48345 OCTOBER 1978 $1.25

FAR WEST

AMERICA'S LEADING WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

A SEASON FOR HEROES
By Carla Kelly

RAWHIDE REASONING
By Francis La Fugate

GOIN' TO TEXAS
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LIKE LUCIFER
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FAR WEST

AMERICA'S LEADING WESTERN FICTION MONTHLY

MEMBERS

WESTERN WRITERS OF AMERICA

FAR WEST, a Pocket Magazine, is published monthly by Wright Publishing Co., Inc., P.O. Box 2260, 2949 Century Place, Costa Mesa, CA 92626, (714) 979-2560. Second class mailing permit applied for at Costa Mesa, Calif., and at additional mailing offices.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: U.S. and U.S.possessions, one year (12 issues) $10.00; two years (24 issues) — $18.00. Canada and other foreign subscribers add $2.00 per year. Single copy price $1.25.

NATIONAL ADVERTISING OFFICE: 2949 Century Place, Costa Mesa, CA 92626, (714) 979-2560.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS: Six weeks notice is required for change of address. Please furnish both old and new address, with an address imprint from a recent issue, to the Circulation Department, FAR WEST Magazine, P.O. Box 2260, Costa Mesa, CA 92626.

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NOTICE

Coming your way this fall is a western film for television based on James Michener's best selling novel, *Centennial.* Currently camera crews are busy filming in Colorado, as well as in Texas and, we understand, New Mexico. Recently we had an opportunity to view footage shot on location with *Centennial* in Colorado. We were impressed with what we saw.

Usually programs which attempt to capture the sweep of westward migration fall flat. *How The West Was Won* is an excellent example of a good idea gone bad. Casting "Latin lovers" as Indians and dressing the principals like refugees from a hippie leather shop were but two of the complaints we had with what went on to become *the McCahans.* Further, the plot seemed archly contrived and the characters totally unbelievable. From what we saw of *Centennial*, we won't have much to gripe about.

Admittedly, what we saw was "bootleg stuff"—one of the crew, a western enthusiast, stopped by with about twenty minutes of film he had shot while on location. The camera angles weren't the same, and in many instances we were looking at out-take footage, BUT what we saw was some of the most accurate costuming and research we had seen in a film in at least five years.

The first treat were the Indians. Unlike the usual Hollywood extras, they looked like Indians. They lived in a *real* Indian village, instead of canvas tipis on the back lot. They dressed like Indians and, if it weren't for the camera crew in the foreground, you would swear that you were with Catlin, 150 years ago, visiting a tribe of Plains Indians for the first time.

We will have a full report on *Centennial* later, but from what we've seen so far it looks like it will be the best TV western in more than a decade. Don't miss it.

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Vol. 1 October 1978 Number 8

CONTENTS

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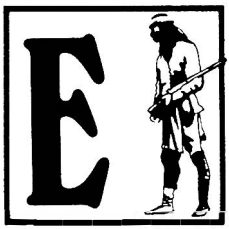
A SEASON FOR HEROES

By Carla Kelly



zra Freeman died yesterday. I don't usually read the obituaries, at least I didn't until after Pearl Harbor. With four grandsons in the service now and one of them missing over a place called Rabaul, or some such thing, I generally turn to the obituaries after the front page and the editorials.

There it was, right at the bottom of the column, in such small print I had to hold the paper out at arm's length. . .Ezra Freeman. There was no date of birth listed, probably because even Ezra hadn't known that, but it did mention there were no surviving relatives and the deceased had been a veteran of the Indian Wars.

And when I thought about Ezra Freeman, I ended up thinking about Mother and Father. Still carrying the newspaper, I went into my bedroom and looked at the picture of Mother and Father and Company D hanging on the wall next to the window. It was taken just before Father was assigned to 10th Cav headquarters, so he is still leaning on a cane in the picture. Mother is sitting on a bench holding quite a small baby and next to her, his shoulders thrown back and his feet together, is Sgt. Ezra Freeman.

The picture was taken at Fort Bowie, Arizona Territory. I was ten or eleven then and that garrison was the first memory that really stuck in my mind. It was where Dad nearly got killed and my little brother was born, and where I discovered a few things about love.

But first, something about my parents.

My mother was what people call lace-curtain Irish. She was born Kathleen Mary Flynn. Her father owned a rather successful brewery in upstate New York and Mother was educated in a convent where she learned to speak French and make lace. She

never owned up to learning anything else there, although she wrote a fine copperplate hand and did a lot of reading when Father was on campaign. The nuns taught her good manners and how to pour tea the right way. Father could always make her flare up by winking at her and saying in his broadest brogue,

"What'll ye hev to dhrink now, Kate Flynn?"

She had beautiful red hair that curled every which way. Little springs of it were forever popping out of the bun she wore low on her neck. She had a sprinkling of light brown freckles which always mystified the Indians. I remember the time an old reservation Apache stopped us as we were walking down Tucson's main street. He spoke to Father in Apache. Dad answered him, and we could see he was trying to keep a straight face.

We pounced on him when the Indian nodded and walked away.

"What did he say, Dad? What did he say?"

Father shook his head and herded us around the corner where he leaned against the wall and laughed silently until tears shone on his eyelashes. Mother got exasperated.

"What *did* he say, John?"

"Oh, Kate Flynn," he wheezed and gasped, "he wanted to know. . .Oh, God. . ." He went off into another quiet spasm.

"John!"

Mother didn't approve of people taking the Lord's name in vain (which made garrison life a trial for her at times).

"Sorry, Kathleen," Dad looked at her and winked. I could feel Mother stiffening up. "He wanted to know if you had those little brown dots all over."

We children screamed with laughter. Mother blushed. A lesser Victorian lady would have swooned, but Tucson's streets were dusty then, and Father was laughing too hard to catch her on the way down.

Mother and Father met after Father's third summer at West Point. He had been visiting friends of his family in Buffalo and Mother had been a guest of one of the daughters. They had spent a week in each other's company, then Mother had gone back to the convent. They had corresponded for several months, then Father proposed during Christmas furlough and

they were married after graduation in June.

There had been serious objections from both sides of the family. Papa Flynn made Father promise to raise any children as Catholics, and Grandpa Stokes wanted to be assured that he and Grandma wouldn't be obliged to call on the Flynns very often.

Father agreed to everything and he would have raised us as Catholics, except that we seldom saw a priest out on the plains; besides, Mother wasn't a very efficient daughter of the church. I think she figured she'd had enough, what with daily Mass at the convent for six years straight. But she always kept her little ebony and silver rosary in her top drawer under her handkerchiefs and I only saw her fingering it once.

I don't really remember what my fahter looked like in those early years. I do remember that he wasn't too tall (none of the horse soldiers were) and that the other officers called him Handsome Johnny. Mother generally called him "the Captain" when we were around. "The Captain says you should do this, Janey," or "Take the Captain's paper to him, Gerald." When he was promoted, she called him "the Major," and the last name before he died was "the Colonel." Fifteen years later, just before she died, she had started over and was calling him "the Lieutenant" again.

I was born in Baton Rouge about a year after they were married, where the 10th Calvalry was serving Reconstruction duty. Pete came along two years later at Ft. Sill and Gerald was born at Ft. Robinson in the Black Hills.

When I was ten, we were assigned to Ft. Bowie, Arizona Territory. That was in the fall of 1881, more than sixty years ago.

Dad commanded Company D of the 10th Cavalry. The Ninth and Tenth Cavalry were composed entirely of Negro enlisted men, serving under white officers. The Indians called them Buffalo Soldiers, I suppose because their kinky black hair reminded them of the hair of a buffalo. Father always swore they were the best troops in the whole U.S. Army and said he was proud to serve with them, even though some of his fellow officers considered such duty a form of penance.

My favorite memory of Company D was listening to them

riding into Ft. Bowie after duty in the field. They always came in singing. The only man who couldn't carry a tune was my father. I remember one time right before Christmas when they rode out of Apache Pass singing "Star of the East." Even Mother came out on the porch to listen, her hand on my shoulder.

Company D had two Negro sergeants. Master Sergeant Albert Washington was a former slave from Valdosta, Georgia. He was a short, skinny little man who never said very much, maybe because he was married to Clara Washington who did our washing and sewing, and who had the loudest, strongest voice between the Mississippi and the Pacific.

The other sergeant was Ezra Freeman. Ezra wasn't much taller than my father and he had the biggest hands I ever saw. They fascinated me because he was so black and the palms of his hands were so white.

Ezra had a lovely deep voice that reminded me of chocolate pudding. I loved to hear him call the commands to the troops during Guard Mount and I loved to watch him sit in his saddle. My father was a good horseman but he never sat as tall as Ezra Freeman, and Father's shoulders got more and more stooped as the years passed. Not Ezra. Last time I saw him, sitting in his wheelchair, his posture was as good as ever, and I think he would have died before he would have leaned back.

Once I asked Ezra about his childhood. He said that he had been raised on a plantation in South Carolina. At the age of twelve, he and two sisters and his mother and father had been sold at the Savannah auction to help pay off his master's gambling debts. He never saw any of them again.

He was bought by a planter from Louisiana and stayed a field hand until Admiral Farragut steamed up the Mississippi and ended that. He sometimes spoke a funny kind of pidgin French that made my mother laugh and shake her head.

But she never got too close to Ezra, or to any of Father's other troopers. None of the other white ladies of the regiment did either. Mother never would actually pull her skirts aside when the colored troopers passed, as some of the ladies did, but she had a formality about her in the presence of the Buffalo

Soldiers that we weren't accustomed to. At least, she did until the summer of 1882, when we came to owe Ezra Freeman everything.

That was the summer Ignacio and his Apaches left the San Carlos Agency and raided, looted, burned and captured women and children to enslave or sell in Mexico. The troops garrisoned at Bowie knew that Ignacio's activities would touch them soon, and the early part of the summer was spent in refitting and requisitioning supplies and ordnance in preparation for the orders they knew would come.

Mother was not receiving any callers that summer. That was how we put it then. Or we might have said that she was "in delicate health." Now, in 1942, we say "she is expecting," or "she is in the family way." But back then, that would have been altogether too vulgar and decidedly low class.

Neither of them told us. I just happened to notice Mother one morning when I burst into her room and caught her in her shift. She bulged a little in the front and I figured we were going to have another baby brother sometime. They never seemed to have girls after me. She didn't say anything then and I didn't either. Later on in the week, when we were polishing silver, she paused, put her hand on her middle and stared off in space for a few moments, a slight smile on her face.

At breakfast a few mornings later, Father asked Mother if she wanted to go home for the summer to have the baby. The railroad had been completed between Bowie and Tucson, and it would be a much less difficult trip.

"Oh, no, I couldn't, John," she had replied.

"Well, why not? I'll probably be gone all summer anyway." Dad wiped up the egg on his plate with one swipe of his toast and grinned when Mother frowned at him.

"Oh, I just couldn't, John," she repeated, and that was the end of that.

About two weeks later, three of the cavalry companies and two of the infantry were detached from Bowie to look for Ignacio.

Mother said her goodbyes to Father inside their bedroom. As I think of it, very few of the wives ever saw their husbands off

from the porch, except for Lieutenant Grizzard's wife, and everyone said she was a brassy piece anyway.

But we kids followed Father out onto the porch. My little brother Pete wore the battered black felt hat Dad always took on campaign and Gerald lugged out the sabre, only to be sent back into the house with it. Father let me bring out his big Colt revolver and I remember that it took both hands to carry it.

He took the gun from me and pushed it into his holster. He put his hand on my head and shook it back and forth. Then he knelt down and kissed me on both cheeks.

"Keep an eye on Mother for me, Janey," he said.

I nodded and he stood up and shook my head again. He plucked the black hat off Pete's head and swatted him lightly with it. He knelt down again, and both Pete and Gerald clung to him.

"Now you two mind Janey. She's sergeant major.'"

Company D rode out at the head of the column after Guard Mount, and the civilian who taught school for the officers' children was kind enough to dismiss us for the day.

Summers are always endless to children, but that summer of 1882 seemed to stretch out like cooling taffy. One month dragged by and then two, and still the men didn't return. In fact, another company was sent out and Bowie had only the protection of one understrength troop of infantry and the invalids in the infirmary.

The trains stopped running between Bowie and Tucson because of Ignacio and his warriors, and I recall how irritated Mother was when the last installment of a serial in Frank Leslie's ILLUSTRATED WEEKLY never showed up. The only mail that got through was official business the couriers brought in.

But then Mother was irritated with many things that summer. She usually didn't show at all until the eighth month, but this time she had Clara Washington sew her some new Mother Hubbards before her sixth month was over. And her ankles were swollen too. I rarely saw Mother's legs, but once I caught her out on the back porch one evening with her dress up around her knees.

"Oh, Mama!" was all I said.

It startled her and she dropped her skirts and tucked her feet under the chair.

"Jane, you shouldn't spy on people!" she scolded, and then she smiled when she saw my face. "Oh, I'm sorry, Jane. And don't look so worried. They'll be all right again soon."

Toward the middle of August we began to hear rumors in garrison. Ordinarily we just shrugged off rumors, but the men were now quite overdue and still Ignacio hadn't been subdued. One rumor had the troops halfway across Mexico pursuing Apaches, and another rumor had them in San Diego waiting for a troop train back.

On the 18th of Autust (I remember the date because it was Gerald's fifth birthday), the rumor changed. A couple of reservation Apaches slouched in on their hard-bitten ponies to report a skirmish to the south of us, hard on the Mexican border. Captain Donelly, B Company, 4th Infantry, was senior officer of the fort then and he ignored the whole thing. The Indians weren't scrupulous about the truth and they often confused Mexican and U.S. soldiers.

I mentioned the latest rumor to Mother, who smiled at me and gave me a little shake. I went back outside to play but I noticed a look in her eyes that hadn't been there before.

Two days later the troops rode in. They were tired, sunburned and dirty, and their mounts looked mostly starved. Mother came out on the porch. She leaned on the porch railing and stood on one foot and then the other. I saw that she had taken off her wedding ring and Dad's West Point ring that she wore on her first finger. Her hands looked swollen and tight.

The troops assembled on the parade ground and some of the women and children ran out to them. We looked hard for Company D but it wasn't there. Mother sat down on the bench under the parlor window.

Several of the officers dismounted and stood talking together. One of them gestured our way and Mother got up quickly. When Major Connors started walking over to our quarters, she backed into the house and jerked me in with her.

"Listen to me, Jane Elizabeth," she hissed and her fingers dug into my shoulders until I squirmed in her grasp. "You take

their message."

"But Mother," I whined, trying to get out of her grip. "Why don't you?"

"It's bad luck," she said, and turned and went into the parlor, slamming the door behind her.

Major Connors didn't seem too surprised that Mother wouldn't come out to talk to him. I backed away from him a little myself, because he smelled so awful.

"Jane, tell your mother that Company D and A are both a bit overdue but not to worry because we expect them anytime."

After he left I told Mother, but she wouldn't come out of the parlor until supper time.

Several days passed, and then a week and still no sign of either company. None of the other officers' wives said anything to Mother about it but several of them paid her morning calls and brought along baked goods.

"Why are they doing this, Mama?" I asked her, after Captain O'Neill's wife left an eggless custard.

Mother murmured something about an early wake. I asked her what she meant but she shook her head. My brothers and I downed all the pastries and pies but Mother wouldn't eat any of it.

One night when I couldn't sleep because of the heat, I crept downstairs to get a drink of water from the pump. Mother was sitting on the back porch, rocking slowly in the moonlight. She heard me and closed her fist over something in her lap, but not before I'd seen what it was. . .the little ebony rosary she kept in her drawer. I could tell by the look in her eye that she didn't want me to say anything about it. She rocked on and I sat down near her on the porch steps.

"Mother, what happens if he doesn't come back?"

I hadn't meant to say that. It just came out. She stopped rocking. I thought she might be angry with me but she wasn't.

"Oh, we just manage, Jane. It won't be as much fun, but we'll just manage."

She rocked on in silence and I could hear above the creak of the rocking chair the click of the little ebony beads. I got up to go and she took my hand.

"You know, Jane, there's one terrible thing about being a woman."

I looked down at her. Her ankles and hands were swollen, her belly stretched against the nightgown that usually hung loose on her and her face was splotched.

"What's that, Mama?"

"The waiting, the waiting."

She didn't say anything else, so I went back upstairs and finally fell asleep after the duty guards had called the time from post to post all around the fort.

Another week passed and still no sign of the companies. The next week began as all the others had. The blue sky was cloudless and the sun beat down until the whole fort shimmered. Every glance held a mirage.

It was just after Stable Call that I heard the singing. The sound came up faintly from the west, and for a few moments I wasn't sure I heard anything except the wind and the stable noises to the south of us. But there it was again, and closer. It sounded like "Dry Bones," and that had always been one of Dad's favorite songs.

I turned to call Mother, but she was standing in the doorway, her hand shading her eyes as she squinted toward Apache Pass.

People popped out of houses all along Officers Row, and the younger children began pointing and then running west past headquarters and the infirmary.

There they were, two columns of blue filing out of the pass, moving slowly. The singing wasn't very loud and then it died out as the two companies approached the stables.

Mother took her hand away from her eyes and walked over to the edge of the porch.

"He's not there, Jane," she whispered.

I looked again. I couldn't see Father anywhere.

She stood still on the porch and shaded her eyes again, then she gave a sob and began running.

So many nights in my dreams I've seen my mother running across the parade ground. She was so large and clumsy then, and as I recall, she was barefoot, but she ran as lightly as a young child, her arms held out in front of her. In my dream she runs

and runs until I wake up.

I was too startled to follow her at first and then I saw her run to the back of the column and drop down on her knees by a travois one of the horses was pulling. The animal reared back and then nearly kicked her but I don't think she even noticed. Her arms were around a man lying on the travois. As I ran closer, I could see him raise his hand slowly and put it on her hair.

I didn't recognize my father at first. His hair was matted with blood and it looked as though half his head had been blown away. There was a bloody, yellowish bandage over one eye and his whole face was swollen.

He turned his head in my direction and I think he tried to smile, but he only bared his teeth at me and I stepped back. I wanted to turn and run and I didn't see how Mother could stand it.

But there she was, her head on his chest. She was saying something to him but I couldn't hear, and all the while he was stroking her hair with that filthy, bruised hand.

I backed up some more and bumped into Ezra Freeman. I tried to turn and run but he held me.

"Go over to him, Janey," he urged and gave me a push. "He wants you."

I couldn't see how Ezra could interpret the slight movement of Father's hand but he kept pushing me toward the travois.

"Pa? Pa?" I could feel tears starting behind my eyelids.

He said something that I couldn't understand because it sounded as if his mouth was full of mashed potatoes. I leaned closer. He smelled of blood, sweat, dirt and woodsmoke. As I bent over him, I could see under the bandage on his face and gasped to see teeth and gums where his cheek should have been.

Mother was kneeling by him now, her hand on his splinted leg. She took my hand in her other hand and placed it on his chest. He tried to raise his head and I leaned closer. I could make out the words "Janey" and "home," but what he was saying was unimportant. All of a sudden I didn't care what he looked like. He was my father and I loved him more than words could say.

He must have seen my feelings in my eyes because he lay

back again and closed his eyes. His hand relaxed and let go of mine.

I helped Mother to her feet and we stood back as two orderlies lifted him off the travois and onto a stretcher. He moaned a little and Mother bit her lip.

They took him to the infirmary and Ezra Freeman walked alongside the stretcher, steadying it. Mother would have followed him but the post surgeon took one look at her and told her to go lie down, because he didn't have time to deliver a baby just then. Mother blushed and the two of us walked back to our quarters hand in hand.

Mother spent an hour that evening in the infirmary with Father. She came home and reported he looked alot better and was asleep. We went upstairs then and, while she tucked Gerald and Pete in bed, I sat on the rag rug by Pete's army cot, and she told us what happened.

"The two companies had separated from the main detachment and, after a couple days, they found an Apache rancheria. It was at the bottom of a small canyon near Deer Spring; when they tried to surround it before daybreak, they were pinned down by rifle fire from the rim of the canyon."

Mother paused and I noticed that she had twisted her fingers up in the afghan at the foot of Pete's bed. He sat up and prodded her.

"And what happened, Ma? What happened?"

He pulled on her arm a little and his eyes were shining. He had been down at the creek that afternoon and hadn't seen Father yet. The whole thing was still just a story to him.

While the candle on the night stand burned lower and lower, Mother told how Father had been shot down while trying to lead the men back to the horses. He had lain on an exposed rock all morning until Ezra Freeman had crawled out and pulled him to safety. The two companies had stayed in a mesquite thicket, firing at the Apaches until the sun went down. They withdrew in the dark.

Pete was asleep by then but Mother went on to say that the men had holed up for several days about sixty miles south of us because they were afraid Father would die if they moved him. When it looked like he would make it, they started for the fort.

Gerald fell asleep then and as Mother pulled the sheet up around him, she said to me,

"I can't understand it, Jane. Everyone else thought the Captain was dead. Why did Sgt. Freeman do it?"

Then she tucked me in bed.

But I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I kept seeing Father on that travois and the look in Mother's eyes as she knelt by him. I got out of bed and started into Mother's room.

She wasn't there. The bed hadn't even been slept in. I tiptoed down the stairs, stepping over the third tread because it always squeaked. As I groped to the bottom in the dark, I saw the front door open and then close quietly.

I waited a few seconds, then opened it and stood on the porch. Mother was dressed and wrapped in a dark shawl, despite the heat, and walking across the parade ground. She wasn't going toward the infirmary so I trailed her, skirting around the parade and keeping in the shadow of the officers' quarters. I didn't know where she was going but I had a feeling that she would send me back if she knew I was following her.

She passed the quartermasters buildings and the stables, pausing to say something to the private on guard, who saluted her and waved her on. I waited until he had turned and walked into the shadow of the blacksmith shop before I continued.

I could see now that she was heading to Suds Row, where the enlisted and their families lived. She walked to the end of the row and kept going, toward the Negro soldiers' quarters at the edge of the fort. Halfway down the row of attached quarters she stopped and knocked on one of the doors. I ducked behind the row until I came to the back of the place where she had knocked. There was a washtub in the yard and I dragged it to the window and turned it over and climbed up.

It was Ezra Freeman's quarters. He lived there with his friend Jackson Walter of Company A, Jackson's wife Chloe and their two children.

Mother and Ezra were standing in the middle of the room. She had taken off her shawl. Freeman offered her the chair he had been sitting in but she shook her head. I could see Chloe in the rocking chair by the kitchen, knitting.

Mother was silent for a few moments. Then,

"I just wanted to say thank you, Sergeant Freeman," she said finally. Her voice sounded high and thin, like it did after Grandpa Flynn's funeral three years before.

"Oh. . .well. . .I. . .Jeez, ma'am, you're welcome," stammered Ezra.

She shrugged her shoulders and held her hands out in front of her, palms up. "I mean, Sergeant, you didn't even know if he was alive and you went out there anyway."

He didn't say anything. All I could hear was the click of Chloe's bone needles. I barely heard Mother's next word.

"Why?"

Again that silence. Ezra Freeman turned a little and I could see his face. His head was down and he had sucked in his lower lip, and he was crying. The light from the kerosene lamp was reflected in his tears and they shone like diamonds on his black face.

"Well, hell, ma'am. . .he's the only man I ever served of my own free will." He paused. "And I guess I love him."

Mother put her hands to her face and I could see her shoulders shaking. Then she raised her head and I don't think she ever looked more beautiful.

"I love him too, Ezra. Maybe for the same reasons."

Then she sort of leaned against him and his arms went around her and they held onto each other, crying. She was patting him on the back, like she did when Father hugged her, and his hand was smoothing down her hair where it curled at the neck.

I am forever grateful that the white ladies and gents of Ft. Bowie never saw the two of them together like that, for I'm sure they would have been scandalized. But as I stood there peeking in the window, I had the most wonderful feeling of being surrounded by love, all kinds of love, and I wanted the moment to last and last.

But the moment soon passed. They both backed away from each other and Mother took out a handkerchief from the front of her dress and blew her nose. Ezra fished around in his pocket until he found a red bandanna and wiped his eyes. He sniffed and grinned at the same time.

"Lord almighty, ma'am. I ain't cried since that Emancipation Proclamation."

She smiled at him and put her hand on his arm, but didn't say anything. Then she nodded to Chloe, put her shawl around her head again and turned to the door.

"Good night and thank you again," she said before she went outside.

I jumped off the washtub and ran down the little alley behind the quarters. Staying in the shadows and watching out for the guards, I ran home. I wanted to be home before Mother because I knew she would look in on us before she went to sleep.

She did. She opened the door a crack, then opened it wider and glided in. I opened my eyes a little and stretched, as if she had just wakened me. She bent down and kissed me, then kissed Gerald and Pete. She closed the door and soon I heard her getting into bed.

One week later a couple of troopers from Company D carried Father home on a stretcher. The doctor insisted on putting him in the second parlor on the daybed because he didn't want him climbing the stairs.

The post surgeon had done a pretty good job on Father's face. The bandages were off so the air could get to his cheek, which was a crisscross maze of little black sutures. He had lost his left eye and wore a patch over the socket. (Later on he tried to get used to a glass eye but never could get a good fit. He gradually accumulated a cigar box-full of glass eyes, and we used to scare our city cousins with them and play a kind of lopsided marbles game.)

His mouth drooped down at one corner and made him look a little sad on one side, and none of the other officers called him Handsome Johnny again.

