted rope that bound the bag into a neat, servicable bundle. Bandy Gates mumbled to himself, down at the end of the house and Tad kept cutting his eyes under his shoulder at the growling cowboy as he belabored the knots of the rope.

Tad saw the drunken tophand raise up and glare in his direction. Then he saw Gates' right hand flash to the bone-handled gun swinging far down on his right thigh, and Tad didn't do anything till he saw the muzzle of the gun clear the leather of the holster. Gates' drunken eyes were upon Tad and he could see it and he knew that the gun would be aimed at him. Not until Gates' gun started to level did Tad do anything.

Then he whirled erect, and as he whirled his right hand flashed to his single, old-fashioned five-shooter. He weaved to the right to avoid the lead that even now was pouring from Bandy Gates' gun and he fingered his own. The flash and smoke blurred his view for a brief moment, but he heard a loud, anguished oath pour from the lips of Bandy Gates and Tad knew his aim had not weakened in his brush with humanity.

He and old Rufus Winters strode over to the wounded man. Gates writhed and cursed on his bunk, and Tad saw a patch of blood on the blanket and it dripped from the tips of the fingers on Bandy's right hand as his left squeezed it. In that moment Tad regretted ever leaving the solitude of the long trails, for he did not want to hurt people in order to live peacefully with them.

"Right across the thumb and trigger-finger. Son, that's shootin'!" Old Rufus cackled appreciatively.

Tad tore a strip from a pillow-case and handed it to Rufus. He said calmly, "Better bind up his hand. I'll get some water." He came back with the water and the oaths from Bandy Gates' lips still despoiled the air. Tad said, "Wish you hadn't drawed, feller. I hate to hurt folks."

Bandy's lips tightened and a vicious twist marked the corners. "I'll even this with you, if I never do another thing in this world, you range-bum!"

AT SUPPER Tad met most of the crew—Pete Smith, a middle-aged gaunt man with a walrus mustache; Patchy Collins, a good-natured kid of eighteen or nineteen, who still thought a cowboy's life was adventure; Harve Fortson, serious-minded red-head with the problems of foreman heavy upon his face; Hank Harris, who had been brought in just awhile before supper, with his leg tied up in white sheeting and walking with a hard limp, and three or four others.

Tad ate in silence and his ears filtered the talk and his mind tried to put the pieces together. He noticed the grimness of the men, and he saw how nobody laughed at any of young Patchy's tenderfoot remarks.

When Patchy asked, with an expectant excitement in his eyes, "When we going gunning for them sheepherders?" he saw the fierceness in Harve Fortson's small dark eyes, and he felt the silence of the foreman beat upon the thoughts of the crew. Now and then as Tad glanced up from his plate of frijoles, fried steak and boiled potatoes, he caught Fortson studying him out of squinted, inquisitive eyes and he wondered how he stood with this worried cowman.

In the dark silence of his bunk, Tad could not sleep. He fought that feeling of something closing in upon him, and now and then he raised up and sat on the side of the bunk with his socked feet on the floor. He must fight this trapped feeling, he kept telling himself, for if he wanted to live with other people he must learn to sleep under a roof, for otherwise he would be marked as a queer one and would not be accepted as one among men.

He pried his mind from the walls and roof of the bunkhouse and bent it to the events of the day and when it probed the pieces of the puzzle it could not give him an answer.

His mind took him to the graveyard and the girl with the startling blue eyes, and it sent a strange uneasiness through him when he caught himself wanting to see Judith Sorrell again. He pictured her there on the porch of her mother's boarding house and how she watched him, and a glow enlivened his body; and he recalled the words of Lila Cunningham, "She's poison!", and he wished he would not think of her again.

The grim silence of these men of the Two-C recalled the tenseness he had felt pressing upon him the moment he rode into Mesa Verde and how he had sensed it even in the idle bar-talk of the men at *Concho Saloon.* And he probed his brain for an answer. Why? What sinister undercurrent was running through this country and setting men to silence and furtive watchfulness? Why had Hank Harris been shot, and why did Two-C riders engage in a running fight with some other crew?

And he remembered the bitter hate he had caught in Lila Cunningham's voice and on her face when they rode upon the sheep peacefully grazing on the hillside near Mesa Verde. Tad knew little of thoughts of men, but he knew the ways of the denizens of the out-trail and brush country. He knew silent, stealthy animals spelled danger. He knew that when an animal stalked on padded feet, some other animal was going to die.

And his boss, Lila Cunningham? When he tried to probe her he was a little ashamed when he found himself thinking mainly of her graceful form and the way she walked and how she carried her shoulders and how the tight vest fitted her perfect body. He thought he had caught more than the relation between employee and employer as she and Bandy Gates exchanged hot expletives; but he was not sure, and he kept wondering.

NEXT MORNING at breakfast, Harve Fortson said, "East, back north from here, four miles, there's a wide box canyon, tree-covered and pretty rough. Some cows with calves—no more than twenty or so head—are rangin' there. You ride up and drive 'em to the main corral for branding. You'll see the corral as you ride out." The lamplight made a yellowish cast of his face and Tad saw the worry there in his eyes. "Watch for sheep-sign, goin' and comin'," he added.

When Tad forked his piebald roan and headed north, old Rufus Winters yelled at him. "Hold up a little spell, Son, and I'll ride partway with you. I'm checkin' a windmill a ways out." Without realizing it, Tad was appreciating this opportunity for solitude and his answer was short, without his intending it to be so. He snapped; "Well, hurry up!"

They rode beside each other, for the trail was wide and led across a treeless tableland, and they were a long time silent. Then Rufus said, "You're a queer one, East; but you got a natu'al shootin'-eye. Likeable, too. Now you take that growl of your'n when I asked you to wait. Comin' from some hombres, that 'ud a' riled my dander no end. Comin' from you, it kind of seemed natu'al, and I didn't care."

Tad smiled at the old rider and his bright teeth flashed like the crystals the sun made of the morning dew on

the Spring gamma grass. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that I ain't used to people. But I think I like it here," he added quickly, not wanting to offend the old man again. "How'd Miss Cunningham ever get hold of a big spread like this?"

Rufus said, "Ha!" and he cut his eyes over at Tad. "Fust, she ain't a Miss. She' a Miz'. And I wonder why she hired me."

"Me too, sort of," Tad agreed. "I was standin' in front of the saloon, mindin' my business, and up she rides and tells me to fork my roan, that I'm workin' for her. Somethin' like that. Kind of like she owned the world and ever'body walkin' on it. 'Pears nice, though."

Before they rode to where Rufus' trail forked off toward the broken-down windmill, Tad knew some things and was trying to piece them together and decide the answers to some of his unmasked questions.

Jonas Cunningham had ridden into Concho Valley as a kid scarcely dry behind the ears. With a burning ambition, a true rope and a hot branding iron, he'd roped and branded wild stuff by the hundred until at thirty he was the biggest rancher in the Valley. He built the rock house and set himself up like a baron and he ruled his selected section of the range with an iron hand. Whoever crossed his path joined him or never crossed again.

Eight years ago he rode a cattle-train to Kansas City and came back three weeks later with a bride. Lila. He never said much about Lila or his courtship and of course nobody had the guts to ask him. Jonas Cunningham was one to ask questions, not to answer them. When anyone wanted to know something about Cunningham or his business, he waited till Cunningham told him or he never knew.

The rumor finally got around that Lila had been a Kansas City show girl. Anyhow, she kind of set the range folks on their ears, first time she made an appearance in Mesa Verde. Young bucks hardly old enough to wipe their own noses and oldsters who hadn't shaved since the surrender of Robert E. Lee showed up with clean faces and axle-grease in their hair, and the way Jonas guarded his bride against the grinning stares of the range men was a wonder, the way old Rufus told it.

About six years ago a homesteader bought a section of school land up at the head of Squirrel Creek, brought in a few sheep and starting busting the sod. Jonas and the little ranchers didn't pay much attention to that one sod-buster, but first thing they knew that one had a dozen neighbors. Farmers had found this shale country was a natural range for sheep, and what seemed almost overnight, woolies were spreading over the range.

Well, the inevitable happened, and Tad remembered how Rufus had shaken his head as he narrated this part of it. The ranchers, led by Jonas Cunningham, started trying to drive the sheepmen off the valley range. Some of 'em went. Others fought back. Then one evening late Jonas personally led three of his cowboys and they started driving a flock owned by a fellow named Pete Sorrell over a cliff. When Jonas didn't pay any attention to Sorrell's warning, the sheepman sent a bullet at the cattleman. It caught him in the forehead, just above the base of the nose.

That divided the country. Folks had to take sides. They were sheepmen or cattlemen. Few were allowed to straddle the fence, whether they ran stock or not. The sheepmen rescued Sorrell from a cattlemen mob and in court Sorrell was cleared by a jury of townsmen.

"And that's how Lila come a widder," old Rufus had said balefully. "That was more'n a year ago."

As a sort of afterthought, Rufus told him about Pete Sorrell, and how just five weeks ago he was found dead on the edge of the valley, under a dead

horse. The cowboy that found him said the horse'd stepped in a gopher hole, fell and broke his leg, and crushed Pete Sorrell under him.

Tad felt a vague anger rising after old Rufus said, in a confidential voice, "But, 'tween me and you, Tad, I saw the carcas of that hoss last week and I found a bullet hole in its skin, just behind the right shoulder.

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THINGS were beginning to take shape now in Tad East's mind. He understood the tenseness of the town and the way people looked at him, with their eyes asking questions. And the fresh mound in the graveyard and the two women. They would be Pete Sorrell's widow and daughter and without understanding just why he felt a pity for the women, left without a man to do for them.

He rode down a bluff by a narrow trail long used and cut out of the soft sandstone by the marks of many hoofs. In the soft rock on each side of the trail—so close that he could reach out and touch both sides at once—he saw initials carved into the rock, and crude caricatures of cowboys. And a little farther there was a sketch that showed three sheep grazing and a herder lying on his face with a dagger in his back. Under the crude sketch was *"This for sheepmen"*. Someone had come along and scratched across the sketch three or four times and Tad imagined he could read the anger of the person as he drew his knife across the surface; but the man had done an incomplete job, leaving the crude sketch plain and full of meaning.

In the distance Tad saw the growth of timber Harve Fortson had mentioned and even from this distance he saw several longhorns grazing leisurely at the timber's edge.

The wide-floored canyon into which the trail led drew to a point where the timber grew, and on both sides the clay walls rose irregularly for thirty or forty feet and Tad saw the luscious green grass, even now grown up to the fetlocks of his horse; he marveled at the value of this range, for either cattle or sheep.

Across and up, nearly opposite the canyon's head, a little mud shack squatted on the quarter-mile flat tableland between the canyon cliff and the beginning of the next mountain. Tad saw a woman hanging clothes on a line by the side of the shack and a tot holding to her dress as she fastened the wet clothes on the line. On the tableland a small flock of sheep grazed contentedly, and back of the shack a wispy line of dust rose methodically and drifted into the side of the mountain. Presently a plowman, following a single plow with a gray mule pulling, moved from behind the house and followed the dry row to the edge of the wire fence.

The crude shack, the faded clothes on the line, the one-horse plow, told Tad of the poverty of the farmer and his family and a feeling of sympathy grew within him.

He hazed the cattle from the brush and as he emerged, with the cattle pointed down the canyon toward the big central corral, another flock of sheep grazed leisurely across the path of the cattle. He checked the moving direction of the woolies and saw that they had cut down from the tableland through a path.

As the point of the herd neared the sheep, Tad saw someone run around the belled leader of the flock and turn him back in the direction the flock had come, obviously clearing the way for the wild cattle.

"Hi, ya!" the man said as he raised a hand. Tad saw that he was a youngster—no more than nineteen or twenty,

and he saw the fear in his face which could not be masked by his effort at friendliness.

"Howdy," Tad said.

The youngster cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled above the muted clamor of moving hoofs and the noises of a moving herd, "Didn't mean to get in your way, feller! These woolies got down in the valley before I knowed it."

Tad waved his hand and touched his roan to head off a mean critter trying to lead the herd back to the brush.

HE REMEMBERED that Harve Fortson had told him to watch for sheep sign, and now he hoped Harve would forget to ask him if he had seen anything. This boy obviously was trying to keep out of trouble with the cattlemen. He was an honest-faced, friendly kid. And Tad thought of the farmer and his wife and their sod hut on the tableland. They were poor people and trying to get along. Tad could not hate people like these. He found himself taking sides without wanting to. He wondered at first why it should be, and then he knew, for he always had been for the weak animal in its fight to survive against the stronger bully. Tad had taken a measure of satisfaction in killing the biggest bear or rabbit he could find when he needed food, for they always lorded it over the small and the weak.

And now the sheepmen and farmers were the weak bears and rabbits and the Two-C and the other ranchers were the bullies, pushing the poor ones from the feed. He did not want to take sides with the little people. He was accepting money from Two-C, and for that he must do its owner's bidding. He was obligated to return an honest day's work, and because he felt a sympathy for the little men, a feeling of guilt touched him.

And then he remembered what old Rufus had told him about the bullet in Pete Sorrell's dead horse, and he wondered if some Two-C rider had shot at Sorrell and hit the horse instead, and in so doing had hoped to curry the favor of Lila Cunningham. And he wondered if Lila knew.

Pete Sorrell was Judith's father and a cowman had murdered him. And when he let that completely settle in his thoughts, his feeling of guilt in sympathizing with the sheepmen molded to anger—anger against any man or combine that could be so bitter as to murder the father of Judith Sorrell. Tad felt the tug of the girl's impress upon him and he was filled with an urgency to see her.

Tad corralled the herd and the sun had painted its final canvass behind the blunt-pointing hills as he jogged leisurely toward headquarters. A rider galloped in from the hills to his right and he pulled up and looked around.

Lila Cunningham said, "How'va, cowboy! Got 'em penned so soon?" She kneed her gray over the short-cropped grass beside Tad.

Her hat lay loose against the back of her head and neck, held by a strap under her chin; and her blonde hair danced as the wind fingered through it. She rode straight and shoulders back and Tad detected a glow in her cheeks that he did not see the day before.

"Wasn't much job," he said with a grin. "No trouble a'tall."

"See any sheep?"

Tad didn't look at her, and he felt her eyes proving him. "Yeah," he finally said, still without looking at her. It was in his mind to avoid telling about the sheep if possible; but he had not been around people long enough to lie. He felt that if he could lie, lying now would be justifiable. But he couldn't, and things would have to be as the truth propelled them.

He felt her reading the tightness of his face and he knew she knew where his sympathies lay. His very tone had told her, and he could not help it.

"On our range?"

"On the upper canyon floor. Open range; public school lands."

"So I hired a woolie-lover to ride cattle-herd!" Her words were cold and they fit the animated brown pits of her eyes.

"I'm no sheepman; I told you yesterday. But I don't hate sheepmen. They've never done anything to me. They got to live, same as you and me. But I don't cotton to sheepmen. I see things through my own eyes; but I don't cotton to nobody."

SOME OF the hardness moved away from her lips and she said, "If it came to a fight between the Two-C and the sheepmen, what would you do? Tuck tail and run—or join the sheepmen and sod-busters?"

She waited for his answer and Tad saw by her face that her first anger had gone and its place had been taken by curiosity. He said, "Long as I take your money I do your biddin'. When I can't take orders, you'll know. But I don't have any hate in my heart for sheepmen—for any of the little men. I don't hate anybody; I moved among human beings to live in peace."

She unbuckled the strap under her chin, lifted the hat from the back of her head and knotted the strap around the saddle-horn. She held her head far back and tossed her hair and let the rising coolness blow through it and she breathed deeply. She said "It is not natural that so much violence could be so near to the surface in a country so serene; but my husband left me a cattle domain here. I'll not be the one to see it broken.

"When he was ready to run the iron on his first crop of calves, he chose the Two-C and he set about with iron will to build his domain to the status of that brand. Do you know the meaning of that brand? Two-C—that means two counties. He was determined that his holdings would spread over two West Texas counties. When he saw that he must buy land to hold it, he began buying up tracts wherever he could obtain title. Before he died, his herds ranged over all of Simpson County and much of Sillford. The sod-busters came in with their plows and sheep and bought up choice sections right in the middle of our ranges—before we got around to it."

Tad saw a trait of her he had suspected lay beneath that alluring surface since his first words with her yesterday. Beneath the feminine softness he saw a woman who probably grew up with a will for power and had found in the man she married more fuel to drive that will to new heights. The woman he saw there frightened him, gave him fear for the people who stood in her path.

"But there are laws, laws for all the people," Tad reasoned. "Laws made to govern some and not others are not good laws. If the law allows the squatters to buy public land where your cattle range, then the laws should be changed—or you should give up the land. It is not the fault of the squatters. It is the fault of those who made the laws if there is a fault."

She rode in silence then and Tad wondered at her thoughts. He was mildly amazed that he had said so much and again he reminded himself that talk was the basis of most trouble.

They dismounted at the home corral and Rufus took the reins of her gray. She said to Tad, "Come to the house a minute."

Tad shot a look at old Rufus for some answer to her order and Rufus glanced away, pretending not to see Tad's eyes upon him.

The great living room was the most splendid place Tad ever had seen, and he sat on the edge of a high-backed antique chair and nervously tormented the inside hand of his cap with his fingers. A painted picture of a man bordered by a gold frame hung on the wall above the mantle of the fireplace and Tad was drawn to it by the fierce determination of the man's eyes. Tad guessed it was Jonas Cunningham.

Lila said, "Sit there. I'll be back in

a second," and before Tad had fully circled the room and all its finery with his widened eyes, she was back. She carried a fine gray Stetson, and it was creased deep across and crushed in on each side of the crown.

"I'm tired of looking at that damned sod-buster's cap!" she said. "Try on this for size."

Tad looked at the hat in her hand and he looked at her as he moved awkwardly to his feet. He read only that same steady determination in her eyes. The hat was nearly a perfect fit.

"Now you look at least something like a ranch hand. If you're to ride Two-C range, look the part. That was one of my husband's. Wear it half as well as he did and you'll make a good hand."

Tad stole a glance in the mirror and he was pleased with the reflection. He put on the hat again and adjusted it to his face. "Thanks," he muttered. Then he took it off and held it in his hand with the cap.

When he gave her a quick glance, he caught her eyeing him methodically from toe to head. Her face lighted, then the light went away, and finally it came back again. He saw her eyes brush against his tight-fitting shirt where it was so close to his arms and shoulders that it seemed grown on him, and then her gaze shifted and Tad experienced again that feeling of nakedness, so intense was her scrutiny.

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LASHES of yellow light marked the homes of Mesa Verde, a waning half-circle of glitter said here was *Concho Saloon*. At sight of this invitation, old Rufus touched his pony and started moving ahead of Tad. "Throat's dry's a Spring branch in late August!" the old cowboy pleaded. "Come on, Son!" He said to Rufus, "I'll meet you at the *Concho*. A little later."

Squares of light showed in the windows of Mrs. Sorrell's boarding house, and it drew Tad like a geni's magic. He dropped his reins over one of the white pickets of the yard-fence and the gate complained on its hinges as he opened and closed it.

In the living room of the boarding house sat Mrs. Sorrell, with her same gaunt paleness, and Judith. The light on the high center-table sent soft yellow rays down into Judith's hair and it mingled there and made a copper loveliness. Tad saw the white cloth spread over the dishes on the dining table in the afterglow of the living room lamp and he knew it was far past suppertime.

He tapped lightly on the door and a guilt crept through him and he had the feeling of invading the sanctity of these lonely women. When the girl opened the door, Tad saw her eyes widen in surprise and he said, "Good evenin', Miss Sorrell. Er—is it too late for supper? I—"

She laid her eyes upon him and the violent blue of them in frames of long lashes cast a fascination over him. A soft smile toyed with her lips, and then when her eyes thoroughly conceived the hat in his hand, the smile dissipated. She said finally, "It's too late; yes."

Tad ran the hat very rapidly in a circle around his hand. "Would I be—that is, could I come in and talk, for a little while?"

She was not hampered by hesitation now. She said, "I see you're now a Two-C man. No Two-C man expects a welcome here. Since—what happened." Her lips made a sharp, tight line of her mouth and Tad detected a small trembling of her chin. "I wouldn't think you'd have the gall—" She made a move to close the door and Tad gave way for its closing, and he saw mist in her eyes as the door built a wall between them.

The *Concho* held no lure for Tad

East, but he had said he would meet Rufus there shortly and he must go there. As he rode slowly the distance to the saloon, he was impressed with the furtiveness of men on the street. The tenseness he had felt yesterday still was strong upon the town and he felt it tightening.

Old Rufus Winters worried an empty glass at the front end of the bar and formed a fifth of a half-circle of range men. As Tad joined them, he saw the vacancy along the bar, and this vacancy trailed to another group of men halfway down the forty-foot counter. The men of the latter group stood close together and their talk was only for their ears. Their thick-soled shoes, bib-topped Levis and caps or narrow-brimmed hats marked them as farmers or sheepmen, and Tad did not like the looks of that vacancy between the two knots of men.

Rufus introduced Tad to the other four and Tad marked them as two small ranchers who ranged the skirts of the Two-C, a rider for one of them and a Two-C man Tad had not seen before.

"Any sheep down your way, Tobe?" one of the ranchers asked and Tad felt the ice in his question. He noticed, too, that the man had raised his voice so that the other men down the bar might hear if they chose.

"Plenty!" Tobe said. "Somethin's got to be done."

Tad saw the sheepmen loosen their half-circle and he caught the new tension that marked every man.

THE SWINGING door creaked inward and a short form stood just inside for a brief moment, and Tad saw his eyes check the groups at the bar. Then he raised a hand and headed for the group of range men. Tad saw it was Bandy Gates and that he was drunk. He felt an irritation rise in him.

"Rufus, you ol' mossy-horn!" Bandy grinned at the old rider and his red-rimmed eyes squinted in their search of other faces. Then they touched Tad and swept to his head—and the gray Stetson there. Tad saw him stiffen and straighten, and his hands, two fingers bandaged, started toward his hips. Tad saw a shadow of caution cross Gates' eyes and a paleness swept his face. Gates' hands halted in their sweep and his lips curled when he said, "Well, if it ain't the wooly-man, with a range-rider's hat! I been waitin' for you. An' I'm tellin' you now—stay 'way from Sorrell's boarding house! That's my claim, and no sod-buster's gonna slam his pick in my diggin's!"

Tad felt the red climb his neck and spread over his face. Something touched the control of his temper and his fist came up.

Rufus slipped between him and Bandy. "Here! Here! None o' that stuff. You're drunk, Bandy; go sleep it off!"

Bandy stood back and a fear showed in his eyes and it touched his parched lips. A sickly grin lighted the paleness of his mouth finally. He said, "You better go on over there with the rest of them woolies and sod-busters, 'cause I'm gonna do a little fancy trimmin' and they'll need yore help."

He moved apart from the cattlemen and his short arms arched slightly to swing his hands just above his two white bone-handled guns.

One of the sheepmen moved away from the bar and his eyes were fiercely upon the drunken Gates. He said slowly, "Better button that lip and take a ride, cowboy. We don't want no trouble; and we don't want that sort o' talk!"

Tobe dealt himself a hand then. "And we ain't takin' that kind of talk from no sheepman, either!" He moved to stand by Bandy and the farmers and sheepmen spread out.

Tad saw that death was in this room for men's pleasant leisure and an urgency prompted him to move. He strode to the vacancy between the two groups and he held up a hand and faced one group, then the other. He

said, "Men, this is foolish talk. You have a life and it is not given that you waste it in useless fightin' 'gainst your neighbors. We have come here to drink. Let's drink. I think—"

"Stand aside, you yellow-livered owlhooters!"

THE SPEAKER was Bandy Gates, and Tad caught out of the corner of his eye a movement toward his guns.

He glimpsed also a quick movement of the barman. And then a powder-flesh exploded upon the tenseness of the room and when the fire of the explosion was dead, the saloon was wrapped in total darkness. Tad heard the clatter of glass as the overhead lantern scattered itself upon the floor, and he heard the muffled voices of men and the soft movement of feet.

He sprang against the bar, his shoulders and head crouched below the top. And then a flash and a roar broke from the group of range men.

The sheepmen answered, and then the saloon was criss-crossed with tongues of fire and the roar and the stench of burned black powder pressed upon Tad's consciousness. The points of fire gradually spread, until soon each end of the room was lined with bursting flame and the roar was a tumult of death.

Tad heard a body thud against the floor, and in the same moment he felt a man brush past him. He held low and close to the bar and his gun was in his hand, but he could not push himself to use it. It was a useless fight between two factions, and from this small group it would spread like the consuming flames of a November prairie fire pushed by a north wind, until it touched every man in the Concho Valley. And he crouched there, not willing to take a hand. He was taking the money of a range outfit and he held grimly to a stubborn loyalty as long as he carried Two-C marks. And yet he could not draw his sympathies from the little men of the sheep herds and the soil.

A man at the lower end of the room yelled and Tad heard an oath pass his lips. The creaking hinges of the swinging door announced the passage of a man outside, and the firing began to die and finally it stopped altogether as the saloon drew tight its shroud of darkness.

Then the swishing of a match across the barman's pants formed a round glow back there and the flickering light moved in shaking hands to a candle on the back-bar and he leveled it across the cedar surface. "Next man moves to shoot gets a load of buckshot!"

Tad saw four men down. Two sheepmen lay very still in their grotesque sprawl upon the sawdust-covered floor. One cowman lay on his back, one hand flung loosely across his chest and the other outstretched, palm up. The death was in his unseeing eyes. Another rancher sat against a table and Tad saw the pattern of blood as it trickled through his tight-gripped fingers around his leg. The cattleman's lips were tight-drawn and pale and a curse broke them.

Bandy Gates was nowhere in sight, but old Rufus Winters and Tobe still stood their ground at the upper end of the saloon and they gripped their guns and their eyes made quick semicircles of the room, alert to any sheepmen move.

Four sheepmen stood at the lower end of the place and the purpose expressed in their faces said, "We didn't start it, but we'll finish it if anybody makes a shootin' move!" But in a moment first one man then another relaxed and the crisis had passed.

At that moment Tad heard a moan near his feet, slightly to his right, and for the first time he saw the body lying there. The moan expanded and articulated until it said, "Water!"

The barman set a glass of water on the bar and Tad reached it and touched it to the man's lips with one hand as he helped the fallen man to a

sitting position with the other. The man drained the glass, slowly wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and muttered, "Thanks, feller." Tad put the weight of his two hands under the man's shoulders and helped him move so that he could sit propped against the base of the bar. He saw a ragged round spot in the man's shirt, and he knew that a bullet had ripped through his shoulder above the heart.

