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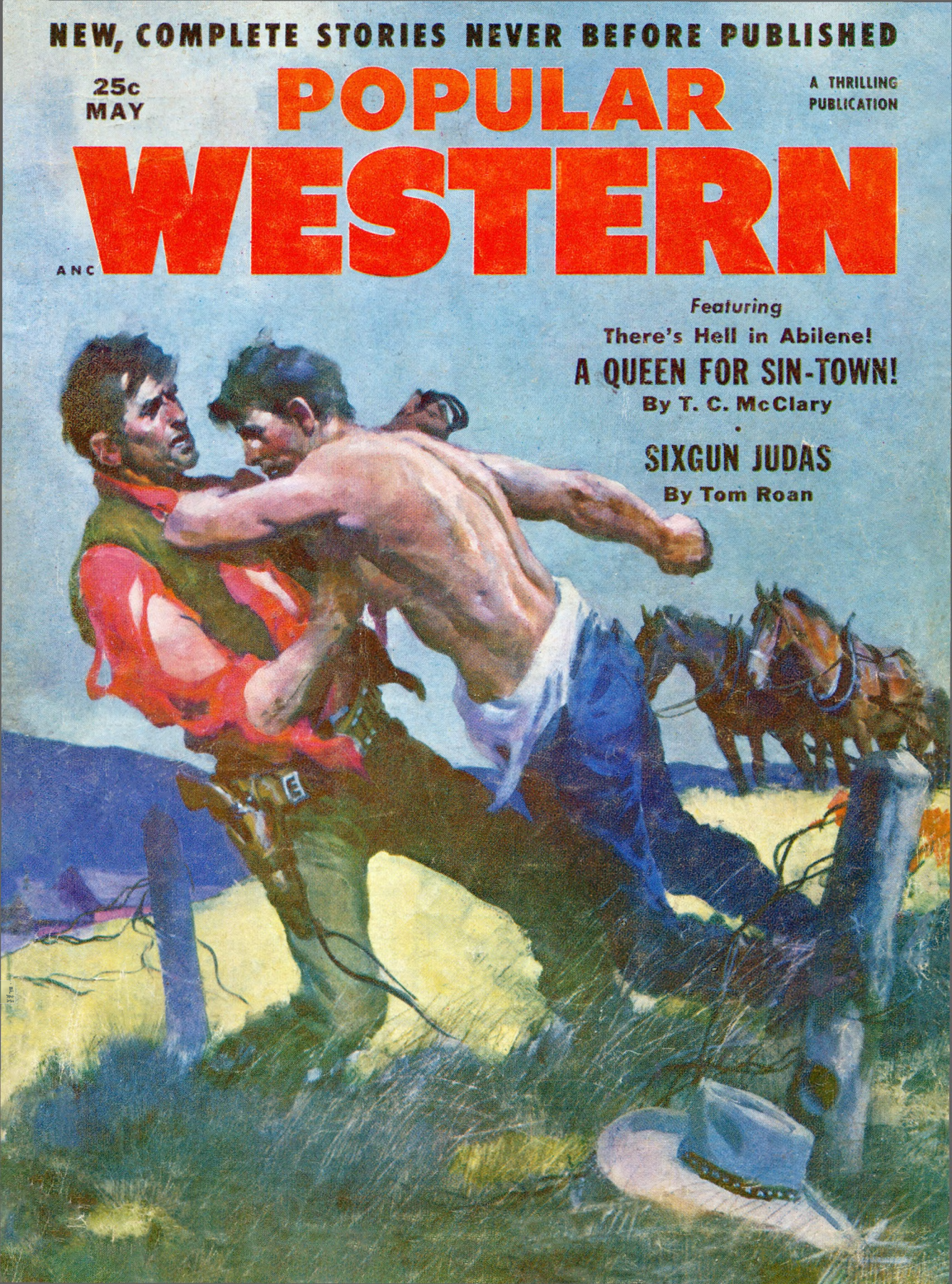

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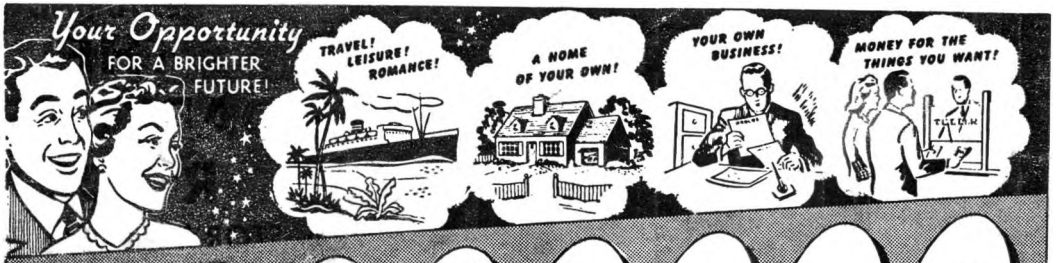

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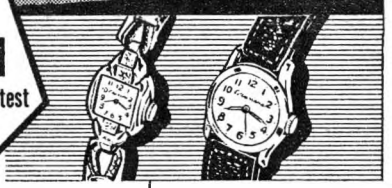

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Note how we identified each object with a word of as many letters as there are boxes in diagram accompanying it. In upper left we filled in word SHOE; in upper right, TIE. In lower left, TIGER; in lower right, PURSE. Note that some of the letters fall into boxes with a little circular frame inside. Those "circled" letters, arranged into proper order, spell out the famous name we are looking for.

Here, for example, the "circled" letters are H T R U. So we run through the names printed under the puzzle and discover Babe RUTH, whose last name is the correct solution, and whose picture you see at bottom.

SAMPLE PUZZLE

Solution is One of the Names Below:

Zane GREY — Henry CLAY
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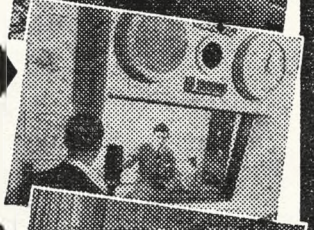

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Vol. XLIV
No. 2

POPULAR WESTERN

MAY
1953

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW — A THRILLING PUBLICATION

NOVEL

NOVELETS

SHORT STORIES

FEATURES

EVERETT H. ORTNER
Editor

POPULAR WESTERN, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), $3.00; single copies, $.25. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter June 26, 1952 at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879.

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They claim this coupon brings you "good luck"

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"My break came when I sent the coupon!"

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DOC LONG TRAIL

MEN roamed the old West to trap beavers along the rivers. Nowadays they come to trap the rivers. Soon the day will come when every Western watershed will be a prison containing a "captive" river, no longer wild and free, cold and clear, but a chain gang of tame green lakes, guarded by a vast system of dams.

There's no denying that a new era of production and prosperity will result. But it saddens mossy-horned old-timers like me to see even a river lose its freedom. I can name twenty or more, from the Rockies to the Pacific, that were primitive, living streams when I first saw them, and which have since been harnessed and put to work as storage basins for flood control, for irrigation, and to provide power to turn the wheels of growing industry.

Mixed with the benefits of dam-building are some serious disadvantages. When modern progress disturbs Nature's orderly processes, havoc often follows.

Let's examine one actual case, the fabulous salmon run in the Columbia River and the $20,000,000 annual industry that depends on it.

Fish Ladders

Tourists who visit the fish ladders at Bonneville Dam and marvel at the persistence of the migrating salmon believe that the problem of detouring them to their upstream spawning waters is happily solved.

But it isn't. To begin with, Bonneville is a comparatively low dam. It lifts only 59 feet. How about towering 550-foot Grand Coulee Dam? Fish can't climb that. Mighty few, if any, will be able to pass such barriers as the 100-foot Ice Harbor Dam on the Columbia's most important tributary, the Snake. Above that the Bureau of Reclamation intends to build a chain of dams, including the world's tallest one at Hell's Canyon, 740 feet high.

Getting back to Bonneville, the fish ladder there was an afterthought, built only at the frantic insistence of conservationists headed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. It seems downright incredible that the engineers who planned and built such a mammoth project could be so blind to a valuable natural resource like the Columbia River fisheries. But they were.

After that precarious experience, the conservationists tried to keep one jump ahead of the dam-builders. One of the things they accomplished was the transplantation of entire runs of salmon shut off from their upstream spawning areas, to downstream tributaries.

But there just aren't enough feeder streams below the dams. Each tributary has only so many spawning miles. To make it worse, dams are now being planned on some of these fish-producing tributaries.

Providing means for spawning migrators to get over a dam is not the only problem. The baby fish have to come downstream, to carry out their life cycle in the sea. It is estimated that fully 15 percent of the young salmon descending Bonneville are chopped up in the power turbines.

Add to that loss the numbers that will be destroyed at the Dalles, McNary and Chief Joseph dams, now under construction. It is easy to see that not many fingerlings will survive to reach salt water.

Everybody, with the possible exception of dam engineers, knows that salmon is one of the world's most important food fishes.

No other fish is quite like salmon, with its rich red color, its distinctive taste, and its nutritional elements. No other staple food contains such a remarkable abundance of

Vitamins A and B, so valuable in these days of diet deficiencies. In other words, there is no substitute for salmon. Yet our Congress cheerfully authorizes billions for dams—and hardly a penny for salmon study and benefit.

From Ocean to Can

If they had money for the job, biologists figure they might find some method to save at least some of the salmon in the Columbia and other rivers along the Pacific watershed. Once the salmon are destroyed, such studies will be too late. Right now, the National Wildlife Federation aims to persuade the new Congress to pass research appropriations.

The life of a salmon is a complicated study. One reason is that the fish spends most of its life at sea, where its habits are hard to study. Another reason is that they have a different set of requirements in one parent stream than in another. Also, there are five species of Pacific salmon, each dependent on its own rivers, and spawning at different times of the year.

The five species are Chinook, silverside, sockeye, humpback and dog salmon. All of them have other regional names. The Chinook is also called king and spring salmon. It is the principal Columbia salmon, along with the silverside or cohoe, and is also the largest of the salmon family. Smallest is the sockeye, taken in British Columbia and Alaska. The humpback and dog salmon are fish of the far north only. There is also the widely distributed steelhead, or seagoing rainbow trout, which accompanies salmon on their journeys, even into cans on your grocery shelves.

From the time that it is a pea-sized egg deposited in the gravel of a flowing shallow until it completes its life cycle, three or four or five years later, to become a dying kelt drifting downstream, the salmon is beset by natural enemies, by seines and traps and Indian spears and trollers' hooks. It is pursued and preyed on from its place of origin in some high mountain streamlet to the mysterious and uncharted depths of mid-ocean.

Though its numbers have declined, the salmon has survived these many hazards until now. Whether it will go the way of the buffalo depends on the wisdom and forbearance of its grimmest enemy—modern man.

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THE LIARS' CLUB

Can you top these Tall Tales from the West?

Bobcat Oil

IN 1913 in Roswell, New Mexico, my handyman, Sam, and I started for a ride in my old Model T Ford. About 15 miles out I noticed that we were running low on oil. Seeing a sheep camp ahead, we stopped and asked the Mexican herder whether he had any oil around. He shook his head. No machine oil or lard, he told us. However, he did have a gallon of *gatto aseta*—bobcat oil. Anything was better than no oil, so we poured it in the engine. A half mile away we came across a jackrabbit. In spite of everything I could do, that car chased the rabbit for two miles, until the animal disappeared into an arroyo. We had just gotten back onto the road again when we came across a ranch house, and several hounds came out. Well, sir, that car turned right around and ran for 13 miles. That's the last time I've used bobcat oil. Too dangerous.

—Clinton R. Hamilton, Washington, D. C.

Those Poor Gophers!

THE gophers on my old homestead in North Dakota were so thick that I was on the verge of pulling up stakes—that is, until the big storm came up. I never saw a wind like that. It was so strong that it lifted the gopher holes right into the air. The poor gophers had to jump up to get into their holes, and when they came down they broke their necks. I farmed there 60 years and never saw another gopher.

—Douglas Shauer, Hoffman, Minn.

Dog Tale

WHEN Lum Whitaker came back from the Army, he brought with him a dog who had also served in the Signal Corps. The highly intelligent animal had watched Lum for many hours while Lum had wigwagged messages with flags. One day, Lum and the dog went out on a hunting trip. The dog was about 300 yards in front of his master, on the brow of a hillock, when suddenly he froze, his tail straight up in the air. Then suddenly the tail began jerking madly—he was sending a message! Lum watched breathlessly while the wonderful animal wigwagged: "Lum—have—you—got—any—heavy—ammunition? If—not—vamoose. Big—bear—coming—your—way!"

—Adrian Anderson, Birmingham, Ala.

Walking Fence

IT GETS pretty cold on the plains of New Mexico. One time, my mother sent me out to build a drift fence out of what looked like dead limbs lying around in Mesquite Valley. It was a fine fence and I was proud of it. But with the spring thaw, darned if that fence didn't just up and crawl off one day. Those "dead limbs" had actually been frozen snakes!

—Clifford G. Simpson, Hobbs, N. M.

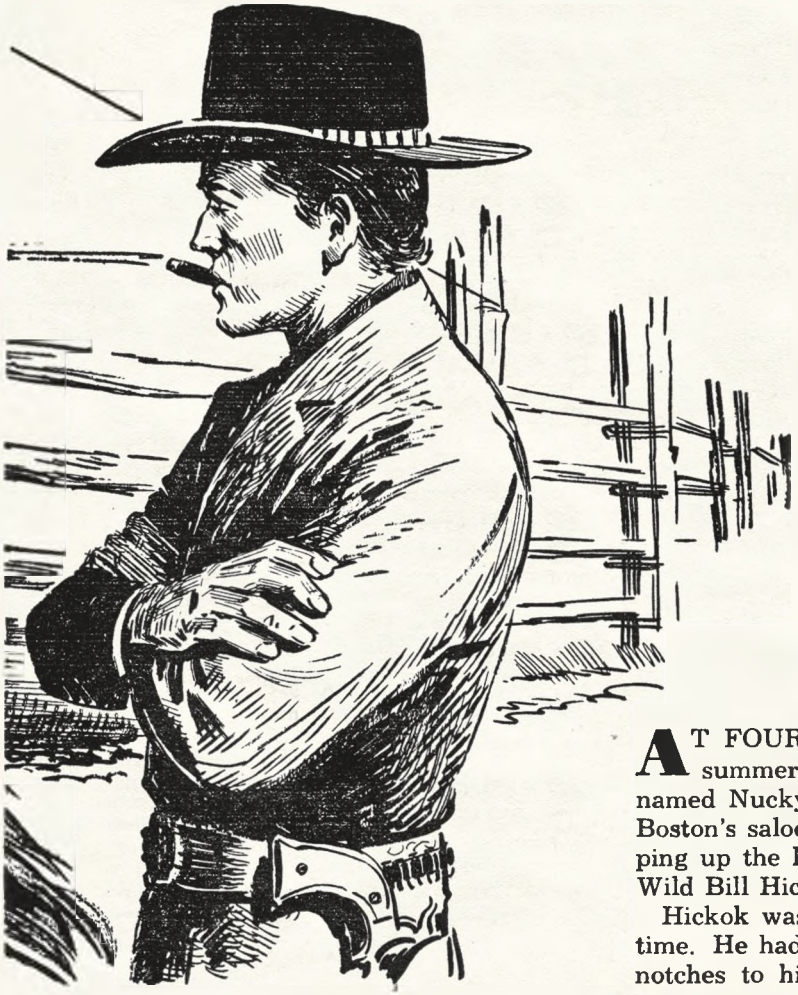
***Popular Western* will pay $2.00 for each tall tale submitted by a reader and used in this department. Keep your story under 200 words. If you want an unsalable story returned, enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Address all contributions to The Liars' Club, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.**

A Queen

A Novel by T. C. McCLARY

for Sin-Town

There was one thing about him she could not know—that women were mere playthings to Wild Bill Hickok, and his only and true love was a flaming sixgun!



"I saw you once on the Natchez boat," she told Wild Bill

CHAPTER I

Flash Lady

AT FOUR o'clock on this sweltering summer's morning, a tinhorn tough named Nucky Nelson ran amuck in Dan Boston's saloon, killing his girl and chopping up the honkytonk in general before Wild Bill Hickok came and dropped him.

Hickok was marshal of Abilene at this time. He had come there with forty-four notches to his tally and nearly doubled

the number in six months. He stood tall and spare and built like a wedge, a man with a thoughtful, sensitive, almost gentle face, yet it had the fierceness of an eagle's when he was crossed.

He stood blowing the smoke from his gun, alert to any false moves by Nucky's pards. He was tallying the damage and it wasn't good—two respectable townsmen wounded, two hoggers badly chopped by flying glass, and a beardless kid with the smell of the Brazos on him whimpering in the sawdust while he held in his guts.

Hickok made a gesture at the hurt men and thumbed two fresh shots into his gun.

"So a mad dog can have his drop of blood!" he rasped. "Where's Dan Boston?"

Nobody knew, or else nobody would tell, and Hickok's eyes turned icy. He said to the chief floorman, "Damn it, I told Boston to get rid of that one! Now you tell him to see that any more mad dogs he's got make tracks, or I'll clean his whole damn bunch of coyotes out and burn this snake nest to the ground!"

The floorman held the marshal's gaze with effort, and also held his tongue. Doc Crawford came bustling in and gave first attention to the townsmen. The kid could die or wait. He was just another Texas cowpoke.

"What started Nelson stampeding?" Hickok demanded of the floorman. "Dan Boston's doped-up rotgut?"

"I didn't notice when he started," the floorman answered sullenly.

Hickok's gun flashed up and down. The man dropped, with half of one cheek cut loose. He lay in the slops and sawdust breathing hard and cursing. When he rolled laboriously to his hands and knees, Hickok reached for his collar and jerked him up.

Hickok said in a flat, merciless note, "You'll still have a cheek to sew back on if you talk!"

THE man held the flesh of his cheek to the bone, and was torn with hate and fear, the only two emotions his breed knew. He blurted on deep, whistling breaths, "I done told you! It was something to do with this new flash woman in town. Nucky's girl started to holler something and he shot her. Then he went crazy."

"Or made out to!" Hickok muttered grimly.

There were forty customers, as well as housemen and girls left in the saloon. It was a strange coincidence that the two men Nucky Nelson had picked to chop up were of the tough fiber willing to speak out against the wanton viciousness of this wicked town. The two hoggers had once resisted, with considerable success, an attempt to roll them in the alley. The Texas kid had probably spooked at the shooting and gone for his own gun.

It looked like a partially setup job, or at least as if Nucky had taken shrewd advantage of an ugly situation. Hickok wondered how the new flash woman's name had arisen. She had been the talk of Abilene for a week, but she had stayed to herself and was definitely superior to visiting any honkytonk on Alamo Street.

Then he wondered about Dan Boston's absence at this time of night when there was always chance of a cowboy raid on the till, and trouble. It suggested that the shady saloonkeep had foreseen the trouble, possibly built it, and taken care to be out of the way. Maybe Nucky's girl knew too much, maybe Nucky did, and it was a good means of getting rid of them both.

It would be thoroughly in character with Boston's gentler tactics. He reserved his rougher ways for special occasions. Such as the time he had personally carved a man limb from limb alive.

Hickok booted his gun and moved to go. T. A. Moffett who owned the tannery left a girl and joined him. He said, "I'll go along with you a ways, Bill. There's something upsetting in a woman's murder —even a woman of that kind."

Hickok nodded, knowing full well that Moffett was coming along for what help he could be in case some of Nucky's pals

or Bostons toughs jumped him from an alley. Outside, Hickok put a light to a fresh cigar, found the taste sour and hurled it down into the street's thick dust.

"Mad dog slaughter!" he growled, anger still churning through him. "It doesn't do one damn bit of good to keep shooting the toughs and tinhorns as long as the respectable element is too gutless to clean out men like Boston and Abe Ives, who runs that other hell-hole.

"It is a hard situation," Moffett answered. "Clean up the town and the Texas trail herds won't come in here."

"I'm not suggesting a Sunday school," Hickok said stiffly. "I just say to clean out the snakes who never show their heads above the ground! Put Boston and Ives and the Widow Charity making dust and this town would be reasonably safe outside of personal gun fights. Let those three get any stronger, and one day they'll take over the whole town, your tannery included."

Moffett grunted, and was silent a moment, then admitted, "Matter of fact, there has already been some effort at a shakedown, but it came roundabout. There's nothing to put your finger on."

They stopped on the corner of Alamo and Main and stood a moment feeling the vague drift of dawn breeze from the prairie, and watching the sky turn saffron above the dark gray landswells. Flare lights still showed out at the stockpens, and cattle bawled between the bangings of a cattle train. Behind them, nickelodeons still jangled and cowboys still whooped, and somewhere there was a lift of deep-chested, brutal laughter and the hollow dump of a man's gasp of pain. But from this corner at this hour, the tough town behind was dim. The sound of the cattle and the trains dominated Main Street, and the street had a solid, rooted look in the early shadowed light of saffron gray.

HICKOK said half-savagely, "There's what made this town. Not Alamo or Front Streets. I'm getting tired of acting as a town butcher of gunslinging cowpokes and cheap tinhorn toughs!"

Moffett considered the marshal with speculation, asking on a tight note, "You ain't thinking of quitting, Bill?"

Wild Bill blew out an irritated blast of breath. "I'd quit fast enough, but I'm stuck until I lick the bunch that's licking the law. I thought I was hired here as a marshal. What it amounts to is I was hired as a killer."

"I can see your point," Moffett acknowledged. "Fighting man to man, or cleaning out a pack of sneaky, bushwhacking, two-bit coyotes are different things. You've had some tough ones to tame, though; fights you can be proud of."

"Damn few!" Hickok answered. "And I'm beginning to taste the scum I have to wade through."

Moffett recognized his bad mood and let the matter drop. Maybe Wild Bill was looking back upon his life and regretting the glory trail that inevitably wore shoddy, and the game that, right or wrong, a man could never quit. He had respect for Wild Bill's manhood and his sympathies were with him. Nevertheles, Moffett knew the fiber of his fellow merchants. Between fear and avarice, they'd put no law in here that actually backed a marshal. What law there was would be carried entirely in a marshal's gun and fists.

Moffett passed a few final words of random gossip and turned off for his bachelor quarters. Hickok moved up Main, attentive to any slightest sound or show of light in stores. Spent-out cowboys had a great way of just helping themselves to hardware and saddlery in particular. On a town basis it was justified. They themselves had been systematically robbed and cheated of up to two years' pay. But it was the Dan Bostons and Abe Iveses and the Widow Charitys who got their money, not the merchants.

Hickok set his steps for the far end of Main, thinking he might walk out to the stockpens to wear off some of his edgy mood. There was a small watering trough halfway. The mystery girl was there on her coal black horse—the beauty who had

the town raving. So was the Widow Charity, in a buggy, driving two of her paintpot hussies home from their night's trade.

Hickok thought of what had been said at Dan Boston's and that this might be a meeting of secret allies. But closing the distance, he saw things stood the other way. There had been an argument over precedence between the women, and the Widow Charity was having her say in lurid language.

The girl on horseback took all she could, then simply leaned down and slammed the Widow's horse with her quirt. The animal jumped, took the bit in its teeth, and took the buggy careening off. The Widow's tipsy fancy girls shrieked, and the Widow filled the street with her man-sized bellow, swearing vengeance of a most emphatic kind.

The marshal grinned, for the Widow was a ponderous mass of brute muscle whose four husbands had died, peculiarly, of strangling. It was not often that anyone bested her, but she was sure bested now and her horse a runaway.

Wild Bill strolled out of deep shadow to the watering trough, expecting that the girl there would show fear, or at least wariness of a strange man at this hour, or that she'd prove as tough as the Widow Charity.

He was wrong. She said, "Good morning, Mr. Hickok. I hope you were gentleman enough not to hear what that she-ogre called me." Her tone was self-assured and cultured. And damned stirring.

It was the signs in her of caste and quality that first struck him. This was the first time that they'd met face to face.

"I caught the bellow, but not the words, ma'am;" he said, and touched his hat. "This is like to be a rough hour for a lone lady, Miss Wandless. It is not a time of day I'd recommend for riding."

SHE noted he called her by name and called her a lady, and a smile of pleasure touched her lips. They were rebel lips, not reckless so much as rebellious and stubborn. It was clear she was a young lady who would have her own way.

She asked, "What hour of the day can a young lady ride out here, Marshal? I had a little experience at the river yesterday afternoon. A rider tried to flirt with me, and then tried to take my bridle."

He asked the details. From her description the man had been Nucky Nelson, and his clear intention had been, by one means or another, to get her to some private place. The idea might have sprung from Nucky's brute arrogance, or to accomplish Dan Boston's ends. Broken and submissive, this girl would be a gold mine for a honkytonk or gambling place.

Wild Bill was rather amused that she'd made a fool of the tough. She had bumped his pony down in the ford and scattered mud and gravel in his face. But on the other hand the marshal was bothered by the self-assurance the incident had given her. There were plenty of men around here more subtle, and smarter than Nelson.

He studied her against the spreading sea of light, noting the peculiar wedge shape of her eyes, the sculptured mold of her face. She wore a riding habit of light bluff corduroy that fitted her lithe body like a glove, and she rode sidesaddle, which brought out her cut and class. She had all the signs of blood and breeding and he wondered how she'd got to this raw, rough, riproaring town.

She studied him with her head a little tilted. She told him, "I saw you once on the boat to Natchez. It was some years back, but you haven't changed."

He looked apologetic. "Maybe if you were in different dress I'd remember you, too."

She laughed and shook her head. It was a low, throaty laugh that stirred a man and lingered. "No. I was a freckled, gawky sixteen, with a proper aunt who wanted to blanket me like a papoose." She made an ironic gesture. "So I turn up at Abilene a gambler!"

He smiled, but a shade grimly. "I am afraid this will not be the romantic adventure you may have pictured. The color of a wild town is pretty thin. The thing under it is vicious, brutal, sordid."

She showed her youth then in the arrogant toss of her head. "I have not gone into this with my eyes closed, Marshal Hickok. You will admit I was able to handle things just now, and at the river yesterday?"

He nodded. "I will admit that, ma'am, and pay my respects."

"I've heard," she said, "that coyotes only attack the weak and hurt, Mr. Hickok. I am not weak, and I do not intend to get hurt. I am not insensitive, but I come of a family of tough fiber."

His mind went back to the McCanless fight that had started his own career and trail to glory. The trail had been painted with gallantry and adventure then. The homage of the crowd had been like a desert sundown, painting a cruel and sterile land with fancy. But once a man started across he could not turn back. If he had the iron in him, he reached his goal, and nobody ever learned of his bitterness and uncertainties. If he was weak, he failed and went out whimpering—but then, who gave a damn?

A woman's life would have a parallel, but a woman could not soak up the beatings of a man. He wondered if this one would make the crossing, or if she'd fall as so many, many had. If she saw this life in its true values, maybe she'd succeed. But if she was misjudging, if she was believing the mirages—

Well, the decision had been hers. And he had the tough-fibered realism of his profession. It was her business.

CHAPTER II

Dude From the East

DAYLIGHT was sweeping through the town chasing, for a brief hour or two, the late drunks, the fancy girls, the footpads off to bed. For a short space the air would be clean and the light would be clean and the activities of the town would not be too bad.

It was a time of day that became Miss Phoebe Wandless's dark, tempestuous beauty and showed her caste, and the breeding she must have had. Wild Bill was glad he had met her in the hour's freshness and in riding habit, instead of sheathed with sequins, and with a background of cards and chips clicking.

"I'll be running my own game at the hotel, Marshal," she told him. "You're welcome to drop in for play or refreshment at your pleasure."

"I'll do that," he told her. "But I still suggest you watch the place and hour you go riding."

She laughed, lifted her reins, and swung her horse downstreet at a canter, leaving him floating in the mystery of her allure. He had another cigar and this one tasted fine. He walked to his home in a mellow mood, the raw heat of an earlier hour burned out of him.

Midway of the afternoon, he went to the station to watch the midweek passenger train rattle in. This was a major event, with cowboys racing the train for heavy stakes, and the town putting on a boomer reception with a brass band. Every bawdy house in town took its best looking girls down to the station in carriages. The runners from the honkytonks and hotels jostled and brawled and occasionally used a knife or gun to possess themselves of some unfortunate greenhorn or drunken cowboy.

The Widow Charity dominated the reception. She came not with a carriage but with a bedecked hayrick toting twenty girls and a long sign reading:

You Call It, We Got It
100 Beautiful Refined Young Ladies

The Widow herself was as outstanding as her sign. Her bull voice issued from a ponderous bosom encased in corsets of wagon steel and the frilliest pink lace she could buy.

On these occasions, she was a sharp competitor with Dan Boston and Abe Ives. Both were on hand, of course, to size up any loose money arriving in town. Dan Boston was a human cannonball of a man

with a smooth moon face that had never been known to change expression. Abe Ives looked like a bald-headed vulture with a mouth full of solid gold teeth. Boston dressed like a piece of painted Indian pottery. Ives dressed like an undertaker.

Looking the three of them over, Hickok wondered if there was any crime they would not commit for a dollar. Ives, it was said, had the only kind streak of the three. He had put a second shot into his brother when he killed and robbed him.

Dan Boston strolled over and said almost conversationally, "I hear you paid my little place a call this morning, Bill."

"I left a message," Wild Bill commented.

"Yes, I got it," Dan Boston acknowledged. "I'll admit that Nucky was a little out of line. But I don't like my head floorman being decorated that way."

"A pistol whipping's the only language your floormen understand," Wild Bill said.

"Well, you sure talked his language then!" Boston growled. "Find out what you wanted?"

Hickok drilled him with a look and said drily, "Yes. It concerned one of the town's latest arrivals."

Boston probed him a moment, then snarled, "Well I didn't tell the damn fool to try and kidnap her or to tell his girl about it! I told him to go meet her and corral her business."

"What was Nucky's girl going to yell out when he shot her?" the marshal asked.

BOSTON never changed an expression. He said, "You know, I been wondering myself. But I guess it don't matter too much now they're both dead, does it?" Mockery glittered on the surfaces of his black lizard eyes. Then he said, "Well, it's good to know we've got a marshal can tame this town and keep the peace. Trouble's no good for business, Bill. Fact is, I hate to see you involved in so much trouble. I figure you're entitled to a little peace yourself."

"I'll make my own peace," Wild Bill told him.

"Yessir, I think you will," Boston agreed blandly. "There's nothing like gun law to do it."

He extracted a small, short cigar, put a light to it, shot Hickok another mocking look and moved back to Abe Ives, leaving his veiled warning twanging through the marshal.

It was nothing that scared Wild Bill, but it was nothing to pass off lightly, either. It could mean that every time he crossed a street corner he'd be a target, that bushwhack death might lurk in every shadow. Worse, if he breasted his assailants, he'd not find any of the men he wanted.

The shrill toot of the train's whistle took his mind from his sour thoughts. Down track, the gaudy little brass-trimmed, red-painted engine careened and jolted at twelve miles an hour across the prairie. The engineer put on a final boiler-testing burst of speed and skidded his train to a jolting stop that turned stage drivers green with envy.

The three cars disgorged a motley throng of toughs, trollops, card slicks, a few drummers, stock buyers and railroad men. But there was one greenhorn today, a dandy whose appearance startled the crowd, froze them with astonishment.

He was a small, dapper man, dressed in the fashion of a Mississippi beau. He looked like ready money, easy money, and utterly incapable of saying "No!" The runners from the hotels and honkytonks stared at him with bewilderment, then came at him like a pack of hungry coyotes.

One of Ives's runners grabbed his valise. With a sap in his other hand, he started to clear a way through the cursing ranks of competition. The dude looked at this human dog fight with amazement that turned to indignation. He tapped Ives's man with his cane.

"My man," he piped, "put down my bag this instant!"

The runner stared at him and guffawed. "I'm just protecting you from all these thieves, dude!" he chortled. "We don't want you to get robbed, you see."

The dude did not see, but he did hear the insolence in the man's tone. His shoulders dropped and his knees went a little springy. His cane drew back and darted

At the alley's end, a brute of a man strode from a door

like a snake's head, tapping the burly tough precisely at the base of the skull.

The tough dropped like a sack. The crowd gawked, then whooped its surprised approval. Another runner started to grab up the valise. The dude's eyes grew sharp, his voice peremptory. "My man," he said, "I've had quite enough crowding. Be off with you before I am forced to chastise you also!"

Wild Bill chuckled and shouldered through the crowd. The runners were still

fighting with each other for this green plum, but the pack could turn nasty and together give him a roughing. Hickok liked the half-pint dude's spirit. He swung some of the tougher runners aside and told them:

"Stand clear of this stranger, boys, and let him make up his mind."

The dude noted his star and looked relieved. He extracted a large silk handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped the dampness from his face. The handkerchief, perfumed, brought fresh amusement to the crowd.

The dude snapped, "Savages!" then said to Hickok, "I thank you, Marshal, and I will ask your advice. I am looking for a quiet little hotel with a good French chef and a stately view."

THE crowd whooped all over again. If a French chef had set foot in Abilene, the boys would have taken him for something on the hoof to eat. As for a quiet hotel, probably the quietest spot in town was the stockpens. The only view around the dude had right in front of him now—a mile of raw plank sheds and false-fronts, or the limitless expanse of hot, singed prairie running into the shimmering horizon.

Wild Bill couldn't think of just how to satisfy the little man, but he did send him off to Mrs. Nugent's where it was possible to rent a room twenty-four hours a day, instead of eight, and where the beds weren't used around the clock. The dude nodded gratefully, and Wild Bill hailed him a buggy and started him off before he let loose his own humor. Abilene had seen some weird characters and sights, but nothing like this. The dude looked like a tropical cockatoo that had flopped down on desert hardpan.

The marshal cleared his routine business and with day's lift of heat, found occasion to stop by Miss Phoebe's hotel. He found her decorating some rooms she had contrived to wangle, and again was struck by her taste and the background it told of. She had no business gambling; she certainly had no business being alone in Abilene. Not that she was entirely alone. She was attended by an octoroon girl she called Chloe, who was almost as striking as she was.

She served him refreshments on her balcony. From here, they could watch the evening's pastel light flood across the baked yellow prairie, and also watch the life of the town. She had jade-green eyes, he found out now. She had a power in her that drew him like a magnet. It was something fierce, pagan, primitive; it was made of the stuff of storms and desert sundowns.

When the shadows fell long and flat and edged with purple, he stood up to leave. She came to him and put her hand within his elbow.

She said on a deep and stirring tone, "I've always wanted to meet a man like you, Wild Bill Hickok. You're a man who holds yourself above the crowd. You'd not stoop to take anything less of life than what you want."

He glanced through the doors at the new green felt gaming tables. "And you, Phoebe?"

She said, "It is what I want. I didn't just drift. I decided."

He said, "I wonder if you really know?"

She lifted her eyes straight up to his. "I think so." She stood there, letting him see down into the deeps of those pagan passions that stirred through her.

He took her shoulders and swung her to him, gently, and yet with the force of a floodhead. Her vibrant body pressed against him as a strong mesa wind presses against grasses. Her mouth was eager against his kiss. She made no slightest murmur, but her lips said, "Take me for what you will! I ask nothing more of this!"

Over her shoulder he saw the room come gently alight as her maid brought in a lamp. There again was the taste that told of caste and breeding, but in her lips had been an honest freshness that told that never before had she offered herself like this.

He set her gently from him. He was shaken, but it was beneath his pride to

take advantage of the moment. The Sphinx was in her eyes, the Sphinx of high emotions. But she'd not known experience yet. She was reckoning life without its costs and penalties.

He said, hoarse with feelings, "You had best do some thinking on this."

She gave a disturbed, half-touched, half-bitter little smile and inclined her head. "I suppose I knew you'd say that," she murmured. "But why? What is there to think when we feel like this?"

"There are always the costs," he said somberly. "In my case, the costs are the notches on my guns. It is a trail I chose and I thought would be good because it was on the side of law."

HE SHOOK his head. "It doesn't make any great difference which side you're on after the killing has been done. The blood has been spilled and the stain is on you."

"Somebody has to tame the bad," she said.

"Yes, but it builds hardness and a violence. I'd not like to think of that kind of hardness building up in you."

He gave her chin a wag with his knuckle. "You had better know me a little better, Phoebe."

She smiled. "All right, Bill. But my feelings will be the same."

He had another ginger beer and a smoke to ease his feelings. He made small talk, telling her about the dude who had arrived that day. He noted the intentness of her expression suddenly. Her eyes were wide, so dark they looked black.

"You know him," he surmised. "Does he mean trouble for you?"

"Never that!" she breathed. "No, never trouble, Bill. He is the gentlest soul alive. But I feel sad because of what I can't give him. And he just follows me and waits to be on hand if I need him."

He asked nothing more, respecting her right to privacy. After a time, he got his feelings in hand and left. Night had fallen in Abilene and sound broke out of the wilder streets with the primitive savagery of sounds rising from a jungle. Recklessness lurked in every shadow. Explosive violence underlay every laugh. Unseen eyes watched every move he made. Only his own molten violence countered the hatred that would have put lead into his back.

He thought of the dude, comparing that gentle life with his own. How could the girl overlook that? How could he offer her only blood and violence and cruelty and danger, even if she were willing?

It didn't make sense, of course. She'd been carried away and didn't know what she was doing. Yet gambling by itself might bear as heavy a cost. It was a door that opened into worse things.

CHAPTER III

The Prize

MISS PHOEBE had been noted and was already marked in town. Hickok caught the thread of that in Dan Boston's Casino and Abe Ives's Mustang Saloon. She'd be a gold mine at their tables. Both men wanted her. She had class and looks, something they'd never had and couldn't buy and they wanted hers as a symbol of their ill-gained power and in whom they could take pride in possessing. Already there was bantering rivalry between Ives and Boston. Both were letting it be understood that in due course, she'd be the queen of their tables. And maybe more.

There was only one difficulty. How were they going to get her, especially since she meant to set up on her own? Neither man was above a little polite kidnaping or use of force and threats, but with a girl of her class, one with her cool resolution, they would need cooperation.

Wild Bill sensed that in the same way he could smell trouble. Before she had even opened her own tables, the web was being spun around her. She was a property her rivals meant to possess.