The day after he had been set up in the second parlor, Mother went into labor. The post surgeon tried to stop him but Father climbed the stairs—slowly, hand over hand on the railing and sat by Mother until their third boy was born.

An hour later the doctor motioned me and my brothers into the room. Mother was lying in the middle of the bed, her red

hair spread around the pillow like a fan. Her freckles stood out a little more than usual, but she was smiling. Father sat in an armchair near the bed, holding the baby, who had a red face and hair to match.

"What are you going to name him?" I asked, after giving him a good look.

Mother hesitated a moment, then looked over at the baby and Father.

"Ezra Freeman Stokes," she replied quietly, her eyes on Father.

He said something to her that I couldn't understand because his face was still swollen. But Mother kept her eyes on his and snapped back at him in a low voice that sent shivers down my back.

"I don't give a damn what the garrison thinks! He's going to be Ezra Freeman!"

None of us had ever heard Mother swear and Father nearly dropped the baby.

So that was how Ez got his name.

About a month later Father was promoted to major and given the Medal of Honor for "meritorious gallantry under fire at Deer Spring." I remember how he pushed that little medal around in its plush velvet case, then closed the box with a click. "I'm not the one who should be getting this," he murmured. No one could ever prevail upon him to wear it. Even when he was laid out in his coffin years later, with his full dress uniform and all his medals, I never saw that one.

Father was transferred to 10th Calvalry headquarters, then in San Antonio, and given a desk job. We didn't see much of Ezra Freeman after that and never did correspond with him because he couldn't read or write. But somehow we always heard about him from the other officers and men of Company D, and every year at Christmas, Mother sent him a dried apple fruit cake and socks she had knitted. We knew when he retired twenty-five years later and learned in 1915 that he had entered the Old Soldiers' Home in Los Angeles.

Before Father's stroke, he paid him one visit there. I remember that it was 1919 and Father went to tell him that Captain

Ezra F. Stokes had died in France of Spanish influenza.

"You know, Janey," he told me after that visit, "Ez may have been my son but I ended up comforting Sgt. Freeman. I almost wish I hadn't told him."

After Father passed away, Mother paid Ezra the yearly visit. She insisted on going alone on the train up from San Diego but when her eyesight began to fade, she finally relented and let me come with her once.

As it turned out, it was her last trip. I think she knew it.

Sgt. Freeman was in a wheelchair by then and, after giving me a nod and telling me to wait there, Mother pushed Ezra down the sidewalk to a little patio under the trees. She sat next to him on a bench and they talked together. After about half an hour she took an object out of her purse, leaned toward Ezra and put something on the front of his robe. I couldn't see what it was but I could tell that Ezra was protesting. He tried to push her hands away, but she went ahead and put something on him. It flashed in the sunlight but I was too far away to make out what it was.

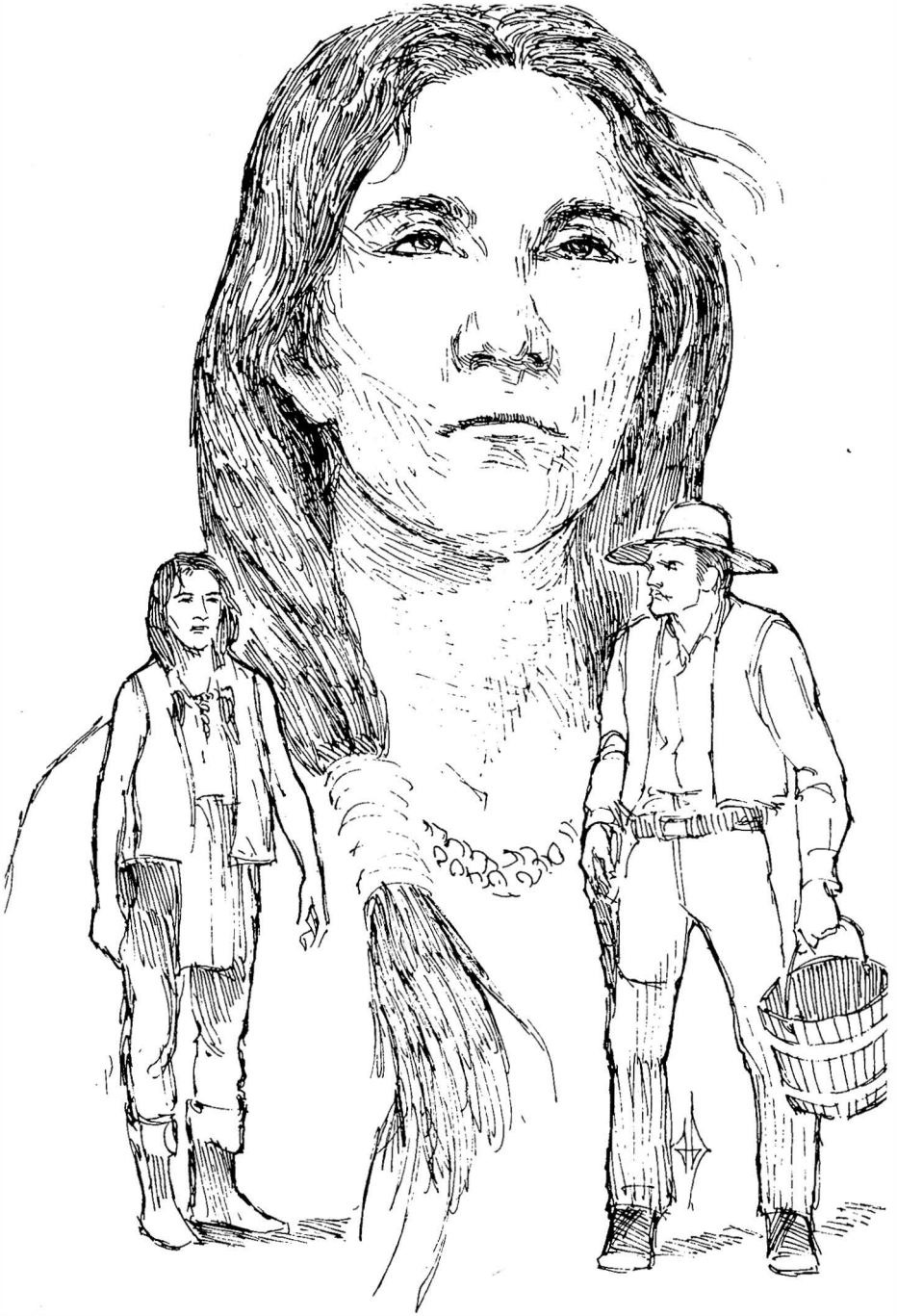
Then she took a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped his eyes. She sat down again beside him and they sat there together until his head nodded forward and he fell asleep. She wheeled him back to the far entrance of the building and I never had a chance to say good-bye.

She was silent on the trip home; after we got to my house, she said, "Jane, I feel tired" and went to bed. She drifted in and out of sleep for the next two days and then she died.

After the funeral I was going through her things when I came across the plush velvet case containing the Medal of Honor Father had been awarded at Ft. Bowie. I snapped it open but the medal was gone. I think I know where it went.

And now Ezra's dead. Well.

I can see that I've spent more time on this than I intended. I hear the postman's whistle outside. I hope there's a letter from my daughter Ann. Her oldest boy Steve has been missing over the Solomons for more than a month now.. I don't suppose I can give her much comfort but I can tell her something about waiting.



YAQUI VENGEANCE

By R.C. Burkholder

s soon as Frank Brewster stepped out of his cabin he knew something was wrong. The spring morning was too still, too quiet. Brewster's smoke-grey eyes swept the mesquite and palo verde ahead of him as he slowly lowered the water bucket and, hand on the grip of his lowslung revolver, turned to look along the rocky slope bordering the cabin.

A young Indian warrior, hardly more than a boy, suddenly materialized from a clump of desert brush and saguaro. A cartridge belt was slung over his shoulder with a holstered six-gun dangling under his right arm. A Winchester carbine was cradled across his left arm, the muzzle pointing up the canyon. Brewster froze.

White man and Indian faced each other in a long moment of complete silence. Brewster realized that the warrior, whatever his reason for being here, intended no harm. Had it been otherwise, Brewster knew, he would be long dead and the silent warrior long gone. The thought of being caught so flat-footed . . on his home ground . . . like the greenest greenhorn . . . angered Brewster.

"Apache?" he asked, glaring into the Indian's dark face and level, obsidian-black eyes.

The Indian shook his head. "Yaqui," he answered, pointing off to the south.

"What are you doing so far north of the Sierra Madre?" Brewster growled. "What do you want?"

"You are *pistolero,*" the Yaqui answered, making a statement of fact rather than asking a question. "You will teach me to use pistol."

Brewster scowled. True. He *was,* or at least had been, a *pistolero*—a gunfighter. One of the best in the territory too but, now, twenty-five years and seventeen dead men later, he wanted to forget the past. And now *this!*

"No!" Brewster grunted. "I cannot teach you. I will not . . ."

"I have yellow iron," the Indian replied, as if convinced that he had in his possession the answer to all questions, the solution to all problems. "I will give you two bags of gold-like sand and one bag of gold-like small stones. You teach. I pay."

Brewster hesitated. The Yaqui was so calm, so cool, so sure of himself.

"Why do you want to learn how to use a handgun?" Brewster asked. "Why are you so dead set on . . . ."

"There is something I must do," the Indian interrupted.

"What?" Brewster insisted.

"I must kill a man," the Yaqui answered matter-of-factly.

"Why not a Yaqui arrow?" Brewster demanded. "Or that rifle?"

"It will not do," the Indian shook his head. "What I must do must be done in the way of the white man."

"Where is this man?"

"In Vacacito."

"A Nakai-Ye? A Mexican?"

"No," the Yaqui answered grimly, returning Brewster's steady stare. "Pinda-Lick-O-Ye. A big white man. He is called You-Wing."

You-Wing? Eqin? *Clint Ewing?* Brewster gaped at the young warrior. Clint Ewing! Saddle tramp! Bordertown bully! Fast fun! Killer! An . . . an . . . an Indian, a Yaqui pup, going up against Clint Ewing with a six-gun!

"Why?" Brewster exclaimed. "Why in the name of . . .?"

The Yaqui propped his rifle against a rock, unslung his belt and holster and unbuttoned his shirt. He pulled the shirt down to his waist and turned his back to Brewster.

Brewster flinched. It was only too obvious that the boy had been savagely and brutally whipped. His back, criss-crossed with raw, half-healed welts, presented ample proof of a merciless beating.

"What's your name, boy?" Brewster asked, his voice surprisingly soft and gentle.

The young warrior turned, pulled up his shirt and reached down for his gunbelt and holstered revolver. "A-Chee-Co-Tah-Tha," he answered proudly.

Brewster reached up and ran a hand, his gun hand, over the grizzled stubble on his chin. "A-Chee is the best I can do, young feller," he said, "and I can't guarantee nothin' but . . . ."

"You teach?" the Yaqui asked eagerly, his eyes glittering with *something* which Brewster could not identify. "You teach?"

"Strap on that hogleg, A-Chee," Brewster grunted. "Maybe . . .if you have good moves, a quick hand, a steady arm and a sharp eye . . .*maybe* I can teach you enough to keep you alive. I *know* you have more than enough guts for a *pistolero!*"

The Yaqui buckled the gunbelt around his waist and adjusted the holster on his bare thigh.

"No, no!" Frank Brewster, ex-gunfighter and frontier hard-case, grumbled. "The first thing you gotta learn is how to wear the damned thing! And then . . ."

Brewster and A-Chee reined in their horses on a low ridge overlooking the border village of Vacacito. Behind them, plodding along under the late summer sun, an elderly man, two women and a child—all Yaquis—led and herded a short string of saddled pack mules.

Brewster, glancing back over his shoulder at the approaching Indians, frowned. "I still don't know why you had to bring along more'n half your clan!" he muttered.

"We need supplies," A-Chee replied, "and this is as good a day as any . . . ."

"It's as good a day as any to git yourself kilt!" Brewster exclaimed. "In front of your people too! Of all the dumb . . . ."

A flicker of a smile raised the corners of A-Chee's tight, thin-lipped mouth. In the four short months he had known this Pinda-Lick-O-Ye Brewster, he had come to respect him, to like him, even, perhaps, to love him—if not like a father, then like an older and possessive brother.

"It was on such a day," A-Chee broke in, "when me and my people came for supplies, that You-Wing . . . ."

"All right. All right!" Brewster huffed. "But look. Give me a few minutes to look things over, to scout out the town. Just in case. You wait here until I find Ewing and . . . ."

"This is A-Chee's fight!"

"Sure! Sure! But Ewing may have friends down there . . . ."

"I will wait," A-Chee agreed, pointing to a spire of red rock towering out of the cliffs to the west, "until the sun is above the needle rock. Then I will be at the trading store."

Brewster grunted, wheeled his horse away and rode down the slope toward the little town sprawled across the flat below.

The single street was deserted except for a dozen or so saddled cowponies dozing at hitchracks and a team of horses standing hipshot in wagon harness in front of Crispin's Livery Stable. Brewster pulled up in front of the only saloon in town, slid out of the saddle and walked into the cool interior of the thick-walled adobe building.

Seven men were in the saloon—five playing cards at a corner table and two standing at the bar. Brewster, ignoring the curious glances cast in his direction, walked up to the bar.

"Whiskey," he ordered.

The bartender set a bottle and a glass in front of Brewster. Brewster tossed a coin on the bar and reached for the bottle and glass.

"Suppose," he said to the bartender in a voice loud enough to be heard throughout the room, "someone was looking for a jasper named Ewing—Clint Ewing. Where might he start?"

A hush fell over the room. Brewster calmly filled his glass, drained it and refilled it. Behind him he heard a chair slide across the floor as one of the men at the table got to his feet.

"What's on your mind, mister?" a voice asked.

Brewster turned—glass in his left hand, bottle in his right hand—to face the speaker. He was a tall, lanky, hard-faced man with all the characteristics of a frontier tough. His gun hand hovered over the grip of his sixgun. The card players at the table got up and quietly moved aside.

"Well, well!" Brewster said, raising the glass to his lips and sipping the whiskey. "So you're Ewing?"

"I'm Ewing. Who are you?"

"Brewster. Frank Brewster."

A slow grin spread over Ewing's bearded face. "Frank Brewster!" he exclaimed. "I figured to run into you someday but I

sure never thought you'd come looking for me with glass in both hands!"

A snicker ran through the room.

"*I* ain't lookin' for you, Ewing," Brewster replied, "but I have a friend who is."

"A friend?"

"An Indian . . . Yaqui," Brewster said. "Name's A-Chee-Co-Tah-Tha."

"Don't know any Injuns," Ewing snarled, "and I never did like Injun-lovers."

"You know this one," Brewster said coldly. "You met him once . . . over a whip!"

Ewing's eyes narrowed, his mouth hardened.

"*Now* you remember, big man," Brewster's voice was crisp with barely-controlled anger.

"Where is that hard-nosed red . . . ."

"Out in the street," Brewster answered, "and he ain't tied to a wagon wheel this time!"

"Where do you stand in all this, Brewster?" Ewing demanded.

Brewster turned and slowly and carefully placed the whiskey and glass on the bar. "I stand between A-Chee and your friends," he said, sweeping his eyes across the men in the room, "if you got any."

"He's out there, Clint!" one of the men at the doorway announced. "In front of Tucker's store . . . and he's wearing iron!"

"I don't need any help taking a gut-eating Injun!" Ewing snapped. "You hear that, boys?"

"I'll see to it!" Brewster threatened.

"You-Wing!" A-Chee called out from the street. "You-Wing! I, A-Chee-Co-Tah-Tha, am back! Come, You-Wing!"

The men in the saloon filed out on the covered porch fronting the adobe building. Brewster leaned up against a porch post where he could watch the action and keep an eye on the men lined up on both sides of the doorway. Across the street curious but cautious townspeople peered out of windows and doorways. Down the street, safely out of the line of fire, A-Chee's

people waited patiently with their pack mules for the outcome.

Ewing, a confident smile on his sallow face, walked out into the street. "You don't learn so good, Injun," he drawled. "I thought I told you to stay out of a white man's town."

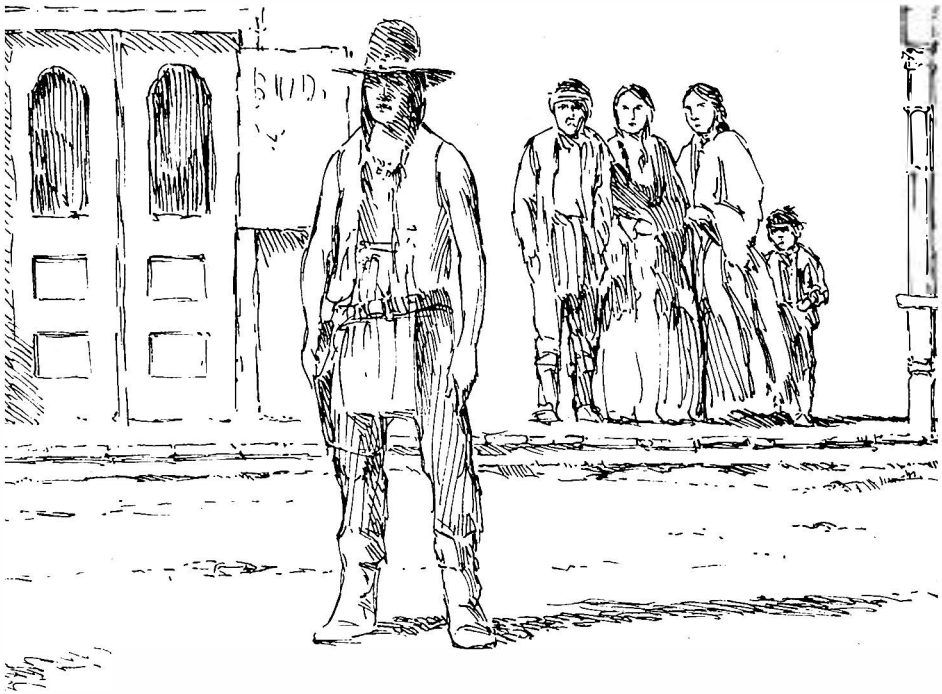
"No talk," A-Chee grunted, his hand poised above the old revolver cradled in a well-oiled holster tied down to his right leg. "Shoot!"

Ewing's smile widened into a leer. "Make your play, Injun," he sneered, "so's I can kill you and get it over with."

A-Chee waited, his eyes fixed on Ewing's face.

"Like you said, Ewing," Brewster broke in, "he don't learn so good. You'll have to make the first move. Less'n you're smarter than I think and call this whole thing off."

Ewing cursed. His hand flashed down to his sixgun . . . and there it was! . . . the muzzle of A-Chee's cocked revolver pointing at his belt buckle! Ewing's eyes widened with surprise and fear as he let his half-drawn weapon slide back into the holster. Ewing raised his hands to his waist, palms outward, as if to ward off the hot bullet he knew was coming. "No! No!" his lips



formed the soundless words.

A-Chee, his dark face an emotionless mask, stared hard at Ewing for a long moment, then, easing the hammer of his revolver down with his thumb, flipped the sixgun back into the holster. A murmur rustled through the crowd of onlookers when the Yaqui turned his back on Ewing and walked away. A-Chee motioned to his people on the corner and stepped into the doorway to the general store.

Brewster joined Ewing in the street. "Reckon we know who's the best man in these parts," he commented drily, staring after the young Indian. "He's a better man than you are with a gun and *that's* for certain."

Ewing reached up and brushed the perspiration from his forehead with a trembling hand.

"And he's a far better man than I am," Brewster admitted casually, " 'cause I would have killed you!"

Frank Brewster pulled the broad brim of his hat down over his eyes and sauntered across the dusty street to join his Yaqui friend haggling good-naturedly with George Tucker over the price of a copper kettle.

RAWHIDE REASONING

By Francis L. Fugate

Sandy MacCloud, of purest Scots ancestry, had been in Cottonwood Bend exactly one and one-half minutes when he walked into the Golden Eagle for a wee nip. He had spent the first minute in town determining that his precious fishing rod had weathered the stage ride from Abilene. In the remaining half minute, he learned that Greg Harrington of the Rafter-D was well known in Cottonwood Bend but that he had not met the stage. Sandy promptly located the town's only saloon.

After the ride from Abilene, Sandy was in sore need of a wee nip. Every bone in his body ached from the merciless pounding of the springless stage coach. In fact, bones were about all there were of his body to ache. He was six-foot-one and built on about the same proportions as the spoke of a Conestoga wagon wheel.

As Sandy approached a vacant space at the bar, the bartender

shoved a bottle toward him—a clear bottle, half-full of glistening red liquid. Beside the bottle he placed a small empty glass.

"Stranger, you're drinkin' with Curt Devlin," he announced cryptically. His lips drew a thin grim line under his graying mustache.

Surprised, Sandy eyed the bottle, shuddering inwardly at the raw, red look of the stuff. "Am I now?" He smiled as cheerfully as possible on top of the long, hot dusty ride from Abilene. "And I'll be most happy to join Mr. Devlin, whoever he is," he watched the bottle warily as if it could bite, "if you'll just set out a bottle of bonnie Heather Dew, or Loch Lomond, or even—"

"What's the matter with my whiskey?"

Sandy started at the sound of the husky grating voice close by his elbow. He turned to look into a pair of frowning red-rimmed, beady black eyes. Under the frowning eyes were a craggy red nose and a hard-cut mouth, chiseled from bloodless lips. The mouth was twisted into a snarl that sent sudden cold chasing up the middle of Sandy's back. Crazily the thought spun through his head: The doctor said he must not get excited.

"When you drink with Curt Devlin, you drink Curt Devlin's likker." A painfully hard finger flicked out and prodded Sandy's ribs. "Red-eye—a man's drink!" He rasped a mocking laugh and looked about the saloon. "There must be a man of some sort under them store togs." His rasping laughter was echoed by cowhands up and down the bar.

The bartender moved the glass conveniently close to Sandy's fingers and poured it brimming with the red liquid.

"But I never drink anything but Scotch," protested Sandy, quickly drawing his hand away from the glass. "My father was a Scotsman, my grand—"

The bartender leaned close to Sandy's ear. "I'd drink with Mr. Devlin, sir, if I was you." His voice was low and charged with hope. "I wish you would, sir." He cleared his throat apologetically and glanced apprehensively at the big mirror behind the bar. "Besides, we ain't got none of that other stuff you mentioned."

"No Scotch?" A saloon without Scotch whiskey was so sur-

prising that Sandy completely forgot the menace of the burning-eyed man at his elbow. "But what do people drink?"

"They drink red-eye and like it!" snarled Curt. He grabbed the bottle from the bar and tipped it to his mouth. It gurgled and when he set it back the level of the liquid was noticeably lower. He brought his face so close that Sandy could feel the heat of his nauseating whiskey-laden breath. "And you'll drink red-eye or my name ain't Curt Devlin." Weaving slightly he backed away, as if better to watch Sandy's full length. His glazed eyes were like a cat's watching a very small mouse.

"Mon, I—let's think it over." The Highland burr twisted Sandy's tongue as his heart quickened. He did not like the look of Curt's eyes—a wild look of hate. "I dinna ken your customs. I'm a stranger in—"

"Drink!" Devlin's voice cracked and a Colt seemed to materialize at his fingertips. Sandy found himself looking down the gloomy blackness of its .45 caliber barrel. "Or you'll dance to Curt Devlin's music."

There was scrambling as the population of the Golden Eagle shifted to clear the space behind Sandy. "Please," pleaded the bartender, "it's only one drink." He looked helplessly at Sandy and then at the already bullet-punctured painting on the wall behind him.

"Two drinks!" rasped Devlin. He reached the bottle again and a full inch disappeared. He smacked his lips noisily and held the bottle toward Sandy.

"Hoot mon, maybe with a wee drop of water I could manage." Fear was pushing at Sandy's heart until he could hardly make his voice recognizable through the thick Scotch accent. Devlin was swaying on his feet but the Colt remained as steady as a rock. A familiar pain caught in Sandy's chest. He couldn't breathe and he knew that in a moment he would faint away.

"No excitement, Sandy, and lots of fresh air," the doctor had said. "You'll have to go West where it's high and dry and healthy."

Bitterly, Sandy remembered the prescription. From his viewpoint the West might be high and dry but it was definitely

unhealthy. His life now seemed to be measured by the ticking of a watch instead of a calendar. Desperately he wished that he had looked for Greg Harrington instead of coming to the Golden Eagle.

Slowly he reached for the bottle, his stomach already burning from mere thought of the fiery liquor. The room was growing hazy and Curt Devlin was a vague swimming outline from which the Colt's barrel protruded.

"Drop that gun, Curt!"

The sudden voice was low but there was authority in its cold hard tone. The effect was immediate. Devlin relaxed his grip on the Colt and it clattered to the floor. He shook his head slowly as if trying to awaken himself. Then his glazed black eyes rolled white, his knees buckled and he grabbed at the edge of the bar—too late. He slumped to a sitting position, his head bobbing forward to his knees. The bottle crashed on the rough plank floor, spreading a puddle about his feet.

"Passed out," whispered the bartender thankfully. He leaned toward Sandy. "Stranger, if I was you I'd be out of Cottonwood Bend before he wakes up, 'cause he's liable to want another drink and then he'll remember you."