Tad raised up from his task of mercy and his eyes fell upon the face of old Rufus. The expression he saw there shocked him and for a moment he could not understand the glare of intense hate that the old cowboy focused upon him.

Rufus moved toward the door, followed by the other cowmen, and then he stopped and wheeled around and faced Tad. He said, "You finally showed yore colors, East. I'll tell the Missus we left you weepin' over a shot-up woolly-man!"

The bitterness in the voice shocked Tad. Not until this moment did he realize that the man he had helped was a sheepman. Before, he merely had been a human being who needed help, and he had helped him. In so doing, he had branded himself a sheepman's man in the eyes of the cattlemen—even to old Rufus.

He shrugged his shoulders. He ordered another drink as the doctor and the undertaker moved in upon the jobs tailored for them.

- 6 -

ILA CUNNINGHAM sat before her full-length mirror and moved the hairbrush slowly, methodically through her long blonde hair, the pull of the brush straightening out the waves, only for them to snap back when the brush had completed its journey of devotion.

Then she smiled at herself deliberately to watch the formation of wrinkles around her eyes. She touched the wrinkles meditatively and wondered if they revealed too much. She shrugged her shoulders finally, but her fingers kept exploring the vicinity of the wrinkles and her mind continued asking personal questions.

She shook off the straps of her soft pink bodice and let the garment loll at her waist as she deliberately surveyed herself anew in the mirror, and then she smiled faintly as what she saw reassured her of the youth that still claimed her body. She slipped a silk nightgown over her head, stood up, permitted her underclothing to make a heap upon the floor and shook the gown on down. She blew out the ornate table lamp near the mirror and in the faint glow of the low-turned lamp on a fixture above her bed she moved gracefully to the bed.

Sleep did not embrace her, and she knew it wouldn't. There were times for thinking, and this was one of the times.

Her husband, Jonas Cunningham, had been dead more than a year now, and she was confident that if Jonas' spirit looked upon her handiwork since he had gone, the spirit would approve. She not only had held together the empire of range and cattle Jonas had left her but she had added to it. She believed she had done equally as well as Jonas himself could have done, had he lived to guide the destinies of the Two-C.

Already innured to hardship and imbued with a fierce determination to rise above her inherited station life, she had met Jonas Cunningham just at a time when the curtain was beginning to rise to reveal the beginning of her dreams' reality. In Jonas she had met a personification of her own grim determination to forge ahead. Through these years as his wife, she not only

had fed the flame of her own ambition but she had caught the greater driving force of her husband it had fused with her own and grown more fierce.

She had accomplished alone all that Jonas could have done. She was the mistress of one of Texas' great ranches. Cattle bearing her brand roamed the green valleys of two counties. Her brand was known wherever cattlemen met and talked together. She had tackled a man's job in a man's world and she had done a strong man's job.

And yet a definite longing sapped her. She hungered for the things that cattle, land and money—couldn't bring her in complete sincerity.

The hunger brought her a desperate feeling of futility, for so few men, she knew, could satisfy that hunger. He must be a man whose will was so strong that she herself could not bend it, and yet a man whom she would try with all her might to bend. He must be a man who could go through all the fire of her strength and yet emerge with his own will and character unbowed by her force.

At first the outward bravado of Bandy Gates had fooled her. She was ever subconsciously searching for the man to fill the void left by Jonas Cunningham's passing, and at first she prodded her longing into believing the loud-talking, cocky Bandy Gates might be the man. But time destroyed any illusions she had built around Bandy and had revealed him as a blowhard with the character of a wet-weather wriggleworm.

The next man must be Jonas Cunningham—and more. Jonas had commanded her respect and complete admiration for his will and driving-power; but he had not completely commanded her love. The next man must have the power to claim that, too.

THIS SIMPLE, uncultured, unspoiled Tad East from the open prairie intrigued her from the moment she saw him standing there in the dust of Mesa Verde, so erect, so virile and so obviously out of place. She saw in him the raw ore from which it would be possible for the right woman to refine the truest steel.

In Tad East's presence, she experienced the rare feeling of incompleteness. He was the only man in a long time who had been able to get under her skin and dissipate that inner calm which she had so methodically created over the years.

And because Tad East had done that to her, he interested her. She detested his views toward the sheepmen; but she had secretly admired his courage in coming out and telling her what he thought. Most men would have groveled to her views, whether they believed in them or not. Men always catered to her. Tad East obviously was not catering to her, and he was at once a challenge and an intrigue.

Her innermost conscience told her that she had encouraged the man. Not obviously, of course. Most men, however, would have accepted it as a challenge and would have followed through. Tad East had not given notice to her encouragement, and she was both angry and glad. If he had reacted as the others, come pawing at her feet, pouring out sacchrine mouthings which he did not mean but which his egotism propelled him to do as a defense of his manhood, she would have been disgusted. Tad had not, and she was angered and at the same time glad and intrigued. And she suffered slight forebodings, too. Maybe she wasn't as young and alluring as she had been. Maybe that was the reason Tad East could look upon her and still turn the topic of conversation to cattle or the weather without a ruffle in his countenance or a falter in his slow voice.

No, that could not be it. The mirror had not lied. She still turned other men's eyes. She still could stir an outburst of attention from any other man with the mere parting of her lips in

a smile. Others succumbed to the very same things which failed to stir this simple product of the out-trails and lonely prairies.

Tad East had character. She knew that. He had spunk—the spunk to take her money for an honest day's work and then stand on his own feet and tell her what he thought about sheepmen and sod-busters. In a penniless cowhand, that was courage and proof of sound character. That sort of stuff, funnelled into the proper channels, could not be stopped.

She tossed upon her linen-slipped pillow and sleep would not visit her. Questions kept tormenting her innermost thoughts. Was Tad East the man? Could he, by the rash force of his will and character, make her love him and respect him, and force his will upon her? And at the same time, was he pliable enough to mould into the self-assured dynamo of ambition and force strong enough to continue to build Two-C into the biggest spread in West Texas?

It was expecting a lot, and troubled sleep finally rescued her, with the questions unanswered.

ANXIOUS thuds on the front door brought her back from restless sleep. She sat up and the persistent pounding at the door filled the house with ominous reverberations. She groped at the foot of the bed for her robe and said, "Who is it?"

"It's Rufus. Got to see you—right now!"

The urgency of old Rufus' voice, and the note of trouble it carried, sent her into a fury of rising. She found a match on the table beside the bed and in its beam she found the overhead lamp. She flung the robe around her shoulders, jumped into soft slippers and dashed to the door.

She flung open the door and old Rufus halted her questions with, "Hell's broke loose! A bunch of cattlemen tied into a gang of sod-busters and sheepmen down at the *Concho Saloon* this evenin' and she's busted wide-open. Three or four men dead already. The whole country'll be an armed camp, beginnin' right now!"

When he halted for breath, she asked, calmly now, that she had heard the worst. "Where's Tad East?"

Old Rufus lowered his face and his eyes would not meet hers. "Shore hate to tell you, Mis' Cunningham, but the boy's gone over to the sheepmen. Last I saw of him, he was nursin' a slugged woolly-man like a long-lost brother!"

A white, delicate index finger went to her chin, and it and the thumb served as a meditative prop for a moment of silence. Then, "Thanks, Rufus; go on and get some sleep. At first show of dawn, tell Harve Fortson to hold all the riders here and come and see me. You ride the north rim of the valley and tell all the ranchers to meet here tomorrow noon. Tell Harve to have one of the other boys ride the south rim and call all the ranchers in.

"Guess this is it, Rufus. It had to come, one way or another."

"Yes'm." And old Rufus moved into the night, to do his mistress' bidding.

Anger already was making crimson streaks up her soft white neck, even before Rufus left. Now she let down her restraint and it moved over her in a torrent. Tad East, gone over to the sheepmen! The doublecrossing pilgrim! He'd likely taken the job to spy on her and the Two-C for the sheepmen. And she'd played right into his hands—made it velvet-easy for him by riding right up and offering him the job!

And he'd said that he'd not take pay without rendering value received, and he still was on her payroll. Her anger simmered as a seasoning of doubt intruded. He'd been forthright in his words and actions, and he had not quit his job. Possibly there was some mistake. Possibly Rufus had got his facts a little mixed in the excitement. After all, he was getting old and his

eyes weren't what they used to be. And then she wondered whether she had any basis of doubt or was it merely hope?

Morning would bring an answer.

Later, the touch of horse-hoofs upon the hard soil of the premises told her of other riders coming in, and she suppressed an urge to slip outside and try to find Tad East's pie-bald roan among the ridden mounts. She slept no more the night through.

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THE EAST showed the bulk of hills in black relief behind dawn's first touch as Tad East unsaddled his roan and turned him loose in the Two-C home corral. He had remained behind to assist in carrying the two wounded men—a cattleman and a sheepman—to the doctor's office, and he had formed a shield between the two wounded men to ward off the verbal darts they flung at each other through their pain. He had taken his time riding back to the ranch, for he knew trouble was due and he knew he was caught in the middle.

He pondered again the evil generated by the words of men and he doubted the logic of his leaving the out-trails for so-called civilization.

He had caught the knowing glances and the whispered hints of the men in town, and he knew that in the showdown to come, everyone was expected to choose a side. And Tad wanted to avoid that.

He was accepting the cash of Two-C for an honest day's work; and honest work, in his code, meant rising to any demand made upon him. And now if he accepted more Two-C money, he must ride with Two-C riders. That made him a cattleman. Cattlemen would be gunning for the squatters, and he would be expected to go gunning, too. That would be a part of an honest day's work, in the code of the range.

Yet he could find no hate in his heart for the little men. They were born little, and they had nothing to do with that. They had remained little, because Fate had not stopped the wheel at their numbers. It was no crime to be little, and yet the range men would shoot them down as criminals. All men had rights, little men and big men, and it was not in his heart to help either to wrest those rights from the other.

On the other hand, he had unwittingly cast his lot with the ranchers; and he admitted now that it had been the challenge of an alluring woman who had swung the balance in his choosing. He never was one to switch his interest in the middle of a job undone.

He was reminded of the time, long ago, when the ways of the brush were still new to him, of his experience with the squirrel and the rabbit. He had stalked a gray squirrel from tree-top to tree-top, waiting for a chance with his rawhide slingshot, until both he and the squirrel were tiring. Then as the quary leaped from the top of one wild pecan tree to another, a half-grown rabbit flushed from a clump of sage-grass at Tad's feet. The rabbit seemed an easy target, and he took after him. Within fifty yards, he lost the rabbit. He returned to continue stalking the squirrel, but he never saw the squirrel again. Wild game was scarce in that vicinity and Tad almost starved before he was able to find anything else to eat.

So that had taught him to follow through anything he started, and he recollected vividly now the lesson the squirrel and rabbit had taught him. He knew he must go on and do his share of the work he had hired out to do, and he knew that work now called for slinging lead at sheepmen. That meant, too, all thought of Judith Sorrell must

be banished forever from his mind, because Judith was a sheepman's daughter and more sheepmen's deaths would thicken the wall he already had unintentionally raised between them. A pang of remorse stabbed him.

"You can just saddle that roan again, East!" The cold voice brought Tad around and away from his thoughts. It was Foreman Harve Fortson, and the man's expression magnified the cut of his words. "I heard about your stand last night!"

And now he knew for a reality that his act of mercy had been misinterpreted. He knew his refusal to join in the shooting at the Concho had branded him a little man's man and the futility of explanation smothered him.

He merely looked at the livid-faced foreman and said, "I was hired by Mis' Cunningham."

"Why, you—"

The touch of feet upon the shale brought both men around. "So you were," Lila Cunningham said. Her voice was calm, but Tad detected the storm that threatened just beneath the surface.

"Answer me one question," she said in the same calm voice, "Did you side the squatters last night at the *Concho?*"

He looked at her with all the power of his sharp dark eyes. His reason fingered his thoughts for the right words, and the words were elusive. Finally he said, "I gave a wounded sheepman a drink of water. I helped him to sit up. I saw him, and—"

"Then it's true." The words were a dirge to her hopes and her eyes showed the hurt that they poorly curtained. "Your time'll be ready in ten minutes."

He groped for words again, but all he found to say before she moved away was, "But—"

He caught his roan and lifted the still-warm saddle up. By the time he had the second cinch buckled and had led the animal out of the corral, Rosa, the cook, was there with his pay.

He looked at the money and he turned it slowly over and over in his hand. It was the first tangible earnings from his new life, and it galled his hand. Finally he shoved it in his pocket and he looked a long time at the big house before he mounted the roan and rode toward Mesa Verde.

LOSS OF his first job was of no consequence to Tad East. Yet his conscience ached and he rode away from the Two-C headquarters with regret in his heart. He didn't particularly mind being fired; but he galled under the thought of being misunderstood. If he really had sided the squatters, he would have said so with a straight-forward yes when she asked him. But he hadn't sided the sheepmen. He hadn't sided anybody. It was Bandy Gates' loud mouth that touched off the fight and the ranchers and squatters alike had been fools to be pushed into it. Now, because he did not blindly join the unreasonable gunbattle, he was a marked man. Marked a squatters' man.

He had wanted to explain all this to Lila Cunningham before he rode away, but she'd left no opening for an explanation and his own slow-coming words had doomed him.

Across peaceful-looking Concho Valley lay the blue hills and the outtrails there beckoned. To return to those trails right now would be the easiest thing in the world to do, and it would be logical, Tad reasoned. And then he remembered the lesson of the squirrel and the rabbit. He had deliberately given up the brush and the prairie for civilization. It was a step in his life. He had thought it over and he had cast his lot with Mesa Verde. In these brief days he had tested the fruits of civilization and he had found them stimulating, if pretty disturbing. He thought of Judith Sorrell and a tightness caught his throat and the lure of the old brush trails magically lost its pull.

He rode leisurely toward Mesa

Verde, a man apart from all other people, not only because of his past but because of his stand last night. The squatters and their sympathizers looked upon him as a cattleman, because he had ridden Two-C range and he still carried the weight of Jonas Cunningham's hat upon his head and he did not feel the inclination to change to his corduroy cap. True, he had been booted off Two-C range, and the hat no longer was a part of him. But he had accepted it and worn it for a brief moment as a Two-C man. To remove it now, he sensed, would be an acknowledgement of guilt.

On the green slope far to his right, squatted a sheepman's cabin. Sheep grazed the hillside and drifted on down to the valley. As he watched the sheep and pondered the forces which made men kill over land and grass when there was enough for all if properly divided, he saw two riders urging their mounts from a canyon mouth half a mile away and head toward the sheepman's cabin.

He watched the men and their purposeful riding, until they dropped from their horses in front of the little shack. A man came out of the house and Tad saw their greeting. The sun flashed shafts of brilliance from metal in the riders' hands and Tad knew it was the reflection of the sun upon gunbarrels. The man from the cabin carried a rifle in the cradle of his arms. Sheepmen and squatters rallying their forces.

Far across the five-mile Concho Valley a wisp of dust lazed upward, and its rising and direction told Tad that the range men were riding fast toward the Two-C.

The forces of battle were forming. The sheepmen had considered last night's *Concho Saloon* battle the final challenge of the cattlemen, and the little men were meeting that challenge in the only way their inflamed thoughts directed. In the past, the trouble had been localized—a sheepman ambushed here, a flock chased over a cliff there; a lone cowboy shot at, a brief pitched battle between small groups now and then. Last night's battle had fused all these individual animosities into a whole. It no longer was one man against another, a small group against another small group. It was all the squatters against all the cattlemen, and Tad knew that by nightfall, unless a miracle happened, Concho Valley would be spotted with the blood of good men.

MESA VERDE, in its explosive, stillness, reminded Tad of a huge powder dump, waiting only for the touch of a single match to erupt it into an inferno. The faces of men bespoke it; the studied caution of everyone who walked the streets proclaimed it. Even the dust of the grayish streets seemed reluctant to venture from the solidness of the ground.

Tad rode slowly as he passed the Sorrell boarding house and he strained his eyes for a glimpse of Judith Sorrell. A feeling of depressed futility held him as he recalled her words of the night before, and failure to see her now heightened the feeling.

He saw Bandy Gates' horse tied to a cedar post near the *Concho Saloon* and a curse for the vicious little cowboy tainted his thoughts. Four other animals drowsed in front of the place.

Tad tossed his reins over a low oak limb and moved on into the *Concho*. He did not particularly feel for a drink, and yet something drew him to the place. Possibly, he reasoned, it was that he construed Bandy Gates' presence as a challenge. Maybe it was because he might hear something of the coming battle.

One small knot of men half-circled the bar, and in the center of this group stood Bandy Gates and his talk was loud. As the squeaking of the door-hinges announced the presence of Tad, the men's voices dropped to silence.

Tad leaned against the bar alone a

dozen feet from the men and he felt the hate of the men's eyes upon him. The barman's eyes did not meet his as he accepted his order for beer. Tad felt the intenseness of the place and he knew it was but one of many burning fuses scattered through the valley and the hills which soon would slither on up to the powder dump and set off the conflageration.

The men began to talk in whispers and their eyes told that the talk was about Tad. He shoved the Stetson to the back of his head and words began to form in his thoughts. These words wanted to say that he had not sided the sheepmen the night before, that the whole fight had been senseless and that the men must stem the tide that was enveloping the valley. But reason warned him that it was too late now for more words. Anything he could say to these men now would serve only to incense them further against him.

Finally Bandy Gates, drawing himself up straight and important, said in a loud voice, "Seems like I smell a sheep somewhere."

The other range men looked at Tad and there was a dare in their eyes. Tad adjusted his hat and emptied his beer glass. He took his time moving his bandanna over his lips and face and returning it to his pocket. Then he said, "Gates, if you'd step outside, I think you could smell the sheep a little better." Then he strode through the door and waited on the dirt walk and he waited a long time alone.

His mind seethed with thoughts of Bandy Gates and the more he considered the little braggart, the more he realized that he was instigator of much of trouble.

Tad shaded his face against the sun and looked up and down the street and he wondered at the absence of squatters in town. Then the sun picked up the star on the aproaching man's shirt and flashed it in Tad's eyes and he considered the flash an omen. As he turned to go to his roan, the lawman held up a hand and yelled something at him which he could not understand.

Tad leaped to the saddle and untied the reins from his saddle position. The pie-bald roan pounded dust from the silent street as the lawman ran toward Tad.

That a star-toter wanted him could mean only one thing to Tad—the thing he had feared most in embracing the complexities of civilization. The lawman had tagged him with his owl-hoot days and his trouble with Hood McGonigal.

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TAD HAD mounted his pie-bald roan, not knowing where he would go. He followed the first road the roan hit, until he had ridden well out of sight of the star-toter, and then he reined up and rested in the saddle in the soothing shade of a cottonwood on the bank of Concho Creek. The serenity of this spot, with the velvet greenness of the gamma grass, the merry singing of the water rushing over pebbles in the creek-bed, the murmur of the wind through the young leaves of the cottonwood, belied the violence about to curse the Valley and Tad felt an urgency to do something to halt its crimson course.

He had cast his lot with Mesa Verde and Concho Valley. But he had been misunderstood from the start, by the cattlemen for aiding fallen sheepmen, and by the sheepmen for riding for Two-C.

The brush and the prairie had exacted a toll for everything they had given up to him—toll in hunger, biting cold, searing heat and the discomforts of the outdoors. Now it occurred to him that nothing was easy—that civilization, too, demanded its toll. Wherev-

er a man wanders, Tad concluded, he must pay his way, in one manner or another.

And now all at once his duty was clear to him. He was a neutral. He recognized that both factions of men had rights. He believed this trouble might be averted if cool heads from both factions could be brought together and men like Bandy Gates, from both sides, could be kept away from the meeting.

It could be his way of paying his toll to civilization, Tad concluded. But how? Each side thought he had pitched his luck with the other. Who would listen to the words of a supposed traitor?

He cut through the brush toward the upper end of town and as he found an opening in the undergrowth he glimpsed the Sorrell house and saw three horses hitched in front of it. These would be sheepmen, and he pointed his roan to the spot, keeping a lookout for the star-toter.

Judith Sorrell responded to his knock and through the cracked door he saw men moving away from their concealment at windows as they recognized him. All four of the men he saw were heavily armed, and their hands were limp above gun-butts.

Judith said, "Two-C riders aren't welcome here!" The blue of her eyes carried now a tint of green and the lids half-shuttered them and the anger that lay there.

Tad ignored her. He pushed through the half-open door. "I must talk to the sheepmen. Now!"

Two men moved stealthily toward him. "It's all right, Judith; we can take care of the varmint," one said. He was a tall, gaunt man of middle age, and trouble marked his face.

"I'm Tad East. Until this morning, I was a rider for Two-C. I'm not a range man; I'm no squatter. I'm taking no sides. But I'm interested enough in both sides to help stop this war. If there's a sheepman with guts enough to help me!"

The gaunt man studied Tad a long time. His troubled gray eyes searched him and when he found no faltering in Tad's gaze, he lifted his eyes from him and called over his shoulder, "Dave, come and talk to this hombre."

Another man stalked into the front room. He was younger, about Tad's size and build, and there was a calm determination on his face that at once built a surge of confidence in Tad.

"Dave Calber, this here's a rannihan named East. Says he ain't sidin' nobody. Says he was paid off by Two-C this mornin'."

Calber touched Tad from head to foot with his penetrating eyes and finally he grinned faintly and extended his hand. "You could be a range spy," he said, "but, ag'in, you mightn't. There's not a sheepman or a plowman in the Valley who wants more bloodshed. We're only trying to protect what's ours. Any man who comes to us with clean hands and an offer to palaver gets a hearing!"

TAD WAS taken by the simple sincerity of Dave Calber and he got to the point. He said, "That's the way I figgered it. I believe most of the cattlemen feel the same way. There's no use belittlin' what's about to break loose. That fight last night touched it off. All you know that. Same as the range men know it. And who touched it off? A loud-mouthed cowboy who'd been fired off the Two-C and discredited by Lila Cunningham. Yet he had the power, with his loud talk and itchy trigger-finger, to cause the death of two men and the hurt of others. And that same irresponsible power has touched off the fuse to set the whole Valley aflame. There are men like him on both sides, hot-headed and itching for a war. It's up to the level heads to nip it in the bud before it touches everybody!"

Tad halted and let out his breath. The words had poured out with a smoothness and logic that amazed him

and he was inwardly proud of the role he was playing.

"The man talks sense to me, Dave," the tall, gaunt man commented.

Dave Calber nodded. "What's yore proposition?"

Tad was ready. He said, "Pick four men. Men with halters on their tempers, and have them at the schoolhouse at three o'clock today. I'll ride to Two-C and try to persuade Lila Cunningham and three other ranchers to meet you. I can't promise they'll be there. I'll do my best.

"In the meantime, and this is important, call off your lead-slingers. Any man who fires a shot before this meeting'll be a traitor to the whole valley!"

Tad picked up his Stetson and there was purpose in his walk as he headed for the door. Judith opened it for him and when he looked at her, there was apology in her eyes, but her lips remained closed. Tad said, "See you later, Mis' Judith," and he moved on steps of confident ease toward his roan.

PUFFS OF dust on both rims of the valley told Tad of the gathering gunhordes. He had heard Lila Cunningham's orders, and he knew the cattlemen would gather at the Two-C before they rode to make war upon squatters wherever they found them. He believed the little men would confine their fighting to a defense of what was theirs. They would wait for the fight to be brought to them, in the way of little men everywhere.

As he neared headquarters, many fresh tracks and settling dust told of the recent passage of mounted men; and first sight of the ranch buildings showed him more than a dozen horses tied around the place.

Men stood around in obviously earnest conversation as he dismounted and tied his roan. The sudden halt of conversation, and the quick stiffening of the men, told of their recognition. Talk had died to a sullen silence by the time his black boots touched the first step leading to the long veranda.

At first, he had not seen Lila Cunningham; but now the groups of men made a quick passageway and Lila stepped briskly through the channel and up to Tad. She placed both fists on her hips and her tight lips broke with rasping words. "I thought I paid you off this morning!"

Tad saw the anger making crimson lines up her soft neck and tormenting her cheeks and a faint smile touched his lips. He answered, "I'm still wearin' a Two-C hat. But that's not what brought me back. I returned to ask you one question: do you really want war with the squatters?"

The crimson receded from her face and the question left her with a silence, and Tad was grimly amused that he, who knew so little of the use of words, could silence this woman whose words carried the power of life or death over many men.

Finally she said, "I can't see that it's any concern of yours!"

Tad grinned, and the grin disarmed and angered her. "But you ain't answerin' the question."

"Of course I don't want war with squatters—or anybody else! Don't be ridiculous! But I'm not one to sit by and see my range overrun with a bunch of woollies and my grass turned under by a horde of sod-busters!"

Tad saw the alertness of the ranchers, and he knew they were waiting for the bidding of Lila Cunningham, whatever the bidding might be. He knew this woman held his own life in her hands at this moment.

"That's fair," Tad said. "At three o'clock today four sheepmen and farmers will be at Mesa Verde schoolhouse, to meet with four ranchers of your own choosing. The little men are meeting with open minds, to discuss the differences between them and the ranchers. If you really want to avoid a range war, you and three other ranchers will

meet with them. Keep the hotheads away. I think this trouble can be stopped right where it is."

Lila's eyes searched Tad and he felt a nakedness again and he knew she searched for signs of treachery. Apparently she discerned none, for she said to the gathered ranchmen, "You've heard the fellow's proposition. Are three of you willing to ride with me to meet the squatters?"

The crowd raised a buzz of sudden conversation, and finally old Rufus Winters said, "I'm no ranch owner, but I guess I can speak my mind. I don't see what can be lost; we had enough killin'."

"That's how I feel," a gray-haired, stoop-shouldered cowman said. A dozen or more voices agreed instantly and Lila Cunningham held up her hand for silence. "All right. We'll try it." She designated the three men to go with her.

"But," she added, "I'm not taking the chance of riding into a trap. I don't doubt the motives of Tad East; but I do have my doubts about some of those squatters. You men come on to town with us. Stay away from the meeting, and keep your noses clean. Don't fire the first shot. But if the squatters start anything, take care of 'em!" She glared at Tad with a fleeting defiance in her eyes. "That suit you, Mister East?"

Tad smiled broadly. "I think so," he said softly, and he moved to his roan and mounted.

- 9 -

BY THREE o'clock, Mesa Verde was crowded. Men walked the streets with their hands always close to their hips, their faces wearing the grimness of pallbearers. The schoolhouse stood at the head of Main Street, and Tad had seen to it that the eight representatives of the two factions had gone in and opened their meeting. From there on, it was their meeting and their problem. He felt he had paid his fare to enter upon citizenship in good standing of his chosen community.

