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Two Complete Novelets

CABINS IN THE FLAT.....*L. P. Holmes* 9
The nester trouble at the Saddlefork was dynamite with the fuse sputtering—and it was bound to end up in a gun-roaring clash!

JACKPOTS AND CRACKPOTS.....*Syl MacDowell* 34
When those weary wanderers, Swap Bootle and Whopper Whaley, roam into a "horse Harvard," they both land at the foot of the class!

A Western Classic Novel

BOTH SIDES OF THE LAW.....*Bertrand W. Sinclair* 91
An encore of a famous Western novel In which Bing Miller, Deputy Sheriff of Coldwater, solves a rustling, land-grabbing mystery!

Six Short Stories

SHEEP TREK.....*John Prescott* 24
Angry as Jim Miles was at that girl rancher, he'd fight for her

SLOW-FUSE VENGEANCE.....*John Jo Carpenter* 51
It takes a sturdy breed to brave those hot winds of Santa Ana!

MEASURE YOUR MAN.....*Joseph Chadwick* 60
Foreman Ed Nolan of the Circle B wanted the best for Tory Blaine

TRAILPOST TRIGGERMATES.....*Nels Leroy Jorgensen* 70
Would your best friend obey his instructions to shoot you down?

DAY OF RECKONING.....*Johanas L. Bouma* 81
Cal Todd learns manhood comes not in boasting—but in actions

TROUBLE RIDES A MARE.....*Jackson Cole* 87
Bruce Ward has a surprise for the molesters of Martha Tilford

Features

THE HITCHING RAIL (A Department).....*Buck Benson* 6

HOW WELL DO YUH KNOW YORE WEST?.....*A Quiz* 69

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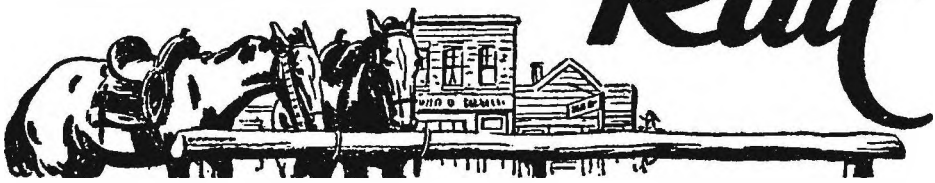
The HITCHING Rail



HOLA, EVER'BODY, welcome once again to the good Hitchin' Rail circle. It's sure glad I am to be settin' here amongst rannies and gals o' the range, talkin' our kind o' palaver and bein' sure o' understandin' one another plumb complete. Ain't no comradeship closer'n that between pals o' the range nowhere on this good green earth.

Been havin' me a little amble way out in California for the past month, seein' some o' the old waddies what I used to know way back when. Down in southern California there's the great Irvine ranch touchin' the shores o' the blue Pacific on the west and spreadin' into desert country on the east border.

Sure a fine and powerful prosperous ranch, that one. Many o' the old timers are gone, but them that's left are the same swell cow folk as always.

The Blacksmith of Bell

Out at the town o' Bell, California, I run into a hombre who's doin' a sure interestin' job, and I found him after city officials had assured me there wasn't a stable, horse, or barnyard in the whole danged town. These high-powered, motor-minded city fellers are often wrong, knowin' next to nothin' about cow folks. Don't take 'em too seriously, rannies and gals. Hunt up an old timer and you're apt to find out somethin' o' interest to cow folks like us in the most unlikely places.

There's a blacksmith shop in Bell, and that in spite o' the fact that there ain't no broncs around, and it's a plumb interestin' place to visit. Outside o' the place looks like any garage shop, but inside it's different as night and day. The shop don't get a horse to shoe or a wagon to repair once in a blue moon, but the owner is busy as a wrangler at roundup time.

Paul C. Joratz is the smithy I'm talkin' about, a small but plumb powerful man, about fifty years of age. What is the blacksmith doin'? Well, fellahs and gals, he's makin' brandin' irons for cattlemen, that's what, and he's got all the business one fellah can do. You'll find horseshoers on the big spreads, and occasional small blacksmith shops scattered over the towns o' the cow country, but ain't a whole slew o' the breed left in the business.

The Good Old Days

Watchin' Joratz work sure took me back a spell to the good old days when I was a rootin', tootin' cowboy without a care in the world.

When a bronc would throw a shoe I'd ride to the blacksmith shop, hunker down, and watch the smithy pump the bellows o' the old forge, heat the shoe to a flamin' red, then hammer it into proper shape on the old anvil. Them ringin' blows was sweet music to my ears. Then I'd hold the bronc while the smithy in his leather apron took a hoof expertly between his legs and proceeded to nail the shoe in place.

Joratz wasn't shoein', like I said, but his forge is no different from the old timers. No new fangled machinery for him. He forges his metal and pounds on the anvil like a master smithy, which he is. Each brandin' iron is made entirely by hand, and it was sure a treat to these old eyes and ears to see him in action.

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(Continued on page 139)

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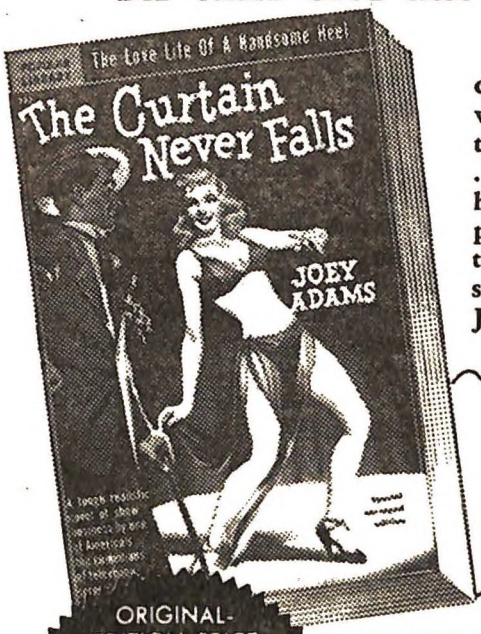

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Cabins In The FLAT

The nester trouble at the Saddlefork was dynamite—with the fuse sputtering!

a Novelet by

L. P. HOLMES

CHAPTER I

A Shift in Jobs

STANDING WITH his feet spread and his heavy shoulders loose and swinging, as though to add the weight of a natural truculence to his authority, Rome Bischoff threw his early morning orders.

"Spayd and Tinsley and Dugan work the gulches under Coldwater Rim. Patton, Grider and Simmons

comb the thickets along the creek. We'll make the gather in the bend below the point of the rim. Get at it!"

The six riders filed away silently to catch and saddle. Beyond the reach of the firelight it was still a dark world, the morning stars chill in the sky. Monty, the cook, was already stowing gear in the chuckwagon, readying for the move down to the new camp.

Squatted on his heels beside the flames, Steve Ewell built an after breakfast cigarette and awaited his orders for the day. They would not, he knew, be pleasant; Rome Bischoff would see to that. And Ewell was mildly amused at himself that he endured them at all. His own fault, of course. A man was a fool to let himself get so pinched for eating money he had to take the first job that came along. And if the penalty for such lack of judgment was tough chores, ordered in a tough way by a tough wagon boss, then the fault was his own. Of course there were limits, and Steve Ewell hoped Rome Bischoff didn't push past those limits before he had at least one month's wages coming.

Bischoff's heavy words hit across the fire. "You shag over to Anchor headquarters, Ewell. Tell Bill Able if he wants another rep at this gather to get one over here in a hurry. And this time to send a man with sense enough to know who's givin' orders and not to talk back. Get that?"

The heat that crawled through Steve Ewell wasn't from the fire. This fellow Bischoff just couldn't give a man an order without making it an insult. And in Steve Ewell's case it was being done deliberately. Steve bit back the hot retort which tugged at his lips and contented himself with a brief nod as he stood erect. But the cold flicker in his eyes promised that some day, Mr. Bischoff, there'll be trouble!

