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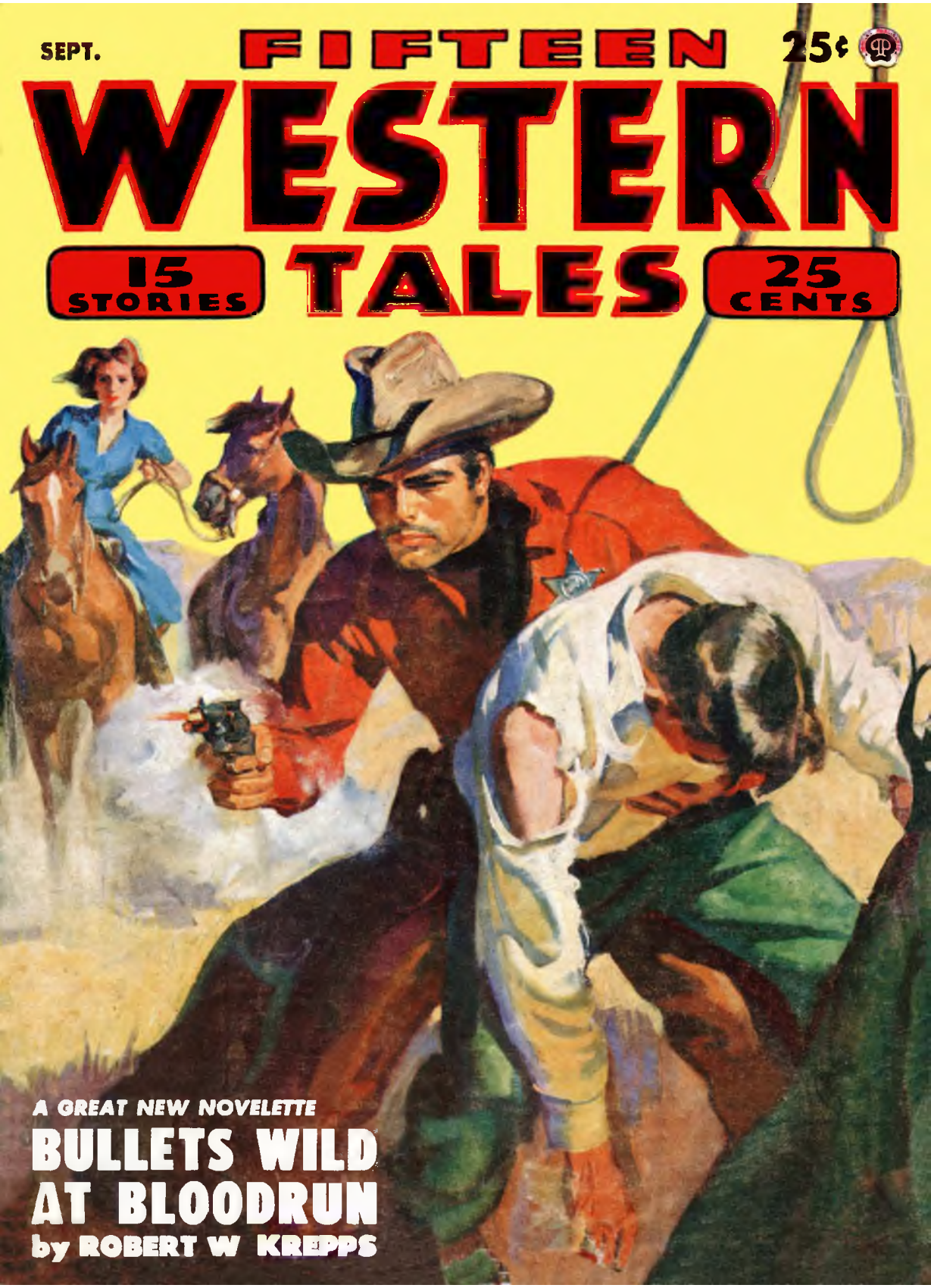

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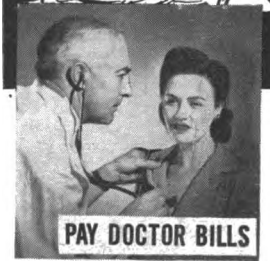

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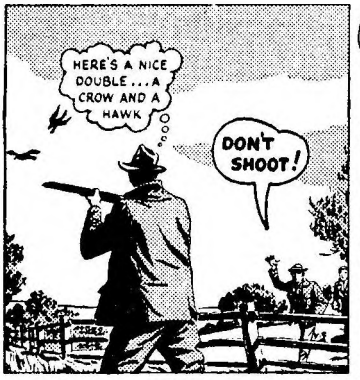

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NEXT ISSUE OUT SEPTEMBER 3rd!

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15 STORIES — 25 CENTS

VOLUME 26, No. 1 — SEPTEMBER, 1952

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Smashing Short Fiction

Departments and Features

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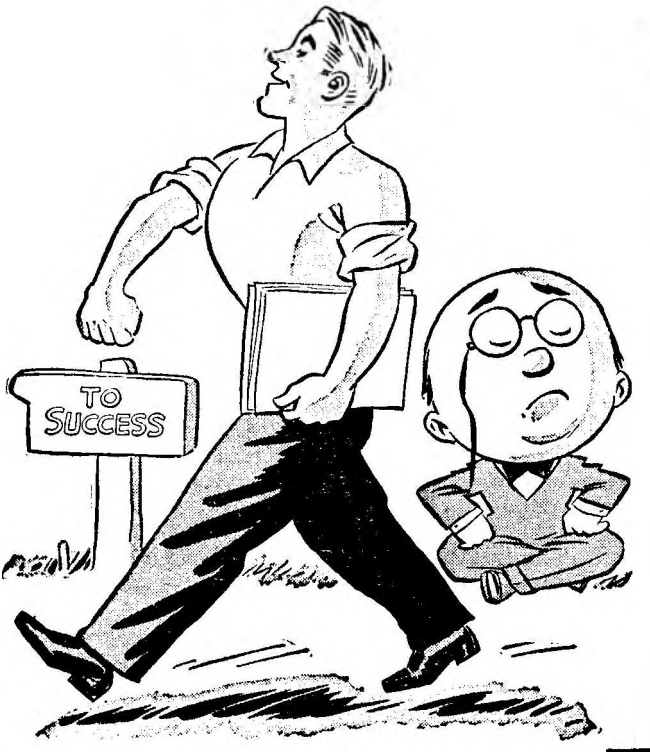
How to pass a genius



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THE PROSPECTOR

By VIC SHAW

ROCKHOUNDS, get busy—hit for the hills and tall timber pronto this summer, after snow is off the mountains and the high water is gone in the creeks. Dig up gold pans, prospecting picks, camp outfits, and beat it. Prospecting isn't dead yet by a long shot. Let no one tell you different. But first, write me for reliable dope on best areas to pick.

Maybe you've heard that hand-worked placers are gone. That the rich ore veins have all been found. That now only the geophysical instruments can locate new ones. Forget it. It is true they help, but the rest of that stuff applies to those deposits that were in plain sight—easiest to find. The fact is, there's plenty left for the gravel-sifter and hard-rock buster, who has learned the "know-how" and so has the answers. If you haven't got it now, we'll give you all you need—and for free.

Sure, it's true that twenty years ago experts in Western states said: "There're no hand-placers left." Yet during the depression, when thousands were out for just bean-money, lots of good strikes were made by experienced miners and more remain to be made. The trick is to know where to look, after you *sabe* how and why.

Amateurs fail because they don't know that ores occur only in certain kinds of rock—you must know the kinds, and then be able to identify them at sight in the field, even though colors may have been changed by weathering on surface. This goes for rock where gold veins occur—as well as many

(Continued on page 8)

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 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.

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(Continued from page 6)

other commercial ores, now priced so high that they pay miners as much as gold.

First paste this in your hat—the trouble with the gold ores today is that only the very richest veins now are worth large-scale development. Our costs of labor and material are so high there's no margin of profit in corporate working of lowgrade veins, which before 1941 always paid big dividends. But while the rich stuff is scarce as hen's teeth, prices for commercial ores other than gold are high and may be higher, with a big demand for them due to the national shortages. So the wise prospector now hunts these other ores but always with a sharp eye out for a pay-placer, or quartz-gold lode.

Our Western mining fields have plenty of such ores, and Uncle Sam is howling for more to stockpile, since too many foreign sources are shut tight. He wants all he can get here, of copper, lead. zinc, mercury, antimony, tin, nickel, chromite, the tungsten ore of scheelite and especially several ores of uranium oxide, as well as many nonmetallics like perlite—a volcanic glass.

Of all these uranium ore is top of the list—most needed, because we still must import most of what we use for our war and industrial research purposes. There are some 120 radioactive minerals, all but a few just curios or cabinet specimens for collectors. Pitchblende, the primary ore richest in uranium oxides is most needed by our Atomic Energy Commission. If you discover a deposit acceptable to the A.E.C., you get a bonus of $10,000 in addition to a price of $3.50 a pound for all you produce. You get a smaller price and no bonus for the secondary ores of carnotite, torbernite, and tyuyamunite, but they too, are extremely profitable to mine.

There's still a broad prospecting field, wide open and waiting. The ores mentioned are widely scattered in the U.S.A., Alaska, Canada, and Central America, where there still are virgin gold placers, and maybe uranium, for little is known of it. So, if a free healthy vacation in the hills calls you, with its pure air, hunting and fishing and no time clocks, there's still a chance in favorable areas to find something that'll be a lifetime stake.

And sometimes if you pick up your end of your rainbow, the other may not be too far away.

TRACING A MOTHER VEIN

Query: I have always been interested in prospecting, but so far have panned only a thimbleful of gold, for fun, in Indiana (Brown County).

I know of a location in Oregon that would possibly pay my expenses on a trip there from my home in Los Angeles. It is a placer location, but I'd like to take a crack at its source.

Since I know nothing about hard rock mining except what I've read, could you give me some hints and practical methods of tracing the gold to its lode? The second most important question is about weather and terrain. The spot is in Boker County, Oregon, in the mountains south of Boker City. I want to know how far you can drive into the mountains with a luggage-sized trailer, and if the mountains are too rough for travel without horses. Also, what is the best month to go? I won't be out of the Army until February, 1953, and would like to go that summer.

M.W., Pfc., U.S.A.

Reply by Victor Shaw: I like your plan to start with an old placer deposit, and trace "colors" back uphill to hunt the parent lode (vein, or maybe a series of gold-bearing seams, stingers or crevices). And I don't mean "pocket hunting"! And I happen to have plenty of data on both Grant and Baker Counties for many years back, especially in Baker Co. along the Powder River.

Of course, you must know all that country has been prospected rather thoroughly from very early days—first by small scale miners working surface placers by hand methods, then by dredges. There's also been some hydraulicking done in favorable canyon-creeks. After which there was quite a lot of prospecting for lode deposits, of quartz-gold veins called "dry gold ore", and also for deposits of complex ores carrying silver-galena-copper, with some associated gold. Even twenty-five years ago the production of gold from placers was 60% from dredges, 23% hydraulicking and less from hand placers.

However, 5-6 years ago a buddy of mine jeeped into that region, and found one canyon-creek that had been dredged. He panned around it to find that the dredge had been pulled out when gravel-values got too low, also that some creek bends hadn't been touched and quite a lot of gold remained. I mention this to give you a strong hint. Also, he did a lot of prospecting in the Sparta district, and had pretty fair results; but so far as I recall he didn't get up on the North Powder at all.

However, I certainly would have taken a trip there, along the east flanks of the Blue Mts. and maybe the head of the Willow Creek branch that hits the Powder near Haines, also the head of the Muddy and Little Muddy Creeks, and surely at head of the main North Powder west of Bulger Hill.

(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

Those peaks in the Blue Range run up to 8,000 and 9,000 feet, with lots of lesser peaks between. All gold-bearing creeks heading in canyons along a high range like that will drop the coarsest gold up near their headwaters, where the steep grade flattens off a bit. That's where you'll hit the heavy nuggets, always! Some fairly coarse gold is washed along from there too, big as barley or wheat, but down on the lower parts of long rivers all you get will be flour-gold in most cases.

And concerning lode gold in quartz veins—in any high mountain areas, there always are numerous snow-slides, that carry down everything in their paths, rocks, timber, earth etc., and scour it all right down to bedrock leaving it more or less bare. This often exposes brand new quartz veins never before seen by man. The summer and spring is always a fine time to search snow-slide paths. If you bear this in mind it may serve to locate a good gold vein, even if you aren't lucky enough to trace your colors back up-creek to a parent vein. This is an A-1 hint, and comes from years of experience.

About panning up a creek to find a parent-vein: All gold that is washed downhill into a creek and down it to form a bedrock placer, always leaves a trail of flour-gold or tiny grains. So pan the gravels upstream from any placer workings, old or not, until you come to a point where the colors stop. It may be only a short distance, or quite a long way. Anyhow this tells you the vein isn't up-creek any farther. Now, the vein might cross the creek on its bottom, so you hunt around on creek bed at that point. If you don't find a vein there, you know the colors had to wash down on one side of the creek, or the other; so you pan along the banks both sides till you locate the right side, by getting the colors again.

Then you have to pan along up the hillside, taking care you don't go up some gully or shallow ravine and lose 'em. If you do lose 'em, you'll have to trench along parallel with the creek, until you pick 'em up again. Somewhere above on that hill is the vein from which your colors came and all the gold that concentrated down-creek to form the bedrock placer that had been worked out. This always is the method used, and if your work is careful, you'll not miss. If there should be a fork in the creek, you pan both to locate the proper one.

Fact is, you might find plenty of coarse gold in the creek or its bank, that was dropped there when the grade flattened, so the creek water didn't have enough velocity to carry the heavier gold. And maybe the guys who worked the placer down below, never traced it up to where the coarsest gold always drops out and is left behind.

The climate in Baker Co., and the various mountains to the west and south, is like most all mountain regions along the Pacific coast states. You get snow in winter, with rain spring and fall, but in Baker Co. summers are okay, not too hot daytimes but nice and cool nights. On account of high water in streams, I think your best time to get there is middle or last of April. The creeks in mountain canyons will be bankfull and muddy before that, hard to cross and impossible to work for placer colors.

All that country is mountainous with foothills, but there are roads along all rivers, including the Powder. From Baker City the Old Oregon Trail runs up the Powder through Haines, and Telocaset to La Grande, where you hit the State Highway that goes on to Pendleton on the Umatilla River and down it to the Columbia River at the town of Umatilla. And I think this is the best way to drive to Baker City from Seattle. Or, if you drive north from L.A., 395 goes right to Pendleton, and you can back-track to Baker from there.

There are some dirt roads and/or trails that leave highways going up canyons as far as possible. Then it'll be a hike for you, if you don't have a saddle horse and pack mule or burro. But that's okay, for you will be doing some keen prospecting and panning in such places.

If you don't *savvy* hard-rock stuff, it won't matter much, for if you make a strike, you've got to come out anyway to record a claim, and can then get whatever you need of working tools. Also, you should take samples off your vein outcrops by chipping it off with a gad right across the vein from wall to wall. Make a cone of the fragments, then quarter it and take one quarter to make another cone and repeat until you have just a handful. Place this in a mortar, grind it to fine powder, place it in a mailing envelope and send or mail it to a reliable assayer, in Pendleton or Seattle.

Meanwhile, I suggest you get a copy of *Handbook for Prospectors*, by M. W. Von Bernewitz. I think you can get it at Technical Book Co., 407 Market St., San Francisco. If they haven't it you can get it from Mineralogist Pub. Co., H. C. Dake Editor, 329 S. E. 32nd St., Portland 15, Oregon. This book covers outfitting, placering and hardrock prospecting and working of deposits, how to use mercury, how to make and use rocker, sluice, and goldpan, how to retort amalgam, how to stake a lode or placer claim etc.—everything you need to know. And I'll explain anything you don't *savvy* on request.

Lots of rattlers in that region, so have a snake kit along. Get Oregon mining laws, also game laws. Get maps of U. S. Forest Supervisor at Pendleton, and ask his regulations for camping and prospecting in a National Forest. You can mine if you obey rules.

Best of good luck to you. Hope you make a real strike.

A FAST START TO KNOWLEDGE

Query: I have no experience in prospecting, other than from books. I do have some knowledge of metallurgy. Can you list the

(Continued on page 101)

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By ROBERT W. KREPPS

Bullets WILD AT BLOODRUN

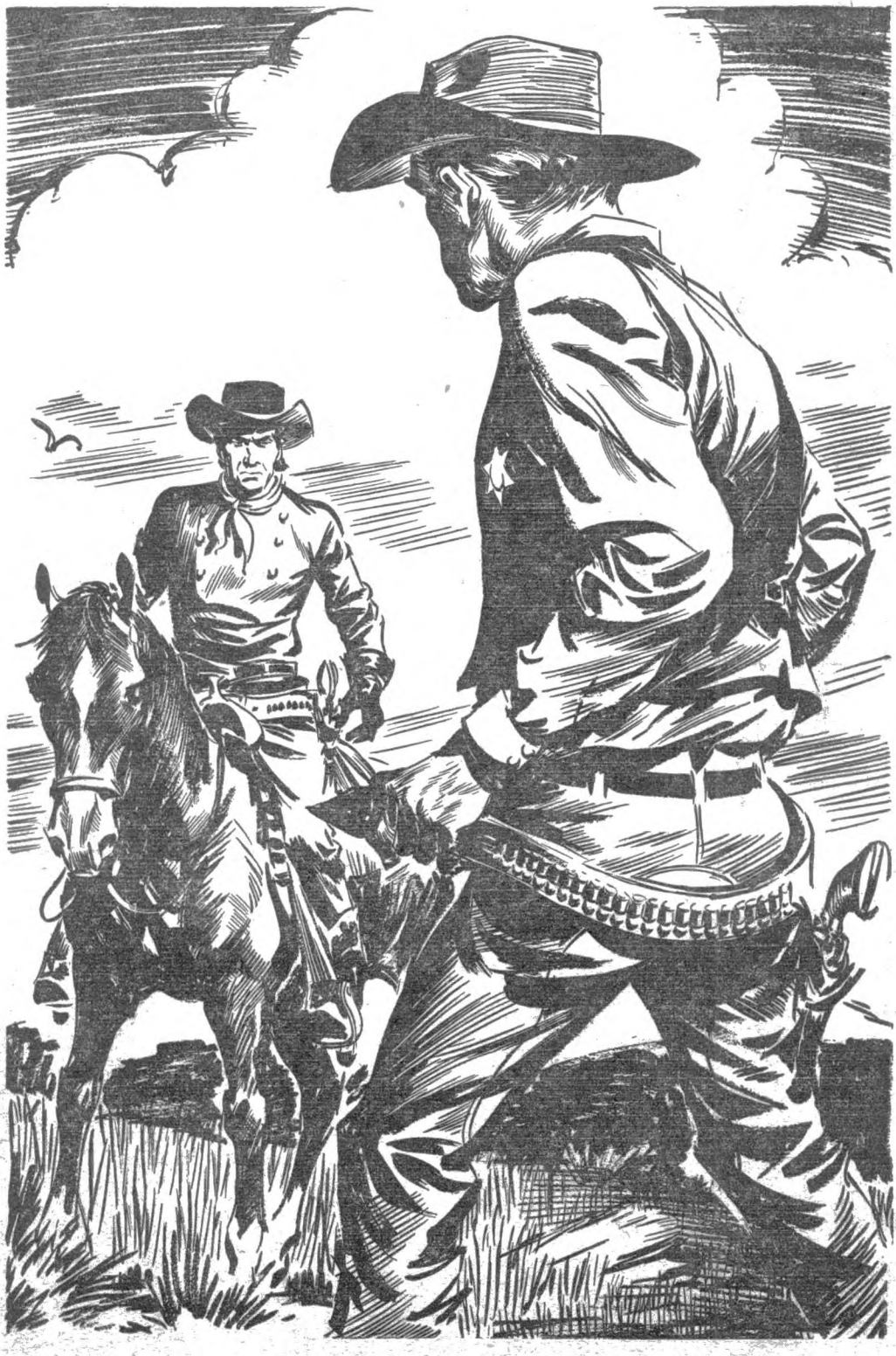
The kid dreamed an owlhoot killing for his lightning sixes—a dream that only the law could help him find!

JIMMY BARKANN came to Bloodrun in the early eighties. He'd followed the stage from the nearest town, which was some forty miles to the east; cantering along easily on a big, black, narrow-headed, devil-hearted beauty of a horse, sitting a saddle as encrusted with silver conchas as a caballero's vest, he was a handsome sight. But he gave me a cold thrill for the first ten seconds, because he looked almost exactly like Billy the Kid.

I knew Billy fairly well, back in Lincoln County in the days of the great range war. And Billy had been dead for years. Yet for those few breaths I thought he'd surely risen from his grave. . . .

This lad came riding into town, sitting his big fancy saddle arrogantly, with the right

"Get off that gotch-eared, broom-tailed jughead of a lame jackass before I get sore," I said. . . .



shoulder higher than the left, and just a suggestion of a slouch to his slim back. His face was long and brown and not too wide; his eyes were gray, large, and didn't shift when he looked at you. He must have slapped the trail dust carefully out of his outfit just before he struck Bloodrun, for his suit was clean and black as the deep-running river below Dutchman's Crag. There was a pair of black gauntlets thrust into his silver-spangled belt and he wore a jet-black John B tipped casually over one eyebrow. There were small, almost dainty silver spurs on his dark boots, and when he tapped the mare with them she'd rear and prance. He did it once or twice in the middle of the road, showing off his horsemanship.

That broke the spell for me, because Billy the Kid would never have done a brag-dance like that. I relaxed and eyed this boy again. He didn't have Billy's buck teeth, his lips were full and happy, and his hair, instead of being blond like the Kid's, was dark chestnut and cut rather long. But aside from these few variances the resemblance was remarkable.

"There's a flaming headache," said Bob Cantrell, my deputy. "There's another piece of trouble if I ever seen one."

I watched the young fellow sidle his horse up to the livery stable across the street and ease off her. His boots raised little puffs of red dust. He looked down and frowned.

"Tidy one, that rattler," said Bob. "Don't care for our messy streets. I hope he's just droppin' off for a slab of pie."

"I've got a feeling he's planning to stay a while," I said.

"So do I," said Bob. "Say, Art, don't he look like the Kid!"

Bob Cantrell was a sidekick of mine from away back. He'd been down in Lincoln County with me.

"Hasn't got the mouth," I answered, "nor the hair. But he's the same build and general look."

"I wonder how many notches he's got cut into them purty guns?"

The boy wore two .44s, single-action Colts with ivory grips that stood out against the dark slim thighs like the Arizona moon in a deep night sky. They were hung low and the holsters were tied down with rawhide strips dyed black. When he walked his fingers brushed the butts, back and forth, back and forth. He went into the stable and came out in a minute with the old smith. He had a nice free-swinging style of strolling, as if he didn't care whether school kept or not.

"You know," I said, "I've got a hunch he isn't quite the desperate character he's trying to look."

"Oh, now, Art," said Bob, "you don't want to turn your back on that gent. Look at where he keeps his hands."

"Show," said I. "He's practiced it for years."

"I'll bet you he's got a draw like Billy's."

We couldn't get away from the Kid, watching this stranger come across the road toward us. He was about eighteen and by the powers, the resemblance was remarkable.

"We'll see," I said.

"I'll just bet we will," agreed Bob Cantrell.

HE WENT around the hitching rail and up the steps into the Little Owl Saloon, and we followed him, Bob edging his belt around so his blue Russian .44 would be handy. Bob was a little more worried than I was. I had a feeling this boy wasn't so bad after all.

I ambled over and stuck my foot on the rail beside the kid's and snapped my fingers for a drink. Ike slid me a bottle and a couple of glasses.

I said, "Drink, friend?"

He turned halfway around. He had a smooth beautiful way of moving, like a panther, and you couldn't tell just where the motion began or ended. It was a fluid, easy, gunman's action. I still wasn't worried about him. That's a movement you're born with; it doesn't have to mean danger.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm dry."

"Dusty road from Flagger," I said, sloshing whisky into the glasses. "You come far?"

"Good ways," said he. "Pretty good ways."

"You're from the East, I guess," I went on.

"Originally," he said shortly, looking at me from under the brim of the big black Stetson. "I been out here a long time."

Yes, I said to myself, *all of six months, I'll bet.*

"The bottle," growled Bob Cantrell, and I pushed it over to him. He was standing behind me, watching over my shoulder.

"My name's Art Smith," I told the youngster. He glanced at my vest.

"You're the sheriff."

"Why, yes, I work at it sometimes. You planning to light in Bloodrun a while?"

"Maybe." He picked up his glass and made a little courteous bob with it at me and drank the whisky off. Then he choked and coughed and turned his head away to shake it. He hadn't been drinking for more than a few months; he wasn't quite sure of himself with liquor yet.

"What's your name, son?" I asked him.

"Jimmy Barkann," he said, and his fingertips just touched the grip of one revolver, as if he expected me to recognize the name and go for my own gun. I grinned.

"Glad to know you," I said.

He had another drink, which he handled better than his first; then I told him, "You look a lot like a fellow I knew down in Lincoln County."

"Who was that?"

"Boy named Billy Bonney."

Jimmy Barkann's gray eyes got wide and hard and he let out a gasp. "You knew Billy the Kid?"

Then I knew he was no rattler, but a lad whose real business in life was hero-worship and play-acting. I lost any tenseness I may have had, and butted Bob in the stomach with an elbow to show him he could relax.

"I knew him real well," I said. "He was quite a fighter."

"They had to shoot him down in the dark," said Jimmy Barkann.

"It wasn't unfair," I said, "because he was a criminal and it was plain suicide to face him in the light."

"Besides, it just happened that way," put in Bob. "The man that kilt him would've shot it out with the Kid anywheres. It just happened it was in the dark."

"They had to do it in the dark," repeated the boy savagely. "They didn't dare come at Billy the Kid where he could see 'em." He evidently thought it had taken a whole platoon of sheriffs to nail the desperado. I didn't set him right. I paid for the drinks and took my foot off the rail.

"I'll be seeing you around," I said. I might have made him a fatherly law-and-order speech about watching his company around town, but it would only have set him bristling. I thought I'd wait and see what the boy did for a day or two.

Bob Cantrell said, "Keep your nose clean, Junior," and we went out and sat down on the old dilapidated chairs in front of the adobe jail.

"Lordie," said Bob, "we got a holy terror on our hands, Art."

"Oh, thunder, Bob, he's no more gunman than your Aunt Fannie. He's a kid from New York, or maybe Ohio, come out to impress the bold bad bandits of Bloodrun with his superior coolness and deadliness. Didn't you see the way he swatted the dust off his pants?"

"Will you listen to the Pinkerton deteckitive," yelped Bob, lifting his hands to the sky and almost overbalancing himself. "Ain't you never seen the Kid hisself do that very stunt? That's the worst kind, them that's so careful how they look."

"I don't know," I said, "there was something about the way he did it. And the way he lets his hands dangle against those white hoglegs of his—"

"You're just showin' me how bad he is, Art! He don't want to lose touch with 'em. He could whip them things out like a greased shoat out of a funnel."

"Oh, hell. He's acting a part, right to the hilt."

"Tell me some more, Mister Pinkerton," said Bob sarcastically. "Tell me he ain't got rattler's eyes."

"He's got clean, honest eyes," I told him. "And that mouth was never stitched onto his face to show hate or cruelty. He's not used to whisky, and he talks short and quiet because he's a little scared somebody'll find out he's a fraud."

"You make me sick," growled Bob Cantrell. "But go ahead, read me some more of them tea leaves, Daddy. Tell me he come out here to do a spell of chuck line ridin'."

"He came out to be a bad man," I said, "and he's frightened now that maybe he'll have to be one, but we'll see that he don't."

"I'll lay you eight to three," said Bob, "that if we don't set on him permanent the first time he twitches a gun, he'll have himself a private Boothill in a month, and maybe we'll be the first customers."

"You got no faith in human nature," I told him. "Besides which, you've got no more eye for character than a vinegarroon. We'll have no trouble with Jimmy Barkann."

Which proves pretty well how wrong an old rooster can be when he decides to set

himself up for an oracle on his fellow man.

BLOODRUN in those days was still doing its best to live up to its name. We had a handful of fairly despicable characters drifting in and out of the town at intervals, working here and there and getting into fights every Saturday as regularly as the day came around. There were some middle-sized cattle spreads near enough to disgorge a pack of whooping drunk punchers at us once a month. There were two or three varmints who were probably wanted in Texas or Old Mexico for one crime and another if we could have found out what their right names were. And there was one genuine twenty-four-carat gunman, named or nicknamed Yavapai.

During the year Bob and I had been striving to keep the peace we'd had visits from other real lowdown badmen, naturally. They'd ride into town, size the place up, move into the gambling hall and try their luck, take a few drinks in the Little Owl, and decide to rest a while. Then we'd shove them on, or try to; and often they'd fight back. I'd had to shoot three of the cat-eyed gentry, and Bob had killed one. The others either left town or tangled with Yavapai. Either way they weren't with us long.

Yavapai took a protector's cut of the gambling hall winnings, a slice of the punchers' losses at the Little Owl poker game, and undoubtedly a lot of other bits and hauls that we didn't know of. He was a big man in Bloodrun without actually owning any part of it, and we couldn't get a thing on him that would help us take him by the heels. Sometimes Bob even suggested despondently that it was a good thing to have Yavapai around, since he kept the town cleared of other trigger-happy killers—"*Like makin' a pet of one old rat, Art, that's so mean he scares the other rats away.*" But I would have given my shirt and pants and my left boot to be able to tempt Yavapai into pulling his gun on me.

Not that I'd have lived to brag about it, I suppose. He had a draw that was a snake's striking, a swift flash of lightning, a perfectly coordinated swoop in which the slap of leather was unheard for the crash of the .45 in his thin blue-veined hand. He wore one gun, as most of us did. It was slung tall on his hip and I never could figure how he managed such a fast draw with that high holster. He was of slim build, the hands lean and almost fleshless, the feet narrow as a girl's, the waist so small I could have spanned it with my two hands. His hair was light blond and his eyes were washed-out blue. He was cold death and as clever as they make them. He might have piled up a fortune if he'd been honest, but his mind was a reptilian thing, full of devious twistings and without a vestige of pity.

He'd been settled in Bloodrun for longer than I had. He'd been careful never to tread too hard or openly on the toes of the law, and because of that marvelous draw he could afford to let an enemy go for his weapon first, so it was always self-defense. When he met me it was, "Good morning, Sheriff Smith," and "A pleasant day, Sheriff," and "How's the lock and key business, Sheriff?" I hated his guts.

I'd seen him rid the town of his competition a dozen times, and now I suddenly began to wonder what he'd do when he met young Jimmy Barkann.

That night there was a mob of cowpokes in from the Circle JZ. Bob Cantrell and I strolled out of the office and into the Little Owl Saloon, which was, handily, next door. We had a drink and put our elbows on the bar behind us and surveyed the place.

Yavapai was sitting in on the poker game. There were five punchers playing with him and a lot more watching. At the other end of the bar stood Jimmy Barkann. With the exception of the thin gunner, he was the only man in the place whose clothes looked as if they'd ever seen water, let alone soap. He had his left hand resting on the butt of one big Colt.

I said to my deputy, "That kid's either ambidextrous or suicidal."

"I don't give a whoop what his religion is," said Bob. "I'm waitin' to see him and Yavapai lock horns."

"Maybe they won't," I said hopefully.

"Maybe it ain't gonna snow on the Frisco Peaks come December," said Bob. "Maybe my mare won't throw a shoe next time I got a fifty-mile ride home." Bob fancied himself as a dry humorist.

I didn't say any more. I'd watch Jimmy Barkann for a while, and then I'd watch Yavapai.

Not too long afterwards there was some sort of argument over the cards. A couple of the cowboys got loud and angry and then

one of them stood up and slapped out at Yavapai with the flat of his hand. The gunman, of course, wasn't there when it fanned by. He was a long jump back, looking like a snake that had been wakened by some careless footstep and was on the alert to take vengeance.

"Draw," he said.

"Never mind, Yavapai," I told him. I was six yards away and I spoke normally but things were so quiet it sounded as if I was shouting.

"Draw," said Yavapai again, without so much as a glance at me.

"You draw, Yavapai, and I'll blow you in two," said Bob loudly, and the muzzle of his blue Russian came poking out past my arm.

"Are you going to draw?" asked Yavapai coldly. He wouldn't look at us at all.

"No," the puncher said huskily. All the effects of the liquor had left him and he was scared.

"Let it drop," I told the gunman. I had my own S & W pointed at his stomach. "He didn't hit you."

"I'll pistolwhip you if you don't draw," said Yavapai evenly.

"Blast him if he moves, Bob," I said. I was beginning to feel edgy with the strain. I thought perhaps I'd got Yavapai where I wanted him at last.

Then Jimmy Barkann, down at the end of the bar, said coolly, "Put your gun away, Sheriff, like a good fellow." I turned my head and saw that he'd thrown down on me with both ivory Colts.

"Don't be a jackass," I told him.

"Fair play, Sheriff," said he, and he grinned. I liked that grin even when it was spreading itself above the dark muzzles of a pair of hoglegs.

Nobody said anything for a minute and then one of the Circle JZ boys snarled, "Come on, you cowprods." They all moved toward the door and Yavapai turned on his heel and went over to Jimmy Barkann. He never even looked at Bob and me.

He stuck out his hand and said, "My name's Yavapai."

"I'm Jimmy Barkann," said the boy, dropping his guns into the black holsters. I was looking closely at him and I decided that he *was* ambidextrous. His movements were as easy and fast as the gunman Yavapai's.

"Thanks for the help, kid," said that gentleman. "I didn't need it, but thanks. You like a drink?"

"I don't mind," said Jimmy Barkann, and his gray eyes were white-rimmed saucers in his brown face. "Pat Garrett there had you covered. I thought I ought to throw in."

"You got a heart of gold," said Yavapai. "Ike, give the kid a drink."

Jimmy Barkann accepted the whisky without taking his fascinated gaze off the gunman's snaky figure.

Bob Cantrell said to me, "I thought you said he was a faker."

"Play-actor. There's a lot of difference."

"He's got guts, to throw down on two of us."

"I never said he hadn't. I said he's a nice boy with plenty of nerve who thinks he's cut out for a big cutthroat, when he ought by rights to be going to school and learning how to be a decent citizen. It's a plain case of hero-worship." I looked up the bar and went on talking. "That's the first badman he's ever seen, and he's all eaten up with admiration. He doesn't realize that he's worth a hundred Yavapais himself."

"Put away them tea leaves," said my deputy. "That gun fanner's as bad as Yavapai. You oughta retire and raise flowers. You're too old for this business."

"Look at him gawk," I said.

"He's sizin' him up," Bob said. "He's figurin' how fast can Yavapai draw. We got another corpse a-comin'."

"No," I said, "I have an idea they'll pair off together."

"Rats," said Bob disgustedly.

THE next day I met Jimmy Barkann in front of the livery stable. He'd had his big wild mare out for exercise. He grinned when he saw me.

"Hello, Pat Garrett," he said.

"My name's Art Smith," said I, "if you can remember such an odd handle." Pat Garrett was the sheriff who killed Billy the Kid, and an old partner of mine. It appeared to amuse Jimmy Barkann to label me with his name. I couldn't help but take it as a kind of compliment, for I'd always admired old Pat.

"You seem to fancy yourself as Pat, though," he said. "Done any jailing lately?"

"You've been talking to Yavapai," I said. "I don't like to see a nice youngster like you mixed up with the scum of Bloodrun."

"Yavapai's all right," said Jimmy Barkann, and added naively: "He calls me the Kid. I like that. He says I look like Billy the Kid."

"He was never nearer than seven mountain ranges to Billy," I said. "Besides which, I told you that myself. Don't get any ideas you're a reincarnation of Billy Bonney. He could've eaten you for breakfast without relish."

"I ain't properly started yet," said Jimmy Barkann. He patted his Colts on their gleaming ivory grips. "You're going to hear more of me and these barking irons."

"Why don't you go home?" I asked him seriously. "You're a nice little boy. Why don't you go home and be a credit to your daddy?"

"I don't know why I stand that talk from you," he said, letting his fingers ripple over the gun butts. "I guess I kind of like you, Pat."

"Art," I said. "Come on, Jimmy, get on your mare and go back where you came from. Ohio, was it?"

"Pennsylvania," he said. "Honest to Pete, I don't know why I take your talkin' like this, Sheriff."

"You like me," I said. "Everybody likes me. Good old woolly-witted Art Smith. The gunman's friend." I went over and sat down in front of the jail.

Jimmy Barkann was around town for about a week. We got together and talked a good deal, and I spun him some yarns about the Kid, trying to show up the worst features of that deadly cold killer. He absorbed it all and begged for more. As a reformer I was a washout.

Every day he exercised his great black mare. Every day Yavapai oozed around and played up to him, and his gray eyes became permanently wide and wondering. Here he was, Jimmy Barkann, fresh from the staid hills of the East, chumming with famous gunmen, on equal terms with them. I got madder and madder about it. He was really such a fine boy. But when Yavapai called him "The Kid," he fairly groveled with glee. He was on the wrong road and traveling lickety-split.

Then one afternoon he vanished, with his black horse and his six-guns and his dear friend Yavapai, and we didn't see him for quite a while.

A range detective, drifting through town on his way to a job, told us about the stage robbery over on the other side of Flagger. "Two fellows did it. They wore handkerchief masks and the one had a pair of black hoglegs strapped low; they both had black horses with white blazes on their faces. Nope, nobody hurt. They say this one with the two guns, he kept 'em covered while his pardner collected. That's something you don't see often any more, 'bird handling two thumb-busters at a time. Men ain't what they used to be."

The range detective moved on, and Bob Cantrell said, "There's your babyfaced boy hard at work, grandma."

"His mare's got no blaze."

Bob gave a sardonic chuckle. "My — I reckon that lets him off. His mare ain't blazed. Naturally nobody's gonna go and fake a blaze."

"And his guns are ivory, not black."

"Oh, go plant a tulip," Bob said. "You disgust me with your innocence."

Later that month there was another holdup, this one down to the south. By chance there was a fellow aboard the stage from the Circle JZ, a puncher who'd been on a spree and lost his horse and was coming home in disgrace. We talked to him in the Little Owl.

"It was Yavapai and that sidewinder Kid of his," the puncher informed us. "I'd know that fire-eatin' black mare of the Kid's anywhere. He'd painted a blaze on her face."

"Uh-huh," said Bob Cantrell. "Just so Hear that, Arthur, old petunia-coaxer?"

"You shut your yap," I said. "What about Yavapai's horse?"

"He musta stole it. It wasn't his old Jane."

"Everybody can make a mistake," said I. The cowprod shook his head.

"Not on the Kid's mare. There ain't but one hoss like her this side of the Mogollon." He spat. "Besides, that's a pair you can spot ten mile off in a gale. You think I don't know Yavapai's skinny hands? And how many curly wolves in this county carry two lead chuckers?"

"I take it they were white-handled?" I said casually. The cowpoke blinked.

"No, they was black."

"Ah, black. Well, go on down to the JZ, son, and don't shoot off your mouth too freely about it. You might be wrong. Likewise you've seen Yavapai in action."

"It ain't so much Yavapai," said he. "It's the Kid. He's a hunk of bacon rind on a hot skillet when it comes to movin'. I wouldn't go up against him with an army, leastways if I was half in my right mind I wouldn't."

JIMMY BARKANN rode into town alone. I was sitting in front of the jail. His black outfit was clean as usual and the silver conchas of his saddle sparkled and shone in the sun. His mare was dancing and sidling, and he sat her with that touch of insolent swagger that to me was just a little pathetic. His grin was as sweet as ever.

"Hello, Pat Garrett," he called.

"Art," I said. "Art Smith. Come and chew the fat a while."

"Soon as I get the nag fixed up." He rode her over to the stable and slid off. He handed the reins to the liveryman who came out and then he strolled leisurely across the street. "Where's your right bower?" he asked.

"Bob's pursuing the oppressors of the widow and orphan," I said. I could be as bantering as the next fellow. "Sit down."

He sat, leaning the chair against the adobe, balancing on the back legs.

"Where've you been?" I asked him. He gave me a look and tipped his wide black John B back on his head.

"Over the hills and far away," he said.

"Mind letting me see one of your guns?" I asked. He slammed his chair down hard on the ground and was standing in front of me, tense and wary, before I could blink.

"What for?" he whispered. "What are you figurin', Sheriff?"

"Not a thing," I said. "If it makes you any happier you can hold a bead on me with the other one. I just want to look at your gun."

He thought it over a minute and then he said, "All right. I reckon I'm just jumpy."

"You've had a tough month," I said sympathetically.

I took the ivory-handled Colt revolver and squinted at it. In the finely engraved lines of the insigne, which was a stallion with a spear in his mouth, I could see grains of black dust. I picked some out with my thumbnail.

"For such a neat cuss," I said, "you did a pretty untidy job of cleaning her. What is it, charcoal? Burnt cork?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said sullenly. "Watch your step, Pat. You don't want to cross me."

"Son," I told him flatly, "if I want to cross you I'll do it just as if you were a bridge. But I took a liking to you when you rode into Bloodrun that first day. I'd sooner see you dead than tied up with Yavapai." He was trying to say something. "Shut up and listen," I said. "I'm not through. I've told you before, you're a good kid. But you've got a Robin Hood complex, son, about these gunnys we breed in the West. It's all wrong. They're a pack of ornery snakes without a drop of real he-man's blood in their veins. Ten of them wouldn't make one of you when it comes to true worth. They're cowards. They play sure things. They know they can draw a gun quicker than any poor honest jake and they bank on that. You're not their breed, kid." I wished at once that I hadn't called him that; he narrowed his eyes and stuck out his lower lip and looked tough. "I tell you you're not the killer breed. I've seen a hundred examples of the real article and I know. Go on home to your mother, son. Be a good boy."

