

*The*  
**LONE RANGER**  
10 CENTS  
*Magazine*

*a complete novel*  
**The Phantom Rider**  
*featuring*  
**The Lone Ranger**  
*and his wonder horse*  
**"Silver"**  
*with Tonto the Indian*



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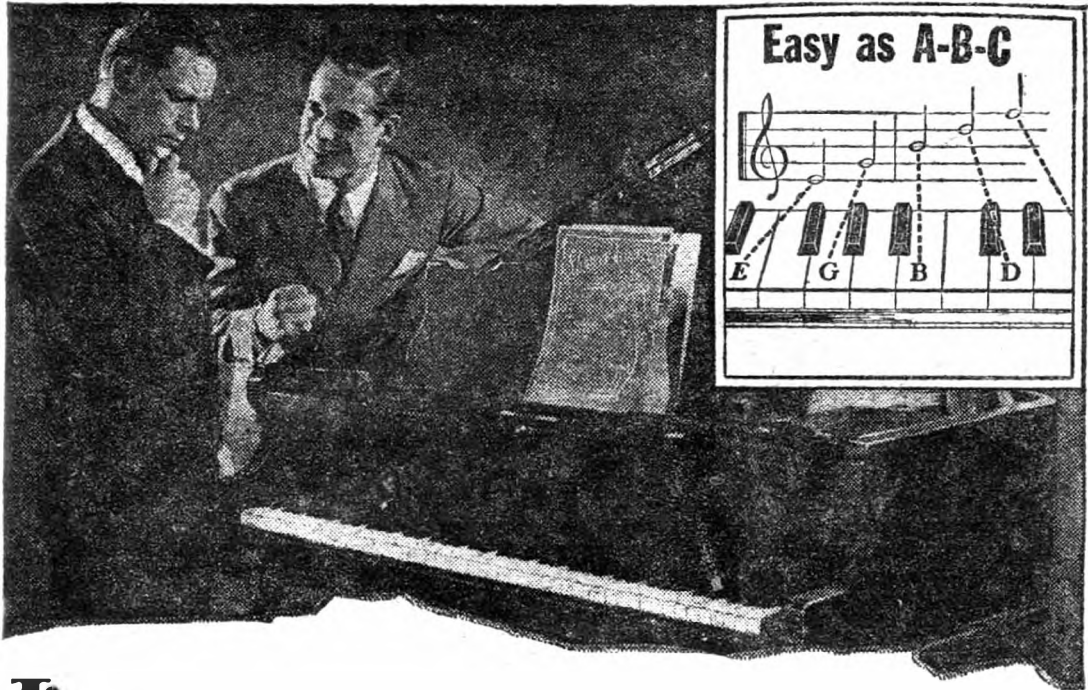
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# The LONE RANGER

Magazine

Vol. 1

Contents for April, 1937

No. 1

A Complete Novel

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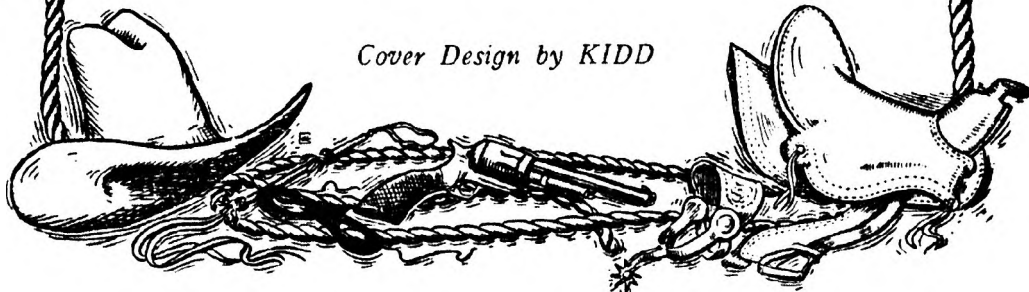
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## Dear Lone Ranger Fans:

*Those of our readers who have listened to the radio programs of "The Lone Ranger", know the thrill that comes with the sound of that rich, ringing cry, "Heigh-Yo, Silver!" They know that the sound of pounding hoofs, growing louder and louder, then fading off into the distance, means the beginning of another stirring episode in the lives of the masked rider, his beautiful and intelligent stallion, "Silver", and their faithful Indian friend, Tonto.*

*To these friends of the Lone Ranger and his companions, we give our assurance that, not only will they find the complete full-length novel in each issue of The Lone Ranger Magazine as fascinating as the radio broadcasts, but the added features, such as short stories, articles, cartoons and departments, will give them many additional hours of entertainment.*

*To our readers who are meeting these famous Western champions of justice for the first time in these pages, we heartily recommend the stirring Lone Ranger tales to be heard every Monday, Wednesday and Friday evening over a large network of radio stations.\**

### To The Lone Ranger Safety Club Members

*The Lone Ranger Magazine extends a friendly "Howdy!" Though you are automatically a member of The Lone Ranger Magazine Club, we urge you to fill out the coupon on the last page, so that we can get acquainted and let you know about the many advantages connected with The Lone Ranger Magazine Club.*

### To ALL Our Readers!

*Do not fail to fill out the coupon on page 128. Mail it in and receive your Club membership card by return mail. Many interesting features are being planned for future issues. Only Club members will be entitled to participate. So let's hear from ALL of you. Until then,*

**"See You Next Month!"**

### THE EDITORS

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*See your local newspapers for time listings.*



The Lone Ranger, quick to see the situation, thundered, "Come on, Silver!" and the great horse charged. "At them, Silver old boy," shouted the masked rider.

H.S. MILKSTEIN—'36

### **INTRODUCING**

**To Readers of Western Fiction—Young and Old!**

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Stallion

**And**

**TONTO**  
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Companion

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A Ringing Cry — "Heigh-Yo, Silver!"  
It's The Lone Ranger—Silver and Tonto,  
Riding the Danger Trails of Yesteryear—  
Matching Guns and Wits With  
the Ruthless Night Legion!*



## Out of the Night

**T**HE evidence of sheer brutality, destruction and near murder, finger-marked another raid of the Night Legion.

The only thing left undisturbed in the cabin, were the still glowing embers in the fireplace. Furniture, crude as it was, had been torn apart. An old trunk which for years had occupied a dim corner now lay smashed open on its side in the

middle of the rough floor, and its papers mingled with the contents of smashed cupboards and drawers.

The night wind, howling free across the plains, added further thievery to that which had already been committed, as it plucked letters, papers, and old mining stock certificates through the open door and plastered them against a decrepit corral and the remnants of a wire fence outside.

By all the laws of nature Joe Frisby

should have been stiffening in death. He lay sprawled on the floor while dark moisture seeped slowly into the hard-packed earth beneath him from a knife thrust in his back; another ear-mark of the Night Legion.

However, Joe Frisby—"Old Joe," as he had been dubbed—was not dead. His breathing was labored, but his heart-beat, though faint, was regular, as the door of his cabin creaked and banged wide open in the wind.

**W**ITH a wide sombrero pulled low over the mask on his face, a man rode alone through the night. His slender figure of whipcorded strength forked the silver-white stallion beneath him with the easy grace of a panther, and panther-like, through slits in his mask, his steel gray eyes studied the ground ahead when scudding clouds uncovered the face of the moon.

This was the mysterious Lone Ranger, whose face had, with one exception, never been seen by living man. That exception was Tonto, his faithful Indian companion. Together, with Silver, the beautiful silver-white stallion ridden by the Lone Ranger, they had acquired a fame that was legendary throughout the length and breadth of the West.

It was a unique trio which righted wrongs, solved mysteries, and brought criminals to justice where established law had failed. They struck without warning then vanished unthanked, and unrewarded, leaving no hint of their destination.

All three, two humans and a horse, acted together with the smooth precision that can come only from long association, and deep and mutual understanding.

Whenever men swapped yarns there was usually one in the group who had a

story of the Lone Ranger to tell. It was always a story of sterling courage and matchless skill with rifle, six-gun, horse or rope.

Occasionally there would be a man who had actually heard that pulse-thumping cry of "Heigh-Yo Silver." No one knew where he came from or where he went except Tonto. And Tonto did no talking.

Now, as he rode, he talked to the white horse in the manner of men who have spent much of their lives in the solitary companionship of a faithful animal. There is no doubt but that mutual understanding, under such conditions, passes all the reasonable and believable limits of civilization. That the horse did understand, was also tradition.

"Silver," the rider muttered into the wind, "I've a hunch that tonight we are going to unravel some of the Night Legion's ball of yarn."

The white ears of the stallion turned back questioningly, "No," the masked man chuckled, "I don't know how or why the hunch came, don't know who they are, who the leader is, or where they get the information they work on, but—" He broke off leaving his speech unfinished. His eyes had caught a distant gleam of light, too steady to be a camp-fire in the night's sweeping wind.

"There you are Silver," he muttered, eyes straining in the darkness, "I'll bet you a peck of nice tender oats we're coming to another kink in the string."

As the stallion's quickened pace ate up the remaining distance, the rider's slitted eyes first made out a crude cabin, then a doorway through which he could dimly see a flame still faintly burning in the fireplace.

The cabin door banging free gave the first intimation that something was def-



initely out of place. Dismounting and hitching the heavy Frontier Specials strapped low on his thighs into quick draw positions, he patted the horse on the neck and whispered, "Stay here boy," then with long, easy strides walked to the doorway.

**W**ITH both hands an inch from gun butts he stepped into the dim circle of light. A quick glance around the room revealed the figure of an old man stretched out on the floor, as if dead.

The Lone Ranger bent down and started to raise the weak old shoulders. Then his exploring hands felt the back of the blood-soaked denim shirt as his eyes registered the picture of callous destruction in the cabin.

"The Night Legion again or my horse is a coal black heifer," he muttered, as he lifted the old man to the low blanket-strewn tier of the double bunk against the wall.

Mentally wishing that Tonto was with him, he ran outside and from his saddle bag drew one of the first aid kits such as come ready equipped with iodine, swabs, bandage and tape, from the mail-order houses in the cities. From another bag he drew a metal covered flask of fine old brandy, kept strictly for emergencies such as this.

Back in the cabin he cut away the old man's blood soaked shirt and uncovered a knife wound just under the right shoulder blade, narrowly missing the lung. Not a serious wound, but one which had just escaped being fatal. A big lump on the old man's head was undoubtedly the result of the blow which had brought unconsciousness.

"Take it easy now, Pardner," he said softly as he bathed the wound from a basin which he had set over the freshly

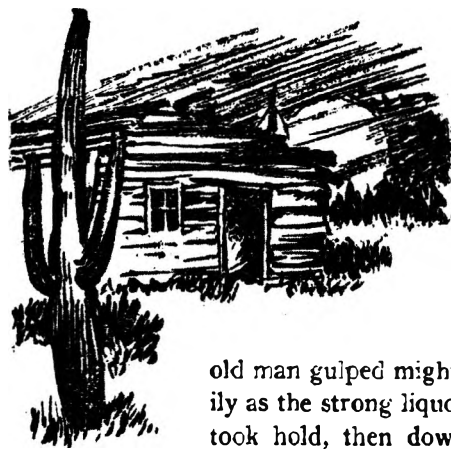
refueled fire. Then he swabbed the wound with an iodine pad as the old man's reflexes caused the body to twist weakly. He placed a pad of gauze over the wound and fastened it in place with a strip of adhesive tape.

"Not a real good job, but at least there's less danger of infection now," he mused as he surveyed his first aid job. "And now to try and bring him around. I hope he can give me some information on the Night Legion."

"I'm awake," a weak voice wheezed, as the old man's eyes, under the grizzled brows, gleamed momentarily. "I'm awake you murderin' sidewinder, I'm—" the eyelids fluttered, then were still.

"Steady there, friend," the masked man said softly, "I thought you were further gone than that."

Hastily he unscrewed the cap from the flask and poured a liberal draught of the brandy between the bearded lips. The brandy between the bearded lips. The



old man gulped mightily as the strong liquor took hold, then down went another he-man slug of fine brandy.

As the liquor's rich aroma flavored even the gusty air of the cabin, for the door still banged in the wind, the old man choked, gasped like a mountain trout, and sat bolt upright in the bunk.

"Whew," he wheezed with the strong

stuff still stinging his vocal cords. "Why'd you come back? Ain't you satisfied with what you got? My money belt and the map," then as if the extent of his loss struck him hard he repeated, "the map! Blast it all, if I had it back I'd swap it for a gun with just one ca'tridge in it."

"To shoot me with?" the masked one queried with a half smile at the old man's returning vigor.

"Yeah, to shoot you with, you murderin' thievin', slinkin' coyote."

"Then I'm glad you haven't a gun, because you'd only be sorry for what you did with it." There was a kindly manner in the Lone Ranger's voice, a half amused, half tolerant manner.

"Sorry, what d'you mean sorry? Aint you one of them night ridin' masked snakes that don't give a man half a chance to defend himself, not even when the odds are ten to one?" Then a gleam of speculation came into the old fellow's eyes. "Say, now that I think o' it, why'd you come an' try to kill me one minute, then bring me around to life the next? What's th' idea?"

"Considering everything, I don't wonder that you're pretty much confused, but take it easy for a couple more minutes, then we'll be able to talk." It was a soothing voice the Lone Ranger used. The same voice he used so often in speaking to Silver. "The night isn't getting any younger, and there are lots of things to be talked over."

"Who be you, stranger?" the old man wheezed out. "I grant that it aint in no wise believable you'd try to murder me one minute an' save my life the next, but they all wore masks an' so do you. Accordin' to my notions an' to my way of thinkin', any man that wears a mask has somethin' to hide."

"I have nothing to hide," the masked man replied. "You'll simply have to believe me when I tell you that I'm not one of the Night Legion. I was riding to meet my friend and saw your cabin. The door was open and I looked in and saw you on the floor. Because I wear a mask, don't misunderstand. I have done nothing criminal, neither have I done anything that I'm ashamed of."

**T**HE old man pondered this for a moment. After all the masked man had saved his life. "Well, if you'll kind of excuse the way I acted a minute ago, I reckon we can sort of shake hands." He stuck out a horny paw. "Frisby's my handle, stranger, Joe Frisby. Folks around here have got to callin' me 'Hermit Joe,' an' 'Old Joe' an' plenty other things, but just plain 'Joe' suits me fine."

The Lone Ranger grasped the extended hand. "I'm glad to know you, Joe."

"What'll I call you? Bein' as you're masked, I don't suppose you'll tell your name."

"Why not call me 'Friend'," the masked man smiled. "I'll take it as a compliment, and I'll come when I'm called."

"Suits me," said Joe tersely.

The mystery rider sat on the edge of the bunk and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Now then, let's talk of the men who called on you. They seem to have done quite a bit of damage."

"The ornery coyotes didn't give me a chance. They busted thru the door sudden like, with their faces masked. I seen right off that they was the gang that's been around these parts that have got to be known as the Night Legion."

The Lone Ranger nodded. He too had

heard of the desperate, hard-riding, ruthless killers.

"They come thru the door, two of 'em comin' for me an' the others goin' for everything in the room. One of 'em stuck me with a knife, an' they figured me fer dead. What they was after was the map, but how they knowed about that map is beyond me." Joe paused and eyed the brandy wistfully, then looked at the Lone Ranger who gave no sign of taking the unspoken hint.

Knowing that the surest way to get all the facts from Old Joe was to remain silent and not ask questions, the tall visitor waited. Presently Joe continued.

"Sakes alive how those men searched! They ripped open the trunk, they busted the table an' chair lookin' for a hollow leg that might be a hidin' place, they ripped my bunk apart, an' then one of them found the map. Half a map I should say, but half the map was all they was after."

"Half the map was all you had?"

"That's right stranger, uh, I mean, Friend. It's a mystery to me how anyone knowed that I had even that much. There wasn't but one man in the world that knowed I had it, an' he's my partner who's got the other half. What's more, he's at least two weeks hard travel from here."

**J**OE paused, uncertain whether to go on. Should he tell this masked stranger more of his story? Was this a man he could trust with a secret he had guarded for three years? Already he had told him more than was prudent. Yet somehow, this stranger gave him a feeling of confidence. He decided to tell all he knew.

"You see, mister," he said, "when they got that map, they got the one thing

that I counted on to keep me from bein' poor for the rest of my life. I tried to get up from the floor, then one of them skunks fetched me a whack on the head, an' that's all I knowed till you come here." Joe looked once more toward the flask. "This talk is sort of tirin' to a man," he hinted.



The masked man filled another pause by closing and fastening the battered door. Returning to his seat on the bunk, he said, "Is that all you care to tell?"

"No! They aint no harm in tellin' the whole thing now. From what you said, I guess maybe you know somethin' of these critturs that make up the Night Legion."

"The more I can learn of them, the better my chances to wipe them out."

"Just so. Well, I can't tell no more of them, but how they got to know about that half a map is a downright deep mystery."

"What was the map?"

"Well, after some years of prospectin', my pardner an' me had a streak of uncommon good luck. We stumbled on a vein of gold back in the hills that looked to be as rich as any gold mine that had been found. The ore was as rich as the famous 'Lost Dutchman' mine was said

to be, but it was all hard rock minin' that had to be done and we couldn't go far workin' it ourselves and we didn't have no cash to work with.

"We made a map of the place so's we could find it again, then we tore the map in half an' my pardner took half an' I kept half. Sam Whitcomb, that was my pardner, took his half of the map an' went East to get some backin'. I come here to wait for him, promisin' to wait till he come back. I waited without breathin' a word of what we found. Then tonight you seen what happened."

Old Joe cleared his throat and looked longingly at the brandy. "So much talkin' is sort o' hard after hardly sayin' a word for the three years I bin here."

The masked one, with a whimsical smile twitching at the corners of his mouth, passed over the flask without a word. Frisby with an apologetic gesture shook it, then placed it to his lips. The Adams apple in his skinny neck moved up and down as a long draught went to join the others.

"It's been a long time since I tasted liquor like that Stranger—er—uh, Friend," he corrected. "An' there's been plenty times when I've drunk a durn sight more an' needed it a durn sight less."

"Frisby, this gang of men that has been terrorizing the entire region must be wiped out completely. No one knows who the leader is, but he is some man that has an uncanny knack of getting information, just as he got the information about your half of the map. I was hoping to meet my friend tonight. He thinks he knows where some members of this band will meet. Lawmen, vigilantes, and every settler that can carry a gun should cooperate in destroying the Night Legion. Did you hear the leader speak?"

"I sure nuff did," exploded Joe.

"Would you know that voice if you heard it again?"

"Pard, I'd recognize that voice in Hades," the old eyes took on a vicious gleam, "An', what's more, I'd be almost willin' to go there to find him!"

Having thus firmly expressed himself, Old Joe took another long draught from the bottle of brandy.

**T**HE wind, howling around the cabin, covered the stealthy approach of another masked man. Unlike the mask worn by the Lone Ranger, the newcomer wore an affair that was more like a hood, which covered all parts of his face.

The flickering log fire made the hooded face peering thru the window assume an eerie character. As Old Joe Frisby lowered the flask, his eyes grew wide. The fiery liquor stopped the words he tried to say, he could only point!

The Lone Ranger whirled, both hands snaking guns in a lightning draw. The glass of the window was shattered by the explosion of the three shots that crashed almost as one. But of the three, only one found its mark. Joe Frisby, still holding the flask, fell back upon his bunk. This time there would be no awakening. The Lone Ranger dashed thru the door. Here was the chance to meet the Night Legion face to face!

## CHAPTER II

### The Hooded Man

**T**ONTO was cramped from long hours of silent waiting. His horse had been tethered at a safe distance from the small clearing in the woods in the early evening and since dusk the Indian friend of the Lone

Ranger had been perched on the far-flung branch of a Douglas fir.

Tonto had learned that before morning, men would meet in the clearing below him. There was a chance that these men would be members of the Night Legion and a further chance that their conversation might be the means of learning more about them and their mysterious leader.

Somewhere, beyond the wooded foothills, the Lone Ranger was riding. Sometime after dawn Tonto and the Lone Ranger hoped to meet.

Suddenly he heard hoofbeats. Peering out, he saw dim moving forms in the darkness, quite close at hand. They had approached against the wind, so the sound had been deadened. Nine horses with riders, Tonto made out—saw them loom close. The entire head of each man was concealed by a hood of some dark fabric and the sombrero was worn over the hood. The riders stopped their tired mounts and swung to the ground.

"Boss aint here yet," growled a voice, "tie the horses an' we'll wait."

"Wait, humph!" came a harsh reply. "Wait all night an' nothin' tuh eat."

"Shut up, Scar. Reckon you aint no good for anything but eatin'. Put them hosses away then rustle up some wood for a fire so we can thaw out."

"Talk sense for a change, you blame fool. The boss said to freeze if we had to, but not tuh go buildin' no fires that might be seen. What's more, I'd like to know who it was that found that old man's map if it wasn't me? Good for nothin' am I?"

A third voice broke in, "stop the arguin' both of yuh. We may as well take off these hoods so's we can breathe free an' easy again."

Tonto almost held his breath when a fire was mentioned. This was an emergency he hadn't counted on. A fire would have meant smoke and smoke might have brought a cough that would have revealed his hiding place. He leaned forward as far as he dared, watching the men remove the hoods from their heads. They were a short-tempered, ugly lot of outlaws.

The man called Scar spoke again. "Here's the old guy's money belt, the boss said we could divvy up whatever cash we found. Mebbe by the time we're done, he'll be here."

"Reckon so, Scar, he won't keep us waitin' long. He's got to tell us the next move, then get back to wheré he come from before daybreak."

"Does any one of you hombres know just *where* the boss comes from?" It was a heavily bearded man speaking.

"Anson," said Scar, "you bein' sort o' new in the gang maybe don't savvy the way the boss works. There's been only two men who found out who he was."

"Two?" said Anson.

"Two men, that's right, an' where d'ya think them two hombres are right now?"

"How'd I know? I aint no mind reader."

"Wal, the both of them are planted in boot hill. They sort of died sudden."

"The boss don't cotton much tuh men that gets too curious," added another of the band.

Anson thought this over for a time before he spoke again. "Gents," he said, "I guess I know when it's best not to ask too many questions, but I hanker to ask just one more thing."

Grim eyes watched him.

"Why'd the boss stay behind instead of ridjn' away with us?"

**T**ONTO observed that the man called Scar seemed to be a lieutenant who took charge of the men in the absence of the unknown leader. It was Scar who gave Anson the information.

"One reason why the Night Legion ain't never been rounded up, is because the boss don't like loose ends." Scar lighted a cigarette before he went on. "He stayed back to watch an' see if there was any loose ends that needed tyin'."

The Lone Ranger whirled, both hands making guns in a lightning draw . . . three shots crashed almost as one. But of the three, only one found its mark.



"Or shootin'," added another of the band with a laugh.

Tonto heard another horse coming up the trail toward the clearing. The outlaws heard it too, and instinctively their hands reached for their six-guns. "There's the boss comin' now boys," one of them said.

"Ho there!" called a voice from the darkness.

"Ho yerself," shouted Scar. "That you, Boss?"

"Reckon so," returned the newcomer riding into the clearing and dismounting. "One of you boys take care of my horse." He was a large man and his voice rumbled from a barrel-shaped

chest. A potential force seemed to be wrapped in his movements. "I had a time gettin' here."

"Any trouble?" queried Scar.

The big man grunted. "A masked man come to Frisby's shack. He doctored the old galoot an' then he heard his story. I waited to see just how much the old man knew, an' it wasn't much. I'd have got them both, if Frisby hadn't seen me watchin' thru the window."

"What happened?" Several of the men were speaking at once.

"Well, this masked man could see by Frisby's actions there was somethin'

wrong outside, so he whirls 'round an' starts throwin' lead. Boys, that man's greased lightin' with his six-guns. Luckily he couldn't see much o' me.

"But I got Frisby allright, then this masked man come chargin' from the shack and I hit the saddle fast. He kept unloading lead from his guns an' one of his slugs got me in the shootin' hand."

"You got away allright?" asked one of the men.

"Got away, sure, but I left a loose end, I left a man alive, an' I carried a scratch from his bullet away with me. Boys, I don't like that! If his horse hadn't been some distance from the shack, we might've had a race of it!"

"We got the map anyhow, Boss," consoled Scar. "That's what we was after."

"Half the map," corrected the leader. "Now listen you men. Here's your orders for gettin' the other half. The west-bound stage goes thru the Gilda Gap some time tomorrow afternoon. Now don't interrupt me!" Several of the men were about to speak at once, until the one man who still wore the hood stopped them.

"Oh board that stage, there'll be two women. They'll be gettin' off at Showdown where some of Grant Whitcomb's men will meet them. They're relations of old Whitcomb."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Scar as the big man halted. "An' what of all that?"

"They mustn't never get as far as Showdown."

"You want us to hold up the stage—an' get those girls?"

"Exactly."

"Well, what then?"

"One of those two girls will have the other half of the map. Get it!"

"Maybe they won't like the idea of givin' it up," said Scar. He chuckled at

what he thought was a humorous remark.

The boss went on without regard for the interruption. "I don't want the girls hurt, savvy? Get the map then let them go on to Whitcomb's place if they've a mind to. I'll take the part of the map that you've got, Scar."

SCAR handed it over. Tonto was strongly tempted to drop from his perch and fight it out with these plotters, but discretion held him back. He had secured information of value to the Lone Ranger. Together they might—but the voice of the leader broke his train of thought.

"That's all for tonight. When we got the whole of the map, boys, we will sure enough *have* something. Break up now. You know where an' when to meet the next time."

A lull in the wind brought a hoof beat to the group of men. They stopped, tense, listening. One of them muttered, "Another hoss comin' this way."

"Quiet," hissed the leader.

Tonto tensed with the men below. The soft call of a night bird came from the woods beyond the clearing. "That was a man-made call," Scar whispered.

"None of our outfit," whispered the leader. "Stand ready!"

Hands reached for guns and cold steel reflected the uncertain light. Tonto knew that call. It was the Lone Ranger who was riding to meet his friend, Tonto. He came on, unsuspecting the death-trap that awaited him. Then Tonto acted.

With a shout of warning he dropped from the tree, landing squarely on the back of one of the outlaws. His fist swung hard to meet a bristling jaw. Shouts of rage came from the throats of the surprised men.

The Lone Ranger, quick to see the situation thundered, "Come on, Silver!" and the great horse charged. Scar swung his gun and squeezed the trigger point blank at Tonto, who was locked in the arms of two of the men. At the moment the gun exploded, the flying hoofs of Silver struck at the outlaw. His shot went wild, and his gun went flying.



"At them, Silver old boy," shouted the masked rider of the stallion. A gun clutched in his hand served as a club to crack down on the cursing outlaws. Hands tugged at the Lone Ranger, pulling him from his horse.

Desperately he struck at the unknown, missed, then saw a gleaming knife, the same that had struck at Old Joe, being brought into play. A cruel face leered close, as the arms of the Lone Ranger were pinned by the man behind.

Once again, Silver reared, and with the fury that was like a wild horse that never knew taming, his forelegs rose and fell and hard hoofs lashed the knife wielder to the ground.

Tonto had broken free, and another blow from his hard thrown fist landed flush on the jaw of the one who held the masked man's arms.

"Break clear," shouted the Lone Ranger to Tonto. "Silver," he shouted to his horse. For a split second all three were free from the clutches of the outlaws, who were gathering themselves for a rush that would have ended the desperate fight.

In that instant of time, the Lone Ranger saw that the odds were too great to hope for victory. He also saw that the leader, the one man above all others whom he wanted, had already snaked away from the clearing.

He leaped to the broad back of Silver, shouted a word to the understanding Tonto. Then came that cry that sent the silver stallion away at a lightning pace, the cry that rang throughout the West: "*Heigh-Yo, Silver!*"

A flash, a thunder of hoofs in fast tattoo and the Lone Ranger and Tonto, both riding on Silver, disappeared into the darkness.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Mystery Ranch

**T**ONTO threw more wood on the fire, and with a crackling and sparkling the blaze curled up, fanned by the wind that moaned through the pines. In the distance a pack of coyotes pierced the air with their cries.

After their escape from the Night Legion, the Lone Ranger and Tonto circled through the woods to get the horse the Indian had left tied in a cove. Then after hours of riding, the two men made camp for the night. They were dog tired. Since they had separated in the afternoon many things had happened.

With their backs to the small fire, the Lone Ranger and Tonto compared notes. The masked man told of the attack on Joe Frisby, and his subsequent



murder by the hooded men, and Tonto in turn revealed the outlaws' plans to capture the two girls from the East on the following day to get the other half of the map.

If the leader had remained in the hand-to-hand scuffle in the clearing, there might have been a hope of tearing aside the hood and learning his identity, but with his flight, little had been gained.

To capture any of his men would merely have meant their replacement by others, equally vicious—equally willing to kill and ravage.

Who was the hooded leader? Where did he learn the facts on which he based his operations? These were the two questions foremost in the mind of the two men, camped in the woods that night.

"I wonder what relation these girls are to Grant Whitcomb," said the Lone Ranger. "Whitcomb has lived almost alone since he came to these parts."

"Only one woman on Whitcomb place now," explained Tonto. "She not wife of Whitcomb. She old Injun woman. She cook-um food."

Tonto's speech was a queer combination, made up of the construction of the Indian tribe to which he once belonged, the western dialect of the cowboys, and the more precise manner of the Lone Ranger with whom he had so long associated.

"They might be cousins, or nieces, more likely nieces."

"Umph!" Tonto grunted agreement. "Mebbe so."

"So these hooded men, unless they change their plans, will stop the stage before it gets to Showdown. They'll capture the girls, and get the other half of that map from them. Well Tonto, I know of one way we can prevent that."

"Kill-um outlaw."

"Not exactly, Tonto. Perhaps we can beat them to that stage."

"What then?"

"We'll see what turns up."

The tall white man was settling down in his blankets as he spoke. "We can't make plans until we see if the girls are on board. If they are, maybe we can persuade them to cut overland with us, if not—" The deep voice trailed off.

Tonto knew what the unspoken plan of the Lone Ranger would be. He'd acted with the mystery rider too long not to be familiar with his manner of acting. Without a word the Indian pushed the fire together, emptied the canteen on it so a rising wind would not carry dangerous sparks to dry timber, then settled in his own blankets for the night.

No guard was necessary with the stallion of the Lone Ranger near at hand. The keen horse would give warning of the approach of any strangers.

**I**T WAS some time before Tonto allowed himself to sleep. He had a decision to make. He had heard strange stories about the Whitcomb ranch. The Indian woman who cooked there had brought unexplainable items of news to other Indians, and Tonto in turn had heard them.

He knew of things that were perhaps better untold. No use, he told himself, of adding to the white man's worries. Time for that when the need arose.

Yet, what explanation could be given for certain things? For instance, the time two men rode into the ranch, and never came out. How to explain that other time when a small band of Indians passing nearby, heard a man's scream pierce the night?

There were other curious things about Grant Whitcomb and his ranch. He

never mixed with other men, rarely went to the nearest town, and never had a word to say about the conduct of his ranch. Every detail was left to his foreman. The Whitcomb riders never rode into town on a pay day. Never drank, never left to go to other jobs. They seemed immune to the wanderlust that stirred most cowmen at some time or other.

Finally, deciding to keep these things to himself, Tonto dropped off to sleep and the noises of the forest with an occasional movement of one of the horses were the only sounds.

**T**HE stage was fifteen miles from Showdown when Marge Whitcomb made an alarming discovery. Accompanied by her eighteen-year old sister Sally, a pert little blond-haired girl, Marge had left the place that had so long been home, with a heart saddened by the death of her father.

She was the daughter of a true pioneer who had struck out for the West years ago, leaving a trusting, hopeful wife and two small daughters while he tried his luck at prospecting.

Three years ago, he had returned with a story of a gold strike richer than anything that had been found, and a torn bit of paper—half of a map locating the gold.

A series of disappointments in his efforts to get financial backing and the sudden death of his wife, had broken Jeremy Whitcomb's health. For a year he remained in bed an invalid, before he died.

His last request had been made to the twenty-two year old Marge, his daughter. She was to take Sally into the West. Live with her uncle Grant, her father's brother.

Meantime, she was to locate a man

named Joe Frisby, and show him the only heritage, half a map. It might be worthless, and it MIGHT be worth an undreamed of fortune.

With the map pinned carefully to the inside of her blouse, Marge had been watching the endless expanse of desert while the stage bowled westward. Sally had been nodding her touseled head, dozing from time to time.

Until a few moments before, Marge had been thrilled with the anticipation of a new life in this glorious country. To live in this boundless, open, rolling place on a wonderful ranch—to fulfill a deep but undeveloped love of horses, cattle, of desert and mountain, of field and stream, would indeed be living. Then she noticed that the stage was being followed.

**O**FF the trail a bit to the North and slightly back of the lumbering coach there was a horseman. His big white stallion maintained the same pace as the six-in-hand. The guard and driver on the high seat appeared not to have noticed the rider of the white horse.

For some time Marge had watched him, first with curiosity, then as it became apparent that he was riding with the stage, she grew a bit apprehensive. Stories of holdups, bad men, and killers had been hammered into her ears long before she'd left the East.

The rider came closer and the dark haired girl saw a mask concealing the upper half of his face. Marge Whitcomb was not a cowardly or easily frightened girl, but here was grim reality! The masked rider represented all the outlaws she had heard about. Those two heavy guns might at any moment leap into play.

"Sally, Sally, wake up," she said, nudg-

ing her sister none too gently in the side.

Sally yawned and stretched boyishly, blinking her eyes. "Is this Showdown?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

"No, no. Wake up. Look over there. That rider is masked. He's probably an outlaw. Maybe he'll rob the stage coach!"

"He's a scrumptious rider," admired the younger sister. "And *what* a horse."

"But Sally, don't you see? He's going to rob us! He may shoot us!"

"Then we'd better be nice to him. I wonder if he's handsome, Marge?" Sally was apparently more pleased than scared of the masked rider. She was self-confident, sure of herself, and welcomed the chance to meet life in the West as it came.

The trail narrowed ahead where a clearing had been made through a heavy growth to make an approach to a small bridge. Marge saw that which made her certain that an attack on the stage was planned. The bridge was blocked by three horses.

One, a big silver white, and the others typical paint horses so familiar in the West. The masked man cut in, as his horse put on a fresh burst of speed. Above the clatter of hoofs, a ringing cry reached the two girls, "Come on, Silver!"

"Sally, aren't you afraid?"

"I'm scared to death, but I love it! Marge, fancy meeting a real flesh and blood outlaw! This is the real West!"

"Get down on the floor, Sally, quick," said Marge.

"Not on your life," the excited blond girl said. "I don't want to miss any of this. I wonder if they'll shoot to kill."

"You're positively bloodthirsty! What will we do if that man demands our money?"

"Get him to stick his head in the window," Sally was fumbling near the

floor of the coach's interior while she spoke and had to stretch her neck a bit to keep the hard riding masked man in sight.

"For what?"

"There! Look at this, Marge." Sally held a tiny low heeled shoe in her little brown fist. "Get him to stick his head in, and I'll hit him with my shoe. I'll bet that'll take the fight out of him!"

SALLY was really enjoying every minute of her first thrilling experience in the West. Marge was genuinely frightened. She heard the rough shouts



of the driver and felt the stage lurch as it was brought to a stop near the bridge where the masked man sat astride the big white horse with both guns leveled.

The door of the coach was being opened and an Indian stood outside. Sally gave a little scream. "Oo-oo-h, what will happen to us now?" she cried.

"Git-um out," the Indian muttered.

There were thuds as the luggage of the girls hit the ground.

"Who's throwing our bags around like that?" shouted Sally.

"Hush dear, don't make them angry with us."

"Well they needn't think they can do that sort of thing, Marge. Where's that masked man?" Sally still gripped her shoe hopefully.

"We—we'd bet-better do as the Indian said, Sally, he—he looks aw-awful bloodthirsty."

"Git-um out," repeated Tonto.

A new voice, that of the driver spoke. "Better you gals sh'd do what's told ye. It's the safest thing all-in-all."

"Is this the way you protect your passengers? Why don't you fight back? What do you think your gun is for?" Sally was half out of the stage as she spoke.

The masked man dismounted and stepped close, "Better put that shoe on before you step down. The sun's made the ground pretty warm for stocking feet."

"Oh," said Sally, "Ohhh gee, you have a nice voice."

Marge was in desperation at her sister's antics. "Sally, p-please don't—don't act like that. D-do what you are told. We, we—" She was really frightened.

Still half in and half out of the coach, still holding her shoe, Sally studied the masked man for a moment, her blue appraising eyes moving from the high heeled boots he wore to the checked shirt, the firm tanned chin, and then the mask, and last of all, the tan sombrero.