"Something else," went on Rome Bischoff. "On your way back swing by Beegum Flat and tell that nester crew to get gone and stay gone. Make it plenty strong. Tell 'em that if they ain't pulled out by the time we get done making our gathers, I'll burn 'em out, shanties and wagons—everything. Get that?"

It was the way Rome Bischoff added those last two words, even to the simplest and most easily understood order. It was as if he considered himself always giving orders to fools or half-wits. It was the cutting tip of the lash of his heavy whip of authority. Used often enough it could rasp a man raw. Steve Ewell clenched his jaw and his fists as he picked up his saddle and carried it out to where Lonnie Starbuck, the outfit's wrangler, was holding the remuda.

THE sun was up by the time Steve Ewell rode in at Anchor headquarters. Bill Able stood near the door of the bunkhouse, arguing with a couple of sullen faced riders. As Steve came jogging up, Bill Able turned and stared at him, blue eyes hot and angry under jutting, frosty brows.

"You're that new Saddlefork hand," charged the cattleman bluntly. "I suppose Rome Bischoff has sent you over after another rep?"

Steve nodded. "That's right, Mr. Able. Said he wanted one this time who'd take orders without talkin' back."

Bill Able swung an angry fist. "Him and his orders! The over-bearin', fat-headed bully! Who does he think he is? Has every man got to crawl on his hands and knees just to get along with Rome Bischoff? Did you see him beat up Charlie Lear?"

Steve built a careful cigarette. "Yeah," he admitted quietly, "I saw that."

"What caused it? Charley's already given me his story, but mebbe he's prejudiced. Mebbe you'll be, too—in Bischoff's favor?"

Steve shook his head, a bleak smile touching his lips. "Never that, Mr. Able. Bischoff ordered your man to gather some

and Foreman Rome Bischoff Were Bound to Clash!

wood for the cook's fire. Your man told him that wasn't part of a rep's job, which was true enough. Words flew back and forth, heating up. Then Bischoff started in with his fists. That's the truth of it."

Bill Able nodded slowly, a little wearily. "That's how Charley Lear told it. And now Charley, who's the best man I got, is on his bunk inside, all beat to a pulp. And none of the rest of my crew

STEVE EWELL

will go over to take Charley's place with the Saddlefork gather. Swear they'll quit on me, first. If I didn't have so many other things to do I'd go over and rep for myself. If Rome Bischoff started gettin' tough with me, I'd blow his head off . . ."

The cattleman paused to load and light a blackened, stubby pipe. Then he added, "Wish I had me one real tough fightin' man in my crew. I'd send him over to that gather with orders to bend a gun barrel over Rome Bischoff's thick skull the first time Bischoff looked sideways at him. They're all good cattle hands, but ain't none of 'em care to tangle with Bischoff. And I got to have me a rep over there, or Bischoff will rob me blind. I wouldn't trust him or that old skin-flint, Gabe Sorrel, as far as I can spit."

Steve Ewell switched the subject for a moment. "That squatter camp down on Beegum Flat, Mr. Able. You got anything against those folks?"

"Nothin' in particular, no. They're squatters of course, and as a cattleman I suppose I should wish they was all in a heap with their backs broke. But the grass on Beegum don't amount to enough to think about, and they won't stay, anyhow. That's hungry ground, you can't grow nothin' on it to amount to much. They ain't the first of their kind to hit there; there's been near a dozen others who've tried Beegum. They all get discouraged, pull up stakes and move on. This outfit'll do the same. They ain't hurtin' me or anybody else that I know of." Bill Able swung his grizzled head. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm supposed to drop by there and tell 'em to move on," explained Steve.

"Bischoff's orders?"

Steve nodded. "That's right. And I don't enjoy the prospect. They were good to me when I first drifted into this country. Staked me to a couple of meals and treated me plenty decent."

"Bischoff know that?" asked Bill Able quickly.

Steve nodded again. "Yeah."

"Then," declared Bill Able, "that's why he's sendin' you on the chore instead of somebody else. There's a mean, cruel streak in Bischoff. He knows that by sendin' you it'll hurt you as well as the squatters to deliver that order. Yeah, that's Rome Bischoff all over."

Bill Able had been studying Steve Ewell all the time he'd been speaking. He saw a man who sat tall in the saddle, full of lean hipped, rawhide power, a man

whose strength was deceptive because it was so easily and lightly carried. He saw a clean cut, flat jawed face, deeply brown, and gray eyes that were cool and direct.

Somehow Steve's gun was in his hand, bucking his elbow back and back again in recoil

"How long do you figure to ride for Saddlefork?" he asked bluntly.

Steve Ewell smiled faintly. "I was flat broke when I signed on. I need a little stake. I might last a month, maybe two, before I tangle with Bischoff. Then again, I might be on my own once more a couple of hours from now."

"You mean you're aimin' to quit?"

Steve shrugged. "I'll probably be fired. Because I've just decided I'm not going to bother the folks down at Beegum. And Bischoff won't like that."

Bill Able scrubbed his blunt chin with thumb and forefinger, eyes narrowed in shrewd judgment. "If you'd like a real job with only one dirty chore to do, how'd you like to sign on with me, friend?"

Steve stared at the cattleman. "How dirty a chore?"

Bill Able grinned. "Go back to the gather as my rep."

Steve spun a cigarette into shape. "What," he asked slowly, "makes you think I'd have any better luck than Charlie Lear?"

"You got a look to you," said Bill Able frankly. "There's a toughness in you that ain't in Charlie Lear or in any of the rest of my crew. I'd give you a fifteen-dollar a month bonus over regular wages."

Steve inhaled deeply. "I wouldn't be interested in any bonus. But I would in a steady job, with a good sound outfit and for a boss I could like and respect."

"You put Rome Bischoff in his place and you got a job with me as long as you want one, son," vowed Bill Able. "For the rest, anybody who knows will tell you that Anchor is a sound outfit. And I got my share of friends. I don't have no trouble gettin' along with decent folks."

Smoking out his cigarette, Steve Ewell let his glance run over Anchor headquar-

ters. You could generally tell about a ranch by the look of its headquarters. A haywire looking headquarters nearly always meant a haywire outfit. But there was nothing like that about Anchor. Everything was well built, well cared for. Even as Steve watched, the Anchor cook came out of the cookshack to dump a pail of slop water. The cook was whistling. Considerably off tune, to be sure, yet, whistling. And cooks, notably morose individuals, didn't whistle unless the atmosphere of the ranch was a healthy one.

Abruptly Steve nodded. "A deal, Mr. Able. A minute ago I quit Saddlefork. Starting now I'm an Anchor hand."

Bill Able shoved out a gnarled, horny palmed fist. "We'll shake on that, son. C'mon over to the office an' I'll get your name on the time book. But I want one thing understood right here and now. Don't you take no manhandlin' from Rome Bischoff. If you have to throw a gun on that hombre, you throw it. An' I'll back your hand until the ice is four feet thick over purgatory!"

CHAPTER II

A Warning

RELAXED and graceful, she stood in the doorway of one of the half dozen lath and tar paper shanties on Beegum Flat. She was a tall girl, and strong. She had a wealth of fair hair and there was a calm strength and serenity in her hazel eyes and the set of her smoothly tanned features that was strangely restful and comforting. Kindness was in this girl and a reassuring strength that brought all things to her that were fearful and unsure. Like the little tot which now crowded close against her skirt and welcomed the curving grace of her arm, while staring in big eyed solemnity at Steve Ewell.

Sitting his horse before the cabin door, Steve took off his hat. He said, "I dropped by to say thanks for your kindness to me a few days ago, Miss Marsden."

This was the squatter girl who had fed him, who had given of her boundless kindness without question or false reserve. Now the glimmer of a smile touched her eyes and lips.

"You thanked me before," she said, her voice as quiet and cool and full of refreshing comfort as a breeze on a hot day. "But it was nice of you to stop by, Mr. Ewell. Did you find that job?"

Steve grinned. "Two of 'em. Quit one not an hour ago to take on a better one. Started out with Saddlefork, but I'm an Anchor hand, now."