"Pat," he said, "you got it all wrong. I'm just naturally poison and if you rile me you'll get all the trouble you want."

"There's another place you've got it all crooked," I said calmly. "You take a real rattler, like Billy the Kid, he wouldn't say a thing like that ever."

"He wouldn't?" said Jimmy Barkann, opening his gray eyes wide.

"Hell, no. He'd just go ahead and make the trouble. You're the one that's got it all wrong. You can't be a bad man, son. It's not in you." I started to make a cigarette. "You want to tell me about those coach jobs?"

"I don't savvy you at all," said Jimmy Barkann. He hitched up his cartridge belt and caressed the ivory Colts. "I guess you're plumb loco."

"You and your Western words," I said. "You'll kill me."

"Maybe I will," he said.

"Ah, son," I said, lighting the cigarette, "don't try. Please don't try. You've got me all worried."

He turned around and went into the Little Owl Saloon. He was as puzzled a young one as I'd ever seen. He couldn't understand why he didn't shoot me on the spot. He had

himself thoroughly confused. and he wasn't happy about it. Mayze he was even beginning to doubt the existence of his own evil tendencies.

NEXT morning I said to Bob Cantrell, "Watch out for Yavapai. Keep him where you can see him till I get back."

"Where you going?" asked my deputy.

"Jimmy Barkann exercises his mare over by Dutchman's Crag," I said. "I want a few words with him. See that you watch Yavapai."

"I'll throw my saddle on him," said Bob. "I'll have the so-and-so broke by the time you get back."

"Just don't draw on him," I said. "You aren't Art Smith, sonny."

"I hear tell you're named Pat Garrett yourself," said Bob. "I wonder where this fabulous Smith codger hangs out?"

I slung a leg over my apple-horn saddle and lit out for Dutchman's Crag. I rode all slumped over, in my usual fashion, and for the first time it occurred to me what a sad picture I'd make beside Jimmy Barkann. His saddle style was so carelessly fine it had a touch of flamboyance. Mine had a touch of something but it wasn't that.

"Sloppiness," I said aloud, "is likely the word." Then I knew I was tensed up, because I never talk to myself otherwise.

I found my boy on the top of Dutchman's Crag, romping his mare back and forth over the long level stretch of ground that overlooks the river, a hundred feet below. "Hello, Pat," he sang out.

"Art," I said. I slid off my horse and trailed the reins to make him stand. I started to unbuckle my gunbelt.

"What're you doing?" asked Jimmy Barkann, trotting over. "What do you want out here, Pat Garrett?"

"I came out to prove a couple of theories," I said. "Get off your mare, son."

"Why?" he wanted to know. I turned on him and gave him a hard look.

"Get off that flea-bitten owl-headed whey-belly before I pull you off by the spurs," I snarled. His face turned white.

"You can't talk about my hoss like that, Sheriff," he said.

"Get off that gotch-eared broom-tailed jughead of a lame jackass before I get sore," I said. I let my gunbelt fall and stepped away from it. "Come on, gunman, blast me for calling her names. Billy the Kid," I said, eyeing him sideways, "would have cut me into hash meat for calling *his* horse names like that."

He dismounted slowly and came over to me. He put his fingers on the butts of his Colts and took them off again. His hands and forearms were trembling as though they had a palsy. He tried to draw his guns and he couldn't do it. "Pick up your lead thrower."

"Call it a gun," said I, "you swivel dude."

"Pick it up."

"Go to hell."

"Please, Art, pick up your gun," he begged. He was almost crying, and his hands would touch the ivory Colts and draw back as if they'd been hot.

"Go on, draw," I said coldly. "What's wrong?"

He started to unbuckle his heavy cartridge belt that held up the two holsters. His lean face was taut and his teeth had caught the upper lip and were biting hard. He was in a fury and he was scared at the same time, scared sick because he couldn't understand why he didn't shoot me.

I took off my John B and slapped him in the face with it. He could have ducked but he just stood there and accepted the blow, his hands working away at the stubborn buckle of his belt. The creased-up hat left red marks across the clear tan of his cheeks.

"Shoot me, Kid," I said, giving the nickname plenty of satirical emphasis.

He dropped the belt with its paraphernalia. "I'm going to beat the pants off you, Sheriff," he said.

"All right," I said. "That's theory number one proved. You're no dyed-in-the-wool gunman, son. I hope you see that now."

"A guy can't draw on an unarmed man," he said innocently. "Put up your fists, Sheriff."

"A real gunman has as much pity as a gila monster," I said. "You're a dish of milk and water. Come on."

He lashed out at me with one solid fist; I bobbed my head back and felt the air swish by my nose. "Are you gonna fight?" he asked me.

"Sure, son," I said. "But I doubt if you will."

He struck at me again, and this time he landed a beautiful blow on my ribs. "That's theory number two," I said, "but we may as

well get on and finish what we've started."

So we went at it. For quite a while it felt as though I'd been jumped on by a mountain lion. I'd said good-by to my fortieth year some time before and the muscles in my arms and legs had begun to dry up and lose their spring, while Jimmy Barkann was in absolutely flawless condition.

But he wasn't scientific, and he hadn't the weight I could put behind my punches. After a while I managed to land a good right cross on his jaw that staggered him back. I followed it up with a brisk series of jabs in the belly and when he was folding gently down I gave him all I had right under the chin. For a minute or two, as I knelt above him, I was afraid I'd broken his neck. Then his gray eyes fluttered open and he half-grinned at me.

"You got a wallop like a wicked old mule, Pat," he said.

"You have panther's meat in you, son," I told him. "You learn a little more about boxing and you're going to be a terror to the ungodly."

He felt his face. "You didn't mark me up," he said. "Thanks, Pat, old man."

"Old man," I repeated. "You sure made me feel like one. You'll have a blue-black chin for a couple of days but it'll fade."

"What was that theory number two?"

"That you had the guts of a grizzly," I said. "Consider it proved."

"You're a funny guy, Pat Garrett," he said, getting to his feet.

"Art Smith," I said automatically.

He picked up his gunbelt and wound it around his waist.

I said, "Where's the stage coach loot, Jimmy?"

He pursed his lips and stared at me; then he said, "Under that big tree yonder."

Then I knew I'd shown him the way things really stood with him.

I started to walk over to the cottonwood tree and the gunman Yavapai stepped out from behind it and rasped, "You dumb yack, I mighta known you was yellow!" He was talking to Jimmy Barkann, but he had his six-gun trained on my stomach. I halted and felt the muscles crawling up and down my back like mice with cold toes.

"I ain't yellow, Yavapai," said Jimmy Barkann, and I knew from his tone that he still thought the rattler was a man and a half when it came to comparisons with poor honest fellows like me. "He beat me fair and I thought I ought to tell him."

"It won't do him much good," said Yavapai shortly, "where he's headed for."

"You can't kill old Pat," said the boy. Yavapai's glance flickered over to him and back to me.

"I can't do nothing else but."

"He's got no gun."

"Go on, make me laugh," said the badman. "Tell me funny stories."

"But you can't shoot an unarmed man."

"You think I'd give this gristle-heel a chance to get his forty-five?" Yavapai laughed harshly. "This is Art Smith, Kid. If I gave him an even break he'd blow my head off. He's got the fastest draw in the county."

"Thanks," I said. "I never knew you were afraid of me, Yavapai."

"Just cautious," he said, "just cautious."

"I don't want to press the point," I said, "but this proves what I was talking about, son."

Nobody said anything for a minute and then: "Yavapai," said Jimmy Barkann, "look here."

THE gunman's pale eyes went over to Jimmy and stayed there, suddenly surprised. I turned my head. The kid was standing about ten feet to my right and both ivory Colts were aimed straight at Yavapai.

"Put your gun up," said Jimmy Barkann.

"Don't play that way with me," said Yavapai, frowning. "I'm gonna dust this lawdog front and back."

"Put it up," said the boy steadily.

Yavapai switched his gun muzzle slowly from me to Jimmy Barkann.

"That won't do you any good," said the kid, "because by the time you put one slug in me I'll put four in you. You've seen me shoot mark, Yavapai. Put it up."

Yavapai hesitated for a minute and then, by the powers, he slid his gun into its holster. Jimmy Barkann had bluffed him down!

"Get your gun, Art," said the youngster then. He dropped his Colts into their leather.

I walked over slowly toward my gunbelt. I kept watching the slim blond gunman and I hadn't taken three steps before he did what I'd know he would. He went for his gun. His hand was a pale twinkle across his side.

The revolver cleared leather, but it never spoke. I heard Jimmy Barkann's Colts start to chatter in the split second that Yavapai's hand was flying, snake-striking, to bring up his weapon. There was a sharp double clap and then two shots on the heels of the first pair.

Yavapai was jolted backward by the terrific impact of the .44 slugs in his chest. Jimmy Barkann shot again, twice, and Yavapai whirled around and sprawled out on the ground in a twisted ragdoll heap. I looked at the kid. His guns had been holstered, the same as Yavapai's. His draw must have been superhumanly fast.

"You're a wonder," I said. "I'll bet you've got the quickest draw in the world." I didn't care what it did to his ego, or his gunman fancies. When a man's got a talent like that, you've got to admire it out loud.

"I ought to have," said Jimmy Barkann. His voice was shaking. "I been practicing since I was five." He went over to the corpse. "Glory," he said, "I never saw a dead man before, not up so close. He looks awful, don't he?"

"He was no raving beauty to begin with," I said.

"He looks just awful," said the boy. "I couldn't let him shoot you, could I, Art?" he asked. "Besides, he drew first."

"He was going to shoot you before he shot me," I said.

"I was armed," said Jimmy Barkann innocently.

"Yeah," I said. "You shame me, son, you really do. You want to help me dig up that cash now?"

"Sure," he said. He couldn't take his eyes off the dead gunman. "I'll—I'll be back in a minute." He turned and went into the woods. After I'd been grubbing in the cottonwood's roots for a while he came back. He was looking white and washed-out and he was carrying his belt with the two ivory Colts.

"Here," he said to me. "I want to give them to you, Pat."

"Art," I said. "Why, son?"

"I'm not going to carry 'em any more," he stammered. "I guess I'm going home for a spell now, Sheriff. I been away a long time."

"Sure," I said. "But you don't want to go galloping through this territory without guns, Jimmy. Too many punchers are laying for you. You got yourself a tough reputation."

"I don't want to touch them," he said, handing me the gear. "I don't want to touch them again."

I took my own belt off and traded it to him for his; he looked at it stupidly.

"That gun was given me by Pat Garrett," I said. "Not any fake joking Pat Garrett, but the real one, Jimmy. It's made a lot of history with one man and another. You sling that around you for luck."

He buckled it on without speaking; then he asked, "Whose was it in the first place, Art?"

I didn't know whether to tell him or not. You can't submerge a lifetime of warped hero-worship in one dirty gunman's blood, I thought.

But then I took the chance.

"It belonged to Billy the Kid," I said.

Jimmy Barkann touched the worn old grips. "Tell me something, Art," he said.

"What, son?"

"Was Billy like that—was he like Yavapai?"

"I won't tell you a lie," I said. "He was just like Yavapai. He'd shoot a man from the front or from behind, whether he was armed or not, any time it occurred to him to do it. He was no better than a mad dog. He was just like Yavapai."

I waited.

"Glory," said Jimmy Barkann. He looked up at me. "Anyway," he said, "you've carried it all this while, haven't you? I'll wear it, Art."

"Pat," I said uncomfortably. "Pat Garrett. I've got used to it."

He whistled for his mare. "If I come back, Art," he said, "after I go home and all, do you think you might want me for your deputy?"

"You'd make the best blamed deputy in America, Jimmy Barkann," I said to him. "We could clean up the West together. But I've got me a pretty good sidekick now, even if he can't keep an eye on some gents as instructed—and in a way I hope I never see you again."

"I don't know," he said. The clear, gray eyes looked levelly at me. "It all depends. There's a lot of work to be done on my mom's farm. . . . Maybe you won't be seeing me again, after all."

And I never did.

CRIMSON CROSSING

Jonny groaned. "Get back," he said.

By VERNE ATHANAS

"I'm crossin' this dead man's creek —or I'm crossin' Jordan," Jonny swore. "Either way, I'll come a-shootin'!"

THERE was no hired wagonmaster at the beginning. Old Aaron Courtney led off, as a matter of course, full of years and dignity as head of the family, riding his spring wagon behind the two matched bay mares.

The Courtney train was a family train. Old Aaron and his wife; his two sons and their wives and families; the six hired men—

Jonathan Free and Dai Evan and the rest.

Jonny Free hired on because he was young and handy with tools and stock, and it was a chance to move West, and be paid for it. Dai was a Welshman with a rover's itchy foot. The Courtneys—well the Courtneys were quite a family. They had means among them to make up the family train, three big Conestogas with their arching bows taut under new canvas, a couple of wood and bed wagons and Aaron's spring wagon; some three hundred head of spare oxen and meat cattle and loose horses; a pious, proper and provident train moving West to Oregon.

Providence went with them. Jonathan Free thought it should, for old Aaron said the Words each morning before he mounted to the seat of the spring wagon—he read from the Book each night before they rolled in. Jonathan sometimes thought a little more night guard would have reinforced the prayer, but during the reading of the Book and the saying of the Words he could stand in the circle close to Charity Courtney, and that was about all the chance he got.

They went well enough until they hit Sand Creek. Old Aaron led off, splashing into it with his wagon. About midway, one of the mares got nervous and spooked the other, and the upshot of it was the wagon turned over, and Dai Evan had a bit of a time getting the old man ashore on the far bank. The Conestoga next behind the wagon stopped and began to settle, and bogged until even its four-yoke ox team couldn't handle it, and it was deep dark before they got the last of the train across that hundred-foot stretch of shallow water.

Aaron stood on the shore, wrapped in a blanket, and with his long white whiskers still streaming water, gave devout thanks that God, in His infinite mercy, had seen fit to spare his life in this, the winter of his years. The next day, it was the eldest son, Provider, who lined them out and set the wheels rolling.

Thereafter, though he stood merely at the right of the splint-bottomed chair that was unloaded at each stop for the patriarch to sit on, it was Provider who usually had the last word to say about the next day's drive, and by-and-by the rest of them looked to him for the word as to who should do what in their work.

A tall, wide, humorless man, was Provider Courtney. But there was horse sense in him, and not a lazy bone. His two sons, almost men grown, were quick and obedient, and his two daughters were neat, mousy and ladylike. When a couple of ragamuffin Kiowa bucks rode in one evening to beg sugar and then tried to steal a couple of horses, it was Provider who smartened up their backsides with a load of fine shot from his fowling gun and sent them howling over the hill. Thereafter, Malachi, the second son, as well as the boys, went on guard duty half the night on odd nights, and so did Provider.

PROVIDER straightened out Jonny Free, too. That was across the Missouri. An Iowa train was camped a mile away, and they were not in good shape. Two wagons were broken down and the best of their stock lamed. Provider sold one yoke of oxen to them, after much dickering, for $150. They were small steers, not well-broken. Jonny drove them over, visited around, and came back. Aaron sat in his splint-bottomed chair, and Provider was hunkered down at his right.

Jon went to Aaron and said, "Mr. Courtney, I'd like to draw a bit on my pay."

Old Aaron looked up at him keenly, plucking and teasing at his white chin whiskers, and he said slowly, "Well, now, Free—"

Provider said, "You were engaged for the emigration, Free. All the way."

"Yes," said Jon, "but I've a chance to buy a yoke of oxen at a good price, over yonder, and I want to draw no more than is fair."

"Why, now," said old Aaron, and Provider said, "There's right and wrong, Free. You engaged to travel all the way at a set sum, and it would not be right to pay before the job of work is done. Besides, we've no time or labor to spare with sick and lamed oxen."

"But I've looked at them," said Jonathan Free. "All they need is—"

"No," said Provider Courtney.

Jon stopped and looked hard at Provider. "Right and wrong," he said. "Let's understand it. When I engaged to your father, I was told I could throw any stock of my own in on the common drive."

"Right," said Provider quickly. "And you were engaged from Ohio to Oregon. Nothing was said of drawing against pay before Oregon."

"Right," said Jon through his teeth.

He turned away and walked to the last

bed wagon, where his kit and possibles were. He got a slim hide pouch out of his stuff and thrust it under his belt. He mounted his horse and rode out without looking back at the Courtneys.

At deep dusk he came driving two shambling oxen ahead, and turned them in with the grazing stock. He silently took his place at the fire by Aaron's wagon, where Malachi's daughter, Charity, did the cooking.

Charity was a remarkably pretty girl, particularly here among the rest of the Courtney women, who tended to have a uniformly subdued look about them. She gave Jon a smile and got up to go to the big kettle to serve him. There was hog jowl in with the beans, and she found a piece well streaked with the lean, to go on his heaped plate. She got him a bit of short-bread from the reflector and tea from the bucket, and when she went back to her own place by the rear wheel of the wagon, she moved over a bit so that there was space beside her. Jonny walked over to sit there.

Old Aaron finished his plate, laid it aside, separated his beautiful white beard from his beautiful white mustache with two fingers to drink off his tea and said gently, "Some water, Charity?"

The girl got up, took his cup, rinsed it, and brought it to him filled with warmed water from the bucket. He parted beard and mustache again, swished water through his teeth, dampened his red bandanna and carefully cleaned a little dribble on his beard.

He said, "You bought the oxen, then?"

"Yes," said Jon.

"We'll not be able to hold back for them," Aaron said regretfully, "in case they cannot keep up."

"They'll keep up," said Jon.

"Fine," said Aaron. "You have the first guard, I believe?"

"That's right," said Jon.

He finished his plate of beans and took the plate and cup over to the washing tub. He cut across the camp to where his horse was tied, thumbing tobacco into his pipe as he went. He stopped by Provider's fire to pick up a coal to light it, and Provider looked across the fire at him.

"You bought them," said Provider.

"Yes," said Jonny. He got his pipe going.

"Maybe you'll spend more time tending them, then, and less lollygagging."

Jonny took the pipe out of his mouth and said directly, "You'll have to make it plainer than that. I'm doing my work."

One of the girls giggled, and a flush of color came up Provider's face, spreading up from his dark beard.

"There's right and wrong," he said in his steady, unhurried voice. "You were hired to perform your task and not to lollygag about making sheep's eyes at young females."

"I'm a hired man," Jon said evenly. "Hired to your father, not you."

"We are all one, in this family," said Provider.

"That I can believe," said Jon through his teeth. He clamped down hard on the pipe stem and walked on around the fire to his horse.

It started to rain about midnight.

IT RAINED all of the two days before the murder. That brought them up to the creek that never had a name before, unless the Indians had a name for it. After that it went down as Murderer's Creek.

They made scarcely ten miles a day through the rain. Twice they had to double-team through low places where the water tended to gather and soak, and they used up most of the precious hoarded wood they'd brought in the wagons. Wet buffalo chips just won't burn.

The morning of the second day they came to the bridge. Jonny hunched miserably in a wet saddle and sucked at his empty pipe, wishing he could make it smoke. The wagons pulled up, and Dai and Jonny slacked back and let the herd drift to a halt.

Jonny, cold, wet and restless, waited for something to happen up ahead, finally waved at Dai and walked his horse around the herd and toward the wagons. As he passed Aaron's Conestoga, Charity looked out at the sound of the horse and called, "What is it?"

"Don't know," he replied. "I'm going up to have a look."

The lead wagon was stopped a hundred yards short of the creek. Three men sat horses in a group ahead, and the Courtney men were gathered in a knot by the lead ox team. Aaron and Malachi stood like two great wet roosters, uncomortable but bent on retaining their dignity. Provider stamped to and fro, shaking water off his beard. His

face was dark and raw in colorful temper.

"Fifty damned dollars," he shouted as Jon rode up within hearing. "Fifty dollars! It's robbery, I tell you!"

"Swearing will not make it better," said old Aaron pontifically. "Perhaps if you talked to them again —"

"I've talked enough," Provider shouted. "I'll see them in hell first!"

"My son," Aaron started sternly, and then he vented a prodigious sneeze and rainwater flew from his beautiful white mustache.

"I won't do it," roared Provider. "I'll swim and carry every damned wagon across before I'll pay fifty dollars toll to these robbers!" He wheeled and stalked around his father and brother, and whipped a sweeping arm through the air.

"Circle in," he bellowed. "Swing 'em in to park!" He did not wait to see the order carried out, but stamped over to his horse and swung up, turned his back on the men by the bridge and the train alike, and started off down the banks of the swollen creek.

The rain was tapering off when he got back, but Provider was still growling with anger. The bridge men had gone back to their fire and a couple of canvas flies that made their camp.

"We'll swim the stock across," said Provider. "You can see how these thieves have done it. Held up the trains till they've et off the grass and had to pay to get across. There's grass on the other side."

So they drove the loose stock a mile down the stream to where the miry banks shelved, and drove into the water. They lost Provider's Durham bull and two of the milch cows.

Dai Evan had privately nicknamed that bull A'd Aaron, and there was some justification for the Welshman's wry humor. A'd Aaron, the bull, was like Old Aaron the man; full of years and an inpenetrable, unthinking dignity, bland of face and slow and ponderous of stride. A'd Aaron the bull wallowed out into the fast muddy water, swam half of the distance, decided he didn't like it, and turned back. The hurrying water took him away downstream, along with two of his harem who had followed him these many hundred miles now.

Provider thought a lot of his bull. He cursed and roared when the water took the bull, but had to stick with the job of getting the rest of the herd across, or lose more; but when he got ashore finally, he laced into his hired man, one George Stringer.

Stringer had put in as wet and tiring a time as any of them, and being a silent and brooding man, hadn't said much about it. He said nothing now, until Provider rode his horse up alongside and laid a heavy shaking hand on him, and then George Stringer pulled a new Colt's Patent Revolver out of his waistband and shot Provider through the belly at about a two-foot range.

Provider fell out of the saddle in a helpless sprawl and landed on his head and shoulders in the muddy grass. George Stringer stared at him for a long moment, as if he were as surprised as anybody, as if now he wished he could take it back, and then he yanked his mount around and spurred him into a run.

JON had been circling the loose herd to hold them from spreading, and he ran his horse at the sound of the shot. He met Stringer, who leveled the pistol at him and yelled, "Stay clear, there!" and Jon, who had no weapon, and whose mother hadn't raised any simple children, pulled up and let the man run on past. Stringer was out of sight by the time someone came with a gun, and there was nothing but to carry Provider back to the train.

Provider died a little after sunup the next day. The clouds drifted away reluctantly, and the sun came through, to make the earth steam as it dried. Jon and Dai rode back to where they'd seen an abandoned wagon and brought in boards and built a coffin.

There was no preacher. Old Aaron read from the Book and the women sang a song, and then Aaron walked with his slow unheeding stride back to the wagons while the younger men filled in the grave, and put up a board.

Old Aaron spent the rest of the day reading to himself out of the Book and writing in his journal, which he had kept up every day since the train had left Ohio. The hired men stood around waiting for someone to tell them what was next, but no one did, and finally they took up among themselves and split the work. Jon and Dai rode down the creek and dragged back a huge bundle of willows for firewood, and Charity and her mother made shift to feed the lot of them. After dark, Jon and Dai went out to guard

the stock across the river. It didn't do much good, though.

A little mob of screaming, whooping Indians rode through and stampeded the whole shebang a little before midnight. Jonny and Dai each fired a shot at shapes in the dark which they hoped were Indians, and then very prudently flattened on their horses and rode north while the cattle and Indians stampeded south. Then they swam back above the bridge and shook out the camp, and spent the rest of the night on their bellies by the wagon wheels with every gun in the train loaded and close at hand.

Breakfast was pretty dismal, though the sun was out bright and warm. Jon sat on an ox yoke and watched old Aaron and Malachi. The old man sat in his splint-bottomed chair and Malachi squatted beside him, and they didn't seem to be talking much. Charity worked silently at cleaning up after the meal, and he spoke to her, but even she was depressed. All he got was a wan smile and a murmur that said nothing. Finally Jon knocked out his pipe and went over to the two men.

"Hadn't we better be taking a look about the stock?" he asked.

Malachi looked up at him almost furtively and said viciously, "Those red devils!"

Old Aaron thumbed reflectively through the thin leaves of his Book, and finally looked up.

"It is the Lord's will," he said with his bland, unshaken dignity.

Jon waited. Aaron went back to his Book and Malachi squatted and tore grass apart with his fingers and muttered about the accursed things that had happened since they left home. Jon said as patiently as he could, "The Indians won't have any use for the cows and oxen. We can't move without them anyway. We've got to try to find them."

Old Aaron muttered, "It is the Lord's will. It is a judgment."

Jon jammed the empty pipe between his teeth and slapped his thigh with one hard hand. "That may be," he said around the pipe stem, "but I don't think He's going to hold it again' me if I go out and see can I find 'em."

He tramped across the encampment, chewing vigorously on the pipe stem.

Dai wanted to go. They had their horses, and two others they'd kept in camp for emergencies, and one of Provider's boys went along.

It took them all that day to round up what was left of the stock, and that was most of the cattle and oxen. The Indians had killed half a dozen and butchered out the tongues, and of course, had taken all the horses in the bunch, but Indians knew the white man's *wohaws* couldn't compare to buffalo meat, and they'd just chased them till they were tired of it. Jon recovered both of his oxen. One had just been starved and worked down, and the other was coming along nicely since he'd lanced the swelling on its left foreleg. Grass or no grass, they swam them back across the creek and herded them close to the wagons for the night. One of the bridge men rode over in the evening.

He sought out Aaron and Malachi, demanded bluntly, "You goin' to cross the bridge tomorrow?"

Jon thought there was just a touch of uncertainty in the way old Aaron looked up, but the old man said, "We have had a great loss in our camp here. We mourn our dead. I will decide later."

"Well, be thinkin', gramp," the bridge man said. "It might go to seventy-five tomorrow."

"It is unseemly," said the old man with lofty dignity, "to dicker and bicker when our son lies newly buried yonder."

The man said something short under his breath and then aloud: "You'll still cross our bridge if you cross, so think on it."

Jon drifted closer and said suddenly, "You never built that bridge."

The man looked down at him from the saddle. He was a big man, rough and bearded and his coat skirts were ragged across his thighs where his rifle was balanced.

"No?" he said.

"Stands to reason," said Jon. "Look at your outfit. A horse apiece and a couple of ragged tarps and your blankets. You never skidded timber thirty mile to throw in a bridge when you had no wagons to cross. It's not your bridge."

The man grinned unpleasantly. "Try crossin' it and see," he invited.

JON crossed the encampment a little after sunup and watched while old Aaron clambered stiffly down from his wagon. The old man grumbled and rubbed at his legs

and clumped around to pull his chair out from under the wagon bed. Jon said, "Mister Courtney, are we going to cross today?"

Malachi came down from his wagon and walked over to squat by his father's chair. The old man mumbled something and opened the Book across his knees.

Jon said, a little more sharply, "Are we crossing today?"

The old man looked up. His mustache bristled out and fell back as he worked his lips under it. "Young man," he said severely, "Your ways are most unseemly. Our business can wait for prayers and meditation."

Jon said shortly, "Unseemly!"

He looked almost wonderingly at Malachi, but the man did not look up. Jon got his horse and rode out and cut his two oxen out of the herd. He drove them in close, dragged a spare yoke out of one of the wagons and with Dai's help, got them yoked. He balanced his tool box across the saddle bow. Then, without asking permission or saying any other word, he drove the yoked team ahead of him, back the way they had come. He heard Charity call once, but he did not look back.

It was after noon when he came back, driving his weird rig. It was the two good wheels and an axle from the abandoned wagon they had used to make Provider's coffin. He'd cut the bed in two and balanced half of it on the axle and patched the broken tongue with dowels and a strap of iron from the rest of the wreck. The hubs squealed dryly, and the wheels wabbled a bit, but it moved. He drove it into the circle of the camp, and again tramped across to the Courtneys, father and son.

"Are we going to cross?" he demanded again.

There was a steady tremor to old Aaron's white beard as he tipped his head back, almost as if he couldn't stop the shaking of his chin. He looked out sternly under his frosty brows, and then his eyes went aside, out and above the wagons to the little knoll where the board stood up out of the prairie grass. He cleared his throat harshly and his hand shook as it went back to the Book on his knee.

"I will think on it," he said finally. He looked away from Jon.

Jon switched his eyes to Malachi. The man fidgeted, and looked almost imploringly at his father, but he said nothing, and he said it sullenly, almost frightenedly, with just the flickering shift of his eyes and the hunching of his shoulders. He was a rudderless ship, with Provider dead.

"Mr. Courtney," said Jon quietly, "It has to be done. I know how you feel about. . . . Well anyway, we can't just sit here. One way or another, we've got to cross."

The old man read from the Book, apparently not hearing, clear on down the page, and then he looked up absently.

"Provider will—" he said, and then his faded blue eyes came sharply into focus and the tremor started in his beard again. He stared fixedly at something midway between him and Jon. "I will think on it," he said finally in a vague voice.

Malachi got to his feet suddenly and his voice cracked. "My brother Provider was slain. God will send a judgment on the thieves who have slain him!"

"Fine," said Jon, not following the reasoning, entirely, but hopeful that something was finally going to happen.

But Malachi slowly squatted down again. He looked at his father, and then at Jon's boots, without raising his eyes higher.

"There is time," he said. "The Lord will provide."

"Now that," said Jon, "I aim to find out."

HE FOUND Dai, and said, "I'm going across. Are you with me?"

"Tha'll pay 'em?" asked the Welshman.

"I'm going across," repeated Jon. "Are you with me?"

The Welshman grinned a slow grin. "A'm tired i' the hunkers, lad," he said. "Reckon a'm wi' tha."

"Fine," said Jon, and told him what he wanted done. Then he went and got his kit and blankets out of the bed wagon and loaded them into the cart. He drove down toward the bridge.

As he pulled around the wagons, Charity's brother Tobias came running, swinging his short old caplock rifle at the end of his arm and said, "I'll go with you, Jonny."

"Better stand clear, button," said Jon.

The oxen slouched over the shoulder of the bank and started toward the timbered bridge. Across the bridge a rifle boomed and the slug slapped into the mud not six feet ahead of Jon.

"That's far enough," called the man.

Tobias fell flat on his belly and thrust his caplock's muzzle ahead.

"Stop that, you tarnal fool," snapped Jon, and then he yelled back at the bridge man, "I'm coming across."

"You are like hell," the man retorted. He handed back his fired gun and took another from the man behind him.

Tobias said a bad word and eared back the hammer of his gun, and Jon said, "Wait," and then he heard the light pattering of feet running behind him, and Charity Courtney came around the cart, holding up her skirts to clear her hurrying feet.

Her face was flushed and one end of the braids about her head had come loose and bobbed to her running like a limber little horn.

Jonny groaned under his breath. "Get back," he said.

Charity's eyes snapped. "I will not!" she said. She dropped her skirts and clenched her fists, and her small mouth compressed firmly. "Those bullies," she said, and the words fairly crackled, "Those great bullying boobies! Just let them shoot at *me!*"

Jonny grabbed, but she was past him, and stamping her small feet into the mud approaching the bridge. Jonny groaned again and then tipped his head back and roared despairingly, "Dai!" He wheeled aside and snatched his double-barreled gun out of the cart.

The man on the bridge yelled at the girl, "Now stop, dammit."

Jonny took three running steps and cocked his gun.

Then, across the creek, from behind the flied tarps of the bridge men's camp, Dai Evan rose up like a drowned Lazarus. His clothing still dripped from his swim across upstream, but the long dragoon's pistol he pulled out of its oilskin wrapping was dry.

He trained it on the bridge men and said dryly, "Tha'll be smart to stay put." The bridge men stayed put.

Jonny hurried, but he didn't catch Charity until she was completely across. She was still marching on the fuddled bridge men with her fists clenched when he caught her arm and held her.

He kept the butt of his cocked gun under his armpit and let them look into the double muzzles

"It's not your bridge any more," he said. "Pack up and git."

And while Dai watched them carefully with the dragoon's pistol carelessly in his hand, they packed and got.

Jonny laid his gun down so he could use both hands at the job, and he put them on Charity's shoulders and shook her. He shook her rather severely, so that her head snapped forth and back and the limber end of the detached braid bobbed briskly. Then he saw that her eyes were wide and her lips were trembling as if she were about to cry, and he stopped and put his arms around her. He really hadn't meant to hurt her, he said, and somehow his arms got all the way around her. He saw the way her mouth trembled, and he didn't really remember kissing her, but he must have, because she was kissing him back, and it was all very confusing.

"Well," said Jonny, and from behind him, Dai Evan said dryly, "A'd say tha do't verra well," and Jonny turned loose quickly.

Old AARON wrote in his slow, careful hand:

July 20. Clear morning, fine warm day. Today traversed 21 miles. Our wagonmaster, Jonathan Free, has proved out most capable, though inclined to impulsiveness.
We are now. . . .

Jon waited for the old man to look up from his writing. When he did, Jon said carefully, "Mr. Courtney, I understand there is a preacher with the train camped over there. I've spoken to Charity's father, but she wanted me to speak to you too. We plan—well, we plan on getting married this evening."

For a moment, the old man seemed almost to hesitate. Then he said, "Yes, of course. You have my blessing." He looked down at his pen, stuck it in the ink bottle and offered his hand. "It is the Lord's will, I suppose," he said at last, almost resignedly.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," said Jon soberly. He shook the old man's hand vigorously, and turned back across the encampment to where Charity waited.

But just the same, he thought rebelliously, *I don't think it frets Him too much if a man puts his back into it and keeps things rolling on such days as He's busy someplace else. . . .*

"I think he's coming," Charity said with a queer breathlessness as he came up. Jon grinned and took her hand and held it tightly as they walked together across the encampment to await the preacher riding toward them from the other train.

A NEW KIND OF PIONEER

Pardner, the next time you're told to sort out your victuals a little more finnicky, don't blame your doctor. Blame a tough young Indian trader named Alexis St. Martin, who grudged a living out of the Northwest before you were born.

St. Martin, a scrapping, strapping youngster, got half his midsection torn away with a bullet, the year he was nineteen, and they said he would die. He declined to do so. But the wound didn't heal easily. Always one to turn a problem to a profit, St. Martin cooked up a deal with the local sawbones, a bright and resourceful gent named William Beaumont.

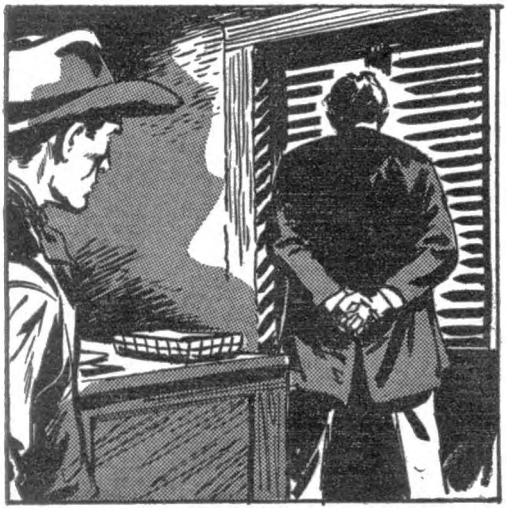
St. Martin's middle wouldn't close, and medicine knew a lot of questions that hadn't been answered yet. They got together. For a fee, St. Martin took his chow at the doctor's house. Beaumont tied various tidbits to a silk string, lowered them into St. Martin's stomach, and later withdrew them, noting how long each took to digest. He made notes that later became famous. Incidentally, he disproved the theory that traders can thrive on nails. St. Martin's window stomach rejected anything tougher than range beef à la mode.

Think the Old West was crude? Seventy years later, when the East got around to using X-rays, they found that Beaumont and St. Martin had been right, on all scores. And all from a belly-bullet that wouldn't heal. —*David Crewe*

Next issue

Published **FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES** September 3rd

Howdy, friends. Have a look-see at next issue's fast-moving feature yarn by one of your favorite writers, Robert L. Trimnell. You'll meet Steve Collins, a cattle rustler on the run who blew into the boom town of Powder Junction with a chilling message for its leading citizen, Banker McNair:



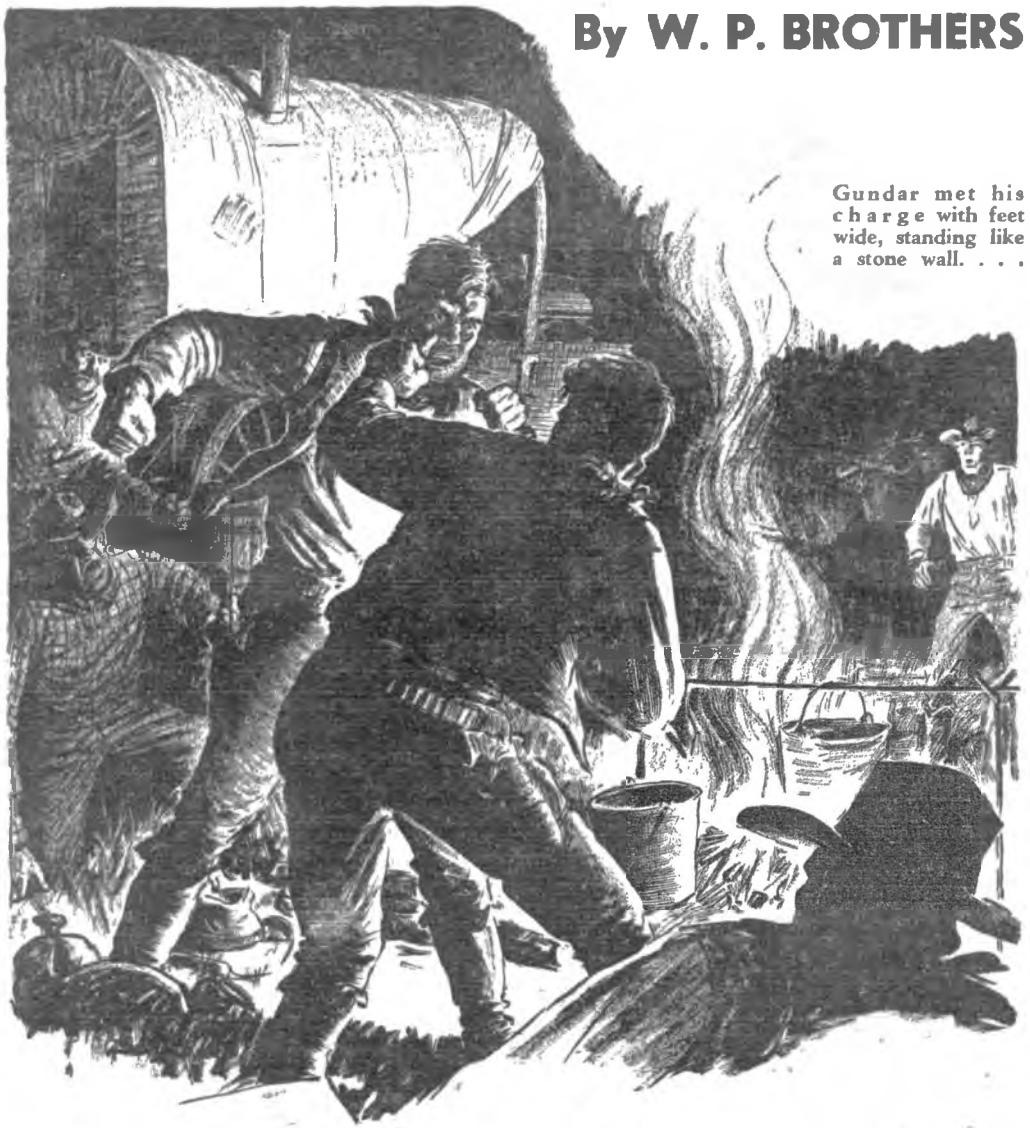
"Your runaway son was my rustling pard and died of a cowman's bullet." But all McNair was worried about was what whether the boy had given away any secrets to Steve before he died!

Steve began to guess the secrets concerned a money-making dam that McNair's outfit was building. Then, when he found the outfit included the girl who made him an owl-hooter. . . .

He decided to explore the dam. A bunch of killers hot on his trail made him hole up in a cave where he found the answers to most of the questions he'd been asking in Powder Junction.

A lot of people died that night in the lead-filled streets of the boom town . . . but not the way anyone had expected—as you'll see when you read it in the next issue!

By W. P. BROTHERS



Gundar met his charge with feet wide, standing like a stone wall. . . .

LIKE a bloated-bellied snake, the herd stretched more than two miles. It moved slowly, a few gaunt leaders ahead keeping up the steady, plodding pace. At the rear, four sweat-streaked punchers pushed at stragglers that strung in a long line from the main body. The dust, thick and white, rose perpendicular into a cloudless sky.

Matt Chambers pulled up his horse and watched the passing cattle out of heavy eyes. He was a tall, lean man with tired lines around the corners of his mouth. The horse, a big bay, stood with head down while he reached for the canteen on his saddle cantle. He sleeved the sweat and grime from his week-old growth of stubble and took a swig. He held the brackish water in his mouth minutes before he let it trickle down his parched, aching throat.

John Gundar rode up as Matt replaced the cap and put the canteen back. He was ready for the man's question, even before Gundar opened his cracked, caked lips to speak.

"How much farther, Chambers?" Gundar demanded in a hoarse voice. "Them steers are about to drop."

John Gundar was a big man, almost as tall as Matt Chambers, but heavier. He sat his

From the rich night trails they rode to the dusty hell of an honest desert—four desperate men whose hot guns whispered—

THREE MUST DIE

saddle with a peculiar slouch, his shoulders hunched forward. As with Chambers, a week-old growth of beard, white with alkali dust and caked with sweat, covered his face.

"I reckon we'll hit grass country late this afternoon," Matt said. "The river maybe two hours later."

John Gundar shifted his weight in the saddle. "You damn well better be right, Chambers. I don't hanker to see my cattle turned to bleached bones in this alkali hell-hole."