But Sandy was not listening. He had recognized the voice and was looking for Greg Harrington. Dimly he saw him holstering his gun as he stepped across Devlin's feet with contemptuous disregard. Sandy gripped the extended hand.

"Mon, ye were just in time." The pain subsided in Sandy's chest as he took his first deep breath in many minutes.

A smile wrinkled the rancher's bronzed face. "I was late meeting the stage but I figured I'd find you here."

"Next to a nip or so of Heather Dew along the way, you're the most welcome sight since I left Saint Louis." Sandy surveyed the meager stock of bottles behind the bar and shook his head sadly.

Greg broke into a ringing laugh. "You old son of a gun!" He slapped the Scotsman's shoulder. "You wait till we get to the ranch. I think there's an inch or so left in that bottle you gave me." He nodded meaningfully. "But when that's gone it's the last between here and Abilene."

"Kansas City," put in the bartender. "I tended bar in Abilene."

"*No!*" Sandy whispered unbelievingly. "No Heather Dew?" he asked, and the bartender shook his head.

"What in tarnation is this 'Leather Do' stuff?" asked one of the cowpunchers who were crowding back up to the bar.

"Heather Dew," corrected Sandy, feeling genuinely sorry for anyone so ignorant of life's pleasures. "Heather Dew is the finest Scotch whiskey—the very breath of the Highlands," he explained reverently. "Smoky, ripe, mellow, wonderful—" The only way to describe its flavor was with one's hands in the air, and he could see by the blankness of the cowhands' faces that they did not understand. "It's not such liquor as merely sets a man's stomach and mind on fire. It's a bonnie—"

"Until you start to walk," interrupted the bartender, "and then you stroll right out across the ceiling like a blooming fly."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed a wide-eyed waddy. He licked his lips thoughtfully and stared at the ceiling.

"If you was going to be around long," said the bartender, "I'd get a bottle so these saddle stiffs could just taste what some people drink."

"It tastes like hair tonic that has been used to put out a fire," said another puncher. "I had some in Kansas City once." He puckered his mouth ruefully.

Sandy disdained this outright blasphemy. He brightened at the thought of a supply of Heather Dew. "Order a case," he told the bartender eagerly. "I've come out here for my health," he explained, "and I'm going to be working for the Rafter-D." He looked around and was surprised to see Greg frowning.

The man who had been to Kansas City looked narrowly at Sandy. "I reckon you'll just be staying until Devlin goes on another spree," he said, jerking his thumb toward the inert body. "Unless you're mighty handy with a six-gun, which I don't see you wearing."

"I guess we'd better get your gear and head for the Rafter-D," said Greg quickly and Sandy followed him through the swinging doors of the Golden Eagle.

Greg slapped the reins to urge the horses that drew the buckboard across the flat toward distant mountains. "Doggone it, Sandy, can't you understand? You're welcome to stay at the Rafter-D as long as you please."

Sandy clutched the bouncing buckboard with one hand and held his fishing rod aloft with the other. "I've got to earn my bed and board," he said stubbornly.

"But I just can't give you a job like we talked about in Saint Louis." Greg shook his head sadly. "The cattle business is bad—what with big herds coming up from Texas and the homesteaders fencing all the water." He waved his hand toward the semiarid desert stretching off toward the white-capped mountains in the hazy blue distance. "We're on such short grass that I got to make every hand count. And besides, taking that load of buffalo hides off my hands will pay your keep for a long time. That was the dumbest trade I ever made."

Sandy shook his head. He had come West for his health but it was a poor Scotsman who couldn't earn his own way.

Suddenly Greg snapped his fingers. "You can cook! That's it—my cook left—"

The rancher's voice faded as Sandy again shook his head. "Nothing but fish and tea and maybe a little broth."

Greg glanced at the fishing rod in Sandy's hand. "You and your fishing! It's few fish you'll catch out here," he said. "The catfish in that creek in Cottonwood Bend is the only fishing short of those mountains, and that's a long ride."

Sandy looked at the sagebrush and cactus lining the faint dusty ruts that reached endlessly ahead, then at the mountains peeking over the horizon. They were a lot farther than the cool Ozark trout streams had been from Saint Louis. This was worse than being without Heather Dew.

"Working for that fur place in Saint Louis was sorta like a store—" Greg stopped. "Nope, that won't do. Being in Cottonwood Bend you'd be too close to Curt Devlin."

"Mon, why should he hold a grudge? And with him fuzzy, he'll nae remember."

"You don't know Devlin," said Greg. "He's just plain mean. When he's drunk he remembers everything that happened when

he was drunk before, and when he's sober he remembers what happened when he was sober—only he ain't sober much."

"Would he hae shot?" Something hot seemed to be crawling about in Sandy's stomach as he thought of the big Colt.

"Only at your feet," said Greg, as if that didn't really matter. "Curt's a great one for making the pilgrims dance." He frowned. "But the next time he goes on a bender he will remember and he'll think about it until he hates you." Greg glanced over his shoulder and quickly reined up. "Can you use a gun?" he asked matter-of-factly. His eyes had narrowed and his voice was tense.

Sandy jerked around and saw a distant cloud of dust on their back trail. Again he felt the pain burn his chest. Curt Devlin was coming, sure as sin! The crawling in Sandy's stomach turned into a churning sickness. He gripped the fishing rod until his fingers hurt. He remembered Devlin's hand flickering down and coming up with the Colt—faster than a hungry trout could strike a fly. If he had stayed in Saint Louis! It might have been only a year, like the doctor said—but he would have lived out that year. Sandy couldn't look away from the rapidly approaching dust.

The plume grew larger and two mules became distinguishable at its head. "It's the Dry River freight," said Greg. There was relief in his voice. "I should have known it would catch up with us."

Sandy was breathing again by the time the heavy freight wagon drew opposite their buckboard but his pounding heart was not back to normal. Swearing lustily, the mule skinner stopped in the swirling dust kicked up by the eight double-hitched mules.

"Cliff Bryson!" exclaimed Greg. "What are you doing at this end of the line? I thought you never got east of Dry River."

"I don't," said the teamster, removing his hat to mop his forehead, "except when my dadblamed mule skinners get gold fever and quit; then I have to drive double." He spat a brown stream over the side of the freight wagon and for three continuous minutes expounded on hired help in general and mule skinners in particular without uttering a complimentary word. Then he uncoiled a long black whip and swung it about his

head. "If you see a handy mule skinner, let me know."

Back and forth the whip curled and then cracked over the heads of the lead team so loudly that Sandy almost jumped out of the buckboard. *"Hi-i, ya-a-ah!"* Bryson uttered a long hoarse cry. The forward mules strained against the wagon's weight and slowly it started to move.

Greg Harrington waited for the freight wagon's dust to settle before he clucked the buckboard into motion. Sandy watched until the wagon disappeared around a distant mesa. "I could do that," he said.

Greg laughed at the impossibility of such a thing. "What do you know about mule skinning?"

"After all, I drove wagons to the wharf when we were loading furs for New Orleans and Cincinnati," said Sandy, somewhat injured.

"But that was one team."

Sandy waved the fishing rod. "It wouldn't be any unhandier than playing a trout in the brush."

Greg shrugged his shoulders, apparently in dismissal of the subject. "You can't do everything with a fishing rod, Sandy," he said. "You may be thin but not thin enough to hide behind that little pole when Curt Devlin starts painting his nose and slinging his gun."

But Sandy refused to dismiss the subject. He had an idea and he was going to try it—Curt Devlin or no Curt Devlin.

The next morning Sandy found an old buggy whip and a rawhide lariat in the bunkhouse. He labored industriously until noon when he called Greg to witness a demonstration. He had arranged oversized wooden guides along the whip, carefully whittled and polished, and had replaited and waxed the lariat into along spindling streamer. It was not unlike a giant fly rod, but in place of a leader and a hook he had attached a thin strip of rawhide.

"You see," Sandy explained, "Mr. Bryson's whip was so long that he could only crack it over the lead mules. They had all the work of starting the wagon." He coiled the thin rawhide in his left hand and took the buggy whip in his right. "Watch."

With his elbow tight against his side, he twitched the buggy

whip back overhead by a deft movement of his wrist and unloosed a coil of rawhide as he brought it forward and jerked back. Greg jumped at the sharp crack and horses nickered and reared in the corral. Back and forth the whip swung, on each forward trip picking up more line from Sandy's left hand. Four times in rapid succession it cracked, as if over the heads of four successvie teams.

"Well, I'll be jumped up and grasshopper pecked!" exclaimed Greg.

The newfangled whip earned Sandy MacCloud a seat atop a freight wagon without difficulty. At both the Cottonwood Bend and Dry River terminals of the Bryson Freight and Stage Line astonished spectators gathered to watch him start an eight-horse team, and more than one experienced mule skinner wrapped a stinging whipcracker about his face attempting to imitate the act with his own blacksnake.

Sandy was no longer a pilgrim and it had been a long time since he felt the pain in his chest. He forgot the menace of Curt Devlin who was on a remarkable period of sobriety, exhibiting no sign of enmity as he worked at various odd jobs about Cottonwood Bend.

Sandy spent most of his spare time trying to get the few catfish in Cottonwood Creek to act like Brown Trout, or Loch Leven Trout, as he called them. By using barbless hooks and releasing the fish, he managed to conserve the stream's stock. However the few other fishermen of Cottonwood Bend complained bitterly that the fish would now have nothing to do with them but waited to be caught by Sandy MacCloud on his long wispy fly rod.

One blistering August afternoon Sandy spent the last twenty miles into Cottonwood Bend solacing himself that he was nearing the little grove of trees and the limpid pool where Bonnie Jo—Scottish for Pretty Sweetheart—stayed. Bonnie Jo was a full eight pounds and the best fighter of them all. She seemed to allow herself to be hooked because she enjoyed the battle with Sandy. Smart, too—enough to whet any angler's anticipation.

As if this prospect were not sufficient pleasure, the bartender from the Golden Eagle met the freight, waving a bottle

in his hand. The Heather Dew has come at last! Sandy fingered the familiar ribbed glass of the brown bottle. He itched to open it on the spot but decided that first must come the tussle with Bonnie Jo. Joyfully he took his fly rod and headed around the stable toward the creek with his bottle under his arm.

Sandy heard a voice behind him. He turned and saw Curt Devlin. The joy dissolved into fear and his heart seemed to swell and burst in his throat. Curt was carrying a bottle under his arm.

"I've been wantin' to see you in action with that funny fishin' pole of you'n for a long time." Curt hurried to catch up and fell into step beside Sandy. There was no animosity in his voice or face, in spite of the bottle and the ever-present Colt.

Sandy relaxed. Maybe he had changed since he had been sober for so long, even if Greg Harrington did insist that Curt would never change. Sandy continued toward the pool and Curt walked beside him.

When they arrived at the pool Sandy set the precious bottle of Heather Dew in a safe place, well back from the water. He put the sections of his long rod together, attached the reel and threaded the line through the guides. Carefully he surveyed the insects on the surface of the water and selected a fly from a little tin box—a nymph which he had tied himself. He had never tried it before. He heard a popping sound behind him and turned to see Curt sniffing the open quart of red liquor.

"You just go ahead," Curt invited. "I'll just sit here comfortable like and watch how you do it." He sat down on a flat rock and tipped the bottle to his mouth.

Cold perspiration seeped out of Sandy's forehead and ran down into his eyes. He remembered Greg's warning and shuddered. But Curt seemed friendly enough.

Resolutely Sandy turned back to the pool, fighting the uneasy fear within himself. He stripped several loops of line from his reel and started to back cast. The line sighed through the air and he paused until he felt the live line almost straightening out behind him. He brought the long limber rod forward, allowing more line to slip from his fingers and feed through the guides. He knew exactly where Bonnie Joe would be: straight

across the pool and far under the big rock ledge. It was a difficult cast. He didn't let the line touch the water the first time; it wasn't far enough yet. Another back cast and more line whispered out across the pool directly at the rock. But still not far enough. Sandy smiled. This time would do it. Smoothly he whipped the rod back just before the line could settle to the water.

"Say, ain't I seen you before—some place besides Cottonwood Bend?"

Sandy froze at the sudden sound of Curt's husky voice. His whole body tingled. He stopped his arm and the line collapsed in a tangle about him. He looked around to see Curt observing him intently. His black eyes were brighter now and he frowned as if he were trying to remember.

"No. N-Nae, I-I dinna think so." Sandy's voice came out in a shaky squeak.

Curt's eyes narrowed. He took another drink and set the bottle down beside him. "How 'bout Abilene?" he demanded.

"Nae," protested Sandy, "couldna be." He busied himself with untangling the line. It would be best to leave now. Curt was getting drunk and he was getting mean, just like Greg had said he would. He hadn't changed.

Hastily Sandy coiled the line. With an effort he kept his gaze on the ledge across the pool. He almost believed he saw Bonnie Jo's bewhiskered head, looking to see why he was taking so long. He could feel Curt's eyes burning into his back. The conviction grew that he should leave immediately—while he had time. He leaned over to loosen the fishhook from a tangle of brush and saw Curt taking another drink. His nose was red and his eyes glistened black and beady. His lips were cruel and bloodless as he smacked them in a wiping motion against the back of his hand.

Sandy shuddered. Maybe Mr. Bryson would let him drive the west run out of Dry River. He had to get away from Curt Devlin. Quickly he began to reel his line. He was about to remove his leader when he changed his mind. He remembered the first two weeks of terror—of waiting and watching for Curt Devlin to get drunk. Dry River was only forty miles away; he

wouldn't be safe even there. And besides, there was no fishing in Dry River. There was a little splash across the pool, as though Bonnie Jo understood in some mysterious way and had broken water to applaud his decision.

Sandy's throat was dry and aching as he again stripped line from the reel. He had decided to wait for a showdown. He was stronger now and he might have a chance if Curt did not go for his gun. Sandy's hands trembled as he prepared for another cast toward Bonnie Jo. Blood pounded in his ears, drowning the rippling of the stream. He could hardly keep from looking toward the rock on which Curt sat.

"By cripes, I remember!"

Sandy wanted to run but it was too late. He dropped the rod and turned. Curt was on his feet, his face set in a horrible wide-eyed leer.

"This time you drink with Curt Devlin!" Curt took a step forward, holding out the bottle of redeye.

Sandy's knees went rubbery and it was suddenly hard to breathe. He was cornered with Curt Devlin on a rocky neck of land—no place to run and not a chance of Greg Harrington coming to his rescue this time. Fear boiled in his stomach and then he saw his bottle of Heather Dew, warm and friendly, glistening in the sunlight.

"S-sur-r-re, Mr. Devlin." He started for the Scotch. "I'll drink with you, Mr. Devlin."

"Keep away from that bottle!" Curt's voice snapped out like a whip. Cat-like, he moved between Sandy and the brown bottle. "You'll drink redeye."

"Nae," said Sandy stubbornly, backing away.

Blinding pain exploded in his face as Curt's right hand licked out to slap him. Sandy tasted blood and his tongue hurt from biting it. Before he could duck, the back of the hard knobby hand caught the other side of his face.

"Drink!" snarled Curt. "Drink, damn you!"

Sandy shook his head to clear the swimming haziness from before his eyes. "I'll nae do it," he insisted.

This time the hand was knotted into a fist and Sandy went to his hands and knees. His head felt as if it had been torn from

his shoulders. Dimly he saw Curt set the bottle of redeye down and come toward him. He cringed as the heavy boot caught his ribs, racking his body with pain. He rolled on his back, gasping for breath.

Curt straddled him and Sandy saw a great hairy fist descending. He shut his eyes and his head was driven against the rocks. The world turned spotted red, then glistening gray, then cleared. Desperately Sandy tried to move his arms but they were pinned under Curt's knees. The weight of his body paralyzed Sandy's threshing legs. Helplessly the Scotsman saw the fist cocked again. He extended his hand toward the bottle of redeye but couldn't reach it. Curt Devlin laughed drunkenly.

"Ready to drink with Curt now, eh?" He lurched to his feet.

Painfully Sandy raised to a sitting position. His lips were puffing, his nose was bleeding and his left eye was closing. He couldn't speak for the swelling of his tongue. He got to his knees. Finally he stood.

Curt had the bottle. He laughed—a crazed, half-animal sound. "And you'll say, 'Please, Mr. Devlin, can I have a drink?' "

Sandy mouthed his swelling tongue and wondered if he would be able to speak. He no longer dreaded the red whiskey. With so much pain in his body he would never feel it. He started toward Curt and then stopped in unbelieving horror as he saw Devlin's foot draw back and deliberately kick the Heather Dew. The bottle sailed through the air and crashed in front of Sandy.

The smoky, heady flavor boiled up around him and with it came a blinding rage. His Heather Dew was gone—the drink for which he had waited long dry months—destroyed by Curt Devlin. In a fit of unseeing rage he grabbed a rock and hurled it wildly. It sailed harmlessly past Curt and splashed in the creek.

Curt's eyes became almost invisible and his face turned crimson. The Colt snapped into his hand.

"Now you've done it!" he rasped. "Get down on your hands and knees." He set the redeye in front of him. "You'll crawl to this bottle." He motioned back over his shoulder. "And then you're going to crawl all the way to the Golden Eagle and dance for Curt Devlin."

The pungent smell of the spilled Scotch whiskey fed the

anger in Sandy's heart, but it was a futile flame in the face of the Colt. The pain left his body and so did the fear. There was only trembling rage as he dropped to his knees. Then he felt the fly rod beneath his hand.

Desperately he gripped it in his right hand. With his left he snatched for the line and jumped to his feet. He didn't have time to see how the line laid in his hand. Curt was standing, feet apart, slack-jawed with surprise at Sandy's sudden movement.

Pinning his gaze to the deadly Colt, Sandy brought the rod tip forward, loosing some line from his left hand. No time for a false cast. Curt's finger might tighten in the trigger at any moment. This was his only hope, one thin chance to catch the Colt with the curling leader or with the tiny hook.

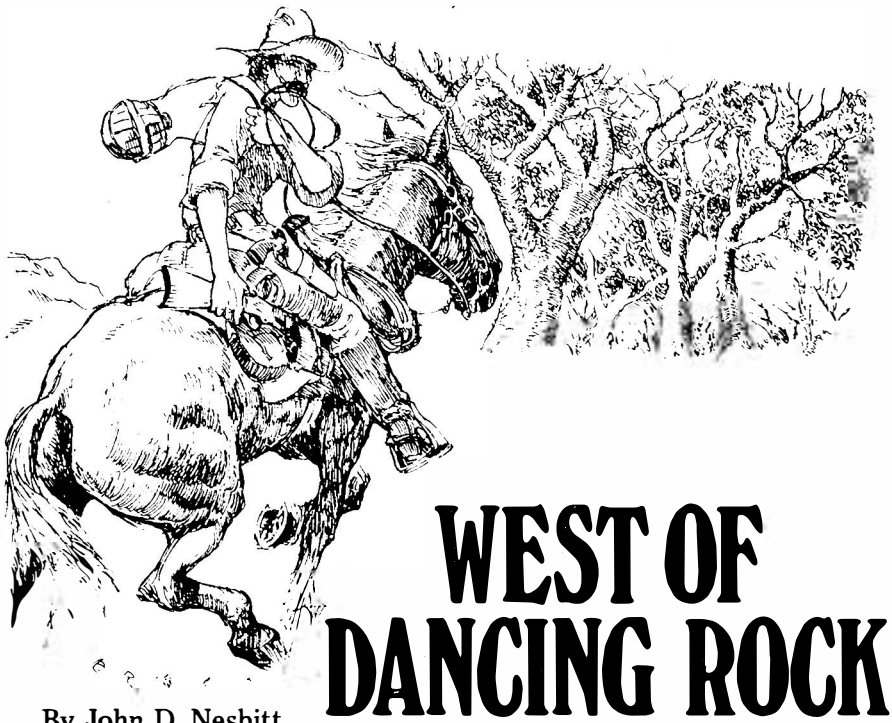
A swelling pain sealed Sandy's throat. There was too much line in the air; the cast was going over. He jerked the rod tip down and grabbed at the rod with his left hand. With a sudden two-handed jerk he started to back cast. It was like setting the hook against the lightning strike of a mammoth Rainbow. He cringed. Would the leader hold? Would the rod's slender tip break? The Colt roared an ear-shattering blast, but it was sailing back over Sandy's head.

"Why, you—" Curt bellowed. He lumbered toward Sandy.

Sandy prayed the heavy gun would leave the line on the back cast. He clutched frantically with his left hand to shorten the line. The pole lightened as the leader snaked forward and the pronged fly caught Curt squarely in the middle of the forehead. He stopped and screamed, grabbing at the welling red gash. Again Sandy whipped the rod back and forward. Now the line was under control. This time the hook darted with deadly accuracy to Curt's right ear. Sandy made a savage, ripping set that left the ear hanging in two pieces.

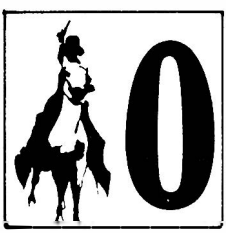
"No!" screamed Curt, cowering and sheltering his head with both hands to try to keep away from the flicking fishhook. "Please, no!"

"Turn around," Sandy commanded, "and start for the Golden Eagle." He let the hook nick the back of Curt's hand. I guess it's Sandy MacCloud's music that there'll be dancing to," he said, "and ye'll be learning the Highland Fling."



WEST OF DANCING ROCK

By John D. Nesbitt



ut on a spine of the first foothill ridge a man could see how the town got its name. There, strung along the creek as it turned around the huge rock, lay the town. The simmering heat rose from the valley floor, and long before the town was there men must have looked down and imagined the rock was dancing in the summer heat. Close to the top of that ridge I rested my horse and took the first stingy swallow of water—I was just into the foothills and had a whole mountain range to cross. And in a dry year like this one, many of the old places might have nothing more than cracked mud. There would be a full moon and I could travel some in the cool of night.

As I paused there looking back at the town, watching it over the hump of my canteen as I poured a trickle down my throat, I heard the first shot. At almost exactly the same time there was a *thwang!* between my hand and my lips, and the canteen flew away. It sounded like a Winchester, but I didn't give a good God-

damn at that point what kind of a rifle it was. I kicked that buckskin into a run for the nearest clump of oaks.

A hundred yards from the oaks I had my second canteen slung over my shoulder and the reins in my teeth. I was pulling my Winchester from the bucket as I heard the second shot and felt the bullet slam into my horse. His whole body took the shock and I felt it myself up to my shoulders. Down we went and I was glad I'd shucked my rifle. I kicked free from the stirrups, spit out the reins and holding the gun up out of the dirt, rolled into a patch of manzanita.

From where I lay the skyline was up and to the left, and the valley was down on the right. Since the two shots everything was deathly still and silent and dry and hazy. Way off to the right, wheeling in slow and patient circles above the valley floor, were the buzzards. Sometimes I saw four and sometimes five. Tomorrow morning, or perhaps even late this afternoon, they would start on my horse. After that it would be something—or somebody—else. I gave into a drink of water, sloshed it around my mouth and wetted my lips, and swallowed it with a gulp that I thought could be heard from the top of the ledge.

At some point I slept. For how long I don't know, but I awoke with a jerk. I was soaked with sweat and sore, and from the sun I figured it was after five. The first buzzard had landed on my horse; maybe it was the flap of wings or the presence of another creature that woke me up. I scoured the rocks again, and again saw nothing. Down on the valley floor I saw a wagon threading its way north. Two more buzzards landed on my horse and I took advantage of the distraction to move into better shade. Again I studied the ledge and I judged the distance to be a couple of hundred yards. Whoever the bastard was, he was a good shot, and he wanted me—or someone who looked like me—dead.

I had plenty of time to think, but in the next three hours till sundown I couldn't dredge a single name or face. Then, as the sun was slipping behind the mountains and the shadows were stretching down from the rim, a face from far out of the past loomed up in my memory. It had been six years ago, and maybe two months later in the year. I was riding the grub line,

between outfits, when I rode down a quiet little draw. The autumn winds were getting nippy and I had my right hand inside my sheepskin coat. When my horse's ears came up my hand came out, and I shucked my Winchester. Rifle across my saddle, I rode into a very unwelcome little scene.

What happened I was only able to put together later. One man was on his horse, keeping the rope taut on a steer's heels. A second man was leaning over a fire, heating up a branding iron, and the third man was just getting off his horse. I didn't like the lay of the land and I didn't really care whose steer they were branding. Mostly I just wished I'd ridden down a different draw, but it was too late for that now. The man sitting his horse fired first and I emptied his saddle. The one at the fire drew and my shot spun him sprawled across the fire. The third man, half-dismounted as he was, re-mounted his horse and came straight at me. As fast as it all happened, I only had time to bring my rifle butt around and smash him in the mouth. That emptied his saddle and I lit a shuck out of there. I heard a whole gang of shots but I figured they were from the second guy's gunbelt as he lay in the fire. I was sorry it had to happen and I was sorry about that steer still there all hogtied and helpless, but they didn't give me any chance. For months afterwards I could see that man's face as he raced head-on into my rifle butt and I wondered if I would recognize that face again, busted up as it had to be. And now, lying in the manzanita out on that hillside, I was pretty damn sure that Busted Face would recognize me without fail. And from a distance.

How long had he followed me? Certainly not for long or I would have known it. I always traveled alone, kept to cover, built no fires that could be seen, left no trail that was easy to follow and stayed in no place long enough to be known well. Not that I was on the run--caution had just become a way of life, and out of second nature I always kept an eye on my backtrail. And now someone had gotten out on the trail ahead of me and had gotten me in his sights twice in less than a minute.

