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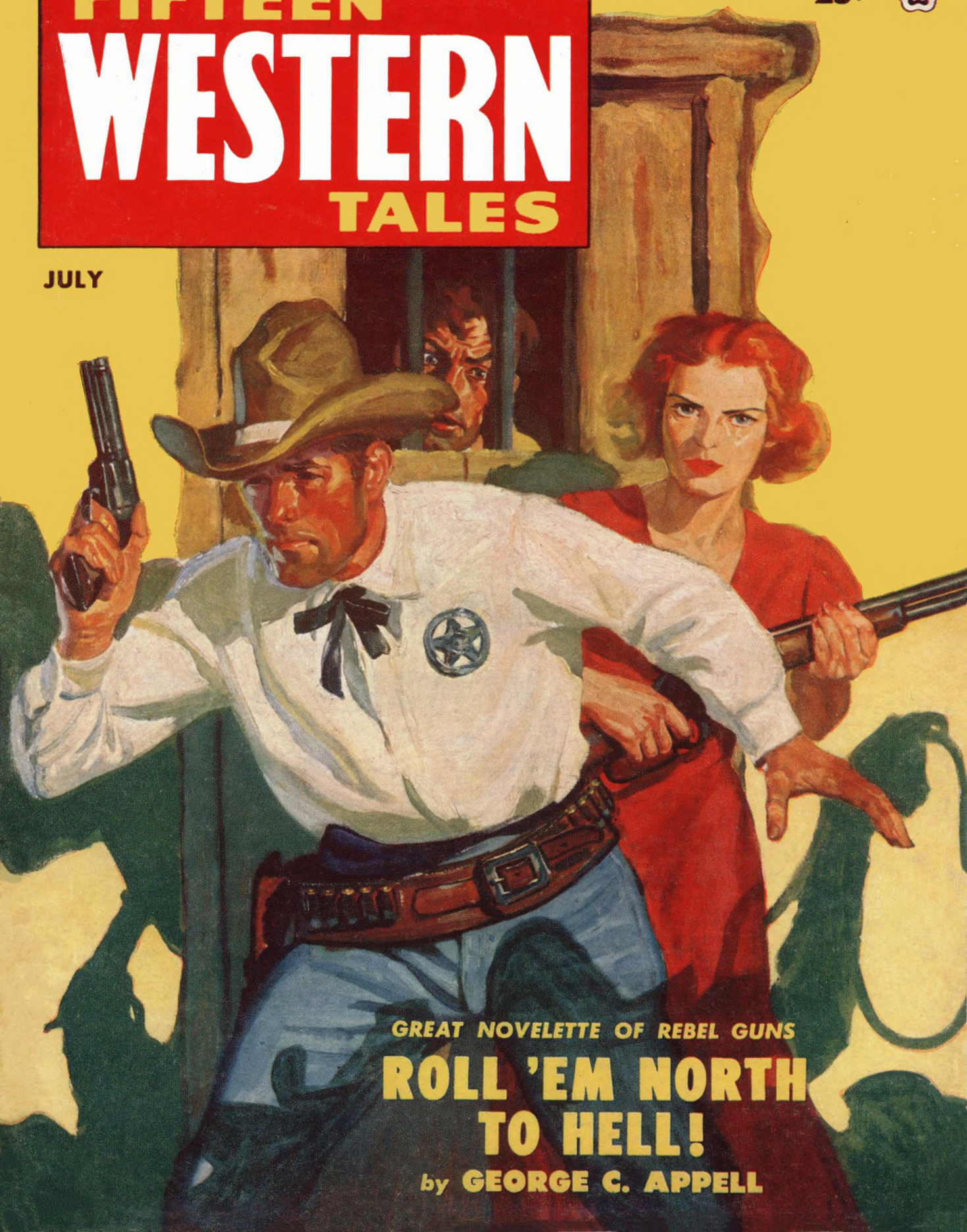

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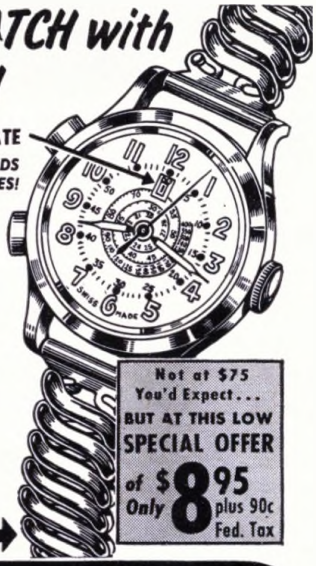

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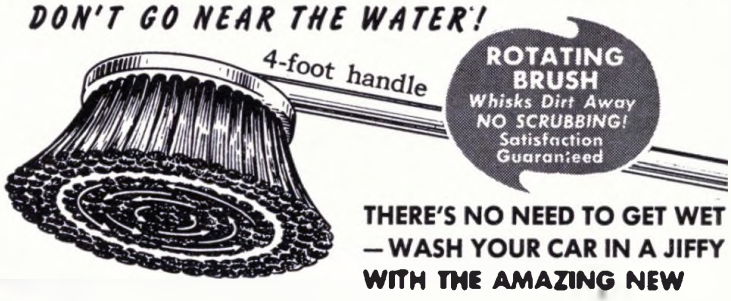

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

25c

July, 1953

VOL. 27 NO. 2

NOVELETTES

SHORT STORIES

DEPARTMENTS AND FEATURES

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE JULY 3RD

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By VIC SHAW

Mr. Shaw is a well-known authority in the fields of mining and mineralogy, with nearly a half-century of practical prospecting behind him, and with numerous published works, as well as a lifetime of service as consultant on pertinent matters to his credit.

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES is both pleased and proud to add him to its roster of regular contributors—and hopes the additional service Mr. Shaw enables us to perform for our readers will result in profit to all concerned—in funds, fun and health!

Mr. Shaw will answer all queries gratis—simply enclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope with your letter. Address all queries to *FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES*, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

STRATEGIC MINERALS

Query: I am contemplating prospecting for semiprecious stones in this or nearby states and would appreciate any advice as to a location and helpful books.

I don't expect to be a "rockhound", i.e. to start a collection, and while I don't contemplate getting rich, I'd want to sell what I found. Also, might want to hunt tungsten and other rare or recently become valuable minerals such as chrome, vanadium, molybdenum—minerals that the old prospector would have passed up because he could not have sold them even if he found a mountain of them.

I am seventy years old and have enough to live on the rest of my days, so am looking for a chance to spend my last years in looking for a mine. If I were sure The Lost Dutchman Mine near Phoenix, ever existed, I'd go there and have a good time trying to unravel that ancient riddle.

Samuel B. McDearman,
Los Angeles, California

Reply by Victor Shaw: Your query covers more territory than could be covered by a letter, so I'll name a book that should answer you fully: *Gemhunter's Guide* by Russell P. MacFall, sold by Science & Mechanics Pub. Co., 450 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11, Ill.

The MacFall book gives locations of most all semi-precious and gemmy stones, and also tells you how to hunt them, besides covering diamonds and pearls, gem characteristics.

With regard to strategic ores that are in great demand for stock-piling, but still are a national shortage: It's true that prospectors today are turning toward these instead of gold, silver etc. Add to the strategic ores, uranium ores of pitchblende and carnotite, torbernite, and tyuamunite, also thorite. The last three are secondary ores, only the first being the primary ore with the $10,000 bonus for discovery.

The ores in short supply include those you mention that are used to harden steel—tungsten,

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

molybdenum, chromite, and vanadium which in the U.S.A. is often associated with carnotite. They also include nickel, cobalt, platinum, palladium, cinnabar (mercury ore), bismuth, antimony (stibnite), manganese, manganite, pyrolusite, psilomelane, and some others

As you must realize, in order to hunt ores which occur in veins, and must be mined and concentrated in reduction mills, the prospector must have proper equipment and above all must know the rocks in which they occur, as well as how these ores look in a natural state.

For example: Chromite ore is found in belts or zones of rock called "serpentine"—a greenish, soft rock, containing a lot of the olivine, of which dunite is the parent rock. Now, one can describe rocks and ores and minerals, and tell you their composition, even show photos of them, yet you may be unable to recognize them in the field unless you have actual samples to compare with the description.

With such samples, and a good book on ores and the various rock formations in which they occur, a little study will prepare you very well for ultimate success. You'll find such samples in museums, displayed with labels—also in mineral collections; but if these aren't handy, they can be obtained boxed and labeled, usually in 2-inch specimens, from quite a few mineral dealers. This last means of study at home is the handiest at no great cost.

I used to get these boxed rocks and minerals from the Pacific Mineral Mart, 637 Redondo Ave., Long Beach, Calif. Think you still can. Ask for price of a box of common igneous rocks, also a box of common sedimentary rocks, and one on samples of the chief commercial ores and also of strategic ores in short supply. These may cost $1.00 for common igneous rocks, and maybe $1.50 to $2.00 for the ore samples.

Now assuming you have the samples, you'll need a good book on mining and prospecting methods, equipment for prospecting etc, and the best one in my opinion is *HANDBOOK FOR PROSPECTORS*, by M. W. von Bernewitz, now selling for $4.50 plus 25 cents postage. It is sold by the McGraw-Hill Book Co., 330 West 42nd St., New York City. You might also get a copy at any one of the mineral dealers I've mentioned.

Note that these books describe minerals and list tools needed to hunt them. I'll add that in our southwestern desert regions in summer months you should always have handy a snakebite kit, for rattlers are numerous most everywhere. And your best method of transportation is the jeep that in low gear goes right along, even in soft sands. Of course, the old reliable burro is okay for packing too, to hike and haul him, or lead from a saddle cayuse.

But, always carry plenty of water whether in jeep, or pack outfit!

You're wise to question the location of the Lost Dutchman in the Superstition Mts. I made three survey trips in that area and a thorough study of its geology proved beyond doubt that it is impossible for gold veins to exist there, as that whole area behind that mountain is covered by recent flows of the basalt and rhyolitic lavas. Also, none of the drainage creeks showed the tiniest grain of flour-gold.

UTAH GOLD

Query: At present I am at Provo, Utah, which is near the south end of the Wasatch mountains but I expect to move to Price, Utah, before spring. The questions I have in mind are about prospecting in this area.

Have any worthwhile gold discoveries ever been made in either area, the Wasatch mountains, or in the Price area? The first coal that was ever found in Utah was near Price and it is still a coal mining area. There is also oil in that country. From what little I have seen of the country east of Price there is a lot of shale and standstone.

I am interested in any of the country east and south of Price and to the Colorado river.

Wayne Rogers,
Provo, Utah

Reply by Victor Shaw: Gold has been found altogether in nearly a dozen counties in Utah since 1918, but most of it has come from Salt Lake, Wasatch, Juab, and Utah. In more recent years, Utah gold has come chiefly from copper ores which have gold associated with the copper-sulphide chalcopyrite. Utah has been the largest silver producer in the U.S.A. and was in second place for copper in the late 1920s.

At that time some gold was found in the southern counties of Beaver and little Piute, also some in Garfield, in the Imperial district. These were chiefly lode mines, with virtually no placer gold. However, you say you're interested in counties south and east of Price, which is in central Carbon County, which includes the plateau region, a southerly extension of the Wasatch Range. In Emery County, there is the Red Plateau, and the San Rafael Swell, also the Henry Mountains in eastern Garfield County. All this is part of the great "fold" of Wasatch Range, having pre-Cambrian igneous intrusives to the east, and pleistocene lake deposits on the western side.

As a summary, outside of new coal deposits, it seems to me that your best bet will be hunting new deposits of the secondary uranium ore, carnotite, with a Geiger counter, as new discoveries are still being made in Emery, Grand, and San Juan Counties right along. In many of these areas the carnotite occurs in the McElmo sandstones (Upper Jurassic) and also is found in the San Rafael Swell region in petrified wood and fossil remnants of plants.

Usually, around the uraniferous sandstones, there's an irregular envelope of gray-to-black sandstone rich in vanadium. But most carnotite ore is canary-yellow, and is a soft mineral like chalk that is found in cracks, crevices, seams etc of the sandstone beds. The Atomic Energy Commission pays well for this ore. You must have their permit, but can mine deposits yourself and sell to them. They now have buyers all over that southeast part of Utah.

Luck to you.

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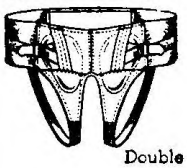

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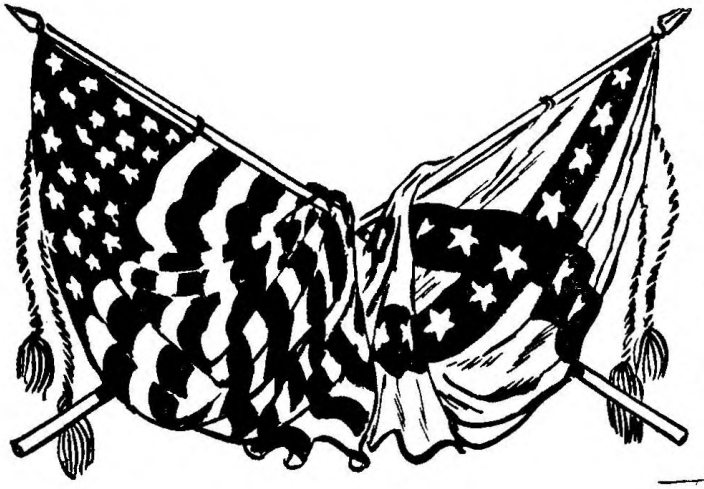


ROLL

To the ghostly drums of a forgotten war they rode—that ragged remnant of that once-proud cavalry, who had lost home, life and the long road back — lost all save one last battle!

By GEORGE C. APPELL

'EM NORTH TO HELL!

IT WAS a bleak land here in this corner of Colorado where the rimrock dropped four hundred feet to the valley floor. There was a suggestion of threat to it. It was a land without welcome, running gray and yellow until, at the far side of the valley where the rimrock rose again, it was difficult to tell exactly where the horizon ended and the weeping spring skies began.

On the afternoon when Major Cutts came to it, a hint of sunlight was coming through the damp grayness, shafting its radiance onto the further rimrock in broad yellow splinters. He lifted his half-hunter watch from his frayed vest pocket and noted the time as 4:55. He called his sergeant, Robert Bewstock.

"Bewstock, we'll dry-ration here, in this

He rose high in one stirrup, clawed at his chest and toppled off. . .

juniper. Caution the men against breaking the skyline—I have the feelin' we're bein' watched. And no smoking." Major Delancey Cutts, CSA, was young to the world and young to his job, but during the past four years he had mastered his profession to such a degree that he had been entrusted with this wild scheme that had been hatched two thousand miles away, in Virginia.

He only had one hundred and eighty men with him, a number decided up with the announced excuse of mobility—but Del Cutts knew as well as Jefferson Davis knew why he only had one hundred and eighty men. There were no longer many trained regulars in excess of that number, who could be spared for hazardous service in the West.

Captain Macafee came forward on foot, spurs clinking, fringed gauntlets scraping his worn beltings as he walked. He was not in the uniform of the Confederate States Army; none of them were. They were wearing whatever scraps they had been able to find down in Mississippi, where the expedition had started. Even so, their patchwork rags were not much worse than the four-year-old uniforms they had discarded before embarking up-river to Kansas.

Macafee, with his sparse brown beard and glittering blue eyes, was ten years older than the major, but lacking some of the younger man's elan.

He pointed to the valley, now, and said, "There she is, Del."

"Yes, at last." Major Cutts threw a weary leg off his saddle and stepped down into the juniper. "It's a long ride from the Mizzoura, isn't it?" He stroked his long yellow moustaches. He was very proud of them, as he was proud of his yellow hair and his lean, muscular frame and his slender, cavalry-man's legs. He was twenty-seven years old. "There's the town, just like the map says."

"Yeah," Macafee drawled. He had not been looking at the map, but at his commanding officer. There was a certain dangerous elegance to Cutts that Macafee envied. The captain had often noted it in the way the major rode—jauntily, with one leg longer in the stirrup than the other.

And it was in the way the major wore his hat—brim swept upward on the right, and slanted downward on the left. And always, from habit, he rode with his right hand on his hip, close to his holster.

There were no carbines in that command, they would have attracted too much comment from curious civilians, whom they passed along the way.

The men now were picketing horses and breaking out rations. The sounds were muted; they couldn't have been heard fifty yards away. A long training in silence had made them like that.

Delancey Cutts, CSA, said, "Crawl up to that rim on your belly, Mac, an' take a long-see at that town an' the terrain south of it."

Macafee snaked forward through the damp scrub, focused his glasses on the distant valley town and held a gauntlet over them to prevent dying sunlight from reflecting on the lenses.

Del Cutts handed his bridle to his orderly and walked down the picket line to where Mr. Gail Rohan, the third lieutenant, was standing.

"Gail, boy, I do b'lieve we'll bag the Yankish before morning." Cutts grinned whitely and twisted the tips of his moustaches, exuding a peace of mind that he did not feel.

Indeed, with each day that they had put behind them, his uneasiness had grown worse. First there had been the long voyage up the river while they pretended that they were miners contracted by the Union to work the Denver patents; then there had been the pre-arranged midnight deal with Streckfuss to get horses at Gumshoe Landing back in Kansas; and after that, the endless ride west to the valley, moving only by night and holding up like animals during the day.

And now, here they were.

GAIL ROHAN smiled. He wished that he could light a cheroot, he only had two left but he needed the solace of tobacco before making this attack. He was a pale youngster with steady black eyes and a hang to his shoulders which belied his naturally swift movements.

Major Cutts said. "It's 'most five o'clock. After dark, some of us'll mosey down into that town an' have a listen an' a look."

"Has it got a church, like the man said?" Rohan asked softly.

"I 'magine so."

"You remember about the church?"

Cutts nodded solemly. He had heard about the church when they were at Gumshoe Landing, and he didn't want to be reminded of it. The year before, he'd been told, its aging minister had been about to deliver evidence in Denver against the Lasher Gang, but before he'd been able to present it, he had been hanged in his own belfry and left swinging there, until the townsfolk went to see why the bell was tolling so unsteadily and unmusically.

Rohan said, "This looks kinda like a place I knew in Georgia, the way the valley falls an' the trees scrimp along its sides—" His voice roamed off. He had the uncomfortable notion that he would never see Georgia again, ever. Cutts sympathized with him, because the major had no home that he could go back to, nor any family either.

Captain Macafee came back from the rim, closed his glasses, cased them, and swung the case behind his hip. "Maybe six buildin's down there, an' that's about all. No telegraph, even."

Rohan blurted, "Was there a—"

"Yes, Gail, there was a church, like we were told. But it's closed."

The three officers stood in abject silence, pretending to watch the men eat but actually projecting in their tired minds what to do next.

Finally Cutts swung a hand toward the mess lines and said, "Damn dirty ragamuffins."

Sergeant Bewstock heard him, and smiled. The sergeant knew affection when it was spoken rightly.

Cutts said, "Mac, what was south of town?"

"The creek road, like the map shows—'bout six or eight miles south, near as I could tell in this light. There's cottonwoods along it for maybe two miles, runnin' west to east."

"Then that's the place for us. We may have to lay in ambush for a week, but it'll be worth it."

Macafee didnt think so. "Seems like we may be late now, Del." He took a deep breath. "It's fine land, I must say. Or will be when summer comes. It's not like—like—"

The others knew what he meant. It wasn't like the devastated southland they had left two months before, a land bereft of beauty and marked with gaunt chimneys that stood like witches' fingers pointing to the passage of terror.

Del Cutts had seen this part of Colorado before, when, in 1850, his father had brought him this way on a journey to California that had failed. That was his reason for asking Macafee to make the reconnaissance, because he wanted to see it through the captain's eyes for the time being, and not through his own. He was about to desecrate it, and he wanted to remember it for as long as he could in the way that he had first seen it.

He said, "Streckfuss told us that the train would be crossin' the valley at the end of this week. This is Thursday, so maybe we're late like you say, Mac." Streckfuss was a Confederate agent who had been operating on the Missouri for almost two years. "We better move tonight, so's to be amongst 'em when they come. I don't want to make any cavalry charge against standin' wagons. Mac, I'm leavin' you here with the command. Gail, here, an' Bewstock an' me'll mosey down into town. We should be back before midnight, I reckon."

"Think you'll have news?"

"No, but I might. The Yank strength probably hasn't changed, but maybe the route's been altered." Del Cutts knew that strength by heart. It had been graven into his brain for two months, and he couldn't forget it—thirty wagons, sixty span of teams, one hundred men and a remuda of fifty horses. In the first fifteen wagons, ammunition and arms from the Western arsenals for Union garrisons down the river. In the next twelve wagons, smelted bullion from California for the government mints further east. And in the last three wagons, rations, implements and forage. That information had been transmitted to Richmond from Sacramento, but like most information of a military nature it did not remain complete for long. A couple of items had since been added to it which would have surprised even Jeffie Davis.

"It'll have to be quick," Macafee said for the dozenth time that week. "If we start fracasin' around with 'em in little groups, it'll go on all year. What we'll have to do is shoot the drivers off the seats, ride in an' take the reins."

Cutts said, "They'll have about three men to defend each wagon, an' we'll have six to attack with. So with speed an' surprise, we should be able to reduce the whole train to matchwood an' wheel it away on its axles."

Rohan ventured, "They'll be feelin' safe now, an' surprise should work. I mean, they've been on the road about twice as long as we have, and they ought to be trail-beat an' mighty weary."

Del Cutts noted the deepening skies. Green twilight was coming in, bringing with it the winesap air of fresh places. "One thing's for sure—them Yankish won't be expectin' us this far west."

That had been the core of the whole plan—to make this secret thrust into the high backside of the Union and make it quiver with alarm and draw some of its garrisons out of the East in expectancy of further thrusts. Grant, thus weakened, would allow Lee to breathe for a spell.

Major Delancey Cutts, CSA, said, "Any further questions?"

There were no further questions.

"Then we'll move out—Bewstock!"

Robert Bewstock was a thorough soldier, secure in the system that had made him, knowing the things that he knew and defying any man to best him or to break him. He had been a member of the old 2nd Dragoons, one of the first mounted units in the United States Army, a unit which had been organized by Franklin Pierce's Secretary of War, Jeff Davis.

Bewstock cracked his heels together with the sound of a carbine shot. "Suh?"

"Let's go to town."

"Ready now, suh."

In the darkening twilight, Gail Rohan took Macafee's hand and squeezed it hard in farewell.

THEY reached the town at eight o'clock, when the cold skies were hosed with a fine spray of stars. Cutts said, "Remember, we were hired to prospect the Denver patents. That's all we know." He led the way in, past the lifeless little church, and tied up at a ramshackle saloon.

It was dimly lighted, small, and smelled of old sweat, stale beer and dead tobacco. Only one man was in the place and he was behind the bar, chewing on a toothpick. He was an old man with ragged white hair and big black brows. His head was hanging forward on his turkey neck, as if in perpetual inquiry.

Bewstock ordered whiskey. Del Cutts and Rohan asked for beer. The bartender moved slowly, as if uncertain where to find things. "Ain't had this much business in a month," he told them. His voice was a thin whine, with no strength to it.

"Always this quiet?" Del asked casually.

"Oh my Lord." The old man was amused by that. "You could hear a mouse wink,

it's that quiet—lessee, who had the whiskey?"

They relaxed against the stained bar, taking their time with their drinks. The old man yawned gummily, stretched and said, "Where yuh from?"

"Cairo, Illinois," Cutts answered. "We're headin' for Denver on contract."

"Contract?"

"The mines—for the government."

"Oh," the bartender said, "the mines." He lost interest.

A slow shuffle of hoofs became audible in the street. There was the jingle of bits and the squeak of stretching leather. The door opened and a big man thrust his way in and stopped suddenly, surprised at the sight of the three strangers. He was wearing a black slouch hat and a black beard and a brown leather coat. He nodded with no trace of greeting and stepped to the bar.

The bartender reached for a bottle. "Evenin', Harry."

"Evening."

The bartender set out the bottle and a thick glass. "Where yuh bin?"

"Around." The man filled the glass, raised it, and swigged it dry. "Down by the springs." His glance drifted to Cutts and appraised him briefly. "Kind of cold."

"Yeah," the bartender agreed. "Kinduh cold."

The big man's glance wavered slightly. The dominant expression in his eyes was one of malevolent irony. He moved them to Rohan, to Bewstock. Then he dismissed them by turning to the bartender. "Set up another."

More hoofs disturbed the silence of the street. Leather squeaked. There were voices, rough and insistent; and then a single voice that was louder than all of them. Finally that voice sank to a rasping whisper. The door opened and a small man came in and peered anxiously about. When he saw the big man he raised his brows in a question.

The big man nodded, and the small man called over his shoulder, "All right, come on in."

They began to come in—hard-lipped men who wore their six-shooters strapped low on their thighs. There were a dozen of them at the bar before the door stopped flapping in and out.

Del Cutts counted out change from his purse and paid for the drinks. Sergeant Bewstock, relieved of his saddle weariness by the alcohol, was feeling slightly reckless. He stared at the big man as if he thought that he might recognize him, although he knew in his fuddled thinking that he had never seen him before.

Rohan touched his elbow. "Come on."

The three filed past the group, Rohan leading and Cutts bringing up the rear in order to guide Bewstock if he stumbled. In the icy air outside, however, the sergeant recovered. He mounted quickly, like a cat, and collected his bridles.

Cutts stepped into his saddle and backed his horse around, waiting for Rohan to climb up. The crowd in the saloon was talking now, throwing their words loosely as if in relief at being alone among themselves again.

Gail Rohan, mounted, said, "I didn't like that."

"Neither did I," Cutts murmured. "What're all those people doin' in this one-bit town?"

"Tell you what," Rohan suggested. "Why don't I kind-uh keep an eye on 'em?"

Bewstock, to prove that he was fully sober, said, "I can do it, suh."

But Cutts shook his head. "Sergeant, you go back an' tell Captain Macafee that Mr. Rohan an' myself are in those cottonwoods on the creek road. Ask him to join us there. Tell him that it's my suggestion that he move the command in small groups, by various routes." He paused, holding his chin in the fingers of his left hand. He stroked his moustaches. He twisted the ends.

"Further orders, suh?"

"Tell him that if he gets stopped in the dark, he's still a mine contractor deliverin' his labor to Denver. But if the other party wishes to open the ball, the captain has my permission to accept the invitation."

Bewstock circled on the forehand, touched his hatbrim in hasty salute, galloped east toward the valley wall and was gone in the night.

"Come on, Gail. We'll poke west, then angle south. That way, an' with Bewstock goin' east, anyone followin' us won't know which of us to track."

They rode at a walk, because running horses at night and in wartime were liable to draw fire. They walked west for half an hour, then stopped and gave their animals a blow. They listened to the darkness behind them, but there was no rumor of pursuit.

"I guess," Cutts murmured, "that the old barkeep passed our lie along to 'em, an' they bought it."

"I hope they did," Gail Rohan said. He shivered once or twice, and crossed his arms over his chest and massaged his triceps. "Gettin' colder."

"It'll be warm enough for all when we hit that wagon train," Cutts promised. He looked at Rohan, then looked again. "You all right, boy?"

"I'm all right." He spurred alongside Cutts, working his shoulders back and forth in his clammy shirt. "You've been out this way before, haven't you?"

Cutts smiled briefly in the darkness. "When I was twelve years old. But my pappy died on the way, an' I returned home with a pack train. . . . Let's steer south now, an' look for those cottonwoods."

Young Mr. Rohan once more had the notion that he wouldn't see Georgia again, ever.

Presently he began to sweat.

DURING the remaining hours of darkness, Captain Macafee sent six groups of thirty men each across the valley floor and into the cottonwoods, where they were met by Cutts and Rohan and posted on each side of the creek road for the two miles of its rutted length, with the picket lines deep in the bush. The creek, still bankfull from the recent thaw, chuckled and flashed in the moonlight, reminding a farrier sergeant of a stream near his home town of Cheraw, in South Carolina.

"We used t' hunt quail there, in the early mornin' like it is now."

Bewstock, the top soldier, told him to shut and be quiet. The farrier sergeant shrugged, as if it didn't make any difference anyway.

When the entire command was concealed and the firing signal had been passed and acknowledged, Macafee made a personal report to Cutts. "A passel of horse riders went southwest about midnight, maybe a dozen of 'em, ridin' between my fourth an' fifth groups, though I'm certain that they didn't see either, because I was usin' one-hour intervals. But otherwise, I didn't see nothin'."

"Those'd be the ones we saw in the saloon. Bushwhackers, they looked like."

"Dry-gulchers, more likely."

"Cheer up, Mac."

Dawn was coming on shadow feet, tiptoeing among the trees and touching them with silver. Branches and leaves became evident, and then the sparkle of moisture on trampled grass.

Just before full daylight, Cutts sent a scout west along the road, with orders to report immediately anything that moved on the land. Then he lay back against his thrown saddle and refreshed himself with a cheroot.

At noon, Macafee approached him and whispered, "It occurs to me that we'll have more trouble haulin' the cargo home than we'll ever have in obtainin' it."

"Same thing occurs to me," Cutts said aloud. Then he said, "What're you whisperin' for, Mac?"

"I don't know."

Everyone was whispering. They had become so inured to silence, so practiced in its uses, that it had almost become a way of life for them. Now, crouching trailside for the kill, silence seemed to be the most important thing in the world. And everyone's nerves were fiddlestring taut, which made that silence more oppressive than it had ever been.

Cutts said, "If I can strip some Union uniforms off, we might bluff our way back to the Confederacy by claimin' to be these very teamsters an' their escorts."

"Naw—they'll have friends somewheres ahead."

Del Cutts fluffed up the ends of his moustaches. "They come from California, most of 'em, except for some replacements they might have picked up in Nevada or Utah." He searched his pockets for another smoke. "Although I doubt if many replacements are available in that part of the country."

Macafee was worried about something. He kept breaking twigs between his grimy fingers and tossing the pieces away irritably.

"What's eatin' on you, Mac?" Cutts thought that he knew, because the same thing was eating him.

"Well, this." Macafee looked all around to be sure that no one could hear him. "Has it occurred to you that maybe this is just a show of strength? That maybe we're not particularly important after it's done? I mean—I mean—" He snapped a twig in half and flung the ends from him. "The amount of ammunition and bullion that can be carried in twenty-seven wagons isn't enough to bail the Confederacy out of the fix it's in now. Maybe we're meant to wham the fear of hell into the Yank frontier an' make the civilians holler for help, nothin' more. Or maybe—oh hell." He glanced miserably at Cutts, then glanced downward.

"Or maybe," Cutts suggested gently, "we're meant to get killed doin' it, just so long's we do it?"

Macafee was relieved. "Yeah, that's it." He stuck a twig in his teeth and nibbled nervously on it. "It's a long way home."

Delancey Cutts, Major, CSA, dropped his half-smoked cheroot and stepped carefully on it. "Our orders, Captain, are to ambush this wagon train in this valley, avail ourselves of its properties an' then convey those properties to—"

The scout was galloping east toward the cottonwoods in a cloud of high-flying dust. Startled faces appeared in the bushes as he clattered past. He hauled his horse savagely down to its haunches, leaped off and ducked into the trees where Cutts and Macafee were standing.

"Major, seh?" He was panting mightily. "They comin' slow, but they comin' sure!" He gulped for air.

"The Yankish?"

"That's the word, seh!"

Cutts rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Get your horse off the road. Mac—run down there an' seal off that east end. If they have a point, let it ride through. We'll cut the train in half, separatin' the remuda from the wagons." He had said all this before, but release from the tension of waiting was spilling the words like a drawn cork. "Four men—five—to jump each wagon. The rest under Rohan to run off the remunda an' round it up east of here." He swept his fingers along his moustaches. "I don't care about killin' 'em so much as I do about gettin' the wagons. Attack on my signal."

There was surprisingly little commotion in the trees. A hoof thudded softly from far back on the picket line. A man sneezed. The dust from the scout's horse died easily, and the day took back its silence.

THEY heard the complaining of dry axles first, and then the steady grinding of wheel rims. A whip slapped. Distantly at first, then nearer, a banjo struck out into the afternoon and threaded its notes above the sound of turning wheels.

A point rider on a shaggy roan came into sight, riding slowly, his hat tugged far down over one eye, his rifle held loosely across his pommel. Another rider appeared, an elderly man with the tarnished shoulder threadings of a first lieutenant. His uniform, once blue, was now powdered to ash gray by constant alkali. He glanced curiously at the cottonwoods as he rode through them, but showed no suspicion.

Del Cutts cocked his Adams pistol.

The hoods of the following Conestogas were not white, but gray-brown from long weeks on the trail. The teams plodded as if drugged.

The bumbling wagons were spaced about twenty yards apart, denoting to Cutts that the escort had little fear of an ambush. Most had only one man on the seat, and they were sitting slumbrously, the ribbons loose around the whip sockets. In one wagon there was a card game going on. The banjo struck into a quick-time tune that brought a duet with it, and that caused Delancey Cutts to stretch his neck in wonder. One of the voices was female.

She was riding in the last wagon, sitting next to the sleepy driver, a shaggy oldster in stained buckskins. Just behind her, leaning against the seat, was a boy of about fifteen, and it was he who was plunking the banjo. She was smiling as she tapped out the rhythm with a finger on the seat, and nodding her head in time to the music:

"Fond of fun as fond can be,
When it's on the strict q.t.;
Whirl around and—"

Del Cutts watched her ride past. She was plainly beautiful, even though her linen dress was dusty and wrinkled, even though her hands were suds-red and her face was burned by many weathers. Her nose was tilted up on the end, her eyes were too big for her features and her tawny hair was hanging stringly in places from beneath the yellow bandanna that was wrapped around her head. "Still she was beautiful.

Del caught a brief glimpse of yet another woman in that wagon, an older woman wearing a bonnet, sitting sideways to the chain-gate, sewing.

And then the remuda came plodding past in billows of girth-high dust, and Cutts put his whole attention on it.

There were no longer fifty horses in it, but about twenty-five. The overland route was hard on animals.

Cutts sensed a surge of futile anger wash through him. Damn a quartermaster who'd allow females to ride along with a military train!

For the first time since he'd started from Mississippi, he resented his orders. But he had them, and there was no changing them now. He aimed his pistol at the front of the remuda.

The duet was loud and clear:

"Whirl around and take your girl,
Spin her for a precious pearl—"

Cutts fired.

The echoes of the shot were smothered in the terrifying ululations of the Rebel yell: "Hi-yi-yi-yi-yi-i-i-i-i-i—" that burst from forty-score throats. Team horses snagged up their heads and backed against their traces, prancing.

"Hi-yi-yi-yi-yi-i-i-i-i-i—"

The bushes erupted with wild, hairy men who scrambled toward the wagons from both sides of the road and hurled themselves at the shocked drivers. The remuda milled off to one side, collapsed backward onto itself and flowed around and started back west.

Smoke spurted angrily from beneath canvas hoods. Shots ripped along the length of the stopped train with the sound of grommets being torn from tarpaulin. A man yelled and threw himself off a tailgate at Sergeant Bewstock, who promptly caught him and threw him back into the wagon.

Gail Rohan flashed past, followed by a troop of sixty, heading toward the scattering remuda. Suddenly he rose high in one

stirrup and clawed at his chest, then toppled off. The troop galloped past without stopping, shaking the ruts with their going.

By the time Cutts reached Rohan, he was lying dead and broken in the torn bushes.

Cutts rose and sprinted toward the last wagon, choking and gagging on the dust that had been flung up by Rohan's racing troop. The smoke-laced air was streaked and tattered with long gouts of burned powder and swirling dust. Nobody could hear anything clearly. A horse whinnied in soprano agony and thrashed down, kicking. A man cursed violently and then screamed in pain. The racketing shots, the thumping rifle butts, the frantic hoof-lashings of crazed animals, all came together in one weird cacophony of relentless sound that deafened everyone and left him numb in the head.

Del Cutts sprang into the last wagon and took a blast in the chest that stung him with powder and blinded him with smoke and blew him backward. But the bullet wailed between his extended arm and his sweaty ribs. He hurled himself forward again and grappled with the shaggy old driver who had fired at him, and bent him back and down and forced his shoulderblades against the soles of his moccasins and held him there.

"Now quit that, pop! I don't want to kill you!"

Something was circling through the air at him and instinctively he ducked. It was the banjo, and it was being wielded by the girl who had been singing. She was furious.

"You don't want to kill us?" She swung the banjo again. "Then why don't you act like it!" Her hair was a wild mass of tawny strands that got in her way, so that, feminine-wise, she swiped at them with a hand. "You sneakin'—"

Del threw himself at her, seized the banjo and jerked it from her. He pushed her violently across the seat. Through the eye of the hood, he saw wagons moving east into the flaring dust, which meant that the attack was succeeding, that his ragamuffins were driving, not the Union teamsters. The fight was edging in that direction, although its racket was lessening.

A step sounded behind him, and he spun around. The old driver was rising, was reaching for a barrel stave. Del pointed at him. "I told you once not to—"

The banjo was snatched from his hand, and before he could turn around it crashed onto his head and there was a sharp bursting noise like a clap of shrapnel. He remained conscious for an instant longer, even as his strength ran out like a tide and he realized that the banjo was around his neck and that the strings were cutting his ears.

Then the planked wagon bed came up with incredible swiftness and smashed against his face.

A BLOODIED, dust-caked Macafee was kneeling over him in the sallow light of a hooded lamp, poking his sore chest with a hard finger. "Del? Major Cutts? Del—wake up!"