"I'm glad you changed," she said, with some gravity. "I've heard it said that Bill Able is a good man."

"And that Gabe Sorrel isn't, is that it?" asked Steve.

She nodded. "That's it."

Steve selected his next words carefully. "You folks on the flat here, may have some trouble with Saddlefork. But Anchor will never bother you. I'm going to have a talk with Saddlefork. Maybe I'll be able to sell 'em on the idea of leaving you folks alone."

She studied him gravely. "There's no call for you to champion us folks. We can take care of ourselves."

"Maybe," said Steve briefly. "There's a hombre named Rome Bischoff. If you ever met him—"

"I've met him," cut in Felicity Marsden quietly. "It was only a day or two after we first arrived here. He is not a good man." Color came unbidden into her cheeks and she seemed to be looking back on things that had been anything but pleasant.

Steve Ewell missed none of this and a brittle tone crept into his words.

"I intend to talk particularly to Rome Bischoff."

Worry showed in the girl's fine eyes. "Please! Not on our account."

"Particularly on your account." Steve put a faint emphasis on the word "your." "I'll be seeing you."

He swung his horse and rode away, and Felicity Marsden watched him until the

wide roll of the range drew him in and hid him. . . .

THE Saddlefork chuckwagon was pulled up in the bend below the point of Coldwater Rim. The first cattle of the gather were beginning to mass on the flat between Coldwater Creek and the rim. Monty, the cook, was lugging a couple of buckets of water from the creek as Steve Ewell rode up. Rome Bischoff and Gabe Sorrel, owner of Saddlefork, were squatted on their heels, backs to the near front wheel of the chuckwagon.

Gabe Sorrel was a scrawny man. He always wore a threadbare black business suit which hung on him in baggy shapelessness. His boots were cracked and scuffed and run over at the heels. Rusty hair hung frowsily from under a floppy old Stetson that seemed much too large for his narrow head and pinched, drily freckled face. Gabe Sorrel's one personal extravagance was chewing tobacco, and the stain of it now lay at the corners of his pursed lips.

Rome Bischoff threw his best scowl as Steve Ewell drew rein. "Took you long enough," charged Bischoff. "I didn't send you on that chore to lallygag half a day away. Got a good notion to dock you half a day's wages for playin' around."

To this Gabe Sorrel nodded quick assent. "Always in favor of disciplinary action by my foreman and wagon boss in cases like this," he twanged in his thin, high voice. He met Steve Ewell's glance as he said this, but his pale, lack-lustre eyes flickered and slid away at the cold contempt he found there.

"You see Bill Able?" asked Bischoff.

"I saw him."

"Well, then—where's his rep?"

"Right here," said Steve coolly.

Rome Bischoff didn't immediately get it. He stared around, coming upright. His heavy lips peeled back in anger. "So you're a smart guy, eh? A joker. Well, Ewell, smart jokers don't last around one of my camps. I want a straight answer. Where's the Anchor rep?"

"I told you," drawled Steve. "Right here. You're looking at him. Me."

Rome Bischoff got it, now. He stared, spreading his feet, hunching his heavy shoulders forward. "You! So that's it. You're quittin' Saddlefork and hirin' on with Anchor. And you think you can make that stick? Why, you cheap, double-crossin' saddle bum, I'll take that ambition out of you—quick!"

He came at Steve with a heavy rush, hands reaching to claw him from the saddle. Steve gigged his horse sharply, came over hard on the reins. The horse lunged, whirling and its off shoulder met Rome Bischoff with a solid impact. Bischoff went down, sprawling. And Steve, stepping lithely from the saddle, was ready for Bischoff when he came upright again, bawling his fury.

Steve had lifted his quirt from the saddle horn as he swung clear. Now he reversed this, ducked under Bischoff's first mauling blow and rapped Bischoff solidly across the side of the head with the quirt's loaded butt. Rome Bischoff went down again, not completely out, but too befuddled and dazed to carry on the trouble at the moment. Steve moved in, jerked Bischoff's gun away and tossed it under the chuckwagon. Then he looked coldly at Gabe Sorrel.

"You owe me three days and a half of wages, Sorrel. Fork over!"

Gabe Sorrel had scrambled erect, his face twisted in alarm. He had to lick his lips before he could speak. "The time book—I'm not sure—haven't any money with me," he bleated.

"You lie!" rapped Steve. "You don't need any time book and you got the money on you. Fork over!"

Blind hate seethed in Gabe Sorrel's pale eyes, but he "forked over." Steve Ewell pocketed the money and said harshly, "I'm Bill Able's rep. I stay his rep until all your gathers are done with, Sorrel. I intend to see that every Anchor calf turned up gets an Anchor brand on it. You or Bischoff try anything different, you'll get the same dose any other cheap cattle thief would get. Something else. If you want to keep Mister Rome Bischoff as a live and

healthy wagon boss, tell him to lay off me, else he won't be alive and healthy long. While I'm at it, don't you or any of your outfit bother those squatters down at Beegum. You got *all* that straight?"

Gabe Sorrel apparently had, for he nodded.

Steve turned back to Rome Bischoff, who was up in a sitting position now, but still groggy.

"As for you, Bischoff, from here on out you'll speak to me only when you're spoken to." Then Steve added the lash of the whip. "Get that?"

Whether Bischoff got it or not was hard to tell. There was a stupid, unbelieving look on his face. Steve didn't bother to press the point one way or another. He stepped back into his saddle and rode out to where the gather was making.

It was another full minute before Rome Bischoff lurched to his feet. He wobbled over to the chuckwagon and grabbed a wheel for support. Then he began to curse, a venomous, scalding outburst that kept up until he was breathless.

"That ain't doin' you a bit of good," twanged Gabe Sorrel. "Ewell was layin' for you and you walked right into it."

Bischoff threw another fit of cursing and then, because he had to vent his spleen on someone, turned on Monty, the cook.

"Why didn't you do somethin'? You workin' for Saddlefork or ain't you?"

Monty didn't give an inch of ground. "You allus talked big about bein' able to skin your own snakes, Rome. So why should I horn in? As for workin' for Saddlefork, I can wipe this dough off my hands and walk away right now, if that's what you want. I ain't chained to this layout."

Monty had Bischoff there. Good range cooks were hard come by, a select fraternity. And a couple of missed or poor meals would have every rider in the outfit calling for his time. All of which Rome Bischoff knew, as did Gabe Sorrel. It was Gabe Sorrel who answered Monty.

"Nobody said anything about you leavin' Saddlefork. Forget it."

"I thought Rome was buildin' up to somethin' like that," retorted Monty. "But if you say he wsn't, we'll let things slide."

Monty turned back to his biscuit mixing, smiling to himself as though highly pleased over something.

The word got around, probably from Monty to Lonnie Starbuck the horse wrangler, and from Lonnie to the rest of the hands. Nobody said a word, openly, but sitting around the camp fire that night, there were plenty of guarded, but not unfriendly, glances thrown Steve Ewell's way. And when, after the meal was eaten, Steve reached for his smoking and found the tobacco sack empty, it was Long John Tinsley who noted this fact and tossed his own sack over to Steve.

A little enough thing, but carrying a certain significance which Rome Bischoff, hunkered sullenly down somewhat apart from the others, did not miss. And he reserved a small part of the hate which simmered in his eyes, for Long John.

Later that night, when Steve spread his soogan roll, he found Long John's blankets spread on one side of him and Harry Spayd's on the other. Steve understood and asked softly, "This necessary, boys? I'm obliged, of course."

"You cut a bully's claws and you got him hatin' you forever," answered Long John succinctly. "He'll make his try to get even, no matter how. Take nothin' for granted, Ewell."

"Long John and me on night hawk at midnight," added Harry Spayd. "Come mornin', Ewell, you'll find Rio Dugan and Bib Simmons alongside you. They're good fellers."