If she had Wild Bill's protection, though,

they'd do nothing, unless they bushwhacked him first. Never had he been afraid of that for himself alone. He feared it now for the sake of the girl. And how could he give her protection without the risk of involving her in the danger to his own life? What if vengeance against him were taken out on her?

He had still arrived at no clear decision when Miss Phoebe Wandless opened her private tables. The evening was notable for the size of the game and importance of the players. Among them were Abe Ives and Dan Boston, who had washed their necks and doused themselves with cologne and played with fierce rivalry, apparently to see how much each could lose.

The dude, whose name was Gerry Pannel, had gone native as a full-fledged Westerner. He had acquired the biggest white stetson he could find in Abilene, the floppiest chaps and Spanish spurs, and fancied that he could pass for a regular cowboy. This was a matter of enormous humor until the boys got him aboard a burred pony expecting the worst, and he astonished the town by holding leather under him a full three minutes.

It was clear that the gambling girl had the strongest admiration for the dude, was devoted to him, but not to the extent of allowing him to pay court to her. As the days and nights passed she was more likely to be seen dancing or picknicking with the affluent who gathered at her table. And she was reveling in the attention.

Hickok found nothing to object to in her actions, but her good sense was a different story. Both Boston and Ives had surprised him by behaving and each had; he knew, extended some personal protection over her among the tough element. It was some kind of an act, of course, with them having some vain idea she could be won over, and she must sense it. At least she surely would sense the kind of low and sordid snakes they were just from the businesses in which they mixed openly.

Yet she seemed to find actual pleasure and excitement in their company. She shrugged off the stories of their viciousness, much as Wild Bill knew some women to thrill to an Apache war dance with utter disregard of what cruel savages the Apaches were. It was something he could not fathom, for she was both cultured and gentle, and in gaming, she used the coolest calculation. But she did not seem able to realize that men capable of brute violence for small reason were equally capable of using it against her if spurned.

He spoke about it to her tactfully. She just laughed.

"Bill," she said, "a woman has one advantage as long as she holds a man at decent distance and asks no favors. She can never be challenged nor considered to be under obligation."

"You're speaking of decent men," he tried to tell her.

"Oh, come!" she mocked him. "You sound like Gerry. I'm having fun and getting into no trouble, and as far as I know, I'm not causing any."

HE CUT the air with the side of his hand. He told her with emphasis, "You're building trouble for yourself, Phoebe. You weren't cut out for this game. Even at best, you aren't going to like the things around you when you recognize them for what they are. But by then it will be too late to turn back."

She turned directly to him with wide eyes that showed the green pagan flames beneath the surface. She wanted this man and he wanted her, and that was something they did not need to say.

"Bill," she murmured, "you keep harping on my being a lady. What if I went somewhere else and settled in my proper place?"

"Then I would respect you as I have few women," he told her.

"But you'd not follow?" she asked.

He made a gesture. "How could I? I'd have to go back fifteen years and never have handled a gun before I'd marry a decent woman."

"I haven't mentioned marriage," she said softly.

The muscles of his jaws knotted. "What kind of a man would you think me for lec-

turing you in one place, then taking you somewhere else for my own enjoyment?"

Her mouth twisted with taut irony. "Then there's scarcely a reason for me to be a lady!"

He took her by the shoulders. He said, "The reason has nothing to do with anybody else. It is something you should do for yourself because this other life is not in you. You haven't read it for what it is. You're still dazzled by its color."

"What about you?" she demanded.

"I pay the price every time I look at my guns," he admitted. "Now, since I met you, I am paying the bitterest price of all. Except for my past, I could have a future. In your case, there is time before the stain of this life corrodes you."

She shook her head. "For you I'd change. I can't see there is any other reason but that you might want it." Her face grew taut. "But of course, if you don't want me—!"

A knock came at the door and her maid admitted the dude. He spur-dragged in, saying, "Howdy, folks!" with his meticulous, cultured voice and thinking he sounded doggone rangey. He added, "Phoebe, I'd like to sit in your game tonight."

"Why, of course," she murmured, with faint surprise, for he seldom played.

The dude looked at Wild Bill with a curious smile. "Bill," he suggested, "it would be pleasant if you sat in, too."

Bill looked at the girl, considered there must be some reason, and nodded.

Phoebe said, "Well, we have time for a cup of chocolate before we start."

She led the way onto the balcony. Day's heat had drifted off the land and sundown was turning the prairie into a rolling sea of gold and crimson. The peace of day's end hung in the sky, and all three were touched in their own particular ways by its mood. Wild Bill thought what his life might have been if he had been just a poor rancher. And maybe, he thought, Phoebe was catching a vague idea of what he'd

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tried to say as she looked out at that peaceful beauty and contrasted it with the rude vulgarity that drifted up from the street below.

Evening's excitement was already a throbbing pulse through Abilene. Somewhere a bunch of cowhands yipped and howled. Somewhere else raw voices lifted in argument. A window crashed and a gun barked three times.

Men's rough boasts and challenges and raw humor rolled like surf through the town. The drum of hoofbeats and pound of boots and drag of spurs and deep-chested shouts carried the turbulent feel of pent-up animal hungers and man-cruelty and violence. The shrill, paid-for laughter of girls drifted out from the hotel alley, and in another quarter, a woman shrieked with drunken rage or fear and was sharply silenced.

WILD BILL watched the girl moodily, his feelings still churning, and told himself he was a fool. Then Phoebe stepped inside to dress, and the bland mask dropped from the dude's face.

He asked abruptly, "Bill, just what is the exact connection between Boston and Ives?"

The marshal's senses sharpened. "Why, they divide most of the bossing of the honkytonks and gambling dives between them," he said. "In some things they are partners. I don't believe they would stab one another in the back for less than a dollar."

"But they could strike a deal together?" the dude persisted.

Wild Bill inclined his head. "Particularly a bad one. Why?"

"I heard something—I think," the dude said grimly. "It was not enough to be sure. But it sounded as if they had been intentionally losing to Phoebe, and that they have decided to put some kind of pressure on her. But what could they do?"

"Almost anything!" Wild Bill said realistically. "Did you hear more?"

The dude looked hesitant and embarrassed. "They mentioned me—without great respect, I judge. And briefly, Ives said offhandedly they could dump me in the river if need be."

Faint humor touched Wild Bill's mouth at the dude's disgruntlement. He said, "Well, I don't think they'll do much of anything until they've bushwhacked me. There's not much they can do."

In the game that night there was no slightest indication of anything having been planned by the two. But next day something happened that made the marshal think hard. Phoebe's good-looking octoroon maid went out shopping and did not return. By midnight, Phoebe was so nervous that she was losing heavily for the first time since she had been in Abilene.

It was possible that the maid had been abducted. It was also possible that she had been lured away, or simply drifted off. The stakes were high for a handsome young wench of easy virtue in that town, and the octoroon had been missing her old friends and good times.

Wild Bill traced her movements by grapevine and found she had been seen in one place talking with some easy girls, and at another had been seen going off to a dance hall with two cowboys. For about thre hours, she had been mixing around at a good clip, which was her right, it being her own time. Then she had simply dropped out of sight leaving no trace whatever.

Wild Bill was in a bad spot on this. There were two hundred places, including camps, where she might have gone of her own sav-so. There were twenty or thirty deadfalls to which she might have been abducted. He'd look like a damn fool visiting all those places, and in the end learned she was there of her own will. What happened to women was not considered the proper business of the marshal.

On the other hand, Phoebe wanted to know, and also the maid's disappearance might be part of a plan cooked up by Boston and Ives. The incident had sure lost Phoebe's card sense for her.

About three days later, Boston and Ives broached the idea to Phoebe of setting her

up in a rather pretentious gambling joint where the games would all be run by women. They made no mention of any side business, but it was pretty clear to the marshal where that idea was meant to end. Still, they made no secret of their offer and they didn't press the point.

But they kept winning, and Phoebe looked at them now as if she were feeling the cold shadow of their power for the first time. And a woman's instinct was to side with power. She might not hold the whip hand, after all.

There was little that Hickok could do. There had been a reserve between him and Miss Phoebe since their last futile talk, and there was no way he could give her the self-reliance she was losing. Bitterly, it occurred to him that she had misunderstood his refusal of her. She had taken it as a rebuff instead of the honorable gesture it was meant to be.

BUT mostly her jittery nerves and worry were caused by her maid's disappearance. On a hunch, Hickok went down to the Widow Charity's. She made a fool of him. She stood with muscular, beringed hands on her broad hips and boomed her insults and jeering taunts at him. There wasn't a girl in her place who was not there of her own free will, she claimed. She'd swing and stab the girls with her ruthless, beady glare, and girls the marshal knew were being held by force and threat would deny it flatly.

He lowered his pride to go through every room and closet and found probably half a dozen hideout traps and secret rooms in the place, but no octoroon maid. He left with his teeth locked, the Widow's final flaming insults burning his ears. By nightfall, this would be the joke of the town. So the tough town-tamer had lost his secret heart and flame!

Phoebe kept fretting and losing at cards and each new loss unnerved her more. Ives watched this with the satisfaction of a waiting vulture. Dan Boston's face remained impassive, but his eyes held a look of already tasting future flesh and gain.

Wild Bill damned the breaking of his earlier friendship with Phoebe, when he'd had her open confidence. But she had offered too much, too rashly. Now nothing could cut through the reserve she had drawn around her to hide her embarrassment. She was friendly, outwardly showing no change. But she gave him no further chance for confidences.

She was stubbornly set to hold her trail and stick at the game. Her pride was involved, just as his was with his guns. She'd made her bed, and come hell and high water, she was going to sleep in it. Win, lose, or draw, she had the pride of a gambling queen.

The two honkytonk coyotes knew women as a wrangler knows horses. They were certain that in the end they'd own Miss Phoebe; they could wait. There might have been quicker ways to get her, but such would have given Hickok the excuse he needed to go really berserk. Further, they wanted the girl's submission and cooperation. She was something special. They wanted her proud and hard; a front piece. Not a broken jade.

Wild Bill was filled with a man's furious frustrations, but he stopped by Phoebe's some time during each day. Part of his reason was to give her the protection of his obvious friendship. Part of it was the hope that sometime the guards and barriers of her hurt would drop, and he could talk her into common sense before it was too late.

He was on her balcony having coffee with her one sundown when his deputy sang out a call from down below. Bill moved downstairs almost thankful at the prospect of fresh trouble. In his present mood, he would have joyed in fighting it out with every cowboy on the Chisholm trail.

He moved out into the thickening shadows feeling the surge of fighting ferocity. His deputy's words were like the slap of cold water.

"Girl tossed up dead on Benson's sandbar. Knifed."

Wild Bill lifted into his saddle. A hell of a chore when a man needed a fight!

"Identified?" he growled.

"Yeah," the deputy nodded. "The octoroon girl. Miss Phoebe's maid. She's a damn mess. She must have put up one helluva fight."

CHAPTER IV

A Little Quiet Fun

RIDING to Moffett's tannery, where the octoroon's body was laid out in a shed was a routine matter with Wild Bill in this town. Reason for disappearance, he considered, probably kidnaped; killed because she showed fight, or spirit enough to claim she'd get word to Wild Bill, or because of jealousy, or just because somebody was killing drunk. There was a price on a cow and a price on a woman in Abilene, and nobody cared much beyond that.

Starbright quiet of night had taken possession of the river when he had finished. But back in Abilene, the lights were as garish as bonfires leaping up through jungle. The whoops and yells and ever crackling gunfire mixed with the creak of wagons and drum of hoofbeats and beat of anvils and the brash crash of honkytonk bands into the rising and falling cadence of a savage blood dance.

He dismounted and covered the better saloons on Front Street and found little trouble outside of ordinary flaring arguments. One cattleman had been beaten and robbed of his entire stake in open daylight. A second had been doped and rolled for what he had on him while he slept, but he was chuckling that in a bigger way, he'd "outsmarted 'em!"

Hickok turned the corner onto Alamo Street, where conglomerate sound came at him like a cannon blast. Figures jostled like cattle in a trail herd and lurched from pool to pool of light. Four private fights were in progress in the street. Five or six drunks who had been thrown out of saloons or off stoops sprawled on the boardwalk. When they were in the way, men spur-dragged over them. Drunks sobered up remarkably fast on Alamo Street.

Three men were beating hell out of another one in Hogan's stable alley, and the three fled at Wild Bill's approach, which probably meant the fellow had been robbed. Somewhere a window screeched up and a woman started to yell. The window was banged down with an oath and the wail of the woman's voice cut off. Tough and furtive figures moved through the darker bands of shadow. A raw-voiced waddy was yelling a trail call down the street to gather his own bunch for some trouble, and a knife fight spilled out of the Alcazar, but the men came to terms shortly and lurched back in to drink together.

And everywhere, men snored or cursed or laughed and yelled. Every band of incoming or outgoing riders let loose whoops and shots. Men held target practice in back yards or right inside saloons. The whole street was filled with challenge and contests of a dozen sorts, and the unrestrained activity of virile men on the prod. And the watchful waiting of those who hoped to take them over.

All this was routine. A marshal did not bother with it unless he wanted to risk a lynching for being meddlesome. Unless a man were downed in a gunfight, the trailwise usually got out of town in reasonably good health and maybe with some money left. For the greenhorns, the cost was put down to experience, if *they* got out alive.

Wild Bill moved through the street, conscious of the hate and fear his presence caused, and of eyes that watched him out of shadow, the eyes of men who wished they had the guts to shoot him. Here and there, a gunhand with a rep met his eyes steadily or gave him a noncommittal nod. Stand-offs. Some day he'd have to fight them.

He noted pairs and groups of men barging out of Abe Ives's Mustang Saloon, some laughing raucously, some talking loud, some growling with irritation. Wild Bill splayed the fingers of his gun hand, tested his gun slip, and moved through the batwings.

HE FOUND a saloon hanger-on named Johnny Dallas holding forth, spoiling for trouble and having a little fun while he was doing it. Johnny Dallas was a free lance, but he did dirty jobs for Ives, and on occasion worked for the Widow Charity, when she had a chore too tough or dirty for her own crimps to handle. Something had wound Johnny up tonight, and Wild Bill could guess at what it had been. But a marshal couldn't go around shooting up men on guesswork. Either he had to be sure, or else provoke a fight.

Right now, Johnny Dallas stood at the bar howling out his lurid boasts. He had spilled over a table and cowed the disgruntled card players into sitting on the floor. He had slapped some white-faced young cowhand into a state of sobbing shame. He had made a big bruiser of a muleskinner dance and stand, with his hands raised against a post.

That was all private business. A marshal didn't bust in. But right now Johnny was aiming to practice some trigger-nometry on the overhead lamps, and the marshal could consider that a matter of public interest due to the possibility of fire.

He moved at a quiet, steady pace across the room, stopping before Dallas with his thumbs resting on his belts.

"Your night to howl, Johnny?" he inquired.

Dallas swung and glared with half-wild eyes. "What's it to you, Marshal? I'm having me some quiet fun." He snarled truculently, but he had been loading and now out of caution, he left the chamber of his gun open as he laid it carefully upon the bar.

"A nice, peaceable gesture," Hickok approved. "You said you were having a night of quiet fun, Johnny. Wouldn't be you'd already had your fill of excitement and blood?"

Caution and sobriety dropped over Dallas like a blanket. He was a bad one, but he was tough. He didn't take any pushing around and, crowded hard enough, he might even fight Hickok. His eyes narrowed and went hard and steady.

"What you driving at, Hickok?" he grunted.

"Thought maybe you'd started with a little fun out at the Widow Charity's," Wild Bill allowed.

"Yeah, I was out there," Dallas told him bluntly. "The place was dead. It's why I come downtown."

"Deadness is kind of catching," Wild Bill said.

He saw the pupils of Johnny's wild, dangerous eyes dilate, but the tough had a brass front.

Johnny said bluntly, "You trying to crowd me, Hickok? I raised less hell out there than you did the time you got the Widow all stirred up looking for some octoroon gal nobody'd ever heard of!"

Suppressed laughter ran through the room, and Hickok saw he'd lost this pot. Laughter was the worst thing that could happen to a gun marshal. His eyes flickered bleak lights at Dallas.

"Well somebody's heard of her now," he rasped. "She was found in the river Knifed."

Dallas tossed his head and snorted. "What the hell's it matter about some runaway black gal?" he demanded loudly. "You trying to start another War Between the States, or just feeling proddy?"

"I'm feeling damned proddy," Hickok said.

"Well, feel it somewhere else," Dallas growled. "I don't know nothing about that girl, and I don't give a damn. I'm just having a little quiet fun, like I said."

Ives came to his office door and called

TARGET PRACTICE

ONE of the lustiest mining camps in the Southwest in the early 1880's was Mammoth, on the San Pedro River. When its residents weren't fighting off Apaches, they were quarreling among themselves. It is said that on one occasion, after a man had been killed in Mammoth, his body was left in the street. The townsfolk then amused themselves by placing tin cans on his body and shooting them off.

—B. W. Matthews

testily, "What's wrong, Hickok? Johnny ain't out of hand."

Ives's toughs and his floormen began a mutter of agreement that ran through the crowd. The bunch had been indifferently interested at first. Now real sympathy for Johnny Dallas was building.

THIS was the thing a gun marshal without law to back him had to contend with. This was what he always had to watch. He could shoot only one shot at a time. When the showdown came, it was the temper of the herd, the respect or truculence, that gave him his outside protection or let some snake get away with a few sneak shots. And Dallas had openly disavowed any knowledge of the maid, and had turned down a fight. If Hickok pressed the matter further, he'd have to breast a whole mob.

He said grimly, "All right, as long as your fun is quiet, Johnny. Boot your gun now. And be careful."

Dallas laid his hand on his gun with an eagerness broken by sharp hesitancy as Hickok's hand slapped his own gun butt.

"I said, be careful!" the marshal snapped.

"What you so spooky about tonight?" Dallas mocked him, but with purposeful control of his movements. He clasped the gun forward of the trigger guard and over the hammer and, holding it that way, holstered it carefully.

Hickok nodded. "Walk over and see Ives now. He's waiting for you."

That would put Ives in the line of fire if Dallas tried for a trick shot. Dallas shot him a truculent look, but saved face with a rough laugh, and sauntered toward Ives who was looking as worried as an unpaid undertaker. Hickok kept his hand on his gun butt and moved out through the mixed-tempered crowd.

He'd lost face by the incident, but he'd read the answer to the maid's disappearance—and had seen death in Johnny Dallas's eyes. Maybe Johnny had knifed her, maybe not. But Johnny knew about it, and it had happened at the Widow Charity's where a rickety dock ran out into the river.

Still, Wild Bill had to check the fact. That was the real hell of this business. Not the risk, not the fighting, but the pressure that gun law decisions put upon a man's conscience. When you came right down to it, that was the chief difference between gun law and outlaw—the separating of right and wrong, knowing the difference between the two.

He went on down the brawling street, sensing this night's mood and the potential chance of mayhem from the rhythm of the street sounds, what he saw or failed to see, what he heard or did not hear. Extra joviality in Boston's Casino could tell a story. A man drinking in an unaccustomed place or standing on the wrong side of the street could tell another.

Near the end of the street he turned into Pig Alley, where gin-soaked, jeering girls slammed the doors of their cribs in his face. At the end of the alley, a big, dark-brown brute of a man strode from one of the doors and came to a sudden stop.

The man gave a rough laugh at seeing who was before him.

"Well, well, marshal, ain't fallen for one of my choice little tenants, have you?"

Wild Bill bit off the end of a cigar and rolled it in his mouth. "Just looking for the little octoroon who used to work for Miss Phoebe."

The man's mouth hardened. He knew something, and knew that Hickok knew something, and he wanted no misunderstanding with the marshal.

"Won't do you no good to look here," he growled.

"Won't do me no good to look anywhere until I find out where she was," Wild Bill commented.

"Was?" the man repeated, and in his eyes were lights of understanding. "So she wouldn't break and they knocked her off." He dropped his face and spat. "There's some rough people giving this business a bad name, Marshal. I ain't no lily, but murder ain't happened in my alley yet. You find this gal in the river?"

HICKOK said, "That's a good guess."

"Only a guess," the man told him. "I ain't heard nothing about her since the day she disappeared. But most of the dead ones show up in the river. Knifed or strangled?"

"Knifed," Hickok said, put a light to his cigar, and nodded.

Pig Alley was the chief competitor of the Widow Charity. When you wanted information on one snake, go to another. Knifed or strangled was enough of a tip. That meant that all that time, Phoebe's maid had been held captive at the Widow's.

Wild Bill moved back through Alamo Street's wild bedlam, pulling in a deep breath of fresh air at the corner of Main. He had supper alone, wondering what to do about this. The feel of Abilene was like a bad taste all through him. He could gunwhip Johnny Dallas, maybe, and beat some truth out of him, but there'd be Ives and Boston stirring opinion against him, and nobody was going to get too excited about a Negro maid, who might have been wild in the first place.

He was not above a semi-indifference himself. It had been his hard-boiled experience that few people, male or female, got into trouble they could not have avoided. Men who got killed were usually wearing guns in gunmen hangouts. Women who got abducted were usually flirting with somebody they should not have been.

Phoebe now—and heaven save her—was heading for trouble, but she had built it by coming here and disregarding the code of respectability. And he did not exempt himself from the trouble quota. It was his considered opinion that some day he would die by a bullet, but he had asked for it.

CHAPTER V

Cat and Mouse

LAYING out a coin, Hickok got a handful of cigars, left the saloon, and went up to Phoebe's. Two tables were in play. Abe Ives, Dan Boston, the dude, and a drummer were all together at one table playing with Phoebe. She looked a good deal harder that she had that first morning the marshal had met her. The cold calculation of gambling was settling upon her. The easy talk, the merciless driving, the disregard of what a man could afford to lose, the click of chips, the smell of liquor, were becoming her background.

Small things so far, but sign. To one kind of women it would be softening, weakening. To Phoebe's kind, it was hardening, and suddenly he knew that the shadow of things to come had already touched her. But she had steeled herself with the conviction that she was the one out of many who could lick the game if she stuck to it. Right or wrong, win or lose, she meant to stick to her guns. Just as Hickok himself would. And Boston and Ives read that in both of them.

He sat down, watching the game, but his sharp eyes could detect nothing wrong, unless it was the assurance of Boston and Ives their certainty of eventually destroying her independence. But as far as he could see now, it was her nerves that were causing her to lose. In fact, some nights lately she would not have lost at all had it not been for the invariable big pot windup rounds of cutthroat.

He waited his opportunity, then tossed out his dynamite. Between deals, Phoebe casually asked him what he'd been up to all evening.

He said with quiet bluntness, "Investigating the murder of your maid."

Ives was dealing, and there was the barest pause as he flicked out the cards. He covered it with a straight look for interrogation at Hickok, asking:

"So you found her? Now I'm right sorry to hear that. She made the best juleps in town."

Boston said on a toneless note, "Who did it, Bill?"

Wild Bill said, "I'll have to prove that with my guns. She was found on Benson's Bar."

That was the same as saying, "Downriver from the Widow Charity's."

Miss Phoebe had gone white, her eyes molten. In a low, tense voice she asked, "Was that aimed at me?"

Ives said quickly, "Nobody would go that far to spite anyone, Miss Phoebe!"

She tried to read Wild Bill, failed, and got up and went to her room. Ives gathered the cards and reshuffled. Thoughtful silence hung over the table for a space, then Boston sized up what would be the town's opinion.

"Well, I'm sorry for Miss Phoebe."

The dude said disturbed, "Chloe was a good girl. Something ought to be done."

"Something will be," Wild Bill promised, hoping that would draw things to a head, would draw enmity directly upon him.

Abe Ives licked dry lips. He said, "You'll have to prove that the girl didn't come to grief from her own actions. Some of these girls around town get pretty drunk and troublesome. I've seen them try to stab my customers—and without much reason."

The dude shook his head. "Not Chloe!"

Boston sat back in his chair and looked pious. "Well, a woman's got to watch out in a town like this. Even at that, she must have started off with mischief. Nobody could hogtie her and take her off Main Street in broad daylight."

They played on in a desultory fashion. After a time, Miss Phoebe came back. Her eyes were hot-dry, and hard as green marble. The news had done something to her. It had ended her nervousness and brought her to inward decisions she had been stalling. She began to play with a driving recklessness that was new to her.

HOW much what had happened was responsible for her actions, Wild Bill could not guess. If she did believe that her maid had been killed to satisfy the Widow Charity's spite it might open her eyes to the dangers of the life around her. He could not accuse Boston and Ives of having had a hand in Chloe's abduction and murder. All he had was simply a hunch based upon an intimate knowledge of the town's seamy side and the way things fell together in a kaleidoscopic picture.

When the game broke up, Phoebe was ahead for the first time since Chloe's disappearance.

Boston said heartily, "I'm glad your luck is back," and even Ives seemed careless of his night's losses.

The two left together as friends, but theirs was a friendship formed by their mutual distrust and common wickedness. They were wolves who hunted together, but eventually one would eat the other.

Phoebe looked tired and Hickok left with the dude, bent on supper, but on the street, the dude stretched and said

loudly, "Damme if I wouldn't like a breath of air. How about a stretch down to the depot before java?"

Wild Bill stretched himself, and they strolled down there, each occupied with his own thoughts. They stopped on the depot platform for a smoke and watched the all-night activities in the nearby stock pens.

The dude asked abruptly, "Bill, is that game on the square? I mean the players?"

Wild Bill frowned. "I've wondered the same thing," he admitted. "But I've not caught anything wrong. What's on your mind?"

"Well, I'm just worried about this Boston-Ives setup," the dude admitted. "They've been smart enough to behave and smart enough not to deny their reputations for evil, and I am afraid Phoebe is taking them for diamonds in the rough, and they are taking her for all she's got."

"I think they're playing for bigger stakes than her money," Wild Bill said bluntly. "The danger is not what they want, but that she'll fall into their trap and voluntarily put herself beyond any help we could give her."

The dude nodded in agreement. "My own thought," he said.

"Beyond what I've told her, there's no way to point out her danger," Wild Bill said consideringly. "Your own position is different. If you think raw facts would do any good, I could give you some to pass on to her."

The dude shook his head somberly and put a finger to his ear. "It goes in here," he said, tapped his forehead and then his heart, "but it doesn't mean anything here or here."

"You've known her a long time?" Wild Bill asked.

"Yes. Our families arranged our marriage, but she rebelled. She wanted to see things, to strike off on her own, she said, and in a way, I admire her independence. But gambling in places where your family has been known and in a wild town like this are two different matters."

"She must be beginning to realize that," Wild Bill said.

"On the contrary, the harder she gets hit the more stubborn she grows in admitting that any harm could come to her. She made a mistake in coming here, but she won't admit it, and now she is dead set to ride things out to the bitter end. I could make it a personal issue with Boston and Ives, but I'm afraid they'd best me, and in any case, she'd tell me I'd pushed in where I had no business."

"What's the trouble with her?" the marshal grunted.

THE dude lifted his shoulders and let them fall. "What's the trouble with any woman? They decide what they want to believe, what they want to see, how

[*Turn page*]

life ought to be, and nothing can change them. She grew up on stories of gentlemen pirates, highwaymen and gamblers, and she still believes the fairy tales."

Wild Bill cussed, then said, "I'll tell you. There's a point just when a snake starts to strike when it is always out of balance, and a touch of the smallest stick will deflect it. I think we will have that time to work in."

"Thank you for reassurance," the dude said, and formally put out his hand. "Tell me anything I can do that you think necessary. Even to insulting those two, if that would give you the incident you need."

Such an incident would mean the dude's murder, and Wild Bill grinned with appreciation of the cold guts another man possessed. The dude would never get a chance at self-defense. Both Ives and Boston made lightning draws, and the dude would be lucky to be shot dead outright and not get taken over by some of their toughs for a little fun and torture.

He clapped the small man's shoulder and they pinched out their smokes and turned back for breakfast. As they crossed from the depot, a furtive shadow drew farther back into the darkness of an alley. They had been spied on but could not have been heard, and the place the dude had picked for this talk showed he was well aware of danger and had sense.

Wild Bill continued to watch for crooked dealing, but could detect nothing whatever wrong in Miss Phoebe's games. Both Ives and Boston won or lost indifferently. Sometimes both lost quite sizable stakes. The only consistent pattern of the game was that regardless of who came out on top, Miss Phoebe lost steadily almost every evening.

The strain was telling on her, shown by the webs of fine lines at the corners of her eyes, in her restlessness, the hardening around her mouth. This was something that went deeper than loss of money. Her bad luck had struck at the core of her self-assurance and trust in her star of fate.

Wild Bill realized that she was going broke. She had too much pride to tell him, but he could sense her grudging acceptance of fate, like a man in a fight who knows he is licked but will still hang on for the last blow. She must see now, though, what was in the offing. But she had made her decision, and would ask no quarter and no favor.

He had no way of knowing whether she'd made a deal with Dan Boston, but could make a guess when he saw the man coming from the direction of her hotel toward dusk one evening. He knew it positively that night from the mocking smirk in Boston's ruthless eyes, the way Phoebe avoided looking directly at anyone. Then he saw her sad gentleness as she looked at the dude, and he had the key. She'd finally gone broke, she was going to have to court protection, and either she'd learned or guessed what lay in store for the dude. She had probably called in Boston to make a deal if he'd give her time to send the dude away.

Before the night was out, Ives had nosed matters out, too. It was in the sharp glitter of his ferret eyes and the mean set of his mouth as he drove the play at Boston. If Hickok had had any doubts before, Boston gave him the answer. He was taking his losses too carelessly, in the way of a man with more pleasant thoughts than of any money he might be losing. And he was too easy-going in answering some of Ives's rawhiding—the half-sleepy, easy mood of a man already planning another's finish.

IVES quit the game early, his temper sparkling, a gray line along his jaws. He stood a moment, his index finger poked down on the green table.

He said directly to Boston, "Dan, we made a little deal once. I'm ready to straighten off."

Boston gave him a sleepy look and said carelessly, "Why Abe, we can figure things out anytime you say tomorrow."

"Two o'clock then," Ives told him. "I'll come by your place."

"Fine," Boston nodded, but suddenly sounded sharp, knowing it was a lie, as did Wild Bill. for neither of these men

would normally venture into the other's stronghold.

Boston fidgeted after Ives left, his mind no longer on either Miss Phoebe or the game. He tossed his cards in suddenly without waiting for the draw.

"Recollected a little business." He excused himself and with a brief, private word to Phoebe, left them.

Wild Bill looked at her and she caught his attention and dropped a guard upon her face. She leaned across the table and pressed his hand.

"Bill, I feel like hell," she told him. "Do you mind if we call it quits for tonight?"

"Not at all." He smiled, and patted her hand. "Get a good sleep. Maybe everything will turn out all right yet."

She smiled back at him, but her smile was weary, bitter. She looked at him a moment as if thinking, with the right answer from *you*, everything would.

Then he was leaving, mouse-quiet on the stairs, for all that he was a big and solid man. He caught a sound in the darkness below him and stopped to listen. Footsteps beat back through the thick dust of the alley.

He moved on down the stairs and walked directly to Ives's Mustang Saloon, but the owner was not around. His head man let it slip that maybe the marshal would find him at Miss Phoebe's. That meant that Ives had not returned to his own place since he'd left the game.

CHAPTER VI

Tough Cleanup

HICKOK walked another block to Boston's Casino. Dan Boston was already on hand, stripped of coat and down to shirt sleeves, and wearing an armpit holster. He was moving around in front of his bar keeping an eye on things. He had already posted lookouts, and his toughs were lounging near the front of the room, which was not their regular point of loafing. There was heavy dust on Boston's boots, and a scattering of it up his black pants. So it had been Boston who had lingered and run through the alley as Wild Bill had come from Phoebe's.

Boston was expecting trouble then, and ready for it, and had Miss Phoebe not been in the picture, Wild Bill would have wished him grudging luck. He was a bad actor, but there was a blunt, brute honesty in the man's toughness which Ives did not possess. It was even possible that in his fashion, Dan Boston loved Miss Phoebe as far as his callous nature would permit.

He had, at times, done a few decent things, the marshal recalled. Once he had returned a girl to her folks in Ohio because she had been only a foolish, overgrown kid, masquerading as seven years older than she was. Another time, he had taken care of an old desert rat who'd got smashed up by mistake in one of Boston's orgies of violence.

Not too many kindnesses for a man's talley when he reached the gates of hell, but a lot for Abilene. It made him an angel compared with Abe Ives, who had sponsored that female tarantula, the Widow Charity.

Dan Boston gave the marshal a tight grin. "Stick around and watch me save you some trouble," he remarked.

"Always glad of that," Wild Bill nodded, and took a position near the chuckaluck table from where he could watch the room.

The games finally broke up and time crawled toward dawn. There were the usual arguments and fights, but Dan Boston broke them up fast tonight. He wanted no action that might screen a sneak entrance by Abe Ives.

When dawn was a pale smudge of dirty gray-yellow through one upper window, it did not look as if Ives meant to come. But if he didn't, he was stuck with that showdown for two o'clock, and that was to mean trouble.

Wild Bill was pondering this, while Dan Boston moved impatiently around the saloon, watching the front and side doors.

Then something, sight or just a highly developed sense for trouble, took Wild Bill's eyes to the back of the room. There was a door there, kept bolted. There was a high one, too, leading into the storerooms. This door was swinging slowly open and it showed a man's shadowed form, squatting.

At the same moment, a whistle came from outside the saloon, and was repeated by a lookout inside. Boston stopped in his tracks, his head jutted forward, his attention riveted on the front door. Boots pounded on the front steps and there was the sound out there as of five or six who were drunk.

Bill saw light glint in the storeroom doorway. His hand flashed and his gun barked. Boston threw himself aside, almost in a cartwheel. A rifle shot came from the storeroom door, but it went wild. A second shot sounded back there, but it kicked up sawdust right below the door. Then Ives's figure showed in the light, turned grotesquely, and pitched down from the door.

Dan Boston looked over at Wild Bill's smoking gun and made a wigwag of thanks. "Do the same for you some time, Bill," he growled.

"You mean you'll do for me what Ives was going to do to you?"

"Go to hell!" Boston stomped back to look at Ives's gasping form. He paid Ives the last respects of a good kick in the head. Ives probably never felt it.

IVES'S toughs and Boston's toughs were fighting it out on the front stoop. Bill had a drink with the honest conviction that the more this bunch shot themselves up, the better for Abilene.

Dan Boston came up the bar to join him, indifferent to the fight in front. "That sneaking rat! I knew he'd try a doublecross!"

"Ives seemed to think you pulled a doublecross," Wild Bill commented.

Boston stiffened. His lids drooped, his eyes went cold and calculating.

"Ives seemed to think he had some money, and maybe high-card draw for a woman, coming," Wild Bill grunted, his blue eyes icy cold. "Only deal like that I can figure would be a crooked deal."

Boston growled, "Strong language, Marshal. If you mean the card games, you were sitting in most of those games yourself!"

"But not always in the same seat," Wild Bill said. "You and Ives held the same seats each time. I think I'll go take a look at those seats, Dan."

He snarled, "Go look then! I've got to give my boys a hand!" He made tracks for the front door.

Wild Bill wheeled for the side door, grimly amused at Dan Boston's abrupt interest in helping out his toughs. Outside he stepped into the darkness of the alley. The sound of the fight came clearly.

His vision adjusted to the darkness, he crossed the yard and let himself out through a door in the back fence. All sounds of the fight in front had ceased. He could picture Boston ending the fight with the announcement that Ives was dead and he'd hire any of Ives men who could still shoot. Dollars bought loyalty in Abilene. Nothing else did.

Wild Bill ran down the big back alley at a lope. He came out a half block from Phoebe's hotel and stopped to blow. He had a deputy on duty, and sent his shrill signal whistling on the chance the man would hear it. He turned and went up the steps, calling Phoebe's name.

He pounded on the door and she answered shortly with a night lamp in her hand. He banged the door shut, turned the key, and crossed to her personal table. He felt the surface in front of Boston's seat, the edges, and then underneath. A deck of cards slipped from a clip into his hand. The same thing happened at Ives's seat.

He straightened and fanned the decks and saw at a glance that these were trimmed decks, and that she would have been dealt a losing hand. He stared at the cards unbelievingly. How in hell could they switch decks and stack a game with him watching for just that? Maybe once, maybe twice, but—

He pounced upon the thought. They didn't have to stack the decks to gain the advantage! Twice a night was enough to be sure of winning, if the two times were those final staggering no-limit pots!

Phoebe followed his thinking. "But how could they leave them there?" she asked. "I do clean up and look around!"

"They never left them before," he told her. "They'd bring a fresh deck each time and take it with them when they left. Last night the tension built too fast and they forgot them in their hurry to get out."

SHE bit her lip. She murmured, "Bill, I've been a fool, I guess! I watched for shuffle and deal tricks, but when none showed up, I put everything down to my own bad luck. I figured them tough but honest. At least, as far as I went!"

He flung her a sharp glance, not critical, but suddenly understanding. She was not the first woman whose thinking had never gone beyond herself. Probably in the same way the town's toughness had meant no more to her than a story book because she had never seen that it could touch her personally.

A raw-voiced call broke at them from outside.

"Bill Hickok, come out on that balcony for a palaver!"

"Don't go!" Phoebe cried, clutching his arm.

"Don't worry!" he told her grimly. He wheeled her around and shoved her toward her bedroom. "Get inside!"

Violence broke through Hickok in a storm. His quiet expression exploded with lust of battle and fighting hatred. The door burst open with a crash. Boston and four of his gunslicks piled through, their guns blazing.

Hickok's first shot blasted one tough back through the doorway. The marshal's second shot raised another gunman into the air and dropped him, beating a tattoo upon the floor.

Dan Boston reached the cover of the balcony door as Hickok scrambled beneath the table. Wild Bill fired, and heard Boston's suck of breath, and Boston lurched a little, so that one arm and shoulder showed beyond the door. Wild Bill used the mark for estimate and put two shots smashing through the door.

He felt fire cross his shoulder at the same instant that Boston twisted out into sight, staggered, and sprawled out, writhing. He had guts, though. He brought his gun arm into position, trying for one last shot at Hickok before he dropped into eternal night. He had his sight and he had shots left if he could use them.

It left Hickok no choice but to dart out from under the table, stand and deliberately shoot Boston in the head. The man was already half-dead and it was a picture which was not a pretty sight.