It has always struck me funny how a man can see something, register it and think no more about it for years. Then at some unexpected moment the scene clicks, like the well-oiled cylin-

der of a six-shooter, and for the first time it all makes sense. There was a man up there in the rocks who wanted to make buzzard meat of me, and there had been a man branding a steer six years earlier. And then there was the man in Wichita, only two years earlier, a man I'd never given a second thought to until right now. I had been dusting my hocks down the main drag of Wichita one August afternoon, thinking to cut the dust in my throat and toss away some of my wages at monté. I had the feeling of being watched, and as I glanced out to one side I saw a man standing behind a horse. Just as I looked his hat lowered and all I saw was the crown of a dusty sombrero and a pair of boots. The man was pulling on the saddle cinch on a *grulla* mare and it seemed that he had pulled the mare sideways. But seeing no gun barrel resting over the saddle I figured whatever the guy was up to was his business.

I never saw his face that day, but I would have bet anything that evening on the hillside that below that dusty sombrero had been a busted-up face, and that the same busted face had recently been squinting down the barrel of a Winchester at me. Now I had from sundown to sunup to think about that face and to wonder how many times it had looked on me. Had he first cut my trail in Wichita? in Laredo before that? or Durango? or Laramie? I knew that I had a decent chance to slip down the foothills at dark and hoof it into Dancing Rock, maybe to ask around about Busted Face and make my way east back to Santa Fe. But he would always be there, either behind or ahead, and I would have no rest. No, here I would spend the night, and come daybreak I would see how the chips fell. I'd been rimrocked today and I didn't feel like living every day of my life waiting for it to happen again.

The sun went down; dark came. Then the stars came out and the moon rose. The moon, which I had earlier hoped to travel by, now lit up the hillside where I would spend the next several hours. I thought I would take advantage of the light and move up and around the hillside. Even if he saw me, which was not very likely, he probably wouldn't waste powder and lead and risk giving away his position. So I took my rifle and canteen and as quietly as possible picked my way through the brush and

rocks. After about half an hour I was feeling loosened up and warm. The working of my muscles had burned off some of my tension and I was relaxed but alert. Pausing to take a blow and get my bearings, I stood facing towards where I expected my enemy to be holed up. I figured I was halfway around the hill and about a third of the way up. So I was most likely, from his point of view, up and away to the left from where my horse was.

As I was locating myself, I sensed something back down the hill from where I'd just come. I crouched quickly behind a rock, held my breath and silently laid my rifle barrel over the rock. About forty yards down the hill a big buck stepped into my sight and paused. I couldn't count his antlers in the moonlight but I could see he had a good-sized rack. His form was silhouetted pretty neatly in the silvery night so I let my breath out and dropped him with one shot.

A shot like that, on a still, clear night in the mountains, is enough to make anybody sit up and wonder. I figured Busted Face was getting mighty curious, and I guess I smiled. Quickly I worked my way down the hill to the fallen buck and stood back as he kicked his last few kicks. I've always felt that a good clean neck shot spoils the least meat and messes up the least bones, but this time in the imperfect light I wanted a sure kill, so I had put one through the brisket. Besides, I had use for that trophy head. It had a large six-point rack, as I now saw.

Working swiftly, I gutted and trimmed the carcass. He was a good-sized buck for the foothills and it took about all I had to get him hoisted. With a rawhide thong I tied his hocks together and strung him up in a little oak tree that I reckoned was down the hill enough to be out of Busted Face's line of vision. I propped the cavity open with a small branch, to allow for cooling. Then I caped out the neck and shoulders and cut off the head right behind the ears. With the head and cape of skin I worked my way halfway back to where my horse was and laid my bait. I found a cutbank about three feet tall and chose a spot where there was a boulder just up the hill from the ledge. On the ledge there I built a foundation of small rocks and set the head in solidly with the antlers sticking up. I laid the cape

out and pegged it down with other small rocks, just for ballast.

With a grim smile I imagined my enemy scanning the hillside at sunrise. Down the hill and a little to his left, he would see the antlers behind a rock. Many a hunter has had a blue jay point out a deer for him, and many another hunter has had a deer point out a man. And since deer usually prefer to stand behind cover and look downhill, Busted Face would figure that the deer might be watching me. He might also be interested in catching a look at the deer itself, seeing how big it was, or imagining how nice of a target it would make. He might even wonder why it was still out feeding in the morning when there had been a full moon. Anyway, the son of a bitch had plenty to keep an eye on and think about.

Next I went back to my horse and got my rope and started to climb up the hill on the other side from where I had first gone. Busted Face would be interested in the hill down on his left and I wanted to be up and to his right.

When the sun rose over the mountains on the other side of the valley, I was cold and stiff. I had slept sitting up, with my toes against the trunk of a big manzanita bush and my back against a rock. The rifle barrel was cold, the dried deer blood on my hands felt cold, and the water in my canteen tasted cold. I held a mouthful for a long time, then spit it on my right hand. I wiped the hand clean on my shirt and continued to work the hand. By the time the sun had cleared the far-off mountains, my hand was warm enough to do the work I had in mind for it.

The first landmark I picked out was Dancing Rock, cold and stark and still on the valley floor. Next I located my fallen horse, then the buck antlers. I searched where I expected my man to be, but I found nothing. I thought that maybe he had sidehilled in the night and I doubted that it would have been to the left. Before long I saw what at first I took to be a deer but what turned out to be a horse. A *grulla* horse. It was cropping grass almost directly below me. The hill fell away pretty sharply from where I now sat and it leveled out where the horse was. Just before it fell away again there was a clump of rocks and that was where I figured my hunter had picked his stand. I kept my eye on those rocks, glancing away from time to time to

see if the horse would point out the man for me.

By and by I heard a little rattling around in those rocks and the horse perked up his ears. Suddenly a blanket and a saddle were thrown into a clearing in the rocks, so I figured my man had gotten up and was getting situated in his perch. There was a big rock right behind him blocking my view, but pretty soon I saw a boot stick out on the left side. For the longest time the boot sat there. Occasionally it looked like it twitched or moved but I couldn't be sure. It did look, though, like he'd settled himself pretty comfortably for the morning hunt. I was tempted as all hell to shoot at his boot and I sighted in on it a dozen times. But it was an awfully small target at fifty yards and downhill. I figured if I waited, sooner or later something would bring him into my sights.

About an hour later, as I was starting to get mighty itchy and jumpy, a coyote came skulking down across the hill. He was heading straight for the buck antlers. I knew I couldn't run the bluff any longer, and all of a sudden I had me a hunch. The boot pulled out of view and I knew that Busted Face was looking sharp downhill. So I threw my Winchester up to my shoulder and fired half a dozen quick shots down into that bunch of boulders. I hoped like hell for one lucky ricochet shot to give me the edge I needed, and I guess I got it. I saw both legs kick out beyond the rock and then they both pulled back in. I sat back and considered. Now I had to go into that rattler's nest for a showdown. And the sooner the better, before he got to better cover. As long as I was up behind him I had the drop on him and I had to work fast.

I tied my rope around the base of the manzanita bush and dropped the rest over the edge. It was a forty-foot rope and the coils were stiff, so the end dangled about twenty or thirty feet from the little flat where his horse was. With the rope stretched out I would only have to drop about twenty feet. If he didn't plug me while I hung there I should have a good chance. I remembered how back home we used to tie a potato on a string and get it swinging from a tree branch for target practice. Bullets would knock little bits of potato all over hell. And now, as I leaned my Winchester against the rock, loosened the thong

on my Colt and started to let myself down hand over hand, I felt as helpless as one of those potatoes. But it was too far to jump all the way.

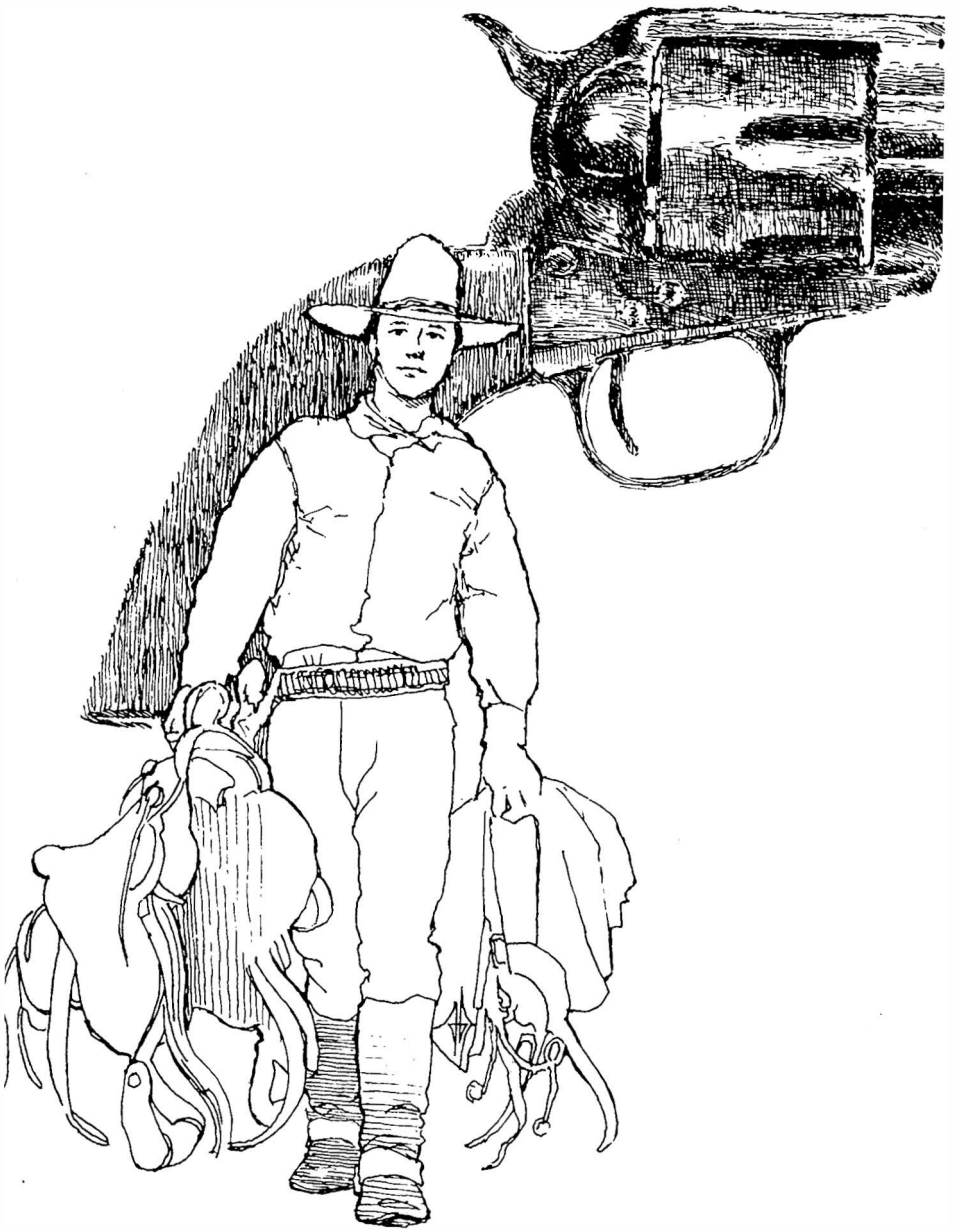
I had to start with my back to him, but as soon as I got over the edge I worked around to where my back was to the cliff and I was facing the nest of rocks. I went down quickly, burning my hands and straining my muscles. My feet were already below the end of the rope when he opened fire on me. Chips of rock and a spray of dirt bit into the back of my neck and he was gone. I pushed off from the cliff with my feet, flung the rope aside and hit the ground with a jolt. As I was coming to my feet he came around the other side of the rock, just as I expected, and it took him an instant to locate me. By then I had palmed my Colt, and at a distance of twenty yards I put a bullet through his chest. I stepped quickly to the left and sent another bullet through him. His flailing arms threw his rifle off to the side and he crumpled to the ground. When I got over to him his life was fading fast. He cursed me slowly, in half sounds.

"Gud . . . dim . . . yu' . . . dirt . . . ." Blood was frothing through his clenched teeth and strained lips. I must have hit a lung.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded.

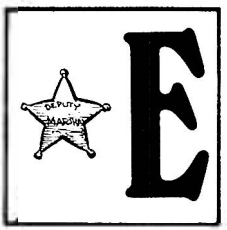
"Yu' . . . dirt . . . son . . . uv . . . bitch . . . ." And the last light flickered in his eyes. The grizzled features relaxed and I recognized the same ugly face that I had smashed that day with my rifle butt. His right cheekbone was lumpy and his upper lip had been split and scarred into a snarl. Now it was all over, I told myself, and I didn't really even want to know his name. I would bury his body under rocks to keep the coyotes away. Any man deserved that. I would take only his horse, since that was all he had taken from me.

When I had buried him well, and gathered my rope and my rifle and my saddle and my venison, I rode the *grulla* mare back into Dancing Rock. That night, after I had traded most of the venison for jerky, cartridges and a new canteen, I camped upstream from the town and roasted a hunk of venison for dinner. Tomorrow I would once again head west out of Dancing Rock and across the mountains.



THE DEPUTY

By Marc Simmons



Every boy growing up must worry sometime or another whether he's got the stuff in him to make a man. I guess I was no different in this way. With me, though, the fear may have run a little deeper, for the road was harder and mostly I had to look to myself for answers instead of to some older fellow who had been through it himself. I'm not complaining, mind you! Because I met rough going, I figure I'm stronger for it today. Besides, I got the right breaks when they really counted.

Most of what happened to me in those early years is not fixed too clearly in my memory. It all seems pretty shadowy and remote now—all, that is, except the events of the summer of 1899. I easily remember how with the first peep of sunup every morning I'd saddle my Chico horse and, taking Dad's old .45, head for the dump a mile and a half south of town. That was the one thing that had real meaning for me then—going out in the crisp morning light by myself and blasting away at the litter of old bottles and cans.

Of course, my blasting didn't go on very long, being as I

carried only half a dozen shells with me. I took a box a week as part of my wages from Mr. Pike but I'd make them last as long as I could, by sticking in only one live one and the rest empties. Next I'd give the cylinder a good spin and that way I couldn't tell when that live shell would come around. So I aimed as if every shot would count. Old Pete Taylor used to come out to the dump some of those mornings and give me all kinds of good pointers about drawing and balance of the gun and such. But that was before he got himself killed, which really tore me up bad.

After my morning wake-up with the .45 I'd usually ride Chico around the few little arroyos, hoping to spot a stray cottontail. Then the two of us would go sit on the little rise that stood up like a round, treeless island right smack there in the middle of the San Augustine Plains. I called it Hamilton Island, naming it after myself, which I figured was all right. Nobody else seemed to notice it really. I guess because it wasn't much of an island as things go. But it sure was a keen place for spotting what was happening in the country roundabouts.

Off to the north a few hops was our town of San Augustine Springs and way beyond that, the ragged edge of the Detail Mountains, marking the end of the plains up that way. The Magdalenas were around to the right where the sun had to climb over them every morning. They sheltered the new railhead at Magdalena town with its railroad and fancy stores and Saturday night wingdings that was pulling all the business off the plains and turning San Augustine Springs into a ghost. The Black Range which sloped on westward to the Mogollon Rim just about filled up the rest of the horizon and left us an' the big ranches sitting in a grassy bowl a hundred miles long and half again as wide. More'n once I'd heard cowmen around town allow that here was the best stretch of range in the whole New Mexico Territory.

A time or two I'd brought Penny Pike up to my island when the moon was riding high. You can't say I was really courtin' her for she insisted on treating me like a kid brother even though I was better'n a year older'n her. We'd just rest there on

our horses and study the country turned silver under the moonglow and talk about things that really didn't mean too much. I couldn't blame Penny for the way she acted towards me 'cause I sure wasn't much when it came to muscles and good looks.

My father died before I was born and the only thing I had from him was the Colt .45 Peacemaker and the name of Bertram Hamilton. Everything else I guess I got from my mother, including a puny constitution. It was because she was ailing all the time that drove her to take a St. Louis doctor's advice and pack me up and light out for New Mexico. The dry air was a good tonic all right but she'd come too late for it to really take hold. I was just a sprout of twelve when they buried her in the churchyard at the end of Central Street.

Mr. and Mrs. Pike more or less took me in. I helped them out in their mercantile store which made up for my keep and caught odd jobs around town when I could. When I was sixteen Mr. Pike figured I was doing enough to draw a little salary to boot and that's how come I got the shells for Dad's old gun.

What led up to that first day of August, 1899 really started with Pete Taylor. Old Pete was *alguacil* of San Augustine Springs. That meant he was the constable which was all the little one-horse towns down in the southern part of the Territory could afford in those days.

Whenever I had times off, I'd taken to loafing around the low adobe building that served as jail and office. Sometimes when I felt like it, I'd sweep the place good or haul the ashes out of the potbelly stove where Pete kept a sooty coffeepot working. Evenings the two of us would drag chairs outside and, tilted back against the mud wall, we'd watch the sun drop behind the Black Range and listen for the first oties to start barking and yowling. 'Bout then was when old Pete could be counted on to really open up with the windies. He'd talk on and on about how he'd been in all kinds of tight scrapes and gunfights in his young days back in the Kansas cowtowns. I naturally didn't believe all the guff he put out. I figured that if he had really been so all-fired great as he let on, then he wouldn't have ended up with this third-rate job of *alguacil* in our town. But then times was changing. Everybody said so. And anyway he was sure first-rate

when it came to spinning a yarn, whether it had any truth to it or not.

But a certain happening the last week of June caused me to change my notions about Pete Taylor and his tales. It was getting on close to midafternoon. I'd finished up early helping Mr. Pike in the store and I was just hanging around out front soaking up some sun. Directly I saw this rider, all dusty, turn into Central Street from the Magdalena Road. He went on past, not paying any attention to me, and pulled up in front of Bud Tanner's Gold Dollar.

If I'd been anywhere else that day but the front porch of Pike's I'd have probably missed that fellow and he would've wet his whistle and been on his way to the border. But I was there, and I sure as heck recognized his face being I'd seen it before on a reward dodger tacked up in Pete's office. Soon as he disappeared through the batwings of Tanner's place I sprinted for the jail to give Pete the word. Ten minutes later our *alguacil,* calm as you please, walked into the Gold Dollar and up to this fellow hunkered over the bar.

"Keep your hands where I can see 'em, Harlow." That was all Pete said, but you knew he meant it. Even so this Harlow would've jerked around but for the feel of cold steel prodding him in the back. I was watching from the door and saw the whole thing. So did Ollie Jackson, the telegraph operator, and Moon Buchanan, our blacksmith, and a bunch of others there at the time. In my hand I was still carrying the dodger we'd picked up listing this gent as a train robber and gunman out of the Dakotas. The look he gave me as Pete led him out sent a shiver down my back. I didn't breathe easy until the cell door clanked between us.

The big surprise for me though was the way the old man had acted. I began looking back at some of the stories he had told and seeing them in a new light. One thing was certain—when Pete got going, he was all business.

He took me aside then and let me know what was on his mind. "I'll have to take this fellow over to the U.S. Marshal in Magdalena tomorrow, Bert. If I push it we can be there before noon. Now, I figure I'm going to need my rest 'cause I'm not as

spry as I used to be." I nodded and held my breath, suspecting what he was leading up to. "So suppose I just deputize you to sit up with this bird and make sure he doesn't fly the coop."

There was plenty around town with a head on their shoulders that would have been an easy match for this job, and it should've made me wonder why Pete'd pick a scrawny seventeen-year-old kid that was slow getting his full growth. Right then I was so stirred up at the chance he was offering me that I didn't stop to puzzle it out. I should have, I guess, and maybe I would have known then what I came to see later. Old Pete must have been a boy himself once, hard as that was to imagine. He had an inkling of what runs through a young button's mind and how much a little push or pat on the back could mean. Especially to one that's had to do his growing on his own.

I had had my heart set on cowboying and Pete knew it. Every time a rancher or foreman would hit town to pick up a few supplies he didn't feel like riding to Magdalena for, I'd brace him for a job. There was a lot of 'em my age and younger holding down a man's place out on the plains and beyond. I could start as a nighthawk or even cook's louse, I told them, I just wanted to be where the action was and get a chance to learn the tricks of the cow trade.

They'd look me over, maybe, seeing my bones that stuck out and a red nose that was always peeling 'cause it wouldn't tan and then, most likely, they'd rub their jaws and peer off into space. But their answers were always the same. And while some of 'em tried to be polite about it, a good many got kinda gruff like I hadn't oughta' been wasting their time with such a loco proposition. Every stone wall I ran against took a little bit out of me. That's why Pete's wanting to make me his deputy really meant something.

With a badge pinned on my shirt-front I was about the proudest fellow on this side of the Rio Grande. *Alguacil de Asistencia* it read at the top and Deputy Constable below. In the Territory, everything was written in both languages that way.

I got very careful instructions on what to do that night, but anybody with half the eyes I had could've seen there really wasn't much to the job. Harlow was locked in tight as could be

and wasn't going nowhere 'til morning. But I paid mighty close attention when Pete told me how to sit and hold the shotgun I was given and to keep the coal oil lamp turned up and not to doze and to raise a ruction if any monkey business got started.

I know that was the longest night I ever passed. The later it got the more I tensed up, so once when a shutter banged I came about two feet out of the chair. The lamplight made little shadows dance on the wall and across the faces of the outlaws whose posters were tacked up there. Nothing but long snores rolled from the cell but that didn't stop me speculating on what I'd do if Harlow should suddenly come bustin' out of there. Just the thought of it set the butterflies to flopping in my stomach. I finally decided I'd probably freeze up and not even be able to pull the gun around in line. What had been gnawing at me for a long time finally came to the surface. I was yellow clear through. Maybe even it had gotten written across my face so that folks could tell by just looking. This kind of thinking really put me in a bad way so for the last few hours I just sat rigid, hardly daring to breathe.

I must have loosened up some with the first light of day because, when Pete showed up shortly before sunup, I was able to talk and joke with him almost natural. We stood out front for a time with the chill from the plains wrapped around us and searched the sky for any chunks of clouds that might be bringing rain. We hashed over the road to Magdalena and it was pretty plain that Pete was nervous about this job. Then he went off down to Buchanan's to borrow a horse for Harlow, and in another twenty minutes the pair of 'em was heading east out of town.

That was the last San Augustine Springs saw of its *alguacil* alive. We never did find out exactly how it happened. The posse that formed up afterward over in Magdalena read the sign and made a few educated guesses, as they say. Somehow Pete had let his guard down and given this Harlow his chance. The outlaw had taken both horses and Pete's gun and spurred south as fast as he could for the border. They brought the body back to our town and we all gathered for the hymns and prayers behind the barbwire that enclosed the churchyard. It didn't dawn on me 'til later that now I was the law in San Augustine Springs.

The first of August started out like most any other day for me. I left my little lean-to back of Pike's store early, saddled up Chico and headed for the dump with my Colt. I really wasn't any good with the thing but I kept at it mostly because I wanted an excuse to ride out every morning. Penny's father sure didn't approve of me wasting time or shells that way. But he never said much.

I got back in town a little after seven and sat around the office whittling on a cholla stick. Hadn't felt like doing much in the days since Pete had died, mainly on account of I was all confused inside. A lot had happened and I hadn't got it all sorted out in my mind yet. When I wasn't doing my regular work for Mr. Pike, I'd prowl around town "howdying" everybody and poking into corners as I'd always done, but all the same I knew things had changed. Fear was lurking right behind me like a shadow.

At first I'd been afraid Harlow would come back and try to get me for pointing him out. When that wore off there were other things I couldn't even name. Nights I'd lie in my bunk seeing all kinds of pictures in the dark and hearing noises flit around. I sure was wishing I had Pete to talk to.

I threw the cholla stick down and put my clasp knife back in my pocket. A hollow feeling down low told me it was getting close to breakfast. Across the street at the store, the front window shade went up. That was Penny's signal for me to come and get it, and I sure didn't waste any time.

I hustled through the store and back to where the Pikes had their living quarters. Penny was just taking the big coffeepot off the stove when I walked into the kitchen and she threw me a cheery smile. Mrs. Pike had been ailing for some time and kept mostly to her bed, leaving Penny to do all the cooking and house chores.

"Get the cups down, will you please, Bert?"

When Penny asked me to do some small thing like that for her, it sure as heck pleased me. She was holding a heavy white crock and was beginning to ladle batter onto a griddle in little puddles. I got a whiff of simmering hotcakes and of bacon popping in the deep skillet that set my mouth to watering.

I rattled around in the cupboard and pulled out three enam-

eled cups. Then I plopped down in a chair at the heavy oak table and began to watch Penny at the stove. Just the sight of her always managed to perk me up no matter how mopey I was. This morning she seemed as fresh as wild flowers when they first fill a mountain meadow in the spring. I figured she was about as perfect a gal as you could hope to find and the only thing that troubled me was that she couldn't take me serious. I knew in her eyes I was just a kid who had a lot of stretching to do before he reached manhood. This business of me being deputy showed that.