Lying in thought, watching the bright wheel of the stars above, Steve Ewell mused that here indeed was the bully's doubtful reward. These men worked for Saddlefork and took Rome Bischoff's heavy authority because right now jobs were none too plentiful. But while they might take Bischoff's orders and endured his bullying way in silence, they hated the man. They hated him and were glad to know someone had cut him down to size.

There was another angle. The bully, the tough guy, once reduced in size, would

find his heavy authority harder to put over. The proof of this came right after breakfast the following morning.

Rome Bischoff, getting back some of his self assurance, gave his usual orders in his usual way, singling out each man of the crew, slamming his words as though they were his fists, ending up with the usual, "Get that?"

There was an extra edge of venom in his manner toward Long John Tinsley and, with the inevitable, "Get that?" Long John whirled on him.

"Of course I get it," growled Long John. "I'm not deaf and I'm not stupid."

Bischoff's fists balled up and he took a step toward Long John, but stopped abruptly. Long John had pulled a gun.

"You lay a finger on me, Bischoff—ever—and I'll shoot you to rags. Get that?"

There was only one answer left to Rome Bischoff. "You're fired, Tinsley!" he stormed thickly. "Pull out of here."

"If," said Harry Spayd curtly, "you make out Long John's time, then you can make out mine."

"Same here," said Rio Dugan.

"And here," put in Bib Simmons.

It went on, with every man in the crew, including Lonnie Starbuck and Monty, the cook, speaking up.

Rome Bischoff was almost weeping with rage, but he had to back down. Gabe Sorrel would have plenty to say if the whole crew moved out, and Bischoff knew who he'd say it to.

"Forget it," mumbled Bischoff thickly, "guess I'm on edge this morning. Let's get to work."

This was what he said, but it wasn't what he thought. Once the final gather was done with, somebody would pay, and pay dear.

CHAPTER III

Man at the Cabin

DAYS ran along and, after this early morning showdown, fairly smoothly. The round-up continued and calves were branded. Steve Ewell did his share of the work and knew now that he wouldn't have to worry too much as to what brand went on any calf following an Anchor cow. In fact, he had reason for strong suspicion that things were moving the other way around. And watching, he became sure of this when Bib Simmons came out of the herd with a bucking, bawling whiteface slick ear on the end of his rope. A Saddlefork cow then came charging belligerently after her calf.

Steve shunted the cow back into the herd and then swung by the branding fire just in time to see Rio Dugan lift an Anchor iron off the calf's smoking flank.

"Wrong tally, Rio," said Steve. "That was a Saddlefork calf."

Rio, a cheerful little Irishman, scrubbed sweat from his brow as he grinned up at Steve.

[Turn page]

"It was, Steve," he said. "It ain't now. Keep your shirt on, cowboy. Bill Able deserves a break. Before you showed up, Rome Bischoff saw to it that plenty of Anchor calves ended up under the Saddlefork iron. Why do you think Bischoff always made it so tough on Anchor reps? To keep 'em out of the way, that's why."

"I was beginning to like you and the other boys, Rio," said Steve gently. "You don't shape up as a flock of thieves."

Rio waved an airy hand. "I come here, I go there. A job's a job while it lasts or as long as a man wants to keep it. There's lots of cattlemen, lots of calves. A few one way or the other don't make much difference to fellers like me—as long as I don't pocket the profit."

Steve nodded thoughtfully. "That's a pretty fine distinction, Rio, but I think I understand."

"Besides," put in Rio, "most of the carelessness went on while Rome Bischoff was handlin' the brandin' fires."

Steve nodded again. "At a rough count, Rio, about how many of these—er—mistakes have been made, mistakes to cost Bill Able money?"

Rio hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "I wouldn't have told this ten days ago, but things have changed, now. That rotten Rome Bischoff! Me and the other boys know what's comin' up. Just as soon as the last gather is finished we'll be ridin' down the trail again, lookin' for another job. Bischoff will see to that. So, my guess on the calf question would be between seventy-five and a hundred. Probably a hundred would come closest. You goin' to face Bischoff about it?"

"Not now, Rio. You," Steve added with a smile, "are a conscienceless little renegade."

Rio grinned impudently. "I'm a man as looks after himself, with now and then a morsel of fair play to toss to a friend of mine. When you combed Bischoff's hair with that quirt butt, you made me love you. Git out of the way—here comes Bib with another calf."

Bib Simmons dismounted, went down the taut rope to the calf, got his hold and flipped the struggling animal. Hovering over the branding fire, Rio yelled, "Name it, Bib."

"Saddlefork," called Bib.

Rio picked up a chuck of burlap sacking and grabbed hold of an Anchor iron. "Take another look, Bib," he yelped. "I think it's Anchor."

Bib grinned and shrugged. "Just as you say, Rio."

LATER when they were in the Anchor office, Steve Ewell slouched deep in a chair, long legs stretched before him. Bill Able was storming up and down the room angrily. Abruptly he quieted, went over and sat behind his desk.

"No point in me blowin' off too much steam," he grumbled. "It ain't like this was a complete surprise to me. I've had the hunch right along that Saddlefork was gettin' away with some of my calves. But there was always the chance that I could have been wrong. Now I know for certain. And that makes a difference. How many do you figger they took me for, Steve?"

"The word I got was around a hundred, Mr. Able," Steve answered. "We'll get 'em back, of course—either the calves or the price of them."

"How?" asked the cattleman bluntly. "Be tough provin' ownership. By this time most of them calves will have quit follerin' their mothers. After that happens a white faced calf is just another white faced calf, belongin' to the man whose brand it carries. And it's like tryin' to pry the side off a mountain to separate a dime from Gabe Sorrel. Mebbe we'd be smart to just write that loss off and keep closer check next year."

"I think I can handle Gabe Sorrel," said Steve quietly. "Worth the try, anyhow. I wish," he added, "there was something we could do for that Saddlefork crew. They're a good gang and under the right kind of boss would make as tight an outfit as any man would want. Bischoff was paying them off when I left."

"Ha!" exclaimed Bill Able, "mebbe we can, at that." He began rummaging around in the clutter of stuff on the desk. "Got a

letter from Richie Heddon a couple of days ago. He's leased a big stretch of range way up in the Stampover River country and aims to shift half his herd up there. He's needin' a flock of extra hands, in a hurry. Wanted to know if I could spare any men and if I couldn't and there were any good hands runnin' loose in these parts, to send 'em along. They can get in touch with Richie at Powder City."

"That," said Steve, getting to his feet, "is swell news. I feel kind of responsible for those boys losing their jobs. Chances are I'll find 'em in town. They're bound to pull in there for a day or two before beginning to scatter."

Bill Able went over to the corrals with Steve, watching while Steve caught and saddled a fresh bronc. Then he said, "I hope you ain't forgettin' that Rome Bischoff is still in these parts, son. When you made that whelp come to heel, you made yourself an enemy forever. And, bein' the sort he is, he'll never rest until he does you some kind of dirt. Don't you take nothin' for granted, boy."

Steve grinned, remembering that Long John Tinsley had used these exact words. "Don't worry, Mr. Able. I'm through taking things for granted. I've wasted a lot of years doing that very thing, and all it got me was to end up broke. From now on it's going to be different."

The town trail between Anchor and Ft. Lyle cut by within half a mile of Beegum Flat. Steve wanted mightily to swing out to the flat, to ride up to a certain lath and tar paper cabin there and see Felicity Marsden standing in the doorway, smiling at him. It was a picture that had been framed constantly in his mind from the first moment he saw her so.

It was that picture that had changed his whole viewpoint on life. Up to that moment he had been content to take things for granted, as Bill Able and Long John Tinsley had put it. And it had been a point of view that had brought him nothing. But his first glimpse of Felicity Marsden had changed all that. He couldn't explain it and he didn't try to. It just hit him like a thunderbolt and he knew then that the old happy-go-lucky, easy drifting days were gone forever. Life, he realized, was a bigger and more meanful thing than he'd ever understood before.