He shot as a simultaneous shot came from the hallway. He wheeled with his empty gun, but knew by instinct the shot had not been meant for him. Across the room, behind a sofa, one of Boston's men reeled erect, cursing and clasping the left wrist of his now empty gun hand. And then the dude's perturbed voice sang out, and the dude rushed in.

There was a cry behind Hickok and Phoebe flashed by him, clutching the dude feverishly. She'd seen it all then, or at least that last deliberate savage shot into the dying man. He didn't know how he knew while he was watching the last wounded tough and reloading, but he could sense the shock and horror on her face, and knew that she was clutching the dude to her, and that finally, the reality of brutality had penetrated to her.

His left shoulder was spouting blood and he looked grim, but not with pain. Fighting savagery was still a molten thing inside him, contorting his features and showing his wicked savagery. Right then, his thoughts were not of the girl in the dude's arms. He was a jungle animal filled with fierce hate and readying himself for more of Boston's men.

Steps pounded on the stairs and he heard his deputy and Moffett both call out to him. Seeing that the hallway was now clear, he dropped his gun to his side and simmered down some, and put his first direct attention on Phoebe. Involun-

tarily her eyes were drawn to the figures on the floor and then to him, and respect lighted them, but the shock was there, the horror of having witnessed a killing.

YET it had not even occurred to her that the dude had run in with his gun smoking, and that possibly he might have been guilty of a killing.

The answer! Wild Bill thought, and his mouth twisted in a bleak and bitter smile. Aloud he murmured, "You see what it is now, Phoebe? You see there's no glory in it, right or wrong? It's the same blood lust, the same savagery."

She nodded and looked apologetic for the way she felt and knew that it was showing. She swallowed hard and managed to say huskily, "Thank you, Bill, for seeing how I'd feel."

His hard, bitter, contained smile included her and the dude. "You two go back now and raise a family."

Swinging around as half a dozen others came pounding breathlessly through the doorway, the smile left Wild Bill's face. It turned fierce and grimly savage again.

He rasped at his deputy, "Where's Johnny Dallas hanging out?"

"He headed down toward the Widow Charity's early."

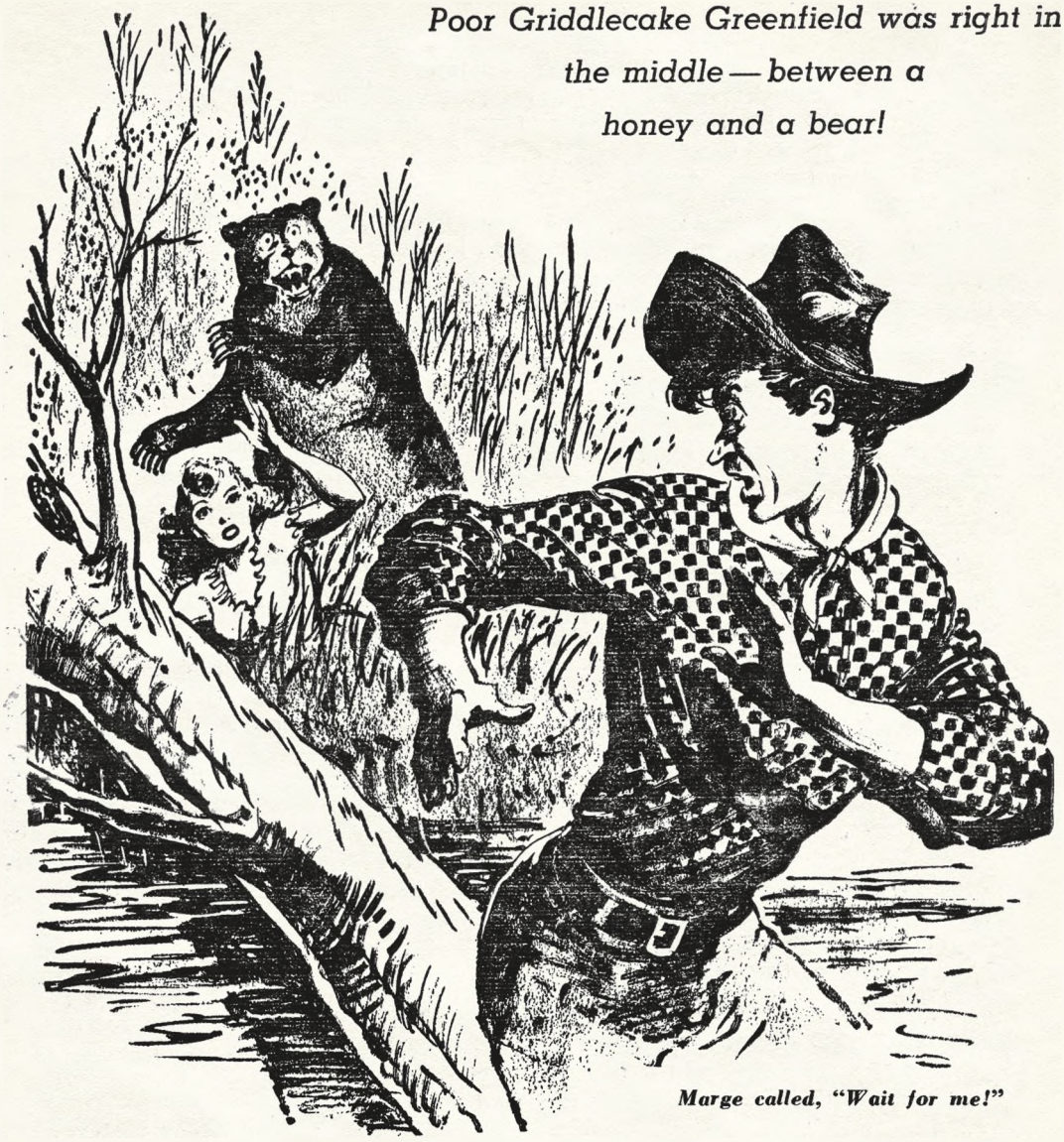
Wild Bill nodded his satisfaction, with a wicked light in his eyes.

"Good! We'll go down there and blaze him out! And don't worry too much about who else you hit, boys!"

He shot one last look at Phoebe, saw her shudder, and then lock her arms tighter around the dude as she understood the gun marshal's meaning. It was hard to take, but he swallowed it as he went out, and from the foot of the stairs his wild, savage war cry rang out. She was already blotted from his mind in his hatred for Johnny Dallas and the Widow.

And he strode toward the river thinking of the hundredth notch he'd put upon his gun and of the glory that would mean the blood trail from which there was never a returning. ● ● ●

Poor Griddlecake Greenfield was right in the middle — between a honey and a bear!



Marge called, "Wait for me!"

The Elbow Basin Broil

By BEN FRANK

WHEN luck runs out on four folks all at the same time—three folks, if you want the absolute truth, for you can't hardly classify Clubfoot Charley as a human being—but, anyway, when luck runs out on a batch of folks, prodding them to action, some good is bound to result. Especially when one of them is a lonesome cowboy who sings off-key, and another is a pretty, brown-eyed girl with no ear for music.

Now, this cowboy's name was Gridley Gilmore Greenfield, commonly called "Griddlecake," a handle which, no doubt, originated from his given name and his appetite. He was a long, hungry-looking young man with innocent blue eyes, sort of orange-colored hair and a bony brown face that was instantly trusted by small children and dogs.

What happened to Griddlecake was that he went to work for old man Caywood on the Box C, fell in love with the old gent's daughter, Camille, but Camille turned her pretty nose up at him when a more dashing and handsome gent, named Smiley VanAnda, came along.

Disillusioned and grief-stricken, Griddlecake quit his job and headed for the little trail-end town of Seesaw. Thinking he would never want to sing another song as long as he lived, he stopped along the trail and smashed his guitar over a boulder.

By the time he reached Seesaw that night, he felt so unlucky and downtrodden that he didn't care what became of him. So he went into the Buckhorn Saloon to drown his sorrows. But before he could decide on what kind of poison to take, a sawed-off, whiskery oldster staggered up and slapped him on the back.

"Welcome, friend," the old gent said with a slight hiccup. "Folks call me Gold-fever Fenton."

Being naturally polite, Griddlecake introduced himself.

"Son," Gold-fever said, bracing himself against the bar, "you look mighty sad to me. Yes, siree! Mighty sad!"

Griddlecake didn't know old Gold-fever Fenton from Adam's off ox, but he did know sympathy when he saw it. Greatly touched, he accepted the old coot's invitation to have a drink, and briefly related the state of his love life.

"I hate women," the cowboy finished grimly. "Especially girls!"

"If you want to know the truth," Gold-fever said, scowling fiercely, "women is what keeps me away from civilization. Fact is, this is the first time I've been in town for six months. S'why I'm a-celebrating. But I know when I've had enough, so if you'll kindly help me down the street to where I left my horses, I'll get out of this town before I catch sight of some dad-burned female."

RECOGNIZING in his new-found friend a kindred soul, Griddlecake obligingly set down his untasted drink, took Gold-fever by a skinny arm and guided him out into the night. Coming to the oldster's loaded pack-mule and saddle horse, the young man untied the animals and boosted his companion up into the saddle.

"Think you can make it all right, old-timer?" he asked worriedly.

"Why, sure," the old man answered, then promptly lost his balance and came tumbling earthward. "Son," he said with a slight groan, "wouldn't surprise me none if I ain't busted my right stomper."

Well, Griddlecake carried the bandy-legged old cuss to the doctor's office, and the doc took one look at the leg and scowled.

"Just a bad sprain," he said, "but he's got to go to bed and stay there until that leg gets well."

By then, Gold-fever Fenton didn't know whether he was coming or going, so Griddlecake took him to a rooming house and put him to bed. But the next morning, the old prospector knew the score and was fit to be tied.

"I got to get back home to look after things!" he ranted.

"At your age, you get to ramming around on that leg, and there's no telling what will happen," the medico said. "You wouldn't want to lose that leg, would you?"

Gold-fever didn't want to lose no leg. No, siree! But he was mighty worried about what might happen if there wasn't anyone around his cabin to look after things. The truth is, after forty years of prospecting, he'd at last found some gold, and being the kind who didn't trust nobody, including himself, he had buried his riches under a loose board in the floor of his cabin.

Of course, nobody would ever dream that he'd struck it rich as long as he kept his big mouth shut. But to save his life, he couldn't remember today how much talking he'd done last night during his celebration. Bedfast and helpless, he cussed through his whiskers as he watched the doctor depart.

"Son," he said to Griddlecake, "luck sure has run out on me."

"Me, too," Griddlecake said, a look of misery on his bony face. "Women! he said between his teeth. "I wished I could go someplace where I'd never have to look at a girl again!"

Staring up into the young man's bitter but innocent blue eyes, Gold-fever Fenton had a sudden inspiration.

"Son," he said, "I know exactly how you feel. Feel that way myself. That's how come I built my cabin in Elbow Basin, forty miles from nowhere."

Griddlecake's eyes showed a flicker of interest.

"Why don't you go there and live while I'm recuperating?" Gold-fever suggested slyly. "You can loaf and hunt and fish and eat and, best of all, you can forget absolutely about women."

"To hell with girls!" Griddlecake said, squaring his shoulders.

"That's the spirit!" Gold-fever cheered. "And while you're there, just don't let no strangers fool around my home."

"You don't need to worry about a thing," Griddlecake promised.

Even if he didn't let on, the oldster felt vastly relieved. He knew that Griddlecake Greenfield was not the kind to snoop around under a loose floor board. And with someone living in the cabin, it wasn't likely that anyone would have a chance to locate his hoard of gold.

Carefully he told how to find the lonely cabin in Elbow Basin. But he didn't tell the long-legged cowpoke about Clubfoot Charley, who also lived in the valley. Or that he had lied about no females being within forty miles of his cabin. No, siree! He hadn't wanted to put no ideas into Griddlecake's head that would change his mind about going there to live.

IN DUE time, Griddlecake, his bronc and the loaded pack-mule arrived at Gold-fever's ramshackle cabin. Talk about being out in the wilderness—pines as far as you could see, a rushing snow-fed stream down the slope a ways, and mountains sticking their snoots into the sky every which way you cared to turn your eyes.

Griddlecake took one good look around and felt mighty pleased. Why, he reckoned, he could live here till he was ninety without seeing one single snake-in-the-grass girl. Whistling off-key, he set to work unloading his provisions, never dreaming he had Clubfoot Charley and Marge Tillman for neighbors.

Old Clubfoot was a big, ornery-looking cuss, with beady black eyes and long yellow teeth. He sat by the rushing stream now, not a quarter of a mile away from the cabin, glaring balefully at a lone cottonwood that grew on a small brush-covered island in the middle of the creek. The tree was hollow, and from an opening near the top, bees busily moved in and out, filling the quiet solitude with a pleasant hum. Clubfoot Charley snorted in high disgust. Just his luck to find a bee tree which he couldn't get to without swimming.

He reached down into the rushing icy water, but drew back with a shudder. Feeling unluckier than a bug in a bottle, he sat down again and turned a thoughtful gaze upon a lightning-split pine that slanted sharply out over the water toward the island.

As for Marge Tillman, she was in the small kitchen of the old Slash-T ranch house a couple miles north of Griddlecake's new residence. At nineteen, she was a cute trick, even when she was dressed in old overalls and a man's shirt. She had light brown hair that curled in ringlets about her ears, and friendly wide-set brown eyes, and a wide red mouth built for giving the world a sweet smile.

But she hadn't smiled much lately, for here she was living with her pa and ma on this out-of-the-way ranch with no young folks to chum with. No two ways

about it, having to live out here was a mighty unlucky break, for here she had no more chance than nothing of catching a husband. Unless she would consider old Gold-fever Fenton.

She snickered at the idea, but sobered suddenly. She felt sorry for the old prospector, probably because she believed he was lonelier than she was. She guessed maybe she ought to bake the poor old fellow a shoo-pac pie.

Humming softly, she began to look through the cupboards to see if they had some raisins, vinegar and molasses, three things you can't make a shoo-pac pie without. Sure enough, all the ingredients were at hand.

The next morning, after a good night's sleep, Griddlecake loaded Gold-fever's old single-shot rifle and went out to have a look around. He came to the stream and spotted the bee tree on the island, pronto. But the thing about the creek that aroused his interest was its likelihood of being a fine trout stream.

He went on through the pines, shot himself a couple squirrels and returned to the cabin about noon. He slanted the rifle into a corner and was about to start dressing the squirrels for dinner when he discovered the crusty brown pie sitting right in the middle of the dining table. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The pie was still there. Right then he knew how Robinson Crusoe must have felt when he discovered Friday's footprints on the sandy beach.

Heart hammering, face pale, he circled the table warily. His first impulse was to throw the pie out the open window. But getting hold of himself, he poked a finger into it and then tasted the finger. Man alive! Mouth watering, he cut himself a slice and ate it. Later, he had a second slice to top off his dinner.

However, he was some worried. That pie meant but one thing—he wasn't the only inhabitant of Elbow Basin. But there wasn't anything he could do about it, so he shrugged his wide shoulders, gathered up Gold-fever's fishing tackle and wandered down to the creek. A couple hours later, having caught more fish than he knew what to do with, he headed back toward his cabin.

THE sun shone and the birds sang, and right at the moment, life didn't look so gloomy to the young cowboy. Before he reached the cabin, he was whistling off-key and kind of wishing he hadn't busted his guitar.

Shoving the door wide, he stepped in —and swallowed his whistle. Standing by the table and polishing off the last of the pie was the meanest and biggest brown bear that Gridley Gilmore Greenfield had ever laid eyes on.

For a horrifing minute, he couldn't make a move. Then the bear curled back his lips and exposed his yellow teeth with a growl, and the cowboy let out a yell and ran.

Likely he would still be running if he hadn't tripped over a tree root and fell flat on his big sunburned nose. For a moment, he lay there, expecting to feel those long yellow teeth taking a bite out of his lap. But nothing happened, so he sat up.

And whom should he see but Marge Tillman, staring at him out of her wide brown eyes!

She was the first to recover the powers of speech.

"So I guessed right," she said, a grim look settling on her face. "A stranger living in Mr. Fenton's cabin. Thought so when I left the pie, so maybe it's a good thing I came back to make sure and—"

That was as far as she got, for Griddlecake had leaped to his feet and was now trying to drag her on along the trail.

"Take your hands off me!" she said, and gave him a push that landed him right back where he'd started from.

"You crazy or something?" he yelled. "There's a man-eating bear back there in that cabin!"

She began to laugh. "Oh," she said, "that must be old Clubfoot Charley. You didn't by any chance leave some of the pie lying around where—"

Dumbly Griddlecake nodded.

"That explains it," she said, laughing. "He's the biggest thief in the country and can smell shoo-pac pie four miles away." Then, suddenly grim again, "But who are you and what are you doing in Mr. Fenton's cabin?"

But Griddlecake didn't want to get et by no bear. He got to his feet again and headed for a tall pine. Likely would have shinnied clear to the top if Marge hadn't given him the low-down on Clubfoot.

It seemed that Gold-fever had picked the critter up when he was a cub. Couldn't keep up with his family because of an injury to a right front foot. Gold-fever had taken him to the cabin, patched up the foot and made a pet of him.

"Spoiled him rotten," Marge finished. "He'll steal you out of house and home if you give him half a chance. But as bears go, he's harmless enough."

Looking sheepish, Griddlecake slid to the ground, found his ten-gallon hat and put it on over his orange-colored hair. Then he introduced himself and explained his presence in Elbow Basin.

"Humm," she said, eying him curiously. "Seems strange a young cowboy would want to live in such a lonely place."

Griddlecake was on the point of telling her the sad truth, but taking his first close look at her, suddenly felt scared half to death. Dressed in a thin summer dress, and with the sun bringing out the gold in her light-brown curls, and with a warm friendly smile in those big soft brown eyes, she was something to make a man forget all his resolutions if he wasn't careful.

"I'd better be going back to the cabin," he said hoarsely.

"I'll go with you," she said pleasantly, "and help you get rid of old Clubfoot."

Feeling trapped but helpless, Griddlecake allowed her to lead the way along the trail. But to save his life, he couldn't keep from noticing the pleasant manner in which her skirt swished about her bare brown legs.

They found the cabin empty but somewhat untidy, for Clubfoot Charley was not what you'd call a dainty eater. As Marge helped straighten the room, she told him something about herself and her family. The Tillmans had come to Elbow Basin when she was just a kid. They'd had a rough go of it, but she really didn't mind the hard times. It was the loneliness that got her down.

FIRST thing Griddlecake knew, he was alone himself, and feeling kind of restless. Why, he didn't know. But one thing he did know for sure—having had his heart broken once, he wasn't going to give no girl a second chance to ruin his life. Not even if she was prettier than a mountain sunrise.

Sitting in the shade a few days later, wondering what to do with himself, he heard the approach of a horse. At first, he thought maybe Marge was riding over to see him and felt a sudden lift to his spirits, But a moment later, the horse and rider broke into the clearing, and he found himself staring up at Smiley Van-Anda, the fancy-pants hombre who had so recently stolen the affections of the fickle Camille.

Smiley seemed as surprised to see Griddlecake as Griddlecake was surprised to see him.

"What're you doing here, Greenfield?" he sputtered.

Looking at Smiley's pearl-gray stetson, hand-tooled boots and silver spurs, and a hundred dollars' worth of duds in between, Griddlecake felt his hackles rise.

"I might ask you the same question," he returned coldly.

"It's none of your business," Smiley said with equal coolness, "but I happen to be taking the short-cut to Deepwell."

Now this could have been the truth, for Deepwell was someplace west of Elbow Basin. But the fact was, Smiley Van-Anda had got wind of old Gold-fever's accident. Also, rumor had reached him that the old prospector had done some bragging about having a cache of gold hidden some place. Never one to pass up a chance to pick up some easy money, Smiley had ridden out to have a look-see. Nobody had told him that Griddle-

cake Greenfield had taken over.

"Well," Griddlecake said in an unfriendly tone, "just keep on short-cutting toward Deepwell."

By now, Smiley had got over his surprise. Sliding to the ground, he turned on his smile full blast as he shifted his gaze over the cabin. The window had no screen, he noted, and the door was without any sign of a lock.

"Let's bury the hatchet," he said pleasantly. "Could I help it if Camille preferred me to you?"

Griddlecake rolled up his fists, and Smiley hastily climbed back into saddle. Finding Griddlecake on guard here made him more sure than ever that Gold-fever's riches were hidden inside the cabin. Also, he was burned up a-plenty, riding out here to this God-forsaken place and finding he'd come on a wild goose chase, but he didn't let on.

Then, for a moment, he was tempted to offer to make a deal with Griddlecake. But his better judgment prevailed. After all, a gent with innocent blue eyes and an honest face wouldn't likely agree to help rob anybody at any time. Still smiling pleasantly, he wheeled his mount and rode from sight among the tall pines.

But he wasn't ready to give up. Frowning, he gave the situation some study and came to the conclusion that the safest thing to do was to return another day with reinforcements. And calling to mind the unsavory characters with whom he had become acquainted, he decided to enlist the help of Buck-tooth Burton, a big, black-whiskered horsethief who was mean enough to drown his own grandma for a dollar.

Whistling softly between his pretty teeth, Smiley VanAnda headed back toward Seesaw, where Buck-tooth Burton was hiding out at the present time.

Back in Elbow Basin, nothing much happened until the day Griddlecake found a red silk scarf with the initials "MT" embroidered on one corner, caught on a low bush. It didn't take him long to figure out that Marge Tillman had lost the scarf, and it seemed only fitting and proper that he return it to her. Never occurred to him that she had hung it on the bush where he would be sure to find it. So that evening, feeling somewhat fluttery on the inside, he mounted his bronc and headed for the Slash T.

MARGE met him at the door. She looked so dressed up and pretty that he had a sudden disquieting notion that she was expecting company. And she was. She was expecting him—but he never suspected that.

"Well, look who's here!" she said, as if he was the last person on earth who she expected to see. "Won't you come in, Gridley?"

"Maybe I better not," he said uneasily.

But before he could escape, she had hauled him on into the front room and was making the introductions to her family.

Mr. and Mrs. Tillman proved to be both pleasant and friendly. Also considerate, for along toward ten o'clock they retired, leaving the young couple alone to talk, drink coffee and eat shoo-pac pie.

"Who plays the guitar?" Griddlecake murmured, noticing a shining instrument hanging from a peg on the wall of an adjoining room.

"No one," Marge answered. "When I was a kid, Dad thought it would be less lonesome for me if I had a guitar to play. But—well, I guess I don't have much ear for music, even if I do enjoy listening to it."

Griddlecake took the guitar from its peg, made some pretense of tuning it and plunked forth a few sour chords.

"How nice!" Marge said. "Please play some more."

But the sound and the feel of the instrument had brought back bitter memories of a lost love, even if Griddlecake didn't no longer care if he never saw Camille Caywood again. Sighing deeply, he returned the guitar to its lofty perch.

"Some other time," he said, looking glum.

"Better have another piece of pie," Marge said, hoping to cheer him up.

But the clock began to strike twelve, and anyway he'd lost his appetite. Bidding her a hasty and unromantic farewell, he put on his hat and departed.

Riding homeward, he came to the foaming creek and followed it toward the cabin, his mind filled with sad thoughts of the fickle Camille. So it's not surprising that a sudden crash liked to made him jump out of the saddle.

Heart pounding, he rode on cautiously, not sure what danger might lurk in the shadows. But coming to the place where the stream widened around the small island, he discovered the cause of the frightening noise. The old pine that had slanted over the water had pulled loose from the soft bank and now lay with its crown resting on the island.

"The next time a tree falls over at night," Griddlecake muttered, "I hope I ain't around to be scared stiff."

Of course, he had no way of knowing that the crash had resulted from old Clubfoot Charley's hankering to get to the bee tree on the island without getting his feet wet. The big brown bear had climbed the slanting pine, and his weight had done the rest.

Griddlecake rode on home and went to bed. The next morning, he was some surprised to discover that he felt pretty cheerful in spite of his doleful memories of the night before. It wasn't long until he found himself humming hoarsely and wishing he had his guitar.

Camille — he grinned broadly at the thought of her. Why, he wouldn't be afraid to bet his last dime that she couldn't make a shoo-pac pie if her life depended on it.

A couple days later, he drifted over to the Slash T, claiming he'd lost his jackknife and pretending to hope that someone had found it. Mrs. Tillman invited him to stay for supper, which was exactly what he had hoped she would do.

By and by, he took down the guitar and thumped out some chords. Then he began to sing one of his doleful songs. Mr. and Mrs. Tillman wandered off some place—probably to get out of earshot. But Marge, who didn't know off-key from on-key, dabbled at a tear in the corner of her eye and asked for another number.

ON HIS way back to the cabin that night, Griddlecake couldn't get over it. Besides being an eyeful, Marge had a remarkable appreciation for sad cowboy songs. Not only had she loaned him her guitar to take home with him, but she had also insisted that he return to the Slash T to sing again. No two ways about it, Marge was one in a million.

But on his fifth visit to the ranch, catastrophe struck. It struck while he and Marge were sitting alone on the front porch in the starlight. He was thumping the guitar and singing about a weeping cowboy whose dear old mother lost her little white cottage, but Marge wasn't exactly listening. She was sitting there, wondering what was the matter with her. She had fed Griddlecake shoo-pac pie till it ran out of his big ears. She'd laughed at his jokes and bragged on his singing until she was blue in the face. And he hadn't made a move toward her. not even to hold her hands.

Sighing, she stood, took an absent-minded step and toppled off the low porch. In a flash, Griddlecake was down there beside her. He gathered her up in his long arms, held her close and asked if she was hurt.

She wasn't hurt, but no sensible girl would let an opportunity like this pass without making the most of it. She closed her eyes, groaned faintly and clung to him. Well, you can guess what happened. Not that he kissed her because he really wanted to. No, indeed! It was just one of those things that happens; and the moment it was over, he knew he'd made a terrible mistake.

Greatly shaken, he lowered her gently to the porch, found his hat and beat a hasty and ignominious retreat. However, by the time he reached the cabin, he was once again somewhat rational.

Being a man of experience, he suddenly realized the horrible truth. He had been tricked. Marge hadn't fallen acci-

dentally; she'd done it on purpose.

Camille had pulled the same stunt on him way back when he'd first started to work on the old man's ranch. Only Camille had fallen off a horse. Later, he had seen her pull the same act on Smiley VanAnda, which was why he knew now that Marge had tricked him, Griddlecake, and that you couldn't trust no girl no farther than you could throw a lumber wagon by its tongue.

Not that Marge wasn't a thousand times nicer than Camille ever was. But he had learned his lesson the hard way and never, never would he again call on Marge Tillman.

Three days passed, and although he weakened a time or two, he didn't go near the Slash T. He hunted squirrels, fished and loafed and told himself he was perfectly contented. He even made plans to build a cabin of his own in some unexplored region of the world and live there the rest of his days. But he failed to take into consideration the fact that Marge had other plans for him.

When the long-legged pie-eater failed to show up for three days, not only did Marge become unbearably lonesome, but she also grew extremely worried. For all she knew, he might have fallen into the creek and drowned. So on the fourth day, she baked a fresh-shoo-pac pie, put on her best summer dress and hiked through the cool pines toward Gold-fever's lonely cabin.

She came to the creek and followed it downstream, never suspecting that if she'd walk a mile or two farther, she would find Griddlecake, hale and hearty, catching himself a mess of trout.

She came to the island and noted with some surprise that the slanting pine now made a stout and safe bridge across the rushing water. Lifting her gaze, she met up with another surprise. Old Clubfoot Charley was squatting in a strip of sun on the island, looking as happy as a cream-lapping kitten. The bees swarming about the top of the lone cottonwood told her the reason for the big brown bear's look of contentment.

She went on. Coming into the clearing, she was startled to hear a great clatter within old Gold-fever's cabin. Warily she stepped up to the open window and peered in.

A LESS brave girl would have turned and run. But Marge just stood there, her brown eyes bugging slightly at what they saw inside the cabin.

The room looked like it had been hit by a tornado. Things were practically turned wrong-side-out; and right at the moment, two strangers were sweating and swearing and working like mad as they ripped up one floor board after another. Of course she didn't know it, but they were Smiley VanAnda and Buck-tooth Burton, who had sneaked in here to get the upper hand of Griddlecake.

Finding nobody to home, the two sidewinders had set to work, making a search for the gold. They'd found one small but heavy pouch under a loose board. But that had merely whetted their appetites for more.

Marge knew right away what they were up to, but didn't know what to do about it. Then her eyes spied the fat pouch, which they had carelessly tossed on the table under the window, and suddenly she knew what to do. Holding her breath, she reached her free hand through the window and clutched the pouch. But her shadow betrayed her, and Buck-tooth turned and let out a squawk.

"Drop that!" he bellowed.

But Marge didn't drop it. She dropped the pie instead, wheeled and ran for the timber. She didn't really feel frightened until she heard the men tearing through the brush after her. Then she remembered how mean Buck-tooth had looked with all them black whiskers on his ugly face, and she felt her blood run cold.

She had no idea who the men were, but if they caught her, she guessed there was no telling what they would do to her. And from the yells behind her, she knew they were closing in fast.

Her dress caught on a bush and was half-ripped away. She stumbled once and

almost fell. Low limbs whipped her face, and brambles tore her legs. But she hung on to the gold and raced on.

When she reached the creek, she saw them lunging toward her and knew she'd lost the race. Then she remembered the island and the tree bridge and felt a faint ray of hope. With a little sob, she leaped up on the tree trunk and crossed over to the brush-covered island with its old cottonwood.

Clubfoot Charley, who now considered the island his own private property, watched with disapproval as the girl entered his domain. But she was no stranger, so he didn't bother to crawl from his soft bed and offer any formal protest. However, when the two men followed the girl, that was a horse of a different color.

Now, he didn't have nothing against people in general, but to have two strangers come yelling and cussing toward his beloved bee tree was something else. With a hoarse growl, he arose to his great height and confronted them with bare fangs and big claws ready for action.

One look at the snarling brute and the two crooks forgot they carried guns. For a second, they even forgot they had legs. Then Buck-tooth let out a terrified gurgle, leaped to the old cottonwood and began to climb. So did Smiley VanAnda.

A great fury shook Clubfoot Charley as with an earth-shaking roar, he also began to climb the tree.

The men had no idea what they were getting into until those bees went to work. Then it was too late. Swatting bees right and left and screaming bloody murder, they managed to snake out on a limb and jump. Their screams ended in a watery gurgle, and then a sudden hush settled over the island. . . .

POOR Griddlecake! Upon recovering from shock at seeing the wreckage in the cabin, he began to look around for a body or something. He figured that somebody must have had a terrible battle in here. Then, outside the window, he discovered the remains of the shoo-pac pie, and a sickening fear smote him. Marge, he knew, had been here.

Like a hound dog on the trail, he circled until he found footprints leading off into the pines. Then he knew the worst. Two heavy-footed men had been after the girl.

He found a piece of her torn dress, and shuddered. He came to the fallen log, and there the trail ended. All seemed calm, but just as he put a foot on the log bridge, Clubfoot Charley reared up.

With a hoarse cry—he figured that Clubfoot had eaten Marge and the two men—Griddlecake headed back toward the cabin for the rifle. But he hadn't taken a dozen steps before Marge called:

"Wait for me!"

The next thing he knew, she was in his arms, sobbing and laughing.

"In a way, it was pretty awful," she said. "But it was kind of funny, too. The last I saw of those two men, they were swimming down the creek with the bees swarming above their heads. But I was frightened, too, and didn't know what to do. So I ran into the timber and hid. But when I saw you—well, I wasn't afraid any more."

But Griddlecake knew exactly what to do. And he did it.

"You," he said, coming up for air, "ain't got no business running around alone like this. So from now on, I'm going to stick close beside you, and as soon as we're married—"

"Oh. Griddlecake," she whispered softly, "I think that will be wonderful!"

So when four folks run out of luck at the same time—well, Buck-tooth Burton and Smiley VanAnda were never seen in Seesaw again. Camille Caywood fell off her horse for a third time and this time was pickedup. for better or worse, by a wealthy old widower. And Gridley Gilmore Greenfield went into the mining business with Gold-fever Fenton and made a wagonload of money. Which was a good thing, now that he had a wife and a family to support.

As for Clubfoot Charley, the ornery old scoundrel is still robbing bee trees and stealing pies. ● ● ●

It was an uncompromising battle, with no quarter given or asked

GRIM COMMAND

By PHIL RAY

Perhaps his soldier's sense of duty guided Lufton's decision. Or, perhaps, his hatred for the most beautiful woman he'd ever known

I CAN write of this now as though it were yesterday, for it is very clear in my memory. Even now I can see that rippling red and yellow guidon and the long column of troopers behind it on the rolling, dead-brown wasteland. And who, having once seen him, could forget the sight of Colonel Wade Myles Lufton, rid-

ing proud and stiff and unapproachable at the head of his regiment?

There were those who likened the colonel to another regimental commander of the day. I must admit that I, too, had been guilty of such a parallel, but I was very young then and my perspective had not yet been sharpened by the blades of experience. The analogy did gross injustice to Lufton, for he had none of the flamboyancy or the vanity of the one whom the Sioux called Yellow Hair. Lufton was a reticent, calculating man and there were none who really knew him.

I do not mean to imply that he was colorless or that he lacked courage. In his quiet way Lufton was one whose mere presence drew attention. In a charge it was always he who advanced at the column's head to deal the first blow—though mere physical courage was not the greatest of his attributes; he had much more than that. And it was he who fought with such gallantry on that bleak November day in 1878.

Reveille was a harsh note against the gray dawn's early stillness. Immediately the barracks were filled with the piqued voices and indignant shuffling of half-awake troopers. Yet by the time they had reached parade a fervor had begun to integrate them. As the horses were trotted out from stables and the saddling began, their good-natured curses seemed to thaw the chill air. They had known this day would come and now that it was here some of the tension began to leave them.

News of the outbreak had reached Fort Elliot in a dispatch brought in by one of the men from B Company, whose three-day scout had finally turned up the enemy. It was a brief message, hastily scrawled by the company commander. There were Cheyenne and Arapaho, fully five-hundred of them, moving north and west and gathering more as they went. Bloody Sleeves, the Cheyenne chief, had loudly proclaimed that the Territory would never hold him. Now he was making good that boast.

Colonel Lufton had called his adjutant forward, handed him the message. "Send a dispatch immediately to Captain Palmer of B Company. Order him to refrain from any engagement with the Cheyenne. He is to follow their march and leave us a trail which we will pick up at his present location. I want all details readied for the march. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." The adjutant saluted and left the office.

The colonel turned to me then, his black cigar clenched tightly between his teeth. I knew that Colonel Lufton, unlike most military commanders, was indifferent to reporters, that he regarded them as mere nuisances in the field.

"I will not rob you of a good story, Wilson," he told me. "You may come along, but you will not interfere and you are not to expect any special favors. I want that understood."

Lufton had no thought other than that dictated by a completely militarized brain. His eyes were chips of blue granite. His mouth was straight and firm and harsh-set between mustache and imperial.

"I understand," I said and turned quickly away.

THE regiment filed out in columns of fours. Up ahead the ramrod-straight back of Colonel Lufton swayed easily with the nervous movements of his charger. On the far side parade officers' wives gazed with resigned wistfulness as the column disappeared slowly through the open gates of Fort Elliot. Once, only once, did Colonel Lufton glance back, and then it was only for a brief instant, his eyes returning front almost immediately. I think that for a moment he had forgotten there was no one on officers' row this day whose parting gesture would be for him alone.

The colonel had loved Helen Lufton in his remote way, for I had seen him smile with secret tenderness at her too many times to know otherwise. I had seen him hold her close in a quadrille and I had seen the proud glitter in his eyes as he beheld the beauty of her. I had often thought that Helen Lufton was the only thing on this earth with the power to melt

the colonel's case-hardened exterior.

And yet she had left him. She had left this lonely post in the dead of night and vanished in the dust-wake of a westward-bound wagon train. We all knew these things and it was fare for conjecture among us. Why had she done it? Perhaps the flashing black eyes of the gambling man bound for California had been too much for the fun-loving Helen. Perhaps the promise of gaiety and the end of a lonely frontier existence had overshadowed the enviable position she held as wife of the post commander.

We knew that Lufton had recently been offered a post in Washington which, in spite of his wife's persuasion, he had declined to accept. Was this then the end result of a bitter quarrel between them—an impulsive gesture on Helen's part?

I looked again toward the head of the column and saw him speak now to our scout, a Crow named Charley Naked Head who wore white man's trousers and vest and a gray derby which he cocked at a jaunty angle atop his greasy head. . . .

We moved swiftly that first day; ten minutes at the walk, ten minutes at the trot, ten minutes rest out of every hour. What havens of relief those rest periods were to me! I was not hardened to campaign as were the soldiers, and in addition to this I soon discovered that my mule's gait left much to be desired. For a brief while I entertained the theory that Lufton had purposely provided me with the animal, so that he could enjoy my discomfort. More probably it was the diabolic device of some crotchety old line sergeant.

With the rattle of musketry and the squeak of saddle leather in my ears, the dust of the march in my nose and eyes, I bore up as best I could, for I knew this was an opportunity I was not likely to realize again. The frontier was rapidly diminishing and even then most of the major campaigns were history. To the north, Gibbon and Terry had broken the back of the Sioux three years previous. In the Southwest the Apache had been ground to dust under the iron heel of Crook. The redoubtable Cochise had lain four years in his unmarked grave, and the numerous tribes of the Far West had been beaten back and put upon their reservations.

The sky remained overcast, but the earth was dry as sifted flour and the parched buffalo grass was brittle as old bones. That night we bivouacked on Red Petticoat Creek, empty now save for a few low-lying stagnant pools. Wearily I unsaddled my mule.

"This'll give you a taste of what's coming, scribe," a soldier chided me. "It ain't going to be a picnic for none of us. The old man's been spoiling for a fight ever since that wench done him in."

A lieutenant's dundrearied face swiveled toward us. "Watch your tongue, private! The colonel would cut your heart out for that."