"Yeah sure—sure."

He hurt all over. When he sat up, his head burst into hot pain. His mouth tasted foul.

"Del—we got 'em all, then pulled out east." Macafee's voice was hoarse and tired. He seemed old beyond his years, and limp of spirit. It was as if he had stepped off the path and let other men march on without him.

Cutts rubbed his eyes and tried to swallow. He was in a wagon, but the wagon wasn't moving. And it was night. Outside, he could hear the sounds of many men moving.

Macafee had a flask. "Here—it's good Yankee likker." Some of his old spirit returned for a moment. "We whupped 'em for sure, Del. They're all back west of the cottonwoods, wonderin' what to do next. They haven't got a wheel or a hoof to move with, either."

The liquor tasted good, though it didn't

help Cutts' headache much. He stood up. "Damn woman." He felt his head gingerly. "Kissed me with a banjo, that's all I know."

"She's back there with the rest of 'em."

Cutts returned the flask. "How far did we come?"

"All the way to the eastern rim of the valley. We're camped in a circle now. At dawn, we'll take the long way home."

They exchanged curious glances, because neither of them really expected to get to their homes—or rather to the blackened areas that had been their homes. Macafee's small plantation had been put to the torch in '63.

"How many casualties, Mac?"

"Plenty." The captain took an immense swig from the flask. "Reckon we lost thirty, plus Rohan, plus Coles, the farrier sergeant from Cheraw. Bewstock's still with us, though."

Cutts gripped a hood strake for support. His ears hurt, and he touched first one then the other. He wondered how he would look with no ears. Those banjo strings had been sharp.

"Did we get the remuda?"

"All of it. Rohan's sergeant brought it around an' teased it past the cottonwoods after the shootin' stopped." He added: "Too bad about Gail."

"Let's not think about it. We're still fightin' a war." Cutts licked his lips. "Reveille at four, no bugle calls, no fires." He was grasping the reins of command again. "We march at five. Pass the word. Did we capture any Yank uniforms?"

"None at all. There wasn't time to strip 'em. Besides, most of 'em weren't wearin' uniforms. I guess they were mostly militia."

Cutts started to hum the tune the girl had been singing:

"Fond of fun as fond can be,
When it's on the strict q.t. . . ."

He couldn't understand why he didn't feel better, why his victory was leaving him with a sense of emptiness. He reached for the flask.

"One more, Mac, an' then I'll find out what a Yank blanket feels like."

HE AWOKE suddenly, with no memory of sleep. It was still dark, and very cold.

And something was wrong.

He crept to the tail gate and dropped into the chill grass, harking to the pre-dawn grayness that was running with the wind across the skies. Shapes were hurrying past.

One identified itself as Sergeant Robert Bewstock. "Major, suh?" He stepped closer. "There's hosses comin' down from the rim above us, lots of 'em. They been kickin' stones ahead of 'em."

"Where's Captain Macafee?"

"He's over there now."

Cutts found Macafee with a group of muttering, half-dressed men who were holding their guns helplessly at their sides, lacking a target.

The first thing that occurred to Cutts was a diversion. "We'll watch it, Mac. They may be tryin' to get our attention from the rim, with the idea of hittin' us from another direction."

"Who?" Macafee was grumpy. His spirits had sagged again during the long night watches and he wasn't retrieving them. "Can't be the Yanks. They're way the hell an' gone west of us, an' wouldn't have had time to reach here yet."

A violent shout broke through the dawn. And then it happened—quick stabs of flame from the valley wall and the banshee shrieks of bullets that rapped into wagons and clanged from wheel rims and blew three men flat into the wet grass, slocked into a fourth and left him hopping in little circles, holding one foot in his hands.

Cutts bellowed, "Rally on the wagons! Bewstock—issue the captured weapons!"

But he was too late. The muted thunder of charging horses filled the lightening dawn and drowned out the last of his words. They

came from every direction, low-riding men who whirled around the wagons and fired from beneath their horses' necks.

The crack of short rifles tore into the circle and started the remuda milling and prancing, so that Bewstock had to rush twenty men to picket duty.

The charging horses slashed in closer and pounded over the wounded and swung in on the wagons. The riders were screeching now, trying to imitate Indians, but not succeeding. Cutts squeezed off six shots in six quick flashes and tagged one man and knocked another out of his saddle. He reloaded, back-stepping, spun a racing shadow off its feet and then turned and dashed for the wagons. Everything was a confusion of lunging remuda horses and colliding men, bawled orders and snarled counter-orders.

Cutts had tears in his eyes; he could hardly lift his voice because of the constriction in his throat. All the planning, all the traveling, all the fighting—only to be beaten in the end, with his prize in alien hands.

He was hurdling a shaft when a jumping horseman knocked him flat, clumped into the center of the wagon circle and almost rode down Bewstock, who dove for safety and made it just in time under an axle. Then other horsemen were jumping in, surrounding the remuda, cutting out the ammunition wagons, snatching weapons from those who still had them and rounding up those who did not. It was a fantastic scene of hellish efficiency that grew larger as daylight came, delineating the features of the hard-lipped attackers. They had struck so early in the morning, had come so swiftly through the pre-dawn darkness, that there had been no time to organize a defense.

A gun was rammed into Cutts' back. His own weapon was grabbed and a knee propelled him forward.

"Don't try anything—we have enough graves to dig already," a voice warned him. It was the voice of the man called Harry, who had entered the saloon in town two nights before.

The smooth operation of the thing was maddening. The remants of Cutts' command were herded into the middle of the wagon circle, the remuda was soothed and rounded up; fresh horses were exchanged for harness-worn beasts and tied in. Drivers climbed onto the seats and shook out the reins.

The man with the black slouch hat and the black beard and the brown leather coat came booting over to Cutts and looked closely at him.

"I thought you were one of them gumlickin' Rebs when I saw you in town."

"And what're you—Union?" Fury was howling through Cutts, humming in his ears and roaring in his chest.

The man was scornful. "I'm Harry Lasher, and I fight for what I want, not for what a pack of congressmen want me to fight for."

"A helluva way for a man to live!"

Daylight lay pink on the high wall of the valley above them; it unveiled the green and yellow reaches of a land that did not seem as bleak as it had before.

CUTTS swallowed a sob. His command was spread out behind him, helpless to move. Sergeant Bewstock was chewing his tobacco in hangdog silence. Macafee was sitting morosely against a wheel hub, pounding a fist futilely into his palm.

Harry Lasher was grinning. "You saved me a lot of trouble, Reb. When you and the escort cut each other down to size, it left fewer for me to worry about."

"Smart, huh?"

"Oh hell, we've been watching you for three days. Those cottonwoods were my ambush point too, until you came along and did it for me. Much obliged." He strutted in a circle, thumbs in belt. The early morning was quiet again. The Lasher Gang was waiting to move. Cutts counted more than fifty of them.

Lasher raised himself up on his toes,

lowered himself to his heels and rocked back and forth. "Now I'm going to tell you something for breakfast," he proclaimed. "The war's been over for damned near two weeks!" He waited, smiling maliciously.

Del Cutts moaned like a kicked dog and lowered his chin. It was something that he had been expecting, but that he'd been hoping against. He had prayed that if Grant could be diverted westward if Lee could recruit one more draft, if. . . .

"That came in on the Denver wire a couple of days ago," Lasher went on. He glanced over his shoulder. "Storrs, you and Kirkman tie 'em up and line 'em against those rocks over there."

But the man Storrs was staring open-mouthed through the wagons. Suddenly he beckoned with sharp, jerky motions.

"They're comin' on foot, Harry!"

Everyone turned that way, frowning westward. A flung-out file of figures was emerging from the thick ground mists, trudging as a line-of-skirmishers. They resembled a band of imperishable shades rising from some cold hell to seek warmth once again.

One of them called out, "I demand that you surrender those wagons to the Union, or accept the consequences of retaining them!"

Harry Lasher laughed out loud. "By God, it's the Blue, just as impudent as ever." He walked across to the wagon that Storrs was mounting. "Level thirty rifles on the Reb prisoners. If any one of 'em opens his mouth, shoot the whole lot." He climbed up on the seat and waved gaily. "Come on in, Johnnies! We got your wagons all ready for you!" He made brisk motions with his hands behind him, and riders dismounted and crept against the inner sides of the wagons. The trap was good.

The play went on. "Sure," Lasher shouted, "we chased off the damned Rebs last night!"

Footsore and limping, but gratified nonetheless, the Union escort approached the circle with guns down and faces raised. Cutts felt a throb of respect for the Union commander pulse through him, because of his tenacity and for the courage that had prompted him to bluff his way back into possession of what he had lost. Cutts estimated that the Blue probably had no more than sixty effective weapons, with not a full firing load for any one of them.

The elderly first lieutenant stepped over a shaft and entered the circle first. He needed a shave, his features were gaunt and drawn, and his uniform was filthy. But he walked erect, with his eyes lofty.

"To whom am I indebted—" Then he saw the dejected herd of prisoners. "Well, here's the whole lot!"

That's when Lasher hit him on the back of the neck with a gun butt and dropped him like a sack. Then the men behind the wagons swooped out in a noisy rush and pounced on the coming escort. There were brief clashes, short fights, and legs whipping in the grass. One shot was fired. A woman cried out, and was stilled.

Harry Lasher's face brightened when he saw the two women being dragged in. He concentrated on the younger one, eyeing her yellow bandanna and tawny hair with overt anticipation.

"Morning, miss." He imitated a bow, clumsily. "It seems that—"

She struck him so swiftly and so savagely that he had no time in which to duck. Her blow cut across his cheek with the force of a braided whip and left a widening crimson welt from ear to chin.

Lasher stepped back several paces, his features brooding and threatful. He didn't speak to her again.

THE escort was herded over next to the remnants of Cutts' command, with the two women in the center. Storrs picked up the lieutenant and slapped his face until his eyes opened.

"Git over there with the rest." He shook him, turned him around and drove a boot into his backside. The lieutenant turned

ragefully, but Storrs threw a gun on him. "Git over there!"

Then Harry Lasher, first wiping at his torn cheek, repeated his news for the benefit of the Blue: "The war ended two weeks ago, as I just told the Rebs, here." The elderly lieutenant started in surprise. "That's official. And there's also an item about Abe Linkern being shot." He nodded happily. "Stew on that awhile."

The lieutenant's face did not blanch, as Cutts's had when he heard the news; it stiffened in surprise, then relaxed with pleasure.

Lasher posted guards around the doubled herd of prisoners, then walked away with three others, talking urgently and pointing toward the rocky wall of the valley.

The man, Storrs, started to unstrap spades from the wagons. Presently the lieutenant strolled over to Del Cutts.

"I suppose we might as well introduce ourselves. My name's Slaybaugh, Colorado Volunteers. We took custody of the train from the California Militia last month, for escort to the Missouri. I take it that ordinarily you wear the Gray. I had supposed that you were an ordinary, yellow-bellied holdup man until that oaf over there described you as a Reb."

"I do wear the Gray—or did. My name is Cutts. I hold the rank of major."

They shook hands gravely. Slaybaugh said, "That lady in the bonnet is my wife. The young lady with her is her sister, Miss Seton. That boy who's holding the remains of a banjo is my son Philip. They decided at the last minute to accompany me, because we all desired to look at this country with the view of settling on it some day."

"I met Miss Seton last night at a musicale."

Slaybaugh smiled. "She told me about it."

Ten minutes wore on. Lasher was deep in argument with the three men who were standing next to him. Snatches of talk came up on the breeze.

"Ten to a grave. . . . Women go with us. . . . Can't have witnesses though. . . . No delay—"

Slaybaugh murmured, "Fortunes of war, eh?"

"The fortunes of peace." Del Cutts felt a bitterness that was harsher than bowel-pain. It matched the bitterness that Macafee had been feeling all along—a gnawing, enervating thing that sapped his spirit and ate at the thin curtain of his self-control.

He had a reckless impulse to grab Miss Seton and run for it, against all odds. It was an impulse that was a little hard to swallow.

Lasher's voice came back. "Remember that damned preacher? He got buried one to a grave for seein' too much."

An uneasiness stirred through the tense prisoners. They could not bring themselves to the belief that they would be murdered in cold blood—yet that was what was being planned. They had all lived through a war, only to be stood against a ledge and shot down for the fighting of that war. It wasn't real to them, it was a fever-dream. They all wanted to bolt and make a mad rush for it, but the fingers of the guards were rubbing their triggers expectantly.

Del Cutts suddenly had an idea, the kind of crazy idea a man gets when he is nearing the end of the road. He waited until Lasher came back from his discussion beyond the wagons.

"How about pencil an' paper?"

"What for?" Lasher was suspicious.

"A letter home. I assume we're to be shot."

"Call it—dying for your country."

Cutts nodded. "Dying, anyway. Well?"

Surprisingly, Lasher agreed. "Why not?" He walked off, calling to Kirkman for pencil and paper.

Slaybaugh was askance. "He'll never deliver any letter. You must be out of your head. I'm going to run for it, myself. I'll try to get the ladies onto a horse, and shield them, at least, while they get away."

"Very noble of you, lieutenant, but it won't work. Watch my method."

Lasher was coming back with a scrap of yellow paper and a pencil. Del Cutts whispered, "When I take him, you get his guns an' dig 'em into his kidneys."

Lasher shoved the materials at Cutts. Cutts reached for them—and seized Lasher's wrists and cracked them together. Slaybaugh got the man's guns and drove them into his back and leaned against them.

Cutts stepped past the incredulous Lasher and addressed the muted rifles of the guards. "Put 'em down, boys, or the lieutenant'll blow your boss in half!"

HE MEANT it and they knew that he meant it. Lasher's black frown was terrible in its intensity. Cutts had never seen such a concentration of hatred on any human face before.

Then Storrs went for his guns and howled, "To hell with Lasher!" He blasted twelve bullets into the phalanx of prisoners.

Slaybaugh said, "So long," and pulled both triggers and blew Lasher ten feet forward onto his face. He never moved again.

The prisoners flew at the distracted guards, and the inside of the circle became a circus without pattern, without form. Shots smacked so fast that the constant sound of them was the sound of green timber splitting. Smoke furrows lay across the wagons, spreading and thinning.

Del Cutts catapulted Lasher's body and raced toward the remuda. A man fired at him and he fired back twice, leapt the man's odd-angled form and emptied his gun at the remount horses' scuffling hoofs. They whirled and started out between the wagons in a thundering run that caught Lasher's outriders on the way in, smashed them aside and washed over them. Storrs was shrieking and criss-crossing his arms, tongue-lashing the riders to get inside, to ride the prisoners down.

Cutts sprang onto a wagon seat and was met by a man who tried to rowel his gut with a spinning spur. The points flicked past his ribs and he swung and connected and belted the man off the seat. In back, Mrs. Slaybaugh was fussing with a trade musket and demanding to know how in tunket you got the thing working. Joan Seton crawled forward and pushed off the brake.

Del back-armed her and knocked her down into the wagon bed, hauled back on the reins and slashed his whip and let go. The teams skidded around out of formation, creaming hot dust, and lined out past the rocks with manes and tails flowing flatly. The wagon tipped up on two wheels, hung there and then crashed back onto all four rims again.

Joan Seton popped her head out, "Here, Reb—it's a loaded musket!"

Del emitted the Rebel yell in a long, wavering scream of sound. The teams strained at the traces and Mrs. Slaybaugh lost her bonnet and the household goods inside were flung all over the jouncing planks. More wagons were rolling north now, manned indiscriminately by Cutts's tattered men and by Slaybaugh's Volunteers.

Low-slung riders came up on Cutts's flank and swung in dangerously close to make the jump onto the seat. Cutts heaved the musket across his lap and fired. A rider flipped over and cartwheeled from sight and his horse raced empty down the valley floor. The second rider, Storrs, closed in and warped his running horse closer. Then an explosion deafened Cutts and he saw Storrs's face disintegrate. The man's horse quartered away from the wagon race and was gone in the flashing dust.

Joan Seton yelled, "Dad's derringer! One bullet!"

"Remind me," Del yelled back at her, "to marry you sometime!"

The wagons were slowing, were turning and coming together at the front, guiding on Cutts's smoking rig. There were no riders this side of the vast, uphung screen of dust that was obscuring the sky and turn-

ing the sun into a tremendous silver pan.

Cutts pulled around, hauled short, backed on the ribbons and set the brake. The others rumbled up, turned off and stopped. It took them half an hour to reform.

Sergeant Bewstock, masked to the eyeballs in alkali, reported that Captain Macafee had, unfortunately, gone home the short way.

The sergeant pointed a finger to his temple and jerked his thumb. "Right through the brain-box, suh."

DEL stood on the seat, squinting north. "I don't like that dust—it's hiding something."

Slaybaugh limped across from his wagon and surveyed it with a cold eye. "Smoke, following the grass. They're trying to burn us out."

Del waved his whip. "Let's get off the grass an' onto the sand, near the rim. We'll never get this junk to town if we don't." He turned and cupped his hands to his wind-split lips. "Mount up again, you scarecrows! We're goin' over the rocks just like Liza crossed the ice!"

Cutts whipped his teams up to a shuffling trot and drove north between the curtain of smoke and the rocky ledges.

And then the teams jogged into daylight, and the sun was bright and the air was clean. It was almost like a promise of things to come.

Soot-colored riders were weaving in and out behind the smoke, beating at it and fanning it and keeping the grass fires alive. Then one of them yelped in alarm and shook an arm toward the blackened wagons that were eroding from the curling smoke.

Rifle fire crashed from Cutts's left, punched through with a spatter of shots from the distant horsemen. The rifles crashed again from the wagons, and one of the riders sagged over his saddle horn, arms dangling.

This time there were no answering shots. The riders closed in on their wounded and started west.

Delancey Cutts, late CSA, lowered his head to his hands and released a stored-up breath. He was shivering and sobbing, so that he didn't notice his scarecrows cutting out team horses and mounting bareback and galloping west after the remains of Lasher's well-organized gang.

He didn't notice anything until Joan's hand was resting on his shoulder and she was saying, "Here's some cask water laced with real Yankee rum. Try it for a change."

Slaybaugh sauntered over. "I'll bet there are five hundred sections of land in this valley. A man wouldn't need much fencin' wire—not if he had good neighbors, that is." Then he noticed his sister-in-law's commanding gestures, and, dutifully, he walked away.

SUMMER came to the land, half a continent wide. The warm running of the earth, the yellow ripeness of budding shoots, scented the air.

Much later, when at vespertime the church bell in town was flinging its notes down the valley, Del Cutts used to tell his tawny-haired children about the time he first met their mother at a musicale in the cottonwoods—up there where the north fence is now.

But the children never quite believed him, even when little Gail Macafee Bewstock was listening too, because they could not imagine that anything like that could have happened to a land as peaceful as this.

Cattle Country Quiz

By Hallack McCord

(Answers on page 63)

HOWDY, hombre! When it comes to range savvy, are you top hand or hen wrangler material? Dab your loop on the following twenty brain-twirlers and find out. A score of eighteen or more right earmarks you definite top hand material. But call the turn on fewer than fifteen, and you're branded for a hen wrangler. Good luck!

1. True or false? The Spanish word, *caballo*, means horseman.
2. True or false? A "chaparral" is a fenced-in place in which to keep horses.
3. In the old time West, what was the purpose of a chip wagon?
4. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you he wanted some "coffin varnish," he was seeking: Paint? Whiskey? Coffee?
5. True or false? A group of cattle cut off from the main herd is known as a "cut."
6. In the language of the cattleman, what is a "die-up"?
7. True or false? "Eagle bill" is a slang expression for a stirrup covering.
8. If a cowpoke friend told you a certain outlaw was about to "die of throat trouble," what would you think was going to happen?
9. True or false? A "free ranger" was opposed to the coming of barb-wire fences.
10. If a cowpoke friend referred to his "funadiddle," which of the following items would he be talking about: His fanciest clothes? Fancy food? A worn-out saddle kept only for sentimental reasons?
11. What is the meaning of the western slang expression, "Go 'way 'round 'em, Shep"?
12. What is meant by the cowpoke slang term, "grass is waving over him"?
13. True or false? A man is said to be "gut shrunk" when he has been without liquor for a good long time.
14. The "hell wind" is: A tornado? A blast? A rainstorm?
15. True or false? A "hen wrangler" is a chore boy who does odd jobs.
16. A "*honda*" is a part of which of the following items: Boots? Spurs? Rope?
17. When is a cowpoke said to be "hopping dog holes"?
18. True or false? In the slanguage of the cowpoke, "immigrant butter" is gravy made from flour, water and bacon grease.
19. True or false: True cowpokes often avoided sitting in a chair.
20. What is a "seam squirrel"?

Killing came easy to Kantack, till that gun-crossed night at roundup's end when he learned from his final victim — that dying comes easier!

He had nothing but the stick of firewood he kept beside his bed. . . .

By ROE RICHMOND

MIDNIGHTER

THE Kid had learned to ride, and even peel some of the tamer broncs, back on Seven-up, and when Ronan took the crew out for calf roundup that spring the Kid went along as wrangler. They had a hundred and twenty-five horses in the remuda, and wrangling them sounds like a big order, but trained horses handle a lot better than cows and it was the easiest job on roundup. Still it was a real job, and the way most of the hands had started out themselves.

At seventeen the Kid was almost full grown, close to six-foot, but lanky and not

filled out and muscled-up yet, taller than some but only a button compared to the other men. He'd make a hand in time, because he had his heart set on it, but it took time to make real hands like Ronan and Tucker and Conley. Or even like Kantack.

Everybody in the outfit but Kantack treated the Kid pretty good. Ronan, the wagon boss, was a sour, salty little old-timer, but he didn't bawl the Kid out much, even when he messed up the works. Tucker was always teaching him things like how to cold-shoe horses, tie the diamond hitch, and throw a rope. And Conley was a real friend, the best the Kid ever had known, treating him like an equal and a grown-up man. But Kantack was a mean one, rotten mean. It showed in the way he treated broncs and steers and dogs, as well as other men.

There was bad feeling between Conley and Kantack, too. Maybe it had started that night at the dance in the schoolhouse, but the Kid thought it had been there right along. They would have been set against each other, no matter how or where they met up. Kantack was always bragging about the women he'd had, from Mexican *señoritas* south of the Rio Grande to Mormon girls in Utah and Sioux squaws up north in Montana. But at that schoolhouse *baile* the good-looking girls had gone for the slim, quiet Conley instead of the husky strutting Kantack, and Kite had been on the prod ever since, although he was careful not to tread too heavy on Con's toes.

The Kid wasn't a coward, by any means, but he was some scared of Kite Kantack, and it spoiled the whole roundup. He thought of Kantack the first thing in the morning, and went to his soogans thinking about the man at night. It was like a sickness, retching his stomach and souring his tongue and clouding his mind. The Kid wouldn't be free from it until Kantack was dead or gone away, and sometimes out alone with the remuda he spent hours devising ways and means of killing Kite.

Kantack was built broad and solid, with great shoulders and a deep chest, and he wore his sleeves rolled up high to show powerfully muscled arms, corded and bulging and sun-blackened. Every move he made was swaggering. Kantack wasn't bad looking in a bold hawk-faced way, with his cold insolent eyes, a hooked beak of a nose, and jutting chin and jaws. His features were as rugged as his body. He smiled quickly and often, but there was more mockery in it than anything else. The Kid hated Kantack so, it was like poison all through his system, but fear and inexperience were stronger than his hatred. . . .

THIS early morning the Kid awoke with someone's boot in his ribs. It was still black with night, the cook stirring about the fire by the chuck wagon. The Kid started to get up, then remembered that it wasn't his turn at night wrangling. He recognized the bulk of Kantack looming over him, and mumbled: "What's the matter?"

"Get up and go out after 'em, Kid," said Kantack.

"It ain't my time."

Kantack swore and kicked him again through the blankets. "You can do me a favor, can't you? I don't feel so good. Come on, Kid."

"No," the Kid said, angered at being awakened early and out of turn. He would have done it for anybody else, but he didn't owe Kantack anything. If he gave in this time, Kite would bear down harder than ever on him.

Kantack cursed again, louder, and Conley's voice drawled behind him: "Shut up and leave the Kid alone, Kite."

"Don't be hornin' in here, Con," said Kantack.

Conley sat up and shook off his blankets. "You're out of line and you know it. Get along and do your job, Kite. You want to wake up the whole camp?"

Kantack stomped off swearing under his breath, and the Kid tried to relax again, thankful for Conley's support. Con snorted

softly and then settled back in his soogans.

When breakfast was ready Pape called the others: "Rise and shine! Come and get it before I throw it out!" Everybody rolled out, pulled on boots, jumpers and hats, and made for the big coffee pot. Pape's coffee was strong enough to wake the dead, the boys claimed, and with it they had steak, potatoes, frijole beans, hot biscuits, and dried apricots. The sky was growing lighter but it was still cool and damp, with dew on the grass and a thick white mist hanging over the creek.

By the time they finished breakfast, they could hear the jingling bells and clopping hoofs of the horse herd coming in, driven by the two on night-wrangling duty. Kantack was in an ugly mood, spurring his mount and slashing at the ponies with his quirt, and the good warm feeling the Kid had got from the coffee and food turned bad when he saw the man. They watered the horses before turning them in.

With the remuda in the rope corral, the punchers got out their lariats to catch the horses they wanted. It was always a pretty good show when they got them saddled up and topped off, because the young broncs seldom failed to explode into some tall bucking, and even the old cow horses might pitch and crowhop a little under the cold leather. Once they were all mounted and calmed down, Old Ronan gave his orders for the day and the punchers started out to work the sections they were assigned to.

"We'll want a change at two, Kid," said Ronan, and rode off after the rest of the crew.

The Kid watched them go with a wistful look. "Sure be glad when I can work stock like that."

Pape grunted over his pots and pans. "You don't know when you're well off, son. Got the best job in camp and you're kickin'."

"Goin' to get mighty hungry before two o'clock," the Kid said sadly.

Pape scowled at him. "Tote me in some good wood, maybe I'll fix up some scraps for you, button." Pape had the ornery disposition of most cooks, but he generally treated the Kid all right.

The Kid grinned and nodded. He already had a cache of firewood out there, the good solid oak that Pape liked best. He'd never fetch in any more juniper. The one time he did that, Pape had blistered his ears and run him out of camp with a cleaver. They never told you just what to do until you'd done it wrong, and then you heard about it in language hotter than Pape's coffee. Maybe that was the best way, because you remembered not to make the same mistake twice.

The remuda belonged to the Kid now. He saddled up and let his blue roan buck himself out, trying to ride like Con did in the breaking pen, and then he started the herd out toward a new grazing ground. The eastern skyline was red from the rising sun now, and the gray mists were thinning out all around. Tender new leaves and greening grass glistened wet and bright, and the air smelled fresh and clean as if the whole world was brand-new. *This is the life,* the Kid thought, *the only life for me. Soon as I get to punching cattle instead of wrangling horses it'll be perfect—if we can get rid of Kantack some way.*

Out about a mile, the Kid turned the herd up a canyon where the grass was good and the country rough enough to keep them from straying too far. The land here was broken by gullies and dry washes, and marked with bare sandstone buttes and juniper mesas. The ponies would fill up after a couple hours' grazing in this rich feed, and then they'd want to sleep awhile, after the sun had climbed high enough to warm the ground. When they drowsed off the the Kid could double back to drag in in some firewood and get something to eat. He was always hungry.

THE Kid knew these horse like you know people, by this time, and they were as different as folks are. Mostly they ran in pairs, or sometimes in threes, and if

one was missing the other one was right unhappy and didn't act like himself. Some ponies just liked to be with the bunch, and others always wanted to drift off alone. There were friendly peaceful horses and mean fighting horses. The Kid knew their habits and natures and ways. Every remuda has a leader, and a broken-down old cowhorse named Stag was in charge of this one. He led the way out in the morning, and he led the bunch back in at night. Old Stag wasn't much to look at, but when he flung up his head and flattened back his ears the others didn't crowd him any.

Horses weren't bad company, compared to some people, but wrangling was a dull lonesome job, any way you looked at it, a job for worn-out old men or green young punks. The Kid had worked stock a little, and he craved a full-time go at it. When they made camp near a regular fenced-in pasture sometimes, Old Ronan turned the horse herd in there and let the Kid ride and gather cattle with the crew. He had done pretty fair too, although like most raw hands he was inclined to charge around and use his rope more than necessary. Men like Conley and Tucker never wasted a move; everything they did was easy and natural. They seemed to know in advance what a critter was going to do, and it looked as if they were letting their horses do all the work.

When the herd had filled up and found nice smooth places to lay down and sleep, it was the middle of the forenoon, and the Kid went to his cache of wood and roped up a load to haul into camp. It was bright and hot with sun well up, and the earth had dried out in the sunshine. This high plain was cut by coulees and crecks, with cottonwoods and alders growing along the streams. Scrub cedars and jackpines clung to rocks and cutbanks in the barren foothills, and higher up a grove of aspens rippled, silvery in the breeze.

Rabbits bounded across sagebrush flats, and gophers scuttled in the bunchgrass. Tumbleweeds rolled in the dust, and wild roses, larkspur and paintbrush were blooming along with sunflowers and ox-eye daisies. Butterflies of extravagrant colors fluttered on the golden air. There was an old buffalo wallow littered with white bones, and here was a pitted and tunneled prairie-dog village. Rattlesnakes sunned themselves in the rocks. A beautiful country to be alive and young in.

Pape inspected the wood before stacking it in the box under the chuck wagon, and mumbled something about greasewood for kindling as he heaped a tin plate with leftover food for the Kid.

"There's goin' to be a killin' in this camp before roundup's over, Pape said gloomily. I got that feelin' and I'm most usually right. That Kantack's a bad one, Kid."

"Con can handle him, Pape," said the Kid.

"Conley's a good man. But jaspers like Kantack don't always fight fair."

"Wisht I was old enough to take a gun to him."

"Don't start usin' a gun, Kid—or even thinkin' about it," Pape said. "Once you start there's no end to it, until they put you under."

"Con's good with a Colt," said the Kid.

Pape nodded his bald head. "Sure, he is. But the best man livin' can't beat a bullet in the back."

"Kite wouldn't dare. The whole crew'd turn on him."

"He's poison-mean enough to try anythin'," Pape said, "when the time comes right. . . . Well, that ought to hold you till two o'clock, Kid. Git on back to them broncs of your'n."

The Kid rode out, thinking about the trouble between Kite and Con, with him right in the middle. He had never shot at anything much but coyotes and crows with a saddle gun, and tincans and bottles with a hand gun. He wondered what it would be like to throw down on a man. It ought to be a pleasure to blast a man like Kite Kantack, but it probably wouldn't be. He'd like to see Con or somebody take Kite, though.

The Kid would breathe a lot freer and easier with Kantack under the ground.

He drove the bunch in and watered them out at two, so the men could change mounts after dinner, and then he took them back to the same canyon. The bronc Kantack had used was all in, because Kite was hard on his horses, while the ponies of Conley, Tucker and some of the others were fresh enough to have worked the afternoon if they had to. That's why Kantack was no good with a rough string. When he broke a bronc, he either broke his spirit altogether or made an outlaw-killer of him. When Con and Tuck gentled a horse, he was a good all-round pony that anybody could ride and work. Old Ronan wouldn't let Kite do any more bronc peeling on the ranch.

The afternoon dragged, especially the last couple hours, with the sun sinking low toward the western peaks and the shadows stretching out long and deep on the plain. The Kid was glad when it was time to throw the herd together and drive it in to water at sundown. Then the two night wranglers took over, and the Kid was through for the day. Until he went on nighthawk duty from midnight to two. The regular halfbreed nighthawk had run off, and the riders all had to take turns standing two-hour watches now. Always something to spoil a man's sleep.

CONLEY, in from his ten-to-twelve stand, woke the Kid up gently at midnight. "Storm comin', Kid. Feels like a bad one. Maybe I better stay on with you." His voice was slow and soft, lazy and pleasant.

The Kid would have liked nothing better than his company, but he said, "Naw, Con, you get some sleep. I'll be all right."

"Won't nobody sleep much when it breaks, Kid," drawled Conley.

"Well, you get what rest you can, Con. I can sleep out there tomorrow." The Kid threw a saddle on his wrangling mule, while Conley unsaddled and told him where to find the horse herd. It was pitch black, the air heavy with a hushed stillness and tension, not a star in sight. The Kid couldn't see much in that darkness, but the mule called Titmouse would take him to the remuda.

He rode out of camp, wishing he'd let Con come with him, because it was bound to be a rough night with all that electricity in the air, and the Kid got a lonely sinking feeling as soon as he struck out. It was a good thing Titmouse had eyes like a cat, for the Kid couldn't even see the mule's head in front of him.

The horses had drifted a little, but the mule went right to them. Lightning started to flicker around the horizon, and the Kid untied his slicker from the cantle and pulled it on. The ponies looked nervous in the flashes, their eyes rolling and their hair bristling. The Kid rode around the bunch, trying to hold it together, but horses kept straying out and he had to ride a wider circle.

About one o'clock the sky split open with long jagged streaks of blue and green and violet lightning, as the storm really broke loose. Thunder shook the earth and rain came lashing down like a waterfall, soaking everything in the first seconds, and the horses began to drift all the more. The Kid was dazed by the blinding flashes and the terrific, crashing explosions, that sounded as if mountains were being dynamited one after another, but he tried to stick with the herd. Some of the ponies were bolting and running away, but most of them were scared enough to stay in a bunch, and the Kid held them as much as he could.

It seemed as if that storm was going on forever, the lightning brighter and the thunder louder all the time, and the rain pouring and beating down hard and heavy enough to bend the Kid over his pommel onto the mule's neck. Even with his slicker he was as wet as if he'd been in the creek all over, and the horses looked like they'd swum the river. It went on and on, the sky ripped open with flaring light and the

ground shuddering under the wicked blasts. The Kid cursed and swore at the storm and then he tried praying for it to stop, but nothing worked. The lightning was pretty close at times, and when it struck a big cottonwood a hundred yards away the shock almost knocked the Kid out of the saddle.

Now and then the Kid was afraid, and all the time he wished Con was with him. He hardly knew he was talking out loud to himself, with the water streaming down his face and neck and chest: *"You can't dodge lightnin', son. If it's goin' to hit you it'll hit you, so there's no sense in worryin'. If it's got to hit anybody from Seven-Up, wish it would hit Kite Kantack, but with his luck that ain't likely. . . ."*

It was after three when the storm started to let up a litle, and it didn't die out altogether until past four o'clock. Soaked and chilled and miserable, the Kid stayed with the remuda until daylight came at last. Then he threw the horses together and took a count, and he was thirteen head short. It could have been worse, but that was plenty bad enough.

Once it was light enough to get his bearings, the Kid figured they were maybe five miles from camp, the horses having drifted more or less in circles instead of straight away. Feeling like a total loss and a complete failure, the Kid started pushing the bunch back toward the campground. He tried to tell himself that he'd done the best he could, and they'd probably find all those thirteen ponies sometime along, but he couldn't convince or cheer himself up at all. The cold soggy clothes and wet leather didn't help much either.

The outfit had finished breakfast when he reached the creek and let the horses fan out to muzzle into the deep, cold running water. Conley brought the Kid a steaming cup of coffee, and it sure tasted hot and good going down. Old Ronan and most of the others gathered around, and the Kid said, "Thirteen of 'em missin'."

"That's all right, son," Ronan said. "You done damn well not to lose more'n that."

"They'll come back, Kid, or we'll pick 'em up somewhere," said Conley, with his slow easy smile.

Tucker handed the Kid a rolled cigarette and held a match to it. "You must of had a helluva night, boy. I rode out to relieve you at two, but I couldn't find you or get anywhere in that weather. Never saw any worse storm in this country."

The Kid began to feel a little better then, but Kite Kantack was looking over the remuda and all of a sudden he let out a yell. "Five of mine gone! Almost my whole string. It's damn funny you'd go and lose all my horses. You never do nothin' right anyway, and I don't know why in hell they keep you on the payroll!"

Everybody turned and looked at Kantack, and the Kid was so hurt and mad his throat choked up and his eyes burned like acid.

Tucker said, "Sure, Kite, the Kid probably hid your string under rocks to keep 'em nice and dry."

Conley stared at Kantack with eyes drawn to slits in the smooth hard brown of his face. "Keep your tongue off the Kid," he said, soft and quiet. "I'm gettin' sick of tellin' you, Kite. The Kid did a good job holdin' most of 'em in a storm like that. Some riders I know would of let the whole bunch go and crawled off into a hole."

"It just don't seem natural he'd lose all of mine," Kantack mumbled, cooling off some with the whole crew lined up against him.

"They're Seven-Up broncs anyway, they ain't yours," Old Ronan said, cold and cutting. "You got nothin' to holler about, Kantack."

"All right, forget about it," growled Kantack, glaring at Conley and the Kid and wheeling back into camp, great shoulders hunched and big curly head thrusting and ugly.

"Catch your horses, boys, and we'll go to work," Ronan said.

Pape grabbed the Kid's damp, trembling

arm. "Git into some dry clothes, button, and I'll give you a good big breakfast—"

That was the day Wallach got thrown and jammed up his leg, so he wouldn't be able to do any real hard riding for awhile. The next morning Ronan put Wally to wrangling, and sent the Kid out to gather stock in his place.

Five of the missing horses had come back to the remuda, but two of Kantack's were still on the loose.

Tucker said, "Kite used them two broncs so bad they never will show up again, and I don't know as I blame 'em."