"You're actually *clean*," said Sally saucily.

Tonto had started to speak, instead his mouth remained open but no words came forth.

"I thought all outlaws were filthy bearded people who wore the dirtiest of clothes and lived like—like hoboes."

The Lone Ranger made as if to answer her, then thought better of it, and merely shrugged.

Marge groaned inwardly at the way Sally was carrying the situation. She welcomed the interruption of the driver.

"Shucks ma'am, this yere hombre ain't no outlaw. You do jest what he says an' don't you worry 'bout a blessed thing."

"Not an outlaw?" Sally acted disappointed. She hopped from the step, landed on the hot, sun-baked ground and then let out a little cry as her unshod foot felt the heat. She almost fell, but Tonto reached forth an arm to steady her, and leaning on the Indian, Sally finally managed to get into the shoe.

"I sort of planned to smash that fancy hat of yours," she said, looking at the Lone Ranger, "but you didn't hold up the stage as I thought you would."

"I'm sorry I disappointed you, Miss," answered the Lone Ranger. "But we have more important business on hand, right now."

**M**ARGE by now had regained some of her composure. Seeing that there was no immediate danger of death from the guns which had already been replaced in holsters, she stepped down and stood at Sally's side.

The deep voice spoke again. "On the trail ahead, some men are planning to capture you and take a map you carry. I have horses for you. We'll cut North cross-country, to your relative's ranch."

"Marge, listen to him," squealed Sally in delight. "He speaks as if he'd had some schooling."

"Do you ride?" The masked man spoke again.

Before either girl could explain that their riding experience was limited, the driver stepped forward again.

"You see, ladies," he began, "as soon as me an' Jim Blunt, he's the guard up atop there, heard that man a-callin' his horse 'Silver' we knewed who he was, an' we knewed that whatever he was stoppin' the stage for, it was for the best. Mebbe you ladies ain't heard about him, but if you spend much time out in these parts, you'll hear a-plenty or my name ain't Buck Fisher."

The Lone Ranger interrupted further talk by saying, "If you don't hurry, these outlaws may come up to meet us. I'd like to avoid that. Get on those painted ponies, you'll find them gentle."

The stranger's manner was reassuring. He had a voice that inspired confidence, and even Marge felt a lot more at ease than she had a few moments before.

"Take my word for it, it's the thing to do," urged Buck Fisher. "If it warn't, you'd heard the rifle of that guard up there, spittin' fire an' lead a long time back."

"Marge," said Sally, "I'm going to go with the masked man."

Without a word, Tonto picked the girl's bags from the ground, turned to the horses and mounted one of the three that had blocked the bridge.

The guard, who had been watching the trail beyond, finally spoke for the first time, "Come on Buck, the girls are in safe hands. They was goin' tuh meet someone at Showdown but we c'n tell the folks there that they've cut overland."

Marge had no choice, Sally was already in the saddle of the liveliest of the two paint ponies.

The task of the Lone Ranger had been made a lot easier than he thought it would be, when the driver and the

guard not only recognized him, but believed what he had told about the plan of the hooded riders of the Night Legion.

As he climbed toward his perch, Buck packed a wad of tobacco in his cheek with his tongue, and asked a question of the girls that had occurred to him for the first time. "Jest whar was the two of you aimin' to git?"

Marge was the one to reply, "Our uncle's ranch. His name is Whitcomb, Grant Whitcomb."

Buck's pale eyes grew wide beneath the heavy brows, "Wh-whar?" he sputtered.

"Whitcomb ranch, do you know of it?"

"Y-yes, it—it's a couple hours ride overland, n-north, b-but, doggone it, I-I'd hightail it fer the south an' keep a goin'!"

The Lone Ranger looked sharply, Tonto listened attentively, and both Marge and Sally stared.

Buck was in his seat, "That place is a hoodoo ranch an' doggone it, it's bad luck tuh even *TALK* of it." He lashed the horses. "*Git along*," he cried, and the stage coach rolled across the bridge, swaying dangerously from side to side.

Sally, the grin fading from her face, murmured softly, "I wonder what he means by that!"

## CHAPTER IV

### The Bald Headed Man

THE steady pound of hoofs marked the progress of the stage along the sun baked trail. For the half hour since Marge and Sally went with the Lone Ranger on a diagonal course across the broken country to the Whitcomb Ranch, neither Buck Fisher nor the guard had said a word.

Each seemed to be deep in his own thoughts. Each knew that at some point on the trail, before the town of Show-down, there would be action. The guard held his long rifle between his knees ready for instant action.

The Lone Ranger had told both men



that there was a plan of the Night Legion under way. A plan which involved the stopping of the stage. "But we've gotta get th' stage through, bandits or no bandits," muttered the guard, half aloud. "Anyways, I'll shoot first an' ask questions after."

"Good thing yuh didn't do that before," said Buck Fisher, "you sure 'nough would've dropped the Lone Ranger."

"Shucks, the minute I seen that white hoss travelin' at the speed he was, I had an idea who it was. Soon as I heard him call the hoss 'Silver,' I knew blame well it was the Lone Ranger."

"Hope we didn't make no mistake lettin' them girls go along with him," said Buck.

"A fine chance we'd had o' stoppin' them, Buck, didn't you see how that tow-

headed she-male was eyin' the masked man?"

"I was too durn busy eyin' him my own self. First time I ever seen the Lone Ranger."

"That girl that was called Sally was plain took up with the masked hombre. I'm durned if I don't think she could git to fall in love with him, without half tryin'."

"More of your nonsensical talk! Guess the Lone Ranger c'n take care o' himself."

"Serious though, Buck, I don't cotton to the idea of two fine sweet girls like them two, goin' to that blasted hoodoo ranch. That place just ain't natural, that's all. No more than Grant Whitcomb himself is human."

"Sure he's human, you ain't tryin' to make me think you take stock in ghost yarns, do you?" Buck showed by his manner that it would take but little argument to convince him that there were ghosts or haunts at the Whitcomb ranch.

"Where there's so much talk, there must be somethin' behind it," said the guard. "These past few months, there's been as many stories told about the Whitcomb spread as there has about the Lone Ranger, which same is plenty."

"In spite o' that," said Buck, "I've tried to get to the bottom of what some of the men said about the Whitcomb outfit, an' there wasn't a one of them that had proof of a single doggone thing. All hearsay."

"Where there's smoke, there's generally fire, Buck, but I always says that the man that minds his own business is the man that's got the best chance of gettin' old." The guard, at times, liked to show that he knew a few things.

"Still," said Buck, "them was awful fine girls. Just in case there is somethin'

that ain't right about that Whitcomb outfit, I don't like to see them go there. Not even if it's the Lone Ranger that takes them."

"Right now," returned the guard, "I'm more interested in what's between us an' Showdown."

He recalled what the Lone Ranger had said about members of the dreaded Night Legion who planned to stop the stage. "I'd sure like to line up my gun sights on some of them skunks." His hand caressed the stock of his straight-shooting rifle fondly. "I'd blast their hoods clean off their heads! If ever—"

**T**HE guard broke off sharply, as Buck shouted "whoas" to the horses, and bracing his feet pulled hard on the reins. A hundred yards ahead, a tree blocked the trail. Buck had heard of this stunt before. He wanted to stop the stage, and stop it quick. The guard too, understood the grim significance of a trail that had been blocked.

The horses plunged and reared at the sudden stop. The guard was alert, tense, ready to open fire at the first moving object. "Watch close," he shouted to Buck. "This is the old trick. Where's them dirty mavericks?" he shouted. "Lemme git a sight of one of 'em."

Buck snatched a gun from the seat beside him, while with the other hand he pointed to a thick growth of weeds that ran along the south side of the trail. "If they's anyone in hidin'," he shouted, "they'll be in there! What's more, I'm findin' out pronto."

The gun in his hand jumped as he slammed a bullet at the woody tangle.

"Hold yer fire you blamed fool," shouted the guard. "Don't waste your lead."

There was a crack from behind, close on the echo of Buck Fisher's shot. The

driver's hat leaped from his head and spun ten yards before it landed in the dust. "Behind us," the guard shouted. "Duck down!"

Fisher was already following his hat. His feet hit the ground and he scrambled to the protection the big stage offered while he tried to locate the man who fired. The guard stood defiantly waiting for the chance to shoot.

He didn't get the chance. From another direction the second shot of the hidden outlaws whanged against the rifle and the shock of impact took it from the old campaigner's hands. As if this was a signal, half a dozen men appeared. There was no doubt as to their identity. They all wore the hoods of the dreaded Night Legion.

Two on foot from behind the newly felled tree on the trail ahead. Others from different directions. No command was needed. The guard was helpless and he knew it. He also knew that further defiance would not only be futile, but the height of folly. "H'aint no use Buck," he called to the man below.

"I ain't quittin' yet!" The shout came back followed by the crack of the revolver Buck Fisher held. One of the hooded men clasped his shoulder as a bullet found its mark. "I winged one," cried Buck exultantly.

**F**ROM one of the outlaws came a shouted command and instantly all six of them, including the wounded one opened fire. Seeing the turn events had taken, the guard leaped, and cleared the high wheel of the stage to hit the ground and join Buck Fisher.

Even as he touched the ground, a bullet grazed his cheek. Buck fired again, this time hurriedly, to try and stop the gunplay of the man who was in the best

position to get them in the partial concealment beneath the coach.

The outlaws were closing in, dodging from rock to shrub, and firing fast.

The mounts of the hooded men had been left at a distance and the grim killers pressed in, keeping themselves partly protected by rocks and trees. The driver and Buck made no easy target beneath the big stage coach but the dust was being kicked up uncomfortably close.

A slug ricocheted from the iron rim of a big wheel with a metallic wham, and the guard gave a single gasp before he slumped against the wheel, then silently crumpled to the dusty road.

One of the stage coach horses was hit, reared madly and fell, with an almost human scream, in a tangle of flailing hoofs and broken harness. The other frightened horses ground their hoofs into the earth to keep their footing, and the wheels of the stage moved crazily, within an inch of the fallen guard's head.

Buck's gun jumped again, as one of the hooded men dodged from rock to rock to get nearer the ambushed men. He stopped in mid-stride, his arms flying wide as he sprawled on his face.

"Got that damned snake," growled Buck. "Thar's one for you pard, now to git a couple for myself."

His finger squeezed again, and then again, but the hammer fell with only a click. With his gun empty, Buck was at a great disadvantage. The guard being out of the fight, there was no way to divert the outlaws' attention, and Buck had to take the chance of reloading while under the direct fire from the guns of the dreaded Night Legion.

He jammed two shells home, and was picking the third from his cartridge belt when a thousand lights burst in his head and thunder roared as if to split his ear drums. Then blackness.

Buck Fisher's head was throbbing as he gradually regained consciousness. He found himself sitting on the ground, his back against a tree.

When he tried to raise an arm, he found that heavy ropes were passed around his body, lashing his arms to his sides and his body to the tree. Blinking his eyes to clear away the cloudiness that still persisted, he shook his head, then wished he hadn't. The action sent a thousand new pains shooting both ways from his neck.

The guard of the stage was lashed in a similar manner to a nearby tree. Buck saw that one side of his partner's face was caked with blood and dirt. The lips were puffed and swollen, and the head rolled in a dazed way, but there was an angry light in the wounded man's eyes.

Four of the outlaws sprawled on the ground, their heads still covered with the sinister hoods. One had his shoulder roughly bound with bloody strips torn from his shirt. The fifth, who was in charge, stood close to the guard with two huge hamlike fists clenched at his sides.

"Talk, you dirty close-mouthed son of a snake, or I'll let you have another in the same place."

The guard could barely speak through his cruelly bruised lips. Buck strained his ears, and heard his partner murmur, "You can go plumb to Hell!"

The big fist of the leader swung hard and connected with a sickening thud against the battered mouth.

Buck groaned inwardly at the impact. The guard's head snapped back and merciful unconsciousness saved him from further pain and torture.

"Now look what you done," one of the hooded men said. "You went an' knocked him out, afore we learned where them two women folks are at." It was



Anson, newest member of the Night Legion, who was speaking.

One of the hooded heads, slate colored eyes glittering through the eye slits, turned to face Buck Fisher. "T'other one's awake now," came a muffled voice.

**T**HE man who had been questioning the guard, came to Buck's side and spoke in a menacing voice. "We hanker to know where you dropped two wom-

"Now that's showin' good sense," said the leader. "Maybe when I tell the big boss that you helped us, instead o' buckin' us like that other blame fool, he'll let you live."

"Ain't *you* the boss?"

"Right now, I am. I'm waitin' for your answer, Mister."

"An' you'll get it. Them she-males is where you won't git 'em see? They left the stage a good ways back, an' they rid



en that you was supposed to have brought to Showdown. Now don't try to tell me you don't know. We aim to git the truth, an' we'll *get* it, sabe?"

Buck thought as fast as his aching head would let him. By this time the two girls and their masked escort should be almost to their uncle's ranch. Their safety was assured. It was too late for these grim killers to overtake them, and even if they did, hadn't the Lone Ranger always made his enemies come out second best? Buck glanced toward the sun. It was low on the horizon. The girls would be almost there by now. "I'll talk," the stage driver muttered.

overland tuh cut on an angle fer the Whitcomb ranch. They ain't goin' to Showdown at all! What's more, you skunks, them girls is bein' took there by the Lone Ranger!"

The leader, who was known as Scar, cursed roundly at Buck's news and the tone of defiance in which it was given.

"Lone Ranger!" he shouted, "that's twice that hombre's crossed our trail, an' that's twice too much."

Shaking with suppressed fury, he turned toward Anson.

"Listen," growled Scar. "The big boss has got to know this. I've got to start ridin' pronto, an' leave a message in the hollow tree for him. He'll be lookin' for it. You take charge here, then spread out an' meet when you was told to."

"Just what'm I supposed to do?"

"If you don't know by this time, then you ain't learned much about the way we do things. The boss don't like loose ends! Get what I mean?"

Anson nodded. Scar swung and plowed through the underbrush until he was out of sight. There was a shouted command, followed by the clatter of hoofs fading in the distance.

Anson turned to his outlaw companions.

"Reckon I got my orders, an' it seems like I was picked for this trick bein' as I'm the newest an' there's likely tuh be some doubt as tuh my loyalty. I wonder what you gents would do, was I tuh refuse tuh drill these two?"

Instantly hands moved closer to holsters, while three pair of eyes looked at him coldly.

Anson grinned beneath his hood. "O. K. boys, I was only wonderin', that's all."

He drew his gun and thumbed back the hammer. Turning slowly he leveled the heavy weapon at the unconscious guard.

Buck Fisher's lips compressed to a thin line. All the stories of cruelty and ruthless, wanton murder that he had heard in connection with the Night Legion terrorists flashed to his mind.

Anson's gun roared and belched flame, stabbing toward the guard. A slight jerk

at the impact of the bullet was the only sign visible that death had found its mark.

Anson turned slowly, keeping his gun level. When he faced Buck Fisher, he once more thumbed the hammer and once more his six-gun blasted death.

**I**T WAS dusk when the Lone Ranger and Tonto led the sisters to within sight of the Whitcomb ranch. The lighted windows of the ranch house brought a little murmur of relief from the tall dark girl.

Marge Whitcomb had felt a strange apprehension ever since her uncle's place was called a hoodoo ranch, and yet this feeling had somehow been replaced during the last few miles of the journey by a confidence in the silent masked man who led the way.

She was confused by the new manner of things in the West. Taken from a stage by a masked man, and told to follow him blindly, she had done so. It hadn't seemed to be unusual at the time, in fact it seemed the only course.

Yet, a few short weeks ago she would have rebelled at the mere suggestion of such a proceeding. She noticed that with a letting down of the tension in her mind, she was tired.

Marge envied Sally's confident manner, and the ease with which she rode the paint horse. The blue eyed girl rode as if she had spent all her life in the West. Sally had tried several times to engage the Lone Ranger in conversation but had met with little success.

Undaunted though, she chattered gaily, telling the masked man all about the eastern home the girls had left; about their father and his efforts to find gold; about Uncle Grant whom they had never seen.

Then Marge noticed that the two white horses had been stopped. Without command the paints drew close, then waited. It was Sally who spoke. "What are we stopping here for? Let's finish the trip."

"This is as far as I go," said the Lone Ranger. "There is your uncle's house."

"That's home as far as we're concerned," said Sally.

Marge added, "We'd like awfully, to invite you to come in with us. I suppose Uncle Grant would feel the same, and you must be frightfully hungry after this trip."

"Don't be dumb, Marge," said the imp-like Sally. "If he's to go and meet Uncle Grant, he'd have to take his mask off, and if he wanted to take his mask off he'd have done it long ago. Wouldn't you, Mister?"

"Perhaps," said the masked man.

"I've begged him to let me have a peek at his face." Sally was bending over in the saddle as she spoke, frankly trying to look in under the tall man's mask.

"Tonto," said the Lone Ranger. "I've a notion that they'll be hunting for a couple of paint horses by this time."

"I hope you swiped them," came from Sally. "Wouldn't it be fun to ride on stolen—er—rustled, or whatever you call it, horses?"

"Before we leave you, let me explain one thing more," said the Lone Ranger. "The other half of the map you own has been stolen. It should be yours. The man who held it has been killed."

"**K**ILLED," gasped Marge. "I didn't know!"

"He was killed because of that map. I needn't warn you to tell your uncle to be careful. He'll be familiar with the Night Legion. That's the outfit that's

after your half of the map. They'll kill, if need be, to get it. You needn't hunt for Joe Frisby and there's no way you can hunt for the Night Legion. If their leader is found, the other half of your map will probably be found with him."

The masked man felt no reason to tell the girls that it was his grim resolve to see every member of the Night Legion brought to justice, and to get the other half of the map in the hands of these two girls.

"Hold on now," said Sally, "don't you ride away until I ask you something. What about this hoodoo ranch talk?"

"I think if there is anything to it, you can trust your uncle to tell you."

"All right then, that's that. One thing more, Mister Masked Man. Where you going next?"

"Sally," admonished Marge. "you're not even polite."

"Neither's *he!*" Pointing a tiny finger at the tall white man. "I think he is positively the most annoying person I have ever met! No, that's not right. I haven't even *met* him. Anyhow, he's the most annoying man I ever *knew!*"

"I am sorry, Miss Whitcomb," said the Lone Ranger solemnly.

"And don't you call me 'Miss.' The name to you, Mister, is Sally. Now for the last time, where are you going, and do we get to see you again?"

"I'm going to a clearing in the woods quite a ways from here to see if I can find out anything in the way of a clue to the leader's identity."

"You mean the leader of the Night Legion?" asked Marge.

"Yes."

"That's the first sensible answer we've had. He is improving on acquaintance, isn't he, Marge?"

"You'd better get on to your uncle's, Miss,—er—Sally."

Marge asked, "What of the horses? I—I hope they aren't stolen."

"Borrowed, that is all."

"Then how can we return them?"

"When they're turned into your uncle's corral, they'll have been returned."

"Good grief," squealed the unsuppressible Sally, "He's swiped them from Uncle Grant himself. Ohhh golly, I think he's simply swell."

"Come Tonto." The big white stallion was brought to its hind legs as it swung around.

"Me ready. Plenty glad go 'way now." Obviously the talk of Sally was beyond the understanding of the Indian whose life had known little of light talk and banter.

"Come on, Silver," the Lone Ranger shouted, and followed by Tonto, the masked man swept along the backtrail into the gathering gloom of night.

**T**HERE were many things crowding Marge's mind to speak of to her sister. Surely the girl should be scolded for the manner in which she had acted, yet Marge couldn't find a way to begin. While she was still considering her duty as the older sister and sometimes of a guardian, Sally commented on the house that was ahead.

"That sure looks like a comfortable place. I hope Uncle Grant is glad to see us."

"I—I hope so," said Marge with some doubt.

"Hope so, but you're not convinced eh? Why the doubt?"

"Well we don't know Uncle at all. His letter was none too cordial when he told us to come out here."

The paint horses were permitted to slow down to a slow walk during these last stages of the long hard trip. The bags the girls had brought with them

had been fastened to the backs of the sturdy mounts by Tonto, and were a somewhat clumsy load for the paints as they joggled with each step.

"I don't see what more he could have said to us Marge. Gosh, you couldn't expect him to beg and beseech us to come."

"There was a funny ring to the letter. Remember what he said about the half a map?"

"No, do you?"

"Every word of it," Marge was really serious now. "As I read it, there seemed to be something between the lines. I—I don't know how to explain it, but I felt that he was a lot more anxious to get that map in his hands than he was to see the daughters of his brother."

There was no sign of activity around the ranch. The lack of men struck both girls strangely, though neither one knew why. It was the first ranch Marge or Sally had seen, and yet there was something that didn't look just as they thought it should.

The bunk house was dark. A few horses stood in the corral and even these stood almost silent, seeming to be waiting for some strange circumstance, they knew not what.

"Hoodoo Ranch," thought Marge and the words somehow had a more sinister ring to them now that the reality was at hand than when they were muttered by a stage coach driver hours ago.

The horses paused at the corral of their own accord. Once during the day, when the hoodoo ranch was mentioned for the first time, Sally's light hearted manner had changed for a brief moment. Now she was really serious again. "Darn it, Marge, I'm scared," she said.

Marge dismounted and Sally slid to the ground and added a comment to her remark. "And lame."

"Better take our bags in with us Sally." Marge was loosening the bags from the saddle tie strings. "And don't be silly," she added. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

She knew she fibbed. There *was* something about this place that was unnatural. What it was, she couldn't tell. Perhaps the silence, perhaps the fact that there had been no sign of anyone approaching from the house to meet newcomers in western style of hospitality.

She consoled herself with the thought that it was just re-action of a frightfully

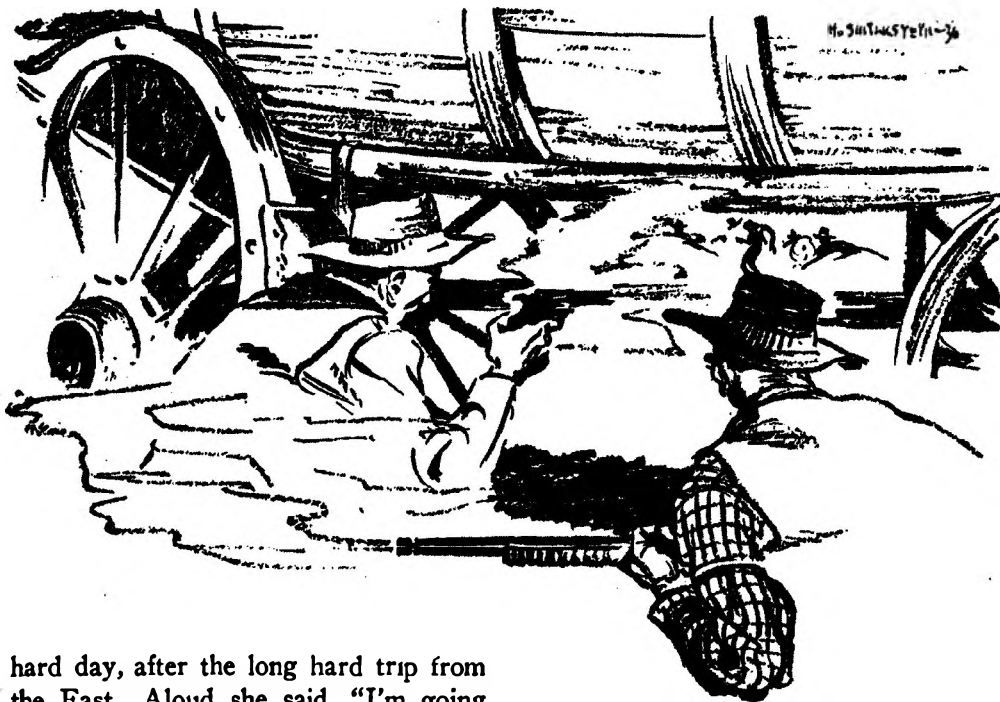
use, "Let's make our way tuh thet thar house."

**M**ARGE rapped on the door of Grant Whitcomb's home several times. Gently at first, then as hard as she could, but still there was no response. Finally Sally tried the door, and found it unlocked. Neither girl knew then that locks were practically unheard of in this region.

The door creaked inward, and Sally passed through, stuck her head forward and looked about her. "Come on in," she invited, "make yourself at home."

Hesitating, Marge followed the pert little girl. The room was a large one,

The outlaws were closing in, dodging from rock to shrub, and firing fast.



hard day, after the long hard trip from the East. Aloud she said, "I'm going to be awful glad to see Uncle Grant."

"Well so far, Marge, he hasn't exactly welcomed us with open arms, but come on." Sally finished with a half hearted attempt at fun by using the slow western drawl she'd heard a few men

plainly furnished but with all the comforts any western ranch knew. Indian blankets hung from the walls and there would have been an air of coziness had the situation been less strange.

The only illumination came from a lamp that swung from the ceiling at one end of the room. The other end seemed draped with shadows on both sides of the big stone fireplace.

Marge thought a fire burning there would have made the place quite cheery, but there was no fire. The stones seemed grim and forbidding, cold, inhospitable.

Then Sally gave a squeal of fright. For the first time Marge saw a figure sitting in the dark corner near the fireplace. It was a man who sat there, a blanket spread over his knees.

He was a big man, heavy but not fat. His head was without a single hair, com-



pletely bald and smooth, and deep set eyes stared steadily at the two girls over a very short stubby nose. The small mouth was out of all proportion to the size of the man.

"Are—are you Grant Whitlock?" faltered Sally.

"The stage, it—it was sto-stopped, we-we came, w-we came overland." Marge was having a hard time speaking. The stare of the man was somehow like that of a cold fish.

The bald headed man spoke. "Did you bring the map?" His voice was like ice. It sent shivers through the girls.

Marge could only nod.

"Go through that door on your left. White Rose will show you where you're to sleep."

The voice of the bald headed man was a dull monotone. His small mouth closed and he gave indication that the welcome and the conversation was ended.

There seemed nothing else to do, but to obey.

Sally picked up her bags again and with a determined manner led the way through the door indicated. Marge followed and heard Sally mutter to herself. "Very hospitable, I call it."

## CHAPTER V

### The Trap Door

WHITE ROSE stood a few yards down the hall and beckoned with a claw-like hand for them to follow her. A lamp, held in what seemed like the talons of a bird of prey, threw a yellow gleam on the dark-skinned face that was a network of seams and wrinkles.

Sally marched boldly forward, with Marge a pace behind. Curious thoughts crowded the dark-haired sister's mind but she was too confused to concentrate on any one of them. "I wonder if she speaks English, Sally," she whispered.

"There's one way to find out," the bolder of the girls replied. "I'll try her

out. Say, you're White Rose, aren't you?"

The crone nodded slowly without audible speech.

"Try again Sally," Marge murmured.

The Indian woman paused before a door, which opened at the push of her skinny hand. A double bed in the corner was made up with clean white sheets and pillow slips, and warm looking Indian blankets were piled at the foot. A wash stand offered conveniences beneath the bright clean mirror hung from the wall.

A big oval-hooked rug covered most of the floor with a brave but somewhat crude design of an eagle with wings spread wide and talons clutching a sheaf of arrows.

There was a single red-upholstered chair, and clean towels hung from a rack near the wash stand. On one board wall a shelf was fastened head high, and beneath it were pegs for clothing. A small table in the corner completed the room's furnishings.

"We're starved," said Sally to the aged Indian. "We haven't had a bite to eat since morning."

White Rose stared from deep set black eyes, and placed the lamp on the wash stand. "Humph," Sally grunted. She raised her voice a bit, then said, "You gottum grub?"

"Bimeby," was the reply. With this, the woman shuffled from the room and closed the door.

Sally sunk to the bed with a sigh. "By and by, that might mean tonight, and it might mean at breakfast. Marge, I'm for finding out just what this sort of a reception means, but first of all, let's unpack the bags and get into some clean clothes." It was odd, how, at a time of stress, the younger of the girls seemed the most capable. Marge knew it, and she admired her sister for it. "I

wish I had half your nerve and a third of your spunk Sally," she commented.

"Well, we're here and as there's no place to go, we'll have to stay, so we may as well make the best of it."



"What are we going to do about this whole thing, Sally?"

"We'll do one thing at a time. Take the most important first, which is fresh clothes and a good scrubbing. Next, I'm going to eat!"

"But how?"

"Raid the kitchen or the pantry or the larder or whatever they call it here. If there's nothing to be found, I'm going to go out and find a steer and cut off a beefsteak."

**M**ARGE smiled at the savage tone of the spunky girl. Then as she was drawing off her blouse, a bit of paper fell to the carpet. The half a map that had seemed so important at one time, but which had become insignificant in the face of the strange reception at the Whitcomb ranch. Sally picked it up and studied it a moment.

"Marge, this thing seemed to be pretty important to some people. That man we

saw asked about it as soon as we came in."

"Uncle Grant," said Marge.

"If *he's* our uncle then I'm afraid I'm not going to like him. Anyway, I think we'll be wise to hide this for a time and see what happens."

"You told him that we had it, didn't you?"

"He asked if we had it and you nodded, but perhaps he didn't see you. Where can we hide it?"

Marge glanced around the room at the meagre furnishings. There seemed to be no good place to hide even a small scrap of paper. Sally thought of the bags, but discarded the idea. They would be searched first of all if a prowler came to the room.

Strange, that in this house that was likely to be their home for the future, both girls had a feeling of distrust for anyone who would be there.

"I have it," said Marge. "Beneath the rug."

"It'll have to do I suppose."

Sally grabbed the edge of the gaudy piece of handwork and tossed it back to expose the pine floor. Both girls noticed a metal ring sunk flush, but which when lifted would furnish a grip to open what seemed to be a trap door.

"That looks interesting," muttered Sally. "Let's see what's in the cellar. Maybe there's food there." She bent and grabbed at the ring, then braced herself for the lift.

"I wouldn't do that, Sally. Perhaps Uncle Grant, or,—er . . . that bald headed man—"

"That's 'Unkie' allright," said Sally. "And if he objects, let him. I'm curious,—and hungry."

She gave a little tug, but the trap door was heavy. Taking a firmer grip, she

was about to try again when they heard a rapping on the door.

"Sally," whispered Marge tensely, "drop it. Throw back the rug." Then aloud she asked, "Who is it?"

"Your uncle," came the answer from outside the door.

"We're washing up, Uncle Grant," called Sally, as a small foot kicked the rug back in place. "We'll be out in about fifteen minutes."

"Supper's on the table, girls," the voice was almost genial, "and it's piping hot, so hurry along."

Marge had already spilled water in the basin and was washing the grime and dust of travel from her face and neck. Sally was grinning for the first time since the Lone Ranger had left the two sisters, and hauling a change of clothing from one of the bags. "Your stuff's on the bed," she said to Marge.

"Perhaps we misjudged Uncle Grant after all." The dark haired girl's voice was muffled by the big towel. "Sally, let's treat him just as we would if we really liked his appearance and liked his ranch and were glad to be here."

"Uh-huh," sputtered Sally through the suds. "At least until he's fed us."

SALLY pushed back her plate with a sigh. The food was good, and both she and Marge found that the strange things they had felt since coming to the ranch had in no way affected their appetite.

Uncle Grant had sat at the head of the table listening to the story the girls told of their trip from the East, the interception of the coach by the Lone Ranger and the trip by horseback to the ranch.

"It was quite a trip for girls not used to riding," he said.

"We took an easy gait," Marge ex-



plained, "and those horses seemed to understand that we were tenderfeet."

"I'd have ridden if it killed me," Sally said. "Just to show that masked man that I could do it. Now that we've told you all about the trip, tell us about the ranch. Do you live here all alone?"

"You saw White Rose."

"But I thought there'd be cowboys, and—and things."

"You'll see the men tomorrow, no doubt. Now let me get you girls straight," a knotty finger stabbing at Marge. "You're Marge, the tall dark haired girl."

Marge nodded.

"And you are Sally."

"Uh-huh."

"And your father left you part of an old map. I expect you brought it with you?"

For a moment Marge felt her face crimson and hoped that Sally would supply the answer. She usually did.

"Funny thing about that map, we were sure that it was packed in our luggage somewhere, but we didn't see it when we unpacked. Have to look for it later on."

"Don't tell me you've lost it?" Whitcomb's face clouded, and his voice shook. Marge thought he looked almost vicious when his emotions got the better of him despite his guarded manner.

"Oh, it'll turn up probably, Uncle Grant. Besides, the map is no good without the other half and the Lone Ranger told us that the other half had been stolen from Joe Frisby by—by some outlaws that are called the Night Legion."

The lips of Grant Whitcomb's small mouth went firmer than usual at the mention of the Night Legion. Under his breath he muttered a curse that the care-free Sally caught. "You seem to hate them too," she said.

"We'd like awfully to hear more about them, Uncle Grant," said the older of the sisters.

White Rose entered the dining room to clear away the remnants of the meal. The man looked at her for a moment while she shuffled about, picking up the dishes.

Marge thought his eyes were the most curious part of him. They were ordinarily without expression, seeming to give no indication of what went on in his mind. She thought she caught a glimpse of anger in them. Then the mask-like, unreadable expression returned.

Whitcomb, though giving no outward sign, seemed to be struggling to control his emotions before he spoke. When he



did speak it was in his usual even voice, but in the Indian tongue.

They were harsh sounding words that meant nothing to either of the two girls, but the effect on White Rose was instant. She dropped her head, her eyes looking at the ground. Embarrassment? Shame? Marge couldn't tell. She left

the room taking a stack of dishes with her.

"I told her to put your bags and things in the right room," Whitcomb explained.

"Weren't we in the right room?" Marge inquired.

"No. I gave her instructions before you girls arrived. The room I set aside for you is across the hall, lots bigger, lots more air, and better furniture in it. Of course if you'd like separate rooms—"

"Oh no indeed," said Marge. "We'd like to be together, wouldn't we Sally?"

"You toss in your sleep and I snore, but I guess I'd sooner be where you are."

Marge thought that most men would have at least smiled at the frankness of her sister, but her uncle gave no indication that he'd heard.

It seemed that this entire conversa-



tion was a forced one. There was so much that each of the three people at the table should have had to say, and yet it was an effort to make conversation.

There was something about Whitcomb that made the deep-thinking girl shudder inwardly. She had never before felt

this same sensation of distrust, of loathing, and yet for what reason?

His reception of the girls had been a brusque one, and his appearance was certainly against him, yet neither of these things should have brought such a feeling to a person as willing as Marge to make allowances.

Sally cupped her chin in her closed fists, with her elbows resting on the table. "What's a hoodoo ranch," she blurted.

**T**HE suddenness of the question made Marge almost gasp, and she glanced at her uncle. She fancied she detected that same tension in his eyes as he had shown when White Rose appeared.

Whitcomb repeated Sally's words, "Hoodoo Ranch?"

"That's what this place was called by the driver of the stage coach. We sort of wondered what it meant and why it was called that."

"Folks out here run out of things to talk about, so they make up all sorts of stories. If you see anything that looks hoodoo to you, just let me know."

"I wonder if we will," thought Marge, but said nothing.

From where she sat, she could look down the hall toward the bedrooms. She saw the old Indian woman cross the hall with the bags of the girls under her arms, and her shoulders and hands heaped with the clothing that had already been unpacked.

She passed from view into the second room that was to be for the use of the sisters. Then there was a thud of bags being dropped to the floor, followed by a shout from the silent Indian.

It was a single word, but it brought all three chairs sliding back from the table, Whitcomb's with such force that

it toppled, crashing to the floor. White Rose had shouted, "Hoodoo!"

From somewhere outside the house there came a ringing cry, the grandest thing Sally had heard for some time. It was the shout of the Lone Ranger. "Heigh-Yo Silver!" A swift tattoo of pounding hoofs crashed through the night, fading away in the distance.

When Sally, Marge and Whitcomb reached the bedroom, White Rose stood pointing to the window with her bony finger shaking with fright.

"Face in window," were the only intelligible words amid a mass of Indian jabbering. Whitcomb stepped to the window, trying to pierce the darkness. The two girls, for a moment, said nothing; then as their uncle turned his back on the night outside, Marge explained.

"That was the Lone Ranger. He's the man that brought us here, but I thought he had gone away."

"Where did you think he'd ridden to?" asked Whitcomb.

Marge didn't catch the warning glance that Sally was giving her and went on with her explanation. "He had a fight with some of the outlaws. He called them the Night Legion. That was last night some time. He said he was going to go back there and see if he could find some footprints, or some sort of clues that might lead to the capture of the leader."

"I see," Whitcomb nodded.

Sally thought that as long as Marge had told so much, she might just as well add her bit. "What's more," she said, "he told us that these men that wear hoods over their heads had the other half of our map, and he said that he was going to try and get it back for us. And I'm betting that he does. Gosh, I sure like that masked man's style!"