Red-faced, the soldier turned and tramped off. But his feeling was fairly typical; his antagonism toward "the old man" was shared with others of the regiment, though it was seldom so openly exhibited. Most of the men were satisfied to place the cause of their discomfort squarely upon the colonel's shoulders. This attitude caused me to wonder. Was Lufton one to vent his personal wrath on innocent men? I did not know, but the feeling persisted among the men of his command. Even though the colonel sometimes prodded his men unmercifully, I suspect that their rancor was caused more by his demeanor than his actions. Remote individuals like Colonel Lufton have never known the affection of lesser men.

The second and third days were like the first: walk, trot, walk, trot, an endless monotony which was no longer relieved even by the change of pace. The men settled down to it, their occasional grumbling charged with rough witticisms. Lufton himself seemed almost immune to fatigue. I marveled at the man's energy. He seemed as fresh at the end of a day as he had at the start. And I, a sorry spectacle on my rough-gaited mule, became the subject of many a jibe. Up front Charley

Naked Head sniffed at the wind like an animal and scanned each horizon with ever-increasing interest.

LATE in the afternoon of the fourth day we caught up with B Company —or rather what was left of it. The bodies were scattered along the slope of a low ridge and it was not difficult to discern what had taken place. Below lay the charred and broken remains of a wagon train, the stripped and mutilated bodies of the passengers lying all about. It had been a valiant effort on the part of B Company. The unshod hoofprints—it was impossible to tell how many—showed plainly the rear attack that the Indians had made on the wagon train's defenders. The battle, if it could be called that, could not have lasted more than a few minutes. The soldiers had been hopelessly outnumbered.

The massacre was a horrible sight; I confess that I was sick. Even some of the oldest campaigners were forced to retreat and express their repulsion. The colonel, seemingly untouched, rode stiff-backed among the victims, looking down at the bodies, his face drawn and expressionless as though behind a mask. And then, of course, I remembered the wagon train which had tarried briefly at Fort Elliot the week previous. and the flashing black eyes of the gambling man bound for California.

Lufton dismounted and called a squadron commander forward. "You will assign a burial detail, Major. The Department Commander will be notified by special courier as soon as I've prepared my dispatch." Lufton nodded in my direction. "If Mr. Wilson wishes to send correspondence he may do so."

The major saluted and started away.

"And Major—" Lufton hesitated. "I want every female body identified."

The officer looked doubtful. His mouth showed an expression of distaste, a gesture that was spontaneous. "That may be difficult, sir. Under the circumstances—"

"I know," the colonel intervened. "But it is important to me. Do your best."

I wrote my dispatches sitting on the bare earth, while all about me hovered the dust and the stench of charred bodies. The soldiers, with their yellow scarves covering their noses, busied themselves at the grim task. It was a day I shall never forget.

At sundown I took my communication to the colonel's tent. He looked up from where he sat at his portable desk and nodded as I set the papers before him. I turned and started to leave when the tent flap opened and the squadron commander came in. The colonel stiffened, but his face retained its austerity.

There was a moment of silence and then Lufton broke it. "Well, Major?"

The officer hesitated. "There were seven women, sir—" He stopped, then shook his head slowly. "We found only this." He placed the comb on Colonel Lufton's desk. It was mother-of-pearl, incrusted with a row of small red rubies. It was one of a matching pair I had seen often against the dark head of Helen Lufton. They were beautiful, delicate things, a proper match for Mrs. Lufton's sultry elegance.

The colonel glanced at the comb, recognizing it instantly. He looked up at the younger officer. "You're certain this was all?"

The major nodded. "Positive, sir. Their faces are—well, fairly recognizable. The women weren't as bad as the men. If you'd care to see for yourself—"

Lufton shook his head. "All right, Major. See that things are put in order. We'll break camp at midnight."

I stood there for a moment after the major left, unaware of the fact that I was staring until the colonel's hard glance caught me.

"Was there something else, Wilson?"

I stirred uncomfortably. "No, sir. I was just wondering. About Mrs. Lufton. I mean, if they didn't find her, if she wasn't killed, then—" I was surprised to find myself speaking of her in Lufton's presence, for I knew that no one had dared mention her name since the incident had occurred.

But Lufton merely nodded. "I know," he said. "It seems unlikely that the Cheyenne would take prisoners. But perhaps they did and plan to keep her as a hostage. Is that what you were thinking, Wilson?"

"I believe we were both thinking that, sir. What course of action would you take if that proves to be the case?"

He glanced down at the delicate comb which lay before him. I did not know—nor did anyone know—how Lufton felt about his wife. I thought that I could see in Lufton's face the torment that confronts a man when he is torn between duty and personal desire. But then he looked at me again, his mouth a taut line.

"I am a soldier, Wilson," he said. "My job is to prevent rebellion among the Indians. Peacefully if possible, forcibly if necessary. I cannot disobey my orders. Bloody Sleeves knows that he must answer for these murders. I don't think it's conceivable that he will return to the reservation without a fight. Under those circumstances I would have no choice but to use force."

I was taken aback. "But surely," I said, "that would mean certain death for any white persons he would be holding."

Lufton nodded. "There is no doubt of that."

"Wouldn't it be wise to bargain with them?" I said. "Couldn't some sort of agreement be reached to prevent further bloodshed?"

The colonel smiled and the flickering candle played weird tricks with his sharp features, his mustache and imperial grossly exaggerated in the deep shadows that were cast upon his face.

"You do not bargain with a murderer," he said coldly. "There can be no compromise. The Cheyenne will trade only for his freedom. That I cannot give him. I do not have the desire nor the authority to do so."

"I see," I muttered and turned from him, wondering if the man had any feeling at all other than his sense of duty.

I wanted to return to Fort Elliot. I had seen enough of marching and murder. But I walked to my blankets, threw myself down and waited for the march to begin, realizing that I could not turn back now.

AT MIDNIGHT we were ready to move out again under a black, starless sky. My mule snorted and I felt his back arch like a cat's as I threw on the cold saddle blankets. The men were half asleep as they mounted, but I heard one of them say, "There'll be no stopping the old man now he's got the taste of blood. I'd hate like hell to be in the Cheyenne camp when he catches 'em."

"You won't like it no better on this end of the stick," another said. "There's 'Rapaho too, an' I've seen 'em fight like the devils they are."

A company officer's voice boomed through the darkness and the column formed a ragged line, pushing forward, leaving behind us the burnt-out fires of our brief camp, the still-smouldering ashes of the wagon train, the hastily-buried dead. And though I could not see to the head of the column, I knew there rode a stiff-backed figure, a man whose unyielding energy was a driving force pushing us deeper and deeper into a land of black shadows and unknown dangers.

Even now when I think of that march I can feel the thirst and the hunger and the utter fatigue that oppressed all of us. The sky remained sullen with low-hanging clouds so that the days were not very different from the nights. And when an icy wind began to blow in on us from the north I thought surely it would snow. The tired voices that reached my ears were no longer salted with wry humor, but were weary and irksome After seven more days of it I began to wonder how Lufton expected these men to continue, let alone put up a respectable fight against those he so relentlessly pursued.

But there had to be an end to it. We had left the flat prairie country and were in a land of rolling dry hills studded with greasewood. The wind had grown stronger and colder and I had taken to wrapping a heavy army blanket around me as I rode, covering my head and shoulders with it

so that only my face was exposed to the icy blast. I was up near the front of the column the night Charley Naked Head came galloping back from his scout, shouting that he had seen the Cheyenne fires.

The colonel gave the order to halt and dismount. He stationed pickets and then rode forward with two of his squadron commanders and the scout to survey the Indian camp. I followed. My blood began to race and I no longer felt the sharp bite of the wind. Now the fervor of expectation burned in me

We rode up the gentle slope of a knoll and near the top dismounted and crawled on our bellies to its crest. Below us we could see their low fires and the long shadows their wickiups cast. I found myself wondering if Helen Lufton was really down there among them. The camp was silent as a grave. When a dog's howl reached us on the high wind my whole body trembled. Beside me Charley Naked Head breathed heavily. I knew that he feared the Cheyenne as much as death itself.

The stillness of the scene was unnatural and I whispered, "Do you think they heard us?" An entire regiment on the march makes considerable racket; yet we had halted nearly a mile away.

Charley Naked Head's gray derby bobbed forward and he grunted. Lufton said, "The Cheyenne sleeps with an eye open and an ear cocked to his back trail He knows we are here, there is no doubt of that." He studied the scene a moment longer, then began moving back down the slope. "Let's get out of here."

Silently we crawled back to our mounts.

Lufton had his Sibley tent set up and we bivouacked there for the night. Scouts were posted to report any movement in the Cheyenne camp. The candle burned dully within the folds of Lufton's tent and I knew he did not sleep that night. Shortly before dawn he called his officers into the tent. He nodded to me. "Yes, Wilson. Come in if you wish."

He had made a rough diagram of the Indian camp and the surrounding area and placed it on his desk top where the others could see it.

"Gentlemen," he said, "there are at least six-hundred Indians in the camp below us. No doubt they are well armed. Make no mistake about their fighting ability. This will not be easy; it will not be another Washita. On the other hand, I do not intend that we shall repeat the incident of the Little Bighorn." He paused and some of the officers nodded understandingly "Therefore," he continued, "I will expect each of you to carry out your instructions to the letter."

I LISTENED and took notes while Colonel Lufton, in his quiet voice, outlined the campaign and gave each man his orders. The plan was to surround the enemy and grip them tightly in a noose from which escape would be virtually impossible. I noticed that the maneuver avoided charges and hand-to-hand fighting. It would have been a simple matter indeed to send the entire regiment into the camp and engage in a battle which would result in heavy losses on both sides. The colonel, I thought, could drive his men like a demon, but he would not offer them up for the enemy to slaughter as so many others might have done. Or was he, I pondered, thinking, as I was, of Helen Lufton, and hoping somehow to spare her life?

But my wondering ceased, for at that moment an orderly strode into the tent and announced that Bloody Sleeves and a dozen braves had reached our picket lines and wanted talk with the white leader.

"All right." Lufton sighed as though he had been expecting this. He turned to one of his company officers "Send your troop out to escort them in, Captain." He glanced at me then, saying, "The murderers have come to bargain."

The Cheyenne leader was not quite what I had expected. He was an old man with a wizened face and deep, sunken eyes. He rode a scrawny, dun pony and a thick buffalo robe protected his frail shoulders from the freezing wind. Behind him his warriors wore the same hungry look and seemed to huddle against

the cold. They rode slowly into our camp and Bloody Sleeves managed somehow to remain proud and indifferent to the display of military might that was all about him.

He did not dismount, possibly because he felt that his elevated position gave him a certain psychological advantage. He halted before the colonel and I was surprised when he began speaking in English.

"My people do not want war," he said "We wish only to live in peace and to be left alone. We do not like the way the white man has treated us. In return for our freedom we will live in peace among ourselves and do no harm to others."

The colonel spoke then. "You say you do not want war. Yet you have killed many soldiers and murdered many white people who were innocent. You must return to your homes and your people must pay for these crimes. There is no other way. It is not in my power to give you freedom."

A fresh flurry blew in from the north and the old chief seemed to withdraw deeper into the folds of his robe "We know nothing of murders," he said. "My people are innocent." A sly expression came across his features and the ghost of a smile seemed to compress his lips. "We have heard that the white leader who wears the golden bird is a man of honor. We believe that he will promise us our freedom and that he will keep his word."

"It is true," Lufton said, "that I am a man of my word. And I promise you that your people will not be harmed if they return now to their homes and allow themselves to be tried for the murders which have been committed. Beyond that I can promise nothing."

The wizened chief smiled again, a wicked, knowing smile. "Many days ago," he said, "we found a white woman wandering alone in the hills. We took this woman to our camp and fed her and kept her warm and saved her from the jaws of death. By her own word she is the white leader's woman. She is grateful to my people. She says to tell the white leader that she wishes to return to her own people, that she believes Bloody Sleeves and his people should have freedom in return for their kindness."

I watched Lufton closely now. It was the bargain he had been waiting for, yet his features remained implacably stern. He said, "Bloody Sleeves lies. There is no white woman in the Cheyenne camp."

The old chief reached into the folds of his robe and drew out an object which he threw violently into the dust at Lufton's feet. "Bloody Sleeves does not lie!"

I glanced down at the mother-of-pearl comb incrusted with a row of small red rubies and in my mind's eye I could see Helen Lufton lying there in the dust at the colonel's feet, her clothes torn to shreds, her raven hair over her shoulders in long, greasy scrolls, and her face, streaked with dirt, seeming to plead for some small measure of mercy.

The colonel looked up at the old man and laughed. "Is this supposed to be proof that you do not lie?" He laughed again, harsh and loud. "Bloody Sleeves is not only a liar, he is a fool." He pointed contemptuously at the comb. "What is this but a simple ornament worn by many white women. It means nothing. Go back to your people and tell them not to be foolish as you have been. Tell them they face nothing but death if they do not return now to their homes."

BLOODY SLEEVES sat stunned for a moment. He knew this was a gigantic bluff, but he had not expected it. He whirled his horse about with a savage jerk. He shouted something to his warriors in his own tongue and then they were all racing out of our camp.

Lufton waited until they had retreated beyond the crest of the knoll, then he turned and bawled his orders. "Bugler! Sound Boots and Saddles." And to his officers: "Mount your men. You have your orders."

There were the sharp notes of the bugle, a violent rush for the horses and a mad scrambling and cursing and whinnying as saddles were thrown on and cinched tight-

ly. For a moment or two Colonel Lufton seemed to gaze wistfully toward the low knoll on the west. Who can tell what thoughts he was thinking at that moment? Today there are those who remember and argue vaguely, some saying the colonel was thinking only of personal revenge on the woman who wronged him, others taking the position that he did the only thing he could do, that he had no choice.

As for me, I cannot say, for I knew him no better than the rest. But I recall seeing him in the midst of all that turmoil, reaching down into the dust and retrieving the small, delicate comb that had been Helen Lufton's and placing it carefully into the breast pocket of his tunic. I remember too that at that moment someone rode up beside me and handed me a pistol, saying, "Protect yourself, scribe. A scalp is a scalp and the Injuns make no distinction between soldier and civilian."

Then they were moving out, the regiment divided, making its giant circle, forming the noose that would strangle the recalcitrant redman. Behind me I heard rapid hoofbeats and turned to see Charley Naked Head laying the quirt to his pony's rump, wanting no part of this.

Colonel Lufton was mounted on his gray charger and, with a third of his command behind him, rode slowly to the crest of the hill. Below, in the Cheyenne camp, there was activity. Warriors mounted their wiry ponies and began moving westward. Women and children deserted their wickiups and followed doggedly, some mounted, some afoot. Far off, to our right and to our left, two giant dust clouds from the divided portion of Lufton's command rose swiftly, rapidly approaching each other until there was only a narrow void of cottony sky between. It was toward this opening that the village raced.

They did not make it, of course, which was a credit to the colonel's precise planning. We watched through the haze as

[*Turn page*]

the Indians staggered against this offensive line. Distantly we heard the first volleys—the sharp report of our own carbines and the crackling reply of Cheyenne and Arapaho guns. Colonel Lufton raised his own carbine high into the air, giving the command to move forward, taking up the first notch in the noose.

AHEAD of us the firing continued until it became too much for the Cheyenne and he was buffeted back into our laps. I realized then the desperation of these people and the wisdom of Colonel Lufton's words when he had said there could be no compromise. The hand-to-hand fighting which Lufton had purposefully tried to avoid was now inevitable.

The Cheyenne and Arapaho were fierce. I saw soldiers unhorsed and left lying with their naked scalps gushing blood upon the dry earth. I saw the redmen rush forth with their bodies riddled with bullets and continue fighting until the last breath had gone from them. I saw individual struggles that were supreme efforts of strength and endurance. It was indeed an uncompromising battle. No quarter was given. None was asked.

But by far the most valiant fighting of all was done by Colonel Lufton himself. When he finally realized this must be a fight to the finish he dismounted and led his men into the thickest of it. With my own eyes I saw him kill Bloody Sleeves, wresting the knife from the Indian's grasp and plunging it deep into his heart. I saw him engage two young warriors and beat them into the dust with the butt of his carbine. As more of the Indians were driven toward us I was forced to fight for myself and it was Lufton who saved me from death with a well-aimed bullet from his pistol. I looked down in horror at the dead savage who had been about to tear my heart out.

Lufton stood beside me, the gun smoking in his hand. "Get back over the hill," he shouted. "I can't be responsible for civilians."

He went charging off where the dust was thickest and I saw him no more until the fight had ended and all but a handful of the Indians as well as many of our own men lay dead and dying all around me. I wandered among them in a daze, not even knowing that I was wounded until a surgeon noticed me and forced me to lie down until he had done what he could for me.

Later I found Lufton in the middle of what had been the Indian village. His bright uniform was torn to shreds and a deep purple stain covered one sleeve of his tunic. A gash lay across his forehead and blood trickled from it. But I am sure that he did not feel the pain of his wounds, nor did he feel the bitter cold that was closing in all around us. For he stood gazing down at the naked and mutilated remains of what had once been a beautiful woman. He was not aware of me and I did not speak, for I saw the trembling of his shoulders. I turned away, unable to look at the horrible things they had done to Helen Lufton. . . .

I wandered away among the wounded and dying and fell to caring for them because there were few enough of us who could still move about. It grew colder and presently I was aware of icy fingers touching the back of my neck. Apprehensively I glanced upward at the bleak sky.

It had begun to snow at last. ● ● ●

"If there's a wrong way to do something, that new guy is sure to find it."

Of Mustangs and Men

In those days of wild horses and wilder men, it was the same old story—the best ones got away

By
ALLAN K. ECHOLS

WRITERS of western lore and history have long assumed that the Indian first learned horsemanship by capturing the wild mustangs descended from escaped Spanish horses, and later bred and raised their animals from this original stock.

Present students of Indian history now believe that the opposite is true, that they started riding tame animals got from the Spaniards, and only learned the art of mustanging, or capturing wild horses, at a much later date. They have a pretty good argument to prove their point.

They can show that the Indians were expert horsemen long before they learned to use the lariat or to capture wild horses in any way at all. The Indian's first use of the lariat was so primitive that he could not capture good horses with it. It is not commonly known, but the first method of using the lariat was not to throw it over the horse's head, but to hold the loop out on a long pole, then race up to the wild horse and, as the animal was overtaken, drop the loop over the horse's head.

Then, since the Indian did not have a saddle to which he could snub his rope, he had to drop off his own horse and dig his heels into the ground to hold the wild animal, usually needing help to subdue him.

Since the Indian's horse was seldom as fast as the best of the wild ones, he never got a chance to drop his loop over the neck of a good one, and consequently the tame horses were all of inferior stock and slower than the wild ones. In early-day Texas, white people also used this method of catching wild horses, some of them making a loop from a willow switch, to which they tied the loop of their *lazos* with small breakable string so that the loop would stay open until it was dropped over the horse's head.

Since roping was unprofitable, most professional wild horse hunters, both Indian and white, preferred to trap them or to use any of the several other means of capturing them.

Traps were made by building corrals in the concealment of woods or brush, with wings flaring out from the entrance, and camouflaged so that the horse would not recognize the fact that he was being driven into a funnel-shaped enclosure.

The Indians, by virtue of numbers, frequently had the whole tribe surround a band of wild horses, keeping them milling until they were exhausted. Then their best horsemen would ride among them and capture them.

Another Indian method of capture which was practiced by the northern Indians, was to make their drives just after the winter's deep snow began to melt. At that time the wild horses would be in a weakened condition from semi-starvation, and the Indians, using relays of well-fed hunting horses, could capture them by running them to complete exhaustion. Another Indian method was to stake out gentle mares to attract the wild stallions to within capturing distance.

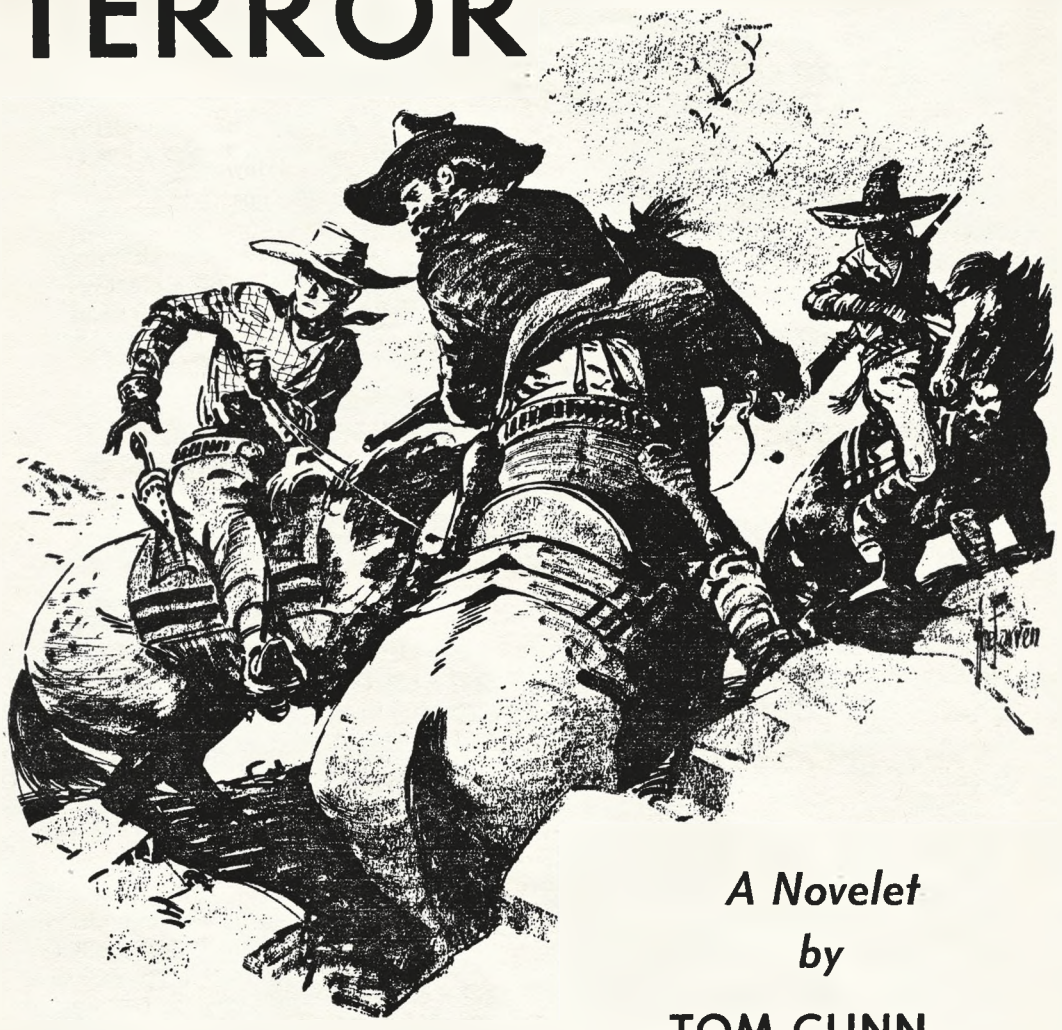
At any rate, it seems clearly evident now from the records of early writers that the Indian always raised better horses than he could get by capturing wild mustangs, which were like fish, in that usually the best ones got away. ● ● ●

THE TONTO

Painted Post was up in arms. Poisoning water holes was bad enough. But the man who'd ruin good liquor was low enough to—well, by God, to bring in sheep!

Steele rose from behind the rocks, a Colt in each hand

TERROR



A Novelet
by
TOM GUNN

CHAPTER I

A Barrel of Trouble

OLD TIMERS called Arizona "the land of too much or too little" and Thimble Jack, who ran the Painted Post Saloon, was learning that there was a lot of truth in the saying.

For days at a stretch, he didn't do enough business to fatten a horned toad. But on this particular Saturday evening, just about the entire population of Indian County showed up in town and his bar was jam-packed with customers.

The place hummed with the two main topics of conversation. The threatened invasion of sheepmen, who were being driven out of the Tonto country to the north, and the weather.

Everybody was cussing the weather. Summer rains were expected and border country cattlemen depended on them. But it was a case of too much this year. Torrential storms had pounded this land of extremes, slashing dry canyons, flooding

bottomlands and drowning livestock. Also, the stage road that linked Painted Post with civilization, was heavily damaged.

It was stagetime now, almost dark, but there was small hope for the arrival of "Magpie" Stevens with his battered old Concord.

Thimble Jack's sad face wore a look of strained anxiety as he stood on the bar to light the big ceiling lamp. He always was worrying about something, real or imaginary. Just now, he had good reason to worry. He was just about out of whisky. Unless the stage showed up with the barrel he had ordered, there was going to be a liquor famine in Painted Post and that would be a pretty serious matter with the biggest crowd for weeks on hand.

He jumped nervously when a Circle 7 puncher banged his empty glass impatiently on the bar and yelled:

"Hey, get busy and fill 'em up! What you trying to do, wean us?"

Under the circumstances, Thimble Jack wasn't rushing the drinks any. He clambered down from the bar and reached for the bottle on the backbar, holding it up and sorrowfully eying the fast-shrinking contents.

"You're a hard man to please, Randy," he sighed. "You make trouble when you ain't got enough and you make trouble when you've got too much."

It was just another case of too much or too little, Randy told him with a laugh. But Thimble Jack refused to be amused. When the drinks ran out, Randy and a lot of others would lambast him for not keeping enough on hand, and probably wreck the joint. He shuddered to think of it.

At that moment, Deputy Sheriff Shorty Watts dashed down the street from the jail office and burst into the saloon.

"Here comes ol' Magpie!" the undersized redhead yipped shrilly. "The ol' jackrabbit made it! Right on the dot, almost!"

THE seasoned old whiphand was greeted with loud cheers as he made his finishing triumphant dash. Mightily pleased, he braked to a spectacular stop in front of the saloon, tucked the reins around the whip socket, threw down the mailbag and lowered himself stiffly from the high driver's seat. A homely, leathery-faced character, he was shy a lot of teeth and hair but full of gab as usual and gloating in the excitement he had created.

"Shucks, I always git there somehow," he bragged. "Mud? Well, damp in spots, yes. I ain't raised dust in the last twenty mile."

The barrel of whisky was roped on the boot and Thimble Jack fairly pounced on it. Willing hands helped him unrope and unload it.

But his pleasure and relief were only momentary. As Thimble Jack rolled the barrel inside, past the batwing doors, he cocked an ear to a very noticeable splashing.

"Now what?" he complained. "A full barrel don't splash like that! Doggone it, I been shorted!"

"Shrunk in transit," Magpie asserted glibly.

"Not that much, it didn't!" grumbled the barkeeper. "It's at least two gallons short."

"It sprung a leak, then," suggested Shorty Watts.

Thimble Jack gave the barrel another roll, carefully examining the staves all around as he did so.

"No sign of a leak," he declared. "I been hornswoggled by the doggone distillery, that's what!"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that." The easy drawl came from beside him. "The barrel might have been tapped."

Thimble Jack craned around and saw the Sheriff of Painted Post. There was friendly amusement in the rock-gray eyes of Blue Steele, the famous two-gun lawman. After all, Steele was used to more serious crimes than the theft of a couple of gallons of cheap bar whisky.

"How can anybody tap a barrel o' whisky?" grunted the barkeeper.

"It's a simple trick," the sheriff told him, "but easy to spot. Got a mallet and a cold chisel?"

Wonderingly, Thimble Jack went into the back room and brought the tools. Steele, hunkered down beside the barrel, explored the iron hoops with keen eyes and sensitive fingers, the way a lock expert would examine a safe.

With a thin smile, he pointed. "Your mystery is solved," he said. "You see where a small hole was drilled through the barrel? With a gimlet or some boring tool. Your whisky rustler drew out what he wanted, plugged the hole with a whittled stick, smoothed it over, then knocked the hoop back into place. If he hadn't taken so much, you'd never have noticed the loss at all."

A curious crowd circled them by now, exclaiming at the Sheriff's swift solution.

"Well, that shows how it was done," Thimble Jack admitted wryly. "But it doesn't show who did it."

SHORTY WATTS decided it was time for him to shine a little. "Now who'd go around packing a gimlet, on the off-chance that he'd find a barrel o' whisky and nobody looking?"

"A good point, segundo," Steele said. "Although it could be managed with the reaming blade of a pocketknife."

His eyes were on Magpie when he said that, because Magpie was whittling himself a chew off a slab of plugcut. Magpie slid the chew to his lips and opened a small, semicircular blade in his knife. A reaming blade. He displayed it with the air of a man who had nothing to conceal.

"That don't mean me, by any chance, does it?" he snorted. "I use this blade to bore buckle holes in harness and such. But I never did use it to git me a free drunk. I'm mighty obliged for the suggestion, just the same, and will keep it in mind."

"Well, nobody had a better opportunity," the barkeeper said stubbornly.

"How about my passenger?" retorted Magpie.

The sheriff's granite gaze sharpened.

"Passenger? What passenger?" he demanded.

"A Mexican that rode down with me, far as Box L Spring. Said he was a bounty hunter, out after coyotes. He had a two-gallon canteen, come to think about it. Also, he was alone on the stage now and then, when I tromped out ahead to shovel in some washouts."

Randy, the thirsty Circle 7 puncher, got impatient.

"Hey, let's drop this post mortem over a little rotgut. It's what's left in the barrel we're after. How about it, gents?"

There was a chorus of agreement and a return to the bar. Over at a corner card table was Judge John Bertram, reading his batch of mail the stage had brought. Bertram owned T Bar T, oldest and largest spread in the Painted Post country. He was a square-built man with a rare beefsteak complexion and a shock of white hair. His bushy eyebrows were flattened in a scowl as he beckoned Steele over to him. He shoved a letter in the sheriff's hands.

"Thunderation, they're after me again to sell out!" he bellowed. "Won't take no for an answer!"

The letter, Steele saw, was from Bert Skegg, one of the biggest sheepmen in the Territory.

"Sheepmen don't discourage easy," he said dryly. "That's why they're sheepmen."

It was the last line in the letter that rankled the judge:

This is my last offer. Better grab it while you can.

"Here's how it is, Judge," Steele explained. "Skegg ranges Tonto Basin, and cattlemen up there are getting on the peck, threatening to drive out the sheepmen. Skegg has his eye on T Bar T because it suits his needs fine. High summer range in the Sawtooths and lots of winter grass on the desert. No long drives, each fall and spring. Ideal set-up for sheep."

"He'll get it over my dead body, by Godfrey!" rumbled Bertram.

Steele had one of his sudden hunches. Almost without thinking, he said ominously:

"Maybe that's just how he intends to get it, Judge."

CHAPTER II

Life or Death

THOSE WORDS seemed to hang on the air like an evil prophecy as Bertram crumpled the letter, tossed it to the floor and stepped to the bar to join the others. At that moment, unnoticed by anyone else, Steele saw two men unobtrusively enter and stand hesitantly by the swinging doors.

They were strangers. One was big, full-bearded and had piercing dark eyes that swept the crowded bar as though looking for somebody. The other was tall and gangly with a triangular face and thin, hard mouth. Both wore sixguns. Steele sauntered over to them.

"Looking for somebody?" he inquired.

The man with the sharp, dark eyes gave him a quick look that dropped to the battered silver badge.

"Confidentially, yes, Sheriff," he said in a low, guarded voice. "I'm Jim Hawks. This here is my brother-in-law, Frankie Collins."

Steele reached to his calfskin vest for makings.

"How goes it up Tonto way?" he asked.

Hawks's eyes showed surprise. "That's our stamping ground, but I didn't know it showed on us. Things are—bad, Sheriff, to say the least," he said with smothered wrath. "Some cowardly sidewinder poisoned a spring, killed off sixteen head of mine and Frankie's."

"Not to mention two men, one dead, the other dying," Collins grated.

"All we got to go on," Hawks said, "is that an hombre named Quintana disappeared sudden from those parts about the time it happened."

"A neighbor?"

"Not exactly. He was a lowdown sheepherder, or had been. Tended one of the Skegg flocks. Lately he's been a bounty hunter, out for coyotes. Used strychnine bait. We figure this Quintana was headed south, and intends to—"

By now the barrel of whisky was racked behind the bar. Thimble Jack had driven out the bung, inserted a wooden spigot and had filled a bottle, pouring drinks.

Judge Bertram was lifting a brimming glass to his mouth, with a "here's how, boys."

He had barely said it when, with a move faster than the eye could follow, Steele's right hand kicked to one of his twin Colts. Hawks and Collins had no time even to flinch before the Colt blasted deafeningly. The glass in Judge Bertram's hand exploded.

Judge Bertram, empty hand still open before his dumfounded face, stared at a thin dribble of blood from a shallow cut between thumb and forefinger. Steele called out in a voice that crackled with authority:

"Hold it, everybody! Don't touch a drop of that stuff!"

"Thunderation, you out o' your head, Blue Steele? What fool trick is this?" bellowed Bertram.

"Dump your glasses, everybody!" rapped out the sheriff. "Jack, cork that bottle!"

"But dang bust it, Sheriff!" wailed the barkeeper. "Y-you can't crack down and ruin my trade j-just as—!"

"Painted Post goes dry," Steele ordered. "Until Doc Crabtree can analyze a sample of that whisky."

A STORM of protest broke, as the crowd thronged angrily around Steele. Hawks and Collins, stunned by the lightning gunplay, were the only ones who had an inkling of its purpose. But they were drowned out by the indignant deluge.

Steele wasted no words in defending his act. He commanded Shorty to rush the bottle to the Doc's office and small laboratory above the saloon.

The crowd's resentment turned to meek gratitude when the small, sharp-nosed doctor appeared downstairs. His pinch-on glasses flashed excitement and his billy-goat beard jutted aggressively.

"Thank your lucky stars, all of you!" he barked. "Chemical reaction shows there's enough poison in that bottle to exterminate everybody present!" He added tartly, "You ought to get down on your knees, John Bertram, and thank the man who saved your life with a bullet!"

The judge blinked and looked around. But Steele and Shorty had vanished.

Jim Hawks spoke up.

"It's time somebody told you where that pizen came from." He repeated what he and Collins had told the sheriff about the Tonto terror.

Thimble Jack mopped his brow with a corner of his limp, soiled apron and wagged his head gloomily. "I'm out a whole barrel now, not just two gallons or so!" he lamented. "What'll I ever do with this one?"

The Circle 7 puncher, his face a sickly green, reeled for the door. "Far's I'm concerned, I'm a teetotaler from now on!" he gasped.

Johnny Sheldon of the Box L had a sudden, startling thought. "Suppose that poison killer does up Box L Spring?"

"Your sheriff is a few jumps ahead o' you, cowboy," said Hawks.

"He might of asked us to go along," Collins said sulkily. "He don't know Quintana from Adam's ox."

Magpie's hand was shaky as he whittled off a fresh chew to steady his nerves.

"I'd say that devil Quintana ain't very bright," he reflected. "Why did he practically identify hisself as the Tonto poisoner by telling me he was a bounty hunter? Just to be sure—tell me what Quintana looks like, mister."

"Fat, pockmarked, bushy black mustache, squinty eyes, around thirty."

Magpie chomped a few times on the plugcut, enjoying the hushed suspense that awaited whatever he had to say.

"That tallies," he finally announced. "Except that somewhere between Tonto and Cottonwood he shed his mustache. Had front teeth that stuck out like a gopher's. Bet he could eat an apple through a knothole."

"That's him," rasped Collins.

Judge Bertram boomed an order to the two T Bar T men present.

"We better get leather under us. That two-legged lobo might be making a sneak right now for T Bar T!"

"Count us in on that," said Hawks. "Someplace here where we can grab a quick bite and fresh horses?"

"It's only five miles to my spread," Bertram said, herding his men for the street. "Come on, let's go!"

CHAPTER III

A Quick Arrest

ON THE FACE of it, Quintana was Skegg's hireling, sent south to spread panic as a means of gaining a foothold in Indian County. But other angles of the case were not so obvious, not to Shorty at least, as he and Steele hit out for Box L Spring.

"What I can't figger," pondered the redhead, "is how this Quintana knew there'd be a barrel o' whisky on the stage he aimed to ride."

"It's possible he saw Magpie loading the barrel at Cottonwood and hit on the idea there."

"But how'd he know that the judge—the man he was mainly after—would be one of the first to go for the poisoned liquor?"

"Some things have to be charged off to coincidence, segundo."

"You expect Quintana is hiding out, waiting to see how that job turned out before he tries something else?"

"No. Poison killers are a thousand times more dangerous than any out-in-the-open murderer. Gun-hands know when to stop. But not a poisoner."

It was a cool night for that time of year, with clouds fringing the horizon and occasional stabs of distant lightning. A good night for long-riding. So they made good time to Rimrock grade, and on up and across the rolling brushland

beyond. They ran out of talk. For miles, even the gabby Shorty Watts had nothing to say. The tension and uncertainty grew, for here was a deadly menace which had to be checked before it reached disaster proportions.

About midnight they reached the wide cienaga flat. In the center of it, near the spring and beside the stage road, stood a line rider's cabin seldom used by cowmen. Travelers sometimes occupied it for a night's stopover. There was an off-chance that Magpie's stage passenger had done so.

In the wet adobe, the Concord's wheel-tracks were rutted deep. Along them Steele and Shorty cautiously approached the cabin which was starkly visible in the starlight. They drop-reined the horses behind a stack of meadow hay and a small corral some twenty yards beyond the cabin.

Dismounting, they drew guns and started. Shorty, to avoid splashing through a puddle just outside the corral, crawled through the fence and started catfooting across it. Passing the stack, he stumbled over some object half-hidden in the loose hay. A stick of wood, he thought for an instant. But it proved to be animate.

There was a stir and movement, an upheaval of hay and a sleepy, peevish voice complaining,

"Look where you go, fellers, and keep offa my feet!"

SHORTY'S .45 pronged out as the man sat up, bracing himself with both hands, making no hostile move. Steele was back in a flash.

"Stand up, Quintana!"

The man gathered his legs under him and rose, arms away from his sides, empty palms showing, offering no resistance.

"You know me, hey?" he croaked. "Who you fellers?"

"The law, you skúlkin' hyena!" Shorty told him.

Steele jabbed a Colt in his back. "March for the shack, Quintana! Trot on ahead, segundo, and make a light!"

Grumbling, but submissively, the prisoner made for the cabin. A candle glimmered on a table. Shorty made a quick look around.

"No gun in here, Sheriff," he reported.

"Sure I gotta gun," Quintana said. "Out there, in the hay."