The Kid was so tickled to get a chance at punching cows that he forgot about the horses and Kantack and everything else.

THE work went well, but the Kid had a lot to learn. He watched Conley and Tucker, Old Ronan and other tophands, and despaired of ever learning all they knew. There wasn't time enough in the world. Cow critters all looked alike to the Kid, and he had trouble reading brands and earmarks. It was hard to believe the things Conley could do. They'd jump a bunch of wild cattle in the brush, maybe twenty head, and after one good look at them Con knew what was in the bunch, even if they wore five or six different irons and earmarks.

They scoured the rough broken country, cut out the branded steers, and pushed the cows and calves in to the holding ground and branding corral. By the time Con got a bunch penned, he knew just which calf belonged to every cow, and when he dragged out a calf he'd sing out the brand that its mother wore. The Kid was tolerable at riding, roping, cutting, and wrestling down calves, but he knew he'd never learn everything that Con could do if he lived to be a hundred. Well, all a man could do was try his best and give it all he had.

Kantack was always criticizing and blaming him, especially when Conley wasn't

around, and it kept the Kid nerved-up and on edge, so that he made more mistakes than he would have otherwise. "You'll never make a hand, Kid," said Kantack, time and again. "You ain't got the head or the heart for it. You ain't got the muscle and guts."

The Kid was hating him harder all the time, and he knew there'd be no peace and rest for him until Kite was dead or out of this country. He stayed as far away from Kantack as he could, but Kite was always turning up to give him the gaff and make fun of him. The Kid got so mad he felt like bawling, and that made him madder than ever to have his eyes smart and fill up.

If he was going to live and grow up and make a hand, the Kid would have to take a club or a gun to Kantack sooner or later, because this was getting him down, making him sick and half-crazy and almost ready to quit.

In the mountains the cattle were too wild and the ground too rough for big drives, and when they found some fairly quiet stock they used them for a hold-up and ran the wild ones to them, making short drives.

This day the Kid was left to hold a bunch in a low wide draw, while Conley, Tucker, Kantack and others gathered cattle around them. The bunch was gentle enough until the other stock started coming down from the hills, lickety-split with the dust boiling up and the punchers chousing them from behind. The Kid's bunch got nervous then, and he tried to circle and hold them, but one big old brindle cow began to break away.

The Kid should have headed her off and turned her back, but he got panicky when he heard Kantack yelling and he shook out a loop and stretched his rope on her. The cow went down, pulling the pony down with her, and the Kid got his legs clear but he hit the ground so hard it jarred all the breath and strength out of him.

He was scrabbling around there in the dust, too stunned to get up and run, with the wild bunch bearing down on him, all horns and hoofs like a regular stampede. The Kid might have got trampled and hurt bad, most likely killed, if Conley and Tucker hadn't come up fast to cut in across the point and turn the herd off him. The cattle kept right on going like an avalanche of beef, and when the Kid got up, scared and shaky and ashamed of himself, the old cow he had roped was the only one left in that draw. All the others, tame and wild together, had gone roaring off down the slope, and had to be rounded up all over again.

The Kid's sorrel wasn't hurt and neither was the brindle cow, but the Kid wanted to find a hole somewhere and crawl in and die.

Kite Kantack was raving and cursing like a maniac. "That snot-nosed punk loses 'em faster'n we can gather 'em, for hell's sake! How can you work cattle with a half-baked, droolin' kid like that in the outfit—"

He raged on and on, until Conley turned on him.

"Shut up, Kite," he said, cold and quiet. "The Kid feels bad enough without you rawhidin' hell out of him. Lay off and stay off, and I'm tellin' you for the last time."

They sat their saddles and stared one another in the eye, and it looked as if Kantack could have pulled Conley off his horse and busted him in two and thrown the pieces out of sight, but every rider there—including Kantack—knew that the lean wiry Conley was dynamite.

So after a while Kantack just said, very mild for him, "Some day we're goin' to have it, Con."

"Any time you want it, Kite," drawled Conley.

And that's all there was to it—for the time being, at least.

When they started out once more, Conley rode alongside of the Kid, saying, "Still usin' too much rope, Kid. You ought to have just turned that critter back. The bronc would of done it himself."

"I know, Con," said the Kid, miserably.

"Well, forget it then, Kid," drawled Conley. "And do it right next time. We all make mistakes. I pulled a lot worse ones than that in my day."

"Maybe I wasn't cut out to punch cattle, Con."

"You'll make a hand, Kid," said Conley. "Just takes a little time, that's all."

WHEN the Kid came in from early nighthawk duty at ten o'clock, Conley was smoking beside the low-burning fire and the rest of the camp was asleep.

The Kid sat down by the fire and rolled a cigarette and talked with Conley a spell, but Con was way off somewhere in his thoughts and the Kid was too tired to sit up long. "Guess I'll turn in, Con," said the Kid, but Conley didn't make any move to join him. The Kid wondered where Con's thoughts had taken him, and if it was nice and happy there or lonesome and sad.

On the way to his bedroll, the Kid glanced over behind the chuck wagon to Kantack's place, and thought he glimpsed a flicker of motion there, as if Kite was still awake. But it wasn't repeated, and he decided it had been his imagination—Kantack hadn't hardly spoke a word to anyone since Conley had told him off that last time. Dark and vicious and silent, he seemed to be waiting for something, and hating them all he waited. He didn't chew out the Kid any more, but Kantack was more dangerous this way than he had been the other, the Kid thought. There was murder in the man.

Snug and warm in his blankets, the Kid soon put Kantack out of mind and slept.

He never knew what awakened him, but he woke up sweating cold and filled with horror and fear. There was no sound, no movement in camp. The Kid let his eyes rove around without stirring his body. Conley still sat by the fire, which was almost burned out now, and beyond his slim figure were the mists along the creek.

As sleep left him, the Kid could hear the low breathing and snoring of men asleep around him, and the murmur of the fire.

The Kid looked toward the chuck wagon, and his heart almost jumped out through his ribs. The broad bulk of Kite Kantack crouched there in the deep shadows, creeping forward with eyes fixed on Conley's back, and the Kid caught the dull glimmer of the gun in Kite's hand. Frozen in the blankets, the Kid wanted to yell out a warning, but no sound came from his tight, dry throat. And if he yelled it wouldn't save Conley, because Con wasn't carrying a gun—it would only bring the second bullet in his own direction.

The Kid didn't have a Colt, and his carbine was out of reach in his saddle gear. He had nothing but the stick of firewood he kept beside his bed, and the Kid's right hand closed on that now, while his left hand eased down the blankets to give him freedom. It was only twenty feet to the wagon, and the Kid had a strong throwing arm. Should he aim at the head or the gunhand? Better try for the gun, knock it loose and then try to jump the big man. Just long enough for Con to get there. . . . The Kid had never felt such terror and dread.

But I got to do this myself, he thought, with teeth on edge. *Nobody else can do it for me or help me at all. If I miss he'll shoot me first and then take Con, unless Con's fast enough to get to him. . . . But it's the only chance, the only way, and it's my move, all mine. Maybe I'll grow up and die at the same time. That's all right too, if it does anything for Con.*

Kantack was almost at the high front wheel now. He said, "Turn around and take it, Conley," and Con came up and around in one swift movement.

The Kid sat upright and threw the stick with all his power, rolling onto his knees and lunging after it from the tangled soogans.

The wood struck with a thumping whack and the gun flew clear, exploding in the air with a bright roaring blast, the flame spearing out at Conley. Con was moving forward

when the slug shocked him to a rigid stop, and dropped him in a loose sprawl.

Kantack bent, groping for the gun, and the Kid struck him from the side with a ramming shoulder and driving legs.

Kantack lurched sideways and fell against the wagon wheel, head and cheek on the great spokes under the Kid's grinding elbow. The Kid fought furiously to pin him there, but Kantack heaved up and around, smashing at the Kid's face, belting him backward with tremendous force.

Kantack went to his knees after the Colt. The Kid thrashed over and reversed himself, lanky and snakelike, driving low and hard at the kneeling man. Conley was dead, and Kantack had to die. Where were the others—why didn't they come? Kite was too big and he had a .44 there someplace. . . . Kantack's fingers were closing on the butt, when the Kid crashed into him again, striking with fist, elbow and then knees. Kite went over, the gun slithering from his grasp, and the Kid's knees ground and mashed that broad snarling face, as he tripped over Kantack and clutched at the wooden spokes of the tall wheel.

Braced on both hands there, the Kid lashed out behind him with a stockinged heel, wishing for his high-heeled boots then and feeling wet flesh and bone under his foot. Grunting and moaning, Kantack rolled ponderously and reached again for the revolver, but the Kid whirled and dove across him and felt the steel under his palm in the dirt. His hand closed on the grip of the gun, and he twisted and flung himself desperately away on trampled turf, as Kantack stumbled panting after him.

Dizzy and breathless with his mouth full of blood-and grit, the Kid came to rest on his back and fired upward at the high wide frame looming over him. The stabbing flame seemed to hold Kantack suspended and motionless, the Colt almost jerking out of the Kid's hand, the sound shattering his eardrums. And then Kite Kantack was crumpling, sagging, and tumbling backward.

THE Kid got up, numb and hollow and shivering all over, the gun smoking as it hung in his hand, and the rest of the men were all around him now. But the Kid staggered toward the reddish firelight and Conley. Somebody was there ahead of him, Tucker it was, holding Con in his arms and looking up with homely grin at the Kid.

"He's all right, Kid. Just nicked his head enough to put him out. Are you hurt, son?"

"No, I ain't hurt," panted the Kid. "I'm fine, Tuck. But I was afraid he got Con."

"Con won't have nothin' worse'n a headache," Tucker said. "You done some job of work here tonight, Kid."

Wallach rose from Kantack's form at the foot of the wagon wheel, and said, "This skunk ain't dead, boys. But maybe he'll die before we can get him in to a doctor."

The Kid spat out a mouthful of blood and dirt. He didn't care much now whether Kantack lived or died. He knew Kite was all done on Seven-up and in this country, and would never bother him any more.

Cherokee saddled up Titmouse and rode out to get Old Ronan, but he must have met the boss not far out of camp, for Ronan was there almost at once, looking at Conley's scalp and then examining the hole in Kantack, while Pape stirred up the fire to heat some coffee.

Con came to before the coffee was ready, and his slow smile meant more to the Kid than any amount of words could have.

Ronan stood up from Kantack's side. "He'll live to go to jail, but we got to get him to the doc in town. Some of you boys rig up an Injun travois, and Wally here can drag him in behind a horse."

Old Ronan bit a chew off a plug and munched away on it for a minute. "And while you're in there, Wally, look up a new wrangler for this outfit." He smiled a wrinkled tobacco-warped smile at the Kid. "Your legs's pretty near healed up, Wally, and I reckon we got a good hand here to ride in Kantack's place."

"When an Injun laughs — look out, mister. Ain't nobody can see a joke like he can—an' likely it'll kill you!"

"All right," said Big Nose Charlie. "Hit him. Ten time."

MY BROTHER, SMILE

I SEEN Big Nose Charley ride in—and that was about all the tip-off I needed. A little shiver went clawing up my backbone like the first time I ever heard the drums at a Shoshoni scalp dance. I don't know for sure what I had in mind, except maybe I wanted to stop it if I could, but I was too far away, and something kept me from singing out.

You see, Big Nose Charley was all duded up in his best bib and tucker. Hair slicked and braided, elk shirt and quilled breastplate, beaded leggins with hair down the seams. Which probably wouldn't mean a thing to you unless you know the Shoshoni. When a Shoshoni dudes up to the brass hilt he's ready to make war or get married or die, and it so happened that Big Nose

By VERNE ATHANAS

Charley was already married—and he had his old fifteen-shot Henry under his blanket.

I gained on him, but not enough—not wanting to run—and I was still behind when he walked into Sam Girt's office.

I tell you, he done it smooth. I was on the porch by then and seen it. Big Nose Charley walked in and Sam looked up and went stiff as a poker, but Charley walked right on across the room without so much as a glance at Sam, and Sam relaxed. Charley toed a chair out, away from the wall and sat down—and Sam and his deputy was caught flat-footed. The Henry was across Big Nose Charley's lap and his thumb was on the hammer.

He never pointed it at them. He didn't have to. Them two knew Charley. He could hit a running rabbit from a moving horse ten times out of ten at fifty yards.

Charley said, conversational, "You take off guns."

I thought Sam was going to cry. His face puckered up like he'd tasted something bitter, and he swallowed a time or two, but he stood up real careful and unbuckled his belt and let his holster fall. Dud Powers, his deputy, done it too.

Then Charley said to Dud. "You get Little Big Man."

That was when I stepped in the door and said, "He don't need to. I'm here." That's what the Shoshoni called me—Little Big Man. You see, my woman's a Shoshoni, and me and the Injuns get along fine. Get along pretty good with everybody, far as that goes, even them as calls me squaw man. Course, I got a couple advantages—being about twicet as old as most of these johnny-come-latelies, I can remember when this whole blamed townsite wasn't nothing but elk pasture, besides which I never seen the day when I weighed more than a hundred and thirty soaking wet and a rock in each pocket. A little man ain't much of a target even for a bully—and even with gray whiskers, I'm still rooster enough to make most of 'em think twicet.

But Charley never even looked at me now. He said, "Little Big Man, you get Slow Elk and Big Pants." That brought me up sharp and I got a cold feeling in my stomach.

I asked in Shoshoni, "What do you want with them, Walking Bear?"

Still he didn't look at me. "I ask you as my brother," he said back in Shoshoni.

I looked at Sam. "He wants me to get Marlowe and Brannigan," I said. "What do you think?"

I held Sam just as responsible as anybody, and I guess he got a little of it from my tone. He looked at Big Nose Charley, and he swallowed a couple times and then he said in a husky voice, "Mebbe you'd better go fetch 'em, Anse."

SO I went down to the Stockman's Rest and routed out Harley Marlowe and Chappie Brannigan. I never told them no lie. "Sheriff wants you up to his office," I said, and they grunted and headed up that way. I wasn't sure I wanted to see the rest of this, but I tagged along. You know how it is— some things you don't want to see, but you can't stand not finding out how it all comes out.

Cause, you see, Big Nose Charley had reason enough to hate the guts of these two to hell and back, and mind you, Charlie was all Injun—and no browbeat Agency Indian at that. Charlie could remember when this was all *his* country.

But times change. The Shoshoni was all herded onto the reservation, and me, I scratch a living out of a little stump ranch. And Big Nose Charley was a kind of a rebel. He got tired of askin' the agent if he could go hunting, and he choked on the starved beef they doled out over there, so he just moved out, him and his woman, and throwed up a little shack on Breakbone Creek, and Charley done a little hunting and a little trapping and a little horse-breaking—wonderful rider, Charley—and he got by fine.

Most people think an Injun is a poker-faced critter with a warbonnet, or else a

greasy, rag-picking beggar, and Harley Marlowe would tell you it was that last.

Harley Marlowe never had no time for Injuns, and he got it in for Big Nose Charley right after he tried to move Charley out of Breakbone Creek. Charley didn't move worth a damn, and Marlowe bad-talked him all over the country—about how he was all the time missing a beef and such. Then when one of Harley Marlowe's riders got himself shot by a rustler, Marlowe couldn't rest till he'd sicced the sheriff on Charley.

Come near a lynching, too, only the judge showed up a day ahead of time. To give him credit, he was a good judge as them Territorial judges go—most of 'em being carpet-baggers with pull, appointed out of the East—and it took him just about fifteen minutes listening to throw the case out of court. Big Nose Charley hadn't been within twenty miles of the shooting, and had witnesses.

Course, that proved nothing to Harley Marlowe. The witnesses was Injuns and they didn't count. Him and his hands laid for Big Nose Charley on his way home, and they got him. Sam Girt was with Charley, but his horse bolted when the shooting started, and he couldn't stop it—he said.

They shot Charley's horse out from under him when he tried to run, and they stood him up hugging a cottonwood, with a lariat to his wrists to keep him there, and they like to skinned him alive with a bullwhip. Marlowe had nine of his men with him, and they give Big Nose Charley ten licks apiece, which is a hundred licks. Charlie was as tough as a rawhide boot, but he never felt the last fifty. Which was a bad mistake. They should have killed him.

I WAS thinking about this when I walked up the street behind Marlowe and Brannigan. I knew them Shoshoni's, and I knew Big Nose Charley—and I was thinking about the poker face he was showing and the stiff proud way he walked—and like I say, he was dressed for war.

That's about all an Injun's got left—pride—and little enough of that. Nothing's so hard on an Injun's pride as hitting him. Wrassle him, shoot at him, cuss him—but don't hit him with your fist or with anything in your hand. That's for squaws and dogs.

We stepped up on the porch, and I heard Big Nose Charley say to Sam, "You go outside, now?" So help me, the quiet way he said it was like a knife through the belly. So easy and and friendly-like.

Sam and Dud come out, and Sam was sweating. His face was plumb shiny. Marlowe and Brannigan seen Big Nose Charley too, and I seen Chappie Brannigan's fingers start to fan out and his hand ease back toward the pistol on his hip. He never touched it, though.

Charley stood there for maybe half a minute. I know it seemed a sight longer. You could see he didn't give a damn. He was giving them all the chance in the world. He had the stock of the Henry under his right elbow, with his finger through the trigger guard and his thumb on the hammer, but the muzzle pointed at the ground five foot to the side. Nary a muscle moved on his face.

Then he said to Marlowe, "You take off shirt."

I began to sweat a little, then.

So did Marlowe. But he done it.

When he had it off, Big Nose Charley let the muzzle of the Henry sag while he shook the wrist loop of his quirt loose and tossed it to Brannigan.

"A'right," said Big Nose Charley to Brannigan. "Hit him. Ten time."

I seen Marlowe lick his lips. Brannigan looked down at the quirt in his hand and back up. Then Charley said again, "A' right," and like he couldn't stop himself, Brannigan pulled back and cut Marlowe across the shoulders with the quirt. Marlowe squalled.

Big Nose Charley grunted. His wide saddle-leather lips curled up at the corners and his nostrils flared like he was smelling some-

thing rotten. Marlowe shivered and took a half-step and got both hands on the hitching rail. Brannigan hit him again. Marlowe groaned, from deep in his belly, every lick; and there was red at the corners of his mouth where he'd bit his lips when Brannigan was finished.

Brannigan cussed and throwed the quirt in the dust.

The corner of Big Nose Charley's mouth lifted, and then he said, "Now, him."

I remembered then, that it had been Brannigan who had shot the pony from under Charley that time.

Marlowe laid it on. Maybe his own hurt made it worse, but he brought blood every lick, and Brannigan was on his knees when it ended.

Big Nose Charley grunted again, and held out his hand. And Marlowe walked up and laid the quirt in his hand.

Marlowe broke first. He looked down, and then he wheeled away, walking like a blind man, got a hand under Brannigan's arm and hoisted him up, and they went down the street together, never looking back.

Charley turned his eyes onto Sam Girt and his deputy, and they were the sickest looking pair I ever want to see.

They stepped back and let him by. I don't think they really started breathing again 'til he was twenty feet past.

I followed him. I had a hunch that when the numbness wore off, this town wasn't going to be no place for me. Charley stalked on down to his pony and swung up. I got my nag and caught him.

He never said a word. A mile went by, and then I said, "Charley, where are you going now? You'll never live through a night in your cabin."

He shrugged—and an Injun can write a whole book with just a twitch of his shoulders. He just didn't give a damn.

After a while he said in Shoshoni, "I am going to the Agency, Little Big Man." Then he started to laugh. He let out a whoop that shied my nag clear off the road.

I wasn't in no laughing mood. "What in hell are you laughing at? You damn fool, they'll have your neck in a rope for this!"

"No," he said. "Maybe they burn my shack, and raise dust, but I go to Agency. Woman already gone. I go to Agency, be good Shoshoni. Agent won't let 'em take me." Then he doubled up on his saddle pad and beat on his thigh with his fist.

"Little Big Man," he choked out in Shoshoni. "did you see those two bladders of pride beat on one another for the amusement of the Shoshoni?" He laughed till the tears came.

I said, pretty sour. "Friend, you are in big trouble. You should know that you cannot hold men under a gun to make them beat one another. Besides, you put the gun on the sheriff and his deputy, and he is the white man's law. He will speak with a big tongue to the Agent."

"Yes," agreed Charley, wiping the tears off his cheeks. He didn't sound a bit sad.

He sobered up a little, but the corners of his mouth still quirked.

"Little Big Man," said Big Nose Charley, "did I point the gun at them?"

"You didn't need to," I grunted. "They've seen you shoot."

"Yes, but did I threaten them? Did I say I would hurt them, or shoot them?"

"No," I said slow, thinking back.

That set him off again. He whooped till I thought he was going to fall off his horse.

"Those big brave white men!" he choked. "Like bladders they beat each other, and like bladders they made noises!" He tossed the Henry to me and wiped his eyes.

I broke the action, and then I got the whole beautiful joke. I brought the lever back and let the hammer down real careful. I knowed I'd never be able to keep this to myself. The whole country was going to hear about it, and I wanted to see Sam's face and Brannigan's and Marlowe's, when they got the word. I couldn't stop laughing either, now, just thinking about it.

The Henry wasn't loaded.

Jim Talon never knew why he decided to give his life for a town that hated him, that would never understand his—

GUNMAN'S BRAND

By WILL COOK

McQueen leaned his knuckles on the table and said. "You got guts coming in here Talon. . . ."

THEY came north with great herds of longhorns. Crossing the Red River at Doan's, fording the turbulent Sabine, they choked on the dust that followed them like a cloud of smoke. Painted death, that clung to them like an eternal cloak through the Indian Nations, was cast aside, forgotten, when they en-

tered town. They were a breed by themselves, hard-faced, pounded lean by a lifetime in the saddle, and stamped by the guns sagging against their thighs. In the year 1872, to be a Texas man was to be synonymous with gunman.

Ellsworth lay on the flat bank of the Smoky Hill River, a drab, ulcerous growth on the bosom of the land. The treeless plaza, fetlock deep in dust, was split by the Kansas Pacific tracks, as they ran a rifle-straight course through town. The bake-oven heat of the day clung with a perverse stubbornness, even as the brassy sun swung low against the flat horizon.

Jim Talon paused in the doorway of the Drover's Cottage, a quill toothpick protruding from between his even teeth. His dark face was harsh-angled, and his thin-boned body ran to lankiness. A star gleamed from between the parted folds of his vest, and he tugged at the flat-crowned hat riding squarely on his head before stepping into the dust to cross Main Street. He swung his head, listening to the sounds of Nauchville, a half mile to the east. He could see the lamplight sparkling in the windows there, and a mild riot of sound drifted from the saloons as they swung into another night of revelry.

Jim Talon saw Joe Brennan pause in the doorway of his saloon. He altered his course, dodging a U-turning mudwagon before gaining the boardwalk of the other side. Brennan's flat face was expressionless as he studied Talon, and a crooked, black cigar jutted from beneath his shaggy mustache.

Brennan's voice was even, with a slight twinge of amusement in it as he said, "Expect a lively night tonight, Marshal?"

Jim Talon flicked his eyes over Brennan's face, and said, "I don't think I'll be disappointed."

"You're a fool," Brennan said without heat. "Get on your horse and make a big cloud of dust."

Talon shook his head, and let his eyes run over the dusty plaza. On the far side, the ticket office stood gaunt and unpainted, a huge sign running the length of the roof. Three men loaded a flatcar with railroad ties, and behind them, toward the river, lights glittered through the grimy windows of the Kansas Pacific warehouses. Talon found a cigar in his shirt pocket, and wiped a match alight before speaking.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Brennan said nothing, and Jim Talon added, "You think it's over, since the railroad moved west—that you don't need me anymore. I think you're crazy."

Brennan snorted. "I had a hand in it when they hired you. I'll have something to say about firing you."

"You aren't ready to let me go yet," Talon said. "Burt McQueen ain't through with Ellsworth. You just wait and see—he'll be back just like he said he would."

Joe Brennan made a cutting motion through the air with his hand. "That was a bluff, Talon. The railroad's moved. Settlers will move in soon. Ellsworth is dead to cattlemen, and so will you be if you stick around."

"One man's opinion," said Talon, and moved away.

HE WALKED south from Brennan's, and stopped as he came abreast of Beebe's General Store. The door swung wide, and the girl stopped suddenly, a package slipping from beneath her arm and striking the boardwalk with a soft sound. Talon bent slowly, and handed it to her.

Her hair was a deep brown, and the last rays of the setting sun struck a chord of gold through it. Her eyes regarded him levelly, and a tinge of interest lurked behind the quiet composure of her face. Her lips had turned full with some secret thought, but she pulled them into a ripe line, and continued to watch him.

Talon swept off his hat, and held it carelessly in front of him. He said, "How have you been, Jane?" He made no move

to let her pass, but stood there, head bowed, waiting for her reply.

"You'll be moving on now?" she said, and Talon lifted his eyes quickly as if to catch the emotion behind her words, but he could read nothing.

"Not over yet," Talon said firmly, and swiveled his head to survey the street. On the gallery of the Grand Central Hotel, across the tracks, Art Larkin rested his feet upon the railing, sending a dark, disapproving stare across the distance. Talon swung his head back to her. "Maybe I shouldn't talk to you on the street like this," he said.

Her face reddened a shade, and her voice held a sharp edge, "The town doesn't run me." Her tone softened, and she touched him lightly on the arm. "Which is it now? Another man to meet, and kill—because your pride is catching up with you?"

He shifted the .44 Rogers and Spencer on his hip, and murmured, "Just part of the job. She was wide open when I came here, a killing every week. When I ride out, she's gonna be quiet as a sinner in church." He looked out toward the prairie, and the residences erected there in hurried permanence. Lamps were being lit against the coming darkness, and the call of children drifted to him.

Jane Cardigan shifted her packages, and said, "Don't put a lot of fancy ideals around it for me. It's the fight that you can't bear missing."

Talon's lips compressed into a thin line, and he gave her no answer. He placed his black hat squarely on his head and asked, "May I call before I leave?"

She nodded slightly, and murmured, "If you're still alive."

She moved away, and Talon watched her until she turned the corner. He cut across the dust to Slaughter's Livery, and halted beside the old man sitting tilted back against the wall.

Pete Slaughter raised his head slowly, his eyes traveling up Talon's height, stopping when their eyes met.

"The black?" he asked. Talon nodded, and the old man flipped his head, bawling, "Jerry! Th' marshal's horse." There was a scurrying far back in the stable, followed by the soothing voice of the hostler. Slaughter watched Talon as his eyes shifted up and down the street, and said, "Keep on ridin'. You can't stop 'em this time."

"Time will tell," Talon said shortly, and listened to the riot of sound drifting across the flatlands from Nauchville.

"Don't anythin' excite you?" Slaughter asked.

Talon swung his eyes back to the old man, and said, "You don't like me either, do you?"

The legs of Slaughter's chair struck with a thump as he rocked forward, and stood up. "No more, no less than anyone else around here. Nobody knows ya. Ya don't say nothin', just pace the streets. Ya don't show nobody nothin'." He peered closely at Talon in the fading light, and asked bluntly, "Ya got feelings, ain't ya?"

"You hired a gun—you got one," Talon said. "What's the complaint?"

"Sure, sure," said Slaughter. "We got a gun, a better one than the men who've tried to tree this town, but the treein's over now that the rails have moved. You tamed the killers for us, got 'em outa' our hair. Now, who's gonna take care of you?"

The boy came up with Talon's horse, and the tall man swung into the saddle. He paused with the reins lifted, and said evenly, "That worries you?"

"It worries all of us," Slaughter said, and held Talon's eyes until he wheeled the horse and moved off toward Nauchville.

Talon rode stiffly in the saddle, and the flat planes of his face hid the riot that churned through his mind. Slaughter's words made a steady drumming in his brain, and his eyebrows drew down from the severity of his own thoughts.

He passed two men leaning against the wall of Brennan's Saloon, and nodded. The curt, unfriendly movements of their heads, returning the recognition, were equally brief.

Talon passed on, and one of them turned to the other and murmured, "Just look at him. He don't feel nothin'. You'd think he was goin' to a prayer meetin'."

The sounds of Nauchville grew stronger, an insistent dinning, and Talon's eyes traveled from side to side, studying the horses standing three-footed before the hitchracks. Behind him, a church bell tolled, calling the gentry of Ellsworth to prayer meeting, and the blare of the dancehalls increased in tempo as if to drown out this chord of peace.

Talon's eyes narrowed as he halted before the Texas House, and he tied the black with a deft, flipping motion of his hand. Men cruised the narrow street, the lamplight shining on the slick leather of chaps, and worn gun butts tied low against their thighs. Talon met their heated glances, holding them until they slid away, and palmed open the swinging doors of the Texas House.

Somewhere, down the street, a gun blared out, and the answering shots caused a strident yell to go up. The string band in a far corner strove valiantly to drown the yells and thumping feet of the dancers, and Jim Talon elbowed his way roughly through the dodging throng. He jostled a heavy-boned Texan, and the man spun quickly, his hand stabbing to the gun, riding his hip. He let his mouth go slack when he saw Talon, patient, and waiting, and his hand slid away.

Talon waited until the man took the woman back in his arms, then continued to thread his way toward the back room.

THE door closed behind him, shutting out a portion of the bedlam, and Talon leaned his back against it, watching the three men huddled around the table. Lamp-

light bracketed the area around them, making the men stand out in sharp angles and bold shadows. One of the men stood up, the scraping of his chair loud in the quiet. His foot hit an empty bottle, and it banged sharply as he kicked it into the corner.

Burt McQueen leaned his knuckles on the table, and said, "You got guts coming here, Talon." Talon watched him, a shimmering light dancing in the depths of his dark eyes, and said nothing. "Don't try to stop us, Talon," McQueen warned flatly.

"The town is dead," Jim Talon said. "Go to where the rails end, and tree that town. Leave Ellsworth alone."

"Don't try to stop us," McQueen repeated. The man on McQueen's right shifted his feet, and his hands made vague motions on the table top. His pale eyes watched Talon with a thinly-veiled hunger, and his lips pulled into a cruel, thin line.

"Is this between us?" Talon asked McQueen. "If it is, let's settle it now." He dropped his right hand until it touched the butt of his gun.

McQueen sucked in his breath sharply. "You stood between us all along, Talon. You killed three of my men, buffaloed many more with your gun. You stood between us when we just wanted to have a little fun and tree your town."

"Texas pride is a stupid thing," Talon stated flatly, and watched the insult roll across McQueen's face.

"I've pinned more than one star on the side of my chuck wagon!" McQueen shouted. "I'll pin yours there too before I'm through." The pale-eyed man at the table shifted again, and dropped a hand to his lap.

Talon pointed to him, and said, "Dutch, put both hands flat on the table or I'll blast you out of that chair. Dutch Henry Swartz tried to hold Talon's eyes, then slowly spread his hands, resting them palm down on the table.

McQueen shot Dutch Henry a contemptuous glance, and turned to Talon. "You're running a big bluff, Talon. You're alone in Ellsworth. They don't want you any more, and won't back you. When you step out to meet us as we ride in, you'll be without anyone at your back—and I'll have twenty Texas guns at mine." McQueen paused to think of it, and let out a short laugh. "You're a fool, Talon. You had a killer's stink to you when they hired you. You walked the streets, keeping their law and order, but you never made one solitary friend. You can't ask for help now, can you? That pride has you pushed into a corner, hasn't it? There's nothing you can do to stop us, Talon."

Talon's glance was troubled, but he said nothing.

McQueen grinned and added: "We'll ride in all right, but you won't stop us. Ellsworth is nothing to you. You've been in contempt of the people who live there ever since you took the job. I know your kind, Talon. You'll kill a man, but there has to be money in it."

Talon watched them with a bland expression, and turned the knob behind him. "Go back to Texas, McQueen," he advised. "Ellsworth is one town you won't add to your list."

Jim Talon opened the door, and McQueen said softly, "Get out, while you're still alive."

Talon backed through the door, and closed it firmly behind him. He made his way through the dance hall, ignoring the muttering men as he shouldered past them, and untied his black leisurely. A momentary feeling of loneliness touched him, but he stamped it out, and turned the black toward Ellsworth.

South Main, and North Main across the Kansas Pacific tracks, were ablaze with lights, and men strolled the streets aimlessly, waiting for the night to wear on. Talon stopped before the Grand Central Hotel. Art Larkin still sat on the gallery, and Talon mounted the steps to lean on the low railing, facing the man. Shadows

boxed Larkin's face, but his cigar glowed red-ended with his quickened puffing. He asked, "You saw him?"

"I saw him," Talon said.

"He means to go through with it?"

Talon nodded, and licked a cigar into shape.

Larkin drew in a gusty lungful of air, and said, "You're finished in Ellsworth, Talon. We'll pay you to the end of the month, but we want you to leave tonight."

"You too?" Talon asked quietly.

Larkin tossed his cigar into the dust, and stood up. "I never liked you, and I'll tell you why. There's something about you, the feeling you give a man that you're too damned proud to take a drink with him. You live alone, eat alone, and walk your rounds alone. You don't have a friend, and you act like you wouldn't want one." He paused, and added: "I mean it. Get out!"

"Later, maybe," Talon said, and left the porch.

HE MOUNTED and rode to the corner, turning toward the residences backed against the prairie. The houses stood dark and yellow-eyed against the blackness of the night, and Talon let his horse walk until he came to a two-story frame house on the corner. He tied the black, pushed the gate aside impatiently, and his spurs clanked as he mounted the steps. He knocked softly and listened, hearing the quiet footsteps coming down the hall. A lamp flared behind the stained-glass window in the door, and the porch was bathed in multi-colored light.

Jane Cardigan swung the door aside, and Talon swept off his hat with a quick motion. "I'm sorry to intrude, Jane, but I'd like to come in for a moment." His voice was earnest, with loneliness making a small echo behind it.

Jane's eyes widened, and she said softly, quickly, "Come in, Jim." He moved past her, the smell of perfumed soap strong in his nostrils, and moved through the hall, into the kitchen. She motioned him into a chair, and he sat staring at the pattern of the table cloth until the coffee gurgled in the cup she had placed before him. He raised his head to watch her as she turned her back to place the pot on the stove. She was tall for a girl, and her dress filled with the flowing lines of young womanhood. Talon manipulated cream pitcher and sugar bowl, then fumbled for a cigar before remembering where he was.

He let his hand slide away, and Jane's voice turned his attention back to her: "I like the smell of a cigar."

He smiled then, and the severity of his face broke, leaving him young and carefree for a moment. He said, "Most women don't like for a man to smoke in the house."

Jane studied him and said quietly. "I'm not like all other women, and my man can smoke in the house when he pleases." She watched the play of the table lamp on Talon's face, and her eyes contained a deep compassion for him as he studied the design on the coffee cup. "Why did you come here?"

Talon drew a long, ragged breath, and said, "I'm lonely. I thought I could do it alone, but I can't."

Jane caught her breath. She clasped her hands tightly together to still the trembling in her fingers, not wanting the man sitting across from her to see how his words affected her.

He raised his cup with a quick motion, then replaced it, and pushed the dishes away from him.

"A man like me," he said, "has no illusions as to how he stands, and what he is. They made it plain to me how it was to be when I took the job."

"Who are 'they'?" Jane asked.

"Larkin, Slaughter, Brennan—what does it matter now? Ellsworth was a wicked town then. They wanted a good man with a clean record, but there wasn't any, so they picked me instead. Killer against

killer. I could stay here a hundred years, and that stand would always keep me from joining the lodge, or taking a friendly drink with anyone.

Jane rested her chin in her palm and said, "There are men here who don't believe that. You have been a good man, Jim. You cleaned out town and kept it clean. You've earned your place here."

"Larkin fired me tonight," Talon stated.

"Then you're saying good-by to me—is that it, Jim?"

He shook his head. "Not until after McQueen leaves." He rubbed his hands together restlessly, and added, "You know, I hated the town and the people that lived here when I first came here, two years ago. Now, it's different, but I couldn't tell you how. I get a feeling when I walk up and down Main Street, like there's something here that I'm missing, and I keep looking for it. That's why I'm staying until McQueen pulls out with his Texans. Call it something I feel I owe the town." He stood up suddenly. "I shouldn't have come here and run off at the mouth. You have your own troubles without listening to mine."

She moved around the table, and intercepted him before he crossed to the door. The flare of the lamp made her face soft and appealing to him, and her voice carried a subtle message beyond her words.

"Jim, tonight will be the end of it for you. Be sure to end it right. You've hid yourself from the town because you thought they didn't want anything more of you than your gun. Show them what you want. Give them that as a parting gift. Let them know you as I know you now."

He studied her intently, and his voice held a breathless expectancy. "How can you know what I really am?"

"The past is haunting to everyone," she said. "There's always some part of us that we wish didn't exist, or hadn't happened. My father was hanged on a raised wagon tongue, on the north bank of the Platte River, ten years ago. He stole a horse, but he wasn't a thief. Killing another man doesn't make a man a killer."

The flat planes of his face smoothed, and a deep interest broke through the surface of his eyes. He touched her gently, then dropped his hand, saying, "You are a great gift for some man, Jane. I wish I could have known you long ago." He watched the expression around the corners of her mouth deepen, and his cigar lay dead and forgotten between his fingers.

"Come back to the house when it's over," she said, and the thing he had been feeling rose up and brushed him momentarily, then vanished, leaving him alone again.

Jim Talon nodded, and moved to the door. He walked down the darkened path, not looking back, but he knew she stood in the doorway, watching him.