The north side of the street was for cattlemen, and the sheepmen and farmers took the south side. They did not mix, and Tad noted with satisfaction that thus far neither range man nor squatter had violated the unspoken agreement to stick to his part of town.

The *Concho Saloon* graced the cattlemen's part of town, and Tad winced at the loud sounds emitting from that oasis. He had hoped some of the leaders would have seen the logic of closing the saloon during the meeting.

In this armed camp, with the sides designated and the windows of every house and store shuttered against the possible battle, Tad East felt the loneliness and the vague uneasiness of an outsider. He had taken no side, and now there was no place in town for the feet of his kind. At first, he sat on the steps of the schoolhouse, a lone, forlorn figure. Then he sensed the fitness of leaving the eight conferees entirely alone and he knew he should walk away.

He scanned the north sidewalk, and the stealth of the range men lounging there told him he did not belong there; and he looked upon the equally stealthy sod-busters with their close-fitting caps and the sheepmen, and he knew as well that he did not belong with them. He began slowly walking down the center of the gray street, and the men from both sides cut questioning glances at him and he felt the uneasiness of one unwillingly under a spotlight.

He was constantly alert to avoid the eyes of the lawman who had called to him this morning, and he shivered at thought of the man's forcing him to take to one side or the other of the street that held grim men apart. After this was over, maybe he would call on the lawman and accept whatever was in

store for him, for that was a part of the price to be paid for living among men: but it must wait until he saw the outcome of the meeting, until rival guns blazed or were silenced by the calm judgement of thinking men.

He drew eventually to the stretch of empty street in front of the *Concho Saloon,* and the din that cursed the air sent a foreboding through him. He halted momentarily to catch the trend of the whiskey talk, and before he pieced any of the vagrant words together, the saloon doors banged open and three men swagged out. In front was Bandy Gates, and a fear jabbed Tad's thoughts —fear, not for himself but for the peace of the community.

Bandy roared, "Gonna get me a woolly-man, just to see 'im squirm!" His walk was the walk of a man drunk, and his talk was the talk of a whiskey-soaked mind; but he strode toward the opposite side of the street, and his two companions sided him.

Tad scanned the two sides of the street and as far as his eye reached, he saw men on both sides stand alert and he saw hands sliding to gun-butts. Again Bandy Gates was fanning smouldering coals into a consuming flame.

A glance backward showed him three men from the south side of Main Street start walking toward the three men from the saloon, and he saw their hands limp above guns and he saw the purpose on their grim-set faces. They were three sheepmen against three men from the cattle ranges, and Tad was grateful in that brief moment that both sides apparently was recognizing the equality of the coming fight and were remaining in their tracks.

At the same time, Tad knew that the least awkward move by either side would be interpreted into a general fight by the other. The fuse was nearing the powder-dump now and Tad felt the urgency of the moment.

He stepped in front of Bandy Gates, his hands easy at his sides. "I wouldn't, if I was in your place," he said in carefully measured words.

Gates halted in his purpose and whiskey-red eyes glared up at Tad. A twist uglied his lips and he spat, "You'll do; you double-crossin' woolly-lovin' son of—"

His right-hand gun cleared leather as Gates suddenly stepped back.

HIS STEP was not long enough for his purpose. Tad East, with that animal stealth, sprang upon the short cowboy. His right fist met Gates' chin, as his left hand sought the man's gun-arm. He snapped Gates' right arm down and aside, and the .45 in his hand roared. But it thudded in the thin dust as it exploded, for the blow to the chin had jarred the grip of the fingers from the gun. Feebly Gates tried to cover with his left hand. A second jab caught him in the pit of his belly and he doubled with a groan. A final jab to the chin dropped him to his knees.

An only in this instant did Tad realize that gunfire was flashing all around him; that the air was pregnant with acrid powdersmoke. Vaguely he saw a range man fall on his face, and he heard the curse of men on both sides of the street.

An urgency stabbed at Tad's brain and he cleared himself from the hell of fire there in the street and he saw men moving in from both sides.

He flung his hat into the air, waving it with his upstretched hand. He yelled, "Men! Men! Listen! Don't—"

"We already listened, and we don't like yore palaver!" The talk came from the range men's side of the street.

"And that goes here!" came an answer from the little men.

The frenzy of right gripped Tad East and he stood there, as hot lead sang a dirge around him. "Listen, men! Bandy Gates deliberately started this. He wants to see a slaughter! Don't lose your heads. Listen to me! I'm no range man; I'm no sheepman! I got no axe to grind. I—"

Men weaved and crouched toward the center of the street and Tad felt himself being caught up in the terrible maelstrom of slaughter and his voice was falling upon murder-deadening ears.

He saw the points of the opposing sides as they were about to converge upon each other, and he sprinted the ten yards toward that meeting point. He halted and raised his hat again. A sheepman's bullet made daylight through it.

"Outer the way, range-rider!" the voice of a sheepman told him.

"The hell he is!" shouted a range man. And then guns exploded from both sides.

A finger of fire streaked through Tad's shoulder and he recognized the gray dust of the street as it sped up in a weird circulat motion to meet his face.

Then the drumming of the gun-fire turned into a thousand bells and the bells caressed him into oblivion....

THE FIRST sense that penetrated his consciousness was the faint smell of water-lilacs. A groan stirred him to realization, and he placed his strength against the burden holding his eye lids. At first, the lids refused to raise. Finally they did. He groaned as a pain stabbed his chest, and then he noticed the uselessness of his left arm.

When he marshalled his strength to raise his head, only his eyes moved; but they moved sufficiently to show him a panorama of the room, and what he saw filled him with a feeling of ease and comfort.

It was a room with gay curtains lining the windows, and a gentle breeze through two open windows swayed the curtains in toward him. The bed was a softness his body had never experienced, and the gentleness of it caressed him. The white sheets and pillow case brought him the faint odor of scented laundry soap and the crisp feel of starch.

A door beyond the foot of the stained cedar bedstead opened and the face he saw there brought a gasp to his lips, for he had not been at all sure of where or what he was in those brief seconds after he had opened his eyes. And now he sensed that he either was dead and in a place where he had not expected to go, or that he was enjoying a rare dream.

"Hello," the personality of the dream said.

Tad blinked his eyes. He said, "Hello," and the sound of his voice shocked him, for it told him that this was no dream.

"You had a close call," Judith Sorrell said, and the smile Tad feasted upon was a fitting companion to the glorious blue of her smiling eyes.

Then recollection stabbed at his mind and a great fear tortured him. "The men—I guess dozens were slaughtered!"

She smiled and said, "Now you take it easy there!" She moved to the side of the bed and a palm explored his forehead and Tad heard the tingle of tiny bells.

Tad heard the homey rattle of dishes and the voices of men at the table and the sounds blended with the coziness of the room and the beauty of Judith Sorrell.

"Just a minute," Judith said, "I believe some of the men are through with their dinner." And she moved through the door that connected the bedroom with the dining-room.

Tad moved his legs and only the vague pain touched his chest. His right arm moved at his bidding and he was able to move his head from side to side. A pad hugged his chest, his exploring right hand told him, and it pressed down like a large rock.

JUDITH re-entered the room and she was followed by two men, grinning broadly. "Hello, cowboy!" Dave Calber, the sheepman, said. The other man greeted him warmly and at first Tad

could not place him; and then he remembered he was John Couch, one of the range men Lila Cunningham had selected for the meeting.

"It's something to see at least two men alive in Mesa Verde," Tad said, as both men walked over to the bed and in turn shook his right hand.

"There're a lot of men alive in Mesa Verde and the Valley, too, thanks to you," John Couch said solemnly.

"I thought—"

Dave Calber said, "That's the way it looked, too; at first. In another minute, if you hadn't thrown yourself into that cross-fire, the whole town would have been aflame. A hundred men owe their lives to you, boy! The stage was set. Reason had left most of us—until you stood there and dared the bullets of both sides, risked your life to save the lives of others.

"As you went down, the sight sent a magic spell over us. In that brief moment, a measure of sanity took over. Both sides halted their fire. And in its spell, men began holstering their guns —men on both sides. In five minutes dozens of men—cattlemen, sheepmen, farmers, merchants, hovered around you, inquiring of your welfare.

"The committee reassembled and came to complete agreement. We all know our rights now, and we respect the rights of all others. Some of the country is for sheep and some is for cattle; and all of us know what the dividing lines are. Furthermore, we have a committee, representing the range men, the sheepmen and the town, that will settle all future disputes. If any."

Tad whistled.

"That's the fact, feller," John Couch emphasized. "Peace finally has moved in on Concho Valley. And woe be to the man who disturbs it!" He grinned at Dave Calber, the sheepman, and Calber smiled back.

"Well, maybe I've paid my toll."

"What's that, cowboy?" Calber said.

"Oh, nothin'; just kind of something I was tellin' myself," Tad grinned.

Then other men moved into the room, singly and by twos and threes—cowboys, farmers, sheepmen, merchants, and they all shook Tad's hand and told him how the Valley was honored to have him.

Tad grinned crookedly and said, "That sounds awful good, but I think that star-toter of your'n maybe has something to say along that line." His face reddened a little when he added, "You see, I'm sort of on the dodge I guess."

Old Rufus Winters of the Two-C said, "Wait a minute," and he stepped out on the porch. He whistled and its sound carried a long way, then he yelled, "Marshal Hicks; come on. He's come out of it!" He was grinning when he returned to the room.

SOME OF the men left but Rufus and Dave Calber remained until the lawman's heavy feet upon the porch announced his arrival.

"Here he is, Marshal, 'live and kickin'," Rufus yelled.

Marshal Hicks was a tall, thin man with a curving red mustache. "You go by the name of Tad East, I take it?" he asked severely.

"That's right."

"You had some doin's with an owl-hooter named Hood McGonigal?"

Tad's face reddened and for a long time his eyes avoided the lawman. Finally he said, "Yes, in a way."

"And you killed Hood McGonigal?"

"Yes; it was him or me."

"You refused to join up with him to rob the Carterville bank, and when he drew to enforce his will, you shot. That right?"

"Something like that."

"Why, you ornery rascal. I been tryin' to catch you since the day you landed in Mesa Verde. Recognized you from the description."

"Yeah, I know," Tad said grimly.

"Maybe you didn't know there was two thousand simoleons on the head of

Hood McGonigal, dead or alive. That reward's yours, feller!"

Tad swallowed hard and a grin finally parted his pale lips.

"I knew about the reward, all right; but I didn't try to claim it. First place, I didn't want folks to think I'd murdered a man to get money, and folks would 'a thought that. Remember about Bob Ford and Jesse James? So I just kept my mouth shut and went on with my roamin'. In the second place, I didn't have much use for that much money—on the prairie or in the brush. Course now—"

"I'll see you get every cent of it, East. And good luck!" Marshal Hicks extended a hand and Tad felt a cry of complete elation fighting for voice.

TAD SAID to Judith Sorrell, "I'm still mixed up; for instance, how come I'm here in your home?"

"Very logical. Our boarding house was the only place on the street with spare bedrooms. Mrs. Cunningham wanted to haul you to the Two-C house the first night; but the doctor wouldn't stand for it." She blushed a little and added, "And I don't think I would have, either." She looked at the ceiling and then idly swept the room with her eyes. "I don't know if I should tell you; but she's been here every day, helping nurse you and worrying about you."

Tad just grinned.

It was nearly sundown before Lila Cunningham called. Tad saw a reluctant awkwardness about Judith as she showed Lila to his room and finally left and closed the door.

"Hello, pilgrim," Lila said. Her lips smiled but Tad read the graveness of her eyes.

Tad's lips crooked into a smile and he said, "Howdy, one-time Boss. You're lookin' mighty well."

"You've had—us worried, Tad. You were out three days! If you'd died, I never could have forgiven myself. It would have been my own selfish ambition that helped to dig your grave. Thank God you're getting well."

"Aw, now. I wouldn't say that. It wasn't all your fault. It was something that just growed. No one or two people caused it."

Her face was a mask of seriousness and Tad detected the mist in her remarkable eyes. She said, "I want you back on the Two-C, Tad. I need you. And—" She halted and her eyes hesitated and turned away. "And I don't want you as a cowhand. I need a partner, Tad. You've sensed that, I know; I'd marry you, cowboy, if you'd—ask me."

She turned her face away and Tad winced as he felt the warmth of her tear strike the back of his hand.

He caressed her gently on the shoulder with his hand and he could not find the right words to say.

After awhile she got up and a smile met him. She said, "I understand, cowboy. I don't blame you. She's a sweet girl. A week ago, I'd have fought for you or anything else I wanted. But you've taught me something about life, I suppose. Anyway, the selfish kind of fighting's been taken out of me."

Then the same taunting challenge turned upon him and between enticing lips she said, "But you don't know what you're passing up, Pilgrim!"

★

Coming Next Issue

THE BIG SALT-LICK

by Charles Beckman, Jr.

Know Your West

A Department For Western Story Readers

By Harold Gluck

"LOTTIE LICKS LOGANVILLE"

When you have finished reading a western story, do you remember what you read? Before you answer, suppose we try a little experiment. Read this short-short western story; at the end, you will find several questions. If the answer to a question is "false" write the word "false" next to the number of the question; if "true", write the word "true" next to the number of the question. Now, it may happen that you can't answer "true" or "false" because the information is not in the story. In such a case, you write "N. E." next to the number of the question; the letters "N. E." mean, "No Evidence."

SAM WINTERS, in charge of the Loganville Division of the Willton Stage Company needed no special effort to be polite, for the young lady standing in front of him was most charming. It could have been the slight tilt to her nose; or perhaps the small pouting lips; or the combination of brown hair and black eyes. At the given moment all of Loganville was talking about this young lady.

"There won't be another stage out of here until next Thursday," explained Sam Winters. "The bridge is down at Cross River and there has been talk of Indian trouble. Jack Hawley leaves with a freighter at the end of the week; he might take you along, provided you don't mind some rough riding.

"But if I were you, I would stay right here in Loganville. The school board has no right to refuse to hire you, just because that Mrs. Lewis wanted to teach again. The kids hate the sight of her. What Loganville needs is a woman like you."

"Thanks a lot for those kind words," replied Lottie Parsons, "but I would run out of money just staying here and waiting for the court to open next month."

Lottie Parsons left the stagecoach office and headed for the one and only boarding house in town. Suddenly she found her path blocked by a young man who had evidently been looking for her.

"I just came from the boarding house," said Bill Faraday, owner of the *Golden Gate*—which combined gambling with good drinks. "I can use an educated young lady to help me with my books; I'll pay you double what the school board offered."

"That doesn't sound bad," replied

Lottie Parsons. "I'll take it; but only temporarily. Anyway I have to stay here until a stagecoach leaves."

That evening the *Golden Gate* did a thriving business. The rumor had been circulated that a disappointed school teacher had taken a job as assistant manager of the place; and in addition that she was good looking. So miners, cowhands, and business men stopped in for a drink or a hand at cards. She met them all in a pleasant efficient manner. Sheriff Frank Devons was on hand just in case trouble might start. But when he returned to his office he had no complaint to make to his deputy, Mike Rogo.

"That's the kind of a gal we ought to keep in this town. Really gentle; shows how powerful educatin' can be. Maybe we would make her a tax collector if she doesn't like to work for Bill."

The owner of the *Golden Gate* was more than satisfied with his new assistant. In fact he had an idea so she could make more money in a sort of nice way.

"Jack Hawley leaves with the freighter tomorrow," he explained. "There will be two armed guards with the wagon. I need some supplies from Harttone. You take care of the business transactions for me and I'll pay you two hundred dollars for the trip."

The young lady was nobody's fool. You just didn't give that money away because there was money around Loganville. So she demanded more particulars, and finally forced Bill Faraday to admit the real reason.

"An efficient bunch of road agents have been operating out here for the past year. They hold up the stagecoach when it carries valuables; and they know just when the freighter has gold. I'm sending out ten thousand dollars in dust. One thing about that bunch is that they are sort of gallant. I figure with a woman around they won't start trouble."

THE FREIGHTER was only five hours out of Loganville when the left rear wheel collapsed. Jack Hawley and the two guards went down to see what could be done. And then four mounted armed men appeared.

"No trouble means no shootin'," said one of the masked men who appeared to be the leader. "We'll march you over and tie you up."

Lottie Parsons wasn't a bit scared. She climbed down to the ground unaided and walked up to one of the men.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," she chided him. "This is not an honest way to make a living—four strong men robbing this freighter. Please either go away or help us fix the wheel."

The leader looked at her and gave her an order in an evidently disguised voice. "We don't want to harm a woman, so just join the others."

Lottie Parsons obeyed and watched the four men as they searched for the bags of gold dust. They found their stuff and mounted their horses.

"We're taking your weapons," they informed the three tied-up men. "The school teacher can untie you after we leave. If you can't fix up the wheel, then ride back into town."

Before Lottie freed the men she took a good look at the wheel. She could see that it had been sawed partly through

which accounted for the accident. Late that evening the *Golden Gate* was again doing a thriving business.

"You weren't scared a bit," said one of the men present. "Funny thing; maybe you have met them without the masks. Could you tell who they are?"

"I know two of them," said Lottie at the top of her voice.

The noise in the *Golden Gate* died down quickly as the import of those words started to hit him. She continued speaking.

"One of them happens to be Sam Winters. You'll notice he has a chip missing from his two front teeth and a wart on his right thumb; I saw those features while he held a gun and spoke. The other is the bartender, Lou Johnson. He has a cut across his chin and a nail missing from the small finger on his left hand. I also noticed those features."

The stagecoach manager never made the exit; heavy hands grabbed him. And Lou Johnson couldn't go for the gun below the counter. He was dragged bodily up and across and then out. The two men talked, and soon the other two were arrested.

Lottie was the heroine of Loganville. All kinds of offers were made. The school board wanted to hire her at double the salary. But she took the best offer of all and that was to marry Bill Faraday.

"A woman like that comes only once in a lifetime," he told the sheriff.

After she decided to become Mrs. Faraday, Lottie told herself: "I don't think I'll ever let Bill know I was employed by the Burton Detective Agency to come here and trap that gang. He'll never know I'm not a teacher."

And Bill Faraday said to himself the day before the wedding: "I don't think I'll ever let Lottie know I know she was employed by the Burton Detective Agency. I love that gal and nothing should come between us."

★

Now — See if you can answer these questions without turning back to the story.

.....1. Sam Winters was in charge of the stage company in Loganville.
.....2. The kids hated Mrs. Lewis.
.....3. Bill Faraday's place was called the *Golden Slipper.*
.....4. Bill Faraday came from Nevada.
.....5. Sheriff Mike Rogo's deputy was Frank Devons.
.....6. Four armed guards went out with the freighter.
.....7. The left rear wheel of the freighter collapsed.
.....8. The road agents were armed with Colts.
.....9. The freighter was carrying gold dust.
.....10. The bartender was a member of that gang.

(Answers are on page 98)

15 Action - Packed, Complete Stories

Featuring

THAT HARDING WHELP

by Seven Anderton

Look for the October **REAL WESTERN STORIES**

This man was a murderer; he and his late partner had killed old Dulveen and stolen Dulveen's gold. But this man had also saved Digger John's life, when the smarter course for him would have been merely to let Digger freeze. And Digger John's conscience was troubled — should he, could he, turn the killer in, under these circumstances?

DIGGER JOHN'S BIG FREEZE

by A. A. BAKER

DIGGER JOHN was caught by the snowstorm, his plaid mackinaw dented in at the shoulders by the weight of his snow-covered pack. His black hat, held in a rakish tilt by a long scarf, resisted the wind but snow particles drove icely into his red whiskers. His deep-set eyes were burning coals that stared out in patient desperation. If he didn't make Dulveen's cabin in the next hour, Digger knew he'd sleep until spring under the blazed blanket of snow. Then, if discovered before the coyotes and civet cats got to him, he'd be planted among other fools on Gold Run's Cemetery Hill. Fools who had stayed a day or a week too long in the Sierra Canyons to take out that last cleanup.

His heavy legs were cramping up; soggy boots slipped on the mushy trail. If the wind would only quit. For it was the wind that blew the hard pellets of frozen snow. As though answering his unspoken thoughts, the wind died suddenly and swiftly; the rocking of the tall trees halted; snowflakes returned to a lazy ascent that give Digger the eerie feeling he was in a floating world. Cotton snow packed in the Cold Ravine somewhere ahead of Dulveen's shack.

Digger John rested, straightening his massive body, trying for his bearings. In the palid dusk his eyes searched for light from the cabin. It *had* to be there. He was still forty miles out of Gold Run, and in no shape to travel four hundred rods.

Overhead a tree limb, sickened by its load of snow, chacked and began to fall. Digger threshed ahead, his head filled with a rush of blood from the sudden exertion. It was then .he heard the crack of the rifle.

The shot was a warm sound in a cold world. A flat explosion but, from behind him. With relish Digger hefted his own rifle from his pack and plugged a shot into the air. The chamber was warm in his hand as he waited for an answering shot. The answer came staccato-like. A swift lever pumping a volley that spelled urgency.

Digger plunged around, head back. He realized that he'd missed the cabin, had passed it in the storm. The wind recovered to pit its icy fury against

Like a frozen Zombie, Digger staggered forward . . .

his heaving run. He fell, but struggled out of his pack, rolling to his feet and crashing toward Dulveen's cabin.

The door was open. Snow, fresh snow, melted on the warm floor and carried the imprints of webs. The fire was a blazing oak log in a chinked fireplace. And Dulveen, his red shirt smoking from the heat, pressed fumbling hands against his matted chest to form a dam against spurting blood. He stared helplessly up at Digger John.

Digger kicked aside a broken chair and lifted the dying man to the bunk. Then, rifle cocked, he dashed back outside and made a swift circle of the cabin. Behind the woodpile, snow shoes made chicken tracks out into the blizzard.

Back in the cabin Digger lighted a lamp and bolted the door. He was just

turning when the cracked voice of Dulveen whispered. "They was two. They come last night. We was fixin' to trek out together, Betcha the fat one won't get far. I jammed a butcher knife into his chest . . ."

"D'you know them, partner? Who was they?"

Dulveen shook his head, a sardonic smile in his dulling eyes. "Never got around to bein' introduced, Digger."

"What'd they look like, Dulveen?"

"One was fat and the other lean—both tall with whiskers. Said they come in from Beller's Hole."

"Was they after yore cleanup?"

Dulveen nodded, his eyes drifting to the smashed cupboard doors. "Pea gold. Twenty full pounds of pea nuggets."

"No dust?"

"No, Digger. I cleaned up a pocket in Cold Ravine. Every nugget the size of green peas—enough to get me home." The man's body became wracked with coughing as Digger stood by helplessly. Dulveen's eyes closed and his breathing seemed to shake the peeled logs of the bunk.

DULVEEN died at dawn. Digger tore up the flooring, next to the fireplace where the ground was thawed, and lining the grave with blankets, buried the body.

There was no trail of the killers now, but Digger knew the murderers would have to follow Cold Ravine. Heading back into the snow-filled canyons would mean death, and one man was carrying a knife-wound. The storm was gathering force again. Drifts as high as Digger's shoulders impeded his progress as he worked his way onto a ridge where the biting wind had swept the loose snow from the frozen rocks.

Two hours out from the shack Digger located one; he was a heavy pot-bellied man. The body was clumsily covered by a deadfall where the man had crawled. The snowshoes had plowed through the powdery snow as the man had elbowed his way into the protection of the skeleton branches. A knife wound, blue edged, was revealed as Digger John felt for life in the frozen body. This was the man Dulveen had stabbed. But how had the man gotten this far? Badly wounded, it seemed impossible. Dulveen's description had been accurate. A mean face with corded neck muscles holding up the stiff head. Black hair grew almost to the eyebrows.

The big miner pawed through the heavy pack sack. There were cans of food, soggy beans and a half a salted ham. A pair of miner's pans and the usual coffee pot. At the bottom was a gold sack. It was of rawhide, and slimy now. Each small pellet of gold was etched against the bag. There were at least ten pounds of pea gold—half of Dulveen's strike—but it had cost this man his life. Digger stacked more of the deadfall branches over the body.

For long seconds he hefted the gold pouch. Weighed out on a gold buyer's scale, it would sell for almost twenty-five hundred dollars. Realizing that an extra ten pounds of weight might wear down his energy, might prevent him from making the last tortuous mile through this storm, Digger scraped the snow away, found a mossy rock and tucked the bag under its weight.

Now the snow was coming straight at him. Each weightless flake, that would accumulate into deadly tons, was driving straight into his lowered face.

Thirty seconds after he left the body he was lost. Digger was a veteran of the Sierras, had traversed every trail; but no one could fight a mass of wind-whipped snow that turned underbrush into mounds and tall trees into lashing monsters. Monsters that belabored their neighbors in a death-struggle.

The big miner drifted with the storm, clambering along each ridge that had no identity with any trail he'd ever traveled. He forgot Dulveen and

the other murderer who must be somewhere in this bitter, lashing, turmoil of snow and wind. He knew only the necessity of putting one step ahead of the other. To fight through one drift and be engulfed to the waist in the next.

Suddenly, Digger John went through the snowpack. The snow dropped away from his feet and he felt his legs flail for a second as thin ice cracked under him. He was in water—freezing water that soaked through his wool pants, filled his open boots and dragged him under. The lash of the creek drew his feet away and he found himself lodged against a slippery boulder. He could hear his rifle clank against the rock. With frozen hands he dislodged his pack and thrust his head and shoulders upward, thankful as he broke through the rim ice but floundering in the loose snow.

Before Digger could reach the creek bank his clothes were frozen and caked against his numb legs. He tried a staggering run, frantic in the hope that exertion would warm him. But how could a man run in this blinding mass? So cold that the snow now froze into ice even as he felt it slash against his gasping mouth? His only hope was to find a cabin or some protected place but he soon realized this hope was futile. He was going to die, and before he died he would feel his body numb as it froze. Now he could only push forward, elbowing the whipping manzanita away from his face, carefully seeking for purchase with each freezing foot. And how many miles—or yards—he put behind him he never knew.

DIGGER fought against coming alive. Rough hands that were slapping his face, drawing him out of the warm clutch of death, seemed to be taking the skin off his cheeks. The fire that blazed under the lean-to was thawing his aching hands as though the tendons were shrunk. His feet, bare but wrapped in some kind of sweater, were tingling. He moved the toes; he flinched his arms. Then with an effort, he focused his eyes on his rescuer.