His voice contained an unmistakable challenge, a challenge that Matt Chambers, as a man, didn't like to overlook. He didn't like postponing a settlement on these things. Men like John Gundar sometimes got the idea you couldn't back your hand.

"We'll keep 'em moving till we come to the river," Matt said, "if it takes till midnight."

"How d'yuh know that river won't be dry—just like the last one," Gundar snarled. "Then what'll you give these steers to drink?"

"I told you there was a good chance of the Rock River being dry this time of year," Matt said, controlling his voice. "And there's a chance the Saddle River'll be dry, too. If it is, we'll move on to the Cumber."

"Fer your sake, Chambers, Saddle River'd better not be dry," Gundar said.

He let his palm caress the butt of his six-gun. Then he wheeled his horse back around the herd.

How long they'd been on the trail Matt himself didn't know. He'd lost count of the days. But it'd been too long. Men and cattle showed it. The animals were thin and straggly, barely more than bones and hide. And the men were lean and gaunt, with tempers sharp as a razor's edge.

They'd been driven out of Texas by drought, by three summers with no rain to speak of. The grass had turned brown, trees had died and streams, once full, had changed to dry, barren arroyos.

Five of them, Matt Chambers, John Gundar, Luke Seigel, Joe Stacy and Harry Logan had banded their herds together and set out to find new range in Montana. They'd figured the proportions each had contributed at the beginning, then agreed to take the same percentage when they reached the new range. That way, they'd share the losses equally, no man'd be hogging things for his own bunch.

Because he knew this country some, and because nearly a third of the herd belonged to him, Matt Chambers had been elected to lead the drive. Something like a fifth belonged to John Gundar. The rest were divided equally, almost, between Luke Seigel, Joe Stacy and Harry Logan. None had underestimated the drive. But hard luck had dogged them constantly.

They'd started out with almost four thousand head and fifteen men. Harry Logan and one of Luke Seigel's punchers had died somewhere back there with Indian arrows through them. One of Joe Stacy's punchers had stopped a rustler's slug and they'd buried him under a pile of rocks near the Jackson River crossing. The other two punchers had found the going too tough and had checked out one night, not bothering to collect their wages—or the slugs Matt Chambers would have blasted in their guts if he'd known they'd figured to quit. River crossings, marauding Indians, rustlers, and stampedes had taken a heavy toll. Now the herd numbered a little less than twenty-five hundred and the crew an even ten men.

MATT CHAMBERS had not known John Gundar well back in Texas. Gundar was a man no one knew well. He lived alone and he didn't invite questions and didn't ask them. But that was just as well. For there were nearly five years of his own life Matt didn't talk about—five years he wished he could forget.

He was crowding thirty. For fifteen years he'd been on his own, years that had taught

him a lot about men, both the good in them and the bad. For five years he'd ridden the night trails, covered most of them from the Rio to Canada. Ten years ago he'd abruptly shucked his guns. He himself would not have been able to explain the thing that changed him. But at twenty, he'd changed from a wild, maverick kid, fast with a gun, to a man.

It wasn't good range where he'd started his ranch, but it was beyond the law. That's what had made men like John Gundar and the others his neighbors. Hard men, all of them, without scruples, respecting nothing but strength.

Matt had been uncertain about water being in Rock River—and he'd told the others so. But they'd decided to risk it, push the cattle across the alkali hole, play their cards close. When they'd arrived at Rock River two days ago, there'd been nothing, not even a trickle to fill the canteens, much less to water the herd with.

John Gundar had stomped and cussed and vowed he'd go to hell before he'd see his share of the herd die on the desert. Joe Stacy had bitten his lip and watched Matt from the corner of his eye. Luke Seigel had looked across the desert and wanted to turn back, but had been afraid to say so.

That night they'd dry-camped and drunk brackish water from the barrel tied to the chuck wagon. Because there was no one else, they blamed Matt Chambers. He was the trail boss. It'd been his word that had sent them across. And Matt's shoulders were broad. He didn't give a damn about their complaints. A third of the herd belonged to him and to hell with John Gundar and the rest.

He stood his horse there while the dust swirled around him. He made no mistake about Gundar. He, and the rest of the owners, would enjoy gut-shooting their trailboss and dividing his share of the herd amongst themselves as Harry Logan's share had been divided.

But Gundar pulled his own weight and more on the drive. There was an unbending strength in the man that Matt had to admire. Something drove him relentlessly toward whatever goal he fixed on. He had no patience with the low conniving of men like Luke Seigel and Joe Stacy. If he wanted something, he'd wade in after it with guns smoking, no matter what the odds.

The challenge between himself and Gundar was a living thing, one that neither man was willing to back away from. The only thing that held John Gundar was the knowledge that Matt could clear leather before Gundar's hand even closed on his gun. And victory, not battle, was what decided things in the end, Gundar knew.

Prodding the bay into action, Matt rode to the head of the herd. He scanned the horizon ahead with red-rimmed eyes. The heat made the air dance and he couldn't tell —the desert looked as if it went on forever.

The herd dragged on. Late that afternoon, they started hitting some patches of grass. Then it was as Matt hoped it would be. The desert, suddenly, almost magically, gave way. Now they were sloping down from the edge of the vast alkali plain into the Saddle River valley.

It was sundown when they saw the two riders approaching. Matt was on the left of the herd and John Gundar was ahead of him. Matt pulled off and went out to meet the two. From the corner of his eye, he saw Gundar follow.

As he approached Matt pulled his gun around where it'd be handy if need arose. But a moment later, he forgot his precaution. The two riders were an old man and a button.

Coming closer, he blinked in astonishment. The button wasn't a button, but a girl. She wore a pair of faded levis and a cotton shirt. A man's Stetson was pushed back on her tawny curls. Her grin was frank and friendly as Matt and Gundar approached.

The man—her grandfather, Matt guessed —was dressed expensively in doeskin riding breeches and a silk shirt. He wore an immaculate white Stetson. A large white mustache covered his upper lip.

Matt waved them a greeting and tipped his hat to the girl. He figured it paid to be neighborly. He judged her maybe twenty. Both their horses were sleek and fat, a strange contrast to the lean, rawhide bay he rode.

"My name's Sorenson," the man said. "Malcolm S. Out for a ride and saw your trail dust."

"I'm Matt Chambers and this here," he motioned to the approaching Gundar, "John Gundar."

Gundar gave no greeting.

The man called Sorenson eyed Gundar and

then turned his gaze to the trail herd. "You bring that across the desert?" he asked.

Matt nodded. Sorenson was a small man, but he had a thin, tight jaw. In spite of his clothes, he looked to Matt Chambers like a man who knew how to get what he wanted.

"Heard the drought in Texas was pretty bad, but I didn't know it was that bad," Sorenson drawled.

Matt was about to reply when Gundar broke in. "Whose range is this?"

Sorenson said, "I run my cattle from the desert rim some sixty miles along the river. I reckon to have it stocked full in another ten years. There's a few smaller ranchers on the other side, but it gets into timber pretty quick over there."

"What's to keep other outfits moving in on this side?" Gundar wanted to know. "There's plenty of good range here—and water."

Sorenson's eyes narrowed.

"Me and my Hourglass'll prevent other outfits moving in."

Gundar spat in the dust. "Any legal claim?" he demanded.

Sorenson's voice shook when he spoke. "I got the best legal claim in these parts, stranger. Possession. An' I got enough hands to back my claim."

The old man was trembling with sudden rage. Gundar's arrogance made him mad. Matt guessed if the oldster had had a gun, he'd have gone for it. The girl sat her horse, a small, grim smile on her lips.

Matt broke in then. "You consider selling some of this range?"

But his question was never answered. Gundar spat out a "Haw!" and wheeled his horse back to the herd. Sorenson watched him go, barely able to control himself.

He said to Matt, "Move your herd across my range and move 'em fast—or I'll move 'em for you! And make sure you don't pick up any extra on the way through!"

If Sorenson had been a younger man, or if he'd carried a gun, Matt would have forced a showdown. He didn't take insults easily. But as it was, he sat there, feeling the color mount up behind his ears.

Sorenson jerked on his reins. "Come on, June!"

The old man's horse heaved and started away on the run. For a brief moment, the girl waited. "Gramp'll sell some of the range, if you approach him right," she said. "He's tired and old and doesn't feel like stockin' it up, in spite of what he says."

"We're heading for Montana, ma'am," Matt Chambers said. "You don't need to worry."

The girl ignored this. "Don't try to move in without his say-so," she went on. "Or he'll think it's his sole purpose in life to run you off. And we've got the men to do it."

"Why you tellin' me this?" Matt asked. "I told you—"

"Because he's getting old," the girl said. "And because I've seen it happen before. I lost my father and mother in a range war. And because—" she nodded dumbly at the gaunt cattle of Matt Chambers' herd.

She wheeled her horse suddenly and galloped after her grandfather. Matt rubbed his hand across his milk white stubble and looked after her. He suddenly realized how he must look, how the whole outfit must look to her.

THAT night they camped on the banks of the Saddle River. There was a good supply of water in it as Matt had known there would be. It was good cattle country, this valley. There was plenty of year around water and good grass.

During the evening meal, Gundar was silent. He ate his grub with snapping wolfish bites. When he'd finished, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and pulled out his makings. He'd smoked his cigarette down to where it was barely more than an ash between his fingers when he spoke.

"I'll take my share of the herd no farther," he said. "This valley's good enough for me."

Luke Seigel and Joe Stacy both turned to look at him. Matt felt his legs tighten beneath him as he squatted there. Something inside him warned him to caution.

"It looks good to me," Joe Stacy remarked.

Luke Seigel said, "Me too. It's a wonder somebody hasn't already grabbed it."

"They have," Matt Chambers said. "The man we talked to this afternoon."

"I'm moving in," Gundar said. "I'll go no farther."

"Looks to me like you might have to whip Sorensen and his Hourglass," Matt drawled. "From the looks of the man, I imagine that's quite an outfit."

John Gundar repeated, "I'm moving in. If Sorenson won't make room, I'll take it."

The muscles on Matt Chambers' jaw tight-

ened into hard little knots. He knew he meant every word he said. And he knew the man had weighed his chances, and figured he could make it, even if he had to soak the range in blood.

"The herd shore looks poorly," Joe Stacy put in. "Reckon there'll be hardly any left by the time we get to Montana—if we get there."

Matt said, "The girl told me there was a good chance her father would sell."

"Sell!" John Gundar exploded. "It's free land! An' old Sorenson admitted it wasn't stocked full."

"We could raise enough money on the herd to get us in," Luke Seigel said.

"I'll not pay a damn cent," Gundar snapped. "The ten of us c'd swoop down on old Sorenson before he knew what happened. With the old man dead, his punchers'd high-tail it."

"But if we don't get the old man," Joe Stacy said, "it's maybe three, four to one against us."

Matt's lips thinned across his teeth as the wrangling went on. Lowdown skunks. He said, his voice brittle, "We're not murderin' the old man! We'll buy in or move on!"

John Gundar turned his head slowly. There was a slow smile on his lips when he spoke. "You gettin' chicken-livered, Chambers?" he rasped. Then, "Or is it the girl? She's not a bad—"

He never finished the sentence. Matt covered the ten feet that separated them in nothing flat. But Gundar was ready.

Gundar met his charge with feet wide, standing like a stone wall. The momentum carried Matt through the man's chopping fists. He slammed the full weight of his body behind a blow to Gundar's middle. But there was no give. The man absorbed the shock of the blow with no apparent feeling.

From the corner of his eye, Matt saw Joe Stacy and Luke Seigel. They watched, their mouths open a a little. This wasn't their fight. They didn't want any part of it.

Gundar was coming forward now, heavy fists ready. He went after Matt like he went after everything else, relentlessly tough, no quarter asked or given. Matt waited till Gundar was close. Then he stepped in and laid a hard one across the other's temple. He felt the bones in his arm jar pain to his shoulder blade. Gundar roared like a bull but shook off the blow. He caught Matt a vicious, swinging blow high on the cheek.

They were backing away from the fire now, trading haymakers. In the half darkness, Gundar was hard to see. For a moment, Matt lost him there in the darkness. He bore in where he thought the other must be. Matt swung hard, his fists fanning air. Then something exploded in his head and for a second everything went bright. He hit the dirt on hands and knees. He twisted away in time to miss Gundar's knee slicing up for his chin.

Matt shook his head and scrambled up. The other was against the fire now, a silhouette. Matt forced himself to tear into Gundar. Something in him refused to give Gundar the satisfaction of knowing his blows were having effect.

Matt closed in again. Gundar came forward to meet him. Matt slammed blow after blow, everything he could muster, into the other's middle. He felt sledge-hammer explosions against his head, threatening to rip it from his body.

But where the slabbed muscle of Gundar's middle had been solid, it suddenly became soft. The two moved toward the fire again, and Matt could see Gundar's face, bloody and sickly in the flickering yellow light. His own arms felt like heavy, lead weights with no strength left in them.

Neither man moved quickly now. There seemed to be nothing left in either of them, but they stood there, face to face, slugging it out.

Matt shifted his blows to Gundar's head. Then the other suddenly backed away. In Gundar's retreat, Matt found added strength. Gundar's fingers closed on a piece of firewood big as a man's arm. Before he could raise it, Matt threw every ounce of his body behind a slamming haymaker to the man's jaw. The sound of bone against bone was like the crack of a rifle.

Gundar stood there, weaving, eyes glassy. Matt couldn't have hit him again. He didn't have the strength. But there was no need. Gundar pitched forward on his face and lay still.

KEEPING his knees steady with difficulty, Matt staggered over to the chuck wagon. He sloshed water on his head. His face felt cut to ribbons. He spat a mouthful of blood and tried to work his jaw. His body ached from the terrible pounding.

Some of the dizziness was gone from his head when he went back to the fire. Gundar still lay where he'd fallen. It looked to Matt like the others hadn't budged since the fight started.

He looked from Joe Stacy to Luke Seigel. "Any more arguments?"

Joe Stacy told him, "I reckon you're boss."

Luke Seigel nodded and said, "What yuh aimin' to do now, Matt? The herd cain't go much farther. They'll be dead before we get tuh Montana."

Matt knew what Seigel said was true. He'd known it for weeks, but even to himself he wouldn't admit it. Maybe it was John Gundar that forced this stubborn streak in him. But now Gundar was beaten and the whole thing was before Matt Chambers.

Since the talk with Sorenson and the girl and throughout the evening meal, a plan had been taking shape in his mind. It was only a half-thought-out idea, but he knew he had to make a decision.

He licked his bruised and battered lips before he spoke. "I'll ride to the Hourglass tonight," he said. "Maybe I c'n make a deal with Sorenson. I reckon the old man'll be reasonable if we try to buy in."

Joe Stacy said, "That won't leave us operating expenses till we can ship beef."

The statement demanded a reply from Matt. Both Stacy and Seigel were waiting for it. But Matt turned on his heel and went down to the remuda. He roped his bay. His fingers were raw and stiff and sore. It took him a long time to saddle. He pulled up the cinch and mounted. He looked back toward the fire. Gundar was dragging himself to his feet. Matt rode in the direction Sorenson and the girl had taken that afternoon. He didn't look back.

He knew this thing with John Gundar wasn't settled. The man pushed on till he got what he wanted. Matt didn't think a beating would stop him. But if it took a bullet in John Gundar's guts, Matt was ready to put that there too.

Chambers knew what range war was. He'd seen it time and again. One hog tried to grab the whole shebang, and pretty soon a man's business wasn't raising cattle but killing men. It never settled anything. Like any war, it only brought bloodshed, then retaliation and revenge.

But John Gundar had been ready to risk this. The herd meant more to Gundar than human life. The odds were maybe five to one against muscling in in the first place.

A big moon poked over the rim of the valley and gave him some light. He rode steadily for nearly two hours before he saw ranch lights off to his right. He headed for them, hoping it was Sorenson's spread, hoping the old man had cooled off some since the afternoon.

As he approached the buildings, he marveled at the size of Sorenson's holdings. The ranchhouse was a big rambling one story affair. There were huge barns for winter hay, a large bunkhouse and a dozen or so other smaller buildings. In the moonlight he could see well fenced pastures and corrals and hay racks. You could tell a lot about a man by the way he kept his ranch, Matt figured.

He rode up to the house and threw the bay's reins over a hitching post. He stepped up on the broad, veranda-like porch. He lifted his hand to knock when a voice snapped from the shadows, "Don't touch yore gun, mister!"

Matt spun, searching for the man who'd spoken. He could make out nothing in the shadows of the building. He said, "I come peaceably."

"That's good. There's a dozen guns trained on yore back. What do you want?"

"Palaver with Sorenson."

The voice said, "Get his gun, Jake."

From the other side of him, Matt heard soft footsteps. His gun was jerked from its holster. Then the man emerged from the shadows and knocked on the door. It was a heavy door, solid oak, Matt judged from the sound.

The door swung open and he blinked in the sudden, bright light. Malcom Sorenson stood there dressed as Matt had seen him that afternoon. Behind him, Matt could see into a spacious living room. June Sorenson came up to stand by her father. Matt pulled out his battered hat.

"You keep your place well pertected," Matt said dryly.

Sorenson motioned him inside. He took in the beat-up condition of Matt's face and knuckles but made no comment. Instead he said, "I ain't a fool, Chambers. I know what men desperate for a range will do. An' I know just about how they'd go about doing it."

Matt got to the point quickly. "My herd can't go farther. I'd admire to buy in if you're reasonable."

Sorenson nodded automatically. "From the look I got of your cattle and your partner out there," he said, "I figured you'd try to move in shooting. You can't go much farther. Any man can see that."

"I had some trouble convincing Gundar you'd be reasonable if we approached openly," Matt said.

"I'll put my case straight," said Sorenson. "I built this ranch from nothing. But I'm old. Too old t'be ambitious. It's bigger'n I can take care of without trusting a man further than I have to—save my own kin. I ain't got no kin save June here. If I had a grandson, it'd be different.

"Anyhow, too many people around these days. Can't expect to keep a place this big with people moving west like they are. I'll be spending all my time running nesters off. Reckon I ought to cut it down to size so's June can handle it after I check on.

"Now, I don't want to sell, but June's convinced me I oughta. I'm willing to sell at a decent price because I figure June'll find money in the bank of more use than a ranch bigger'n she can handle. Still interested?"

Matt grunted in the affirmative. Sorenson looked at him closely for a moment. Their eyes met and held. Then the older man seemed to come to a decision. He said, "I'll tell the boys to hit the hay and we can go over the survey maps I've had made. Reckon they're pretty accurate."

He went to the door and spoke a few words to the punchers who waited on guard outside. When he came back with Matt's six he said, "Don't reckon they need to stay up. Guess I had you figured wrong."

Matt shoved the gun in his holster, feeling somehow easier with the weight of the thing on his leg once more.

Sorenson said, "Those cuts on your face look mighty sore-ful. I got some salve that'll take the sting out quick. Like to wash up and try some?"

And June said, "I baked a great big apple pie this morning. I know how you men eat on the trail. Maybe you're hungry."

THE hat Matt held suddenly became awkward in his hands. He twisted it and a lump came into his throat. It was the first time in fifteen years he'd found such friendliness. As he looked at the girl it seemed to him that his past had been wasted, aimless years. More than anything in his life now he wanted to buy into this valley, settle here for good, have neighbors like these two.

Without realizing it, he found himself being led to another part of the house by Sorenson. He washed and let the older man put the salve on his battered face. Next they went to the kitchen where June had laid out a good deal more than apple pie. He ate thick slabs of cold roast beef and sweet smelling homemade bread. Finally he topped it off with a huge wedge of pie, washed down with good, hot coffee. He thought he'd never tasted such food before.

They went back to the living room. Sorenson brought out his survey maps. Together they studied them, Sorenson explaining the details of the land.

They were bent over the maps when a roar ripped the night wide open. All hell broke loose outside!

Sorenson came up fast. Before he blew out the light, Matt saw his eyes. They were cold, hard eyes now, like finely polished splinters of steel. In few men had Matt seen the same cold look of resolution.

The girl reacted quickly. She raced through to the kitchen and barred the back door. Matt heard her shoot the bolts seconds before heavy footsteps pounded up outside and a shoulder slammed against the door. Like the front, the back door was solid oak and would stop a dozen men. There was cussing outside and Matt knew the girl's swift action had saved them.

He felt his big six in his hand. He didn't remember drawing. He was at the window in two strides, wondering what this was all about but at the same time already knowing. Inches from his head the window sash seemed to erupt in splinters and glass.

At the hitching rail, Matt's bay heaved and jerked in fright. Most of the shooting was close. It came from around the far corner of the house and was directed against the bunkhouse. To the left, behind a smaller building, Matt could see an occasional flash as someone poured deadly crossfire into the front of the main house.

Presently from the bunkhouse a weaving, running figure emerged. Matt half shouted. He knew the man couldn't make it through that deadly hail of lead. In the moonlight, the figure pulled up suddenly as a slug hit

him. Then he started again, staggering, determined to make the front door.

And then Matt's guts froze inside him. From the corner of the house, he heard John Gundar's hoarse voice yell, "Get him! Keep the bunkhouse pinned down!"

But the puncher was already on the porch now. He carried a rifle. Old Sorenson opened the heavy oak door to admit him. The man pitched inside on hands and knees.

"It's that bunch with the trail herd," he gasped out. "They sneaked in. Didn't start shooting till they was planted." Then the lead into the bunkhouse. They'd figured to pin down the punchers there. And they had the main house pinned down. Soon they'd bust in shooting. June Sorenson's quick action had prevented that, but they'd try again. And once the Hourglass owner was dead, moving in on the range wouldn't be any

He'd convinced the others the range had to be taken by force. . . .

man collapsed to the floor, sucking hard at his last breaths.

Matt was furious. Any allegiance he might have felt to his men was gone. The whole thing became plain. Gundar had gone hog wild. He'd convinced the others that Sorenson's range had to be taken by force. Matt guessed it didn't take too much to convince Luke Seigel and Joe Stacy.

The strategy of the attack was clear. Gundar's men were pouring a steady stream of trouble. The whole attack depended on keeping the punchers bottled up in the bunkhouse while they got Sorenson.

Matt cursed himself for being a fool. He should have guessed Gundar wouldn't let a beating stop him for long. Once the man had set his course, he never swerved till he got what he wanted. One word from Matt would have kept the guard posted, a word that in his foolishness Matt had failed to give.

In the dark, he could feel the eyes of Sorenson and June on him. They were accusing eyes, accusing Matt Chambers of betrayal. "So you wanted to buy land," the old man sneered. "Coming like a friend to put us off guard while them rannies of yours sneaked up on us. I should 'uv run you off the range this afternoon."

Matt Chambers' teeth came together tight. His lips were white lines across his face. "I ain't in on John Gundar's murdering. You can believe that or not."

Sorenson didn't answer and he didn't believe it. He went for the rifle the puncher on the floor had carried. Matt saw the movement in the moonlight. He stepped forward. As Sorenson's fingers closed on the stock, Matt's fingers closed about his wrist.

The rifle clattered to the floor.

The puncher had Levis pulled over his flannels. He had no six-gun. Matt shoved his own gun in his holster and took the rifle. "Sorry, old feller," he said in a tight voice. "Don't want any interfering till I settle some things."

The girl was in the corner, out of the line of fire. Sorenson was cussing. He started for another room after a gun. Matt let the oldster go. He'd have this thing settled—one way or another—before Sorenson could find time to use his gun.

Gundar had one man covering the front of the house. Matt guessed he'd have another covering the back to prevent escape. That left seven men pouring lead into the bunkhouse. Gundar depended on keeping the punchers bottled up in the bunkhouse. Once the firing stopped long enough for those punchers to break . . . .

He knew what he had to do. Keeping low, he went to the window. He waited till the man covering the front of the house fired again. Almost with the other's spurt of flame, Matt's rifle cracked. The slugs which had been coming through the front window and against the heavy oak door stopped

Matt took one long last look at the girl. He could see only her shape outlined in the darkness. He thought he heard a muffled sob escape from her.

Words were difficult. He said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. Reckon mebbe it's up to me now."

HE LET himself out the front door. The air was thick with the acrid smell of burned powdersmoke. The roar in his ears was like a living thing. Flattened against the wall, he edged along the veranda away from the corner behind which Gundar's men were firing.

He wished it were darker. A man moving in the moonlight was a good target. When he came to the corner of the house, he paused. He selected the nearest outbuilding from which he could take cover. He had to get the man covering the rear of the house. He knew there would be one.

Then, hunching down as close to the earth as possible, he broke for it.

He'd not gone ten feet when he saw dust spurt at his feet. He turned to locate the flash. In that instant he saw two separate flashes. He knew then he couldn't make it. Gundar had posted two men at the back. Something slammed into his side and he fought for balance.

The strength drained from him. The outbuilding seemed a long ways away. There was no pain. Only the sudden shock of the thing had taken everything out of him. He forced his legs to move. He felt another slug twitch at his jacket.

He could go no farther. Against his will, he felt himself sink to the ground. Lying there, he brought the rifle up. Something seared across his leg and he was seconds later getting his aim. He fired first at one spurt of flame, then without waiting, jacked another cartridge into the chamber. On his second shot there was a yelp of pain and he could hear a man cussing. He fired again. Then he noted with a grim satisfaction that both the other guns were silent.

How long he lay there he didn't know. It had only been minutes since the firing had first started. Those few seconds he lay there seemed like hours. But he didn't pass out. Gradually, some strength came back in his arms and legs and with it came pain.

It was a raw, jagged agony. It gripped him tighter when he sucked in a breath. He managed to get to his feet. Everything seemed bright and distinct in the moonlight. He made his way around the ranch house keeping well away from the building.

He saw someone trying to climb through a back window. He raised the rifle with an effort. The kick nearly knocked it from his hands. But he missed. When he jacked the empty out, he knew by the sound it had been the last one.

(Continued on page 112)

"This town'll never miss a lawman like you," they told peaceable Sheriff Jess Lunt—"leastways not with a bullet!"

By GEORGE C. APPELL

Four miles up the trail, we found Jess Lunt. . . .

BLOODY AN' PEACEABLE

ANOTHER raid was coming up the valley, the second in two months. It was coming up in high-flying dust from galloping hoofs and the faint *whick-whack* of shots, just like the first one had. The shots were effect, to fray the nerves of old Evan Goodchild and his wife. It was twilight—a good time to start trouble.

The raid was four miles from town now, almost to Goodchild's fence, and it was too late for any of us to do anything about it. By the time we'd taken our horses off the rail and gotten down there, the thing would be over. But we started anyway—all except Jesse Lant—and crossed the dry wash of Crazy Man's Creek and headed for its big bend, which loops bank-full around Goodchild's east boundary. Old Evan had a small spread—half a section, three hundred and twenty acres. He was planning to acquire the other half from the bank after he'd thrown his steers into the drive and pocketed Kansas City cash.

We made white water through the big bend and got there in time to see Evan come out of his dog-trot with a seven-shot Spencer

on his arm; in time to see him throw the stock to his cheek and loose off at the raid, which numbered eight riders.

He got two before they got him, and the sound of the shots was like sticks being whipped into a blanket.

A torch sputtered across the dusk and clumped into the dog-trot and set it on fire. Sarah Goodchild came out, holding her skirts above her ankles, followed by the little Mex boy they'd recently hired. We waved to her as we galloped past—there was nothing we could do for Evan.

We followed the retreating raid along the trace of the old stage trail for almost five miles, but we didn't save much of Goodchild's stock because we'd been fooled. While the party of eight had been diverting attention to the dog-trot, another party had run off two dozen head, half of old Evan's herd. He hadn't been able to graze more than fifty head at a time on that acreage.

Full dark came down fast, the way things do on the prairie, and Ben Pearson circled his horse across our front and shook his head. "No use to go farther. They got clean away. Let's go back an' see what we can do for Sarah."

She was tossing buckets of water onto the roof fire, trying to save what she could. Evan still lay where he'd fallen, though his wife had turned him over to see how bad he was hit. He was hit bad. One of the bullets had taken his left eye out.

We put the fire out, and for a minute nobody said anything. Sarah sat on an upended bucket, her gray hair hanging down past her chin, her hands dangling off her knees. The breath was running in and out of her in little whispers.

Ben Pearson knelt beside her. "Did you suspect it might come—you or Evan?"

"Didn't suspect anything." She was sniffling. "When they got Sackett's last month, we thought it'd be the last—"

Sackett's spread, adjoining Goodchild's on Crazy Man's Creek, had been burned and the stock run off, and he'd been wounded while defending himself.

We examined the two riders that Evan Goodchild had toppled, but we didn't recognize them.

"Paid killers," Ben Pearson said, and made a sour face and spat. "Barshee's too smart to use his own men for this kind of dirty work, though one of those boys we scared off bore a strong resemblance to Matt Nye."

Matt Nye was Barshee's segundo, and Barshee owned the Jinglefoot, a big outfit at the other end of the valley, whose west fence bordered the east fences of Goodchild and Sackett. But the Jinglefoot had too much dry range for its own good, and it didn't require much cogitating to see what Barshee was up to, if he couldn't buy out Goodchild and Sackett—who had sole water rights at this end of the valley—he'd burn them out. Neither of them had any idea of selling.

Sarah Goodchild was saying, "Didn't suspect a thing. Just this mornin' Evan told me, he said, 'I can buy that other half section if I can throw fifty head into the Drive'. He said—" she was sobbing now—"that it'd be nice to get it before Barshee gets it, that Barshee owns enough land a'ready, an' has no right to—to—" She couldn't finish, because she was crying.

Ben Pearson swung down and helped her into his saddle, then mounted behind her. The rest of us packed Evan and the two strangers, and we all rode slowly back to town in the moonlight, leaving the little Mex boy to clean up the place and keep watch on it for a while.

THERE wasn't any point in riding onto the Jinglefoot to ask Barshee for permission to inspect his stock, because both Goodchild and Sackett had used only hair brands on the cows that were marked for the Drive, and hair brands can be altered in no time at all.

We took the strangers directly to the hill and buried them, but we left Evan with the Reverend Opdycke. The reverend said he'd fix him up to look nice while Sarah stayed with Mrs. Opdycke.

Jesse Lant was sitting in his office cubby, whittling a stick. His knife blade kept flashing silver in the lamplight, and for a moment we only saw him and nobody else. He was small and bow-shouldered, and his sandy hair looked like he never combed it, even on Sundays. He didn't much resemble a town marshal at all. In fact, nobody thought he was much of a town marshal, and it was a mystery to everybody why Miss Deborah Clark had side-chuted Matt Nye for him. But then, women are queerer than red-eyed longhorns.

A year before, Ben Pearson had said, "Somebody's got to be marshal, an' it might's well be young Jesse. He's fixin' to get married, an' he can use some stability." We'd all smiled at that, because stability was an understatement when used to describe the job of marshal in our town. Except for chasing a chicken thief or locking up a drunk on a Saturday, there was little to do. Or had been, until these raids started.

Jesse stopped whittling long enough to lift his eyes to us and nod. He had ash-gray eyes, and he always moved them slowly, which gave an effect of steadiness.

Ben Pearson said, "Well, Jesse?"

"Well?" He commenced his whittling again.

"I guess you've heard what happened to Goodchild. We—" he bore down on the word—"chased 'em until we lost 'em."

Jesse kept on whittling.

Then we all saw Miss Deborah standing in the shadows behind the desk. From the way she stood, with her head back and her nostrils flaring like a runout mare's, it was pretty clear that she didn't want to be seen and that we'd interrupted a private conversation. Miss Deborah had come out from Omaha a year or so before to run the combined school and public library, and not six months after that she became unofficially engaged to Jesse Lant. But lately, because of his inactivity, it was seeming more and more like a case of one-sided desire, with no meeting of the minds at all.

Miss Deborah wasn't beautiful like the calendar girls are beautiful, but she reminded a man of something sweet that he'd known long ago and had almost forgotten because so many things had piled over it. She made a man remember his mother's face, maybe, when she had appeared at night with a candle to see if her tot was warm. Or his first girl, the one with a hair ribbon and a freckled nose that made him feel all queer inside and all hands and feet outside, and with no voice at all.

Ben Pearson went on, "Services for Evan are tomorrow at ten o'clock. Mrs. Goodchild's stayin' with Mrs. Opdycke 'til we can find a man to help her with the place."

Jesse Lant looked up again. "That's pretty stupid."

"What is?" Pearson took a step forward and glared.

"Chasin' 'em."

Ben Pearson let his breath all the way out, and I thought he would pick Jesse up and hit him. But he didn't, he grinned instead. It wasn't a nice grin, because Pearson wasn't in a nice mood.

After all, he'd been responsible for pinning the marshal's star on Jesse's shirt, and the star was beginning to tarnish.

Pearson said, "You should've been there to see it."

Jesse snapped the blade shut, put the knife in his pocket and pitched the shaven stick into the woodbox. He stood up. The dusky shadows made him appear odd-angled and smaller than usual. The wooden butt of the .44 on his hip seemed the size of a plowhandle.

He said, "I'm responsible for what happens here in town, not for what happens outside it." His voice was drum-deep in his narrow chest.

"Evan Goodchild was one of our citizens, no matter what distance away he lived." Pearson cleared his throat. "Sackett is a citizen, too."

Jesse wet his thin lips. After the Sackett

raid, he had done just what he was doing now—nothing.

He said, "Last month a man was wounded, and today a man was killed. I don't propose risking any more lives to do the impossible."

"Risking what lives?" Pearson asked.

Jesse let the inference pass. "The impossible is to track down hired gunmen and prove a case against them. You'd only get yourself shot up. That's why I said that chasin' shadows in the dark was stupid. They could have ambushed you an' blowed you off your saddles, an' why they didn't, I don't know." He glanced over his shoulder at Miss Deborah, but she hadn't moved. If he was trying to acquit himself of the silent charge of cowardice, he was a failing. Technically he was right, his bailiwick was inside the town limits; but there are things other than technicalities that count, and those things show in a woman's attitude. Jesse finished lamely, "Those two raids were in the county jurisdiction, and Pennycook's the county sheriff. I duly reported Sackett's to him, and now I'll report this. If he wants to do anything, he will."

Ben Pearson said, "Not while Barshee's payin' him to lie still."

Jesse shrugged and stared down at his palms. "That can't be proved."

"Proved!" Miss Deborah stepped from the shadows, her fists at her sides and her eyes blazing. She had grass-green eyes, the kind that really ignite. "Are you going to sit around here the rest of your life carving wood while men are being murdered?"

Quietly he told her, "Only one man was murdered, and we don't know who did it, and probably we never will." He turned slowly to Ben Pearson. "We can't go flyin' off half-cocked just 'cause we're excited."

Pearson started to swing. He drew his fist back and twisted his right foot to get punch-leverage, but he never threw the punch. Something like pity came over his face and he let his fisted fingers fall loose. He shook his head.

"Don't you ever get sore, Jesse?" He moved toward the door. "Come on over to Marble John's, everybody. I'll buy a drink around." He turned and said to Jesse Lant, "For men only." Then he went out.

I WAS following them across the street when I heard a step behind me, and a hand touched my elbow. It was Miss Deborah, and she was trying to smile but she wasn't making it very good.

She said, "Walk home with me, will you?"

We ambled toward Kelcey's Rooms, where she lived, and neither of us talked for a while. She kept her hand in my elbow, like she didn't want to hurry; so we ambled. Finally she said, "You're a friend of his."

"Guess you can call it that." I was years older than Jesse, but I'd known him since puphood.

Miss Deborah said, "I'm so ashamed of him I could cry. I would cry—" she was raising her voice—"if I thought it would do any good."

"It wouldn't."

She paced me to the corner of Elk Street. "I know what you're all thinking—that he's not just afraid, that he's in Barshee's pay by way of Pennycook to keep his hands off the Jinglefoot's lawlessness."

That stopped me short. "Is that what you think?"

"It's what everybody else is thinking."

It hadn't occurred to me until she mentioned it. I said, "Glory be damned, if that can be proven—"

She took my elbow and almost pushed me around the corner. We walked down Elk Street, and when we reached Kelcey's she stopped and whispered, "He is not a coward—is he?"

I didn't answer. All I understood was that if Jesse Lant wasn't a coward, he was surely acting like one, although there had been times in the past when he'd acted brave. Like the time when old Henry Fifield had come down from his winter traps, gaunt and gray as a timber wolf, and proceeded to drink up a seven-month thirst. He got ructious in Marble John's Saloon and threw a few bottles out the door, then declared his intention of throwing out the customers, too. Jesse Lant was summoned.

Henry Fifield saw him coming and snagged out a gun and bellowed, "I'll blow you right out'n them size five boots if you come near me, Short People!"

Jesse walked the length of the bar and reached out smoothly and stuck a thumb in front of the firing pin of Henry's revolver, risking permanent mutilation of his knuckle, but at the same time rendering the revolver useless. Then he took the weapon and handed it to Marble John. Henry Fifield hasn't been seen in town since.

Miss Deborah repeated the question: "Is he's a coward?" She sounded desperate, as if she was trying to convince herself that he wasn't, and could not.

"You've got me cornered," I told her. Personally, I'd always thought that Jesse Lant was— well, if not scared—cautious of Matt Nye. Matt had known Miss Deborah long before Jesse had—had, in fact, taken her to her first dance this side of Omaha.

"Just a minute." She hung back a step. "He won't go near the Jinglefoot, so maybe you will. Somebody's got to." She was standing close to me, and by the line of her mouth I knew she'd made up her mind about something. "Will you do me a favor when you're out that way again?"

"Why, Miss Deborah—"

"I knew you would. And there's another thing—don't let Ben Pearson start insulting Jesse again. Jesse's temper is—is—" Her face was clouding up, and she was having trouble with her throat.

That's when I peeled off my hat and leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Maybe there's no fool like an old fool, but it can be fun finding out.

A WEEK later Matt Nye trotted into town and smiled pleasantly all around, though few people smiled in return. He was wearing a black hat and a dark gray coat and light gray trousers tucked into the tops of well-oiled boots. He tied up at Mable John's, nodded genially to the house and ordered barley.

He was a tall man with lean hips and slender, saddle legs. He was in his early thirties, which is young to be segundo of an outfit as big as the Jinglefoot; but he had a certain competence that showed in the carry of his large head and in the clean curve of his jaws. He was a picturesque man until you looked at his eyes, which were too pale in the gunstock brown of his face and which had the disconcerting trick of never focusing directly upon you, but always above your head or beyond your shoulder.

Marble John, pouring barley, said, "We don't see much of you here, Mr. Nye."

"That's because I'm not here much."

Marble John laughed politely. He had no illusions about the goodness or the badness of mankind. The dominant factor in his life was the reality of the dollar, and he didn't particularly care where his dollars came from. He could afford to laugh politely at Matt Nye, because Nye was a good spender and Marble John didn't give a damn if his money came from Barshee or Pennycook or the devil himself.

Matt Nye said, "Heard you had a small shooting a few days ago."

"So we did. But it was in the evening, and perhaps it was a matter of mistaken identities."

"It had better be."

"I'm sure that it was, Mr. Nye."

Matt Nye swigged his barley. "I further heard there's a dance here next Saturday night."

"There is indeed. We're bringing the music all the way from Acropolis—squeezebox, fiddle an' guitar."

Matt Nye spun a coin across the bar, slanted his hat over his left ear and went out. He marched toward the corner of Main and Elk Streets, his spurs sounding like silver dollars clinked deep in the pocket of a greatcoat. At Kelcey's Rooms he turned into the path and took the steps in one stride and knocked smartly on the door. Miss Deborah was waiting for him, as he knew she would be, and they sat for an hour in the front parlor.

When he returned to Marble John's, he met Jesse Lant at the tie-rail.

Jesse said, "I thought I recognized your horse, Nye."

Matt Nye stiffened. "He's like a lot of other horses."

"Except that his pasterns are too straight for easy riding. It's a noticeable defect."

Nye's face suddenly flushed crimson. "He isn't a work pony, I seldom use him." He entered the saloon and let the doors slap shut behind him.

Ben Pearson came along the plankwalk and saw Jesse, then winked at me. I'd kept my promise to Miss Deborah, and asked Ben to lay off Jesse for a while. Ben had agreed, but added that he wasn't going to keep his guns spiked forever.

Now he said, "Goin' to the dance on Saturday, Jesse? Or will you be too busy whittlin'?"

Jesse regarded him coolly. "The only reason we can afford to have a dance in this town is 'cause I keep it tame."

Ben Pearson threw back his head and laughed. "From what I've observed in the

past half hour, you'll dance alone if you dance at all." And he laughed again and walked on.

Jesse stepped over to me. "What's he mean by that?" His face was tense and his gray eyes were hard.

"Why, Jesse—" I was having trouble making a cigarette—"I reckon he means that Miss Deborah's already been asked."

He swung his gaze from me to the slatted doors of the saloon, and there was no color to his skin at all, only a pastework of shadows. He made a move as if to push his way through the doors, but he didn't. He turned abruptly and slogged toward Elk Street, arms swinging and thighs thrusting. He turned down Elk, but before I finished my cigarette he was back on Main again, looking pastier than ever. I heard later that Mrs. Kelcey told him that Miss Deborah was out, or sick, or something.

THAT dance on Saturday was one of the biggest we ever had. The reason for the crowd wasn't the three-piece orchestra from Acropolis, the county seat, nor was it the fine autumn weather. It was curiosity to see what might happen between Jesse Lant and Matt Nye. Everybody knew that Matt had squired Miss Deborah until she'd taken a fancy to Jesse, and everybody was highly interested in the fact that Matt was now back in the picture.

There were no guns there, we didn't allow them at social functions—but there was a punchbowl and there were knuckles, and ordinarily those two don't mix when blood is running mean. But Jesse didn't do a thing except hang around the music and glower.

Once when Matt and Miss Deborah asked the fiddler for *Pig On The Ridge* she looked up into Matt's face and told him, "You dance just as well as you always did."

Matt said, just loud enough for Jesse to hear, "My only fault is modesty."

Then the music broke into *Pig On the Ridge* and Matt and his lady skipped away.