THE black snorted restlessly as he mounted, and Talon turned on Main Street to stop at the Drover's Cottage. A few men made scattered knots of conversation as he crossed the lobby, and he paused at the foot of the stairs, turning quickly to catch their indifferent stares. Eyes were dropped, or wandered away from him, and Jim Talon mounted the stairs quickly, opening the door of his room. He fumbled as he lit the lamp, and when the room brightened with light, he pulled another gun and holster from the dresser drawer. He unbuckled his gunbelt, threaded it through the holster, and rehitched the rig around his hips.

He raised the gun, spinning the cylinder to check the caps, and slid it into the holster. Talon paused before the mirror, looking long at the image that stared back at him. He studied the heavy .44's flaring from his hips, and thought, *That's the way you came in, a gun on each hip—and that's the way you'll go out. . . .*

He locked the door behind him, taking the stairs with a familiar ease, and paused before the long desk in the lobby. Lou Gore sorted the mail that had arrived on the late

stage and nodded briefly to Talon. A tall boy with a shock of black hair and nervousness washing over his face, pushed away from a table, and crossed the room to stand beside Talon. Lou Gore's eyes quickened with interest.

The boy said, "Get out of town, tinstar!"

Jim Talon straightened slowly. The boy swayed slightly on his feet, and his right hand twitched nervously.

Talon's voice was soft and smooth. "Don't be foolish, son." The young man laughed, the sound brittle in the quiet attention of the room, and Talon added, "Go on back to your Texas friends."

"After tonight, we'll own the damn town," the kid stated brazenly, and touched the butt of his Colt briefly.

Talon stood unmoving, and Lou Gore switched his eyes between the two men with an eagerness he didn't bother to conceal.

The kid reached out quickly and slapped Jim Talon across the face. "What does it take to make you fight?"

Talon's temper filled his eyes, but he kicked it under control, and said smoothly, "A night in the cooler wouldn't hurt you any."

"Touch me," the kid said, "and I'll kill you where you stand.

Talon smiled and reached quickly as the boy's hand dipped, and came up with the Navy Colt. Talon moved aside, and the gun filled the room with its explosion, the bullet plowing a long groove in the side of the desk. Chairs were overturned as men sought cover, but Talon grabbed the gun hand and twisted sharply, bringing the boy to his knees. The gun clattered on the floor, and Talon sent it kiting across the room with a sweep of his boot. He grabbed the boy by the hair, jerking him to his feet, and propelled him out of the door. The sound of the body, cascading over the rail of the porch brought a broad smile to Lou Gore's heavy face.

Men sheepishly regained their feet as Jim Talon came back and leaned on the desk. He wiggled a finger at Gore, and said, casually, "Mail?"

"Nothing," Gore said, and touched the tall lawman as he turned away. "Is it worth it, Jim?"

"Jim?" Talon said. "That's the first time anyone's called me that."

"He pulled on you," Gore insisted. "Why didn't you shoot him?

Talon shook his head sadly. He opened his mouth to speak his true reason, but said instead, "I'm saving my caps for the big show later tonight."

"All right," Gore said. "Let it go. But when a man takes chances like that for seventy-five dollars a month, he does it for another reason besides money."

"Maybe," Jim said, and walked through the door. He stood on the wide gallery, watching the street. The heat of the day was long dead, and a breeze blew coolly from the river. Out on the prairie a coyote howled, but the sound was not lonely to him. It reminded him only that he was alone—restlessness shoved him and he moved off the porch. He crossed to Joe Brennan's saloon, making his way through the throng that jammed the place.

JOE sat alone in his wire cage, nursing a cold cigar, and browsing through a week-old paper. Talon leaned against the framework, and said, "Close it up, Joe."

Brennan raised his eyes quickly, an annoyed look crossing his face, and said, "To hell! You ain't the law around here."

Talon never shifted his eyes from the man's face. "I still have the fastest gun. Close it up, or I'll close it up for you."

"The other places are still open," Brennan protested. "Why pick on me?"

"They'll be closed when I get to them," Jim said. "Don't make me come back." He watched until Brennan shifted his eyes and motioned for a house man. Brennan spoke a few words, and the house man shot a quick glance at Talon before moving

off to close the games, and dim the lights.

Beebe's General Store stood open, the two windows facing the street wide with light. Talon stopped in the doorway looking past the customers, and said, "Lock it up for the night, Harry."

Beebe's small face glowed with a momentary contrariness, and his edged voice snapped, "On whose say-so?"

"Mine," Talon said briefly, and waited in the doorway until a clerk moved to blow out the lamps. One of the women snorted, "The idea!" and flounced past him to leave the store.

Talon stood there until the building turned dark, and Beebe came to lock the door.

"I don't know why I'm doing this," Beebe said. "You ain't the law any more," and turned to walk to his home on River Street. Talon turned to the next building, a restaurant, and closed it quickly. He cruised the street for the next hour, closing one place after another, until South Main was a darkened row of locked buildings.

Art Larkin still rested on his gallery, and stood up as Talon mounted the steps. "Don't try that on me," he said, warningly.

Talon leaned against the corner post, and said, "Shut the place up, Art. The town will be closed when McQueen arrives."

"Go to hell," Larkin said. "I fired you once tonight. You don't have any authority now."

Talon waved to the lights burning in the lobby. "Turn 'em out."

Larkin snorted, and Talon drove him to his knees with a knotted fist. Art Larkin scrambled to his feet, rage and hurt crowding into his eyes, and Talon stepped into him again, chopping him down with a dull, meaty sound. Larkin rolled into a chair, knocking it off the porch and into the dust, and Talon jerked him to his feet with a rough hand in his collar.

He slapped Larkin twice when he tried to speak, and said, "Douse the lights," and shoved him toward the open door.

Art Larkin pawed at the blood oozing from his cut lip, and went into the lobby. Talon watched the chandeliers die, one by one, and stepped off the porch when the hotel was dark.

Ahead of him, the remaining lights glowed feebly, then died as the wicks were turned down. Talon paced the side of North Main until he came to Slaughter's Livery.

Slaughter stood in the doorway, and Talon said briefly, "How tough am I gonna have to get with you to make you mind?"

"I'm too old to fight any more," Slaughter said, and waved a hand to the hostler. Darkness settled over the stable, and Talon turned to look at his town.

The buildings stood gaunt and blackened, like lonely tombstones, and the street was so silent that it startled him. He grunted, and said, "First time I ever heard Ellsworth this quiet," and smiled.

Slaughter struck a match to light his cigar, and said, "What is it gonna get you? Turning out the lights and closing the town, I mean?" The noise from Nauchville came across the flats, brazen and wild in the night that shrouded them.

"McQueen's sore," Talon said. "Sore at me, and the town for hiring me. I've kept his Texas boys cooled off for two years now. Even shot three of his top gunhands. It's ranklin' him to have Ellsworth spoil his record of treed towns. Well, when he comes in tonight, the town will be dead. There won't be anyone fighting back—no women running around screaming, with his boys hazing them—no open buildings for his men to ride their horses through. He can't tree something that's dead. All he'll have to fight is me."

"That's fool's talk," Slaughter said bluntly. "What do you get out of it besides a bullet? The town's through with you."

"I don't know," Talon said.

He left the man standing there, and crossed to stand by the watering trough in front of the Wells Fargo Express office. The silence beat against him, and he found himself straining to catch the soft sounds that drifted from the residences backed against the prairie.

JIM TALON smoked a cigar short, and lit another. He dragged his turnip watch from his pocket, and saw that it was after nine o'clock. An hour had passed since he had closed the town, and the waiting played a tight tune along his nerves. His glance up and down the street showed him nothing, and he settled himself for a long wait.

He heard the sound of soft footfalls, and turned as Jane Cardigan came from the deeper shadows. She held a wrapped bundle in her arms, and set it down on the stone curbing of the trough.

"I thought you might like some coffee."

Talon stirred, and said, "It was kind of you to think of me."

"I've sometimes thought of you," Jane said quietly, and a dish rattled in the darkness.

"I wish it were light so that I could see your face," Talon said.

"Sometimes we see more clearly in the dark than we do in the light," Jane said, and turned to look up and down the silent darkened street. "A town is lonely with no one in it, isn't it?"

"Towns can be lonely when they're full of people too," Talon said.

"Men have no monopoly on loneliness," Jane said. She turned from him, wrapping her arms around herself as if to form a shield against a cold that she alone felt.

He framed the words in his mind, and said, "Jane, I've watched you for two years. I hope you won't be offended, but beauty is something a man admires." He heard her move beside him, and reached out, touching her. She moved against him wordlessly, and his arm encircled her waist.

(Continued on page 110)

TOP RIDER

Darrah was a top hand at all the dangerous things in life—ropin', and shootin', cows and ladies. He shouldn't ought to've tried to smell good besides!

Darrah caught one of Tommie's legs in one swift motion....

WE SPENT that winter in the brakes along the upper reaches of the Trinity, not loafing much, but not working much either. Old Man Towne was down on his T Bar nursing the gout, and Ab Kenniston, his top rider, was away in the mesquite jungles teasing out strays that had decided not to go to Kansas come spring.

So that left me and my partner, Bart Mann, and Dave Darrah and Chuck Arnister and a few others to hold the herd close

By CHARLES BLAKEMAN

until the weather swung warm, when we could start the early drive. Every now and then, Ab would come in and throw some caught-up redeyes at us, and we'd put a road brand on them and turn them back into the brakes. At least it was saddle work and not mending fences or fishing drains or shoring up roofs. By late May everyone had heard everyone else's lies about how good he was; we were all broke, and it wasn't long before we even stopped playing cards for matches. We were sick of one another, that's what.

After a while we got to teasing Ab about Beth when he'd come in with his strays, because he was expecting her to ride up from the T Bar with Old Man Towne and say good-by to him before we started north. We'd tell him, "Ab, she was here waitin' all week on you, but she finally left. Yestiddy, it was—"

Ab was good-natured about it, he didn't seem to care, although he loved her as much as any man ever loved his wife. It was Bart Mann who once said, "He's so cockeyed about her that it's all he can do not to mention the subject to her." And I guess that's love.

After a while I began to notice that Ab would look kind of queerly at Darrah when we were kidding about Beth, and that led me to notice that Darrah never joined in the joke. He'd sit back out of the firelight, resting himself against his thrown saddle, and stare up at the stars and not even smile. He was a handsome chunk of man, Darrah was, with deep-set, dark eyes and thick black hair. He didn't have any faults that you could point to, either, and I think that's what riled Ab most, aside from Darrah's being soft on Beth too.

A top rider likes to identify his men by their weaknesses, the better to keep them ranked off in his mind, but Darrah didn't have any that showed. Me, I can hit a gnat with a running iron at two hundred yards on a foggy night, but damned if I can use a rope handily; Bart Mann is one of the best shots in the business and he can rope too, but tell him to scout ahead for bed ground and likely as not he'll pick the bottom of a dry wash or else a nice, rocky hill. And Chuck Arnister, one of the best swing men in the business and a first-class gent with his knuckles, is scared of Indians because of what they did to his people.

During a homestead raid when he was a kid, his pa hid him under an ash heap, and when he crawled out he ceased to be ten years old and became a young man. What he saw that day never left his memory.

But Dave Darrah was a self-contained, smoothly-functioning workman with no past to haunt him and no future to worry him. He was good at everything, but he did his jobs with an effect of listlessness, as if work was beneath his dignity.

"Hey, Ab," we said one night in early June, "she was here waitin' on you but—"

His grin broke slow and easy and he shook his head. "I'm 'fraid it's no use this time, boys. Mr. Towne's mestizo come out to where I was an' told me that they'd be along in a few days."

HE WAS so pleased that we quit kidding him and turned to polishing gear. If the owner was coming soon, he'd want to see the rendezvous in good shape, with the steers all fat from months of natural grazing that he couldn't have provided on the T Bar's home range.

We had two wagons that time, a chuck and hooligan, with old Doggy Trotwood, the cook, on the first and young Tommie Buttons on the second. No one knew Tommie's real name, including himself. He'd come drifting in off the desert a couple of years back, with a sack of trade buttons like you see at the missions, a dirty shirt and not much else. He said he didn't remember his folks, but he was sick of wandering. He allowed as how he could peel broncs, talk to cows—do anything. So Old Man Towne took him in and sort of adopted him, a responsibility that was

shared by Ab Kenniston, who hadn't yet started a family. He and Beth were waiting until they could make their own stake before they settled down and had kids.

The days stretched out into a week, and the drive was ready to go. The tension got so you could hear it, which wasn't a proper way to start two months of trail work. Tension usually came later, within smelling distance of the Abilene pens, not this early.

But one day we heard a long halloo from south of the brakes, and Ab clapped a leg over his saddle and took out like the dogs were after him. We began to smile easy again, and someone kidded Chuck Arnister about where he could buy a wig in Kansas if the Indians should scalp him along the way, and Bart Mann took Chuck's side and said, "If he keeps his hat jammed down over them big ears of his, he'll be safe."

Pretty soon a tassel-topped rig rolled into sight with Ab's horse on a lead rope behind it, and him perched on the seat with Beth next to him and Old Man Towne at the ribbons. I was watching it when Bart punched me in the ribs with his elbow and jerked his head at Dave Darrah.

Darrah was behind the chuck wagon finishing his shave. We watched him rinse off with some Mex lotion he'd bought across The Line, and then damned if he didn't put on a new shirt, a green one with white piping. For a man who was about to ride six hundred miles with a herd of steers, he surely was elegant.

Bart made a sour face. "Let's quit the T Bar after this drive. Somethin's about to go wrong, an' I don't want to be in on it." His jaw muscles started twitching like they do when he's confronted with something he thinks he'd better avoid. "I've heard that the Lazy H in Wyoming is payin' forty a month now, instead of the usual thirty. What d'you say?"

"I don't know." The Lazy H paid better than most brands, and it fed better too, but none of the hands ever seemed to stay there long.

A lot of people thought that the owner was a midnighter, and they wouldn't deal with him. "We got two months to think about it, Bart."

"I've already thought about it."

I was going to argue with him, but the rig came up then and Ab hopped off and helped Beth down. She was a handsome girl in every way, that Beth Kenniston. She had hair the color of a summer sunset, flaming orange shot through with reds, and her eyes were grass-green with meadow mists in them, so that you looked and then looked again. There was constant humor in the curve of her mouth, but at the same time it was a firm mouth. She was—as we used to say about our whiskey—pure Texas.

We all crowded around the rig and touched our hats to Beth, and also touched them to Old Man Towne. He was a little man with a florid face and an eternal cigar. He wore big, square-toed boots on account of his

gout, and he never walked much if he could help it. When he wanted something, he'd holler for his mestizo. The Mex was another orphan boy that Old Man Towne had taken in about the same time that he'd adopted Tommie Buttons.

He was that kind of a man.

AB WAS saying, "Any time you give the nod, Mr. Towne."

Old Man Towne screwed his eyes up at the brooding skies and grunted something that we couldn't hear, but which Ab and Beth could. They both grinned. I knew that we wouldn't shove those steers onto the trail for another day or two anyway.

When Ab took Beth's arm and led her toward the chuck wagon, he looked shorter than she was, although actually he wasn't.

He was spidery and somewhat stoop-shouldered, with squinty eyes and a gaunted face and rough, workman's hands that hung ahead of him all the time, as if he was forever reaching for something more to do. He was not the sort to win a girl like Beth, you'd say, and yet there was something about him that filled the eye. I don't know exactly what it was. All I remember is that you didn't notice him much when he was around, but you noticed it a lot when he wasn't.

He led Beth over to the tailgate, and she asked Doggy Trotwood if he still could sing. When Beth was near him, he liked to play his accordion and raise his voice in song, though when Doggy sang, the bullfrogs met their master. But Beth never seemed to mind, she'd always ask him for more—*When It's Roundup Time In Texas*, or *The Cowboy's Lament*, or *The Little Brown Jug*. Things like that.

He was fixing to sling on his squeezebox when Dave Darrah stepped around from the far side of the wagon and presented himself to Beth. He cocked himself forward from the hips and allowed as how the blessing of her presence at the start of the drive practically guaranteed its safe conclusion.

Bart Mann murmured, "Where d'you s'pose he learned them fancy words?"

You'd have thought that any other husband would go up to Darrah and say, *Enough's enough—keep away or I'll kick your head off*. . . . but it hadn't come to that yet, it was still a matter of elegant manners and small attentions, none of them ever lingering long enough to point to any conclusion.

Whatever, Ab hadn't yet chosen to call Darrah's hand. Also, Ab had plenty to do that winter keeping the herd in the brakes and retrieving the strays he felt personally responsible for those strays—and figuring rations and collecting a remuda and estimating dry weight delivery in Abilene.

He was one of the most conscientious men I've ever known, although a lot of us were beginning to think that it was time he kept his eyes open wider.

We stayed a few more days on the Trinity, and then the weather broke clear and the smell of violets came with it, and Old Man Towne lifted a crutch at Ab and said, "Take 'em to Kansas in the morning."

Ab went ahead to scout for first bed ground, but we expected him back before full dark. Doggie played and sang some of the old songs, and those of us who knew the choruses, joined in.

And then something happened that brought on the tension again, and spoiled that last camp in the brakes. Beth went to the hooligan wagon where she and Ab had their pitch, saying something about getting a kerchief. Ab hadn't returned yet from locating bed ground, and we thought that maybe Doggy's ballads were affecting her and she'd gotten worried.

Doggie's squeezebox was droning and his voice was honking:

> *"When it's roundup time in Texas,*
> *and the bloom is on the sage—"*

when there was a she-bleat of protest from the wagon, and a gasp.

Old Man Trowne motioned with a crutch to Chuck Arnister, who rose and started toward the wagon. But he didn't get far because Dave Darrah dropped off the seat and pushed right past him. Darrah glanced at the faces around the fire once, as if to say, Anyone want to interfere? But no one did because Beth came into the light then, looking flushed and angry. Shadows were flagging up and down her face, so that it was hard to tell just how angry she really was.

"Get back in the wagon, Beth!" It was Ab's voice, thrown from the outer darkness.

We didn't see him immediately, but we saw his horse's eyes hanging like most jewels in the night, high and detached and all-seeing. I wondered how much Ab had seen.

He came booting past us and headed for the wagon, not even looking at Darrah. A moment later a lamp bloomed under the hood.

Dave Darrah sat away from the circle around the fire, gazing at the dying flames and wearing a mournful expression, as if he'd just heard some bad news but wasn't going to cry about it.

I saw Bart Mann's hand stray toward his holster, and then I went just as slowly for mine. Bart was saying something through his side teeth that I couldn't hear, so I leaned closer to him and breathed, "What?"

"The Lazy H for me, pardner. You can do whatever you please."

Ab Kenniston appeared on the wagon seat, jumped down, turned and reached for Beth. She dropped into his arms and he lowered her to the ground, then escorted her to the fire.

"Mr. Trowne," he said, "I located some new grass eight miles due north, where the Camino Viejo crosses from the east. I reckon that's about as far as we'll get the first day, so I marked it for the point to guide on."

"I had that crossing in mind," Old Man Trowne said.

Ab waved to Doggy. "Give us another tune, a lively one, an' then we'll all get some sleep before we start for Kansas."

But Old Man Trowne called him over and said something to him, and I heard Ab answer. "Sure I still want him—he's a good workman."

Darrah stayed where he was beyond the light, smoking a cornshuck and staring at nothing.

Ab and Beth set next to each other, listening to Doggy's song as if nothing had happened. Whatever she had told him, he'd accepted.

Later, rolled up in my henskins with my feet to the coals, I got to thinking that a man who wouldn't stand up for his marriage wouldn't stand up very well to six hundred miles of trail driving.

But I didn't hold that thought long, because my mind roamed off to Wyoming, and forty a month on the Lazy H. . . .

WE WERE a week gone before the Kiowas demanded toll.

The drive was shaken out now, with the leads trudging ahead and the others massed for half a mile behind them, chopping all the dust in creation up into the air and obscuring the wagons and remuda and turning the sun into a great silver pan. The music of the drive had become so insistent that we weren't conscious of it any more—the clicking of horns, the cracking of ankle joints, the bleating of steers and, above it and around it and behind it, the jingling of bits and the tinkling of rowels and the jouncing squeak of damp leather.

Chuck Arnister was riding left flank, swinging in and out with his goad, popping recalcitrant steers back into the mass, and me and Bart were on the right, upwind of the dust and riding clear, when we saw Ab Kenniston spur forward and quarter left, west, and gallop up a hillock. And then we saw the Indians sitting their stubby little ponies on the crest, waiting for Ab to reach them. I counted six, but there might have

been some more of them behind the hillock.

Chuck saw them too, but he didn't pay any mind to them, he was too busy weaving in and out keeping shape on the mass

I figured that this was going to be a routine toll-taking, like you have to do when you're crossing part of a reservation. The usual thing is to give them a few head that are trailworn or that have foreign brands, drifters that wandered off an unfenced range and got mingled with the drive.

It took most an hour to pass that hillock, and by that time Ab had made a deal and was leading the Kiowas down toward the drag where the weaklings and the foreigners were plodding. I kind of pitied him, because no matter what arrangement he made, it would be criticized behind his back. Most of us weren't feeling too easy about serving under Ab any longer, and almost without knowing it we were searching for things in him that we could disapprove of. We reckoned that any man who'd let a Fancy Dan get fresh with his wife and then not do anything about it but accept a quick excuse, couldn't be a whole man after all. So we ragged him among ourselves.

Tommie Buttons had said, the third night on the trail, "He didn't even kiss her goodby when Mr. Towne drove her back to the T Bar from rendezvous."

And Chuck Arnister said, "Guess she gave him his walkin' papers, he's been writin' 'em long enough."

But none of us got to like Dave Darrah any better, and perversely that irritated us to the point where we took it out on Ab.

The six Kiowas were following him down the left flank of the drive now, bouncing like wheatsacks on their mat saddles, looking as if they owned every steer in the bunch. Bart and me hung back aways and lingered near the drag so we could see what kind of a deal Ab was making. He'd be a fool to pay more than four worn-out beasts, because there was no telling how many we'd lose during the weeks ahead.

There were three big rivers to cross, and in addition to that there was always the danger of a stampede. Even a freak summer storm, say, could scatter the herd across two counties and leave Ab with much less than the two thousand head he was responsible for delivering to the pens.

So we watched him as he told Chuck Arnister to tease out three old bone-racks and turn them over to the Kiowas. But Chuck didn't seem to hear him; he was eyeing those Indians the way a kicked puppy looks at a pair of boots. The head Indian was a rangy man with gray hair braided down his back, and the others were somewhat younger. The head one said something to them, and they all began hissing and quacking and pointing to Chuck as they talked. It looked to me as if they were enjoying a joke

The older one suddenly turned to Ab and said, "We take him instead." And he pointed to Chuck again.

Ab understood Chuck's infant fears, and he didn't want them torn open and exposed to scorn, even if that scorn was wrapped in humor. "Take your steers an' go back where you came from," he told them. "Chuck, cut those three out now, before the drive's halfway into Oklahoma."

But still Chuck didn't seem to hear him, he was tight in the mouth and his nostrils were stretched wide. And in that moment I knew as much about Chuck Arnister as I ever would—he wasn't a coward, he was a man who rode through life with the memory of an old fear. The difference is important.

Chuck was battling that fear, which no coward would do. He was trying to get on top of it and hold it down, and the Kiowas knew it although they couldn't divine the exact reason for it.

Ab swung his bits around and yelled at Bart and me, "Go on with 'em! You want to leave that right flank open?"

The wagons and the remuda were passing now, and Bart said, "Let's go."

But I still wanted to see how the toll was

going to come out. "It'll be right along, Bart. You go ahead."

I was glad that I waited. The rangy Kiowa with the gray braids reached out a strong brown paw for Chuck, and Chuck pulled away and circled on the forehand and tried to get closer to the remuda. Until then, it had been a joke, but now Ab made an important gesture with his arm and spurred right up against the head Indian and hatcheted his fist into the man's grinning face and belted him off his pony onto the ground. Then his hands blurred to his holsters and he fanned two guns up and held them level on the others.

"Take the last three cows off the drag an' be damned soon about it!"

Chuck got the beasts out and poked them toward the Kiowas. The head one picked himself up and climbed onto his pony and rode off toward the hillock without another word, and his five friends shoved the tribute brutes after him.

Ab holstered and spun his horse around and told Chuck to get back onto the left flank. I skeedaddled up to the right without waiting to be told.

The drive trailed on into Oklahoma, and the dust tasted awful.

WHEN we were about twenty cow miles from the Canadian River, Dave Darrah, riding point, came back to report that it was bankfull and that we'd better ballast the wagons with logs. Ab detailed a timber party to go ahead, then selected bed ground himself and ordered heel-and-toe watches, the same as he'd been doing since we crossed the reservation.

He was worried about those Kiowas following us and making trouble in the dark, though he never said as much. In fact, he wasn't saying anything these days except what was necessary to keep the cows moving. He didn't sleep much, he ate little, and he didn't even gripe at Doggy's hoecakes and sorghum the way the rest of us did. When we'd come in from nightbirding, we'd see him sitting cross-legged in front of the fire like an Indian, staring at his big hands as if he didn't know what to do with them.

The night before we crossed the Canadian, Chuck Arnister managed to say, "Thanks for tippin' their hand back there. I mean—the chief—" He was having trouble getting it out, but Ab knew what he meant.

"Forget it," was all he said.

Darrah's grin cut like a sickle across his tan. "Anybody can hit an unarmed Indian, Arnister. Why say 'thanks'?"

"An old Indian, at that." Tommie Buttons put in.

I needed to spank that boy. I don't know why he sided with Darrah, except that being young he wanted to imitate his elders, and his elders had been running Ab down too. I took a step toward Tommie but Bart Mann stopped me.

"Give us a song, Doggy," he said. "Somethin' that'll remind us of home."

I got the notion that Bart wasn't planning to see Texas again, ever, and that here at the halfway mark to Kansas he wanted a last reminder to carry him along. That very afternoon he'd told me that the best way to reach the Lazy H from Abilene was to follow the Platte across Nebraska to southern Wyoming, and his words sounded good to me.

Doggy hadn't sung in a month, and for the first time I could remember, we all missed his voice. But that night he told Bart, "Wait'll we get the river behind us." Then he shook a ladle at Tommie and said, "Come on youngster, lend a hand with the pans!"

Dave Darrah hung around a few minutes longer, like he was expecting Ab to defend himself for hitting an unarmed old Indian. But Ab didn't open his mouth, he just sat and stared at the fire, and I knew that he was thinking about Beth. No one had ragged him for days.

After another minute or so, Darrah strutted away and took his horse and went out to start his four-hour hitch of night-

birding. It was only then that Doggy handed his apron to Tommie, strapped on his squeezebox and began to play.

It sounded pretty good, too.

THE CANADIAN was booming along between its banks at a gallop, carrying driftwood and small drowned animals and all the other litter of a sudden thaw with it. Ab had already ordered tree trunks chained to the wagon strakes to help float them across, and now he snagged eight horses from the remuda and traced them to the teams for added pulling strength.

Tommie Buttons, driving the hooligan, said he'd go first after the steers, but Doggy said no, age before insolence. Ab and Dave Darrah teased out the leads and whacked them into the current, working well enough together but not chipping any small talk back and forth the way men will when they're both taking the same risk. Every time I looked at them, the faint image of Beth rose in my mind's eye and stayed between them.

Bart and me were on the other side, farther along the bank, ready to lure the leads onto dry ground again. We'd been carried for most a quarter mile downstream when we crossed.

The leads were creaming through the flood now, thrashing and kicking, and the mass started to follow. This was one of the worst parts of a cattle drive, fording a river. If a high limb came twisting into sight unexpectedly, if the herd started to mill in midstream, if. . . .

But nothing happened to the steers during that crossing. The leads breasted through the brown water and picked their way onto the north bank and stood dumb and shivering until Bart and me shoved them into motion again. The mass followed, bawling and pushing, and then the remuda came across with the drag men swimming behind.

Dave Darrah, prancing his soaked horse like a general on a battlefield, yelped, "Here comes the Navy!"

The chuck wagon was tilting dangerously, yawing downstream and angling away from the plunging horses. Doggy Trotwood was half off the seat with one leg bent under him, slashing the air with his whip and cussing in urgent falsetto.

Darrah rode down to the bank and three-fingered a cigatette together and stuck it in his mouth and then searched himself for a match. Doggy's teams slammed against the bank and hauled the wagon up and trotted nervously forward until Doggy set the brake and hollered for someone to untrace the extra horses.

Tommie Buttons was coming through the current with the hooligan wagon now, and Ab Kenniston was watching him from the south bank, the last man to cross, which meant that he'd have to cross alone. Ab couldn't swim, either.

Tommie was having better sailing than Doggy because the hooligan, loaded as it was with all our personal gear, sat lower in the water and was easier to handle. Then Darrah swept a lucifer alight on his thigh, which was a very stupid thing to do. The sudden sputter of flame spooked Tommie's teams sideways, careening the wagon and catapulting Tommie off the seat and into the current, whip and all. There was a brown splash and white foam and that was all, except for Tommie's hat. It was riding the flood like an overturned bucket, dipping from side to side.

Ab Kenniston charged into the current, lifting his rope and yelling something that no one could hear. Dave Darrah was pounding downstream at the gallop, rising in his stirrups and hollering to get out of the way, here he came. He sun-fished his horse to a stop in belly-deep water and twirled his rope and snaked it out and caught one of Tommie's legs and snubbed the rope to his pommel, all in one smooth and continuous motion. He pulled Tommie in hand-over-hand and dumped him on the bank just as Ab lunged out of the current in a spatter of mud and braked his trembling horse and

leaned down to see if Tommie was still breathing.

He was, and before Ab could step down he sat up and rolled over and gagged out some of the water that was in him.

Ab was furious. "What the heck did you lose your bits for? You were doin' all right without pretendin' you were on a highwire!" He hadn't seen the flare of Darrah's match, and I don't think Tommie had either.

Darrah was coiling his rope, flipping it across his palm, loop over loop, never fumbling. "Lucky I happened to see his leg, wasn't it?" He reached down and seized Tommie's shirt and hauled him to his feet. "All right now, kid?"

Tommie blinked a few times, choked, and swallowed. "Thanks Dave, thanks an awful lot."

"Any time, kid." Darrah spurred jauntily after the herd, whistling as he rode, mighty pleased with himself. All he lacked was Beth Kenniston to cheer him on.

Bart Mann gave me a disgusted look that asked, *You still want to stick with the T Bar?* Aloud he said, "Darrah did that a-purpose, didn't he?"

I shrugged it off. We had less than a month to go, and there was no use quitting now on account of a swaggart.

WE TRAILED north with the grass across Oklahoma, and raised the Kansas line in mid-July. During the final weeks of the drive, a new kind of tension built up—anticipation of being in a town again. We'd been passing them frequently, though always at a distance, and more than one rider had asked Ab for permission to go in and visit a while. But he always shook his head.

Dave Darrah was itching to pay a call, that was obvious. He broke out another new shirt that week, a red one with black piping, and he rinsed himself with the last of his Mex lotion. He shaved every day, too.

Ab was watching the skies more often than he had, craning his neck around and squinting upwards, keeping his head on a swivel. And pretty soon we knew what he'd known for days—that we might get hit by a line storm. Sometimes you can feel them just before they come, when the air begins to smell metallic and the grama grasses stand out more sharply than usual and there's no wind at all. But usually, by that time, it's too late.

Ab had sensed this one coming ever since we'd crossed into Kansas, which was why he hadn't let anyone leave the herd to visit a town. He wasn't banking on the off-chance that the storm would veer and blow itself out further west.

There was no sunset that night, just a leaden smear the length of the horizon. A pale flash of lightning flickered in the north and went out, and thunder clumped down across Nebraska from the Dakotas.

Not one even bothered to take his gear off the hooligan wagon, there'd be no sleep until this weather went away. The thunder rolled again, sounding like empty trunks banging down a staircase.

And the bedded herd came apart.

There was no preventing it, it was too primitive for men's hands to stay. Lightning trickled down the black heights of the sky and smashed into the prairie and shook the whole world. The steers started to mill, rolling their tails and bellowing and colliding with each other and striking out with spade-sharp hoofs. Blue fire was on their horns when they started to run, but it was streaky yellow when they hit full stampede and drummed south through the rain-swept darkness.

We galloped after them and emptied our guns into their flank, shooting so close that we churned flame against their eyeballs. There was a confusion of yells and shouts and I heard Bart Mann shriek, "Look out!" and the stampede swung east, frightened onto a new course by a flash of lightning that had exploded ahead of it. Now we were no longer on the flank, trying to turn it, we were riding for our lives with the

crazed steers thundering right behind us.

It had happened so suddenly that we were helpless to do anything except try to escape. Lightning broke white and I saw Dave Darrah far ahead of us, slung along his horse's neck, using a quirt.

Then his skidding horse stumbled and went down head first and rolled forward, over and over. Dave was tossed like a sawdust doll high into the air.

"This way!" It was Bart crowding me out of the steers' path.

"Darrah's caught in—"

"To hell with Darrah!" Bart whipped my horse so hard that he crow-hopped in flight and came down hard. "This's as good a way as any for Ab to get rid of him!"

Bart and me got clean away and backed around and watched that avalanche of hot flesh descend on Dave Darrah. Lightning kept winking on and off like distant cannonfire, and in its weakening flashes we could see Darrah sprawled in the mud with his arms twitching convulsively from shock.

"He hasn't got a chance," Bart said. Then he said, "My God—look!"

Ab Kenniston was racing his horse directly across the front of the stampede, flying toward Darrah. The lightning went out and there was nothing but deafening hoofs.

Bart was sobbing between his teeth. I thought I heard angry gunfire, but I couldn't be sure.

The stampede rumbled on through the lessening storm and spent itself to eastward, with Chuck Arnister and the others closely flanking it to round it up and ease it onto fresh bed ground.

Doggy Trotwood and Tommie Buttons came up with the wagons and we got some lamps started and began to search around for what we were afraid to find. But we didn't have to search far, because presently we heard Ab shouting. "This way, dammit, this way!"

He was sitting in the trampled mud, blowing out his breath and rubbing his eyes. Darrah was kneeling next to him, sniffling and licking his lips and trying to say things that wouldn't come out. Just beyond them was the battered body of Darrah's horse, and beyond that lay four or five steers, lumpy and dead, strewn where Ab had tumbled them into a quick defensive position with revolver fire. The stampede had washed against that barricade and split in the middle and streamed past on either side.

Tommie was the first to speak. "Can I catch up your horse for you, Ab?"

"Sure, go ahead." Ab rose and blinked irritably at the shaky gleaming of the lamps. "The rest of you get back an' sing hymns to those cow brutes, heel-an'-toe, all night long. We're goin' to be a few days roundin' up strays from the run."

I DIDN'T see Dave Darrah again after we threw the drive into the pens. He took out north and never said good-by. Bart and me didn't go to Wyoming and sign onto the Lazy H, either. We decided to stick with the T Bar at thirty a month, where there was a feeling of moral responsibility for the lives of the hired help.

Before we started back to Texas, Bart found out from Ab Kenniston what Darrah had suggested to Beth in the wagon when we'd been camped in the brakes along the Trinity.

"What was it?" I had to know.

"Lotion," Bart said simply. "He wanted her to go down into Mexico an' get him a dozen more bottles, when she had time."

I was lighting a cigarette when he said that, and I almost dropped the match. "Bart," I asked, "did Ab believe that?"

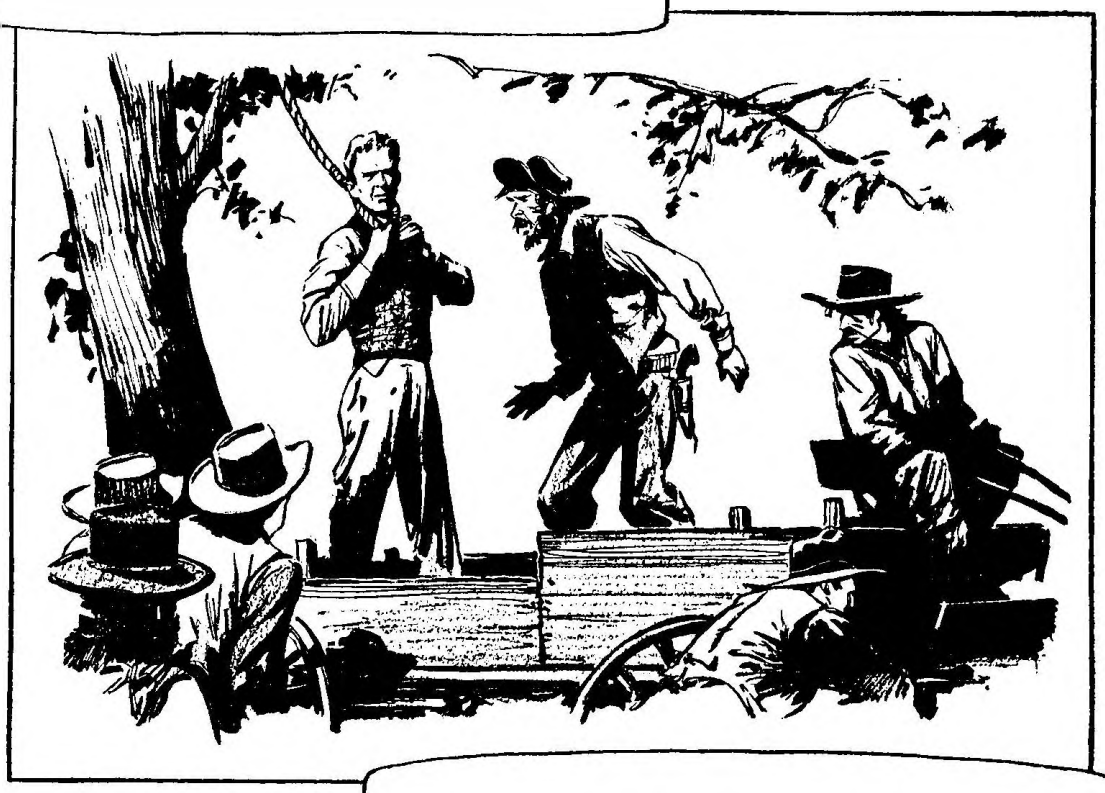
Bart's jaw muscles started twitching. "He chose to believe it. Guess he wanted all the good workmen on the drive that he could get." Then he said, "Guess Beth figured that Darrah could help Ab, too."