The face was massive. A face of black whiskers above narrow shoulders that seemed to fill the lean-to. Long legs, kneeling on the steaming pine needles, were knotted muscle.

"Comin' alive?" it was a harsh voice. "It's about time! I figured you was dead for sure, 'cept you were still movin' when you barged in here."

Digger grimaced. "Man always lives a few seconds after the hangman drops the trap."

"Here—drink some more of this hot water." The steaming can was pushed against Digger's mouth. "S'all we got. But we have got a fire and this storm can't hold out forever."

"Thanks . . ." it was bitter. This could only be the man who had killed Dulveen and who had left his dead companion back on the trail. Tall, lean and mean. Dulveen's description fit. Yet without his help, Digger knew he'd be a frozen corpse—a skeleton of wasted bones in the spring.

"Get outa them wet clothes." The rescuer poked through a blanket roll for a shirt and a pair of wool pants. "My name's Simon Wagers."

Digger John meekly shucked off his wet clothes and into the dry ones.

Two days later the two men struggled through the drifts into Gold Run. The main street was a mudhole of melting snow. A weak sun warmed the snowpack on the slanting roofs and let a glistening trickle of runoff water drip onto the boardwalk. Smoke poured from leaning chimneys. Several horses, covered with red mud to their shoulder joints, champed in front of *Dredger Dan's Saloon.* The snow, packed as high as the windows of the buildings, was rounding off.

"It's a sloppy town," Wagers surveyed it in disgust. "But where there's men, there's got to be liquor."

"Dredger's Saloon." Digger pointed out the hotel. "Go on up there; I'll stop off at my adobe," he turned away, "An' shuck outa these clothes. I'll bring yours to the saloon."

"That's all right," said Wagers, "no hurry."

"I'm in a hurry!" Digger snapped, and stomped through the shush to his home, leaving Wagers staring.

Digger John lighted kindling in the cold stove. This Simon Wagers was a murderer; he had butchered Dulveen. But could *he* turn Wagers in to be hanged? His mind drifted back to the storm, to his panic as he clambered out of the creek. He would have died, and Wagers could have pushed him away and left him to flounder like a steer against barbwire. Then the death of Dulveen might never have been discovered, and Digger's own death would have been laid to the storm.

Wagers would have been in the clear. Could have spent Dulveen's gold and lived to murder again. Instead, Wagers had brought a frozen man into his lean-to and brought him back to life. What kind of man would do that? Could he be mistaken about Wagers?

THEY HAD talked on the trail. Wagers claimed he was coming out of Red Cap Canyon with the summer's cleanup. He had made no mention of a partner or of stopping at Dulveen's cabin. Wagers could have missed it.

Digger remembered the rifle shots. They had come from behind. him. He had passed Dulveen in the storm; might not Wagers have done the same thing just slogging along, head down, in the storm? And Wagers had made no mention of a companion. The man dead from Dulveen's knife was still in possession of half the pea gold.

Poor Dulveen, his strike made, wanting only to go home. Digger struck one fist into his palm. If Wagers was the murderer of Dulveen, by glory, the man *should* stretch a rope! Digger changed his soggy clothes and slamming the door, hurried across the mucky street to *Dredger's Saloon.*

It was already crowded. The smoke-blackened ceiling, low enough to permit a loft for sleeping rooms, seemed even lower. The large room, a bar defending the glittering bottles and yellowing mirror, was warm and filled with excited voices.

"Digger," Dredger Dan waddled from behind his bar and gripped Digger's hand, "they's been another strike! This fella..." he pointed to the tall form of Simon Wagers who was carefully raising a brimming drink to his whiskered lips... "This fella, Wagers, here, brung in the finest take of pea gold this country's ever seen. At least ten pounds of the..."

"Yeah?" Digger moved toward the bar. "Does that make a strike?" Digger tossed the clothes he was carrying onto the back of a chair near the stove. "Here's yore clothes, Wagers."

"He told us," Dredger blurted, "how he found you in the storm. Yew sure owe him a drink, Digger."

"Yeah," answered the big man, "I'll buy for the house, but..."

Simon Wagers lowered his empty glass. He turned his huge head and stared reflectively at Digger John. "But—what?" it was a purred query.

"All right, Wagers." Digger's voice was even. "Where'd yew make yore strike? Where's this place where only pea gold is found?"

The room silenced. The roulette ball, in its rickety race around the wheel, whirred like a stick against a picket fence until the table man hushed its clatter with a soft hand.

"That—" slowly, Wager poured another drink, "is *my* secret. Nobody's gonna start a rush in there till I get a chance to get in first. And that won't be until spring."

"Red Cap Canyon," argued Digger; "Red Cap Canyon's been prospected by a thousand men. Yew told me on the trail yew was in Red Cap Canyon?"

"*Maybe* that's what *I* told you," smiled Wagers.

"Might be it came from Dulveen's?" Digger was angry.

"Who's Dulveen?" Wagers' hand was steady as he poured another drink.

"He's a sniper," interjected Dredger Dan, "who's got a claim on Cold Ravine. Never brung in much—no ways any pea gold. That's real pocket gleanings. Sometimes the hydraulic cleanup brings it in. Nosiree, Digger, this is another strike. And," he fawned on Wagers, "I don't blame yew none for keepin' it hid. Come spring an' maybe yew'll let us in on the location?"

Wagers laughed and turning away from the lowering face of Digger John, folded the returned clothes and stuffed them into the pack sack. The room was buzzing. The men didn't understand Digger's bruskness toward a man who had saved his life. But they could understand Wagers' desire to withold the location of his strike. A hundred miners, snow or no snow, would pack up and fight the drifts to be in possession when the spring allowed mining again.

THOUGHTFULLY, Digger John drank. What could he do? These miners were fawning over Wagers and glaring at himself. Yet he knew Wagers had killed Dulveen. There had to be some decision made.

"Dulveen's been murdered!" Digger spat out the statement that brought a hush into the barroom.

While glasses were held suspended and mouths opened with interest, Digger John told of his arrival at the cabin, the snowshoe tracks, the stolen gold and then of the dead body he'd found under the deadfall. As he painted the picture, the men in the barroom drew away from Simon Wagers and finally Digger John turned and studied the stolid, whiskery face. "An' *I* think this Simon Wagers an' his partner killed Dulveen!"

It was out now. Digger's struggle with his conscience was over. Wagers was crooking his right elbow, a hand curling over the gunbutt at his waist. His eyes pinned Digger John.

"Don't mean a damned thing!" It was another voice.

Wagers' clenched hand relaxed. His arm raised back to the bar and he gripped the bottle.

Digger turned to face the speaker. It was Coyote Tiddings who, as usual, was half drunk.

"I come over that trail myself!" Tiddings slurred the words. "I come over that trail jest one day ahead of you. An' there's a dozen men left off the river the same day as me an' maybe that many more the day after. Now you'll want to be sayin' I kilt Dulveen. 'Ceptin' *I* won't take it like Wagers done. I'd kill you!"

Before Digger could collect his thoughts, several other men joined in agreement with Tiddings. Dredger Dan lifted his shotgun off the deer antlers and cocked the triggers. His voice carried authority.

"No fightin' in here!" he let the black muzzles sweep the room.

Wagers' whiskered face was taut. "The man accused me of bein' a killer an' a claim robber. That don't go!" He jerked the gun from its holster and cocked the trigger. Digger, surprised at the interference of Tiddings and the stubborn refusal of the miners to accept his story, stood silently.

"You're supposed to be a tough cookie," Wagers' was pressing the issue. "But if you don't take back them words, I'll blow your guts out!" He was tensing his finger on the trigger when the saloon man took charge.

He jammed the shotgun against Wagers' chest and roared. "I said—no fightin' in here! Drop that gun 'fore I blow yew apart!"

Wagers took a long look into the saloon owner's eyes and let the Colt slip to the floor. "You ain't settled nothin'..." Wagers began.

"Just one thing," retorted Dredger Dan. "There'll be *no* gun fight in my saloon. Outside—that's yore business." His teeth were beginning to chatter in excitement. "An' maybe some of Digger John's business; he can usually back up what he claims."

"Not this time!" shouted Coyote Tiddings. "If I was Wagers I'd gun him outa town an' quick!"

"That's a good suggestion, friend!" Wagers snapped. "I'll give this whiskered liar jest one hour—remember, jest one hour—to get outa Gold Run!"

DIGGER JOHN hunched his shoulders without answering. He stepped away from the bar and retreated through the batwings. A hoot of laughter followed. The tinkling piano jumped into life, its tinny strains pacing the miner back to his adobe.

Digger fussed with the stove, raising such a heat that the coffee boiled its brown bubbles over. Then he sat down and cleaned his navy Colt. It hadn't gone as he'd expected. They should have listened; have sent a couple of men back to Dulveen's cabin. And maybe talked to the miners from Red Cap Canyon. They should have checked Wagers' story. If Wagers had worked a Red Cap claim, miners would know about what his stake would be. They'd know if he took out ten pounds of pea gold.

But led by Coyote Tiddings, the men in the saloon had given Wagers a clearance. It was obvious that, excited by the man's admission of a new strike, they had fought against anything which might deny their hopes. They *wanted* to believe the pea gold had come from Wagers' hidden claim. And Wagers, playing his desperate game for survival, had the entire winter in which to escape. At any time he could walk away, could disappear into the disjointed void that was California.

But first he had to run his accuser out of Gold Run or kill him. This thought brought a flush to Digger's cheeks. How could he fight Wagers when the man had saved his life? That one thought had kept his gun in its holster back there in *Dredger's Saloon.* Now should he take that long walk back to the saloon, meet Wagers on the street and match his life against Wagers' courage? Or should he tuck his tail between his legs and leave town?

The hour's leeway was clicking by. Digger began making up his trail pack. Let the damned fools think what they would. They'd discover that Wagers' had no new strike. Digger jammed his pack together and hefting the packsack onto one shoulder, he stepped out the door.

Digger was dropping the latch when the rifle shot cracked down the street. The slug tore into the door. Digger threw off his pack, dodged around the corner, dropped into the slush and peeked around the wall. The rifleman was dodging behind the livery stable. Digger triggered a shot. Had Wagers gone crazy? He must have seen the pack and would know Digger was leaving town. Or, had someone teamed up with . . .?

The thought died. Behind him boots crushed against the snow pack. He whirled. It was Wagers, Colt drawn. Rolling away, Digger fired. He saw Wagers double in the middle, his weight carrying him forward until the legs lost motion and Wagers' body slumped to the ground.

SHOUTS blurred as men hurried out of the buildings. Digger John rolled Wagers over. The man was dead, a cold, unfired gun in his hand. But the bushwhacker was free, hidden with a rifle somewhere behind the livery stable. In a crouched run, Digger dodged across the street. Men dove for cover as they noticed his gun. He rounded the barn and clambered under the corral fence. Ahead, behind a stack of hay, he caught the glint of a rifle.

Deliberately, Digger fired again through the lose hay. Coyote Tiddings staggered into view, his rifle raised as the dying hand clinched on the trigger. The shot blazed into the sky and Tiddings slumped into the water filled hoof cavities of the corral. Digger waited several seconds but Tiddings was dead. Wearily, the big miner turned back holstering his gun.

"Now!" Dredger Dan's voice was ripe with his authority as judge of the Miner's Court that had quickly convened in the saloon. "Now—quiet down."

"What's all this fol-de-rol about?" shouted a spectator. "He killed both of them. First Wagers an' then Coyote Tiddings . . ." His face congested. "Now we'll never know where that pea gold come from. Hang the varmint!"

"Aw shut up!" roared Dredger Dan. "We gotta listen to what he's got to say. He can defend himself—that's the law anywheres. Anyways, they both were shootin' at him." The judge turned solemnly. "Digger John, what made yew so sure Wagers was the one what murdered Dulveen? That's what started this whole mess."

"Cause Dulveen said," Digger answered, "they was two of them. A fat one an' a thin one—both was tall. Wagers give me a shirt an' pants to dry out in. The shirt was too big an' them pants was too small."

"An' what the hell does that prove?" questioned Dredger.

"The dead man—the one with the knife-wound was fat an' tall. An' Wagers was lean an' tall. Well the shirt was a fat man's shirt—fit me double. The pants was Wagers' extra pants an' they fit me real tight—see?"

"No!" bellowed Dredger Dan. "But see if'n *yew* can clear it up."

"Partners do it that way," answered Digger. "They make up two packs but one pack is always grub. The other is blankets an' extra clothes cause stuff like bacon gets the clothes greasy. When they run off, after Killin' Dulveen, Wagers had the pack with the clothes. The dead partner was carryin' the grub. Wagers made the mistake of givin, me his partner's shirt—an' *he didn't have no food.* All the food was in the other pack. Y'see, the man carryin' the food was usin' the only pair of snowshoes, his pack bein' the heavier . . ."

A hush settled over the room. Digger was right; every man who had struggled over a mountain trail knew this.

"But where'd Coyote Tiddings come in . . .?" began Dredger.

"Don't rightly know," replied Digger. "Wagers must'a promised him he'd be the first man he'd lead into the supposedly new strike. Coyote was that kind of man. I guess he was just supposed to throw a slug my way; then I'd think Wagers was up at that end of the street. Meantime, Wagers would sneak around an' plug me from behind."

"What tipped yew off, Dig?" Dredger raised the bung starter to bang the bar and held it poised.

"Wagers never carried no rifle an' that was a rifle shot comin' from Tiddings."

"Case dismissed!" shouted Dredger, slapping the bung-starter onto the oak bar. "First drink on the house in fond memory of Dulveen!"

★

A. A. Baker, author of the "Digger John" stories, also writes the "Able Cain" stories in our companion magazine, **REAL WESTERN STORIES.** Look for the big October issue, containing 15 Complete Stories, including

ABLE CAIN'S DUEL

★★★★ SPECIAL FEATURE ★★★★

RIVER BOAT GAMBLER

by LEE FLOREN

THERE ON the green-topped table was three thousand dollars. Outside, the slow-moving paddles of the river boat turned slowly, splashing up the dirty water of the Missouri River.

For hours, the river boat gambler had been winning. Four men played at the table, and now one of them—a hot headed southerner—glared at the gambler, who apparently was studying his cards.

"I am claiming this pot, Mr. Gambler."

"Lay down your hand, sir; if you have the high hand, then the pot is yours."

"I am not claiming it on my cahds, suh. You have been cheating me for hours—so I claim the pot for my own, on that premise—"

The southerner stood up, hand going for the pistol on his hip. His other hand went out, encircling the pile of gold coins.

Suddenly, both hands stopped. The one, hooked around the pot, hesitated, stopped; the other, reaching for the short-arm, also stopped in mid air. For their owner was staring into the muzzle of a gun.

The gambler held it. It was a snub-nosed gun, heavy and deadly, its twin bores dark and ominous. It was a gun especially designed and constructed for the use of gamblers. A gambler always shot at close range. This derringer was accurate up to ten feet, and the southerner was about three feet away.

"Did you say something, sir?" the gambler asked, eyes cold as he studied the disgruntled player.

The third player drew back, hands slightly raised. He wanted no part of this feud or this snub-nosed deadly short-gun. The southerner, staring into the gun, decided he wanted no part of it, either. "I made an error, suh," he said.

The gambler nodded. "All gamblers are crooked," he said slowly. "They have to be, or they don't win. He is dishonest before he sits in on a game, for he is dishonest when he gets the thought he will win from his fellow man."

"I didn't come to be lectured."

The gambler nodded. "Well do I know that, sir. You sat in on this game to win from me. As it turned out, I won from you. I outguessed you and outbluffed you, and your pride is hurt more by those points than by the loss of your money. You don't really want your money back so badly—what you want is to uphold your pride. Well, if you want your money so damned bad, take it and get out."

The southerner debated this point momentarily. He realized, now, he had acted impetously; he had been lucky the gambler had not shot him. He would be on this river packet for some more weeks, for he was headed for the end of navigable water on the Big Muddy—Fort Benton, in Montana Territory. People would discuss him pro and con, and he would be classified as a man who could not lose without bellyaching. The man sat back, smiling.

"Deal me two cards," the southerner said.

The gambler spoke to his derringer. "You came in handy, Thomas." He restored the gun to its holster.

Many gamblers had pet names for their pet derringers. "Honest Abe" was one name, another was "Nancy Hanks." A gambler's life sometimes became a precarious life; some players hated to lose.

USUALLY river-boat gamblers worked in pairs. To the passengers they put on a front of being strangers. When on boat they did not associate and seldom, if ever, spoke.

But once a trip was over, after the suckers had been fleeced, they would walk arm and arm down the gangplank, their partnership suddenly revealed to the passengers. They were good actors.

Some boarded river-packets under the guise of planters. They had hired Negroes to bid them goodby at the landing.

"Don't you worry about your plantation, boss. Us boy's'll take good care of everythin'. You all jes' enjoy your trip, boss. Yas suh, you enjoys every turn of them paddle-wheels, boss."

So the gambler boarded as a plantation owner. He was "coaxed" into a poker game—or either a three-card monte game, which was very popular at that time. Sometimes he got into trouble. If he were close to a port, he could slip ashore; but, with the closest port a long ways off, he had to stick with the packet. To swim to shore would only deliver him into the hands of redskins.

History shows that a gang of men, having been "taken" by a gambler, swore to kill him. The gambler, frightened for his life, blacked his face and joined the boat's orchestra, an all Negro aggregation.

Men searched the boat for him; they could not find him. The gambler, wearing a ragged, tattered garb, hands and face corked, meanwhile played a jaunty banjo in the orchestra, singing in a loud Negroid voice.

His life depended on his maintaining his disguise. Grinning Negroes worked with him in keeping his secret. He helped them as roustabout—he carried trunks and luggage, bowed and scraped, and all the time the killers hunted him. Finally they decided he must have leaped from the boat. He had not gone down the gangplank. Only the Negroes, laden with cargo and luggage, had gone up and down the gangplank. The gambler had evidently jumped into the Missouri and had swam for shore. They hoped the redskins had lifted his hair.

The gambler, twanging his banjo, heard this talk, and broke into a happy song. His "fellow Negroes" grinned at him.

The gambler, the journey ended, went onto the docks at Fort Benton with a load, dumped it and went to a hotel, where he washed the makeup and cork from his face, had a long nap, and then went down town, derringer in holster.

One of the searchers saw him, flashed a knife, and lunged for him. The gambler shot him neatly through the heart with cold dispatch. That changed the minds of the other searchers.

"How come thet gambler get into Fort Benton?"

"I dunno. Must've swam to shore an' got a hoss an' rid in ahead of us. One thing is—he never come in on the boat with us!"

"He sure didn't."

"He sure was a handy gent with thet derringer of his, too."

All gamblers were handy with their derringers. They had to be...to keep on living. Short, double-barrelled, the derringer packed a wallop, for it shot a forty-one caliber bullet, rim-fire.

"Good old Andrew Jackson," the gambler said, reloading his derringer. "The only true friend a gambling man has."

And he was undoubtedly correct.

Mattie would stick by Slim, even if he were the hunted cardsharp that Nathan said he was. And she wondered what other explanation for her husband's mysterious comings and departures there could be.

WHAT'S YOUR BUSINESS?

by HELENE HUFF

SOMETIMES Mattie thought she'd married the wrong man. She loved Slim, her tall, lean husband with his black hair and the crinkly lines around his gleaming eyes. He was all any romantic girl could want. That was the trouble.

She wasn't a romantic girl any longer. She was a married woman, and there were some qualities in a husband a woman wants that don't seem to matter a whit when you're courting.

Nathan, the losing suitor, hadn't seemed exciting. He was steady and sometimes right boring, and unimaginative except for one thing—wanting her. She shuddered as she remembered his greedy eyes surveying her as though she were a piece of horseflesh. But he did own the local dance hall and had a good income and had a love of women—especially a love for her.

Mattie leaned the broom against the side of the cabin and looked out across the endless prairie. Then her heart missed a beat as she saw Slim riding toward her on his black horse. She smiled and ran to meet him, feeling alive and complete for the first time since he left on his mysterious business four days before.

He reined the horse abruptly and it reared up on its hind legs. Mattie drew back out of the way of the flailing hoofs. A frown formed between her blue eyes, and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask why he always had to make a show of doing such simple things as reining a horse.

But she didn't ask it.

Slim reached down and picked her up onto the saddle in front of him. She snuggled in his arms an responded when he kissed her.

"Got some pretties for you." He kissed her again. Then his voice quietened. "Sometimes I wish I didn't have to leave you like this; you're too sweet to be away from."

She squirmed around in his arms.

"Then why do you?" Before he could answer, she asked the question she'd asked ever since she first met Slim at a square dance. "Tell me, Slim, what do you do? What's your business?"

He looked at her steadily for a moment, then he threw back his head and laughed. "Now, don't go bothering your head about man's work."

"But it's important," she insisted. "I'm your wife now; have been for almost six months. And I have a right to know what you do."

"Why, Mattie, baby, it's like I told you all along. I travel."

Mattie's shoulders drooped. She knew there was no use prodding any further. Unaccountably she was chilled. Then she saw the bullet-hole in the crown of Slim's hat.

She pointed to the hole with her forefinger. "How did you get that hole in your hat?"

Slim hesitated. Then his jaw clenched and she saw a small muscle working in his cheek. "A little misunderstanding."

He lifted her down from the saddle, kissing her on the forehead. "I'll water the horse." Over his shoulder, he called, "What's for supper?"

She waited, watching him ride toward the creek to water Coalie. Mattie sighed. She had to admit it. Against her better judgment, she loved this irresponsible, gay Slim. And she reckoned she'd go right on loving him. But, somehow, like now, she thought she'd be better off if she packed up her clothes and got a job cooking on a ranch.

Idly she wondered why Slim left his horse at the creek as he swung up the path toward her. He grinned and walked ahead toward the cabin door.

She hesitated. Suddenly Slim seemed like a stranger. She didn't want to be in the same house with him. That restlessness of his, the agile hands that shuffled cards endlessly when he was home, his abrupt movement and the automatic reaching for his pistol when he heard a noise in the night. What did all of it mean?

Then he turned and held out his hand to her and she forgot her worries, her riddle, and ran to him.

IN THE middle of the night, she awoke when she heard the sound of horses' hoofs coming nearer and nearer the cabin. Then she became aware of Slim, in the dark, working on the floor. She sat up. "Slim, what is it? What are you doing?"

"Prying up the floorboards." His breathing was heavy. "Help me. Hurry, Mattie; they're after me." Two boards came loose as he talked. "I'm crawling in under the floor. Nail the boards back in place." He disappeared, and she saw him stretched flat on the ground.

"What did you do?" she asked between dry lips as she nailed the boards in place.

Working quickly, she moved a straight chair over the boards. Then she crawled back in bed, tense and straining every muscle. She took several deep breaths.

She heard the pounding on the door. Slowly she lighted a lamp and walked across the room.

"What do you want?" she asked, breathing rapidly.

"We're after Slim," a deep voice replied.

Mattie paused. The voice was familiar. She spoke slowly. "Is that you Nathan?"

"Yes, ma'am. I hate to come barging in like this, waking you up and scaring you and all, but we aim to get Slim."

"What's he done? What's wrong?"

"Gambling game over in the next county. Caught him cheating; can't let dishonest men like him go running around loose."

Of course, Mattie should have known Slim gambled. All the signs pointed to

it. But he couldn't be dishonest; he was too fine a man for that.

"I don't believe it! Go away if you're going to go around thinking things like that."

"We got proof, Mattie. It's not the first time, either; now you better let me in or we'll have to knock the door down."

Wearily Mattie said, "I'll let you in as soon as I get dressed, but Slim's not here. You know he doesn't stay home much."

"We'll check."

A few minutes later, she unbolted the door. "Come in and look. It's just this one room and you'll see he's not here." She held her chin high and her mouth was firm.

After a thorough search, Nathan told the other men to wait outside. When he was alone with Mattie, he said, "I'm sorry; honest. But a cheating gambler's bad as a horsethief. I warned you all along, Slim wasn't no good. And, like I said before, any time you'll marry up with me, I'd be powerful proud."

Mattie drew herself up to her five feet three inches, and her eyes darkened in anger. "That day will never come."

Nathan's grin was sinister. He reached an arm out toward her. Mattie cringed. "Get out!"

His face whitened as he growled, "You'll be sorry!"

Mattie stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips. "And if you catch Slim and so much as..." she floundered. "I'll, I'll..." She slammed the door hard, and stalked across the room, seething with indignation.

SHE SAT on the chair over the concealing boards until she could no longer hear the horses. Then she went to the door and walked around the house. There was no one around. Only then did she go back inside, pick up the hammer from under her pillow and begin prying the boards loose.

At last she sat back on the floor as Slim wiggled out. He brushed the dirt off his face and clothes. Then he grinned. "That was kind of close, wasn't it?"

Mattie stared up at him. "It's not true, is it, Slim? You didn't do those things Nathan said you did. Did you?"

"That no-good liar; that two-timing romeo courting you, counting on me being a corpse soon." He stuck his hands in his pockets and paced up and down the room.

"Did you?" Mattie asked again.

"Did I what?"

"Did you do what he said you did?"

He walked over to Mattie and lifted her up into his arms. Gently he kissed her and buried his face in her hair. "What do you think, baby?"

She relaxed in the safety of Slim's strong arms, safe and secure from the world, and from the threats of men like Nathan.

Finally she said, "It doesn't matter what you did, Slim. Only..." she hesitated.

"Only what?"

"Can't you stay home? Can't we be together always? I get so lonesome when you're gone. Stay with me. Please!" She felt tears come into her eyes and she leaned her head on his chest.

Slim patted her on the shoulder. "I can't stay now; they'll be back. They've got to pin the cheating on someone, and they've marked me. But when this is cleared up, and when I finish my job, I'll send for you and we'll be together always."

Mattie's heart beat rapidly. "Where will you go? Take me with you. Please, Slim. Don't leave me. I'd rather be with you anywhere than alone without you."

He took her arms from around his neck as gently as though she were a child. And then he looked into her eyes as though he were storing up memories to last a lifetime. At last, he said, "Not this time, baby; not this time."

Mattie felt her heart breaking. She wanted to cry and bawl like a baby, to

plead with him, to cling to him, but somewhere deep inside her, she knew she mustn't. He needed her strength now. She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling and then she smiled brightly. "I'll get your supplies ready while you saddle up."

"Don't need to. I hid Coalie in the creek bottom. I figured they'd be out this way soon. But I had to see you."

She worked quickly, and wordlessly walked to the door with him. He kissed her. "I'll send for you, Mattie. But if you don't hear from me in a couple of months, don't wait for me."