"The old Injun trick, making camp then bedding down away from it, huh?"

Quintana fingered hay out of his tousled hair and looked befuddled. He didn't appear to be topheavy with brains.

"Always outdoors I sleep," he mumbled. "Unless she rain. Same as sheepherders."

"You landed here in today's stage, is that right?" the sheriff asked.

"Sure. To hunt coyotes."

"Without a horse?"

Quintana's projecting teeth bared in a brief grin.

"One time I herd sheep. I walk plenty good."

"Either he's the smartest sinner alive, or else the dumbest!" Shorty said. "How do you get your coyotes. Put salt on their tails?"

"No, poison in their bellies," smirked Quintana. "What you fellers want? Just make silly talk?"

Shorty spun his .45 by the trigger guard and disgustedly poked it back in its holster.

"Sheriff, there's something mighty haywire here. This galoot admits about everything. Everything but—"

"Poisoning coyotes is one thing, poisoning people is another, Quintana," Steele said. "Did Bert Skegg put you up to it?"

The other's stupid grin faded. His swarthy face turned bitter.

"Skegg? Bah! He fire me, hire anodder fella. So I hunt coyotes."

Shorty flapped his arms in despair.

"Migosh, Sheriff, this thing is blowing up right in our faces! Unless this ex-sheep louse is lying."

"I think he's giving us the straight goods," the sheriff said. "He can't—"

"What you mean—poison peoples?" Quintana finally got around to asking.

"You see, segundo?" Steele finished. "He can't think fast enough to be a good liar. One thing more, Quintana. Why did

you pull out of Tonto?"

"No more coyotes. So I come here," was the simple and convincing answer. "That okay?"

The sheriff's Colt was back in holster. "Okay. That's all for awhile."

"Then I go crawl back in the hay."

"You stick in here," Steele ordered.

Quintana shrugged and slumped into a bunk. Steele somberly started to build a cigarette. Licking it shut, he leaned over the candle and got it going. Shorty tilted his hat over one ear and scratched the other.

"Well, this sure is a letdown," he said. "What's the answer, anyhow, Sheriff?"

Steele started outside, beckoning the little deputy to follow, so that Quintana would not hear. They ambled towards the corral and the horses.

"There are two things to consider—motive and opportunity," Steele began. "Leaving Quintana out of it, who had a motive to get Hawks and Collins, or else stampede them out of Tonto Basin?"

"Skegg?"

"Correct. Skegg, for a similar reason, would benefit by throwing a scare into T Bar T, wouldn't he?"

"Naturally. On account of he hankered to get hold of the judge's range."

"All right, there's motive enough. Now let's consider who had the opportunity. Let's hear your ideas on that, segundo."

It was a rare thing for the sheriff to hold counsel with him in this way, and Shorty was flattered by it.

"Well, when Quintana went to poisoning Tonto coyotes, that gave Skegg a fine opportunity," he rattled off glibly. "He waited until about the time Quintana

[*Turn page*]

HOW'S YOUR HORSE SENSE?

by Joseph C. Stacey

LISTED below, jumbled fashion, are the names and nicknames of 13 horses—type, breed, color, etc.—together with a thumbnail description of each. Can you match up at least 8 correctly for a passing score? 9-to-11 is good; 12-13 excellent.

1. SKITTISH HORSE	**(a)** a perfectly trained horse.
2. ROAN	**(b)** a half-wild horse of the North American plains.
3. SPAN	**(c)** a leggy, ill-proportioned horse, worthless for breeding purposes, racing, etc.
4. STUD HORSE	**(d)** one that's never borne a rider.
5. SUMPTER HORSE	**(e)** a horse that's easily frightened.
6. SWAY-BACK	**(f)** a pair of matched horses.
7. THOROUGH-PACED	**(g)** an asthmatic horse.
8. STEED	**(h)** any horse from Australia is so called.
9. UNBACKED HORSE	**(i)** a stallion.
10. WHALER	**(j)** one of a color consisting of bay, sorrel, or chestnut, thickly interspersed with gray or black.
11. WEED	**(k)** a horse whose back sags unnaturally.
12. WINDBROKEN HORSE	**(l)** a pack horse.
13. BRONCO	**(m)** a spirited war horse.

ANSWERS

1-e, 2-j, 3-f, 4-i, 5-l, 6-k, 7-a, 8-m, 9-d, 10-h, 11-c, 12-g, 13-b.

pulled out, then dosed that spring so poor dumb Quintana would get the blame."

"And after that?"

"After that, by some lucky means, Skegg had a chance to slug up that barrel o' whisky, again making it look like Quintana done it. Migosh, it's easy to figger out these things, once a man puts his mind to it, huh?"

"Tell me one thing more," Steele said with deceptive humility. "Why didn't Hawks and Collins have a showdown with Quintana when they came past here, where he was camped?"

That was a blow to Shorty's quick theory.

"Migosh, I never thought o' that!" he faltered. "They came along after the stage, didn't they?" Mulling that over, he pounced on an explanation. "Here's how to account for that, Sheriff! Quintana must o' seen Hawks and Collins coming! So he ducks out o' sight till they get past!"

The sheriff blasted that in a hurry.

"Hold on, segundo. If he recognized them, and is as innocent as he lets on, then what reason did Quintana have for dodging them?"

"Then I'm stumped," Shorty sputtered. "All this palaver proved nothing, except that I don't know the seat of my breeches from a hot rock. What'll we do now?"

Steele flicked his cigarette butt to the puddle beside the corral fence. He was thinking hard. But he wasn't sharing his thoughts now, whatever they were.

"Suppose we go back inside and ask Quintana a few more questions," he proposed.

They returned to the cabin. It was the same as when they had left it, even to the stub of candle stuck in the neck of a bottle. Nothing was changed. Except that the bunk was empty.

"He gave us the slip!" cried the little deputy. "Vamoosed! It's lucky we were out there with an eye on our hosses, or he might o'—!"

Hoof sounds interrupted him. Quick as a shadow, Steele flitted outside. Once, twice a Colt erupted. Then they heard the sound of horses on the run. When Shorty got to the corral, the Sheriff's steel-dust gelding and his own pinto were gone. He was alone in the lingering scent of gunsmoke.

CHAPTER IV

Out to Kill

JUDGE Bertram was a veteran of many a range war, but never a campaign like this, against a danger as invisible as a phantom. Before daylight, he despatched every rider on T Bar T, with orders to fence in every waterhole and spring.

Fortunately, Caliente River coursed through the middle of his range and his cattle could drift to it when thirst drove them. That good-sized flow couldn't be loaded with a killing potion.

These precautions he took on the likelihood that Steele and Shorty failed to find Quintana, or that he slipped through their fingers. Beckoning on that definite possibility, he headed for Rimrock, taking Hawks and Collins with him.

"A man can be spotted a long ways from up there," he told them. He rode with his favorite weapon, a sawed-off shotgun. "I only wish it was Skegg himself. What sort of a varmint is this Bert Skegg, anyhow?"

"Smarter'n you think," Hawks told him. "Gets what he goes after, most usually."

"He'll never get a toehold on T Bar T!" vowed Bertram.

"He's crimped you bad, already. With the watering places closed off, there's miles of your range you can't graze."

"Only till we get Quintana."

"Suppose it doesn't end there? Skegg will think up another way to get at you. I'm bound to admit, I'd like to see you sell out to him."

"Why?"

"Then Tonto cattlemen would have him off their necks."

"I don't aim to be that obliging!" Bertram said stiffly.

"Look, Jim," spoke up Collins. "There's another way to work it. If only we could get a grazing lease down here, or some such agreement, I'd be for up and hauling out of Tonto Basin."

Hawks gazed toward the granite cliffs of Rimrock, reaching towards the sky, eroded with fantastic patterns of light and shadow in the early morning light. Typical Arizona formation, this, a counterpart of Tonto Rim and Mogollon Rim to the north. Being familiar, it gave him an at-home feeling.

"I'm sort of took with this country, myself," he admitted meditatively. Then, with a burst of eagerness, he said, "How about it, Bertram. No need for you to worry about Skegg. How about selling out to me and Col?"

It sounded tempting, with all this trouble and maybe no end of it. Tallying off the years of his struggles, Judge Bertram was reminded that he wasn't as young as he used to be.

"Skegg has offered me a big price," he countered.

"Whatever it is, me and Col between us can top it," said Hawks.

Bertram was yielding. This would be different than to be forced to sell to a hated sheepman. To do that would be treachery to his neighbors and friends.

"When this business on hand is settled," he told them, "let's talk it over."

"We sure will," Collins said.

As they neared the Rimrock, Bertram studied the zigzag scar of the stage road. It was the only route across this barrier that formed his north boundary. All at once he jerked rigidly erect.

AT THE very crest, sharply outlined against a billowy white cloud beyond, was a horse and rider, statue-still.

"Look, we've got company already!" he jerked out. "By Godfrey, this is better'n I dared hope for!"

Hawks's teeth bared in his dark mat of beard.

"If it's who we're after, we'll settle with him quick and permanent!" he grated. "Then we can settle our deal, Bertram!"

Collins ripped out an oath.

"Come on, Jim, let's get it over!" he grated. His sullen wedge of face was malevolent, his voice husky with great urgency.

"No," objected Bertram. "If that's Quintant, let me pump him."

"Why bother?" said Collins.

"Thunderation, it's the only way to prove in a legal way that Skegg is back of all this!"

"Law, hell!" snarled Hawks. He raked his horse ahead.

Bertram's quick temper rose.

"Hear me, Hawks!" he rumbled. "I'm running this show, savvy? If it calls for shooting, I'll do it! A few buckshot can do wonders in making a man talk!"

He spurred his moon-gray horse to pass Hawks and take the lead, clutching the grip of his handy sawed-off.

Collins swore again and swung in front of him.

"We got first claim on Quintana!" he argued hoarsely. "You're too blasted easy, Bertram!"

"Easy, am I?" blazed Bertram. He rammed the double-barrelled snout of the sawed-off into Collins's ribs. "Out of my way!"

Collins, livid with rage, grabbed the gun, pointing it upwards. Bertram triggered, jolting it out of Collins's hold. He reined away and whooped at Hawks:

"Stop, or by thunderation I'll let you have the other barrel!"

Hawks, tilting forward, rowelled his horse into a run. Bertram brought the sawed-off to his shoulder. He had been head man in Indian County too long to let a couple of strangers take over, ignoring his orders on his own ground. If he raised dust with a charge of shot, Hawks would know he was in earnest.

But Collins hurled himself on him before he had time to trigger again.

Judge Bertram was a powerful man, or had been. He still had bulk and tenacity but the years had robbed him of that vital force that was vibrant in the younger man. Locked together, they swayed, the moon-gray whirling under its double bur-

den. Bertram, fighting Collin's smothering head lock, dropped the sawed-off.

Suddenly letting go of him, Collins hit the ground, bounded back in his own saddle, and streaked off after Hawks.

"You'll see it our way, after you simmer down, Bertram!" he called back. "You're just too law-minded, that's all!"

Bertram, rumpled and frustrated, unloaded himself and picked his sawed-off up off the ground. Too late to give chase. He couldn't hope to overhaul Hawks and Collins, now at the foot of the climb.

The man up on the rim, still motionless and waiting, had the advantage. Bertram couldn't help but feel a grudging admiration for his nervy visitors. He had been headstrong and reckless, too, once upon a time, when he could back up his say-so.

He did simmer down, gradually. Now, in his mellowing years, it was hard to stay at the boiling point overlong. He even managed a rueful grin as he watched the pair from Tonto surge up the switchbacks.

Maybe them roosters could run T Bar T, at that, he admitted to himself. It could fall into worse hands. They've got spunk. Also, Tonto men don't cotton to an old man's methods. Anyhow, if I sell out, why should I bother about getting the goods on Skegg?

Whatever the outcome, this was going to be interesting, and he had a grandstand view. Another consolation was, if the poison killer was put out of the way, he would have the bargaining edge which he lacked—with his waterholes closed, his spread in a state of siege and the deadly menace hanging over him and all he had.

Bertram had just about brought himself to a state of approval of Hawks and Collins when the lone rider, up there against the sky, swung his horse around. The side which had been in shadow was in glaring brightness, and he saw that the horse was a pinto. A showy black-and-white pinto.

Only one animal like that in all Indian County. It was Shorty's paint pony. Cold horror clutched Bertram's throat. The stage was set for sickening tragedy. One of those shocking mistakes that come about when hot-headed men ride hell-bent to kill. The little deputy didn't know what was waiting for him.

He yelled at the top of his lungs, even though he knew there was no chance to be heard at that distance. Nor was there any chance to head it off in any way. But in a frenzy he dug iron onto the moon-gray and raced for the twisted stage road.

CHAPTER V

Jaws of the Trap

BLUE STEELE had fired two Colt shots into the air, as a challenge for Quintana to halt, although his man was visible enough as he made off on Shorty's pinto. Visible and vulnerable to Steele's expert gunmanship.

It was doubt in the sheriff's mind that prevented him from dropping the fugitive. Doubt that his clear reasoning had applied to contradications in recent happenings. Only Quintana could settle those doubts. And a dead man could not give testimony.

So Steele mounted the steel-dust gelding with a running jump and gave chase, out across the spring flat and to the brushy desolation beyond.

Afoot, a fugitive would have the advantage in that thorny jungle. He could dart and hide in places where it was impossible to ride. Darkness would make such pursuit hopeless.

Mounted, and inexperienced horseman that he was, Quintana's chances for a getaway were slim. He did not know that two animals constantly associated, such as the steel-dust and the pinto, had a tendency to stay together. One could follow and find the other unfailingly, even without the help of the rider. Steele knew his horse would cling to the pinto's tracks like a bloodhound.

Quintana pounded south, along the stage road. Behind him, easily keeping the pace, came the sheriff.

"What's the use, Quintana?" he cried out. "Don't make a lot more trouble for yourself! Stop, give it up!"

Repeatedly Steele tried to halt Quintana's panicky flight. But on through the night the other fled.

It was a long drag. But when dawn streaked the east Quintana knew the futility of going on. He was taking punishment he had not expected. His flat-soled shoes slipped through the stirrups. The gun he had kept in the hay—an old rifle with split, wired-together stock—he carried by a gunsling over one shoulder. A heavy-barrelled .38-55, it pounded his ribs at each jolting jump of the rough-gaited pinto.

Finally, he could endure no more. He hauled off the road, into a narrow gully, floundered from saddle and plunged into the undergrowth.

Steele was prepared for the dodge. He left leather, hitting the ground at a run. Again he called out for Quintana to surrender as he followed, only a few jumps behind.

The gully came to an abrupt rise, a dry falls, only the rocky face was drippy now from the recent rains. Quintana started up, reaching frantically for fingerhold. He might have made it to the level above. But one foot slipped on wet lichen. He came tumbling down.

The sheriff was on him now. Quintana fought fiercely but he was stiff and lame from the gruelling ride. As the lithe sheriff pinned him down on his back, he went limp and gave up.

Steele got to his feet. He hadn't bared a Colt since the start of the race.

"You're a lowdown horse thief," he accused. "Tell me, why did you tail off from Box L Spring?"

Quintana struggled for breath.

"Skegg!" he blurted. "Skegg and the feller with him! They say I poison peoples, so?"

"Skegg? No. Two Tonto citizens. Hawks and Collins."

"Hawks? Collins? Nobody by that name in Tonto country."

Something clicked in Steele's brain. "Bert Skegg, what does he look like?" he demanded.

Quintana, still breathless, couldn't think of the words. Steele swiped a hand across the lower part of his face.

"Whiskers?"

"Yes, yes! Much whisker! Other feller look like this." He sucked in his cheeks and pulled down his chin.

"Then you saw them pass Box L Spring?"

"Sure. I was down in willows, gettin' wood for fire." Quintana clambered to his feet. "They tell big lie, to say I poison peoples. I go find Skegg, make him sorry."

THE facts were plain enough now. Skegg and his companion, hiding their actual identities, had come to Painted Post to carry out their sinister poison plot. They had handled it cleverly, fixing the blame on the coyote hunter.

"Lucky you didn't meet up with that pair, Quintana," Steele told him. "They're out to kill you. But before doing that they accused you and spread it around to put themselves in the clear."

Quintana had made a bad mistake and the fact was slowly seeping into his dull brain.

"You smart feller," he said dolefully. "What we do now?"

"We go after Skegg," Steele said tersely. "Together, right now. Pile back on that pinto."

Limpingly, Quintana obeyed. The sun was up when they reached the top of the Rimrock. Steele saw the trio of riders below. He drew cautiously back out of sight.

Steele's eyes, used to the open spaces and Arizona's vast distances, were eagle-keen. Soon he recognized the familiar figure of Bertram. That made it easy to identify the two men with him. Swiftly he formed a plan, a ruse to bring the wanted men in reach. He ordered Quintana to ride out in plain view and to halt there.

Quintana squinted at him suspiciously.

"So I get shot?" he said.

"Not with me backing you. You're the bait, that's all."

Quintana started to strip the rifle from his shoulder.

"Leave that be," Steele ordered. "I'll do the shooting, if it's needed. Now get out there and just sit."

Quintana's reliance on the able, decisive sheriff had grown. He put the pinto forward a few paces and stopped.

The plan worked immediately. As Bertram's companions dashed towards them, he crept over the rim to an outcropping beside the road, a few yards below Quintana. He stationed himself there, the butt of a Colt cradled in his right hand.

The wait was a nerve-fraying ordeal. In springing a trap like this, the outcome was never certain.

Abruptly, the whiskery sheepman and his fellow-culprit burst around a bend, thirty yards away, not yet in sure gun reach of Quintana. Their horses were spur-ripped and winded.

"There he is, Bert!" hissed Collins. "Let him have it!"

The bearded man drew his spent horse down to a walk.

"Don't rush it," he cautioned in an undertone. "He ain't onto us." He called out a greeting and Quintana responded. It was heroic, the way he stood, unprepared to defend himself. It was a tribute to Steele, proof of the trust he inspired.

With murderous deliberation the pair advanced on him and when so near that he could not miss Skegg drew.

Steele rose from behind the rocks, a Colt in each hand.

"Drop it!" Skegg swiveled around. "The first inkling I had of who you are and why you'd come," Steele told him, biting off the words, "was when you didn't join the rush for the bar last night. For that poisoned liquor."

The stupefied look left the sheepman's bearded face. That change, even before he slapped his gun around for a shot from the waist, warned the sheriff.

The colt bucked. Fuzz flew from Skegg's hairy underjaw and he clutched his throat as he swayed and fell. Steele leaped aside as Collins's gun came out, slanting at him. The two shots sounded like one. Collins's bullet missed, whining off the rocks. His gun arm flopped down at an unnatural angle from the elbow. There was a gush of blood and he screeched like a bobcat as his horse bolted ahead.

Quintana tried to block the road but he maneuvered the pinto clumsily. Collins, winged and gunless, scooted past him and north along the road.

"When he shows up at Box L Spring," Steele said, "the segundo will know what to do. It'll save his face to have a hand in the windup. Then maybe he'll go easier on you for stealing his horse."

The Colt slug which entered Skegg's grizzled throat, had broken his neck as efficiently as any hangrope. The sheriff caught up Skegg's horse, then he and Quintana hoisted the heavy body onto it. He was tying the dead man across saddle when Judge Bertram arrived.

"Good Godfrey!" he raved. "What happened to Hawks?"

"Hawks was Bert Skegg, Judge," Steele told him. "And Skegg was our poisoner, the Tonto terror."

"Thunderation, that can't be! Don't tell me he strychnined his own stock—and men too!"

"It's possible—as a part of the plot to put the blame on Quintana, here. Then he planned to sneak up on your blind side, Judge, and turn T Bar T into a sheep spread. In time, he would have squeezed out every cattleman in Indian County. He was playing for big stakes."

Steele saw the telltale flush on Bertram's honest face. At last the judge realized the deceit and fraud of the man who called himself Jim Hawks.

In that closing moment, Steele knew that the scheming sheepman had almost succeeded. But he didn't say so. He also knew, as the judge's gaping mouth clamped shut, that he never would admit what a dupe he had been.

It was better that way, better to bury unpleasant memories. Jerking the last knot tight on the sagging corpse, Steele rolled another smoke. ● ● ●

Sawdust Cutler had a .45, a dog and a fence. Now he needed only one thing to be a cowman: cows

The Rush at Skamooch

By L. D. GEUMLEK

THERE hadn't been a range war around Grasshopper Junction since Sitting Bull stood up, but Sawdust Cutler was ready if one ever should break.

He was equipped with a special hate for sheep, a .45 that had never shot anything

bigger than a tomato can, and a long-haired black dog. He also had made a first payment on a two-bit spread on Skamooch Creek, with a fence that would keep sheep out and cattle in—as soon as he raised a down payment on some cows.

Skamooch Creek came down from the blackened stubs of the burn on Harness Mountain. It had been a good steady stream until the forest fire had denuded the slope; since then it was a flood in spring and a trickle in hot weather. There was enough water for Sawdust to irrigate his hayfield if he worked from dawn until dark, but the five-mile strip between his ranch and Harness Mountain was dry and barren except for sagebrush or cheatgrass.

Sawdust had a quarter-section of land with a solid two-room cabin of peeled logs. There was also a new corral and a dirt-roofed barn used at present only by Nickleplate, his saddle horse, and the two work horses. He hoped it wouldn't be long, though, until he'd have cattle also—herds of shorthorns summering on the range and fattening for market on the hay he raised.

His work days were all the same. Coffee at four-thirty, then, sloshing around in rubber boots, he guided water through the maze of narrow ditches while Japp, the black dog, investigated woodchuck holes. At eight o'clock, they came in for breakfast and Sawdust cooked sourdough hotcakes. When the stack was eight inches high, he pushed his big hat to the back of his head and sat down at the table.

Half the cakes were for Japp. Sawdust tossed them to him one at a time, and Japp carried them behind the stove to swallow in two gulps.

Breakfast over, Japp put his chin on Sawdust's knee and rolled his eyes until the whites showed below the irises.

Sawdust patted the fuzzy head. "Good dog." Sometimes that was the only speech Sawdust made all day long. He wasn't much for talk, even to other men. As for mumbling to himself, he left that to the sheepherders. Anybody'd associate with a bunch of blatting sheep was bound to end up talking to the empty air, was the way Sawdust felt.

HE KNEW he was a sad-appearing hombre. Skinny enough to slide through a knothole sideward, he had a long face wtih a kind of hard-used, lop-eared look. He didn't mean to be sour, but by the time he got around to laughing, the joke was usually over. He shaved his stubble of pale beard regularly every Saturday, and his blue eyes had a distance focus that showed they had been spotting cattle across miles of range for at least thirty years.

Of course, there were a couple years when he'd worked in a lumber camp and earned his name.

Sometimes it seemed to him that Japp was getting the same mournful cast of countenance as his own. What that dog needed was company. Cow dog without no cows was bound to be lonesome. Soon as Sawdust sold his hay—

Except that he'd need the hay to feed the cattle which he couldn't buy unless he did sell the crop.

Sighing, he got up and went back to the irrigating.

He was lifting a shovelful of mud to change the course of the water when he heard his name called. He turned to see Windy Bill Turlock outside the fence, his folded arms on a post. Windy's spavined old roan—a typical sheepherder horse, Sawdust thought — was stretching its scrawny neck to nibble alfalfa under the wire.

"Why don't you catch on to yourself?" Windy shouted. "This ain't no way for a white man to make a living."

Sawdust splashed the mud in place before he answered, "I like it."

He didn't know Windy very well, but a little was enough. Turlock's nickname was a natural. He'd blown into town six months before and had been blowing hard ever since. When he got a job herding for Sherman Locke's big outfit, it was the general opinion that it was a good deal. Damn coyotes wouldn't come near the

sheep—scared of getting an eardrum bust.

Windy's little brown eyes glittered cheerfully under his shapeless black hat. He could have wrapped his greasy black coat twice around him, and the sleeves almost covered his hands.

"Now me—" He waved in an expansive gesture that took in the whole country. He meant, Sawdust guessed, that he and his stinking sheep could go any place they wished, which was a lie, of course. Sheep had to stick to their own range, just like respectable cow critters.

"I'm on my way to Butch Jackson's right now to pick up some sheep of my own. Didn't cost me a cent, neither." Windy winked until his whiskery face was twisted into a grimace that hid one eye and left the other a dark slit. "Jackson thinks he's quite a poker player. Yessir, quite a player. Yessir, poor old Jackson didn't know he was up against a *real* player. Why, I mind the time in Texas—"

Sawdust didn't listen to the story. He wondered, without much caring, just what kind of a slicker deal Windy had pulled on Jackson, who could pull a crooked one pretty fast himself. Shake hands with Windy, though, a feller wanted to count his fingers—that is, if he got his hand back at all.

"Going to get me a grazing permit." Once again Windy waved his arm to encompass the flat along Skamooch. "My boss, Sherman Locke, he's buying the Waller place and going to graze out there—the hand swept from horizon to horizon—"but I'm beating him to the best part. Getting water for my stock. You got to get up early to get ahead of old Bill Turlock, I'm a-telling you!"

"You can't keep him away from the water," Sawdust said.

He poked at the ditch with his spade to show that he was busy, but Windy didn't take the hint. As Sawdust worked, Windy followed along the fence recounting a large bit of his unbelievably adventurous past. At last Sawdust moved too far away and Windy shouted:

"Good-by, neighbor! I'll see you again right soon. Be a-camping right here."

It curdled Sawdust's blood.

ONLY bright spot was that there might not be anything to it. When Windy told you it was a nice day, you better look at the sky. Ten to one it was blizzarding. Of course it was true that old man Waller did want to sell out.

Sawdust leaned on his shovel and stared bleakly up the hill toward the blackened side of Harness. Between the mountain and the ranch was the strip where magpies harassed flea-infested gophers and even the jackrabbits were gaunt. It wasn't good for anything but sheep, and hardly good enough for them.

It would be crawling with them. Woolly, dumb, blatting, stinking sheep. All around the ranch. Drawing coyotes like carrion draws flies. Trampling in Skamooch Creek, polluting the water, sending their greasy taste and smell down on the west wind. Baa-ing day and night.

Besides all that, Windy would be herding. Cows'd be afraid to drop their calves lest they get blown away.

Sawdust chunked the shovel in the water a couple times, but he'd lost interest in irrigating.

"C'mon, Japp." He shouldered the shovel and started back to the cabin.

The dog came along with his head down and tail wagging only enough for balance. His hair hung in wet muddy tags around his flanks.

Dog didn't know the trouble in store for him, Sawdust thought. He'd really look whipped when the sheep came in. Poor mutt.

Sawdust buckled on his .45 and went to the corral. He put a bean can on the gate post and marked a bean on the colored label. In eight tries out of ten, he hit the bean he had chosen or at least the one next to it. He practiced his lightning-swift draw.

Despondently, he knew this wasn't the answer. He might keep Windy Turlock off the range, but the Sherman Locke outfit was too big to buck. The only way was to get some stock, quick, and get a govern-

ment grazing permit for cattle before the sheepmen moved in.

He laid his gun aside, changed his dusty blue work shirt and mud-caked levis for another set, equally old, but cleaner. At least they had been washed, if not ironed. He had to mend the elbow of one sleeve, whipping it together with coarse black thread. There was a three-cornered tear on the left hip of the tight levis, but he decided it wasn't anything worth worrying about.

His boots were his pride. Hand-made Justins, the narrow toes scuffed with age, they still showed their quality in the elaborate stitching of the tops and the fineness of the leather. He tucked one pants leg inside the boot top, but folded the other back into a wide cuff.

It took a few minutes to rope Nickleplate, then he was on his way to town to talk to Tom Gebber, the banker. Japp trotted beside him, approving the sagebrush along the way.

Gebber was not encouraging. He hemmed and hawed behind his mustache, talking about collateral, equity, interest, risk, banking policies.

Sawdust boiled it down. "You mean I ain't getting no money."

The banker nodded. "I'd like to let you have it, and if it was me personally, I'd do it, but the directors—"

"Is Sherm Locke buying the Waller place?" Sawdust interrupted.

The banker answered cautiously. "That's the talk."

"Funny how a stinking sheepman can get all the money he wants and a respectable cowman—" Sawdust left the bitter sentence unfinished. "Who eats mutton, anyway?"

"A lot of people do, but that's not all. Here's where the money is." Gebber lifted the lapel of his coat. "One hundred percent wool. And the blankets you sleep under."

Sawdust stuck out his foot. "And look at that. Genuwine cowhide."

The banker agreed. "True, very true. But isn't it also true that a cow can be skinned only once."

SAWDUST and Japp went back to the irrigating.

That night, Sawdust sat on the edge of his sagging iron bed. He took off his boots, then his overalls and his blue shirt with the mended elbow, and sat with his hands on the baggy knees of his long underwear while he pondered the problem.

There wasn't any answer, so he blew out the light, took off his hat, and crawled between the blankets.

No use trying. He couldn't get rangeland on Skamooch Creek unless he had the cattle.

He tried to think of men who had enough money to loan him, and there were only two. One was a scared old skinflint who wouldn't lend a dime to bail his grandmother out if she was spending ten years on a frameup. The other was Sherman Locke.

Couldn't file on the land for homestead. Couldn't buy—

But there was one way to locate Government land! It might work.

Eagerly, Sawdust got up, put on his hat, and struck a match to light the lamp.

Scrabbling through his wooden box of gear, he found what he wanted—a small buckskin bag containing a large nugget and a bottle with about half a teaspoon of coarse gold. The nugget was not as heavy as it looked. It was nothing much more than a coat of yellow over bits of quarts, so that on one side the gold didn't show at all, but on the other, it seemed to be solid gold and big around as a half dollar. Altogether, there was probably less than fifty dollars worth of gold.

Once more, Sawdust blew out the light, took off his hat, and got in bed. This time he slept. . . .

It took Sawdust four days to dig enough holes to bedrock along Skamooch Creek where it entered his ranch, to give it a placer look. Then he set up his corners and put his written notice in an old tobacco can announcing to all the world that these claims belonged to Sawdust Jim Cutler. He was allowed twenty acres.

His next step was to file the claims at the courthouse.

He had planned to go to the sheep camp to hunt up Windy Turlock, but on his way back from the courthouse, he saw the herder entering the Latigo Saloon. Sawdust went in only a few minutes later, but the bar was already resounding with Windy's voice.

"Hello, neighbor!" Windy yelled at Sawdust. "Come on, have a drink! Have all you want. Take two!"

Wearily, Sawdust nodded at the bartender and pointed to a whisky bottle. They both knew that Windy's invitation meant that Sawdust would pay for all drinks.

Sawdust put the bottle of gold dust on the bar. "Will you take it out of this?"

"Hey!" The sheepherder moved closer. "You mining on your place now? Damn good-looking gold. Good as the time I was doing some mining in the Yukon and in one day's panning—"

"I've filed on Skamooch Creek." Sawdust let the nugget rest in his palm, but before Windy could look too closely, slipped it back into the buckskin bag.

"How much you got in that poke?" Windy reached out to feel the bag, but Sawdust put it in his pocket.

Sawdust shrugged noncommittally. "You can tell your boss, Sherman Locke, to keep his sheep away from my claims. That goes for you, too."

"You only got mining rights. You can't stop nobody from grazing. Lemme see that nugget again."

"See that beer bottle?" Sawdust pointed to the other side of the room where a beer bottle stood on a round table. "Watch the top of it."

He whipped out his gun and without seeming to aim, shot the neck of the bottle. The barroom filled with an echoing thunder that rattled the stacked glasses in front of the mirror. The sound was so deeply satisfying to Sawdust that he shot the bottom of the bottle for good measure.

Sawdust blew in the barrel of the gun and holstered it.

"No trespassing on my ground," he said. . . .

JAPP growled in the night. He walked restlessly around the room, his toenails clicking on the bare floor.

Coyotes. Sawdust thought, and drifted back to sleep. The dog snuffled at the crack under the door, whined and scratched, and Sawdust rose to let him out. The dog disappeared toward the creek, running and barking furiously.

Noises in the night mingled with Sawdust's dreams, but it wasn't until he awoke at first coffee time that he realized something unusual was happening.

Through the window he saw them in the first shadows of dawn. Every man within traveling distance of Grasshopper Junction was coming up the hill. He heard the clank of their gear, the pound of their feet. They were strung out along the creek, and still coming up the road. They were coming across the flats from both directions. They were walking or riding, leading packhorses or carrying their own picks and shovels.

They streamed through his fields and past the corral. He knew his fences had been cut and his alfalfa trampled down.

Waiting only long enough to put on his hat and pants, he ran out barefoot, yelling, but nobody paid any attention. They only hurried on toward Skamooch Creek.

After daylight, he went along the creek. The men there were using gold pans, frying pans, bread tins, whatever they had been able to grab in a hurry.

"There ain't no gold in Skamooch," Sawdust said.

"The hell there ain't!" The man who jeered had been a clerk in the general store yesterday. "Everybody in town knows about the strike. Nuggets like oranges."

"Who said?" Sawdust demanded.

"Everybody."

"It's just one of Windy Turlock's stories," Sawdust told him.

"I didn't hear it from Windy," the ex-clerk snarled. "I got it on good authority. And if you're trying to hog the whole creek, you got another think a-coming. I'm here and I'm staying."

Sighing, Sawdust moved on. The busy

men, swishing their makeshift gold pans, trying to dig to bedrock, wouldn't listen when he tried to tell them.

Sawdust was not good at explaining. Talk wasn't easy for him, but they wouldn't have believed him anyway.

He began to feel the fever in himself, an itch to get hold of a gold pan, to see the thin tail of yellow left with the black sand. If everybody was so sure that gold was here, there might be something to the story.

His own ground was safely staked and recorded, but he began to wonder if he had enough.

"I'll kill him—I'll kill him!" The high-pitched voice of a man he didn't know cut across Sawdust's thoughts.

"Huh?" Sawdust turned slowly.

"Butch Jackson!" the man yelled, almost frothing. "While I was trying the ground, he took and put in his own corners. I almost had it, the best claim on the creek, I betcha!" He strung out the singeing oaths, but Sawdust did not stay to listen.

Maybe he'd got the wrong claim. He should have looked around more.

He hurried to the cabin for his gold pan. After all, there was no use trying to mend the fences and ditches today.

Back at the creek, with the first pan of gray and mica-shining gravel in his hand, the fever died. He was sorry he'd started the excitement, but nobody'd get really hurt. A couple days in the outdoors might so some of them some good. He himself was the worst off, with his fences and his alfalfa nearly ruined.

Besides, it was time for breakfast.

He made the stack of hotcakes and whistled for Japp. He thought he heard the dog barking, but he couldn't be sure. He almost thought he heard sheep.

HE ATE his share of the flapjacks, then went to hunt Japp. He heard the urgent barking, not excited or angry, but a spaced, businesslike bark. And there was no longer any doubt, he did hear sheep.

He went through a break in the fence and up over a hill in the sage-covered range above the ranch.

There they were, about fifty head of sheep. And Japp.

Sawdust felt the terribleness of betrayal. Japp, his dog. His respectable, lonesome cow dog was having the time of his life, herding sheep. Stinking, blatting sheep, and Japp was running around them, chasing the strays, hazing them along toward the ranch. Sawdust could see that Japp's tongue was flapping eagerly, his fuzzy black ears cocking up, and there was a grin all over his face.

There was no herder, but the painted brand showed they belonged to Butch Jackson. Sawdust hurried to the creek to tell Jackson.

"They ain't mine. Windy Turlock won 'em in a poker game." Jackson added absently as he poured off the first mud and filled the pan with more water roiled by the activities above him, "Crooked deck, too—I think there was color in that last pan. If I could get some clean water on this—"

"Where's Windy now?" Sawdust asked.

"Don't know. Don't care." Jackson tipped the pan carefully.

Sawdust peered over his shoulder. It did seem as if there was just a glint, a fleck of light before Jackson moved the pan the last time.

Sawdust hurried back for his own gold pan.

He was bending over the creek when Windy Bill rode up on the old roan. For once, Windy was not boasting.

"Me and my damn big mouth," he mourned. "Me and my big talk. If I'd had sense enough to keep my big bazoo shut— But no. Seems I'd ruther talk than get rich. Me and my big bazoo. Look at 'em. I could of come up today and got my pick of claims. First time anybody ever believed a word I said. Why didn't the damn fools think I was lying this time?"

Sawdust suddenly felt silly about the gold pan in his hand.

"Don't make no difference," he said. "There ain't no gold."

For one second, Windy's face was crafty, then became almost too innocent.

"You know, you might be right, Sawdust. Tell you what I'll do. I'll take that claim off your hands, and give you ten dollars to boot. Sight unseen. I'll take the chance there ain't no gold."

"The hell you will," Sawdust said flatly.

He turned back to the muddy trickle of water. There might not be gold here, but Windy's sheep were just over the ridge and if he didn't watch out, they'd be all over the ranch.

"Twenty," Windy offered. "Tell you what, you're a sport. You'll take a chance. I'l play you three hands of poker. Best two out of three gets the placer rights." He slid down off the horse and taking a greasy deck of cards out of his pocket, squatted on the ground. "I'll even let you deal the first hand."

"There ain't no time to deal no cards," Sawdust said. "Right now you better be a-getting your sheep outen my field."

"Sheep." Indifferently, Windy dismissed the subject. "Here, you deal. Best three out of five, then."

"I ain't dealing no cards. I ain't selling no placer ground. Now, you get over to them sheep!"

"Tell you what." Windy licked his lips and watched the gold pan as if it hypnotized him. Sawdust tipped it, swirled it slowly around and around and Windy's beady eyes circled with it. "Tell you what, I'll trade you half them sheep for the ground. For a partnership in the ground. Half and half, even-stephen."

"I wouldn't have a sheep on my place," Sawdust said.

WINDY was breathing hard, but in the comparative silence of his not talking, Sawdust heard the echo of a bark, the authoritative voice of a dog proudly ordering sheep around.

"Can't find anything with all this mud," Sawdust grumbled. "Until them fellers up above settle down a bit, there's no use wasting time."

"There ain't a square yard on the creek," Windy began, then changed his tune. "I reckon I can pick up plenty of ground further up, only like you said, I bet there ain't no gold any place."

"There ain't no gold," Sawdust said, "but there ain't no creek left, either. Remember what I told you—keep them sheep off my property."