The dance ended before midnight. Neither Matt nor Jesse were drinking, and it was pretty obvious that there wasn't going to be a fight. Jesse was the last to leave, and I walked with him along Main Street while he tested the locks on dark stores and kept an eye open for anyone who might disturb the peace.

I said, "Nice dance."

Jesse didn't say anything. We walked past Elk Street and he looked straight ahead, though his neck muscles were tautened against the desire to face in the direction of Kelcey's Rooms. I faced that way, and saw Miss Deborah and Matt Nye standing together on the steps.

We walked as far as the marshal's office, where I said, "Good night, Jesse. Everything'll seem different in the morning."

But in the morning nothing seemed different. Matt Nye drove into town in a Jinglefoot rig, and escorted Miss Deborah to church.

Now, Matt Nye had never been inside a church in his life, except maybe when he was christened and couldn't help it; and Miss Deborah had always attended on the arm of Jesse Lant. But Jesse didn't go that morning, he stayed in his office whittling, and whenever anyone nodded to him through the window, he merely stared at them. His stare reminded me of a man who'd been trapped in a glacier centuries ago, and who'd been carried down through the crevices, inch by inch, all these years until suddenly with absolute murderousness he's staring out through the last preserving glaze of ice.

He wasn't nice to look at, and as Sunday wore on, people stopped nodding to him. He whittled savagely, his hat pushed back and his sandy hair spilling over his forehead.

After church, Matt took Miss Deborah for a drive in the rig. He told Conover, the stablekeeper, that he wanted to see the Goodchild place so he could estimate the damage and try to help Sarah, poor woman.

When Jesse heard that, he almost skewered himself with the knife.

I ventured, "The criminal always returns to the scene, eh, marshal?"

He still wasn't talking. I left him and went to dinner with Ben Pearson, and afterward Ben cut and lit a cigar and peered at me through the smoke.

"I don't like it," he said. "It's bad."

"Matt and Miss Deborah?"

He waved his cigar impatiently. "Jesse. He's about boiled over, an' he'll hurt somebody, an' most likely it'll be the wrong person."

"He can aim a gun, can't he?"

"That isn't the point. The point is that when he shoots, Miss Deborah'll be within range."

"Not here she won't. Jesse doesn't like a

ruckus in his own bailiwick, and he won't do any shooting in town."

He didn't, either.

It was dusk when Matt Nye braked his rig to a stop at Kelcey's and handed Miss Deborah down. On the veranda, he took her by the shoulders and pulled her up to him and kissed her on the mouth, hard. She didn't try to break away. That kiss sounded like a bootsole squashing into soft mud. You could hear it as far as the corner of Main Street.

Then Matt Nye saw her to the door, trotted down the steps and swung a leg into the rig. He was humming *Pig On The Ridge,* but he stopped when he saw Jesse Lant prowling toward him.

Jesse hooked a thumb outward, east toward the valley.

"Don't come back, Nye."

Matt Nye pretended great surprise. "Why, this is a free country, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I aim to keep it so. You're no longer welcome in this town."

Nye kicked the brake off and gathered the ribbons. "Other people will be the judge of that, not you." He backed his team around, so that Jesse had to get out of the way. "And if you don't mind your manners runt, I'll report you to Sheriff Pennycock and have that toy badge taken off your shirt." Nye slashed his whip and rolled down Elk Street and headed for the valley.

Conover yelled, "Those're the main buildings!"

IN THE afternoon, Ben Pearson caught me by a gallus and whispered, "I just been down to Mrs. Opdycke's to see Sarah Good-

child. That dumb Conover came an' told her about Nye wantin' to help her with the place."

"What did old Sarah do?"

Pearson snickered. "She grabbed the reverend's fowlin' piece off the mantel an' went for that man like she was a lioness. Allowed that no crocodile consciences would change her opinions, an' that not a cent of Jinglefoot money'd ever go into her property, an' it still was her property, an' for Conover to get out fast." Ben laughed. "I need a drink. Come on to Marble."

A patch-colored pony was plunging into Main Street with the little Mex boy from Goodchild's place hanging onto the saddle, and both pony and boy were in a white lather. He threw himself off and waved his arms at us and gabbled in soprano Spanish until Ben caught his flying wrists and hauled him back to earth.

"Speak You-nited States," he commanded. "It's legal here."

The boy got his breath. "*Señores*—please. *El marecal*—Señor Lant—he is—" the boy twirled a finger to his damp forehead—"loco. Crazee!" The Mex boy, it seemed, had been sneaking along the Jinglefoot's west fence, hoping to spot some of Sarah Goodchild's stolen stock. Jesse Lant had come loping past with his eyes on the skyline and hadn't even said hello, which was unusual. He'd ridden straight onto the Jinglefoot range and disappeared east. About an hour later, the boy had seen much dust in that direction, and then smoke. Much smoke. Jesse hadn't returned, so the boy had caught up his pony and come pronto to town.

We collected as many men as we could in a hurry—about six—and lined out for the Jinglefoot. We passed Goodchild's and went through Sarah's wet bend of Crazy Man's Creek and up to Barshee's west fence. Jesse had cut it in the same place that the rustlers had thrown the Goodchild stock through, and we galloped past the loose strands without stopping for repairs. We raised the smoke almost immediately.

Conover yelled, "Those're the main buildings!"

We reached them in an hour. They smelled of lead pencils, which were the cedar beams burning—they'd collapsed into the blackened foundation, and greasy smoke was hanging low over the ground, held close by the heat, so that at first we didn't see the bodies.

There were three, and none of us were mightily surprised to recognize Barshee as one of them. The other two were strangers. All of them had been shot clean with a .44.

A Chinese man came out of the cook house and pointed north with a meat cleaver. While we watered our horses he gave us the news like this: "Wan star man come, all mad like devil. Man shoot at him, he shoot at man. Balshee shoot at him, he shoot at Balshee. Shoot-shoot-shoot. Devil-man get hit—" the cook clutched his left arm—"get mad some, kick lamp in house and all flames go." He aimed his cleaver north again. "Devil-man fly that way to get thlee man who fly. Me, I pack, go back to Flisco."

I didn't blame him. "Where's Nye—the segundo?"

The cook blew out his breath. "He fly that way when devil-man come."

We rode north out of the valley, and presently caught up with a riderless horse that was winded and lame. A mile farther on we found the rider dead of a .44 hole in his head. but he wasn't Matt Nye.

He was, like the two back at Barshee's a stranger to us.

"Paid killers," Ben Pearson snarled.

We rode on, and toward sunset we reached Acropolis. The county seat is four streets at right angles, with a telegraph office in the Overland Building, and sheriff's quarters above it. But there wasn't any sheriff. We were told that Matt Nye and another man had come through Acropolis an hour before, and that Pennycock had departed with them. A little later, we were told, a small gent with a marshal's star on his shirt had pounded in from the south, paused briefly to bark questions about Nye, then pounded north again.

So did we.

TOWARD twilight we found another body, but there was no horse. This stranger was all tangled and twisted, like he'd been dragged with one foot in a stirrup for aways. And he, like the others, had suffered from a collision with a .44 slug.

Four miles up the trail, we found Jesse Lant.

He was standing in the fringes of a cot-

(Continued on page 114)

WIVES WEST

It was love in boom along Puget Bay— all widows wed on arrival!

By FREEMAN H. HUBBARD

ALTHOUGH the pioneer, Asa S. Mercer helped to build the first college in Washington Territory and served as the first president of Washington University, he is best remembered today as the man who gave Seattle bachelors a break by importing marriageable females from the East.

In the early 1860's the white male settlers of the territory outnumbered the opposite sex by about nine to one. The *Puget Sound Herald* estimated that nearly 3000 voters in and around Seattle were unable to marry because of the scarcity of decent women. Mercer, then a young man, conceived the bright idea of importing a few boatloads of prospective brides from New York and New England. But who would finance this romantic venture?

The territorial governor, William Pickering, shook his head. "It's a great scheme and I'm all for it," he told Mercer, "but the territory can't help you. Our treasury is empty."

Undaunted, Mercer canvassed the town, collecting funds from single men who wanted to marry. As soon as he had enough money he went to Boston by ship, held a mass meeting in a Lowell hall. Women filled it to overflowing. He pointed out the "wonderful financial advantages" open to ladies of marriageable age in the Northwest.

The audience showed avid enthusiasm; but in March, 1864, when he set sail for Seattle, only eleven would-be brides had nerve enough to accompany him. Within a few days ten of the girls had acquired husbands; the eleventh died unwed.

This venture made Mercer so popular that he was unanimously elected to the Territorial Legislature. Then he made grandiose plans for a really big importation of brides. In March '65 he drew up a covenant:

> I, Asa Mercer of Seattle, Washington Territory, hereby agree to bring a suitable wife, of good moral character and reputation, from the East to Seattle on or before September, 1865, for each of the parties whose signatures are hereunto attached, they first paying me or my agent the sum of $300, with which to pay the passage of the said ladies from the East and to compensate me for my trouble.

He counted on President Lincoln's help. But on the very day he landed in New York, black-bordered newspapers carried the tragic news of Lincoln's death. General Grant intervened in his behalf; and Ben Holladay, Western freighter and shipping magnate, advanced money for him to buy a Federal troop ship in which to transport 500 "female war orphans and widows" from New York to Seattle.

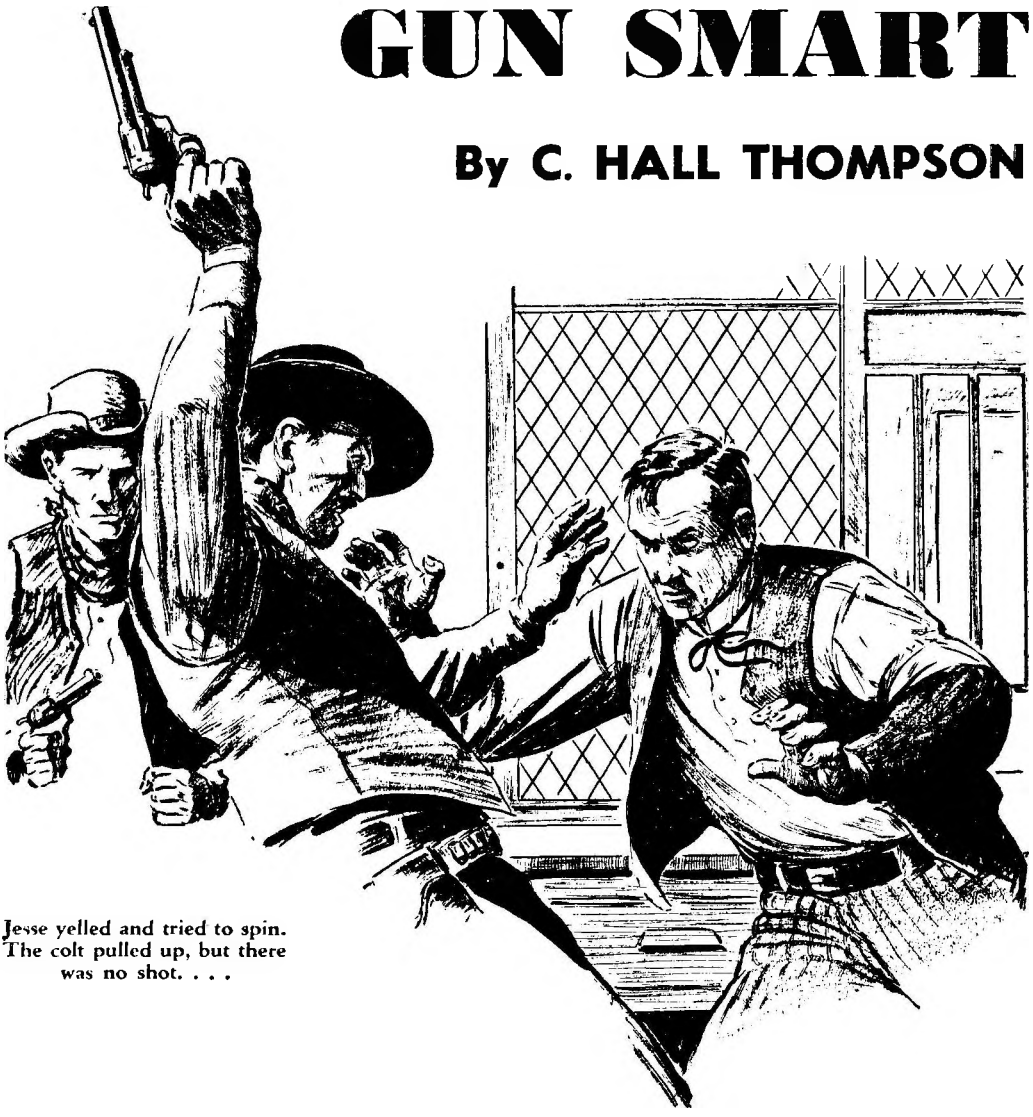
But the *New York Herald* and a Massachusetts legislative committee denounced the project as immoral, with the result that the number of would-be Seattle brides quickly dwindled from 500 to less than 100. The ship set sail in January '66, rounded Cape Horn, and arrived at San Francisco after a rough voyage of 96 days. Mercer's money was almost gone. Holladay forced him and the girls to disembark. Some stayed at the Golden Gate permanently.

Bedraggled and weary, a few girls finally reached journey's end. The reception they received has become a legend of the Northwest.

Marriages followed in short order. Mercer himself took one of the passengers, Annie Stephens, as his wife. There are leading families in Seattle today that proudly trace their ancestry back to the Mercer girls.

GUN SMART

By C. HALL THOMPSON



Jesse yelled and tried to spin. The colt pulled up, but there was no shot. . . .

VIRG felt the grease of sweat on his palms. The hair pulled tight at the back of his neck. He hitched straighter in the saddle, in the red dusk above Cardova. He watched the others.

The four men looked like riders heading in for a big night at the saloon. Clell chewed the stub of a cigarette—his full lips bent a smile on the town below. Harker and Jack were thin and expressionless. Under their long linen dusters, the Winchesters did not bulge. Jesse lifted his Colt and checked the load. He slid the gun back into leather.

Be like him, Virg thought, cold and sure, like Jesse.

Clell said, "Scared, kid?" through that smile.

"Let him alone," Jesse said.

"Let me alone," Virg said. "I'm all right."

Clell laughed. "He's tighter'n a rusty spring."

When a gun is a part of a man—it takes a bullet to make him whole!

Harker and Jack laughed. Virg felt his neck get hot. Jesse's lips thinned under the dark mustache.

"The kid's all right."

"I don't know," Clell said.

Jack said, "Maybe we shoulda left him back at the camp. We don't want no mistakes."

Jesse looked at Virg steadily. "There won't be no mistakes. Will there, kid?"

"No."

"You'll remember your brother. It was a bank dick killed him. You'll remember that."

Virg said, "I'll remember."

"It's a perfectly simple job," Jesse said.

Virg frowned. "That cashier. He won't take it lying down."

Jesse touched the gun. "He'll take it. Because of this. That's all you got to know. The gun makes 'em lie down. And he'll know it."

Harker said. "We're wasting time."

Jesse nodded.

They put down the hill trail through the stunted piñons and along the falling spur. They didn't talk any more. On the flats, they split. Harker and Jack swung east and circled into the low-sprawled buildings of the town. Clell went in from the west. For ten minutes, Jesse and the kid waited.

Then Jesse said, "This is it."

They didn't ride fast. Virg's duster fluttered in the sundown wind. Their shadows were tall and restless in the dust before them. Virg felt of the cool bone of the gunbutt. *This is what does it. You got this and you're more than yourself, bigger. . . .* The way his brother had been. The way Jesse said he was.

The town had a peaceful, home-to-supper look. Poplars rustled in the tiny dooryards and a woman was calling her kids from the kitchen porch. They passed the bleached clapboard church and the council house. Some of the saloons were beginning to rattle to night-life. The Granger's Bank of Cardova was halfway down the rutted dust and sagging boardwalks of Division Street.

Jesse sat lazily, but his eyes moved under the tilted flat sombrero. A corner of his mouth smiled.

Virg saw the squat hunch of Clell on a barrel outside Holwell's General Store, close to his horse, patiently whittling at a willow twig. Upstreet, Harker lounged under the arcade of a saloon and Jack's blue roan was halted almost before the bank, the rider dismounted to tighten the cinch buckles. They covered the bank entrance from all angles.

Jesse pulled up Union Alley. Virg followed. They left the ponies outside the rear exit of the bank and walked back to Division Street. Jesse's boots struck harsh echoes from the boards. He studied the main drag. A woman hurried home from late shopping. An old swamper dumped stale water in the gutter. A mangy dog slept peaceably on the bank steps.

Jesse looked at the kid. "Remember."

Virg's hand brushed the thonged Colt. He nodded.

The bank smelled of old ledgers and ink. There was a desk with a placard that said, JOB WALTHAL, PRESIDENT. But the president had gone for the day. The cashier in the wire cage looked big and square. The celluloid collar was tight on his thick neck. He held his place in the ledger and smiled.

"Well, you're the gent was in yesterday to look over our little bank before you invested. You're Mister—"

"Miller," Jesse said.

Virg felt the dryness of his mouth. He wished the clerk wouldn't smile so friendly-like.

The clerk said. "Come in to make another deposit, I reckon?"

"No," Jesse said. "A withdrawal, this time."

The smile went crooked. The big man in the cage stared at the leveled gun.

"You're married," Jesse said. "You don't want to leave a widow."

The cashier didn't move. Jesse nodded. "Inside, kid."

They swung through the knee high wicket. The room behind the cage was cramped and hot, with the door leading to Union Alley in the rear wall. The clerk kept turning to face Jesse's gun. The barrel jerked toward the iron-black vault.

"Open it."

Thick shoulders bunched under the nankeen vest, aching to fight back. In the stillness, the clerk said, "I can't."

Virg saw the paling lips. "Easy, Jess."

The muzzle shoved into the cashier's belly. "You're a liar."

"There's a time lock," the clerk said. "Nobody can open it till eight in the morning."

Something happened to Jesse's face. He brought the gun up and down fast and Virg heard the crack of jawbone. The clerk went to his knees. Virg felt a numb sickness in his chest. He watched Jess wheel to the vault.

"He's lying. It'll open. It's got to—"

The clerk lunged. Jesse yelled and tried to spin and the Colt pulled up but there was no shot. Jesse swore at the jammed hammer and flung out. The gun slapped the cage-wire above the clerk's head. The wire sang shrilly. The big square man closed in.

Virg stood there. He saw the flattening of Jesse's back against the iron door.

"Get him, kid! For God's sake—"

Virg didn't fire. He stepped between them and swung in low, feeling the clerk double over his fist, bringing the right up from the floor. The clerk twisted and lunged across a table. An inkspot spilled black across the ledgers. The big man lay still, arms dangling over the table edge, swaying idly.

Jesse was already at the back door.

"It's no good, now. All that noise'll bring them running. Got to clear out."

He flung through the exit and fumbled with reins and stirrup. Virg stepped into the saddle on the run.

"The others," he said.

"The hell with—" Jesse caught it. He didn't look at the kid. "They'll know it went wrong. They'll meet us tomorrow at Larosa."

He didn't wait to argue. They pulled out through the tail end of the alley. Back on Division Street, in the lamplit night, shots racketed.

Virg said, "Clell—the others—"

Jesse rode on as if he hadn't heard.

IF A posse lit out, it was after Harker and Jack and Clell. It didn't come near the first low reaches of the mountain, the pass where Jess and Virg halted.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Jesse built a cigarette. His hands were all thumbs.

"It was the gun. That damn gun went back on me."

Virg didn't answer. Jesse let out a quivering sigh of smoke.

"You could've got him," he said. "You were armed."

Quietly, Virg said, "I got you out of there. Maybe I owed you that much—the way you kept me in grub the last months."

"What's that mean?"

"That much I owed you. No more."

The pass was quiet. Jesse tried a laugh.

Virg said, "The gun made a man bigger, you told me. Added something to him. Only you were wrong, Jess. I saw that, back there, when you lost it. The gun wasn't something added. It was a *part* of you—something to make up for a piece of you that was missing. It was the only thing that made you even equal to other men. Without it, you were crippled, where you live."

"Fancy talk."

"Maybe. Or maybe something you know. A thing my brother never learned, but I did—before I was past learning." Virg lifted the reins lightly. "I won't be seeing you, Jess."

"You're walking out."

"I'm walking out."

"You think I'll let you. You think I won't stop you—"

Quiet eyes rested on the empty holster at Jesse's hip. "No," Virg said. "You won't stop me."

He didn't.

BAD INJUN

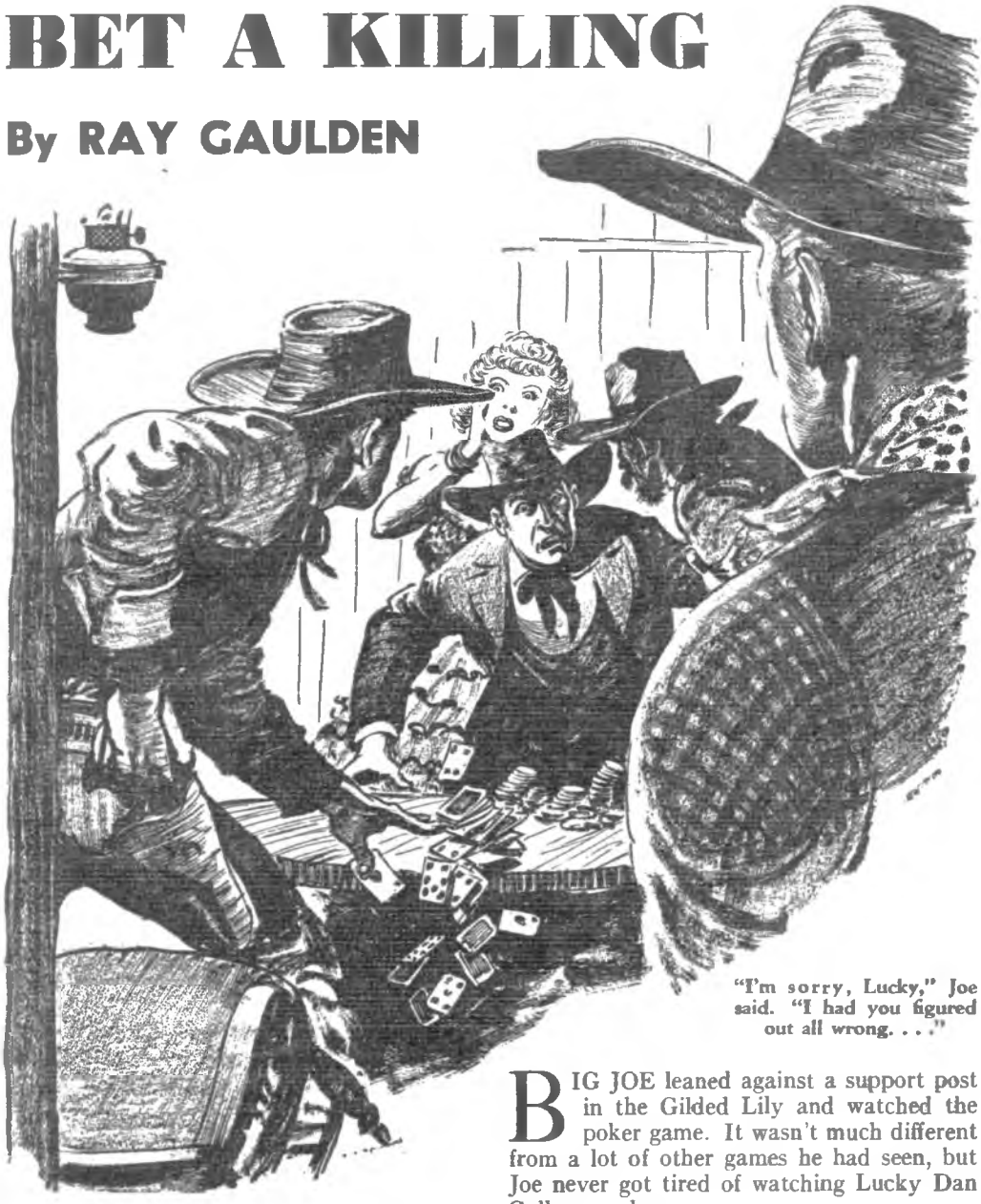
Ever hear of Chief Wakunzeekah—Yellow Thunder to his white friends, of whom he had too many? In a century bloody with land wars, he was something of an oddity. Even the worst enemies of the redskins said there were two kinds of good Indian—dead ones, and Yellow Thunder.

It didn't make the old chief happy. Known through the North as the "white man's Indian," he hated the monicker, tried to his dying day to keep secret the deed that had caused it.

What Yellow Thunder had done, after his tribe was pushed back by the whites, was to go to work. For money, U.S. dollars. When he had enough saved, he bought the land off which he had been pushed, and lived as he'd lived before, undisturbed. Except by one thing—his spotless reputation with the whites.—*Lance Kermit*

BET A KILLING

By RAY GAULDEN



"I'm sorry, Lucky," Joe said. "I had you figured out all wrong. . . ."

Whether he dealt lives or cards, Big Joe was Lucky Dan's ace in the hole, till the flaming night Lucky found himself holding—too many aces!

BIG JOE leaned against a support post in the Gilded Lily and watched the poker game. It wasn't much different from a lot of other games he had seen, but Joe never got tired of watching Lucky Dan Galloway play.

Smoke from Lucky Dan's cigar drifted up past his dark, handsome face and he sat straight in his chair, slender hands dealing the cards—smooth, easy. Big Joe grinned, because Lucky was winning tonight. He looked at the chips in front of Lucky, thinking, *Maybe we'll get that stake we need.*

He sobered then and began to watch the man across the table from Lucky. His name was Stoner, a miner who worked for Yellow

Star. Stoner's eyes were red from too much whiskey and he was losing steadily.

Now he threw down his cards, growling, "Let's have some new pasteboards."

Lucky smiled as he raised his hand to one of the bartenders, signaling for a fresh deck. The other players exchanged glances, but Joe kept watching Stoner, seeing the sullen way the miner stared at Lucky. Joe's nerves tightened a little. He knew Stoner was sore because he was losing and pretty soon he'd accuse Lucky of cheating. So Joe watched the man because it was Joe's job to keep down trouble.

There was a whiskey bottle at Stoner's elbow and his eyes were mean. Lucky must have known what was coming, but he went on playing with his usual calm. He didn't look around at Joe; he didn't need to, because Joe was always there, ready for anything.

"You fumbled that last one, fella."

Stoner was on his feet, his chair kicked back out of the way, and he was glaring at Lucky Dan while his hand hung close to his gun. Lucky just sat there smiling at him and when Lucky spoke his voice was soft as always.

"You're a poor loser, friend."

"You damned tinhorn," Stoner said.

Big Joe stepped away from the support post. He was a mountain of a man but he didn't make much noise when he walked. He came around the table and moved in close to Stoner.

"Let's take a walk, mister," Joe said.

Stoner turned to face him and Stoner was trying to get his gun out. Joe's fist traveled no more than six inches, but it went deep into the miner's stomach. Stoner turned loose of his gun and bent over, his face gray. While he was in that position, Joe hit him again, this time on the jaw.

That was all there was to it and it was so quick and neat that only those close to the table were aware of what had happened. Joe caught Stoner as he started to sag, kept him on his feet and carried him through the swinging doors.

Behind him, Lucky Dan said, "Shall we continue, gentlemen?"

When Joe had thrown the miner into the street, he dusted his hands and came back inside. Lucky Dan looked up from his cards and smiled at him.

Joe grinned.

HE WENT back to his position behind Lucky's chair, folded his arms across his chest and leaned again with one shoulder against the support post.

"Hello, muscles."

He looked around and Lily Dunstan was standing there, smiling at him. Lily knew how to smile, too, a slow curving of her lush red mouth, but Joe didn't smile back. He watched her move over to Lucky's table and he knew he should be a little nicer to her. After all, she was the owner of the place, but there was something about her that Joe didn't like.

For one thing, she spent too much time around Lucky, and Joe couldn't figure why Lucky, who had a wife like Jeanie, wanted to pay attention to the likes of Lily.

It was late when the poker game broke up and Lucky Dan cashed in his chips. The crowd had thinned out, but Lily was still there, standing at one end of the bar with her eyes on Lucky.

"Ready to go?" Joe asked.

With his eyes on Lily, Lucky said, "I've got a little something I want to talk over with Lily."

Joe shuffled his feet. "Jeanie's going to start worrying if you don't get home pretty soon."

Still looking at Lily, Lucky said, "You tell Jeanie I'll be along in a little while."

"Okay," Joe said, and he tramped toward the slatted doors. Going out he glanced back over his shoulder and saw Lily and Lucky standing at the bar. Their glasses were lifted in a toast and they were smiling at each other.

The camp was new and the smell of raw lumber was in Joe's nose as he walked down the dark street. All around him the mountain was scarred with mine shafts, but they were just so many holes in the ground to Joe.

He came to a cabin on the edge of town and gave a familiar rap. Heels tapped lightly inside and the door opened and Jeanie was there, the lamplight in her dark hair. Her face was small and her eyes were large and held a touch of sadness.

"Hello, Jeanie," Joe said.

She smiled at him and glanced into the darkness. "Where's Lucky?"

"Had some business to take care of," Joe told her. "He'll be along in a little while, he said."

Jeanie said, "Would you like a cup of coffee, Joe?"

"I don't want to put you to no bother."

"No bother," Jeanie said. She went over to the makeshift cupboard to get a cup and Joe watched her. He remembered the day she and Lucky had gotten married, the way she'd looked then. You wouldn't have thought then that she'd ever look sad again. That had been two years ago.

Joe supposed it was kind of hard on Jeanie, knocking around the country like they did, but it wouldn't always be that way. As soon as Lucky had a stake, they were going to start a ranch. They'd settle down.

When Jeanie had brought his coffee, she sat down at the table across from him and Joe saw the book she had been reading. A little black book of poems that she'd had a long time.

Joe took a sip of the coffee and said, "Read to me, Jeanie."

She smiled at him. "Which one?"

"Anything."

He sat still, the coffee forgotten as she started to read. He watched her lips move and listened to the soft sound of her voice. He didn't understand the poem, but he liked the way she spoke the words. And while she read thoughts filled his mind and he saw himself as he really was—a man with strength in his hands and nothing else. Except for Lucky Dan, he'd never get anyplace, never have a stake. Except for Lucky Dan, he'd never have met a girl like Jeanie.

Joe's coffee cup was empty and Jeanie had just closed the book when Lucky Dan came in. He was smiling as he went over to the table and bent down to kiss Jeanie. Joe watched him.

"A big night, honey," Lucky said. "Won't be long now till we can start that ranch."

Jeanie smiled but her eyes didn't light up the way they had a year ago. Joe felt ill at ease. He got up and moved toward the door.

"What's your hurry?" Lucky asked.

"Think I'll turn in."

"Aw, it's early yet. Let's break out that bottle we been saving. Have a little party, just the three of us." Lucky's face was flushed and Joe wondered how many drinks he'd had with Lily.

"Not tonight," Joe said. "I got to get some shuteye."

He went out and around back to the shed where he had fixed up a bed. His thoughts were troubled and it was a long time before he went to sleep.

THE next morning Joe got up early and went for a walk beyond the town. There was a chill in the air that caused him to remember the warm sunshine down in the valley. He wished they could have stayed down there. It was a nice place, a quiet little town where the people weren't always in a hurry like up here.

There were cattle ranches down there where a man could get a riding job. It had been a long time since he'd had a rope in his hand. His face gentled as he thought of it and then he swore softly. You couldn't get anywhere working for forty a month.

He hadn't seen much money but it had been good being around Lucky and Jeanie. And Lucky was just that—lucky. They'd get a stake. And the three of them had had some mighty good times together.

Joe walked on and presently he came to a tree beside the trail and drew up, staring at the grim shape that hung from one of the limbs. The sight chilled him even though it was not unusual in a camp without law. Joe was still there when Matt Holland, foreman of the Yellow Star mine, came down the road on a black gelding.

Holland pulled up, a big man with a straight mouth and a firm jaw. He looked at Joe and nodded toward the hanging man.

"He was a thief and he got what was coming to him."

"Stealing ain't right," Joe said.

Holland looked straight at him. "Does your boss know that?"

Joe wet his lips. "What are you getting at, mister?"

"I don't like the way you threw one of my boys out of the Gilded Lily last night."

Joe said steadily, "He got out of line."

Holland folded his big hands over the horn. "Maybe he did and maybe he didn't. But I'm going to tell you something and you can pass it on to your boss. We know how to handle crooks in this camp."

"Lucky Dan is no crook."

"That fella claimed he wasn't, either." Holland nodded again toward the tree. "But we knew better. There's no law here yet and until there is, we'll handle things the way we see fit. You tell your gambling friend that he better play it straight because I'll be keeping my eye on him."

"Lucky never plays it any other way," Joe said.

Holland rode on toward the camp and after a moment, Joe turned and followed.

When Joe came to the creek below the cabin, he saw Jeanie filling a bucket with water. She looked tired, he thought, as though she hadn't slept well.

"Morning, Jeanie," Joe said.

She gave him a smile and turned to stare out across the mountain toward the valley. Joe watched her, aware of the way the morning sun touched her hair.

Joe said, "You liked it down in the valley, didn't you?"

"More than any place I've ever been." She answered without looking at him. "It's like the place where I was born, clean and quiet and friendly."

"We'll go back there one of these days," Joe told her. "Lucky said we would. You won't have to live in a shack like this no more."

"Sure, Joe," she said, but she didn't look like she believed it. Joe studied her, wondering why her mouth had tightened up and her eyes had turned bitter.

After a moment, Jeanie sighed and smiled at him. "I'd better get back and fix Lucky's breakfast."

"I'll carry the water for you," Joe said.

Lucky was still sleeping when they got to the cabin, so Joe set the bucket down and went out. He had always taken his meals with them, but now for some reason he wanted to be by himself.

JOE had breakfast at the Miners' Cafe. The food wasn't as good as what Jeanie cooked, but it filled the empty spot in his stomach. He finished the last of his coffee and went out, stopping in front of the place to roll a cigarette. He saw Lily Dunstan drive down from the livery stable in a shining red-wheeled buggy. She pulled up in front of the saloon and sat there as if she were waiting for someone.

Because he didn't have anything else to do, Joe stood in front of the eating place, smoking and killing time. He could see the basket on the seat beside Lily and he figured she was going on a picnic. Joe's cigarette was almost smoked down when Lucky Dan came along the street, walking straight toward the Gilded Lily.

Joe felt a sickness creep into his stomach as he watched Lucky go up to the buggy, saw Lily Dunstan smile and pat the seat beside her. Lucky climbed in and took the reins. They were smiling at each other as the buggy rolled down the street. And then Joe saw something that caused his insides to tighten. Jeanie Galloway was standing on the porch of the general store, a forlorn looking figure as she stared after the buggy.

Turning away, Joe walked down the street in the opposite direction. Once he looked back and saw Jeanie walking slowly toward the cabin.

When Joe reached the end of the street, he came back on the other side, walking heavily, unmindful of the flow of traffic along the street, the creaking ore wagons, the heavy freight outfits. He went into the Gilded Lily and sat down at a corner table and stared at nothing.

The bartender called across the room, "You want a drink?"

Joe shook his head without looking at the man and went on staring into space, thinking of Lucky and Jeanie, of how much joining up with another man's luck was supposed to have meant to him.

He was still sitting there when Lily Dunstan came in that afternoon. She passed a few words with the bartender and without even a glance in Joe's direction, went into her office and closed the door. Joe stared at the door for a few minutes with bitter eyes and then he got up and walked across the room.

Lily was sitting at her desk when Joe came in. She looked up and smiled and said, "Hello, muscles."

She was pretty, all right, and Joe knew it would be easy to take a shine to her, but he wondered why Lucky couldn't see that you couldn't have a woman like this and Jeanie at the same time.

Joe looked at her and he had to fumble for his words. Finally he said, "Ain't there plenty of fellas around here without you picking on Lucky?"

"It just happens that Lucky's the only one I want," Lily said, still smiling.

"Lucky's married."

Lily leaned back in her chair, her bosom tight against the bodice of her dress. "What does that make me?"

"Something pretty low if you don't leave him alone."

She sat up straight and the smile was gone

now. "Who do you think you are, coming in here trying to tell me what to do?"

"Lucky's my friend," Joe said. "And so's his wife."

"I've seen her," Lily said through slanted lips. "She doesn't look like much to me."

Anger came up in Joe, swift and hot. He went around the desk, grabbed Lily by the shoulders and jerked her to her feet. There was fear in her now and she tried to twist away, but Joe held on and shook her until her teeth rattled.

"Don't you say nothing about Jeanie."

Joe turned loose of Lily then and she reeled against the wall, her eyes wide, her breath coming hard and fast. After a moment the fear went out of her and anger came back.

She said in a low voice, "We'll see if she's good enough to hold Lucky, to keep me from taking him away from her."

Joe moved toward her and Lily backed away, sliding along the wall. But he wasn't sure of himself. He didn't know just what he would do when he reached her. He stopped and looked at her, a sense of helplessness filling him.

Lily smiled. "If you had any brains you'd know that you don't mean anything to Lucky."

"Lucky and me have been together a long time." Joe stood and stared at her, the frustration still working on him.

Lily laughed again. "You're just somebody Lucky can use. You poor damn fool, why don't you wake up?"

Joe stood there, staring at her for a moment longer. Then he turned and stumbled toward the door and Lily screamed after him, "You ever lay your big hands on me again and I'll kill you."

HE DIDN'T turn around and he didn't bother to close the door when he went out. The bartender and some of the customers stared at him, but he kept his eyes on the swinging doors and went through them and up the street.

The sun was going down, staining the mountains with its red flush, but Joe wasn't aware of the sunset's beauty. All he could think of was that something had happened to Lucky Dan. Something had come between him and Jeanie, something that had put shadows in Jeanie's eyes.

The answer came to Joe then. The three of them had to get away from this town, go back to where they had been happy. He'd talk to Lucky, make him see that was the only thing to do.

Jeanie opened the door and let Joe in. Without saying anything, she turned and walked listlessly over to the stove. He stood there in the center of the room and stared at her.

"Jeanie, what's the matter with your face?"

She moved the coffee pot around on the stove, not looking at him. "It's nothing, Joe. I went to turn the damper and burned myself on the stove pipe."

"Turn around, Jeanie, and look at me."

"It's nothing, Joe. I'm all right."

He went over and put his hand on her arm and pulled her around. "You're lying, Jeanie. Lucky slapped you, that's what he did."

"No, Joe. It happened the way I said."

Joe shook his head. "You saw him with that woman today and when he came back, you two had an argument, and he hit you."

Jeanie looked down at the floor, a touch of bitterness in her eyes. "It doesn't matter, Joe. Nothing matters any more."

Joe felt a sickness growing and spreading in him. He said miserably, "He didn't know what he was doing, Jeanie. That woman, she's done something to him."

"It doesn't matter, Joe," Jeanie said in a dull voice.

"It matters, Jeanie. He loves you and you love him."

She still didn't look at him. "It's all over, Joe. It's been over for a long time."

"Don't say that, Jeanie. I'll talk to him, get him to leave here."

She looked at him then and he saw the mist in her eyes and heard her say, "It's too late, Joe."

He swallowed hard and there was a heaviness inside him. Finally he said, "Pack your things and be ready to leave tonight."

When she didn't answer, he turned and went outside and back up the street.

It was dark now and the lamps had been lighted inside the Gilded Lily. Joe went in and saw Lucky at a corner table, idly rifling a deck of cards. Lucky was alone and there was no sign of Lily Dunstan.

"Hello, Joe," Lucky said when Joe came over.

Joe sat down and looked at him, not say-

ing anything. Lucky kept shuffling the cards and there was a faint smile on his face.

He said, "Lily tells me you were kind of rough on her."

"She's no good, Lucky."

"She can do me a lot of good, Joe." Lucky laid the deck down and leaned back in his chair. "What's come over you, Joe? Don't you figure I know what I'm doing any more?"

"I don't like the way things are shaping up, Lucky. It used to be you and Jeanie and me, and now it ain't the same."

"You're imagining things, Joe."

"No, I ain't. Something's wrong. I've been stringing along with you, Lucky, and things were all right till we got here."

"You're talking crazy, Joe. I'm after a stake, some big dough to set me up for life."

"Then you won't leave?"

Annoyance stirred in Lucky's eyes and then it was gone and he smiled. "The setup's too good to walk away from, Joe. Stop worrying. Everything's going to be all right."

Joe studied him, thinking, *Hitting Jeanie don't seem to bother him any. . . .*

"Come on, Joe and snap out of it," Lucky said gently.

Joe stood up, a sick, empty feeling inside him. He looked at the deck of cards and touched it absently, listening to Lucky say, "Go on over and have a drink and you'll feel better. Ought to be somebody wanting a game pretty soon."

Usually Joe didn't drink anything but beer, but now the need for whiskey was strong in him. He went over to the bar, where there were a lot of miners, Matt Holland, foreman of the Yellow Star among them.

Holland finished his drink and spoke to the man next to him, "I think I'll play a little poker."

Holland was looking across the room at Lucky when he said it, and then the big miner turned and walked with firm, deliberate steps toward Lucky's table. The bartender leaned over and spoke to Joe in a worried voice, "You better be ready for trouble. Holland's out to get Lucky."

There was a dry feeling in Joe's mouth as he crossed the room. Holland had sat down across from Lucky and Lucky was shuffling the cards, his handsome face expressionless as he looked at the mine foreman. Joe put his back against the wall and Lucky smiled at him, as if nothing was wrong, as if this was just another night with the two of them working together, Joe ready to stop any trouble that started.

Joe saw the tight set of Matt Holland's face and remembered the man hanging from the tree. The rough and swift justice of a mining camp without law.