"You girls must be tired after the hard day you've had," said Whitcomb, abrupt-

ly changing the subject. Apparently he considered the incident closed.

"Sort of," agreed Sally.

"Well, this will be a lot more comfortable than the other room you had. I guess everything's here for you. Better turn in right away because we eat breakfast pretty early. I'll see that White Rose calls you in time."

"We will be ready," said Marge. "We always get up early."

"As to that masked man, don't worry about him. I'll have a couple of the boys stand guard outside in case any more prowlers come around here."

"He's not a prowler," defended Sally, "And besides I'd sort of *like* to have him around."

"If you find your map, let me know, won't you, Marge?"

"Y-yes, I—I guess so."

"Sure thing," said Sally. "And now goodnight."

As the door closed behind the man and White Rose, Sally dropped to the floor and scooped back the rug, a similar one to the first. Examining the floor boards, she muttered half aloud, "This room may be bigger and better, but I'm disappointed. We don't have a trap door."

Marge still had the map, and when forced to hide it suddenly a while back, had tucked it in her shoe. She decided to leave it there till morning.

Tomorrow there would be a lot of time to talk, and perhaps when they got to know Uncle Grant better, he would improve. At any rate, this was going to be home, and the bed was soft, the sheets cool. Sally blew out the lamp, threw the window wide, looked out for a moment, then almost fell into the bed, from sheer exhaustion.

Had the girls been able to hear the things that were discussed outside the

house that night, they would have known why the place was called the Hoodoo Ranch, but they did not hear.

**W**HEN the Lone Ranger and Tonto left the girls at dusk, the masked man fully intended to return to the clearing in the forest, miles away, to hunt for clues that might lead to the downfall

"I checked this, Cook, an' it's the truth. Old Joe Frisby has been murdered."



of the unknown leader of the Night Legion.

During the first few miles covered by the two men, Tonto was even more silent than usual. The red man was turning over in his mind the things he'd heard of the Whitcomb place. Finally reaching a decision he told the Lone Ranger of the things that he had heard about the hoodoo ranch.

"Have any of these things been proved, Tonto?"

"Tonto not know."

"I've known of Grant Whitcomb for years. He's always had a reputation as a square shooter. Rather a strange man, and one who always kept to himself, but honest as the day is long."

"That why me not tell you to now."

"Yet, if there are things going on there as you say Tonto, perhaps we should return and see if the girls are being treated well."

"We lose plenty time."

"We can still get back to the forest and to our camp in time to get some

sleep and start at daylight for the clearing where the outlaws met."

"You go, Tonto follow you."

That was how the masked rider happened to return to the ranch house in the same cautious silent manner that Tonto had used when he went to borrow the horses for the girls to ride.

On foot the two men had moved to the house, and looking through a window, they saw the girls apparently enjoying supper with their uncle. Thru another window they noticed White Rose moving the bags and clothing to a cool, clean room that seemed cozy and comfortable. Everything was as it should be.

The girls were safe, and efforts were being made to make them comfortable. Then White Rose saw the face at the window. She screamed, and the Lone Ranger gave a running leap to land in the saddle and speed away.

It was hours later that a dark form moved away from the ranch house. Over his head and shoulders was draped a hood. No one saw him, no one could hear that silent tread. His horse was waiting as he swung into the saddle he chuckled softly to himself. "I'll have things to tell the boys tonight."

The leader of the Night Legion was riding to a meeting.

## CHAPTER VI

### Outlawed

**A** SCORCHING sun beat down on the town of Showdown. It was the morning after the Whitcomb ranch riders had waited in vain for the arrival of the stage coach. A weather beaten sign on an unpainted building explained that within might be found the office of the Sheriff and the jail.

Sheriff Cook sat at his desk, his black hat shoved back from his high forehead

showing a lock of grey hair falling across his right temple. The long straight nose, firm chin and tight mouth served as indication that the lawman was of the fearless type.

Cook had a soft-spoken, mild manner that went well with his blue eyes, yet his voice seemed to carry a tone of authority that tolerated no refusal. He was respected by the deputies who served under him and feared by the outlaws who crossed his path.

The ivory handled gun that now rested on the desk had no notches carved in the butt. The Sheriff felt no reason to boast of his killings. He hated the necessity of murder, and unlike most of the quick-trigger men of the region, he still considered it murder even though it was justifiable, and in self defense.

The bowlegged deputy who faced Cook was nicknamed Walrus, because of his handle bar moustache. When Walrus heard his old sidekick lower his voice to a barely audible murmur, he knew that his boss was in dead earnest.

A moment before, the Sheriff had slapped a black-bound book closed, and pushed it into a desk drawer. He closed the drawer methodically, slowly, calculating the man who stood before the desk being sworn in as a deputy. Tex Wilson hailed from the Lone Star state and spoke in the slow drawling manner that was characteristic of that part of the country.

Walrus sat studying the new member of the Sheriff's staff during the procedure. He saw a man about twenty-three or four, at least six feet tall in stocking feet and taller in the high heeled boots. A pair of capable looking shoulders tapered to lean hips, and a ruddy clean-shaven face was topped by sun-burnt yellow hair.

Walrus tugged on one side of the

moustache and calculated that Tex might be fast on the draw of that gun that was strapped low on the thigh. He mused as to how fine the trigger had been filed to blast a bullet at the touch of something not much heavier than a feather.

**T**EX stood at ease watching the Sheriff's steady gaze, and Walrus squirmed uneasily in the bent-wood chair. He sent a tobacco stream at the brass spitoon and grinned somewhat complacently as he scored a direct hit. "At least eight foot away at that," he noted.

"Do you know why you're bein' took on, Tex?" asked the Sheriff.

"Sure 'nough, Sheriff," drawled the man from Texas. "Ah'm tuh take orders from you, suh, an' see that them orders git carried out to the lettah!"

"That'll do for a starter, Tex. But there's another reason. Did you note them two men that was toted in here with what was left of a stage coach with a dozen bullet holes an' five horses, when there should o' been six?"

"Ah seen the two men."

"Well, what'd you think about 'em?"

"Taint nothin' ah wouldn't like better'n tuh have the law on mah side when ah get the chance to line mah six-gun on the pole-cats that treated human bein's so."

"The law's on your side, Tex."

"Ornery coyotes that would first torture a man with boot an' fist, then pu. a bullet in him, aint worth takin' the trouble tuh hang, suh. Jest dig a hole an' throw 'em in, then fill the hole."

The Sheriff nodded without comment. The eyes of Walrus opened wide, and the rhythmic motion of his mouth was broken.

"Hyars a man with new idees, Sheriff. Drat it, I'd like tuh turn him loose on

a couple Night Legion varmints. Dog-goned if I wouldn't."

"Those men," explained the Sheriff, "were tied to a tree while they were being tortured and shot. They was the driver an' guard of the stage coach. What was on the stage that was wanted bad enough fer that, is more'n I know, but they's one thing I do know. It's the work o' the Night Legion."

"Heahd tell o' that outfit."

"You aint heard nothin'," spouted Walrus, "just you wait'll the Sheriff gets to tellin' you about the Night Legion an' some o' t'other things that's been done by 'em!"

"Ah sho' crave to heah, pahdnuh, an' if you don't mind, ah don' yet know yo' name."

"Jest call me Walrus," another brown stream scored a bull's eye at an eight foot range, "or Dead Shot."

Walrus fancied he saw a gleam of admiration in the eye of the blond man, and skidded his chair back another two feet, just to prove to the new deputy, on the next shot, his expert marksmanship.

The Sheriff lowered his voice still more. "The Night Legion," he began, "started up a couple months ago, when the first attack was made on Chuck Stillwater's ranch. The rustlers came down on the place roarin' wild an' shootin' hard. The house was the first place that they hit. Shot Chuck an' his wife an' kid, then fired the house."

"Like Apaches," commented Tex.

"Worse," said Walrus with authority. "Wait'll you hear."

"They shot two more men before they left with the cattle, but one of them wasn't quite dead when we found him. He told how there was about a score o' men in the band, an' how they wore hoods over their heads, an' sombreros over the hoods. Couldn't see no part of

their face or head. That was the start of the Night Legion."

"Who named the outfit?" asked Tex.

"We don't know just how the name got started, but soon everyone was speakin' of the Night Legion." The Sheriff paused as he noticed Walrus studying the distance to the cuspidor with a calculating eye. He waited until the old man let go, then saw that the shot had fallen short, to add one more to the many brown stains on the floor.

no folks alive to tell much about 'em. I suspicion the leader pays bounty on human lives. Wal, if they'd only killed an' robbed, it'd be bad enough, but you seen what they done tuh them two men from the stage coach?"

Tex Wilson nodded. "Aint they no clues as to who these men might be?"

"No clues. No tellin' who they are. No way of figgerin' what they're after. They've stole enough already to make a dozen men 'most millionaires. Mebbe not



"H'ist yuhr hands, mister, an' don't make us shoot!"  
 "Yipee," shouted Walrus. "Thar's our man, an' masked, by ginger. We got him at last!"

**W**ALRUS covered his confusion by returning his chair to its former position. He looked up, saw the half smile on the goodlooking Texan's face, and muttered, "Better fergit that name o' 'Dead Shot', jest call me Walrus." He saw the Sheriff's look of disapproval and said, "Go on Sheriff, tell the new man more about the Skunks."

"As I said, the raid on the Stillwater place was jest the start. It got to be so's 'most every night some of them crooks would go out makin' trouble fer some poor victim, ridin' Hell bent fer election an' shooting straight tuh kill. One of the things about them, is they don't leave

exactly that much, but they've stole plenty an' still they aint in no-ways satisfied. Now what was on the stage coach that they wanted? No one knows. All we *do* know, is that some riders from Grant Whitcomb's outfit was in town

yesterday waitin' for some nieces of old Whitcomb to come on the stage. If the gals was on the stage, then . . ." The Sheriff paused with grim meaning.

"What did Whitcomb's men say when they found the stage was stopped?"

"Nothin'," said the Sheriff. "They're a serious bunch that work fer Whitcomb. Hung around the town all day an' never once went near one of the three saloons. Whitcomb don't take drinkin' men on, an' he don't change men, not often. There's another funny thing, the Whitcomb ranch."

"What's funny about that, boss?"

"You'll hear tell of a lot o' things that has been said tuh happen over there. Strange noises in the night an' such like."

"Haunts?" asked Tex.

"Dunno what, but as long as the bunch is law abidin', an' there ain't no trouble that involves lawbreakin', they ain't no call tuh go tuh the Whitcomb place."

"We don't take no stock in the yarns we hear anyhow," declared Walrus. He eyed the cuspidor again, caught the look of Sheriff Cook, then changed his mind. The Sheriff was in no mood to tolerate another miss at this time.

From outside there came a clatter of hoofs, and a horse reared to its hind legs as it was brought to a sudden stop. Tex turned, his hand half reaching for his gun. The door burst open and a dust covered man flew in. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt, and flecks of foam from a hard ridden horse covered his shirt and chaps. In his hand, he held a paper which he slapped down on the desk of the Sheriff with a curse.

"I checked this, Cook, an' it's the truth. Old Joe Frisby has been murdered."

WALRUS gagged and choked as he swallowed hard. Cook swung around the desk, slapping his gun into leather as he moved. He grabbed the paper and found that it was addressed to him in the crudest of block letters.

Sheriff Cook knew the value of making haste slowly. He could move with the speed and agility of a cat, despite his age, yet he could take his time to read and study a situation—or a letter, when most men would be in a turmoil.

"Noticed that nailed to a tree, Sheriff. Then I cut over to Hermit Joe's old shack an' found him dead. I come back fast, because that note may be somethin' for us to work on."

"Shake hands with Tex Wilson," said the official without looking up from the paper in his hands. "This is Dave Sands, Tex. A good man."

The two hands met with a firm grip and Tex and Dave saw in each other the things they admired in men. A frank face, a steady gaze, and a confidence that comes only with perfect health and trained muscles. These two would be friends, and both knew it. Sands was dark haired and a couple of inches shorter than the man from Texas, but a trifle heavier.

"Stop tryin' to read over my shoulder, Walrus, I'll read this to you. It says that Joe Frisby has been murdered, and if I want proof of it, and want to find the man who did it, I might send a posse to the timber. In a clearin' just south of the cave near Flynn's Bluff, I might find the killer. It says he'll likely be there sometime today."

"Then what're we a-waitin' for," howled Walrus. "Let's shove off after him. I know the clearin'. I know exactly where it is. I bin there a dozen times. Let's git goin', I want the chance



tuh unlimber my gun on a killer." He snatched an old weapon from his hip and swung it over his head. "Let me git at 'em," he yelled, "I'll show 'em!"

Cook turned to Dave Sands and asked quietly, "Bullet?"

"He was shot all right, Cook, an' it's the bullet that killed him, but he was knifed in the back first."

"Sounds tuh me like some more Night Legion." It was Tex who spoke.

Dave went on, "Not only that, his place was messed up awful fierce, like someone had been searchin' it for somethin'."

"What did it look like they were searchin' for?"

"Somethin' small, because they hunted in small places."

"Big enough to maybe be a cash box or somethin' of the sort?"

"Smaller'n that."

Cook moved to the door, paused and turned to face his three deputies. "Boys," he said, "I can't form a posse of pickup men, because with this Night Legion, I don't know who tuh trust. There's four of us, now that Tex has joined. There's maybe twenty of the Night Legion. We're goin' after 'em!"

**T**HE Lone Ranger and Tonto slept past daybreak after their strenuous day and the short hours of sleep preceding it. The sun was slanting through the trees that formed the ceiling of their small camp, and the two white horses seemed to be uneasy at the irregular proceeding.

Silver was muzzling his master's side when the mystery rider wakened with the realization that a new day was already a couple of hours old. Tonto was awake, but motionless in his blanket. He knew his tall white friend was in

need of rest, and was determined that he should have it if possible.

Before this day was gone, their very lives might depend on the speed of the Lone Ranger's draw, or the sureness of his aim. This was the day they had planned to go to a clearing in the forest and search for whatever might be found in the way of clues to the identity of the Night Legionmen, especially the leader.

Seeing the white man awake, Tonto rose and built up the small fire that was used for cooking. In almost no time the aroma of coffee and frying bacon filled the air. The Lone Ranger drew deep breaths of clean air, then moved to a nearby spring to refresh himself.

Long years of close association had brought about a natural division of camp duties. Tonto did the cooking while the white man filled canteens and saw that



both horses were attended to. Then while Tonto washed the pans and utensils after a meal, the Lone Ranger inspected leather, guns, and other equipment.

Today was an exception, though. This was a day when every hour must be made to count. Each night that the

Night Legion went unhampered brought new deaths, more ravages, and greater terror to the countryside.

In half a dozen counties the lawmen had done their best to find some clue, but without the slightest measure of success. Of all who had sworn to get the Night Legion, and especially the hooded leader, of all who had fought against them, only two men remained alive—the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

This was the first loose end the master mind had left. Yet, whoever he was, he was aware of the unfinished work. He knew that a tall white man, and an Indian named Tonto, must be added to his list of victims.

He knew that in the Lone Ranger, he faced his most dangerous adversary, just as the Lone Ranger knew that he was pitted against the most treacherous, brutal, shrewd, and calculating enemy of law and order, he had ever met.

While the two men let the stallions pick their footing through the woods, the Lone Ranger turned over many things in his mind. Tonto, he knew, was one of the most skilled men in all the West at reading trail signs. He had senses which were almost as acute as those of a bloodhound, and in addition the Indian possessed the ability to reason.

The merest sign of footprint could be interpreted to such an extent that a careful study gave Tonto the size, weight and sometimes even more detail, about the man who made that print.

**I**T WAS Tonto's ability that the Lone Ranger counted on in planning this return trip to the clearing. He recalled vividly the hand-to-hand fight of two nights before. He had seen the leader make his escape and made a mental note of the exact spot. The Lone Ranger

wanted to search the clearing carefully. There might be some trace, some clue—

These two could ride for hours without the exchange of a word. They had their thoughts, and oftentimes these thoughts were parallel. Tonto knew, when the masked man paused a moment, that they were passing near the place where a cut-off to Joe Frisby's shack might be made.

When the white man resumed the journey, Tonto knew that he had realized that Old Joe could be given burial when time was not so precious. He was past all earthly aid, and if the old fellow was watching from some future world, his desire would be that the march in the name of Justice be continued.

Finally the clearing was reached. It seemed smaller in the daylight than it had at night. Some queer quirk of nature had left a flat rock, or a layer of stratified rock over an irregular area of several rods. Loam had deposited on top of this in the centuries that went into the building of this forest, but trees could not find root in the shallow layer of dirt.

It made a regular room, surrounded by towering timber with interlacing branches above, forming a roof. The sun at its best could barely penetrate that green ceiling, and this with lack of moisture made vegetation sparse in the clearing.

Tonto noted the branch on which he had perched in the night, and both men saw the scars of the fight stomped deep into the ground. There were the prints of Silver's sharp hoofs when he had pounded and struck in defense of a beloved master.

Nearby the imprint of Tonto's moccasined foot, and other marks were easily picked out. The prints were there. It only remained for Tonto to follow those of the leader, and perhaps—

A soft whinny from Silver warned the Lone Ranger. Tonto grew tense. Both horses stood motionless and the masked man turned in the saddle, listening for the sound that the keen ears of Silver had already heard.

The silence was broken only by the soft rustle of the leaves and pines. Then the crack of a dry twig. White man and Indian exchanged glances. The white man's hands moved closer to his guns. He moved carefully so no creaking leather would betray him.

Silver, canny horse that he was, stood motionless for the same reason. These

A RUSTLE of leaves gave further warning of something, or someone, approaching stealthily. Tonto knew this, and signalled the Lone Ranger. Then suddenly four men came out, with six-guns leveled.

"H'ist yuhr hands, mister, an' don't make us shoot!" It was Sheriff Cook and his deputies.

"Yipee," shouted Walrus, "that's our



Instinctively he whirled and fired. There was a gasp from the intruder, while his guns barked in answer to the sheriff's shot.

might be outlaws returning to the place they had often used for meetings, it might be some traveling ranch hand, lost in the forest, or, it might be lawmen.

It could be no animal of the woods moving through its natural haunts, for Silver knew and understood these creatures and would give no warning in such instance.

man, an' masked, by ginger. We got him at last!"

The other two men, who accompanied the sheriff and Walrus, now stepped forward. The one that was tall and blond spoke up with a heavy Texan drawl.

"Mister, they jest aint no use yuh puttin' up an arg'ment. A gun is th'

voice of authority 'round heah—an' we uns has four sech jest achin' t' speak up!"

The masked man made no attempt to draw his guns. He spoke in a level voice that matched that of the Sheriff for calmness.

"What are we arrested for and what are we charged with?"

"The charge is murder, stranger, an' the man you killed is named Joe Frisby."

"You're mistaken."

"As tuh that, we'll see. Thar's a heap of footprints close by Old Joe's shack, an' if yores don't match up with none o' them, I reckon it'll back yore story, an' I'm mistaken. But if they do match up, then mister, it's a hangin' crime. What do yuh know 'bout this business?"

"There was part of a map stolen, but not by me. It was the Night Legion."

"Seems to be about the same thing to me," Dave Sands said.

Tex moved close to take the guns of the masked man. Many thoughts flashed through the Lone Ranger's mind. Above all things he wanted to keep his identity a secret.

The first move of the sheriff's men after taking his guns, would be to remove the mask. Unmasked, his usefulness might be impaired, perhaps ended, if indeed he was able to escape the hangman's noose.

Knowing the fever heat to which men's passions had been aroused by the Legion's crimes, and aware of the speed with which trials were conducted, and punishment meted out, there was a chance that he and Tonto would die for a murder which they were trying to avenge. His footprints would be found near Old Joe's shack, perhaps in Frisby's own blood, on the floor.

As Tex reached forth a hand to snatch

the guns from the white man's holsters, the Lone Ranger's left foot, which was obscured by the body of his horse jabbed the big white stallion. Like a suddenly released steel spring, Silver acted. Trained for just such an emergency, he plunged, swept sideways against Tex, bowled him over, then leaped. Four men started to cry out at once, but so sudden was this fiery attack of the horse, that no word was uttered. Straight into the three, still upright, men the big horse charged. Tonto too went into action. With his knee he pressed hard on the side of his horse, shouting, "Gittum up, White Feller!"

There was a melee of flying legs and arms as the lawmen tried to dodge the nimble horses. Guns were forgotten in the turmoil.

Then the Lone Ranger shouted, "Get away, Tonto, get away!"

Tonto's cry of "gittum up White Feller," was followed by that more familiar shout of "Heigh-Yo, Silver!" A thunder of hoofs breaking into rhythm faded out with the two fugitives.

Tex, the first to recover, had his gun in play, saw the back of a fast riding man breaking through the woods, and brought up his weapon. But he never fired. Nearly two hundred pounds of Sheriff landed on his gun arm.

"Hold yer fire," cried Cook. "Don't shoot!"

"He'll get away!" shouted Tex.

"Get the critturs, get 'em I tell yuh," Walrus yelled. "Shoot Tex, afore they're outta sight! Them two are in the Night Legion!"

"Night Legion nothin'!" exploded the Sheriff. "The white man called his hoss, 'Silver'. He's the Lone Ranger!"

But this the Lone Ranger didn't hear. As far as he could tell, both he and Tonto were fugitives from justice, likely

to be shot on sight, or hung, when captured. Their innocence could be proven only by the capture of the real killers, and these were the Night Legion.

A light breeze carried a faint call back to the Sheriff's men as the white horses disappeared in the distance. "Heigh-Yo, Silver!"

## CHAPTER VII

### The Scar Faced Man

**I**T WOULD have been impossible for any horse to have kept the pace of the nimble-footed stallions ridden by the Lone Ranger and Tonto, as they made their escape from the sheriff and his three deputies.

Silver had an uncanny instinct that made him avoid treacherous tree roots and the holes of burrowing animals that might have meant a broken leg. The big white horse dodged this way and that, and the masked rider let him pick his own course. He did however, see to it that a certain direction was being followed. He and Tonto were bent on finding a hiding place where they could plan the next steps of their campaign against the Night Legion.

Despite the fact that these champions of justice never spent more than a few days in any locality, they knew more landmarks than the natives of the country. They knew of caves and gullies in the most obscure places, where none seemed to exist. These made ideal hiding places and it was toward one of these that they rode.

When the lawmen burst into the clearing and almost captured the masked man and the Indian, the plans of the Lone Ranger suffered a serious set-back. It was a large problem, that of bringing the Night Legion's leader to justice, and it had been made even more difficult now that the forces of the law were hunting

the rider of Silver and his Indian companion.

His description would be given out as soon as the Sheriff returned to Show-down. Every man of gun-toting age would be on the watch, ready to shoot on sight, and shoot to kill, firmly believing that they were getting one of the hated Night Legion.

Long years of keeping his identity a secret and creating the character of a mystery rider, had often made it necessary for the fugitive and Tonto to hide their trail.

Whenever they came upon a stream, it was followed for a time, so that no tracks would be left. Every moment the Lone Ranger subconsciously availed himself of ground conditions that made a trail impossible to follow. Thus for hours, he rode with Tonto, constantly heading toward the hiding place and in the general direction of the Whitcomb Ranch.

Suddenly Tonto broke the silence with what seemed at first to be a mild question, but one which was charged with significance.

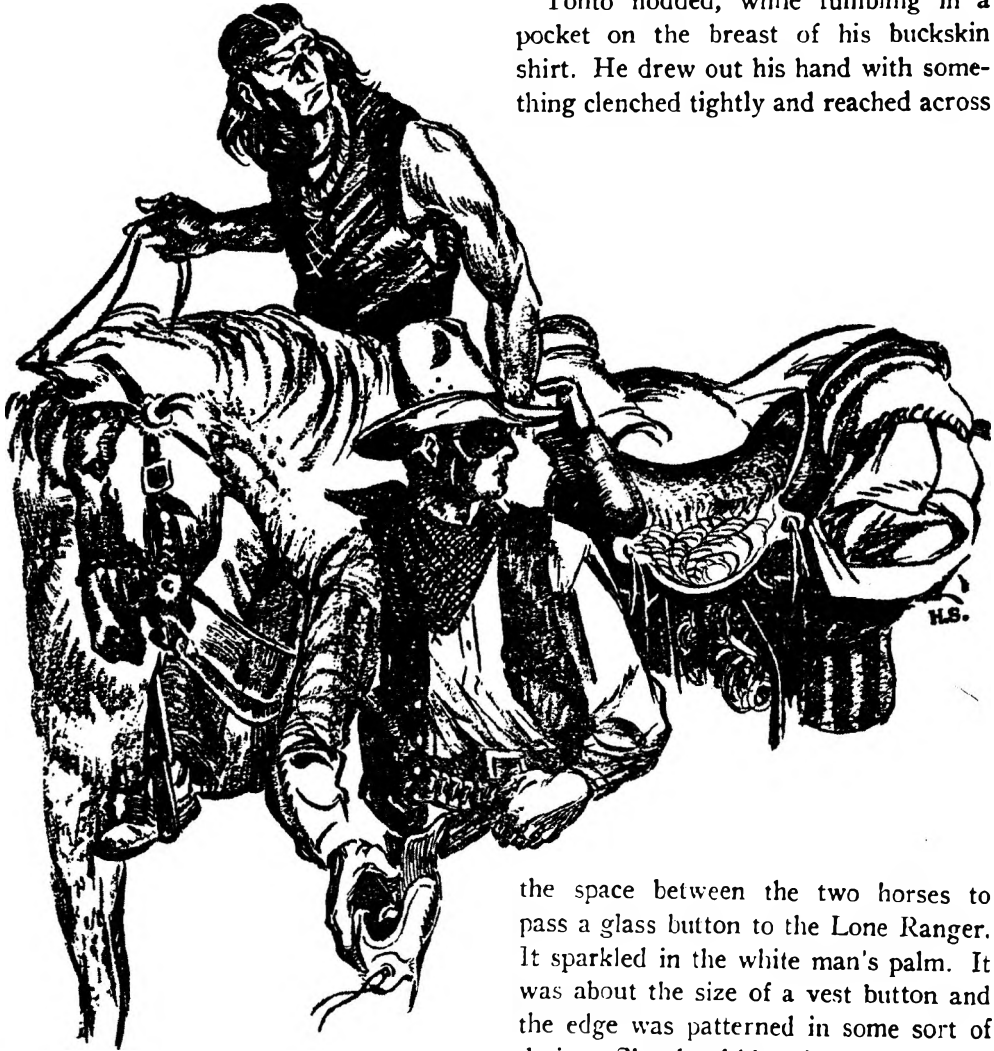
"How do Sheriff know we go to clearing?"

The masked man straightened in the saddle. It surely was more than coincidence that had brought the Sheriff to that clearing. None but the Lone Ranger and Tonto knew that the hooded men had met there. None, that is, except the Night Legion members themselves.

If it had been simply a guess on the part of the Sheriff that this forest was used by the Night Legion for its meetings, there were hundreds of clearings that might have been used. True, there was but one as large as that where the meeting had taken place, yet why did Sheriff Cook go directly there?

"Did we tell anyone, Tonto, that we were going there?"

"Ugh," the Indian grunted. "Tell-um girls."



**T**HE masked man recalled what he had told Marge and her sister, Sally. "We did say, Tonto, that we were going to visit the clearing where the outlaws met, but we did not specify which clearing."

"Girl tell-um some feller we go-um there. Feller tell-um law go git us there."

The Lone Ranger, for several moments, turned over in his mind the facts

brought out by his Indian friend, before he spoke again.

"I think you've struck the point, Tonto."

Tonto nodded, while fumbling in a pocket on the breast of his buckskin shirt. He drew out his hand with something clenched tightly and reached across

the space between the two horses to pass a glass button to the Lone Ranger. It sparkled in the white man's palm. It was about the size of a vest button and the edge was patterned in some sort of design. Shreds of blue thread still clung to the eyes of the button, which had apparently been torn from a garment with force.

"Me find-um that in clearing," said Tonto. "Pick-um up. Put-um in pocket, then Sheriff come."

In one short speech Tonto had explained why he had not before mentioned the find to the masked rider. He had found it in the clearing, his keen eyes

spotting it almost on his arrival. Then before he could call his friend's attention to it, the Sheriff and his deputies had closed in on them.

Here in the hand of the Lone Ranger was the first clue left by the Night Legion. One member had lost this button, and his vest with the remaining buttons, sewed in blue, might be the thing that would hang him!

"Blue threads," murmured the Lone Ranger.

In the masked man's mind things were accumulating. Unknowingly one of the Whitcomb sisters had spoken to a member of the Night Legion, who, in turn had sent the Sheriff to trap the two men. If only he could learn whom these girls had spoken to since their arrival at the ranch!

Another important item was the button which one of the members of the Night Legion had lost from his vest. Now, if he could find the man wearing that vest—! Abruptly the Lone Ranger made his decision.

"Tonto, tonight we are going to call on Sheriff Cook and ask him just one question."

**S**HERIFF Cook couldn't get to sleep. After a day spent in the saddle hunting for the trail of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, he had fallen into bed two hours ago, exhausted from his fruitless search. He was an old campaigner who fully knew the value of rest, despite all conditions.

Cook had slept when death was close at hand, when bullets were whizzing close to his head, slept in fire and flood and battle, to gain strength for the more arduous work that was to come, and yet tonight he could not sleep.

He seemed to be awaiting something, he could not tell what. No reason, no

explanation, yet there persisted a force that seemed to charge the atmosphere. A force that kept Sheriff Cook wide awake.

Hours ago, the saloon down the road had become quiet. The last of the patrons had departed to go their various ways. There was only the habitual sounds of the night, of crickets and katydids, and the far distant howl of a wolf or cry of a coyote.

Cook grumbled, made a new resolve to sleep and turned over, but his tuned ears picked up a sound that brought him sitting bolt upright in his bunk. It was the soft clump of horses' hoofs. Hardly loud enough to hear, yet it was the very softness of the sound that caused Cook's hand to slip his six-gun from its leather sheath beside his bed.

No person would have his horse's hoofs muffled with burlap sacking unless there was some reason for it, and there could be no logical reason unless—the sound came again, just outside his window.

Noiselessly he crept from his bed toward the window, drawing back the hammer of his heavy six-shooter with only the slightest of clicks.

Outside he heard another padded clump, followed by the faintest of squeaks. Someone was stealthily pushing open the door. Instinctively the Sheriff acted, as, with a single motion, he whirled and fired.

There was a gasp from the intruder, while his guns barked in answer to the sheriff's shot. As if snatched by invisible fingers, the lawman's gun was wrenched out of his hand with paralyzing force, from the impact of a heavy slug.

With a bellow of rage mingled with pain, Cook charged the dark intruder, while fully expecting another burst from the guns. Instead, he was met with a

stinging blow from a hard driven fist, that landed flush on his chin. He clawed with both hands, trying to close in, but found himself helpless in a grip of steel. His hands were drawn down, pinned to his sides and a calm, level voice spoke in his ear.

"You'll have the whole town awake with your gunplay. I merely came to ask a question."

That voice, its depth, and tone. That pure, precise way of speaking was not the manner or the voice of an outlaw. Only once before the Sheriff had heard it, yet it was a voice that he would never forget. It was the Lone Ranger who held him with arms that were long and slender and muscles like highly tempered steel. "I didn't want to shoot, but you made it necessary. I only shot your gun from your hand."

For the first time, Cook realized that his hand was unhit, that he was unharmed. "I shot at *you*," he muttered. "Hit you, too, I reckon."

"Scatched my side, but that won't stop me from getting what I came for."

"How do I know you didn't come here intendin' to drill me dead, to take me off your trail?"

"I could easily have shot to kill. I had time for a second shot, if I'd wanted to take it. I went so far as to have Tonto making sounds outside your window to attract your attention while I came through the door. Doesn't that prove that I am not here to harm you?"

"You're the Lone Ranger." It was more a statement than a question.

"What brought you to that clearing in the woods today?" asked the Lone Ranger.

**C**OOK'S mind was a confusion of thoughts. If this really was the famous Lone Ranger, he could be made

a strong ally in the battle against the menace that had terrorized the West. If, on the other hand, this was some member of the Night Legion, he might be able to stall until help came in response to the crashing thunder of the six-guns. As if he had read the lawman's thoughts, the masked man spoke again.

"In the name of Heaven, be quick. Tell me where you got the information you acted on! Do you think I'd be here alone, if I were one of the Legion?"

"No, by God, you wouldn't," cried the Sheriff. "Those damned skunks go in a mob; they ain't got the guts to tackle a man single handed."

The sound of clattering hoofs came from down the road. Already men were dashing toward the Sheriff's home. Half a minute would bring them to the door with guns ready for use. Split seconds would suffice to send a dozen lead slugs crashing into the body of the Lone Ranger.

"Be quick," the masked man commanded. "Tell me."

"Let me go, I'll get you the note that was brought to me."

In those few seconds there had come into being a mutual trust between the masked man and the lawman. The Lone Ranger released the Sheriff's arms. Cook took two long barefooted steps toward a small table. He pulled out a drawer, and in the dark knew just where to feel for a folded paper that was there.

Outside the house half a dozen men were leaping from the saddle and drawing guns, even before they hit the dirt. The Lone Ranger slammed the door closed, and stepped toward the window.

A glance outside showed Tonto, with the two horses waiting. Heavy fists were hammering at the door, and a voice



was shouting to the Sheriff. Even as the men outside were pushing open the door, Cook was pressing the folded paper into the hand of the Lone Ranger.

"Here's the paper, it's all I know, Pardner. I pray Heaven you'll do what I'm beginnin' to think is more than I can do."

The masked man already had one leg over the window sill. Waving a hand toward Cook, even as the door burst in, he sprang.

The clatter of heavy, high-heeled boots on the pine boards and the confusion of a dozen questions burst on the Sheriff at once.

"Boys, boys," he shouted, "take it easy, what's the meanin' of all this excitement? Can't you let a man sleep?"

"We heard gunfire. One of the boys said he seen a man comin' here. Cook. Where'd he go to?"

"There's sure enough been gunplay in this here room," another shouted. "I smell powder smoke."

"Speak up Cook, what's it mean?"

Then above all other shouts came one that made each man's mouth gape wide, made half finished sentences remain suspended. From the rear of the house there came a hearty shout, "*Heigh-Yo, Silver.*" A clatter of hoofs, and two white stallions raced into the night.

Sheriff Cook, in the half light of the room, grinned broadly at his friends. "Gents," he said, "now, if you'll vamoze. I'll get me a little sleep."

**M**ARGE WHITCOMB was alone in her room at her uncle's ranch. She and Sally had wakened early in the morning and both had done justice to a hearty breakfast prepared and served by White Rose.

Ham and eggs, crisp toast made from huge slices of bread, a jam made of wild

strawberries and cream, so thick it could be lifted with a fork, and fragrant coffee. The younger sister had been full of enthusiasm with every detail of the meal and after finishing had declared that she was going to have a look around the place.

Marge thought she detected a trace of disapproval on the poker face of Grant Whitcomb, but it had been quickly veiled and he merely nodded approval. The day before had been spent with her uncle as he took both girls on a horseback tour of his many acres, but Sally had been right in her terse comment at bedtime the night before. "We didn't see *anything.*"

A little crease of concentration appeared on the brow of Marge as she sat on the edge of her bed. The precious map was still concealed in one of the shoes she wore. There had been no reason to suspect that it would not be safe if left in her room, yet she felt certain that on the previous day, while the girls were out, the room had been searched.



Then there was something else that worried her. It happened during the night. Sally had rolled in the bed and drawn the covers partly away, thereby wakening her sister. In those few moments of wakefulness Marge heard what seemed to be a groan or a soft moan. She thought at the time, that it was

merely one of the things of the prairie, some creature of the night. Today it had taken on a new significance.

While she sat at the breakfast table she saw something that made her curious. White Rose had just come out of the first room assigned to the two girls, closing the door carefully behind her. This in itself would not have been a strange incident, but she carried with her a tray of dishes.

Grant Whitcomb, when asked, denied that any new arrivals had come to the ranch, but Marge was not satisfied. A moan in the night, an extra breakfast taken from a supposedly unoccupied room that had a trap door in the floor, someone searching her room. The name, "Hoodoo Ranch," all these served to make her feel more uneasy than ever.

**W**HITE ROSE, the old Indian woman was making a clatter of her dishwashing when Marge wandered into the big kitchen. Though the crone must have known the dark haired girl was there, she made no comment, neither did she look up from her work. She seemed to be muttering a chant that was a mixture of guttural sounds and grunts.

From the big dishpan, with its foamy water, White Rose drew a cup, rinsed it, and methodically put it on a table. Another cup was drawn out of the suds, to be placed alongside the first.