Trouble was, he thought ruefully, what excuse could he give for dropping by. He'd used up the old reason, which was that he wanted to thank her. If he said that again there would be laughter gathered in her fine eyes. Of course it would be gentle, kindly laughter, not meant to taunt or hurt, but he knew it would make him squirm, just the same. . . .

He took another look out that way and reared a little higher in his saddle, stiffening. For out there, maybe half way to the flat, a rider had lifted past one of the deceptive rolls of country, a rider heading in for the flat. And even at this distance there was no mistaking his identity, not that burly, forward leaning figure, that rode as it stood and walked, throwing heavy-handed arrogance and truculence ahead. Rome Bischoff!

There could be, Steve figured, only one reason for Bischoff to ride into Beegum Flat. It would be to carry some kind of ultimatum to the squatter colony. To brow-beat and threaten. And these things would strike at Felicity Marsden as well as the rest. Steve swung his horse off the trail, breaking for the flat.

The same roll of country that had held Rome Bischoff hidden for a time, dropped Steve out of sight of the flat. When he brought it into view again, he saw Bischoff's horse, standing by a cabin, but Bischoff was not in the saddle. And it was Felicity Marsden's cabin.

A queer coldness snaked through Steve Ewell. It was a combination of blind anger and an even blinder doubt. Ruthless and arrogant as he was, Rome Bischoff wouldn't go into that cabin unbidden, or would he? And right then Steve Ewell knew that if he never found out about anything else in his life, he had to find out about that.

He dropped off his horse, went forward quietly. And when he stopped, close by the blind side of the cabin, the doubt became a black, bitter shame and disgust

with himself, while the anger turned into something bleak and polar-cold. For voices carried easily through the flimsy wall of the place. It was Felicity Marsden's voice, low and full and steady.

"If you come another step closer, I swear I'll shoot. Get out of my cabin, Rome Bischoff!"

Bischoff's voice carried a heavy sneer. "I wonder. It don't look right, a pretty girl like you, behind that old shotgun. Just you put it down and we'll talk real pleasant and friendly."

Steve went around to the door, fast. His gun was out and level as he stepped in.

"Bischoff!" The word came from Steve's lips like a thrown club.

There was the small center table, the one at which Steve had sat and eaten a meal, the first he'd known in thirty-six hours. Felicity Marsden had sat across from him and talked with him while he ate.

She was on the far side of it now, the shotgun held in steady hands, waist high, muzzles bearing on Rome Bischoff's thick body. And Bischoff stood on this side of it, his back to Steve. But at Steve's harsh challenge, Bischoff came around, fast, hand beginning to dip toward his hip.

He stopped the move, however, when he saw Steve's face and Steve's gun. His hands spread and lifted shoulder high. And on the far side of the table Felicity Marsden let out a soft little cry, full of breaking relief.

"Steve! Steve Ewell!"

Steve gave the muzzle of his gun a little jerk. "Outside, Bischoff!"

He could have shot Rome Bischoff in his tracks and no man or group of men would have blamed him. But this was Felicity Marsden's cabin and she was watching. Besides, it wasn't lead that Steve wanted to deliver. It was punishment of another sort. He wanted the feel of his fists battering into Rome Bischoff's face, fists that would cut and slash and numb. He wanted to take this fellow apart with his bare hands.

"Outside!" he rapped again.

He moved aside to let Bischoff pass and, as Bischoff went by, Steve reached out and lifted Bischoff's gun. He dropped this on the cabin floor, dropped his own beside it. Then, moving into the clear behind Bischoff, he said, "Turn around!"

Bischoff turned around and Steve hit him.

CHAPTER IV

Savage Justice

AFTER that Steve Ewell had no idea how long the fight lasted. He was a man locked in a strange, wild frenzy—a frenzy to destroy. For this mad stretch of time nothing existed except the burly figure before him, which Steve saw through a sort of red haze. Steve didn't know how many blows he landed or how many he took. He only knew that time after time the shock of his own blows ran up from fist and wrist and arm to the rolling power of his shoulders, to fill him with a wild, blind exultation. The blows he took were far away explosions of force, registering at strangely distant limits. There must have been surface pain, but none of it reached the deeper senses, walled off by the armor of his consuming fury.

Even when he found himself rolling on the ground, none of his physical power left him. He came back to his feet automatically, to lunge ahead once more behind savagely winging fists. And there were times when Rome Bischoff was down and then Steve would circle him, waiting for his target to come erect again, a hungry tiger whine in his throat.

Steve never saw the squatter men who came running and formed an awed and silent circle. He saw nothing but Rome Bischoff, through that red haze. Rome Bischoff was not an easy man to whip this way, for he was full of burly power and buoyed up by his own hate and a growing desperation. Long since would Bischoff have made a try for the cabin door and

the guns that lay on the floor just inside it. But he couldn't make the try, because always there was a mad panther swarming all over him. And with all Bischoff could muster, it was not enough to meet the driving fury coming at him, always coming at him.

Something had to give, and it was Rome Bischoff. Fear came into him, and when it came resistance began to crumble. His face was a gory, pulped mask. His heavy chin was sagging and he groaned thickly as he gulped hungrily for air. He ran into a left that set him up and a right that was like a charge of dynamite under the angle of his sagging jaw. Reason, strength —everything ran out of him. The smash of the earth taking him was far away and the blue and wondering sky squeezed down and turned black. Rome Bischoff was out.

Steve Ewell stood over him, waiting for him to get up, and for a moment fought off the hands that would have pulled him away. Until those hands were gentle ones and a soft voice, slightly sobbing, registered through that deadly red haze. Then he obeyed those hands, stumbling a little as he went.

He was in the shadowy stillness of Felicity Marsden's cabin. He was sitting down. A wet, cold cloth was working over his face, its touch a benediction of soothing comfort. Tension began to seep out of him and the hard rasping of his breath began to ease and quiet. The thunder of his pulse softened. And now he heard Felicity Marsden murmur, "Your poor face! Oh, Steve, your poor face!"

Half an hour later the world was real and solid and sane again. A squatter put his head in the cabin door and said that Rome Bischoff had recovered enough to haul himself into his saddle and ride away.

Steve looked at Felicity Marsden and said harshly, "I should have killed him. I'll have to do it sometime, anyhow. I wanted to—with my hands."

Her fingers touched his lips. "Hush! You did enough. You killed something in him as it was. His pride. He'll never know it again."

"There's no pride in a rattlesnake," growled Steve. "Only poison."

And now he said something else, something he had to say. "I owe you an apology, Felicity Marsden. When I first saw his horse standing by your cabin, I thought you'd invited him here."

The touch of her fingers stilled his lips again. Her eyes were very soft. "It doesn't matter," she said.

He remembered his mission to town. When he stood up and moved to the door he knew what physical torture was. He felt like he'd been beaten with clubs from his feet to his head. He had to set his teeth over the effort necessary to swing into his saddle. He would have forgotten his gun if the girl hadn't brought it to him.

Riding away, he looked back, once. She was standing by the cabin, watching.

Fort Lyle, the town was quiet. Steve found the former Saddlefork hands all in the Trail House saloon. They marveled over his bruises and when they learned the reason wanted to ply him with drinks to celebrate. Steve accepted just one, then told them why he had sought them out.

"Well, now," said Long John Tinsley. "I could stand to see some new country. And I've never been in that Stampover River range. Think I'll ride out tomorrow and have me a talk with this Richie Heddon. White of you and Bill Able to do this for us, Steve."

Long John's decision suited the rest of them. Rio Dugan had the only objection. "I hate to pull out without puttin' some kind of a crimp in that damned skin-flint of a Gabe Sorrel," declared Rio. "And—one in Rome Bischoff."

"Bischoff's had the crimp put in him," said Steve Ewell. "But you can still take a swipe at Gabe Sorrel if you want. I'm heading for Saddlefork to collect from Sorrel for a hundred mis-branded Anchor calves. With a couple of you boys to stand as witnesses to the fact that this mis-branding took place, I reckon Gabe Sorrel would cave easier and come across. How about it?"