Ever since that morning Pete had ridden out with Harlow I'd kept to wearing my badge. Seemed like everyone around town knew how I come to get it in the first place and they didn't pay no more mind than if I'd been a ten-year-old sporting a play tin star. Nobody said out-and-out I wasn't deputy and I didn't go pushing it by boasting or anything like that. But it was mighty clear that if there was any lawing to do they weren't going to look at me. Lucky I was, too, that our wide-place-in-the-road was so quiet. The rowdy crowd stuck pretty much to Magdalena and the bigger towns over on the Rio Grande, like Socorro and Los Lunas. Just the same, I knew that trouble was bound to pop up sooner or later and no matter how much I dreaded it, I was going to be sucked in.

Penny didn't really chide me about the whole thing, but once she let on that her father thought I was something of a fool for pretending to take on a man's job. Allowed as how he was considering cutting me down to size with a serious talking to. I asked Penny if she looked at things the same way as him, and she got kind of embarrassed and hedged around until I knew how it was.

She set a tin plate full of her special hotcakes down in front of me and then heaped a mound of bacon on top. I sloshed a lot of syrup on and began to dig in while Penny poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down opposite me to wait for her father.

"You haven't forgotten that you're helping Dad unpack those new tools this morning?" she said.

"I know, I know," I answered kind of roughly. "I usually

stick around and do my share of the work." Right quick I was sorry for the tone of voice I'd used because Penny got a little red and flushed and I could see the hurt.

"I didn't mean that, Bert. It's only that lately you've been . . .well. . ."

I mumbled half an apology and stared hard at my plate. We didn't speak any more at breakfast and I hurried to get out of the kitchen and at those crates of tools.

In the front of the store I found a wrecking bar and really went tearing into things. Out of the wooden crates came shiny new axes and buck saws, posthole diggers, adzes and the like. 'Fore long Mr. Pike came shuffling up from the back and kinda grunted a good morning to me. He always acted gruff, but down under he was a decent enough sort of fellow. His mustache had a habit of wagging when he talked and he'd twitch his nose ever so often. Sometimes I'd catch myself watching these things and not paying any mind to what he was saying. He thought I was a mite deaf since I had to ask for repeats on directions now and again.

We worked for the better part of an hour: Mr. Pike jotting down in his ledger while I put stuff on display and hauled extras to shelves in the storeroom. Things was about done when Mrs. Monroe came jangling through the front door with her shopping basket on her arm. Her husband was our barber and undertaker. He kept saying he was fixing to pull stakes and move over to some of the new towns in Arizona where there was business enough to keep him and his family alive. But he hadn't got around to leaving yet and I'd about given up on him. Mr. Pike went padding up front to wait on his customer and left me to sweep up the splintered crates.

I really didn't mind working in the store too much. There was always a good smell like right then: red chile peppers hanging in *ristras* from the beams, saddle leather oiled and soaped, fresh ground coffee, cinnamon, grain and feed—all these jumbled in with the damp, earthy smell thrown out by the adobe walls. 'Course it was a far cry from the cowboying I wanted to be doing, but I learned to put that out of sight and not let it nag at me.

I was thinking about these things in general and Penny in particular, all the while pushing away at the broom, when I heard the jangling again. Ollie Jackson from the telegraph office was poking his bald head in the door.

"Trouble," he sang out. "Marlin boys shot up the Express office in Socorro. Heading this way. Everybody's meeting at Tanner's." Seeing the woman, he added, "Tell your Bill, Mrs. Monroe." And with that he disappeared, slamming the door so the glass like to rattled out.

"Oh, mercy. What next," Mrs. Monroe groaned, putting her hand up to her throat. Quick as a wink she bustled out, leaving her basket half-filled on the counter.

Mr. Pike came whipping out of his apron, barreling for Tanner's Gold Dollar. He just had time to holler at me over his shoulder, "Watch the store 'til I get back, Bert."

What ole Ollie had said sure hit me with a wallop. I just stood there for a time, getting numb all over. The Marlins were well-known in that part of the Territory, mostly for petty rustling and the fights they'd been in up and down the Rio Grande. Folks were always saying as how they'd cut loose some day and really bring the law down on 'em by startin' something big. And it looked like that prediction was coming true. There was the two Marlin brothers, Fitz and Henry, and usually a couple of hardcases tagging behind them that they passed off as cousins. Whatever they had stirred up over in Socorro was coming my way and it sent a little finger of cold running down my back.

"What's happened?" Penny asked, coming up from the back.

"Everybody's joining up at Tanner's. Some fellows held up the Express office in Socorro and headed out this way." I tried to keep my voice even and calm so as not to get her excited but I could see the worry start to creep across her face as I spoke.

"Oh, Bert! There won't be any trouble, will there?"

I didn't answer because my thoughts were jumping ahead. Whatever was being planned over across the street didn't include me, 'cause I sure hadn't heard anyone yelling for the deputy. Penny must've spotted the bitterness that came into my eyes because she paled a little and put her small hand on my wrist.

"You're not thinking of mixing in this, are you, Bert? Leave it to the men. They'll decide what's best. And besides, it's not your. . ."

I didn't wait for her to finish. I just tore loose and got out of there as quick as I could. I stood on the porch for a while and watched a few stragglers hurry toward the Gold Dollar. Kept fingering the badge sagging on my shirt-front and trying to figure out what I should do.

About then a rider turned off the road from the west and came jogging down Central Street. One look told me it was just another drifter—one of those lean, saddle-hardened cowhands that are a dime a dozen in the cattle country. His horse was a chestnut, short-coupled and muscled in the right places. The man himself wore faded Levis with dust beaten into them, the uniform of his trade. Only thing out of the ordinary was his black hat and the little shiny silver band around the crown. That headgear said he was from over in the Navajo country someplace. A hundred times in my imagination I'd seen myself as a cowhand like that—always on the move from place to place, following a hard life, doing a man's work.

The stranger pulled up in front of the Gold Dollar and eyed the place up and down. He stretched himself in the saddle, then climbed off and headed inside. Seeing him helped me make up my mind. If I was ever going to do any growing up, now was a good time to start.

The chestnut had been tied so he could lean his head over the hitchrail and dip into the water trough. I went over and rubbed his neck and at the same time studied the batwings leading into Tanner's. 'Fore long I puckered up courage and slipped inside.

They were all so busy yammering at one another that nobody even noticed me. I stuck close to the wall and kept quiet, trying to pick up the gist of their talk and get the situation straight. Ollie Jackson was the center of it all and he kept telling over and over the few details that had come in on the wire. Seems the Marlin crew had made a raid on the New Mexico Overland Express Office just after it opened that morning and shot up the place pretty bad. The clerk had put up a fight and got one of

'em while the other three lit out like the wind in our direction. The whole country was up in arms so it was figured they'd head for the wilderness down below the Black Range. But for a long run they would be needing supplies and stuff and, since Magdalena was too big for them to tackle, it was a pretty safe bet they'd try their hand in San Augustine Springs.

When everybody had this much straight they fell to arguing about what to do next. Ollie seen the attention was drifting away from him so he raised his voice a mite.

"Now the smart thing for us to do," he said, "is lay low until all this blows over. If they come in and we start trouble, this town'll be taken apart. Most of us have families and we don't want to see that happen. So what we do is close up everything and keep out of their way. Let them bust in if they have a mind to and take what they want. Like as not a posse is close behind and they won't get far."

"Now look here," interrupted Moon Buchanan, "are you saying we should just turn this town over to a pack of outlaws without putting up a fight?"

"That's right," Ollie came back at him. "If Pete was here, why then maybe we could think of doing something. But there's just too few of us to go up against a rough bunch like this."

When Moon looked like he was about to argue some more, Bill Monroe put his two bits' worth in.

"Ollie's got it right. He's talking sense. The first ones I'm thinking of are my wife and little Tommie. No use bringing grief on them. You don't have a family, Moon, so you can talk about standing up to the Marlins, but not the rest of us."

Several others around the room nodded their heads and you could see they had made up their minds and was relieved. Bud Tanner cleared his throat from behind the bar and all eyes turned toward him. He was a big, even tempered fellow who seldom had much to say, but when he did open up, people had a habit of listening.

"'Pears to me," he said slowly, "that we want to preserve our property and look out for our women folks and the best way of doing that is to follow right along with what Ollie Jack-

son says. Course there's those who'd allow we're taking the coward's way out but then they're not here and in the same position as we are."

"That's right. These men are dangerous. If we make a show of force, only Bill Monroe's undertaking business is going to benefit," somebody chimed in.

That brought a few snickers but it was plain the whole bunch was uneasy. Now that things were settled, they were eager to go looking for their holes to crawl into and hibernate. But Tanner wasn't through.

"And how do you figure this, stranger?"" he asked, turning to the man at the end of the bar.

Nobody had paid much attention to the cowboy when he first came in. He was kind've short and there was nothing particular about him to make you sit up and take notice, except maybe his black hat. But he'd been noticed now and the place got quiet waiting for him to answer. He leaned on the bar with his elbows and rolled a half-filled glass between his palms.

"I make it a general rule not to mix in other folk's affairs," he declared carefully, which is just about what you'd expect anyone to say. But then he added, "Unless, of course, I'm out to prove something."

"Well, it's all settled then," Ollie piped up, and you could tell he was pleased as pie about all his arranging.

"Not quite," came a voice from over against the wall. And it took 'em a minute or two to realize that it was me doing the talking. Every head had turned my way when I announced, "I'm still the deputy here and I say we put up a fight. If we don't, this town will be the laughingstock of the Territory."

I really meant it but I guess my voice didn't carry a ring of conviction. Instead of convincing anybody, I'd just made them angry. Ollie Jackson was the maddest. You could tell by his frown.

"Well, looka' here," he mocked. "The big man with the badge is going to throw his weight around and tell us how to run things. Now, kid, suppose you go climb off our backs and onto your hobby horse."

His words stung my ears like nothing else ever had, and all

the resolve I'd worked up just seemed to ebb out of me. With everybody in the whole place staring, I shrank down to about an inch high. Mr. Pike came up to me then. He'd mostly kept quiet and let the others do the talking, but what I'd said put fire in his eyes.

"Bert, I thought I told you to stay in the store! Now is not the time for your brand of foolishness."

His voice was as stern as I'd ever heard it. I started to stammer something, but the words got snagged in my throat and all I could do was turn and walk out.

Without even thinking, I headed for the office where I could be alone. I'd really stuck my neck out but there was no turning back. I knew I was going to find out once and for all if I had what it took to wear that badge Pete gave me.

The late morning dragged into afternoon. I sat on the edge of the desk checking and rechecking my gun, its weight cold and strange in my hands. Through the window I kept an eye on what was happening. First off, a little crowd gathered to see Tommie Monroe mount his paint pony and get instructions from his father and a couple of others. Then they sent him off to the edge of town to keep a lookout on the plains to the east. After that folks started disappearing. Pretty soon you could see the shades come down and the shutters close, and in no time it was hard to tell the buildings with the people in them from those that had been deserted and boarded up for quite a spell. San Augustine Springs acted like it had suddenly turned over and died after a long sickness.

As the hours crawled by, my own worry began to wear me down. I went over again in my mind all that had happened until I finally settled on a single thought that kept hammering home. If I couldn't stand up to that saloon full of men, how in the world did I figure I could meet the Marlins head-on. Then every time I would come back to the knowledge that this maybe was my last chance to prove up and I'd better not throw it away. My best bet seemed to meet the outlaws in the street and then hope the others in town would back me when they seen I'd forced their hand. It was a crazy idea but the only one that would come to me.

A little after three, Tommie came pounding in on his pony shouting, "Somebody's coming. Somebody's coming." A few men ran into the street, and one got his horse to ride out and check. He was back in no time, all excited.

"It's them, all right. Three riders coming this way at a fast clip. Be here in less than ten minutes." This sent the ones in the street scurrying for cover.

I sucked in a long breath. At least the waiting was done. Walked out in the street and over to the edge of the boardwalk on the other side. The sun dipping behind the stores was just beginning to send a shadow creeping across the hard-packed sod. I took a long look up Central Street. After a couple of blocks, the east-west road crossed it and you couldn't see what was coming either way 'cause of the buildings squatting on the corners.

There was no denying it. I was plenty scared. A deathly silence had seeped into the town, making it seem more like a ghost than ever. A horse off somewhere whickered and I like to've jumped out of my skin. I began seeing how stupid this whole thing was. If nobody else cared about this town, why should I go trying to stop a bunch of rowdies from shooting it wide open. Maybe Mr. Pike had been right and this wasn't any of my business. Anyways, if I was to get gunned down, who was going to spill any tears? Not that crowd from the saloon. Ollie and the rest'd swagger around saying how they'd been right all along, then they'd show up at my funeral with long faces they didn't mean. When you got right down to bedrock, it was every fellow for himself in this world, which meant I was playing the part of a fool standing out here in the path of the Marlins.

My mind was really working fast 'cause I seen I still had time to get out of this mess. I knew folks was watching out from their windows, but most likely they were keeping their eyes glued up the street toward the Magdalena road and hadn't even spotted me. I'd just started to look for an alleyway to slip off into when I heard something behind me. My mind froze but I reckon the body moved by instinct because I whirled around, my right hand moving down toward the Colt.

It was that black-hatted drifter from the saloon. He was up in

the shade leaning against an adobe wall with his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. He studied me for a couple of seconds and then took a step out.

"Alrighty, deputy. Name yore play. I'll back you." That was all he said in a speech that was tight and purposeful.

I was so stunned that it took me a few moments to come to myself. Nobody had ever called me deputy before, and sure no man like him had ever spoken to me as his equal. Yet here it was, this cowboy offering to stand right beside me while I did the leading. The gratitude that swept over me brought a mist to my eyes and suddenly I heard myself talking in a calm and assured way that didn't seem to be a voice I knew at all.

"Much obliged, mister. But I'm the law here. It's my job. And like you said, this town ain't none of your affair."

"Have it your way," he replied, spitting out a little puff of air that was almost a gesture of relief. "I'm sure in no hurry to cash in my chips. Just wouldn't have felt right if I hadn't of offered, seeing the way things stood."

In that instant it dawned on me that he was as scared as I was, as everybody was. The trick, though, was not to let it buffalo you—to go ahead and do what had to be done. That was the little secret that every real man knew.

He nodded and moved back into the shadows and I was left alone there in the sun-splashed street. Started walking slowly up Central, feeling straight and tall for the first time in my life. Already you could hear the drumming of horses' hooves at the edge of town. I stopped after a ways with my eye riveted on that corner where they'd come. A dust-devil spun down the street, tugged at my clothes, then slammed into a wall, throwing little pebbles against a window pane. The pounding got louder and trickles of sweat slid down from my forehead and fogged up my eyes. But I stood rooted and I knew my voice would work and my right hand too, if it had to.

I had already started crouching when they busted around the corner—three blurs on horseback. My arm moved slightly toward the gun at my hip; my jaw went rigid.

Then all at once the voice of the drifter called out from somewhere to the left, "Ease up, deputy. It ain't them."

And it was true. I wiped the dust and sweat out of my eyes with the back of my hand and saw 'em clear. Three cowhands had reined up and were sitting easy and loose in their saddles, staring at me curious-like. People were already starting to empty out of their houses and stores and fill the street.

"Hey," Bud Tanner hollered. "It's Branch McAdams and a couple of his boys from the Circle M. What are you doing so far from home, Branch?"

"We just come from delivering a bunch of horses over on the Rio Puerco," said the rider in the lead. "What's going on here anyway?""

"We thought you all were the Marlin boys," volunteered Ollie Jackson.

"Haw, haw. That's a good one," roared this McAdams, slapping his thigh. "Not likely we'd be the Marlins. A posse of miners jumped them south of Magdalena just before noon. They're warming a jail cell right now. Reckon with all the excitement they haven't gotten around to flashing the word along yet."

All this time I'd been standing there alone wanting to run and hide or maybe go drown myself in the horse trough. That's how ashamed I was when I realized how ridiculous I must've looked. Better had they been the outlaws, then I'd most likely be dead now and out of my misery.

The crowd was all laughing and talking about what had happened and didn't even seem to notice me. Tanner went up to the three on horseback and said good-naturedly, "You boys climb down and come over to my place. We want to hear all about it. Refreshments on me, everybody." And a cheer went up as the whole crew began to surge toward the Gold Dollar.

The three cowboys, though, kept their horses right where they was. They were peering at me again and the older one out front had his face screwed up like he was pondering something mighty deep. Hot as the day was, I felt cold all over, knowing I'd come to a crossroad where all the choices seemed to dead end.

McAdams straightened in the saddle then and his eyes cleared like he'd reached out and got a' hold of some idea. The crowd

had moved off, but he called after it. "I'll be right with you, fellows. Just as soon as I shake hands with your deputy there." That stopped 'em in their tracks.

"What's that you say, Branch?" somebody asked.

"I said, I want to meet the man who was fixing to stand off the Marlins all by his lonesome."

"Yea," echoed a cowhand behind him. "You can count me in on that."

I guess nobody could believe their ears, because I sure couldn't. The next thing I know those three men were on the ground and lining up to pump my hand.

"Anytime you need somebody to put in a good word for you, young fellow, just look me up at the Circle M," this McAdams says stoutly.

The other two followed him and one of them declares, "Mighty pleased to wring yore hand."

The blood had drained out of my face but I was grinning and giving back as strong a grip as I could muster. The rest was standing around gaping with their mouths hanging open and looking like they was seeing me for the first time. Pretty soon they all closed in and kinda sheepish-like was slapping me on the back and saying how proud the town was and all that. After a while, I pulled away and let them head for Tanner's again.

I'd caught sight of the drifter leading his chestnut out from where he'd been tied off the street. He was just starting to swing into the saddle when I caught up to him.

"Hold on a minute." And the cowboy stopped and turned. "I just wanted to thank you." We shook and I held onto his hand and repeated, "Thanks. Thanks a lot, mister."

He smiled and nodded. "Good luck to you, deputy." Then he was on his horse and pointing him up Central to the Magdalena road.

I remained there in the street until he was gone, feeling kind of washed-out, but happy that at last I knew my own mind. Across at Pike's, Penny was standing in the doorway. Walking over, I hooked a boot heel on the bottom step and said without even thinking, "There's one tired man here who sure could use a cup of coffee."

GOIN' TO TEXAS

By Voyle A. Glover

I cut him wide and I cut him deep. It wasn't much of a fight; he was a big'un and I knew I'd best be topplin' that tree of a man quick or it was the end of Lucious Albright. Blood had spurted out all over me and it did rile me some 'cause I had nary a coin for new duds, and it was goin' to be awhile before I latched onto any. Now I was gonna have to walk around lookin' and smellin' like one of them buffalo hunters I happened onto once. They got to be the awfulest smellin' bodies a man could ever chance onto.

I spotted a gambler with a lean, hungry look about him, like he could take a feller's last dollar and do it smilin'. He stared hard at me, then yawned and turned around like he done seen it all before. I reckon he had, too. Some old whore was screamin' for the law and just about every soul in that crowded room was talkin' at once. I moved back, tryin' to keep everyone in front of me 'cause you never know when a body's friend will pop you. But I reckon that big tree hadn't a friend in the world 'cause not a man laid a hand on me. Got myself out of there right quick, I did.

Pap, he told me long time ago never to hang 'round them places where the jug was emptied more'n twice in a night. Reckon I know what he was gettin' at now. Hadn't took but a couple of minutes in there for me to get mixed in that trouble.

I was nearin' the bar where my mule was tied when I caught the sound of a heavy man runnin' lickety-split down the street, headin' my way. I lay back, aimin' to see what's up. But this feller, he 'pears to be huntin' me special, 'cause he stops where

I'm standin' in the shadows and calls out.

"Hey, boy! Come on out."

Now Pap didn't raise no fool, so I called back to that big dummy standin' there makin' such a fine target in the moonlight: "Speak right out, mister. Say your piece."

"Boy, you best be clearin' out. This town and this whole territory ain't no safe place for the likes of you. Reckon you best not stop till you get to the Pacific Ocean, kid."

Now that was a queer tale if I ever heard one so I ups and asks him, "Why would I want to go to this 'Pifik Osun' place?"

He just stands there starin', like he don't believe I asked him what I did. I saw he wasn't lookin' to do me harm so I walked out of the dark and stood there lookin' up at him. He run a big hand through a mane of black hair, shook his head and grinned.

"Boy, you beat all I ever did see. Here you done split the gizzard of this town's leading citizen and you're asking me why you shouldn't travel." He chuckled, which seemed to me like he was sayin' he was glad I done for the leadin' citizen.

"Mister, that tall son might have been a leadin' citizen to you but he was a man aholt of my throat, takin' the life out of me like I was a mangy dog."

The big man, he just rocks back on his boot heels and says, "Boy, Hank Basil wasn't no gentle man, that's true, and there ain't a soul in this town will miss him, but there's a passle of Basils in them foothills will miss him. That's why you best light out of here and don't stop. Reckon we felt we owed you. Hank was a big spender but he put the fear of God in more than one man in this town. Don't reckon any of us will miss that."

Well, you could have knocked me down with a feather. I ain't been done many favors in my sixteen years and, since comin' out of them hills in Kentucky, I can't count nary a one. It struck me kinda hard, this gent givin' me the high sign like that. So I give him a thank you and lit a shuck, but not to that Pifik Osun cause I never knowed that place. Sounded like some place over in the Injun lands and I ain't hankerin' to get cross of them souls, not by a long sight.

I figured I'd stick to where I been headed all along. It was Texas for me. I was up on Fred in a wink and Texas-bound. I

put that town out of sight in a mighty quick time.

'Bout four days out I spotted riders comin' slow and easy on my trail, on purpose hangin' back. Pap taught this boy trailin' real good and I always run back on my trail, so I spotted 'em early. Figured they must be kin folk of this Basil I cut.

Now Fred, he ain't much and he was mighty lean even 'fore we left home. We'd moved through some rough and strange country and so it didn't come as no surprise when he up and quit on me. I been quit on a time or two so I knowed it would be a day or so 'til Fred got his stubborn over. I made camp and waited for that bunch trailin' to catch up. Wasn't no place to go so I figured I'd best settle the matter now as later. Likely, they'd have caught me even if Fred hadn't quit on me.

Pap used to be the best rifle shot in them hills where I growed up. Course I got to admit I never did see too many folk there, but I know there couldn't have been no better'n Pap. I never did see him miss even once. Reckon I got pretty good too with such a good teacher, but I never really took to that rifle. Probably 'cause when I was just a pup, he always made me carry a big, single action Colt. I kept it shoved down the front of my pants and Ma, she quit sewin' buttons on them pants 'cause that gun kept poppin' 'em off. Piece of rope served just as well.

I got to pop all the small game while Pap took care of anything else. Reckon I ain't lyin' none if I say I could hit a rabbit on the second hop and tumble a squirrel 'fore he climbed a tail's length. We'd spot a rabbit and I'd snatch that iron out of my pants faster'n a billy goat's wink, aim and fire, all 'fore the second hop was done. Always hit 'em too.

I limbered up a mite while I waited for them riders. I checked my loads, dragged Pap's old rifle out of my roll and got up on my perch. Right soon I figured on dodgin' some lead.

They rode in proud, settin' high and lookin' wide. That Big Ugly in the lead made a pretty good target and I liked to have give in and took him right off that high steppin' mare, but Pap always taught me to be polite. That don't mean I give a dog the first bite, but I reckon I owed 'em notice that it wasn't no child they was huntin' and that it might be some of them was gonna get killed.

That Big Ugly jerked up sharp when I hollered out and them green eyes latched onto me like I was a piece of deer meat in a smoke house. I grinned a little, showin' I ain't about to start no war, and there was quiet for a small piece of time.

Big Ugly had a scar runnin' down the side of his ear to his bottom lip. Shore didn't help that face of his none. He spit a stream of brown chaw juice out and said, "Kid, I ain't gonna mince words with you none. There's six of us and one of you. We're gonna take you back ridin' or belly down, however you choose to make it."

One thing Pap did teach me good was when to talk and when to fight. I seen right off there wasn't no amount of talkin' goin' to change their minds about takin' me. So I didn't bother with that speech I had planned and hauled on that old Colt restin' easy against my stomach. 'Bout all them boys was surprised, but one. Big Ugly was an old he-coon, for sure. Reckon he saw the shine in my eye and the fact there wasn't no fear shakin' my bones, 'cause he lit off his horse and was puttin' lead my way almost as quick as I was puttin' lead into that pack.

I put two of 'em down right off, then I put the wind in my ears 'cause Big Ugly had bought 'em time. Wasn't for him, I could have put away four at least. I made it up the side of that mountain into some scrub pine. They was gonna have to work some to tree this boy. I reckoned they'd have to come after me on foot on account of the way bein' so rough. Ain't a horse built could take the ground I was takin'. I figured everything was goin' my way 'cause I was young, strong as a mule's stubborn and quicker'n a rabbit to a hole.

If you ever get to mixin' bullets with a crowd, don't ever think you got 'em foxed. Pap taught me well but there was still some kid in me, 'cause I got me an idea that liked to have killed me. I knowed that bunch would be froggin' after me up that mountainside and I figured they'd leave the horses with one of that bunch. So I follows on this idea. It liked to have been the end of me.

Now it wasn't that it was such a bad idea. 'Nuther time or place it likely would have been all right, but I didn't take into account that I was playin' 'round with a curly wolf, smarter'n a

fox, and wiser than any sixteen-year-old kid. He treed too many coons in his day to be taken by that one. 'Sides that, I found out later that the only place to go after apiece in the direction I lit out was back down. Up just petered out.