Mattie's hand flew to her throat and she gasped. She watched as he walked toward the creek. And then the blackness engulfed him and she could no longer follow him with her eyes. She sank to the floor sobbing.

AT THE END of two dragging months, Mattie was thin, her eyes were surrounded by deep blue circles and she did her daily chores in a trance.

Nathan had been out to see her several times and each time she had more trouble avoiding his forceful attentions on her. During the past week she had forced herself to make plans for the future.

She looked out of the kitchen window and saw Nathan dismounting. *I won't let him in,* she told herself. He no longer seemed steady and kind and good husband material. She hated him. Hated him for what he was doing to Slim, making him a fugitive; hated him for lurking around her like a buzzard waiting for the kill so he could crudely gobble her up in his dirty arms.

But she was too late to hide; Nathan saw her. He swept off his hat and bowed. She wanted to throw the pot of beans on his thin blond hair. Instead she walked to the door, went outside and closed the door behind her.

She looked at him from half-shut eyes. She saw his look of cunning and delight. "Yes?" Her voice was cool.

"You're looking mighty beautiful these days, Mattie." He put out his hand to stroke her arm, but she drew back, shrinking from his smooth hands touching her.

"What do you want?"

"Like I've been telling you all along; I want you. You picked the wrong man to marry. But after you got hitched to Slim, I couldn't figure out no way to win you back. That is," and his cat eyes leered and his open mouth displayed uneven teeth, "until I got on to his racket."

Mattie's chin jerked up. "You framed him! You did that to Slim!"

The smile vanished and Nathan's lips drooped at the corners. "Now I wouldn't put it that way exactly. You might say I was just lucky to find out about him. You mustn't go getting mad at me."

"You snake! Just wait until Slim gets back and he'll take care of you!"

"That's what I'm getting around to." Nathan smoothed his hair back in place to cover the bald spot on top of his head. "Slim won't be back. They strung him up a couple of days ago about a hundred miles down the line."

Mattie stood still, hardly breathing. A chill struck her and she trembled. Her lips barely moved. "I don't believe it. It's not true!" She stopped and shook her head as though to clear it. Licking her lips, she asked, "Was there any identification?"

Nathan laughed. "Guess people around here know what a rat Slim was. It was him that was strung up all right."

"You're lying!" She spit it out, fighting the tears that blinded her and ran down her cheeks. All at once her anger washed away the shocking sadness.

"Well, now, Mattie. I don't reckon I'd call a honorable man like me a name like that. Come to think of it there was something to prove it was Slim."

She watched as he pulled a piece of rope out of his hip pocket. "Reckon

this'll prove to you it was Slim. One of the fellows was out that way the next day and cut this here piece of rope from the tree Slim strung from. You know we always string the outlaws up with their own ropes. Seems kind of a fitting end."

MATTIE'S eyes were glued to the rope that Nathan dangled before her.

When she didn't say anything he continued, "Slim always did have fancy rope; it's real pretty." He laughed gloatingly. "Got a piece of blood-red twine running through it."

Suddenly Mattie felt hot anger coursing through her veins. She backed away from Nathan. Her voice was icy. "You're real happy about Slim, aren't you? Real happy, because..."

"Because why?"

"You know why!" Her voice rose. "You've wanted to marry me all along and now you think that because Slim's gone, I'll jump at the chance!"

His terrible smile made her shiver. "Now that you mention it, that's what me and you'll do. Get hitched. Right now. Today." He reached for her and drew her protesting body close to his and leaned down to kiss her.

Mattie strained backward, reached up one hand and scratched his face with all five fingers. Then she jerked loose and kicked him on the right knee. She heard him cursing as she ran into the cabin and bolted the door. She stood with her back against it, fighting for breath, feeling tarnished and filthy.

I hate him, she thought. *I hate him.*

Closing her eyes, she spoke softly, as though Slim were in the cabin with her. "I don't believe you're guilty, but if you are, it doesn't matter. You know that. And I would have waited forever for you to send for me. I'll still wait. Nathan didn't actually see you; maybe it was somebody else. Maybe."

But she knew it was useless to hope any longer. If Slim could, he would have sent for her. Now the two months' waiting period had passed.

When she heard Nathan ride away, she opened the door and picked up the foot-long piece of rope. She ran her hand along its length, feeling its roughness and strength. Strangely there were no tears; only a vast emptiness filled her being.

She looked at the rope, noticed the slender red twine running through its coarse thickness. Red, she thought idly. Blood-red.

And then her eyes widened. She held the rope up close. Of course, she smiled. Unexpectedly a warmth flowed through her. Humming, she let the rope fall unnoticed to the floor.

THE NEXT few days she was busy. She knew it wasn't safe to stay here alone with Nathan closing in almost every day. She needed time. She didn't want to leave this cabin where Slim and she had been so happy, but she knew she must.

When Nathan came Monday, she was ready for him. Her plans were made. She walked out to meet him. Inwardly she rebelled. She hated the sight of him; she cringed when he shook her hand and held it longer than necessary.

She knew Nathan felt the change in her immediately. "Bless my soul, Mattie, you're prettier than a speckled calf."

She preened, then smiled up at him, all the time wanting to slap his smirking face. "Thank you, Nathan," she simpered, dropping her eyes.

He patted her hand again, then enveloped it in both of his. "Just passing by," he said and she knew he was lying. "Thought I'd stop by for a neighborly visit." He peered at her from under his bushy eyebrows. "Thought you might be feeling sad-like, but I see you're already over that no-good Slim."

She tensed her body, but relaxed quickly when she saw Nathan noticed. "Slim was a good husband."

"I been thinking," Nathan pursed his thin lips, "it's not safe a pretty little filly like you living out here alone. I been thinking you ought to be getting married again now."

"But it's only been less than a week." Mattie caught herself. She asked coyly, "Don't you think it's a little soon to be thinking of that?"

"People won't make no talk, knowing Slim for what he was. They'll think you're right slick to hitch up with me. I got not only myself to offer, but plenty of money. You'll be the prettiest dressed woman in town. I can give you lots of things."

Mattie knew she was playing this all wrong when she said, "Everybody liked Slim; he was kind and good to all."

Nathan shrugged. "Seems like people want to remember the good in the dead and clean forget the bad. But you're veering off the subject. You got everything *I* want." His eyes roamed over her greedily.

Mattie crossed her arms in front of her as though she could hide from those lustful eyes. She felt her resolve sink farther and farther away. *I can't do it,* she told herself. *I can't do it.*

She blinked and her eyes cleared. "I love Slim. I don't love you."

Nathan laughed and she stared at the crooked teeth and the cruel eyes. "You'll forget him once we're married. I'll *make* you love me. I'll give you everything you want."

Mattie stood straight and unyielding. "You can't buy love."

His eyes narrowed and she thought he was going to strike her. Instead he squeezed her hand and said, "You'll see."

Numbly, she said, "All right. If that's what you want. I'll marry you; next Sunday."

He eagerly lunged toward her, but she held him off. "No. Please go now. And don't come back again. I'll be busy getting ready. I'll be at the church Sunday morning."

He was angry, but he controlled himself. "If that's the way you want it, you can have your way now; I'll wait until Sunday." He rode away in a cloud of dust.

MATTIE walked around to the pen and got her horse, which followed her to the creek. She followed the same path Slim took when he rode away over two months ago. She sat on the bank. "It's the only way I can work it out, Slim. The only way I can buy time to get out of the country," she explained.

As though Slim could hear her, she continued, "I'll go to Oklahoma where they're homesteading. I can do that. Besides, that's what we planned to do someday, you know."

She frowned. "I have it all figured out. Nathan won't be back this week. I won't be at the church Sunday. I'll be way off where he can't find me."

She stood up, dusted off her skirt, and threw back her shoulders as she led the horse by its mane back to the pen.

The days passed much too quickly to suit Mattie. She planned to leave early Thursday morning.

She was awakened Wednesday night by a light tapping on the door. She opened her eyes and lay tense and frightened. Had Nathan learned of her flight away from him? She knew he'd be crazy-mad if he had. She pulled the covers over her head, afraid to breathe.

The knocking was louder. In a hoarse voice, she called, "Who is it? What do you want?"

"Mattie. Mattie, baby. Don't be frightened."

"Slim?" she asked, fear and hope mingled in her voice.

"Yes. It's me, baby. Let me in!"

She stumbled in the darkness to the door. As he stepped inside, she threw her arms around his neck and held tightly. "Slim," she cried, "Slim, Slim. You're back!" She sobbed, hardly able to speak.

"I couldn't get back any sooner.

Hurry and get dressed. We're leaving now. I have your horse saddled and we'll be out of the country before daybreak."

As she struggled into her clothes, he noticed her packed sacks. She heard surprise in his voice. "You're all packed!"

"Yes, I..."

A coldness crept into his voice. "So it's true! I heard you were planning to marry Nathan Sunday. Why?"

"Oh, Slim. It's not true!"

"That's why I rushed through my work a couple of days earlier than I planned so I could save you from him—and for me!"

She ran to him, but he said sternly, "Later. We'll talk later."

AS THEY hurried down the path toward the creek where the horses were hidden, she clung to Slim's hand. "They said you were hung. That you were a cheating gambler."

She heard his breathing in the darkness beside her. As they rode away without a backward glance, he said, "That's what Nathan hopes. There was a hanging of a fellow that looked something like me; Nathan jumped to his own conclusions."

"But what happened?"

"Nathan and his gang *were* cheating. They tried to pin it on me; tried to get me. The time you noticed the bullet hole in my hat." He paused. "I would have stayed and shot it out with them, but I had my job to do, and couldn't take a chance on being shot. Not then.

"What is your job?" Mattie felt as though she would die if he didn't tell her now. "If you're an outlaw, it doesn't matter if you'll just let me tag along. I don't care *what* you are, if you'll tell me and let me share it wth you."

She saw Slim's straight white teeth gleam in the darkness as he smiled. "Why baby, I'm a Texas Ranger. I kind of look into things that might hurt us, like robbing mail coaches, and putting a nail on outlaws. Had to associ-

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Important Announcement

The next issue of

WESTERN ACTION will be dated

November, 1955

It will have 32 MORE PAGES

at NO INCREASE in price

And starting with this ***BIG*** *November issue, it will be the policy of this magazine to present*

15 COMPLETE ACTION-PACKED STORIES

REMEMBER *The big November issue will be on sale September 1st*

Frank Hanscombe didn't see how helping this old man would help him in the futile search for Harry Kimberly. But he couldn't let two young men get away with booting one oldster around!

SHORT CUT TO A SHOWDOWN

by William Richards

FRANK HANSCOMBE reined up in the timber at the top of the rise to let his horse blow, and swung down from the saddle to try to stamp out the frustration and despair that rasped his nerves raw. He looked at his watch and shook his head in exasperation. Six hours now, up one rise and down another on a seemingly endless trail over the steep, pine-covered hills to Allenville. A short cut, they'd called it back in Prescott, but as far as he could see it was a short cut to the insane asylum and nothing else; for every minute he wasted in these hills was another minute added to Harry Kimberly's lead.

Frank swore softly. Stop worrying about minutes, he told himself; Kimberly's lead was measured in days. But Frank knew he wouldn't listen to his own advice. Time had just about run out and every minute counted now. In another few days they'd fill the vacancy in the superintendent's office, and he had to have Kimberly in hand by then or give up all hope of getting the promotion.

Frank drew out his badge and studied the worn emblem. Ten years a detective for the Ames & Walsh Stage Coach Company. Ten years in the saddle chasing a never-ending succession of will-o'-the-wisps; riding into dozens of strange towns; asking a hundred men if they knew something about this crime or that involving the company. Ninety-nine knew nothing. The hundredth knew a man who might know—who turned out not to know, but who knew another; and on and on to the last man in the chain, who more often than not knew nothing. Ten years chasing his own tail in a tighter and tighter circle, and now, at thirty-five, he was sick of it.

But the only way out was to land the superintendent's job, for he was too old to start over in something new. Once he got the job, once he was settled down behind the desk, he and Betty could begin the quiet, steady life together they'd yearned for so long.

Frank shoved the badge back into his pocket. Standing here was no way to catch Harry Kimberly. He swung up into the saddle and rode down through the timber, straining his eyes to follow the dim, twisting trail.

Suddenly it opened into a small clearing. Frank pulled up well back from the edge and scanned the one-room log cabin that nestled deep in the sun-speckled hillside. Above and beyond it a small mine spilled its tailings in a widening gash down the slope. No one stirred. Only the raucous cries of a pair of jays disturbed the silence.

Frank was about to ride into the clearing when he saw two riders come out of the timber at the far side and move toward the cabin. Almost immediately a wiry, white-haired little man rushed out of the mine, yelling and shaking his fist.

FROWNING, Frank waited until all three men were out of sight behind the cabin and rode out into the clearing himself. As he came up alongside the cabin, he heard the old man's voice raised angrily.

"How many times I got to tell ye I don't want ye hanging around here?"

"Take it easy, Scotty," a harsh voice answered. "We didn't come up here to make trouble."

"I know what ye came for, and this is the last time I'm going to warn ye."

There was a moment's silence before the harsh voice said, "That's pretty big talk for a little old man like you."

Frank rode out past the corner of the cabin and sized up the two men sitting their horses before the door. They were brothers, from the look of them, both stocky, dressed in workstained levis. They eyed Frank sullenly.

The harsh-voiced older man turned to Scotty. "Who's this?"

"Why don't you ask me?" Frank said.

The man looked at Frank. "If you're smart, mister, you'll mind your own business."

"I decide what my business is."

In the short silence that followed, Scotty reached back into the cabin and grabbed a double-barreled shotgun standing just inside the door. He whipped it around and leveled it at the riders.

"I've had enough of this," he shouted; "you two mosey along before I blow your ugly heads off."

The brothers stared poker-faced at Scotty a few moments and then reined around and rode back into the timber.

"Blast them two," Scotty said to Frank. "I'll lose me temper one of these days and there'll be hell to pay." He returned the shotgun to its place at the door and beckoned Frank into the cabin. "Let me fix ye a cup of coffee."

Frank followed the old man inside and sat at a rickety table in the center of the dirt-floored room. A rough cupboard and two bunks stood at opposite walls and a pot-bellied iron stove centered the back wall. Scotty bustled about the stove briefly and set out two cups of steaming black coffee.

"I'm much obliged to ye," he said, sitting down across from Frank.

Frank shrugged. "I like to see the odds even."

"They was even," Scotty said, "the way them two look at it."

"They neighbors of yours?"

"The Ludlows? They're supposed to to run a few head down near Allenville somewhere; but as far as I can tell, they spend all their time pestering me. I've not had a moment's peace in the two months I've been here."

"Two months?" Frank asked. "You work fast."

"It's not all my doings. The mine was abandoned, but she looked good to

me, so I moved in and started working her again."

"It must be panning out," Frank said, "or at least those two think so. Why don't you get the law on them ?"

"The law?" Scotty snorted. "What do I need the law for? I ain't scared of that pair."

Frank stood up. "No, I reckon you're not. Well, I've got to be riding. Much obliged for the coffee and all. By the way, you haven't seen anything of a skinny jasper on a white-faced bay in the last couple of days or so, have you?"

Scotty frowned. "Are ye the law?"

"No, Frank said. "It's a private matter."

"I've seen the man," Scotty said. "But while ye're looking, keep an eye out for them Ludlows—especially that Bart. He won't take kindly to your siding with me this afternoon."

"I will, Frank said, "but I don't scare so easy myself."

HE MOUNTED and spurred his horse across the clearing into the timber on the far side. As he zigzagged down through the pine he caught glimpses of a wide valley below. Shortly he rode out into the late-afternoon sunlight, picked up the valley road and let his horse out into an easy lope toward Allenville.

As he pounded along, the rhythmic, monotonous beat of his horse's hoofs lulled his mind, and before he knew it he was caught up again in thoughts of the endless, frustrating agony of his job. Allenville, he thought bitterly—one more strange town where there was supposed to be someone who might know something about a stage coach holdup that took place over a month ago.

Three men had shot up the stage and made off with fifty thousand in gold. They'd been masked, but someone thought he'd recognized Harry Kimberly and the hunt was on. As the days and weeks dragged by, however, with the clues fizzling out and no sign of Kimberly or the money, the law turned its attention to more immediate problems and Ames & Walsh drew off most of its own men.

They'd kept Frank on, though, and he'd welcomed the assignment. The superintendent was ready to retire, and Frank knew the choice of a successor lay between him and another longtime detective. He knew, too, that the other man had a somewhat better record and would probably win the promotion unless something out of the ordinary happened. Bringing in Harry Kimberly and proving him guilty would be that something.

It had sounded easy, but it hadn't worked out that way. Kimberly was last seen heading south, but a hundred miles away from the scene he'd dropped out of sight. Frank had ridden all the way down to Prescott in the hope of picking up the trail again, but without success. He had been about ready to give up and go back when a man from Allenville had said he thought he'd seen someone a week before that answered Kimberly's description.

Frank had set out for Allenvile as soon as it was light and now, as his horse plodded through the dust of Allenville's main street, he fell into the old habit of sizing up the town. He noted the buggies and wagons drawn up before the false-fronted buildings; the ranchers and idlers lounging on the boardwalk; the womenfolk in their bonnets and calico, all of them surreptitiously eyeing the newcomer and being eyed in return.

FRANK TOOK a room at the hotel and ate a hurried meal. It was a quiet, midweek night and he knew there wouldn't be much activity in town, but he was anxious to see what he could learn. Right after supper he went into the nearest saloon and struck up a conversation with the bartender and the few men at the bar.

None of them knew anything of the holdup or Harry Kimberly, so Frank moved on to the next place. But it was the same story there and the place after that and the one after that. So, along about midnight, as the saloons turned down their lights and closed their doors, Frank gave up and started back to his hotel, the taste of failure bitter in his mouth.

As he passed the darkened feed store, a man suddenly stepped out of the shadows and blocked his way. Frank stopped, his hand near his pistol butt, and waited quietly for the other to move. The boardwalk creaked as a second man came up behind him. In a faint flash of light from the swinging doors of a saloon down the street, Frank recognized the man in front of him as Bart Ludlow.

Ludlow kept his harsh voice low. "They say you're asking questions around, something about a holdup, wasn't it?"

"That's right," Frank said.

"Any reward?"

"Five thousand."

Ludlow hesitated. "We might know something."

"Yes? What?"

Ludlow chuckled softly. "Not so fast; we'll show you."

"You can tell me," Frank said. "Don't worry; I don't get any reward money."

"Maybe not. Just the same, suppose we lead you out there."

"Out where?" Frank asked sharply. "To see what? You haven't said anything yet."

Ludlow's voice tightened. "I said we'd show you. You coming or not?"

Frank eyed the man a moment and nodded. "When do we start?"

"Tomorrow," Ludlow said. "Six o'clock. At the hotel."

"I'll be there," Frank said.

Ludlow grunted and moved past Frank up the street. Frank watched him and his brother disappear into the dark and went on to the hotel, a vague apprehension gnawing at his mind. He didn't like the idea of riding out with the Ludlows, especially after what had happened up at Scotty's. But it was possible they actually knew something that would lead to the man he was looking for. The only other thing to do was ride aimlessly around in the hope of picking up Kimberly's trail again somewhere. But that might take weeks and he had only a few days at the outside. There really wasn't much choice.

AFTER breakfast next morning he stepped out onto the hotel veranda for a smoke and found the Ludlows waiting there. He returned their nods and the three men mounted and headed for the open range. In minutes they were pounding along the road Frank had ridden in only the night before. The suspicion that had begun to plague Frank deepened when, after an hour's ride, Ludlow swung his arm wide and headed for the nearby hills.

It was strange territory to Frank and he knew the way they were riding could take them anywhere, but the thought they were riding back up to Scotty's little mine loomed ever larger in his mind. Now that the Ludlows knew who he was, it wasn't impossible that they planned to use him and his shield in some new way to rob the old prospector. Frank couldn't quite see what the Ludlows had in mind, but he knew he'd eventually wind up in a tough spot whatever it was.

But the thought was swept away in a sudden flood of anguished despair. What did he care about the Ludlows or Scotty? All this was taking time, valuable time, time in which Harry Kimberly was no doubt pounding his way south and out of reach. And riding with him was the superintendent's job and the years-old dream of a happy, quiet home life in town with Betty.

Frank reined up to a stop. "I'm giving up on this," he told the puzzled

Ludlows. "You go on ahead; if you find anything, you'll still get the reward."

The brothers glanced at one another and Bart shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said. "You know your business." He nodded to his brother and the two rode up into the timber.

Frank started back toward Allenville. He tried to think ahead to the problem of finding Kimberly, but he found he couldn't get the Ludlows and Scotty out of his mind. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't convince himself he didn't know what the Ludlows were after nor how they'd go about trying to get it.

And yet, he told himself angrily, he had his own life to look out for. He had sentenced Betty to the loneliness of a detective's wife long enough. It was time he gave her, and himself, the satisfaction of a full-time marriage, a home and family. Now he had a chance to get that kind of life, a slim chance, maybe, but a chance just the same, and he wasn't going to give it up for an old miner he'd met for the first time only yesterday.

After all, he didn't know the man. He might be a petty thief or a quarrelsome old skinflint who cared for nothing but gleaning a wretched little hoard of gold dust to finger and gloat over in the secrecy of the night.

But it was no use. Frank reined his horse around again and headed once more toward the hills. To abandon Scotty to the Ludlows was to sentence the old man to death. Far better to remain a stage company detective, no matter what its frustrations, than saddle his conscience with an old man's murder.

FRANK found the trail at the foot of the hills and rode up into the timber. A half hour later he reached the edge of Scotty's little clearing. Two horses stood hitched near the door of the cabin. Frank circled around out of sight to where the timber was nearest the cabin and dismounted. In a half crouch he moved swiftly across the clearing and burst into the one-room shack, his pistol drawn.

Both Ludlows were towering over Scotty, who was forced down on his knees before them. They swung around, anger following quickly on the first shock of surprise. Bart Ludlow let go Scotty's shirt front and both brothers raised their hands to shoulder height. Scotty stood up, grinning lopsidedly through bruised lips.

"I'm mighty glad to see ye, son," he said.

"You can't do this," Ludlow said. "You're only a stage coach detective."

Frank ignored the remark and ordered both men to face the wall. "Take their pistols, Scotty, and then get me some rope."

The grinning little prospector disarmed the Ludlows and brought a length of rope. While Scotty covered the brothers, Frank holstered his pistol and quickly tied their arms behind their backs. He turned smiling to Scotty, only to see the man with his pistol high overhead, his face contorted with violent physical effort.

Frank ducked and threw up his arms as the sixgun flashed down. But the heavy pistol crashed against his head, dropping him to his knees and into a deep enveloping blackness.

With returning consciousness came a heavy throbbing in his head that left him weak. He glanced over at the two Ludlows sitting hunched on the floor, their faces blank, and then looked up at Scotty.

The little miner sat at the table grinning, a sixgun dangling from his hand. He picked Frank's badge off the table and held it up. "Ames & Walsh, eh?"

Frank nodded and pulled himself to a sitting position.

"I'll wager ye're looking for the holdup men, eh?"

Again Frank nodded.

Scotty's grin widened. "The search is over." He cocked his head and listened. "That'll be me partner now," he said, and went to the door and waved his arm.

Hoofbeats pounded across the clearing and a rider pulled up in front of the cabin, dismounted and came inside. Frank recognized the thin, hook-nosed man as the long-sought Harry Kimberly.

It was clear enough now. Scotty was a member of the holdup gang, and he'd hidden the stolen gold away in a worked-out mine. From time to time he brought out a little dust to pave the way for the day when he would pretend to have struck the original vein again. In the excitement of the gold rush that would follow, the gang could easily put the stolen gold back into circulation without arousing the suspicion that would be if they suddenly showed up one day with plenty of money, and couldn't explain where they got it.

IT WAS A clever plan and one, Frank was afraid, that was all too likely to succeed, for there wasn't much doubt about the outlaws' plans for him. He watched the two carefully.

Kimberly nodded at Frank and the Ludlows. "Who're these people?"

"Snoopers," Scotty said. He pointed at Frank. "Thanks to him I rounded them all up."

"Who's he?"

"Ye'd never guess; he's a detective for Ames & Walsh."

Kimberly laughed. "Wait till Dutch and Mack hear this."

"Where are they, anyway?" Scotty asked.

"I left them in Prescott. They ought to be here about dark. In the meantime, what about these? I say plug them."

"No shooting," Scotty said. "There's always a lad around who hears shooting. Besides, that way we'd have to bury them ourselves. I figured I'd run them into one of the mine shafts and set off a charge behind them. It'd be a good clean job all around."

"Suits me," Kimberly said. "Let's get at it."

"Come on, me lads," Scotty said to Frank and the Ludlows. "On your feet."

Awkwardly the Ludlows climbed to their feet and walked toward the door. Frank stood up, hesitated a moment and lurched forward a few steps to the table, where he grabbed a chair for support.

"What's the matter with him?" Kimberly asked.

"I had to rap him one," Scotty said. "Come on, me boy."

Frank stared coldly at the little outlaw. He let go the chair and followed slowly after the Ludlows. At the door he staggered again and fell to his knees against the wall, where, in one turning, falling motion he grabbed the shotgun Scotty had used to drive off the Ludlows, leveled it and pulled the trigger.

The cabin trembled with the blast. The charge grazed Kimberly's shoulder and drove him crashing back into the table and onto the floor. Wildly Scotty fired his pistol once and threw up his hands and backed against the wall.

Frank's finger was tight on the trigger of the second barrel and he urged himself to finish off the man who would willingly have murdered him, but somehow his pressure relaxed.

Bart Ludlow stepped forward. "Good work."

"Keep your distance," Frank said, standing up.

Ludlow frowned. "Ain't you going to cut us loose?"

"Not yet," Frank said. He had to get Scotty and Kimberly down to Allenville and bring the sheriff back to wait for the other two outlaws, and he couldn't afford to let the Ludlows go free while he did it.

He ordered Scotty to bring his horse

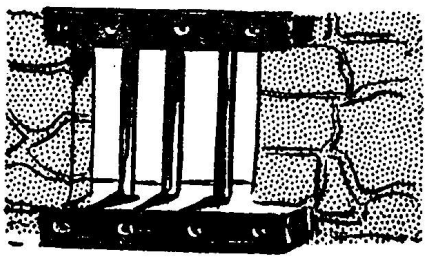
down to the cabin and then help Kimberly and the Ludlows into their saddles. After the little outlaw had climbed up behind to ride double with Kimberly, Frank took the rope from each man's saddle and drew the loop snugly around each of their necks, with the other end secured to his own pommel so that each man was tied by his neck to Frank's saddle.