White Rose turned her red-black eyes toward the white girl, then dropped them again. Two more cups appeared from beneath the soapy water and these in turn were rinsed and stacked. White Rose then, and for the first time, looked directly at Marge.

She held up four dripping, skinny fingers. Her other hand made a slight motion toward the four cups. She mouthed four words in her best English,

making each word a speech in itself and putting forth every effort to make herself clearly understood.

*"Me not use cup!"*

For a moment the girl thought perhaps this old squaw was slightly demented. "Loco," Sally would have called her. A look into those steady eyes, though, and Marge saw that the old woman was trying to convey some meaning.

Marge did some mental arithmetic. Whitcomb, Sally and herself; three people who *did* use cups—what about the fourth? Was White Rose trying to explain that another person had been in that house for breakfast? And what if there had been another person? As she watched White Rose, she saw a look of genuine fear come into the wrinkled face. It was stark terror, such as Marge had never seen in a human face! She turned, half afraid to look, yet more afraid not to look at whatever had caused this change in the squaw's face.

She saw her Uncle Grant, bald head, huge body, and small mouth. He stood in the doorway, and for the first time, his face had a definite expression. He was scowling fiercely at White Rose.

When he spoke it was no longer in the guarded monotone he'd used before. His voice had a commanding rumble to it.

"Your sister is in trouble. Come with me, I'll take you to her."

"Trouble," echoed Marge in alarm, "has she been hurt?"

"I don't know how bad she's hurt. Come on."

"Where is she?"

"One of the cowmen found her. Are you coming with me, or not?" The round face grew actually menacing to match the voice that rumbled at Marge.

"Y-yes, of, of course I am." Marge

could hardly tear her gaze from that face, yet she managed a glance at White Rose, and saw the faintest of a negative shake in the movement of the old woman's head. Yet, despite what might have been a warning, there was no way to refuse to go with Whitcomb.

He gripped Marge by the arm and led her from the back door of the house. Barely had the door slammed shut behind them, when a man came running.

His face was swarthy and streaked with dust and sweat, but the thing Marge noticed most of all was the livid scar that ran from the left temple, along the cheek almost to the chin. He gasped as he tried to speak to Whitcomb.

"B-b-b-boss, m-my vest. It—it's g-g-gone."

"What vest? What about it?"

"Th-the b-blue one. Th-the one with, with the glass buttons. It's—it's been stole."

"Come with me," said Whitcomb, dragging Marge with him as he made his way toward the corral where horses were already saddled and waiting.

Dimly aware of feeling the map in her shoe with each step she took Marge was glad she had it with her. Yet, had she realized what the future was to hold, she would have felt different about that.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Glass Button

"SHERIFF," drawled the deputy from Texas, "Ah heahd aplenty about this yere hombre that's called the Lone Ranger, sence he took the notion tuh call on you last evenin'."

"There's plenty about him that you didn't hear, too," said the Sheriff. "He ain't no more a Night Legion man than I am, an' I'm darned sure I ain't one of them."

The sheriff and his three deputies were gathered at the lawman's office and jail that were combined in a single building. Dave Sands was examining his gun, giving it a thorough cleaning, and checking his cartridges. Walrus sat in his favorite chair, with his cuspidor at easy range, while the big blond man from Texas sat on the edge of the battered desk, one foot swinging clear of the floor. Pushing the wide brimmed hat another inch higher on the broad forehead, he continued his questions. "What fer did you give over the paper tuh a masked man?"

Cook frowned slightly. He didn't like being questioned by the newest member of his staff. Yet, there was no reasonable cause for resentment. "Tex," he said, "it takes a damned good man to admit he's up against somethin' a little more'n he can handle. If I hadn't been willin' to admit that, I'd never took you on as an extra deputy."

Tex nodded slowly.

The Sheriff went on. "This outfit of killers an' crooks have gotta be wiped out. They've gotta be brought in, tried quick, an' strung up before they kill everyone in the region! I'd like nothin' in the world better than to be the one to do it, but if I can't then I don't care who does it.

"If I can't do it, maybe you boys can, if *you* can't, then maybe the Lone Ranger can. It sort of struck me between the eyes when he come to me last night, an' by Heaven," the Sheriff stood up and slammed a big fist down on his desk, "if he'll help me, I'll help him to help me!"

Walrus had been tilting back in his chair but at the fire in the Sheriff's voice, he let the front legs drop to the floor, and stopped his jaws in their rhythmic chewing.

"That's the talk, Boss," he shouted. "Yore the best gol-danged square shoot-

in' lawman that ever was seen around these parts, an' the man that says yuh ain't has me to lick."

He looked at the big man from Texas with meaningful expression, as if he dared him to question the Sheriff or his motives further, yet secretly hoping he wouldn't take the dare.

the seat, and one of these waved to the lawman. "We got 'im, Cook," he shouted.

Cook muttered and waved his hand. His three aides followed him as he pushed through the door to the short porch. "What the Sam Hill!" began Walrus.

In the wagon there was an object



If he killed those who merely saw him hooded, what chance had this slim girl who knew his identity.

Tex grinned that slow pleasant grin, and started to speak, but Dave Sand's sharp ears had caught what the others had not yet heard.

"Wagon comin' down the road," he muttered.

**T**HE Sheriff went to the door, looked out and saw a pair of horses drawing an old open wagon. Two men were on

wrapped up in a blanket. "Old Joe Frisby," explained the Sheriff. "I sent some boys to fetch him in. The least we can do is give him a decent burial."

The four men remained silent while the old man's body was carried past them. Tex and Dave looked grim, their hands made into fists at their sides. Each

glanced toward the other and each seemed to be breathing a silent vow that some day, somehow, they would bring to justice the human fiends who had strewn murder, terror and destruction throughout the West with wanton cruelty and merciless savagery.

The moustache of Walrus twitched furiously. He spat so hard that his cud followed the brown stream. "Damn skunks," he muttered.

So intent were the four men that not one of them noticed the trim figure of a small blond-haired girl approaching. Her arms were bare to the elbows and a soft white shirt was open at the throat. Her pert little nose was shiny and her hair a tousled unruly mass of curls. It was not until she spoke that she was noticed. A single word, accompanied by the stamp of a small foot brought four pairs of eyes focused on her.

"Well?" said Sally Whitcomb.

The effect was instant. Girls in this section were a rarity, and pretty girls were practically unknown. Cook, Tex, Dave, and Walrus, four men who lived and would probably die by the gun, men who had faced all manner of things without a qualm, found themselves speechless. Walrus was the first to recover, perhaps because he was the oldest and therefore the most nearly immune to feminine charm.

"My Gawd, she's got men's pants on," he gasped.

"What if I have," demanded Sally. "I'm here on business, and I'm going to settle that business once and for all. Where's the Sheriff?"

Cook stepped forward and started to speak, found that the words wouldn't come and merely nodded his head. Then he opened the door and motioned for the girl to enter. Tex by now was grinning broadly and Sands seemed to be

swallowing something that stuck in his throat. "Yore type of gal, I reckon, Dave," muttered the Texan as he swung through the door with Sands.

Dave Sands' whisper was hoarse, "I never knowed they growed that sort of gal outside o' magazines."

Sally was perfectly conscious of the excitement she had caused and gloated in her position. She emphasized her words with slaps of her riding crop against her slim straight leg.

"There's been a robbery!"

"Name," grunted Cook.

"Sally Whitcomb. My sister and I were warned to get off the stage before it got to Showdown the other day. I supposed you'd heard of us by this time. The driver and guard must have told you."

"What was stole?" asked the Sheriff with a pad and pencil ready.

Sally noticed Walrus with his eyes glued on the strange outfit she was wearing. She swung on him. "What're you ogling?"

"Shucks ma'am, I ain't doin' nothin' like that, I'm only lookin' at them pants yore wearin'."

"What's it to you if I borrowed some clothes that would be more comfortable for riding than a split skirt?"

"Tain't nothin' tuh me, ma'am."

"What's more, I borrowed not only the pants, but the vest and crop and bandana as well. Now are you going to do your duty as lawmen, or are you going to spend the morning gaping? One would think you'd never seen a girl before."

"Doggone it, Miss," said Tex, "we blame near ain't!"

"Leastwise," went on Walrus, "not in *pants!*"

Sally's hand came up from the hip and swung in a wide arc, to land with

a resounding smack against the leathery cheek of Walrus. "Now," she said, eyes flashing, "do we get some place, or do we not?"

"Lady," said the Sheriff, "we do. Tell me what was stolen, who done it, and where and when. Anything you can that you think might help us."

SALLY explained that the stolen article was the other half of the map their father had left the two girls. She told how a masked man had met them, taken them from the stage across unbroken country to their uncle's ranch. How the masked man had been so kind, and how he told her that Joe Frisby had been murdered and the map stolen from him. Then she demanded that the Sheriff take men out at once to locate the members of the Night Legion and make them return her property.

When the girl was about half way through with her speech, the sheriff put down his pencil, leaned back in his chair, hooked his thumbs beneath suspenders and merely nodded tolerantly. When she finished, he tried to explain, as patiently as he could, that he and his men were working on the affair.

"We'd give anything we got to run this Night Legion down, Ma'am, but that ain't so easy. Yuh see we don't have the first idea who's in it. We don't know who we're lookin' for. Them critturs don't leave tracks that can be followed, they don't leave men alive to tell about them, an' they jest don't give a man a chance to get at 'em. Maybe you didn't know, but when we found the driver an' guard of the stage you rode in, they was both dead."

"D-dead," stammered the girl.

"Killed an' tortured, by the Night Legion."

Here was grim reality for Sally. This

was the sudden death she'd heard about, and scoffed at. But now she knew, for she had actually played a leading part in one of these swift dramas of the West, had been, almost, a witness to it.

The Sheriff went on speaking. "I don't want to cause you girls no alarm, but you better get ready to face facts. This Night Legion is after more money than any bunch of crooks could spend in a dozen lifetimes. Most crooks that have got as much as the Night Legion would be content, but not them. They're after the gold mine you spoke about. They got one half the map, they want the other half. They made one attempt to get it, but the Lone Ranger sidetracked them. Then they made a play to have the Lone Ranger caught an' killed by us, but Fate must've took a hand in that one."

Mention of the Lone Ranger recalled to Sally the tall, tanned man, his perfect grace, kindly voice, and courteous manner. A little sigh escaped her. Then her mind returned to the situation at hand. "Gosh, what'll they do next?"

Grim manhunters were forced to admire the courage of a mere slip of a girl who could face such horrors coolly. None of the five people in the room saw the masked face of a man, peering through a window at the side of the jail, and looking through an open door into the room in which Sally stood.

The face disappeared from the window, long strides carried the Lone Ranger around the building. He took the three steps of the porch in a single stride, pushed aside the door and entered the room, gun in hand, ready, in case there was an attempt to capture him.

Before anyone of the amazed people could speak, he went directly to Sally, reached out a hand for the vest and

saw that it had buttons of glass, sewed with blue thread.

But what was more important was the fact that one of the buttons was *missing!*

"Damn you, take yer hands off that girl!" It was Dave Sands who shouted at the masked man.

"Hold it, Dave," called Sheriff Cook. "That man's our friend. Wait a minute."

"Bettah yo' take things a mite easy-like," drawled Tex.

Then the masked man spoke. "All of you be quiet and listen to me. I can match the buttons on that vest. Step forward men, and tell me if these are not the same as the button I have in my hand."

Walrus stretched out his skinny neck and bent close. "Like two peas in a pod," he decided. The others agreed.

"Where'd you get that button?" asked the Sheriff.

"Let me," said the masked man, "ask Miss Whitcomb where she got the vest."

"I don't mind telling. I wanted to go riding today, to come here to town, and the clothes I brought from the East weren't worth a darn for riding. I found that out when you made me ride that Paint Horse."

The Lone Ranger recalled the troubles Sally had had with her clothes on that hard trip.

"So I went to one of the shacks on the ranch," continued Sally, "to see if I could find something else to wear, and took the best I could find. These are them," she finished pointing.

"What about that button?" demanded Dave.

"I can explain that," said the masked man. "When Tonto was struggling with one of the Night Legion, he tore this button from his vest. He later found it in the clearing. We know that it is the

button from the vest of some member of the outlaw band."

COOK gave a low, meaning, whistle. Walrus packed huge wads of tobacco nervously in his cheek. Tex and Dave grew more tense. "You know what you imply?" asked the Sheriff.

"I do. From what this girl has said, I think it might be a good move to start searching for the owner of the vest at the Whitcomb ranch."

"I don't know whose it is," said Sally, "but gosh, I'd sure like to find out."

Dave Sands stepped forward, "You'd better keep outta this, Miss, this is man's work an' there'll likely be a lot of gun-play."

"Then what're you so stingy for? Give me a gun so I can play too."



"Gosh!" breathed Sands in admiration. "What a gal."

"No fooling," said Sally, "I mean it. Show me how to use a gun and let me go along with you. Please do!"

"Not a chance," said the Sheriff.

"You'd better stay right here in town till we get through."

"I'll do no such thing."

Cook turned to the masked man again, "How'd you happen to locate that vest, mister?"

"Tonto and I headed toward the Whitcomb ranch this morning. There were a couple things I wanted to ask Whitcomb about a few of the men he hires."

"A good idea," nodded the Sheriff. "I've thought some o' them weren't on the level but old Grant himself is square an' honest as the day is long."

"Perhaps," said the Lone Ranger. But in the way he said it, he showed that he had some doubts.

"That ain't tellin' how you spotted the vest."

"Tonto and I were riding the trail when we heard a horse coming toward us. We thought it best to remain unseen, so we hid in a dry wash. As the horse went by, we saw this girl sitting in the saddle and Tonto noticed the vest she wore. I came here to check on it."

"In that case," said Sally, "I'm the one who gave you the clue."

The masked man nodded.

"Then I'm going to stay in on the game till the finish."

"That, Miss. is where you're downright mistaken." Dave Sands had made up his mind on that point, if on no other. "You ain't got a Chinaman's chance of goin' back to the Whitcomb spread till we seen what's doin' there."

"You just try an' stop me."

"Yes'm." The husky young deputy reached forward and picked the girl up bodily. Screaming, and kicking, squirming and wriggling, Sally was helpless in the dark haired fellow's grip. He held her under one strong arm and walked into the small room that had barred windows and a substantial door.

"You big bully," screamed the girl. "You can't do this. You just wait, I'll claw your eyes out. I'll—I'll. . . ." Sally ended in a grunt, as she was dumped on the small hard bunk in the cell.

"You better stay right there, Miss," said Dave. "You'll be all right here, until we decide it's safe fer you tuh leave."

"You c-c-can't jail m-me, you c-c-c-can't do it." She was almost crying in her helpless rage. "I—I'm no criminal."

"No'm," consoled Dave, "course you ain't, but you see out here we sort of do things different than in the East. Back where you come from, they catch the crooks an' killers, an' jail 'em. Here, if we cain't find the crooks, an' they're on the *outside*, we put the honest folks *inside*, where they'll be safest."

"Well then," sniffed Sally, "let me take your handkerchief." She sat on the bunk while she wiped her face with the huge red handkerchief the deputy held out. Then she looked at him appraisingly for a moment, studied the clean cut face and recalled how easily he had lifted her from the ground. "Mister, what's your name?"

"S-Sands, ma'am. Dave Sands, an' I'm sorry I had to handle you so."

"I'm not," said the girl. "But it seems to me that as long as I've got to stay here, the least you might do is to stay and keep me company."

"Aw-w-w, gosh," said Dave, "I—I got tuh, tuh go with the rest."

"Then, Dave," Sally spoke in her sweetest voice, "will you come back?"

"Doggone!" exclaimed the young man. "I sure enough will!"

Slamming and locking the door, he raced through the Sheriff's office to the hitching post. The others being already in the saddle, Dave, with a Comanche yell vaulted to the back of his own black horse and as the little cavalcade started



shouted, "Git along doggone it, an' git this done with. I'm in love!"

Sally heard and grinned. "Not half bad," she murmured. "At least, he isn't masked, and I know *his* name!"

was not in trouble, did *not* need her. Therefore she must ride. With a silent but none the less fervent prayer she mounted the paint, and with Grant Whitcomb, started south.



There, in the rays of the lamp-light, he saw a man sprawled on the damp ground. He knelt quickly at the figure's side. It was Tonto.

## CHAPTER IX

### Kidnapped

**M**ARGE had tried all the way to the corral to think of reasons for not going with her Uncle Grant. Yet what reasonable excuse could she offer? Sally, Grant had said, was in trouble and needed her. There was then no choice but to go.

Yet she felt that she had not been told the truth. She didn't know that at that very moment, Sally was riding toward Showdown. She didn't know that Whitcomb had watched her go, and seized upon this opportunity to get Marge from the house. There was no way that Marge could be sure her sister

This was new country for the girl. She had ridden in from the stage trail to the north, and when on the previous day her uncle had escorted Marge and Sally about his acres, they had not traveled south of the rambling house and out-buildings. Whitcomb set the pace, and it was an easy one. One that both horses could maintain all day without becoming blown or lathered.

Marge had no difficulty in keeping up

with her uncle but she was many times grateful for the lessons in riding that her father had insisted she take in the East in preparation for the day when he would take his family into the new territory in search of gold.

Marge looked back. The horses were at the top of a small hill. The open country sloped easily ahead of them, and in a few moments the Whitcomb ranch and all the buildings would be lost to view. The last thing the dark girl saw behind, was a lone horseman riding hard to join them. Her uncle saw, and spoke, "That's Scar."

"The man who lost a vest?"

"The same. I told him that he might as well come along. We might have need of him before we're through."

"What sort of trouble is Sally in?"

"Can't tell for sure."

"Is she injured?"

"Don't know."

"Where is she?"

"Ain't sure." Obviously Whitcomb did not care to give the girl any details.

"Uncle Grant," began the girl again, "you might at least tell me whether or not Sally is in serious trouble."

"It's likely to be blamed serious before night-fall, Marge. Now don't ask no more questions, an' you'll keep your peace of mind a little while longer."

SCAR drew up alongside the other two and slowed the pace of his horse to match the mare and the paint pony. Whitcomb threw a look at the man with the scar and said, "Who'd you think got that vest?"

"I dunno boss, they ain't much that can be told as to who got it, but I left it hangin' on the usual peg in the same place as always. an' it's gone. What worries me, is that missin' button."

"Where'd you lose the button?"

"That's what has sort of got me worried. I dunno if I lost that button around the ranch somewheres or if I lost it some place where it might serve as a cl—." A sudden alarming gesture by Grant Whitcomb prevented him from finishing the sentence.

"Ride along with us," scowled Whitcomb. "I'll be needing you a little later."

"I savvy, boss."

"Perhaps," said Marge, "I can explain something about your vest."

"Yuh can?"

"My sister didn't like to ride in the clothes she had with her. She thought perhaps, some place around the ranch, she could borrow clothes. She probably found this vest."

"If she's took that vest to Showdown," muttered the scarfaced man.

"Showdown!" exclaimed the girl.

"Why are we riding this way if my sister went to Showdown?"

"What ails you anyway, Marge," demanded Whitcomb. "To hear you talk, a person'd think you was suspicious of me."

Marge was, but dared not say so. She thought for a moment, decided that she might just as well clear her mind once and for all. "Uncle Grant," she said, "I might be suspicious. After all, you've told me nothing at all about Sally, except to say she was in trouble. If you know she's in trouble, you know more about her. You might at least tell me the sort of trouble, where she is, where we are going, and how you found out about her so soon after she left the ranch!"

She paused, noticing the growing anger that her uncle made no effort to conceal. She brought the paint to a halt. "I'm not going another pace until you explain a few things to me. What's more, I want to know why they call your place a Hoodoo Ranch."

In Whitcomb's face a grim smile broke the corners of the small mouth. "There's a lot you want to know, ain't there? Well, that sort of makes things even. There's things that I crave to know too. Things I aim to find out before the day is over with. Now prod your paint and come on along."

"I won't do it." Marge felt a little panic-stricken at the tone the bald-headed man used. Scar had fallen a pace behind her horse, for a reason she was soon to learn.

"Don't make things hard, Marge! You're goin' with me, and you're goin' to do what I say. Now come along."

"I won't! I don't believe a word you told me about Sally. She went to Show-down and simply forgot to tell me she was starting. You saw her go, and for some reason you wanted to get me away from the house. I'm going back there."

SHE was trying hard to haul the paint around, but her uncle's fist closed over the bridle and held it. "Scar," he asked, "where was Anson and the rest of the boys to be?"

"Two miles yonder, waitin' for us in the cave."

"Then this is about as far as I care to go with my face showin'. I reckon it's about time that I covered up." He was drawing something from a saddle bag as he spoke. "Your sister went to Show-down, right enough," he said, turning towards Marge. "And you're goin' to another kind of showdown."

Marge was reeling. She saw her uncle remove his sombrero, exposing the bald head to the fierce sun that burned down. He was pulling some sort of hood over his head, a hood made of black fabric with two slits for the eyes to peer through. It fell over the shoulders, and fitted snug

around the top of the head. He replaced the hat.

Then for the first time the girl realized that Scar had drawn his gun and was holding it easily, but ready. His face had grown more grim, the scar more livid. The truth broke through the many questions that made the girl's mind whirl dizzily. Her Uncle, the man whom she had traveled over a thousand miles to live with, had at last been revealed for what he was. *The hooded leader of the Night Legion.*



A man wanted for countless crimes, a man who left no loose ends, who would murder wantonly, rather than leave alive anyone who could speak against him. If he killed those who merely saw him hooded, what chance had this slim girl who knew his identity!

Her brain spun, faster and faster, the terror of her position, the hooded face,

the leering Scar, death, torture, the Night Legion—an endless kaleidoscope of facts, faces and scenes raced through her mind. She was half aware that she screamed, and yet she heard no sound. She felt herself falling, falling into a black pit that seemed to have no bottom. Then nothing.

Scar caught the slim body as it reeled and would have fallen to the ground. "Nothin' to do now but tote her on my saddle," he said.

"Tote her then, we've only a little ways to go."

"Think she's got the map. or has the light haired one got it?"

"There's ways to find out." The hooded leader spurred his horse while the scar-faced one followed more slowly with the unconscious girl.

## CHAPTER X

### Trapped Underground

IT took quite a while for the Lone Ranger and the sheriff to return to the ranch owned by Grant Whitcomb. Dave Sands had long since joined his companions and gloated over the tidings that Sally wanted him to return. Between Sands and Tex, there had been good natured banter thruout most of the trip, but Sheriff Cook knew that this was merely a mask for the grim thoughts of each man.

The lightest of talk was often heard when western men were riding to danger. These men were heading toward the Whitcomb ranch with very good reason to believe that somewhere on the place there was, at least, one member of the Night Legion, and if there was one, there was likely to be more.

Though each was a good shot, they were hardly a capable force to combat

murderers such as the Night Legion had proved to be. Cook, riding slightly ahead with the masked man, spoke seldom during the ride. When he did, it was to comment on Grant Whitcomb.

"I always knew him as one of the finest men in the West," he said.

"I never did know him," replied the masked man. "Tell me about him."

"There ain't much to tell. He's been out here for as long as I can remember. Raised and sold cattle the same as other men. Only difference was he hired others to do all the work for him. He didn't even enter into business deals himself. Just kept to home, and done a lot o' readin' an' some writin', an' studied up on Indian language an' all that sort o' thing."

"Did he live there alone?"

"Wal, I guess his foreman lived in the house with him. Then there was a Chineese cook and an old Injun woman that he called White Rose. The cook died a couple years ago, an' the squaw took over the work of cookin'."

"Does anyone know why he had someone else handle his business for him?"

"Oh there's lots of stories as to that. Some said that he'd got so grumpy about bein' called Baldy, that he didn't like to show himself in town, an' wouldn't hire any man that did. He seemed to have the notion that whenever his men got to drinkin' in Showdown on a pay day, they'd be kiddin' an' talkin' about him. He paid the highest wages of anyone around here, so the boys figgered it was worth doin' without red liquor to work fer him."

SHERIFF COOK knew that there was motive behind the questions the masked rider was asking and he was doing his level best to give the Lone

Ranger every shred of information he could.

"Where's your Injun friend?" he asked.

"Tonto remained behind when I came on to town. He may have some information for us, when we reach the ranch. Cook, there's one thing more I'd like to know. What happened at the ranch that brought about the nickname 'Hoodoo Ranch'?"

"Wal," began the lawman. "It wasn't any one thing you could lay a finger on. Just a lot of little things. Not even enough to cause me to go there an' investigate. I did go over once, to see about some screamin' that was heard there, it sounded like a murder bein' done, an' I took a couple boys an' high tailed it for the place, but it wasn't nothin' but one of the waddies with an awful toothache. Man named Anson. The rest was tryin' to pull the tooth. I couldn't blame the man for screamin'. They'd got the tooth out by the time I got there."

"Did you see Whitcomb?"

"Yeh, but he wouldn't come out of the house. He was sittin' in a darkened room, his eyes havin' been strained from too much readin' an' studyin'. He was right cordial though, invited me in, offered me a cigar, an' all such."

The ranch house was in sight, and the five riders urged their mounts to a faster pace with the end of the trip at hand. Walrus, riding between Tex Wilson and Dave Sands had long been silent. Now he burst out with an enthusiastic shout.

"Boys, right thar's the Hoodoo Ranch, an' right hyars the hombre that aims tuh see what this yere hoodoo business is about. All I ask is that if any of these blasted killers with the hoods over their faces shows hisself, let me git first crack

at the skunk. Hyars where I earn the name o' 'Dead Shot'."

THE older man was somewhat disappointed when the sheriff chose him to be the one who would remain with the horses as guard. There was no argument with Cook, however, and though he mumbled to himself, he made no comment. The white horse of Tonto was still saddled and stood untethered near the house. The other riders dismounted there, the Lone Ranger pausing to examine the saddle and see if any sign or note had been left there by his Indian friend.

"I reckon," said Cook, "the first thing to do will be to locate Whitcomb and have a talk with him."

He was at the door and hammering with his fist when he spoke. The masked man was studying the horses in the corral. He made a mental note of their number while he waited for the response to the sheriff's raps. Cook pounded again.

"Maybe there's no one home," suggested Sands.

"Shore the redskin oughtta be thar," drawled Tex.

"Which one, the old woman or this one called Tonto?"

"Both."

"Whitcomb should be there too," added the sheriff. "He never leaves the house durin' the day. Sun hurts his eyes, they tell me."

He was using the handle of his gun to make a noise that would waken the soundest of sleepers in case those inside the place were enjoying a siesta during the day's hottest hours.

As he thought of this, the sheriff wiped his beaded forehead, and shuffled uneasily from one foot to the other. The Lone Ranger whistled. "If Tonto

is in there, he'll know that whistle," he explained.

"An' eff'n he ain't in thar," said Tex Wilson, "whar at is he?"

"Tex," the sheriff called, "you go around to the back door, take Sands

He knew Tonto was inside, otherwise the faithful horse of his Indian friend would not have remained untethered where he stood. He would be following the redskin who was his master, just as Silver would have followed the Lone

Whitcomb, quick to take advantage of the situation, snarled a command to the sheriff.

"Drop that gun before I blow your friend's brains out."



with you. Try that, an' if you don't get an answer in two minutes, we'll bust in."

The two minutes went by slowly while Dave and Tex tried their luck on the rear door of the house. Meanwhile the masked man whistled again, with no response from inside the house.

Ranger, to the very ends of the earth, or till exhaustion felled him.

"Here goes," the sheriff put his shoulder to the door and pushed. The door gave no sign of budging. "Gimme a hand," he grunted. The added weight of the Lone Ranger could not move the door of solid timbers with a bar of equal strength on the inside. "That won't do," said Cook. "We'll have to smash a window. Maybe I'm goin' a little beyond what my office is allowed, but I'm here to find things out, an' I aim to do that same."

"I wonder," said the masked man, "where all the hands are? Shouldn't there be some men around this place?"

"Umm, should be," answered the sheriff, "but maybe they're out ridin'.

range, or line ridin' or somethin'. I'll smash that window an' we'll go inside."

"Wait!" The masked man's voice stopped the sheriff, "I hear the bar being removed." The sheriff returned to the door and heard wood grating against wood as a heavy bar was lifted from the supports. A dull thud told of it being dropped to the floor inside the house. The door swung open.

**W**HITE ROSE motioned for the men to step inside the house, and after calling Dave and Tex to join them, the lawman followed the Lone Ranger inside.

"Where is Tonto?" asked the masked man. At the mention of the Indian's name, White Rose glanced at him. Then her hands made motions to indicate that she didn't understand the white man's tongue. Cook brushed past the old crone, and gave terse instructions to Dave and Tex to search the house room by room. The Lone Ranger stood, just inside the door surveying the big living room with its cold looking fireplace.

Somewhere inside this house, Tonto would be found. If he had left, even though he went by a back door, his white horse would have known it. He was here, and if alive and able, he would have answered the whistle of the white man.

"Tonto," called the Lone Ranger. He paused, tense, listening. Then called again, "Tonto, where are you?" Still there was no answer. White Rose shuffled back to the big dark room. She waited till the masked man's eyes fell on her. Then she made motions for him to follow.

He was wary, on guard lest this be some sort of trap, but he went after White Rose, recalling the expression that came to her face when the name of

his Indian friend was mentioned. In the long hall off the living room the wrinkle-faced old woman paused, she stood on tiptoe to reach the white man's ear, and then hissed, "You come. Me show Tonto."

He nodded. The sheriff and his two companions were in other rooms conducting a methodical search of the entire house for signs of Whitcomb, or Marge. Unseen by either of the two deputies or the sheriff himself, the tall masked man followed White Rose into a small room.

The furniture was scanty, and out of keeping with that in other parts of the house. There was a wall mirror, a washstand, and a bed. That was about all. A hooked rug on the floor was emblazoned with a colorful eagle, clutching a sheaf of arrows in one taloned claw. To the Lone Ranger, there came a thought that the talons of the old Indian woman were strikingly like those of the eagle.

This was the first room assigned to Marge and Sally. The room in which the girls had found the trap door in the floor. White Rose waited, until the tall figure with the mask was well inside the room, then closed the door behind him. He watched her curiously, awaiting explanation.

It was obvious to him that she was about to give him some clue, or some lead to Tonto. She stooped and her bony fingers clawed back the rug until the trap door was exposed. Pointing to the iron ring, she muttered, "You take um up."

**A**LERT and wary, the masked man knelt, and keeping one hand near the gun on his left thigh, reached for the ring. But before he touched it, he bent lower and held an ear close to the door, listening. There was no sound from

below. He pointed down, then in a soft voice asked, "Who?"

White Rose understood the single word. "Tonto," she said stolidly.

The Lone Ranger drew a gun, held it ready in his left hand, and tugged at the iron ring. The door lifted on well greased hinges and revealed a steep flight of stairs disappearing into the pitch darkness below. The masked man flashed a glance at the squaw, and saw her pointing down the stairs. "You go," she said.

But the Lone Ranger waited. He reasoned that his canny Indian friend had come inside the house a short time before. Something must have happened to Tonto. What sort of trap had he stepped into? Surely the same trap might again be set, waiting, ready to snatch him from life itself.

Down those stairs, in that dense gloom, there might be the answers to many questions that flashed thru his mind, but having learned the answers, he must be alive, alert, and able to act! Yet, the questions would not be answered while he stood here, above. He called down "Tonto, are you there?"

His voice seemed muffled. He had the same sensation as if he had called out in a tomb. A hollowness, and a sense of depths unknown. Still there was no answer.

On the washstand he had seen a coal-oil lamp. He turned to this and noted that it was more than half full. It was but a moment's work to light it, then with the lamp in one hand, and a heavy gun in the other, he made ready for the descent. The stairs were old, and rotted, and he wondered if they'd hold his weight, as he went down.

At the bottom he noticed that the floor was dirt, hard packed, and slightly moist. A glance back up the stairs

showed the brown and wrinkled face of the old woman watching the feeble light reflected from his own face.

He held the lamp above his head and tried to pierce the dense gloom, but he had but a few moments before left the out of doors and his eyes were not yet accustomed to the darkness. He placed the lamp on the dirt floor, and turned the wick low until only a feeble blue flame showed.

He stood stock still, waiting, and counting the seconds to himself while he let his eyes accustom themselves to the new surroundings. His ears were tuned to catch the slightest sound. A drop of water fell with a tiny splash somewhere in the place. It was followed by other barely audible drips. He tried to determine the direction from which the sound came, but without success.

**A**FTER moments which seemed like eternities, he turned the lamp's flame full, but left it on the floor at the bottom of the stairs. This gave him one hand free to hold out in front of him while he moved ahead.

His left hand still held the .44 in readiness. Cautious lest there be a hole, a pitfall, or some trap, he slid one foot carefully ahead of the other, testing the footing with each step before he shifted his weight. His right hand met an obstacle. It was cold, damp and clammy. "Stone," he muttered to himself. He felt around, and decided this must be one wall of the cellar.

This, he decided, would be the starting point of his search. He returned for the lamp, fully aware that it might make him a good target for an enemy, yet certain that the risk would be greater if he went into that gloom ahead with only the sense of touch to guide him.



He moved ahead slowly, cautiously, and his eyes tried to see beyond the circle of the lamp's light. He noticed little pools of water on the floor. After what seemed to be ten yards or so, he came to a corner and made a sharp right angle turn to the left, following the wall of stone. Then he stopped.

There had been a sound, a slight rustling! Who was in the place with him? What caused that feeling that he was not alone here? He stood stock still, listening for another sound. "Must have been a rat," he thought, then proceeded for a few yards more. Again he paused, but this time he had seen something which brought cold sweat to his forehead.

There, in the rays of the lamplight, he saw a man sprawled on the damp ground. Buckskin shirt, moccasined feet, and long black hair! He knelt quickly at the figure's side, and turned him over. The eyes were closed. It was Tonto.

What unseen, unheard object lurked here in this dank cellar? What force had struck down the powerful, canny Indian? Here was a power that all manner of courage and cold steel could not combat! A mysterious force that even Tonto had failed to conquer!

The masked man's hand felt for the heart beat and murmured a word of relief when he found that Tonto was alive. His first hasty inspection revealed no sign of wound by knife or bullet. He called aloud the name of the sheriff, and his voice seemed to echo from distances unknown. He waited, then called again, looking back toward the square of light from the room beyond the trap door, but the light was gone! Silently, while the Lone Ranger had hunted for Tonto, the trap door had been closed behind him!

## CHAPTER XI

### The Meeting in the Cave

WHEN Marge Whitcomb first regained consciousness, she thought that she was waking from some horrible nightmare in which hooded men figured prominently, but the jouncing of the horse and the firm grip of the scarfaced man who held her, brought back her senses quickly and she realized that this was no dream, this was reality.



Her own uncle was leader of the dread legion of death. There he was, with his head and face covered by the sinister covering, riding slightly ahead of his lieutenant who held the girl.

The land was slightly rolling, with purple hills in the distance. Marge had

no idea of the time of day. It had been morning when she was told that Sally was in danger or trouble, and needed her. With her uncle she had ridden for perhaps half an hour before the stunning announcement of his intentions.

She was being abducted. She was on the way to some meeting place of the Night Legion. Other hooded men were probably there awaiting their leader and Scar. These were the murderers, the cruel killers who had snuffed out the life of an old man for the possession of half the map of a gold claim.

It was this Night Legion that had planned to capture Marge and her sister on their way to the Whitcomb ranch, to get the other half of the map left them by their father.

Marge gave no sign that she was conscious. She knew that there could be no escape from the strong arms that held her. There were so many things to consider. Where was Sally? Was she too in the power of these men? What of the Lone Ranger and the Indian who traveled with him?

He had persuaded her to leave the stage coach before it reached the town of Showdown to avoid the very peril that she now faced. He could not have known that Whitcomb was the leader of the merciless outlaws, or he would never have brought her to the ranch.

She knew she could trust the Lone Ranger. Instinctively she felt a confidence in the masked man just as every fibre of her seemed to cry a warning when she first saw Whitcomb.

There was little consolation in the thought that the map these men seemed to want so badly was at that very moment tucked inside her boot. Would they give her freedom in exchange for it? Hardly.

Their sole hope of security was vested

in the fact that no one knew their identity. Small hope then that she would be allowed to live, for she knew too much already. Death was certain. Despite all promises these beasts might make to get the map, she knew they would kill her to protect their own bloodied heads.

WITH something of a start Marge realized that Whitcomb had let his horse fall back until it was beside the one Scar rode, and was watching her intently through the slitted eye holes of the hood. "We're almost at the cave," he remarked, as he noticed her staring at him.