"Let's go!" chirruped Rio. "You an' me an' Long John."

"That," agreed Long John, "is a real idea.

Saddlefork headquarters looked still and empty, as though deserted, but Gabe Sorrel came stamping out on the ranch-house porch as they pulled rein before it.

"Looks like he'd been drinkin' vinegar," murmured Rio Dugan. "If the world was such a hell of a place to live in as that jigger makes it appear, I'd shoot myself."

Gabe Sorrel heard the remark and snarled. He looked like a mangy gopher, backed into a corner.

"When I fire a man he's supposed to stay fired," shrilled Sorrel. "Get out an' stay out. I don't owe you jiggers nothin'."

"Maybe not us," agreed Steve, stepping down. "But you owe Bill Able for a round hundred mis-branded calves. I'm here to collect for Bill."

"A hundred calves!" squawled Gabe Sorrel. "You're crazy. You can't hold me up like that. Show me one of them calves!"

"That," drawled Steve, "would be too much of a chore. But I know it happened, Sorrel, and you know it. You're going to pay for them."

"I pay for nothin'," yelled Sorrel. "You're just talkin', tryin' to bluff me, Ewell. You can't prove a thing. No court of law would uphold you."

"A court of law operates on the testimony of witnesses," broke in Steve. "I got half a dozen witnesses to swear that the mis-branding took place. Two of them are right with me. How many witnesses can you produce to testify different?"

That was when Long John Tinsley yelled: "Steve! Look out!"

Steve was whirling when the bullet hit him. There was no definite pain, just the shock of impact that sent him staggering and lurching. Which was why Rome Bischoff's second shot, fired as he lunged into view past the corner of the bunkhouse, missed.

Steve Ewell had the feeling that he was way off in some dim and distant world, where things floated around like leaves in a wind. Even he was floating, but he could see Rome Bischoff, his beaten face crazed and twisted, plunging straight at him, a gun jabbing ahead of him.

Steve had no conscious knowledge of drawing his own gun. But somehow it was in his hand, bucking his elbow back again and again in recoil. To his confused and fading senses the reports were dim thunder rolling far beyond the rim of the world. Then the weight of his gun became too much for him and he dropped it.

Another violent blow struck him. It was the earth, jumping up to receive him. But as he lay there he had to blink in amazement. For Rome Bischoff was on the ground, too, flat and still, not twenty feet from him.

After that it was as though someone had jerked a curtain down, smothering him with blackness. . . .

When he regained his senses, he thought he must be back in Felicity Marsden's cabin. For those same gentle hands were working over him, bathing his face. It took terrific effort to get his eyes open.

"Rome Bischoff," he mumbled. "I'll lick him again the next time I see him."

Felicity Marsden's soft voice told him, "You licked him for the last time three long weeks ago. Now, hush! You mustn't talk."

STEVE figured he must have slept for a week after that. Anyhow, when he woke up again, though feeling plenty puny, he had a pretty firm grip on the world again. He saw Bill Able sitting by his bed. Steve grinned weakly. "Something's happened, Bill," Steve said.

Bill Able blew his nose emphatically. "You tough scalawag, I'll say things happened! You scared the livin' wits out of a lot of people, me included. That Rome Bischoff! But you got him, boy, after givin' him the first bite. You got him good and final!"

Now Steve remembered. "He was hid out past the Saddlefork bunkhouse. I must sure be a fool for luck. But I didn't get the money for those calves, Bill."

"You the same as did. Them two boys with you, Long John Tinsley and Rio Dugan, they shore went at Gabe Sorrel

rough and wild when they thought you were dead. They put the fear of the devil in that old coot, once and for all. He paid up, all right, and Long John brought me the money at the same time him and Rio brought you here across your horse. But none of that matters, now that I know you're goin' to get well and I can quit shakin' and sweatin' over you. Now you behave yourself and get back on your feet—quick! Things for you to do. You're my foreman now, you know."

Steve digested all this in silence. "Once," he murmured finally "when I kind of crawled back into the light for a minute or two, I thought there was—was a girl taking care of me."

"There was," growled Bill Able. "Right here in this house. And she's still here. And if you don't keep her here I'll fire you so dang far you won't land for a week. Now, there's a girl for you—that Felicity is. When she got word, which was quick, that you were shot up, she come right in here and took over. Never was such a girl. Makes me feel humble jest to look at her. That's the one dirty trick life ever dealt me—that I lived and grew old without ever meetin' up with a girl like her. You hear me, boy? Don't you let her get away from us." Bill Able blew his nose again and stamped out.

Steve was dozing when she came in. But there was no mistaking that soft step, nor the fact that her mere presence was like trumpets pealing in a man's ears.

She put a soft hand on Steve's brow and, after luxuriating for a moment under the touch of it, Steve captured that hand in both of his and hung on to it.

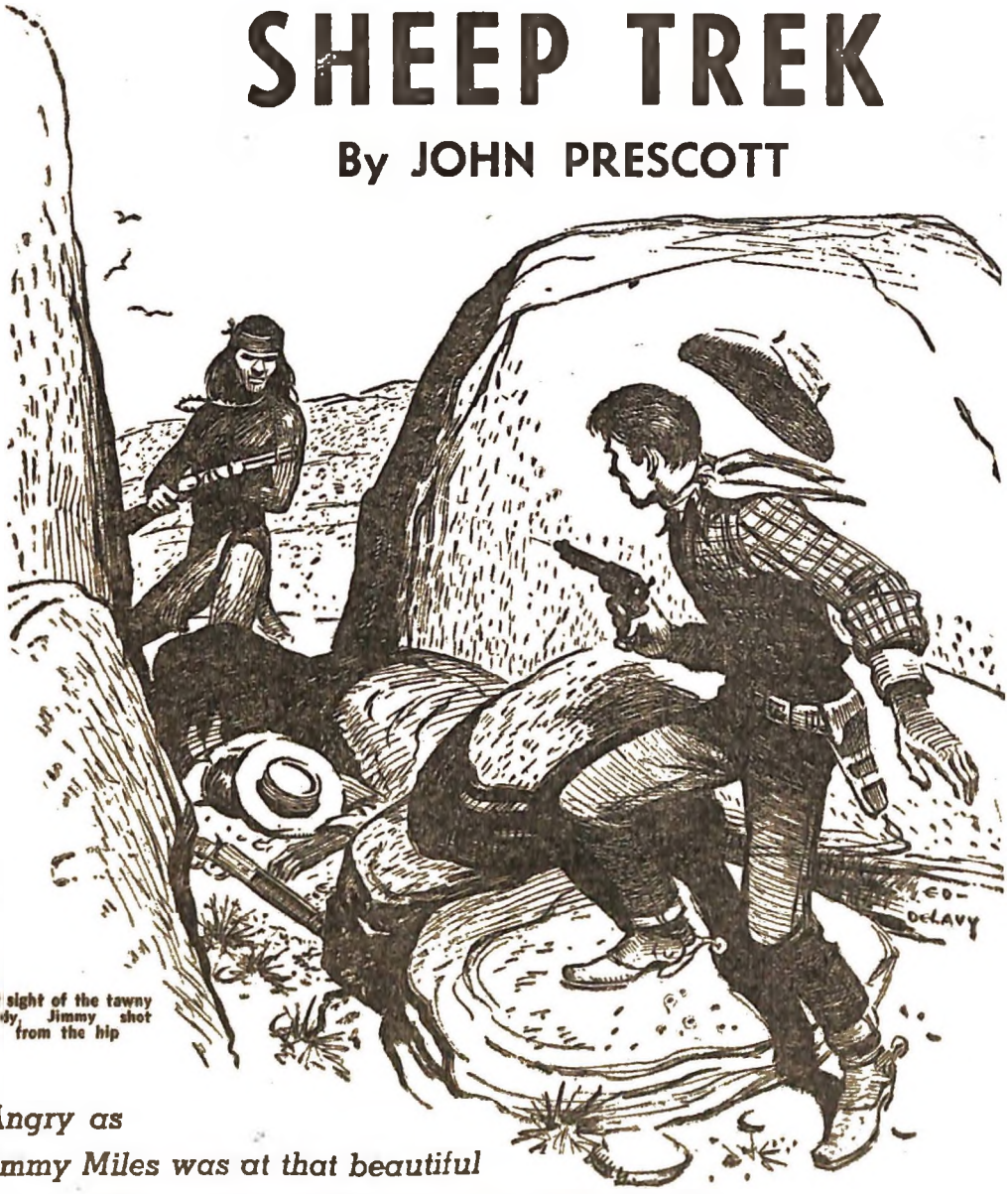
"If there's fever there, it's because of you, Felicity," he said.