"All right," he called out. "Let's head for town."

"You can't do this, you crazy jasper," Bart Ludlow yelled. "You'll hang all of us going through the timber. Who do you think you are, anyway?"

Despite the pain in his head, Frank laughed. "Just call me superintendent."

★



What's Your Business?

(*continued from page 56*)

ate with them so I could get first-hand information."

Mattie heaved a sigh of relief. "Then why didn't you tell me? Why did you let me sometimes think you were a fugitive?"

His voice was patient. "Don't you see, baby? If I'd told you, you might have let it slip and then I wouldn't have been any good in my job."

"Oh." She was so happy now that it didn't matter. She raised her eyebrows. "Then why are you telling me now?"

"My time's up and I didn't sign over again." Then he startled her. "What's this about Nathan and you?"

Mattie laughed. "What a terrible rumor! Whatever made you believe that?" She felt gay and light-hearted.

"But your packed bags and..." he prodded.

"A trip," she said casually. "I was going on a trip."

"That's good," Slim said nonchalantly, "because I ran Nathan and his gang in yesterday. They'll have plenty of time to cool their heels."

Mattie's eyes were shining. She was thinking she'd tell Slim all about it—sometime later. And she'd tell him about the piece of rope too. That she knew he was safe somewhere because of the red twine. In the wispy dawn she eyed Slim's rope with its hot-orange thread running through it. Orange, she thought. Not blood-red.

Slim was looking at her in apparent puzzlement. "There are times I can't figure you." He ran his hand over his chin.

Mattie tilted her head. She'd almost forgotten. "If you're not a Texas Ranger now, what will you do for a living?" It didn't really matter to her, but she was curious.

"I found something easy that will keep me home all the time. Keep us together. We're going to homestead a farm up in Oklahoma. I've saved money and we'll have a few head of cattle and..."

But Mattie wasn't listening. She was watching the sun nose its way upward into the cloudless blue sky. She smiled. "The beginning of a bright new life together."

Slim straightened in his saddle and reached for her hand. Together they rode toward the brilliant sunrise.

★

Yank had to show his new master that his coloring wasn't a reflection of his temperament . . .

YELLOW DOG, RED COURAGE

by MAT RAND

KIERAN was in a boastful and reckless mood when he bade farewell to the lounging half-breeds at Cedar Post, and proceeded, somewhat unsteadily, to the landing-stage, where his birch bark canoe was piled high with equipment. On one of the packs Yank, his dog, lay curled up; and as Kieran stepped in, sending the boat ricocheting across the dark waters, the animal looked up, his rounded scalp and huge pointed ears in wolfish silhouette.

On either side bloomy cedars overhung the waterway; but though there was as yet no moon, Kieran could evidently see well enough, for with rapid, silent strokes he piloted his canoe through the multitude of protruding snags. Before an hour was past he had gained the roaring Rapids, where a giant pine marked the stepping-off place of the first portage.

No sane woodsman would ever have attempted to shoot that rapid at night —indeed, there were few who thought it worth the risk in broad daylight— but tonight Kieran was supreme in his own confidence.

So, despite the fact that he had scarcely an inch of freeboard, they took the downward plunge, and Yank sat up with nervous inquiry as the first cloud of spray drenched them through. Yank's eyes sought his master's keen, expressionless face, and he lay down again, confident in Kieran's wisdom and judgment.

But before many seconds had elapsed Kieran realized that distance and speed were deceptive in the darkness, while the white foam pathways played strange tricks with one's judgment. There was no landing now; it was a case of going on to the end.

One sea after another they shipped, while overhead the bright stars whirled, the Indian stooping forward, staring fixedly, the sinews of his naked, scraggy arms standing out like the fibers of a jackpine. Water dripped from his face and from his long, black hair; but before the first swift run was passed the canoe swung round, gripped by an irresistible force. The man stooped lower still as he hauled on the paddle, putting forth his utmost strength to right their water-logged craft.

Snap! It was the worst thing that could have happened under the circumstances, for the paddle broke in his grasp just above the blade. With an oath he flung aside the useless shaft, and turning began frenziedly to grope under the packs for his spare paddle. He gripped it, but it jammed, and the game was up. The canoe took a downward plunge, still broadside, and there was a report like a pistol-shot as her keel smote the surface. Then over she went—man, packs, and dog—over and over half a dozen times, glimmering

grotesquely, finally to settle bottom upward, weighed down by the sodden dunnage jammed beneath the thwarts. A second or two later she struck with a grinding crash, and went to bits.

Thus Kieran the Chippewan passed out of human record. No special inquiries were made, for Kieran had no debts. So far as the world of the north was concerned, he simply failed to return from his hunting-grounds, and the north went on grinding out her dramas without him.

But that day another drama opened. Daybreak found a little yellow dog sitting and shivering at the water's edge near the tail of the rapids. A slim little muckle-breed he was, part whippet, part terrier—though his big erect ears showed, wolfish ancestry, harking back from the veins of the northern malemute. He was whimpering distressfully, watching the water, nostrils quivering, as if he expected something to rise ghost-like from the whirling flood; then he moved to another point, and so on for many hours. He did not know that his master was dead—he merely knew that he had missed him; and so at length he set off down the creek, heading toward those dim northern hunting-grounds from which Kieran had wrung his living.

Had Yank been a white man's dog, he would have returned to the settlement when other hopes died; but being an Indian dog, the sullen independence of his training bade otherwise. He had known but one master, and there was nothing in his limited dealings with the rest of the world to create a sense other than aloof distrust. So, in his innermost desires, first and foremost lingered the wish to find Kieran; failing this, would go on somewhere—somehow, without him.

Yank was little more than a puppy, and his character was yet in the mold. Accustomed, like all Indian dogs, to fending for himself, he did not want for food; he knew how to surprise the wary red squirrels, which swarmed in thousands everywhere; and he was a past master in the art of ambushing Wahboos, the wood-hare. He knew the scream of the lynx, and the hollow bay of the timber wolf; so Yank lived when grievous misfortune would have befallen one less able than himself.

ON THE third day of his searching he saw a great eagle swooping and circling over something which lay, freshly stranded, on a sand-bank, but he merely steered clear of the thing and the place, for eagles are not to be trusted; but even had he seen all that there was to see, he would not have understood.

Yank was heading for the musquash flats of the prairie foothills—where surely he would find his master—and between the mountain forests and the plains there lies a vast belt of country which, at certain seasons, is brimming with winged game, at other seasons, lifeless as a desert. This was the gameless season, and as the birch and balsam groves slowly gave way to vast undulations of tundra and jack-pine, hunger befell Yank.

Always he was watching for game; and time and again, after an elaborate stalk, he discovered that the object of his excitement was not a ground squirrel at all, but the stump of a pine snapped off short by the gale. Once he flattened like a rag on seeing a barren lands wolf come down to drink half a mile away; and once he saw a herd of caribou; and for several days he followed them, hoping that one would die, or fall out, or in some other way prove obliging.

That hope also died, and he returned to the river, very lean and lank now; but his wild instincts told him not to yield to the temptation of trying to satisfy his hunger by drinking cold water, as a city-bred dog would probably have done. He loped steadily on, still looking for his master—though three weeks had elapsed since last he

saw him—keeping always to the hollows, peering coyote-like over every ridge before he crossed it; so, in course of time, the jackpine county also was crossed, and ahead lay the rugged grandeur of the eastern slopes; beyond that the brimming prairies.

So it came about that Yank, so weak now that he tottered in his steps—a pitiable skeleton of a dog, but still searching, still hopeful—gleaned from the wind the tidings of a great feast somewhere to the northern side. Upwind he drifted, checking, readjusting his course till there, in a hollow, lying among the sage bush, he beheld a dead steer, and standing by it—a mammoth grizzly!

Yank was too hungry to be afraid—too near death himself to fear its final stoop. So he drifted up to seek the mercy of a king.

But here was another molded by the hands of the lean, inexorable north! The grizzly raised his head and looked at him. He was accustomed to seeing coyotes near at hand while he feasted, and usually he took no heed of them. If they became too bold he would dash out and scatter them; but he had more sense than to follow far, for he knew that the wild dogs are fleeter than the wind. Perhaps, however, he recognized Yank for what he was—a creature of man's threshold, a foe in hand with the deadliest of all his foes. Yank drifted up, and then with a coughing snarl the grizzly charged.

A coyote would merely have doubled and twisted, then yapped his mockery over the dust clouds; but Yank was so weak that, startled and surprised he fell, and the grizzly, more surprised than he was, charged right over him.

Yank struggled up and headed for the sagebrush, sneaking from bush to bush; but the grizzly knew now that he could catch him. Silently, systematically, he set to work to hunt the dog out, striking down the cover with his forepaws, listening silently, then drifting to another point. Again he would strike and listen, while Yank wormed in and out, knowing now that he was in mortal peril of his life.

THAT GRIZZLY was hunting, not for food, which was abundantly at hand, but for the joy of killing; so he would not readily abandon his quest. The minutes passed, and his first tactics having failed, he worked himself into a fury, crashing headlong hither and thither, rearing up with forepaws widely flung, crashing in another direction, guided only by his nostrils. Yank crawled and bellied and crept—flattened out and panting when an opportunity occurred—but at length he sighted him.

Now it was merely a matter of time. Headlong Yank dashed after him; and as he sought cover, the grizzly stole silently and swiftly to the other side, so that they all but collided. The twigs and the sand flew as from a whirlwind as he struck, then followed hot at Yank's heels, scattering the bush which hindered him but was too slender to hinder the bear. In and out, round and about, feinting, dodging, diving headlong, but each close call was closer than the last, and Yank assuredly was doomed.

Then, in the very act of charging, the grizzly froze to a statue. For a moment he stood, deadly still, then swinging from right to left he stole away—straight and silently and true for the tundra heights.

And, as Yank lay panting, he heard the *click-click* of a pony's hoofs, which presently ceased, then a man's voice, hushed and contemplative, as when one thinks aloud.

"Dang!" said the voice. "Blamed if I didn't think so! A grizzly too!"

Languidly, as if possessed of a sleeping-sickness, dragging himself along on his forepaws, trailing his hind limbs, little Yank strove to obtain a view of the speaker. He did not mean to go to him—oh no! He meant to creep away and hide, for, always fear-

ful of a race he did not know, his recent experiences had not tended to make him more trusting.

Part plainsman, part mountaineer, Bill Sackton partook of the rugged splendor of both. He was looking down at his dead steer; then his keen gaze rose as, without dismounting, he examined the tracks. So Yank among the twisted schubfoud himself looking into the man's eyes; he cowered into the dust, awaiting the man's will.

"What's that blame little coyote up to? Skit!"

His hand fell to his belt, and he withdrew a heavy automatic pistol. Still the creature in the sage did not stir.

"Well I be—!" muttered Bill Sackton, and still holding his gun he slipped from his pony and approached Yank.

Yank lay very still, his muzzle between his forepaws, and Bill, stooping over him, raised his head in one strong hand.

"You poor little critter!" he said aloud. "Blessed if you ain't pretty well all in!"

Then with Yank under one arm, rode homeward, fording the river which alone could whisper the story of Kieran the Chippewan.

Bill had two dogs of his own—one mostly greyhound, the other chiefly bull-terrier, sturdy, hard-fighting beasts—kept for trailing dangerous game, and therefore schooled in a rough school. He lived alone in a small cabin, with a corral adjoining. He kept a few cattle, a few sheep, and several horses, and eked out a living by prospecting and hunting. Ranching was his hobby.

Thus opened up the third phase of Yank's life; and so strange to him it at first seemed that he would not eat the food Bill offered. Bill fed him by hand, and the satisfying of his bodily cravings came to him with the mental associations of the man's kind hand, an impression which left upon his mind an indelible mark.

But Bill did not want the dog. Yank was of no earthly use to him; and as the days passed, and he regained his strength, it became very evident that his sufferings had completely broken his spirit. Bill often wondered what he had suffered; and when at night time he lay at Bill's feet, looking up into his eyes, he was prompted to caress him by the same sense of sympathy that had led him to take the dog in. But Bill was no coward himself, and he hated it in other things; so when Yank fled in terror when the stove smoked; when he cowered in abject fear before Blackie and Dancer, who were above heeding him, Bill usually drove Yank angrily from his sight. He did not know just what his caresses meant to this little waif of the hills, nor what weight his curses carried.

ONE DAY a mountaineer rode by, and stopped to pass the time of day with Bill.

"How much for the purp?" he inquired.

"You can have him for an old pair of socks," Bill replied. "Did you ever see such a scarecrow?"

They both looked at Yank and laughed.

"Maybe he'll improve when you've fed him up," observed the visitor leaving.

All that day Yank hid under the bungalow, for he knew that they had laughed at him and said unkind things!

But one thing Bill had to admit—Yank was teachable. Being an Indian dog, he was at first of the opinion that anything he could take and hold was rightly his. To call him a thief would be unfair, for he simply did not understand; and one day Bill lost his dinner. Naturally he punished the dog, but he never had to punish him a second time for that.

Yet, having no use for the dog, and despising him not a little, it was only natural that Yank drifted into a backwash. He ceased to look for his

master's caresses, dear as they were to him. He loved him none the less, for Bill had won the dog's heart in the hour of his direst need; but by degrees he imbibed the knowledge that his place in the household was a lowly one. So, like many a good man, who sees nothing better in store for him, he settled with sad resignation to accept his humble lot.

On the evening of the day that Bill took Yank home, he had set out at sunset with two huge bear-traps on each side of his saddle. These he had carefully set by the carcass of the steer; and every day since, he had examined the sets through his glasses from a distant ridge. A month or more had now passed, but the grizzly had not been back, yet Bill still watched intently from the windward side. And one morning, sure enough, the ground all around the steer was raked and furrowed, and one of the traps was gone.

Bill went home for his two dogs, knowing well that the grizzly, hampered as it was, would not travel many miles, but he left Yank shut up in the cabin, remarking as he dropped the latch: "We don't want you, miserable little croaker!"

Blackie and Dancer were unquestionably brave dogs; on encountering the trail of that grizzly, both of them said a good deal—but did not seem overanxious to run it. Their part was merely to indicate the right direction, and Bill, armed with a high velocity rifle, would do the rest; and at length, after a good deal of coaxing and urging, they took up the line. Soon they were heading over country through which no horseman could follow; and Bill, making a detour, rejoiced to learn from the way in which they threw their tongues that they were warming up to their work. Five miles farther on he intercepted them, and learned to his disgust that they were chasing a mangy little coyote!

Angrily he whipped them off, and precious hours of light were lost in refinding the trail. Again the dogs set off, heading now for the high country, which seemed more hopeful. Up and up they climbed, while Bill, listening at intervals for their baying, came eventually to the topmost barrens, but still could not find them.

Evening was near when eventually he discovered them—Blackie wallowing in a pool, Dancer rolling in the sand having completed his wallow. Bill cursed and raved and lashed at them; for the strenuous day had resulted in nothing at all, and with night so near there was nothing for it but to return to the valley.

IT MUST have been an hour or so previous to this, that a new restlessness fell upon the little yellow dog imprisoned in the cabin. He got up and began to whine, sniffing and scratching at the door, leaping to the bench and peering out of the window, his eyes bright, his ears immensely acock.

His whines turned to yelps, his yelps to frenzied howls. He snapped at the legs of the bench; he hurled himself, clawing wildly at the door. At length he attacked the window, scratching at the joints, then standing back he hurled himself at the glass with the frenzy of a trapped animal. It cracked across but beat him back, bruised and dazed; yet, gnashing his teeth, he hurled himself again, this time to fall, cut and shaken, on the grass behind him. For a moment he ran hither and thither, undecided which way to take, then straight and true he headed for the river, and across.

The descent Bill chose, though a perilous one, was by far the quickest, and the wiry pony on which he was mounted was fully accustomed to those giddy shelves. He would have trusted her where he would hardly have trusted himself on foot; and so, as the glory of the sunset faded from orange to gold, Bill, whistling jauntily—for his anger was soon forgotten—looked out across the rolling ridges from a narrow game-track across the cliff

face, a drop of close upon eight hundred feet directly beneath his right elbow. The wind was behind him, which was unfortunate, and his two dogs head to tail, followed closely at his pony's heels.

Presently they reached a point at which a deeply-cut fissure ran darkly into the mountain face; and here there was a perilous elbow turn to the left, where the track was partly washed away. Bill had all but gained it, when the light directly ahead was shut out by what looked like a great boulder, moving silently round the bend, and completely blocking the only way of travel.

Next moment Bill's heart leaped as it had never before, for there, not forty paces away, stood the grizzly, the trap still fast to one forepaw, its little pig eyes, red with rage, fixed upon him.

For a moment Bill remained spellbound, so also his pony. He heard the whimper of his dogs as they turned and fled. Then there came an agonized scream from his cayuse, which, unable to turn on the narrow shelf, reared up, and hung there, poised in giddy suspense.

Bill had no time to disengage his rifle from the saddle-holster, but he quickly slipped his feet from the stirrups and prepared to dismount on the cliff side. He heard a *cough-cough* from the fur-clad monster ahead, and knew that it was about to charge; he heard the clanging of the steel trap, and the rumble of the log on the naked rocks. Then over the pony went, to fall with a thud, pinning him against the wall, one leg under the girth,

Through the unbelievable nightmare of it all Bill, peering up, saw the bear lumbering toward him, foam flying from its yellow fangs as it slashed at the trap and the iron chain which sorely hindered its progress. Desperately the man fought to obtain possession of his gun, but pinned as he was he could not reach it. On the grizzly came till its way was barred by the thrashing hindlegs of the pony, and as the monster reared to strike, Bill saw that only a miracle could save him now. The arm flashed out; he heard the terrible, rending thud, and the next moment the pony was hurled from beneath him, to spin giddily downward into space. And there, not five feet away, nothing between them now, both huge paws upraised, one with the trap as proof of the evil about to be avenged, Bill beheld the death of which he had sometimes dreamed.

He was free now, and struggling to regain his pistol he leaped back, but —there was no time. One bullet would not stop the brute at such close range, even had there been time to aim and fire it; but, as the very buzzards in the blue above paused in their glide, something happened,

It was as if a yellow cloth, borne by the wind, went hurtling past, to smite the grizzly's face and there to hang, flapping wildly as the monster snarled and shook.

Yank! Little Yank! There, his sharp fangs fast in the grizzly's snarling face, shaking and snatching as he hung, was the mongrel dog whose spirit had been broken on the long and hungry trail! The other dogs—the fighting dogs—were gone; they must almost have brushed him from the shelf as he, in the desperation of a deadly fear, came on to meet the death from which they fled; and now, between Bill Sackton and the bear, was one who knew that foe of old, and hated him.

It was merely a second's diversion, but it was the needed second. Two massive paws clutched him, and hurled him back at his master's feet. There was another coughing roar, but accompanied now by a pistol shot, followed by shot after shot like the tearing of calico. There was a heavy thud as the blue flame ceased, the clash of steel, the sound of great claws rasping naked stone, and Bill and Yank were alone.

In the quiet that followed, Bill heard

a sound from far below, and knew that his pony had reached the valley. He peered over the edge and saw a dark mass following it, spinning as it fell. Then the man crouched back, and buried his face in his arms, groaning, till he felt a cold muzzle thrust against his cheek, and his hands groped out in the tenderest of caresses.

A few days later the other mountaineer returned and called at Bill's cabin with the news.

"How's the purp getting on?" he inquired, with a wave toward Yank.

"You be careful what you say about that dog," he advised. "When you insult him you insult me!"

★

Western Courage Plus

Special Feature by J. J. Mathews

THERE WAS no substitute for courage in the Old West; the man who had a streak of yellow in him didn't last long. Darwin could have written a lot about Nature, and the way she let the fit survive had that naturalist turned buffalo hunter. But being fit didn't only mean having courage, physical strength, the ability to shoot quick and straight, and even brains. It meant something more—the canny ability to make a decision in the split second that would either let you live, or let you lose your scalp.

Maybe you'll say that ability really is brains. Could be you are right. Won't argue about the point while we are being surrounded by redskins.

James H. Cook had helped to drive a herd of cattle from Texas all the way to the Dakotas. The beef supply was to be used to feed reservation Indians. The year was 1876—the year in which General George Custer's entire troop was annihilated at Little Big Horn.

And a party of Sioux warriors swarmed down upon the camp of James H. Cook and the rest of the men on the Niobrara River. From the viewpoint of the cowboys it looked like the end. The redskins were riding bareback and though some had rifles and pistols, most of them were armed with bows and arrows.

The setup was perfect for a movie scene. The encircling group of Indians and the little band of brave men ready to sell their lives dearly—up to the last cartridge. And then came that dramatic moment: an old Sioux warrior stops his horse shot in front of our Hero and demands in his native tongue; "What are you doing in our country?"

At this point our Hero could have shrugged his shoulders and remarked, "I don't know what the blazes you are saying!" Then the shooting would begin. But lady luck enters. That peculiar element that even Darwin couldn't figure out. For our Hero, James H. Cook knows a few words of the Sioux tongue. He is going to answer. But what?

And in that split second came the right words that meant the difference between living or losing scalps. Slowly and patiently he explains they had just driven a herd of cattle to the Indians on the Missouri River. And he adds a hint that cowboys who bring cattle to Indians shouldn't be killed.

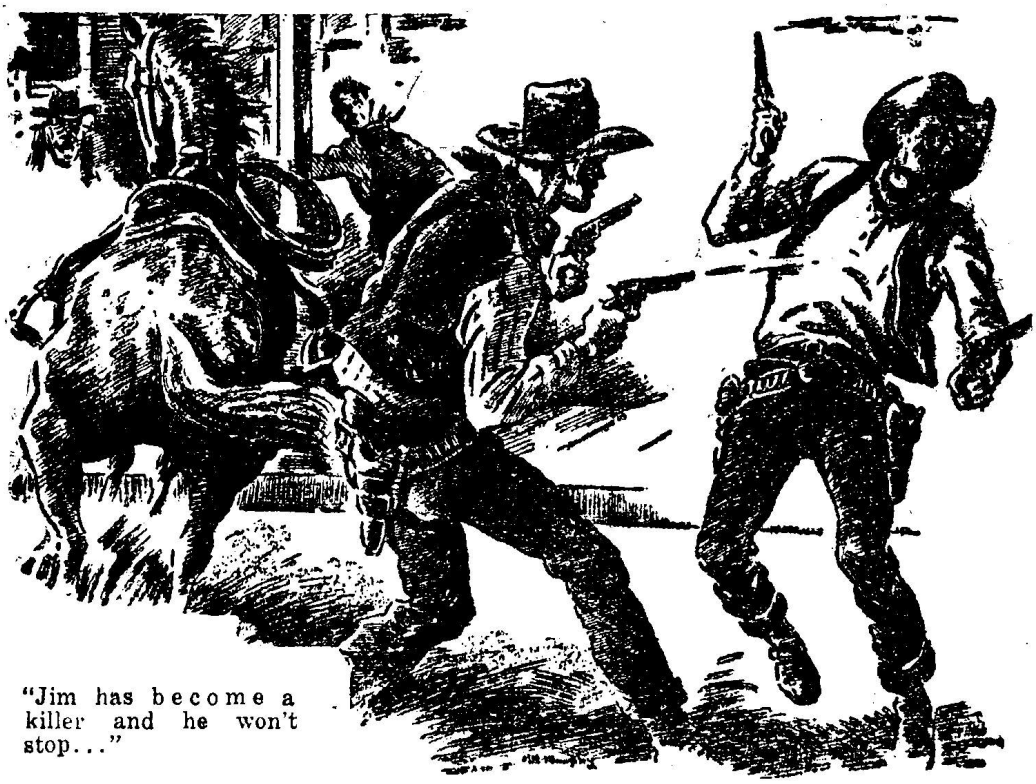
The warrior tells all this to his party. And it works, better than magic or bullets. For, strange as it seems, that group of redskins ended up by helping the cowboys to round up their saddle horses and drive them across the river; and friendly farewells were exchanged as the cowboys and redskins parted.

Please don't involve me in the dispute of what might have happened had General Custer had that tact, understanding, and that split-second ability to decide correctly. He might have even taken with him those four Gatling Guns he left behind at headquarters.

But James H. Cook had what it took to live in the Old West—and to survive.

★

Old John was gone now, and his sons were grown. But Mary Rowan, the boys' stepmother, knew what had to be done when the youngest, Pete, went wild . . .



"Jim has become a killer and he won't stop..."

ROWAN WOMAN

An Off-Trail Novelet

by Burt Arthur

WHEN OLD John Rowan died, his three husky sons carried him up the sloping, dewy wet side of a grassy, flowering rise and laid him to rest in a grave that they had dug at the very top of it. The rise, a couple of hundred feet from the Rowan ranchhouse, commanded a broad view of the Rowan property that spread away in every direction as far as the eye could see. Mary Rowan, the old man's widow and the stepmother of his sons, had selected the site. From the window of the rear upper floor bedroom that John and she had shared for nearly twenty years, she had a clear view of the spot.

There was a brief burial ceremony, over which grim-faced and dry eyed Mary Rowan presided, reading the service from a worn-looking bible. Then she stopped back and stood quietly looking on as the sweet-smelling, freshly turned earth was shoveled down upon the plain pine box that held John Rowan's remains. When the last spadeful had been patted down in place over the humpbacked mound, the Rowans hoisted their shovels to their shoulders and followed the stiffbacked, black-clad figure back to the house.

In the kitchen, with the deep silence filling its corners with its hushed echoes, she faced them. "I've something to say to you," she began.

She shook her head when Matt who

was twenty-five and the eldest—two years older than his twin brothers, Pete and Bill—started to bring a chair forward for her. He put it down, pushed it back in close to the table. "It would be asking too much, I know, to expect any of you to be the man your father was. Even of you, Matt, though you look so much like him. But because you three are John Rowan's sons, because you have his blood in you, I think I have the right to expect you to be good, decent men."

The three Rowans, standing around the table, shifted their weight from one leg to the other.

"I kept this from your father because I didn't want to hurt him," she continued. "I've heard a rumor about that there's bad feeling among you three, and that with your father gone, the bad feeling is liable to explode in violence."

The twins averted their eyes. Matt didn't; he met Mary's gaze and smiled reassuringly. "That's just talk, Ma," he told her. "And you ought to know better than to go puttin' any stock in it. Folks who haven't anything better to do with themselves and their time like to talk—even when they don't know what they're talking about. We're Rowans, so we don't aim to do anything to accomodate some flannelmouth, who must be lookin' to start something just because the town's dying on its feet and needs some excitement."

Ma's eyes shifted away from him, to Pete, then to Bill. "Well, Bill?" she demanded.