Other men began to drift over to the table and they stood behind Holland, a tight, silent group, waiting, Joe knew, for Lucky to make a slip. But Lucky would play it straight tonight. He wouldn't be fool enough to try dealing off the bottom of the deck in this game.

Joe put his back against the wall and time dragged with a terrible kind of slowness. The two players were about even and Holland was watching Lucky with a sharp intentness, waiting for him to make that one slip. But Lucky kept his hands on the table and was very careful about the way he handled the cards.

Lily Dunstan came over and stood beside Lucky and he smiled at her. Joe looked at them, thinking, *He's throwing Jeanie over for that. He's getting set to throw me over, too. He's rigged up something that'll get me—maybe even tonight. He's just looking for a stake for himself, though it was a slip when he said it. . . .*

WITH hands that weren't steady, Joe reached for his tobacco sack and slowly rolled a smoke. While he was fumbling for a match, Lucky glanced at him and nodded at the box of matches on the table. Joe stepped over and picked them up, stumbling against Lucky as he did so.

"Sorry, Lucky."

"You must have had more than one drink," Lucky said frowning at him.

Joe moved back against the wall. He could see Lily glaring at him, but he ignored her and kept his eyes on the players, feeling the tension that was heavy in the room. Lucky laid down his cards, four aces, and showed Holland a mocking smile as he raked in the pot.

"Lots of time yet," Holland murmured.

"Your deal," Lucky said as he stacked his chips.

Holland picked up the cards and started to shuffle them and then he stiffened, eyes pinned on a pocket of Lucky's coat. The smile froze on Lucky's face as he followed

the miner's gaze, saw the edge of a piece of pasteboard. One of the miners behind Holland stepped forward and jerked the card out of Lucky's pocket and Lucky made no move to stop him, but sat there numbly, staring at the black ace of spades the man laid on the table.

"Holding out one, huh?" Holland said.

Lucky looked as if he wanted to say something and couldn't. His breath made a thin, sharp sound in the stillness and Joe saw the fear spring into his eyes as Holland shoved his chair back. Lucky sent a desperate glance at Joe.

Watch them, Joe. . . .

Joe didn't move. There was a tight hurting in his throat, but he kept his hand away from his gun, watching the miners close in. Lucky's chair scraped back and his eyes were wild now.

"Joe, for God's sake—"

"I'm sorry, Lucky," Joe said in a low voice. "I had you figured all wrong. You never were any good."

Sweat ran down into Lucky's eyes. "Help me, Joe. We're friends, pals. We'll leave like you said, go back to the valley. Anything you want, Joe, but you've got to stop them."

"It's too late, Lucky," Joe said, and he walked out of the saloon. On leaden legs he moved down the street, not looking back when he heard the sound of voices and the tramp of feet. His throat was hurting and his eyes were smarting, but he hitched up the buggy that they had come here in, and went down to the cabin.

"We're leaving, Jeanie," he said. "I'm taking you down to the valley."

"Lucky's not coming?"

"No, Lucky's staying here."

He saw the relief in her eyes and knew that some day she would find a good man who would make her forget Lucky Dan. He put her things in the buggy and he didn't tell her he had slipped that card in Lucky's pocket.

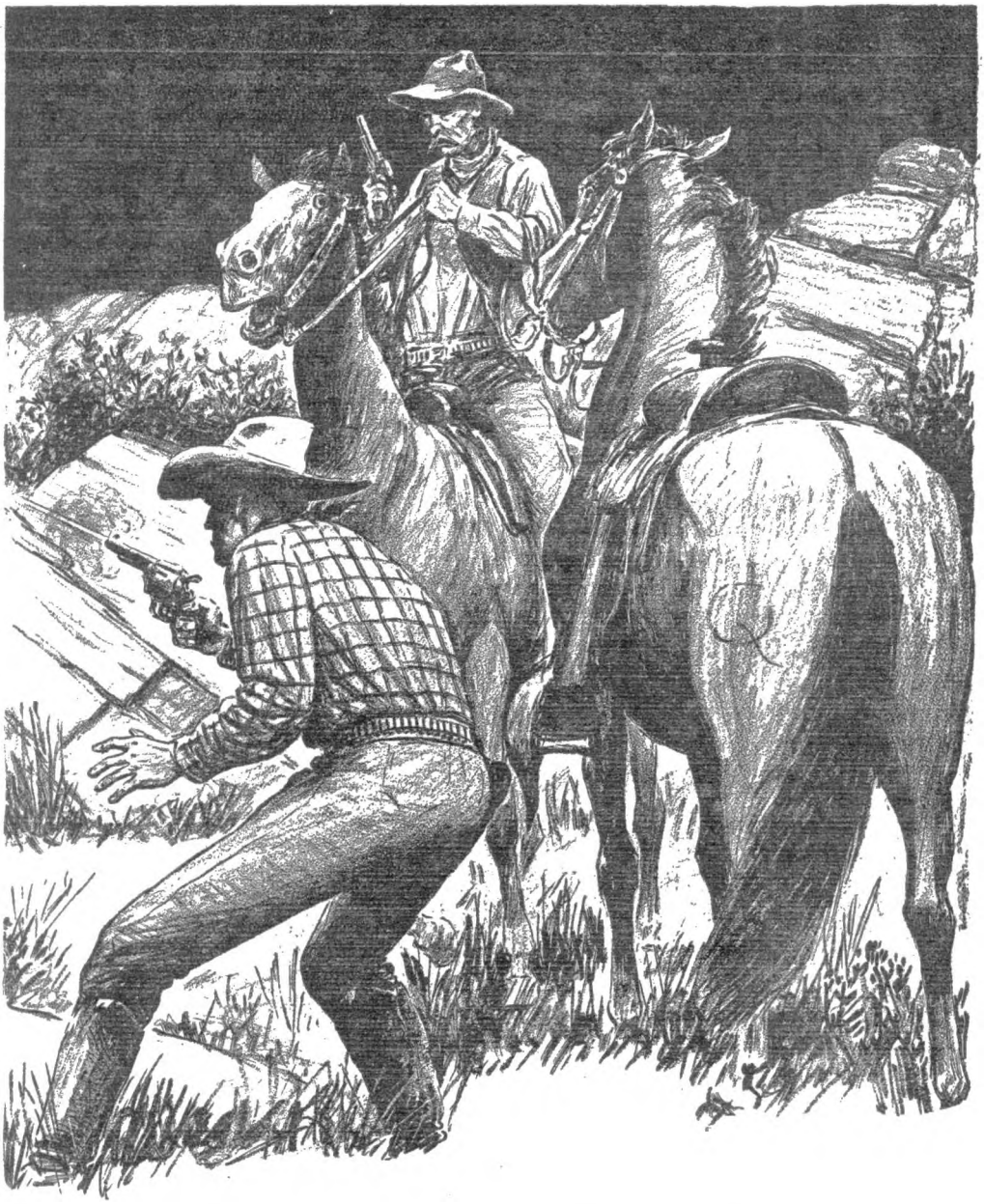
Just he and Lucky were the only ones who knew that.

He helped Jeanie into the buggy and they drove out of town, silent and not looking back. If they had they could have seen the figure swaying gently in the breeze. Lucky Dan had dealt his last hand.

Hell was building on the range his father's guns had won—till his own forgotten sixes thundered out Jim Blackland's final challenge—

SAVE ME A GRAVE

By GIFF CHESHIRE



HE SAW Penny beckoning to him hesitantly from the end of the corn row beyond the fence. He touched his hat and with deep misgivings swung his horse at a slant toward her side of the dusty road. She came over to the fence carrying a hoe, and he was astonished at the change the weeks of drought had wrought in her. Her face was thin, drawn, too weathered for the fine texture of her features and hair. He did not like those marks. He tried to bring up a greeting to Penny Ransome, who hated him beyond reason, with the raw-nerved intensity of all the nesters on this hot and hostile land.

Before he could speak Penny said, "Jim Blackland, I've been wanting to see you." Her gaze unconsciously searched his side for a gun she didn't find. The talk of trouble was open and frequent now.

She wore the cheap calico of the nester women but the limp, dusty dress fitted her

slim figure to a nicety. Her hair was reddish brown, pulled back in plain and hurried severity, and hers was a strong face, Jim had always thought. The eyes that watched him were really kind and level, and the harried look was of this summer's doing.

He knew, with an odd sense of separation, that they regarded a tall, tense, work-leaned figure, not handsome, just a cattleman born and reared.

"You surprise me, ma'am," Jim said, and he grinned at her. "It's struck me you've gone out of your way to avoid me. I've noticed Duke Kent helping you to do it."

She straightened, her gaze shifting. "Lately I've wanted to ask you to change your stand about the water."

"Now, Duke Kent never put you up to that," Jim drawled. "Kent means to kill me, as he's made plain. Figures he's got to do something to earn his pay, I reckon, before you nesters terminate the hire of his gun."

He saw her wince, but her gaze came back in a full bitter sweep. "That kind of remark means you're lying. I've thought you were begging the water, but I never thought you a man that's afraid."

Jim shook his head, and his glance went beyond her. Her words, oddly struck no temper from him. A corn field could be a hot place on any July afternoon. The gray, clay-lumped soil seemed to simmer. The wind swept through the lazily murmuring stalks, bearing the unpleasant scent of tortured plant life. The sun, quartering down a cloudless sky, spilled a flood of coppery light across the field, creating shadows within the rows that were appalling because they made the heat seem more intense.

He had seen her toiling here, at the handles of a creaking cultivator, with one of her younger brothers astride a sweating old mare. He had always sensed bitterness in her at this lot, and it stood now on her heat-flushed face, directed at him instead of the land that deserved it. He couldn't blame her. Heat, dirt and a pretty woman were a terrible combination. He could relieve it only a trifle by giving in to the nester's demand for irrigation water and opening his dam.

In a kinder voice, Jim said, "How come you figured you could persuade me, Penny? I've already turned down your men."

"You were nice to me once. Maybe I put you down for a decent sort."

He shrugged. "I thought I was fair to the lot of you, at first. I saw twenty families of hardscrabble nesters gobble up range I need bad. Because the government says you've got the right to take it. Now it's my water you want, and pretty soon it'll be my shirt." His jaw tightened. "There you've got no rights."

He saw her flinch. "Your water? All of it? You couldn't fill a lard pail in the lower creek!"

"There's the same flow in the lower creek as in the upper," he pointed out. "What's behind the dam was spring runoff. My dad built that dam twenty years ago. You nesters wouldn't have any more water if it wasn't there. His voice was firm but reasonable. He dared not lose his temper and tell her what all he knew—that the trouble brewing here sprang from an old hate, before Penny's time.

She raised a hand. He saw the anger of her face give way to a beseeching humility. It was hard to say no to that face, that voice, and Jim Blackland knew his moment of uncertainty. Then he saw his father in the eye of his mind, and the two-fisted legacy that had come down with the Totem brand, and his eyes hardened.

"I can't risk four thousand steers. You hate to see your garden dry up, but you've never seen a droughted cow."

Her pride surged back. In an intense voice, she said, "Then Anse Monroe's right! You want to see us drought out so you can get back your range! My people won't stand for that. You don't seem to realize that you're asking for trouble. We'll get water. And we'll get it from the only place we can."

Jim looked at her for a long moment. "I know about trouble," he said softly. "I know a lot about it. Deeper trouble than you dream of, right now." He touched his hat and rode on.

THE nester colony was scattered across a dozen sections of what had once been Totem range. Ugly shacks and outstructures stood at lonely distances upon open land that was never meant for more than graze. Grainfields lay ripe and burned at meager half-maturity, with garden patches showing the same dry lack of life. Jim Blackland laughed at their irrigating ditches, though he was not a vengeful man. Their pitiful little scraped-earth dams had gone out in the spring fresh-

et, as he had warned the nesters they would. Now the creek had dried to nothing, as he had also predicted.

But he did not laugh at the people he saw watching from distant dooryards, identifying the brand on his horse, drilling him with hostile eyes. The enmity of this community had become a palpable thing. They had taken his land and now hated him because they wanted more.

And now there would be trouble. They would try to take water by force. And not one of the dunderheads understood their leader's real reason for egging them on.

Quiller ran Ring Q, on beyond the colony. It had struck Jim as odd that not a foot of Ring Q graze had been claimed by the settlers, though there was no proof that Quiller had brought them in. Quiller was well-fixed now, but hatred was a thing he could not drop. That which he bore Totem went back to the time when Pike Blackland nearly killed him over the rustling with which Quiller had got his start. Now Quiller wanted Totem and revenge and was out to get both in one big play.

The nesters were not all like Penny Ransome. His first sight of her had come in town, before he knew her background. No woman had ever stirred him as she had at first glimpse. He thought about her a long while, afterward, remembering every detail of her face and smooth, simply clad figure. There were times when a man knew at once when he wanted something above all else.

But the next time he saw her it was like this, hoeing corn, one day when business took him through the nester colony. It seemed to him, that day, that she gave him a glance of quickened interest, of friendly remembrance, and he had been the one to turn cold at the shock of discovering they were on opposite sides of a growing controversy. He had realized that if he followed his inclinations it would make him susceptible to her interests and sympathies, a thing that would only lead to Totem's ruin.

He conceded the whole Ransome family to be above the common run in the colony. They seemed to be good people and certainly were clean, orderly and hardworking. But as for the bulk of them— Anse Monroe, their big wheel, was typical, a raw-boned, slump-shouldered, whining-voiced man who relieved his deficiencies by blaming the world for his troubles. He was the perfect cat's-paw for Sol Quiller, and he had an immature son who was a show-off and given to little tricks that kept Jim annoyed.

Jim regretted that he hadn't put up a last-ditch fight on the question of the homestead land. But he didn't mean to give an inch in the squabble over water. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. His father had had a favorite saying: *"Any man can make an honest bumble. I'll tolerate one. But there's a couple of things I won't stand for. A dumb mistake or an innocent one made twice."* In all the long, sternly-disciplined years of growing up, Jim had taken one licking for a repeated blunder. He had never needed another.

He rode into Ring Q and left his horse at the ranch yard hitchbar, curious and disturbed at the swayback horses and rickety rigs he saw there. The cook showed himself in the cookshack doorway and disappeared with too much haste. At first there was no one else to be seen. Jim went up the walk and found the aggregation on the big side veranda, which was heavily screened by an aged wisteria vine.

He paused on the top step. Duke Kent was there, his shoulders pulled back, face hostile, arrogant and vaguely speculative. He was shorter than Jim but wider through the shoulders. He had the smooth fluid motions of a fighter. He had showed up a few weeks back with no business he troubled to explain, though he had grown friendly with the nesters. Jim had often seen him and Penny Ransome together.

Kent said, "Howdy, Blackland," but the others offered no greeting.

Jim nodded. "How are you, Kent?"

"Still inclined to get riled when I hear how you're treating these settlers."

"Do I make the weather around here?" Jim's tone was light, but cold had touched his heart. At each of half a dozen encounters Kent had ridden high, using an insolent manner and baiting words, crowding trouble. It hadn't been hard to figure out. Every earmark proclaimed Kent to be a gunman. The attachments he had made here filled out the picture and this meeting at Quiller's confirmed Jim's suspicions. Kent was here to deal with Jim Blackland, and the settlers were behind him.

"Seems to me you try to play the Almighty," Kent said in his even, superior way.

The door swung open. Quiller came out,

followed by the nester leader, Ansel Monroe. Quiller had the head and face of a bulldog, and his shoulders were broad and bunchy. The bruskness of his manner contrasted sharply with Monroe, who was loose, ungainly, a man whose looks and ways spoke of cunning. The man had been the first squatter to come in, which had given him a kind of leadership.

THE pair apparently had been closeted for a consultation, with the half dozen men on the porch awaiting a decision. They still made a silent, sullen group, and Jim noted that Penny's father was not present.

Quiller's jaw set. He cut in bruskly, "Tend to your own knitting, Duke."

"Why," Jim said, "that's what Kent's doing. Trying to crowd me into a corner where I'll have to fight him. Isn't that what you brought him here for, Sol?"

He saw surprise leap into the faces about him. Quiller's lips parted and he sucked in an audible breath. Monroe's boy looked excited, hoping for trouble here and now. He beat his father a mile in aggressiveness.

"And so far you've lacked the stomach for it!" Kent snapped. "I see you're not wearing iron."

Jim shook his head. "You don't seem very bright, Kent. I'm not a gunfighter. I raise beef."

Kent's lips pulled back in a sneer. "There comes a time, Blackland, when a man fights or crawls. It don't matter to me which you do. These settlers are my friends. I don't aim to set on my hands while they drought out so you can get back what you call your range."

Kent's glance played askance at the settlers. The man didn't expect anything here, with Jim unarmed. He jumped and seized the front of Kent's checkered shirt at the open collar. His other fist swung in a smash that took the grin from Kent's face. Blood streamed from mashed lips. The man's hat went sailing. Jim rocked the gunman's head with two short, hammering punches that landed hard.

The assault drove Kent off balance. Jim yanked him forward, out of the stunned group of watchers. Kent got to his feet. He drove again at Kent, tumbling down the steps with him. It was give and take after that. Kent bit, kicked, slugged and gouged, driving a heavy punishment into Jim, who never slacked pace. Their shirts were ripped to sweaty tatters, and the sweat was mixed with blood.

There came a moment when they had to halt and stare at each other in exhaustion. Kent's loose-pouched gun had fallen free in the fracas. But his fingers sought it, absently brushing the holster. He was the killer in full flame now. Jim rested no longer. He made a driving, hunched lunge forward, his left arm feinting, his right fist powering through as Kent came in, deceived by the feint. Kent took the hard blow in his midriff and Jim heard his blasting breath.

Kent tried to get up, his mouth open and noisily sucking wind. His face was a deep red, a glistening and battered montrosity. He made a whimpering noise, a sound of unaccepting impotence, his puffed eyes blazing fury. But exhaustion had him and he couldn't rise. It was no final victory, Jim knew. Hate stood out from the man. The killer was in command.

"Lord A'mighty," somebody breathed in the gallery. Jim flung a glance to see bewilderment on the slack face of Anse Monroe. The face of the Monroe boy had an unwholesome light. He had tasted what he wanted and, regardless of the outcome, was deeply aroused. Jim didn't like that look. The other nesters seemed astonished, puzzled. Kent had built himself up for a mighty tough customer and now was fallen and there was shock in this for the settlers.

Jim panted to Quiller, "If you're smart you'll send him packing instead of forcing this trouble! If these squatters were smart, they'd know you're only playing them for plain fools!"

Quiller stroked his heavy jaw, taken aback. Kent was getting up, his legs contracting convulsively, his hands pushing drunkenly at the ground.

When he was at a swaying stand, the gunman said, "Blackland, there'll be another time."

"You sure seem set on it," Jim agreed.

"The next time!" Kent panted, "have a gun on your hip! I'm telling you before all these witnesses!"

"Nobody tells me, Kent," Jim returned. His voice was steady, restrained, but the knowledge was stirring in him that Kent wanted more than killer pay now. The beating had been vicious, humiliating, and the gunman had lost in a way that could not be

alibied. It was a gall-and-wormwood that had made the man a dangerous enemy.

Jim glanced at Quiller and said, "In the long run you're responsible, Sol. For whatever you people have cooked up. Remember that." He walked toward his horse.

HE HOPED that Penny would have quit her eternal hoeing of the parched corn patch. She hadn't. Jim had to pass there again, and he wore his battered, bloody appearance with stiff pride. He heard her call at a distance up the corn row and was of a mind to pass unheeding. Then impulse halted him. He swung the horse, got stiffly from the saddle and walked to the fence.

Penny came up with her hoe. Her tired face showed sudden concern as she regarded him. "I was afraid of that!" she breathed. "You went to Quiller's and ran into that meeting. I would have warned you, but when you left I was so mad I didn't care." It was almost an apology, and this amazed him.

"It's one man's work," Jim returned. "Kent came off worse."

Penny's voice turned friendly, almost pleading. "Why can't you be reasonable? My family is having no hand in it, but we know what's talked. They're going to release that water by force and rely on the law's setting them free. They know you'll put up a fight and somebody will be hurt, killed. They're desperate enough to bank on that for sympathy."

Jim shook his head. "Water's only a part of it, Penny, and I'd share if that was all there is to it. But Quiller's got bigger irons in the fire. It's an old enmity between him and the Totem brand. You people stepped into an old war."

Penny looked incredulous. "I don't believe that."

He sighed, crossed to his horse and swung up. This was the hard part. This final riding away.

Though it was at the tail of the afternoon, most of his crew was still out on the graze. Jim went to the big house and cleaned up, which left him feeling no better. The back-porch mirror showed a face he hardly recognized. He ached to the marrow, and dread rode him like a saddle.

He was crossing to the cookhouse for a bracer of coffee when Matt Paine rode into the yard. Rugged and aging, Matt had been Totem's ramrod back in Jim's boyhood. He would keep the job, as far as Jim was concerned, until he voluntarily hung up his saddle.

Matt flung a stare at Jim's battered face and said, "Did you crawl into a wolf den for a snooze?"

Jim pulled the sore tissues of his face into a grin. "Maybe I was even more foolish. Went over to Ring Q and run into that ringy Duke Kent. We tangled. So bad we had a hard time getting untangled."

"Hope you left him with the most kinks," Matt breathed. He was erect in the saddle and his keen old eyes were troubled. "I seen Sam Robinson today. He's about the only decent hand Ring Q ever had on its payroll. He told me some things about that Kent. The cuss is some kind of kin of Sol's. He's got a bad record. Been up for two killings. He got off by proving the other fellow drew first."

"He never invented that," Jim grunted, "but he's maybe got good at it. If I'd had a gun I might have given him a chance to show how good."

Matt got down from his horse, spat into the dust and looked at Jim somberly. "He's braggy. When he's puffing hisself up to the boys in the bunkhouse he runs off plenty at the mouth. Robinson told me Kent hinted he was paid for them killings." He walked off toward the saddle corral, leading his horse.

Jim was at a cookhouse table sipping hot coffee when Matt reappeared. The ramrod's face still wore its brooding scowl. He got coffee and came out to the table. Throwing his long legs over the bench, he sat down across from Jim and said, "This thing has turned mean. Fist-whip a gunnie and you've got a sidewinder to watch. Down at the corral I started shakin'. It's either ague or the heebie-jeebies."

"Don't worry about it," Jim said. "But we've got to put a guard on the dam, starting now. You take care of that, Matt. I'll handle Kent."

"Like you would a lobo," Matt advised.

The remainder of Totem's crew was drifting in from the day's riding. With no appetite for supper, and even less for conversation, Jim left the cookhouse before the punchers came in to eat. At the front of the big house he could look down into the bottom and see the disputed water. The dam was

no elaborate structure, nor could the pond behind it be called a lavish hogging of water. Pike Blackland had gone to trouble and expense to erect the dirt fill and log gates blocking the creek, and Totem had never impounded anything but winter waste water.

But the thing crowding Jim now was Penny. She was young, overworked—she could be lonely, starved for fun. She needed a man, and there was this barrier between them, that he didn't know how to cross. It bothered him to think that no barriers would stop Kent.

Which was the better man? Jim ground out his cigarette with an angry heel. It was a serious matter to strap on a gun, in this day when one was infrequently required. A decent man did so only when there was no other recourse. Jim walked into the house and got the gun with which Pike Blackland had tamed a wilderness. He had taken care of it, keeping gun, holster and shell-belt well oiled. Now he strapped it on and went out, heading for the saddle corral.

WAGONTIRE was a flat, dimly glinting huddle of weathered buildings in the starlight when Jim looked down on it from the last rise. Kent would be here. Duke Kent was a man who craved movement, excitement, and Jim had heard of his nightly activities here in town. Riding on, Jim came onto the main street in settled, easy motion. At the corral he saw a group of men hunkered outside the pole fence, the regular assemblage of punchers in from the nearby range, men seeking diversion.

Jim's arrival excited only a friendly interest, but he knew that news of his fight, of Kent's challenge, might have got around by now. If a Ring Q puncher had been in town since the fight the word was out.

A man called, "Howdy, Jim. When did you start tom-catting?"

Jim hitched reins at the rack on the street. He had come to the corral only because it could give him information he wanted in a way that wouldn't draw too much interest.

"Duke Kent in town?" he asked.

He sensed a quickened interest. The word was around, and they were wondering if he was dodging a meeting or finally seeking it.

"Why yes," someone said. "Seen Kent at the Rosette just now. He's painting his nose. You better stay away from him."

"A good idea," Jim agreed. "But it happens I crave a drink in the Rosette." He left the hushed group and moved idly along the street.

Bright's mercantile was still open, and Jim went in, not wanting anything particularly except to kill a few moments time. Buying tobacco, he saw men hurry past the front windows, those who had been at the corral. He knew they were heading for the Rosette and its promise of excitement, and one of them might think it would be more exciting to warn Kent.

He spent a few moments in conversation with Bright then emerged onto the street. The town seemed quiet, but to him it had taken on an ominous temper. Eyes watched him from the hotel window as that curious, lightning-like phenomenon of a town grapevine went to work. Ahead three men crossed the dusty street together and moved into the Rosette.

Outwardly Jim gave this no more than a casual interest. The Rosette was as yet two doors down. Within he would come upon a dangerous and possibly forewarned man. Jim's mind dwelt on that thought, but there was no break in his stride. Then the Rosette's batwings swung out. A man came out, stared at Jim, then vanished again. Jim reached the doors and turned in.

All feeling left him in that instant. His purpose had become an equation that he had to balance with action. He felt the heated, inner air of the saloon, saw the usual crowd. He paused a second just inside to survey the group. He couldn't see Duke Kent, or any nesters. But half a hundred eyes regarded him from faces he knew well. They looked baffled, then somewhere a man laughed.

Jim tensed, anger flushing through him. It looked like a prank had been played on him, though no man in his right mind would trifle with a situation so deadly. He flung a scowl about the room.

A voice said, "If you're huntin' Duke Kent, Jim, he plumb evaporated. Word come in that you aimed to wet your whistle here."

For a moment Jim was numb with shock. "What is this?" he demanded. "Somebody's idea of fun?"

Rice Watson stood at the bar, a puncher from Hook, which lay north of Totem. He shook his head and said, "It is and ain't. Like the feller says, Kent was here but he sure

lit his shuck. Don't guess he realized we all knew why. Most of us just heard he give you warning. Hank Unsinger come in. He said loud and casual that you was in town and maybe we could get up a game. And right there Duke Kent got a sudden need for fresh air."

A sense of real disappointment ran in Jim. He could only stare.

"Come have a drink," Watson added. "You sure earned one."

Jim shook his head. "Thanks, Rice. Next time." He turned and went out.

Only then did weakness hit him. Distrusting his knees, he paused under the board awning to roll a cigarette, silently cursing his shaking fingers. He felt defeated, frustrated. A man did not easily face a thing like this. When he did, he deserved results.

Kent had been rattled, confronted with a fight he hadn't expected. His dodging the showdown he had crowded hungrily to this point meant that the fist-whipping had put a crack in his complacency. His gun-courage would not come back in full flood until he had a rigged situation.

Anxiety rode wtih Jim each mile as he left Wagontire and followed the worn trail to Totem. Each copse and rim and rearing rock became a menace that he defied. Tensions came and passed, time after time, but he found himself crossing the boundaries of his own range without incident.

The sound that came in the night, then, was hard to identify. Jim pulled down his horse, instantly on guard and listening with strained attention. Two gunshots, closely spaced, came to identify the first sound Shooting, at Totem. Jim drove in his spurs, lifting his horse to a pounding gallop. There was no more shooting, but his mouth was dry when he topped the last rise. Totem's in-range stretched serenely in the starlight. He hammered on, driving for the dam, knowing it was the scene of the trouble. He had the impression that the initial and following shots had come from two different guns.

He found two men at the dam, the guard Matt had stationed there, and another. The second man lay on the ground. Jim threw himself from his horse before it was at a ful stop.

"Who is it, Luke?" he asked the puncher

Luke Hudson's drawl was strained. "Monroe's smart-alec kid. They call him Monk Matt told me to lay low and try to catch a nester sneaking around the dam. This fool kid was trying to open the gate. He popped a shot at me when I yelled at him. I had to plug him." There was revulsion in Luke's voice.

"Dead?" Jim asked.

"Got him through the chest, but he's still breathing. His old man sent him on a job he was scared of hisself, I reckon."

"Maybe," Jim agreed. "Or maybe he was out on his lonesome to get a chunk of glory. We'll have to take him up to the house and get help."

"I reckon," Luke said. "But we ought to let him die where he lays and save ourselves some more hell. Here come the boys, I reckon."

"They can take him in," Jim said. "I'll ride over and tell Monroe. They'll have to send for the doctor."

TWO SIDES OF THE HILL

By M. KANE

There's one they tell about an old-timer who couldn't watch the big days die without doing something about it. It was noticed that he spent a lot of time at one particular lonely spot in the hills. Friends finally asked him what he did there.

"Know that hairpin bend in the road?" he said. "Well, I stand there with a mask and a gun, and hold up fellers in autos when they pass."

He wasn't joking. His interlocuter warned him he was courting arrest.

"Uh-uh," said the old-timer. "Soon's I've done a job, I duck over the hill to the other side of the road, take my mask off, and put on sheriff badge. When the feller comes along, I stop him and give back his valuables. Tell him I just caught the hombre that robbed him. It don't hurt anyone. And it's kind of exciting."

HE MOUNTED again and headed east, riding cross-country and thinking of the afternoon's meeting at Quiller's. It didn't seem likely that they would have decided to send young Monk on this mission. It must have been the show-off kid's own idea. It made no difference. There were the requirements of mercy to be met now, and it didn't matter that they involved the no-good son of a bitter enemy.

Monroe's land claim was on the far side of the nester colony. Jim rode boldly through the settlement, hearing the bark of distant dogs but encountering no one. He had forgotten Duke Kent momentarily, but he thought of Penny as he passed the Ransome place, wondering if he should ask her to come and be with Monroe's wife. Women bore the brunt of men's antagonism and violence. They so frequently inherited the job of trying to repair the damage. Jim rode on, dismissing the impulse. Penny would only hold him accountable for what had happened to young Monk, and that, at least, was something he could put off facing for a time.

Monroe's shack was dark in the distance as Jim drew near. Jim called a hallo from habit as he rode in. He called again, closer to the house, but wasn't answered. He swung down at the doorstep of the drab little shack. Once more he yelled for Monroe, and in a moment a woman's uneasy voice called out through the closed door.

"Who is it?"

"Jim Blackland. Where's your man?"

"He ain't here. What do you want, anyhow?"

Jim nibbled a swollen lip. He hated to tell the woman what had happened to her son.

"Know where Monk is?" he asked.

"With his pa, as far as I know. They never tell me." There was a whining complaint in her voice.

Jim turned around and mounted, unable to bring himself to tell her.

He had covered half the long and lonely distance to Wagontire when his horse showed sudden attention to some distant sound in the night. Jim pulled the animal to a quick halt and sat motionless, auditing the silence about him.

For all his caution he was unprepared for what happened. A voice came, soft and casual, and for a moment Jim couldn't locate its direction. But he recognized its owner.

"Put up your hands, Blackland!" Duke Kent called. "Then get that cayuse over. I don't want to gun you there."

For the moment Jim felt only the shock of complete bewilderment. He sensed that Kent was on top the rock to the left, flat there and motionless. They were miles from anywhere, and he couldn't understand why Kent had not knocked him out of the saddle and been done with it. But Kent had more respect for man's laws than for those of decency. He would dispose of his victim under circumstances that could be warped to his favor.

Kent warned sharply, "Stay right where you are, Blackland, and live a little longer. Anse took our horses off to keep them quiet. He'll fetch 'em back here any time I whistle."

"Anse? Was he in town with you?"

"Not with me. He was cheerin' up with rotgut. But we come out together. You made a showy play in there, Blackland, and it done you no good. But how come you're riding the wrong way?"

"I've been home and was going back to town," Jim told him.

"What for?"

"Then let's get him." A sharp whistle sounded. After that came a silence through which Jim sat motionless, knowing Kent had not taken the gun off his back. There was no audience here, no need for a flashy recklessness. Allowed to act according to his nature, Kent was as cowardly as they came.

It seemed a long while before Jim's mount paid attention to something ahead. Then Jim picked up the sound of cautiously moving horses. Suddenly they appeared on the forward trail, one ridden, the saddle of the other empty. The long, lank figure of Anse Monroe became recognizable as he rode up cautiously. The man kept his glance above Jim's head, which meant he was watching Kent.

"Put your hogleg on him while I climb down from here, Anse," Kent called. "We got him. All we have to do is make it look like we're the last ones on earth who could have killed him."

Monroe patently had been pressed into service and didn't like it. He kept shifting

in the saddle, and he seemed uncertain as he pulled up his gun. Jim fought a wild impulse to make his play now. The nester probably wasn't gun-handy, and his nerve wouldn't hold through much stress. But something rose in Jim's mind—thought of the errand that had originally brought him forth.

He said, "Anse, while you're keeping me here your boy's bleeding to death, if he's still alive. It looks like Monk made a fool play for glory. He snooped around the dam, tonight. One of my punchers plugged him through the chest. I was heading for the doctor when you sprung this big, brave trap."

He saw Monroe pull straight. But Kent's voice came in a quick, belittling snort. "You've sure turned tricky," Kent flung out. "But you're up against an old hand. We're going to take you to the middle of the nester colony. Then let the law figure out which one of twenty nesters might have plugged you."

"I guessed that," Jim answered. "Anse, you got any feeling for that boy?"

"Shut up!" Monroe yelped. "I ain't falling for that!" But he had his mouth open, and a spark of hope glimmered in Jim.

"Wouldn't you feel fine, Anse," Jim asked softly, "if you found out your boy's gone to face his Maker and you had murder on your hands? To my mind you were wrung in on this deal. I don't think you've got killing courage in you, yourself."

"It's a trick, Anse!" Kent snapped. "Blackland, shut up!"

"Can you prove what you claim?" Monroe asked, and his voice was soberly doubtful.

"No," Jim said. "But you know Monk. He's a show-off. Maybe his kid's vanity makes him try to show the kind of nerve you lack. He left home with you tonight, didn't he? How would I know that if I hadn't learned something about him? He's got a bullet hole in him, Anse. Every minute you and Kent hold me here takes him closer to death, if he isn't already there. And the time it'll take for you to get rid of me'll keep you from finding out for sure that much longer."

"That's enough, Blackland!" Kent rapped. "Anse, go fetch my horse over here."

"Wait a minute, Duke," Monroe said uneasily. "Monk could have done what Black-

(Continued on page 110)

"This fool kid popped a shot at me when I yelled. I had to plug him. . . ."

INJUN PROOF

There's never a fight but an Irishman wins it, even when it's between two other gents—both craving his crimson scalp!

JAMES PHELAN was up before the sun to grapple with his problem. The camp was not stirring yet, not even the cooks, and it struck him with a kind of awe that a thousand Irish could keep that still. A thousand men and a hundred teams, all laying track for Jack Casement and the Union Pacific! Wouldn't it be a fine thing and a proud thing to be a foreman for General Jack, and have that to brag about for the rest of your life? Wouldn't it, so?

This problem—how to get himself made

And because of the mighty workings within him, Phelan roared out, "We'll put 'em in their place—and that's underground!"

By WILLIAM ARTHUR BREYFOGLE

a foreman—was what had roused James Phelan so early. He wanted to think about it while his mind was still fresh and before the hurly-burly of the day swept him into its roaring current. It would take some contriving! Against such a field of contestants, it was not a distinction to be won simply by brawn and willingness. There were men James Phelan knew who would pick up an eight-foot tie and scratch an itching back with the end of it. Nobody heeded that, for an itching back is a common thing.

He sat on the end of yesterday's last rail, staring out over the Red Desert into the future, and he was so lost in thought that he didn't hear Terence Shea limping up behind. The little blacksmith was as gnarled and twisted as an old thorn, and as tough. Lame since Gettysburg, he made no concession to lameness, and he wore his battered hat at a truculent angle. He was carrying a Spencer rifle, and when he reached James Phelan, he set the butt down on a tie and cupped his hands about the muzzle, as if fondling the weapon.

"You didn't see one o' them Cheyenne devils?" he asked hopefully. "Or any o' that new lot, the Sioux?"

"I did not. Terence, what's a good way to get made a foreman?"

"There's no such thing among us blacksmiths. If I was Jack Casement, I'd bring up a field-piece, shotted with grape, an' I'd move their damn taypays for them! What are they but fleas on the dog o' Progress, and ain't we got a right to—"

"Is it foremen you'd take cannon to?" Phelan demanded, scandalized.

"Foremen? Let them wait their turn, till I've done with the redskins! Look at them lodges o' theirs, out beyond, and tell me, isn't that a galling thing?"

James Phelan looked, as he was bidden, but with no great interest. The Cheyennes were an old story, and it was not likely that the Sioux, camped a mile or two away now, would prove very different. The Indians hung on the flank of the advancing railway, exacting what toll they could. When devilment wrought strongly in them, the tracklayers snatched up their rifles a half-dozen times in one working day and sprang for their "prairie monitors"—the dugouts roofed with sheet iron from which they beat back the Indians' yelling charges. It slowed the work, and made General Casement swear.

A thought crept into the outermost circle of James Phelan's mind, like a jack-rabbit venturing into the edge of firelight. Terence Shea's angry voice frightened the thought away.

"Them to take their ease out there, the murderin' heathen, without so much as a sentry posted! That's what they think of us, and why wouldn't they, when we don't set to and clean them out?"

"We're here to build a railway! We don't draw three dollars a day for chasin' Cheyennes."

"And now the word's gone out, or the Cheyennes have whistled up their neighbors, the Sioux! If I was Jack Casement, I'd ballast this road with their bones!"

James Phelan sighed and stood up. "You're a man of contention, Terence, and no help to me at all! My heart's set on being made foreman and yours on mere slaughter! Come back and we'll get breakfast."

IT WAS a bad day for Phelan, tormented with the painful and unaccustomed processes of hard thinking. To be sure, he watched with something like his usual delight as the whole camp stirred noisily and prepared to go to work. That was the finest show a man could see anywhere! Away to hell and gone, the double line of the rails ran eastward, with the telegraph strung alongside, its wire dropping from the last pole into the office of the camp train. There was blue wood smoke from the cook stoves, and the chief bosses went leppin' up and down the line on horseback. Two locomotives had hauled up the supply train, and the wagons waited for ties and iron. Ahead of the camp train, horse-drawn trucks waited on the wagons; handlers snatched the stuff from the trucks, and Irishmen with sledges and wrenches spiked and bolted it into place.

What more could a man ask than to be a part of all that, and in a hot race with the Central Pacific, that Crocker was building with Chinamen? What more, but to be made a foreman? It was not higher pay James Phelan coveted but the pride of having an even greater part in this hurrying, roaring, back-breaking dream that was flinging the first railway across the continent.

His obsession persisted through the haste and din and hard work of the day. He swung his sledge with the best of them, but

it was easier to drive a spike than to knock an idea on the head. An idea was what he needed—something to bring him into notice! Steal the favorite squaw of the Cheyenne chief, maybe, and make her a hostage for the tribe's good behavior? But how was a man to tell which one the old devil favored above the rest, and did he care enough for any of them to make him behave himself? What if it didn't restrain him at all, but only stirred him up? Anyway, there would still be the Sioux.

He thought about Indians not by choice but because the Indians knew how to get themselves noticed, the way he wanted to do himself. Driving spikes was so familiar a rhythm by now that James Phelan could do it in his sleep. But the Indians, though almost as familiar, fell into no easy, unchanging pattern. They jerked at a man's sleeve, in a manner of speaking. They trod on the tails of an Irishman's coat. Try to ignore them, and you might pay a great price for it.

Phelan nearly did. He was abstracted, and the first he knew of Indians was the whistling of bullets and the cracking of rifles all up and down the line. He made a dive for the nearest dugout and snatched up a rifle.

"Is it you, Danny?" he asked.

"'Tis," said Danny Doyle, sourly. "You could be in better company, for I just missed an easy shot. I don't know but somebody has spit in this rifle."

"Isn't it early for visitors, by the sun?"

"It's them upstart Sioux, with no manners to them at all! They got Tim Grady. I saw him drop, as I was proceedin' to this snug. Think o' him, the first time you take aim!"

"A decent man! And it's Sioux, is it?"

"It is, and the Cheyennes standin' off and keepin' score. It's a great wonder they wouldn't be content to murder one another, tribe against tribe, and leave their betters be! Livin' as neighbors this long time, they must have scores enough to settle."

Phelan didn't know why, but that remark struck in his mind as a pregnant and arresting thought, worth further consideration. It had not occurred to him before, but the truce between the tribes might be only temporary and uneasy, imposed by the presence of the white men. But it would not be feasible to take all the whites out of the country, just for the sake of setting the Indians to fighting each other again! He had to think of something a little more practical than that.

"That fat one on the brown nag!" Doyle exclaimed suddenly. "Take a bead on him, now, in case I miss!"

The attack ended as such attacks did—suddenly, and because the braves had lost interest. Out on the desert, the dust settled. Presently the Sioux struck camp and straggled off westward—to harry the graders and bridge-builders a while and wait for the track-layers to overtake them. A little later, the Cheyenne village followed.

James Phelan was back at driving spikes by then, but with a sharper focus for his thoughts and a quicker tempo. They kept a couple of miles apart, did those two tribes, and there was no coming and going between their camps! When the Sioux made a rush at the railway, the Cheyennes held off. It might be by some sort of agreement, but more likely they didn't trust each other. Assuming that to be the case, it might not take more than a nudge to. . . . He decided to talk to Terence Shea about all this. Shea had no ambition to be made a foreman, himself, and he wouldn't begrudge James Phelan an honest opinion.

They were working a mile and more beyond the camp train by the time General Jack Casement rode up the line on his saddle-horse, and they would lay another mile by sunset. Casement Brothers' contract read eight hundred dollars a mile for anything less than two miles a day; for over two miles, twelve hundred dollars a mile. This was a good day, and General Jack ought to be stroking his red beard, instead of tugging at it. The fact was, he was in a tearing temper.