Sawdust poured the last of the water out of the pan, studying the sand carefully. He kept his body between the pan and Windy.

Windy's voice rose desperately. "Them sheep! I'll trade you *all* of them sheep! Every last head. Just gimme that ground!"

"You got a bill of sale from Jackson?" Sawdust asked.

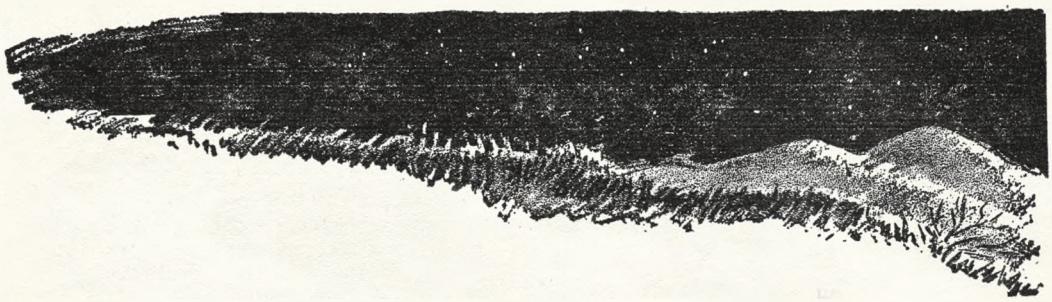
Windy produced a piece of folded paper, less than a week old, but already much soiled. It was a pencil-written bill of sale for fifty head of sheep—so many old ewes, so many yearling ewes, so many bucks. . . .

The ex-clerk was first to get his ground located and start back to town. He met Sawdust dragging his feet behind the sheep.

"When did you turn herder?" the clerk asked incredulously. "I thought you wouldn't have anything but cattle."

Japp came running from his duty and stood beside Sawdust, waiting eagerly, importantly, for an order.

"I done it for him," Sawdust sighed. Then his shoulders straightened and his chin lifted. "Anyhow, a cow can be skun only once." ● ● ●



SIXGUN JUDAS

By

TOM ROAN

The white man's words were usually lies, they knew. But this one they trusted. "I have come," he told them, "to sing you a song of easy riches, many white scalps . . ."

BRACE BRADLAW muttered to himself, as his pale eyes studied the surrounding emptiness. Waiting here in the heat of the early fall afternoon was like sitting in the bottom of a gigantic saucer with the far rims rearing against the distant skylines. Only God—and perhaps Satan—knew just what was beyond those towering rises.

A spot behind each ear felt cold. That was a bad sign and one that never failed. It was not right, for it was hot here under the spreading old cottonwood by the water hole. Except for a twisted dead snag on the other side of the shallow water, the cottonwood was the only tree in miles. Even the grass looked as if it had recently been clipped to the roots. That meant a buffalo herd had passed through Suicide Basin in the past four days.

He had come from the south and reached the outer rim of the country four days ago. The toothless old Tongue River buck and his wrinkled and blind squaw Bradlaw was looking for were in a cave where they had holed up to spend their last days in peace. He had made a deal with them and figured it would take them two days to go through with it.

Yesterday morning, he had come to this

"War I hate with all my heart," declared the old man

spot three hours after dawn. Riding a lean old black horse whose usefulness was just about ended, Bradlaw was far from the man he had once been. In the past he had stood six feet four, a bull-chested, golden-haired giant whose laughter or roar of rage could have been heard a mile away.

Age, whisky, women, and all the other mistakes that so often plague a man had come Brace Bradlaw's way. He was dirty now—yes, just plain dirty—and, at seventy, was only a shadow of the man who once could whip seven times his weight standing waist-deep in a barrel.

No flying Indian horsemen, done in pretty beads of many colors, adorned his buckskins. The beads were gone, only a few bright eyes of them left here and there. The once-elaborate fringe was worn away. The rest was scorched and pitted by a thousand camp fires, smeared and patched from a thousand drunks.

Accordingly as his mood had changed, Brace Bradlaw had been hero or villain, good man or bad, prince or devil, in scores of camps and settlements and covered wagon trains. Now he had dropped about as low as one could and still retain the queer idea that it was necessary to go on living.

Sometimes he wondered why he considered it necessary. All men died in time, some by the knife, some by the gun, and some in bed with their boots off. Some died because they were old and tired and had seen too much in their time; some died quietly with a peaceful smile; and some were roaring, fighting tigers to the bitter end. Indians now—a lot of them—had a way of facing it with straight faces even in the flames of a torture pole.

Hell, death was the heritage of every living thing, even of the rocks that were worn to nothing by the eroding wind. Yet Brace Bradlaw was here to keep from dying, a greedy human being clawing to hang on to life a little while longer.

There had been a killing in an Army camp at the edge of a settlement to the south. A soldier had been found dead, stabbed, his money gone. An Army colonel, itching for decorations, had seen an opportunity to make himself great in the eyes of Washington by laying a certain death trap, in an ordinary-looking wagon train, for Long Lance, the dreaded Cheyenne chief, and his warriors.

Brace Bradlaw had been the one man who could get through to the old chief, and the rest had been simple. The colonel had ordered the arrest of Bradshaw and his girl, a pretty Irish wench. It had been a cold-blooded frame-up, since neither knew anything about the murder, and yet the colonel had had them both condemned to die.

The colonel had put it to Bradlaw brutally.

"Call it what you like. You won't let your Irish honey die. If you fail me, I'll have her killed. You know it and you won't fail. I'll hold your hussy until you go and come back. The moment you return, I'll have her set free and issue a public statement that I made a mistake about her. Then I'll hold you until my baited trap goes into Suicide Basin and makes the wipe-out. After that, Bradlaw, I'll set you free and let you go back to your pretty little wench. Hell, man, a lot of people will look upon you as a hero'"

IT SEEMED to Bradlaw now that he had been here a week. Last night he had slept but little, lying for long periods in his rags of buffalo robes, listening to the wind slow-stirring down the basin and making ghostly voices through the branches of the cottonwood. It had almost seemed as if the dead were telling him to rise and flee while there was yet time.

This was the Cheyenne country of the Seventies, as dangerous and deadly as a rattlesnake den. Only two years before, a mile-long wagon train, northbound out of Wyoming for the Ruby in Montana Territory, had been wiped out here in the basin.

Long Lance, the Cheyenne chief, and three thousand war-painted bucks had let no one—man, woman or child—escape his bitter vengeance. The fire-charred wreckage of wagons and the bones of animals still lay in a great circle around the water hole.

Soldiers had come a week after the massacre to bury what was left of the people in one long, shallow grave near the hole, and not a single Indian had they found.

A wild rose bush grew in the middle of a large pile of bones where the flaming red hell had swept. Brace Bradlaw could not keep his eyes from the bush. The bright-red roses nodded in every stir of the warm air. A verse, learned some time in his hectic past, kept sawing through Bradlaw's head, but he could not remember where he had read it:

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The rose as where some buried Caesar bled;
That every hyacinth the garden wears
Dropt in her lap from some once-lovely head.

It was a perfect fit, here in this vast and lonely dent in the face of the earth. Many a fighting Caesar had bled and died in that circle of lost souls caught in the trap of the bloody Long Lance. Many were the lovely heads that had dropped, screaming and the dying.

Of course, it was only imagination to think those infernal roses were

nodding, but a man could not help a foolish notion now and then. Indians were a superstitious lot, and Bradlaw had lived among them a long time, between seven and eight years with the Cheyennes. Maybe he had become part redskin. They were always reading signs. They saw pictures and omens everywhere. The sky was their father, land of the Great Mystery up there, and the earth their mother. Why should not sky and earth tell their children things?

Clouds talked to Indians. The ground whispered, the winds and the birds of the air brought messages from all directions. Many a tragedy or blessing foretold its coming in pictures the wise redskin eye could see in the coals of a dying fire. A sick buzzard on a high limb could croak the approach of disease or famine. A rain crow called the rains. But just what the knowing nods of blood-red wild roses meant was something Brace Bradlaw would never know.

No sensible man was afraid of the dead. The living were the ones to watch, and those cold spots behind his ears kept telling him something was coming. Too often they had signaled danger, blood and death to this once-burly trapper, scout, and buffalo hunter. And yet, damn it, he was here to pull this dirty deal and save his worthless carcass.

His past kept coming back. He had killed eleven white men face to face, nine over flaming gun barrels, two hand-to-hand with dripping blades. Personal squabbles, those killings—quick explosions of tempers and quick deaths. He had not kept track of the Indians. The killing he had done under Jackson in the Civil War was something else.

Killing a few men did not make a man mean. Killing in one way or another was the way of life out here on the frontier where the quick trigger or blade made judge and jury. Brace Bradlaw was thinking of other things too as he sat here waiting and hoping. He could never be sure of anything until he looked it squarely in the eye. He had been mean in so many little ways, the kind that really counted in the long run. There had been women, crooked gambling joints in towns and trading posts, and loads and loads of other shady things. Now and then there had been spurts of selling rum to the Indians and running guns to the redskins when he had known they were getting ready for the warpath. Guns that the Indians had later turned on white men.

Brace Bradlaw's conscience had never bothered him on that score, for the white man killed just as many, or more, redskins, cheated and robbed them and rarely kept their word to an Indian. No, it was what he had come here to do, he reckoned. Damned rotten, it was, and nothing was more galling, more repulsive than a rotten man.

Life was life, though. Any man would cling to it, hanging on day by day, cheating death to the last hour.

What he would do with his life if he came through this mess was something Brace Bradlaw did not know.

Only one thing was certain. Long Lance would come soon, tonight or tomorrow, if the old Tongue River buck and his squaw had gone through. Death alone would keep the old chief from this meeting at the water hole. One white man in all this wide and wild frontier could ask Long Lance for his right arm, and Long Lance would cut it off and hand it to him without a murmur.

THAT white man was Brace Bradlaw. All the big Army men knew it, from the strutting Custer to General Crook, but none of them knew it better than a duck-legged, gopher-faced squirt called Colonel Winniford Dudley Brown! Damn 'im, Brown had him where there was no chance to worm out of it, and that was why he was here and could not afford to fail. If he failed, a firing squad would be waiting for him when he got back to the post, and there would be no more of Brace Bradlaw, good man, bad man, rake of the frontier.

He could beat that kind of washout for himself. He could find a haven with the Cheyennes or, like a lone wolf, lope for

Canada, the Northwest or Mexico. Brown had known that, and kept an ace up his sleeve. If Brace Bradlaw pulled such a trick, then the woman would die in his place, and no fooling about it. Colonel Brown was just that kind of frontier Army man.

The heat of the day passed as the sun dropped lower and lower over the far spurs of the Rockies. When he got hungry he started a little blaze in a pile of dry wood, took a haunch of antelope from behind the cantle of his saddle, and started it slowly cooking.

At sundown he sat cross-legged eating his supper, using his long knife from the once-beaded buckskin sheath that hung against his bosom. The knife was one of the last relics of the past and it brought back a flood of wild memories. With that blade he had once saved the life of Long Lance, cutting the heart out of a huge brown bear that had the Indian down and was chewing him to bits. With a rifle ball he had saved Long Lance a second time, stopping a drunken Tongue River buck in his tracks an instant before he would have buried a tomahawk in the Cheyenne's skull. By the blood and bullish brawn of him, Brace Bradlaw had saved Long Lance a third time, dragging him out of a hail of deadly gunfire one night when their horses had been shot from under them and Bradlaw was bleeding like a hog with his throat half cut by a pistol ball.

Looking back, he thought that those years among the Cheyennes had probably been the best of his life. Certainly he had lived cleaner and freer than at any other time. In those years not one lie had passed his lips, and no man had lied to him. The Cheyennes had gloried in his great strength. He had taken two of their squaws to wife. The first had been Falling Rain, tall and strong as a willow sprout. The second had been Long Lance's youngest sister, a pretty little trick called Moon Woman, and Long Lance had considered himself and his sister honored. Bradlaw had done better by them than by any other women, and there had been many women in his long life.

The Cheyennes had trusted him beyond all measure, even seating him at their council fires. Many times they had taken him with them and asked his advice when other powerful chiefs were to be met and important decisions made. What queer twist of the brain had made him leave them and try to go back to the ways of the white man? One could not be like an Indian long without having it forever in his blood and feeling it stir in his heart.

DARKNESS seemed a long time in coming. By the time it had come it was cold, still and lonesome. Not a coyote had lifted its thin wail anywhere in the distance last night and none would lift a voice tonight. That told a man something in the Cheyenne country. It meant that Indians were all around him, shadows blending with the shadows, not to be seen or heard until it was too late for anything but dying.

Then the moon came up, a cold yellow little scimitar above the rim. Almost at once he heard the click of ponies' hoofs, and seven riders appeared, ghost horsemen who seemed to have dropped right out of the moon.

Long Lance was in the middle, shielded right and left by three powerful young bucks on strong ponies. Each young buck showed the battles he had survived by the number of feathers he wore in his hair; each was a warrior, old long before his time, cut and slashed by ball and knife and proud of every scar.

The old man needed no battle markings. This was Long Lance. The name alone was enough to turn the innards of a man cold. His head was bare, and the long braids were as white as the snow on the distant mountain peaks. Around his shoulders was a blood-red blanket. The single ornament in sight was at his throat on a heavy gold chain. It was a slug of hammered gold two inches square with a diamond as large as a man's thumb set in the middle of it. A pretty trinket probably plucked, with no notion of its value,

from a gambler's body in some wild raid on a town or wagon train.

Long Lance had been a powerful man, almost as large as Bradlaw. Now he was old and thin and stooped, and his face was shrunken and marred by many scars. When the ponies stopped, he slid down, and Bradlaw saw that he dragged his left leg and that there seemed to be something wrong with his left arm. The six bucks had dropped to the ground, too, carbines cocked and ready to kill at a blink. Long Lance stared for a moment as if his memory had grown dim in the dozen long years since Bradlaw had seen him.

"It is Yellow Bull," the old man said. "It is well."

"Yellow Bull," intoned Bradlaw, voice strained, not his old free self at all, "comes without presents."

The old chief gave his bent figure an irritated little jerk. "When must Cheyenne come to Cheyenne with presents in his hands?"

"The mouth of Yellow Bull stumbles." Bradlaw could not meet the searching glint of the old man's eyes. "Long have I been away from my brothers. I am no longer a strong man."

It was a slow beginning, and the situation would be the better for it. When a white man faced seven Cheyennes, it was like being among wild horses, and a quick move or quick word was apt to be the end of him. In spite of his age, and he was years older than Bradlaw, Long Lance was a weasel with eyes that could see right through a man in the darkest night.

Two of the powerful young bucks hovering the closest to the old chief were half white, Brace Bradlaw could see even in the moonlight. A thoughtful glint filled his eyes each time he glanced at them. Half white and far more handsome than the others, they were all Indian just the same, cold and deadly Cheyennes.

THE talk was long. No matter how close he had been to Long Lance, a man did not blurt things right out to him. The chief weighed a man's words, however lightly spoken, as a miser weighed a tenth of a grain of gold. Inch by inch Bradlaw edged up to the troubles of the Cheyennes.

"War I hate with all my heart!" declared the old man. "In my heart there is room for nothing more. Long has the paleface tasted my leaden rain and heard the scream of it. I do not hate him. I fight him to hold back my tears. The shame he has cast upon the redman moves the Indian to deep sorrow. To die as a man, not as a coward with a white foot on his neck, the Cheyenne must fall on battleground.

"The redman is weak. The white man is strong. We who have journeyed far places have seen and know. The more we kill, the more will come, as blowflies—" he shot up his hand—"rise for the carrion of the dead! In the end he will kill us. We ask but one thing of our Great Mystery whose lodge stands high in the sky. Let us show the white man the Cheyenne fighting face with the clear, bold eyes, not the tears that fall as if we are old and weak squaws.

"Again I say our sorrow is great. Each day the shame heaps higher on our heads, and the white man laughs at our misery. His words, his promises are only sounds. The Indian knows the rattlesnake and lis-

BRAND OF THE OUTLAW

IN GERONIMO—an Arizona territory settlement named after the Apache renegade—respectable citizens thought nothing of fraternizing with the many outlaws who frequented the town. It was easy to tell who the outlaws were. On hot nights, it was the custom to put ladders against the walls of the flat-roofed houses and crawl up them to sleep on the roofs. The houses on which the outlaws slept were easy to identify. Their ladders were hauled up.

—Gene Olson

tens to his rattle. If the Indian keeps to one side of the trail the snake keeps to the other. You can trust the snake to keep a bargain, but not the white man. He comes today with a pretty smile and pretty words. Tomorrow he returns with a frown and a gun to kill our squaws and children, burning the lodges over their heads and leaving their bodies smoking in the ruins."

It was the old story. Men knew the truth of it all the way back to Washington. Spring, summer and fall saw the great strings of wagon trains rolling, settlers pouring in. Many were the wild, the rowdy and the uncaring, eagerly looking forward to the day when they could say they had shot and killed an Indian.

As if given a last chance for an appeal, Long Lance had stated the whole case, just as if this man the Cheyennes called Yellow Bull did not know it.

Death stalked the Indian everywhere. Plug-hatted men, who called themselves sporting gentlemen, sometimes shot them from the platforms of the cars of the great railroad that stretched across Wyoming and on to the rim of the Pacific Ocean. The same thing had happened from decks of steamboats on the Missouri, each boat bringing its share of get-rich-quicks who hunted free land and easy dollars, and damned the lowly Indian, inferior in race, culture and creed. Let him live and die—the ones they didn't kill—on some allotted strip of land.

There was more, more, and yet more, strong-gutted words from a strong-gutted man who had long suffered. The white man's coming was an invasion. That much the redman knew and understood. The white man talked of new ways of life, new laws for all men, for the young and the old, for the small and the great, all men being the same before the law. That had sounded good, but it had not worked that way at all. It was a lie! The truth was not in a white man's face.

Also there was a Great White Father somewhere who loved the Indian. To show his great love he sent soldiers to kill the redman He sent men to slay the great buffalo herds and rob the Indian of his meat. Men came and told the redman he could not stay here, there, or there. The Great White Father, without seeing it, had set aside a place for him. Men came where the Great White Father had said stay. They said move on, and on, and on.

AN INDIAN was like the buffalo. The Great White Father had said there were to be no more buffalo. They had to be cleared from all the plains, and men killed them by thousands on thousands, taking only their hides, and leaving the good meat on the ground for buzzard, crow, wolf, and coyote. If an Indian killed a few, carefully cutting and curing the meat against winter famine, then by some strange twist of the invading white's tongue it was a terrible thing. Again the Great White Father sent soldiers to shoot the Indian down.

"The Indian weeps," cried the old chief, "because he was born a man and not a buzzard! The buzzard is the white man's brother. The great bird's shadow follows him as he walks or rides the ground. When the man has passed, the buzzard comes down to pluck the bones of his leavings where he has dropped them.

"I am an old man, Yellow Bull. My tongue is long. The heart is heavy in my bosom. My words can mean no more, I know, than the crying of the night wind across the empty spaces. Why it cries I have no way of knowing. Out of space comes the wind. Back to space it returns. It is very foolish, I know. I am old, as I say, and yet the old may think and dream. Sometimes I like to think the voice of the Great Mystery is calling, telling the Indian where to go and how, and I cannot read his words. Some day or some night I will go up to ask Him, eye to eye, the meaning of these things. What greater proof can I carry beyond my scars and battle markings and the war paint on my red face to tell Him I am Long Lance, chief of the Cheyennes, and have done all I could for my people? Had I known a better way, I would have

followed it. The Great Mystery must know that."

Silence came then, and the little yellow moon looked down on the still night. Wind came out of the north, gentle in its blowing. Faint, far voices whispered in the cottonwood, caressing and low and eerie.

Long Lance stood as straight as his good right leg would allow. His head was up, his eyes looked straight ahead. He was like a man who had just ended a long prayer and was listening for the answer, trying to hear it in the whisperings in the cottonwood or on the gentle wind. His chest had swelled with emotion. Suddenly it fell, and Long Lance smiled, breaking the spell.

"My welcome was poor, Yellow Bull." Again the gentle intonation was back in his voice, reminding Brace Bradlaw of golden chimes softly whispering. "As I said, I am old. You came to Long Lance for something. That much even an old man would know. Name it. Three times you held my life in the hollow of your hand. Three times your hand was steady. By blood you are my brother, for our blood was blended as one in Moon Woman, my sister. Name it, Yellow Bull, and if it is in the power of Long Lance, he will give it."

"I came to tell you something." Brace Bradlaw's shoulders had come up and back, his voice never more steady in his life. "I came to sing you a song of easy riches, of many scalps and much loot. Call it what you may when I'm done and gone.

"Soon another great wagon train will come to the basin." There was a hint of a little curl to the corners of his lips. "Many wagons, many fine horses. There will be few women and children. Each wagon will carry many guns and hundreds upon hundreds of bullets." He paused, then said slowly, "That is the present I am here to bring to the ears of Long Lance."

"Long Lance will accept your present." The old chief bowed, then straightened. "Long Lance dreams of one more good fight. These two—" he jerked his head toward the handsome young half-breeds —"will be at my side when I fall. Know them tonight. They are brave men. If I fall, they may fall beside me, blood of my blood and your blood, the sons of Yellow Bull and Moon Woman."

Bradlaw took a deep breath. Then his bull voice sounded. "Long Lance will not attack the wagons." Having said it, he felt better. The two handsome halfbreeds had nothing to do with it. Hell's fire, he probably had colts and fillies scattered all over the West! Brace Bradlaw had suddenly found himself, and a glint of free and easy laughter once more filled his clear eyes and his voice.

"Every wagon," he said, "will be filled with soldiers. The women your scouts will see from the distance will be soldiers wearing dresses. It will be a trap for Long Lance. Put not your hand to its jaws." Shoulders back, body as straight as a ramrod, he molded his long arms across his chest in the manner of a proud chief at the end of his speech. "Yellow Bull has spoken. His song is sung. Mark well his words. Let Long Lance fail him not."

"Long Lance—" the old Indian bowed humbly, a strange gleam in his eyes—"has yet to fail a friend."

NOW, damn Colonel Brown, Brace Bradlaw was going back to that Army camp and have the woman released. After she was free, he could tell that hot-spur Brown just what he thought of him. Let them shoot—if it was to be that way! Like a real man again he would look them in the eye without a blindfold and laugh in their faces when the rifles cracked.

As he strode toward his horse, he saw Cheyennes popping up from everywhere. No great chief would cast a stain on his dignity by stooping to saddle his own horse. The Cheyennes knew it. The old black was saddled and ready to go when he got to it. A young buck stood at its head. Another held the stirrup for Yellow Bull. ● ● ●

They came in on a howling wave of wildness

The Taming of Bent Fork

By PHILIP MORGAN

HUGH DELANEY was sitting on the porch of the Trail House when the five riders boiled into Bent Fork in the early dusk. They raced down the street and pulled in before the adobe shack that housed the office and jail of Sheriff Ben Maltese.

One of them sent a sharp call at the office and Ben stepped out on the walk, his yellow moustaches covering his bitter mouth. There were five quick shots fired by the riders and Ben Maltese tipped to the dust of the street with a tired sigh. The riders spun their mounts about and ran from town.

As they passed Hugh Delaney, one of

them gave him a direct stare and he recognized the wild, tough face of Tip Lattin, the leader of the local wild bunch. Feeling no great regret for Ben Maltese, who had acted like a tyrant, Hugh crossed the street and knelt beside the man. People poured from the saloons and stores along the street to join him.

The crowd stood around, looking down at the dead man for several minutes. Then George Gordan, owner of the mercantile store, spoke harshly. "That's it. That's the fifth sheriff in a year Tip Lattin and his gang've killed. I guess we move out and turn the place over to Lattin and his crowd."

"Maybe we can get someone else," Jim Byers said. He was a small, solemn man, who ran the Fair Deal, Bent Fork's best saloon. He was the leader of the town's shadier element, just as George Gordan was the leader of the respectable element. Any decision would be made between these two men.

Byers was said to have aided Tip Lattin, supplied him with information, and shared in his spoils. Hugh Delaney watched Byers attentively as the gambler thought about the problem. He thought he saw a decision form behind his hard-set eyes. Then Byers spoke again. "I suggest we hire a man tough enough to get rid of Lattin. Law and order has got to come to this country."

"If it doesn't, this town is going to die," Gordan replied flatly. But Hugh wasn't listening to Gordan. He was still watching Byers's eyes. And they seemed to hold a secret amusement.

The gambler, Hugh concluded, had seen the writing on the wall. To him it meant Bent Fork was dying under his feet. so he had decided that Tip Lattin had to die—as cold-bloodedly as that.

Until now, Byers had stood silently by while Lattin raided the cattle herds driven through this country and made periodic marauding sweeps through the town. But he could not, in the end, afford to have the town die, so he was switching his support. It was a little tough on Lattin, but that was the way it was.

"Come over to my office," George Gordan said peremptorily to Byers. "We have to talk this over. Hugh, you come along, and Toby and Ed. Pete, get a man and take Ben down to the undertaker's. I'll foot the bill." He turned away, a big, gruff-talking man, accustomed to authority, expecting immediate obedience.

Hugh laughed to himself, but he followed out of curiosity. These men had made the town what it was and he enjoyed seeing them squirm. It would be interesting to watch Byers work.

THEY SAT in the hard, barrel-backed chairs in the rear of the mercantile. Four of the five were men of wealth. Toby Peters ran the hardware store and saddle shop and Ed Franks the livery barn and the stables. Hugh Delaney was the only poor man in the crowd. His new stage line was small and not yet doing much business. But the others respected him—respected his toughness and his sure knowledge of trouble. Of all the men in the town, Jim Byers and Hugh Delaney were the only ones not hit by Lattin's crowd. Byers because of his alliance with the outlaws and Hugh because he was a hard man whom Tip feared.

"Now," Gordan said, "we're all here. What's it going to be? But before we start, there's one thing better be made clear—just where do you stand with Lattin, Jim?"

The small, fastidious gambler took his cigar from his mouth with a deliberately careful gesture, the large diamond ring on his little finger winking once in the lamp light. "I have said that Tip Lattin has to go. Any understanding I may have had with the man in the past is dead. Does that sound plain enough?"

"Plain enough," Gordan agreed. "Now, we get down to business. I say we all kick in the money to pay a town-taming marshal from some place like Dodge or Abilene. He can come in and calm this town down for us to where an average man can handle it. Of course, he'll have to kill Lattin."

"No," Byers said flatly. "That's as bad

as not having anyone at all. Those boys are too handy with a gun; they get kill-crazy. We want a safe town, but we don't want a dead town. Those Texas hands have to be able to get a play for their money, or they won't stop here. And if they don't stop, we lose plenty. We need a man with judgment."

They all sat and thought about that for awhile and then they all turned, gazing at Hugh.

He sat there, relaxed and easy in his chair, a thin veil of cigar smoke before his square-planed face. He had gray eyes that looked steadily out upon a world that he knew too much about. There were deep wrinkles around his eyes. In repose, his face was hard and humorless and almost homely, yet he could laugh and often did. When those lighter moments were on him, he was a better-looking young man.

He was big, standing two inches over six feet and weighing an even two hundred pounds and he had the narrow-flanked build of a man born to the saddle. A worn .45 rode his right hip, down low, and now these men were remembering how careful Tip Lattin was not to step on his toes. There was a latent deadliness in his quiet strength. What they couldn't see was the cynical contempt that he held for them.

"The job's yours if you'll take it, Hugh," George Gordan said, breaking the long silence.

"I guess not," Hugh said and came from his chair. "You boys wanted a wild town and you didn't care about anything as long as the profit was there. Now the Texas crews are threatening to by-pass you and the settlers won't come to your town. You regret your decision. You're paying the piper."

"That's right," Byers said, not taking offense as the others did. "But you forget one thing, Hugh; you're in business here, too. You go down with the town. Anyhow, what could any of us have done about things. I couldn't face Tip Lattin and come out anything but second best."

"You've all been kidding yourselves and you know it," Hugh replied coolly. "No one man could stand up against Lattin and his crew. But he rides into town tonight and kills your sheriff right in front of you and you don't do a thing. If Ben Maltese had been my man, I would've been out there backing him. Once Lattin knew you meant business, he'd move on."

"Either you take the job, Hugh, or we get a professional gun-slinger and that won't do you or us any good. It's up to you."

HUGH THOUGHT about that for a while, standing before them, his eyes cold. Finally he shrugged. "All right, I'll take a job as town marshal, but not as sheriff. I will touch nothing outside of the town. And what I say goes."

"That's fine!" George Gordan boomed and rose ponderously to his feet and extended his hand. Hugh ignored the hand and turned to the door.

"The pay will be three hundred a month," he said and waited until they nodded agreement. He went out, experiencing a small feeling of triumph. The town needed a cleaning up and he would see that it got it. But some of them in there were going to regret hiring him before it was over.

The next morning, when Limpy Charles, the swamper at Jim Byers's Fair Deal, opened the doors and swept out the debris of the past night's revelry, Hugh came down the boardwalk past him and ducked through the swinging doors into the saloon. Byers was at the bar, counting the night's take. The gambler looked up at Hugh and made a grimace of distaste. "Thank God a herd's due today. I don't make much off the local trade."

Hugh leaned on the bar and Byers put out a bottle of good whisky and two glasses. Hugh poured a drink and held it before him, admiring the color, before he tossed it down with one quick motion. His eyes held the hint of controlled smiling as he looked at Byers. "Time we had a talk, Jim."

"Sure; what's bothering you, kid?"

"You've been friendly with Tip Lattin for a long time and now you say you're

through. I want to know why. When the time comes that we buck heads, I don't want you standing behind me unless I know who you're shooting at."

"I see," the gambler said gravely. "Well, I guess you deserve an explanation. Sure, I had my deals with Tip and I'd keep on having them, if I could. It's a rough world, as you know, and a man has to get on the best he can. But I see what's coming.

"There's three hundred settlers out on the Apache Flats right now. They've come in since the first of the year. Where there's settlers and families, you get law and order. They won't stand for it any other way. Men like Lattin have to be killed off and I don't propose to die with him."

"You figure on staying when the country gets settled up?"

"You bet I do. I'm gettin' too old to go booming around the country any more."

"I always figured if a man was a friend, he stayed a friend," Hugh said softly. He saw the remark bite at the gambler's sharp pride. "I don't know as I have any use for any other way."

"Lattin wasn't ever a friend of mine," Byers protested. "He's a wild one and he'd turn on me any time he saw a way to make something by doing it."

"All right, Jim, but watch your back trail. Tip knows what's happened by now and he won't like it."

"I can take care of myself."

"One more thing. From now on, every man riding into this town checks his gun with me. If no one's packing an iron then no one'll get hurt. The order goes for your gamblers and housemen, too. If I find one of them with a gun on him, he leaves town. Spread the word around, Jim—I'm not fooling." Hugh walked out then and behind him Jim Byers stood at the bar, reflectively stroking his jaw.

JIM BYERS spread the word and as Hugh went from place to place, he met no trouble. Only two men gave him an argument and they knuckled under when he got tough. He returned to his office at five o'clock, conscious of the trail herd that was spread out on the grazing range south of town. The crew would be riding in before long and he would have to meet them. It could be a bad situation. Those Texas hands wouldn't want to give up their guns.

They came in at last light, ten of them, in a howling, shooting wave of wildness. They were dirty and unkempt and they had two months of stored-up hell to vent on the town. They rounded into Main and spotted the lone figure in the street's dust, blocking their way. They pulled up in a swirl of dust before Hugh Delaney and roared at him to get out of the way. A tall, hawk-faced redhead was in the van.

"Get out of the way, suh," he drawled and the devil danced in his blue eyes. "We're sure raring to have a time."

"You'll have your fun," Hugh said coolly, "but when it's over you'll all be going back to the herd. The gun play in Bent Fork is over. I want your guns. I'll keep 'em at my office and you can have 'em back when you ride out."

This brought an immediate outburst of cursing from the riders. Hugh held up his hand. "I mean what I say. You turn over your guns or you cut me down right here. But I'll take some of you along."

For a minute he didn't think it was going to work. They sat and looked him over and the desire to buck this Yankee marshal was in their faces. But they were just boys and they were looking for a good time and they didn't want to fight. In the end, Hugh counted on that. He took three fast strides and was alongside the redhead's horse. He reached up and lifted the man's gun from its holster.

"You can get it at my office when you leave," he said and the redhead gave him a tight grin.

"It was a close thing, mister. All right, boys, give him the guns." The others crowded around then, grinning at him, and he took their guns.

"This order covers everyone in town," Hugh told them. "I've told the gamblers and if they're caught packing a gun they get a ticket out of town. Go on and have your fun."

They gave a concerted whoop and rode

around him. They pulled to a stop before the Fair Deal and swung down. They hesitated a moment, looking back at him, and then plunged into the saloon, wild as the cattle they drove.

Hugh headed back for his office, feeling the tightness in his back muscles. That had been the big one. These men would pass the word about the new order in Bent Fork and say they'd gotten a fair shake. The rest of the crews would go along. So now all that was left was keeping order and getting rid of Tip Lattin.

Bent Fork settled down to an even run of days. The new order was accepted and most of the town citizens liked it. Hugh's job became routine. He had to break up an ocasional brawl and he jailed one of Jim Byers's gamblers for knifing a cowboy over a woman who wasn't worth the trouble, but that was all. He went his quiet way and his tall muscular shape became the symbol of the peace that had settled on Bent Fork. Yet, everyone knew it was a false peace. Tip Lattin still roamed the Apache Hills and would be riding into town one day for a showdown. Not while Lattin lived would Bent Fork know real peace.

ON A MORNING three weeks after his appointment as marshal, Hugh stopped in at the Fair Deal. Jim Byers was again behind the counter, going over the night's take. He smiled at Hugh.

"Business is good, Hugh—better'n I ever thought it would be in a tame town. Congratulations on a good job."

"Not in order yet," Hugh said. "Tip'll be riding in to see us any day now. He can't help seeing that the coming of law and order is the end of him. He can't let the people get to liking it too well. I figure he won't wait much longer. You better be ready, because he'll be looking for you first, and he'll want your scalp." With that advice, he left the saloon and crossed the street to George Gordan's mercantile store.

Gordan saw Hugh come in and waved at him to wait a minute. He was waiting on a pair of farmers from out on the Flats and he was being extremely courteous. It was a new business and a more stable business than he had known and he liked it. Finished, he walked to the door with the men, agreeing wtih them that the country needed rain. When he came back to Hugh, his eyes showed the brightness of his thinking.

"What is it, Hugh?"

"You like things the way they are, George?"

"Sure, I like it. You've done a good job. If it's a raise you're looking for, I think it can be arranged."

"No raise, George. I just wonder how well you like the town peaceful. Because Tip Lattin and his men will be riding in here any day now. When they come, it will be decided whether you keep the new way, or go back to the old. I'm the only thing standing in front of him and I won't be enough."

"What do you mean, you won't be enough? We have complete faith in you, boy."

"I mean what I say. You've hired your dirty work done and sat back and watched, taking no part. So you've had five sheriffs shot and you still think you can get the job done the easy way. All I wanted to tell you was that when you really decide you want law and order to stay, you'll find you can't get it for any amount of money. Nothing's ever easy, George." He turned sharply away then and walked out of the store, not looking back. George Gordan looked after him with a puzzled frown.

Tip Lattin rode in that night. He led his five riders across the Prairie Creek bridge at a slow walk and they came onto Main at the same slow pace. Hugh Delaney was told of their coming and he walked from his office and took his stand in the center of the street.

It was early dusk, as it had been when Ben Maltese died. Standing there, seeing Lattin and his men coming at him, Hugh had a moment's bitter hatred for the men who had put him here. They stayed safely inside and hired another man to fight their battles. They wanted the fruits of peace

without paying for them.

Then the doors of the Fair Deal swung open and Jim Byers stepped out. A .45 rode each of his hips, their holsters tied down to his legs. He paced through the street's dust and took his stand beside Hugh.

"There won't be much chance," Hugh warned him.

The gambler shrugged. "That has been the way with my life. I would like to have Lattin, if that is all right."

"Just so," Hugh replied.

THE TWO of them watched the oncoming horsemen. Lattin reined in some hundred yards from them and sat considering the situation. He suddenly swung from his horse and came forward on foot, his men dismounting and spreading out on each side of him.

They came on and the two men waited while the distance narrowed down to twenty-five yards. The bitterness was gone now from Hugh Delaney and he thought only of the coming fight. Lattin closed the distance to twenty yards and pulled up.

"I hear you got religion, Byers," the outlaw said. "You cut out on us and strung along with the peace-forever crowd. I don't like having my friends back out on me."

"What you like has never concerned me," Jim Byers replied in the coolest of voices. He was a still and small and contained shape in the fading light, showing the outlaw no fear. Hugh made one try.

"Turn around, Tip, and go back to your horse. Ride out of here. This town's dead for you and your kind."

"That may be," the outlaw admitted. "If it was just you, Delaney, I'd take the advice. You never gave me any trouble. But I have to settle with friend Jim. You can walk away from here and I'll leave after our little parley and won't come back."

"No," Hugh said wearily, "I'm staying. This is my town, Tip." It was coming then and he wondered why the outlaws waited. They were looking at something behind him and he dared not turn for a look. But then he heard George Gordan's voice.

"Do like the marshal says, Lattin. Get out and don't come back. If you or any of your men are found in town, you'll swing."

Hugh risked a look back then and what he saw filled him with a silent wonder. Behind him stood George Gordan and Ed Franks and Toby Peters and Emmett Franzen and ten other merchants. They all held shotguns—deadly at this range—and they presented a solid and unbeatable front to the six outlaws.

The five riders with Lattin saw that they were whipped. They backed slowly up the street to their horses and mounted. They turned back the way they had come. But Tip Lattin stayed where he was, his chiseled features ugly in the poor light.

Lattin waited and these other men waited and the tension built up like heat before a summer storm. Then Lattin said, "Jim, you crossed me," and went for his gun. Byers matched the outlaw's draw, but his gunsight caught on a fold of his trousers and hung up for the barest fraction of a second. Lattin's gun boomed once and the big slug drove through Jim Byers and dropped him to the ground.