"'Tain't but another quarter-mile," said Scar. "I reckon the others have already got there, I seen a couple horses standin' by."

"They'd better be there," was the reply.

"Is—is my sister captured too?"

"That's one thing I wanted to speak to you about, Marge. You think a heap of your sister, don't you?"

"Y-yes, of course."

"All right, then I'm puttin' her life in your hands. I'll explain just what I mean. None of my men know who I am, that is, none but Scar and I trust him."

There was something about that rumbling voice that made shudders run through the slim dark-haired girl. This was the voice that had often sent willing hirelings to carry out orders to rob, ravage, and kill. Would this voice decree her own death before the day was out? Marge stammered a response, "What—what d-do you mean?"

"You an' Scar are the only two that know me. Scar's the only one I trust. I know he won't tell the rest of the men who I am. He knows better. And you'd

better not learn if you don't want your sister to die sudden."

Then Sally was still alive, still safe. Something at least to be grateful for. Perhaps, even though her own life would be taken, Sally's might be saved.

Her entire body was aching from the hard grip of the man who held her and her head was swimming from the confusion of thoughts and dangers that had occupied her mind since morning.

The two horses were making their way down a slight grade which ended in a sort of gully bounded on the far side by a perpendicular rise in the ground which continued level beyond the gully. Near the wall, which rose to a height of fifteen or twenty feet, the girl saw a dozen fine looking horses grazing.

At the bottom of the gully, the horses ridden by Scar and Whitcomb were brought to a stop, and the man who held her, lowered Marge to the ground. Her legs were cramped and her body ached. She stumbled and almost fell. The hooded leader grumbled. "Go on inside the cave," then with a chuckle, "They're lookin' for you."

For the first time Marge noticed that the wall was broken by an opening some eight feet in size. Beyond there was yawning darkness. A fleeting notion of making a break for one of the tethered horses came to the girl, but she discarded this as hopeless.

**M**EN came from the cave. They were unhooded, and Marge recognized several of them as cowmen she had noticed on the previous day, when her uncle had taken her and Sally about the Whitcomb ranch. While the words Hoodoo Ranch were securely founded, "Outlaw Ranch" would have been more accurate.

A tall, lean man, who had been called

Anson, stepped forward ahead of the others and stared at the slim girl for a moment, much as a snake stares at a bird before it strikes. "Wal," he finally said, "looks like we're at last about to get somewheres." He turned to the hooded leader and shoved his broad brimmed hat back slightly. "She got the map with her?" he asked.

"I don't know. She's to stay here till we get the map. If she's got it on her, let her hand it over, if she ain't, she can tell where we can find it. Either way, it doesn't matter."

Anson spoke again, "What about old bald-headed Whitcomb, won't he be wonderin' where at are all his men if we ain't back on the job?"

Marge thought she saw the leader tense, saw his hands form fists, and then relax. "Scar handles Whitcomb, you know how little attention the boss of the ranch pays to what you men do. He leaves everything to Scar."

"An' I'll tell him you're still ridin' the lines," said Scar.

During this, Marge was desperately trying to decide the best course to pursue. If she told them the map was not in her possession would they search her? If she told them that it was hidden someplace at the ranch house, would it give a day's reprieve while a search was made?

Or would the best course be to tell these men that Sally had the map, and trust that the Lone Ranger, the one man she felt might be trusted, would be near Sally when an attempt to capture her was made.

The thought of turning the map over, on the spot was discarded as soon as it came to Marge. As soon as this bit of old paper was in the possession of the leader, her usefulness would be at an end, and certain death might be preferred to other things that might come to pass.

Anson was on her left, and Scar gripped her right arm as the girl was marched inside the cave. As she sank to a crude pine-log bench she made a decision. She would put off the end as long as possible. She would deny possession of the half a map. If only Sally were here to tell the fibs for her. Sally, who could fib so well. Would these shrewd eyes of the members of the Legion penetrate a ruse? That remained to be seen. There was nothing to be gained by immediate surrender. Until these men were in possession of the map, her life would be spared. After that . . .

Grant Whitcomb was speaking. "Now I'll ask you one question, point blank, to start with. We want the map. You know the map we mean, so don't stall. Where is it?"

For a moment Marge felt on the verge of blurting out the truth, and begging for mercy, but she bit the words off before they were uttered.

"I'm waitin'. Speak up."

"It—it's at—at the house."

"Where at the house?"

"In—in the first room I had. The little room. The room with the—" she broke off, as she was about to mention the trap door, then finished. "The room where the eagle was on the rug."

"Where in that room?"

"Under the rug." Fibbing came easier after the start was made.

The hooded man turned away from her. Scar followed him at a nod and the two left the cave after instructions to the men to hold the girl until her story had been checked. When they found that the truth had not been told, then what? But there was time to consider this, plenty of time. It would be nightfall before these men returned.

So much had happened in the few hours since breakfast, what might not

happen in the time remaining in that day? Hope was almost futile, yet Marge clung to that hope.

She was only half aware that ropes were being thrown about her as she listened to the retreating hoofbeats of Scar and Grant Whitcomb, returning to the ranch for the map.

## CHAPTER XII

### The Lone Ranger Ride

"IT'S damn funny," growled Sheriff Cook, "where that masked man's gone to." He and his men had scoured the Whitcomb house searching for the owner, and Tonto, and now the masked rider had been missing for more than an hour.

"Shore, Boss, his hoss is still outside thar," offered Tex, "an' knowin' hoss-flesh as ah think ah do, that hoss wouldn't be stayin' thar peaceful like he is, eff'n it's ownah warn't close by."

Dave Sands said nothing but many thoughts were going through his mind. He wondered if the strange disappearance of first the Indian, then the white man, might not in some manner be connected with the strange reports of the place that had brought about the nickname of Hoodoo Ranch.

Whitcomb himself had not been seen. The silent deputy looked out through a window and saw old Walrus whittling at a plug of tobacco while he stood watch over the horses. A slight shuffling sound caused Sands to turn, and White Rose came into the room.

Several times in the past hour one of the three lawmen had tried to question the old woman, but each time a futile gesture with those claw-like hands indicated that she understood little or nothing of what was being said. Yet, she

seemed to be waiting, apprehensively waiting for something.

Sheriff Cook had read the sheaf of letters in his hand several times since he'd found them in Whitcomb's desk. He looked at them again. "I thought we might find somethin' in the desk, but I was disappointed."

"Whitcomb sure saves his old letters," observed Sands.

"He never got many. A couple from his brother, before he died, then one from the girls." Cook held a neatly written letter in a girl's handwriting to the light of the window and studied it again. "Tells about the map their father left," he said, "and that old Frisby had the other half. Now if, as we sort of wondered, this Night Legion could have a spy right here on the ranch, and if that spy could have seen this letter, that would have been enough to have them murder old Frisby."

Tex and Cook had agreed an hour before, when Cook made this observation for the first time. They were about to agree once more when the door burst open and Walrus stormed through with the partly whittled plug in one hand, the knife in the other, both being waved in the air to emphasize his shouts. "The tow-headed girl's a-comin'."

All three of the men showed their amazement. Sally was last seen, locked in the jail. "She's comin' ridin' hell bent fer election," screamed Walrus. "Pants an' all. Now how in tarnation did she get outen the calaboose?"

**A** CLATTER of hoofs backed up the old man's words as Sally brought her borrowed horse to a halt. She came through the open door with her curly hair more touseled than ever, her cheeks flushed from riding, and her small hands knotted into fists.

"Doggone," growled the Texan, "How'd you git outen jail?"

"How do you suppose? I reached through the bars and worked the lock on the door."

"That's what comes o' makin' a hoose-gow fer mansized folks, 'stead of half pints," grumbled Sands.

"Yer right," old Walrus said, "even them pants don't make her full-growed." He ducked just in time as Sally heaved a pottery vase from a convenient shelf to miss his head by inches and smash against the distant wall.

"Where's my sister? Where's the Lone Ranger, and where is everyone? What's the matter with you men? Don't stand there like that, answer me." She stamped her foot to back up what she said.

White Rose shuffled toward the window. Wordlessly the Indian woman pointed toward the corral. From beyond this enclosure, men were approaching. One, the bald-headed Grant Whitcomb. The other, his foreman. Those inside the house watched them dismount at the corral, and saw Whitcomb speak a few words to his foreman who proceeded to remove the saddles. Then the owner of the spread came toward the house. He lifted his eyebrows at the lawmen's horses, mumbled something at the sight of the white stallions of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, then came on to the door.

"Seems like I've got callers," was his greeting, as he strode through the door.

"There's a few things we want to speak to you about, Whitcomb," returned the sheriff.

"Where is Marge?" demanded Sally of her uncle.

"She left when I did, we rode away together, then we separated. Isn't she back yet?"

"No."

"She probably will be, before next mealtime. Now if you men will tell me what you're here for, I'll do the best I can to accomodate you."

"First of all," the sheriff's voice was soft, "where is there in this place that two men could disappear?"

"I don't know. Have men disappeared?"

"Two of them."

"And one's the Lone Ranger," squealed Sally, "what's happened to him?"

Dave Sands frowned at this, but kept still. Whitcomb smiled slightly.

"We may as well tell you," went on the sheriff, "that we've searched this place pretty thoroughly, and we know that these two men are still in the house. We can't find 'em. Where are they?"

"If you've searched, and haven't found them, I don't see how I can tell. What's more, what business did you have to come here and search?"

"Is there any sort of cellar beneath the house?"

"Cellar? Of course not. This ain't cyclone country. Folks around here don't use cellars. Didn't find no doors to one did you?"

Here was a statement that gave Sally food for thought, and with her, to think was to speak. "If there's no cellar, what's there a trap door for?"

SALLY'S remark burst like a bomb-shell amongst the men. Whitcomb actually blanched, tried to hide his confusion, and failed.

"Don't you deny it, Uncle, we saw the trap door." Sally threw caution to the winds now and went ahead regardless of what the bald headed man might think. "There's a trap door in the floor of a bedroom. We saw it there, Marge and I, when we first came here. White

Rose took us to that room but Uncle Grant had us moved to another."

"Where is it?" The sheriff let his hand move closer to his gun. White Rose was actually grinning in the face of the tension that surrounded the people in the room.

"I'll show you. follow me," said Sally.

"Hold on," commanded Whitcomb. "There's a trap door in the floor, but nothing below it. I'll show you."

His hands were hidden from view of the lawmen as he turned his back to them. They didn't see him carefully drawing a gun from his belt until he whirled, confronting the group. "Damn you," he snarled, "I'll show you better'n to come to a man's house like this."

The heavy gun barked, jumped again, and Dave Sands with his weapon half out of leather gasped, clutched his side and spun around with the force of the bullet's impact. While the young deputy was falling to the floor, Cook's own weapon leaped into action. He fired from the hip, the bullet slamming into the wall over Whitcomb's head.

Sally screamed a warning as her wide eyes caught Scar coming thru the door with a gun in each hand. Her scream was covered by the blast of both weapons as he squeezed the triggers. Tex Wilson had been taking a more careful aim at Whitcomb but he was too late.

When his gun burst flame, the Texan was already falling from two leaden slugs that found their mark.

Cook whirled and fired at Scar and this time he did not miss. The scar faced outlaw stumbled, then the second shot of the sheriff went home. A small hole appeared in the outlaw's forehead, and he fell on his face, his scream cut off by Death.

Walrus had dropped his knife at the first sign of gunplay and during the

melee had fired without success until his own six gun was empty. With a curse of mingled rage he charged, head low, directly at Grant Whitcomb.

Whitcomb sidestepped nimbly as old Walrus charged at him blindly, and the deputy sprawled on the floor. The sheriff was bleeding from a shoulder wound, and he alone remained to finish the battle with the bald headed man.

Cook fired again, the shot going over Whitcomb's head. The lawman, weakened by the loss of blood from a shoulder wound, could hardly pull trigger.

Suddenly Whitcomb dropped to the floor and grabbed old Walrus in his arms, using the struggling body as a shield. Cook dare not fire again, lest he hit his friend. Whitcomb, quick to take advantage of the situation, snarled a command to the sheriff.

"Drop that gun before I blow your friend's brains out." His gun was held at the head of Walrus.

Cook realized that nothing could be done, but to obey. His gun was lowered with a thread of smoke still coming from the muzzle. Whitcomb's small mouth widened in a grin of confidence. Death yawned before the sheriff in that small grim hole of the killer's weapon as it was brought slowly to bear on him.

Over it, he saw the round head of Whitcomb, he saw the look of futile struggle in the face of old Walrus, as he was still held in a grip of iron. Then a new hope came to Sheriff Cook. Seeing the changed expression, Whitcomb was about to turn, when a cool voice spoke from behind.

"Drop that gun. You're covered."

Whitcomb knew that voice. Many times he'd dreamed of the day when he could silence it forever. It was the voice of the Lone Ranger. Whitcomb let go his grip on Walrus, whirled and

would have fired, but a crashing roar and smashing impact met him. The Lone Ranger's gun had spoken. Whitcomb spun hard, as a .44 bullet smashed his hip.

With a yell that would do credit to an Apache on the warpath, Walrus swarmed all over Whitcomb, even before he struck the floor. "I got him, boss, so help me Susan, I got the coyote, an' he's got plenty to account fer!"

"Get up," commanded the Lone Ranger. "I'll keep him covered till you rope him."

Walrus found some rope and proceeded with the job at hand. Meanwhile the masked man found that Scar was beyond all earthly help, and concentrated his attention on Tex and Dave whose wounds while serious, were not vital.

Then he returned to Cook and whispered a few words in his ear. Leaving the house, he strode swiftly to the side of Silver, and as he swung to the saddle the hearty voice rose over the clatter of fast hoofs, "Heigh Yo, Silver!"

**G**RIM, silent men watched every motion made by Marge Whitcomb as she sat with arms tied, in the cave. There was little talk. Like hungry wolves moving in the night around a starving man, knowing that the prize would soon be theirs, these outlaws waited.

Anson had been watching outside the cave for the first sight of the returning leader or Scar. Marge had been trying to prepare herself for the end that was soon to come, yet when Anson returned to the cave and remarked shortly, "He's comin'," a lump rose in her slender throat.

Marge could hear the clump of an approaching horse. From where she sat it was impossible to see outside the cave, yet her ears told her when the

horse was halted at the entrance. A tall form darkened the opening of the cave and entered. A black hood concealed his head and shoulders.

"Wal." drawled Anson, "What about it?"

Without a word, the hooded man drew a bit of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and showed half of a map to the men. They came close, eagerly examining the prize they had been so long hoping would be theirs. Then they froze at a shouted command from outside the cave! "*Game's up!*"

Marge screamed as she looked toward the entrance of the cave. A dozen men were there, carbines leveled at their shoulders. The outlaws were cornered like rats in a trap.

It was Anson who made the first move. As his hand moved toward his gun, the hooded man's fist came up from the hip, smashed full in his face and Anson was felled like a log.

The rest of the outlaws, taking advantage of the brief tussle between Anson and the hooded man, drew their guns, only to be met by a volley of shots from the men at the entrance. The roar of the carbines mingled with the screams of the wounded and dying.

Only Anson, felled by the hooded man's fist, remained in the fight. His gun came up and barked once, but the men with the carbines were not caught unawares. The cave re-echoed with the roar from their guns while orange flames lighted up the dimness of the interior. Anson's gun fell from lifeless fingers. He rolled over on his back and lay still.

The hooded man ran towards the girl huddled in a corner. Quickly he drew a knife and slashed through the ropes that bound her.

"The miracle," thought Marge, "has happened."

She saw the man who had released her lift the hood from his head. Beneath it there was a mask, yet a thrill went through her as she took note of the firm chin, the gleaming white teeth. There could be no doubt as to his identity—the one man she had trusted since coming to these turbulent parts—The Lone Ranger.

"I had to travel fast," he said, "to get a posse here in time. They left their horses out of sight and crept up to the cave."

"B-but, how—how did you—"

"Sheriff Cook wanted to come with us, but he was wounded and pretty weak after he had organized the posse. I had to take the men to your uncle's home before they would believe that they were actually going to be taken to round up the Night Legion."

"I—I still don't understand."

The outlaws were being roped, those of them who still lived, and carried to the outside of the cave. "Sit down a moment," requested the masked man.

Marge obeyed, though still very much confused by the turn of events.

"It's quite a story, but you must hear it before you go back to the house."

Marge nodded.

"First of all," continued the Lone Ranger, "the man you know as Grant Whitcomb is not your uncle. Your real uncle was a peculiar man. He had little or nothing to do with other people around town. He left everything to Scar.

"That was why it was so easy for Scar to bring in another man, an outlaw friend of his, to pose as your uncle, shaving his head and making himself



look like the real Grant Whitcomb as much as possible.

"Together they organized the Night Legion. Your uncle was imprisoned in a soundproof cellar beneath the house. They held him there, so he could be made to give them information when they needed it.

"It was not hard to carry out the deception because few people knew Whitcomb very well. They staged many raids, and then returned to the security of the ranch. When your letter came, they saw their chance to make a fortune. They killed Frisby and then planned to get the other half of the map from you and your sister."

"But what of White Rose?" broke in Marge.

"She of course knew the truth, but she was mortally afraid of the false Grant Whitcomb. She thought he was a maker of magic, her superstitious mind was easy for him to work on. That is how the place came to be talked about. White Rose tried to do what was right. She tried to warn you girls, she tried to show you where your real uncle was hidden, but she dared not go too far, because she feared this man would punish her."

"It hardly seems possible that a man could do all this."

"You would understand, if you knew the Indians better."

"Is Sally all right?"

"Your sister is quite safe, she's at the ranch house now."

"And—and the real Uncle Grant?"

"He is weak. For a long time he's been kept a prisoner in his own cellar. White Rose showed my friend Tonto where to find him, and your uncle, hidden down there, thought Tonto was an enemy. He had finally managed to work loose the ropes that held him. In the

dark he knocked Tonto down and when I went there, tried to knock me down too, but I managed to make him understand the truth. Then we could not get out."

NOW that everything was being revealed to her, Marge could not help thinking of the heroic part the Lone Ranger had played in this drama. Eagerly she listened as the masked man continued his story.

"When Sally told of the trap door in the floor, it brought about a show down. The imposter tried to shoot it out and very nearly succeeded, but White Rose opened the trap door and let me out so I could cover him from behind. It was this, that convinced us that White Rose should not be punished."

"Where did you get the map you showed?"

"I wanted to get inside the cave before the attack, so the first move of the outlaws when they were trapped, would not be to kill you. I had half of the map, that I got from the bald headed outlaw who took your uncle's name. You still have the other half of the map, haven't you?"

Marge wiggled her toe, and felt the reassuring bit of paper, then nodded.

"Your real Uncle is much different than the man you knew. He'll help you to find your gold, and establish your claim to it."

Marge stammered her thanks to the tall masked man, but found words to be of little value in stating the great debt of gratitude she owed him. He waved aside her thanks, "I am only glad that this Night Legion is wiped out."

"I can add some little information to all that you have learned," said the girl. "All the things these outlaws have stolen are in this cave."

The Lone Ranger nodded. "The money can be returned to those who lost it. It's too bad human lives can't be given back. I guess though, they'll be paid for—in full."

A voice came from outside the cave, "If you're goin' back, let's get started. Cook'll be darned anxious to hear how things turned out."

"Come with me," begged the girl.

The Lone Ranger shook his head. "I am going in the other direction. Tonto will be waiting for me in our camp in the forest." He walked from the cave and whistled once. A great white stallion approached and stood at the tall man's side.

"Sally," whispered the Lone Ranger to Marge, "sent a message for you when her uncle told us of this cave and we were sure that you'd be found here."

"What did she say?"

"There are two young deputies who will have to remain with your uncle until their wounds are healed. Tex Wilson, and Dave Sands. Sally said that if you liked Tex as well as she liked Dave, everything would be—" he hesitated—"well, she said everything would be just swell."

The firm mouth smiled at the dark haired girl. Then as the tall masked man's foot hit the stirrup, the white horse leaped into action. A ringing cry accompanied those pounding hoofs as the Lone Ranger settled in the saddle.

*"Heigh Yo, Silver!"*

Marge watched the cloud of dust settling behind the fast disappearing horse and rider for a moment. Half aloud she said, "So Dave Sands comes out on top, but only because the Lone Ranger abdicated." Then aloud she said to the man who was to ride back to the ranch with her, "Come, please take me home."

NEXT MONTH

# The Lone Ranger Rides Again!

*in*

**"THE MASKED RIDER'S JUSTICE"**

**A Smashing Complete Novel That Will Hold  
You Spellbound With Its Thrilling and  
Fast-Moving Action**

**DON'T MISS**

**THE MAY ISSUE!**



Article by  
Chuck Martin

Illustrations by  
H. Smilkstein

*John Wesley Hardin was born in Fannon County, Texas, on May 26, 1853. His father was a Methodist preacher who afterward became a lawyer. His older brother, Joe, also passed his bar examinations before he, too, was declared an outlaw. Later in life John Wesley Hardin also became a lawyer, but that was after he had whittled twenty-eight notches on his guns to stamp him as the Ace of Texas gunmen. Although Wes and Joe Hardin were too young to fight in the army of the Confederacy, both had been trained for war and became expert in the use of firearms.*



**1** Texas in 1858, just three years after peace had been declared between the North and the South. A slight fifteen year old boy being "told off" by a giant negro. A boy, born and raised in Texas, where most boys took a man's place at fifteen.



**2** The big negro, club raised menacingly, rushed at Hardin. The boy coolly whipped out his gun and fired. Maze's legs trembled, his knees sagged and he pitched forward—Dead. Thus Wes Hardin became an outlaw with the first notch on his gun.



**3** Rather than trust his fate in the hands of his "peers", he fled to Navarro County after the killing of Maze. He had as many friends as enemies, and one of these came to his hiding place early one morning to warn him that the police were on his trail.



**4** Wes Hardin mounted his horse and left a plain trail that led through a deep ravine with steep sides and a sandy bottom. All day, Wes Hardin waited behind a huge boulder until finally the clatter of hoofs warned him of the approaching police.



**5** When the moon came up that night there were three bodies to be buried in the sand. Having piled the last rock upon the graves, Wes Hardin rode away to Hill County. A month later another white officer tried to arrest him, and the outlaw whittled another notch.



**6** In Hill County he sat in a poker game with a gambler by the name of Jim Bradley. Bradley reached for the pot too soon after using a sleeve hide-out to make a high hand. When the smoke had cleared away, Wes Hardin carved his sixth notch, and celebrated his sixteenth birthday.



**7** Hardin attended a circus in Horn Hill on the Brazos River. A frock coated swindler was running the old shell game. The sixteen year old boy watched the game for a few moments and then made a bet. The gambler grinned when Wes lost and shifted the shells again.



**8** Hardin bet again, and this time located the pea—between the fingers of the gambler's left hand and demanded his money. The barker went for his gun—and the circus needed a new operator.



**9** Wes Hardin started for Brenham to visit his Uncle Bob, at whose home he could hide. On the way he stopped off at the little town of Kosse to visit a girl friend named Dolly.



**10** A few minutes later he was holding the girl in his arms, telling her of his love. Suddenly a door opened and a tall man stood framed in the doorway. The young outlaw came to his feet like a cornered wildcat.



YOU CAN'T COME  
RIDIN' IN YERE  
AN' MAKE LOVE TO  
MY GAL WITHOUT  
PAYIN' FER IT!

I'LL GIT  
GOIN!

**11** There was a moment of silence. Hardin glanced at the girl, and his face hardened when she nodded confirmation. He made a move to leave but the tall man stopped him and reached for his gun.



**12** Before he could draw the weapon a black dot leaped squarely between his eyes. Hardin stared at the girl, then stepped across the body and closed the door after him.



**13** Hardin mounted quickly and rode away in the darkness. He now had eight notches on his gun, and not quite seventeen years old.

## THE IRONY of FATE



### JOHN WESLEY HARDIN

ACE OF TEXAS  
GUNMEN IS --  
ARRESTED FOR  
A CRIME HE  
DIDN'T COMMIT  
. . .

BE SURE TO READ  
OF HIS ESCAPE --  
AND OTHER THRILLING  
ADVENTURES -- IN

**NEXT  
MONTHS'  
ISSUE**

# A LITTLE KILLIN'

By  
**Lawrence A.  
Keating**

They had waited five hours in this elevated, craggy spot. The pressure of waiting for the ace of Wells Fargo detectives was making both outlaws nervous.



*When There Was a Little Killin' to be Done, the Ace of Wells Fargo Detectives Could be Counted on to Do His Share of It*

**T**HE whiskered man flat on his stomach behind the mica-gleaming rock squinted again through his rifle sights. For the dozenth time he shifted the gun slightly, making certain it commanded the sharp elbow of the canyon shelf trail. Turning his head, he squirted lager tobacco juice at a weed, and saw his horse and Lace Fleck's waiting ten yards back between two high rocks. He could see the saddlebag on each horse that held nearly twenty thousand dollars worth of gold dust.

Red Keston faced front. There was a bitter, icy gleam in his eyes that always

shimmered there when he was waiting to do a murder.

His crooked-jawed companion stirred two feet away. He also was flat on his stomach, also was watching the trail over his rifle resting in a niche of their rock breastwork. Keston's wide lips rippled in a confident sneer.

"We'll pump lead through that lousy express dick! The two of us can't miss. S'posed to be so foxy nobody ever got him 'tween gun sights. But this time's different, eh, Lace? He'll come ridin' along that there trail. He won't close this case—but *we* will!"

Lace Fleck nodded as he drew a pint whisky flask from his pocket and laid it beside him. "We'll blast Callahan to Kingdom Come. We got to, or he'll foller us clear into Mexico." He stared at the trail below. "'Tain't fifty yards when he gits to that elbow, and I've hit the top of a tin can farther away than that—done it a thousand times.

"But I wish he'd come," Fleck snarled. "Reckon Brad Callahan wasn't so close behind as we thought, Red."

"After two days o' breakin' down hoss-flesh, did you think he had us within a quarter-mile?" Keston retorted.

They lay a moment in silence. The sky above was a pale blue field behind a noon-day sun that beat down fiercely.

"The devil himself wouldn't suspect us here," Keston gloated. "Wait till he's right in that elbow below. I'll count three so we both shoot at once. We *got* to cut him down," he agreed, snarling.

"Don't forget, Lace, it's worth forty thousand to us to smear this lobo!"

They waited five hours in this elevated, craggy spot of the canyon. The tedium of it in the boiling sunshine, the utter silence, and the pressure of waiting for Brad Callahan, ace of Wells Fargo detectives, was making both outlaws nervous.

The wide, colorful-walled canyon twisted and writhed out of sight to the north. Its flat bottom, three hundred feet below, showed a glinting creek with grass and trees along its banks. Against the west wall of the canyon, forty feet from its top prairie edge, ran a shelf along which the narrow trail curled. The two men were in a turn just above this shelf, commanding the trail-elbow perfectly.

Keston and Fleck sucked breath. For down the canyon where the trail revealed

briefly, they spied a horseman. A dot of yellow and black, he came at a slow trot, with tiny dust puffs floating up in his wake. The sun flickered on the blue carbine across his saddle in front of him. Then the rider was gone.

"See that yella shirt?" Lace notified excitedly. "When we ran out the back o' that express office in Eagle Creek, I saw Callahan runnin' and shootin'. He had on a bright yella shirt. This sure is him, Red!"

"Yeah. It'll be a minute yet before he hits this last curve."

They waited. Keston, as his comrade had done a moment ago, drew a pint bottle of whisky from his pocket. He uncorked it, smelled it. Fleck's hand gripped his forearm.

"No drinkin' now, Red. Remember, killin' this hombre means forty thousand for us, just like you said. And either we get him or the buzzard'll get us for sure. He's got that kind of rep!

"You ain't shaky, are you, Red?" he added anxiously.

Keston replaced the cork. "Naw, I ain't shaky. Don't do no drinkin' when there's a job on like this. I was just smellin' it, Lace. I'll pour that whole bottle down my gullet when we've finished Callahan!"

He felt a little shaky, though. Gun butcher that he was, Red Keston always got to quivering as the showdown moment neared.

"Don't think of his record. Spoil your shootin'," Fleck sought to encourage him.

"Shut your big mouth! I'll do my part an' you do yours! If you can't lay quiet, take a drink yourself!"

"I will, afterward. Watch your rifle now, Red. And I'll wait till you count



three. We'll—There he comes!" Fleck whispered.

Their granite-hard eyes gleamed down the sights of their rifles. The dappled grey horse came ambling from the last twist of the canyon shelf trail, holding its head down oddly. Both men noted the vivid yellow shirt of the rider, saw that his sombrero and trousers were black. They couldn't see his face, a blank of hat shadow as the express company detective came on.

It was harder . . . harder for Keston and Fleck to keep from squeezing their triggers. Two murders during that express station holdup had set a price on their heads. It meant that if Brad Callahan took them back to Eagle Creek for trial, there would be a double hanging to follow it some orange-shot daybreak.

Their lives and the forty thousand dollars of loot hung on accurate shooting now. Forty thousand dollars—eighty thousand pesos in Mexico, a mere sixty miles south! The killing of Brad Callahan meant that the only law vengeance they need really fear was obliterated. It meant a life of laziness, gambling and drink. Easy street!

Each man cocked the hammer of his rifle. Each noted the way the dappled horse carried its nose down to its chest. The wait seemed an eternity . . . as the horse came on.

"One," Red Keston whispered.

Their eyes narrowed to mere slits. Their forefingers crooked around their triggers.

"Two!"

The horseman reached the sharp elbow of the trail.

"Three!"

Their guns roared together. The reverberations whacked from one canyon

wall to the other, lessening as they dribbled into distance.

The rider swayed backward drunkenly. His carbine plopped into trail dust as the horse reared up. The beast struck hard on all four and bolted with a jerk that lurched its rider out of leather.

He pitched splashing into grey dust—lay face-down, motionless.

"Got him!" Fleck shouted. "Square 'tween the eyes!"

They looked at each other. Triumph wreathed their sweaty faces. Then the terrible reaction of murder brought an abrupt loss of nerve control. Each flung down his empty rifle and snatched up his flask of whisky.

"Claw clouds! Quick, you dry gulchers!"

The unexpectedness of it froze them. Then Fleck and Keston leaped to their



feet, spilling their whisky bottles. The rye drooled over their chins. One bottle smashed on a rock. The killers spun around as if on pivots, their hands slash-

(Continued on page 112)

# Boomer Buckaroo

By  
**George C.  
Henderson**



*With Blazing Guns, Ranny McArthur Solves the  
Mystery of a Leather-covered Box, That Meant Life  
or Death to a Desperate Outlaw*

“RANNY” McARTHUR dropped a big brown hand to the butt of his black-handled, blue-steel Colt and leaned forward to watch the skulker there in the darkness.

Right in front of Ranny was a log cabin. Light shone from the windows and a fan tail of blue smoke curled from the chimney. It was a strange place to the cowboy. But the actions of the slinking hombre he could see moving toward the cabin, told him that something was wrong.



For a moment the prowler stood partially revealed in the faint light that fell through the window. And in that instant Ranny glimpsed a swarthy, evil face and saw the black gun that was gripped in a grimy paw.

“Gosh, I wonder what he’s up to,” thought Ranny. “I don’t want nothin’ to happen to the people who live in this place, leastways not until I’ve had a chance to buy some grub off ’em. I’m hungry as a she-wolf. An’ this is the first sign of civilization I’ve seen in two days.”

Schooled in gunfighting, bullet-scarred from many a ruckus, Ranny was too chuck-full of gun savvy to bust up to a strange place without investigating.

He had left his horse among some trees and had come silently forward on foot to have a look at the outfit before hailing the house. It was then that he had seen that flat-faced, slit-eyed half breed sneaking around the house.

Suddenly the skulker spoke to someone, who was hidden from Ranny among the pine trees.

"Don' move, *señor*," he said, "Or I keel you."

There was a moment of silence during which Ranny swiftly debated what he should do. His first impulse was to leap forward and tear into the prowling hombre. But he checked the movement as he realized that he didn't know what this was all about.

He heard a startled gasp. And then a cracked and senile voice blurted out a name.

"You! 'Scar' Vargas! Don't kill me! I'll give it up! Don't shoot me!"

"Han' over thee box," snarled Scar Vargas. "Come on. Pronto!"

A silvery-haired old man, stooped and feeble, stepped into view and handed the halfbreed a package wrapped in leather.

**R**ANNY McARTHUR, crouching there in the darkness, got one glimpse of the gray-beard's lined and haggard face and knew instantly which side he was on.

A chuckle was on his lips as he stepped silently forward and rammed his gun into the back of Scar Vargas.

"Drop the *pistola*," he said sharply in Spanish.

The steeple-hatted, swarthy-faced man stiffened. His fingers released the leather-wrapped box, letting it fall to the ground. He uttered a queer, choking sound, then suddenly ducked low and whirled toward Ranny, his gun flaming.

Ranny McArthur had to shoot. The cowboy's Colt was already cocked. He had only to squeeze the trigger. Scar Vargas never got a chance for his life. A big .45 slug, driven into a man's chest, through his left shirt pocket, has a very final and definite effect.

The old man, who had stood aghast at the sudden tragedy, abruptly scooped the box from the ground, darted to the

cabin door, opened it, ducked inside and slammed it after him. He did not even wait to utter a word of thanks to the man who had saved him from robbery and perhaps death.

Ranny McArthur whistled softly.

"Waal I'll be blamed," he chuckled. "Ain't that a funny way for a feller to act. Never even invited me in to have a bite of supper. Mebby the old jasper's kind o' tetched in the haid. I just got to bum a meal off him."

Without a second glance at the fallen half-breed, Ranny McArthur calmly stepped over the body and knocked on the cabin door. He was a cool customer, was this lean, lanky boomer cowboy in the wide-brimmed Stetson and bullhide chaps.

There was no answer to his knock. Anger welled up within him. Lifting the latch, he pushed the door open, stepped into the room.

**F**IRST thing he saw was a table set with steaming food. A buxom woman with iron gray hair was just pouring coffee into a thick cup. The very odor of it made Ranny's mouth water.

The woman looked up, startled at the cowboy's unceremonious entrance. The feeble, gray-haired man, whom Ranny had just rescued, suddenly stepped through the doorway from an inner room and leveled a shotgun at Ranny.

"Git out!" he cried in a quavering voice. "Git, before I shoot!"

"But see here," protested Ranny McArthur. "I'm yore friend. It was me plugged Scar Vargas."

The old man's voice rose to a shrill scream.

"Git out I say!"

Ranny saw the old man's finger tight-

en on the trigger of the scattergun and hastily backed through the doorway.

"To blazes with you," he said hotly. "I'm sorry I saved yore life now. I hope you lose yore old box of what-ever Scar was after. Yo're the fust West-erner I ever knowed that wouldn't feed a hungry man."

Choking down his wrath, he stomped over to his mustang, untied it from the tree and slid into the saddle.

Ranny did not know Scar. He had never heard of the fellow until the gray-beard had blurted out the name. If the cowboy had been a law officer, he would



have felt it his duty to search Scar's body for evidence and take it into town. But it had been a number of years since young McArthur had worn a deputy's shield and he didn't want to get mixed up in that work again. He liked the lazy, easy-going life of a boomer buckaroo much better.

For hours, Ranny galloped swiftly along zig-zag trails, until he finally dropped down into a lower valley. Darkness cloaked the rangeland, the ghostly trees, the slow-moving files of cattle that were visible here and there on the plain.

The smell of frying bacon and the delicious odor of coffee was in the air when the rambling range waddy finally drew rein before an old frame ranch house. In the pallid light of early morning, he saw rough-looking cowboys lounging at the door of the kitchen, some washing their faces, others slicking back their hair as they waited the call for breakfast.

"Hi yuh, boys," he said as he traipsed toward the cook shack, spurs dragging. "Where's the foreman of this outfit?"

Instead of answering, the cowboys deliberately turned their backs on him. Ranny felt himself flushing to the roots of his hair. Was he to be turned away hungry again? He had always made it a practice to work for the little grub he ate. He had never shirked chores. But evidently this outfit was not even going to give him a chance.

**R**ANNY McARTHUR halted uncertainly in the middle of the yard. Anger at the injustice of the thing seethed within him.

He could not understand this sudden hostility. According to cattle country custom a traveling cowboy was always invited to get his feet in the trough. Now twice in one day Ranny had been refused food. There was something mighty queer about the whole thing.

He heard a drum of hoofs behind him and turned as three riders vaulted from their broncs in the yard. All wore stars on their vests. The cowboy recognized the leader by his big nose and his perpetual scowl. It was Sheriff Jed

Purdy. The men with him were deputies.

Spurs clicked on the gravel and leather rigging creaked as they stomped across the yard and into the house.