"When everything else is right—when the material's on hand, and the graders keep ahead, and the water's fit for the horses to drink—then it's Indians! Two tribes of Indians now, as if the Cheyenne weren't enough by themselves! Two men killed this morning—good men, both—and the work stopped for the better part of an hour! That's something Crocker and his pets don't have to face, up in their mountains, and it's something I'll not put up with, down here! Not if I have to buy scalps, to teach those savages manners!"

He was not talking to anyone in particular, but he happened to be glaring straight at James Phelan. And because of the mighty workings within him, Phelan roared out, "We'll put them in their place, and that's

underground! We'll do it for you, General Jack, and before tomorrow's today!"

Some of the anger went out of Casement's eyes. He said, "You will, eh? What's your name?"

"Phelan, sir. James Phelan."

"Well, James Phelan, let me see you act as boldly as you speak and you'll find that I'll never have to ask your name again!"

He rode on, erect in the saddle. If Phelan had thought hard before, he was thinking furiously now.

For he had made a boast, and Jack Casement had invited him to make it good. Let him do that, and he would be remembered; let him fail, and he might as well never have existed. General Casement's job was to lay track, and bold talk, with nothing to back it up, would not set a single tie in its place. James Phelan didn't have time even to call himself a fool.

SHEA had not heard the exchange with General Casement. But Shea was Irish, and he knew an overruling compulsion when it presented itself before him. Strong drink wrought some men up to that pitch, and with others it was a woman's doing. With James Phelan, it was neither liquor nor a light-o'-love, but the rare kind of possession that seizes upon its elect, to make them the vessels of its larger will. Terence Shea recognized the signs, and respected them. Phelan's plan, as hastily outlined, might well cost them both their lives. Shea took that as evidence that Phelan had given the plan his most careful thought.

"Would you patronize the Sioux for what you're needing?" the blacksmith asked. "Or the Cheyennes?"

"The Cheyennes, for we've known them longer. Their two camps are much as they were last night, only moved a jump to the west and maybe a bit farther back from the railway."

"I saw that when I walked out with the old rifle, in hopes they'd be maybe a shade nearer. Well, they're not, and it's a fairly long crawl! We'll need a length of rope and a sharp knife apiece. We're lucky there's no moon. It'll be that dark, you wouldn't see a rattlesnake till you'd put your bare hand on it."

"And may none of the heathen take the nightmare—for I don't think there's conscience enough among a thousand of them to spoil one man's sleep!"

"Around half-eleven, then, and we'll start from the end of the rails? I'll get together what I need, and then I'll just shut my eyes till it's time."

That was all very well for Shea, an old campaigner who knew what even an hour's sleep could be worth. Shea had nothing particular at stake, except the intellectual interest of seeing what would come of Phelan's plan. But James Phelan staked his one, great

ambition and his standing in General Casement's esteem, and sleep was not for him. He tried anticipating the dangers that Shea and he might meet, but so many of them promptly arose before his mind's eye that he gave that up, shivering. There ought to be some less troublesome way to stir up trouble for the Indians! But wasn't it always a fact that when a man set his wits to planning and contriving, his own peace was the first thing to go?"

"I thought of a thing, just before I dozed off," said Terence Shea, limping up to their rendezvous. "I had it from one o' them old mountain men, back at Laramie. He said a beast that had carried whites could never stand the smell of an Indian. Now, if the creatures can distinguish like that, why wouldn't those Cheyenne cayuses follow you and me almost without head-ropes? I wouldn't wonder that they'd trail along behind, sniffin' and snufflin' in a kind of ecstasy!"

"We'd best fetch the ropes along, just the same. And the less sniffin' and snufflin', the better! Are you ready, Terence?"

"I am, and it's a fine night for stealin' horses!"

Because he was Irish, the worst of James Phelan's fear was behind him when the time came for action. Excitement took the place of fear, but the excitement was kept rigidly in hand. The plan was his, and he led the way. He could scarcely hear Terence Shea, only a long pace behind him, and that ought to mean that the Cheyennes could not hear either of them. The hardest and most dangerous part of the night's work was still ahead, but in that he counted heavily upon Shea, who had a blacksmith's way with horses. Their knives were as sharp as an oilstone could make them.

It must have been getting on for midnight when they crept up to the edge of the Cheyenne camp, guided by the peaceful sounds the horses made, grazing. Phelan cut three of the rawhide ropes that tethered them to their stakes and, fumbling a little, tied the ends of the ropes together. Then he moved off, one careful step at a time, and the three horses followed without protest. He made himself move slowly—no faster than the small hand of a clock, it seemed!—and he took it as a good sign that there wasn't a sound from Terence Shea. There was not a sound anywhere, in fact, except that now and again a coyote howled like a banshee, out on the desert. The silence lasted until silence itself was enough to make a man jumpy. A law-abiding person, except in trifles, James Phelan had had no idea that it would be this easy for a thief to come in the night.

Because he was an older man, or because his experience had been wider, Terence Shea was less surprised. "It's because the Indians teach their ponies not to whinny after dark," he whispered. "The way a Gypsy teaches his dog to course without givin' tongue, and for the same reason. You'd no trouble?"

"None, only I fancied the point of a knife between my shoulders every little while! We're headed right, are we?"

"Just right, and we're halfway between the Cheyennes and the Sioux, where we stand. Mind, now, and don't try to hurry this last bit! Tie your ponies in among the others, to the pegs that are already driven. Then steal away, and let the heathen make what they will of the evidence by us provided. It'll look bad for the Sioux—like a man comin' out of a strange hen coop with eggs in his pocket. But that's for them to explain. You've only to look at them to know they'd steal horses!"

Their luck held, and the Sioux were no more wakeful than the Cheyennes. They tethered the six Cheyenne horses, and then crept off in the darkness toward the railway. There might be a couple of hours of sleep left in the night, if they could settle themselves to it. One thing sure—they would want to be awake and watching from sunup on. They would not want to miss what they had spent half the night in preparing.

JAMES PHELAN prayed that General Casement should not miss it, either, though they said that nothing escaped those keen eyes. The trouble was that, unless you knew what to watch for, the first stirrings of the two Indian camps might look like just the beginnings of another day, any day at all. If some of the Cheyenne horses had strayed off during the night, what was unusual in that? The braves who owned them could follow the trail. Seeing where it led, they might not follow it all the way, or not alone. They might report back to the Cheyenne chief, first. If they did that. . . .

It puzzled General Casement sorely. "What

the devil are they up to?" he demanded, taking his field-glasses from his eyes. "They're not striking camp, because—"

"It's too soon for that, sir, and anyway, it's only the braves riding out, not the squaws."

Casement stared. "Phelan, isn't it? What do you — Lord! Look at them go now!"

"Hooray!" yelled James Phelan, whirling his sledge in the air. "Bet on the Cheyennes, General, sir, for they don't know but what their cause is just! Oh, begod, but there's a lesson for all horsethieves!"

General Casement gave no sign that he had heard. He was staring, and every man along the line of the railway downed tools and stared with him. The man beside James Phelan tried to put the wrong end of his pipe in his mouth.

The impetus of their first charge carried the Cheyennes straight through the Sioux camp and out the other side. It was not until they turned back, to charge again, that the true struggle began. The Sioux fought on foot, amid their swaying, reeling lodges, and fought savagely. Smoke went up where a cooking-fire had caught on the frame of an overthrown tepee, and the railway builders could see the flames, pale in the morning sun. Riderless horses meant that the Cheyenne braves were not having it all their own way, in spite of surprise. The fighting spilled out on the desert in every direction, beyond the edges of the camp, but lost nothing of its yelling fury for being spread thin. Men running in the open flung up their arms suddenly, dropped their rifles and crumpled in little, twitching heaps. It looked like Election Day, like Saturday night in Julesburg, like Armageddon itself!

From exultation, James Phelan's mood had turned to a kind of awe. Would they never be done with it, then? Would they leave none but a handful of squaws and orphan children? There wouldn't be enough of two tribes left to hold up a handcar!

General Casement had to nudge him, to get his attention. There was wonder in Casement's face, too, but he was getting control of it now.

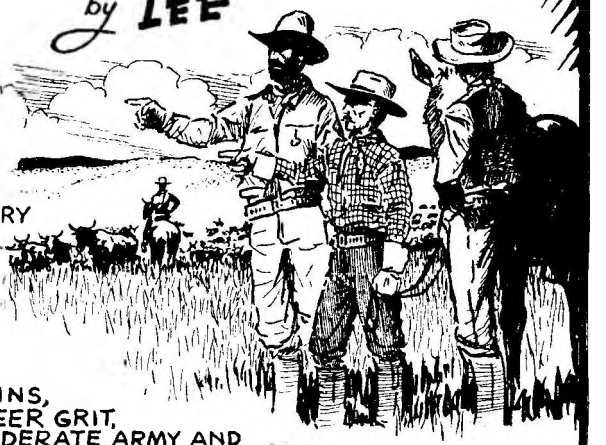
With a queer note in his voice, he said, "I spoke yesterday of buying scalps, but I'm behind the times! Whoever set off that lot of fireworks out there, he's my master at dealing with Indians hence. Was it you, Phelan?"

James Phelan swallowed. "Me and Terence Shea, sir!" For the moment, he had even forgotten about being made a foreman.

"Go get Shea, then, and bring him to the office car. I don't know how you did it, but in the War, they'd have given you your brigade for a coup like that! The War's over these three years, but—go and get Shea! And put your sledge down, man! If you wanted to go on just driving spikes, you should have stayed in your blankets last night!"

TALES of the

by LEE



JOHN SLAUGHTER

THE MAN WHO TAMED TOMBSTONE

JOHN SLAUGHTER WAS'NT VERY TALL IN THE SADDLE, BUT THE WAY HE COULD DRAW AND USE HIS PEARL-HANDLED COLTS MADE HIM A CONSIDERABLY BIGGER MAN THAN MOST.

RAISED ON THE TEXAS PLAINS, 5' 6" OF RAWHIDE AND SHEER GRIT, AFTER A HITCH IN THE CONFEDERATE ARMY AND 6 YEARS WITH THE TEXAS RANGERS, HE DROVE A HERD OF LONGHORNS TO ARIZONA AND MARRIED THE DAUGHTER OF A RANCHER NEAR TOMBSTONE.

THE EARPS, THE CLANTONS, CURLY BILL BROCIUS AND JOHNNIE RINGO WERE SHOOTING IT OUT AMONG THEMSELVES, BUT SLAUGHTER STUCK CLOSE TO HIS STOCK BUSINESS.

WHEN HE AND HIS WIFE SET OUT IN A BUCKBOARD TO BUY CATTLE, WORD HE WAS CARRYING A HEAVY WALLET HAD GOTTEN AROUND AND TWO BADMEN RODE TO WAYLAY THEM. SLAUGHTER SAW THEM FIRST, WHIPPED UP HIS HORSES AND CAREENED 'ROUND THE AMBUSH.

LATER, A FEW SHREWD QUESTIONS IN THE RIGHT PLACES AND HE LEARNED WHO THEY WERE. ONE HE KICKED OUT OF BED; THE OTHER HE GOT THE DROP ON AT A BAR. BOTH HE TOLD, "IF YOU'RE NOT OUT OF TOWN BY TOMORROW, I'LL KILL YOU!" THEY WENT.

IN '86, SLAUGHTER, THEN 45, WAS ELECTED SHERIFF OF COCHISE COUNTY. WORKING MOSTLY ALONE AND ON THE THEORY IT WASN'T WORTH THE RISK AND EXPENSE TO BRING IN A BADMAN AND CHANCE A RESCUE BY HIS PALS, SLAUGHTER PROVED THE MOST EFFICIENT LAWMAN THE OLD WEST EVER SAW.

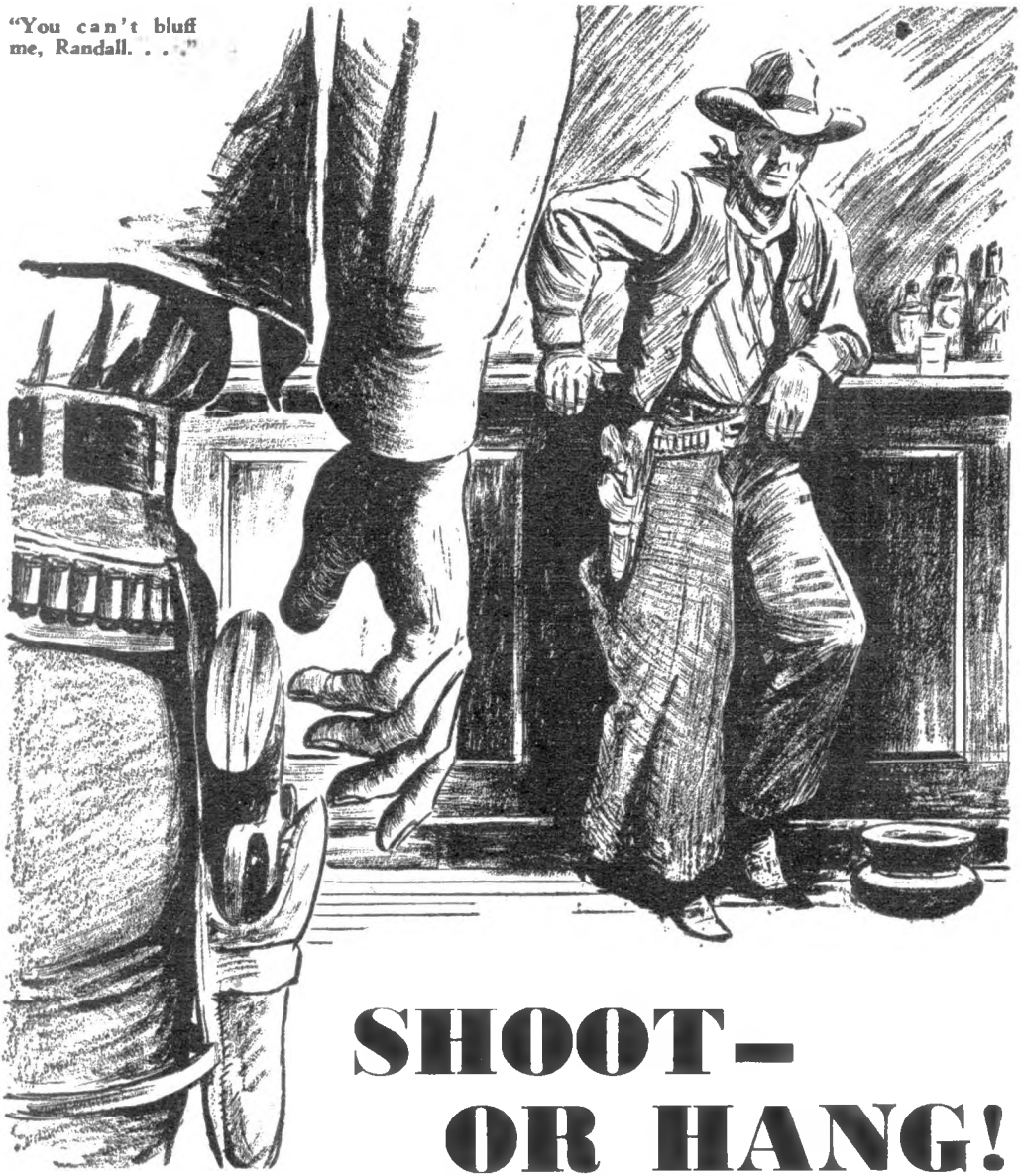
HIS FIRST ACT WAS TO VISIT THE HOTSPOTS AND WARN KNOWN RUSTLERS, GUNMEN AND BANDITS TO LEAVE THE COUNTY. SUCH WAS HIS REPUTATION THAT MANY DID, PRONTO!

OLD WEST

HE TOOK TWO DEPUTIES WHEN HE LEARNED THAT OUTLAWS WHO HAD HELD UP A TRAIN AND KILLED THREE OF THE CREW WERE HOLED UP IN THE MOUNTAINS. THE BANDITS, SURPRISED WHILE ASLEEP AT THEIR CAMPFIRE, WENT FOR THEIR GUNS. SLAUGHTER'S COLTS ACCOUNTED FOR ALL THREE. IN THE MELEE HE GOT HIS FIRST AND ONLY WOUND, A CREASE IN THE EAR.

HE BROUGHT IN PLENTY OF STOLEN HORSES BUT FEW HORSE THIEVES, REPORTING SIMPLY THAT HE'D CHASED THE SUSPECT CLEAN OUT OF THE COUNTY. ON A HUNT FOR A STAGECOACH ROBBER, HE UNCOVERED THE BRUTAL MURDER OF A PROSPECTOR. WITHIN 24 HOURS HE'D KILLED THE ROBBER, CAPTURED AND SECURED A CONFESSION FROM THE MURDERER.

DURING THE 4 YEARS HE WAS THE LAW IN COCHISE COUNTY, JOHN SLAUGHTER TAMED RIP-ROARING TOMBSTONE DOWN TO A WALK. THEN HE RETIRED TO HIS 75,000-ACRE SPREAD IN THE SAN BERNARDINO VALLEY WITH NOTHING TO FIGHT BUT RAIDING APACHES, AND SURVIVED TO THE RIPE OLD AGE OF 81.



"You can't bluff me, Randall. . . ."

SHOOT— OR HANG!

By A. C. ABBOTT

Jim Randall's life was riding in his holsters, side by side with sudden death—for the one man who could save him from a rope!

JIM RANDALL stopped just inside the batwing doors, slapped by an icy hostility that momentarily stiffened him. Someone had seen him coming, and the wall of murderous hate had been thrown up sooner than he expected. It didn't make any difference. He had known when he rode into this remote, explosive cowtown that his life was

riding in his holster for as long as he stayed.

One swift survey told him the man he sought was not present and he strode on to the bar, the slow clink of his spurs making the only sound in the hushed room. His manner was cool, almost insolent, in spite of his taut nerves.

"Water," he said to the tight-lipped bartender.

He stood clear of the bar, a big man, black hair showing under his wide-brimmed hat, with a dark inscrutable face and untelling eyes. His long right arm swung free above the butt of the heavy gun at his thigh.

Most of the men in the room kept their eyes fixed studiously on the drinks before them. A few showed a cautious curiosity. One young cowman, standing with a group near a card table, was openly sizing him up; and Randall felt a chill.

He would have known, anywhere, that this man was Allie Meade's brother although he had never seen him before. The same golden hair, the square chin, the same direct fearless look out of sun-lit blue eyes. Those eyes were traveling over Randall's long frame with speculation; and Jim instinctively lifted a big brown hand to the pocket of his shirt where a long strand of golden hair curled softly.

If he knows, he thought bleakly, *he'll put a slug through that pocket and all hell won't stop him.*

He swore under his breath as he turned to the bar, damning the fate that had put Ben Meade in his path this day. He was risking everything on a blind hunch.

Meade detached himself from the group and strode purposefully across the room. As Jim swung to face him, Meade came to a slow halt, his hands at his belt.

"Jim Randall?"

A tight knot formed in Jim's breast as he met the blue gaze squarely. "My name," he admitted quietly.

"Hell with a gun, I hear. In fact, I've heard a lot about you since I hit this country." Meade's eyes were suddenly bright with decision and contempt. "You damned rustler!"

No one spoke. The knot in Jim's breast was tightening, but he said evenly, "Your mistake, Meade."

Meade's lip curled. "You can't bluff me, Randall. I'm callin' you straight out. You're a skunk and a thief. Stealin' from men you've worked for! Maybe you've got everybody else buffaloed but not me. Drag iron, or ride!"

For a second the young rancher stood poised, then his gun flashed up to center on Jim's chest, his thumb rigid on the hammer. His face flamed with suppressed fury.

Randall said, "If you've got what it takes to kill a man in cold blood, hop to it!"

Meade tried. His face turned gray as his lips curled back over his teeth in a savage snarl, and for a moment his hand tightened on the gun. Then his whole arm began to tremble and finally sagged.

He straightened slowly, then sheathed his gun with a vicious gesture. "I'll give you an hour to get out of here," he said coldly. "Out of town and out of the country. Any time after that, anywhere, I'll shoot you on sight."

AS MEADE stalked out of the saloon, Jim turned, marble-faced, toward the bar. The cool water eased the cramp in his throat but could not put out the fire in his mind. For twenty-five years he had ridden a reckless, flaming trail, not caring. He hadn't even cared about being branded a rustler until he met Allie Meade. And now time was running out

He set the glass down and turned out of the bar. On the board walk he paused, squinting in the relentless glare of the afternoon sun, reaching a hand automatically for tobacco. He got his cigarette into shape and, as he lit it, favored the crooked dusty street with a hard thoughtful scrutiny.

It was Saturday and the little town was bustling with ranchers and cowboys. He hadn't cared much for it before, and liked it less now. That jagged broken country lying below the rim had seemed haven enough until the day he'd found Allie Meade sitting forlornly by the trail, nursing a sprained knee.

Her horse had thrown her and run off. Jim had carried her home, and he could still feel the gentle roll of her head against his shoulder. He had told her harshly who he was and then—to his own surprise—had kissed her. Afterwards, he found the strand of hair, tangled around a button on his shirt. . . .

Movement across at the general store caught his eye, and his heart leaped convulsively as Allie Meade came into view. He wondered at her power to move him so, even at a distance too great for him to see her

clearly—to do more than remember how she had felt in his arms that other day. She was talking to someone, but it was a moment before Jim could wrench his eyes from her to look at her companions.

One of them was her brother, Ben, who was gesturing angrily. The other, tall and dark and forceful, was their foreman, Wade Preston

Then Allie, glancing casually across the street, saw him and seemed to freeze in the middle of a sentence, one hand uplifted. The two men saw him at the same time and stepped away from the girl with guarded significance, but Jim no longer heeded them. He felt his face grow hot under the pressure of Allie's wide-eyed stare and he turned abruptly up the street, cursing softly to himself

In a matter of moments, however, he collected himself and slowed to a saunter, his eyes touching every saddled horse along the scattered hitch rails until he spotted the Bar M sorrel carrying Wade Preston's saddle. Then he turned back toward the saloon, in front of which his own roan dozed, hipshot.

Allie and the two men had vanished. Jim put his back against the wall of the building, built a smoke and waited. He was half through with his second cigarette when little Billy Gray burst around the corner of the building and skidded to a halt in front of him.

"How—howdy, Jim," he stammered, trying vainly to be nonchalant.

"'Lo, Billy," Jim drawled easily. "What d'you know?"

"Plenty." Billy's chest swelled with importance, but he waited until a passing cowboy had gone into the saloon before adding guardedly, "Somebody wants to see you. Out in that cedar grove back of town. She said to hurry."

"She?" Jim grabbed the boy's shoulders in steel fingers.

"Ouch!" Billy said, squirming painfully. "Darn it, I told you I promised not to tell. Leggo, you big maverick."

Jim let go and straightened, his chest heaving with a ragged breath. "Billy," he said tensely, "you won't tell anybody, ever, about comin' after me here?"

"Course not," Billy retorted. "I'm your friend, ain't I?"

Jim's voice was rough with feeling. "If you are, cowboy, you're the only one I got."

He dug into his levi pocket and pulled out his last silver dollar. For a moment he weighed it in his hand. He shrugged and dropped the dollar into Billy's shirt pocket. "How's your fishin' tackle these days?" he asked with a grin.

"Busted." Billy took a peek into his pocket and let out a shrill yip of joy. He broke off to make a run for the store across the street.

Jim waved to him, then moved deliberately to his horse. He jerked tight the cinch and only as he was prepared to mount did he remember the sorrel he had been watching.

He stopped, stung. He hadn't meant to miss Preston's trail when the Bar M foreman rode out of town.

Then he shrugged and swung into the saddle. This was his day to gamble.

HE JOGGED out of town to the west, noting the surprised and relieved glances of men, then circled north and spurred into a lope. He left his horse in a brush thicket some distance from the cedar grove and slipped ahead on foot. Allie Meade, sitting on a log with her little fists doubled nervously in her lap, didn't see him until he spoke.

She gasped, whirling to her feet.

"Howdy, miss," Jim said, and somehow managed to keep his voice level. He had his hat clamped in both big hands and was squeezing the devil out of it.

Allie took one hesitant step toward him. "Jim, I—had to see you before you left."

"Left?" he echoed, startled. "You thought I was goin' to run out?"

"You wouldn't fight Ben? Jim, you'd kill him!"

Her words hit Jim with a staggering impact. He had put Ben Meade's ultimatum out of his mind, not allowing himself to make any plans beyond the trailing of that sorrel horse. Now he could only stare at her, reacting to the pained terror in her eyes. Suddenly she was in his arms, her face hidden against his chest.

He breathed heavily, his hands gripping her shoulders hard. "Allie, don't do things like this unless—"

She lifted her head. "Jim, you can't fight Ben. Please! You've got to leave and—and take me with you."

"You don't know what you're sayin'." He shoved her away.

"We'd make out somehow," she pleaded. "Please, Jim."

"No," he said harshly. "I won't do it. Not for your brother, Allie."

She stared at him, hurt. "That's not what I meant."

"It isn't?" His head was clearing now.

"Jim, what can you do?" she whispered hopelessly. "If you kill him—it isn't going to solve anything. Why did you come back?"

"I'm playin' a hunch," he said. "I've seen the man your brother's looking for, out in the breaks, and—" he grinned crookedly—"it ain't me."

"Who?" she demanded, suddenly eager.

His grin held. "If my luck holds out, I'll show him to you—"

And then she was in his arms again, her arms around his neck.

Jim lingered over that kiss, then waited in the grove until he saw her safely nearing town.

He mounted and headed east toward the brush-lined creek that tumbled out of the wild country to flow past the edge of town. He had lost his chance to trail Preston's sorrel—his hunch had better hold good now.

He entered the brush cautiously, and one swift glance at the trail leading up the creek showed him the fresh tracks of a horse. With an exultant exclamation, Jim pulled back into the lighter timber away from the creek and put his horse into a stiff lope up country. He covered a mile, hindered in places by steep rocky gulches, before once more approaching the creek trail, every sense strung taut. The tracks were still going up.

He had started to rein back when his horse suddenly threw up his head, ears pointed toward a thick clump of willows a hundred feet up the creek. He was off instantly, his hand muzzling the animal, his voice murmuring reassurances. Quickly he led the animal away from the trail and tied him in a rocky gulch. Then he hurriedly shucked chaps and spurs and, loosening the gun in his holster, headed toward a clump of willows.

In the willows, on the edge of the water, was a small clearing. He had almost reached it when the restless stamping of horses, the jingle of bit chains, sent him dropping flat. He wriggled the last few yards, depending on the murmur of the creek to mask what few sounds he made, and lifted his head cautiously over the top of a log.

Preston had his back to him and was just shaking hands with a scar-faced man. Evidently the other had just arrived at the rendezvous, and Jim felt a hot surge of elation. He hadn't missed a thing and, with the men not over ten feet from him, he could hear every word that was said.

Then Ben Meade saw him and whirled, his gun sweeping up with smooth certainty. . . .

"See anybody on the way in?" Preston asked.

"No."

"Good. Then I reckon we've nothin' to worry about."

"I ain't too sure about that. Me an' the boys heard you was quittin'."

"What's the matter with that?" Preston frowned. "You've taken enough cattle to pay you off, and my quitting was a part of the deal. Now that Randall's back it just hurries things up. After he kills Meade, he's goin' to have a price on his head. He won't last long and everybody'll think that's what ended this rustlin'. I'll have Bar M."

SOUNDLESSLY Jim gained his knees, his left hand on the log to steady himself; but as he started to his feet, the stream bank

gave way under him. Momentarily he clung helplessly to the log with head and shoulders in full view of the two men in the clearing.

Jim had just a flashing glimpse of them stabbing for their guns. Then he got his legs under him and lunged up, snapping a shot at the scar-faced man as that individual's gun came free. Jim had shot for the right arm, and he missed. He fired again, still trying for a crippling shot. Then a bullet slammed into his right shoulder and he felt the gun slipping from his fingers.

Both rustlers were firing now as fast as they could pull the trigger, and Jim Randall had no choice. He caught the gun in his left hand as he went to his knees in the icy water, and he shot to kill.

Rocks along the creek were still throwing back echoes of the crashing guns when he staggered out of the creek and bent a raging despairing look at the two men he had shot. Neither of them would ever tell Ben Meade anything. Sickness from his own wound swept over him, but he clenched his teeth against it, shoving the gun awkwardly into his holster and turning stonily toward his horse.

He was reeling drunkenly in the saddle by the time he reached town. He had let the roan pick his own way, and now the horse moved into a narrow alleyway. Jim realized that it ran along the general store and came into the main street across from the saloon where he had heard his death warrant read seemingly hours ago. Just short of the mouth of the alley Jim pulled up and slid weakly to the ground. Lead would be flying the moment he came into view, and there was no use in a good horse catching hell just because the man who owned him was a fool.

He had to cling to the horn for a moment while a terrible weakness shivered through him. Then he shoved himself away and forced his trembling legs to carry him past the end of the building, into the open.

He saw, instantly, the group on the boardwalk, not over twenty feet away and swung to face them, his legs braced defiantly, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. He saw Allie's golden head shining mockingly in the sun, and he saw Ben Meade standing beside her. There was a low drumming in his head, like the steady pound of a running horse, and he tried to shake it away.

Then Ben Meade saw him and whirled, his gun sweeping up with smooth certainty.

Through a thickening haze Jim saw Allie throw herself at Ben as the gun went off, and the bullet whispered harmlessly past his cheek. The drumming in his head was louder, driving him crazy, but still he couldn't shake it free. Above Allie's scream, he heard a childish voice shrieking frantically.

"Wait! Wait! Jim ain't no rustler. I seen it all. Wait!"

Slowly Jim swung around to see Billy Gray bearing down on him, riding Wade Preston's sorrel horse. The boy had a fish pole in his right hand and was waving it desperately. Then Jim's legs went out from under him and he saw the ground coming up. . . .

The next instant, it seemed to him, he could hear Billy's voice: "I was fishin' with my new pole—I was so scared I couldn't do nothin' for a while, but then I come a-runnin'."

"Well, sonny--" That was Ben Meade's voice, fervent and very close. "Thank God you did!"

Jim looked up, straight into Meade's clouded blue eyes. The rancher's face was gray, his lips trembling as he started to speak, but he didn't get a chance to say what was on his mind. At that moment a golden head slipped in between them, and Jim felt a cool little hand on his cheek.

"Jim," Allie whispered.

Her blue eyes were shining and her lips were parted in a tremulous smile. Jim watched them, fascinated as they came closer and closer. Then he heard a quick, short laugh.

"Hell," Ben Meade drawled in surprised approval. "Looks like I'm gonna save the wages of a foreman—got me a partner instead."

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 100)

REIN up and relax a spell, pardner, and while you're at it, try your hand at answering the twenty rangeland brain twisters listed below. Answer eighteen or more and you're top material. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're good. But answer fewer than fifteen, and you're crowding into the Arbuckle class. Good luck!

1. True or false? An albino horse and a palomino are the same color.

2. If the ranch boss sent you out to get an all-around cow horse, what type of horse should you return with?

3. True or false? The term, "bad medicine," is a Western expression used in reference to persons considered dangerous.

4. What is likely to happen if one cowpoke blats "baaaa" at another?

5. Which is darker in color—a blood bay or an ordinary bay horse?

6. What is meant when it is said that a bucking horse is "blowing the plug"?

7. True or false? A "bucking rein" is generally a single rope attached to the hackamore of a bucking horse.

8. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you he'd been "bucking the tiger," which of the following things would he have been doing? Riding an especially wild horse? Playing faro? Eating a tough meal prepared by the camp cook?

9. True or false? The expression, "California twist," is a roping term.

10. If a Mexican cowpoke told you he had just left the "camp santo," at which of the following places would he have been? A graveyard? A cow camp? A rangeland Christmas celebration?

11. True or false? In the slanguage of the cowpuncher, "cow rigging" is a sort of harness used to lead cows with.

12. What is the early-day definition of "cowtown"?

13. What is the meaning of the cowpuncher slang term, "daylighting"?

14. True or false? In the slanguage of the cowpoke, the expression "deadfall" was often used for any establishment of ill repute.

15. What is the meaning of the Western expression, "leg bail"?

16. If a cowpoke told you he had "just missed being exalted," what would he mean by this?

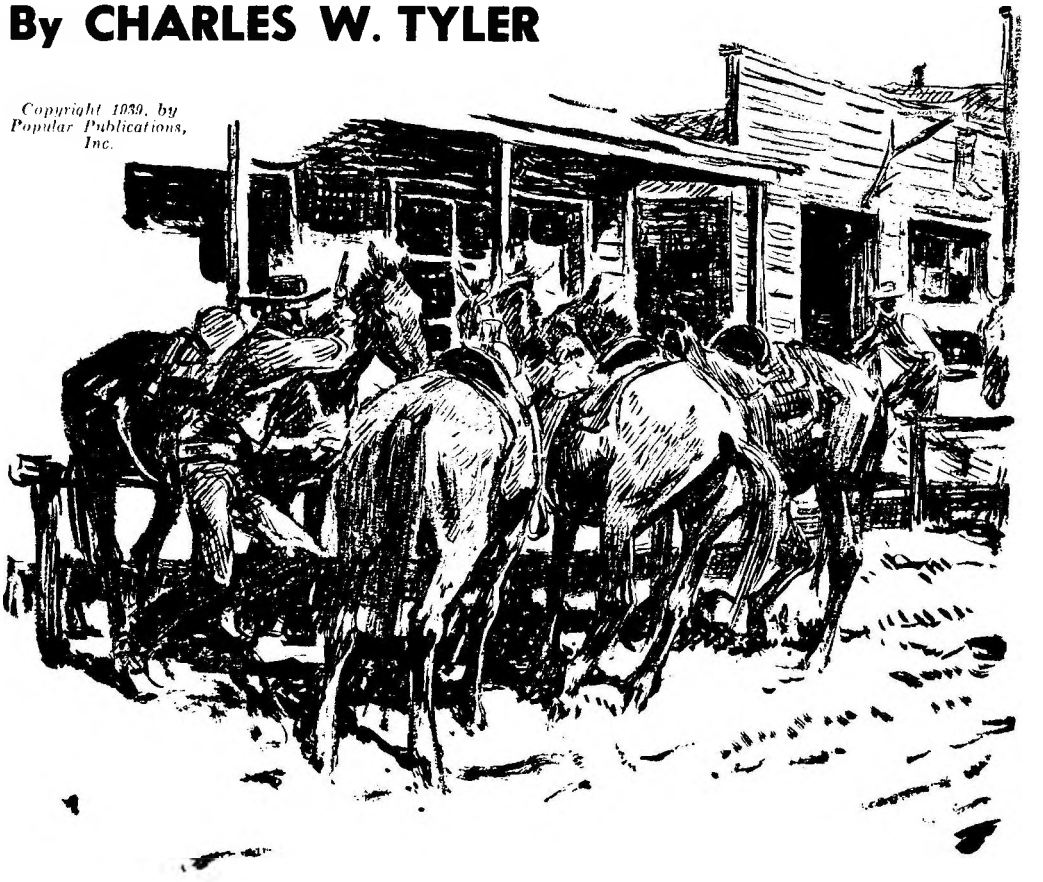
17. According to the slang of the Westerner, what is the meaning of the term "fried chicken"?

18. True or false? The cowpoke expression "to fort up" means to barricade oneself and prepare for a battle or seige.

19. True or false? "Hatajo" is a term generally used in reference to a train of pack mules.

20. True or false? According to Western slang, a "hay shoveler" is a farmer.

By CHARLES W. TYLER



DEVIL MAKES A COWMAN

"MISTER, this is Key an' Cross range. You know what's good, you'll keep travelin'." The cowman tilted forward a little, putting his weight on the stirrups, his hands resting on the saddle horn.

The nester was small, spare. He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"I've already filed at the land office," he said. "I located a quarter section up here on Snow Crick."

"I don't care what you filed on, nester," the horseman said coldly. "There ain't no settlers in the valley, an' there ain't goin' to be none."

A gangling, freckle-faced boy of fourteen came from the creek, a flop-eared mongrel rollicking at his heels. He went around by the heads of his father's horses and stood gazing sullenly at the riders. His eyes took in the tall, lean spokesman, then slid away to the second man, sitting silent, his bleak eyes a-glitter.

Then he gave his attention to the girl. She seemed about his own age. She smiled.

"Hullo!" she said.

"Sod-busters are an out-breed," his father said, and died to prove it. Was it any wonder the kid swore: "I'll raise hell—and cattle!"

The foreman threw a wild shot and ran behind some horses at the hitchrack. . . .

The boy stared back stonily. She belonged to *them.* Cowboys always meant trouble. He hated them.

"My name is Rose Mittag," the girl persisted. "What's yours?"

"Luke," the boy answered grudgingly. He felt his face getting red. He added: "Lott."

The nester's wife was small, delicate. Toil and hardship had left their scars. She rested her hand on her husband's arm, as though to give him courage. He glanced at her quickly.

"Don't ye fret, Marta," he said. "Everythin's goin' to be all right."

His eyes went back to the scowling cowman.

"I sorta figgered we'd be above cattle range," he said in meek tones. "There's plenty graze an' water in the valley—"

"Mister, I ain't augerin'," the cowman said angrily. "I'm *tellin'*. You keep goin'."

Slow anger kindled in the nester named Lott. He was a mild-tempered man, but had also a stubborn streak. He stood there for a long time, washed-out eyes looking away across the meadow. Then he spoke, slowly, choosing his words with difficulty.

"Ever since me an' the woman come west, we been starvin' on gover'ment claims. Times it looked like we was goin' to make a go of it, cowmen run us out. We don't figger to do nobody injury. We just want a chanst to live. Our money is gone. The harnesses is fallin' apart. Look at that nigh front wheel. Won't stand fer to tote us no further. This here land is ourn if we can hang on. I 'low we stay."

SOL MITTAG never backed up. He was cold-blooded, ruthless. More than that, he possessed shrewdness. It had been by sharp scheming, backed up by guns, that he had possesed himself of the land in the great valley of the Saddlehorn.

He needed not even a gesture now. The rider beside him, Dorg Fogel, loosened the tie-strings that secured his lariat. His lips thinned.

The boy watched him, suddenly suspicious of this other man. Fogel shook out a little wildcat noose, nudging his horse forward a step or two.

"Look out fer him, pop!" the boy screeched, but the warning came too late.

The noose settled over Wade Lott's head and there was the dry hiss of hemp running through the honda. The nester was jerked from the seat, as he clutched desperately at the whale line.

"What say we give the damned squatter a taste of a rope over a limb, Sol?" Fogel snarled. He started to drag the sod-buster along the ground.

Horror made the girl's eyes pop.

"Dad!" she screamed. "Make him stop it."

Sol Mittag scowled. The dog was barking hysterically and leaping about. The boy hesitated, terror on his face.

He was convinced that these cowmen were going to hang his father. Suddenly he clawed forth a clasp knife, a prideful possession, and leaped for the taut lariat, slashing at it with the keen blade, severing it.

"My best rope!" Fogel ripped out an oath. "I'll fix yuh fer that!" He piled from the saddle and slugged the boy to the ground.

Wade Lott, choking and sputtering, blundered to his feet and rushed to the aid of his son.

Mittag reined his horse into him, hazing him away.

Luke wouldn't stay down. He kept getting up and charging in, his head lowered and his arms churning ludicrously.

Fogel jerked out his six-shooter and began batting at the kid's head with the barrel. Blood streaked the boy's face. He shook his head dazedly and back away, swaying on his feet. The other charged in.

Martha Lott reached down for the Winchester in the wagon and pointed it at Fogel's head.

"Stop it!" Her voice rose shrilly. "Stop hitting him or I'll kill you!"

Fogel turned, his face twisted in a snarl. "If I ever git a chance, I'll tear the damn whelp apart."

"You'd better not!" the girl cried. She was frightened, angry. She was crying a little. "Why don't you pick on somebody your own size—"

Sol Mittag made an impatient gesture. "Rose, the next time you'll stay home. Git on your horse, Dorg. They'll move on."

Wade Lott threw his arms around the boy. His wife was clambering from the wagon, still clutching the rifle.

"How bad is he hurt?" she cried fearfully. "Lay him down an' get some water." She turned toward Fogel, a desperate anger in her eyes, as though he had struck her.

"I—I'm all right," Luke stammered. He was breathing hard. "But there'll come a day when he won't be."

He glared at Fogel.

The cowman and the range boss reined away, but the girl remained for a few moments, staring. Through the tears in her eyes shone a puzzlement, as though there were people she couldn't quite understand. Then she, too, spun her horse and, small heels kicking, spurred away.

CHAPTER TWO

Tioga Bill

UNDER Wade Lott's exterior mildness was a streak of plodding obstinacy that would not admit this final defeat. A few miles from the meadow, he and Luke discovered the buildings of an abandoned mine, and he salvaged lumber enough for a frame shack. He was always faced by the fear that the cowmen might return—and yet there was the small hope that they might still make a stand. He had sensed a weakness in Sol Mittag, that had to do with his daughter.

The shack was close to completion when a stranger appeared, plodding behind two heavily laden burros. He offered no immediate greeting, but surveyed the shack as though it were an affront to God and man. He grunted at last, spat.

"How long d'ye reckon that matchbox will stand when the snow comes?"

"What's the matter with it?" Luke demanded with boyish resentment. They had worked hard to make the shack weatherproof and comfortable.

"Won't stand snow on the roof," the old man stated flatly. "Ye kin look for ten-twelve foot on the level, an' it starts early. Newcomers t' high country, I take it."

The stranger was a stooped, wiry person, with a tobacco-stained beard and skin like the bark on the north side of a tree. He had faded blue eyes, and there was something friendly about him, in spite of his cracked, scolding voice.

Wade Lott looked at his wife with sudden dismay. "They didn't tell me at the land office. They said, 'A little snow at this elevation.' "

The old man grunted. "Land office ain't wuth a durn 'xcept to them as runs it. Build a log house, if ye're sot in your mind that this here is whar ye're goin' to squat."