Then the shotguns boomed and the slight form of Tip Lattin was battered backward and flung dead to the street. Hugh Delaney, who had not drawn his gun, bent over the fallen Byers. The gambler's lips had lost all color and he was dying. The knowledge was in his eyes.

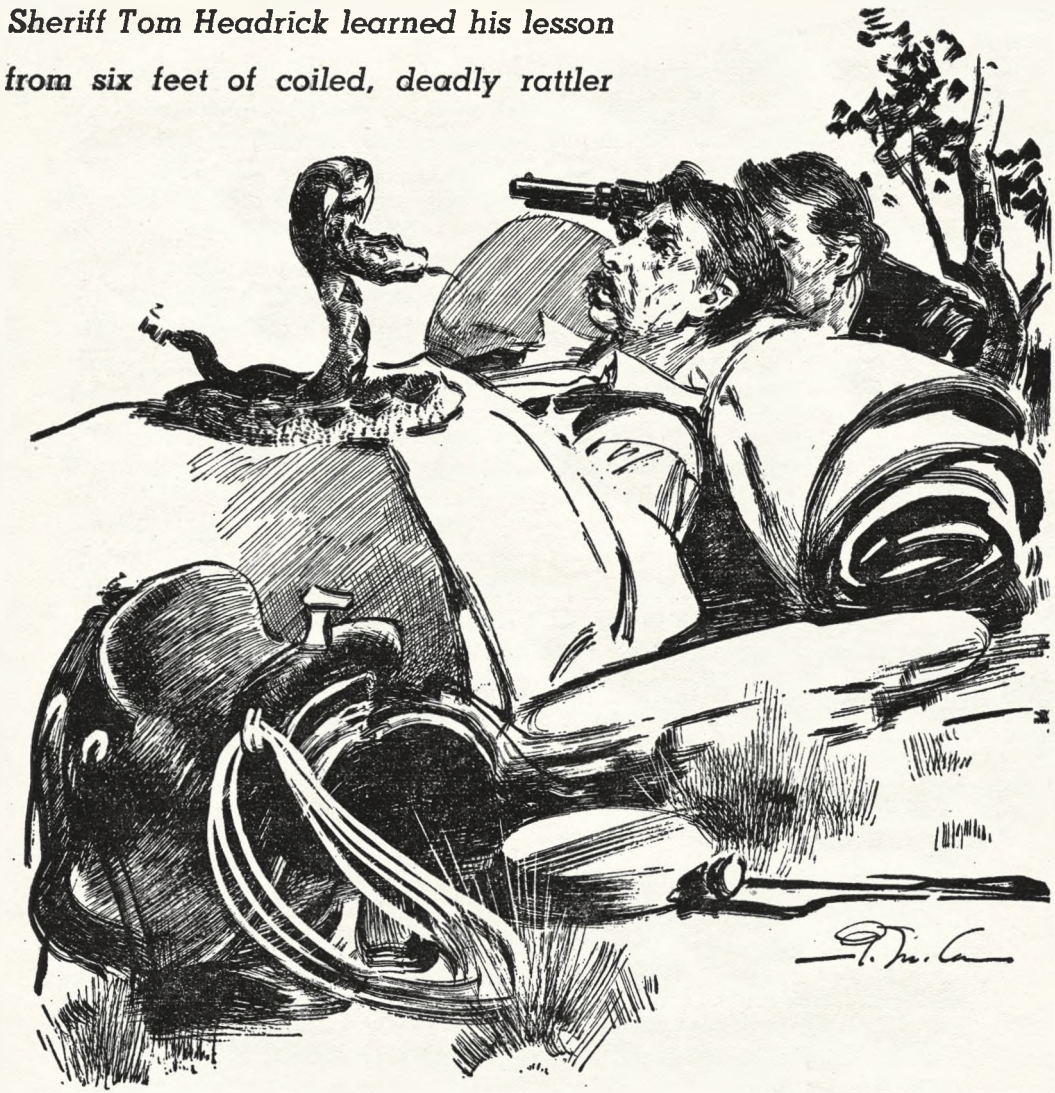
"He didn't run," Jim Byers whispered, and there was a secret pleasure in his voice, as though that fact vastly pleased him.

"He was no welsher," Hugh replied and Jim Byers nodded his head. The gambler went limp and Hugh laid him gently down and stood erect.

"What was he saying when he died?" George Gordan asked.

"You wouldn't understand, George," Hugh Delaney said and walked past him. He had taken ten steps down the street when he paused and turned back to face the merchants. "Thanks," he said. "You bought yourselves a peaceful town tonight." Then he turned and walked slowly back toward his office. ● ● ●

Sheriff Tom Headrick learned his lesson from six feet of coiled, deadly rattler



SIDEWINDER

By RAYMOND PAUL

THEY had ridden all that day and Tres Palos was still two days off when they reined in at the spring. Sheriff Tom Headrick dismounted wearily and held the reins while his horse drank. He did not let his eyes stray too far from Kurt Miller, who remained in his saddle without speaking. When the horse had finished drinking, Headrick slipped hobbles on the animal and unsaddled him.

"All right, son," he said then, and Miller climbed down awkwardly from his horse.

The sheriff found enough dry twigs for a small fire and raked them together. Still his eyes did not remain at length away from the younger man. He boiled coffee in an ancient can that had been left at the spring long ago by some unknown Samaritan.

When Miller had finally managed to unsaddle his horse and turned him loose without hobbles, Headrick's gray brows

pulled together disapprovingly. Young Miller, noticing this, came over to the fire and sat down with the thin edge of a smile on his broad mouth.

"He won't stray," he said.

Tom Headrick shrugged. "Your horse. I'd hate to be left afoot in this country. Wouldn't trust a horse without hobbles."

"Or a man?"

Headrick's eyes reached him again from beneath his hat brim. Miller held out both hands. His wrists were red and swollen from the chafing of the steel cuffs.

"You don't need these," he said.

The sheriff shook his head slowly. He wouldn't take that chance. "You killed a man," he said.

"Self-defense."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Court's got to decide that. My job is to bring you in. I figure on doing just that."

He handed Miller a tin cup filled with steaming coffee. The young prisoner took it silently and held it to his blowing lips with both hands. He did not pursue his complaint.

Headrick thought, he's just a kid, and now he's learning how heavy the load can get. But he don't whine the way some of 'em do.

The day had been hot, but now as darkness closed in there was a sudden shift of temperature that made both men shiver. Headrick stood up and hauled his blankets from the saddle-roll. He dropped one of them beside Kurt Miller and took his own a short distance from the dying fire. He placed his revolver beneath the rolled blanket at his head and lay there, watching the man who remained near the fire.

THE sheriff was no longer young, and sometimes his bones grew weary after a long day's ride. Often he felt weighted with the responsibility that was placed thanklessly on his shoulders. It was this way now. Maybe he could trust Miller. Maybe not. He didn't know. So he lay awake, watching.

When he could no longer fight off his weariness he stood and moved slowly toward his prisoner. He hefted Miller's saddle. It was a stout rig, built for heavy roping. Forty pounds, more or less, of working equipment. The stirrups were leather-covered; beneath them was solid iron.

"I guess this will do," he said. "Hold out your hands, son."

He unlocked one handcuff and ran it through the stirrup, then snapped it quickly again around Miller's wrist.

"Sorry, son. It has to be this way."

He knew the words meant nothing to the younger man who could not know that he really was sorry. It was one of those little things that sometimes gave the sheriff's job a bitter taste. He went back to his blankets.

And then because he was getting old he permitted himself to drop off into a light sleep. At the first murmur of sound he awakened and saw Kurt standing against the sky. Yawning, he stretched his legs, then bent to throw a few more bits of wood on the fire.

As he moved, the chain at his wrists rattled and the stock saddle raised a dust as it was dragged. He was a big kid, tall and heavy-boned, and with a ruddy burnish on his cheeks. Just a kid who had found himself some trouble.

He dropped to the ground and, yawning again, awkwardly removed his boots. He pulled the blanket around him, shifted the saddle to a place for his head, and lay down full length on the ground. The sheriff relaxed and pulled his own blanket higher around his chest.

Before the moon had risen Headrick was snoring lightly, and his breathing created a small area of warmth in the cold night air. He began to dream that a great weight had been placed across his chest. But he did not come awake, for there was no sound to disturb him. And beneath his head the stock of his revolver still lay as a solid and comforting lump. He slept on.

Dawn finally began to push its way slowly into the chilly darkness. A steel-gray streak formed at the crest of the mountains eastward. The heat that would

soon be on the desert began to lay claim to it and sent a warning breeze across this level stretch of earth that had in it only a hint of warmth. Far off, a coyote's bark was shrill testimony against the indictment that no living thing could survive here. And with that sound Sheriff Headrick came fully and instantly awake.

He opened his eyes slowly. And the weight on his chest that had been obscure in his dream became now a reality—gray and brown and terrifying!

The rattler's head was not six inches from his face. Its long, cylindrical body lay coiled across his chest. The sprinkling of perfect diamond-shaped spots that gave this reptile its nickname formed a neat circle on the surface of Headrick's blanket. Diamond-backs they called them. But in this country a man was more apt to refer to them by that more contemptible term—sidewinder.

And this one, having found that one small area of warmth created by the man's breathing, had come to it and luxuriated in it. Now it slept, lulled by this warmth and by the rhythmic rising and falling of the man's chest.

Headrick stopped breathing for a moment. His impulse was to move, but he checked this, knowing that to move now, no matter how swiftly, was to court death. The snake could strike out with the speed of a bullet. No matter how fast Headrick moved, the snake could move faster.

HE BEGAN breathing again, evenly, rhythmically. His warm breath went out and enveloped the deadly creature, soothing, placating. He had to keep on now; he could not stop or alter the rhythm of his breathing. He felt the perspiration begin to dampen his shirt, felt the tingling of it as it broke out at the roots of his hair. He had a sudden fear that the rapid pounding of his heart would disturb the monster on his chest.

The sheriff's eyes moved, but not his head. He scoured the dirty-gray mist that hung over the desert and found an indistinct shape near the black mound of ashes that had been his cooking fire. It could have been Miller sleeping. It could have been merely a clump of sage. He groped further for the figure that would be his slumbering prisoner. But his head did not move, nor did his breathing alter.

And then the possibility that Kurt Miller had crept off during the night began to obsess him. Reluctantly he chased this thought around in his brain. He had slept —perhaps too soundly—and it was possible that his prisoner could have made his escape soundlessly. But a man couldn't get far in this country afoot—not when he had forty pounds of saddle to slow him down.

But Kurt Miller was just a kid who'd never been in any real trouble before. A desperate kid. And Headrick knew nothing about him except that he'd killed a man. Maybe Miller was the kind who would stand up and face trouble. Maybe he was the other kind. Headrick didn't know, and his eyes continued their frenzied search.

But his head did not move.

The thing on his chest stirred slightly and for an instant Headrick stopped breathing again. The quivering motion against his body sent a momentary chill along his spine and he began to sweat again. A muted sound came from his right and his eyes again made their questing search. Near the spring two shapes loomed against the gray dawn—the horses coming in to drink. He listened to the soughing noises their muzzles made as they watered. He became conscious of his own thirst.

The sounds ceased and for a moment there was complete silence. Then their hoofs were a muffled drumming in the soft earth as they moved out again to graze. Headrick's glance returned to the coiled rattler on his chest.

Dawn came fully then and long shadows were suddenly cast across the desert. He felt the warmth of those first feeble rays. The revolver pushed uncomfortably against the back of his head and became a disturbing thing. He wondered if he could reach it, and made a tentative movement of his hand. But the night had been

cold and he had tucked the blanket around his body so that now his arms were pinned to his sides. He could not move them without rolling his body.

Again he sought Kurt Miller's figure. But all around that little circle of ashes there was no human form—nothing but the brittle, gray-green clumps of sage. He closed his eyes and continued his slow, rhythmic breathing.

Long afterward, it seemed, he felt the gentle probing beneath the blanket at his head. He lay very still and his head dropped slightly as the revolver was drawn silently away. Still the thing on his blanket did not stir.

Then the muzzle of his own gun was beside him, almost resting on his shoulder, and behind it was Kurt Miller's bright blue eye laying a sight along the barrel. The hammer made a metallic snick as it was pulled into firing position.

Headrick thought, now's your chance, son. If you want to get out of this spot you'll never find a better one.

The gun roared in his ear and burned his face with its muzzle blast. A streak of sudden fire seared his chest. The sidewinder's head disappeared.

THE body of the snake thrashed wildly across Headrick's stomach. He jerked his arm from beneath the blanket and threw the dead snake as far as he could. He looked at Kurt.

"Close," he said.

"Yeah," Miller said and handed the sheriff his gun.

Tom Headrick studied the young fellow a moment. He thought again that Kurt was just a kid who had found himself some trouble, and now it was beginning to weight him.

The sheriff said, "Hold out your hands, son." He took off the handcuffs and draped them over his belt. "Guess I was wrong. I won't need 'em."

Kurt Miller squatted there for a moment, rubbing his swollen wrists.

The sheriff raked up some more twigs and built a fire. He made coffee in the ancient tin can and when it was ready told Miller to help himself. He looked toward the rising sun and remarked, "Going to be hot again."

Miller nodded and drank the coffee in silence. The two of them sat there for a while, watching the desert come alive with the red dawn.

Presently Headrick rose, saying, "We've got a long ride, son. We'd better move along."

"All right," Miller said and with his arms swinging easily at his sides, walked jauntily out onto the desert to find their horses. ● ● ●

A few yards from the cottonwoods Sutherland flattened on his roan

Flags in the Dusk

By CLIFF WALTERS

Barely visible in the evening dusk they hung—two white flags signaling death

LEE WONG'S thoughts were as dark as the clouds banked along the rim of this Wyoming valley which, for thirty-odd years, had been the home of the rotund little Chinese cook. Death had claimed Jim Sutherland, the square-shooting old cowman who had been his friend and companion. Today, in the heart of the aging Chinaman, were the emptiness of the present and the plaguing uncertainty of the future.

One of the two heirs named in Jim Sutherland's will had appeared at Twin Cottonwoods this morning. He was Marvin

Drake, only son of Jim's sister. The husky, handsome young stranger had greeted Lee Wong pleasantly enough—had even complimented the cook on the excellence of the noonday meal. But somehow Lee Wong had been aware of a vague feeling of disappointment. The Chinese scolded himself for this feeling as he sat alone in the ranch house kitchen. He was being unjust, he told himself. He must not be swayed by first impressions.

Perhaps this dark young man, one of old Jim's two nephews, didn't mean to be blunt or arrogant. Perhaps these mannerisms had been inherited from his father, Handy Drake, the gambler, who had been killed five years ago in a card game in Colorado. Lee Wong could remember old Jim's saying at the time, "I sure hope young Marve don't turn out to be like his dad—and make his poor mother turn over in her grave."

Lee Wong heard the hoofs of a horse. Expecting the rider to be Marvin Drake, who had ridden out to look over the range and cattle this afternoon, the cook went to the door. He stood there very still, as if he were seeing a ghost from the past.

THE SANDY, raw-boned six-footer astride a roan horse was the picture of old Jim Sutherland—forty years ago. He sat his horse the same way, lightly, easily. His blue-eyed grin was the same, and his voice had the same pitch as he said, "Hello, Lee Wong! That is, I *guess* you're Uncle Jim's cook?"

"The same," said Lee, and the sudden warmth within him was like a candle burning within a round, yellow-ripe pumpkin. "Welcome to your new home, Bob Sutherland!"

The young man swung from his saddle and said, "By golly, I've seen bigger spreads than this up in Montana, but never a prettier one. I'm not surprised that Uncle Jim wouldn't leave it for anything . . . anything short of death, that is."

"Twin Cottonwoods," Lee Wong said. "He named it after those two big trees growing over there. It has everything a cowman could wish for. Good water, good range, the big meadow with its wild hay —and the big rimrocks for shelter. If you'd like to stable your horse, I'll get supper and—"

"Who's this riding up?" Bob asked.

"The cousin you've never seen—your new pard," Lee answered.

"Well, I'll be darned." Bob Sutherland, son of old Jim's only brother who had died six years ago in Montana, grinned and called, "Hello, Cousin Marvin! Yeah, I'm Bob."

"Howdy," said Marvin Drake, halting his rangy sorrel horse and offering his hand. "Family reunion of what's left, eh?" His quick, dark eyes were appraising his cousin.

"Yeah," Bob said. "Seems kinda too bad that neither one of us ever got around to visiting Uncle Jim, since he's been blood's-thicker'n-water enough to leave us everything he worked so darned hard for."

"That's spilt milk now," Marve Drake replied. "Anyway, *both* the Sutherland brothers—Jim and your dad—didn't like the idea of my mother marrying a gambler. Not that he wasn't just as good as either of them was."

"And that's water under the bridge now," Bob said soothingly. "We're starting from scratch, Marve—you and me. Let's just be grateful for all that Uncle Jim's done for us and not—"

"That roan horse of yours is pretty fast, is he?" Marve interrupted.

"Fast enough that I'll run him against any horse on any range," Bob answered, laying a gentle hand on the roan's slim neck.

"Yeah?" Marvin's dark eyes narrowed slightly. "And how much'll you be willing to bet that the roan'll win?"

"No betting," Bob answered, while Lee stood there comparing the two cousins. "I'm not a gambling man."

"In other words, you're just another talking man," his cousin replied, tone brittle. "Me, I'm like my dad was—and proud of it. The put up or shut up kind."

"What do you mean by that?" Bob drawled. "Is your sorrel a race horse?"

"Fast enough to show his hind shoes to that roan plug of yours!"

Lee Wong saw Bob Sutherland stiffen a little at his cousin's words, yet the blond man's voice was patient as he drawled, "We'll try them out some time when they aren't so tired, just for the fun of it."

"No, not just for the fun of it," said young Drake, and his tenacity somehow reminded the cook of a fighting horse trying to corner a less belligerent animal in a corral. "The same as my dad, I'll put my cards on the table. I don't like partnerships any more than your dad and dear old Uncle Jim liked my father. I don't want to be handcuffed to some stranger, even if he is my cousin. Don't want him telling me what I can and can't do."

"Meaning?" Bob inquired.

"I want all this spread or none of it!"

"I can't buy you out, not yet, anyhow," Bob said slowly. "Golly, Marve! Give me time to catch my breath before you start in—"

"I haven't got time," the other man said sharply. "I've got a chance to marry a cute little red-headed girl. But she's too beautiful to wait for any man—even me—very long. Not with a dozen other young bucks chasing after her. I aim to marry her right soon and bring her up here to do my cooking. I think I'd like that better than Chinaman grub."

LEE WONG winced and no longer blamed himself for not being favorably impressed with Marvin Drake. The latter, true son of a notorious gambler, was shoving a tall stack of chips to the center of the table. Lee Wong didn't like the spectacle he was witnessing.

Bob Sutherland said, "According to the last letter I got from Uncle Jim, he wanted Lee Wong to stay here as cook and to make this his home as long as he lives."

"Maybe he can, if you aren't too yellow to run a horse race—and *if* you've got the fastest horse," Drake goaded. "Bragging about how fast your roan is and then, when I call you on it. . . ."

"What's on your mind, Mr. Drake, besides that beautiful red-headed girl?" Bob Sutherland asked slowly.

"I'll run you a horse race," Drake said. "If you and your roan get over the finish line first, you own *all* this spread. If you don't, it's mine. Now, start backing down."

Anger darkened Bob Sutherland's blue eyes. "I don't think Uncle Jim intended to will me a lot of trouble," he said. "And—I can see now—that's all there'd be if you were around. As I said, I'm not a gambling man. But if it's a horse race you want, with winner take all and the other get out, you're on."

"Good!" Drake said. "A fair and square bet—with the Chinaman here the witness!"

"I'm going to unsaddle my roan and let him rest a while first," Bob said. He turned to Lee Wong. "I'd appreciate some supper, Lee. Providing my dear cousin here can abide me that long."

"Supper, yes," said Lee Wong, and turned numbly back into the kitchen.

That young Bob Sutherland had allowed himself to be goaded into high stakes on a horse race. But there it was. And all Lee Wong could do now was pray that a roan horse would outrun a rangy sorrel which, the Chinaman suspected, must be fast indeed.

TALKING quietly with Lee Wong, Bob Sutherland had been eating for several minutes before Marvin Drake came in. He seated himself at the oilcloth-covered table and said, "We'll each sign a bill of sale, and give them to Lee Wong to hold, Cousin Bob. Mine's all made out, which is the reason I'm a little late. But don't let me hurry you. There'll be enough daylight left, even if it is almost dusk. And that roan cayuse of yours'll need all the rest he can get."

"Mighty light biscuits, Lee," Bob said. "I'd like to keep right on eating them."

"I hope you can," said the cook gently.

"I'll bet you do," Drake said. "You don't like my plans, do you?"

"I'll get some more biscuits," said Lee Wong, retreating into the kitchen.

Dusk was deepening when two riders, one on a roan, the other astride a sorrel,

halted their mounts beside the house where Lee Wong stood. Bob Sutherland smiled at the Chinese and said, "Wish me luck, Lee."

"I do!" said the cook. "And I'm sure old Jim would wish you luck if—"

"Listen, Sutherland!" Drake cut in. "When the Chinaman yells 'Go' we'll start racing up the wagon road, turn around that little knoll up there about half a mile away and swing back down the creek trail that runs between those two cottonwoods over there. And the first one over this line where we are now takes the jackpot. Savvy?"

Bob nodded and looked at Lee. The Chinese swallowed hard. Then he called, "Go!"

Both roan and sorrel started fast. But Lee Wong didn't see much of the contest. He was staring at a meadow lark which, supported on a perch invisible from the house, trilled his evening song. For a moment Lee Wong was a pudgy, yellow-bronze statue. Then he was darting into the house, grabbing a couple of very white dish towels and hurrying outdoors again.

By the time a pair of hard-racing horses came thundering down the creek trail, with Bob's fleet roan a good three lengths ahead of the spur-punished sorrel ridden by Drake, two white dish towels fluttered in the evening breeze, from the wire that had been stretched from one giant cottonwood to the other. A wire high enough above the ground to permit a horse to pass under it—but not the horse's rider.

Lee Wong watched, and his throat was so tight he couldn't have cried out if he had wanted to. Then Bob Sutherland, only a few yards from the Twin Cottonwoods, leaned over in his saddle, flattened himself against his roan, and flashed under that wire without touching it.

A cry broke from the lips of Lee Wong, a cry of victory. Yet, before the echo of that yell had died on the dusk-veiled hills, Marvin Drake was leaping off his out-distanced sorrel, was smashing a blow to the side of Lee Wong's round head.

The little Chinese reeled back against the house and sagged down. He was trying to get up when Drake, coming at him again, yelled, "You and your white flags! Tipping Sutherland off about that wire!"

The tall form of Bob Sutherland was suddenly between Lee Wong and his attacker. Drake swore and hit his taller cousin twice. But those were the only blows Drake landed. Lee Wong saw Bob Sutherland's long arms lance out. He heard the crack of knuckles. He saw Drake reel as if he had been kicked by a horse. Again knuckles cracked, and Drake went down so hard that it seemed as if the distant rimrocks shook for an instant.

A LITTLE while later, his handsome face marred by the punishment he had absorbed within a few seconds, Marvin Drake was riding away from Twin Cottonwoods.

"Thanks for noticing that wire he stretched between those trees while I was eating a fine supper. Huh! I'd probably have had my neck jerked out if I'd hit that wire. And *you'd* probably have been blamed for stretching your clothes line between those cottonwoods."

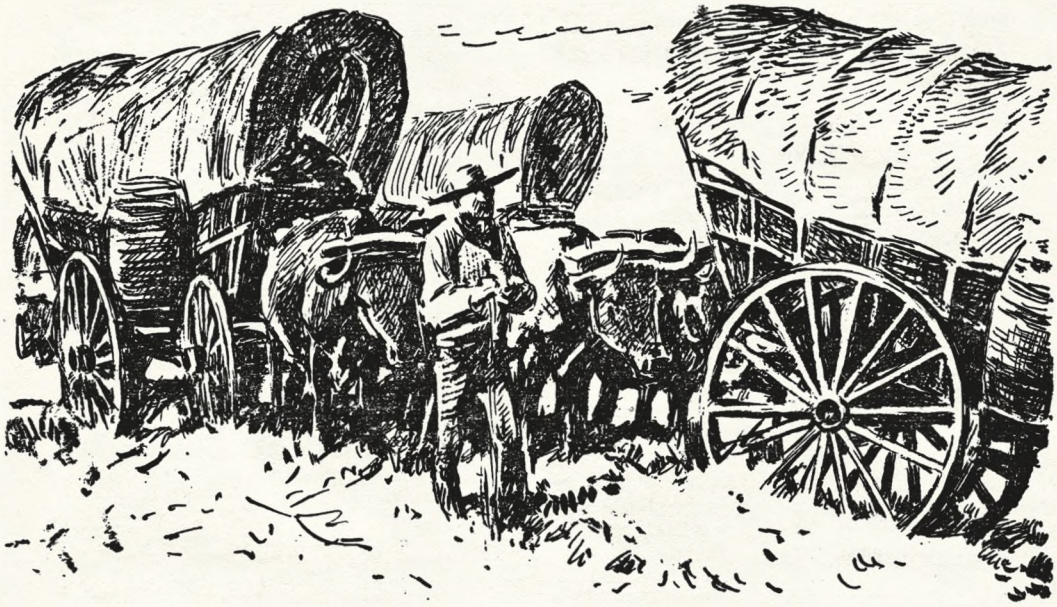
"There's no doubt of it," said Lee Wong. He grinned. "With Mr. Drake testifying against me, I wouldn't have had a Chinaman's chance."

Bob looked at the vanishing rider. "Well, I still wish things had worked out different, more the way Uncle Jim must've hoped they would, but—"

"Since you had no choice, there must not be any regrets," said Lee Wong gently. "The day Jim made out his will, he said to me, 'One's as much my nephew as the other, Lee. Yet, I wish there was only one, because a hunch tells me I might be getting young Bob Sutherland into something—by willing half my spread to the son of a tinhorn gambler named Handy Drake.'"

Lee Wong looked at pale stars beginning to twinkle above the sage-tufted rim of this valley which was still his home. He said, "Maybe things *have* worked out the way Jim hoped they would, and in spite of the way his conscience forced him to deal the cards." ●

DESERT MASSACRE



There were Indians around, they knew, and their oxen were dying, and the children clamored for water. And it was thirty long, dry, deadly miles to the Humboldt

CHAPTER I

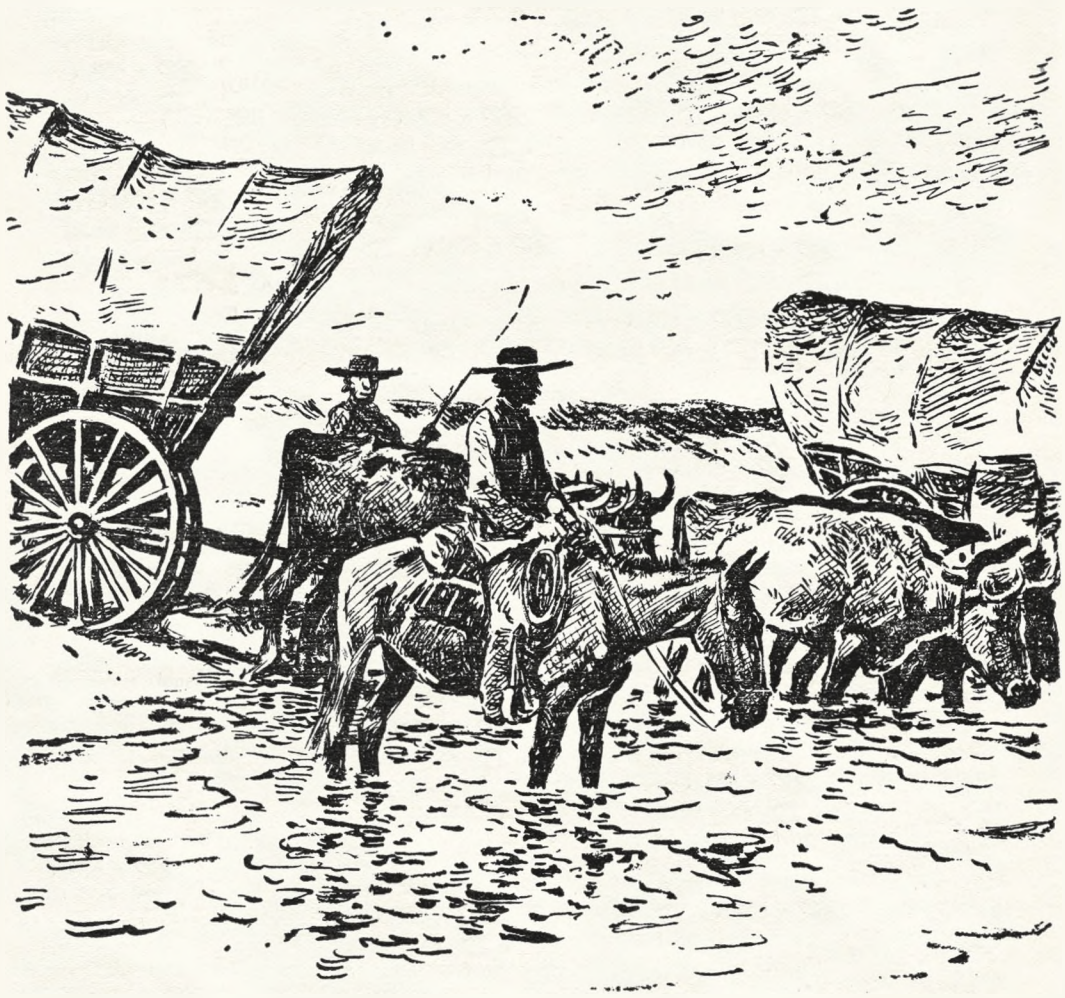
A Cargo of Trouble

THERE were two things Lieutenant Mark Caldwell didn't like about this wagon outfit. One was Bull Bigelow's three wagonloads of painted women headed for the California Gold Coast. and the other was Mormon Matthew Sammis's three yoke of speckled oxen with the tips of their horns painted red.

The painted women Lieutenant Caldwell could understand. Bull Bigelow had closed up his floating gambling Palace on the lower Mississippi, and was taking his entire establishment to California where women were scarce, and where money was abundant.

Oxen with the tips of their horns painted red was another matter. It was one which had occupied Mark Caldwell's mind for two weeks, ever since the train had rolled out of Fort Andrew Jackson across the deserts to the headwaters of the Humboldt. They were on the Humboldt now, a stinking, willow-lined sliver of greenish water, twisting across vast ex-

A Novelet by GEORGE KILRAIN



panses of barren desert land, spotted with sagebrush and greasewood, with here and there outcroppings of black basalt rock baking in the hot sun.

Nothing moved here except the fifteen wagons, rumbling slowly along the course of the river, crossing it and recrossing it, ten times a day, fifteen, twenty times a day, drivers cursing, crackling their blacksnake whips as the heavy Conestogas lurched through the shallow water, rickety wheels banging against rocks.

Caldwell rode his little buckskin a short distance behind Matthew Sammis's wagon. He rode with a Hawkins rifle across the pommel, his black slouch hat pulled low over his eyes, faded blue shirt open at the neck. He did not look in the direction of the two trollops openly trying to flirt with him through the canvas slit in Bull Bigelow's rear wagon up ahead. He'd been annoyed by them before, but he'd kept his distance, not wanting to become embroiled in any kind of trouble with the

brutal, evil-tempered Bigelow.

Bigelow had already smashed up two men in this outfit who had tried to follow up the flirtations of the painted women, and while the lieutenant was not afraid of the big man, he did not want to attract attention to himself. He was a nonentity with this outfit, a drifting rider headed for California, tying in with one of the passing wagon trains. That was how Colonel Stanton had wanted it, and he was still a member of the United States Army even though dressed like any of the other half-dozen drifters with this caravan.

COLONEL STANTON had told him quietly, "Most of the trouble seems to be coming from the 'big bend' of the Humboldt. Three outfits were wiped out in July, and a settler who managed to get away claimed he'd heard white men out in the brush while the Diggers were burning the wagons and taking scalps."

Caldwell's orders had been to slip out of the post and drift into Fort Jackson in civilian clothing. He was to join up with one of the outfits passing through, and accompany them to California, keeping his eyes open. Colonel Stanton was fairly certain white renegades were behind these raids on the California Trail, men who had organized the animal-like Digger Indians now skulking in the sagebrush and among the basalt rocks of the trail. They had furnished the rifles and the ammunition for the Indians to raid, run off stock, and massacre the smaller outfits.

"Unless we are able to break up this gang," Stanton had said, scowling, immigration into the Territory of California will come to a halt, and the Government is anxious that more and more settlers move out to the Coast."

Caldwell had heard rumors back along the Missouri where wagon train outfits were being organized that many were hesitant about crossing the deserts and the mountains, only to be prey for these savage attacks along the Humboldt, so near, yet so far from their goal. It was now three years after the close of the Mexican War and many outfits were going up the Snake to Oregon instead of to California. While Oregon was also United States territory, of course, the Government wanted this tide to be moving into newly-acquired California, now primarily having a Spanish-speaking population, and still leaning in the direction of Old Mexico.

Now, at high noon in early August, the California Trail was a replica of hell. The slimy waters of the Humboldt steamed; the rocks steamed; heat waves shimmered across the vast expanses of sagebrush. Overhead, buzzards wheeled and drifted down toward the rotting carcasses of stock scattered along the trail.

Mark Caldwell wrinkled his nose at the smell of dead flesh. The girls in Bigelow's wagons had tied handkerchiefs around their noses and mouths, and some of them looked sick. For days the wagon train had been passing dead oxen, dead horses and mules, killed by the foul water which was heavily impregnated with alkali. Some animals could get by, but others did not seem able to absorb so much alkali into their systems. Sickened, they dropped in the traces, and cursing drivers with parched throats cut them loose where they lay, and drove their wagons around them. Mark Caldwell had seen hundreds of carcasses in the past few days, and there were new cut-off's where earlier wagons had left the trail to get away from the foul smell.

A little past noon, Henry Breck, wagonmaster, pulled the fifteen Conestogas off the trail for the mid-day stop. There was little grass on the uplands, the animals of previous outfits having cropped what there was so close that following wagon trains had to subsist on practically nothing.

Caldwell, listening to the bellowing of dry, hungry cattle, watched Matthew Sammis unyoke his six speckled steers with the painted horn tips. Sammis was a dried-up little man with unblinking blue eyes which peered out of his wrinkled, parched face like the eyes of a monkey. There were rumors in this outfit to the effect that Sammis had departed from the faith of the Latter Day Saints in order to

make this trek to the gold fields. Mark had noticed that he kept much to himself.

Sammis's speckled oxen broke for the river as soon as they were released, and the little man walked behind them, trailing his blacksnake whip. He slid down a sand embankment and disappeared among the willows along the bank.

Lieutenant Caldwell moistened his thin lips and dismounted. He borrowed a pail from one of the emigrants and followed Sammis, leading the buckskin.

HE HAD strained some of the scummy water through his handkerchief into the pail and was letting his horse drink when he saw Sammis standing less than a dozen feet away. He was idly flicking his whip, watching Mark from under the brim of his wide Mormon hat.

Caldwell said, "Hot as all hell."

The ex-Mormon nodded. His six speckled oxen were knee deep in the water, lapping it up feverishly.

"The paint marks so you won't get them mixed up?" Mark asked, nodding toward the red-tipped horns of the nearest animal.

Sammis snapped off a willow twig with his whip, said carefully, "That might be, mister."

Caldwell knew it wasn't. Sammis's cattle, being speckled, were identifiable enough. Yet the horn tips had been meticulously painted.

"Been over the trail before?" he asked casually, and knew he'd made a mistake, that Sammis didn't like questions.

The little man said succinctly, "No."

Lifting his canteen, Caldwell drained the contents, then refilled the container with strained water. He was bending down when he saw a shadowy form slip through the willows on the other shore of the river, the movement almost imperceptible. He saw the willows quivering where the Indian he'd caught sight of for a moment had been crouching. Then all was quiet.

Straightening, his hand on his Army Colt, he looked at Matthew Sammis. The little man had his back turned and was walking west along the river. Caldwell was positive the man had not seen any Indian, or Indians across the river, still the Diggers had not opened up on the Sammis cattle, and in the water they had been fair targets.

That fact brought a thoughtful frown to Mark Caldwell's face, for he was well aware that time and again Indians had hidden in the willows across the river and sent their shafts into the thin flanks of oxen and horses drinking. Proof of that had been in evidence at every stop the train had made, when they had seen stock sprawled on the banks or in the water, with arrows protruding from their bloated bodies.

Sammis turned around and came back up along the river, still flicking his whip, his big gun hanging on his hip. Studying the man's parched, skeletonlike face more closely, Caldwell realized that here might well be a dangerous man.

Abruptly there came a sudden shout downriver, and a gun banged. A man was shouting at the top of his voice:

"Indians!"

Caldwell scrambled through the willows, running in the direction of the sound. Other men were racing for the cutbanks, below which the unharnessed animals were drinking in the river, then rifles started to crack along the river. Clearly, Mark heard the death scream of an Indian, a high-pitched whoop.

He arrived on the scene just in time to see brown forms slipping through the willows on the other side of the river. Three oxen lay in the knee-deep water, struggling to get up, arrows haft-deep in their ribs, the water reddening around them.

One Indian lay on the opposite bank on the river which had widened to about twenty yards at this point. He lay with arms and legs sprawled, his face in the water.

Bull Bigelow, whose oxen were in the Humboldt, was roaring like a wounded moose, as he waded across the river, six-gun in hand. He was hatless, his blue flannel shirt open at the waist, revealing his powerful hairy chest. He was not a tall man, but tremendously wide, with a thick

powerful trunk and tremendous legs.

COMING out on the other bank, Bigelow pointed his gun at the Indian lying on the sand and emptied it. The body jumped every time one of the heavy-caliber slugs smashed into it. The gun empty, Bull Bigelow aimed a vicious kick at the dead Digger's head.

He came back across the river then, still swearing, wide face a dull red, small yellowish eyes flaming with rage. The Indian band had disappeared, scurrying out of sight among the sand hills and, knowing the jaded condition of the wagon train horses, Henry Breck made no attempt to go after them.