Ranny's hunger drove him to a desperate move. He fell in step with the sheriff's men and followed them inside. He saw a big-toothed, lantern-jawed hombre shaking hands with Sheriff Purdy and heard someone mutter that it was "Wolf" Rucker, the ranch boss.

Wolf's barrel chest bulged out and his piggyish brown eyes suddenly blazed with anger as he saw Ranny in the doorway.

"You!" he roared. "Git the blazes out of here! What do yuh mean, buttin' in on my business?"

Ranny turned and started out but Wolf's bellow stopped him.

"Wait a minute!" roared the ranch boss. "Come back here! I want to have a look at you!"

In spite of Wolf's strange actions and despite his own hunger, Ranny gave the appearance of coolness and unconcern as he walked over to face the cattle boss. In some ways Wolf was the biggest man he had ever seen. It was not so much his height as the thickness of his body and the size of his arms and feet.

"I don't know you," growled Wolf, glaring at the hungry cowboy. "What do yuh want here?"

Ranny McArthur's snapping black eyes were expressionless.

"I'm lookin' fer a job, Mr. Rucker," he said. "I never knowed it was a criminal offense before."

A laugh went up from the sheriff and his men at Ranny's witty reply. Big-nosed Sheriff Purdy studied the tall, black-haired buckaroo with keener interest. He liked the cool way that Ranny handled himself.

Wolf Rucker drew in his horns.

"Huh," he grunted. "What could you do? Tote wood for the cook or help the jingler kid?"

"Do I look like a tramp?" drawled Ranny.

Again the sheriff and his deputies snickered. Wolf Rucker's face reddened with anger. He was getting nowhere fast with this strange puncher.

"I'm bettin' yo're no good," he said curtly. "Report to Marty Snell, my segundo an' he'll prove it. Better have yore breakfast first. I hear the cook ringin' the bell."

THERE was a clatter of boots on the porch, shouts, howls and roughhousing as the cook hammered on a steel triangle. Ranny followed the jostling buckaroos into the kitchen and soon was busy with a plate of bacon and eggs and a steaming cup of coffe. He had to take a sharp hold on himself to keep from wolfing down the food.

As the hot coffe warmed him and the nausea of hunger vanished, he had time to reflect upon the strange happenings of the last few hours. He found himself wondering who the gray-haired folks in the log cabin might be.

How would they explain Scar's death? If they told a story of a strange cowboy busting up to save them, it would require a lot of explanation. It would also probably mean that the sheriff would be looking for Ranny before long if he was not already doing so.

Through the screen door of the kitchen, Ranny saw an Indian boy leap off a saddleless pony and run into the house. He carried something in his arms that looked like a bundle of clothing wrapped in a slicker.

A few minutes later Wolf Rucker ap-

peared in the doorway of the kitchen, followed by three gunmen. In their midst was the bronzed, bare-headed Navajo.

Ranny saw them regarding him with sidelong glances and a sharp feeling of uneasiness swept over him. At the end of the table Wolf stopped and leaned over to speak to a short, horse-faced puncher, Marty Snell, the *segundo*.

Marty got up, jerked his guns into place and started to follow Wolf outside.

"I want to see yuh, McArthur," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be down by the pump house."

"Yes sir," answered Ranny. "I'll be right with yuh."

**R**ANNY hoisted a final snort of coffee under his belt, kicked back his chair and walked outside. Alert and suspicious, he let his hand hang close to his guns as he dragged his rattling spurs across the gravelly yard toward the creaking windmill. The unoiled metal wheel shrieked and groaned on its bearings as it spun around swiftly, high up on the fifty foot tower. A pump house was built around the frame work.

The short, bow-legged *segundo*, Marty Snell, stood at the entrance to this shed.

"I've got a job fer yuh," he grunted when Ranny stopped before him. "It's a tough proposition. If yuh got any yaller up yore spine, yuh still got a chance to draw out."

Ranny's face did not show his anger, but there was a harsh note in his voice when he answered.

"I got just enough yaller in me to ram my fist down yore throat, grab yore innards an' turn yuh inside out," he barked. "An' I wouldn't even git up a sweat doin' it."

With a savage snarl, Marty reached

for a gun. Ranny shot out a steel-muscled hand, got a grip on the front of Marty's calfskin vest and shook the *segundo* until his teeth rattled.

"Turn loose of me," raged the *segundo*. "Yo're fired. Hit the grit, afore I lose my temper."

Releasing his hold on Marty, Ranny gave him a shove that slammed him back against the side of the pump house.

"All right," he chuckled. "Now that I'm fired an' you ain't my boss no longer go ahead an' snag out them irons."

For a moment it seemed that the bow-legged, horse-faced jasper would go for his hoglegs. But something in Ranny McArthur's jet eyes stopped him.

"All right," said Marty. "I was only testin' yuh out. You ain't fired. Stick around for further orders. Don't leave the place either, savvy?"

"Shore," answered Ranny. "Now let me tell you somethin'. Never make a pass at me with yore guns unless yuh aim to go through with it."

Rather enviously, Ranny McArthur watched the other men as they cut out their broncs down at the hoss corral, saddled, mounted and galloped away. Marty Snell was among them. Sheriff Purdy and his men continued to hang around the house.

All day long, Ranny was forced to loaf around the 808 ranch house. Along toward sundown the punchers came trooping in. The sheriff and his deputies had gone out and then come back again. Ranny couldn't understand that at all. It made him uneasy.

Night had fallen and it was dark in the yard before Ranny got his first orders.

"Go down to the hoss corral an' git yore bronc, McArthur," commanded the *segundo*. "Saddle up an' hide the mustang behind the pump house. Be shore

nobody sees yuh. Wolf's goin' to give you a chance to make good on yore fightin' talk."

**W**OLF RUCKER'S harsh, gruff voice called out to Ranny as he stepped up on the porch of the house. The place was pitch dark. Utter silence hovered over it, broken only by the raucous braying of a burro in a nearby corral.

Rucker's huge, bear-like body loomed enormous in the shadows as he led Ranny along a hallway and into the ranch office. There was no light, but moonbeams, falling through the window, revealed a leather bag resting on a table. The floor was littered with papers and documents. The door of a safe in the corner hung open.

"All right, McArthur," growled Wolf Rucker. "Marty tells me you're a proddy gent. I'm ready to test out just what kind of a gun-slick you are."

His hand pointed toward the bag on the table.

"I need a man to take that bag into town secret-like an' unseen," he continued. "My enemies are watchin' every move I make. You bein' a stranger won't be suspected. If you're scairt, yuh kin still draw out."

"I'll go through with it," said Ranny. "Where are these enemies of yores hidden? If yuh know they're here, why don't yuh blast 'em out?"

"I don't know who they are," said Rucker impatiently. "Or where they're hid either. My outfit's honeycombed with traitors. I don't know who to trust. All you got to do is obey orders. See that pump house out there through the window?"

"I ain't blind," answered Ranny.

"All right, if yuh ain't blind tell me what yuh see up there now."

As the sorely puzzled cowboy watched, a faint light appeared through a window high up on the second floor of the pump house. Someone was waving a match back and forth.

"He's the lookout," grunted Rucker. "Soon as everything's clear, he'll flash the light again. It's a signal for you to



take this bag, git onto yore bronc an' scoot for town. Don't stop until you've reached the Sagebrush cantina. I'll meet you there."

As Wolf Rucker talked, Ranny tried to read the expression on his flat, lopsided face. Wolf's teeth gleamed in the moonlight. His piggish brown eyes glowed deep in bony sockets.

"I'd like to know more about this," said Ranny slowly. "What's in this bag? Why should anybody be after you?"

"Never mind the questions," snapped Wolf. "I'm payin' you to do as you're told. This window here is open an' there's a screen on it. When yuh see the signal in the tower, sneak out an' git goin'."

Another question was on Ranny's lips but Wolf had already vanished into the darkened hallway. A moment later Ranny saw him stomping swiftly toward the bunkhouse in his high-heeled boots.

Suspicion flared in Ranny's mind.

Why was the ranch boss going to sleep in the bunkhouse? Was he trying to get in the clear before something happened? Somehow Wolf's story did not ring true.

**S**LIPPING over to the table, Ranny felt around until he touched the catches of the leather bag. It was locked. Whipping out his knife, he pried it open and then held it up to the moonlight. Gold and silver pieces tinkled as he up-ended the bag.

"Gosh," he muttered. "Funny Wolf would trust me, a stranger, with so much dinero."

His suspicions grew to a certainty. The truth was gradually dawning on him. The looted safe and the torn-up condition of the room could mean but one thing, thievery, robbery. Only this time it was not the real thing but a fake.

If he waited for that signal and stepped out of the window, a blast of lead would mow him down. The sheriff, who had been kept here on purpose, would rush up, find the bag on him, see the ransacked room and would acquit Wolf of the killing on the grounds that it was a robbery.

"Why do they want to git me?" mused Ranny.

His thoughts flashed to the Indian boy who had brought in the bundle and he began a swift search of the room. It was some time before he found what he sought, Scar Vargas' crimson stained clothes. That meant that Wolf Rucker was Scar's boss, that he had sent Vargas to rob the old couple.

Somehow they had learned that Ranny had killed the half-breed and they were going to dispose of him as quickly as possible. He might know too much.

The realization galvanized Ranny into action.

"I can't wait for the signal now," he muttered. "I've got to git out of here pronto, before they're set to finish me."

Picking up the bag, he gripped a six-gun in one hand and slipped noiselessly toward the hall door. He could hear heavy breathing and then a whisper. Ambushers were waiting out there.

Darting over to the open window, he looked and listened. All was quiet. There was no sign of a light in the pump house tower.

Ranny lowered the leather bag outside, slid one leg over the window sill, followed it with the other and then dropped down into the shrubbery that bordered the house.

Hugging the wall, he kept in the shadows until he reached the end of the building. Now an open space of a hundred feet lay between Ranny and the brush where he had hidden his horse.

He thought of trying to creep across that spot, but realized he would be seen. Instead he darted across it at a dead run.

*Br-r-r-rang!* The night stillness was shattered by the crack of a rifle. A spurt of flame leaped from the second story window of the pump house.

A dozen guns were firing on him now. Bullets whistled past his head. A slug churned up the turf not an inch from his toe.

Down at the bunkhouse men came pouring out, shouting excitedly and waving their guns. Wolf Rucker was bellowing at them.

Inside the main building sounded the high-pitched voice of Sheriff Jed Purdy.

The branches of palo verde trees hung like drooping willows in Ranny's path. He dropped the heavy bag and leaped for this cover. A gun flamed in his face. He fired at the flash and heard a body thud to the ground.



Ranny stifled a cry himself as a searing hot iron ripped the flesh along his ribs.

Through the whip-like stems of the trees, he caught a glimpse of his snorting, rearing mustang and he breathed a prayer of relief. At least they hadn't found his horse.

Ranny heard a snarling oath and saw a shadowy figure leap toward him. It was Marty Snell. Marty's guns blazed almost in his face. Ranny hardly realized that his own Colts were blazing death at the segundo until he saw Marty stumble and fall.

Ranny reached the roan, jerked loose the tie rope and vaulted into the saddle. Bending low he spurred his mustang out of the palo verde grove and out into the broken prairie.

**T**WO hours later Ranny drew rein in a patch of high weeds behind an old broken down wagon and studied the familiar outline of a shake-roofed log cabin. This was the spot where he had shot down Scar Vargas.

Through the windows he could see the old folks moving back and forth. They were acting as if nothing had happened.

"I reckon Wolf ain't raided 'em yet," muttered Ranny. But if my guess is correct he will. He wanted to git shet of me an' the sheriff fust, then he'll be out to git that box that Scar was about to steal when I plugged him."

Ranny tied his horse in a thicket, loosened the saddle girth and moved stealthily toward the cabin. He was sure that Wolf Rucker and his men had not gotten here yet, but he was not taking any chances. They might be lying in ambush, watching the place.

Ranny did not knock at the door of the cabin this time. He simply opened

it and walked in, gun in hand. The old folks were sitting at a table. Both jumped up, the woman with a startled scream.

The silvery-haired old man darted a hand out toward a gun which lay on the table, but Ranny covered him before the old man could reach it.

"No more funny business now, Grandpop," he growled. "I don't want to have to hurt yuh. Pull them blinds down. All of 'em."

The old man faced Ranny defiantly, but the woman hastened to obey.

"Who are you?" blurted the gray-beard. "What do you want?"

Ranny McArthur put on his fiercest look.

"I want that box you took away from Scar Vargas," he snapped. "You better git it for me, old lady, unless you want to become a widder pronto."

Tears were in the old lady's eyes, but she obeyed Ranny and brought the



leather-bound box over to the table in front of him.

Quickly Ranny unwrapped the box and opened it up. The first thing that met his eyes was a WANTED notice, sent out by a Texas sheriff. The picture on the reward circular was of a huge,

barrel-chested man, lantern-jawed and buck-toothed. Wolf Rucker! The name given was not Rucker. It was Verne Sherick.

Written in blood across the face of the paper were the words, "Get him."

Ranny did not bother about looking through the other papers in the box. Instead he turned to the frightened old people and quickly told them who he was. He knew that their names were Tom and Ella Worth from the documents he had seen in the box.

"We've got to git together here," he said smiling into their frightened faces, "Because we're all in the same boat."

"What do yuh mean?" asked Tom Worth.

"Do you know a man named Rucker?" countered Ranny.

"Why yes," exclaimed Mrs. Worth. "What have you got to do with him? We paid him every cent we owe on that mortgage."

"Well, I don't know anything about a mortgage," said Ranny. "But I'm here to tell yuh that Wolf Rucker is gunning for you. It was him sent Scar Vargas here to rob you."

"That's a lie!" cried Tom Worth. "Don't believe a word this rascal says, Ma. He's workin' some slick scheme. You an' me both know that Joe Rucker is dead. It was him sent us this box with all our deeds an' papers except the cancelled mortgage in it. I never could understand why he sent us that reward notice for Verne Sherick, but we kept it anyhow."

**R**ANNY McARTHUR'S thoughts were working swiftly now. He was beginning to understand what it was all about. It was perfectly evident why Wolf Rucker wanted that box. As long as the Worths had that reward notice,

there was always the danger that they might identify Rucker as Sherick, the notorious outlaw.

"Let's git this straight," said Ranny slowly. "Tell me again about this Joseph Rucker. Who was he? What did he have to do with this mortgage? What did he look like?"

"He was a little gray, bald-headed feller," said Tom Worth, "A friend of ours, an El Paso money lender. He let us have ten thousand dollars on a mortgage on this place. The house ain't much but there's a lot of acreage. Little by little we paid him back. Just about the time we sent him the last installment, we got word that Mr. Rucker had died. One of his last acts was to send us this box. Mebby he was tryin' to warn us against this outlaw, Verne Sherick, or send us a message of some kind by puttin' that WANTED poster in. The funny part is that he never returned the mortgage cancelled. Now we hear that somebody's got hold of it an' is goin' to foreclose."

"That's the answer," exulted Ranny. "Verne Sherick, the outlaw robbed Joe Rucker, stole the mortgage an' tuk Rucker's name. Now he's goin' to try to grab yore ranch. Somehow he found out that you had that WANTED circular in the box an' he sent Scar Vargas here to git it. If I'm not mistaken he'll be here himself afore the night's over."

As if Ranny McArthur's words were a prophesy, Mrs. Worth's shrill shriek caused him to whirl around just in time to see Wolf Rucker throwing down on him from the back door. Suddenly Ranny found himself lying flat on the floor.

For a moment he experienced utter surprise. He did not even feel the bullet

*(Continued on page 121)*



# The Necktie Tree

By  
**Wayne  
Brooks**

Sheriff Stokes' temporary deputies were taking the law into their own hands — ostensibly to uphold it, as is ever the way with mobs.

*When a Young Feller Strays Into Bad Comp'ny It Brings a Heap o' Trouble—Such as Playin' the Leadin' Role in a Necktie Party*

LATE one chilly afternoon in November seven riders on mettlesome horses clattered up to the weathered wooden railroad-depot building of a small town in southeastern Wyoming, not far from one of the main tributaries of the North Platte. They were a dusty, grim lot, these horsemen. Beneath the broad brims of their hats little of features was to be seen except sharp, predatory eyes, for every man of them

was masked, with a handkerchief or a bit of black cloth.

Each carried a rifle in his hand, and from their ammunition-filled cartridge belts sagged heavy caliber pistols in worn holsters. One of their number, a lithe dark fellow with ornate boots, huge silver spurs of the type designated as "California", with rowels at least two inches in diameter, and a woven silver cord around his high black sombrero, had

the airs and pretensions that immediately stamped him as their chief. His mount was a magnificent bald-faced black that pranced and trembled with equine fire in every glossy muscle. It wheeled daintily as he whirled it about and cried curtly:

"Lowry, yuh an' Spade tend to the operator. The rest o' yuh ride with me."

He spurred the black into a lurch of action and, followed by four of the strange cavalcade, galloped around the corner of the depot and off into the main street of the town. The two left behind speedily swung from their horses and ran across the loose, creaking platform of the station.

On two sides it was bordered by empty stockyards, nor was there a soul to be seen in the vicinity except the railroad telegrapher in his little office. He was a wizened, bald, insignificant man with a green celluloid eyeshade and black oil-cloth guards to protect his sleeves. He was on his feet, peering in awed bewilderment over his spectacles as the two masked men, with drawn guns, marched into the door and covered him. They didn't bother to speak.

Without ceremony one grabbed him while the other popped a piece of oily waste into his gaping mouth and fastened a bandanna over it. With no lost motions, they tied the operator securely, with a length of rope one of them carried. Or rather Spade did. Leaving him to finish the job, Lowry turned to other work. He picked up an axe used to chop kindling for the pot-bellied stove in the corner of the office and proceeded to wreck the instrument desk. He splintered the wooden top, scattered musty papers in trays and clip-boards, sent pens and ink flying in all directions and smashed at the telegraph instruments with lum-

berman's vigor till they appeared a tangle of metal, wood and wire. Halfway through this chore he stopped, looking over his shoulder.

Spade was on his knees, with his back to him, busily taking half-hitches in the rope around his unfortunate victim. Then Lowry did an odd thing. He picked up a stray telegraph blank, scribbled something on it, folded it. He wielded the axe again a few more times, noisily, and as Spade sprang up, leaving the operator bound and gagged on the floor, called: "Ready?" and jerked his head toward the door. Just before he followed Spade out the door, that bit of paper dropped in a conspicuous place on the ravaged desk.

THEY mounted and sped away in the direction their companions had taken. A spurt of some five hundred yards brought them abreast a sedate frame building whose big windows, half-curtained with green baize on brass rings, bore the legend: FERNALD CITY BANK. The street and environs seemed to be as deserted as the station. In an alleyway at the side of the bank Spade and Lowry saw another of their band herding five horses.

Before they themselves could dismount, the four other partners, their guns glinting menacingly in the declining sunlight, backed out quickly through the wooden pillared front entrance. The man with the silver cord carried a canvas bag with bulging sides. Their guns, silent up to now, belched flame into the air as they leaped into their saddles—a warning, or perhaps merely a gesture of derisive good-by. Then almost with the precision of a cavalry unit, they swung their horses and thundered down the road.

In a few moments only a settling cloud of dust, merging with the sunset haze of the horizon, marked the passage of the mysterious raiders.

Some hours later the seven sat around a fire in a dense cottonwood grove. They had ridden forty miles since their informal call at Fernald City and they were tired and out of humor. Their faces now revealed by the crackling flames, it was to be seen that they were all young men, possibly none over thirty-five: the youngest, addressed by the others as Curly, a slim lad not turned twenty, with gray eyes so pale against his deep-tanned skin as to seem well nigh colorless; the oldest, the man called Lowry, heavysset and wry-mouthed, and with close-clipped hair already showing streaks of gray.

They lay prone on clumps of buffalo grass or sat resting against their saddles, smoking and muttering in monosyllables when they talked, which was seldom. Not far away a stamping in the brittle underbrush or an occasional snort or whicker disclosed that their horses were picketed in the shadows not distinguishable except when a big rolling eye caught a fleeting ray from the fire. The men were hungry, for they had not eaten since midday; and the prospects for a meal before noon of the following day, to judge from the trend of the talk, seemed decidedly slim. Their chief, the man in the silver-corded sombrero, was speaking:

"Yuh sure yuh wrecked up that telegraph complete, eh, boys?"

"Lowry smashed 'er to smithereens," chuckled Spade. "Didn't leave enough to send a squeak over."

The chief spat and rubbed his jaw. "*Bueno*. Then the first news they can git to Halfmoon Junction'll be by the

eleven o'clock train. By that time we'll have cleaned the Security Bank an' be headin' fer Colorado an' points south."

Curly, whose lean fingers had been tinkering with a loose cinch-ring, now pushed his saddle aside. He stared intently across the fire at the chief for a moment, then said quietly:

"Jake, yuh'll have to count me out, I reckon."

Stubbed, travelgrimaced faces jerked, wearied postures stiffened to sudden attention. The men all looked as if they had not heard aright. All eyes shifted slowly, uncomprehendingly from the speaker to the chief.

"Huh? What's that?" he grunted, his jutting brow furrowed.

"I said I'm quittin', Jake," came the drawling, even reply.

"Yuh mean yuh're not fixin' to sit in on that Halfmoon job tomorrow?"



The pale-faced youth shook his head, slow, from side to side. His glance rested on the saddlebags that lay beside the chief. "Uh-huh. I'm takin' my split an' pullin' my stakes now."

**T**HE chief clamped his strong yellow teeth together like a buzzard gnashing its beak. He leaned forward.

"Listen, yuh vellerbelly. I'm here to

announce nobody gits a red cent o' this haul—"his eyes swept the circle—"that don't ride into Halfmoon with us tomorrow mornin'."

"Yuh mean yuh won't give me my lawful share?" Curly flared.

"My talk was plain."

"Then, by God," exploded the hot-blooded youth, "I'll take it out o' your measly hide!" His hand raced for his holster, but before he could draw, two arms of steel whipped about him. The wry-faced Lowry, agile as a cougar, had leaped up and seized him from behind.

"Easy. Easy, kid," Lowry cautioned. "There's no call fer gunnin'. This yere kin be settled plumb peaceable."

"Who asked yuh to butt in, Lowry?" Jake snapped. "Yuh take too much on yerself fer a newcomer, d'yuh know it?"

"Aw, he's only a kid—" still grinning, unabashed. "Probably wants home so's his mama kin wipe his leetle nose."

"Let me go," the youth panted, his legs thrashing. "I'll beef the crook if it's the last thing I do."

"Let 'im go, I tell yuh," cried Jake, his face contorted. "I'll fix 'im so's—"

At which point Curly suddenly sagged, crumpled to the ground. It happened with such amazing swiftness that none of the others saw much more than a blur of motion. As the youth fought wildly to free himself, Lowry had pulled his gun, brought it up and crashed the barrel against Curly's skull.

"Guess that'll take some o' the cussedness outta him," was Lowry's dry comment as he deliberately replaced the weapon in its holster and squinted at Jake, who was torn between fury and astonishment, too flabbergasted to speak. Lowry was still grinning, but his hand lingered near the pistol-butt. "These

young 'uns ain't got no respect fer their elders these days, not any."

Jake worked his lips nervously boring with gimlet gaze into the other.

"Yuh're a cool 'un," he muttered at length, but his hand slipped away from the region of his breast and the tension of his body relaxed. Then he cocked an eye as if reconsidering, spat as if disgusted with the whole business and took up one of the saddle-bags.

"Let the little skunk have the money," he growled. He thumbed through a couple of packets of new banknotes and threw them across the fire to fall near the prostrate figure. "Yuh, Lowry, since it 'pears yuh've gone in fer child nursin', git 'im outta my sight. The sooner he clears out the better fer his health."

Lowry picked up the thrown money and stuffed it into Curly's inner coat pocket. Then slinging the youth easily over his shoulder and stooping to catch up his saddle with his free hand, he moved off to where the horses were picketed. He dropped Curly at the foot of a tree, quickly saddled the youth's horse, and returned to him.

The pale-eyed Curly was just stirring from his coma. Lowry shook him none too gently. Curly opened his eyes, licked his lips, and felt dazedly of his head. Then, memory returning, he spluttered an oath and tried to make a lunge at the grey-haired man bending over him. But Lowry grabbed and twisted a handful of his shirtfront, high up near the collar, pushing him back. With a furtive glance toward the fire, he whispered:

"Yuh keep still, yuh fool, hear? It ain't your fault yuh ain't smoked out this minute. Why, Jake could give yuh a leap-year head start an' still beat yuh to the draw." He peered over his

shoulder again, then smacked the inner pocket where he had put the currency, with a flick of his fingers. "Yuh got yer money. Now take my advice: Yer pony's all saddled. Fork it an' vamose—pronto."

Slowly Lowry released his grip but continued to hold him with his eyes. Curly reached into the pocket, partially pulled out the packets of bills and stared at them hard. Without a word he shoved them back, and got to his feet, then, untying his horse he swung into the saddle and headed the animal south.

IT was about eleven o'clock that night when Curly rode into Halfmoon Junction. The town was the county seat and important as a terminus for trail-drivers from the south with herds of longhorns to sell, and whither northern ranchmen came to buy. Abounding in saloons, gambling-rooms and dancehalls, and a floating population of cowboys, miners, muleskinners, honkey-tonk sirens, cattle kings and derelicts, gamblers and assorted suckers, it was usually a very lively place. But tonight it seemed, to one who knew it as well as Curly, that things were singularly quiet.

The gay, raucous noises were muted somehow; there were few people on the street. There seemed to hang over the town an aura of restraint, or of ominous expectancy. Or was it his imagination, his own uneasy conscience, Curly wondered and pulled his hat lower over his eyes.

His throat was dry and he pulled up before the largest saloon in town, Pete Westervelt's place, bearing the quaint sewing-circle name of "The Idle Hour". He tied his horse at the hitchrack and entered. There were plenty of people there, the bar and gambling tables were

crowded; but once again he was assailed with the impression of unwonted sobriety and tension.

Curly unobtrusively found a place at the bar-counter and smiled as he saw the look of surprise of one of the barmen who came up to take his order. It was the walrus-mustached Pete Westervelt himself, the owner distinguished from the help in that he wore black suit and no apron.

"Dog my cats!" cried Pete, wiping a red hand on a damp cloth and extending it toward Curly. "If 'tain't Rance Benton!"

"Howdy, Pete," Curly said lightly, shaking hands.

"Ain't laid eyes on yuh fer two years. When the devil d'yuh git back to town?"

"Tonight."

"Wal, I'll be—Where you been hangin' your hat all this while?" Pete hastened to pour a drink and pushed it toward him. "Seems to me I heard yuh'd drifted up in the Dakota country punchin' cows."

"Yeah, I reckon I've been migratin' 'round some," admitted Curly, and poured down the whisky neat. He squinted through the empty glass and grinned. "Ain't changed the quality of your rotgut, I notice. Still coupla shades worse'n rattlesnake poison."

"Ha-ha," laughed Pete, giving his mustache end an embarrassed twirl. "Same old Rance. Allus have yer little joke."

Some one clapped a hand on Curly's shoulder from behind, and he whirled, reaching for his gun. He looked into the faces of Sheriff Neil Stokes and his deputy, Hank Glassick. The Sheriff's smile of greeting froze and his hand remained outstretched as he noted the alert crouch, the half-arrested reach for the pistol.

"Why, hello, Sheriff," Curly stammered, forcing a grin.

"Wal, wal, wal," said the Sheriff in his hearty bass, recovering himself. "If yuh promise yuh won't shoot me, I'll shake hands with yuh."

His heart pounding, Curly shook hands with both.



"Funny, the Colonel never told me yuh was back. How are yuh, Rance? Kinda expected yuh'd be hung long afore now. Back to stay?"

Curly, to avoid questions, said he reckoned so, and invited them to a drink, which they accepted. As Pete came back to attend to them, he remarked to Stokes with a chuckle: "What d'yuh think of our visitor? Same old Rance, eh?"

"Ain't been tamed any, if that's what you mean." The Sheriff good-humoredly surveyed the pale-eyed youth from head to foot. He chewed the end of a stogie, frayed and extinguished. "Gettin' to look like the spittin' image of the Colonel. By the way, we're expectin' him to show up any minute."

"Here?" cried Curly.

The Sheriff nodded. "Goin' to make a little talk an' do some recruitin'."

Curly looked puzzled, and Pete put in knowingly: "Gittin' ready fer them bandits."

The words sent a chilly tremor up the youth's spine and made the hair at the base of his neck prickle. To hide his consternation he swallowed his liquor at a gulp.

"Yes, we aim to be ready fer 'em if they show up tomorrow. You heard, I s'pose, Rance? Jake's boys held up the Fernald Bank this afternoon. Got away with more'n forty thousand dollars."

"That so?" the youth said in a dead voice. "I hadn't heard."

"Fer a fact. An' they had the gall to leave a note sayin' they was headin' here to hold up yore Dad's bank. Me, I sorta hope they mean it."

"What I can't understand, Neil," spoke up Glassick, the deputy, a bandy-legged and slightly stoop-shouldered individual, "is why, if they does mean it, they go fer givin' it away. Don't listen reasonable to me. Take the trouble to mask their faces an' then leaves a visitin' card, yuh might say. How do we know 'tain't some other gang cashin' in on Jake's reputation?"

**T**HE Sheriff hitched up his trousers about his bulbous equator and wagged his cigar emphatically. "Wal, whoever they be, if they come, they'll git to see plenty fireworks, an' not the fourth o' July kind neither. We'll lead 'em up so's their onery carcasses'll be too heavy to drag aroun' comfortable."

Curly looked anxiously toward the entrance. His heart pounded so hard he felt sure the others must hear it. He told himself he must leave—and now. He threw down a bill to pay for the drinks. In his agitation he did not realize it was one of the brand new bank-notes and only became aware of the fact when Pete commented laughingly:

"A hunnerd? Say, Rance, yuh must



be flourishin'. Ain't yuh got nothin' smaller?"

Curly blanched under his tan. From the tail of his eye he fancied he saw a look of suspicion appear on the Sheriff's face. Not six inches from Stokes' sleeve, in the youth's breast pocket, were nearly four thousand dollars in identical crisp new bills—his share of the loot of the Fernald Bank.

In a voice he hardly recognized as his own he said: "I have, but I'd like to bust it, Pete." And with affected levity, "Made a little killin' at poker."

But their attention was diverted by the entrance of several newcomers. Two or three were influential cattlemen, one a rich mine-owner. Conspicuous among them was a slim, white-haired man of medium height, cleanshaven except for a bit of whisker under his lower lip. His eyes had the same striking greyness as Curly's, and he walked with the erect military carriage of an old soldier.

"Here comes the Colonel now," said Stokes. The banker spotted the Sheriff at the same moment and he and his group approached.

Curly, feeling definitely trapped, stood rigid. The two pairs of pale grey eyes met, clung. Then with a gasp, an exclamation of pleasure, the older man was at the youth's side in a few eager strides.

"Rance! My boy!" he cried, his hands on Curly's shoulders, his eyes shining with a suspicion of tears. He pressed him to his breast, then held him off to scrutinize him again, displaying a depth of feeling Curly had never suspected in his parent.

"You rascal," he chided Curly in a rather quavering voice, smiling with delight, "I ought to whop the livin' tar out of yuh right here in public, goin' off

thataway. We've got to stick together from now on. The bank's doin' more an' more business every year. Need a bigger place, an' I've been figurin' of raisin' a new buildin'—of brick—the finest on Main Street, b'gosh. An' print on the windows in big gold letters: "Halfmoon Junction Security Bank, J. F. Benton *and Son*, proprietors. How does that strike yuh?"

CURLY felt his eyes smart and in his throat the cords seemed to become entangled in knots. He grinned and admitted it sounded fine to him, while he hated himself as he said it and his brain was in a state of turmoil. Why in God's name, he asked himself, had he stopped in Halfmoon? How could he have been such a jackass? It had been his intention to keep going, heading south. Vaguely his destination was Mexico, where a young fellow with money in his jeans was sure to find plenty of excitement. What devilish impulse had tempted him to stop off here? Was it homesickness? He couldn't say, and thought bitterly he'd give every cent he had to be a hundred miles away.

"Yuh know, son, I was gettin' plumb worried yuh'd never get back," his father was saying. He smiled. "Don't need to tell *me* how cussed stubborn yuh are. So two-three months ago I hired me a Pinkerton to see if he could round yuh up. He traced yuh up into the Black Hills an' later to an outfit up 'round Fort Benton, but I reckon he sorta lost your trail up there—ain't heard from him in nigh a month . . ."

Here the sheriff intervened. "'Scuse me, Colonel, but seein' as yuh got most everybody corraled 'round the bar, how's fer startin'?"

"What's that? Ah—oh, yes. Rarin'

to go, Sheriff." He gave Curley's arm a squeeze and said, "Got a little speechifyin' to do. Won't take a minute."

Hank Glassick, the deputy, set a chair in the center of the floor, and Benton mounted and called for attention. Singly and in groups the men drifted over, till they were massed solidly before him in a semi-circle in attitude of respectful interest. To most of them Colonel Benton was *the* man of the town, and his bank was the rock on which it was maintained. Without preliminaries the white-haired banker plunged into his subject:

"It seems, gentlemen," he uttered with a twinkle of grim humor, "that the gang of cutthroats stylin' themselves Jake's Boys is plannin' to pay us a visit tomorrow mornin', with the intention of makin' free of the bank an' the town in general. I suppose yuh-all heard about it by now—"

Something like an angry roar went up from that case-hardened assembly of punchers, miners, trappers and outdoorsmen. Distinguishable in the outburst were cries of "We'll string 'em up, the—!" and "We'll make crow-bait outta 'em!"

"Those Jake's Boys," went on the Colonel, "are a powerful bad lot. They need exterminatin', an' if I know this town we're the folks to do it . . ."

The men broke in and shouted *their* approbation.

"Now I've been discussin the thing with several members of the Cattle-men's Association an' other prominent gentlemen an' it seems to us the best way to handle it is in a businesslike way. Now it's our idea an' Sheriff Stokes' to deputize twenty-five men, preferably single. I personally will undertake to finance the payroll. An' those of yuh that are tied up with a job, I'm sure

your bosses will let yuh off for the purpose. Those that want to sign up, the Sheriff and Deputy Glassick will swear yuh-all in at the corner of the bar."

There was another wild shout, and a mad scramble of the listeners to reach the Sheriff first.

During the foregoing scene Curley had remained standing at the bar, not far from the door. With the feeling of an icy hand groping round his heart, he heard his father's words. He passed his hand over his brow and it came away wet. Licking his lip nervously, he waited, for the colonel's eyes commanded the entrance. But a few moments later, in the confusion and rush of the men eager to offer their services, he found his opportunity.

Unobserved, he slipped to the door and out. He quickly untied his horse at the hitchrack and jumped into the saddle. In five minutes he had left the town well behind him.

## CHAPTER II

CURLY rode into the night, with a late-rising moon, huge and sickly yellow, shedding a wan radiance over the uneven trail. His horse had carried him far that day, was nearly fagged. But the youth was determined to put as *many miles between himself and Halfmoon as possible. Almost as if actually hard-pressed by some enemy,* he forced the faltering animal to the limit. He had covered about ten miles when the horse stumbled in a badger hole, almost throwing Curly clear out of the saddle. At the same instant he thought he heard a sharp crack, and his heart contracted as he swung down, expecting to find a broken foreleg. But a hasty examination disclosed no fracture,

though the animal limped painfully and he realized that it could carry him no further tonight, probably not for another day or two.

It was twenty miles to the next town, and the nearest ranch-house was nearly half that distance. He decided there was nothing for it but to camp out and, slowly leading his limping mount, he began searching for a likely spot.

He was passing through a densely thicketed swale when he spied what appeared to be some sort of habitation, about two hundred yards from the trail, and almost hidden by a screen of cedars and jackpine. It was a deserted shack, and he remembered it belonged to a trapper who ran a line over the ground in the winter. The night—it was after one o'clock—had grown uncomfortably cold and the place would have to serve as shelter. He tied his horse to a tree, unsaddled it and carried saddle and blanket to the shack.

Within he found, by the light of a match, a bit of candle stuck on a rude table. The place looked and smelled as if it had known no humans for years. Its single rough-boarded room was dank and moldy, and monstrous cobwebs hung from the rafters, swaying eerily with the chill breeze that Curly let in with him. The furniture consisted of a bunk fashioned from planks against one wall and covered with a pile of mildewed burlap, a stool and a couple of small packing-cases evidently used as chairs, a few rusty cooking utensils hung on nails and a tin Dutch-oven with some ready-cut wood piled nearby.