"Sure, Ma, we've had our differences; but what family hasn't one time or another? Long as we've never let them get out've hand, that's all that matters.'

"That's right," Pete said.

"I'm taking you at your word," Mary Rowan said evenly. "And I'll hold you to it, too. Just see to it that none of you ever does anything to bring shame to the Rowan name."

MATT PULLED out the chair he had offered her, spun it around and straddled it.

"About a year ago your father had Judge McCreary draw up papers dividing the ranch in four equal parts," Mary went on. "It was to take effect the day he died. One quarter—the ground this house stands on, and enough acreage around it to make up the quarter—is mine. The other three quarters go to you.

"They're all the same size and all worth the same, with the stream touching all four quarters so that all will have easy access to water. So from this minute on, each of you has his own spread, and each must shoulder the responsibilities that go with land-owning."

"What about the stock, Ma?" Pete wanted to know.

"Everything on the ranch is to be divided the same way as the land, equally. Oh, yes, one last thing. Your father left each of you a sum of money so that you'd have working capital. Judge McCreary has the deeds, and the other things; he'll turn them over to you whenever you go to him. I think that's everything now."

Matt climbed to his feet. The twins glanced at him. When he started toward the door, they followed him.

Mary said: "I wondered if any of you would be interested enough to ask what I was going to do. Apparently you aren't. However, I'll tell you anyway." They stopped and looked at her. "I've paid off the crew, all except Tom Spence, Lee Willis and Sam Potter. They're good, steady hands, so I'm keeping them on."

Bill rubbed his chin thoughtfully and frowned a bit. "I don't know, Ma," he said finally. "I don't think that's such a good idea, you living here alone."

"She's just after telling us she won't be alone," Pete said. "With Spence and the others..."

"Alone in this house, I mean. Suppose she gets sick or something?"

Mary smiled. "Now I'm sorry I said anything," she said a little wryly. "You boys will have enough problems of your own to deal with without having me add to them. If I should get sick, I'll send for the doctor. It's as simple as that, so please don't give it another thought."

"We won't be that far away that we won't be able to ride over here every couple o' days," Pete pointed out, "and kinda see for ourselves how she's doing."

"Yeah," Bill conceded. "That's right."

"And if we see that she isn't getting along the way she should," Pete continued, "heck among the three of us. we oughta be able to work out something for her."

"Think I'll ride in to town today," Bill said. "Might be a good idea to sorta begin making arrangements for things. Y'know?"

"Uh-huh," Pete said. "I'll ride in with you, Bill."

MARY HEARD the scuffing scrape of their boots as they trooped down the path that led to the barn, heard the fading murmur of their voices. There was a brief silence, then she heard the thump of their horses' hoofs on the planked ramp as they rode out of the barn, heard the swiftening beat of hoofs as they loped away. It died out quickly, and a stillness spread itself over the place.

It gave her an empty, uneasy feeling. She trudged upstairs to the bedroom that was hers alone now, and standing at the curtained window, she peered out at the rise. Tears welled up into her eyes, and a great sob shook her. Head bowed she wept, giving in to the emotion that she had managed to hold in check earlier. But then she stopped her crying, dried her eyes, turned away from the window.

Soon the boys would be gone, and the few miles that would lay between them and her would grow in distance as time went by. They would have their own problems to work out; they would marry and have families, and she would see less and less of them all the time. She had no quarrel with that. That was life, the way it was patterned, the way it had to be lived.

There was nothing she could do about it. That was what happened when children grew up and left the old home for new ones of their own making.

Perhaps in her case, it was a little different than it was with other women; she had acquired her family through marriage. She wasn't the boys' mother; she hadn't borne them. Hence there was no obligation, nothing due her, as she saw it. She supposed it was that way with all or most stepmothers.

Something that peered out at her from beneath the long folds of the bedspread made her stop and bite her lip. They were John's old slippers. The spacious closet beyond the big double bed held John's clothes as well as hers. She opened the door, and the first thing she saw was an old jacket of his. She moved her hand inside of it. There was warmth in it, body warmth.

Perhaps she should get rid of his things. If she didn't, every time she went to the closet to get something of her own, his would be there, too; and the sight of it, the feel of it, would bring back memories and make her even more miserable and lonely.

She thought about it, but with a shake of her head, she closed the door and turned away. The old rocker with its pillowed and doilied headrest in which John had rocked away the last few weeks of his ebbing life still stood near the window, and she sank down in it. There was a familiar warmth to it, the body warmth that John had left in it. Lightly she ran her hands over the curved armrests. She could feel the same warmth on them too. She put her head back against the pillow. There

was warmth in that also, in the very middle of it, where John's head had hollowed it out.

Her thoughts went back over the years, to the first time she had met the boys. Twenty years ago that was, she told herself. Matt was five then, the twins three. She had expected them to resent her, and they did. But gradually she was able to break down the barrier between them and her, and for a time it was as though they had never had another mother. Little, amusing incidents that marked their growing up came back to her and they brought a thin trace of a smile to her lips. But then they faded out, and so too did the smile. She sighed a deep, wearied sigh, and she squirmed a little and burrowed a little deeper in the rocker. After a bit, she surrendered, and dozed off.

IT WAS A month later. The boys had finally moved out and the old house was shrouded in silence. For the first week, the boys rode over to see her every day. Matt usually came in the morning, to breakfast with her, admitting sheepishly that his coffee still couldn't come up to hers.

"Fixed myself some hot cakes the other day, Ma," he told her and he shook his head. "They were really something; heavy as lead. Then I fixed some bacon. That's when I got disgusted and heaved the whole business into the swill can."

The twins came later in the day, sometimes together, sometimes singly. The second week, their visits began to fall off. Mary understood though. They had much to do.

The third week, Matt came twice, Pete not at all, and Bill just once. The moment Bill entered the house and Mary got a look at him, she knew that something was troubling him. But she gave no sign of what she sensed.

She didn't press him either; she knew that when he felt the urge to unburden himself she wouldn't have to pry it out of him. He would tell her of his own accord.

"Can I fix you something, Bill?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Got something to tell you, Ma," he said. She made no response, simply sat back and waited for him to go on. "Ma, I'm gonna get married."

"Wonderful, Bill," she said. The Fred Snows were their nearest neighbors; and Snow's pretty daughter, Ann had been the on-and-off object of the twins' attention and interest. Mary took it for granted, since she had no reason to think otherwise, that the bride-to-be was Ann. But she asked the question anyway. "Ann Snow, Bill?"

"Uh-huh."

"She's a fine girl, and she'll make you a good wife," Mary told him. "I wish Matt and Pete would follow in your steps. Be good for them. It isn't meant for a man to live alone."

"I haven't seen Matt, so I haven't told him. Pete doesn't know about it yet either, Ma; and telling him is what's bothering me. How he'll take it, I mean."

"I didn't know you boys were seeing Ann again."

"Began again right after we went off on our own. I ran into Pete at the Snow place a couple of times, and I could tell he didn't like the idea of me being there.

"Before that, we were seeing each other 'most every day, Pete and me. Then it stopped; now we don't see each other at all. I admit he started callin' on Ann first, and he probably felt I was hornin' in on him. But I liked Ann same's he did; and when I asked her if there was some kind of understanding between her and Pete, and she said there wasn't anything, I made my play for her. And if she had picked him over me, I think I would've understood and I'd have taken it the only way. . ."

"He'll have to take it that way too.

I'm sure he will, Bill, once he'd gotten over his disappointment. Has Ann set the date?"

"It's this coming Sunday, Ma."

"Goodness, that is soon, isn't it?"

The husky youth blushed a little. "Long as Ann said she was willing, I couldn't see any point in waiting. So we made it for this Sunday morning. I'll come by for you about nine, Ma. Maybe a quarter of. Think you can be ready by then?"

"I'll be ready, Bill."

"Swell, Ma."

MATT CAME the following morning. Mary related what Bill had told her.

"Uh-huh," he said. "And you want me to go see Pete and get it straightened out with him. Right?"

"Yes, Matt."

"I dunno, Ma; I'm kinda put out with Pete. Last time I rode over to see how he was makin' out—three or four days ago that was—he wasn't what I'd call delighted to see me. Fact is, he acted like I was a poor relation come to borrow some money from him."

"I wish you'd do this for me, Matt."

"All right, Ma. I'll go see him."

"Thank you. Oh, would you like some coffee cake to take home with you, Matt? I made some extra."

Matt grinned. "And how I'd like it."

"If you get a chance, Matt, after you've been to see Pete, and you can spare the time. . ."

"I'll come by and let you know how I made out with him."

But Matt did not come by the next day, or the day after that; and when Ma's concern proved overpowering, she trooped down to the barn, backed the buckboard horses out of their stalls and hitched them to the buckboard. In a matter of minutes she was on her way to Pete's place.

It took her a little more than twenty minutes to negotiate the distance. As she neared Pete's spread, she spied a saddled horse idling in front of the newly built cottage that was now Pete's home. The animal lifted its head when it heard the beat of the oncoming team's hoofs. The fresh paint on the cottage gleamed in the late afternoon's waning light. Mary slowed the team to a walk as she came closer so that she could get a good look at the cottage. But then the waiting horse whinnied and a tall, lean man came striding around the cottage from the rear, and Mary, leveling a wondering look at him, recognized him.

It was Sheriff Dan Quimby. He looked a little surprised when he saw her; she was equally surprised to see him there, and a little troubled too. The buckboard rumbled up to the cottage and braked to a stop in front of it.

"Oh, h'llo, Mary," Quimby, a greying oldtimer said, touching his hat brim to her, and halting at the side of the buckboard. "Know where Pete is?"

"He should be around somewhere."

"He isn't though," Quimby answered, thumbling his hat up from his forehead. The silver star that he wore pinned to his shirtfront was tarnished around the edges. "Rode all over the place looking for him, but I couldn't find him."

"Is there anything you'd like me to tell him for you, Dan?"

Sheriff Quimby rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. Mary was quick to suspect that something was wrong. "Don't hold back on me, Dan Quimby," she said severely. "What do you want to see Pete about?"

"It's a kinda personal matter you might say, Mary."

"I think you can do better than that."

"All right. Guess you've got the right to know if anybody has. Pete's drinking, Mary; drinking his head off."

"Go on," she commanded. "You aren't looking for him just on account of that."

"Isn't that enough?" he asked wryly.

"No," she said flatly. "I think there's a lot more to it than that."

"There is," Quimby admitted.

"That's what I thought," she retorted.

"Didn't want to worry you. That's why I was holdin' back on you."

"I'm listening."

"Pete's after Bill. Gunning for him."

"Oh," she said, and she caught her breath. "Has it anything to do with... with Ann Snow?"

"Everything. Understand Pete claims Bill stole his girl from him, so he's out to kill Bill. That's why I'm looking for Pete. To see if I c'n talk some sense into him before he goes and does something he'll be sorry for."

- 2 -

IT WAS night when Mary Rowan wheeled the buckboard into town. There was little activity now and few people were about because it was suppertime. Most of the stores, Mary noticed, had already closed; the few that were still open had dimmed their lights preparatory to closing, and soon the street would be as dark as the night itself.

Only one place showed bright light —Pat Connor's saloon, and Mary, grim-faced, headed for it. She guided the team over toward the curb, came abreast of the saloon and stopped. She pulled back hard on the handbrake and wound the reins around it, and climbed down.

Tight-mouthed she crossed the walk and entered the saloon. A cloud of tobacco smoke that hung low over the place drifted streetward gently, and the stronger smell of malt and hops and beer, reached out to her and she made a wry face. There were some ten or twelve men standing at the bar, and every head turned in her direction.

The bartender, a balding, sweaty-browed man, shot a look at her too; recognizing her, and sensing trouble, he flushed uneasily, and hurriedly emerged from behind the bar, wiping his hands on his ankle-length apron.

"Evening, Ma'm," he said. "Something I can do for you?"

"My son, Pete," she said coldly. "Where is he?"

"Well, now, Ma'm," he began, and his flush deepened into a crimson. "What...what makes you think he's here?"

"This is the only saloon in town," she retorted and her sharp tone made him wince. "Since he's been drinking, it stands to reason that this must be..."

She didn't finish. A burly, beefy man with a week's growth of beard on his heavy face, stepped back from the bar, wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve, and lurched doorward. Mary's mouth tightened and her glinting eyes held on him. He came abreast of her and stopped, rocked a little unsteadily, and suddenly belched.

"Swine," she said furiously.

He belched again and laughed; some of the other men at the bar laughed too. Mary slapped him across the face and he staggered backward. But he managed somehow to stop himself, and squaring his thick shoulders, stumbled forward again.

Someone came in behind Mary, stood between her and the drunken man, pushed him away and watched him stumble out to the street. Mary glanced at the newcomer. It was the sheriff.

"What are you doing here, Mary?" he asked. "This is no place for you."

"I came to get Pete."

"Y'mean he's here?" Quimby levelled a hard look at the bartender. "What's the idea, Ed? Why didn't you tell me he was here instead of lettin' me think he wasn't and then lettin' me go chasin' myself all over the county looking for him?"

"He wasn't here then, Sheriff, honest," the bartender protested. "Or I woulda told you."

BEFORE the sheriff could put out a restraining hand, Mary marched

swiftly toward the rear. She stared back stonily, scornfully too, at the men at the bar. There was no one in the back room, where tables with chairs pushed in close to them stood in measured rows. A portiere-draped doorway caught her eye and she pushed through it into a small, private room. There was a single table in it, and at the table sat a hunched over man with his head bowed and nodding.

"Pete," she said.

There was no movement, no response. She nudged him and repeated his name. He stirred and slowly raised his head. His hair was mussed; his youthful face hair fuzzed and dirt-streaked; his eyes heavy and red. Saliva oozed out of a corner of his mouth and ran down his chin. Mary looked at him disgustedly. He raised his hand and wiped it away.

"I've come to take you home, Pete," she told him.

It took a moment or two before he was able to get his eyes properly focused. "Don't wanna go home," he mumbled.

"I'll have no nonsense out of you, Pete Rowan," she said crossly. "I said you're going home with me, and you are. Now get up on your feet."

"Don't wanna go home," he repeated.

"I'm glad your father isn't here to see you," she said to him in a low voice. "The shame of it would have killed him. Now get up and let's go home; I've had enough of this."

She tugged at his arm; when she tried to pull him up, he pushed her away.

"Weakling," she said scornfully. "That's what you are. You're put out with Bill because Ann accepted him instead of you. You think there was something underhanded about it. You've said as much, haven't you, threatening to kill Bill because he stole your girl? If you were honest with yourself you'd know there wasn't anything underhanded about it at all.

"Bill didn't steal Ann away from you; she wasn't yours to begin with. She was never your girl. So instead of being put out with Bill, you should be put out with yourself because you're the one who didn't measure up, while Bill did. Now get up."

She dragged him up from his chair. The portiere was suddenly whisked aside, and Mary, raising her eyes, saw Bill standing in the doorway.

"Bill," she said.

Pete raised his head. He broke away from Mary, backed around the table, his right hand clawing clumsily for his gun.

"Pete!" Mary screamed. "Don't!"

There was a deafening roar of gunfire, thunderous because of the narrow confines of the room. There was a gasp from outside the room. Mary stared. It hadn't come from Bill because he had flung himself out of the doorway. She could see him standing off to a side. He was looking over his shoulder at someone else—Sheriff Dan Quimby it was, Mary saw.

Quimby was bent over a table, holding on to it with both hands. His bowed head jerked suddenly and his legs buckled under him and he crumpled, pulling the table down with him.

Mary's raised hand pressed hard against her mouth to stifle the cry that came surging to her lips. There was a rush of booted feet and wide-eyed men swarmed into the back room. The bartender and Bill Rowan reached Quimby at about the same time, and both bent over him. It was Bill who looked up first. He eased himself around on his haunches, met Mary's eyes.

"He's dead," he said simply.

MATT AND Bill had spent the night at the old house, Tom Spence having summoned Matt there at Mary's instance. Now it was the middle of the next morning; the Rowans, silent and worried-looking, were sitting around the kitchen table.

Matt squared back in his chair. "Wonder what's keeping the judge."

"Yeah," Bill said. "Thought he'd be here earlier'n this."

"He'll be along," Mary assured them.

They looked up together when they heard the rumble of approaching wheels. Matt went striding to the door, opened it and poked his head out. There was a brief wait, then they heard footsteps outside.

Matt backed inside and the judge entered the house. White-haired and stocky Cornelius McCreary had served on the bench for twenty years; then he had retired and returned to the practice of the law, limiting himself though to a mere handful of clients. The Rowans were among them. Matt followed McCreary to the table, pulled out a chair for him, and the judge, wheezing a bit, sat down in it heavily.

"I'm sorry to say I've brought you more bad news, Mary," McCreary began.

The Rowans' eyes held on the judge.

"As you know," he said, "Dan Quimby was well liked by the townspeople."

"We liked him too," Mary said evenly. "So they aren't alone in their grief for him. And the fact that he met his death at the hands of a Rowan—even though it was completely accidental—makes us feel even worse."

McCreary nodded. "By midnight last night," he went on, "feeling had begun to run pretty high in town. Richie Weaver, Quimby's deputy, decided it would be better for everyone concerned if Pete was removed from the scene. Accordingly he spirited Pete out the back way, and drove him over to Rawlins and turned him over to the authorities there for safe keeping. Since Rawlins is the county seat, and the authorities there are better equipped to deal with emergencies than we are here, Weaver felt that he was doing the right thing."

There was no comment from anyone.

"This morning, about an hour ago Weaver burst in on me with the news that Pete had broken out of jail at dawn, shot down the jailer, and fled."

Mary gasped.

THE JUDGE pushed back from the table and climbed to his feet. Matt and Bill arose too.

"I'm on my way to Rawlins," McCreary told them. "If there are any further developments, I'll be back here."

When the judge walked to the door, Matt stepped ahead of him, opened it and held it wide, and closed it after him. Then he backed against it and stood slightly spread-legged with his hands on his hips. He glanced at Bill. The latter was standing at the window, staring out. There was a troubled frown on his face.

"Oh, that foolish, foolish boy," Mary said with a shake of her head. "Quimby's death was accidental, and I'm sure the judge would have gotten him off. But this second killing—that was murder; they'll hang him for that one. He knows that; he must, so nothing will matter to him now. He'll kill others, because the penalty for killing a dozen isn't any greater than it is for killing one. He knows they can only hang him once no matter how many he kills."

With a deep, wearied sigh, Mary got up.

"I'm going upstairs," she announced without looking at either of them. "I...I think I'd better get some rest. I'd better be prepared for the next thing that happens, and I'm sure there will be something."

After she had gone, Matt sauntered back to the table and sank down in the chair that Mary had been sitting in. He looked at his brother.

"Blamin' yourself for what's happened," he said. "Aren't you?"

"Some."

"I wonder if some of it mightn't be my fault. I was just thinking back. I used to ride herd on Pete, kept on top of him all the time and never let up

on him. I wonder if that mightn't have had something to do with what's come over him lately."

"I wouldn't know about you. But talking about the way you used to hound *him,* I'll bet you never knew how many times you nearly had your head beat in. I can remember a couple o' those times, when we were both so blamed sore at you, we were all set to jump you and give it to you good."

"But you didn't, though."

"No; but don't think it was because we were scared."

"Why didn't you do it, Bill? What stopped you?"

Bill shrugged, but volunteered nothing beyond that.

Matt sat back. "What are we gonna do, Bill?"

BILL LOOKED at him over his shoulder. "You think he's hightailed it, Matt?"

"Nope."

"I don't think he has either; I think he's still around, and close by too."

"All right. Where d'we go from there?"

"I think he's holed up somewhere, and the only time he'll come out will be at night."

"Go on."

"Matt, I've got a crazy idea that when it gets good and dark, he might try to see Ann before he clears out."

"Just to see her, or d'you think he might try to get her to go 'way with him?"

"The spot he's in with a rope waiting for him, I wouldn't put it past him to try to force Ann to go with him."

"Then the thing for us to do is wait for him tonight near Ann's house; if he shows up, we'll grab him and see if we can't talk some sense into him, and get him started for Mexico."

"That's my idea exactly. How are we gonna get away from you here without gettin' Ma suspicious?"

"We've been away from our spreads since last night. We oughta go see what's doin' with them."

"Only once we get away from here, we'll head straight for the Snow place."

- 3 -

THE LONG, wearying day had finally come to an end. The back door to the Rowan ranchhouse opened and Matt and Bill eased themselves out.

They rounded the house, and taking to the muffling grass that flanked the shale and stone path, headed for the barn.

There was a shadowy figure standing in front of it. As they came up to the idling man, the shadows around him seemed to dissolve and they saw that it was Tom Spence.

"I was just gonna go over to the bunkhouse after you, Tom," Matt told him. "You wanna go inside and saddle up, Bill?"

"In a minute," Bill answered.

"Bill and I kinda think we oughta go ride over and see what's doing on our spreads," Matt continued to Spence, "bein' that we haven't been near them for a whole day."

"You're coming back though, aren't you?" Spence asked.

" 'Course," Matt answered at once. "Meanwhile though, we'd like you to go up to the house and stay there till Ma comes down. She's asleep right now; kinda played out. When she wakes up, you can tell her where we went and that we'll be back; then she won't go worryin' herself. Y'know?"

"When d'you want me to go up there?"

"Now," Matt replied. "No telling how long she might sleep or how soon she might wake up. But we wouldn't want her to come downstairs and find

us gone and nobody around to tell her anything."

"Right," Spence said, and trudged off toward the house.

Matt and Bill followed him with their eyes. When he reached the head of the path and rounded the house, they went into the barn. Minutes later they rode out astride their horses.

THE ROAD on which Fred Snow's S-Bar ranch fronted was gloomily dark and hushed. A rifle-armed figure crouched behind the thin wall of brush, on Snow's side, it raised up every now and then and peered over the top of the brush and swept the road with straining, anxious eyes. The watcher stiffened a little when there was a sudden, muffled beat of hoofs somewhere off in the dark distance; it came closer shortly, then abruptly, there was silence again. Suddenly a half bent-over figure appeared on the far side of the road, raced lightly across it and came panting up to the brush a step or two at the most from the spot from which he was being studied. When he pushed through the brush and lifted his eyes to the house that stood inland about a hundred yards from the road, there was movement behind him, but before he could turn a rifle muzzle dug into his back and made him freeze in his tracks.

"It's me, Pete," the voice behind the rifle told him.

He whirled around instantly. "Ma!" he said in a hushed whisper. "You nearly scared me outta my boots. What... what are you doing here?"

"I think you'd better tell me what you are doing here," Mary Rowan said quietly.

"I came to see somebody."

"That all you came for, Pete? Just to see her?"

" 'Course."

"I don't think that would have satisfied you, just seeing her."

Pete held his tongue.

"Sure you didn't have something more than that in mind?" Mary pressed him. "Sure you didn't think you might be able to talk her into going away with you, and if you didn't succeed in that, maybe try to kidnap her?"

"Aw, come on now, Ma!"

"I didn't think you'd go without trying to get to Ann," Mary went on steadily. "That's why I'm here—to make sure you don't add to what you've done already. Why did you kill that jailer?"

"He wouldn't let go o' me, Ma, and I guess I kinda lost my head."

"H'm," Mary said. "And what do you plan to do now?"

"Only one thing I can do, Ma. Get across the border and down into Mexico."

"And then?"

"Try to make a new life for myself down there. Ma, the wedding still on?"

"I don't know, Pete. Nothing's been said about it."

"Then it must be still on. Nice brother I've got. Cuts me out with my girl and now he'll have her all to himself while I have to go..."

MARY SAID firmly, but not unkindly, "He didn't do anything of the kind, Pete, and you know it. And to blame him for what you've done..."

"All right, Ma," he said, interrupting her. "I know you're on his side, so don't let's waste time arguin' about it. That won't get anybody anywhere. I came here to see Ann and that's what I aim to do."

"Pete, if you really love her..."

"If I didn't love her, d'you think I'd be here now when I coulda put a lot o' distance between that posse and me?" he demanded. "You'd better go home, Ma. It'll be better that way for you and me both."

"But not for Ann. You're not going to bother her, Pete; I'm sure she has enough to contend with as it is without having you add to it."

"Ma, I'm telling you..."

"And I'm telling *you*, Pete."

"You're gonna make me do something I don't want to do."

"Turn around, Pete," she commanded.

"Now look, Ma," he began darkly.

"Turn around, I said."

"First time I ever heard of a mother or even a stepmother takin' sides with one son against another. Children are supposed to be the same to a mother. But not with you, huh, Ma?"

"I told you to turn around, Pete."

She nudged him with the rifle and he turned slowly. Holding it on him so that the muzzle kept boring into his back, she shifted the rifle from her right hand to her left, and with the right hand she reached for his gun and lifted it out of his holster and quickly stepped back.

"You're all right, Ma," he said over his shoulder. "If I ever had a chance of gettin' away, you sure fixed me good. Now I'm done for. Without a gun..."

"We're going out to the road, Pete," she told him; "we're going to get your horse and mine."

"And then you're gonna turn me in to the law, I suppose, huh?"

"No," she said quietly. "Walk ahead of me, but don't try any tricks."

"Where we going?"

"You'll find that out soon enough. Go on now."

Holding his gun on him and maneuvering the rifle, muzzle downward, she brought it up under her left arm. When she poked him with the Colt, he trudged forward, parted the brush with his hands and stepped through it and emerged in the roadway and stood there mutely waiting for her.

IT WAS EVENING, four days later. Matt and Bill Rowan, looking haggard and dirty, were trudging out of the barn when they heard hoofbeats in the roadway below the level of the ranch. They stopped mechanically and leveled their wondering gaze on the upgrade. Presently they were staring a little open mouthed; Mary topped the upgrade, halted for a moment to give her head-bowed and heavy-legged horse a chance to get his wind.

"Ma!" Matt hollered, and Bill and he forgot their weariness and ran to meet her as her horse came on again at a walk.

"For the love o' Mike, Ma!" Matt greeted her as Bill and he reached her side. Her horse stopped of his own accord. "You all right? Where've you been?"

"You sure had us scared to death," Bill told her. "We didn't know what to make of it, you disappearing like you did into nowhere."

"We covered just about every inch of the county, looking for you, Ma," Matt went on a little breathlessly. "The boys and us. Just about ran the legs off our horses."

"That's over with, Matt, so forget it," Bill said. "You look beat, Ma; fact is, you look like you haven't been to bed in a week."

She smiled a little. "Only for four days," she said.