"I never built no log house," Wade Lott said wearily. "Just shacks on gover'ment claims." He told the old man then of the visit of the Key and Cross men and showed the scar on the boy's head.

"Yare, I know Sol Mittag," the other grunted. "Know 'im like the trail over Kearsarge. He was in on the big swamp land steal. Hand-in-glove with the land office. Parcel of crooks. Swore the hull valley was swamp an' wuthless, an' hornswoggled onto the hull lot of it. Hain't got a mite more right to it than four-five thousand acres of blue sky. Not even legally."

The stranger voluntered the information at last that he was known as Tioga Bill, and further explained that he had been "projectin' " thereabouts since the days of the Piute wars. He had known Vasquez, the bandit, and had played a part in Cerro Gordo's rampant days when "a man for breakfast" had been the order.

Promptly Tioga Bill became a hero in the eyes of Luke. The boy felt that he had won some small place in the affairs of men, because of his fight with the cowman.

Luke looked at Tioga Bill. "Do you know how to build a log house?" he said.

"Sartin do, bub. Got one up t' Saddlebag Lake an' 'nother one over the hump on the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin. Do a leetle minin' there."

"If you'll help us build one," Luke suggested, "I'll do a stint of work for you at the mine."

Old Tioga Bill regarded the boy with twinkling eyes. He shifted his cud.

"Now mebbe ye sold a bill of goods," he drawled. "I been a-figgerin' to pack out some ore by burro train. If yore paw's waggin was in shape to haul it from Snow Crick here to Pineville, I could jist about double the output an' we'd make a leetle money."

"I figgered to git a job somewhere," Wade Lott said. "We're goin' to need cash to go on pretty soon." His dull features brightened. "I'll have that front wheel fixed—"

THEY built a snug cabin, there on the edge of the meadow, and chinked it with mud. The rafters were great logs placed horizontally and close-spaced to withstand the weight of heavy snows. They were covered with shakes, over which were laid sod and stones.

The floor was of boards from the old mine. There was a big stone fireplace. A lean-to stable was built for the horses, and meadow hay cut and stacked close by.

When the work was done, Tioga Bill went on to his mine over the first divide, a verbal agreement having been reached between the squatter and himself to the effect that Lott would freight ore from Snow Creek to the railroad the following summer, working out the wages due Tioga Bill plus a stipulated amount per ton.

There had been no more visits by Key and Cross men, and the Lotts came gradually to have a certain feeling of security.

It was September when Wade Lott prepared to go to Pineville. There had been snow flurries at timber line and below. The high peaks, with their snow patches, held a constant threat of storms.

The squatter family needed supplies, harness parts and blacksmithing for both horses and wagon. Mrs. Lott remained at the cabin. She kissed her husband and son.

"Do be careful," she admonished them. She watched from the cabin door, waving, as the team rounded the breasting swell down the slope.

About halfway to Pineville, Luke and his father passed the great Key and Cross ranch. Wade Lott had stopped the team on a high shoulder several miles away, to stare at the rich, green valley. It was a vast country, this Saddlehorn—too big for one man. There was room for hundreds of settlers, and still not crowd the cow outfit.

"It's awful purty," Luke said.

"God's garden," the nester said slowly. "Snow water irrigatin' it all year. Tioga Bill, he says the winter is mild on the floor of the valley. Four thousand foot. We're seven thousand where we be. Kain't do much so high. I wisht I could git a quarter down here som'ers fer you an' mom, Luke."

"You got as much right as them cowmen," the boy said.

"Might is right in cow country, son." The squatter shook his head. "I wa'n't never much of a fighter."

A mile beyond the cattle ranch, they met Rose Mittag. Luke had hoped he would see her. He had built day-dreams about her, half-angry dreams compounded of violence, with himself on the side of the right.

The girl called a greeting to them. She arched the gaunt, awkward youth a pert glance. "Hullo, Luke."

The boy grinned shyly. She seemed prettier than he remembered her. He swallowed hard and mumbled an answer.

"Are you still up on Snow Creek?"

"We got a better log cabin than Dan'l Boone," Luke declared. "We're goin' to trap this winter."

"I hope yore paw don't hold it in fer us too greatly." Wade Lott said.

"He was pretty mad, but he's kinder forgotten."

The nester ran his fingers nervously around the neckband of his shirt. There was still a horrible, dark line showing from the rope burn.

Rose Mittag was saying, "I'm just getting home from school. Don't you go to school, Luke?"

"Naw."

"You'll be awful ignorant when you grow up," the girl said, "just like Piutes an' heathen."

Luke found no word to that. His father gathered up the slack reins, pulling the horses away from their feast of lush roadside grass. The wagon started off.

Rose Mittag smiled and waved her hand. "I'll come and see you some time. 'By."

It was close to dark when the wagon drove into Pineville. Lights cast their faded yellow glow from an occasional window. On the outskirts of town, cowboys were poling the last of a trainload of steers into cattle cars.

Wade Lott identified Sol Mittag, perched on a top rail with a tally book. Dorg Fogel was among the cursing, yelling punchers, hurrying to complete the loading before dark.

The lid would be off in Pineville tonight. Wade Lott moistened dry lips with his tongue. He'd had unpleasant experiences with drunken cowboys before. Somebody was sure to recognize him as a squatter.

"We'll git the list at the store," he told Luke, "an' some crackers an' cheese an' camp by the willers outside of town. Come mornin' we'll be in early an' git that blacksmithin' done."

Luke did not answer. Aching thoughts slugged him. He would have liked to stay in town and see the sights, listen to the music, peek past the bat-wing doors into forbidden but fascinating realms, watch the swaggering punchers. If only for once he wa'n't a nester's kid.

He felt a little like a coyote, skulking past human haunts. They'd camp at the edge of town, the same as outcasts. Sometimes he almost wished he was a cowman's boy. Cowmen were fighters.

WADE LOTT drove to the blacksmith shop in the morning, and Luke found it a place of immense interest—the burly smithy, the forge and anvil, the wheezing bellows, steel turning mellow under the coals, the clang of hammers, flying sparks,

as metal was deftly moulded into shape.

Pineville still lay dormant after its night of carousal, a sleepy, false-fronted town surprisingly dull and uninteresting under a mid-morning sun. Here and there a horse stood slack-hipped at a hitchrail, a few men lounged in front of the hotel, a stolid-faced Piute sat astride a ribby pony—bearded prospectors were sitting and spitting and a man was swabbing cuspidors.

The blacksmith, a great hulking figure, stared at the nester. "Stranger in these parts?"

"I located a quarter up on Snow Crick," Lott answered.

"Oh, yo're that feller, huh?" The blacksmith rolled his under lip into a neat gutter and fired a brown stream at the nearby water tub.

Luke saw the loungers outside of the door exchange significant glances. One, a lanky, snake-eyed puncher whom the blacksmith called Clint, asked him, "What's yore name, bub?"

"Luke Lott."

"Call me 'mister' ye sod-buster whelp."

"Y—yes, mister," Luke gulped.

There was a roar of laughter. There were other coarse jibes. One stuck out a leg and tripped him. Another threw his hat into the water tub.

"Leave the boy alone," Wade Lott cried at last. A stocky puncher addressed as Link hunched himself in front of the nester, fists clenched.

"Keep yore tongue to yorself, sod-buster." Luke never forgot Clint and Link. He saw them with Dorg Fogel several times after that.

Luke glanced fearfully at his father, and was shocked by the haggard look on his face. His eyes burned with a strange, feverish brightness.

"Be back after a bit," Wade Lott muttered. He turned to the boy. "Come on, Luke. We'll go up to the land office."

Luke walked silently beside his father. Some day when he got big he'd punch a cowboy. Once, as he shuffled along, he stole a look at his reflection in a store window. It shocked him a little. His sleeves were halfway to his elbows; his overalls were far too short and skin tight. He was as tall as his dad, whom toil and hardship had bent with a ruthless hand, but gawky, undeveloped. He was different somehow from other boys and he guessed Rose must have snickered behind his back.

THE land office was dark, gloomy. The register was a hawk-faced man named Bruno Armitage. He peered at Wade Lott over his glasses.

"How do, Lott? Get settled all right?" His voice was squeaky. It made Luke think of a complaining hinge.

"Mister Armitage," the nester said, "ye lied to me."

The other suddenly ceased polishing his palms and spread them on the counter. His face turned fiery red.

"What do ye mean?" he demanded.

Luke's eyes widened. He stared at his father.

"Just what I said," Wade Lott retorted harshly. "Ye told me there wa'n't never no snow to speak of up there on Snow Crick. That's lie number one. An' ye said there wa'n't no valley land open to entry. I said I wanted a quarter section where a man could make a livin', not a place where me an' my family'd be snowed in seven-eight months in the year."

The register stared at the man before him as though he could not believe his ears. At last he said gratingly, "My friend, you're lucky to be allowed to stay where you are."

"Look, you." Luke was sure it couldn't be his father talking. In all of his life he'd never heard that tone before, even when he was swearing at the horses. "I wanta tell ye suthin' Just as quick as I can make a little money, I'm goin' to locate the best quarter there is on the Saddlehorn."

"I tell ye there ain't no land open in the valley," shrilled the other. "Look fer yourself." He waved his hand at a map covered with little squares, large blocks of which had been marked with red canyon. "Ye don't have to take my word for it."

"I'll have me squatter rights plumb in the middle of it," Wade Lott was saying in a flat, hard voice. "I'm goin' to write to the general land office an' find out jist what land has been patented an' what ain't. I hear Sol Mittag made application for survey and purchase under the Swamp Land Act, an' that was repealed."

Bruno Armitage was breathing noisily.

"Yo're makin' trouble fer yourself, Lott," he said. "I warn ye. Ye can't monkey with Sol Mittag."

"Mebbe *I* won't git to profit by it none," Wade Lott persisted doggedly, "but by the times things is straightened out, there'll be room for other settlers."

"It will go bad with ye!" the register warned.

They went out to the street, Luke and his father The boy's heart was pounding like a hard-swung double-jack. He heard his father's voice, suddenly become low, tranquil. "I allus been a great one to do things wrong, Luke. Your maw uster tell me I was as thumb-handed a feller as she ever see. Mebbe I done wrong now. I dunno."

They were on the sidewalk again, and Wade was making slow, measured footsteps on the planking.

"I got to thinkin' outside of town last night," the squatter said. "There we was skulkin' in the dark, same as we'd done suthin' we hadn't oughta. Me, I'd liked to been in watchin' the doin's, but I didn't dare on account of Mittag an' his punchers. I was a great one for excitement when I was a boy." He shook his head forlornly. "Ain't much fun for you, Luke. Hard on your maw; she'd like mightily to git to come to town now an' then, but it seems I allus git in trouble. Squatters is kind of an out-breed, I reckon."

" 'Tain't so, pop," Luke said—he felt excited as if at a discovery. "Squatters make wagon tracks fer others to foller. They got to have fightin' stuff in 'em."

"Yes, I 'low ye're right," Wade Lott said slowly.

He looked up and down the street. "That's it—fightin' stuff."

Cowboys, Key and Cross men, were beginning to appear on the sidewalks. They had slept off their respective jags of the night before and hangovers left them sullen-eyed, morose.

Dorg Fogel slouched from the hotel. He yawned, made a wry face, his eye wandering aimlessly over the town. Suddenly he stiffened, as his glance identified the two figures in front of the saddle shop. He stared hard at the nester and the boy, his hands clenching.

At that moment Bruno Armitage bustled from the land office in his shirtsleeves.

Luke gaped at Fogel and the scene that day in the meadow came back with a rush. Panic laid hold of him.

"Look, pop! Look over there! It's the feller that drug yuh off the wagon with his rope."

Wade Lott turned slowly. His lips thinned under his ragged mustache. A slow, desperate fire kindled in his faded eyes.

"He's a bad one." The nester's voice rasped hoarsely.

"How soon will the wheel be fixed?" the boy said.

"Not fer a couple hours. There's spokes to fit an' the rim to be shrunk on."

THEY went toward the blacksmith shop. Two young punchers had joined the group there. They seemed little more than boys. Luke learned later that they were Mittag's two youngest sons.

Mittag had joined Fogel on the hotel piazza. The man from the land office was there, gesticulating excitedly. Luke's scared glance kept skirmishing toward them. The register was sure to tell the cowman what his father had said.

Sol Mittag started down the steps. He came up the street, Fogel striding briskly beside him. At last they confronted the nester menacingly.

"Lott, I hear yuh been throwin' talk in town," Mittag stormed angrily.

"Guess ye didn't hear nothin' that wa'n't the truth," Wade Lott said thickly, tugging at his mustache.

"So I ain't got nary right on the Saddlehorn, eh?"

"Ye ain't got no right to try an' keep settlers out, like ye been a-doin'."

"Any legal right I'm lackin'," thundered the cowman, "I pack right here." He slapped his holster.

"There's plenty land fer everybody," Lott said stubbornly. "I aim to file on a quarter in the valley when I kin. No good mincin' words. I done been hearin' how you made a grab while that Swamp Land Act was in effect."

Sol Mittag laughed mirthlessly; then he said in a menacing tone, "Let me tell ye somethin', sod-buster—all the squatter rights you ever hold will be in Kingdom Come, if ye don't drag."

The men hunkered next to the building got up. The clang of the hammer on the anvil ceased.

One of Mittag's sons said, "What's up, dad?"

Wade Lott's voice plodded on. "Ye can't stop settlers. They'll be rollin' down the

Saddlehorn one day. Mebbe I won't be seein' 'em, but my boy will."

"We don't want your kind here, ye damn plow-chaser!" the man called Link snarled.

"Run 'im out, Sol," Clint rasped. "Town's with ye."

The nester spread his toil-worn hands. "I ain't got nothin'. 'Low I never will have, but I reckon it's better that-away than to have my woman an' my kid hear folks say I'm rich, but I stole what I got."

Sol Mittag stared at the squatter, his hands clenched. Luke gaped at the cattle king. For one brief instant something dulled the savage fire in the cowman's eyes. Like a fear, it seemed to Luke. Then it was gone, and Mittag was cursing.

"He's callin' ye a crook, Sol!" Fogel cried. His face was alive with thin-veiled craft. "Smash it back in his teeth. I'll see that his damn sneakin' brat don't pull a knife on us ag'in."

Fogel struck Luke on the mouth. "Ye ain't got your maw here now."

Lights blazed before Luke's startled eyes, and out of the dazzling aurora he had a glimpse of his father, lunging for Dorg Fogel's throat.

The foreman made no attempt to defend himself with his two fists. Instead he lurched back, clawing out his six-shooter. It blasted once, a muffled detonation, there between those two straining bodies.

The squatter drove Fogel against the wall of the blacksmith shop. He wasn't a timid, scared-looking little man any more, but a mountain-quickened wildcat. Yells broke. Boots rolled their ragged drum-beat on sidewalk and piazza. Doors slammed. The crowd grew and staring faces shaped a hollow square around the fighters.

The impact of the foreman's body shook the boarding, shattered grimed panes in a loose sash. The squatter loosed his grip, only to clamp on another. He lifted Fogel, raised him high, and dropped him on the great wheel stone by the door.

The sound was like the cracking of an eggshell. Wade Lott staggered back, swaying a little on wide-spread feet. His eyes found Luke and recognition fought through the glaze that was already skimming those faded depths. Once the nester raised his hand, attempting to brush away the eternal mists that blurred his vision, before he went down.

"Pop!" Luke's voice pitched to a scream, then dropped to a small, plaintive cry. "Pop." He threw himself beside his father.

"I—I'm all right—Luke." The squatter was fighting for breath. Two tell-tale streaks of red crept from his mouth corners. "Take keer—of your maw. I likely done wrong, but somebody has—t' break trail—"

CHAPTER THREE

Sod-Buster's Kid

THEY buried Wade Lott on a little knoll at the edge of the meadow on Snow Creek. That was the way his wife wanted it.

"He'd want to be near us," she said. "Not in the cemetery in town among strangers."

Luke and Tioga Bill built a great cross out of logs, and carved his name on it: WADE LOTT—PIONEER.

Luke did not see Rose Mittag again until the following spring. She rode across the meadow one day late in June. There were still snow patches in the timber.

Luke saw the girl rein in and stare for a long time at the grave. Then she came on to the cabin.

"I guess you must hate us all," she told Mrs. Lott. "But—you're our neighbors and I *had* to come and tell you how sorry I am."

Mrs. Lott smiled and held out her hand.

Luke said, "See, the snow was up to here last winter."

"I thought of you lots," the girl said. "It must have been terribly lonesome, snowed in like that. What did you do all the time?"

"I had a trap line," Luke told her. "Old Bill- he let me use his traps an' learnt me the things a feller has to know."

Pridefully, Luke exhibited his homemade snowshoes, explaining how he had cut and split hickory for the frames, set in the spreaders, cut thongs of deer hide, fitted the lanyards, woven the netting, worked the heel and toe mesh and shaped the knots for the loops and foot fastenings.

But mostly Rose exclaimed over the snow plants, studding the carpet of pine needles, where the snow had melted, with their carmine brilliance.

"My mother died when I was born, and there was never anybody to show me. Dad and the boys were always breaking horses or working cattle—they think it's silly to make

a fuss over pretty things, but I love them."

Luke sold his furs in Pineville, and more than ever felt himself a man. The winter had not been without profit. He broke a little ground at the lower end of the meadow and put in a garden.

Tioga Bill brought burros from the feed yard in town and Luke helped him pack ore over the hump. Later he hauled it to the railroad.

One day he saw Dorg Fogel in Pineville. The foreman glared at him with eyes flaming with hatred. Luke noticed that the Key and Cross foreman walked with a pronounced limp, as the result of injuries suffered in the fight with Wade Lott.

"Liked to bust him wide open," Bellerin' Teck, a freighter, with whom Luke had made friends, said. "Another man would a-died decently, but not Fogel. He's too damn ornery." And then, "Kid, ye better watch 'im, or some day he'll gun yuh down."

More and more Luke saw rickety wagons laden with a hodge-podge of household goods and farm implements in Pineville. And always sad-eyed women, sullen-faced men, while small, startled faces peeped, scared-like, out at a new world and new enemies.

The words uttered by Wade Lott that day in front of the blacksmith shop had echoed far. Freighters carried the news of the nester who had been killed because he disputed the rights of land thieves. The telegraph operator told a train crew, and the train crew carried the word down the rails.

Some men came because they could not resist a challenge—and a few killings took place as the result. Sullen mutterings grew as people were stirred to take sides.

When Luke thought of his father, he found a lump in his throat.

"*Squatters is an out-breed,*" Wade Lott had said.

Out-breed! More than one man of that breed was showing he wasn't afraid to die.

THE second winter Luke extended his trap line. He was wiser in wood lore now—he made fewer mistakes. He loved the high country, but sight of the green valley of the Saddlehorn always stirred the longing to own a piece of it.

The third winter he successfully matched wits with the most cunning fur-bearing animals, and his profits were substantial.

He was seventeen then. He had shed his angling awkwardness in the timber. He had grown tall, and was as tough as the hickory and rawhide that had gone into the making of that first pair of snowshoes.

Rose Mittag had never come to the cabin on Snow Creek following her visit that spring. Once Luke had seen her for a moment in Pineville, and she had given him a shy smile. Again he had met her riding out from town with her father.

Something had happened to her. Luke couldn't quite make up his mind what it was, but all at once she was a woman.

When her eyes met his that day, she said, "How do you do, Luke?" with stiff formality.

Sol Mittag stared straight ahead, his lips thin-drawn, his eyes fired with that old hatred.

Luke learned later that rustlers were looting the Key and Cross herds.

"They're bleedin' Mittag white," men said. Cattle thieves on the Saddlehorn! Luke couldn't understand it. There were no other brands. Men blamed it on the would-be settlers, who'd come with a chip on their shoulders after Wade Lott's killing, and whom Key and Cross had blasted back. Luke took no sides, beyond admitting to himself that he'd like to see Mittag take some punishment.

A restlessness was growing in town, and though Luke recognized it for a wolf-pack's turning on a wounded member, he saw no reason for not availing himself of it.

"We'd oughta to go down to the valley," Luke told his mother one day, "an' locate the place on Willow Crick that pop had his eye on, out north of Pineville."

Martha Lott said nothing.

"Guess it'll mean a fight," Luke said thoughtfully.

"It's been a fight ever since we headed our wagon west," his mother answered. "Drouth, hail, grasshoppers, cowmen, cold, flood an' starvation." Her chin quivered a little, but her eyes were defiant. "Wade wa'n't thinkin' about givin' up that day in Pineville."

The vein in Tioga Bill's mine had pinched out. The old man had gone to town to outfit for a prospecting trip in the Panamints. He met Mrs. Lott and Luke on the street, and they told him of their plans.

"Ye'll blow the lid plumb off the land office politics," he declared. "Ye're likely to blow it off the Saddlehorn. Still 'n' all, fur as

thet goes, thar wouldn't been but damn leetle minin' if it hadn't been fer gunpowder and guts." He clucked in his beard. "Durn my pore relations, if I don't stay to see it."

Later he took Luke up to his room in the hotel.

"I wouldn't say this in front of yore maw," old Bill said, "but a bare-handed man in these diggin's is gonna be sin in the sight o' God if you do what yo've set on. What ye want is a six-shooter strapped around your middle. I showed ye how to build a log house, an' l'arnt ye to make snowshoes an' run a trap line. Now, by the great Horn Spoon, I'm a-goin' to onfold a leetle wisdom consarnin' a six-shooter."

He resurrected from his war bag a battered but well-oiled and smooth-working .44 Colt, together with a belt and holster. "It belonged to an ole podner o' mine," Tioga said, "back in the boom days o' Cerro Gordo an' Panamint. Strap 'er on—an' may ye have need fer it!"

"Thanks, Tioga." Luke's hands were trembling a little, as he fondled the stained walnut grips. "We couldn't done nothin' if it hadn't been for you."

"Lis'en to me," Tioga Bill went on gruffly, waving aside the boy's words of appreciation. "Lis'en clost. Jordan is a hard ole trail. Ye're goin' to meet up with some tough hombres. Don't ever figger ye're onder airy obleegation to give t'other feller an even chance. Thar ain't no gentlemen's code in a gunfight. That's all storybook blather. When ye rightly sabe who your enemies are, come a-foggin'. If ye got to kill a man, go git him 'fore he gits you, 'cause he sartin will if he kin. Don't let 'im talk yuh down, or it'll be another case o' slow.

"Yore paw was a brave man, but he never had a chance. Sol Mittag an' Fogel figgered him a fool 'cause he didn't pack an ounce of iron. Ye're jist a sod-buster's kid, but ye know how to shoot, 'cause I l'arn't ye up thar in the mountains—an' a Colt in hand is wuth two on the draw. Keep this thing right handy."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Come A-Foggin'!"

LUKE LOTT walked slowly down the street. His heart hammered wildly at his ribs. Every nerve seemed to be threading flame through his body. Fear lurked in his faded blue eyes.

He went toward the livery stable, and a voice hailed him. "Hi, kid!" It was Bellerin' Teck. The freighter's eye noted the gunbelt. "Wall, I see ye done growed up."

Funny about that six-shooter—a feller might just as good been wheeling a cannon down the street. Everybody in town seemed to be looking at him. Two Key and Cross cowboys gave him a hard-eyed stare, then made some jeering remark.

Dorg Fogel came out of a saloon. He glanced carelessly at Luke, then stopped, pushing up his hat and scowling.

Calf round-up was done on the Saddlehorn and all of the Key and Cross men were in town. Sol Mittag was at the blacksmith shop now. Luke suddenly made up his mind to talk to the cowman. No good in putting it off.

He walked slowly down the street. The sing-song clamor of a hammer on the anvil reached him, stirring memories. Never as long as he lived would he hear a blacksmith's hammer without seeing his father sprawled on the ground, dying.

His hands clenched, then opened slowly. He flexed them to take the stiffness out of his fingers. Mittag never waited—and he'd boasted about how he backed his legal rights with a .45.

Luke wondered how it would feel to have somebody shooting at you. He wondered how it felt really to point a gun at a man and pull the trigger. The though, the rising beat of his blood, gave him a funny sort of lift, and if he'd been more practiced about these things he would have recognized it as the urge to kill. He knew he was ready to kill, if he had to.

Luke went toward the blacksmith shop.

SOL MITTAG had his back to him. He was talking to the blacksmith. The blacksmith looked past the cowman, and his jaws came apart and a small drizzle of tobacco juice leaked down his chin.

He rolled up his eyes and said, "Goddlemighty!"

Sol Mittag heeled around, ripping out an oath. He stared at Luke, tardy recognition dawning. "What in hell do *you* want?"

"I want to talk." It seemed to Luke as though his own voice came from a long ways off.

"You want to talk to me?" Mittag thundered.

"Yeah. Some place."

"Why not right here?"

"All right. Right here. Look. I'm goin' to locate a section where them big cottonwoods are, north o' town. If yuh figger to raise hell about it, now is a good time!"

At that moment, Rose Mittag came out of the general store. A small piece of colorful print fluttered in her fingers. Luke didn't see her then, but he heard her voice, calling to Fogel. He couldn't see Fogel either, but he knew the foreman was somewhere there on the street behind him.

"Dorg! Dorg, where's dad?"

Fogel didn't answer.

"Dorg, what's the matter? Answer me!" Her voice ran through the sudden silence of the street, carrying a note of panic.

Then Luke heard a faint, partly stifled cry. There was the quick patter of small shoes, hitting the planking, sharp little hammer blows. He heard the rustle of skirts, as she swept past, so close he could have touched her.

"Dad's, what's the matter?" Her eyes were wide, frightened, bewildered. She looked from her father to Luke.

Luke saw the bright piece of print which she still clutched. A sample of a new dress, he guessed. She sure liked pretty things.

She stared at Luke for a long time. "O-oh. It's you!" And it didn't seem to him that she liked him then.

Luke didn't answer. He was breathing hard. He saw the girl staring at the holster at his hip. He dropped his eyes. The fingers of his right hand were spread, stiff-like, close to the butt of the .44. There was no masking his intent.

Sol Mittag's eyes drove at him with tigerish ferocity. Then, at last, he looked down at the girl, and the fierceness seemed to die out of him.

"What is it, Rose? What yuh got there?"

Rose Mittag had never taken her eyes from Luke. She seemed to be plumbing the depths of his soul, seeing there what he had not realized he felt. Her cheeks drained white. "You fool!" she flung at him. "You—"

She turned to her father and held out the bit of cloth. Her lips were trembling. "It—it's a sample. Some new goods—they got in. It's awfully—pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure." Sol Mittag took her hand, as though she had still been a little girl.

"Come, Rose. We'll go look at it in the bolt. Tell more about it that way."

OUT of all the crashing turbulence in his brain, Luke remembered that Dorg Fogel was in the street behind him. Vaguely it came to him that he'd heard the voice of Clint Wall calling to someone: "It's that damn sod-buster's kid. He's on the peck. Look out fer 'em!"

Luke was surprised to find that he could think at all, but suddenly his mind cleared, and it was as though he was standing on a hogback in the mountains, with the frosty air giving vivid outline to every object.

Link Slaven would be out there too, likely. Slaven, Wall and Fogel. Old Tioga Bill had said, *"When ye rightly sabe who yore enemies are—come a-foggin'."*

Luke knew nothing of the art of the fast draw and quick-thrown hip shot, but he had used Tioga Bill's Colt on the trap lines, and he guessed a lively lynx or a timber wolf was a lot harder to hit than a man.

He dragged the old plow-handle .44 from its holster and eared the hammer back and jerked around.

Fogel was better than sixty yards away, gun drawn. Somehow it came to Luke that the foreman, at that distance, was more of a decoy than an immediate menace.

He had a glimpse of the lank Clint Wall, slinking behind some horses at a hitchrack across the street. Link Slaven was on the same side as the blacksmith shop, near the assay office. He was standing spraddle-legged in front of an alley holding a six-shooter.

Seemed like Fogel must have told 'em to get him.

Luke heard a gun blast out. Glass crashed behind him, and he was dimly aware that Jake Vaght had hunkered down behind the forge. Other figures were scrambling frantically to get out of the line of fire. He felt suddenly alone, abandoned.

He started to run. He ran toward Link Slaven. He saw the cowboy's eyes pop, as though suddenly confronted by the fact that he had a crazy man to contend with, probably reaching the conclusion that sod-busters were all loco, like sheepherders.

Luke guessed that he wasn't fighting according to the rules, loping along the side-

walk like a startled coyote. Likely they'd figured he'd stand there and let them bludgeon him down with lead.

Link fired, still looking somewhat startled. Luke crouched a little, lengthening that deceptive coyote stride. Link's shot went wide.

Luke saw the gun in the other's hand jump again, quick, and something cool fanned his cheek. Suddenly he stopped, jabbed the old .44 toward Link and fired.

Link tried to thumb the hammer back again, but he seemed to be having some trouble. He looked at Luke, his eyes wide, bewildered. He took one step and tripped over a loose plank. That was what it looked like. But Link never got up.

A PROSPECTOR had left some pack-laden burros in front of the assay office. Luke found that they served as a sort of fortification. He peered past them and saw Fogel. He threw up his gun, but one of the burros flung around in his way.

The foreman threw a wild shot, and ran in between some horses at the hitch-rack on the opposite side of the street. There were no more shots, and people began spilling from doorways and alleys.

Luke saw Tioga Bill coming down the street at an awkward lope, six-shooter in his hand. Then he saw the marshal; he saw his mother too. Her face looked like marble. He started toward her.

The marshal yelled at him. "Hold on there, kid!" The man with the badge had pulled a gun.

Luke glanced back, his eyes filled with perplexity. Link Slaven was where he had fallen. Luke guessed he hadn't tripped after all.

Bellerin' Teck was striding from the feed yard, knocking people right and left.

His bull-throated voice rose above the clamor of the street, as he bore down on the marshal.

"If ye arrest that kid, there'll be more kinds of hell to pay than ye ever thought there was. Ye damn ole buzzard—couldn't ye see they was all gunnin' fer him?"

Tioga Bill had come up and was yelling. "I never heerd the law tried Fogel fer shootin' the kid's father.""

"No," Bellerin' Teck roared, "but if we'd had a vigilance committee in this town he'd been tried. We'd trimmed a tree with him."

Luke saw Sol Mittag's stormy figure in the group around Link Slaven's body and he watched him carefully. The Key and Cross punchers would sure be out to get him now.

Some one took hold of his arm. It was his mother. She seemed very calm, as calm as she had been that day on Snow Creek when she pointed the Winchester at Fogel.

"Mebbe I hadn't oughta gone after Mittag like that," Luke said, but it was a concession to what she might think—not anything he felt himself. His blood was singing.

Mrs. Lott smiled at him. "I'm proud of you. You showed them that a—that anybody can fight them with their own weapons."

It took some of the wind out of him, and he grinned at her. "I sorta wisht pop could been here."

CHAPTER FIVE

Homestead in the Valley

RESENTMENT flamed through the town like the run of a prairie fire. A nester's kid, fighting lone-handed, had defied the Key and Cross.

Eye witnesses filled in the details of the fight, and sentiment crystallized into a brittle antagonism toward the Key and Cross. A kid had drawn first blood tangling with the power of The Saddlehorn and wolf-like men closed ranks behind him.

Bruno Armitage craftily began to mend his fences. The Lotts filed on the section on Willow Creek, and Bruno Armitage received their application with soft words and an oily smirk.

ONE day Luke met Rose Mittag at the rutted turn-off that led to the cabin on Willow Creek. The last time he had seen her had been that day in front of the blacksmith shop. She had lashed out at him then, her eyes flashing anger.

He slapped at the horses with the reinends, staring straight ahead, but the girl swung her mount into the road.

"Aren't you going to speak to me, Luke?" she demanded.

Luke felt his face getting red. He pulled off his battered hat. "I—I kinda figgered that you hated me."

"There's been too much hating," the girl said. "And I've been thinking a lot—all the

terrible things that happened to you. I couldn't blame you for wanting to fight. I would have too. Anyway, if you're going to be neighbors, it will be so much nicer to be friends."

Luke said, "Sure. Neighbors." His face lighted, and he told of the new cabin. "I peeled the logs—it makes the place look better, an' we got three rooms an' a stove." He paused, and added: "But there's no fun in havin' nice things if there ain't anybody to show 'em to. I wish you'd come an' see us."

"I can see the smoke from your place at the ranch," Rose said. "It doesn't seem so lonesome any more."

"I'm goin' to run a trap line ag'in this winter, an' next year we'll get everythin' all fixed up just like folks. It takes an awful long time when you're poor."

"We are poor too," the girl said. "We haven't any friends. Everybody hates us. I guess that's the worst kind of poverty there is."

"Yuh got us," Luke said, and then he realized how strange the words must have sounded. What was he offering to a man he was fighting—and once had meant to kill.

A week later, Rose rode down to the cabin on Willow Creek. Luke showed her the things he had accomplished. He was proud of it all, as he had been of that first pair of homemade snowshoes.

When the girl went, Luke walked with he ras far as the main road.

All at once it seemed that words were hard to find. The horse grazed unnoticed, reins dragging.

"Ain't the mountains pretty?" Luke said, breaking an awkward silence.

"The mountains? Oh. Yes."

"I'm goin' up to Snow Crick next week to get my traps ready."

"I'll miss you."

He smiled. "Mother's goin' to stay here. She'd like for you to neighbor with her, I reckon."

"That's what neighbors are for." She held out her hand. "Good-by, Luke."

Her hand seemed ridiculously small, but at the touch of it hot blood hammered in his veins. Suddenly words were clamoring for utterance—all the things a young man who is in love wants to say and never can.

He squeezed her fingers gingerly.

"G'by—Rose," he said.

THE first snow of the season began to fall in the lower altitudes two weeks after Luke's return to the cabin in the mountains. He had been in Dread Pass and was returning to Snow Creek when he saw a small herd of cattle moving in the timber.

Luke remembered now that other years he had come on the tracks of driven herds about the time of the first snowfall. The things he had heard concerning rustlers came back to him.

He concealed himself on a rocky shoulder and watched. He finally identified Fogel and the cowboy called Clint. The other two horsemen were strangers. Luke turned his attention again to the cattle.

They were mostly cows. Cows would have been bred. It meant that Mittag was losing a lot more than those represented here. Small wonder that calf roundup on the Key and Cross these past years showed staggering losses.

Those early snows not only obliterated the rustlers' trail but closed the pass against pursuit. The Key and Cross foreman, then, was not only a gunman but a thief and a traitor as well.

Luke was tempted to throw a bullet at Fogel, as his hatred of the man flamed anew. He cocked his Winchester and sighted experimentally at the riders in that maze of softly falling flakes.

But at last he eased the hammer down.

"Sol Mittag ain't no friend of mine," he muttered. "This is *his* fight."

CHAPTER SIX

Sod-Busters Can Fight

THE place where the cabin had stood was like a black carpet flung down under the trees. Above was the brown tapestry of scorched branches.

Luke's dull stare at last found the lean-to shack by the corral, with its crooked bit of stove-pipe. He went on then, skirting the charred timbers and gray ashes. His mother appeared in the door of the shanty, crying out when she recognized him.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks, as he caught her in his arms.

"Who did it?" His voice was harsh.

"No one knows. A dozen nesters have been burned out, threatened, if they didn't leave."

"Mittag, I reckon," bitterly.

"He swears he don't know anything about it." She paused, adding, "I hear the Key and Cross are in a bad way, too. Mittag let Fogel and the rest go. There's only Rose and the boys now."

Luke told of having seen the foreman and Clint Wall driving cattle over Dread Pass.

"Saw smoke up the crick," Luke added. "We got neighbors?"

"Yes, the Clancys. They filed on the next quarter. They filed on the next quarter. There's a great brood of them, and they've had so much sickness. The night the riders burned our cabin, they were ordered to leave. Mr. Clancy is so hot-tempered; I guess he talked pretty strong. They like to beat the poor man to death."

"I'm goin' up to see him," Luke said.

The sod-buster was a little man, but he bristled with fight and determination.

"Some settlers have quit a'ready," he said disgustedly, "but not me. I been fightin' all me life. It'll take more than a few skulkin' blackguards a-horseback to scare me out."

"Would you know any of them if you saw them again?" Luke asked.

"It's like I was tellin' the sheriff, me boy. Betwixt the night an' the rage that consumed me, I wa'n't fit to be recognizin' me own brother. Wan of them slapped a noose at me an' drug me a bit, ye see, an' whin I got on me feet this feller jumps off his horse, rushes in wit' a pistol, battin' at me head.

"Nope, I wouldn't know none of thim. Oh-ho—wait a minute." Clancy wrinkled up his bushy brows and scratched his stubbly jaw. "It jist comes to me. The wan that clubbed me. It strikes me now that he had a hitch in his git-along. A kind o' limp, d'ye mind."

"I know who it was!" Luke cried. "Dorg Fogel."

"Saints presarve us!" cried Clancy. "Not the feller ye maw was tellin' about—the wan that kilt ye' father?"

"The same one," Luke said. "My father crippled him for life when he threw him down on the wheel-stone at the blacksmith shop."

When Luke returned home, his mother said, "You ought to tell Mittag about those cattle on Dread Pass."

Luke shook his head. "Let him find out." A little later he said, trying to keep his voice calm, "Whatever became of Fogel, anyway? He still around?" He wouldn't tell his mother about the thing he had learned at Clancy's—no use worrying her.

"Tioga Bill says he's living at a ranch just south of town. He's got some young stuff and has registered a brand, the 77, under the name of the Valley Land and Cattle Company. Rose tells me Fogel and Bruno Armitage are real thick; she heard they were in partnership."

A little before dark, Luke slipped a blanket and bridle on one of their work horses and stuffed his gunbelt inside his shirt.

"I'm goin' into Pineville," he told his mother.

"Be careful, son," she said. Her eyes searched his face.

Luke kissed her, wondering that she could always remain so calm. He guessed he wasn't fooling her.

He couldn't know that he was no sooner out of sight than Mrs. Lott was hurrying up the creek toward the Clancy shack, and that not five minutes after her arrival there the stooped little Irishman was astride a plow horse, galloping madly in the direction of the Key and Cross ranch.

HE PASSED the place on the outskirts where he and his father had camped that night long ago under the willows, fearing to go into Pineville. He had grown up since then; Sol Mittag had been whipped to his knees; another man was shaping a new and bloody empire.

Would there never be peace?

Luke slid off the horse at the end of the street near the bell tower. He buckled on the gunbelt, took the old .44 from the holster and put it back, testing its position. *"If ye got to kill a man, go git him 'fore he gits you. . . ." He* wondered where old Bill was.

His eyes skirmished through the muddy shadows. He could make out men seated on piazzas, hunkered on steps. Now and then a match flared, lighting a face. There was the low drone of voices. Luke walked past the feed yard. He saw glowing cigarette ends.

Some one recognized him, "Hi, sod-buster, how's crops?"

Another jeered. "He ain't no sod-buster—he's a trapper. That's Dan'l Boone. Lookit the fur cap." Laughter.

Fogel was bound to be in town. Living

close, he wouldn't be spending his evenings at the ranch. Luke's eyes hurt with watching. His ears strained to recognize familiar voices. Fogel had promised once to kill him on sight.

Luke stopped in front of the Miners' Hotel. A chair slapped down. "Hell, it's the kid." It was Jake Vaght. "Heerd they burnt ye out. Damn shame."

"Tioga Bill around?" Luke asked.

"Nope. Bill's over Death Valley way."

Luke went on. He pushed into a saloon. Three or four were at the bar; a poker game was going. Fogel was not there.

He examined the horses on the street. He remembered Fogel's fancy saddle. He looked in all the saloons on one side of the street and crossed over.

In front of the Saddlehorn he saw a horse with a fancy rig. He was pretty sure it was Fogel's, but he couldn't make out the brand. He ran his eye along the hotel piazza, seeing figures there in the chairs.

Bruno Armitage came out of the door. Luke stared at him. He hated Armitage. And the tension in him dissolved into action.

He slammed up the steps and bunched the front of the register's ornate vest into a twisted knot, jerking the other toward him. A silence grew around him.

"Where's Fogel?"

"Le'go o' me, damn ye!" Armitage snarled.

"Mister, I hear you are mighty friendly with Fogel. I reckon you know where he is right now. Tell me quick or I'll tear you apart!"

Armitage gasped out a curse. "I ain't seen Fogel."

Luke's fist smashed him in the mouth.

The register spat out some unintelligible remark and flapped a hand toward the lobby. A figure got up from a chair down the piazza and eased quickly toward the steps that led to the alley. Luke had a brief glimpse of a flat-crowned hat such as punchers on the Saddlehorn wore, and a lank form. It looked like the cowboy called Clint.

He was goin' to warn Fogel. Fogel must be in the hotel bar. Luke flung Armitage away, stood a moment, undecided. Swinging doors in the lobby led to the bar—there was also a side door in the alley.

If he crossed the lobby he'd be a wide-open target, in case someone happened to be watching through one of those side windows. If he started through the alley, they'd get him sure. But if he could get past the alley and then come back through the passage there between the saddle shop and the side of the livery barn. . . .

He jumped over the railing and ran for the saddle shop, ducking under the hitch-rail and scaring the horses, as he took to the street. Somewhere boots were pounding on the sidewalk, and a voice yelped, "There's hell ter pay!"

Dimly Luke was aware of the impact of the hoofs of hard-ridden horses coming into town, but his eyes were intent only on the pools of shadows that he must penetrate. He came to the passageway and ran along it.

The door at the side of the hotel was open. He had a glimpse of the blue haze of tobacco smoke within and heard the raising yammer of voices. Fogel lunged through the door, gun drawn, a solid shape against a yellow frame.

Clint, in the deeper shadows, was squalling, "Git away from that door!"

From somewhere behind him, Luke heard a yell. "He's in the driveway here, Dorg!" Another of Fogel's men, Luke imagined—one of the fellows who had been there in the feed yard.