I come sneakin' down full of my idea, grinnin' and chewin' on a blade of grass, like I had nary a care in the world. Reckon it's a good thing I come down so quick, 'cause if I'd waited till they was all set I'd not be tellin' this tale. Really thought I had me an idea, I did. Goin' to show them boys, I was.

Pow! Somebody opened up on me right soon and I got to huggin' the rocks like they was my Ma and Pap. I heard 'em yellin' for the others to come on over and I knew then I was in for a bad time. I couldn't even go back the way I come now. All I could hope for was to sneak away in the dark, but somehow I knew that wouldn't be possible with Big Ugly around.

Then that old son ups and yells at me: "Kid! We want to take you back alive. Rest of the folk want to see the end of you. Come on out."

Now I was doin' some fast thinkin'. It was plain that I was dead meat at the moment. But if I let them boys take me back there wasn't no tellin' what might happen. Long as a body is breathin' there's hope and Pap always told me never to pass no rabbit holes without pokin' a stick in. There might be some meat waitin' in there for you but you'd never know it if you didn't look. So I figured I'd have a look-see in this rabbit hole Big Ugly tells me about.

"Hey! Big Ugly!" Funny how that got an answer from the one I intended it for. He hollered right back. Probably cussed himself for speakin' out so quick. I speaks my piece but it shore wasn't easy, not by a long sight. I says, "Call off your dogs. This side is givin' up."

"Throw out the guns, then grab some clouds!" Didn't take long for him to give orders.

I did just that and walked out slow and easy, my hands held high so they could see there wasn't nuthin' dangerous about me. They flocked about me like a pack of hound dogs 'round a possum, shovin' me, cussin' me, callin' me things I never even heard in all my born days, and makin' promises about how they

was gonna stretch my neck, Western style. They told me 'bout a tree they had special for that. But I didn't say a word, 'cause talkin' ain't no good at a time like that. They plopped me aboard a pack horse and we set off for town.

We made good time but it was still near five days 'fore we got back. You'd have thought they was bringin' in a wagon load of deer meat, 'stead of just one tired boy. They gathered 'round us, walkin' and chatterin' like a tree full of robbed squirrels, some of 'em cussin' me, cuffin' me and makin' them same promises about that tree. Reckon they was all Basils. Shore was a gatherin' of 'em.

I was throwed right off into a room servin' as a jail. Wasn't no bars on the window, but I had a look-see and spotted a man outside with a rifle. A little cot was near the wall and looked invitin' so I stretched out and was sleepin' in no time.

"Ps-s-t! Hey, boy!" That whisper reached into my brain and woke me right off. Somebody was tryin' to talk to me and it was plain he wasn't carin' to be heard by anyone else but me. I sat up and then crept over to the wall where the voice was at.

"Yeah, I hear you," I whispered back.

"Boy, there's gonna be a necktie party soon and you're the one bein' strung." The voice paused, then he went on, "They're gettin' likkered-up over in the Palace and I guess it will be soon that they come for you. Ain't nobody in this town havin' a part in it, just the Basil clan and a few of their friends."

I recognized that voice now. It was the same gent that had given me the advice to leave. Reckon if a body needed a friend at any time he'd do for sure.

I asked, "Ain't no way you could be latchin' onto my pistol and my knife, is there?" I never did care to burden another body with my misery, but he'd done come out into the night twice on my account and I reckon I figured him as a friend. Body can't burden a friend, who can he ask for help?

That friend was silent for a minute, then he says, "I think your stuff is tied on one of the horses out front of the Palace. Those rannies ain't even took the time to grain their horses. I'll be back in a little."

Well, it turned out that he was right about that. It only took

my friend a few ticks of time to fetch me my guns and knife. He even brought a rain slicker that wasn't mine. We whispered some about how to get it all into me. They had a man at the door and one at the window in back and they wasn't movin' like a man on guard should. We finally found a loose board and made it a whole lot looser at the bottom. Took a little whittlin' with my blade and some pryin' with the muzzle of my pistol, but we got them two through. Lookin' back I ain't sure why we even tried to get that dumb rifle through. It shore wasn't the smartest thing I ever tried to do. We finally give up on gettin' the rifle through, but as he was draggin' it out there was a squeak made on a nail with the barrel. He pulled it out real fast then while I froze.

Sure enough, I hear a yell, then a couple of shots. I heard a groan and the sound of runnin'. Then I went sick inside, 'cause I heard both them guards talkin' about who they shot.

"Town ain't gonna like this, Will."

"How'd I know who it was sneakin' out back here? Mayors ain't supposed to be sneakin' around a jail in the dark!"

The voices got low then, arguin'. I got the idea they was wonderin' where to plant the body 'cause it was plain they didn't want it known they shot the mayor. That set me back on my heels some, thinkin' that an important man like that would be helpin' me. It was feelin' awful bad too, on account of him bein' killed helpin' me. Just didn't seem right that a man like that should go under, while the likes of them two was still walkin' about on the ground.

Just then I hear a rush of feet and a lot of voices. Reckon them two wasn't goin' to have to worry 'bout their problem with that body 'cause the crowd found it. There was yellin' and hollerin' and a lot of cussin' goin' on for awhile. I listened close and heard them two tell that crowd a tale.

The one guard was sayin', "We heard the shots, too! Somebody look see if the prisoner escaped. Maybe he done it!"

I just shook my head at such nonsense. They was worse fools than I figured if they expected the crowd to believe that. Right then I heard another voice in the crowd say, "Who'd want to shoot John? Had to be a drifter or such. Everybody spread out

and look for him!"

Well, it beat all I ever did see. That whole crowd swallowed that line and melted into the night like butter in a skillet. I heard them guards chucklin' 'bout it. One of 'em says, "Ole Arnie shore pulled the trick out of the hat, didn't he?" The other agrees and they got back to their guardin'. Ain't a soul ever came to check on me.

I waited after that for things to quiet down some. I had my mind made up that I wasn't gonna wait for no neck tyin' party to come down the road after me. I was riled. It wasn't just myself I was thinkin' of now but of that friend layin' there in his blood on account of me. Blood for blood. Pap always taught me that. Said it came straight from the Good Book and I ain't one to deny the Book. So I made up my mind right then and there to get loose of this place and even the score some for my friend.

Pretty soon I got up and tapped on the door soft-like. The guard came to the door right quick. "Whatcha want?" He wasn't soundin' too kind, like it bothered him that a kid like me would be fool enough to bother him.

"Hey, you! I'm gonna tell, 'fore I die, that it was you planted the mayor."

Ain't nuthin' but dead silence followed that. I could almost hear them wheels turnin' and him reachin' the decision I knowed he'd make. He would reckon on them believin' me, 'cause there shore wasn't no drifter about and everyone kinda gives some respect to the words of a dyin' man. I mean, you sorta got to believe that a man about to meet his Maker ain't gonna be goin' out with no lies on his lips. So that guard only had one choice: to kill me, then call it an escape attempt.

I waited for the door to open. The thing worried me was if he called the other man at the back of the cabin. It would make things a wee bit difficult, for certain. But it turns out he decides on takin' this poor boy down all by his lonesome.

The door swung open and he's standin' there in the moonlight, a nice target, but I don't want no shootin' yet. 'Sides, I figure he's gonna take me outside and shoot me there. Beats draggin' a body.

"Kid, I been mistaken. You ain't as bad as they make you to

be." He turned his head and spit, then added, "I'm gonna turn you loose on account of that and because I don't want you tellin' tales. Works out fine for both of us."

That fool must have thought my Pap growed a melon for a son. But I just shows him my teeth and pretends I'm taken with the idea.

"That sounds like a mighty fine idea you got there." Then I allowed a little look of suspicion to cross my face. Got to put this fool completely off his guard. I said, "How do I know you ain't just gonna shoot me?"

That fool laughs like it was the dumbest thing ever said by a human. He answered, "You are the murderer, kid. I ain't built like that."

I tried to look reassured so I smiled and said, "Well, you just point that gun elsewhere, like maybe at the moon, and keep it that way till I gets down the road apiece, then maybe I'll believe you. Otherwise, I ain't budgin'."

He laughs again, like I was stupid for askin' such a thing, but he said, "Sure, kid." Then he pointed that rifle up to the sky and grinned like a fox in the chicken house.

He took the bait, swallered it whole and never even blinked. I walked out and just as I was passin' him I slid that cold steel into his brisket hard. It stiffened him, he gurgled and choked on that wad he had in his mouth, and when I stepped off the porch he was leakin' his life out all over them boards.

I thought he'd make enough noise to wake the dead and I laid back waitin' for somebody to show, particularly that other guard. But he had gone down pretty quiet and nobody showed. I injuned back to the rear of that cabin and 'fore I even got there I was grinnin'. That other fool was sound asleep and I could hear him snorin'.

He was snorin' like he was home on a feather bed, only thing he wasn't. He was sittin' up, back against that cabin. He smelled like one of them jugs Pap told me to stay away from, after it had sat in the sun a long time.

Now it ain't nice what I tried to do next, but you got to understand that I was powerful upset by the way those two had done my friend. I had my blood up and it wasn't no time for

bein' polite or nice. I figured on killin' him but then I couldn't do it while he was asleep. Ain't nobody deserves to die like that.

I shook him hard, cuffed him about some, then dropped my jaw 'bout a foot when that fool went on sleepin'. He wasn't no sleepin' man, he was a snorin' corpse! I tell you, I kicked that man in the side, pricked his ear with my knife, slugged him in the belly, rapped him on the skull with my pistol, and 'bout the only thing he did was stop snorin' once. I figured that even if he did open his eyes I'd still be killin' a sleepin' man so I shoved him over and left.

It was hard to do what I done next 'cause I figured my chances of comin' out alive wasn't more'n that of a deer in a pack of wolves. But there are some things a body has to do and Pap would be rollin' over in his grave if I rode out of that town without payin' my respects. I reckon I had to even things a mite for me and my friend the mayor, even if it cost me my life. 'Sides, I knew that Big Ugly would be after me and there ain't no sense in a body havin' to look over his shoulder all his life. May as well settle his hash right off. His kind don't stop till they're in hell, and then that Big Ugly would likely be stackin' bodies high enough to climb the walls. Boy like me don't need no trouble like that trailin' him.

So I checked my loads and set out for the Palace, where it all started. Since the back door was used as much as the front I figured it didn't make much difference which door I come in. One was as bad as the other. I pushed aside them funny doors on the front and stepped in quiet.

There was a lot of noise and talkin', just like the last time I was there, when I stepped in. Soon as I got spotted though it was like everyone had pine sap poured in their jaws. Nuthin' in that room but a bunch of starin' eyes and clamped jaws. Hats got pushed back to get a better see and chairs scraped to do the same.

I opened up with some words, 'cause I wanted it plain that it was the Basils I was after and not no town folks. Body walks in and starts shootin', he's gonna have everybody throwin' lead at him. So I declared right out who I was huntin'.

"I come for Big Ugly and any of them that stand 'side of him, kin or no." That was powerful strong words comin' from a kid, I know but, like I said, my blood was up and like a horse with the bit in his jaws there wasn't no stoppin' me. I was bound to make my brag. I had kinda thought there'd be bodies divin' for cover and lead come flyin' out of that crowd, but nary a soul stirred.

I called out, "Big Ugly! You come on out so you and me can settle this thing." While I was waitin' for him, I told that crowd about the killin' of my friend the mayor. You could tell that had put 'em off their feed. I heard some cussin' near the back, then that big tree come leanin' out of that crowd, drink in his hand and a grin on that ugly face.

I don't reckon I ever felt smaller in my life, him lookin' down at me like I was a bug or such, but I looked up at him and said, "I'm here to topple you. Let it be with knife or gun 'cause you're too big for me to wallop. Then your kin can line up and have their try."

He laughed hard at that, he did. I reckon it was sorta funny too, a kid like me challengin' such as he. Kinda like that story my Pap read me out of the Book. There was a Big Ugly back in them days too.

He said, "Kid, you got more spunk than four growed men and less brains than a herd of sheep. I reckon all things woolly is dumb." He drank the rest of that glass in his hand, looked hard at me, then said, "Reckon I can't go shootin' at a kid like that, even if he is just a nigger."

Pap always told me to walk careful 'round folk who were sayin' one thing and doin' another with their eyes. Big Ugly, he was smilin' with his face but he was shootin' with his eyes. And that word he used, "nigger," didn't strike no fire with me then, 'cause I wasn't too sure what it meant. I was called that a lot by them riders when they caught me in the mountains, and even that Hank man I cut called me "nigger." I figured it meant scrawny and had somethin' to do with bein' a kid. I reckoned that with so many of 'em callin' me that, it just had to be that I was one.

Big Ugly, he claps a couple of men across the back and hollers, "Drinks on me, boys!" Then he looked at me and said, "Even the nigger can have one." Everyone thought that was powerful funny, which I didn't understand, but I figured I probably was funny, standin' there rags on my back, so lean my bones showed, big Colt shoved in the front of my pants and a knife snugged down into the top of my boot. Reckon that was a funny sight at that.

The rush went on for the bar, with me holdin' back 'cause I ain't one for tippin' the jug and 'sides, I been lookin' at Big Ugly in the eyes. He had turned away from me, like he was goin' to the bar, when he exploded like a clap of thunder. He drawed his iron and whirled as fast as a body could have done. I never seen the like, then or since. But he ain't had to pull iron out and plug a rabbit on the second hop. No billy goat could've winked faster'n I hauled out my Colt. I just turned that Big Ugly into a scairt rabbit in my mind and I got him on the first hop, 'stead of the second. I got two shots into him and he got one in my leg. I had told him I was goin' to topple him and there he was, fallin' like a big tree. I knowed where I hit him and it was certain they'd be plantin' him tomorrow.

I slammed to the floor, rolled and was choosin' another target. I had that hammer eared back and my gun pointed straight at that crowd. Good thing I did, too, 'cause two in there had done got into action and was linin' up on me. I let off a shot at the tallest one and saw him grab his head right where I aimed and fall back to the floor.

Then that other gun sounded and I felt like a hot log had been rolled across my shoulder. Things went dim for a little, then I heard another shot, but it missed 'cause I heard it thunk right by my ear on the floor. The I planted that Basil too. I got him on the first shot.

Now everyone is crawlin' out of corners and from under tables. I see guns pulled and most of 'em pointin' my way. They must have seen I was easy pickin's and figured it was safe. Only thing, them town folk must have took heart at Big Ugly goin' down so easy 'long with them other two, 'cause all of a sudden there's shootin' goin' on in that room that would

have turned a deaf man's head. There was Basils fallin' all over that room and bodies divin' through the doors and windows. The barkeep, he cut loose right into the pack of 'em with a gun I ain't never heard of or seen. It was longer'n me and had a barrel that looked like a stove pipe. I seen it hit square on one of them Basils and drove him clean through that wall. It was a mighty loud gun too.

By the time all the shootin' was over there was nine Basils out of the runnin' as far as makin' any more Basils, plus two that nobody seemed to know. Likely they was just friends. Wasn't but one townsman hurt, plus me, and I figured I was done for. That shirt of mine wasn't but a bloody rag when I left that Palace place the first time. Now it was worse, 'specially since it was my blood on it, plus my pants was plumb soaked with blood. I felt myself gettin' sleepy, then I passed out.

Took me most of a month to heal, and when I got ready to leave that town turned out to wish me well. The blacksmith, he gave me two of them Basil horses, plus I got one of their guns and a saddle. Oh, I kept my slicker my friend had given me. It was kinda special. I took the clothes off one of them friends of the Basils, him bein' 'bout my size. Patched the hole and it looked real good.

The new mayor, he walks up to me as I was leavin' and sticks out his hand: "Kid," he said, "You might be a nigger, but you're white inside."

I just smiles at him and I made up my mind to find out what "nigger" means, first chance I get. I took off and never looked back. I was Texas-bound. Figured I'd be what them folks called a "cowboy."

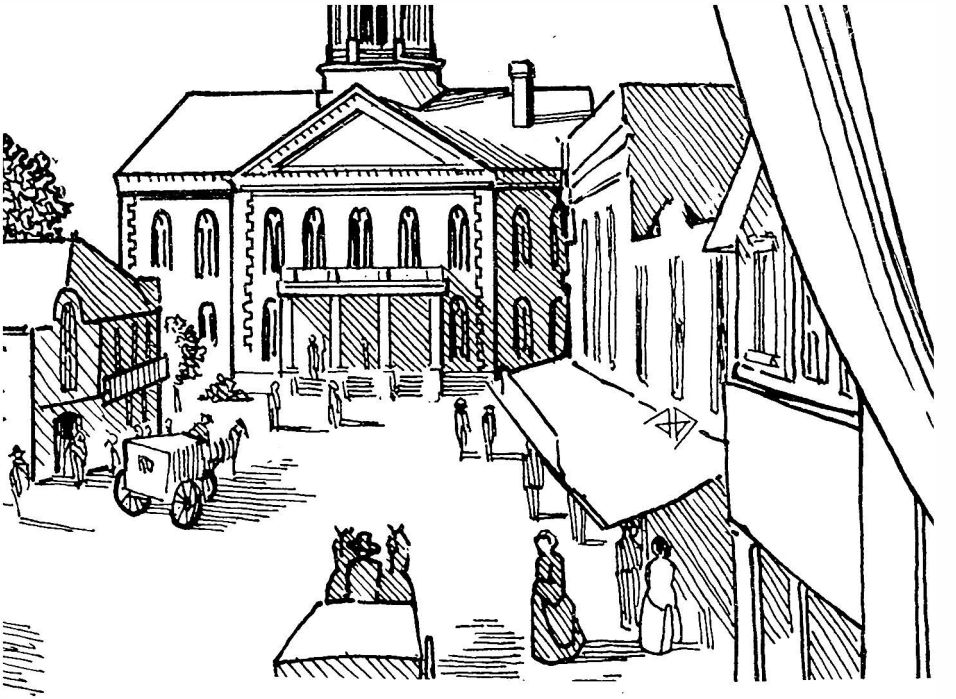
I never learned 'til after I got a job at the Slash Bar, down near the Brazos, what "nigger" meant. But I just never took that meaning to heart. Niggers is supposed to be low down and mean, not worth a corn husk. Me, I ain't no nigger, and there ain't a puncher here will call me one now. Oh, I got me a couple of friends who do it now and then, for teasin', you know. But I ain't met no niggers out here. Way I see it, I planted the only niggers I ever met, way back there on my trail. They was all white all six of 'em, but they was niggers just the same.

LIKE LUCIFER

By Robert Greenwood

Raising the curtain, I looked out. The whole square was spread out below before me. I could see everything except the area beyond the capitol and the section of sidewalk just below me. Things had returned to normal, or so it seemed. An explosion had shaken the northeast corner of the square three days ago, killing one man, maiming another, and blowing a horse and buggy sky-high. The concussion had shattered windows in a radius of five city blocks. I noticed a glazier working on the second floor of the capitol building, setting a frame in place.

I'd not known the man killed in the explosion. But his death had brought me here. Three days ago I'd been in Tonopah. A telegram from Harry Shortall in San Francisco had given me a few facts and told me to leave for Carson City on the next stage. *Register at the Arlington House,* he'd wired. *Letter to Carson will follow.*



The desk clerk had developed the facility of reading upside down. He watched me sign the register. "Welcome to Carson City, Mr. Freeman. How are things in Tonopah? A bit sitrred up, I hear." He spun the register around and reached for a key.

"I want a room on the second floor," I said, "overlooking the capitol. And yes, you heard it right, things are stirred up down there."

"I have a corner room. A fine view." He pulled a letter box from a drawer and handed me an envelope. "For you, sir. Arrived this morning." He punched a bell on the counter and a boy walked up and took my bag.

I followed him up the staircase, opening the envelope. The printed return in the corner told me it was from Shortall. It contained a letter and photograph. The boy unlocked the door, put my bag at the foot of the bed and asked if I thought the room satisfactory. He was about fifteen, tall and wiry, with curly brown hair and large, attentive eyes.

I handed him the photograph and asked if he recognized the portrait.

The expression on his face was answer enough. He said it was

Mr. Murdock, the man killed in the explosion. He pointed out the window toward the square, meaning it had happened over there, three days ago.

I asked him if Murdock had been a guest at the hotel and he replied yes and handed the photograph over. He asked if I were a relative. I said no, a friend. I told him I was interested in anything he might remember about Murdock, especially that last day.

"Then you know he was a lawyer." He looked at me for confirmation. "From San Francisco?"

"Yes," I said, waiting for him to go on.

He told me Murdock had gone to the Supreme Court each day. On the last day he'd asked the boy to hire a horse and buggy for him down at the livery stable.

"And did you?"

"I only hired it in his name. He went for it about nine that morning and drove it away himself. He said when court was over he was going up to Virginia City on business. He rented the rig for the day."

I gave him a quarter and told him if he remembered anything else to let me know. He smiled, turned to go, then paused at the door. "There is something else," he said, "but it's probably not important. Mr. Murdock kept to himself. Had his dinner sent up to his room. I don't think he went into the bar, even once. One evening he asked me to bring a bottle of beer to his room."

"What was he doing?"

"Working, I guess. He had all these papers and books spread out on a table. I think he was writing something."

"Probably a legal brief."

"You think so?"

"Probably." I smiled. "You're observant, aren't you?"

"My sister says I'm nosy and that I talk out of turn."

"I think observant is a better way of saying it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure you won't talk out of turn."

"If you say so, sir."

"One more thing. Could you manage to get the local newspapers for the past three days?"

"I think so."

"Discreetly?"

"I know what it means."

"I'm sure you do."

He nodded, as though to acknowledge a confidence exchanged, and left. He'd guess my inquiries were motivated by more than the curiosity of a friend. He might innocently mention in the hotel I'd made inquiries about Murdock. I didn't see any harm in that. But then I didn't have the advantage of hindsight. I'd only begun my investigation. My situation then was that I couldn't anticipate my adversary, whoever he or she might be.

From the local newspapers and the letter I'd received from Harry Shortall I pieced together a chronology of events. John Murdock had arrived in Carson City a week ago to argue a case before the Nevada Supreme Court, a litigation over a mining property in Virginia City. He'd spent the first two days preparing his brief and interviewing witnesses. The case had come before the court on the third day. The fact that he'd come all the way from San Francisco to represent a Nevada mining company wasn't unusual. It was done all the time. The case was one of alleged infringement, by one company on another's property. The usual thing, nothing sensational about it. Though a lot of money could be at stake. Then on the fourth day Murdock had hired a rig and driven it to the northeast corner of the square. He'd hitched the horse, entered the capitol building and spent the morning in court. At noon, court adjourned. The case was continued over until the next morning. Murdock left. Apparently he intended driving to Virginia City. Probably to consult with his client or to interview witnesses. He unhitched the horse, climbed into the buggy, seated himself and was blown to bits. The sheriff had found evidence a bomb had been placed in the rig. . .at least one case of giant powder, triggered by a spring mechanism to explode when Murdock sat down on the wagon seat. Only a few shreds of his clothing had been found.

Parts of the buggy had been found two blocks away. A wheel, with all its spokes intact, had landed on the roof of the Methodist Church. An innocent passerby had been thrown sixty feet by the blast, maiming him for life.

As I happened to be in Nevada, the case was mine. The Tonopah matter I'd been working on could wait. The Murdock family had hired Shortall's agency to investigate the murder. They could think of no reason why anyone would want to kill John Murdock. He'd never handled criminal law, only civil cases. His specialty was mining law. Not that mining law was all that prosaic an occupation. The trouble down at Tonopah and Goldfield had turned violent enough. The Governor had called out the State militia in an effort to restore some order in the conflict between the mine owners and the Rocky Mountain Miners' Association. But, I wondered, what could that have to do with Murdock's death? Murdock hadn't been involved in a labor dispute. I studied his photograph again and put it in my pocket.

That's all I had to go on. Shortall told me to send in a daily report. They'd help with information at their end. But I had to be specific in my inquiries. There was a postscript. *Pay a courtesy call on Sheriff Carpenter,* Shortall wrote, *but don't expect him to volunteer any information. He won't.*

I went downstairs to the bar and bought a glass of beer. It was late afternoon. People were on their way home from work. The bar was busy with local regulars, men who stopped in to meet friends and catch up on the day's news. I took a table near the entrance where I could see into the lobby. The afternoon paper had run a story on Murdock on the front page but it was mostly a rewrite job, nothing new, speculating at some length on why he had been murdered. Probably in a day or so, unless something happened, they would drop the story or relegate it to the inside pages. I turned over the page and reached for my glass when I saw him walk into the lobby. For a minute I couldn't believe my eyes. I would have sworn it was John Murdock.

Whoever he was, he was important. People noticed him and

spoke to him. He was about fifty, with a full head of gray hair, prominent eyebrows, broad forehead and a blunt nose, flared at the nostrils. He walked with his head up and his shoulders straight. He had poise. I hadn't heard him speak but I was sure when he did I wouldn't have any trouble hearing him. Then I saw the difference. It was in the eyes. This man's eyes were lively. The photograph of Murdock showed a man with an owlish cast to his eyes, as though given to staring.

I noticed a burly man by his side, matching his stride, alert, his glance taking in everyone. They stopped at the bar. The barman called him "Judge," and asked if he'd have the usual. The man replied yes, and I'd been right about his voice. It had timbre and he used it. Then he nodded toward his burly companion, who said he'd have a glass of beer.

I finished my glass and walked into the lobby. The bellboy stood beside the cigar counter. "Would you like a cigar, sir?"