Curly lit a fire, threw off the rotted, ill-smelling rags from the bunk and spread his saddle-blanket on it instead. Then he rolled up his coat for a pillow and, blowing out the candle, stretched

himself out wearily, smoking a last cigarette.

He was quite calm now, and felt safe. What that day would bring to Jake and the gang didn't trouble him much: He was out of it and in the clear. Though for Lowry he did have a little sympathy. Too bad about him. He was a queer sort of critter, Lowry, but the more the youth thought about it the more did he feel convinced he owed his life to the wry, grey-haired man.

**T**HROUGH Curly's mind flashed a picture—Jake's Boys riding confidently into Halfmoon, drawing up in front of his father's bank. Then suddenly, out of the silence of the early



morning (for the raid was planned for nine o'clock, the hour of opening) a blast of flame, a withering fusilade, bullets flying from a score of hidden vantage points. The gang, trapped, cut to

pieces before they could even get into action against the unseen foe . . .

Who had betrayed them? Whence the note revealing the identity of the gang and the plan to attack? And if the Fernald telegraph was wrecked, how had the news reached Halfmoon?

Rack his mind as he would, Curly found no answers. He watched the glow that came through the chinks of the stove, throwing fitful patterns on the dust-packed floor, till he fell asleep.

He awoke late that morning, hungry and depressed. He went out to look at his horse, found some swelling of the sprained leg, and gave up all thought of using the animal that day. He let the animal graze near a small brook.

Suddenly his attention was aroused by the pounding of a horse. Through the trees he glimpsed a black, bald-faced animal galloping along the trail. It was riderless, but even at a distance he recognized it as Jake Slemm's mount. It was moving at a dead run, as if frightened, and was soon out of sight. Curly wondered what it meant.

Returning to the cabin, he found a greasy deck of cards on a shelf and tried to amuse himself playing solitaire, but his interest was gone. With a sweep of his arm he sent the cards flying in all directions, jumping up and striding the room.

He whirled when he felt, rather than saw, the door open. Standing on the threshold was Jake himself. His silver-worded sombrero was gone, his left arm, soaked with blood, hung limply by his side. In the hand of the other was a Colt forty-five. Evidently he was as surprised to see Curly as the youth was to see him, for his beady eyes widened and he caught his breath. Then his face twisted in a horrible leer.

"So it's yuh. I reckon I see it all now."

CURLY stood frozen. The buzzard bleakness of Jake's face was accentuated by his frenzied anger. Wordlessly he jerked the gun upward, and the pale-eyed youth raised his hands at the silent command. The bandit chief kicked the door to behind him. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt. He took two quick steps forward and pried the pistol from Curly's holster, using the injured arm with painful difficulty and nearly dropping the weapon from the nerveless fingers before he succeeded in getting it onto his pocket. Bright trickles of blood ran down the hand and sprinkled on to the floor. The simple act seemed to Curly to take hours.

"Now tie my arm," Jake gritted through his teeth.

The youth looked into the muzzle of the forty-five and it looked to him as large as a hogshead. He licked his lip and nodded. He took Jake's arm and carefully pushed back the sleeve above the elbow. A bullet had gone through the forearm, splintering one of the bones.

"Got nothin' but the handkerchief to tie it with," he showed Jake his bandanna.

"Tie it," Jake spat out, casting a quick glance toward the shack's single window. "Tie it tight." He looked back to Curly and went on, biting off his words: "So yuh thought yuh'd git away with it—doublecross us an' git us all shot!" Well, they prett' near cleaned us, the whole bunch, but they never got Jake. Ain't yuh sorry, yuh—"

"Yuh're wrong," said Curly, without looking up from the arm, "I didn't doublecross yuh."

"Don't want to die, do yuh? Don't like the idea, do yuh? Mebbe I ought to thank yuh an' leave yuh to collect the reward?" his voice vibrated with rage. "There's ten thousand dollars on my head. Reckoned on gettin' it, didn't yuh?"

He jerked his head toward the window. The dull thunder of approaching hooves was heard—many horses, by the volume of sound, and running at a rapid pace.

Curly was tying the knot of the impromptu bandage. Suddenly he gave the injured arm a terrific wrench, pulling Jake around so that for an instant he was off balance and the gun out of position. Jake uttered a sharp cry of pain, followed by a grunt as Curly sank his right with every ounce of his strength deep into his midriff. Then he was swarming all over the outlaw chief, his legs entwined around his trunk, his hands clutching to gain possession of the Colt. The two went down with a crash that shook the cabin.

Jake was a much bigger and more powerful man, but it was two hands against one, and the chief had lost a great deal of blood. He lunged with his knee at Curly's groin, gouged weakly at his face with the fingers of the injured arm. They rolled, reversed positions, snarled like wildcats, kicked and butted. But the pale-eyed youth clung to that gun-hand, never once let go, and he was gradually forcing it behind Jake's body. Desperately Jake heaved himself up, trying to turn. There was a reverberating roar. Curly felt his enemy grow limp in his grip.

For several seconds, panting, his hair streaming over his eyes, he stared uncomprehending. The gun had gone off, tearing a great hole in Jake's throat.

Then came a ghastly rattle, Jake's body twisted convulsively and lay quiet. He was dead.

CURLY staggered to his feet. Outside the throbbing beat of hooves was still to be heard, but they seemed to have passed the shack. A moment later they were coming nearer again, from the opposite direction, as if the riders had been attracted by the shot. Soon he heard animals crashing through the underbrush toward the place. Curly had not moved from the spot. He saw the door fly open at a kick, and the frame bristled with rifles and shotguns.

It was about a dozen of the Sheriff's posse, Stokes at their head; and with him, stern and erect, a Sharps rifle grimly clamped in his hands, was Curly's father. They stared at the youth, then at the body at his feet. After a moment's hesitation, Stokes stepped forward and turned the body over.

"That's Jake Slem," he announced, straightening, to the Colonel. He seemed to be puzzled, and raised his brows at Curly: "What happened, Rance?"

Curly knew that anything he might say would sound highly improbable. With an impatient gesture he brushed the hair out of his eyes and spoke:

"I came an' stayed here last night. A while ago the feller came in, wounded, an' asked me to tie up his arm. He had his gun out an' said he was goin' to kill me. I tied his arm an' then we fought for the gun. Next thing I knew he was dead."

Curly read nothing but incredulity in the faces before him. His father's eyes were narrowed and were observing him intently.

"Are yuh tellin' the truth?" the old man snapped.

"I'm tellin' yuh how he came to be killed."

"Why did yuh disappear last night? What made yuh come here?"

The pale-eyed youth felt the best thing he could do was to be silent.

"I've got nothin' to say," Curly muttered, white-lipped.

"Now see here, Colonel," the good-hearted Stokes began, but the Colonel cut him off.

"Sheriff, two of that gang got away. One of 'em was Jake. Who was the other?" His eyes shifted toward his son and burned into him. "These scoundrels killed Hank Glassick and wounded two other decent citizens tryin' to uphold the law. The law makes no exception between my son an' any one else's. If Rance was with 'em, by God he'll hang as high as Haman, if I have to spring the trap myself!"

Stokes was almost in tears. "But, Colonel," he protested, "we've got no proof—"

**N**O SOONER had he uttered these words than three newcomers pushed their way into the room. They had just ridden up, and one of them carried a pair of leather saddlebags. They stared curiously at the body on the floor, and Stokes explained in a single word: "Jake."

"Got him, eh?" grunted the man with the bags, whom Curly recognized as Hank Glassick's brother, Jess. "Sorry I didn't git the chance to do it myself. That makes five we got—one of 'em got away, seems like."

He did not notice the glances cast in Curly's direction, and went on: "Look, Sheriff. Took these offen Jake's bald-face hoss. Found him down the trail a stretch. 'Pears like the onery—slipped

off an' let the cayuse run, to put us off the track. Look what's in one of 'em." And unbuckling the flap of a pouch, he up-ended it and a small shower of fresh new bills in packets fell onto the table.

"The Fernald money," ventured the Colonel.

Sheriff Stokes picked up a packet and examined it. The bills were hundred-dollar notes. Suddenly his brows contracted. He shot a quick glance at Curly.

"Yuh changed a brand-new hundred-dollar bill at the Idle Hour last night, Rance," he said quietly. "Might happen yuh got any more on yuh?"

The youth swallowed hard. "I don't see that it's any of your business."

"By God, we'll make it our business," cried the Colonel. "Search him, Sheriff."

"Nev' mind." Curly felt the game was up. He reached into his breast pocket and laid down a stack of bills. The sheriff examined them, compared them with those from the saddle-bag.

"The series numbers match," he announced dully, biting his lip and averting his eyes from the Colonel, too overcome to meet his gaze. But the banker was beyond paying attention to anything but his son. He had gone dead-white, and tremors agitated the muscles of his seamed cheeks. He stood before Curly and seemed to increase in stature with his wrath, till the youth felt dwarfed.

"So yuh were one of Jake's gang," cried the banker. "A common, ordinary desperado and murderer. My son. Well, yuh've sown your seeds an' now yuh'll reap your harvest. An' may the Lord have mercy on your soul, for yuh'll get not a particle from us!" He turned to Stokes. "Sheriff, do your duty. Arrest this man for murder!"

## CHAPTER III

IT WAS a grim troop trotting back to Halfmoon Junction along the sun-drenched trail. Crows cawed noisily in the bare branches of the slender birches and cottonwoods. To the east the far-off hills shimmered in the noon-day glare. The world was bright and cheerful, with a breeze just nipping enough to whip up the blood and make man feel it was good to be alive. But there was no joy in those riders. The words they were muttering were of death, not life.

No one knew how it started. Perhaps it was Jess Glassick, aching to be revenged for his brother; it might have been one of the others. However it was, talk of lynching started and now it was mounting to a dangerous pitch. The Sheriff, who was silently riding a little ahead by the side of the banker, found himself becoming acutely worried. They were still a mile from town, where he could safely lodge Rance in the strong County Jail. First there had been some grumbling and a few guarded threats. Now the party was openly voicing its opinion that Rance ought to be seized and strung up.

Just this side of town was a massive old cottonwood known far and wide as "The Necktie Tree", because of the fact that from its projecting lowest limb more than one cattle rustler, horsethief,

and badman had swung off into eternity. Little wonder the Sheriff felt nervous. Once he got Rance safely by that ill-fated spot—

From the corner of his eye he regarded the Colonel. Surely he must be aware of what was going on behind them, must have heard some of the wild, inflammatory utterances. But Benton's face remained impassive, his mouth set and adamant. For a moment the Sheriff considered warning the men to desist from such thoughts, but he was afraid that by the very act of admitting he took them seriously he might incite them to the violence he wished to avoid.

He stole a furtive glance at Curly. The youth was on Jake's handsome bald-faced stallion, the dead chief himself slung like a sack of meal across the pommel of one of the men. Curly's arms were tied behind him. His eyes, like those of his father, looked straight ahead, as if oblivious of the rest of the world. Instinctively Stokes spurred on his horse, as if to hurry the party by the dangerous place.

Now as they were coming abreast of the Necktie Tree, four horsemen detached themselves from the main body, trotted forward and headed off the Sheriff and Benton. One of them, Jess Glassick, swung up knee-to-knee with the Sheriff, who was forced to rein in.

"Jes' a minute, Sheriff," Glassick said.



"We're stoppin' off here for a li'l while—got a piece o' business to negotiate." His three companions had their rifles trained on Stokes and the Colonel, not too obviously but in a careless fashion that was however belied by the tense look on their faces. When Jess leaned over and pulled the Sheriff's rifle from his fingers, he was so dumbounded it was seconds before he recovered to burst out:

"Hand back that gun, Jess. I warn yuh, don't yuh boys go an' do anythin' foolish. Don't do nuthin' yuh'll be sorry fer. Gimme back that gun, I tell yuh."

Jess disregarded him, and spoke to the banker. "Colonel Benton, we're plumb sorry to have to do thisaway to yuh. We don't aim to hurt nobody 'cept them that has it comin' to 'em. So ef yuh'll jes' let us mind that-'ere rifle of yourn—that's right—"

**T**HE old warrior had relinquished it without a move of protest, without stirring a muscle. The band had stopped under the fatal tree, and one of the men was taking a coil of rope from his saddle.

"For God's sake, boys," wailed the Sheriff, "don' yuh do this thing. It's criminal." He appealed to Benton. "Yuh gotta stop 'em, Colonel. Yuh kin talk it outta them. They'll listen to yuh where they won't to me."

The banker's lips hardly moved; his demeanor had the severity of an Old Testament prophet: "He sowed the seeds. I won't raise a hand," he said.

"But, Colonel, he's your own son. At least he deserves a fair trial. It's not justice!"

But Stokes was shouted down with cries of: "We'll save the County th' expense of a trial!" and "Hank Glassick

got no trial!" and "That's what he's gittin'—justice!"

Sheriff Stokes temporary deputies were taking the law into their own hands—ostensibly to uphold it, as is ever the way with mobs. Shaken and helpless, his face drawn with anxiety, he watched as Curly's horse was led under the cottonwood. The man with the rope quickly fastened the noose around Curly's throat, while another climbed the tree and made the rope fast to a thick limb that projected about twenty feet from the ground. Still another came over and roughly pulled the youth's feet from the stirrups.

Glassick circled his mount close to Curly. "Got anythin' to say before yuh step off?"

The youth's eyes flashed defiance and contempt. "Get it over with," he said.

Glassick hesitated, glanced toward the Colonel, sitting his horse austere and stone-faced as a statue. "Wanta say good-bye to yer father?" he offered.

The youth's pale eyes swept over him. "Don't waste any kindness on me," he said sardonically. "Finish your job."

Glassick held a quirt in his hand in readiness. One slash with it at the bald-face's flank and it would be over. A rider suddenly emerged from a nearby grove of trees and was trotting toward them, shouting to Glassick to hold on. Curiously the posse turned to face the newcomer. Curly's heart jumped as he recognized the wry-faced Lowry.

"Necktie party?" Lowry inquired innocently, looking about him with a smile.

"Who are *yuh*?" growled Glassick.

"Reckon I'm the feller oughta be playin' the villain in your mellerdrama. What yuh want to annoy that nice kid fer?"

"This nice kid," spat out Glassick,



"was one o' the gang that tried to hold up the bank awhile ago. Now git outta my way."

He raised the quirt again, but the newcomer leaned over and seized his wrist, Lowry was still smiling, but his eyes were not. "I jes' said, mister, that yuh got the wrong feller. *I'm* the man yuh want." He turned to Curly. "Have yuh been joshin' these geezers into believin' yuh're one of Jake's Boys?"

Curly met his eyes, then grunted: "I told 'em nothin'."

"Thought so," Lowry nodded. He glimpsed the star peeping from under Stokes' coat and turned to address him. "Yuh're the Sheriff, ain't yuh?"

Stokes, hemmed in by several armed riders so that he could hardly stir, ruefully admitted he was.

"Wal, I'm Bart Lowry o' the Pinkerton Agency—might've heard of me."

"Lowry?" the Sheriff's features lighted. "I shore have. One of the best range dicks in the business, I've heard."

"Thank yuh," Lowry said modestly. "Also, Sheriff, it 'pears I'm about the last man o' Jake's gang left alive—the one yuh failed to ketch."

**T**HE horsemen surged closer around the speaker, gaping and excited. But Jess Glassick glared at him with obvious disbelief.

"What're yuh tryin' to hand us?" he blustered.

"Them's facts. I kin understand how come yuh mistook the kid fer me, seein' we was masked. I'll tell yuh how it was—" he broke off with a wry expression— "But first, would yuh mind re-movin' that rope?" he motioned toward Curly with his head. "Makes my innards kinda onsteady to think what would happen if that cayuse was to shy."

Sullenly Glassick slid the knot of the noose and lifted it over the youth's head, not without warning Lowry: "Make yer talk good, stranger. Or mebbe we'll be celebratin' a double hangin' instead."

"Nothin' wrong with your sense of humor," grinned Lowry, but became immediately serious. "It was thisaway: I'd been honin' for a long time to ketch up with Jake's gang. But they was a slippery outfit, as yuh know. They'd pull a job an' lose themselves in some hide-away. So I had no more luck'n a hundred other detectives an' Government agents that was houndin' Jake's trail. Then one day headquarters asked me to trace some fool kid that up an' strayed from home. An' huntin' down my young maverick, blame my cats ef I didn't run plumb into Jake's gang by accident.

"Wal, from then on I stuck prett' close to Jake's roost. I got to talk to 'im an' after a while I'll be switched ef he didn't somehow git the notion I was one o' his own kind—a bad man on the prod. Dunno what give him that idear, onless mebbe some cock-eyed fairy stories I thunk up an' pertended they happened to me.

"Finally, he gits plumb friendly an' invites me to join the Boys, which was just what I was playin' fer. We was sorta isolated an' there was no way I could git in touch with the law. So o' 'course the thing to do was to stick with 'em, which I done. That's how come I was on the Fernald job yestiddy. I'm the feller that left the note in the telegraph office to let yuh know we was comin'. I was supposed to wreck the instruments but I took pains not to hurt the transmitter none though I chopped up things prett' general."

"So it was yuh left the note," the Sheriff exclaimed.

Lowry nodded and went on: "An' this mornin' when I rode into Halfmoon with th' gang—"

Colonel Benton thrust himself forward. He had been listening eagerly; he did not know whether to believe or disbelieve. "Yuh mean yuh rode in with the bandits knowin' we'd probably be waitin' to blow yuh clear to the devil?"

"Wal," Lowry scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully, "there warn't no other way o' trappin' 'em, far's I could see. Had to take the chance." He smiled. "An' a point in my favor, I *knew* there was the blow-off comin'. So when the shootin' began I was ready to duck quick. In all the excitement I sorta dropped outta sight an' here I am."

But Jess Glassick was still unconvinced. "Yeah, but that don't explain how he—" Jess jerked his head toward Rance—"comes to have Fernald Bank money on him."

"I begin to see the light," smiled Lowry. "Yes, sir, I think I do. I gave this lad four thousand dollars in new bills that Jake Slemp handed me as my share of the Fernald job. Seein' I wasn't shore how I'd come out in the raid this mornin', I give it to the lad fer safe-keepin'. Is that the money yuh're referrin' to?"

"Yuh mean to say yuh gave four thousand dollars to a feller yuh didn't even know?" cried Glassick.

"Who said I didn't know this yere lad?" said Lowry. "'Course I did. Why, I'd been chasin' him down fer three months. He's the one I was tellin' yuh about—him that strayed from home.

"When I found him up around Sundance, I made 'im promise to go home. But before I could even send in a report to the office, I falls in with Jake's Boys, so I never heard if he did till last evenin'. We was camped 'bout forty miles

north o' here an' I was takin' a pascat by myself when I run across 'im ridin' by. I talked to 'im for a minute and slipped 'im the money to keep for me."

**L**OWRY talked so fluently and with such naturalness that his listeners could hardly fail to be convinced. It was such a glib mixture of truth and fancy that even Curly himself was almost ready to believe all of it. But Glassick wasn't through:

"Did yuh hire a Pinkerton to find Rance?" he wheeled on Colonel Benton.

Lowry's eyes narrowed. He seemed tense as he watched the faces of the posse turn toward the banker. The white-haired man, pale, cleared his throat. He looked at Lowry.

"I did," he said. "It's clear this man is telling the truth." He turned angrily on Jess Glassick. "Yuh fool," he cried, "can't yuh see? My boy's innocent—in-nocent."

Lowry somehow looked immensely relieved. He added confidently, grinning: "If there's still any doubt about me bein' me, why, there's the telegraph office. A wire will git my credentials here in no time."

"There's none," said the Colonel dumbly. He pushed his hat off his forehead in an absent manner, looked about himself helplessly, and tears sprang into his eyes. The iron will that had submerged every trace of emotion during the near-lynching gave way and he seemed about to break down. Silently he wrung Lowry's hand, thanked him in an unsteady voice. Then with a glance toward his son that seemed to ask forgiveness but was ashamed to ask it, he swung his horse about and with bent head trotted slowly toward the town.

The turn of events had produced a

remarkable change also in fat Sheriff Stokes. Now feeling entirely vindicated, he resumed his official air with a rush. Frowning, he tore his rifle from the grasp of the man who had it, squared his shoulders, stuck a cigar in his mouth, and took active command of his deputies again.

"Every blamed one o' yuh owes a vote thanks to Mr. Lowry," he scolded them. "Ef 'twarn't fer him it would be my painful duty to run the whole damn' kaboodle o' yuh in fer murder." He regarded the posse indignantly and they, now thoroughly cowed, looked meek enough. Even Glassick had slunk back into their midst to efface himself. But the Sheriff picked him out: "Yuh there, Jess. Hump yerself an' loose them ropes offen Rance. It's the least yuh kin do."

Glassick obeyed without a murmur and the sheriff continued: "An' I ain't heard nobody givin' Rance credit fer killin' Jake. Why, we might never've ketched him 'cept fer Rance. I aim to see he gits the reward."

Once again Lowry seemed more than mildly startled. "Yuh killed Jake, Curly?" he asked.

"We fought for his gun an' he got shot," Curly said quietly. "But there's no reward comin' to me. If any's due it belongs to Hank Glassick's widow."

**A**T THIS, with that mercurial change of heart so common to mobs, the

men who but a few minutes before could not get the youth strung up soon enough to suit them now cheered him at the tops of their voices.

"Well, now, that's better," beamed the Sheriff. And then, staring at the old cottonwood with the yellow noose swinging in the breeze, a thought occurred to him. "But before I ferget it, yuh, Jones an' Barnaby—" he addressed two of the men—"I want yuh to fetch back a couple axes an' chop down this Necktie tree. It offers a sight too much temptation to some folks!"

And with that the party started back to town, the Sheriff riding at their head. For the most part the men were silent, lost in their own thoughts. But Lowry and the youth, trailing slightly behind and riding knee to knee, were carrying on a quiet conversation.

"Why did yuh do it?" Curly was asking, contrite and humbled.

"Heck, yuh ain't no killer but a damn' fool kid that got mixed up in bad company, tha's all. Yuh might not believe it, but when I was your age, I was prett' wild myself." He smiled wryly at the youth—"an' I didn't turn out so bad after all. I figger mebbe yuh might do the same. Yuh won't let me down, will yuh, son?"

The youth's pale eyes shone as they turned to the gray-haired detective. "Yuh can trust me. I never will."

*In the Next Issue*

**DUST DEVILS by CLAUDE RISTER**

**Three desperate outlaws against one inexperienced kid. What happens when the lead starts to fly makes a thrilling story.**

# DOODLEBUG JONES

THE DEP' OF GUNSMOKE GULCH

by SCHAFF

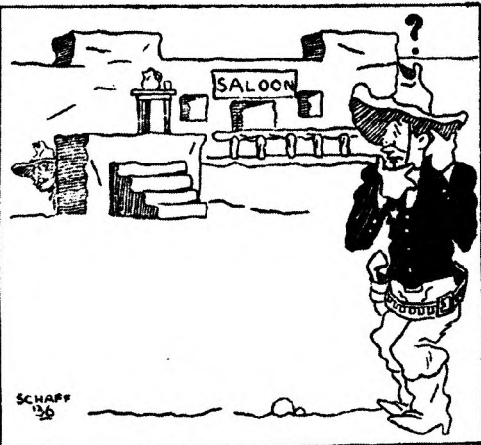
THE ROBBERIES OF EL KLUCKO ARE OUTRAGEOUS- IT IS UNDERMINING OUR TOWN, AND IS BRINGING DIS-GRACE TO THE GOOD NAME OF GUNSMOKE GULCH!!!



WE MUST STAND AS ONE MAN AGAINST THIS COMMON ENEMY- AND NEVER REST UNTIL HE SWINGS FROM GUNSMOKE TREE !!!



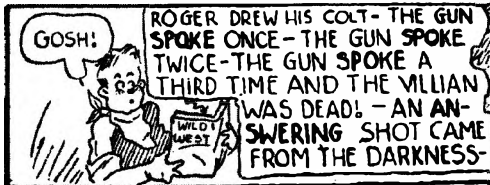
FURTHERMORE, WE SHOULD BE BRAVE AND COURAGEOUS, AND READY FOR BATTLE AT THE FIRST SIGN OF A SHOT !!! WE -



SCHAFF '36

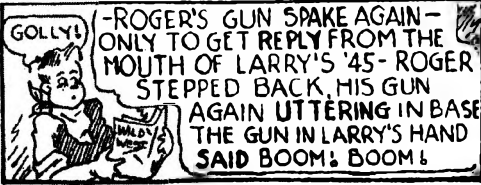
GOSH!

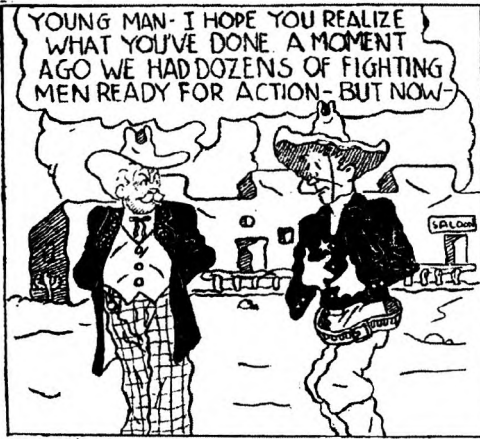
ROGER DREW HIS COLT- THE GUN SPOKE ONCE- THE GUN SPOKE TWICE- THE GUN SPOKE A THIRD TIME AND THE VILLIAN WAS DEAD! - AN ANSWERING SHOT CAME FROM THE DARKNESS-

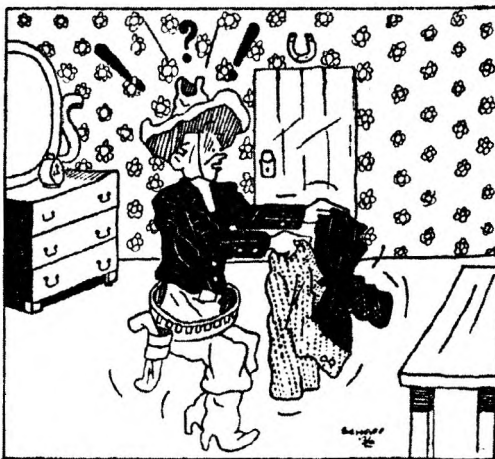


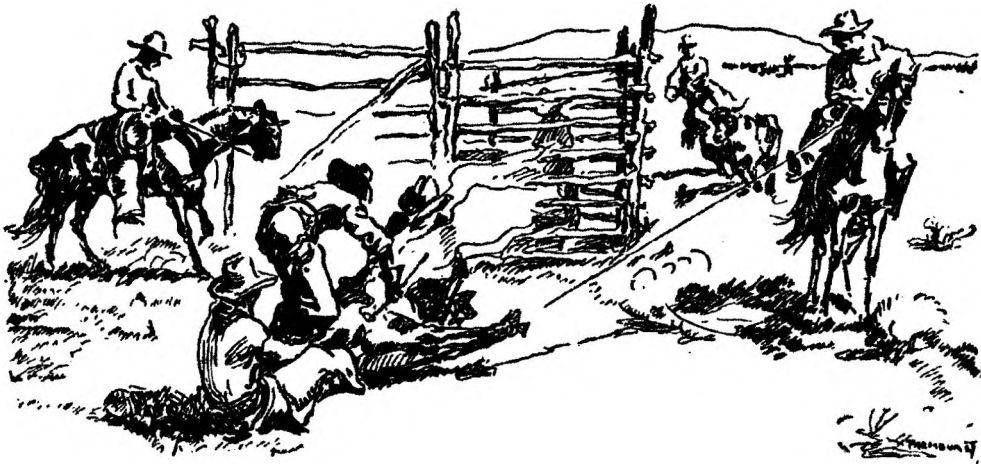
GOLLY!

-ROGER'S GUN SPAKE AGAIN- ONLY TO GET REPLY FROM THE MOUTH OF LARRY'S '45- ROGER STEPPED BACK, HIS GUN AGAIN UTTERING IN BASE THE GUN IN LARRY'S HAND SAID BOOM! BOOM!









## Branding Time On The Ranch

By **Wilton  
West**

**W**HEN a man or girl's heart is filled with love of ranching and the range, writing about it in a limited number of words is not easy, and one must cut corners and touch upon the genuine high spots. Throughout the country there exists and always will, a deep love for the "wide open spaces" and adventure, and the old and new West is packed with it.

Perhaps, after spending some forty years all over our western country, we

can make these monthly installments give pleasure and real information of how we cowfolks live and have our daily being.

First, we rise early, with the dawn, slap our faces and hands in cold water, chuck down plenty bacon, eggs, coffee and hot biscuits, toss our saddles on our broncs and start out for a long day's work on the range. The work has been laid out the evening before, by our boss or ranch foreman, according to range conditions and the work immediately to be done. Late sleepers get a pail of cold water thrown over 'em, and the cook cusses late comers, so it's best to rise early and keep movin'.

We mount immediately after breakfast and out we all go—fence mending, turning back strays, circling the range for cattle and calves needing care, busting green horses, riding after "boggers" and dragging 'em out to hard ground.

We hunt up calves whose Mammias have died and bring 'em home for hand-feeding in our corrals, hold shipping herds together in good grass, set traps for



wild predatory animals such as coyotes, wolves and the like and watch out, everywhere, for rattlesnakes and shooting them pronto. They swell a cow's head up like a balloon and play hell with horses and humans.

That's our usual daily life, folks. Lot's of hard riding, often alone or in pairs,



guns handy and eyes keen for "sign".

Stomach aches, "morning after" headaches, "that tired feeling" and similar neurotic physical ills simply don't exist and are rarely mentioned; and then only to be eyed down into common sense and new "guts". It's a life wherein a man (or girl, for that matter) must "take it on the chin" and smile.

Round-up times on a ranch are exciting and filled with rough fun. Danger, naturally, is always present. Before dawn, all of us are up and in the saddle. The range to be worked that day is divided up among the riders and out they go, usually in pairs, to "ride circle", which means riding their territory and driving all cows found in it back to the home ranch or to the branding corral selected for that day's work.

The country is scoured thoroughly,

which means mighty fast and far riding and, many times, dragging out steers bogged down somewhere and hauling 'em out with your lariat, or finding cattle wandering through "loco weed" range and acting like crazy brutes tryin' to walk circles until they drop.

Down some gully or around some hard hills, your bronc stumbles, turns a somersault, gives you a Gosh-almighty bump, and there's nobody to help you up. If not hurt, or if able to crawl back into your saddle, get up there and keep going.

A man alone and without water, in many parts of the range country, must get himself back to the ranch or feel the blazing sun or howling blizzard ripping him wide open. No baby's game, riding range, folks. I'm giving it to you straight.

Well, back we all come, driving our cows to the branding corral. Other punchers there have already started the branding fires, got the brandin' irons in



the coals, red hot, and are waiting for us. The chuck-wagon stands near, cook fire roaring and the smell of coffee, steak, spuds, beans and flapjacks makin' a rider's nose grow plumb ridiculous. A small herd of cattle is drove into the



brandin' corral, the gate bars shoved into place.

Usually, the branding fire is set right inside the gate. One good roper rides inside, roping the calves or unbranded cattle, one at a time. Best to rope the animal by one or both hind feet, instead of draggin' him to the fire by the head or horns.

The roper drags his calf or other animal to be branded, as close to the fire as possible. Then he sits tight on his rope. Other men now grab the critter, flop him down on one side and hold him there hard. The brandin' men come up with the red-hot irons and jab on the brand, which is held just long enough to burn the brand into the hide.

A hair brand won't last and is only used for trail driving.

While the calf or other animal to be branded is held down on its side, one skilled puncher castrates the animal, touching the end of the scrotum with warn tar or other disinfectant to prevent maggots or worms getting there. Another puncher (often the same man who castrates) slits one or both ears with his keen-edged knife, thus putting on for all time, the owner's "ear mark".

The branded critter is then turned loose and races back among the other cattle. Where there are a lot of cattle to be branded, several branding fires work at the same time, some distance apart, following the same method. And, in many cases, the

branding fires are in the open, minus a corral.

In this case, riders keep riding around the cattle to be branded, holding them in place, while ropers drag out the calves to the fires. The branded stuff is driven a short distance away and held by other riders, to prevent mixing and delays.

The men who have the toughest work at branding time are those who must tackle the calf or other unbranded animal and throw him down and hold him there. Usually two men work at this, though but one does the actual throwing.

Best and usual way is to stand beside the calf, lean over forward across his back, grab a handful of hair and skin in each hand (one near the front leg and one just in front of the hind leg) and, with a quick uplift, fling the calf's feet out from you.

The calf drops to the ground on its side. Plant one knee on his neck and the other on his flank and hold tight. Another man usually then grabs the tail, drops behind the calf to a sitting position

and shoves one foot against the calf's upper hind leg, thus preventing the calf from kicking all hell out of everybody.

Where the animal to be branded is a full-grown cow, it is better for two men to rope the animal, one about the horns and the other about the hind legs. Then both pull on their ropes and throw the animal and, by keep-



ing their ropes tight (one rider ahead of the steer and the other behind it) hold the animal down on its side, while the branding men do their work.

Branding time on a ranch is thus seen to involve much hard and fast riding, much hard physical work from everybody, and with danger ever present. Some people have asked why we castrate. Answer is, who wants bull meat as a daily diet? Try it sometime, folks. And who wants his range filled with nothing but savage bulls instead of marketable beef steers?

Whenever a young man asks me how best to get in shape to ride on a ranch, my answer never varies: "Get rid of your medicine cabinet over the wash-

stand, keep only some Castor Oil and liniment on hand, cut out putting feminine stuff in your stomach and eat plain food, get yourself hard as nails and smile when you stub your toe. And keep on smilin', brother."

But, folks, when the day's work's all done and the cook bangs his old gong and we all ride hell-for-leather to the chuck-wagon and grab our tinware—say, people, that's real livin'! And right after, when the guitars gits goin' some plenty and gals send forth their happy laughter and range songs, that's perfection!

Well, folks, next time I'll tell you about RANCH LIFE AT SHIPPING TIME, and tell you how come the word "Puncher".

## A LITTLE KILLIN'

*(Continued from page 79)*

ing to forty-fives in low-cut holsters. They saw a tall, youngish man hatless, barefoot, and in his underwear.

"Don't!" Brad Callahan yelled.

But already they were drawing with speed that was magical. And Callahan, forced to shoot, drove lead into Lace Fleck's wrist to shatter bones and bulge skin as its flattened nose came to a stop.

Keston's bullet burned Callahan's bare shoulder. His gun bucked twice in answer. A black spot appeared in Red's throat and became larger as he pitched on his face without a sound.

With a wild scream Fleck threw both arms in the air, his right hand dangling and smeared with blood.

Callahan kept him covered while he backed to pick up the double lariat with which he had lowered himself from the top of the canyon wall. Then he went to Fleck and in a moment had him securely bound.

"Hope you didn't plug my hoss," he said softly. "Hope my clothes ain't too much bullet-cut." Finishing, he stepped away for a look at the dead Keston, then at the outlaws' horses nearby with their saddlebags bulging with loot.

"How—how'd you—" Fleck stammered helplessly.

"Eh? Oh, just made up a dummy. Strapped a little sack o' oats on my hoss's chest, which keeps him goin' forward slow. But it took me quite a bother to hoist up to range level, run along it a piece, then slip down in the canyon again. 'Specially barefoot," he explained, looking ruefully at his scratched and bleeding feet. "You see, not knowing which hairpin turn you hombres would try to ambush me on, I pulled this same stunt three other places in the last eight miles."

Then he added sardonically: "Sorry to make you wait so long for a little killin'."



"Señor Ranger," said Black Malone. "He is only a fool whom we must put out of the way, quickly. He will be the first to go—"

# THE Return OF Black Malone

*In One Short Second,  
Black Malone Forever  
Lost His Chance for the  
Revenge He Had Been  
Waiting for Ten Long  
Years*

By  
**Charles A.  
Roberts**

**J**ODE POMROY climbed the dingy stairs to his room with a tread that was quiet and prudent. An easy smile concealed the curiosity that insistently irked his thoughts. Foremost in his mind was the face of the old man who had halted him as he was coming to the hotel. A face gray and ravaged, but with

lips that compressed thinly with an odd vehemence; a hint of remote mastery.

"Will you help me, stranger?" Deepening, the tone had been touched with challenge, masking a scorn that was a protection against jeers. "I can't get a job. I have to eat."

The old man had dropped his head

and stared past a forelock white as a blizzard drift. Odd, a beggar in a cowtown; probably that was why he stayed beneath the soiled and ramshackle balconies of the Mexican quarter.

For all that, Jode had caught a glint, fierce and direct in the old man's gaze. Seamed and sagging, his aged features only heightened the natural hawk-like cast of his face, set off the nose that was sharp and curved like the beak of a desert bird. A strong face for a beggar!