"Yeh," I said, "though Ab's not a bad top rider, either."

"No," Bart said, "he isn't. Guess we better stick with him."

"Yeh," I said. "Guess we'd better."

HIGH CALIBER GENTS—1



GAMBLING BILL THORNTON

By BILL WATSON

A DRUNKEN mob was hanging Gambling Bill Thornton. Carson Valley, Nevada, was wild with gold, and gamblers accused Gambling Bill of fleecing a miner out of his poke. Slender, immaculate, Gambling Bill stood in a wagon parked under an oak tree. A drunken miner, with clumsy fingers, was trying to adjust the noose proper.

"This man is drunk," the gambler taunted. "He's nervous, too. He can't adjust this noose rightly!"

The driver, reins in hand, growled, "Make it pronto, miner! We gotta hang this gambler, then git back to our diggin's!"

With whip upraised, another man stood beside the wagon. His job was to bring the whip down at the proper time across the rump of the nigh horse. The wagon team would then leap ahead. Gambling Bill Thornton would be left hanging by his neck.

Another miner muttered, "Git it over with, men!"

Hangings were nothing new in this raw Nevada camp. Across the Sierras, the Mother Lode had seen many hangings, some of these being witnessed by Gambling Bill.

The drunk fumbled the noose. Gambling Bill Thornton smiled in wry amusement. The drunk was more nervous than he!

"Get away," the gambler said angrily. "I'll adjust this noose myself." With his shoulder, he pushed the miner back, almost knocking him off the wagon. "Loosen my hands, driver?"

The driver loosened the gambler's hands, and he calmly adjust the hangman's knot under his own ear, putting it in a position where it would break his neck. Then he said, "Tie my hands again, driver."

Noose adjusted, Gambling Bill Thornton looked over the drunken, dirty bunch of miners, and history records that he actually smiled. A gallant man to the end, he said in a cheerful voice, "Drive out the team, men!"

The whip cracked. Frightened broncs leaped ahead. The driver hung onto his seat and reins. The wagon box was jerked from under Gambling Bill Thornton's polished boots. The rope tightened.

So died Gambling Bill Thornton.

GAMBLING BILL THORNTON, also known up and down the "diggin's" as Lucky Bill, was born to take a chance. He detested and loathed all forms of manual labor. Born in New York State, he went to California with the first rush of gold-seekers, not to pan gold but to get gold through gambling.

His first stop was Sacramento.

The center of gambling was an establishment known as The Round Tent. Here miners were fleeced through monte, poker, faro and other nefarious games. Gambling Bill was not a card-man. He played the pea game.

His equipment consisted not of a deck of cards but a small "pea" and three walnut shells.

Sitting behind a plank in the Round Tent, he went to work—three walnut shells in front of him, one pea in front of him beside the shells, another pea palmed in his hand. These peas consisted of round bits of cork that were so small that, if necessary, they could be hidden under his long fingernails.

He knew his equipment well and could use it.

He would turn on his boyish smile. "Under which walnut shell, sir, is the pea? The hand, sir, is faster than the eye."

"I don't believe it."

Gambling Bill Thornton would make a few passes with the walnut shells. Deliberately he slowed down his hand motions. The miner would say, "Under that shell, gambler. The one in the middle."

Up would come the walnut shell. Sure enough, the pea would be under it. And Gambling Bill Thornton would pay off the miner. Then his spiel would continue.

"No crooked cards, no gambling devices—an honest, straight game. A contest of skill, ladies and gentlemen—my speed of hand matched against your speed of eye. The hand is faster than the eye—you there, you want to try?"

Usually the victim won the first two calls, then started to lose. The formula was that Gambling Bill bet six ounces of gold dust against one ounce put up by his "customer." When one victim played out, his dust gone, there was always another.

Within a few months, Gambling Bill—with his two peas, three walnut shells, his fast-moving hands—had cleared around $30,000. But there was still more to make, so he organized a group of gamblers, some with shells, some with cards. He got so big he had to build a dive of his own.

The formula here, too, was old. "Mules" wandered through the crowd, placing bets at various games, sometimes winning, sometimes losing. These "mules", of course, were hired by Gambling Bill, the men who lured the suckers into trying their luck.

But Gambling Bill was never a man to operate long from any given point. He had a chronic case of itchy feet, and he wanted always to see new territory. No wife and howling infant was ever to bind him to a single spot. He grew tired of his dive in Sacramento, although the "take" was tremendous.

He went into the Mother Lode proper.

Here, in the High Sierras, he went from camp to camp with a wagon, carrying a table, three walnut shells, and the two notable peas. He had acquired a partner by this time, one Sidney Charlie.

The town was Hangtown. Bill's men took a miner for his entire poke, and the other miners, becoming suspicious and sullen, mumbled something about hanging a pair of crooked gamblers.

Gambling Bill muttered, "Get the wagon ready, Charlie."

Charlie hooked up the team and drove around to the front of the saloon. Scooping up his equipment, Gambling Bill Thornton made a dishonest dash out the door, leaped into the wagon, and out of Hangtown the two gamblers went, with lead whistling over their heads as they crouched in the wagon.

"I could almost feel the noose," Gambling Bill later said, grinning as he recalled the hair-raising incident.

He died with a smile, and a joke. There is the legend of him yet there in the Mother Lode. They say even yet, over a century later, he still visits ghost towns. There, in these dusty, tumbled-down towns, when the moonlight slants in over pine and spruce, when the creeks talk in loud chatter about the gold they once held, old-timers say that Gambling Bill Thornton still plays his shell game.

Ghostly hands, thin, supple, set up the table, there along a street unmarked by footprints, a street that once broiled to mad men seeking yellow gold. Ghostly hands move the walnut shells, palms the pea, and a ghostly voice, heard only by other ghosts, intone, the chant of the shell-man.

"Right this way, ladies and gentlemen—you, there, the man with the feet—six ounces of my dust against one of yours you cannot name the right walnut shell—come up—don't push or shove—"

And ghostly fingers move, reflecting moonlight glistens on a yellow gold ring. . . .

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 26)

1. False. The Spanish word, *caballo*, means horse.

2. False. Chaparral is a thorny shrub.

3. In the old west, a chip wagon was sometimes used to carry cow chips into territory where wood was scarce.

4. If your cowpoke friend told you he was looking for some "coffin varnish," you would know he was seeking whiskey.

5. True. Cattle cut from the main herd are sometimes referred to as a "cut".

6. A "die-up" is a situation in which large numbers of cattle are wiped out, for example, by drought or blizzard.

7. True. "Eagle bill" refers to a stirrup covering.

8. If you were told someone was about to "die of throat trouble," you would know he was slated for a hanging.

9. True. A "free ranger" was an old-time Westerner who was opposed to the coming of fences.

10. If a cowpoke mentioned "funnadiddle," he would be referring to his fanciest clothes.

11. "Go 'way 'round 'em, Shep" means be careful to avoid something ,or keep an eye on something, since it spells danger.

12. The expression, "grass is waving over him," means that somebody has died.

13. False. A man is said to be "gut shrunk" when he has been without food for a long time.

14. If the sheriff warned you to watch out for a "hell wind," you should be on the lookout for a tornado.

15. "Hen wrangler" is a chore boy.

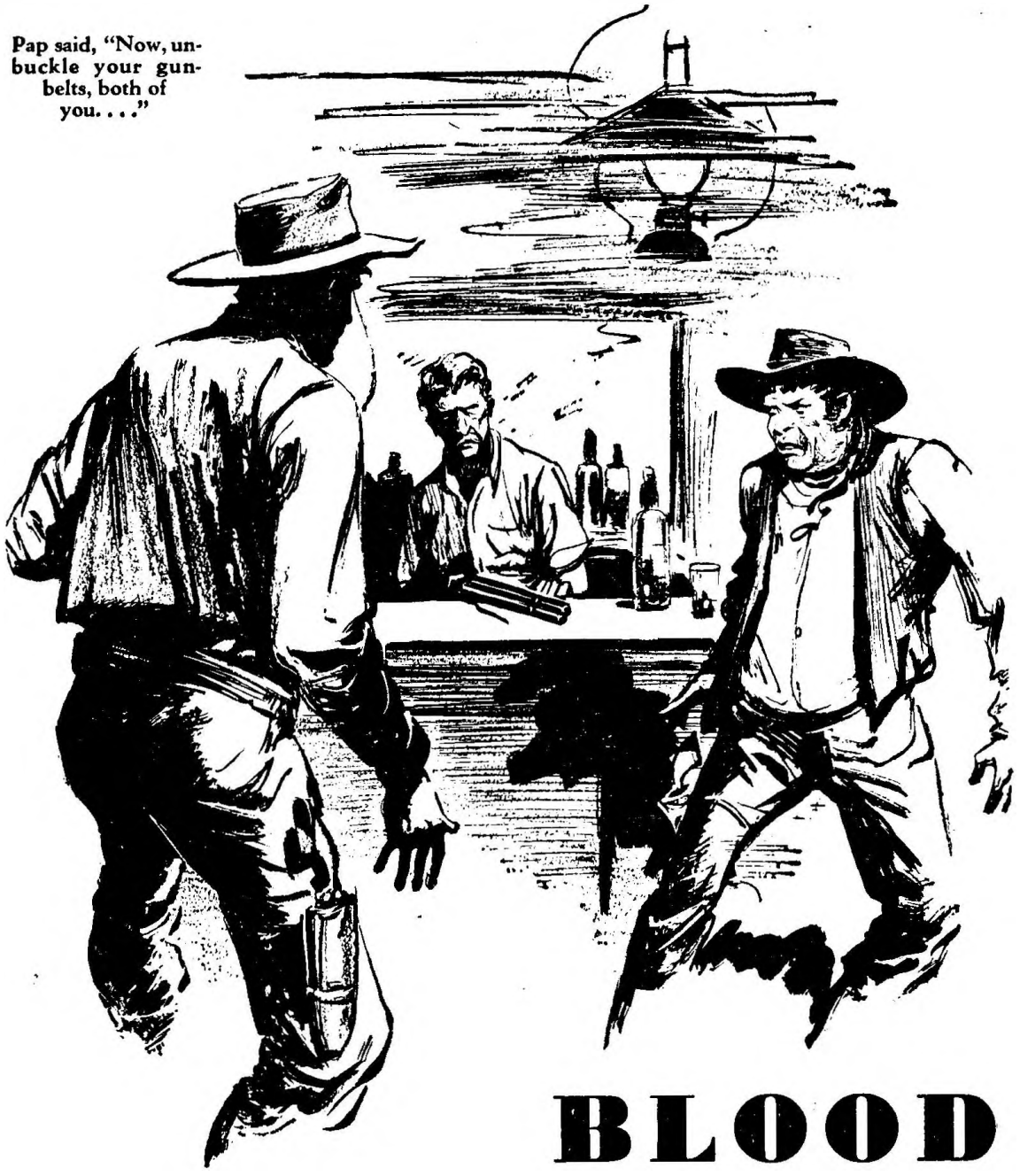
16. A "*honda*" is a part of a rope.

17. A cowpoke is said to be "hopping dog holes" when he is riding through prairie dog country.

18. True. In the slanguage of the cowpoke, "immigrant butter" is gravy made from flour, water and bacon grease.

19. True. Old-time cowpokes often avoided sitting in a chair, preferring to save it for company.

20. According to western slang, a "seam squirrel" is a louse.



Pap said, "Now, unbuckle your gunbelts, both of you. . . ."

BLOOD CALL

Cameron brothers ranched alike, they fought alike and hated alike—and they would die alike, old Pap swore—if he had to kill the last one himself!

By W. P. BROTHERS

THE morning sun came in slantwise through the batwings, reflecting against the white alkali dust that hung in mid-air. It was going to be another hot day, Pap Logan thought as he swabbed down the bar with soapy water.

Jake Cameron and Gil Headfett talked at

one end of the bar. There was no one else in the room when Luke Cameron, Jake's brother slammed in. His face was white, almost as white as the alkali dust that clung to his faded Levis and shirt.

Luke said, "I found six, eight of my two-year-olds running with part of your herd, Jake. Over Dead Horse Canyon way."

Pap saw Jake study his brother's face for a moment. Then he said, "Well, cut 'em out and get 'em back to your own range. Why trouble me about it?"

Luke's voice was terse, clipped when he spoke. "The brand's been altered on all of them. And the job wouldn't fool a half-wit."

Jake Cameron took another sip of his beer. His eyes never left his brother's face. They were twins, these two, both twenty-six and Pap had known them since they were knee-high to a grasshopper. Both men were big, rawboned, with big hands and angular features. They both wore battered range Stetsons and faded Levis. Heavy six-guns were slung low on their narrow hips.

Luke pulled off his hat and slapped the dust from it. Pap said, "Mebbe there's some mistake, Luke. Mebbe—"

"There ain't no mistake," Luke said. "Them steers were rustled. Jake figured nobody'd get over to Dead Horse Canyon till the brands started growing over and a man couldn't tell. But the altered part is fresh now. Can't be more'n a week old."

Gil Headfett said, "It ain't right to accuse a man without giving him a chance to talk—"

Jake Cameron turned to Gil. "This crazy brother of mine goes off plumb loco. Probably the sun got too hot out there and he just imagined things."

Pap said, "Now, there ain't no call fer a fight."

"It's a serious charge," Gil said judiciously, puckering his thick lips. He was older than the Cameron brothers, maybe forty. He wore a greasy hat and a shirt caked with dirt. A week's growth of stubble covered his heavy jowls. He was of medium height and had a big belly which hung over his belt. His legs were thin, so that he appeared topheavy.

Pap moved down the bar and swabbed where Gil and Jake stood. His nose crinkled as he approached Gil. No sense in a man getting dirty as Gil, he figured grimly. Man ought to take a bath once in a while in the hot weather.

Luke said, "Them cattle were stole. The thing to do with rustlers is to string 'em up!"

"He's your brother!" Pap Logan said.

Jake turned to Gil Headfett again. He said, "I really think the boy got too much sun out there. Maybe this'll cool him off." He stepped forward and deliberately emptied his glass of beer down the front of Luke's shirt.

Luke emitted a roar that could be heard throughout the half dozen buildings that composed Alkali. He stepped back, face deathly white. His hand dropped to the butt of the heavy gun that swung on his leg.

Gil Headfett moved away, a sardonic smile on his face. Jake Cameron said, "I always could beat you, Luke, boy."

Luke Cameron took two paces backward. His lean body hunched forward. His hand dropped lower to his side. His eyes blazed with a fierce, hard glow.

Pap Logan reached under the counter and brought up a sawed-off shotgun. He slammed it on the bar.

He said, "It don't matter who wins! I'll kill him that's standing when the shootin's over! I knowed yore paw. He was one of my best friends. Brother drawin' again' brother! I know he'd want me to do it."

The three in the saloon faced old Pap Logan. He was a hardbitten old cuss, formerly prospector, sheriff, cattleman and a dozen other occupations before he became owner and bartender of Alkali's only saloon. His chin trembled, but the old man's blue eyes were hard as steel. Pap Logan wasn't a blowhard—no one in that room doubted

the oldster would do exactly what he said.

Some of the tension went out of Jake Cameron. He said, "It ain't no use interferin', Pap."

Pap said, his voice cold as ice. "I've knowed yuh for a long time. I'd rather see you go like this than—now, unbuckle your gunbelts, both of you and leave 'em drop."

A slow smile spread over Luke's face. He unbuckled his gun and let it drop to the dirty sawdust on the floor. "I always could handle you, Jake."

Jake, too, unbuckled his gun. His fists closed into hard, tight knots. "All right, Luke. Let's see what poison you pack." Jake flexed his heavy shoulders, his lips thinned against his teeth.

Pap Logan slapped the bar with his shotgun again. "You'll take your fistfights into the street!"

Luke shrugged. "Suits me." With that he turned and headed for the swinging doors. Jake followed close on his heels. Gil, disappointment in his face, threw one look at Pap and then followed the two brothers.

PAP, the shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm, came from around the bar. He was almost glad old Zeke Cameron wasn't alive to see what damn fools his kids were. He'd known Zeke a long time, since before Luke and Jake were born. The two had prospected together, gone into business together, gone broke together. Three months ago Zeke Cameron had been bushwhacked out in one of the alkali holes. Only the buzzards circling overhead had told Pap and Jake and Luke where he'd fallen. There'd been enough left to identify him and to tell the three who found him that he'd been back-shot.

But there'd been no trace of the bushwhacker. There'd been half a dozen waddies traveling through Alkali. The town wasn't big enough to have a sheriff. By the time they'd been able to notify the sheriff over in Sageflat, fifty miles away, the killer could have gone three times that distance.

The trouble, Pap reflected sadly, was that Luke and Jake were twins. Their ma had died when they were young and Zeke had been busy with his ranch. There'd been no one to tan their hides when they needed it. They'd been looked after by a sourdough cook who figured if they were fighting each other, they were keeping out of trouble.

They grew alike and acted alike. But they fought. The main thing was, they could never establish who was boss. Jake Cameron was a shade faster on the draw—when the two drew at tin cans, Jake's leaped in the air a moment sooner than Luke's. But Luke could generally get the upper hand in three scraps out of five when they fought with fists. Both were headstrong, quick-tempered, quick to see an insult. Neither would back down before the other.

They were so near alike in everything that they couldn't get along in anything, Pap thought now. When Zeke died, leaving the ranch to them both, they'd had one fight after another until they'd finally decided to split the range, each taking half. Now they worked their halves separately, neither having a big enough holding to make it really pay, both prideful enough to stick it, too prideful to compromise. Luke had taken the ranch house and buildings and had agreed to pay half its value to Jake in cash.

As Pap hit the sidewalk, something tore inside of him to see two brothers squaring away at each other.

Now, Luke and Jake advanced toward each other, fists ready. Luke snaked out a long arm and caught Jake aside the head. Jake brought up a blow to Luke's middle, which sent him grunting back. Then the two were on each other, landing haymakers. The crack of bone against bone was like the crack of pistol shots.

The few other townsfolk came out. It was an old thing. It was Luke and Jake Cameron going at it again.

Pap Logan looked at Gil Headfett. He

had selected a place in the shade and now watched, his hat low on his thick forehead. It was impossible to know what the man was thinking.

Well, why not, Pap thought bitterly. The Cameron place was the biggest spread around Alkali and it bordered Gil's own Lazy H. The dozen or so other ranches were scattered. Let Gil take over the entire Cameron spread and he'd control the county. All Gil Headfett needed was to let one brother tear the other's innards out—and he'd have no trouble pushing into the whole range.

Pap watched the two men slugging it out. After fifteen minutes he wondered how much longer either could take such punishment. Their faces were caked with sweat and dust and blood. There seemed to be no power behind the blows of either. But still they fought, each determined not to give the other the satisfaction of victory.

After another few minutes of it, Pap could stand it no longer. He went into the street and stepped between the two. Both stood back, glad of the respite. Their breathing came in hard, tortured gasps. Both men's shirts were sweat-soaked. Pap grunted in satisfaction. The heat of the day and the pounding they'd given each other had taken some of the viciousness from their tempers. But in each man's face there smouldered hate, each silently telling the other that the thing wasn't finished.

"Git inside!" Pap snapped.

Both men glared, as if to refuse to move. Then Pap turned and gave Luke a shove toward the doors of his Red Eye Saloon. Luke staggered away, through the dust of the street, over the wooden sidewalk and into the saloon. Jake followed.

Gil came in after Pap. He said, "You shoulda let 'em finish it. Nothing's settled."

Pap said, "Gil, if'n you don't shut up, I'm gonna club you." Then to Jake, "There's a pump out back. Wash some of that blood off your face and then ride."

Jake's big hands opened and closed. Pap could see his knuckles, raw, with no skin left on them. Jake finally found his breath. He said, "No man tells me I rustle his cattle. Leastwise without a fight."

Pap said, "All right. You've had your fight. Now get outa town."

Luke said, "The critters is there fer anyone to see."

"I'll see you in hell first," Jake said. "I'll smoke you clean off the range."

Pap slapped the sawed-off shotgun on the bar again. "Get out there and git cleaned up, Jake."

Jake lumbered to the back door and disappeared. When he came back, Luke went out. Pap poured whiskies while Jake buckled on his gun. "Ride!" Pap commanded when Jake had tossed back the whiskey. "That's on the house."

Jake ran a swollen tongue over his battered lips and made no answer. He stalked to the door, Gil Headfett at his heels. Before Luke came in from the back, Pap heard Jake and Gil spur their horses out of town.

He breathed easier then. He poured Luke a drink. Neither man spoke. Pap knew it was no use arguing with either of them. He knew from the look on Luke's battered face that the thing wasn't settled. Not by any means.

Finally Luke nodded to Pap and went after his horse.

After Pap heard him leave town, he stood there for a long time. Old Zeke Cameron had been able to keep a sort of peace between the two. Anyway, he'd kept it under control, because Zeke was tough and the two kids respected their dad. Pap shook his head slowly. He could try to keep them from each other's throats. But he was too old for that sort of thing.

Presently he pulled an old broom from a corner and started sweeping up the sawdust. It was getting pretty dirty, he figured. Reckon it was time he put down some new. Then his eye caught a silver object lying in the sawdust. He bent and picked it up. A rowel from a spur. Gil Headfett's. He

slipped it in his pocket. Gil must have lost it a few minutes ago. Although he had no love for the man, Pap figured it'd be only right to return it. Save Gil buying a new spur or making a rowel himself.

Then Pap's mind went back to the two brothers. He could see no way of their settling their differences peaceably. But he owed it to Zeke to do what he could, whether he was meddling or not. He shook his head sadly and went on with his sweeping.

NEXT morning Pap opened early. He found an often used sign in one of the drawers behind the bar and hung it up in front of the mirror. In crude letters, it read, BARTENDER OUT—LEAVE PAYMENT FOR ALL DRINKS CONSUMED ON BAR. P. D. LOGAN, PROP.

Then he shoved a battered hat on his head and walked across the street to the livery stable. He muttered a greeting to Abe Watkins, the proprietor, and saddled the big bay he kept there.

He mounted and rode out of town. Several miles out, he turned off the dusty wagon road and cut away to the east. It was still early. Pulling his hat low to shade his eyes from the already hot sun, he let the bay choose its own pace.

The sun was high when Pap neared Dead Horse Canyon. The canyon was a long wash a quarter of a mile wide, leading up into the Santa Rosa hills. The grass at the base of the canyon was fetlock high where the rain collected.

He rode up the canyon, keeping his eyes open for sign. Presently he found tracks and followed them. In a few minutes he came upon a small herd of steers grazing in the lush grass. He rode among them, finally singling out one he wanted. In seconds he had it roped and tied. He examined the animal's brand carefully.

What he saw didn't please him. Someone had altered the brand, obviously. It was crude work. Luke had been right, Pap reflected. The job wouldn't fool a half-wit.

But was it meant to fool anyone, Pap asked himself.

He let the bawling steer go. Then he mounted once more and rode farther up the canyon, eyes on the ground, searching. A half hour later he picked up a horse's tracks. They were fairly recent. They'd be Luke's.

He kept going, following the canyon as it narrowed back into the hills. Two hours later he found what he was looking for—older tracks, almost obliterated. He followed them, losing them and finding them again, time after time. And at last he discovered what he sought.

It was the rubbed-out embers of a fire, kicked into the earth when whoever had been here stamped it out. Nearby were enough tracks to tell him this was where the branding had taken place. The tracks were too old to be identifiable. A man couldn't tell much.

Pap searched the vicinity afoot for some trace that had been left behind. He went over the ground, searching minutely. But at the end of an hour he'd found nothing.

He could guess easily enough what was happening. Someone had run some of Luke's steers in with Jake's bunch and then altered the brands with a running iron. It was crude work. It couldn't have been Jake wanting to steal the cattle. To Pap Logan it meant only one thing: some one wanted the Cameron brothers to fight. Whoever it was knew Luke would surely run onto the altered brands and Luke would be out after blood.

At the same time Pap thought of Zeke Cameron's murder. Everyone knew Luke and Jake would be at each other's throats without the old man there to hold them off. Already the two brothers had split the ranch. There was only one man who'd benefit from the brothers splitting up and maybe gunning each other down.

And that man was Gil Headfett.

Pap Logan rode out of Dead Horse Canyon and swung north toward Luke's ranch. A gnawing uncertainty was inside him. He hadn't found a thing that would tie Gil

up with this—there was no proof of what he suspected. You couldn't accuse a man because he had the motives. Why, half the world would be under suspicion of one thing or another. But he couldn't figure it any other way. If he could make Luke and Jake see it, maybe they'd forget some of their headstrong pride and stand together.

It was well past midday when he neared Luke Cameron's place. The buildings were set in a hollow and he couldn't see them till he was less than a quarter mile away. When he topped a rise where the buildings were in view, Pap Logan drew up suddenly.

Where Luke's barn had been there was now a pile of smouldering ashes. Little curls of smoke rose straight into the cloudless sky. There were three men moving about the corrals. Pap bit back a curse and raked the bay with spurs.

One of Luke's waddies said, "Fire started couple of hours before dawn. When we come pounding out, the whole barn was a mass of flame."

Something sharp cut at Pap's heart. *"I'll see you in hell first,"* Jake had said. *"I'll smoke you clean off the range."*

Pap said to the waddy, "Where's Luke?"

"Rode out of here an hour ago heading for Jake's place. Reckon he figured Jake knew something. Luke was out fer blood."

Pap swore. "See anyone around last night?"

"Nope," the waddy said, "but somebody set it fer sure. Ain't no way else it could have happened. Reckon Jake was purty bitter 'bout the fight to fire his own brother's barn."

"Ain't no proof t'were Jake," Pap snapped. "Why didn't you stop Luke?"

The waddy shrugged. "We tried. He wanted to go at dawn, but we kept him. Finally nothing would keep him. Take a dozen men to stop him the way he went outa here."

Pap's eyes narrowed down to thin, angry slits. He said, "I'd admire to borrow a gun. Got a rifle?"

The waddy went to the bunkhouse and brought out a Winchester. He handed it to Pap, together with a handful of cartridges. "Sure hope you know what you're doin', Pap."

Pap loaded the gun and jacked a shell in the chamber. Without answering, he raked the bay with spurs and went thundering out of the ranch yard, heading for Jake Cameron's place.

He pushed the bay hard, trying to calculate the time. Luke wasn't one to punish a horse. Though he'd left an hour previous, Pap figured he maybe wouldn't be too late.

THE bay was white with foam and blowing hard when he rode into Jake Cameron's spread. The house and bunkhouse were small and newly built, the lumber still fresh. The place Jake had selected was bordering a creek. Half a dozen small cottonwoods extended back from the house. A hundred yards away an oldster was digging postholes for a corral.

Pap recognized him. He said, "Les McCrery. You seen Jake or Luke?"

McCrery said, "Luke come by here a half hour ago, looking for Jake. Jake's hazing some cattle out of the draws over on Gil Headfett's range. Reckon you could find 'em with a little looking. Mebbe by now they'd be working around Sawtooth Cut."

Pap knew the place. He thanked McCrery with a wave of his hand and headed the running bay toward the Sawtooth Cut.

He didn't like it. He knew if he guessed right, Gil would see it as a chance to get both Luke and Jake. If he'd killed old Zeke, another killing wouldn't bother him. It'd be easy to egg the boys into a fight, then pick off the one that was still standing when the smoke cleared away. He would claim they fought it out, drew together.

Pap pushed the bay hard and the big animal ate up the ground. He rode low in the saddle, his face a grim mask. *If I can only get to 'em in time*, he thought grimly, *I'll make 'em see*. If there was only some

proof—anything that'd tie Gil to Zeke's murder or the cattle rustling or to firing the barn, he'd have a chance of convincing them.

Finally he had to slow the bay down before the animal dropped. He was nearing the Sawtooth Cut, a jagged break of scab-land in the low hills. His eye picked up some dust to the right.

As he got nearer, he could see two men hazing cattle out of the mesquite brush. He heaved a heavy sigh of relief. One of the men Jake and the other was Gil. At the same instant, he saw another rider top a rise. He knew from the way the man sat his saddle it was Luke.

He saw Luke start down the rise on the run. He knew what the man was thinking. Pap was too far to yell. He pulled up his gun and shot in front of Luke's horse.

Luke's animal reared and Luke hit the dust and lay flat, not taking any chances. The sound of the shot attracted Gil and Jake. Pap raised his rifle arm and waved.

It was too far for six-gun range. Luke held his fire till Pap was closer, then as he recognized the old codger, he stood up and shoved his gun back in its holster. He climbed back in the saddle and headed once more to the bottom of the draw where Jake and Gil were waiting.

Both Pap and Luke rode up on them at the same time from different directions.

Pap said, "Hold it, Luke, or I'll cut you down." He swung the rifle around.

Gil said, "They'll have to settle it their own way, Pap. Might as well let 'em."

"Don't meddle in this, Pap," Luke said. "Jake's gone too far this time."

Pap glanced at Jake from the corner of his eye. Jake's smile was without humor. His eyes were cold and his body was rigid.

Jake said, "Let him alone, Pap. I don't know what's eating him, but whatever it is, I'll make him crawl."

"Somebody burned Luke's barn last night, Jake," Pap said.

Pap watched Jake closely. His features were immobile, but there was surprise in his eyes. Pap had known him too long not to be able to tell. Gil Headfett's eyes betrayed nothing of what he thought. His face was expressionless. And suddenly Pap knew he was right about Gil. Gil should have been surprised, but he wasn't. Gil knew about the barn being burned. He was waiting like a vulture for the Cameron brothers to finish the thing he'd started when he'd gunned down Zeke Cameron.

Jake said dryly, "I didn't fire your barn, Luke. And I didn't rustle your cattle."

"You vowed to smoke me off the range," Luke said. "I aim to stop it! Now!"

"Barn burning is enough to be strung up for," Gil said. "So's rustling."

The tension between the two brothers was a living thing. Gil was helping it along, putting in his two-bits worth. Pap said, "I shoot straight with a rifle. I can splinter your arm without killing you. Unless you're willing to listen."

The three turned to look at Pap. "Listen to what?" Luke asked.

It was bluff and Pap knew it, but something inside him made him go through with it. He licked dry lips and said slowly, "Reckon mebbe I know who bushwhacked Zeke Cameron. An' who rustled them steers of yourn, Luke, and who fired your barn last night. And I reckon I know why."

Gil had shifted in his saddle. His eyes were narrow and his face had suddenly darkened. Now his hand rested carelessly on his saddle horn and his gun hung free.

Pap touched the spurs to his bay and the animal jumped. When Pap had him quiet again, the Winchester across his lap was pointed at Gil Headfett's guts.

Jake said, "Who was it, Pap. I didn't rustle them steers but I was sure jumped for it."

Pap said, "Supposin' it was me?"

In the silence that followed, Gil didn't move in his saddle.

"Supposing," Pap went on, "I wanted the Cameron spread. If I killed old Zeke,

you two would be certain to fight and split the place. Then with some needling, some rustled steers planted, mebbe a barn burned —why, I could be sure you two boys'd be at each other's throats. If'n you didn't kill each other, I'd just try to be handy when you had your fight. I'd take care of the one who won and make it look—"

He didn't bother to finish. Both Jake and Luke had caught his argument, and each thought he'd figured it for himself. They were both staring at Gil as if they'd never seen the man before.

Gil said quietly, deadly, "Yeah, but that's supposin'. What about some proof? They'd have to have some proof, Pap—unless yuh was to confess."

"Mebbe there is proof, Gil," Pap said slowly, his voice hardly steady. "Mebbe whoever did them things dropped something once—like a spur rowel, for instance. You know where you lost yours, Gil?"

Four pair of eyes fastened on Gil Headfett's left spur, the one with the missing rowel. Luke said, "Well, Gil—"

Gil reached then. His hand came up full of six-gun. He was fast, terribly fast. He had them all covered before they realized what had happened.

Jake said, "So it was you, Gil—"

"Jest keep your hands away from them guns," Gil warned. "You'll never tell anyone about this 'cause I'm the only one that's goin' out of here alive. I'll just fix it up like you boys had a shoot-out and the old man got caught in the cross-fire. Plumb accidental like—"

He never finished the sentence. Pap squeezed the trigger of the Winchester. The slug caught Gil in the middle and slammed him off balance.

The horses were rearing now. Gil went to the ground. Luke and Jake were trying for a shot, but Gil used his animal for a shield. Gil swung his next shot for Jake. Over the saddle seat, his gun bucked and roared. Jake hunched over the saddle horn as the bullet took him in the side.

Luke raised his arm and aimed. His shot seared saddle leather and caught Gil in the shoulder, slamming him back. Gil's lips were mouthing curses and Luke's gun thundered and spouted flame. Gil lurched as each shot ploughed into him.

Then Gil's gun dropped from his fingers and he stood there swaying, a look of surprised horror on his face. He tried to raise his hands. "Don't," he pleaded in a voice that was half blubbering. "Don't—" Then he pitched forward in the dust, the sentence unfinished. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Pap slid off his horse and went to Jake. But it was Luke who took Jake from the saddle and gently stretched him out. Pap pulled his knife and began cutting away the shirt.

Pap grunted. "Don't reckon it's bad enough t' be fatal."

In a few minutes, Jake struggled to open his eyes. The first shock of the wound had passed and now the pain was beginning to show in his face. He tried a smile. "I guess you had it figured, Pap. Why didn't you let us know about that spur rowel?"

Pap was binding the wound now. He said, "I was bluffing. I didn't have no proof, really. I figured Gil wouldn't know where he'd lost his rowel and he'd show his hand."

It was Luke who finally said, "Reckon maybe we been fightin' too much, Jake. Think may be we could get along 'enough to ranch together?"

Jake grinned through teeth clenched with pain. "Reckon we ought to ranch together, Luke. Hell, we gotta keep things in the family. Trouble with this fight was we had outsiders poking their noses in."

Pap grunted and spat in the dust. He didn't want Luke and Jake to know, but at that moment he was willing to put up his Red Eye Saloon that these two had finished fighting each other.

He was trying to figure where he'd find a taker.

TALES of the

by LEE

OLD DEVIL ESP

JUST WHAT TURNED FELIPE ESPINOSA INTO THE AVENGER OF THE SANGRE DE CRISTOS IS NOT RIGHTLY KNOWN. SOME SAY THAT WHEN, DURING THE MEXICAN WAR, AMERICAN TROOPS OVERRAN THE ESPINOSA RANCHO IN CHIHUAHUA, OLD DON ESPINOSA SWORE HIS SON FELIPE TO A VOW OF VENGEANCE.

TALL, WITH HARD DARK EYES AND LONG BLACK HAIR, A DEAD SHOT, FELIPE AND A MUCH YOUNGER ESPINOSA NAMED VIVIAN MOVED INTO THE SANGRE DE CRISTO MOUNTAINS OF COLORADO AND BEGAN THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF KILLING AMERICANOS.

THEIR METHODS WERE NOT PRETTY. AN OLD MAN AT WORK ON A SAWMILL WAS BRUTALLY HACKED TO PIECES WITH AN AX. A PROSPECTOR WAS FOUND WITH HIS HEART CUT OUT. SOLITARY TRAVELERS WERE AMBUSHED AND SKEWERED TO THE GROUND WITH STAKES. THE CIVIL WAR WAS IN FULL SWING AND THEIR WORK WAS LAID TO INDIANS.