Suddenly savage concussions slammed the night. Muzzle flame lashed the gloom. Luke, taking refuge in the blackness, held his fire. The flash of his gun would betray his position.

And then the old plow-handle Colt bucked hard in his hand. Once! Twice! Fogel swayed, toppled forward. Clint's gun splashed yellow again. Something hit Luke and half turned him around. He braced his legs and aimed at the orange lances. He fired until the hammer clicked on empty shell.

The gun flanking him by the feed yard roared twice more, then hoofs were pelting the ground. Luke, fighting nausea, braced himself stubbornly against the wall and tried to reload.

He was still fumbling with the ejector lever when he heard a girl's voice, raised above the growing commotion.

"Luke!" it called. "Luke!"

Luke was aware then of a horse b[illegible]e him and a rider bending toward him. "Here he is, sis!" One of the Mittag boys. Funny, them being there.

There was a rush of small feet, and Rose

had caught hold of him, was steadying him. Some one came running up with a lantern. Then he heard Sol Mittag, oaths booming out of him.

"Why in hell didn't you let us know? We'd took care of them damn rustlers."

Luke glared at the big cowman defiantly. "This was a fight I meant to finish."

He wondered if Mittag remembered how it began.

"He's hurt!" Rose cried. "He's all blood. Take him into the hotel and get the doctor."

"How'd you git here?" Luke said thickly.

"Clancy came for us. He just about ran that plow horse to death."

"Fogel's done," another of the Mittag boys was saying. "Clint ain't dead, but I reckon he's wishin' he was."

"HE'S bad hit," the doctor told an anxious little group later, "but sod-busters are a hardy breed. He'll pull through."

It seemed a long time since he'd been out there amid the jolting thunder. He felt funny, done-up, but he could hear low voices, and guessed he must be all right.

Faces took form at last. His mother was there, and Rose. Luke didn't know Sol Mittag at first—he looked funny without his hat on.

"Howdy, neighbor," Sol Mittag said.

Luke stared hard at first one and then another of them. Sol Mittag had called him "neighbor."

He grinned and said it out loud. "Pop was sure enough a pioneer, wasn't he? Jist like he an' ole Bill carved on his tombstone up there at snow crick.

Rose said, "We're proud of you—and him too." Her eyes were shining.

That would make it easier, Luke thought, to tell her what he knew he some day must. He shut his eyes and relaxed. A man needed his strength for that.

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 83)

1. False. An albino horse is lighter than a palomino.

2. If the ranch boss sent you out for an all-around cow horse, you should return with an animal which had been specially trained to perform the many duties required by an experienced cowpoke.

3. True. "Bad medicine" is a term commonly used in reference to persons considered dangerous.

4. If a cowpoke blats "baaa"—the cry of the sheep—at another, a fight is likely to ensue.

5. A blood bay is darker than an ordinary bay horse.

6. A bucking horse is said to be "blowing the plug" when he is trying every trick in the book.

7. True. A "bucking rein" is generally a single rope attached to the hackamore of a bucking horse.

8. If a cowpoke friend told you he'd been bucking the tiger, he would mean he'd been playing faro.

9. True. "California twist" is a roping term.

10. If a Mexican cowpoke told you he had just left a "campo santo," he would mean he had just left a graveyard.

11. False. "Cow rigging" is the gear that a cowpoke wears when at work.

12. According to the earlyday definition, a "cowtown" was a town at the end of the trail.

13. "Daylighting" means to leave the saddle of a bucking horse so far that daylight can be seen between rider and saddle.

14. True. "Deadfall" was often used in reference to any establishment of bad repute.

15. "Leg bail" refers to the situation of the individual who has broken out of the calabozo.

16. If a cowpoke told you he had just missed being "exalted," he would mean he had just missed being strung up.

17. "Fried chicken" is a contemptuous slang term used in reference to bacon rolled in flour and then fried.

18. True. "To fort up" means to barricade oneself and get ready for a seige.

19. True. "Hatajo" generally refers to a train of pack mules.

20. True. According to Western slang, a "hay shoveler" is a farmer.

(Continued from page 10)

points amateurs must know? And the outfit needed. I don't mind tough work, but lack sufficient knowledge to recognize ore in a vein outcrop.

A.M., Corning, N. Y.

Reply by Victor Shaw: Sight-recognition of rocks and minerals in the field, like everything else, takes experience, coupled with a study of rock types from books that I shall list presently. However, one can't really do much with rock descriptions *alone*, but should have actual samples to study.

Such samples now are put up in boxes with labeled specimens of rocks in weathered condition, just as taken from vein outcrops, or surface samples from areas of igneous and sedimentary rocks. The chief *igneous* rocks (note that these are the only ones which have brought to surface by volcanic action the various metallic ores in solution) comprise the gray granites, not the red type; andesite; rhyolite, and also sometimes basalt. The chief sedimentary rocks which were water-laid and include slate, schist, and shale, the conglomerates (those with rounded inclusions of igneous fragments), also graywack (which has only *sharp* fragments included in its mass). There is also limestone and quartzite, which were sedimentary but underwent strong metamorphosis by extreme heat and pressure.

When the molten magma of igneous rocks was thrust up volcanically into and through areas of sedimentary rocks, the magma full of metallics in solution was crystallized in fractures we call veins. But at the same time fractures occurred also in the sedimentary slate and schist, conglomerate etc., so the magma also flowed into these fractures to make similar veins right in the sedimentary rocks, as well.

The igneous rocks usually formed hills and mountains, and that is where you hunt for ore veins. But you also hunt for them in slates, schists, shales, conglomerates etc., but not more than one or one and a half miles from the *point of contact* with the granite, andesite etc.

In the granites, etc., the veins are fissure-type and go down to great depth. The veins in the slates, schists etc. may have great depth, but not always. At any rate, they're often very rich veins, especially at the surface, due to a weathering (oxidization) of the outcrop that in a loose gangue (vein filling) allows the metallics to penetrate downward and enrich the surface ore, sometimes for several hundred feet. That old saying of bygone miners that "a vein is richer at depth" isn't always true.

As for rocks to study, you can order them in boxed form from mineral dealers, one of the best of which is Ward's Natural Science Establishment, Inc., 3000 Ridge Road East, Rochester 9, N. Y. Just write them to select you one box of igneous rocks, and another of the chief sedimentary rocks, all of these labeled with their common names. Ask them about cost of these, which may not be over a few bucks each. Be sure and tell them to use weathered *surface* rocks if possible.

Also I suggest you get *Mineral Indentification Simplified*, by O. S. Smith, Mineralogist Pub. Co., 329 S. E. 32nd St., Portland 15, Oregon. Other publications are *The Rock Book*, by Fenton; and *Handbook for Prospectors*, by Von Bernewitz, published by the same company. Price them before ordering.

These books and rock samples will save you many years of actual field experience.

Success to you, and come again.

TURQUOISE MINING

Query: Could you give me some definite information on turquoise mining? Are there any active mines in the U.S.? I always understood that the Persian stones were superior. Is this true? If there are no active mines in our country, are there any localities where turquoise may be found consistently? I expect to spend this summer in Nevada. Are there any unusual localities where a rock hound might "find things"?

R.I., Reading, Penn.

Reply by Victor Shaw: Turquoise is one of the most ancient minerals and first was mined before the dawn of history, in a mountain range between towns of Mished and Nisdipoor in northeast Persia. Its name is derived from the French meaning "Turkish stone", because it was introduced into Europe *by way* of Turkey. It is also the standard gem of Tibetians who used and revered it from very remote times. It was also mined on Sinai Peninsula, circa 5500 B.C.

As for Persian stones being superior to those mined domestically, it's true they used to be, but the supply in those countries began failing about 1900, due to primitive, wasteful mining methods. And about that time American interests began developing the known ancient mines in our Southwest; until today a majority of the world's turquoise comes from our mines, and is of far better quality.

In North America use of this gemstone has been chiefly confined to Central America, Mexico, and our Southwestern states. And the stone was sought by Cortez in the 16th century, by Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, and Coronado. The Spaniards after the famed "Cibola" found all Indians there using the gem for decorations, went to the mines and took pack loads back to Mexico City. I also got fine turquoise from Navajo Indians about 1903, when on a pack trip through their reservation, looking for new undisturbed cliff dwellings; and heard of one cliff dwelling in which had been unearthed a large pottery jar filled with turquoise.

Today, those ancient diggings still are worked in the Cerrillos Mountains a little west-of-south from Santa Fe on Highway 10, east of US-85 and the Rio Grande River. These mines, two of them, are being worked

on both Turquoise Hill and Mt. Chalchihuitl of this range, the latter being a low knob near the center of the range. Both areas were worked in a primitive manner by the ancient Indian tribes, and the excavations on Chalichihuitl, old and new, are actually amazing. The gem is also being mined to some extent at Azure Mine in the Burro Mountains, some dozen miles west of Silver City in Grant County, also near White Signal at south end of Burro Mountains reached from Silver City via county road 180, and in the Jarilla Mountains four miles northwest of Turquoise Town, Otero County.

In Arizona, there's a rather large mine in the Dragoon Range near Courtland, on US-666, Cochise County on the Turquoise Ridge. The gem is also reported near Kelvin, in east-central Pinal County; and in the Cerbat Mountains, near Chloride, in west-central Mohave County.

In California we have some in both Fresno and San Bernardino counties. And there's turquoise reported on Mt. Holy Cross, Colorado.

If you go to Nevada, you'll find a whole lot of turquoise of good quality being mined in many scattered localities. In Nye County there is a mine near Tonopah, hard by the west-central county line—and at Belmont in north part of county in Manhattan mining district. Lander Country, boasts a mine near Austin; Fox Mine is at Cortez on the east-central boundary line, and there are numerous others.

This gemstone is a hydrous phosphate of aluminum, its color due to a little copper and iron. It is opaque and rather soft so is always cut cabochon. The best gems are sky-blue although much of it comes in greenish or a blue-green hue. Crystals are rare, but some have come from Lynch Station, Va.

You don't want to miss the famed King Mine, at Manassa in the San Luis valley, Colo. It's the oldest in the state.

MARKET FOR GEMSTONES

Query: Can you tell me how to find a market for uncut stones such as agate, garnet, topaz, and sapphire? I have some nice, banded agate, a lot of clear and pale yellow sapphires, and a few of the famous blue Yoga Montana sapphires. The largest of these weighs three and a half karats. I also have a few rubies. I would like to sell just a few of these to help me out on my expenses.

L.H., Billings, Montana

Reply by Victor Shaw: There are many markets today all over the U.S.A. for all rough uncut minerals, both with mineral dealers and with collectors, whose name is legion. Probably well over 50% of amateur collectors now have lapidary outfits and are becoming expert in the ancient art of cutting and polishing minerals and gems.

Of course, you want as high a price as possible, which will hardly come from the dealers for obvious reasons. Your chance is better with collectors, both professional and amateur, because in this market there is lots of competition.

So I'd suggest advertising what you have in one of the mineral magazines. All collectors take 'em and partly to see ads such as yours.

The best mineral magazine in the West, and in my opinion in the U.S.A., is *The Mineralogist*, H. C. Dake, Editor, address: 329 S. E. 32nd St., Portland 15, Oregon. This magazine gives all important mineral dealers in the nation, with many lesser ones as well, so an ad in this monthly magazine will reach a very large potential market.

However, your dealer market isn't too bad and one of the largest of these is Ward's Natural Science Establishment, Inc., at 3000 Ridge Road East, Rochester 9, N. Y. Price depends naturally upon kind of stone, size of samples, and if of gem quality, or not.

LOST MINES

Query: I'm very much interested in gold mining, or rather, gold mines, especially those that have became lost and live only in legends and yarns. Am also interested in lost stage coach shipments, etc. Could you give me any information regarding either of these subjects? I've heard that there are numerous lost mines in Idaho. However, just hearing about mines does nothing except get me all enthused. I would like to do a bit of prospecting this summer and will endeavor to run down any leads you might have. I have heard of two, or rather three lost mines near Lake Pend Oreille in Northern Idaho. I live about a mile from Bayview, which is right on Pend Oreille. However, as yet I have been unable to procure any concrete leads, but am still working.

W.T., Bayview, Idaho

Reply by Victor Shaw: I'm sorry, but I can't give you much encouragement in your proposed quest for so-called lost mines. I've collected stories about them for years, in fact sold a series of them, and while I admit that perhaps a few are authentic, a vast majority have insufficient details of location, with many that are absolute myths. Some have vague directions the original finder couldn't use to re-locate them. So let me ask you—if the first discoverer failed to find his bononza again, what chance have you from 40 to 75 years later? *Nada, amigo,* it's purely ridiculous.

You've noted of course, that all of them are glittering bonanzas.

The logical thing to do is to study a little basic geology, get a reliable book on field methods, then get into favorable areas for some legitimate prospecting of new deposits, either placer, or lode. I can help you in this, if you like.

ALL-AROUND ROCKHOUND

Query: I would like to get information on

prospecting for gold and other metals such as silver, copper, lead, etc.

C.B., Rye, Colorado

Reply by Victor Shaw: I prospected and mined in Colorado for some 18 years, from 1902 to 1920, and have kept in close touch with developments ever since.

Take a good map of the state, and rule a line from Steamboat Springs, Routt County, down through Delta in Delta County, then another from Denver, Arapahoe County, down through Del Norte, Rio Grande County, and inside these lines you'll have (including Teller County) roughly about all favorable areas for gold-silver-lead, copper, zinc, tungsten, and other commercial metallic ores. Outside of this vast belt there isn't much.

This is because this belt contains most of the Rocky Mountain Range, which is composed of the igneous andesite and granite rocks, which are the kind of rocks in which the ores named are always found. The rocks in the rest of the state are different, being of sedimentary (water-laid) type, often metamorphosed, but not parent-rocks for the ores named. It is in these, of sedimentary origin, that you find asbestos and the secondary ore of carnotite that occurs in the sedimentary sandstones of the Colorado Plateau region around San Miguel County and extends into Utah.

Roughly this is the basic geological condition. Of course, there are a few exceptions, where spurs of the Rockies extend into the sedimentary sandstone, slate, gneiss, quartzite, shale, and schistose areas outside.

Colorado has been one of the richest mining regions in the U.S.A. and it still has much to discover and develop, but I've seen many of its rich gold mines become exhausted and let out to leasers, such as the Gold King, Silver Lake, Gold Prince, Sunnyside and others in the Silverton area—Camp Bird and Yankee Girl near Ouray—Tomboy and Butterfly-Terrible in Telluride area—silver mines of Leadville and Aspen—even most of the great gold mines at Cripple Creek, and the rich May Day gold mine in the La Plata Mountains near Durango, just to name a very few of the best known.

However, many older mines still produce, and some new strikes are being made now and then by use of modern geophysical instruments, by hunting over rocks bared by snow slides—or even by sheer luck. There's enough activity to prove that new deposits still remain to be discovered through intelligent prospecting.

For uranium ores, a Geiger Counter is a must. The use of this instrument is explained in the Atomic Energy Commission's little booklet *Prospecting for Uranium*, yours for 30c, if you write to the Supt. of Documents, Gov't Printing Office, Wash'n 25, D. C. It also gives data on the $10,000 bonus for acceptable pitchblende ore, and the price per pound for all of this ore you may produce.

Asbestos is of two kinds: amphibole and chrysotile. The first occurs in hornblende schist rocks and the other in serpentine, which is a hydrated silicate of magnesium. Most commercial asbestos is chrysotile, found in serpentine, which occurs in belts of soft greenish rock, much used for building stone. It also is the rock containing chromite ore, platinum, and nickel. The chrysotile-asbestos comes in veins and its fibers reach from wall to wall of the veins, having a silky luster of yellow-green color. Rubbed in fingers the fibers separate. There may be some in Colorado, but if so I've no reports on any. Most long fiber comes from Arizona, with some short fiber from California.

Panning for placer gold is not hard to learn, but takes some practice to get the best results. Use a common sheet-iron working pan of 16-inches across top, costing about 75c.

Use a #2 round-point shovel and fill the pan with gravel (that'll be mixed with sand, of course) and shake it and bump it, to settle the possible gold to the bottom—practice it in some old washtub. Force loaded pan under water—shaking it well to settle the contents, then while still under water scrape off all larger pebbles and rocks and shake while doing so.

Now raise pan and tilt it so that rim away from you is just under water and shake it to-and-from you so that contents washes out over the edge farthest from you, thus by continual action most of the sand and gravel will be washed off. But, as contents get lower, watch contents closely and now and then bump pan with heel of hand to keep settling possible gold and keep it on bottom.

Presently, you'll see some black sand under the yellow-gray cover of sand; so work more slowly and carefully making sure only the lighter sand washes over the far edge. This is the crucial test of your skill—to get all lighter sand washed off and leave the black, for the black stuff, composed of iron mostly is heavier than sand, but it takes very careful washing to get rid of it all.

When you've done this, carefully empty all but a spoonful of water. Then tilt the pan so as to drain a V-shaped angle back along the bottom and roll the tipped pan around so the black sand will run backward, leaving tiny yellow grains of gold at its sharp tip.

In practicing, you can mix about a dozen small bird shot with gravel, then count shot to see if you've got 'em all. When you do, you're a panner.

RECOGNIZING ROCKS

Query: My brother-in-law has a ranch of approximately three hundred and sixty-five acres in Chihuahua Valley, California which is in Cleveland National Forest, I believe. We've heard rumors that the region thereabouts formerly had heavy deposits of tungsten, garnet, and other metals. The hilly part of his property is nearly covered with quartz and we've found many garnets which were exposed to the elements and, of course valueless. Can you tell me about what to

look for in rock formation, quartz composition, color of quartz, depth, and any other information regarding prospecting in this region. In other words, we believe there are precious metals and stones on his property, but we actually don't know what to look for or how to go about it.

J.B., Los Angeles, Cal.

Reply by Victor Shaw: Now my maps fail to show your valley by name, anywhere in the Cleveland Nat'l Forest region, so I can't locate you precisely. Where is your acreage from Pala or Murrieta? Or is your valley more to the south, somewhere east or west of Lake Henshaw? You see, local geology makes a lot of difference.

You mention tungsten and it's true that it is found in quartz veins, but there are five or six kinds of tungsten, and also many kinds of quartz—and of the latter only one kind is likely to be associated with tungsten ore.

Are you sure what you call "quartz" isn't *calcite*, instead? I ask this because the most common variety of tungsten ore in this state is scheelite, and scheelite is a tungstate of calcium. I mean that where scheelite veins ocur there're usually found a variety of calcium rocks, from calcite itself to those bearing calcium, like limestone, dolomite, etc. And as quartz is the most common mineral, calcite is the next most common anywhere.

You can tell them apart easily, for quartz has a hardness of 7 in the Moh scale but calcite is only 3. You can scratch calcite with a knife point (or with quartz) but can't scratch quartz with knife or file but quartz will scratch window glass and *is* scratched by corundum, or topaz, or diamond. Calcite is glassy on surface and crystallizes in the form of rhombs that usually are transparent, in its massive deposits.

If there's any tungsten in your valley it will be in the form of scheelite. Quite a lot of this type is scattered over the state, the biggest deposit being near Bishop. Another used to be at Atolia just south of Randsburg on US-395 in the Mohave Desert. And there are many others found recently. Also many in Nevada, too.

Scheelite deposits occur in quartz veins in granite in both California and Nevada. Often, too, there may be some garnet in the ore, though not always. However, there is apt to be a dolomite nearby; or perhaps an area of limestone that contacts an area of gray dioritic-granite, or granodiorite. And very often the scheelite ore occurs in a vein in a series of chutes, or lenses, often widely separated in vein. That is, the vein isn't solid tungsten ore right along each way, but in chutes or lenses with barren quartz between.

In fact, though the Atolia mine produced more tungsten than the Boulder and Nederland mines in Colorado once, its peak has probably passed; and the same may be true of the big new discoveries twenty miles from Bishop. For Uncle Sam's tungsten mines never have produced this ore in very large amounts for any length of time and in our wars we always have a "shortage" of this vitally necessary metal.

The above may help you when looking around down there, but I don't know of any tungsten having been found in what I think may be your district. But you can't be very far from the Pala and Mesa Grande deposits of semi-precious stones called "kunzite", which occurs in pegmatite dikes, also rubellite (pink tourmaline), which occurs in lepidolite (a lithium-mica of pinkish color) which is mined for its lithium.

Anyway, please give me your location on the map, and if the above doesn't give all you want to know, query me more fully.

MONTANA MINES

Query: Is there any chance of finding chromium, tin or beryl in eastern Montana? Or what could a person expect to find in that line?

In your opinion, would it be worth while to spend a year prospecting in any one of the northwestern states?

R.L., Baker, Montana

Reply by Victor Shaw: You are not likely to find any chromite or tin, nor is the geology of eastern Montana favorable for beryl, as far as my data and reports go. Back in 1922 Montana produced 10 tons of chromite ore, 22 tons in 1923, and only 20 in 1924, with none listed thereafter. And that output of only 52 tons of chromite ore was all from the counties of Stillwater and Sweet Grass in the south-central part of the state.

The reason for the above is that most of the chromite ore found anywhere occurs in a serpentine rock formation, or maybe in some other ultrabasic rock high in olivine, such as dunite. Beryl usually occurs in granitic rocks, especially in pegmatite-granite—pegmatite dikes are one of the most favorable rock formations for most any type of the semi-precious stones of gem quality. Serpentine is a hydrated-magnesium-silicate and is an alteration product—with added water—of the dunite rocks, all of these with high percentages of olivine and magnesium. The basic type-rock of this group is peridotite, which is an igneous rock of ultrabasic composition and as such occurs only in areas of volcanic activity of the kind that form mountain ranges.

Such mountains occur only in western Montana, where they constitute a portion of the long chain we call the Rocky Mountains. And this western half of Montana differs widely from the eastern half in geologic structure; for the eastern plains consist chiefly of unfolded strata of Cretaceous and Tertiary rocks not favorable for ores or gemstones.

Fact is, Idaho is more of a gem state and is perhaps far less prospected than western Montana that was and is very rich. I'm sorry I can't encourage you in your eastern Montana areas.

ON THE TRAIL

"WHAT does anybody really want to know about the West today?" a friend asked—and somewhat to our surprise we couldn't answer right away. What *did* people want to know about that came within the scope of this magazine?

We went to our files. It was a considerable job. Over the years a lot of people have written to us—and we've written to a lot of people. But we found an amazing number of questions we'd answered, at one time or another, and it struck us that if some readers had found them worth asking, others might be interested as well.

So, in a condensed form, we're printing them here—if you like the idea, let's keep 'em rolling.

Query: Where, in this day and age, can one get hold of some genuine Indian smoke-tanned buckskin?

To our knowledge, most articles commercially advertised as Indian-tanned buckskin are not the real thing. Perhaps one of our readers can help you.

Query: Is the Appaloosa horse strictly a color breed, or is conformation included in the standard?

Color is important, but so is conformation. Drop a line to the Appaloosa Horse Club, Inc., Moscow, Idaho—the standard is too space-consuming to be detailed here.

Query: Is it true that sleeping under a horse blanket while camping outdoors will keep rattlers away?

No. A rattler may respect a horse, but not its blanket, no matter how smelly.

Query: How would a modern midwesterner, used to hunting and outdoor life, make out with the more primitive conditions of Alaska—our last remaining geographical "frontier"? Here's a reader anxious to try.

We passed this one along to a man who has put in a lifetime in Alaska, doing what the above reader wants to do, and here's what he suggests: Don't go out there raw and expect to wrest a living out of wilderness. Trapping is okay, but the fur market is unsettled and nothing to bank on. If you're willing to accept temporary employment—and are not choosy—in one of the larger, settled communities (mines, canneries, etc.) while you get your bearings, the chances are not bad. The Northwest is booming and open to "frontier" initiative.

Query: I am a Pfc. currently in Korea, but about to be rotated. What are my chances of hooking up with the Texas State Patrol?

Requirements are that you're not related to any other member of the force, a six-month residence in Texas; that you're at least 5'8" tall and weigh 2—3½ pounds per

inch of height; that you're 21—35 years of age and of good repute. Write to Chief, Texas Highway Patrol, State Department of Public Safety, Austin, Texas.

Query: Can you give me the dope on the modern U.S.-Mexico Border Patrol?

Quoting from an official announcement: "Patrol Inspectors (are) members of the Immigration Border Patrol, a mobile uniformed enforcement organization. The principal purpose is to prevent the smuggling and illegal entry of aliens into the United States; Patrol Inspectors patrol areas to which they are assigned along the international boundaries and their vicinity, by automobile, on horseback, afoot, by boat, or as observers in aircraft, in search of aliens who have entered or are attempting to enter the U. S. unlawfully. In carrying out their duties, they stop for inspection various kinds of vehicles in which it is believed that aliens are being brought into the U. S.; watch, from concealment, crossing places on the international boundaries suspected of being used by persons engaged in illegal activities; make extended camping details in desert or woods, during which they must rely entirely upon their own ability and resourcefulness for sustenance and shelter; observe the border from towers and in general investigate violations of the Immigration Laws . . . make numerous arrests, sometimes of dangerous criminals, and shooting affrays frequently occur."

Query: How would I go about trapping some of our Arizona snakes and lizards for collection purposes?

There are no satisfactory home-made traps, but you can "rope" lizards and snakes with horsehair or string nooses at the end of a fishpole.

Query: What is a jointed snake?

One thing it's not—and that's a snake. A jointed snake is a lizard without legs, and shares a lizard's ability to grow a new tail if the old one is cut off. No snake can do this.

Query: Is a gila monster actually venomous, or does its peculiar physical mouth construction simply render its mouth germ-ridden, so that its bite is infectious rather than poisonous?

The gila is definitely venomous. Many authorities doubt that bites of animals in the wild are as infectious as those of beasts in captivity.

Query: Is there state land for sale in Nevada or Montana—or is there any land available for homesteading in either state?

There is no homestead land available for settlement in either state—nor do we know of any state land for sale. Occasionally "lieu" land—land transferred to the state by the Federal government in lieu of other considerations—becomes available, and you might query the Montana State Department of Agriculture and Publicity, at Helena, Montana, on this.

Query: Is the yellow ring-neck snake of Ohio poisonous?

The ring-neck snake is entirely harmless. In fact, it doesn't even bother biting.

Query: Where could I buy a couple of hundred unbroken rattlesnake rattles, six or more segments?

Try writing to the South Dakota Department of Agriculture, Pierre, South Dakota. Also, some *FIFT* readers might be able to help you.

Query: After getting out of the army, I bought a farm, which turns out to be infested with snakes. We've killed rattlers and copperheads from the attic to the cellar, have snake-proofed the foundations—and now they're trying to climb up the screen doors. Is there any way to discourage snakes on the property?

Cleaning out all the rubbish on your grounds, thus removing hiding places, will help. However, there are just two alternative ways of dealing with a snake infestation, guaranteed one hundred percent effective: kill 'em—or learn to love 'em.

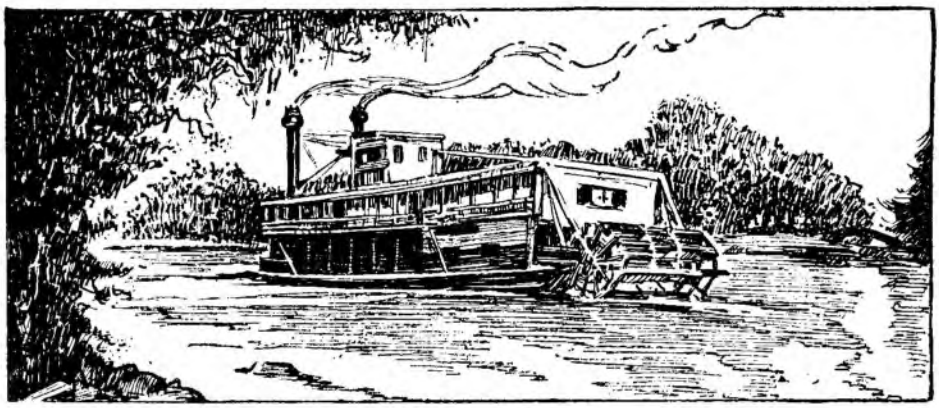
Query: Where would I find information on the ghost towns of the West?

Among books on Western ghost towns, *Gold in Them Hills*, by C. B. Glasscock, (Grossett and Dunlap, 1932) is recommended. The book covers the Tonopah mining boom and the resultant mushrooming communities. Some of the characters mentioned are still alive.

Query: What is the overall climate of Nevada?

It ranges from semi-tropical in the southern part of the state to really rugged winters in the north.

THE EDITORS



MYSTERY OF THE BIG MUDDY

By FREDERICK JAMES

APART of Montana's early history lies shrouded in a deep mystery which through the years has remained unsolved. On a dark July night in 1867 the young territory's acting governor fell from the deck of a river steamer at Fort Benton and was swept away by the tawny, roily, river known in those past as "The Big Muddy."

The drowning ended a brilliant career. Thomas Francis Meagher, territorial executive and highly controversial figure, was taken from the scene at the prime of his life. He was only forty-three.

Wherever Meagher had been, in his brief years, he had been a storm center. At the age of twenty-five he was convicted of conspiring against the Queen of England and sent into life exile along with other rebellious Irishmen. He had then made a dramatic escape from his imprisonment, in the penal colony of Tasmania, and found his way to New York, where he became at once a popular lecturer. When the Civil War broke out, he organized and led his immortal Irish Brigade through one battle after another, until the organization was almost totally destroyed.

"They're after me, Johnny," the governor complained. "They're going to try to get me—" and one black night the muddy and silent Missouri made his fears come true. . . . An unfinished page in the history of the West!

Cashiered from the army for drinking too heavily, he decided to seek his fortune in the Montana gold camps. Fortune smiled on him at this point, and to his surprise he was made acting governor of the territory in the absence of the regularly appointed governor.

Immediately he became a controversial figure in the wild and remote mining region. He was a Republican appointee, but he cast his lot with the Democrats, thus arousing the animosity of many in those parts. Always a dominating, swashbuckling character, he forged ahead, now chastising the judiciary, now challenging newspaper editors to duels, oblivious of animosities and hatreds around him.

On July first he arrived at Fort Benton, to inquire about a shipment of rifles supposed to have arrived by boat from St. Louis. The arms were for his "Montana Volunteers" which he had organized to fight Indians, with himself at their head as "general."

The day was hot and Meagher felt sick and weak from his long, arduous ride. He was afflicted by the common "summer complaint" and a friendly storekeeper suggested blackberry brandy as a remedy. It was readily accepted. After several applications, the governor felt better, much better. In fact, he felt downright gay.

While attending to his ailment, he was greeted by Johnny Doran, an old friend who had just arrived in town from downriver.

"They're after me, Johnny," the governor complained. "They're going to try to get me. One of them pointed at me when I rode into town and said, 'There he goes.'" The "general" seemed unnerved.

Doran quieted him and promised that he could sleep aboard the *G. A. Thompson* that night. This offer from the pilot of the boat was accepted, and after tucking the unsteady governor into a bunk, Johnny Doran himself turned in for a night's rest.

MYSTERY OF THE BIG MUDDY

Nightfall had hardly settled over the scene when a sentry, pacing the deck, saw a white-clad figure near the stern of the vessel and a moment later there was a groan, and then a splash.

"Man overboard! Man overboard!" The cry penetrated the sleeping quarters and half-clad men poured out on deck to render assistance. But assistance was too late. The foamy river, cresting in a late spring run-off, swirled angrily and spirited away the territory's handsome governor.

The rumors began.

One man simply said, "Another victim of whiskey." But this was too simple.

Another said, "The vigilantes." There might have been something in this theory. Meagher had pardoned a fellow Irishman not long before and on his release the murderer had threatened the lives of those who had imprisoned him. The vigilantes promptly hung him to the nearest tree and pinned a note to his dangling body, addressed to the governor: *Do this again and you'll meet the same fate.* Meagher's enemies were legion.

As late as 1913 a prisoner in a small county jail in Montana, suffering from delirium tremens had "confessed" that he had murdered the governor and had been paid for it. When he had somewhat recovered, he denied all.

A few years later, an aged Montanan who had once been a vigilante, asserted that he was present when the organization had "put the mark" on Meagher. No proof of this could be obtained, for any of the old man's contemporaries who had been on the scene at that time conveniently forgot all they knew.

Thus the mystery continues and historians still puzzle over the strange death of one of Montana's most spectacular and most controversial officials.

And the Big Muddy, like Old Man River, "just keeps rollin'—he don't say nuthin'—he just keeps rollin' along."

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land claims. He'd pull the devil's whiskers to get hisself talked about. Blast you, Duke, you claimed you'd shoot it out with Blackland fair and square. You only wanted me for a witness."

Kent's answer was to step back hastily, so that he could use his gun on either man if necessary. Monroe still had a gun in his slack hand, trained on Jim. And Jim knew that this moment was as good as any would ever be.

He jumped his horse squarely at Kent. Kent whirled, and Jim would have died under his blazing gun had not Monroe heeled his nag forward. Kent's jerky reflex at the double danger pulled his sights to the right. Jim could feel the breath of the bullet as it whined past. He lost track of Monroe and brought his own gun up as Kent whipped in behind his horse, bending from sight like an Indian.

Jim shot at the vanishing figure, and Kent's horse shied around on its reins. Kent stood exposed. Two guns fused their explosions in a single report. Jim had only a split second of awareness of this.

He had a sense of trying to brace himself in the saddle, then it was all wiped out by a darkness deeper than the night's.

IT WAS a strange room, stark and painted white, as was the iron bedstead supporting him. Jim's first conscious thought was a wonder as to where he was and how he had got there. He lifted weak fingers to touch a tight, skullcap bandage and, like an echo, his ears recalled the blast of Duke Kent's guns.

When he got his fevered eyes open again the room had steadied. The smell of medicine hung heavily in the air. A woman in white went past the open door, and he knew he was in the little hospital Doc Wineburn ran in connection with his residence in Wagontire. This knowledge only made the gap between here and that blazing heap of scabrock more perplexing. Still giddy, he yelled after the vanished nurse to demand an explanation.

The woman came in smiling. She was portly, gray, the kind of woman a man liked to look upon in a moment like this. Her voice was efficient but kindly when she said, "So you finally came out of it."

"How long have I been here?" Jim Blackland asked.

"Three days. You had a bad concussion. But you're lucky. I've got a sicker man to worry about."

Though Jim had a dozen things to ask, the nurse vanished before he could frame another question on his thick tongue. He let go, resting in his drowsiness. The next time he woke up his head was completely clear.

And he was not alone. He had to look twice to make sure it was Penny Ransome seated so quietly in the chair at the head of his bed. She was watching him closely and without a trace of hostility. She smiled into his eyes and this astonished him more than the fact of her being here. It was like the first time he had seen her.

"I've spent a lot of time here lately," Penny said. "Monk Monroe's in the next room. I came in to stay with his mother till the crisis passed. It has now. The doctor says Monk's going to live. And maybe a better life, for he was surely a scared kid. So, with nothing else to do, I came in to sit with you."

"Thanks," Jim said. "How did it get unscrambled?"

"Anse Monroe brought you on to town, then went back to Totem with the doctor. The next day they brought Monk in."

"Where is Kent?"

"Where he belongs. They buried him yesterday."

Jim lay musing for a long while.

"I aim to let through water," he said then. "Enough to help the colony squeeze through the drought. But on one condition. That this winter you all put up proper dams and trap your own runoff."

He saw her eyes close and open only after a long moment. She probably couldn't help what had come into them and he hoped she didn't even try.

"Thanks, Jim. In my heart I knew I was right the first time."

He held out his hand and wasn't greatly surprised when she took it. It was no handshake. Their grips held, easy and warm and with the sense of a permanent tie.

He didn't have to go any farther, not with words. He was still a sick man, exhausted, unshaven. But her lips came down to his and her eyes shut and that settled it.

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Now there was a roaring in his ears. Matt dropped the rifle and reached for his six-gun. Before he could get it out, before he could fire again, there was a blinding flash at the window. The shadow, half in and half out, sagged suddenly and dropped to the ground. It didn't move. Sorenson, Matt guessed, had found a gun in time.

He headed for a place where he could get at those firing from the corner. He staggered, half running to keep his balance. There'd be six, he thought dully. Well, he had six slugs in his gun—

He stumbled and fell. He began the terrible effort of picking himself up. Then he realized he'd passed the back corner of the house. He was behind those firing at the bunk house.

His first shot turned them around. He heard Gundar scream, "I'll get this one! Keep 'em down in the bunkhouse!"

But no one paid him mind. They had thought their backs were covered. The knot of men at the corner seemed to melt into running shapes.

The only figure Matt recognized was that of John Gundar. There was no mistake. The long arms, the hunched shoulders. Matt called, "Come and get it, Gundar."

He never knew whether Gundar heard him or not above the roar of the shooting. But Gundar came, his gun spewing lead. Matt felt a slug sear his temple. Another ripped at the flesh of his arm. His own gun was firing now as if triggered by someone else.

Gundar had stopped as the first slug took him in the middle. His gun arm dropped and Matt fired twice more, seeing the other recoil with each shot. Gundar brought up his gun again. His last shot kicked up a stinging spray of dirt and stones in Matt's face.

Gundar stood there, gun loose in his fingers. Like a giant ox, he swayed, refusing to go down. Matt tried to fire once more. There wasn't the strength in his hand to ear the hammer back.

Then Gundar pitched forward—dead.

Matt could see black shadows pouring from the bunkhouse then. Guns flamed in the darkness as Hourglass men went after the remaining raiders.

He lay there, suddenly thinking of the girl. He knew now they could never be neighbors. There couldn't be that. He wasn't in their

class. The past fifteen years prevented that. And the past ten minutes had more than clinched it.

But he'd done something for her and for the old man. With this knowledge, a peace seemed to come over him, a peace he'd not known in fifteen years. As the moonlit ranch yard grew black in painful throbs, he let his head sink. Then blackness swept over him in a mighty wave, taking the pain with it—

When he opened his eyes again, it was against bright light. He couldn't figure where he was. He thought he was with the trail herd on the desert. Then his eyes focused on a white ceiling. His hands touched sheets on the bed.

He tried to move but there was no strength in his body. He heard voices and footsteps and then Malcom Sorenson's face came into his vision. Then he remembered the gunfight.

"Easy there, son," Sorenson said. "You lost a heap of blood."

Matt wanted to know about the trail herd, about June, about a lot of things. He tried to speak, but his voice was a hoarse croaking rasp.

"Your heard's all right," Sorenson supplied, reading his thoughts. "I'm running 'em on my range. They need fattenin'. They'll stay there as long as you want 'em there. Reckon there's plenty room here for two spreads."

Matt closed his eyes again. He slept then and his sleep was easy.

(Continued from page 48)

tonwood grove, inhaling and exhaling in long, steady gusts, like a man who's just run an important race and won it. He was holding his gun and his left sleeve was blood-crusted. His sweat-drenched horse was on three legs, snatching at grama grass and switching its tail at flies.

Jesse said, "Hello."

We all said, "Hello."

Ben Pearson wanted to know where Matt Nye was. Jesse nodded toward the cottonwoods. "We can bury him there, where I shot it out with him. He threw down on me first. He was the last of the gang." Jesse flipped the cylinder from the hot frame of his .44 and squinted surprisedly at it. "Last bullet, too."

I asked, "Where's Pennycook?"

"Gone north out of the county, clean off the prairie. Clean off the world." Jesse laughed. "He won't be back."

Conover was thick-headed enough to ask, "What happened, Jesse?"

Jesse Lant looked him over carefully. "Why, I guess I just got plain mad."

I'm the town marshal now, and I spend most of my time whittling because there's little else to do. Ben Pearson thought I ought to have the job on account of how it was me who'd gone out to the Jinglefoot and informed Matt Nye that Miss Deborah was willing to start seeing him again.

Ben gets a kick out of that—says that if it wasn't sleuthin' it sure was spoofin', and a fine favor for her; even though Jesse will never know about it. Ben and Sackett run the Jinglefoot together, and share water rights with Jesse and Deborah Lant. They own the old Goodchild place—Sarah stayed on with the Opdyckes and let Jesse buy it for so much a year—and they're busy and prosperous, raising kids and cows.

The other day I rode out there to give Jesse the deed to the other half section, which he'd acquired from the bank with Kansas City cash after two successful trail drives.

He was rigging a rawhide line from the rebuilt dog-trot to a tree, the kind of a line you use for family wash and baby things and such. He knew I thought it was funny, and he stared at me with icy eyes.

But I never cracked a smile.

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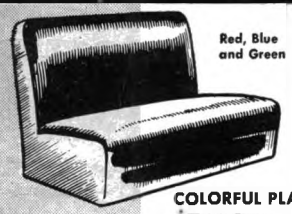

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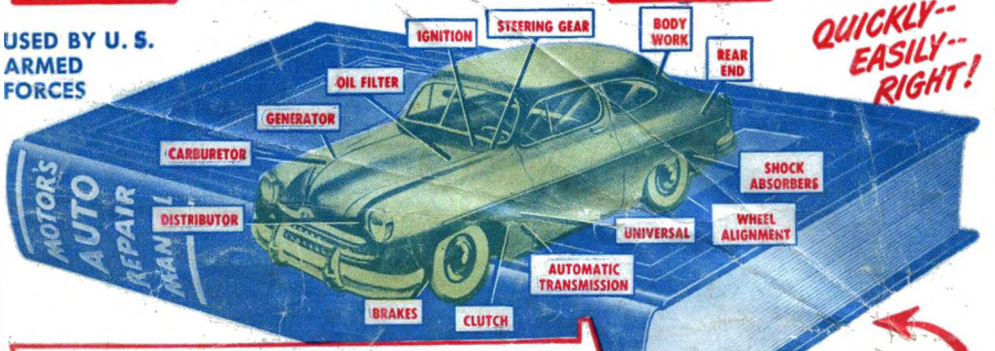

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