"Yo' oughta be gettin' outa the sun, Dad," he had murmured, producing a roll of bills and dropping a careless five dollar bill into a hardened hand.

The old man had mumbled a gruff thanks, but Jode was certain he had flashed a fierce, hard glance, from under eyelids hooded like the eagle's, at the large roll of money.

Now Jode halted by the knob of his door when his acutely attuned ears caught a faint creak in the room.

He drew his gun, turning the knob of the door quickly. With a long stride he was within.

"Ain't it funny-like, Dad, how a cowhand can get lost in these winding hotel halls?" he drawled whimsically.

The old man turned with the celerity of a hawk. For an instant, fear mingled with fire in his hooded black eyes. Then the glow died. Unresisting, he stood expressionless, old, wide shoulders stooped.

"Funnier yet," Jode jested, "how some shrewd pan-handlin' can point to a bureau drawer where a fat roll o' bills might lie."

"I haven't eaten yet," admitted the man evenly. "But I'm not used to petty cash." He finished these words with a sombre bitter tone. "I had long grass years once. I've been through plenty, but I'll have them again."

The bitter dignity of the words in-

dicated purpose. Sinister purpose? The old fellow didn't wear a gun, so Jode reholstered his, and built another quirky

"A power o' waddies come into Sar Miguel. Over the line in *Mejico*," he suggested good-naturedly. "Right liberal to an old man."

The gleam of terror that flashed in the old man's eyes surprised Jode. "Mexico?" he mumbled. "I don't go there. . ."

Jode's curiosity fired. Dread. The features, too. Where could he have seen a face that resembled so elusively this lean and hawk-like profile? For a vain minute he ransacked a memory whose remarkable faculty for retaining even the impression of the way a man lit a cigarette had made his name one of disquiet to the riders of the waste lands.

Jode had an acute desire to know the man's history. "I'm driftin' out to get me some eats," he mentioned. "Better mosey along. Save the five cart-wheels."

A stir of life crept visibly into the brooding figure. "All right," he assented briefly.

Permitting the other to proceed him, a couple of minutes later Jode turned into an alley which made a short cut to the restaurant. The purple and orange streamers of sunset filled the alley with a violet dusk which blended the outlines of buildings and passing figures.

Jode's hand swung near his revolver; the old fellow might be a decoy, after all. A moment after the thought, a voice called softly, "Pomroy . . . Mister Pomroy. . . ?"

A trap? Or someone with information? He'd have to gamble.

Whipping out his gun, he wheeled quickly. Hardly had he sprung to one side when a six-shooter spat orange flame at the place he'd left. His own weapon jerked. A dim shape crumpled, dumbly.

Jode lunged, weaving, to the side. Red fire stabbed the racketing dusk. A voice snarled, caustic as acid, "Plug the Ranger, yuh fools! Don't waste lead on the old man!"

Jode aimed. A hoarse scream; one of the shapes lurched away.

Suddenly a fleck of white moved, and a heavy slat of wood whipped through the air. A gun clattered on the ground.

"Cut fer it, 'Toad,'" a pain-filled voice blurted. Then the alley was silent.

Jode stepped forward warily. "Dodge the lead, Dad?"

The fleck of white—the silver-haired old man—moved through the dusk.

"Never touched me," he muttered.

"Good," said Jode. "Let's go an' eat."

**T**HE old man voiced an order to the waitress who came up, then leaned forward, his seamed and gaunt features growing sombre, intent.

"So," he asked, "yo're Pomroy? The Ranger?"

"Yore memory," Jode smiled dryly, "is too good, old fellow. Jail doors, I done heard, are real smart aids to keepin' quiet."

With the word "jail" Jode saw the old man repress a curling of his strong slender fingers. "I don't forget the name of the fellow who led that gang, though. 'Tex' Little."

"'Tex' Little?"

"The right hand man—of 'Riff' Kallet."

A cold thrill of energy flowed through Jode. 'Riff' Kallet!

"The name comes sort o' vague-like," he smiled acknowledgement. 'Riff' Kallet was a by-word in the whole Southwest for looted gold shipments, robbed mail trains and rustled cattle, for cowboys found cold and still on lonely sagebrush ranges.

"No friend of yore's, I allow?" asked Jode.

The old man's eyes suddenly burned. His wide shoulders, his tall frame, once muscular, were of a sudden very still.

"Did you ever hear of 'Black' Terrence Malone?" he asked levelly.

'Black' Malone! King-pin of the bandits—a figure invested with a glamor that far outshone the dull brutality of Riff Kallet; daring raider and bold schemer. A legend throughout the West, a song of hatred or reverence in North Mexico.

Some ten years before 'Black' Malone had disappeared, mysteriously, with no clue to the baffling reason or manner of his going. He had not been shot in any raid. That was conclusive. Preserving an unsmiling silence in *cantina* or gamb-



ling hall, his loyal followers had divulged no explanation. The astounding mystery had electrified the West with a ferment of debate.

Hardly daring now to believe his thoughts, Jode met the level black eyes

with a forced composure. "I heard o' him."

The old man said calmly, "I am 'Black' Malone."

Throughout a long, tingling silence their eyes held. At last Jode asked, composure concealing the beat of his heart, "Yo' can prove it?"

"'Black' Malone," said the other impassively, "has the outline of a hawk tattooed on his shoulder. A Ranger would remember the description. That hawk is on my shoulder."

"I heard o' the tattooing," acknowledged Jode, masking his keen excitement. "We'll look at it when we done eat."

Even though in a lifetime passed among dangers Jode had grown used to odd and exciting events, on this occasion he found himself obliged to eat with a willed leisure. The food was like so much dried pulp. What uncanny and astounding events, veiled by mystery, moved behind this man's disappearance?

**I**N JODE'S hotel room half an hour later he saw the blue hawk tattooed upon the old man's shoulder. He nodded, hardly believing his eyes. This, then, was surely 'Black' Malone! What had been his history in the dark years that intervened?

Livid, appalling, a web of weals across his back supplied the explanation. His former lieutenant, 'Riff' Kallet, conspiring with the Mexican governors against whom 'Black' Malone had once led an army of bandits and revolutionaries, had secretly turned him over to the Mexican authorities. To prevent revolt among Malone's loyal followers, Kallet had represented that Malone had been killed in a raid; a deception many of the men angrily suspected.

So for ten years he had lived, suffering

the misery of prison and of convict gangs on Yucatan plantations. By degrees the lashings, the tortures, the labor that killed other men had broken his spirit.

One thing alone had kept alive his hope—an implacable hunger for revenge. 'Riff' Kallet must pay. Eventually it goaded him to an attempt at escape—which had succeeded, to his surprise. He had returned to Caliente, a thousand miles; to find his loyal followers dead after ten years of raiding; to find himself forgotten, without reputation; and worst of all, to discover that he himself was without the will or nerve to strive to depose Kallet single-handed.

Concealing himself in Caliente, he had sunk to the bitter apathy of keeping himself alive by beggary and petty theft; meanwhile consumed with helpless hatred.

Jode nodded, reflectively, when the tale was finished, "So I," he commented, building a quirkly, "am goin' to be the rope that hangs 'Riff' Kallet?"

Black Malone's glittering black eyes were fixed on him intently. "You're a Ranger. You're on his trail. I show the way. You get him and 'Riff' Kallet burns on the hot seat for the men he's left watching the stars. He pays—to you and to me."

"How about that empty set of bracelets that's waitin' for you?"

"I help you get your man, don't I? Myself, I served my term in hell. I have no gang. I—can do nothing."

It was true. Apparently, the old man was finished.

"I'll get grub an' pack burros. We start tomorrow."

Black Malone said nothing. But above the inscrutable hollow jowls, an intense and glittering satisfaction kindled in the old man's eyes.

**A**CROSS the noonday cooking fire Jode Pomroy commented humorously, "Secret hideout, huh? I allow Riff Kallet's jaw is goin' to drop real low when we turn up."

Out of the mouth of the canyon, past a red cone of lava, showed a jumbled maze of naked ridges of cream and pink and buff, within which somewhere lay Kallet's stronghold.

It was odd and surprising the change the old man had undergone. As the prospect of triumph fired his astute mind, he regained strength and confidence. A new ring of contempt and authority showed in his voice, a placid scorn in his good spirits, when he mused tersely on his plans for capturing Kallet.

Now Malone paused, in the instant of lifting a piece of crisp bacon to his thin lips. Along the main trail in the nearby canyon beat the clatter of horse's hoofs. As Malone watched down the gorge which concealed their blaze Jode saw a look of surprise in the other's face which gave way to a lively flush. Without a word Malone strode down the canyon, Jode following with a feeling of curiosity. The old man stepped boldly into the rider's view.

A swarthy stranger reined in his horse with instinctive abruptness. Mute, immobile, he stared in amazement. Recovering, he slipped from the saddle and gripped the old man's head fervently.

Concealing Jode's identity, Malone explained at once. This was Esteban, a loyal member of the band who, it seemed, had remained with Kallet.

Esteban had no difficulty in crediting Malone's return, since vague rumors of the matter had floated up from Mexico. Informed of the particulars of Kallet's treachery, he swore to assist Malone in disposing of him.

Half an hour later, after they had de-

ided on their plans, Malone suddenly asked: "And what of Carmela?"

Jode lowered his eyes to conceal a quick gleam of interest. Carmela! The



old story drifted back to him—an incredibly romantic courtship, audaciously carried on under the guns of the father's troop of *rurales*, climaxed by the bold and breathless abduction of a screaming *señorita* whose coquetry had gone a little too far.

Esteban said, without expression, "Carmela waits for you. She does not e-smile, *señor*. Not for the long years. She suspect, but she do not know. If she did—I theenk she would keel that man! Have no doubt of Carmela, *señor*," Esteban promised Malone earnestly. "She weel 'elp."

Some six hours later, Jode stared upward, concealing his wonder. Built of blocks of stone that were gray and massive, the stronghold of the Kallet-Malone band had probably once been a church. It reposed on a rocky spur which reared from the rim of a mountain plateau,

towering over an expanse rich in grazing land.

The red and orange streamers of the sunset struck a crimson glare from the slopes of volcanic glass which descended to the western bad-lands, when a guard emerged from the secret canyon that opened on the spur.

"These two men 'ave the news for *Señor* Kallet," explained Esteban.

A few minutes later, weary, dusty, but tense with expectation, Jode paced at Malone's heels into a compartment in the ancient building. A squat man sat before the dancing flames of a fire, his eyes little and gimlet-like, his jaw as out-thrust and pugnacious as a bulldog's. His suspicious gaze searched them, then rounded as it fixed on Malone's face. His flattened features paled to a quick mottled grey.

Near the wall three or four men lowered cigarettes and grew very still, hands on thighs, near holsters.

The squat man's prominent Adam's apple moved up and down and he brought his muscular limbs erect convulsively, "Malone," he croaked.

"Remain right still, gentlemen," admonished Jode. The muzzle of his six-shooter moving in a deadly arc, covered them all.

Gun in hand, Esteban echoed: "Veree good advice—if you do not weesh the fast calling card from *Señor* the Seex-shooter."

Kallet put a hand upon the beautiful old church table near him, as though to steady his stunned nerves. "Malone," he repeated thickly, "where did you—" 'Black' Malone's thin lips parted in a smile that was too gentle for comfort. "From the place that only devils come." A man didn't have to be a witch-doctor to read his meaning.

The door swung open and a woman's

high heels clicked into the room. Dark and rich as a 'cello chord, her voice said simply, with the faintest break, "Terrence Malone! So you 'ave come back, after all the years?"

With a cool tingle of wonder Jode turned a glance briefly to the woman whose renown had been blazoned across the West. Her eyes, large and dark, showed a sombre fire. Tall, moving with supple strength, she swept into the chamber. Her aristocratic face, etched with the lines of bitter years, bore a sadness that was calm and contained, below the soft grey of her hair.

'Black' Malone surveyed her with a deep content. "I have come back Carmela," he agreed. Their glances met, mutely, thoughts too deep for speech.

A crooked smile on his lips, Esteban was gliding to the door, while Jode guarding Kallet strode forward and handcuffs clicked.

The four body-guards came to their feet. Carmela swung around. "Who ees this man? An officer?"

"At your service, ma'am," Jode bowed. "*Señor* Malone, I think yo'll come with me."

The glint of satisfaction vanished from old Malone's eyes. "I?" he asked with rising arrogance. "Are you breaking your word? To 'Black' Malone?"

"Yo' don't come as a prisoner. But this gang's goin' to get split up. I can't leave yo' free in this place."

A FAINT noise sounded behind Jode. He wheeled, but before he could make a scant quarter turn some object that was round and cold pressed into his ribs.

"Nor can I leave you free here, *Señor* the Ranger." Esteban's voice held overtones of high humor. "The *señor* weel



raise hees 'ands before they betray heem."

Jode had forgotten about Esteban, who had lingered, unseen, near the door.

His air unmoved, Jode lifted his arms, accepting the twist of events with the calm of one who suffers a loss at cards. A man watched, but sometimes the aces lay in places he couldn't guess . . . Taking his gun, Carmela tied his wrists with a hard rope while Esteban and Malone guarded Kallet's henchmen.

"W'at weel you do weeth thees man. Ter-rence?" she asked, sombre.

"That will be seen later," Black Malone smiled. He swung to the four henchmen. "Men, tomorrow Kallet goes to the Fire Ants. He has kept them well nourished in the past, no doubt. Now, he will keep them—nourished again. I am chief of the Grey Church."

There was an angry stir, as marked as the glowering bull-dog mien of Kallet. "We're followin' Kallet. Nobody else," growled one of the men.

Gaunt and commanding, old Malone's frame with its white hair and hawk face seemed to tower over them. His scorn lashed them like a tongue of fire. "You fools! Does it matter who your leader is if he brings in the game? Have you heard of 'Black' Malone? I was leading an army when this man was a child. My name burned head-lines in newspapers when half of you weren't born yet. 'Riff' Kallet! Pah!"

Hard as they were the men seemed almost to shrink under his scornful and haughty assertion of authority. The fame and power of this half legendary figure had visibly awed them, the squat and glaring Kallet was already losing color and respect.

Black Malone's smile was superior. "A drive of cattle is coming up through the White Plains. Wait for them in the

pass. Esteban will lead you. I'll follow tomorrow."

Frowning in surly confusion, but daunted, the men filed grudgingly out.

"And now, Carmela." Malone's parchment face flushed with lively elation. "It is not often we have the pleasure of dining with our enemies. With the men with whom we are soon to settle accounts."

Kallet's thick neck was swelling; a purple flush mounted beneath his features. "Yu' crazy spavinned fool!" he snarled acidly. "Yu' fired yu'r powder long ago. Don't yu' know yu' couldn't haze this salty bunch?" Wait til I get a-hold of something—"

"Words," Malone smiled softly, "will be all you'll get hold of *amigo mio*. Words, empty as hands."



Moving with the celerity of joy, Carmela had set roasted meat and fruit and glasses filled with the ruby glow of wine upon the dark surface of the beautiful old church table.

"We drink," cried Malone. He filled his glass. "And to the Fire Ants," he

shouted, swinging his glass into the air, "to the red Fire Ants, who remove traitors! Drink Carmela."

Carmela's glass lifted, a trifle hesitant Jode thought. "Thees Ranger?" she insisted.

"*Señor* Ranger," said Black Malone. "He is only a fool whom we must put out of my way, quickly. He will be the first to go—"

"Free," finished Jode. His sinewy bronzed hand lifted from concealment below the edge of the table, holding a sharp edged table-knife made of iron—old church cutlery. "A wicked edge for a man's throat, Malone."

"I'd admire if yore hand wouldn't stray nigh that glass. My eyes never got used none to wine. The knife handle fitted right smart between my knees while I sawed this rope—and yo' celebrated. Malone—stand up and remove yore gun belt."

Their gaze clashed. Black Malone saw something in Jode Pomroy's eyes that warned even him. Impassive, he placed the belt on the table and Jode took his gun. "We mosey home at last. Malone, yo'll walk ahead. Kallet, yo' behind."

**M**OUTH tight, Malone rose slowly and paced to the door, followed by a not unwilling Kallet, whose color was growing more natural. Malone swung the door open. Abruptly a pistol detonated. The revolver was wrenched from Jode's hand with an abruptness that left the fibres paralyzed and tortured.

Gun smoking, Esteban stepped into view. "*Señor*," he smiled with mock weariness, "w'y do you not leave me een peace? Always must I watch?"

"Give me the gun, Esteban." Malone's thin lips curved with a deep and mirth-

less pleasure. "Pomroy, you're a shrewd cool man. I would ask you to be *captain* for Black Malone's band. But you would refuse."

He lifted the gun. "The last card . . . plays . . . now, Pomroy." His finger closed on the trigger. Jode knew that the end was near now, for no weapon was possibly within reach. He faced Malone steadily, unsmiling.

"Ter-rence! You weel not e-shoot."

The unexpected voice was like a dash of cold water. Amazed, Jode saw that Carmela held a gun, covering Black Malone. Her tone was quiet and purposeful.

"Carmela—" For a moment Malone stood speechless, stunned. Her act was like a blow. "Carmela, what do you mean?"

"Ter-rence," she said. "You took Carmela an' brought her to thees so-evil an' empty life. The—w'at you call?—the r-roistering robber's life. But, Ter-rence, then I love' you. Now you weel not take thees young man an' breeng heem to worse—to Death. No."

Black Malone's hawk-like countenance grew stern with displeasure. His gaze was piercing.

"I am the chief, Carmela. I make the orders."

Again his gun lifted.

"Ter-rence Malone, if you shoot I warn you. I weel—e-shoot first."

"Carmela." His forbidding gaze pierced her, dumb with fresh amazement. "You—shoot—me?" Then his stunned surprise altered to a harsher tone. "Carmela, put the gun down!"

"No, Ter-rence. I 'ave love' you. But I am weary of the evil. You weel let thees young man go away. Then we weel go and e-stay some place where it is e-still and there ees no more evil."

A flushed anger increased in his face.

"Do not interfere with me Carmela.-This man dies."

He aimed the gun.

"Ter-rence, I warn you. I weel shoot first!"

The detonation of a gun shook the room. Blue powder smoke curled. Thin lips parted in surprise, his white locks lolling, 'Black' Malone crumpled slowly to the stone blocks of the floor, hawk cheek falling on his outstretched arm.

The woman called Carmela said simply, voice heavy with regret, "The worl' was tired of the evil of thees gang, Ter-rence. You 'ave come to peace at last—at the end of a long and weary trail."

Then turning to Esteban she said sadly, "You will see that Ter-rence ces properly buried cen the old church graves, no?"

"*Si, Señora,*" Esteban agreed, reverence mingling with his stupor.

Carmela following, Jode marched Kaller to the horses waiting in the stable, and, mounting, the three rode away into the star-brilliant night. Carmela looked back at the single pane of yellow that cut the dark side of the Grey Stone Church, then turned toward Jode.

"Weethout the leader," she said wearily, "their evil, eet ees finish'."

And they rode on.



## BOOMER BUCKAROO

*(Continued from page 88)*

that had floored him. It was only a split second before his senses began to return, but it seemed ages. In that space of time, Wolf Rucker leaped toward him, ready

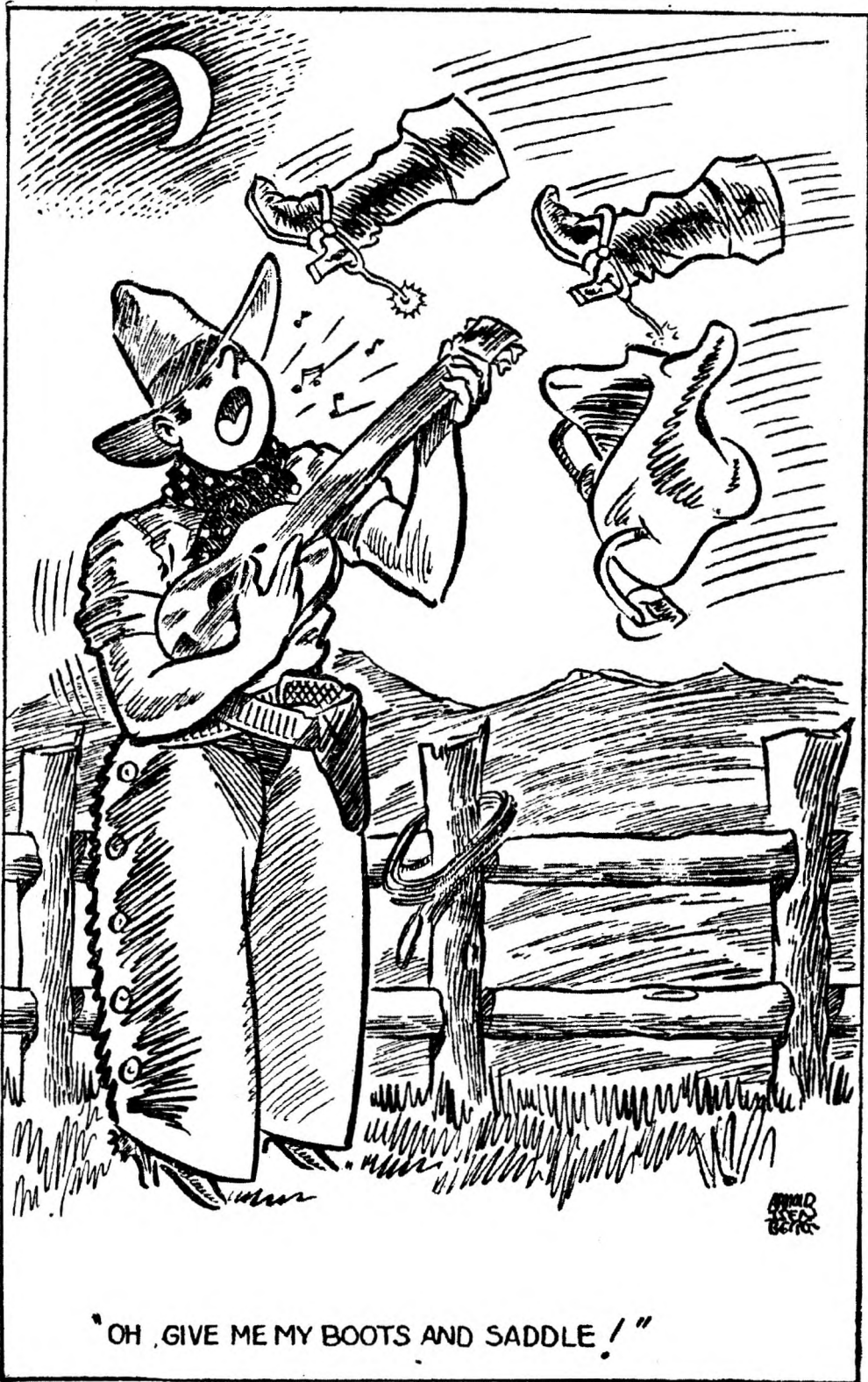
Ranny tried to move his right arm, but a dead weight seemed to hold it down. His left reached for a gun, lifted it and fired. Wolf Rucker fell across the table top, his life blood staining the WANTED circular which had helped to bring him to justice.

Ranny half expected to see more gun-

men come charging in, but none came. Evidently Wolf did not take all his men into his confidence. The fight was over. Ranny crawled over to the bed where he fell heavily.

Tom and Ella Worth bent over him anxiously. The old man ripped his shirt away from the shoulder wound. Ma came running with hot water.

"It drilled clean through," said Tom Worth. "I'll have yuh out of bed in no time. In the meantime Ma an' me will kind of enjoy yore company."



"OH, GIVE ME MY BOOTS AND SADDLE!"



**An Interesting Article About Stamps and Stamp Collecting for Everybody. Each Month There Will Be Another Story About Stamps. Cut Them Out and Save Them—They Will Make a Fascinating Collection.**

**N**O tale of a hell-roarin' town of the Western mining camps ever ran so full of bloody adventure or picturesque characters as the ordinary stamp album. True, the tale is compressed into a small picture on a colored bit of paper that pays the postage on mail from here to there. But the picture or the wording on that bit of paper means something more than that.

For example, the word "gourde" appears on the stamps of Haiti, (whose stamps are the favorite collection-interest of President Roosevelt). The gourde is the unit of money in Haiti, and is worth about 20c in our money. King Henry Christophe established it as the national unit of currency in one of his high handed gestures of whipping his black subjects into a young nation.

This unit of money is derived from

the word "gourd," a melon-like fruit with a hard rind.

The natives used great quantities of gourds of all kinds, as eating and for kitchen utensils. They had no tin or enamel ware. The gourds were their dishes.

When Christophe rose to power, through a sea of blood, he had his soldiers go from hut to hut, throughout the land, and take every gourd in sight.

When he had them all, Christophe told the natives they could buy them back with coffee. For each gourd that a native filled with coffee beans, he could leave the coffee beans with Christophe, and take the gourd home. In this manner a huge amount of raw coffee was collected.

Christophe then sold the coffee to foreign lands, in exchange for gold. He put some of it in his pocket, and the rest in the national treasury—which never had any gold to speak of before. With this gold reserve, he issued currency or paper money, against it, just as we do in this country today.

And the unit of currency was called a "gourde," by reason of the way the cash was raised.

So, when next you see a stamp from Haiti, and you see the word "gourde" on it, it will mean more than just a word. It is a crystallized symbol of a black tyrant's method of raising money for his newly-created nation.

#### **Building a Collection—How to Start**

At the very beginning, you need three things: an album, some hinges, and a packet of stamps.

There are numerous cheap albums available today, even in the dime stores, and a very good beginner's album can be had for less than a dollar.

"Hinges" are small rectangles of gummed paper, used to stick the stamps in the proper spaces in the album.

The stamps themselves can be had from a hundred sources, including regular stamp dealers. They come in packets containing ten to ten thousand different kinds of stamps. Or they can be found in surprising numbers by simply asking your friends for the stamps on their mail.

The procedure is to soak the stamp off the envelope, let it become almost dry, face down, on a piece of blotting paper. Then put a weight on it to press it flat, and let it dry completely.

Then fold a hinge near the middle. Moisten one half and press it against the back of the stamp at the top. Then moisten the other half, and press it into the proper space in the album. Thus the fold of this little piece of gummed paper acts as a hinge, holding the stamp to the album page securely, but removable later if need be.

Don't ever trim off the sides of a stamp, down to the design, nor paste the stamp down flat in your album with glue. A stamp that is torn or cut has utterly no value in a collection.

When a beginner starts to sort over a packet of stamps he soon runs into strange words that he doesn't understand. Here is a brief guide to the more common stamps found in a packet, and their country of origin:

If some of the letters on the stamp are like English letters, and others are not, the country is likely to be Russia, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, or Jugoslavia.

If the letters look like "shorthand" the stamp may come from Arabia (Hejaz or Nejd), Afghanistan, Syria, Turkey, or any one of the Turkish-ruled provinces during the period of the Great War.

"Chinese" characters are found on the stamps of China, Japan, Korea, or the

newer country of Manchukuo. Similar characters are also found on the stamps of North Borneo, but English appears there also. A chrysanthemum-like device nearly always appears on Japanese stamps, and the value is written in "sen," "yen," or "rin." Chinese stamps nearly always use the "cents" word or the good old American dollar sign (\$).

Stamps bearing the initials "RF" are from part of the "Republique Francaise," and most of the French Colonies are understandable as to their spelling. "Moyen Congo" means "Middle Congo" in the stamp album.

"Deutches Reich" is Germany, "Norge" is Norway, "Sverige" is Sweden, "Lietuva" is Lithuania, and "Suomi" is Finland. Holland appears on stamps as "Nederland."

If the value of a stamp is written in pence, such as "1d," and has no name of country on it, it is from Great Britain. Most other countries using the pence sign also give, in English, the name of the colony.

The stamps of the Irish Free State always contain the word "eire," written in small angular letters.

Persian stamps usually contain the words "Postes Persanes," or, for the recent issues, "Iran," the ancient name of the country.

"Pocsta Polska" comes from Poland, and "Helvetia" is the official name for Switzerland. "Eestipost" appears on the stamps of Esthonia, the little Baltic country in northern Europe.

*Let the editor help you with your stamp collecting problems. Address, The Lone Ranger Stamp Editor, 125 E. 46 St., New York, N. Y. Problems will be answered in this column, or enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope for a personal reply.*

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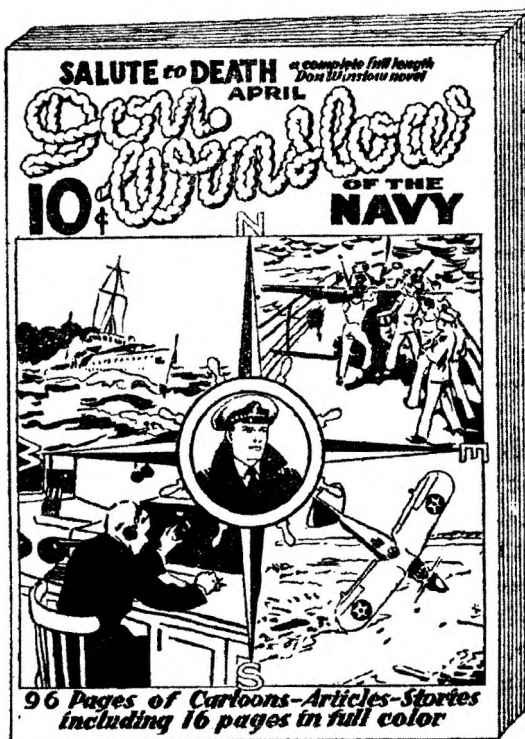
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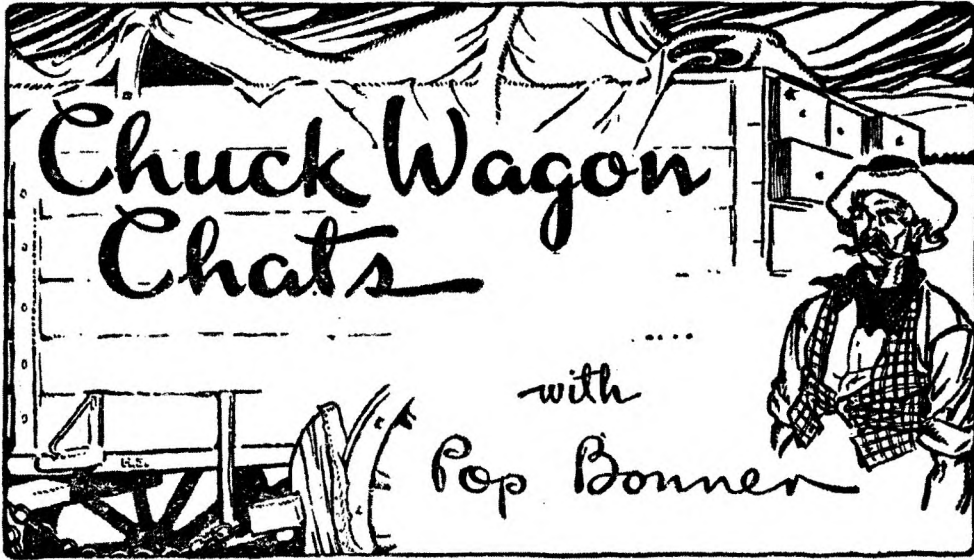
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**H**OWDY, folks. howdy! Shore's plumb *bueno* bein' yere beside th' old chuck wagon an' atalkin' tuh yuh jest like th' boss figgered we'd do when he sent me his telegram tuh come bustin' th' wind an' start meetin' up with you all. Me, I shore was surprised gittin' that wire o' his'n.

Slim Watkins, what chaws a heap o' cutplug outa his forty an' found; Bull Brant, who nobody kin beat stickin' on a sun-fishin' bronc; them two hombres an' me was asittin' straddle o' th' top rail down at our Lazy J cow nursery in southern Arizony, talkin' cows an' red-eye an' 'bout th' new gal what's come tuh Rawhide tuh sling hash an' biscuits—blonde hair, blue eyes an' all.

We was just plannin' bunchin' our dinero an' ridin' in tuh git a meal an' take a squint at her, gals bein' durned scarce down thataway, folks. when up romps Mex Juan on his *palomino* an' shoves th' boss's telegram at me. It said fer me tuh grab th' first train outa town an' git tuh New York pronto an' help 'im run THE LONE RANGER magazine, what ain't no better nowheres.

Was Slim Hatkins an' Bull Brant jealous? Say, folks, them two waddies jest nacherally withered, seein' me rollin' high an' gonna drag down more *simoleons* than they'd see in th' next four months o' range ridin'.

But they've got that new hash-slinger, with me now outa their way, an' one of 'em shore oughta be able tuh marry up with 'er soon an' wire me fer a weddin' present. Them two hombres'd wire me fer money even ef they went an' died an' forgot tuh order a coffin. But I'll have tuh tell yuh more 'bout them two fellas an' that gal another time. Boss's yellin' fer me tuh git busy th' way he's payin' me tuh do an' not jest sit yere honin' tuh chatter with you all.

So, folks, them's his orders. I don't have tuh tell yuh THE LONE RANGER'S the best mag on th' stands—not after yuh've done read this first number. Does our boss know how tuh pick 'em fer yuh? I'll tell th' cock-eyed world, fellas an' gals!

An' what's more, he's wantin' I should ask yuh all tuh drop us a line tellin' us what yuh like best in this



issue. Then him an' me kin pick out more like 'em an' make yuh keep yore cash ready in yore jeans tuh buy th' next number, what's shore gonna be a humdinger an' then some. A grand rodeo o' th' best western writers that ever was born, folks.

But right now th' boss an' me an' his dark-eyed secetary, what I calls Miss Brownie (tuh myself, not knowin' her right well yit), we're pawin' through 'bout ten million MSS tryin' tuh pick out them what yuh'll all like. Sorta a diff'rent life before me now, folks, this sittin' next tuh th' boss on one side an' Miss Brownie on th' other an' us three goin' over these MSS like we war studyin' brands, what's more easy on my eyes than readin' printed words.

But it shore helps a heap tuh have all o' yuh lend a hand; an' yuh kin do it thisaway. Join up with us in our LONE RANGER CLUB an' ride 'longside o' us, tellin' us somethin' 'bout yoreself—age, height, color, what yuh likes tuh do an' sech, yore weight, sign yore name an' address an' mail yore letter in tuh us. An' be shore tuh say which stories in this number yuh've like best, so's we'll savvy yore wants.

THE LONE RANGER'S yore mag, folks, an' we aims tuh please. Besides, ef yuh joins our LONE RANGER CLUB it won't cost yuh a red centavo; nothin' but a *self-addressed an' stamped return envelope* an' we'll mail yuh yore membership cyard, showin' yo're one of us an' bustin' leather aplenty fer pen pals. Yuh'll git lotsa answers an'll find th' world packed with fellas an' gals what wants to hear from yuh.

Well, gotta let th' boss use th' rest o' th' pages fer stories, but we'll be rompin' up tuh th' chuck wagon come next number an' chattin' a heap more. Reminds me o' th' time when Lod

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Littleton, our chuck wagon cook, got chattin' so durned hard while he war acookin' us our noon meal durin' a round-up that he didn't see th' boss's pet cat jump intuh th' gravy pot.

When he stopped chattin' an' started dishin' out that gravy, what war dark brown an' thick, he busted th' long spoon in half an' drewed out nuthin' but th' tail an' hair. Yeah, they's shore a time tuh stop chattin', no matter how pleasant, an' time's up this time.

But watch out fer our next number, fellas an' gals. They'll be a heap a stories what'll keep yuh ridin' herd all night an' yowlin' fer more.

Now folks, ef yuh've got anything on yore minds, jest write me, address yore letters tuh Pop Bonner, care THE LONE RANGER magazine, 125 E. 46th Street, New York City, N. Y., an' we'll try tuh give yuh answers in our CHUCK WAGON CHATS next month.

Until then, rannies and rannie gals, hola, an' "Salud y Pesetas," which same says, to one an' all, "Your good health and wealth!"

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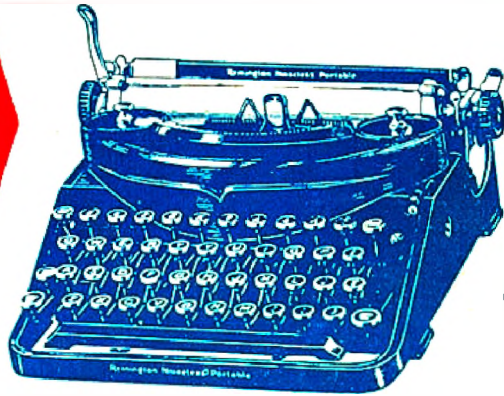
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