"Yes, two of those." I pointed to the brand I smoked. He put the box on the counter and opened the lid. I said, "Who is that man in the bar? The barman called him 'Judge.' Is that his name?" I opened my wallet and handed him a dollar.

"That's Judge Taylor. He comes here every day, usually around this time. When court's in session he has lunch here." He put my change on the counter. Among the coins I noticed a brass token, good in exchange for a cigar, with scalloped edges, the size of a silver dollar. The words "Arlington House, Carson City, Nev." were stamped on the face.

"The State Supreme Court?" I asked.

"Chief Justice, sir."

"Does anything about him strike you as familiar?" I pocketed my change.

"How do you mean?"

"The photograph I showed you."

There was recognition in his face. "Oh, you mean Mr. Murdock. I never thought of it. I see the Judge every day. Take him for granted, I guess. But Mr. Murdock wasn't as tall as Judge Taylor is."

"Much shorter?"

"No, not really. It's just that the Judge seems taller. The way he holds himself. But I see what you mean, the resemblance."

I nodded. "And the man with him?"

"He came in with the Judge last night, I think. Maybe the night before." The desk clerk punched the bell and beckoned to the boy. "Excuse me, sir. I'm wanted at the desk."

Although the door was closed to the dining room, a line of people waited. A menu was posted in a glass frame on the wall. The room inside was brilliantly lighted. Silverware and crystal shone brightly on the tables. In a few minutes the door would open and the room would come alive with the sound of voices and the aroma of hot food. I glanced into the bar. The Judge and his companion had ordered another drink. The burly man stood facing the bar, his face lifted, watching the crowd reflected in the mirror above the backbar. The Judge stood at an angle, his right foot resting against the brass rail, talking to the man on his left. I lit a cigar and went upstairs. I'd have dinner later, when the crowd in the dining room thinned out.

Inside my room it was growing dark but I didn't light the lamp. There were two windows, one with a view of Main Street to the west and one overlooking the square to the north. Outside it was still light enough to see. I sat down on the window-seat where I could see in both directions. It was fifteen minutes before the Judge and his companion came outside. They walked one block north on Main, then turned into a side street, going west. As they turned the corner the burly man fell behind a moment and looked around carefully, his head moving in a slow arc, as though watching for someone. Then he quickened his step and joined the Judge. They walked another block where the residential district began. In the next block they stopped in front of a large house set back some distance from the street, on an expansive lot. An iron grillwork fence surrounded the property, a gate in the middle. The burly man seemed to be examining the gate, bending over it without touching it. Then he walked the length of the fence while the Judge waited. The

light was failing. They were only dim figures. My eyes might not have picked them out at that distance had I not known where they were. They entered and walked up to the front porch where the burly man repeated the inspection procedure with the door. A light came on inside the house, the door opened and they walked in. The shades had all been pulled and I could see nothing through the windows. In a moment the door opened again and the burly man came out, closing the door behind him. I couldn't see him on the porch but I knew he was there. Every minute or so you could see the glow of his cigar as he drew on it. Why was he sitting out there, advertising his presence with that cigar?

I pulled the shades down and lit the lamp. I unpacked my bag and put my things away. Then I shaved, changed my clothes and went downstairs to the dining room. After I finished dinner I walked outside and down the street two blocks to the livery stable. A man was brushing a chestnut mare. He stopped when he saw me. The mare shook her head, pulling at the rope he held.

"Hello," he said, "you want something?" He was elderly, tall, slightly stooped in the shoulders and he spoke in a conversational shout, as though he thought I might be deaf. Probably the night man, I thought. He wouldn't remember Murdock but he might show me the account book.

"I'd like some information," I said. "My name is Hiram Freeman. I'm from San Francisco." He nodded, waiting for me to go on. "I'm here on behalf of the Murdock family making some inquiries. Perhaps you remember. The man who was killed three days ago?"

"Sure do. But I never laid eyes on him. I heard the explosion, you bet." He ran his hand along the mare's shoulder.

"I understand Murdock hired a rig here that morning. I'd like to be sure of the time."

He tied the mare to a post. "Should be in the book. We write down the time you go out and when you come back. We

charge by the hour, unless you hire for the day."

I followed him into a small office. He pulled down a lamp, struck a match, lit the wick and adjusted it. Opening a desk drawer, he pulled out a ledger and handed it to me. "You take a look. Sit right down. I've got to get that mare in her stall. Let me know when you finish."

I opened the book. There it was, written three days ago, about halfway down the page. The name of John Murdock. He'd taken the rig out at ten minutes before nine. But I was looking for something else. I started at the top of the page and ran my finger down the column. Then I saw it. At ten minutes past nine the same morning Judge Taylor had taken out a rig, returning it at six that afternoon. I closed the book and turned out the lamp.

"Find what you wanted?" he asked.

"Yes, I did."

"That's good." He emptied a bucket of oats into a feeding trough.

"I noticed Judge Taylor hired a rig that same morning."

"That he did. He came in the night before and asked me to have it ready."

"May I ask where he went?"

"You can ask, ain't no law against it. I don't have to answer."

"Unless you want to," I said.

"Why should I want to? You go ask the Judge if you want to know. I ain't no blabbermouth."

I smiled. "Neither am I."

"So you say. I don't know you. You told me your name. Could be. Then maybe not."

"I'm Tex Rickard. I own the Northern Saloon down in Goldfield."

"No, you ain't. I seen Tex once and you ain't him. You're funning me."

"Could be. Then maybe not."

"You best run along now. I got work to do."

"No hard feelings?" I asked.

"Hell, no. You didn't steal anything, did you?"

I laughed. I looked back at him as I left and he grinned at me. It had been a long chance but it confirmed my theory. Things were beginning to fall into place. I had hold of something. Back at the hotel, I stopped at the desk and asked the clerk for the city directory. I was fairly sure the house I'd seen the Judge enter was, in fact, his own, but I had to make sure. Opening the book, I found him listed. The address checked.

I went up to my room. The local newspapers the bellboy had brought me were still there. There'd been something in one of them about the Judge. I looked through them. It was on the obituary page, on the day Murdock had been killed. The Judge's uncle on his paternal side had died in Washoe City. The announcement wasn't a death notice but a funeral notice. Judge Taylor was listed as one of the pallbearers. That explained why he'd hired the rig at the livery stable. To attend the funeral. And why he hadn't returned until late afternoon. I clipped the notice and put it in my wallet. Tomorrow morning I'd draft a telegram to Harry Shortall in San Francisco and give him the gist of my theory. That would give him something to think about. Then I'd follow it up with a longer report and post it in the afternoon mail.

I'd reached the conclusion that it was a case of mistaken identity. Judge Taylor had been the intended target. Because of the resemblance between the two men the assassin had instead killed the wrong man, John Murdock. Was there any significance in that? It suggested the assassin might be an outsider, someone not a resident of Carson City. Probably the assassin had a photograph of Judge Taylor; maybe he'd seen him once or twice, nothing more. He'd read the item in the newspaper, probably the day before the funeral in Washoe City, knew the Judge would be in attendance and devised his plan. He'd watched the livery stable for the Judge to appear, making himself inconspicuous. Murdock had arrived first and the assassin had mistaken him for Judge Taylor. When Murdock had driven the rig to the northeast corner of the square he'd followed at a

distance, watching as Murdock parked the rig and hitched the horse. Murdock had walked into the capitol building just as Judge Taylor did each and every day when court was in session. How had the bomber got all that giant powder under the seat of Murdock's buggy? Obviously he'd done it in broad daylight. Yet no witnesses had come forward. He'd probably prepared the spring mechanism beforehand, had it on his person. My guess was he had the box of dynamite in a buggy parked somewhere around the square. He drove it over to where Murdock had left his, parked alongside, lifted the box over and wired it. It could have been done quickly and without attracting attention.

If my conjecture was right, then the assassin might still be in Carson City. He knew he'd killed the wrong man. It was almost a certainty Judge Taylor knew what I knew, had figured it out for himself. Everything pointed to it. He'd seen Murdock in court and must have noticed the resemblance to himself. He was as capable of piecing together the information about the coincidental hiring of rigs at the livery stable as I was. The burly man I'd seen him with tonight was obviously his bodyguard. Someone he'd got recently, from what the bellboy had said. That precaution at the gate to the Judge's house, the drawn shades, the man sitting out there on the porch, it all fitted. The Judge knew. He wasn't taking any chances. I wondered if he knew the identity of the assassin.

I had two things to go on. The assassin killed his victims with giant powder. And he probably didn't live in Carson City. Two weeks ago there had been a dynamite blast in the change room of the Empire Consolidated Mine down in Tonopah. The timing of the explosion hadn't been a matter of chance. It had happened just as the work crews changed, when the normally unoccupied room was crowded with miners coming off and going on their work-shifts. Nineteen men had been killed, over thirty seriously injured. The regular membership of the Rocky Mountain Miners' Association had been out on strike for a month, idling virtually all the mines in the Tonopah-Goldfield

district. The men caught in the explosion had been miners hired by the company to work during the strike. Scabs, the union called them. The Association said the explosion had been caused by a defective boiler in the change room. The company said they had found evidence of cordite in the rubble. This had been confirmed by the sheriff's office.

When I'd been down in Tonopah the newspapers were full of it. Charges and countercharges, accusations and denials. The company had filed an action against the union. The case was on the calendar of the Supreme Court. The disaster at the Empire Consolidated had turned Tonopah topsy-turvy. Everyone had an opinion or a theory. People there had forgotten about the Goldfield bombing. But the people of Goldfield hadn't. A week earlier a bomb had exploded in the Goldfield Stock Exchange, killing the night watchman and starting a fire that razed a city block. For a time fire and wind had threatened the entire city as spot fires from drifting embers blazed up blocks away from the downtown district.

But was any of this pertinent? I didn't know. I'd be thinking of something else and then I'd come back to it. My mind kept turning it over, worrying it like a dog chewing on an old shoe, until I fell asleep.

Early in the morning I drafted a telegram to Shortall. I had breakfast in the hotel and walked over to the telegraph office. Maybe Shortall had some information on the dynamiter. If he accepted my theory of mistaken identity he might want to drop the case. But that would depend upon what the Murdock family decided.

I turned the corner and walked briskly to the Judge's house like a man out taking his morning constitutional. There was a new man sitting on the porch. He appeared not to notice me but his disinterest was too studied. He could probably describe my appearance down to the color of my eyes. Sitting at his feet was a large German shepherd dog. He rubbed its ears, spoke to it and the dog lay down. Out in back of the house a middle-aged woman was hanging laundry on the clothesline. Probably the

Judge's wife or housekeeper, I thought. She looked my way and I got a good look at her. Her hair was dark, done up in a bun at the crown of her head. She was tall, with rangy arms and legs. Her face was full but her features small, except for her eyes. As she turned away I saw the glint of a polished shell comb in her hair. I moved down the street and into the next block, turned left and returned to the hotel.

Back in my room I sat down at the desk and started writing my report for Shortall. He liked detail. The more the better. So I put down everything I'd observed, not verbatim, but at considerable length. For good measure I included my speculations. Putting it down on paper helped put the whole matter into focus. I'd become so absorbed with the report I was surprised when I looked at my watch and saw it was already noon. I addressed one of the hotel envelopes, folded the sheets, put them in and sealed the flap. There was a knock at the door. It was the bellboy telling me I had a telegram. I told him to slide it underneath the door. It was from Shortall. *Identity of dynamiter unknown. No physical description. May use name of Victor Blessing. Not positive. Stay on case.*

If Shortall couldn't turn up a description of the man in San Francisco, there wasn't one. Unless the Nevada authorities were holding back. I didn't think they'd hold back on a physical description if they had one. They might hold back on something else but not that. I didn't like it. If the dynamiter had been able to conceal his identity all this time either he was cunning beyond belief or riding a streak of incredible luck. Maybe both. It gave him the advantage. He could move without suspicion. Simply another face in the crowd. And he knew it. He'd want to keep that advantage.

I burned the telegram in a dish, waited until the ashes cooled, locked my door and went downstairs. The dining room was open for lunch. I took a table by the window looking out on Main Street After I gave my order I glanced around the room and saw Judge Taylor and three men seated at a table against the far wall. The burly man was with him, bent over his plate,

chewing, his eyes lifted, scanning the room. The other two men appeared to be either lawyers or court clerks. One of them read aloud from what looked to be a transcript. Every so often he would pause, the Judge would nod, and the man would go on reading again. When my lunch came I divided my attention between eating and idly watching the street.

I was lighting a cigar when I saw her come out of the bakery on the opposite side of the street. She had changed her dress. Right away I saw the shell comb in her hair. In her hand she carried a large wicker basket. Probably she did her marketing every day at this time, in the same shops. I looked at my watch. It was a little after one. She entered a dry goods store three doors down the street. She appeared to be alone. I was sure the house hadn't been left unguarded. The man and the dog would be there, sitting on the porch. Maybe the Judge hadn't thought it necessary to send a man along with her, if he'd thought about it at all. I wondered.

There was the usual amount of sidewalk traffic, people coming and going. Then I noticed a man standing on the corner. He pulled out a pocket watch and looked at it. She came out then, carrying the basket in the crook of her arm, and turned into a general merchandise store. The man waited a moment, looked around and followed her inside. I paid my bill, left the hotel, crossed the street and looked inside the store. She stood at the counter, waiting for a clerk. The man was on the opposite side in the bottled goods section, his back turned to her. I went in.

A clerk came up to her and asked, "How are you today, Mrs. Fraser?"

"Quite well, thank you." She took a shopping list from her basket and handed it to him.

So she wasn't his wife. His housekeeper then. The clerk pulled several items from the shelves and placed them on the counter. He crossed the room and got two bottles of beer from a case on the floor, polishing them on his apron. He looked at her list again. "We've got some fresh oysters today," he said.

"Isn't the Judge partial to oysters?"

"If they're nice," she answered.

"Right back here, in the barrel. You can see they're still packed in ice. Came in fresh this morning from San Francisco." She followed the clerk to the rear of the store.

The man crossed over to the counter. Someone else passed between us, blocking my view of him for a moment, and he had his back toward me, but it appeared he took a bottle of beer from inside his coat and exchanged it for one on the counter. It was done quickly with the motions of a magician giving a performance, but without the flourish. I wasn't sure I'd seen it myself until he crossed the room and covertly placed the bottle he'd taken from the counter into the wooden case on the floor. He hadn't seen me. I bent over, turned my head and looked down into the cigar case. I tried to make sense of what I'd seen. Was the man a local prankster? A malcontent? How many ridiculous explanations might there be? Something about it bothered me. However preposterous his act might appear on the surface, he'd been too purposeful. The fact that he'd walked into the store with that bottle hidden under his coat showed premeditation of some kind.

When I looked up he was gone. In the brief time I'd taken my eyes off him he'd left the store. Mrs. Fraser was still in the back talking about the oysters. The clerk had given her one to taste. I had two choices. Get the beer bottle the man had left on the counter or go outside and follow him. The more important one seemed the bottle. I edged along the counter, got it and put it inside my coat. Then I walked over to the case on the floor, lifted another bottle out and placed it on the counter with her order. They hadn't seen me. Mrs. Fraser patted her lips with a handkerchief. She'd finally decided to take a pint of oysters.

When I got outside he was nowhere in sight. I walked along the street, looking inside the shops. He'd simply vanished. When I'd seen him switch the bottles I'd looked him over carefully. He was a squat, powerfully built man, weighing close to two hundred pounds with an exceedingly dull and heavy face.

But his eyes contradicted that dullness. They were small, hard as marbles, the eyes of a snake. And the little finger of his left hand was missing.

Two blocks down the street I found a chemist's shop. When I handed him the bottle and asked him to make an analysis of its contents, he looked at me skeptically. I assured him I was serious, offering to pay him in advance. He asked me when I wanted it and I said as soon as possible, it was important. He nodded, as though to humor me, and told me to come back in an hour.

I still had the report in my pocket I'd written to Harry Shortall. I walked across the street to the postoffice and sent it off, registered mail. Then I walked around town, looking for him. Wherever he'd gone he wasn't out in the open. Maybe he was watching me from some window. That was how I'd first seen him. I went back to my hotel and up to my room. I had to do something. So I sat on the windowseat, wrote out a description of him and watched the street. I didn't think I'd see him and I didn't. After about fifteen minutes I went downstairs to the bar. It was the slack time of the day. Four men were playing cards at a poker table in the back. The barman came up and asked what I'd have. I said a glass of beer. He drew it, then set a plate of hard-boiled eggs in front of me. I took one, tapped it on the bar and, peeling the shell off, thought of how it always came off in bits and pieces, of how, once you'd started, it could never be made whole again. I saw the mistake I'd made. I should have followed him when I had the opportunity. Taking the bottle at that moment hadn't been all that important. I could have got it later from Mrs. Fraser on the street or, better still, by asking her for it at the Judge's house. The way he'd suddenly disappeared pointed to the possibility that he'd seen me make the switch. When he went outside he could have doubled back and glanced inside the store. Maybe instead of my following him, he'd followed me. I ate the egg, drank my beer and looked at my watch. The hour was up.

The chemist looked at me with curiosity, his skepticism gone.

"You know what was in that bottle of beer?"

"Arsenic?"

"Cyanide. Enough to kill a horse. Maybe two."

"Would anyone tasting it know it had been poisoned?"

"For a minute, they might. I'd guess less than a minute. After that, it wouldn't matter."

"You wrote an analysis?"

He handed me a sheet of paper. "Say, mister, how did cyanide get in that beer?"

"It would appear someone put it there. Wouldn't it?" I paid him and he handed me the beer bottle wrapped in a sack, the cap pressed back on.

I crossed the square and entered the capitol. The Supreme Court was on the top floor. A crowd of people milled around in the lobby, smoking and talking. The doors to the courtroom stood open. The bench was vacant. Court had either adjourned or was in recess. I saw the burly man in a corner outside the judicial chambers, watching me, his eyes fastened on the sack I carried. He started toward me.

"What you got in that sack?" He blocked my way.

I handed him my card. "Tell Judge Taylor I'd like to speak with him. It's important."

He didn't look at my card. He held his other hand out. He wanted the sack. I gave it to him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'd rather tell the Judge. You can hold it. It won't explode. But don't drink it. The kick would kill you."

He looked up sharply. "Who the hell are you?"

"You have it in your hand."

He looked at my card then. "Wait here a minute. I'll ask him. They're having recess." He opened the door and closed it behind him.

I looked around the lobby. I didn't see anyone I recognized. He came out and held the door open for me. "Through here. He'll see you."

I followed him through a small corridor. He stopped before

a door at the end, tapped lightly, opened it for me and waited outside. The room was elegant. Red drapes at the tall windows softened the light outside. The carpet was thick, chocolate brown in color. Judge Taylor sat behind a huge walnut desk. I saw the beer bottle on his desk blotter. He'd put his pocket watch beside it and opened the case.

"I can give you ten minutes. How is Harry Shortall?" He stood up, leaned over and shook my hand. His grip was strong. He gestured to a chair.

I smiled. "His usual self."

"What else? He was one hell of a lawman. How does he like doing private work?"

"He's the best there is."

"What brings you to Carson City, Mr. Freeman?"

I told him, from the beginning, like I was making a report, but kept to the essentials. When I got to the part about how I'd decided that Murdock's death had been a case of mistaken identity and how he, Judge Taylor, had been the intended victim, he looked across and nodded, then motioned for me to go on. I finished by telling him what had happened in the general merchandise store, how the bottles had been switched, and handed him the chemist's report. He read it and frowned at the bottle.

"The man is resourceful. Diabolical. He even knows what brand of beer I drink. You're quick, Freeman. I hadn't thought he'd try to get at me through Mrs. Fraser. I'm in your debt. And very grateful."

I made a gesture of acknowledgement. "Shortall wired me this noon. He didn't give me much to go on."

"We've had no description of him. Until now. You've seen him. That puts a new slant on it."

I handed him the sheet of hotel stationery I'd written the description on. He read it, took a pen from his vest, wrote something across the bottom, signed it and stood up. He said, half to himself, "His little finger missing on the left hand." He walked to the door, opened it, and handed the paper to the

burly man outside. "Take this to Sheriff Carpenter. Right away." Then he closed the door and turned to me. "You'd make a good miner, Freeman."

"Oh?"

"You find color, then you follow the vein. Pretty soon you're in pay dirt." He stood by the window, looking out over the square.

"I wouldn't make wages. But I like the metaphor."

He laughed, then came over and sat down. His expression changed and he was the Judge again. "We know he sometimes uses the name of Victor Blessing. It may even be his real name. Think of the irony in that name. Fantastic, isn't it? He's blown twenty-two people to kingdom come, maimed and crippled over thirty people. He calculates mayhem, then plans it out the way an engineer might. He may have studied engineering or chemistry. We've reason to think so. He's demonstrated his knowledge of giant powder and elaborate ways of igniting it. Have you ever heard of Greek fire?"

"No."

"Well, he's improved upon it. The Byzantine Greeks used it in medieval warfare. They poured vats of it down on the Turks. It's a liquid, made of sulphur, nitrate, naptha and other volatile fluids. He's found a way to explode it in a bottle, by shattering it. Upon impact. It's so volatile no spark is needed to ignite it."

"How do you know this?"

"We found a bottle. Take my word for it. He used it on the Goldfield Stock Exchange. Damned near set the whole city on fire. We think he's got some here in Carson. You could throw a bottle of it no bigger than that"—he pointed at the beer bottle—"and the explosion would be equal to three sticks of giant powder, not to mention the fire."

"Why is Blessing after you?"

"Because of that trouble down at Tonopah. The suit against the Rocky Mountain Miners' Association by the Consolidated Empire. It's on the calendar for next week. I've had threats, been told to disqualify myself, called a lackey of the mining

interests. You know the sort of thing."

"Why you?"

"Not just me, the whole court. But they've singled me out for special treatment."

"And you won't tolerate violence."

He shook his head firmly. "Absolutely not. And I won't be intimidated."

"Has Blessing been hired by the union?"

"By a certain element in the union. The troublemakers. They're out in the open. Perhaps you've read some of their statements in the newspapers. They do nothing violent themselves, beyond inciting, and they hedge on that. They use a lot of conjunctions."

"Have you proof?"

"Some. We hope for more. I can't be more specific where jeopardy is involved. You understand?"

"Yes, of course." That meant someone had come forward with information. But whoever it was hadn't seen Blessing and couldn't identify him.

"Blessing, whoever he is, is a monster." His eyes were hard, his big mouth drawn down to be firm, and you could tell he spoke from conviction. "The man has no conscience. Absolutely none. Any man who holds human life so cheaply is mindless. He kills people he doesn't even know. In wholesale lots." He shook his head, as though he couldn't believe it himself. "Do you realize it's taken mankind three thousand years to write the law? If mankind has a conscience, nothing he has devised is so great as his sense of justice. The law he has written. True law is the highest expression of man, man in his moral sense. Now this man Blessing comes along. What does he represent? The destroyer. The destructive element."

I watched him. There was marvelous authority in his person. More even than in Harry Shortall. The word *please* wasn't in his vocabulary. He didn't need it. He could talk a lynch mob out of its fury if he had to, shame them to silence and they'd hand the rope over with an apology, in awe of him. He was a combination of worldly decorum and Nevada hardrock miner.

He went on. "A moment ago I said mankind has a conscience and that written law represents the best expression of that conscience. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying anything about a collective conscience. Such a thing doesn't exist. Only the individual can have a conscience. No, I'm not contradicting myself. The law is abstract. Without the individual it's nothing. The individual is the agency through which the law must live and act. An abstraction has no efficacy in the world of reality. An individual man must apprehend Victor Blessing. Individual men must sit in judgment on him. An individual man must sentence him. That's how the conscience of mankind works."

Some of what he'd said I'd thought about before. Most people when they think about the law think of it as a collective "we." But the Judge put the emphasis upon the individual. A sense of right and wrong couldn't exist in the abstract, out in the ether. It had to exist within the individual. If it didn't, if it was totally lacking, you got a Victor Blessing.

"I don't want to sound like I'm carping," he said, clasping his hands on his desk, "but you made the wrong move back there when you didn't follow him when you had the chance. The bottle could have waited."

"I found that out, after the fact. With hindsight, we'd all be perfect."

He burst out laughing. "You are quick, Freeman. I deserved that." He stood and reached for his robe hanging on the coat tree. "I'd like nothing better than to continue this conversation. But recess is over. Perhaps tonight. Will you be my guest for dinner? My house, six o'clock?" He snapped the case of the watch shut and slipped it into his pocket.

"I never could refuse fresh oysters."

"Is that what we're having? You probably know the whole menu, down to dessert. Is it pie or cake?" He smiled, lifted his arms and straightened the robe over his shoulders.

The concussion blew the windows out. The drapes billowed inside the room. I saw the chandelier swinging, heard debris raining against the side of the building. The sound of the ex-

plosion echoed in the distance, like rolling thunder.

Judge Taylor ran to the window, ignoring the broken glass on the floor. "Goddam that man to hell!" he shouted. I didn't say anything. I stared. The whole second floor corner of the Arlington House, where my room had been, was gone. Out of the gaping hole poured a great tongue of green flame. In the distance I heard the frantic bell of the engine company. People were running in all directions. Some into the hotel, others out of it. I saw one man, knocked down in the street by the concussion, rise slowly to his feet. He was dazed. From inside the hotel I heard a woman screaming.