She gave a mock expression of alarm. "The man's delirious again."

But when Steve looked up at her hungrily, he saw that beyond the words there was the old gentle laughter in her eyes—and something else. Something that was warm and slumbrous and enfolded him like the caress of sweet winds blowing.

SHEEP TREK

By JOHN PRESCOTT



At sight of the tawny body, Jimmy shot from the hip

Angry as Jimmy Miles was at that beautiful girl rancher—he would fight for her with his life!

JIMMY MILES was not spoiling for a fight, but his frame of mind was such as to prevent him from dodging such opportunities that presented themselves, and when he saw the slope-headed character with the thick shoulders and sweat-steeped shirt put his hands on the frightened old Mexican he did not hesitate to take a hand in the proceedings.

He had not been in Chandler for more than an hour, but he did not feel that the situation required a formal introduction. Being without a job, and having ridden at a wild pace from Deming, dodging the bullets of a party of reservation-jumping Apaches a good share of the way, he was

in a mood to let off steam. He pitched right in with a will to win.

Jimmy swung the slope-headed man around by the arm and hit him in the face. The man staggered back, swore in wonder, and came in low. Jimmy hit him again, with his left, and when the heavy-lidded eyes simply blinked, he hit him with his right. That time the man stumbled over his own feet and fell to the ground. He came up with his gun in his hand.

Jimmy drew and fired, and as the other gun spun away he leathered his own and fetched a high kick to the wedge-shaped jaw. The gunslinger caught the boot in his hands, hoisted up, and he and Jimmy rolled with one another in the dirt.

Jimmy felt the heavy shoulders feeding strength into the splayed thumbs, crawling toward his eyes. He jerked his head and brought his rowels down deep into the calves of the meaty legs. The scream that went past his ear was the first break in the tight silence of the fighting.

THEY rolled some more and Jimmy jabbed the rowels in again, then varied the routine and ran them up and down the legs. Those spurs were big, jangling Mexican creations and he was surely proud of the manner in which they ripped the jeans and dug into the flesh beneath his heels. Another shrill scream rent the air, and after that there was a new voice, angry and arbitrary. A woman's voice.

"Stop it, Luke! Stop it this instant, or I'll blow you both in half!"

Jimmy was no coward but he knew an untenable situation when he saw one. His arms were still around the man named Luke and his gun was underneath him. Looking up, he saw a long-barreled Frontier Colt, replete with filled cylinder, side gate and rod rammer, aimed at him with purpose. The big gun was held firmly in a surprisingly small white hand, above which there appeared a colored silk shirt, a delicate but out-thrust chin, determined brown eyes and night-black hair.

Jimmy pulled his rowels out of Luke's legs, and Luke shambled to his feet, his legs showing traces of blood through the tattered jeans. Jimmy stood up and waited for the next move. The girl was eyeing him with great distaste, and she still held the gun.

"Well," she said, speaking to Luke, "what brought this on?"

Luke stood beside the girl and gingerly touched his abrasions with blunt fingers. "Damned sheepmen trying to take the town over," he growled.

Jimmy felt his ears get warm and he took a step toward Luke, but stopped when the Frontier jabbed out further. "I'm no sheepman," he said. "And there's nobody can call me a thing like that."

"If you ain't, then what're you siding one for?" Luke said.

That made Jimmy look more closely at the old Mexican who hovered nearby, his big liquid eyes regarding Jimmy with a mixture of admiration and apprehension. For the first time, Jimmy became aware of the lamb in the old one's arms.

"I am sorry, senor," the Mexican said. "I do not think you know what you are doing."

Jimmy hitched at his belt. He was aware that things were looking different now, but not too different. "I sided him 'cause I don't like to see little guys get shoved around by big monkeys," he said.

"I don't think that's so at all," the girl said, and she was smiling now in a taunting sort of way. "I think you're a sheepman, just like Luke says. And you've surely got your nerve dressing and talking like a buckaroo."

Jimmy had not noticed the crowd piling up around them, but now he heard the laughter coming out of it. He saw the faces grinning at him, but there was in them no welcome smiles of friendship. He picked up his hat and pulled it on, then took it off as the dust commenced to sift into his ears and batted it against his knee. He'd never felt like such a fool before.

"I don't figure it makes a heap of difference what you think," he said. "You just keep that bull calf out of my way and

everything will be all right by me."

That brought another round of laughter and Jimmy pushed his shoulder into the crowd. He was sick of the palaver and he felt like a freak of some kind with the eyes of all those people on him. He started up the center of the street at a brisk walk.

He wasn't more than twenty-five yards from the hotel he was heading for when he heard the young lamb bleating, and the pastor trotted up to him and tugged at his sleeve.

It wasn't always easy for Jimmy to guess the age of a Mexican, but a close look at this one's smiling face told him he was somewhere likely in his early fifties. There was just a little bit of gray in his hair and flaring mustache, and his dark, expressive eyes had a million minute seams fanning out from squinting at the sky and weather.

Jimmy didn't feel very good about the herder, and he said, "Well?"

"I only want to thank you," the pastor said. "It is not a usual thing to do, and I simply want to say *gracias.*"

Jimmy looked hard at the square, deeply brown face and commenced to feel a liking for what he saw. He'd never had much truck with sheepmen, but he wasn't thinking of the Mexican as a herder now. He was thinking that this one had an air of competence and that his eyes held dignity and understanding.

Jimmy smiled carefully. "Oh, I guess that's all right," he said. "It maybe wasn't the best way to make a start in a new town, but I didn't like the way that Luke was putting on. Fellers like him ain't much good anywhere."

"No, he is a bad one, that is certain," the pastor said. "He is foreman for the Senorita Kit Sanford, and since she has come to this country he is like a wild thing in the mountains."

CUFFING his hat back, Jimmy let his eyes ramble down the street and in among the dispersing crowd. He found the girl in it and watched the hot wind chuck her hair away from the back of her slender, well-shaped neck.

"Sounds like she's new out here," he said.

"Oh, she is a *nuevo,* yes, she is," the herder said. "And she has just now come to run the ranch which her father left to her in the Sierra Anchas."

Jimmy kept his eyes on the girl named Kit and remembered the way in which she had brassed up to him with the Frontier in her hand. It made him laugh to think of it, but she sure hadn't seemed like a *nucvo* then.

"You seem to know a lot about this country," he said to the herder after a moment.

"I am here all my life. I know nearly everything—yes, nearly everything there is to know about this place here." The herder was smiling and rubbing the tufted wool on top of the lamb's head.

"Maybe you know where I can get a job, then," Jimmy said. "My last one folded up at Deming and I figured to take a pasear through Arizona to see what I could find."

They had commenced to walk and it was a moment before the Mexican replied. "Senor, it is that for which I am sad as well. I think there is a feeling about you now. It is bad enough for you to be strange in this place, without you fight in my behalf. That is *muy* bad. *Si,* indeed it is."

A cottonwood broke the ache of sunlight overhead and Jimmy lounged against the fat trunk. He rolled a shuck and blew the thin smoke through his lips as he lit it.

"I reckon I should have known," he said, and then he grinned at the pastor, squatting on the ground beside him. "But I don't figure I'd have done any different. Gents and dames like those just rub me wrong."