Breck, a mild, gray-haired man who had been a Vermont farmer, tried to console Bigelow for his loss, but the gambling house owner did not even look at him as he scrambled up the cutbank toward his wagons.

As Caldwell came up, Breck shook his head grimly.

"Any other stock lost?" Mark wanted to know.

The wagonmaster scowled. "We frightened them off before they could do much damage," he said, "but they've been getting a few head practically every time we stop." The Vermonter looked around to see that there were no women near. "That's what happened to the McNeil party last month. The raiders know you can't go far without oxen, so they cut off the oxen until there are just enough left to haul the wagons. Our animals are in pretty bad shape already from overwork, and we have to make extra stops to rest them. The Indians, knowing that, keep watching from the brush, and when they see we're hardly moving they'll come in for the kill."

"Let's hope it won't come to that," Mark Caldwell said.

"It'll be another two weeks before we reach the Humboldt Sink," Breck muttered. "But I'm hoping for the best."

He walked back toward his wagons where his wife and two small children were waiting for him, the children huddled around the mother. A girl of about nineteen stood nearby, a rifle in her hands, and Caldwell smiled, looking at her. The gun looked tremendously big, and she was a small girl.

Her hair was black beneath her sunbonnet. She had dark eyes, and she was looking toward the river, unafraid. Caldwell had met her when the wagon train had pulled into Fort Andrew Jackson. Her name was Nancy Blair, and she was Breck's niece, accompanying the family to California. Caldwell had chatted with her several times when the train had stopped at night, and once he'd seen one of Bull Bigelow's girls glaring at them savagely.

Now Nancy Blair asked quietly, "Have they gone, Uncle Henry?"

"This time." Henry Breck smiled. "Reckon you can put the gun away, Nancy."

Caldwell also smiled at the slip of a girl. "Would you have shot at them?" he asked jokingly.

Nancy relaxed then, and she smiled, revealing white teeth.

"I—I don't know, Mr. Caldwell," she admitted.

CHAPTER II

Falsely Accused

MARK CALDWELL saw Matthew Sammis coming up from the river with his speckled oxen. Sammis had to pass the Breck wagon to reach his own Conestoga. He looked at Mark and Nancy, standing near the wagon tongue, then looked at Breck's heavily-loaded vehicle. There was no expression on his thin face, but Mark did not like the peculiar look which flickered into his lidded eyes.

"I'm afraid of that man," Nancy Blair murmured. "I don't know quite why."

"Because he's been a Mormon"—Mark grinned—"and has had a lot of wives?"

"It's something else," the girl said quietly. "He just does not seem to be one of us."

"He does keep to himself," Mark admitted, and again came the thought of Sammis's speckled cattle which had miraculously been spared while Bull Bigelow's stock had been slaughtered in the river.

Henry Breck came around from the rear of his wagon, looked beyond Mark, and said steadily:

"There's trouble brewing, Caldwell."

Mark heard the noise then, and saw Bull Bigelow striding up along the string of wagons, powerful hamlike hands swinging at his sides. He was hatless despite the fierce sun, and his shaggy mane of reddish hair stood up straight in tufts, bouncing as he walked.

Half a dozen of Bigelow's painted ladies hurried along behind him, giggling in anticipation, their faces sunburned, lips cracked from the heat, but still hideously painted.

"He's coming toward you," Breck whispered. "You cross him any way, Caldwell?"

"No," Mark said steadily, watching the shaggy Bigelow who was mumbling oaths as he came on, rubbing his big hands together.

People all along the line hopped from wagons, or left their stock, to follow him. Mark Caldwell stepped aside a little to give Bigelow room to pass, if he intended to.

Henry Breck said, "He's in an ugly temper because of those oxen. He's the kind has to take it out of something or somebody."

Caldwell nodded. He'd seen that when Bigelow had come up from the river. A fire had been raging in the brutal man that would not be quenched until he'd spilled blood or hammered somebody's face in.

Bigelow pulled up in front of Caldwell, less than three feet away. He demanded tersely:

"What in hell you mean, chasing after my women?" And he rushed on before Mark could frame a reply to such an astounding question, "You know damn well that when we left Fort Jackson I told every man in this outfit to stay away from my wagons!"

"That's right," Caldwell said coolly, sizing up the tough he might have to fight.

Caldwell was taller than Bigelow, solid in the shoulders, but not as heavy. At West Point, before leaving for Mexico with Scott's army, he had learned how to use his fists. In the Army of Occupation in Mexico City when the fighting was over, he'd met a tough sergeant who had done bare-fist fighting in England. He'd learned many things from that sergeant.

Bull Bigelow stared at him as the crowd formed a circle around the two men, a circle less than fifteen feet in diameter, with Bigelow's women up in front. Caldwell recognized one of them as a woman who had been sitting in the back of the rear wagon, doing her outrageous best to attract his attention, but he'd coldly ignored her.

He knew the answer to this now. She was the woman scorned, she wanted to make him pay, so she'd gone to Bigelow accusing him, Caldwell, of making advances, to get the Bull to batter him up.

"Damn you!" Bigelow flared. "I'll learn you to stay clear of my wagons!"

Breck put in quickly, "Bigelow, we can't have fighting on this trip. We'll have enough trouble with the Diggers before we reach the mountains."

THE wagonmaster had started forward to intervene, but Bigelow thrust him aside with a sweep of his powerful right arm.

Bigelow said to Caldwell, without looking at Breck, "You admit you were running after one of my girls?"

"That's a lie!" Caldwell said coolly. "And you're a big-mouthed liar!"

That brought a concerted gasp from the onlookers.

Bull Bigelow said softly, "Lil!"

A slatternly girl with bleached blonde hair came forward, smiling tauntingly.

Bigelow asked her, "You hear what this feller says, Lil? He's calling you a liar. Now I'm going to make him crawl to your feet and apologize for that."

Nancy Blair called angrily from the out-

skirts of the crowd, "That's a terrible lie! Mr. Caldwell has never been near your wagons!"

Bull Bigelow grinned. "So you got your own women fighting for you, eh, Caldwell?"

Mark slashed him across the face with his open hand, leaving a red mark. The slap could be heard from one end of the line of wagons to the other. Bigelow fell back in astonishment, mouth open. A guttural sound issued from his throat as he tore in then, big hands reaching for Caldwell.

Instead of leaping back or dodging, though, Mark Caldwell stepped in, swinging his right, aiming straight at Bigelow's left eye. The blow landed cleanly, a sickening spat. Bigelow would not see out of that eye for some time to come.

The blow stopped the squat gambler in his tracks. He stood there, blinking, blood beginning to trickle from the eye as it swelled up. His mouth had been jerked open by the force of the blow. Leaping in again, Caldwell smashed his left into that open mouth, loosening teeth, battering the man's lips.

In the rear of the crowd a woman screamed, then Bigelow was coming in again, almost blinded in one eye, blood spurting from his mouth. But the devil was in his good right eye.

Caldwell retreated this time, dancing coolly away, fists balled, watching his chance to hit at his assailant's other eye. As he retreated, one of Bigelow's gamblers, a sallow-faced, thin-lipped man on the inside of the circle, kicked a water pail toward him. Caldwell's heel struck the pail, and as he tumbled backward he heard Bigelow's deep-chested roar as the man hurled himself forward in a flying dive, seeking to pin his man to the ground.

Knowing what would happen if Bigelow should succeed, Caldwell twisted desperately as he struck the ground. He rolled toward the right, his body eluding Bigelow's outstretched left hand by inches.

Bull Bigelow struck the sunbaked ground with a thud as Mark Caldwell scrambled to his feet. He saw Henry Breck standing with his sixgun trained on Bigelow's gambler.

Breck said firmly, "If it's got to be a fight, it'll be a fair one, tinhorn."

Bigelow got up more slowly this time, his bloody mouth smeared wtih dirt, his left eye completely closed now. He squinted out of the right as he advanced like a gorilla, knees slightly bent, tremendous arms hanging.

Caldwell stepped back carelessly, then came in with a sudden rush, lashing out with his left for Bigelow's good eye. Again the blow went home, and Bigelow let out a pained yell as the flesh around the eye was ripped open.

He staggered back, clutching at the eye with his hands. Then Mark Caldwell went after him, hammering with both hands, cutting up Bigelow's face unmercifully, and not liking to do it. He had his man blinded now, though, and it was an act of mercy to finish him as shortly as possible.

BULL BIGELOW staggered around the circle, trying to steady himself for another rush. He managed to hold Caldwell off for a moment, and rushed toward a spot five feet to his opponent's left, plunging through the crowd, knocking down four spectators.

When he got up, Caldwell was on top of him again, knowing that the man would never quit while he was on his feet. He hit the squat gambling man in the stomach time after time, weakening him, making his powerful legs wobble. Bigelow tried to catch him and draw him in close for a bear embrace, but Mark kept his distance, watching the strength drain from his antagonist.

Bull Bigelow lumbered blindly around the circle like a huge bear playing blind man's buff. He swung at the air with his big fists; he lunged suddenly forward, fingers hooked like talons, as Caldwell continued to hammer him. He dropped to his knees once, but struggled up and stood there, his face a bloody mask, hands at his sides. Caldwell knocked him against Breck's wagon where he stood gripping a wheel with both hands, holding himself

up, refusing to let go.

Caldwell came around from the side of the wagon, looked into his face, and then turned away, knowing that it was all over now. Men were shouting, pounding his back jubilantly. Bigelow had been a bully from the start of this trip, trying to goad men into fighting, insulting them when they refused his challenges.

Henry Breck said quietly, "I was mighty glad to see that, Caldwell."

At a fresh commotion in the crowd, Caldwell swung, thinking that Bigelow was coming around, looking for more fight. Instead he saw Nancy Blair with a pail of scummy green Humboldt river water, standing a few feet away from the slattern with the bleached blonde hair. And as he looked, the small dark-haired Nancy lifted the pail and threw the contents full into the face of the other girl. There was a roar of shouting and laughter as Nancy Blair scooped up another pail of water and went after the dizzy blonde, tossing the water at her a little at a time, driving her along the line of wagons.

The dance hall girl ran like all possessed, holding up her skirts, screaming as each dash of water doused her bleached curls until they hung in strings. The emigrants howled with glee as Nancy came back with the empty pail, her face white. But it reddened when she looked at the sober-faced Mark Caldwell. His quiet gray eyes met hers for an instant, then she looked away.

"It was nice of you," Mark said gravely, "fighting my battle."

Nancy said grimly, "Well, I know you're not the kind of man who chases women like that!"

Two of Bull Bigelow's men were leading the blinded and beaten fighter away from the wagon. Bigelow walked woodenly, head hanging, blood trickling down his chin to his bared chest.

Henry Breck said, "You've made a bad enemy there, Caldwell. He'll hit at you again before this trip is over."

"I'll watch him," Caldwell promised and looking at Nancy Blair he knew he could have added that he'd also made a friend.

In the heat they ate a cheerless mid-day meal, then the oxen were hooked in again and the train moved forward, along the course of the river, cutting overland here and there when the Humboldt twisted snakelike across the desert and among the barren, brown hills. But always he met the river again, the life-line across the desert.

AT FIVE o'clock in the evening Wagonmaster Breck called a halt. Twice they'd been forced to stop when oxen dropped in the traces and had to be cut out. Some of the wagons were moving now with only four animals in the traces instead of six. Wagons had been lightened by discarding various articles—rocking chairs, trunks, family heirlooms. All along the trail such cherished treasures were strewn, tossed aside by previous emigrant outfits who had experienced this same trouble.

Riding beside Mark Caldwell, Breck said quietly, "We'll have to call a meeting tonight and decide upon something, Mark. We're still heading north, following the big bend they've been talking about. I've heard there's a cut-off if we leave the river and head due west. We can pick up the Humboldt again when it turns south and west."

"What about water?" Caldwell asked.

Breck shook his head grimly. "I'd rather risk one bad dry drive than have to go on at this pace. Mr. Sammis—and I've an idea he knows what he's talking about—he says the cut-off is a lot safer because the Indians stay near the river, watching for wagon trains. We won't run across any of them out on the desert."

"Sammis said that?" Mark repeated softly.

"He's been over the trail before," Breck said. "He tells me we can hit a good-sized water hole halfway across the desert, and that should be enough to keep us going until we hit the Humboldt again. We might only have to make a one-night drive to get there."

"Why haven't other outfits taken this cut-off?" Mark wanted to know. "They've

been suffering as much as we have."

Breck shrugged. "Sammis says likely there was no one with those outfits who knew the cut-off. But he knows it. Like I said, he's been over it twice. We save more than a hundred miles by leaving the river, and considering the condition of our stock, I think we should risk it."

That night Mark Caldwell sat on a wagon tongue just outside the circle of light, listening while Henry Breck presented the plan. Twenty-five men were gathered in the circle around the fire, the light playing upon their brown, seamed faces. Bull Bigelow was not present.

CHAPTER III

Ordeal by Sun

BRECK had his say, then asked Sammis to say a few words. The little ex-Mormon spoke simply, giving the listening emigrants a brief sketch of the cut-off and telling of the water-hole.

"You damned sure that water-hole will be filled?" one man asked anxiously. "I got four kids in my wagon."

"There'll be water," Sammis said, without looking at him.

Mark Caldwell could see the small man's eyes under the brim of his hat. They seemed to be glittering in the firelight. Caldwell got off the wagon tongue and strolled forward then.

He said quietly, "How can you be so sure, Mr. Sammis?"

Matthew Sammis stared at him. He was holding his ever-present blacksnake whip in his hands, caressing it gently. He said, "I spoke to an Indian in Fort Jackson. He'd been there, and I've never known the springs to dry up."

"We'll call for a vote," Henry Breck said. "How many in the company want to try the cut-off?"

Every hand went up, including that of the man with the four children. Quietly Caldwell moved back out of the firelight again. He was standing near Breck's wagon, smoking his pipe, when he heard movement beside him and looked down into Nancy Blair's face.

Nancy said softly, "You're afraid of this cut-off, aren't you?"

He grimaced. "A wagon train lives on water," he said. "Every outfit ahead of us has stayed with the river, no matter how far off the course it took them. The river is life."

"And without it we might die," Nancy Blair murmured.

Caldwell saw Matthew Sammis slipping back out of the crowd as he said slowly, "And outfits have died following it also. There's more to be feared along the Humboldt than lack of good water."

"Red Indians," the girl said.

"And red white men," Caldwell added. . . .

The wagon train left the river at seven o'clock the next morning, with the heat already coming to the desert. Sammis's red-tipped oxen led the way now, and Matthew Sammis himself rode up front with Henry Breck, heading the train straight for the barren slopes to the west. Water barrels, water cans, kegs, and canteens had been filled with water. Men and oxen had taken long drinks from the river before leaving it, but as they moved away Caldwell saw some men glancing back, faces grim.

Bull Bigelow rode past him, his face puffed and battered. He peered at Mark through slitted eyes, and said slowly:

"My friend, you'll never reach California."

"I'll try," Caldwell said, his eyes thoughtfully on Bigelow's broad back as the gambling man rode up toward the head of the column.

They had made fourteen miles by two o'clock in the afternoon, but some of the oxen were already beginning to stumble. They were crossing salt flats here where the big wagon wheels sank into the soft earth six inches. Men, women and children got out of the wagons to lighten the loads. Bull Bigelow's painted troupe staggered behind their wagons in the pitiless

heat, some of the women crying. Others cursed the desert, the sun, and even Bull Bigelow for bringing them out here.

Henry Breck called a halt at two o'clock when the heat became almost unbearable. There was no shade, but canvas awnings were quickly rigged up, and men crawled under wagons, lying on the hot sand, panting from their exertions.

The oxen bellowed pitifully, sniffing for water, somehow realizing that they would find none. Mark Caldwell gave his buckskin some water from one of the barrels. He wiped the animal's nostrils with a moist rag.

Breck came up, a dead look in his eyes. He said, "We'll go on again as soon as the sun sets. Sammis says if we keep moving all night we should reach the water-hole by morning, and that'll put us halfway back to the Humboldt."

CALDWELL'S heart gripped as he listened to the whimpering of the children. He even pitied Bigelow's women sprawled under their wagons. Mothers were placing moist rags over the faces of the smallest children and the babies. A man came by, mumbling, a strange look in his face. He had started walking straight out across the desert when another emigrant grabbed him and yelled for help.

"Sun got that one," Breck observed.

Four men had to hold the sun-struck man down while water was poured over his face. He sat up then, shaking his head as if he'd just come out of a bad dream.

When the sun was a red ball in the western sky, the wagons began to roll again. The heat still lay in the sand, but with the glare of the sun gone, it was much easier traveling.

They had to give the oxen water before starting out, and had to use some for the evening meal. With horses, cattle, men, women and children all requiring some water, the barrels and kegs were nearly empty when they headed out again.

Caldwell watched the moon come up, bathing this barren land with its silvery light, etching the black basalt rocks, the barren cliffs and slopes. The air was still hot even when the stars were glittering in the black vault of the sky, but after awhile a certain coolness came to the earth.

They moved due west, a straggling line of wagons, all semblance of order gone, and the only thought in the minds of all to reach the water-hole before the terrible sun came up again.

"We'll camp at the water-hole till evening," Breck had explained. "The animals and the men will need the rest. We can travel again tomorrow night and reach the Humboldt before dawn."

The buckskin was still in pretty good shape, and Caldwell loaded two of the smaller children on its back about midnight, tying them on when they began to fall asleep. Other men with horses had done the same. The women plodded beside the men, except for Bigelow's group who walked by themselves, silent, sullen, and humbled now by the immensity of this desert.

At two o'clock in the morning, they hit a stretch of hard sand and the going was somewhat easier for two hours, but after that they rolled into softer sand again and the staggering oxen could hardly get the big Conestogas through.

Time and time again Matthew Sammis had to hold up his six speckled oxen with the red-tipped horns until the stragglers came up. The big animals were in much better shape than most of the other oxen, and Mark Caldwell noticed that Sammis had emptied his water barrels where other men had held on to small quantities of the precious water until they were positive the water-hole up ahead would be filled.

"He knows there's water up ahead," Mark told Nancy Blair, as he walked beside the girl. "He's too shrewd to use up all his water if he isn't positive he'd find more before we reached the Humboldt again."

"We'll never reach the Humboldt," Nancy said quietly, "if that water-hole has dried up."

Mark didn't like to think about that. He watched a boy of ten marching solemnly along with a smaller sister at his

side. Every once in a while when the sister would start to wobble, the boy would hold her up.

Toward morning Sammis turned more toward the south with his lead wagon, heading in the direction of a series of low hills.

Breck came up to Caldwell and said, "We should be at the water-hole in another hour."

The sun was just coming up over the desert to the east when they dipped down between two sand hills sparsely covered with sagebrush and low juniper. Mathew Sammis turned his oxen down a mild slope, and disappeared.

Men back along the line started to shout in anticipation and run forward. Caldwell followed them. Then Sammis was coming out of the clump again, his seamed face still expressionless.

He said to Breck, "She's dried up."

WITHOUT a word the wagonmaster stumbled past him, other men following, and Mark Caldwell stood with them as they looked down into the hole. It was about fifteen feet across, and two feet deep, a shallow depression in the earth, with dry mud at the bottom. Undoubtedly water had seeped up here at times from underground springs, but there had been no water in the hole for some time.

Men began to curse, and some wept.

Breck said grimly. "Some of you men get picks and dig down a bit. She might fill up again."

Caldwell shook his head, looking at the wagonmaster. Breck's face was pale, sickly. Once he closed his eyes and rubbed a hand across his brow.

"We can't go on," he whispered. "The oxen can't make it."

It was at that moment that Caldwell caught sight of Sammis, watching them intently. As he started forward a man drew his gun, cursing him bitterly. Henry Breck caught the emigrant's hand and wrenched the gun away from him.

"She's dried up," Sammis said. "First time I ever knew that to happen."

"How far is the Humboldt?" Breck asked him quietly.

"Maybe another thirty miles," Sammis said.

Strangely Caldwell thought he saw a glitter of triumph in the small man's venomous eyes—and wondered.

Breck looked around at the crowd of men standing silently, stupidly around this dried hole and said, "We have no choice, except to stay here till night, use up every last drop of water we have, then make a quick dash for the Humboldt. There's no use traveling now. The cattle wouldn't last another two hours under this sun."

"My barrels are already empty," a man said hoarsely. "What in hell can I do about that, Breck? I depended upon this man."

"We ought to hang him up till his damned tongue sticks out a foot," another man grated.

Matthew Sammis backed away, smiling a little now, his hand near his gun.

Breck said wearily, "Hold it, boys. Rig your awnings and everybody get in from under the sun. We'll need all our strength by tonight."

The crowd around the water-hole broke up, still muttering threats, watching Sammis grimly as he walked toward his wagon.

Breck said to Caldwell, "What do you make of it?"

"I don't like it," Mark admitted. "That man was positive there was water here somewhere, or he wouldn't have used up all that he had. And he still doesn't seem to be worried."

"What does that mean?" Breck asked curiously.

"We'll find out"—Mark scowled—"before this day is over. I'd set guards up on those hills just in case there should be Diggers in the vicinity."

"Won't do any harm," Breck nodded.

Tarpaulins were being rigged up from the wagons. Weary men and women stumbled into the humid shade and lay on the sand, panting. A searching party went out to see if there were any other

water-holes to be found. Breck set a guard on the slopes on either side of the wagons.

The hot sun swept up into the bright blue sky, and the heat penetrated the tarpaulins. Breck had the little remaining water gathered together in the center of the camp, and it was doled out by spoonfuls. There was not enough to give any to the oxen, and the animals were bellowing as they stumbled around in the sagebrush, making no attempt to look for forage.

Once Mark Caldwell walked by Bull Bigelow's wagons, and he saw the squat man sitting in the shade of a tarpaulin, watching him intently, his face now purple as the wounds began to heal a little. Two of Bigelow's men sat nearby, and Mark felt their glances also as he went by. One of them, a narrow-faced man with a harelip, was sharpening a wicked-looking hunting knife.

THE search party came back in two hours, faces glum, their lips cracked from the heat. They had found nothing.

"We have no choice now," Henry Breck said quietly, "but to head for the Humboldt and keep going until we get there. If we stop again it means death for all of us."

He gave orders for the men to get as much sleep as possible to build up their strength.

Caldwell smiled ruefully. Sleep was impossible for men with parched, swollen throats, with children crying fitfully, and with the bellowing of the half-crazed cattle.

The sun began the long descent to the western slopes, and men crawled thankfully from their shelters as the heat diminished. They began to move about a little, loading the wagons again, throwing away more to lighten the loads.

They were gathering in the center of the camp for their last dole of water when Caldwell noticed that Matthew Sammis was not present. He looked quickly in the direction of the ex-Mormon's wagon, and caught a glimpse of Sammis disappearing in the direction of the dried-up water-hole. It was almost dusk, but he saw the man clearly.

Grimly, Caldwell slipped out of the crowd, walked around the wagons, and headed after Sammis. The man had already gone through the cut in the sand hills when Mark came up behind him. Sammis was walking fast now, half-running over a slope.

Carefully, Mark Caldwell circled him, plunging through the soft sand to Sammis's right side. The little man was still running, but once when he stopped suddenly and turned around to look over his back-trail, Caldwell just had time to drop on his face and waited, glad now that he had not followed Sammis directly. The ex-Mormon did not look in his direction.

CHAPTER IV

Mission Completed

SAMMIS walked and ran rapidly for more than a mile, heading for a tall, tower-shaped rock in the distance. This rock shot up from the desert floor to a height of more than sixty feet, and was flat on the top.

Mark drew in closer as Sammis neared the rock, then he thought he saw movement at its base. Drawing his gun, he moved more slowly, a hot anger beginning to surge through him as he thought of the helpless men, women and children back on the desert. He was positive now that he knew the reason for the red-tipped horns of Sammis's cattle.

He saw Sammis disappear near the rock tower, and began to crawl forward slowly, coming in from the left side, heading for a slight rise less than fifty yards from the base of the rock. Reaching this rise, he could look down into a hollow at the base of the rock.

He saw little cook fires, red ashes glowing in the dusk, and made out the bronze figures of half-naked Indians—

Diggers, wild, half-animal creatures, the most primitive Indians on the continent. Mark had heard much about them on his way out to Fort Jackson, but he'd never seen a Digger except when one had been on the run through the brush, and then only a fleeting glimpse.

Someone down there tossed some dry brush onto one of the fires and as the flames leaped up he got a clearer picture of what Diggers looked like. They were lean, vicious-faced, with unkempt black hair dangling about their faces, and naked except for loin cloths. They moved around the fires restlessly, as if anxious to be on the move. Many of them carried guns, but more were armed with bows and arrows.

Caldwell had counted at least fifty of them when he saw the white men—a half dozen of them gathered around Sammis. He could recognize the type, even at the distance—lawless Border cutthroats, preying on California Trail emigrants, murdering, stealing, showing less mercy than the merciless Diggers themselves.

These were men who had drifted back from the California gold fields, the dregs of society, and they were getting rich in the way they preferred now—pillaging the smaller outfits, running the stock south to the Mormon settlements along the eastern fringe of the Sierras, selling their plunder to unscrupulous traders along the Humboldt, traders who immediately sold it at great profit to new caravans short on supplies.

Slowly Mark Caldwell began to draw back from the slope. He'd fulfilled his mission, for with his own eyes he had seen that white men *were* behind the Digger raids along the trail. The difficulty now was to get word back to Fort Jackson so that a Dragoon patrol could be sent out to track down these devils until they were destroyed.

What was of more immediate importance was his certainty that the party of Indians and whites at the base of this rock tower now were completing plans for a raid on Breck's wagon train tonight!

No question but that Matthew Sammis was a member of this band that did their skulking along the Humboldt. In all probability he was the leader. And he had deliberately drawn the train out into the desert so that they could be massacred without interference from any other outfit that might come up from behind. The red horn tips were a sign to the Diggers not to kill Sammis's oxen!

Caldwell slipped away, and when he was a half-mile away from the rock tower, he got to his feet and began to run. The moon was coming up again, beginning to flood the land. He could hear the oxen bellowing in the distance.

AND then all of a sudden three figures rose up out of the ground in front of him! And the man in the center was the squat, powerful Bull Bigelow.

"Hold up!" Bigelow chuckled. Caldwell saw the glint of gun metal in the man's hand.

Mark snapped, "You damned fools, there are half a hundred Indians back there in the desert, ready to jump us in ten minutes!"

"They ain't jumping you." Bigelow grinned. "I'm seeing you in—"

Mark Caldwell ripped the Army Colt from his holster, dropping to his knees. A slug from the gun of one of Bigelow's companions went through the crown of his hat. He shot the man down, then quickly swung his gun on Bigelow.

The heavy-set gambler had backed away a few steps. He fired, and his first shot smashed through Caldwell's shoulder, knocking him backward. And this saved his life. For the third man had opened up from the other side, two slugs whistling past the spot where Caldwell's chest had been an instant before.

Rolling, he fired once at Bigelow. The man stumbled, and his gun drooped in his hand. Mark sent another shot at him before whirling on the third man. Mark had dropped flat on the ground now, making a poor target for the two men in front of him. His second shot had caught Bigelow in the neck and he was weaving crazi-

ly, clutching at his neck before he went down with a crash.

Another slug whined by inches away from Mark's face as he leaned on one elbow, steadying his gun. The bullet kicked up dirt into his face, but he got off his shot.

The slug knocked off the hat of the man with the harelip. He fell backward, his face turned up to the moon, a hole in his forehead where Caldwell's bullet had entered.

Staggering to his feet, clutching his bad shoulder, Mark Caldwell began to run toward the encampment. Those shots would have been heard by both Sammis and Henry Breck, and Sammis might take them to mean that the emigrants were warned. He would come on with a quick drive, knowing their weakened condition.

Men were running out of the encampment, clutching guns as Mark Caldwell came in sight.

He yelled frantically, "Get back—Indians!"

He'd had to run nearly a quarter of a mile after leaving Bigelow's ambuscade, and with the bad shoulder weakening him, had not been able to go too fast. He could hear horsemen behind him now, and the patter of moccasins. An arrow whizzed past, and another went through his coat.

He staggered up the hill and rolled down the other side in among the wagons. He could hear Breck's voice, commanding the defense, and he'd already seen the line of grim-faced settlers along the brow of the hill.

As the clash came the shrill screams of the Diggers mingled with the heavier bang of emigrants' rifles. White renegades on horseback circled the camp, seeking to come in on the other side.

Caldwell was trying to reload his gun when Nancy Blair dropped down beside him, snatching the gun from his hands. His left hand and arm were almost useless, because of the bullet-hole in his shoulder. He grinned when she shoved

[*Turn page*]

DESERT DUST

Way out West a hoodlum is a well-respected individual who has an important job when the cowboys ride the range. He follows the chuckwagon, carries the cowboys' bedrolls in a vehicle of his own, fetches water for the cook and chops wood for the campfires. Nobody seems to know how the name originated, but it certainly is different from the Eastern definition.

●

Camayura Indians never speak to their mothers-in-law except through a third person.

●

Epitaph on a tombstone near Cripple Creek, Colo.: "He Called Bill Smith A Liar."

●

The beautiful black baskets that the Indians hand weave and stain out West these days derive their color from the most lethal source possible: The juice of the poison oak. They also use it, incidentally, to burn warts from the hands. No modern physician recommends this remedy, however.

●

Back in 1855 the U. S. Army tried using camel trains to cross the deserts of New Mexico. The idea was eventually given up because the terrain was generally too rocky and the humped animal too ornery.

●

The Blackfoot Indians painted their faces every morning to correspond with their mood, according to whether they were happy or sad, warlike or peaceful.

●

The world's largest mineral hot spring is out west, at Hot Springs State Park in central Wyoming. The flow of Big Horn spring is greater than the combined output of all other similar springs in the United States. Thirteen thousand gallons of mineral water, at a temperature of 135 degrees, flow every minute of the day and night, year in and year out.

By HAROLD HELFER

the big gun back into his hand.

As he climbed the slope again, shadowy forms were drifting through the sagebrush out on the desert, running and dropping behind bushes, sending arrows toward the hill. The attackers split into two waves, coming up on either side of the slope, firing, shrieking as they ran.

CALDWELL knocked one down at a distance of thirty yards, and went on firing. The heavier rifles of the emigrants were taking a deadly toll, but the defenders had to leave the hill now and concentrate on the other side. Breck had had the wagons drawn up in a line with the oxen being yoked when the attack came, so his wagons were strung out between the two low hills. Diggers were running toward one of the end wagons. The women and children were in a group near the center of the line. Then Matthew Sammis and his half dozen renegades burst in from the other end of the line, riding hard.

"Over here!" Henry Breck roared. A score of men raced down the hill toward the wagons.

Caldwell scrambled over a wagon tongue, dropped to his knees and fired steadily at the advancing riders with his Colt gun. The Diggers were coming behind the whites, screaming like devils.

Coolly, Mark Caldwell knocked one man from his horse. Another shot by at a gallop, firing straight at him as he came. The bullet smashed into the wheel of the wagon close to Mark's head. A rifle cracked off to his left, and a rider threw up his hands and fell backward from his horse's back.

The Diggers were sprinting among the wagons now, heading for the women and children. Mark heard Breck's warning shout and whirled around. Nancy Blair, standing straight and defiant, was aiming the rifle in her hands at a savage buck who was charging her.

The gun roared, and the Digger, knocked backward by the impact, fell with a wild scream, clutching at his naked chest. Another buck was leaping over a wagon tongue to come in from Caldwell's right when Mark smashed his gun-barrel into the Indian's hideous face. He fired point-blank at another one, who was scrambling under a wagon between the wheels.

A wagon, down at the end of the line had already been fired, and the red light

illuminated the scene. Settlers, squatting beneath their wagons were firing at the shadowy figures bobbing in the firelight.

Mark Caldwell spotted Matthew Sammis then—up near the burning wagon. Sammis, directing the attack, had dismounted and was yelling for his men to get up on the side of the hill where they could fire down onto the trapped caravan.

A man with an arrow through his chest was sagging near one of the wagons, his gun drooping from his hand, Mark snatched the gun, useless to him now, and headed toward Sammis. He heard Henry Breck calling:

"Caldwell—Caldwell!"

He kept going, the gun tight in his fist. He passed Bull Bigelow's helpless troupe of women huddled beneath his wagons, screaming in terror, and wondered vaguely as he ran what they would do now that Bigelow was dead.

Already many of Sammis's band were getting out of the firelight up on the slope where they could fire down. Sammis himself was running through the sage when Caldwell came up behind him.

"All right, Sammis!"

They were less than fifteen feet apart when the little ex-Mormon spun around, face twisted in a sneer of hate. Caldwell sent one shot at him, positive that it would be the last shot of the fight. He missed cleanly. He saw the grin of triumph on

Sammis's lean face, and tried to get off another shot quickly, but the cylinder was empty.

Sammis's gun was lined on his chest, steady, and the traitor was taking his time so that he would not miss. Then Mark heard the sharp report of a rifle off to his left. Sammis cringed as the slug struck him in the side. He wobbled a little, tried to straighten himself, and bring the gun up again, but lacked the strength. He fell forward, his face disappearing into a clump of sagebrush.

Whirling Caldwell saw Breck standing with his rifle ready for another shot.

Mark yelled, "We've got to get them off that hill!"

The fighting Vermonter nodded. He shouted for the men to follow him, and started up the slope. Caldwell ran with him, picking up Sammis's gun as he passed.

The settlers broke away from the wagons and went up the slope at a fast charge, firing as they went. The stupefied Indians made a feeble attempt to hold them off, aided by the two white renegades remaining with them, but when one of the whites fell with a bullet through his stomach, the Indians broke and fled like jackrabbits through the sage.

Mark Caldwell had a sudden thought.

"Take one of them alive!" he shouted to Breck. "They know every water-hole in this country, and there must be water here. I saw them drinking at their camp!"

One wounded Digger was trying to crawl away through the brush, dragging an injured leg. Breck directed several of the emigrants to capture him and bring him in.

The fight was over now, with the Diggers running in all directions over the sand hills. The wounded Indian was brought back to camp, believing, of course, that the emigrants intended to torture him to death. When he understood, through signs, that they wanted to know where they could get water, and that he would be released if he led them to it, he pointed toward the south.

[*Turn page*]

"Empty three wagons," Henry Breck ordered, "Fill them with water barrels and go with him."

Mark Caldwell lay on the ground while his wound was being tended to. Four other emigrants had been wounded, and one was dead.

"If we get these water barrels filled again," Breck said quietly, "we can start some time after midnight and make it to the Humboldt."

"Then I'll be heading back," Caldwell said, "with the first party we meet returning East."

"Heading back?" Breck asked curiously.

Mark looked up at Nancy who was bandaging his wound. He said, "I'm a lieutenant in the United States Army. I was assigned to accompany this outfit and locate the group of white men who were working with the Indians in the raids along the trail."

"And your work is done," Breck said. "We'll be sorry to lose you, Lieutenant."

Caldwell said, "You will be settling in the vicinity of Sutter's Fort on the other side of the Sierras?"

"That's right," Breck told him.

Again Mark glanced at the girl. "I have a furlough coming next spring," he said, "I— I—"

"We'd be mighty glad to see you," Henry Breck said, and smiled. Nancy looked down at the ground.

"I hope," Mark told her, "that I'll not find you married to one of the rich California miners when I come over the mountains in the spring."

"You'll not," Nancy murmured. It was a promise.

At eleven o'clock the three wagons returned, heavily laden with the filled water barrels. Caldwell grinned, hearing the happy shouts of the wagon train as they rode in.

Henry Breck was smiling again. He said, "It'll be a happy trail from now on, Caldwell."

"A very happy one," Mark said softly, and looked at Nancy's face in the silver light of the moon. She was smiling. She did not have to speak. ● ● ●

The Nine-Dollar Mine

By

Norman Renard

MANY men have struck it rich in the gold fields, but John Wilson is probably the only one who didn't give a damn for the mine he accidentally found.

Wilson, a bandit with a price on his head, had escaped from a Texas jail in 1880. Cutting into New Mexico, he beelined it for the camp of some friends who were placer-mining in the mountains. The friends, Jack Winters and Harry Baxter, were located at the base of what is now known as Baxter Mountain.

Although well ahead of the law, Wilson could not stay long, and so the next day he decided to go to the top of the mountain, to get a good view of the territory through which he intended to travel.

Before leaving, however, he shouldered a pick and said, "Might as well look around for a gold mine while I'm up there." His friends took the remark as a great joke and chortled over it the rest of the day.

Wilson started out afoot, but when he was halfway up the mountain, he stopped to rest. While idling there, he began chipping off pieces from a rock with the pick. Examining these chips closely, he found them laced with yellow. He put them in his pocket and continued on up the mountain, where he spent some time mapping his getaway journey.

[*Turn page*]

Returning to the cabin later that day, he found Winters puttering around outside. Winters grinned and asked, "Well, did you find that gold mine?"

Wilson reached into his pocket and handed the yellow-laced chips to his friend. Winters examined them closely, then looked at Wilson with bugging eyes. Then he let out a whoop. Baxter, who had been asleep, inside the cabin, came running on the double, under the impression that a sheriff's posse had caught up with his bandit friend.

"We've struck it rich," Winters explained, holding out the chips.

Baxter examined them carefully. "I guess we have," he finally said. "We'd better get up there and stake our claims."

It was now dusk, but the three men set out with a lantern. It was pitch dark when they reached the spot where John Wilson had rested. By the light of the lantern the two partners set out stakes, but when they asked Wilson for his full name so they could locate the claim for all three, he said, "I don't want the gold. Let it stay as it is." This the two men could not understand.

Early the next morning, the bandit left. With his parting words, he told the men he preferred the life of a bandit to grubbing out a living in a mine. Secretly, he must have thought the mine would not pan out. Before he left, however, his friends gave him nine silver dollars and a good pistol.

The two claims staked out by Winters and Baxter later sold for $300,000 apiece; and Wilson's original strike, which is still being worked, has produced over $3,000,000 since then. ● ● ●

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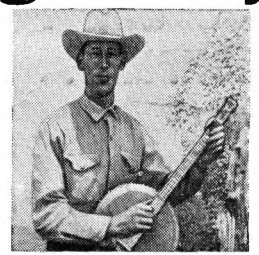

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