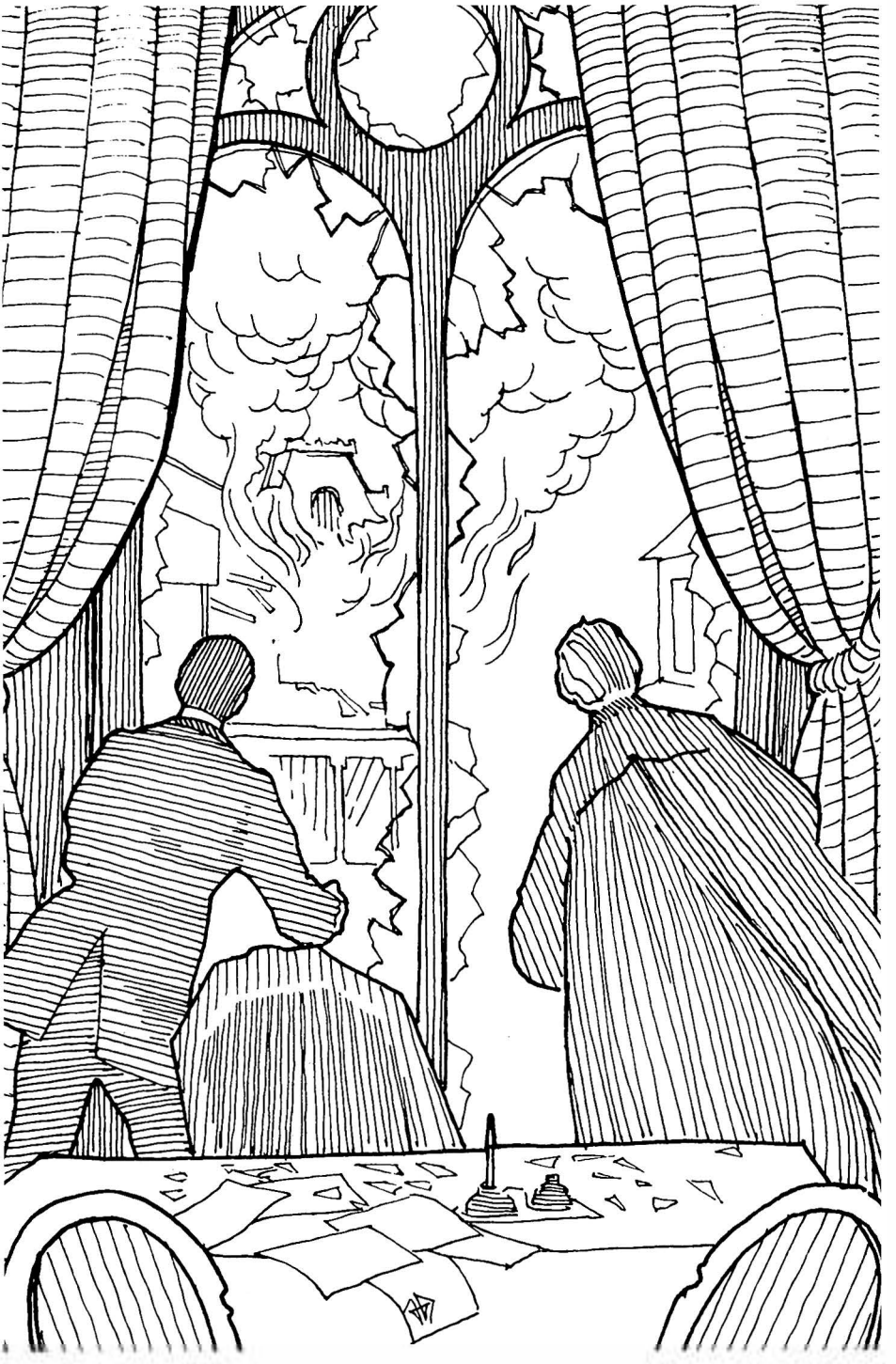
"That was my room," I said.

He answered, his eyes fastened on the disaster. "Yes, because you can identify him. You are the eyewitness."

A cleaning maid had been killed and three people seriously injured. One of those injured was the bellboy who happened to be upstairs when the bomb exploded. He'd been taken to the hospital in Virginia City for surgery. They got the fire under control in half an hour, though it did considerable damage. Everything in my room was reduced to atoms.

The Judge met me in the hotel bar at five o'clock. He'd refused to adjourn court because of the bombing. When he joined me I could see a lot of people looking at us. Everyone was talking about the explosion. Word had got around it had happened in my room. I'd overheard a lot of speculation, some of it fanciful. But no one had questioned me about it, except Sheriff Carpenter, whom I made a statement for. Whatever he told the reporters wouldn't come out until tomorrow morning. When we finished our drink the Judge suggested we'd find more privacy at his home. We left, the burly man walking ahead of us through the lobby.

We talked over dinner. I gave him my version. Blessing had seen me switch the bottles in the store. He knew I'd found him out, had seen him. Somehow he'd got out of sight and followed me to the Arlington House. He'd probably had me in view all the time I'd been out looking for him. I'd gone up to my room



and he'd found out which one it was. He had ways of finding out. Then, after I'd left the hotel, he'd gone up to my room, let himself in, most likely with a skeleton key, and prepared the bomb. Either he'd rigged up a trip mechanism of some sort or used the door itself as the trigger so when I opened it, it would detonate the bomb. But it had been the maid, on her cleaning rounds of the second floor, who'd opened the door. The Judge said the tongue of green flame we'd seen was Greek fire. Blessing hadn't wanted to miss. Yet he had missed. Twice. And two innocent people were dead.

The Judge insisted I be his guest. I accepted. Part of his reason was hospitality, part gratefulness. But I knew he wanted me protected. He hoped, as I did, that Blessing would be picked up before he could leave Carson. Sheriff Carpenter had his description. The stage lines were being watched, the Virginia and Truckee depot, all the livery stables, hotels and rooming houses. When they got him, I would make the positive identification. We stayed up past midnight waiting. But nothing happened.

The next morning I went with one of the deputies to watch the depot. I wasn't out in the open where Blessing could see me if he came in. He didn't. After the local left for Reno, the last train on the daily schedule, we took up our watch at one of the livery stables. It turned out to be the one where I'd questioned the night man about Judge Taylor. He fixed up a sort of blind for me behind some bales of hay where I could see everything going on. Every now and then when the palce was empty he'd glance over at the blind and shout, "You sure ain't Tex Rickard. But you must be somebody. Yes, sir." Then: "Who the hell are you waiting for?" I was tempted to answer back Joaquin Murieta but I didn't think he'd see the humor in that so I said nothing. He shrugged his shoulders at my silence and went on with his work, talking to himself or the horses.

Three days passed. We kept up our surveillance, working in shifts, watching the stage lines and livery stables around the clock. It seemed Blessing had vanished without leaving a trace. On the fourth day Sheriff Carpenter called it off. He'd decided

Blessing had somehow slipped unseen out of Carson, perhaps on foot, traveling by night. Reluctantly, Judge Taylor agreed. I wired Shortall. He told me to return to San Francisco. *A bad run of luck. Witness you sought in Tonopah reported in Placerville. Inquire at Cary House.* That would mean a side trip and a stop overnight.

Shortall had been easy on me. He didn't ordinarily use words like "luck." He knew we were disappointed. Blessing had got away just when it seemed we had him within our grasp. Judge Taylor kept whatever regrets he had to himself. Over dinner that night he sensed my own mood and tried to cheer me up. He talked about grouse hunting down around Luning and made me promise to come over in the autumn when the season opened. Then we played a game of chess in the parlor and I think he deliberately let me win, though it wasn't easy. He made it interesting. All evening he didn't mention Blessing by name, not once.

My train left at seven in the morning. We had an early breakfast, then he walked me to the depot without his bodyguard. The burly man had returned to his other duties when it seemed Blessing had slipped out of Carson. We shook hands and I boarded the train. From my window I watched him walk toward the capitol, pausing briefly to chat with friends on the street. Then I turned to watch the passengers boarding the train. There was a crowd. Many of them were talking to friends or relatives, hanging on to that last moment of presence before goodbye. The baggage truck rumbled by on the platform. A newsboy came down the aisle of the coach hawking the morning paper. A large woman carrying two bags lowered herself into a chair at the opposite end of the coach. She opened one of the bags, took out a fur muff, tucked her hands inside it and looked out the window. Finally I felt the coach move, that first tentative lurch forward. We left the depot. Houses and buildings seemed to move and disappear past my window as the train gathered momentum, headed for Reno.

At Truckee, the train stopped while a second engine was

added for the steep grade up Donner Pass. A double-header, they call it. The conductor said there would be time for the passengers to get off and walk around the station area. I put on my coat, took a brisk turn around the depot, up the length of the platform and back down again. The mountain air was cool and refreshing. I bought a local newspaper and folded it into my pocket. There'd be time enough to read it on the train. The train crew waited for the second engine to back into position. Its boiler had a full head of steam, the excess being shot off, almost obscuring the tracks. I walked the platform again, felt more limber, and went inside the depot for coffee. The woman I'd noticed boarding the train in Carson was walking the platform. She'd put on a yellow linen duster and moved with surprising easiness for so large a woman. Finishing my coffee I boarded the train. The engines whistled. The conductors herded people aboard and we pulled out of the station.

We arrived in Auburn on schedule, around two o'clock. I'd checked the stage connections to Placerville and found one that left in half an hour. As I had no baggage to collect I hired a livery at the depot and went directly to the stage office. By the time I bought my ticket the stage had pulled up outside and was taking on passengers. Baggage was loaded on top and tied down. I took a seat by the door. A passenger asked the driver how long the trip would take. He said two hours, more or less, with stops. Just as we were ready to leave I saw the woman in the yellow duster arrive in a livery and hurry inside the office. The agent came outside and told the driver to wait. The horses were blowing and dancing around, eager to start. The driver reached down and hoisted her bags aboard. The agent opened the door for her, she lifted her skirts and stepped inside, the passengers moving over to make room for her. The driver yelled to the horses and the coach swayed forward on its springs.

We were soon down in the American River canyon, into rough country, then up the steep road on the other side, the horses straining against the grade. Spectacular views appeared at nearly every turn. The river below was a tiny ribbon of silver.

Conversation among the passengers was the usual thing: introductions, the exchange of cards and comments on the weather and scenery. When we arrived at Pilot Hill the driver stopped to water the horses. One passenger got off, another boarded. The stretch ahead of us to Coloma was all downhill and we made good time.

My thoughts were of the witness I would interview in Placerville. I'd been turning the matter over in my mind, as I hadn't thought of it since I'd left Tonopah. Maybe my fellow passengers thought I was withdrawn. I suppose I gave that impression. The gentle rocking of the coach gradually lulled me into a reverie and I dozed off. When the stage pulled to a stop, I awoke with a start. Looking outside, I saw we'd arrived in Coloma. Some of the passengers were buying papers from a newsboy. I noticed the large woman sitting opposite me beckon to him with her head. She removed her hands from the fur muff in her lap and reached for her change purse. She wore black gloves. That struck me as odd, that she would wear gloves *and* a muff. It wasn't that cold. Maybe her hands were sensitive to cold. Some people can't keep their feet warm unless they wear two pair of socks. Maybe with her it was her hands. Then she leaned forward and took the paper from the boy. She opened her change purse. I knew what it was, there among her change, the instant I saw it. I was shocked out of my drowsiness.

I had one in my pocket exactly like it. It was the brass token from the Arlington House in Carson City. You couldn't mistake it for a coin, not with those scalloped edges. You could even read the lettering on it. A woman *might* carry a cigar token around in her purse. But the odds against it were a thousand to one. She snapped the purse shut, put it in her duster pocket, unfolded the paper in her lap and lowered her head, not once glancing my way. I tried to remember if she'd spoken during the journey. I didn't think she had. Perhaps a word or two. She'd nodded and smiled. The truth was I hadn't paid much attention to her.

Her cheeks were generously rouged. A dusting of face powder

over that. Then a veil from her hat covered most of her features. Her hair, expansive and with graying curls, could be a wig. I pretended to look out the window but I was watching her gloved left hand, particularly the little finger. She turned the paper over. All her fingers had been mobile except the little one. It had remained rigid, as though in a cast. Probably that finger of the glove was stuffed with tissue paper, with something, to give the appearance of a finger. And the fur muff. It served a double purpose. To further conceal the missing finger. What else? Probably a bottle of Greek fire. Maybe a stick or two of giant powder. So I was at the top of his list. More important even than Judge Taylor. But then the Judge had told me why.

On the grade into Placerville I feigned drowsiness, letting my head sway with the movement of the coach. Once or twice I tried to penetrate that mask for traces of his beard but none showed through the powder and rouge. It was a clever disguise. It explained why we hadn't found him in Carson. He'd probably checked out of one hotel and into another, leaving as a man and entering as a woman. He'd finished reading the paper. His hands were back inside the muff. With my eyelids half closed I saw him glance at me briefly and then I was positive. It was the eyes. His eyes. They were hard as marbles. He thought I was dozing. He looked away out the window.

When we arrived in Placerville there was a livery from the Cary House waiting. I could have taken it to the hotel but I decided to walk instead. He didn't know where I was going. Let him find out the hard way. He had two bags to bother with. They looked heavy. I wondered if he'd carry them when he followed me. No doubt they contained giant powder, dynamite caps, fuses, and God knows what all. I walked two blocks and turned into a pharmacy, bought a razor, shaving soap, the things I'd need to make myself look presentable. My back was turned at an angle to the street but I could watch it from the corner of my eye. He walked right by and if I hadn't been watching for it I'd never have noticed the imperceptible swivel of his head as he glanced inside. I paid the clerk and walked out.

He'd checked the two bags at the stage office. He didn't have them. Probably he'd send for them when he found out where I intended to stay. He was on the opposite side of the street, walking away from me. When I'd gone a block farther down the street he crossed over and followed me, two blocks behind.

I could have led him a merry chase but I couldn't do anything foolish. He'd notice it. My movements had to be perfectly natural, unsuspecting. I walked into the Cary House and registered in my own name. He'd check that and note my room number. I wondered what method he'd chosen for me this time. A trigger hidden in the bedsprings, set to explode when I put my weight on the bed? A bottle of Greek fire tossed casually through the open ransom of my door as he passed down the hall? No doubt he'd thought it out. But with his mind you couldn't know the means, only the end.

I went up to my room. The bellboy lit the lamp and I made a point of talking to him, knowing our voices could be heard in the hall outside. He adjusted the shades, checked the pitcher to make sure it was filled with water and opened the door to leave. As I continued talking with him and handing him a tip, I saw Blessing walking up the stairs. I was in plain sight, nothing to show that I was in any way suspicious. He must think me a fool. He passed on down the hall, looking straight ahead, without the least concern that I saw what room he entered. He was that sure.

When the bellboy left I closed the transom. I couldn't risk leaving it open. He'd taken a room three doors down from mine. I'd heard the door shut before I closed the transom. If I listened carefully I could hear him open it when he came out, whenever that might be. I pulled a chair up beside the door and sat down, listening. I thought of sending a wire to Shortall or Judge Taylor, then ruled it out. To leave my room, even for a few minutes, would be unwise. Like handing him an invitation to get in. If I went to the local police it would be the same. They'd want to know all about it. He'd know I'd gone. He'd follow me or watch me from his window. Maybe enter my room

and hide the bomb. Besides, there wasn't time. This was something I had to do myself. I heard his door open.

I opened mine an inch, very softly. From the sounds I could tell he was walking toward the other end of the hall, away from my room. I looked out through the crack in the door and saw him. He wore the dress he'd traveled in, the wig was in place, but the hat and veil were gone. And the gloves. Over his left arm he carried a bath towel and in his right hand a small bag, probably his toilet articles. He walked to the lady's bath, opened the door, glanced inside and entered. I heard the lock snap shut from the inside.

I gave him a couple of minutes. While I waited I took out my revolver, made sure it was loaded, then put it back inside my coat. I opened the door and walked quietly down the hall. I heard water running in the tub. I wanted to catch him in the bath. That way he'd be naked, less likely to have a stick of giant powder or bottle of Greek fire hidden on his person. I was sure he hadn't gone in there without something. I heard the rustle of clothing. Then he turned off the water. Silence. When I heard the match strike and flare up I felt a chill come over me. I thought he'd heard me and lit a fuse. Then I smelled cigar smoke. He got into the tub and the noise he made sounded like a beached whale.

Just as I stepped back to throw my weight against the door, my gun drawn, I heard footsteps behind me. A man had come out of his room. He stopped and stared at me. I had no time for explanations. I hurled myself against the door. It burst open, wood splintering and cracking. The first thing I saw was the water heater, then the open window, a fire rope hanging out of it. But he was there, in the tub. His dress was draped over a chair. On the floor within his reach were four sticks of giant powder tied together with a fuse. He looked grotesque. He'd left the wig on. The cigar stuck out of his mouth, frozen in an attitude of surprise. The hair on his chest and shoulders matted against his flesh as he rose to a sitting position. His eyes flicked toward the dynamite.

"Don't try it," I said, holding the gun on him.

He shrugged his shoulders and drew on his cigar.

A crowd had gathered behind me, attracted by the breaking down of the door. I couldn't turn to look at them but I knew they were there. They couldn't see him inside because I blocked their view of the tub. A man's voice said, "What's going on here?"

"Put on that dress," I said to Blessing.

He didn't answer.

"Do it," I said.

"Who the hell do you think you are, breaking in on that lady?" It was the man's voice behind me, someone playing good Samaritan.

I didn't turn around. "You stay out of it. This doesn't concern you."

"The hell it doesn't." He grabbed me from behind, locking his arms around me. I couldn't move the gun. He had me off balance.

Blessing leaped out of the tub. They saw him then. A woman gasped. He picked up the dynamite and very calmly touched the end of the cigar to the fuse. It sparkled. He held it out with his left hand while he reached for the dress with his right. He got into it, holding on to the dynamite, changing it back and forth, one hand to the other. The man behind me relaxed his hold but didn't let go. I shook him off. He stepped back, muttering something intended as an apology.

"My God," a woman said, "he's going to kill us."

They ran for the stairs, a mad scramble, their curiosity turned into panic. Blessing extended his hand toward me, holding the dynamite, as though it were a gift. I knew if I reached for it he would pull it back. He made as though he would toss it to me, the way you throw a ball to a child, making several underhanded passes with it. Then he tossed it up in the air and caught it. He was playing for time. He knew how long the fuse would burn. It was a challenge, to see which of us would be the first to break and run. I watched the fuse as he put on that juggling

act, passing it from one hand to the other. Slowly the expression on his face hardened. He'd realized I wouldn't back down.

Then, without warning, he did toss it. Not into my hands. That would have been too easy. But behind me, out of reach. It rolled on the floor. As I turned I saw him dive for the open window, his hands groping for the fire rope. The fuse was too short to pull out with my fingers. I had my cigar cutter in my hand, clipped the fuse and dropped the dynamite into the tub. I leaned out of the window and saw him in the alley below, looking up. As I lowered myself on the rope I saw him running into the darkness. He was barefoot and made no sound. He was almost to the end of the alley when I touched ground. For a man of his weight he ran effortlessly. His only encumbrance was the dress. As he rounded the corner he seemed to trip over his skirts but recovered himself, then was gone. When I reached the corner he was nowhere in sight. It was a back street, poorly lighted. If I kept running in the direction he'd gone I'd be chasing shadows. There were other intersecting alleys. He could have run into any one of them. I stopped and looked around.

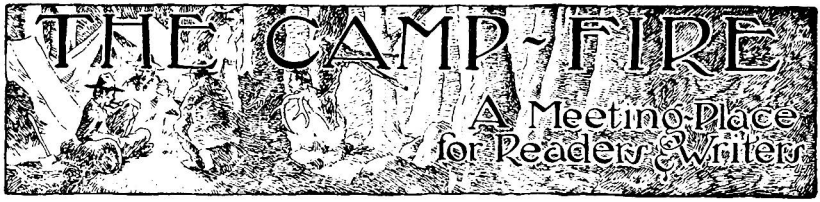
Twenty feet away, set back from the street, stood a wood frame warehouse. It wasn't the building itself that interested me but the portion underneath. It was constructed on a foundation of horizontal timbers supported by wooden piers. It was partially covered over on the outside with shingles. There was a small hinged door, a crawl space entry, and the door moved, as though a breeze had touched it.

I walked over and listened. He was under there, crawling or moving on his stomach quietly. I opened the door, my gun in my hand. It was pitch dark, with little or no head clearance. I flattened myself out and started after him. He heard me. He moved faster, headed for the other side. I reached a place where a wooden stringer overhead allowed no clearance. I groped along it until I found a place where I could squeeze under. My mouth tasted of dirt. He was on some boards, scrambling over them, when I heard the sound of wood cracking and splintering. He cried out. It sounded like an echo reverberating, disappear-

ing into the depths of the earth. At the very end of his cry there was an explosion that rocked the whole foundation. A tongue of green flame shot up directly ahead of me, illuminating the darkness. I saw what had happened. He'd crawled across an old boarded-over well. The boards had collapsed. He'd fallen into it. When he hit bottom the bottle of Greek fire he'd concealed in his dress had broken and exploded.

The building was on fire. The fire bell was clanging downtown when I crawled out and dusted myself. They wouldn't be able to save the building. The flames had already burned through the flooring into the upper portion. I walked over to Quartz Street and found the sheriff's office. A report had to be made, something to satisfy protocol. It would go into the records, officially stamped, filed and docketed for posterity in a wooden box. I would try and write it in such a way as to show cause and effect. The latter would be relatively easy, a matter of describing events. Cause would be more difficult. If at birth his mind had been a blank slate to be written upon, like an empty page in a hotel register, you could only wonder at the nature of those who had left their mark. Had he thought he had a case? A warped idealist maybe? Distorted to the point where he no longer cared about means or end or whether one justified the other. He'd appointed himself sole arbiter. Was there, then, an antecedent cause? If you looked for that you'd eventually go all the way back to first cause and blame it on God or creation itself. It would be like making out a bill of particulars on the machinery of causality, and the further back in time you went, the further removed you got from the fact of Victor Blessing's existence, the more abstract it would become. It hadn't been an abstraction that brought death to twenty-three people. Victor Blessing himself had been the agency of death, including his own. Better to see it as a matter of individual conscience. Or the lack of one.

When I finished my report I walked over to the telegraph office and sent a wire to Judge Taylor and Harry Shortall. In ten words, I said: *Blessing is dead. Like Lucifer, he had a fall. Freeman.*



MORE L'AMOUR

I would like to congratulate you for your FAR WEST Magazine. It is of a high standard. But I disagree on your list of best western books. I think Louis L'Amour's Sackett book or Mountain Valley War book should be number one.

I would enjoy seeing more of L'Amour in future issues of FAR WEST.

Steve Gordy
Ringgold, Ga.

ABOUT FAST GUNS

Of all the western gunslingers, who was the fastest?

Art Ketchum
Cincinnatii, Ohio

According to Wyatt Earp, speed wasn't important in a gun fight. What you had to be able to do was "take your time . . . in a hurry." Most of the old pistoleros were pretty fast, but for sheer speed (and accuracy) it would be a toss up between "Wild Bill" Hickok and John Wesley Hardin. Hickok's exploits are legendary, but it isn't widely known that Hardin once outdrew a man who was pointing a loaded six-gun at him. The man ordered Hardin to "leave town or beat the drop." Hardin complied, not by leaving town, but by drawing and shooting before the other man's finger could tighten around the trigger of his gun. You've got to do some pretty fast shootin' to come out winners in a situation like that. But Hardin did it, earning him the reputation as the fastest gun in the west.

FOREIGN WESTERNS

I know that Louis L'Amour is the top ranked western writer in the United States. What I am curious to know is, who is England's top-rated western author? How does he (or she) compare to writers in the U.S.A.?

Sheldon Roberts
Denver, Colo.

Probably the most popular writer in England doing westerns is J.T. Edson. To date Edson has more than one hundred western novels to his credit, his first having been published in the early 1960's. Edson, like L'Amour, has a large following and many of his novels are now being distributed in the United States. As far as comparing his work to that of authors in America, as our English cousins would say, "He's absolutely top-ho."

A NEW SUBSCRIBER

I picked up your first printing and sent away for a year's subscription. have been very happy with this Western monthly.

Your July issue with full length novel "The Taking of a Ranch" by V.A. Glover has been a joy reading and I am looking forward to the next issue for the conclusion.

Roland J. Purdy
Puyallup, Wash.

LOUIS L'AMOUR FAN

I am a subscriber and an avid reader of FAR WEST. I like the idea of two and three-part stories.

I must congratulate you on signing an agreement with Louis L'Amour. He's the greatest. I am trying to get his complete works and so far have 70 of his books. Could you please tell me what other pen names he uses besides "Tex Burns" and "Jim Mayo."

Keep up the good work.

John M. Clarke
Houston, Texas

TWO-PART STORIES

Your July No. 5 issue of FAR WEST Magazine—the first issue of a two-part full-length novel, "The Taking of a Ranch."

I think it is one hell of a good idea. Really enjoyed this issue. I would rather buy each issue this way or even it it only had one full novel, no short stories.

You sure picked one hell of an interesting story to start off with. I started in and read it and did not put it down until I came to the last word. Said to myself, "What a story!"

So far it has been a top story and better than quite a few books I have bought off the racks at $1.25 per copy.

Earl Yoder
Idaho Falls, Idaho