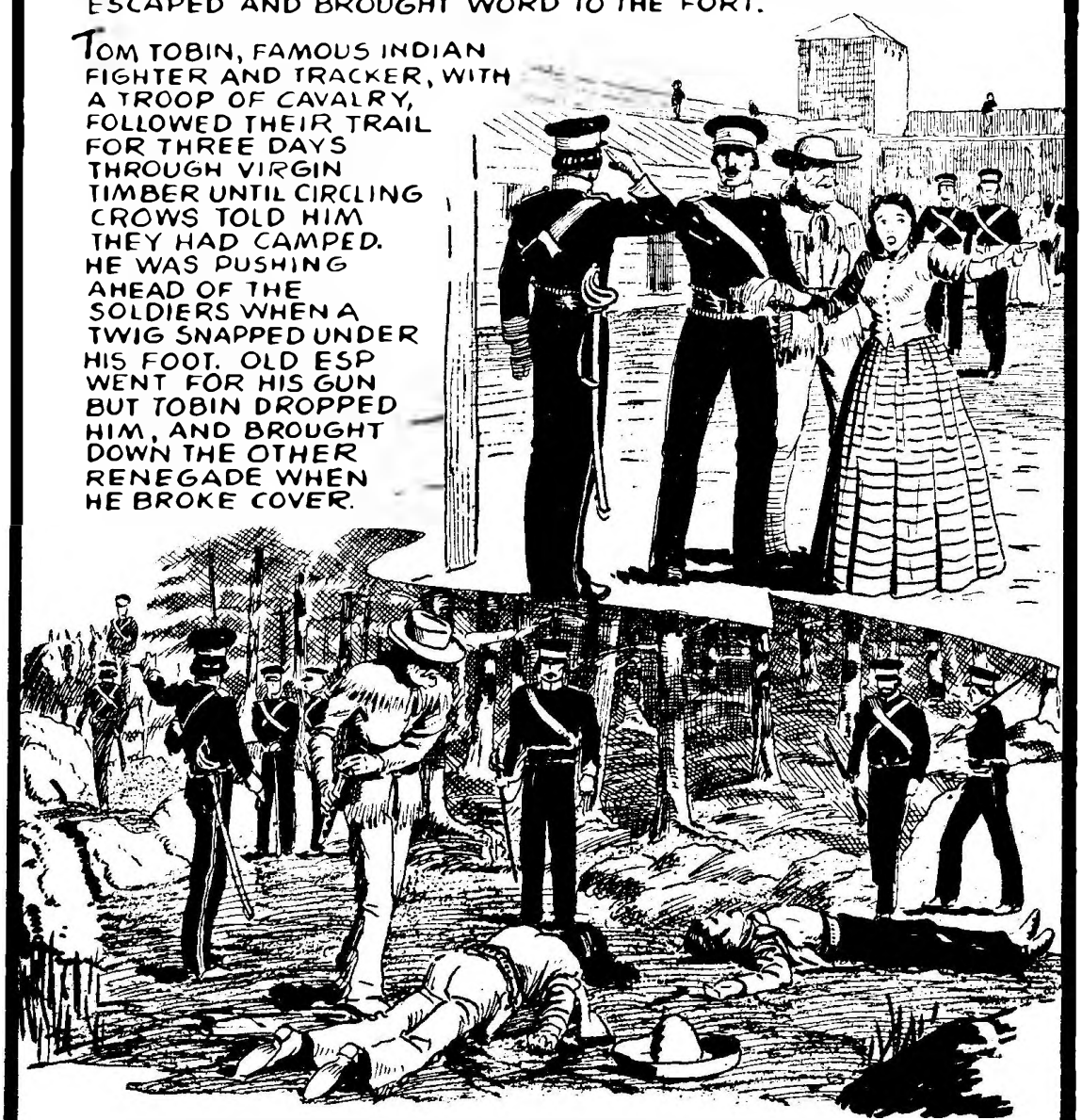
WHEN THE ESPINOSAS CARVED UP AN ARMY OFFICER, A POSSE FROM CALIFORNIA GULCH PICKED UP THEIR TRAIL. THEY WERE SOON SURROUNDED IN DENSE WOODS, AND A POSSEMAN'S BULLET BLEW THE TOP OFF VIVIAN'S HEAD. BUT OLD ESP, AS THEY CALLED HIM LATER, SLIPPED THROUGH THE CORDON IN THE DARKNESS AND ENLISTED ANOTHER ASSISTANT-KILLER.

OLD WEST

IN 1863, WITH SOME 25 AMERICANOS TO HIS CREDIT, THE OLD DEVIL WROTE GOV. EVANS AN ULTIMATUM DEMANDING A FULL PARDON, A RANCH AND A CAPTAINCY IN THE COLORADO GUARD IN RETURN FOR STOPPING HIS SELF-APPOINTED WAR. EVANS' ANSWER WAS TO UP THE REWARD FOR THE PAIR TO $2,500, AND THE SLAUGHTER WENT ON.

NEAR FORT GARLAND, THE OUTLAWS WAYLAID A MAN AND WOMAN DRIVING PEACEFULLY ALONG THE ROAD. THE WOMAN ESCAPED AND BROUGHT WORD TO THE FORT.

TOM TOBIN, FAMOUS INDIAN FIGHTER AND TRACKER, WITH A TROOP OF CAVALRY, FOLLOWED THEIR TRAIL FOR THREE DAYS THROUGH VIRGIN TIMBER UNTIL CIRCLING CROWS TOLD HIM THEY HAD CAMPED. HE WAS PUSHING AHEAD OF THE SOLDIERS WHEN A TWIG SNAPPED UNDER HIS FOOT. OLD ESP WENT FOR HIS GUN BUT TOBIN DROPPED HIM, AND BROUGHT DOWN THE OTHER RENEGADE WHEN HE BROKE COVER.



INDIAN FASHION. TOBIN NEATLY SCALPED OLD DEVIL ESP, WHOSE PRIVATE VENDETTA HAD COST AT LEAST 40 LIVES, AND DELIVERED BOTH HEADS TO THE GOVERNOR.

THE FURY OF KA-BIB-ON-OKKA

By JOHN PRESCOTT

THE Corn Moon was on the wane when Wynah, the Winnebago, sat at last upon his blanket in the lodge of the Potawatomi Sachem on the big island in the Port des Morts. He was weary from his long voyage up the Baie des Puants—so named one time by an early *voyageur* who had thought himself to be near the great sea of salt—but his natural pride, and his arrogance would not let him admit to this while in the presence of his sometime enemies, the despised and lowly Potawatomi. The two tribes were at peace these days, but not even the wisest among them could say for how long it might last.

But he was treated very kindly on the big island in the freshwater sea, and the old Sachem made accommodations for him as he would for a son or brother.

When the South Wind rested, then ruled fearsome Ka-bib-on-okka, whom no man could withstand in battle — save perhaps Wynah, the Winnebago, whose greed was the greed of men, but whose pride was the pride of gods!

"So, then, my son, you seek to trade with the *voyageurs*, but they have gone now and shall return only with the coming of *Shawon-dasee*." The Sachem, who appeared as old as the land itself, wrinkled his face in appreciation of some private humor. "They do not have a liking for the snow and ice, those French. No, they will come only with the south wind."

Wynah, who was listening carefully, if with tongue in cheek, thought he detected an aspersion cast against his valor. His bravery was well known and appreciated by all among the Winnebago, and it did not please him to have it questioned by a Potawatomi so ancient he could no longer walk.

"I am not afraid of *Ka-bib-on-okka*," he declared. "I laugh at him and he holds no fears for me. His ice and snow are nothing."

The Sachem regarded the fire and for a time it seemed to Wynah that his presence there had been forgotten. It was annoying to be ignored in this way, but at the same time he knew that such an old dodderer must have allowances made for him; such a one who sat like a lank and misshapen skeleton in his blanket, with his bear robe wrapped around his feet and legs, so that one could

It was early morning when they commenced to battle....

not be sure whether he had any feet or legs at all—one whose unstrung bow molded in a corner of the lodge with his dusty war bundle, and whose crutches, upon the blanket beside him, attested to his sickness of body, and perhaps hinted of a certain senility as well.

Nevertheless, this apparent disregard of what he had said did not sit well with Wynah, and he leaned slightly forward and repeated it, more loudly this time. Who could say, the old fool might be deaf as well.

"I am not afraid of *Ka-bib-on-okka*," he said. "I intend to go into his country as far as man can go, and when *Sha-won-dassee* once again brings summer, and the *voyageurs*

return, it will be Wynah, the Winnebago, who shall have the richest pelts to trade."

This time the Sachem turned his head. The Sachem looked at him for quite a long time without saying anything at all and it made Wynah wonder if he really had been heard, or if the ancient was simply gazing at him out of curiosity. It seemed to Wynah that the Sachem was not looking so much at him as through him, as though, perhaps, there might be something around in back of him somewhere that had attracted the concentration of the other.

This notion grew in his head until he finally turned around to look, but there was nothing there at all. Just then, the Sachem spoke again.

"So, Wynah, the Winnebago, would challenge the King-of-the-Land-of-Ice."

He said this in a kindly sort of way, and shook his head, and Wynah wondered if he were being mocked. One could never tell with these old ones, but it was irritating simply to contemplate it. He was about to say for the third time that the king of that land, the fierce North Wind, had not the slightest fear for him, but he was arrested by a movement of the Sachem, who reached out with his gaunt, twisted hand and pulled another pine log into the embers of the fire. Then he settled himself once more and gazed at the fresh blaze, staring at it with his eyes half-lidded, as though he might be seeing something in there that was concealed to everyone but him.

All this hocus-pocus was further aggravating to Wynah, and it occurred to him that the old ones were always doing things like that: looking into fires and seeing things obscured to others. It must surely be a sign of a failing mind.

"Perhaps, Wynah, you would like to hear a story. It is a chill night and stories are always good when there is a fire to sit around."

Wynah fidgeted on his blanket, and then relaxed. Well, why not, he thought. He could not very well start upon the remainder of his journey in the middle of the night, and anyway, it would be a flagrant breach of courtesy to refuse the offer. If he found the old man's talk too tiresome he had only to close his ears and consider the fine pelts awaiting him in the north.

"It would please me to hear a story from the lips of the Sachem of the Potawatomi," he said with all the solemnity he could command, and it was a good thing the Sachem did not lift his eyes from the fire because Wynah had a hard time concealing his smile.

"Very well, Wynah, it is this—"

IN A time long ago, the Sachem commenced, in a time before the coming of the French, there was a young man who was the greatest fisherman his tribe had ever known. During all the moons of spring and summer and autumn he would fish in the far north where there are, of course, the biggest and greatest quantity of fish, and his catches far exceeded those of any of his people. There was no deep in Gitche Gumee that he did not know, no cove with whose bottom he was not familiar, no shallow which was not well acquainted with the dragging of his nets. So thorough was his knowledge of the fishing of the Gitche Gumee waters that the others in his tribe came to regard him as a sort of *Manito*. Surely it was magic that attended his success.

Now Ojibe, for that was this young man's name, in time allowed the praise which he received to turn his head. It was a thing he derided and pooh-poohed aloud, but in a little while he commenced to take a secret delight in it, and to expect it as his due. Once he had accepted that much of it it was only a small step for him to believe that he really was a *Manito*. After that he lost all sense of discretion and propriety. There was nothing in the world he could not do.

Every year when *Sha-won-dassee* would become drowsy and take his pipe to the mountain-top and fill all the land about him with the blue and quiet haze the fishermen knew that the time had come for them to

leave the north. When *Sha-won-dassee* became weary in that way, they knew it would not be long before *Ka-bib-on-okka* came shrieking from the top of the world to overpower him and place the land in bonds of snow and ice. He was a thing to fear and they were always careful to avoid entrapment in that country when he brought winter down upon it.

Now one year it was that Ojibe, by this time fully believing himself to be gifted with great powers, was inclined to remain in the north throughout the winter. His companions regarded him in amazement when he told them of this and they begged him not to be foolhardy, for *Ka-bib-on-okka* would surely freeze him solid.

Unhappily, this was exactly the wrong way in which to reach Ojibe's better judgment, and he took their pleadings as a challenge.

"No," he said to them, "I am not afraid of him. As you all know by now, I am a *Manito*, and there is nothing he can do if I choose to stay."

"Well," one of his comrades said, "it is agreed that you are a *Manito* where the catching of fish is concerned, but defying *Ka-bib-on-okka* is quite another thing. Even *Sha-won-dassee* is helpless before that one."

"Pooh," Ojibe retorted. "*Sha-won-dassee* is a tired old man. See how he sits on his mountain and smokes his pipe and dreams. I will not sit that way in complacence and let the ice king overwhelm me."

It was soon seen by the others that there was no moving him. Ojibe was of a very strong mind, they knew, and now that he believed himself to be a *Manito* what could they, mere mortals, say that would be of avail?

They did not argue with him further. It was becoming late in the year and fast approaching time to leave. A new crispness had come into the air which lasted throughout the day and did not dissipate in the early morning as it usually did. The leaves of the maple and birch and oak were whisking away on the swift bursts of the chill wind, and sunrise often found thin webbings of ice formed in the quiet shallows. On still evenings they fancied that they could hear *Ka-bib-on-okka* muttering and stirring across the far reaches of Gitche Gumee beyond them. There was no waiting any longer.

On the day they departed there was sadness among them, for they believed that not even a *Manito* of Ojibe's accomplishments could dare the wrath of the wild king of the north and survive, and they were certain they would never see their comrade again. Ojibe, however, was in great high spirits and claimed to feel sorry that they were not *Manitos* like himself.

WHEN they had gone Ojibe set about making himself comfortable for the arrival of *Ka-bib-on-okka*. He had plenty of fish and fuel and his tipi was pitched in a sheltered place behind a broad, high dune which faced out upon the Gitche Gumee shore. He saw to it that the poles were stout and set solidly into the ground, and he strengthened the outer perimeter of the tipi with stakes—even though he was a person of unusual powers there was no sense in being foolhardy.

Soon it was that *Ka-bib-on-okka* came. From his sheltered place behind the dune, Ojibe awoke one morning to hear the savage waves pounding and clawing at the bulwark which protected him. When he peered through the tipi flap the snow was driving in sheets of such thickness that he could scarcely see the shape of the nearest tree. And the voice of the king of ice dominated everything with its rage and ferocity, sounding particularly vicious in the vicinity of Ojibe's tipi, where sat the brash young man who had dared to challenge his sovereignty.

If Ojibe was frightened he did not let himself think about it. To be sure, he had not frequently heard the wind carry on with such a force before. Nor had he seen the snow heaped to such a depth, nor seen it

acquire a crust so thick so quickly from the intense cold. Even his voice seemed to have a strange, crackling sound to it, when he would poke his head through the flap and shout his insults at the king of ice. But he did not allow himself to think that he might be defeated.

A day soon came when *Ka-bib-on-okka* was able to give Ojibe his undivided attention. *Sha-won-dassee* had proved to be of greater strength than he had first appeared and the south wind had given more of a tussle than *Ka-bib-on-okka* had anticipated, and he had been delayed by consequence. During this time Ojibe had grown quite bold. He did not confine himself to his wigwam, but would sometimes venture out to hunt, or fish through the ice, or simply walked around because it made him feel good to do so. In the evenings he would sit by his fire and compose songs about the stupid vanity of the King-of-the-Land-of-Ice.

But one day all this changed. One day Ojibe's tipi shook with such violence that he thought it might be uprooted and carried away. The snow slatted down so heavily that it seemed for a while that Ojibe might have to crawl through the smoke-vent to get outside. And it became so cold that there was a fog of ice inside. And *Ka-bib-on-okka's* voice was more terrible than ever. But Ojibe was not afraid. He was not afraid at all and he simply threw another log on the fire and, during one of the times when *Ka-bib-on-okka* was drawing his breath and was quiet, Ojibe invited him to come inside.

Ojibe did not know whether he had overstepped himself or not, but he felt so strong and powerful with his powers of a *Manito* that the North Wind was nothing to him any more at all. Had he, Ojibe, not defied him in his own country for many suns, now? Had he not been safe from him within his tipi? Then why not ask him in? He must be getting tired.

At this affront *Ka-bib-on-okka* became more violent than ever and he hurled himself with such force at the outside of the tipi that a thong snapped and once again the interior filled with a blue and icy fog. This time Ojibe could see the king of ice and snow standing inside, but he ignored him and heaped more logs upon the blaze.

"Come on up to the fire," he said over his shoulder, and he laughed at *Ka-bib-on-okka*. "Come up and get warm."

When Ojibe sat down again, he kept watching *Ka-bib-on-okka* out of the tail of his eye, and what he saw amused him greatly. The perspiration was pouring in rivers from his head and body. All the ice and snow that formed his hair and beard were melting away, just as a snowman made by children melts in the warm sun of spring. There was no doubt that the king of that land was disappearing quickly. And if he remained there much longer he would be nothing but a puddle.

At last it seemed that he could stand the heat no longer and he ran outside, but out there a strange thing happened—his anger returned and his strength revived. Once again he summoned his breath and shrilled it into the vent of Ojibe's tipi, and hurled himself against the flap in rage. And this time it was he who did the inviting.

"Come out!" he roared. "Come out and fight me in the snow!

Ojibe sat and listened to him. The old fool was becoming tiresome with all this fuss and noise—perhaps he was in need of another lesson. The fire must have weakened him, Ojibe reasoned, and he could be overpowered now. It would be best to get rid of him once and for all.

After he thought it over Ojibe went outside and *Ka-bib-on-okka* rushed to meet him. The ice king appeared to have revived completely and he looked as fierce as he ever had. For just a moment Ojibe wondered if he had done a foolish thing—and then he remembered that he was a *Manito*, and that a *Manito* could do anything he set his mind upon.

All night long they wrestled. All night long in the blue, sparkling air they rolled

with one another on the crusted snow. They fought silently and with fury, and the only sounds in all that vastness were those of their bodies thundering upon the surface underneath them. Even the animals who came to watch them, coyote and the bear and the wolf, were silent in their astonishment at such a fight.

In the beginning Ojibe had been greatly confident, but as the night went on he began to have his doubts. It somehow seemed that the longer they stayed out there the stronger *Ka-bib-on-okka* became, while he was getting weaker by the moment. A kind of fear commenced to grow upon him at that thought, and it made him wonder if he was really a *Manito* at all.

In a little while it was nearly dawn and Ojibe could think only of the warmth and comfort of his tipi fire. He was numb and without sensation in all of his extremities, and becoming so clumsy with them that he could no longer stand, nor could he grasp the ice king with his hands. He began to crawl toward his wigwam. He began to crawl and the fear was great upon him. What a fool he had been, he thought. What a fool he had been to believe that he was a *Manito* who could challenge *Ka-bib-on-okka's* might. Such a fool, he was.

Now it was that *Ka-bib-on-okka* exerted his greatest efforts. So cold it became that Ojibe felt the numbness that was in his hands and feet creeping toward his heart. He became more acutely aware of the circle of animals around him, and now it occurred to him that their fangs possessed a hostile glint to them in the early flush of dawn. It was this thought which gave him the needed strength. With a final lunge, Ojibe threw himself at the tipi flap and dragged himself inside.

Once within, the fire revived him and the food he had cached gave him the strength to regain a portion of his health and so live out the winter. But never again did he stir from his fire, and so it was that his comrades found him when *Sha-won-dassee* blew his soft breath upon that land with the coming of the spring. And even then they had to carry him to his canoe, for in his vengeance *Ka-bib-on-okka* had taken both of Ojibe's feet.

WYNAH, the Winnebago, took his leave of the Sachem of the Potawatomi as soon as he had heard the ending of the tale. In the beginning he had planned to make his night camp in the village of the Sachem's people, but now he changed all that and took his tipi and canoe across a narrow stretch of water to another island, where he would not be too near to them. In the very early morning he struck his wigwam and departed for the north.

Ho, that wily Sachem, he kept thinking. Almost he had beguiled him from his chosen course, almost that crafty old one had sent him down the Baie des Puants, once again to winter with his people. If he had not in the nick of time recalled the old-time enmity between their two tribes he surely would have done it. He would have gone and left that choice trapping country to the canny Potawatomi, and in the springtime he would have had little for trading with the French. Yes, that dreamy Sachem had been more formidable than he had first appeared.

But now that he had seen the designs of that one he was more exuberant than ever. Surely there were rich pelts in that country to the north—there would be otter and mink and beaver and whatever else he might choose to set his lines for, and in the whole of the land there would be none but himself to take them. Never had Wynah felt so exultant. Almost, he felt like a kind of *Manito* himself. Had he not seen through the cleverness of the Sachem, who had sought to deflect him from his purpose? Well, that was an indication, wasn't it?

Wynah paddled north. His canoe was a beautiful craft which he had made himself after a painstaking search through the forest of his country for a birch tree of just the proper age and thickness, and his youth and

skill sent it across the water like a silver fish. Sometimes his mind would weary when he considered in retrospect the hours he had devoted to the construction of that craft—how he had sliced and wedged the bark away from the trunk, how he had torched the inner surface so that it would lie flat and unbroken in the forms, how he had stitched the seams with elm and butternut, and had pitched them with a strong tallow resin mixed with charcoal to give it color. But it had well been worth the time and patience, for surely there had never been another one like this.

North, always north, he traveled. Sometimes he veered to the east for a time, as when he went through the straits and past the great humped turtle of Michilimackinac, and forward into the Huron lake; and then once more north, beyond the dotted islands and up the rushing river which the Black Robes had called after a divine of theirs, named St. Mary. But north he always bent, never tiring, seldom stopping.

Then one day he portaged across the height of land and Gitche Gumee lay glinting in the autumn sun. Already it was quite chill in that northern land and the water of the inland sea had about it the breathless quality of ice. Winter was never very far at any time from the pine-girt shores of that far-north country and, with *Sha-won-dassee* dozing on his mountain-top, *Ka-bib-on-okka* would be very near.

But Wynah was not afraid. After the manner of the young man in the story, which the Sachem had related to him, he composed songs and insults with which to greet the arrival of the winter king. This was an amusing pastime and it served to while away the long days he devoted to skirting the shore in search of a good place in which to pitch his camp for the coming months. This place would have to meet the special requirements which he had set for it, and at last, after many suns, he came around a sharp point of land and entered a protected bay, and he knew that he had found it.

This bay was very deeply cut into the surrounding shoreline and it was near dusk of the second day of his coming around the point that he reached the bottom of it. To either side of his beaching point, which was gravel and coarse sand, high rock ramparts thrust into the sky, and stunted, gnarled cedars clawed their roots into the seams and clefts upon their heights. Back from the beach some hundred paces, a rising sand spit stretched up to a line of dunes, and beyond those the land was black with pine. Altogether, it was as good a place as could be found.

Once settled on the forest side of the dunes, Wynah set about putting his traps out. Since he hoped to be trading with the French he had no need of large pelts—the bear, the deer or moose—and so set no deadfalls, but devoted his skill and energy to the making of those of the enclosing and arresting variety. He was familiar with a dozen or so different types, but he set mostly nooses, with a few pits and cages thrown in for good measure, being careful not to use those which might damage the fur. The French were very particular about the condition of the pelts and one might as well come in with nothing whatsoever as bring in those skins which had been torn or punctured. True, they might condescend to give a man an old dented kettle in return for something with a blemish in it, but who but a squaw would want a thing like that?

NOW Wynah was of a single-minded nature and once he became engrossed with his snares he forgot all about the impending approach of *Ka-bib-on-okka*. It crossed his mind from time to time, but such was his concentration on the work at hand that when the winter king came roaring from the north he nearly caught him by surprise. It was fortunate, indeed, Wynah considered, that he had thought to shelter his canoe and to bring in a good supply of brush and wood before it happened.

But if Wynah was surprised he was not dismayed. He had been looking forward to

the encounter, if only to prove to himself the fictional character of the story the Potawatomi Sachem had told to him. In the spring, when next he went back to the island in the Port des Morts, he would have a story of his own to tell; and then how would the Sachem wear his feathers? Yeo, yeo!

So it was that *Ka-bib-on-okka* descended upon the tipi of Wynah in all his rage. Perhaps it was that *Sha-woon-dosse* had been obstinate in his departure from that country and had given *Ka-bib-on-okka* a black mood because of it, for when he came it was in a white storm of blinding ice and snow, and such a wind as Wynah had never heard before.

But after his first amazement, and after he saw that all was secure with him, Wynah commenced to take a kind of delight in the winter king's assault, and it was not long before he was shouting his songs and insults up the smoke-vent.

How cold it soon became. Wynah had known cold before, because even in his own land winter was a rigorous time, but never had he known a cold like this. He remembered how cold the Sachem had pictured it in his fairy tale, and it seemed almost as he had described it. The snow crust was so tightly frozen that he could walk upon it without leaving an imprint with his moccasin and he could even beat upon it with a stick and leave little if any mark or indentation. And at night, when *Ka-bib-on-okka* was off sleeping somewhere and his voice was stilled, so frigid was the atmosphere that Wynah could hear nearly every sound there was to hear in the whole of the far-flung northland wilds. Yes, even his breathing had visible particles of ice in it.

Several weeks of this developed a monotonous quality for Wynah, and he became bored. He had been thinking a great deal about the fable of Ojibe and his battle with *Ka-bib-on-okka* and it had occurred to him that a personal encounter with that one would embellish his name with glory and that his victory would make great telling around the lodge fires of the Winnebago—to say nothing of those in the lodges of the craven Potawatomi. So, one day he resolved to grapple with *Ka-bib-on-okka* in the snow.

All during the previous night *Ka-bib-on-okka* had been shouting his derision and abuse down the smoke vent of Wynah's tipi, and Wynah had returned it in kind, with such vigor that he was nearly hoarse from his exertions. Moreover, *Ka-bib-on-okka's* howling had not let him sleep but a few winks, and he thought it high time that this nuisance be eliminated.

So it was that Wynah emerged from his tipi in the morning to do battle with *Ka-bib-on-okka*. He had never placed credence in the Sachem's tale, but he was now a little surprised to see that the winter king appeared very much as he had been described. It seemed almost as though the Sachem might have done it from a personal experience, but then, of course, the Sachem was very old and had likely drawn it from a good deal of hearsay. These old men, Wynah knew, were sometimes adept at piecing things together in that manner, and with the Potawatomi Sachem there had been the additional purpose of frightening him away. Still, he had done it very well.

IT WAS early morning when they commenced to battle. It was a very clear, blue-domed day with no clouds and no wind, as though *Ka-bib-on-okka* had planned it that way, or as though he had reserved everything that was savage in his nature for special employment in his fight with Wynah. Either way, the sky and air were so clean and bright that when Wynah breathed he had the sensation of taking powdered crystal into his lungs.

At first it seemed to Wynah that his would be an early victory. True, *Ka-bib-on-okka* had not let him sleep for very long, but then *Ka-bib-on-okka* had not slept much either, so they were nearly even on that score. But even so Wynah was young and strong and in superb condition, and in back of him he

had a tradition of strength and courage among his people.

After a time, however, he discovered that this was to be no easy thing. It was one matter to wrestle with a mortal, whose strength could be depended upon to ebb and wane as did his own, but quite another to fight with one whose power remained undiminished and who betrayed no signs of weariness or fatigue.

It was not so long, then, before Wynah commenced to suffer anxiety. They had been fighting throughout the whole of the morning and a good share of the afternoon and still his victory was not in sight. In face he began to experience an apprehension that he might not win at all, for *Ka-bib-on-okka* remained as virile as when they had commenced, while he, himself, was sobbing the air into his aching lungs. His arms and legs had the weight and stiffness of the trunks of great trees, and there were times when they clearly did not want to do what his brain had ordered of them.

More and more the tale of the Sachem kept recurring in his head. There was a distressing parallel in the two situations and he wondered if he might not come out of it as the fictional character, Ojibe, had. How would it be to go through life with no feet to walk upon? What would his people say when they found him crippled in his tipi in the spring? If indeed they found him at all. Or would he die and rot inside it, a thing for rodents and carrion creatures to pick upon?

All at once Wynah knew terror. Wynah had known fear in his life, for there are times in every hunter's life when he is faced with a desperate situation, but his other fears had all been disciplined sensations that he could handle. But this was a wild, leaping thing which brought him to the edge of panic and pushed him over.

There was one glimmering hope, the tipi. Inside, the fire still embered its warmth and the very thought of it seemed to revive him. Though unable to walk, and lacking the strength in his arms and legs to creep, he commenced to drag himself across the snow and ice upon his belly. How far it was! How distant, and how small and minuscule—nearly out of sight, it appeared. Would he ever get to it?

Now he became aware of the ring of animals around him. His eyes were bleared and their images shifted and doubled and ran together in a mischievous way, but he recognized them and another jolt of terror ran his veins. Had the teeth of the bear and the lynx and the bobcat always been that long? Had the fangs of the wolf appeared so slavering before? What made their eyes so yellow?

Presently, Wynah knew he was going to die. He had ceased his dragging agony toward the tipi for the simple reason that his arms would no longer pull him toward it. In fact they did not seem to belong to him any more, and when he fixed his eyes upon his hands he saw that they were as white and stiff as any of the ice spears hanging from his tipi poles. Over all his body there was a flowing, delicious warmth, and it was not difficult to imagine that he had gained the wigwam at last and was reclining comfortably by the fire.

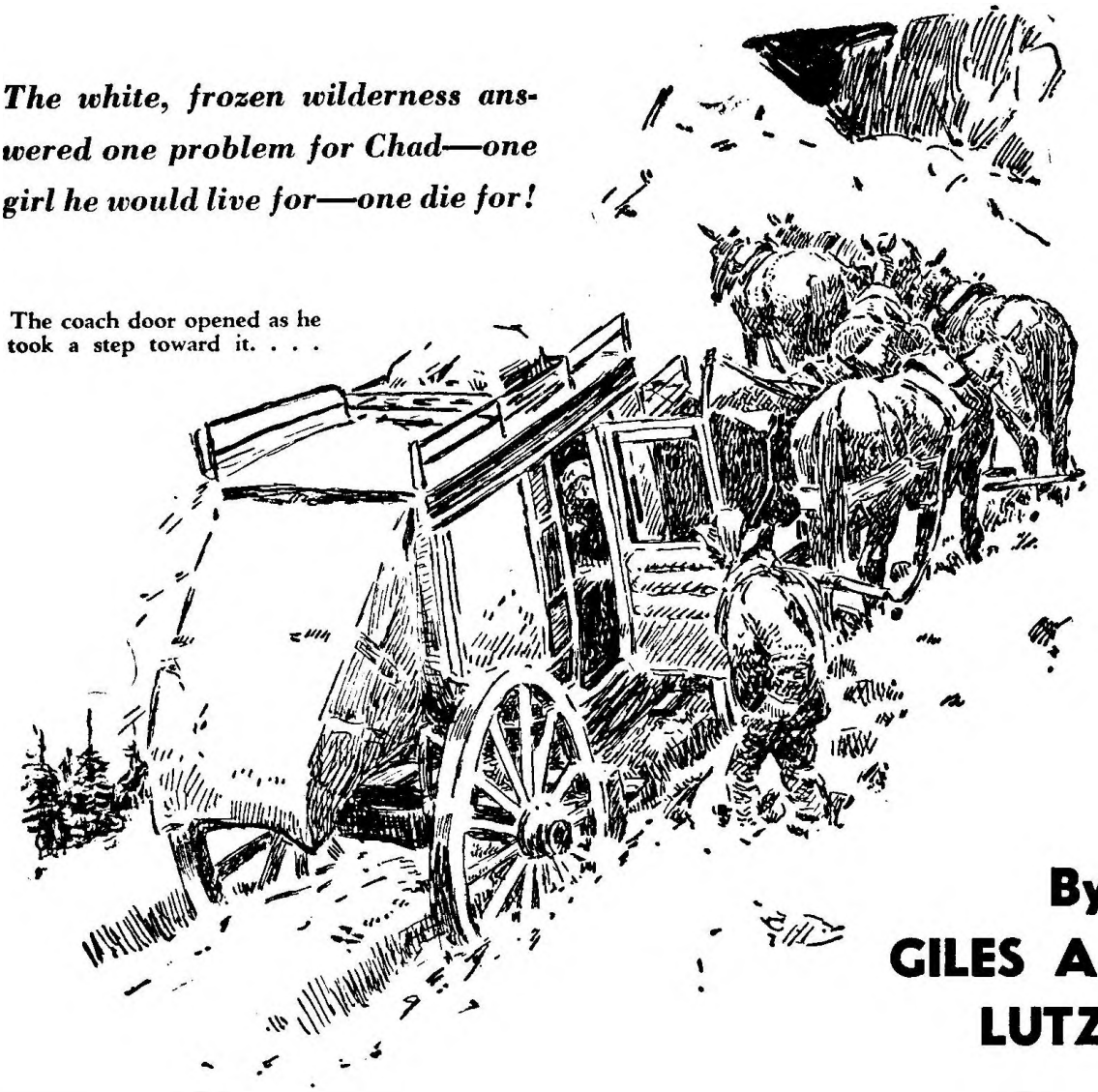
Once again his mind wandered back to the lodge of the Sachem of the Potawatomi. The old man's face was clearly in his thoughts and he could now recall every detail of the story and of the ancient one himself, sitting by his fire—his head nodding at the flames, his gaunt, curiously twisted hands reaching for the wood; his withered body swathed and shapeless in his blanket; the thick bear robe wrapped about his legs and feet, and the crutches on the ground beside him.

Suddenly, the eye of Wynah's mind, in one last, inspired vision, fixed itself upon the crutches and that robe. Had the old one really had his feet beneath it? Had his story been told in sincerity and truth? Did he truly lack the cupidity with which he, Wynah, had charged him? What could the name of that old Sachem be?

Could it be Ojibe?

JOB FOR A MAN

The white, frozen wilderness answered one problem for Chad—one girl he would live for—one die for!



The coach door opened as he took a step toward it. . . .

By GILES A. LUTZ

THE Concord labored up the grade, the three spans of straining horses struggling to move it against the drag of the snow-clogged slope. The sky above the notch of the cut was an ominous black-gray mass of tumbled clouds, clouds that dropped snow in a never-ceasing white curtain. It was not an even, gentle curtain. The wind tore it into long rents, driving the white tatters first in one direction, then another. It howled through the cut, and the swaying evergreens seemed to add a mournful note to the eerie music. The wind gave the snow little chance to pack up on their branches, whirled it away from them in long, uneven lines, looking like white steam.

Chad Davis shivered on the high box of the Concord. He wished he had not thought of steam. It reminded him of how cold he was. His big Jehu's hat was flattened about his ears and tied down by a scarf. The scarf was pulled across his face until only his eyes showed. It was protection, but a man needed even more in this weather, with

the pelting snow stabbing at him with hard little fists.

Above the roar of the storm he heard a pounding below his feet, coming from inside the coach. It was a demanding and authoritative sound. He swore softly and dragged the teams to a stop. Before him, the road to Sacramento stretched a white, unbroken mass. There was close to two feet of snow on that road, and more dropping every minute.

If he could make it to the top of the pass, the decline on the other side should be a mite easier going. Making it to the top was the big question. He should never have started out this day, but he had been overruled. A driver did not tell the owner of the company what to do—not if he wanted to keep on working.

The knocking came again as Chad unwrapped the lines from his glove-encased, stiff fingers. He growled deep in his throat, climbed down, slapping at his blue cheeks. He opened the door of the coach, and the closed-off interior gave the illusion of warmth, even though he knew the passengers did not feel it. The warming tub had long since lost the heat from its sand, and it would not be replenished until the next station.

If we make the next station . . . he thought.

Three passengers were in the coach, MacLendon Lyons, his daughter, Leah, and Ruth Byron. Chad looked first at Leah, and his eyes brightened. Only the tip of her nose showed from the furs swathing her face. Chad did not have to see that face to remember it. It was with him wherever he went. It was a pert face, with arresting eyes and a full mouth that stirred a man, even when it was pouting. Her figure fired his blood, even though it was shapeless now, wrapped about with expensive furs. He had held it momentarily close at several of the town dances, and the remembrance of it made him forget how cold he was even now.

He looked at Lyons and said, "Yes?"

Lyons was a short, thick-bodied man with a perpetually angry face and sharp, snapping eyes. He was an affluent man, he owned the Sacramento-Roseburg stage, and Chad did not know how many other holdings. He paid his drivers well. A man worked for him and overlooked the arrogance of his manner. Particularly, when Lyons had a daughter like Leah.

Lyons said in an angry tone, "Can't we make better time? If I'm late for my meeting in Sacramento—"

Chad bit back the angry reply. Lyons had eyes; he could see what they were plowing through. It must be an important meeting to pull Lyons out in this kind of weather. Chad thought it more likely Lyons had not realized what he was getting into. He had ordered Chad to make the trip, and Chad had been on the point of refusing. Then Leah had said, "Chad, I want to do some shopping in Sacramento. It may be my only chance this winter." He had been unable to resist those eyes, he had been unable to resist the thought of how his standing would be increased in them, and he swore silently at his weakness.

With an impatient motion of her gloved hand, she bared her face. "I'm cold, Chad," she said in petulant tones.

"We all are," he said patiently. "It'll be better after we get to the top."

HE WAS aware of the figure he cut—and conscious of a certain alienness in himself with respect to her—a gap he hoped to bridge. He was tall and lean, with a face harsh-hewn, its features shaped by the weather and the struggle against a rough, wild country. His eyes were deep set, and in their brownness, his thoughts were his own. He was the best driver the company had, but there were other jobs of more importance. He had his eyes on one of them.

He looked at Ruth Byron and asked, "You all right?"

She nodded without speaking. Beside Leah Lyons, Ruth Byron was a plain girl. Her eyes were good and expressive, but she

lacked Leah's vivid coloring. Chad had taken her to a couple of dances before Leah came to town. There had never been anything between them, though at times he thought he had read something in her eyes. Perhaps if Leah had not come along—he sharply broke off the thought. Even now it bothered him.

He stared at Ruth with sober eyes, knowing her trouble and wondering why she was going to Sacramento. It would only increase the depth of her anguish. Her brother was to be hanged there for murder, and Chad could not see that Ruth's presence would accomplish anything. Women sometimes tortured themselves unnecessarily. Perhaps it was a finer sensitivity that drove them so—he did not know.

The town had been shocked at Harlan Byron's arrest and conviction, and Chad could remember Ruth's protestations that it could not be so, that Harlan was innocent. Chad did not know about that, either. The murder and trial were in Sacramento some months ago, and he had not been there. He wished for her sake it was behind her and forgotten as much as a matter like that could be forgotten.

She half-smiled at him, and he could not understand her manner. Her eyes were clear and dancing with eagerness, as though she looked forward to the end of her trip. The stage should get her into Sacramento the night before the hanging, and why would anyone have eagerness for something like that?