"That's all, huh?" Matt said. "Only for four days? Wanna tell you something, Mrs. Rowan. Once you get upstairs, you're staying put there and we'll take turns keeping you there till you get so caught up on your rest, you'll hate the sight of your bed."

Strong arms reached for her and she was lifted off her horse. Matt and Bill followed her up to the house.

Bill didn't wait for her to answer. "We'll all have some," he said. "Only one thing, Matt; *I'll* fix the coffee. I don't want any more that you fix. Ma, can't you show him how to make coffee? His is awful. Tastes more like sheep dip than the real thing does."

"Yeah?" Matt retorted. "You ever taste sheep dip?"

"Nope," Bill answered calmly, "but all you have to do is take one good look at a tub o' sheep dip; and if you can't imagine what anything that looks that bad must taste like, then it's too bad."

"Huh," Matt said scornfully, but he

didn't press the discussion. While Bill busied himself preparing the coffee, Matt seated himself at the table, smiled at Mary and said: "Feel like talking and telling us about it, Ma, or would you rather wait till after you've had a chance to catch up with yourself?"

"No," she said. "I want to tell you about it, and I want to tell you now. I was with Pete."

BILL SHOT a look at her over his shoulder. "I went down to the border with him," she continued, "and when he crossed the river into Mexico, I started back. I suppose though I should begin from the beginning, shouldn't I? That day Judge McCreary was here..."

"You went upstairs to rest," Matt said.

"Yes. Late that afternoon, when I was sitting at the window..."

"When you were supposed to be in bed," Bill interrupted wryly.

"I spied Tom Spence, motioned to him to come up the path and dropped a note to him. I instructed him to run a ladder up to my window when it got dark and to have a horse saddled and waiting for me behind the barn."

"The old coot," Bill said. "He never let on to us what you were up to. Fact is, to this very minute..."

"Tom followed my instructions. I told him he wasn't to let you boys know that I'd left the house. Anyway, I had a feeling that Pete wasn't far away, and that he wouldn't go without first making an attempt to see Ann Snow."

Matt and Bill looked at each other.

"We had the same idea, Ma," Bill said with a grin. "Only you were 'way ahead of us. While we were still hangin' around waiting for it to get good and dark, you were miles away."

"It's a good thing I got to Pete first." Mary went on. "If you two had gotten to him first, there might have been trouble. He wasn't in the mood to be talked to or lectured."

"Uh-huh," Matt said, sitting back. "We-ll, that's that. He got away with a whole skin, and I never thought he'd make it, not with a posse out looking for him. Luck was riding with him. I hope it stays with him."

"Now I want to know something of you, Bill," Mary said.

"Y'mean about Sunday?"

"Yes."

BILL HUNG his head. "I dunno what to tell you, Ma. I haven't seen Ann in, lemme see now... five days. To tell you the truth, I haven't felt up to seeing her."

"You mean you haven't had the courage to face her, don't you?"

Bill flushed a little.

"You still love her and want to marry her, don't you?"

" 'Course I do."

"Then why don't you go to see her?"

"I've been thinking I might do that tomorrow."

"T o m o r r o w?" Mary repeated. "What's the matter with tonight?"

"Nothing, 'cept that it's about eight now. Be nine before I could get there. So I'll wait till tomorrow."

"Bill, did I ever tell you of the time your father proposed to me?"

"Don't think so, Ma."

"I probably didn't. I was living in town, in Mrs. Hamby's boarding house. I think it was about two-thirty in the morning when the idea that he wanted to marry me came to your father," Mary related. "It was about three-thirty when he came galloping in to town. He didn't just wake me, or Mrs. Hamby, or the other boarders. He woke the whole town.

"There was such excitement and confusion! People sprang from their beds and rushed to their windows with their guns, apparently expecting to see a horde of screaming Indians filling the street. Instead it was only your father. I remember sitting on the top step of the stairway, in my nightdress with a blanket thrown around me, listening to your father pleading his case to me

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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while in the background I could hear the grumbling of Mrs. Hamby and the other boarders. Wait a minute, Bill. I haven't finished. Don't you want to hear the rest?"

Bill was halfway to the door. He looked back at her over his shoulder. "'Fraid I haven't got time to hear it tonight, Ma," he said. "I'm going to see Ann."

He strode on to the door, opened it and went out.

Matt laughed and climbed to his feet and stretched mightily.

"Me for bed," he announced. "How about you, Ma? You oughta be about ready to turn in too."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of going to bed now," Mary replied.

"Y'mean you're gonna wait up till Bill gets back?"

"Of course."

He shook his head. "G'night, Ma."

"Good night, Matt."

IT WAS AFTER midnight when Bill returned. He found Mary, head bowed and nodding, with a blanket draped around her, sitting in her chair at the table with soft, turned down lamplight playing over her. He closed the door quietly, tiptoed across the room to Mary's side and bent over her.

"Ma," he said.

There was no response. He touched her arm.

"Ma," he said again.

This time she stirred, sighed and lifted her head. He knew in front of her.

"Ma."

Her eyes opened.

"Oh," she said. "Bill." She pushed off the blanket, leaned toward him and took his face in her hands. "Tell me."

"It's still on for Sunday, Ma," he told her with a happy, boyish smile.

"I was sure it would be, Bill," she answered, and the warmth of the smile that she gave him matched his. "I'm so

(*turn to page* 86)

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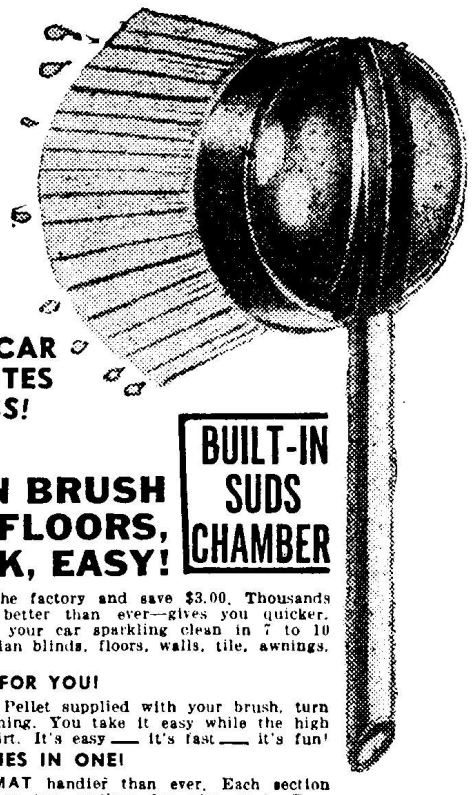

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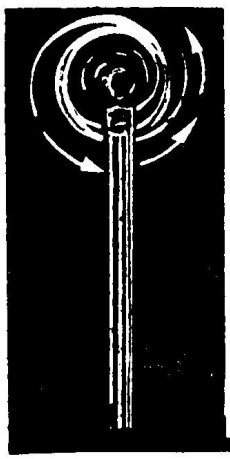

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glad for you, Bill." She bent her head and kissed him. "I'm so very glad."

- 4 -

THREE MONTHS had gone by, and the Rowans had settled down to their new routine of living. Pete's cottage, still so shiny and new-looking and practically unlived in, was closed; his stock, evenly divided, had been added to Matt's and Bill's. Bill and Ann were still living in their dream world. And the day Bill learned that Ann was bearing his child, he brought Mary the exciting news as fast as his horse could cover the distance between his house and the old one.

Matt came for breakfast several times a week. It was such a waste for him to fix things for himself; there was always so much left over, he decided he would breakfast with Ma.

NOW SIX months had passed. Matt and Bill, meeting at the stream, dismounted and talked a bit while their horses drank their fill of the clear, cold water.

"How are things, Matt?" Bill asked.

Matt grinned. "Fine. How are they with you?"

"Couldn't be better."

"How's Ann?"

Now it was Bill's turn to grin, and he did, broadly, too. "Gettin' rounder all the time."

It was night, nearly ten o'clock. Matt was sitting at the table in the lamplit kitchen of his house, hunched over his account books.

Five minutes later he closed the books, got up and put them on the shelf above the sink. Just as he was about to bolt the door, he heard hoofbeats somewhere off in the night. Quickly he went to the window, parted the half curtain over it and peered out.

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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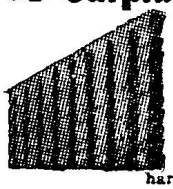

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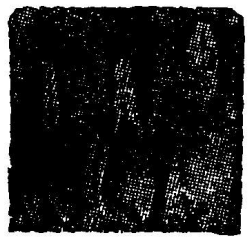

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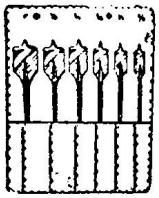

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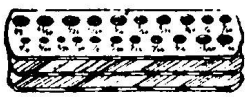

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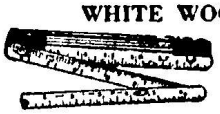

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But the darkness that lay over the range was blanketing and veiling and he couldn't see anything. Closing the curtain he opened the door and stole a look outside.

Shadowy, unrecognizable horsemen pounded up into view and swept on toward the house, drummed up to it in a flurry of hoofbeats and pulled up in front of it. He eyed them wonderingly. A lean, rangy man dismounted and trudged up to the door. It was Richie Weaver who had become sheriff with Dan Quimby's passing.

"Sorry to bother you this time o' night, Matt," Weaver began without any preliminaries. "But it's for your own good. Pete is headed this way and we aim to get him. We don't want anybody doin' anything they shouldn't, like headin' him off or warning him off. I've told Bill the same thing, and just to make sure he does what I've told him, and that Pete doesn't get to him, I've left some men around his place. I aim to do the same thing here. Now how about it?"

"All right, Richie," Matt said heavily. "I won't do anything. I'll stay put here."

"Thanks, Matt, That'll make it easier on all of us. Y'know when a man runs wild, it doesn't pay to try to help him. All it does is give him more room to run and more of a chance to add to what he's done already. Night, Matt."

- 5 -

SITTING AT his kitchen window, grim-faced, Matt Rowan watched the thinning darkness dissolve into nothingness and saw the dawn break.

He trudged wearily to the door, opened it and stepped out-

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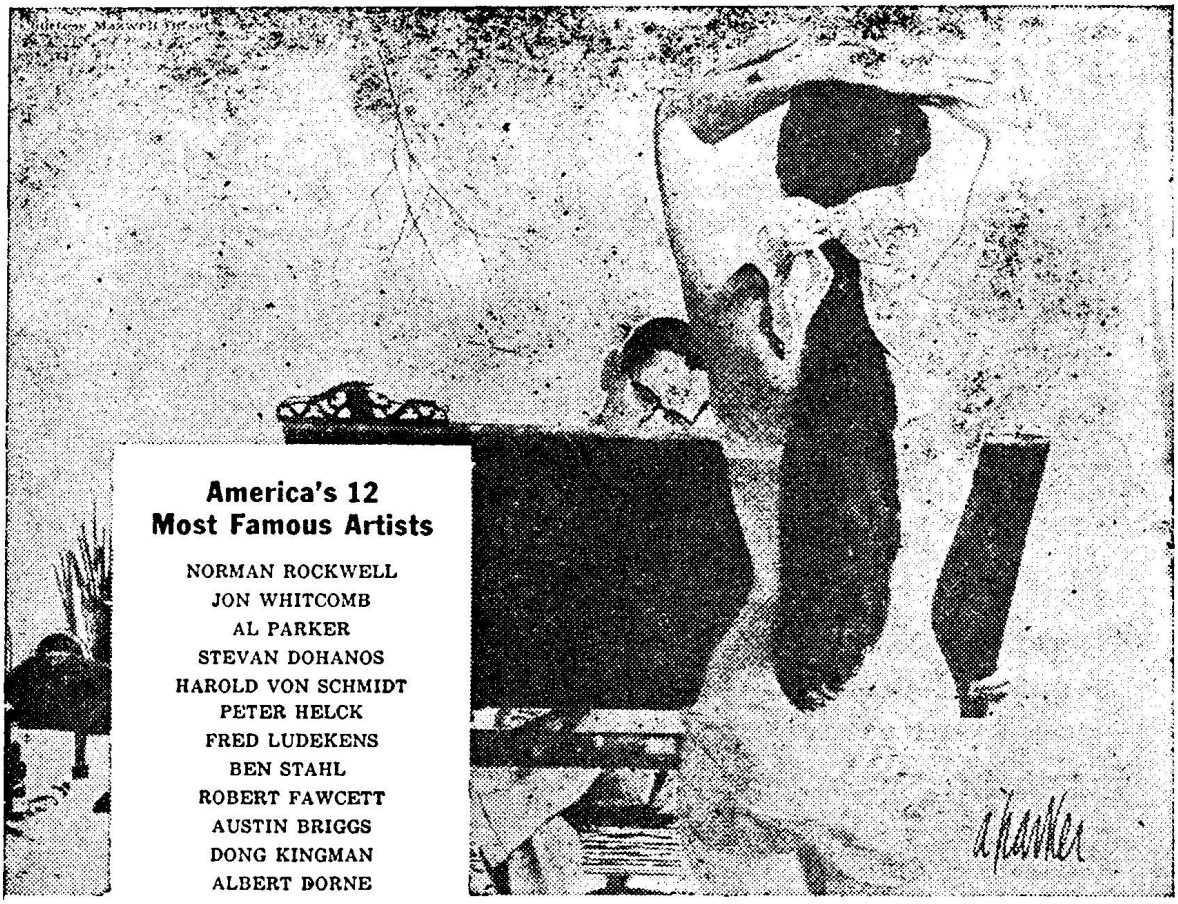

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side. His eyes ranged about seeking a sign of the posseman whom Weaver had left behind him. When he failed to find any, he knew that it was over. The fact that the possemen had been withdrawn could mean only one thing, that the law had finally claimed Pete Rowan. Slowly he turned and went back inside. He slumped down into his chair and sat there staring moodily into empty space.

It was probably ten minutes later when Bill rode up to the house. Matt admitted him. "Well?" he asked.

"Hear anything?"

"Nope. Thought you might have."

Bill shook his head. "Only thing I heard was that shooting last night."

"I heard it too. Somewhere around midnight, I think it was. But it didn't last long. No more'n a minute or so."

"Wonder what happened?"

"He mighta got away, Y'know?"

"Yeah, he mighta. No telling though."

"I'll bet Ma's a wreck. Worried enough about him before this happened. Now. . ."

"Don't you think we oughta ride over and see what's going on at Ma's?"

"I was aiming to."

"Suppose I go saddle up for you? That'll save some time."

"Uh-huh. I oughta be out front by the time you bring my horse around."

MARY, MATT and Bill were seated at the table, each moodily and thoughtfully silent, and each toying with an empty coffee cup that had been filled three times and drained as many times.

"Nine o'clock," Matt said. "Wish we'd hear something from somebody so we'd know what's happened."

Someone came up to the door and knocked; before anyone could answer, it opened and Judge McCreary came in.

"Good morning," he said.

There was a chorused response. The

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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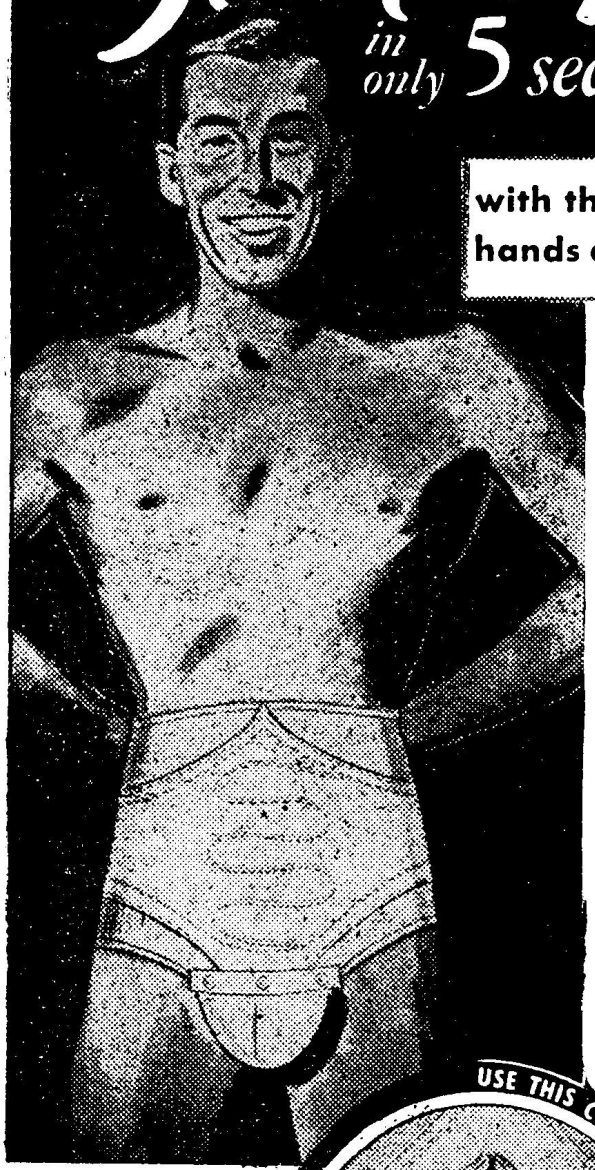

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judge came up to the table. He looked tired. The lines in his face were deeper, and the corners of his mouth seemed to droop a little. Bill pulled out a chair and held it for him. The judge grunted his thanks and eased himself down in it.

"Pete will be brought to trial tomorrow morning," he announced.

"Then that shooting we heard last night," Matt said quickly; "he came through that all right then, huh?"

The judge nodded.

"He was untouched," he answered. "I was notified that they were taking him to Rawlins and I followed him there. I was permitted to talk with him briefly. He hopes to see you today, Mary."

"I'll be there," she said simply.

"What'd he have to say for himself, Judge?" Matt asked. "What made him come back?"

"Pete killed a man in Mexico, in a saloon brawl. Claims the man cheated him in a card game. Pete had to fight his way out of the place. The man he killed had friends there and they pursued Pete, but he managed to make it to the river a step ahead of them. In the course of the pursuit, Pete shot two of the men who were after him. He got across the river safely. But then, suddenly overcome by a longing for home, he cast aside all caution and headed northward. In a small town, a place called Paradise, a deputy sheriff who apparently thought he recognized him from the description given of Pete in the wanted circulars that the Rawlins authorities had sent out to all law enforcement officers, sought to detain Pete. When he tried to disarm him . . ."

"Pete drew on him and let him have it," Matt said.

"Yes," the judge said heavily. "Pete killed him." "There's still another killing that has been laid to Pete," Mc-

(*turn to page* 94)

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Creary went on grimly. "One of the possemen, a man named Harder. Pete shot him just as the posse closed in on him and overpowered him. That was the shooting you said you heard last night, Matt."

AN IRON-BARRED door stood between Mary and Pete Rowan.

"Gee, I'm glad to see you, Ma!" Pete said. She had never seen him look as he did then—dirty, unshaven, his hair uncombed, rumpled and matted, his shirt half torn off his back, a huge tear in the right knee of his levis, and his boots worn to the point of shabbiness. He cast a quick look about him. When he saw that they had been left alone, he whispered: "Where've you got it, Ma?"

She looked at him blankly. "Where have I got what?"

"You brought me a gun, didn't you?"

She stared at him. "A gun?"

"'Course! How else did you think I'd have a chance of breakin' outta here? Look, Ma, you'd better get hold of Matt and Bill, and tell them what I want. Now get this. I'll need a gun, some dough, and a fresh horse waiting for me outside, so the minute I hit the street, I can get going. Tell them to bring their rifles with them so they can hold off anybody who comes after me."

Mary was speechless; she wanted to answer him, but somehow nothing came from her save a gurgling, choking sound. He did not seem to notice it.

"I'm gonna head for California when I get outta here, Ma," he went on. "Feller I met in Mexico told me he'd been to California and he raved about it. Got me so excited about it, I won't be satisfied till I see for myself what..."

She turned away slowly.

"Wait a minute, Ma. Where are you going?" he called after her.

She stopped and looked back at him.

"Out of here, Pete," she replied. "I can't stand it in here any longer."

"You gonna do what I asked you to? You gonna get me what I want?"

"No, Pete," she said quietly.

"Huh?" He stared hard at her. "Y'mean you aren't gonna help me get outta here? You're gonna let them hang me without you liftin' a hand to save me? I...I don't believe it, Ma!"

"You'd better believe it, Pete."

She came back to the barred door and faced him again squarely. "Pete," she began. "I came here hoping to hear you say something about how sorry you are for what you've done. But you aren't sorry at all; instead, you want us to help you get out of here even if it means killing others who may stand in your way. We won't do it, Pete. A man who has killed as wantonly as you have must be stopped and punished.

"Maybe you don't realize what you've done. Maybe you haven't the capacity for understanding. I don't know. If you can't distinguish between right and wrong, I'm sorry for you. Apparently you can't, so there isn't any place for a man like you among decent, law-abiding people."

She turned away from him again suddenly, flung a "Goodbye, Pete" over her shoulder and hurried doorward. The tears that welled up into her eyes blinded her and she had to grope for the door. Through the closing door she heard Pete's voice. It cut into her like a knife. "Ma! Don't go! Don't leave me, Ma!"

THE FOLLOWING day, Pete Rowan was brought to trial. Matt and Bill attended it. Mary, yielding to their pleadings, stayed home. When they returned from Rawlins, she asked no questions and waited instead for them to tell her of the outcome.

"Ma," Matt said and she looked at him. "It's set for tomorrow morning. For eight o'clock."

"They're going to hang him?"

"Yeah," Matt said heavily. "Ma, I

[*Turn Page*]

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hope you aren't planning to go to Rawlins tomorrow. No point to it."

"That's right," Bill added. "I feel the same way Matt does about it."

"You boys will let me decide that for myself, won't you?"

"'Course," they said together. "Only we hope you don't go, Ma."

Matt and Bill, having arranged with the undertaker at Rawlins for him to claim Pete's body after the hanging, prepare it for burial and deliver it at the Rowan place, stepped out into the sun-drenched street.

"Ever see a day like this?" Bill asked. "Ever see it so beautiful?"

"Made for living, all right," Matt commented glumly. "Not for what they're gonna do to Pete."

When people began to gather across the street, Bill muttered: "Lookit them over there. Just as many women an' kids as there are men. And all come to see a man get strung up."

"And they're all spruced up too," Matt added, "like it was a holiday or something. Come on, Bill. Let's walk. I don't like standing here for them to gape at."

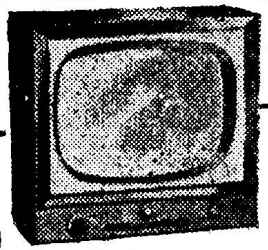
They walked downstreet.

THERE WAS a sudden, startling roar of gunfire. They spun around and looked upstreet in the direction of the gunfire. They saw the crowd opposite the sheriff's office scatter, saw people trample each other in their frenzied haste to get under cover. Then suddenly the street was hushed and emptied.

The door to the sheriff's office was flung open and a man bounded out. It was Pete Rowan. He had a gun in his hand. He looked about him quickly, spotted a horse tied up at a hitch rail a couple of doors beyond the sheriff's office, wheeled and ran to it. But then, as Matt and Bill watched with wide eyes, just as Pete reached the horse, a woman, a slight, black-clad figure

[*Turn To Page* 98]

FIX TV AND RADIO SETS RIGHT AWAY



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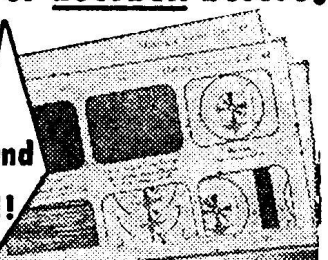

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stepped out of an alley with a raised rifle in her hands.

"Hey, it's Ma!" Bill fairly yelled.

"Yeah!"

Pete had already untied the horse and had swung himself up on the animal's back. The sheriff's door opened again, and a tall, lean man with a bloodied face lurched out on the walk. Pete spotted him, and raised his gun for a shot at him. A rifle cracked ominously. Pete's gun fell from his hand. He sagged brokenly, and toppled sideways out of the saddle.

Matt and Bill came bounding up to Mary.

She handed the rifle to Matt.

"I had to do it, Matt," she told him tearfully. "I was afraid he'd get his hands on a gun somehow, and you see he did. If he had gotten away from here, he'd have gone on killing. Since no one else was able to stop him, it had to be one of his own who did it. Maybe now that he's been stopped, we can go back to living our lives as Rowans should. Take me home, please."

★

ANSWERS

To The Quiz Story "Lottie Licks Loganville"

1. True
2. True
3. False
4. N. E.
5. False
6. False
7. True
8. N. E.
9. True
10. True

What to do about your score:

Give yourself ten per cent for each correct answer. If you get 100% or 90%, then hurry out West and buy a gambling joint. If you get 70% or 80% you might try to be a deputy sheriff. If you get 50% or 60%, read more about the West and read it carefully. If you get under 50%, stay East and under no circumstances go out West.

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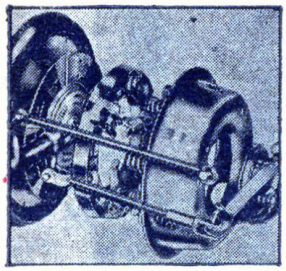

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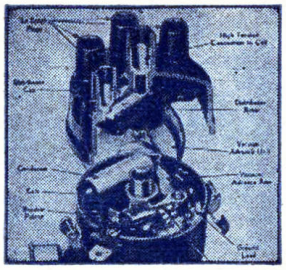

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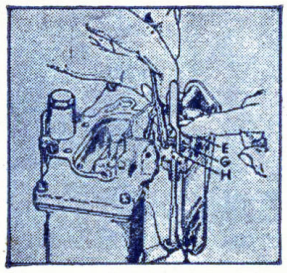

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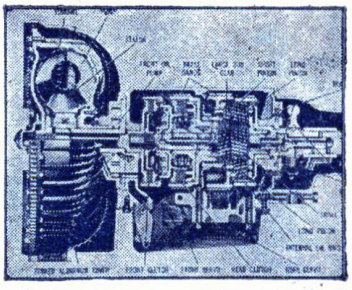

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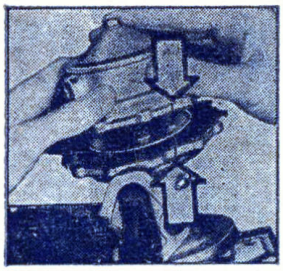

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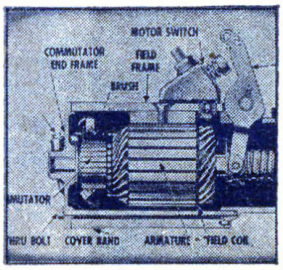

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