Lyons said, "Are you going to stand there all day? We'll never even get to the next station."

Chad put a slow, careful look on him and closed the door without replying. He trudged through the clinging snow and climbed back to the box. He thought the wind was increasing, it had a whining quality to it now. He unwrapped the lines and laced them through his fingers. He snapped the whip at the teams, and their sharp-shod hoofs threshed at the slippery footing. It took effort for the three teams to break out the coach and start it rolling again, and Chad cursed the unnecessary stop.

The California-Oregon road climbed on up into the Umpquas. The teams were hock deep in the snow, and it would get deeper. Their progress was a series of bucking, plunging lurches, sending savage jerks through the trace chains and on through the coach. The passengers were taking a beating, and Chad grinned bleakly. He hoped Lyons was enjoying the trip.

It took an hour to reach the divide, and he strained with the teams, the strain putting an ache in his muscles. It was better after they started down. The drag of the coach would be pushing the spans instead of pulling against them. The deep snow was still a hindrance, but Chad felt the new ease of their progress. Even the trace chains showed slack.

The road bent ahead of him, and above the keening of the wind he heard a growling rumble, then a massive roar. The roar seemed to last a long time, even though it was over in a matter of seconds. It had a frightening quality that squeezed a man's heart. Chad had traveled through the mountains enough to identify the source of that roar. Somewhere ahead of him, a thickening mass of snow on a mountainside had let go, sweeping all before it and growing as it traveled. His only hope was that the avalanche had started below the road, or if it had crossed it, had swept on, leaving the road clear.

He slowed the teams, holding hard against the brakes. He kept the forward motion to a crawl until he rounded that turn. He stood up and stared down the grade, his heart skipping a beat. On the upper side of the road the cliff rose sheer. The slide had started above it, gouging a wide bare track that the falling snow had not time to cover. The slide stopped somewhere down in the canyon, but it was backed up across the road, angling tightly against the sheer cliff. It was a formidable mass, higher than the

stage and studded with old logs and young trees it had swept along with it.

. He stopped the coach, secured the lines and climbed down. The coach door opened as he took a step toward it.

Lyons thrust out his head and snapped, "Now, what are we stopping for?"

He had a subtle manner of placing the blame for everything on another man's shoulders, just as he lumped the two stops together, blaming Chad for both of them. Chad held his temper. The next station was only some six miles distant. There would be fresh teams there, and if snow at all, it would be little. Once they reached the station the rest of the journey could probably be made without event. Chad felt an inner, malicious satisfaction. They would not reach the station, the meeting would have to go without Lyons.

He grunted, "Look for yourself."

He was looking for a place to turn the coach around as Lyons and the two girls stepped down. It would be a tricky job, it would take delicate skill, but he thought he could manage.

Lyons stared at the banked-up snow with wide eyes. Then he turned his head and said, "Can't you dig through it?"

Chad wanted to swear at him. He had a shovel, an ax, and other tools in the boot, but it would take unending hours of the most laborious work to clear a passage big enough for the teams and coach.

Lyons walked nearer the slide, staring at its bulk. He came back with shaking head. Even he could see that digging through would be an enormous task. He asked, "Can you get turned around?"

Relief swelled inside Chad. He was going to go back, whether or not Lyons agreed, but his consent made it better all around.

He nodded, and Ruth cried out, "No, you can't. You can't."

Chad jerked his head toward her. Her face was white, her eyes enormous. Some terrible fear had a hold of her.

"We've got to go on," she burst forth.

She wanted to see her brother so badly that those last few moments were precious to her, and Chad could sympathize with her. But she had to understand that now it was impossible, and he tried to reason with her.

"Ruth, you see that slide. We can't—"

Tears started in her eyes as she shook her head. "Cut a horse loose for me. I can go around the slide."

Chad said patiently, "The slide might be resting on nothing, Ruth. If it started again—"

Lyons snorted. "You will not cut one of the horses loose."

Ruth cried, "Then I'll walk." She took two steps toward the snow mass before Chad caught her arm.

"You'd be soaked through and frozen before you'd gone a mile," he said harshly. "Use your head, Ruth."

She tried to jerk free, and he held her arm tight. Her distress hurt him, but he could do nothing about it.

She said wildly, "Harlan didn't kill that man. Brummer killed him. He confessed before he died. I've got his signed confession and a letter from Sheriff Anson. Anson is sick and couldn't make the trip. He wanted to send someone else, but I begged him to let me go."

CHAD stared at her. He had heard about Brummer being shot in that saloon brawl. The man's death was small loss to anyone. But he had done one good thing before he died; he had given Harlan Byron his chance for life. Chad understood the eagerness he had noted, in Ruth's eyes. She was a quiet one. Not a word of her anxiety, of how important this trip was to her until this came up.

He said in a decisive tone, "We'll get through. I'll unhitch all the horses. Each of us will take one." Those six miles would be wicked. Riding bareback through this storm would put a terrible drain on all of them, particularly the women. He thought

that Ruth would get through under any conditions. She had something spurring her, and there was steel under her quietness. It was odd he hadn't noticed it before. Leah was the one he would have to worry about.

"No," Lyons said explosively. "We're going back." He bridled under Chad's stare. "Those horses belong to me. I have the say about how they'll be used. Leah couldn't ride that far in this storm."

Lyons was not thinking of his daughter; he thought of himself, and Chad felt an inner sickness at the fear written on the man's face.

He said, "You heard her. Her brother's life is at stake."

Leah said with childish anger, "Why should all of us freeze because of her? Even if we tried, it's doubtful we'd make it. That's right, isn't it Chad?" She took his arm and looked up into his face. "I want to go back, Chad," she whimpered. "I'm afraid."

He stared at her as though he had never seen her before. Ruth's plea meant nothing to her. Harlan Byron was only a name with no meaning to either Leah or her father. It did not mean a man's life or a sister's anguish. Chad saw much in that deliberate scrutiny he had not seen before. The prettiness of face was still there, but it was only a shallow dressing, hiding the emptiness beneath it. He shuddered, and the wind was not the cause of it.

Leah stared into his eyes, reading his decision. "I won't go," she wailed. "You can't make me ride one of those horses."

"None of us are going," Lyons said grimly. "Get that stage turned around."

His face purpled under Chad's eyes. "I won't tell you again," he yelled. "I won't—"

"You won't have to," Chad said. He took a forward step. His arm was swinging with the step, and the bunched knuckles smashed against Lyons mouth. It was a solid, hard punch, sending its tingle clear along Chad's arm.

Lyons floundered in the snow, trying to keep his footing, then went over backward.

Chad heard Leah's scream of mingled fright and anger. He turned, and she plowed toward him, her face contorted.

His blazing eyes checked her. "If I have to handle you in a like manner I will."

Color mottled her face in unattractive splotches. Her rage left no beauty in her face. "I hate you," she gasped. "I hate you, Chad Davis."

He had no doubt of that. Men did not cross Leah Lyons's wishes. He sucked in his breath at the thought of the narrow rim he had been walking along. Suppose it had gone as he had hoped, suppose—he shook his head.

Lyons scrambled to his feet, one gloved hand held against his bleeding lips. Chad watched him with narrowed eyes. If it took another punch, or a dozen, to beat reasonableness into Lyons' head, Chad was ready to do it.

Lyons screamed in wild rage, "You're fired. You hear me? You're fired."

He made no attempt to advance, he wanted no more of the physical aspects of the fight.

Chad sighed. He expected that firing before he let the punch go. He turned back toward the teams, and Leah screamed, "I won't get on one of those horses. You can't put me on."

Ruth's face was worried. "Chad, if I went alone—"

He shook his head. They would go together. He would be afraid to send her on by herself. And he could not leave Lyons and Leah here. They would freeze before the night was over.

Lyons growled, "I won't get on a horse, either." His eyes were sullen with defiance.

Chad turned it over in his mind. He could bodily hoist both of them onto a horse's back, but he would have to fight them throughout the six miles. The elements alone would be enough fight without human factors complicating it.

His grin at Ruth was twisted. "Looks like I'll have to get the coach through."

Her eyes were saddened. "Chad, I'm sorry about your job."

Even in her trouble, she could think of someone else. His grin came better. "It wasn't so much. Kept a man in bad company." His chuckle was rich, and he was surprised at its realness.

HE HAD to remove some of the luggage to get at the tools. He stared at Leah's baggage. It was rich and elaborate, as was everything she owned. She had been trained by her father, and the word "own" was important to her. That would apply to everything she touched, including a husband, he thought with sober reflection.

He took the axe and shovel and dug out a small evergreen. He hacked it into short lengths and got a fire going. He could do that much to make them comfortable while he worked.

He worked his way cautiously across the top of the slide, and it seemed anchored. There were some hundred feet, a tremendous task for a lone man to dig through, a task that would take the rest of the day, the night, and most of the next day. He remembered the anxiety in Ruth's eyes. He did not have that much time.

He took a long careful moment surveying the task ahead of him. If he could build a ramp to the top of the slide, then notch across it, and a ramp down the other side, it would save most of those endless hours. He would have to pack it as he worked and trust that the packing would hold the weight of the teams and coach.

He kept on shoveling at an even rhythm, for a frantic burst at the start would only burn him out before the job was finished. He stomped the snow down beneath his boots, and slowly the ramp took shape.

Lyons called, "The fire's going out," and Chad turned and threw him a baleful look.

"I left the ax there."

The wind distorted Lyons's angry yell as Chad bent back to his work. If Lyons would not cut wood for the fire, let him freeze. The thought of the women put a pause in Chad's shoveling. It would be too hard on them, and he half-straightened. He heard the awkward sounds of the chopping, and a bleak grin touched his face. Lyons did not want to freeze, either.

Slowly, the ramp grew, and his weight packed the snow so that his feet no longer sank in. But he had a much heavier weight to use on this ramp, and his doubt was colder than the wind.

He heard more chopping and looked around. Ruth swung the ax in awkward but determined strokes. Lyons and Leah huddled close to the fire, a blanket pulled about their shoulders.

Chad's rage swept away his weariness for a moment. He started down, then stopped. He could hit Lyons again, he could knock him down, but it would do no good. Lyons's money was his crutch. In ordinary, routine living it more than got him by. But it was no good here, and the man was equally worthless. Chad looked a long time at the two women, one awkwardly swinging an ax, the other huddled whimperingly by the fire.

It was almost dark by the time he had the ramp cut out and tramped on the other side. His every muscle ached in protest, and his hands felt permanently cramped. Ruth had come to him twice, asking to relieve him, and he had managed a grin for her.

"You keep the fire going," he said.

He looked dubiously at his finished work. The heavy stage and horses would be a jar against the slide. If it was not anchored firmly enough to withstand that jar, it could start again, carrying everything with it into the canyon.

He turned back to the stage, his weary mind shying from the coming risk.

He stepped to the lead team, and Lyons squalled, "You're not going to drive us over that."

"You'll walk over," Chad said in a dull voice. "Before I lead the teams across."

Lyons's face was pasty with his fear. "If it slides with you, how will we get out?"

Chad's teeth bared in a brief, mirthless grin. "Walk, I guess. If the slide goes again, I'll have too much to think about to worry about you."

If it did go, he might be able to jump free. Or might not.

Ruth pressed his hand before she started. "We'll make it."

HE STARED after her, liking that "we." He waited until the three were across the slide before he started the teams. He kept up a soothing flow of talk to the chill-stiffened teams. The trace chains tightened, and for an instant, the wheels stayed firm. Hoofs threshed a bit for a new hold, then slowly the stage moved.

The horses sank past their knees in the old and fresh snow, but they kept moving. They hung on the last few feet of the ramp, and Chad thought his heart would burst with anxiety. Then with a threshing, plunging lunge, the horses beat their way up and over the last upward pull.

Chad felt the jar of those flailing hoofs run through the slide. This was the moment. It took but little to set off these great, plowing white waves. A gunshot could do it. But the slide was anchored, and it held.

He led the teams across the notch and down the other ramp. He did not realize he was holding his breath until it burst forth from his tortured lungs.

He helped the women back into the coach, then stood aside as Lyons approached. The man put mean eyes on him and said, "Just because luck was with you it doesn't change what I said."

Chad's knuckles itched. He had not expected anything to change.

He said, "Get inside."

He grinned at Lyons's haste. Lyons did not know Chad had no intention of hitting him again.

He climbed back on the box and started the teams. It was wicked driving in the dark, but the horses knew this road, even with its blanket of snow. Chad's eyes felt as though they would burst out of his head as he peered ahead. But the horses kept going.

It took three hours to make the descent, and Chad realized the snow felt wetter. At this lower level, it was turning to rain, and he breathed a gusty sigh. Mud would be easier to handle than treacherous snow.

He saw the lights of the station ahead, a warm, beckoning finger of radiance. He relaxed his cramped hands then. They had made it. A few hours rest, warm food, and fresh horses, and they could go on.

Chad pulled up before the long, low porch, and the stationmaster came out to meet him. The man said with an unbelieving expression, "You came over the mountains in this storm?"

Chad climbed down. He had to grip the front wheel for support. "We came over," he said. "Lyons is inside." He grinned at the way the stationmaster hurried over.

Ruth came to Chad, her eyes soft with an emotion Chad could not quite read. He said, "I'll drive you, if Lyons will let me. If not, you'll make it all right."

"I'll make it all right now." She waited, her eyes never leaving his face.

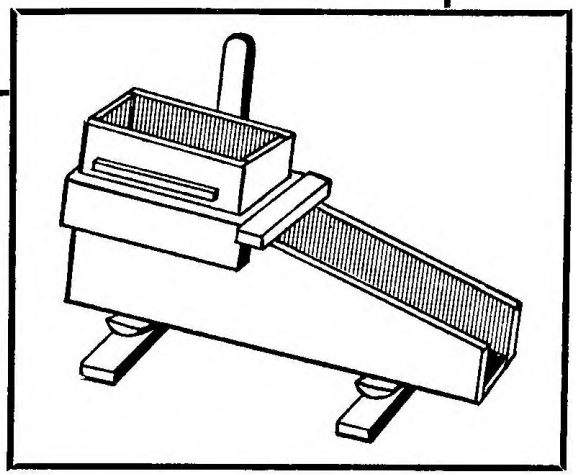
Words jammed up in his throat, rushing to be said. If a man was going to live in this country, he needed a woman with something inside her.

He said awkwardly, "Ruth, it's a bad time to be saying this. But when you get back—I mean—" He floundered, while her eyes grew brighter. "Ruth, I'm out of a job. But there's others. I mean—" His eyes appealed to her for help.

Her laugh was gay and free. She bent forward and kissed him, a light touch but with promise in it. "Whoever said a job was that important?" she said.

She was gone toward the building before he could catch her. She stopped in the lighted doorway and looked back, her eyes glowing. He straightened as he followed her, his weariness dropping from him like a discarded cloak. He was a jobless man, and he did not have a worry in the world.

SMALL SCALE PLACERING



The rocker is the most common machine used in placering.

By VIC SHAW

THIS department has had so many queries about placer recovery apparatus from new crops of gravel sifters, that it seems best to explain them briefly. And, incidentally, to stress the fact that former rich surface deposits are becoming harder to find, making modern field methods necessary.

All readers interested should realize that placer gold is the first sought in every new mining camp. It was true in the East in the early days, as well as in the Western states where these shallower deposits have been found and worked for over a hundred years —in California and only a bit less in other states, from Montana to New Mexico.

During our late depression many jobless gold-hunters were satisfied with mere bean money. A lot was left, in gravels under water, gold caught in stream potholes and the like. And this includes worked-out diggings that have been re-enriched in the course of time and the seasons. Here are some tips for would-be prospectors:

FREE GOLD—Prospectors must first know the physical properties of gold in its "free" state, as found in placer concentrations. It is, of course, a heavy yellow metal and is malleable, and tiny float grains may be flattened out to be visible at some distance. It also is so soft that jabbed by a knife-point it cuts as easily as a piece of lead pipe.

These are good field tests. Fool's gold, the minerals often mistaken for real gold are: (1) tiny yellow grains in creek sands, consisting of amber mica, phlogopite; and (2) iron pyrites, a yellow metal found in quartz veins, both of which crumble to a gray dust if hammered.

Also gold is not affected by any single acid, but is dissolved by mixing one volume of nitric with two volumes of hydrochloric acid (aqua regia) to form a gold chloride. But since it's almost impossible to carry acids safely in field work, the other tests above are generally considered adequate.

The weight (specific gravity) of gold is

In the rocks and riffles of many a stream, gold still beckons—for those who may feel like answering its call. maybe just for the gamble, we are printing this—in an old prospector's words.

19.3. Since sands and gravels are lighter, gold settles through them till it reaches bedrock, or the "false-bedrock" of clay. Hence bedrock gravels are always the richest. But note this: If a belt of serpentine rocks occurs nearby there may be alluvial platinum in the black sands left over from panning—and as platinum weighs more than gold—20-21—the two metals can't be separated in the field and both must be sent together to a U. S. Assay Office, or U. S. Mint.

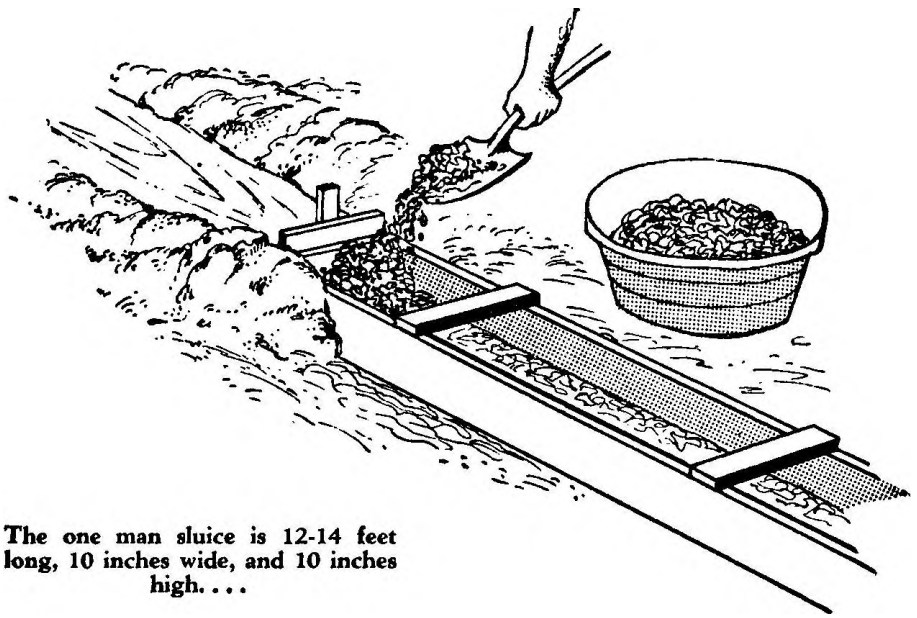
BLACK SAND—This usually occurs in placers and remains with gold when panned, rockered, or sluiced. It is composed chiefly of magnetite and other rather heavy minerals, such as iron, rutile, zircon and so on, that have little value. Magnetite weighs 6.2, so careful panning is essential to separate the gold. Much can be taken out by drying the black sand containing gold, then using a common magnet on any left.

GOLD SIZES—Gold varies much in size, from tiny grains taking 2,000 "colors" to a cent, to very fine, going through a 40-mesh screen, to fine that passes a 20-mesh—and medium that remains on a 20-mesh—to coarse gold, the size of barley, that remains on a 10-mesh screen. All larger sizes of placer gold are termed nuggets.

GOLD PAN—The working pan (see illus.) is made of sheet iron, though pans of aluminum and copper are sometimes used. Some have sheet-iron rims and copper bottoms that may be coated with mercury to help save the gold. The average working pan is 16-inches diameter and 1¼ to 2 inches in depth, with sides sloping out. A handy *test* pan is 6"x1¼" in size, to carry in your pocket for any creek sands when hunting or fishing.

With a working pan filled level, an average good panner can run about 50 pans in 8 hours, or about ¼-cubic yard of common bank-run gravels. About one cubic yard is tops for a careful, skilled panner, with all conditions favorable. Cemented, or sticky clay gravel takes longer.

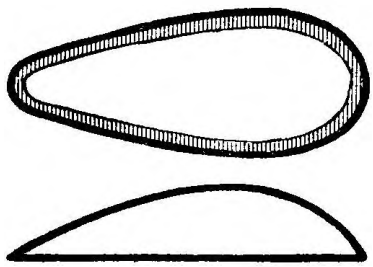
BATEA AND SPOON—The batea, made of wood, is used by Mexicans using the same method as ours but concentrates col-



The one man sluice is 12-14 feet long, 10 inches wide, and 10 inches high. . . .

lect at its center (see illus.). The miner's spoon may be made from a cow horn softened with hot oil, and is used only for testing. They're also marketed in steel, about 8 inches long.

HOW TO PAN—It's hard to describe, but easy to learn. Lower a filled pan under water, shake hard and remove stones and pebbles. Hold with both hands at opposite sides, top edges above water, shake and rotate pan held level to settle heavy particles to bottom. Then slant it forward a bit, so its forward edge is just under water surface, and move it back and forth from-and-to-you. The water flowing in-and-out washes the light stuff over the outer edge. Keep this



The miner's spoon is used for testing only. . . .

up and bat the pan with the butt of the palm continually to settle the black sand and gold and keep it on the pan bottom. Finally, only the black sand, containing the gold grains remains.

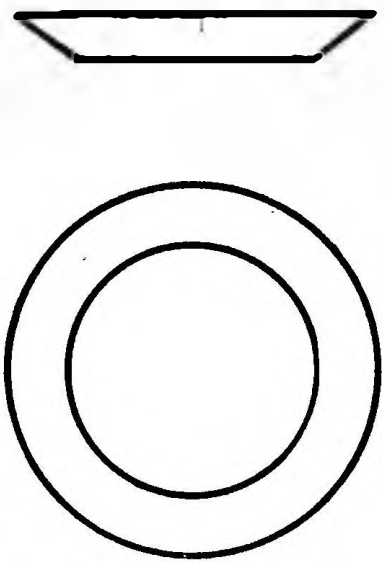
Then, leaving a tablespoonful of water, tip-and-rotate the pan above water so the black sand trickles back along the groove between the pan bottom and its slanting side. The gold will collect behind the black sand. A good way to practice this is to take any sand, put in a dozen bird shot, and try to pan them all out. It doesn't take long to gain skill in operation.

ROCKER—This is the most common machine in placering (see illus.) and is used with less hard labor than a gold pan. It will recover at least three times more gold in less time than a pan. It is made of common boards planed smooth on the inside. Top screen is filled with gravels and pebbles and stones are removed by hand-stirring the contents, to allow fines to pass through screen-holes. The rocker is set close to water, dipped with the right hand while rocking with left hand.

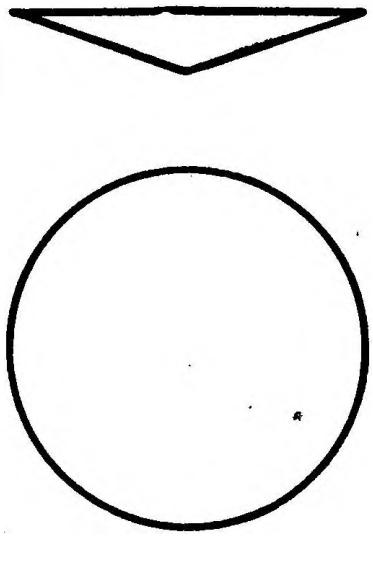
Fine sand and black, with the gold, fall through, to be caught with most black sand and gold on a slanting canvas apron beneath. It is best to cover the slanting rocker bottom with burlap or carpeting that will in turn catch and hold most gold lost from the apron. Tailings may be panned to find if any values are being lost. Clean up when necessitated by too much black sand—pan this down carefully and separate gold as described in panning. Set rocker always on a slight grade.

You may write to me for sources for detailed rocker construction plans, but here's a general description. The top screen has its sheet-iron bottom punched with 1-inch holes spaced one to two inches apart, but with about 3-inches of solid metal left at the rear end, having no holes. The screen fits loosely, to be easily lifted out by the side cleats. The rocker bottom may have several riffles 1"x1¼" set crosswise some 12" apart, better to catch values. Nail ends through rocker sides with nailhead out a bit for taking out at clean-up. Set riffles on top of burlap, placing spoonful of mercury behind each, to pick up gold-making amalgam, which is separated by retorting. This is described under "retorting" later on.

THE SLUICE- The one-man type (see illus.) is 12 to 14 feet long, 10" wide and 10" high in the clear; made likewise of 1" clear pine planed on one side to 7/8ths-inch thickness. Place riffles of same size as for rocker, 12" to 18" apart. Use Box-Layout-Riffle types, and it is customary to nail narrow cleats across the top for more strength. Large rocks and stones are removed by hand, but the smaller stones and pebbles tend to scour and clean gold for much better amalgamation. Rusty gold (iron film) must be cleaned with acid before use. Cemented and clayey gravels must be pud-



The working pan is made of sheet iron—sometimes of aluminum or copper. . . .



The batea is made of wood and is used by Mexicans.

dled" in separate tub by agitating vigorously. A small outboard motor works mighty well.

This type of sluice may be set on one side of a creek, its upper end dammed on each side, to allow water to flow steadily through it. Proper grade for one box averages about 6" to its length, but this depends on the character of the gold chiefly. For average fine-coarse gold the 6" fall is right, but for flour-gold a lesser fall is used, a slope of around an inch or so to fourteen feet. Note that the slope of both rocker and small sluice is decided by "trial and error," with the miner adjusting it to suit the water flow and character of the gold and gravels. Limited water needs a steeper slope. Average fine gold needs a steeper slope, if the creek water is spread shallow in a fairly swift stream. Sluicing takes more water than rocking, varying 10 to 50 cubic feet for each cubic foot of gravel fed in. Note that coarse gold is caught chiefly in the upper riffles. For both rocker and small box-sluice, if black sand is piling up so it clogs the riffles, remove them and put wire netting over burlap, cocoa mat, blanket, or a deer hide, set hair up with water flowing against the hair grain.

These all save much flour gold.

Rocker and sluice can be made take-down, for pack animals, river-boat, auto or truck carriage. For sluice clean-up, remove the riffles and matting, after running clear water through your rig for a while. Gold, sand, gravel are scraped up and panned over a water tub. Dry and burn the wet matting, and pan the ashes carefully. This goes also for a worn-out box, to save flour gold in the cracks. Such cracks must always be stuffed with calking material when the sluice is constructed, with great care taken that they always stay tightly closed.

However, in prospecting, first find a paying deposit to stake and record. Mining equipment you bring in later. So besides a camp outfit, take only a goldpan, pick and shovel, magnifying glass, sample sacks, notebook and pencils, location blanks, maps, a first-aid kit and the local mining and game laws. You just came out to record your claim, anyway.

(To be continued)

GUNS OF THE

By CLIFFE MANVILLE

JUSTINIAN CRANDALL needed brood mares for his ranch on the Rio Brava. Last fall, at Pendleton, he had met two of the Vinano boys from Sonora and the word went with them that the fanciest kind of horse-breeding was in progress on their big mountain rancho below the Border. Anyway, Just felt like going down to see.

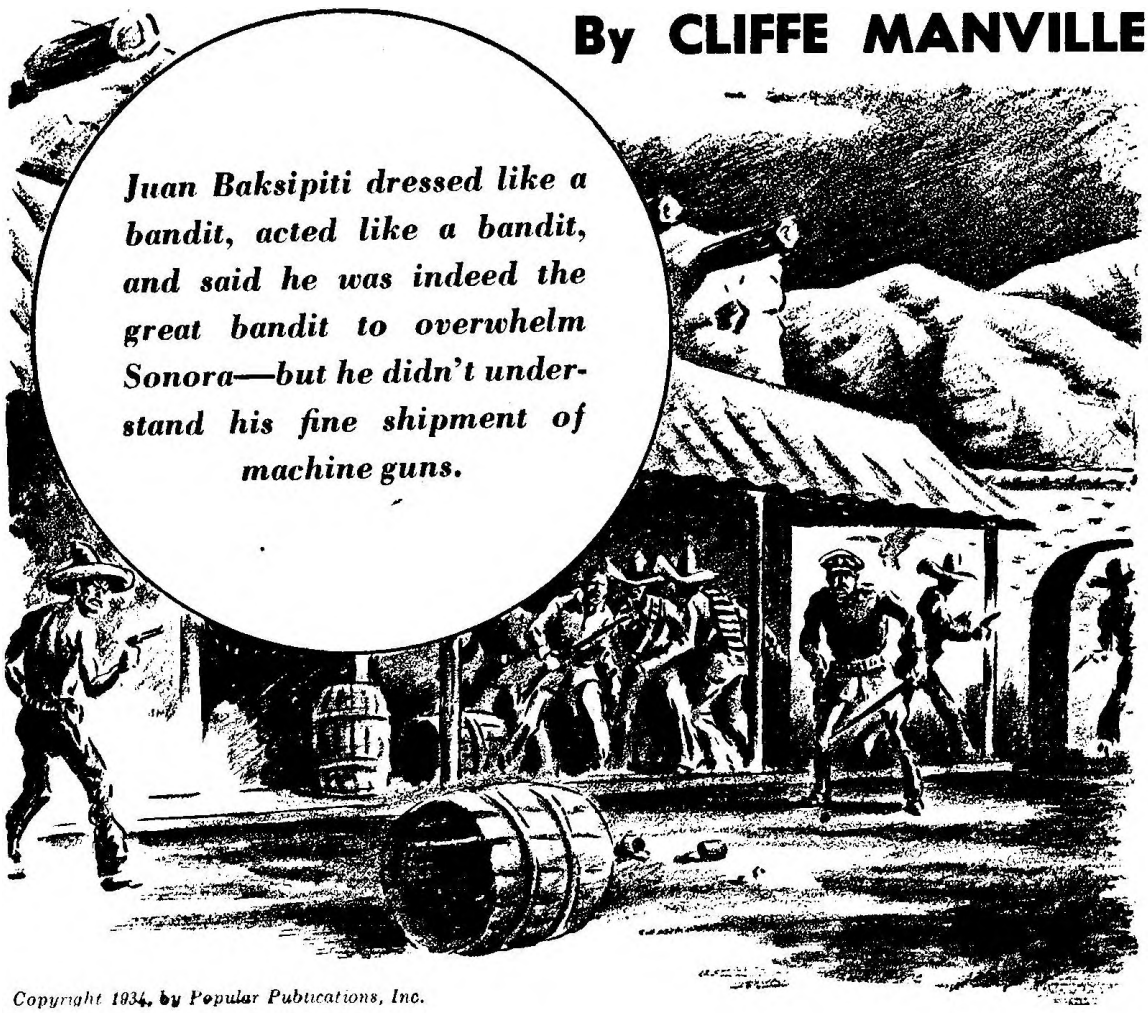
"It'll give the boys on my place a rest—me getting out of the way," he said. "Any man who is his own foreman is likely to be hard on hired help."

Moreover, Justinian liked Mexico; the general let-down was relishable; good as California to play in and different. He perforated the Border at Nogales accordingly and was soon riding along the Arroyo Rancito with the Corte Highlands on his left. One certain town named Casabar he was making for because it was the home of wrinkled old Felipe Rodriguez who had kept a canteen at Nogales when Just had been there a few years ago. He circled into the foothills, reaching Casabar late in the afternoon, and Felipe took him in like a long-gone son.

"Señor Hoost, *mi amigo*—El Señor Hoost!"

"Have the boy put my cayuse aside for the night, Just said, airing his Spanish, which

Juan Baksipiti dressed like a bandit, acted like a bandit, and said he was indeed the great bandit to overwhelm Sonora—but he didn't understand his fine shipment of machine guns.



RAPID-FIRE

he was a lot freer with than American, as a rule. "No, Felipe, I didn't bring down anything particular for a horse, having designs to use this bunny as a trailer coming back. He don't know the difference, though—just as thirsty and hungry as if he was a sure enough horse. Got any tequila, not too young?"

"Si, señor, tequila de viente anos!"

"Twenty years—that's old enough to marry. All the way down I didn't interfere with my thirst none, your place being the first I could trust this side of Hudson Bay."

Just emptied a pistol in the general direction of the kitchen. . . .

A deep earthen gurgle sounded as the jug inclined to the glass. "Stars in her," Just added. "Crescents, too. Looks as if she could wait another twenty years, if I could"

He breathed deep. Casabar had taken him in as aforetime, the fatted calf browning in garlic on the fireplace. He conservatively loosened the sombrero from his temples and shook a sizable roll from his hip.

"No, no!" exclaimed the *fonda*-keeper. "There is nothing for Señor Hoost to pay in the house of Felipe!"

Just looked troubled. Time was in his younger days when such hospitality was smooth-fitting, but affairs hadn't been so slow and stingy for Justinian of late.

"How far south this time, *señor?*" Felipe inquired.

"Turning east into the mountain tomorrow morning"

Felipe noticeably shivered. "Solitary?"

Just nodded. "I'm cutting across the Vinano place in two days. It would take four or five days around by the roads."

"But all is not well. Sonora does not sleep, *mi amigo*. Between Casabar and the Vinano Grant as the crow flies, a political upstart named Baksipiti has taken up his position in high country. His camp, it is said, is in the mesa country at the ruins of the old Mission of the Sacred Heart."

"Bandit gent?"

"Ah, but Baksipiti would not call himself that—a builder of state, a savior of men! It would be much better at this time for the *señor* to ride around by the roads."

"Thanks, I'll think it over after supper."

"And why the Vinanos, *mi amigo?*"

"Thought I'd look over their stock of rockin' horses"

"For the races?"

"Not so's to spoil 'em to sit on."

"Ah, *señor*—finest horses in all Sonora are on the Rancho Vinano. Vinanos are the great men and live the great life—old Simon and his five sons. As far as they can ride, they own the land, raising horses of the blood in the mountain meadows with springs of icy water running through. And cattle—and cattle—" Felipe moved his arms around, powerless to convey an adequate idea of quantity.

"Maggots of 'em, I take it, movin' in and out of timber," Just helped.

"*Si, si!* But the Señor Hoost is late for the big fiesta at the Rancho—the marriage of Edrucio, the eldest but one, two days since at the hacienda—all the Vinanos attending—"

Felipe chatted on indefinitely. Some of the Vinano relatives from "Californee-a" it appeared, had stopped here on the way down to the fiesta. Just figured out at supper that he might as well ride around by the roads, not to reach the Vinano place too soon after the nuptials.

NIGHT had now fallen, guitars had started, *señoritas* peeping in from the plaza. Just was coasting along supreme, when a foreign racket broke in. A girl's laugh reached him, and in she came, arms bare, tanned to the shoulders—a golden brown tan—dark-eyed, dark-haired.

"This looks good!" she called from the door to someone behind. "Come on in, Eugene!"

A tall, olive-skinned chap followed laughingly, his manner of speaking English slightly foreign. He had the look of a tourist born rich, who was used to having things his own way.

"You see, there's no hurry, Monica," he said. "Only forty miles to the Border. Be there in--"

"Yes, but think of the long stretch to Yuma—then—to Beverly Hills!"

She didn't seem worried about it.

California's latest and certified, Just reflected. *I thought old sleepy Sonora couldn't produce her fire and finish.*

Monica's back was now turned, her stilty heel cocked on the rail. Evidently the two were having a great time together. Sort of embarrassed, too.

Probably on their honeymoon, Just thought.

A low musical hum to her voice. Just could have listened to it for a long time, but it made him lonesome. *Nothin' to do with me—she's not the kind of a thoroughbred I'm down here after.*

Yet Monica of Beverly Hills had slowed down his Sonora appreciation just as he had settled to enjoy himself. She and Eugene finished their wine and sauntered out. That wasn't all that went—the hum was gone out of the guitars, the whole honey out of a fellow's homecoming to Casabar. A little while back it had all been fragrant hospitality in Felipe's *fonda;* now he could smell the kerosene lamps, and Casabar's musicians and home talent *señoritas* belonged to the same past epoch.

Just smoked contemplatively for some moments, when his attention was called to externals by a sound of excitement outside in the plaza, and in ran a Mexican boy announcing:

"El Señor Baksipiti aqui!"

Music stopped, musicians vanished, Felipe's face showed gray, as he hurriedly drew the shutters at the far end of the *fonda,* closed the wine room.

He was back of the bar putting away glassware, when a smart but diminutive *caballero* appeared at the door announcing authoritatively: "Tell your people not to be frightened and run away! *El Señor* has accomplished his mission in Casabar. *El Señor* never makes war on innocent people." The dapper Mexican halted, now observing Just alone at his table. "And this man?" he inquired of Felipe.

"Señor Hoost—*Americano.*"

"Does he speak Spanish?"

"Oh, yes, very good."

"*El Señor* will be pleased to know!" He continued to scrutinize Just and resumed: "It is I, *secretario* to El Señor Baksipiti, who speak!"

"Glad to hear it."

Felipe nervously put in further words designed to keep the American from molestation.

"Señor Hoost—very big man in *Los Estatos Unidos*—big soldier of the machine guns!"

At the last words, *secretario* whipped around. "I ask you please to say that again!"

"Señor Hoost—big *soldado Americano—ufficialo superior* of the guns of the rapid fire!"

"Ah-hai!" *secretario* exclaimed. "*El señor* will be most aroused to hear!" *Secretario* stepped quickly to the door, giving several commands to his men. A messenger hurried away.

"Señor Baksipiti will be delighted, Señor Hoost. Who knows, you may be overpowered for the interview this very night!"

Just turned a slow smile to the shrinking *fonda*-keeper. "Never mind, Felipe—you did it for the best." *Secretario's* messenger returned with the word that the American linguist and the colonel of the rapid fire would accompany the army on its return to headquarters tonight.

"But not as a prisoner!" modified *secretario.* "As a guest of honor. I leave at this moment to accompany Comandante Baksipiti, but all will be attended by my men."

A little later Just climbed into the saddle instead of into bed after his long day's ride. They had given him a fresh mount. He found himself in a mounted column of indefinite length. After some time, voices that were not Mexican reached him from behind. One soft droning hum and a man's voice, perturbed, familiar, too, but not exactly American.

The column had ridden into a canyon. Just could smell the side walls of the hills and hear the mountain water booming down. A shelving trail with cool night hanging over the bed of the stream. Suddenly Just jerked up—Eugene and Monica, of California!

"Guests, same as I am," Just reflected, breathing a deeper richness to the night. "The builder of the state and savior of men

must have stopped their car before they cleared from Casabar."

Hours of riding after that. Switchbacks finally, as day broke, a slow grim climb into the heart of the Corte Highlands, at least two hundred men in the outfit.

"That interview with the *comandante* is bein' put off a lot," Just thought, "but I'm making a marked advance toward the Vinanos, and I sure am getting the right escort of protection. Felipe needn't have worried like that!"

Still no *secretario* or *comandante* himself, but Just presently got his first daylight look at the other two prisoners, during a brief halt. Monica at a distance behind was just letting herself down from her horse.

She seemed too cramped to stand and leaned against her pony. She caught sight of Just, rubbed her eyes, stared, and turned to whisper to Eugene, who looked haggard with rage.

THE march was renewed through the hours of the forenoon. Finally a cluster of 'dobe ruins appeared ahead and the ground began to show tramped like a corral.

"The ruins of the Sacred Heart—Baksipiti's home camp," observed Just.

Part of the monastery still stood, and the crumbling remains of thick-walled partitions of the old cells and sanctums. Kitchen, barracks, and headquarters had been finished off against the partly standing walls, even the corrals using the old garden enclosure to avoid fence building wherever possible.

In the slanting afternoon light as the column wound into camp, Just noticed the high heads of a pair of horses in one of the two corrals. To his fancy these two outclassed anything he had ever seen in Sonora. He edged over for a better look—a pair of bay thoroughbreds, if he knew anything of breeding, young but mature, and remarkably alike.

Which is sure getting close to what I came down to find, he remarked to himself. The fact of his having been in the saddle almost continuously for thirty-six hours didn't keep down his enthusiasm.

Secretario now appeared, inquiring for Señor Hoost's health and announcing that *comandante* cared for audience in headquarters for a few moments before supper was brought. Just followed, wondering how *secretario* could look so spick and rested after prolonged travel. He was led toward the highest standing part of the walls under the belfry of the old mission. A sort of vestry-room had been cleared, the roof repaired, and this was headquarters. At a baize-covered table sat a small but much ornamented Mexican under thirty, regarding Just out of the corners of his eyes and chewing on a candy-bar like a schoolboy. There was a basket of coco-and-nut affairs on the table to draw from. Not the faintest sign of humor in those eyes.

"Señor Hoost, I believe," began Baksipiti with a creepy, sick-woman kind of laugh. "It is regretted—my not having room in my motor to bring the *señor* round with us."

So that was how he and *secretario* got here ahead, plenty of time to freshen up before the arrival of his column. Now Baksipiti was asking questions. Just replied as he saw fit.

"The *señor's* Spanish is satisfactory," *comandante* now observed, reaching into the candy basket. "Is it also true you have been a soldier?"

"A while back, as a kid."

"With the guns of the machine?"

"Yes, a machine-gun outfit," said Just, and for the first time Baksipiti turned on him full face.

"It is true—it is then true, what was brought to me last night that you are a marksman—cra-ack!—of the little machines!"

Just deprecated his own powers, meanwhile studying Baksipiti, but concluding that no straight-shooter could get this man's motion and number off hand.

"Tomorrow morning, tomorrow early, you will know more! You are not to consider yourself a prisoner. Tomorrow you will see.

You will now have supper served and your blankets laid. Follow my servant and remember—*mañana!*"

Breathing a lot freer outside, Just was led along the ruins of a section of old monk cells until they came to one partly roofed, where he found that his blankets and saddlebags had already been brought. Supper came presently. Immediately across the open was a roofless three-walled ruin which the other two prisoners were calling home. Monica of Beverly Hills was looking this way. Not far from their quarters was the corral where the two thoroughbreds stood.

Just divided his attention between these points of interest, as he drowsily drew on his last cigarette in the dusk. From a distance Monica and Eugene didn't look as happy as they had been at this time last night. They weren't going about their housekeeping as a young couple should.

If it wasn't for Eugene, I'd probably be fool enough to do something about all this, Just mused.

Next morning, through the dewy fog of daybreak, he saw them sitting there four feet apart and looking hunched and disconsolate. Immediately after breakfast, they were led to headquarters, and a few moments later, he was sent for.

"Ah, ha, Señor Hoost," began the chief again at the rickety baize table, "perhaps you will tell this gentleman that I am perfectly aware of his identity! Since he will not answer me in his native tongue, perhaps he might be willing to speak to you in English."

"I don't know a lot about English, but in American I don't mind telling you that I've no idea of gumming up your affairs."

"The hell you haven't," snapped Eugene, at which point Just would have dropped him cold, except for the girl's quick coming between.

"But he may be just in the same boat with us!" Dusky eyes close at hand, dark rings under them from sustained excitement and the long ride.

"He may or he may not. Anyway, I'm not talking to him—or that!"

"What does he say?" impatiently asked Baksipiti.

"Now as to that," Just improvised in effect, "he allows it isn't his day for talk—"

The *commandante* shrugged and motioned to a sentry. Eugene and the girl were led back to quarters, but Just was told to stay. *Commandante* was apparently enjoying himself on his return to his home camp, something up his sleeve extra pleasing. He gave a smothered, decrepit laugh, reaching into the candy basket.

"It is of no import that Eugenio refuses to speak. It is I, Juan Baksipiti, who knows what he is doing—"

"A fellow on his honeymoon isn't natural and responsible," Just suggested.

"Honeymoon—there is no honeymoon here. He is not Edrucio. He is Eugenio, youngest son of Simon Vinano, living in those United States of late, on his way back at this time, having recently attended the wedding festivities of a brother in the *hacienda.*"

"And his companion, *Commandante?*" Just inquired out of the deep quiet.

"She is Vinano also, but of the California house. A cousin to Eugenio, Señor Hoost—also returning from the nuptials of Edrucio Vinano."

"Just cousins, *Commandante?*"

"That is so."

Just bent closer. He casually loosened the sombrero from his temples. Baksipiti now got down to business.

"Very soon you will understand my complete plans. Juan Baksipiti is to do great and original things in Sonora. Juan Baksipiti is to do them in new and unforeseen ways!"

There was more of this, Just nodding in tireless and winning attention. Without a single apparent bad habit to prop him up, he reflected, Baksipiti could talk all day about himself.

"And now you will know the surprise!"

he finally announced, opening the door to a room farther in.

MACHINE guns--laid out in the half-dark. Three pairs of Lefolio Baby Giants, snug little blue-steeled vipers designed to pour fifteen hundred a minute.

There was plenty of ammunition. The shipment had but recently arrived, the *comandante* said, and Just Crandall was furthermore let into his plans of revolutionizing the art of political warfare in Sonora to the high point reached in the illustrious cities of the North.

Kidnaping and machine guns, Just reflected. *He's learning to do things from the States just as everybody has. . . .*

Up to now, Baksipiti confided, no one of his outfit knew how to put together or exactly operate the guns, but Just was the heaven-sent who not only talked the Spanish language, but knew the language of these bad little guns, too.

"I should know how to make these snorters smoke," Just bashfully acknowledged.

"So it is for you to screw them together, part to part. The Vinanos are coming!"

"How's that? They wouldn't know about Eugene so soon."

"Ah, they will have had my letter dispatched by messenger yesterday," Baksipiti announced. "A letter to Simon Vinano, whose *hacienda* is but sixteen miles away. This: 'We have your son, Eugenio. Awaiting your reply—with pesós fifty thousand. Obedient and affectionate—' "

"Neat," said Just. "Then you are looking for the Vinanos to answer today?"

"This is the day, my friend." Baksipiti expanded himself, tapped his chest with two fingers. "You have come just in time!"

"But is not Simon Vinano said to be a powerful man down this way?"

"Ah, yes, but Juan Baksipiti is one powerful man!"

Even with the machine guns, Just couldn't see the bandit getting away with his conquering in Vinano territory. From all he knew and had heard for years of old Simon and his sons, they took what they wanted, and took it first. However, the challenge had gone over to the *hacienda* yesterday, and the answer was likely to come back today.

Yes, by sundown, and the cousins are apt to know a lot we don't know, Just thought.

During the rest of the forenoon he thoughtfully buckled together the three pairs of machines, Baksipiti's candy breath for the most part pouring over his shoulder. All in shooting order, ready for fifteen hundred a minute, the "Babies" were carried up a ladder to the belfry on the floor above the *comandante's* headquarters.

This was the highest part of the mission ruin, a sort of natural breastworks that commanded the mesa from all angles and looked directly down upon a small, walled enclosure where horses had stood. A huge broken chimney gaped a man's height from the belfry level, all of which details Just registered with interest.

Baksipiti went below at last and Just refreshed himself with a distant scrutiny of the two thoroughbreds, their listening heads rising above the common Indian and cow ponies—also he noted the cousins sitting apart as before.

In early afternoon, Baksipiti's scouts reported a number of horsemen making a crossing of the Corte Peaks coming this way —Simon Vinano's answer—rurales and an outfit of range riders, thirty or forty in number, had been discerned.

"But my command is five times that number!" exulted Baksipiti. "Also we have these—" His eyes fondled the guns. He then sent out *secretario* with the main body of his men to check the Vinanos at a distance from the camp.

"But if Simon Vinano will not be checked —" He paused, and that shivery cackle was in the air.

"That's where I came in with the Babies," said Just.

"Bueno!" said Baksipiti. *"En el ojo del buey!"*

He moved down the ladder. Just observed the main outfit leaving, a hundred and fifty men under *secretario*, forty or fifty remaining to hold down camp. Furthermore, he observed with concern the thoroughbreds in the corral being saddled, but they were presently led this way, to the enclosed shelter under the belfry, in fact. Just descended the ladder to the lower door for a closer look.

A pair of young mares, both bays—fifteen hands—traces of a filly left in one, the other mature.

"Looks as if they were out of the same dam, two seasons hand-running," he thought.

Heads high—wide between the eyes, a little dusty, but he knew how they could shine underneath.

"Sisters?" he inquired of a Mexican sentry.

The other nodded.

"And where did this pair come from?"

The answer was evasive, but the sentry volunteered that they were bred for the race track, which fell short of being news to Just.

"And what does *el señor* keep them for?"

"To get swiftly to where he isn't now!"

Great little idea—a pair of getaway runners for Baksipiti, if fighting got too thick. Certainly a man with a head like that could tackle the Vinanos. Nothing to lose but his men.

Thoughtfully Just reclimbed to the belfry. Sultry waiting after that; plenty of time to find out how hot it was and how slow the time could pass with the sun high in the sky. His eyes roved often to Eugene and Monica.

They're sure getting sedentary over there! he thought.

FINALLY out of the pine fringe at the edge of the mesa where the up-slopes began, a courier appeared coming this way, not sparing his pony. Baksipiti went partly down the ladder to receive the message. It proved to be from *secretario*, saying that Simon Vinano did not care for battle but had brought over the money. It directed that Eugene now be brought forth so that he might be exchanged for a lot more than his weight in silver.

Just slightly raised his sombrero. His forehead wrinkled with the news. He didn't propose to know Simon Vinano's business, but this sure was queer. His eyes veered again to the cousins sitting in their doorway. This was what they were waiting for. It was all they could ask, but as for himself, in command of bandit artillery, the job now showed lonely, even ugly aspects.

Baksipiti had ascended the ladder and was strutting up and down, chin out. If he had worn a beard he would have brushed Just with it, so intimate had he become and high-feeling over his victory. He gave orders for Eugene to be taken out under escort, and then—everything looked suddenly different to the watching American.

They were undertaking to leave Monica. They were pressing her back, in fact, and Eugene was showing more satisfactorily than at any moment so far, having flattened a second sentry who had tried to pull him away from the girl. Now he was struggling with several others.

"It may be necessary for me to put Eugenio to sleep," Baksipiti softly whined, watching with circling head like a wolverine.

"I wouldn't," said Just. "His father and brothers may want him delivered in good running order."

"But he must not continue to resist!"

"But you're keeping the cousin, *Comandante!*"

"To deliver her was not on the terms of the message. Who knows? Her family may be rich as Simon Vinano, and we shall get another fifty thousand from *Los Estatos Unidos*."

"Now think of that!" said Just.

"Why not? We have the men and the guns!"

I have the guns, Just mentally corrected, *and you have the running mares. . . .*

Eugene still resisted. Baksipiti leaned

over the ledge to order violence, when Just intervened.

"Maybe I could speak to him."

The chief agreed, and Just went below.

"Look here, Eugene," he said. "I don't want to see you hurt, and they'll sure hit you over the head and pack you out like a dufflebag—if you don't quit."

Eugene stood up and blew the long black hair out of his eyes. "I don't know you," he said.

"I know you don't, but you're maybe going to. You do as the little guy says. You'll maybe know what to do when you get over there." He talked fast, significantly. Mentioned Pendleton, the two brothers he had met. "I'm goin' to be here while you're gone. Have Miss Monica keep her eye on me in the belfry," he added.

Monica had not missed his orders, however. She spoke swiftly now.

"I trust him, Eugene! I did from the very first. Please don't make it more awful by forcing them to hurt you."

Eugene let himself be led off, with the face of a man cut in two, a Mexican walking behind carrrying his hat. Just went back to the belfry. Just could almost see the dark rings under her eyes. Nearby, at hand in fact, was Baksipiti, pleased as if already counting that silver.

Finally a puzzling racket of guns started out at the front. Had Eugene been turned over, and was old Simon paying in steel instead of silver? But forty men from the Vinano ranch would hardly take the agressive against *secretario's* hundred and fifty. Firing continued, sounded closer, in fact. Presently out on the mesa, the scrimmage showed and another courier was seen coming from *secretario*. Baksipiti bent down the ladder to get the news.

"They took our prisoner without paying the pesos! They fired upon us instead, and many more numbers suddenly appeared," the messenger wailed.

"You mean you have neither Eugenio nor the pesos?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"And they are driving you back?"

"*Si, señor. El secretario* tells me to say it is you they would deal with. They are coming here to deal with you! One way they will deal, if all is well with the *señorita*. Another way if the slightest hurt—"

"Tell them. Tell them—" Baskipiti's glassy eyes roved over the Lefolios.

"I wouldn't speak of these Babies ahead of time," warned Just.

"Tell them nothing! We will let them come on!" Baksipiti said, standing cautiously erect for another look at the active lines.

His bandits were unquestionably in rout, Eugene's father and brothers bent on making a job of it. At this point Baksipiti began to show signs of departure, starting down off the ladder.

"Where to, *comandante?*" Just inquired.

"To the rising ground, *señor*, where I may observe without entanglement!"

"And I'm to hold camp with the Lefolios?"

"*Si, si.* Our men will fall back to this camp—then you will prevent further advance from the Vinanos. It is the great surprise!"

"That's pretty clear. Only your necktie isn't on straight—"

JUST bent to fix it. No sound—hardly time for one amazed look before the stroke had fallen. The limp little chief was pulled up from the ladder and stretched out. Just wiped his bleeding knuckle.

"I had to be sudden like that," he condoned. "I couldn't let him ride away on them sisters. He might have got himself horse-hurt."

He took Baksipiti's small gun and holster, then straightened up to signal Monica who instantly jumped to her feet and started his way, but was stopped by a sentry.

"It's all right! Let her come, hombre," Just yelled officially. "*El señor* wants lady prisoner below."

Monica kept coming. When she appeared at the lower door. Just softly called down, "Stand close to the gates where the horses are, miss. I'll be down there in a minute."

He bent over the fallen leader again and decided he wouldn't come to for several moments.

But I guess you'd better be hog-tied, so I'll feel easy and unhurried in getting clear. . . .

He used the thin holster strap and tie to pin the little one's hands to his belt behind. Standing erect again, he took a quick survey of the camp from the belfry's rim. Plenty of Mexicans showed themselves among the ruins, but every hombre down there believed him and Baksipiti thick as cream. Now he was gathering up the machine guns.

Can't leave these Babies to be turned on Eugene and his family at the last minute. . . .

The open chimney gaped, and down went an armful of gleaming metal—all but one gun and an extra belt of ammunition which he flung over his shoulder. The mares were snorting and plunging at the clatter in the chimney as he started down the ladder. At this moment he heard also the rapid thundering of a pony coming into camp from the mesa.

"We'll be getting out of here in a minute or two, Miss Monica," he called to the girl from the lower door.

It was *secretario* himself who had come in, now dismounting outside, bent on making some report at headquarters.

"*El señor*—where?" he called to Just.

A thin wail from above answered:

"*Aqui! Aqui!*"

Secretario jumped, looked queer and gamely started to push up the stairs. Just took one step back for clearance and let go, but his swing was hampered by the ammunition belt over his shoulder, and the Lefolio in his left hand. *Secretario* ducked, wiggled back out of the doorway and fled toward the camp kitchen. Just had lifted Baksipiti's gun to stop him, but shoved it back in the holster.

"That's my whole trouble, bein' so tender-hearted," he murmured contritely, "hating to spoil anything so bright and well made as that little Mexican. Now the whole camp knows how we stand and we've got to fight our way out instead of passing gently!"

Monica, in the doorway of the horse-enclosure, gave him a look of one still expecting to be saved. Squeaky, trapped cries sounded from the belfry. *Secretario* was wasting no time, talking excitedly to forming groups at the kitchen. Now he started this way again, with a platoon at his heels.

"Look out for the mares," Just called. "They aren't going to like this a lot, but we've got to clear our way out."

HE RAISED the Lefolio, opened the cutout and began to spray. Nothing short of an explosion could have equaled the speed with which that platoon dismembered itself, though Just had made the racket do it, firing high.

"Power, *amigo!*" he breathed. "They're making 'em better since I left the post!"

He turned his piece on the surrounding ruins, letting go a burst over kitchen and corrals, and another panoramic sweep over camp in general, his idea being to register aggressiveness to the very last moment.

The mares were crazed, tangled, one reared full height. Just ran across, caught the nearest bridle-rein.

"Pile into the saddle, quick. You're not going to fall off?"

"Oh, no!"

"That's it—like a real buckaroo! Now hold her steady till I get on. I'll go out first."

He gained the saddle on the second mare, hating to leave the machine gun, though there weren't more than a dozen rounds left.

"Bend forward. Cover yourself all you can. Here goes!"

"I'm with you!"

Then he let his mare go—a long, low dive

out from the shelter of the walls, the girl's mare following close in long, cagy jumps.

Just emptied a pistol in the general direction of the kitchen. Meanwhile *Secretario* had gotten his men into position back of the walls, and his fire began as the two mares made a quick turn to the right, out past the corrals. The air full of slugs from all angles of the walls an instant later as Just looked back—Monica stretched forward on her mare's neck riding the withers like a real jockey.

"She's sure another thoroughbred," he muttered, throat closed at the thought of her stopping one of those slugs.

Right there Just got his—one coming to a full stop in his right side from behind, knocking him to the pommel, and starting right in to make him sick. He righted himself, but everything was getting muffled, daylight dimming out. The firing was far back by this time. Not rightly hearing the second mare, he turned. In a kind of last daylight, he met the girl's look, her eyes wide and horrified from the sight of the wet hole in his shirt.

"Are you—all right?" he called.

"Oh, yes, but you—you!"

"I'll make it, don't worry!"

THE mares stretched out by this time. Just had meant to swing wide around and get behind the Vinanos and thus join Eugene, but the mares seemed to have an idea of their own. He hadn't the strength to resist.

He kept hearing Monica's voice. Once he thought she was riding beside him. His insides were rolling up; his brain badly mixed. All he knew was that this was his job, that he had to keep going. Queer, to lose the feel of the runner like this.

"If you would only pull up," he heard against the wind. "I might be able to bind your wound!"

"Nothing like that. We're ridin', miss, the idea being to get where we—ain't now!"

Right then he lost his rhythm with the runner for a second, awaiting the crash to the ground, but his hand found the horn instead.

"Oh, please stop! You must stop!" She was at his side, bending down and pulling in his mare and her own, too. The change unbalanced him, and down he toppled.

He heard the tearing of strips of cloth. He felt her hands back of his shoulders, her breath as she bent close. She was calling him.

"Señor Hoost! You're not dying! It can't be like that, listen—"

"Nothing like that, miss—" He found her in the dark.

He felt her arm jerk as she worked, holding him up.

"What's that pulling at you?"

"The mares. They want to go so badly."

He chuckled faintly. Both bridle reins in the hollow of her arm, she wrapped the cloth.

"It needs yards and yards—I haven't so much—goods. It's below the shoulder, but the blood seems stopped."

He could partly see through the dark now—empty country of hills.

"They'll be wanting us—looking for us," he mumbled. "Better be in the saddle in case the Vinanos didn't come out on top!"

"Do you think you can get up?"

"Sure. You'll see."

The mare stood. Bare arms pushed as he lifted himself up with one hand. He was on the job again. He felt the bandage growing warm and wet. It seemed hours—the low rocking of the mares.

It was really dark now. "You're what I call a man!" he heard in the wind. No one else could—"

"A little longer," he answered. "We're sure headin' for shelter somewhere!"

Then second by second he fought to keep his head, until his mare came down from her great easy stride of her own accord, and the smell of a barnyard reached his nostrils in the damp night. The last he knew that second time was the girl standing at his stirrup, hands up to help him.

(Continued on page 106)

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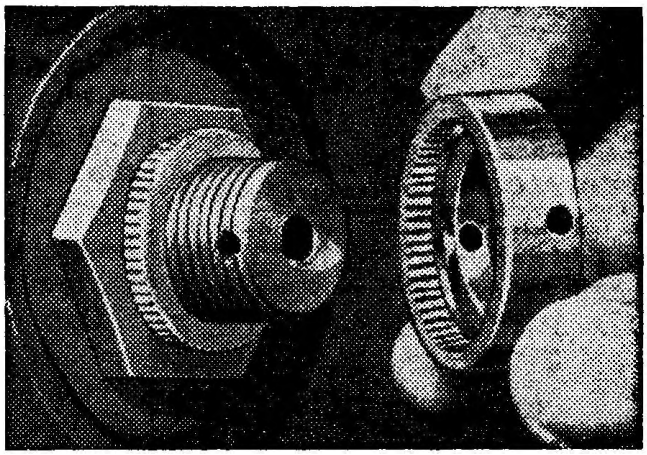

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(Continued from page 104)

NEXT day he found himself in a great room that opened to a broad balcony. There were peons and nurses and a Spanish doctor. Finally he squinted up and there was a shy giant he had seen somewhere before, waiting patiently for him to remember —Manuelo Vinano, one of the brothers he had met at the Pendleton rodeo.

"Hello," he said. "Where's—I mean Miss —California?"

"In this house, *señor*. She keeps asking for you. She was hurt—not seriously, no. What would you say, exposure of the saddle?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Just. "Is this a hospital or hotel?"

"This," Manuelo smiled, "is the humble house of my father, Simon Vinano. You are not to talk."

Later in the day he managed to get in two or three questions, heavy on his mind. It was not Manuelo, but another brother this time.

"How did we get here? I don't remember being picked up."

"You rode here, Señor Hoost. Sixteen miles from the old ruins of the Sacred Heart."

"The mares—"

"They came home, *señor*. They galloped home, having been stolen from this rancho three weeks ago by the men of that worm, Baksipiti. You and Cousin Monica were here before us."

"You got Baksipiti?"

The tall Spaniard made a quick gesture to his tie, holding it up past the left ear. "He is dead, *señor*. We cannot tolerate kidnaping. It is not—for you to talk, the doctor says."

He slept. It seemed like the next days. The brothers—Edrucio, Immaculato, Manuelo—came often; the old father showed himself. Finally he found Eugenio sitting at his side.

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)

"You will forgive my distrust, Señor Hoost?" he asked.

"Sure, and where's—how's cousin?"

"Ah, Monica is fast recovering, though she does not yet walk without pain. It is from the saddle only—the long ride of the night before, as well—just pain from the saddle. You see, *señor*, the dress she had on—so very slight—"

"Yes," said Just.

"It was not on when she arrived. That is, it was not on her, but on you—the wound, you know."

That left Just in a long confused silence.

The door opened, but it was big bearded Immaculato, the eldest.

"We have a word of inquiry for you from one Felipe Rodriguez of Casabar, asking for Señor Hoost's health, and if you have found the right horse. Please say to me what horse is meant, *señor!*"

Just conservatively smiled.

"You see, I idled down this way in the first place to see you boys and looking for some brood mares. I found two I wanted before I got here."

Big Mac's face lengthened. "We deeply regret that it was not on these poor acres you found the mares desired."

Just laughed. "They're here now—the ones that brought us home."

"It will promote the highest peace of my father to present them to you—"

JUST was on his feet again—well enough to sit a horse again. He had seen Monica often through the days, but she had been strangely aloof. He was waiting for her this morning. It was the day before his return to the Rio Brava, and they were riding out together.

The two mares were brought. Monica appeared in white cords and a plum-colored jacket. They rode higher and higher.

The light of altitude was in her eyes. The two mares were glad to be out, pleasant but

peppery. Monica chatted of the day and night spent in Baksipiti's camp.

"The darkest minutes of all to me was after they took Eugene away," she was saying. "I'd have smothered from loneliness if it hadn't been for your word for me to keep an eye on the belfry—"

"You sure made it easy for anyone to help you."

"But I had such faith in you."

"And what started that, miss?"

"I don't know. I felt better when I saw you were with us—the next morning after our capture. Oh, Señor Hoost, when I think of all you've done—"

Just hitched his sombrero a fraction of an inch downward. "These young mares do well together," he slowly, almost coldly observed. "I'd like to keep them together—"

"Why not, Señor Hoost?"

"I'm giving that young one to you—"

"But they belong together!"

"In fact, they do, but I can't quite make up my mind to part with both of them."

She was silent. They reached a lesser peak. A gust of warm wind came up from the brown empty valley before them. Just spoke at last, like a doomed man allowed words under the dangling rope.

"I thought I came down here looking for horses."

Monica seemed locked in some deep impenetrable silence.

"Didn't you?" she huskily asked at last.

"If this is our last ride together," he icily pursued. "That's what I'm here on the mountain to find out!"

She was down before him, her words in his ears:

"Yes, yes—since the moment you turned from your horse—that awful hole in your back! Since the dark, I binding your wound —I knew what I'd come back to Sonora to find—"

"I came back for a thoroughbred," breathed Just, not taking his answer on horseback.

(Continued from page 50)

"All the times I've seen you—I remember them clearly. Everything about you I remember." The smell of her hair was a fragrance that swayed him, and his long cast-aside desires smote him.

"Jim," she whispered. "It isn't too late now. Let McQueen have the town, and we can go away together."

He moved her away from him so that he could peer into her face in the darkness. His voice was soft and final as he said, "Pride is a thing that no longer drives me now. There is some other reason holding me here, something that I can't name, nor shake. Whatever it is, facing McQueen this last time is part of it. I'm sorry, Jane."

She laid her head briefly against his arm, and gathered up the cup, wrapping it carefully. She turned from him, saying, "I'll be waiting for you," and walked away.

Talon listened until her footsteps were faded except in his memory.

Somewhere, ahead of him, a dog set up a clamor, and he became immediately alert. The shuffling of walking horses was a hushed sound in the deep dust, and the creak of saddle leather split the night like a rifle shot.

A low voice murmured, "What do you make of it? The damn town's black as the ace of spades."

Talon peered through the darkness, and made out the black knot of riders standing motionless, twenty yards away. He straightened and walked toward them, his spurs dragging in the street with a muffled clink. He heard the quick indrawn breath of a man, and a voice said, "Listen! Someone's coming this way."

Talon stopped twenty feet from the mounted men, and made out the blurred shapes of Burt McQueen and Dutch Henry.

McQueen stretched his neck to pry open the darkness, and exclaimed, "Men—it's Talon!"

Dutch Henry cursed, and the horses

shifted. The Texans made a solid wall of black behind McQueen, and Talon understood that only a word separated him from death.

Sweat made a fine film on his face, but his voice was even. "Turn back, McQueen. Ellsworth is dead."

"But you ain't." McQueen said ominously.

"No," Talon said, "I ain't dead, and it will cost you your life to kill me. You and Dutch Henry. There's a time in every man's life when he loses. Tonight, you lose, McQueen. The town ain't open to you. The rails are way ahead, and she's off the list for treein'. Take your men and go."

Talon stood there watching them, the guns still resting in his holsters. McQueen moved his horse forward a pace, and the heavy voice of Lou Gore sailed out behind Jim Talon. "Hold it right there, Texan! There's two dozen rifles on you!"

JIM TALON felt his heart hammer oddly, and a quick smile creased his face.

He said, "Turn 'em and ride out, McQueen. Go back to Texas and tell them there is one town you couldn't tree and one marshal's badge that you didn't get to hang on your chuck wagon."

"I always wanted to kill you." Dutch Henry insisted, and moved his hands.

"Keep your hands on that saddle horn!" Talon said sharply.

"I'll take a chance." Dutch Henry said, and pulled his gun. Talon drew, and the plaza filled with sound and criss-crossed fingers of fire. Dutch Henry rolled drunkenly in the saddle and pitched head first into the dust. A horse stamped nervously, and McQueen yelled, "Hold your fire, dammit! Hold your fire! They'll cut us to pieces!"

A rider dismounted, and toed Dutch Henry over on his back. He flipped his head up to McQueen and said, surprised, "He ain't dead!"

"Bring him along then," McQueen said, and three men dismounted to drape Dutch Henry across the saddle. McQueen waited until his men were mounted solidly behind him, and said to Talon, "I suppose I ought to thank you for not killing him, but the words stick in my craw somehow. You fought me too long for me to ever call you a friend."

"Go back to Texas," Talon repeated. "Forget about Ellsworth.

Burt McQueen let out a raw sigh, and lifted the reins to swing his horse. He said, "I guess I better do that," and led his men out of town.

Talon shoved the Rogers and Spencer back into his holster, and stood head down, letting the afterwash of his nerves shake him. One by one, lights appeared in the windows behind him, and a knot of men came off the gallery of the Drover's Cottage.

Pete Slaughter shuffled forward, elbowing his way past the others, and faced Talon. He said, "You didn't have to do what you did, Jim—"

The feeling that had been crowding him circled Talon again, brushing against him, and a full understanding came into his face. He grinned broadly.

"You're wrong this time, Pete," he said. "This was something I had to do, I had no choice. I didn't realize it then, but Ellsworth is my town—my home."

Talon glanced at Art Larkin, and saw a great change come to his face. Lou Gore chuckled to himself, and Larkin stepped forward to take Jim Talon by the arm. His voice was friendly.

He said, "I acted like a damn fool tonight, Jim. Come on over and have a drink with us."

Talon hesitated briefly, thinking of Jane Cardigan waiting for him, but he believed Jane would understand.

He smiled, nodding to Larkin, and said, "I'd consider it a pleasure," and fell into step beside the man.

By Allan K. Echols

DRY WIT

ONE of those talkative grubline riders had settled down to a regular job in the Texas Panhandle one summer when they were suffering from a drought. He was riding fences with one of the regular hands, and making his brag about the places he'd been and things he'd seen.

He had talked quite a bit about California and how hot it was.

"Don't think I'd like that much heat," the regular commented.

"You don't notice it much," the grubliner said, "It's a dry kind of heat."

A little later while he was talking about Oregon during a cold winter.

"Don't think I'd like it," the local rider said. "Too cold."

"You don't notice it much," answered the wanderer. "It's a dry kind of cold."

"Still reckon I'll stick around this country," the native said.

The wanderer looked at the drought-burned ground, and then up at the great masses of white summer clouds without a drop of water in them. "Anything beats this country," he complained. "It never rains here."

"Sure it rains," the native said. "It's raining now."

"Hell, I don't see no rain," the wanderer said in disgust.

"You don't notice it much," was the answer. "It's a dry kind of rain."

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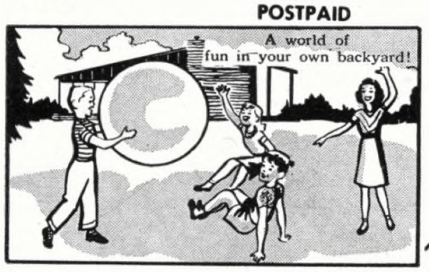

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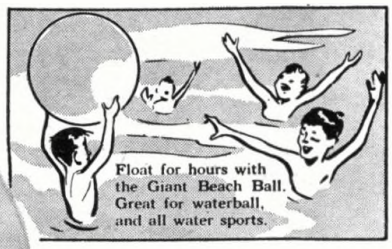
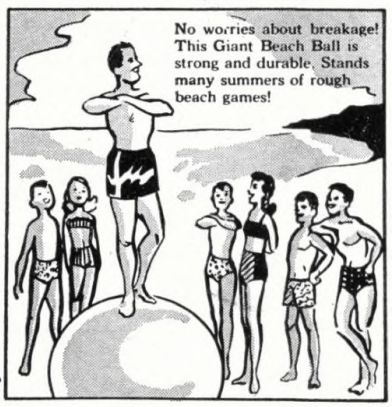
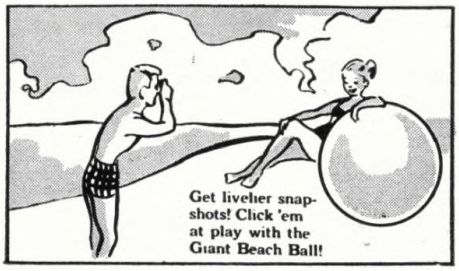
4-FT. HIGH DELUXE BEACH BALL $1.95







GET YOURS FIRST! Rush Coupon Today!

YOUNG PRODUCTS, Dept. 1431, 2605 Elmhurst, Detroit 6, Mich.

OK! PLEASE SEND ME POSTPAID ___ Giant All-Rubber Beach Balls at $1.00 each, and/or ___ Deluxe All-Rubber Beach Balls at $1.95 each. I enclose $_____ in cash, check or money order. You replace without charge if any break under any condition.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

NOW!
The Greatest
HOSPITALIZATION VALUE EVER OFFERED

Smiling and healihy today — in a Hospital bed tomorrow! Be ready!

Sky-high Hospital bills can wreck your life savings. Insure now!

We pay benefits for as long as you stay in Hospital. NO TIME LIMIT!

PROTECTS YOU and YOUR FAMILY

IN CASE OF SICKNESS or ACCIDENT . .

No Time Limit HOSPITAL PLAN

PAYS BENEFITS FOR **FULL STAY** IN HOSPITAL

MAIL COUPON

COSTS ONLY **Pennies a Day**

WE PAY CASH DIRECT TO YOU

IN ADDITION TO WHAT YOU MAY COLLECT FROM OTHER INSURANCE

Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits just as long as you stay — *there's absolutely no time limit!* What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. This is important — it means you can carry the low cost "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy IN ADDITION to any other insurance — then collect two ways in case of Hospital confinement.

ACCIDENTAL DEATH, SURGERY, POLIO INCLUDED

We give you more coverage, better coverage, longer coverage at low cost. You get generous Hospital Room and Board Benefits for sickness or accident (rest homes, sanitariums and Govt. Hospitals excluded) . . . you get Cash Benefits for 73 Surgical Operations . . . Lump Cash for accidental death . . . Cash Payment for loss of eyes, hands, feet . . . special Polio Protection, etc. One Policy covers individual or entire family, birth to age 75. You'll see the low costs in the booklet we send you. DON'T TAKE CHANCES — BE PROTECTED. Send for our FREE BOOK which tells all about this remarkable insurance.

DON'T WAIT TILL IT'S TOO LATE! ACT NOW!

SO SUDDEN!

Policy Sold Only By Mail! Good Anywhere in U.S. & Possessions!
If sickness or accident puts you in a Hospital bed — you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. It's the sensible, practical way to protect your own bank account against the onslaught of high Hospital costs. So ACT TODAY! Do it before trouble strikes.

YOU CAN GET MATERNITY
For slight extra cost husband and wife can have a MATERNITY RIDER attached to their regular Policy and this will entitle the couple to a liberal Benefit for childbirth confinement and care.

WHO'S NEXT?

HAPPY DAY!

POLICY BACKED BY STRONG RELIABLE COMPANY
We do business in all 48 states and U. S. possessions. Claims are paid promptly in strict accordance with Policy provisions.

LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF NORTH AMERICA
Wilmington 99, Delaware

***Mail Coupon for* FREE BOOK**
NO OBLIGATION
NO AGENT WILL CALL

RUSH COUPON FOR VALUABLE FREE BOOK

LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF NORTH AMERICA
Dept. 653-PO Wilmington 99, Del.

Please send me, without obligation, full details about your new, low cost NO TIME LIMIT HOSPITAL Plan. No agent will call.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....