"Well, that senorita's foreman is bad. There is always trouble when I take the herd through the Anchas, even before she came here and that Luke was running the ranch for her father. Now, it will be very much more bad. He likes to feel his importance in a great manner."

Jimmy picked up a rock and heaved it

into the dusty street. "That was it, huh? The trouble? This ranch near your trail?"

"*Si*, yes." The herder drew a rough diagram in the dirt and explained it. "The land they have is at one place along the Reno Road, like so. And they do not care for to have me take the sheep by there. It is only for a little bit, but they do not like it just the same. Two times every year I must go by there."

"And you're heading up for summer pasture now, I reckon," Jimmy said. "This Luke, I'll bet, was saying you oughtn't to do it."

The pastor nodded ruefully. "Yes, he tell me once again. But this time I think he more bad than before, because the senorita is now here." The Mexican rubbed out the diagram with the palm of his hand. "Senor," he said after a pause, "I am not afraid of them for myself, but I do not like them to hurt the sheep. The sheep cannot help it that God has made them as they are."

Jimmy caught the hesitation and reticence in the herder's voice and when it trailed off he tossed another rock into the street.

"Maybe we can make a deal," he said. "I don't know the first thing about sheep and I got no hankering at all to learn about 'em, but I do need a job. Maybe I can pay my way by kind of looking after things on this here trek to the mountains."

The pastor rubbed the topknot of the lamb. "I would not say no, of course. It is for you to say. But I would welcome you, and I would pay you what I could."

Jimmy tossed the shuck away and rose from his haunches. "I reckon you got yourself a herder, then, pardner. Say, what's your name, anyway? Me, I'm Jimmy Miles."

The square, dark face grinned up at him with a wide flash of teeth. "I am called Pablo—yes, Pablo. Everyone in my family is called by that name. It was easy for my *mamita* to remember."

"Okay, Pablo, when do we start?"

"In the morning—the very early morning. At the corral we have at the edge of town."

"I'll be there," Jimmy said. He held his hand out to the Mexican, then he scrambled the wool at the lamb's neck. The lamb twisted its head and grabbed onto one of his fingers, and Pablo laughed.

"Ho, you are a natural! Yes, for certain, you are a natural. The lamb believes you are his mother."

IF JIMMY had had any particular misgivings with taking up with a sheepman on a semi-permanent basis as he was doing, they were lost when he remembered that his original sin in the streets of Chandler had made of him an untouchable of sorts in the eyes of many, and that, as Pablo had unhappily observed, there would be little in the way of alternative employment open to him. Adaptability was a virtue with Jimmy Miles, and with time, he could become accustomed to most things.

As the pastor had foretold, the trek commenced very early in the morning indeed. At that time of the year, which was April, the Salt River valley and adjoining countryside about Chandler and Phoenix were becoming very hot and uncomfortable by day and so an early start was imperative, for there would be slow going for the sheep when the sun was high.

Accordingly, dawn was only blushing, as though embarrassed about intruding upon the night, when Pablo threw back the gates of the corral and exhorted the two dogs, Tito and Manuello, to drive the sheep out into the open. Calling and bleating, the sheep emerged and wandered aimlessly around until Pablo brought the goat, Sancho, to the head of the white avalanche. This creature, Pablo pointed out, was a leader without equal, and would get them to the White Mountains in his sleep if necessary.

Altogether, there were twelve hundred of the sheep, the two dogs, Pablo, Jimmy and Esteban, the *campero* in charge of the camp and the seven baggage burros. At first, Jimmy rode on back toward the rear with Pablo, and later with Esteban and his burros, but as the desert talcum commenced to fill the air he swung off to

windward and walked the horse along the trail at the edge of the herd.

From that point, he could see the whole of the broken, wending stream, from the pace-setting goat in the lead away on back to the rear, where Pablo trudged doggedly along, half leaning on his crook. And even beyond, way back to Chandler squatting in the heat of April.

From the beginning they were in open desert, and after the first encampment the days for a time just seemed to flow in and out of one another. Spring was on the land, and the barren desolation was bursting momentarily into flower all around them. It was the only time of year when a man wasn't heavily conscious of the latent threat and hostility of the land, and when the wild beauty sprang from the scarred, smashed earth in flowing color and profusion.

It wasn't such a bad business for a cowman to get into for a time, Jimmy Miles thought.

A man could ride his horse out there, or walk, even, if he had a mind to, and see nearly every kind of blossom he'd ever heard tell of. Didn't make any difference in which direction he might turn his head, they were all around him—small, white primrose, lavendar verbenas, orange poppies, bursting like fire from the sand. And there were yellow encilias and flowered creosote bushes, and tall, blazing ocotillos and pink-blossomed beavertails. A man's eye could surely take delight in the springtime desert.

After they forded the Salt the land began to lift. The old army road dipped and swung, shot straight up and fell away to seeming nothingness by turn. It made Jimmy wonder how they'd ever got any of those old wagons over it at all. There were some places where it appeared to run straight on into the rocks and splintered cliffs altogether, and it was a pure marvel how the lead goat, Sancho, always seemed to get the herd back on the thing again.

Getting on toward the Sierra Anchas, Jimmy began to wonder about the girl Kit Sanford once again. She had tended to pass toward the background of his thoughts during the first day or so on the trail but now she returned to his mind.

They were sitting in Esteban's tent during a rain squall when he brought the matter up. Pablo was shaking his head over the information supplied by his ancient Spanish weather almanac, which had clearly not foreseen the deluge, and Jimmy was regarding the dripping and melancholy burros thoughtfully, when the girl popped into his head.

"Oh, I think we see her again," Pablo replied to Jimmy's question. "*Si*, I am certain of it. We are not now far from the Sierra Anchas."

"Funny, I didn't get the idea she was bad like that," Jimmy said. "Didn't seem the sort to shoot up your herd."

PABLO dropped the almanac into a saddlebag. "Perhaps she would not do it on her own notion," he said. "But she is a *nuevo* in this country, and she has advice from that Luke."

"I reckon we'll just have to see," Jimmy said.

Pablo stood up and held the tent flap open. "*Si*, yes, we will have to see."

Pablo stooped through the entrance and the dog Tito uncurled his damp body and shivered his way behind the pastor. The weather never seemed to make any difference to Tito and Manuello, Jimmy thought. A man was right lucky to have a pair like that to help him out.

Two days later Jimmy saw the girl Kit on a high rise in the trail a quarter of a mile ahead of them. They had been fighting gnats for most of the morning, and Pablo had been forced, unhappily, to bring the dogs into the sheep to get them on the trail again. Jimmy, himself, had been walking for awhile and had stepped upon a cholla spine, but those irritations seemed to pale and fade away when he saw the wind streaming her hair against the sky.

She was sitting quietly, and waiting, as he spurred his horse through the sheep and up the rise ahead of them.

"Well, howdy;" Jimmy said, as he reined up. "Mighty fine day in the springtime, ain't it? Sure is nice and clean up in these hills."

The girl Kit sat on her horse and regarded him bleakly. She held the reins in one hand and the other rested upon the big Frontier, strapped around her waist by an oversize belt. It made Jimmy want to laugh at her, but there was a kind of spunk showing in her eyes which wouldn't let him.

"It depends on what you mean by nice and clean," she said. The sheep were coming up toward them and she sniffed with an air of disdain as Sancho paused nearby and nibbled experimentally at a prickly pear bush. "Seems to me those sheep smell just as bad as Luke said they did."

"That one there's a goat," Jimmy pointed out. "That Luke, though, he's a man of ideas, ain't he? I wouldn't be surprised but what his ideas some time got him into a heap of trouble."

Jimmy raised one leg across the saddle horn and lounged against the cantle. He tipped his hat back and commenced to roll a smoke.

"Maybe," the girl said, "but he's right about the sheep. He says they ruin the grass. He says they crop it down so the cattle can't get at what's left and he says they've got feet like chisels."

Jimmy breathed a spine of smoke against the fine blue sky. "I don't guess there's much argument about that," he said. "They sure do raise hob with cattle-grazing ground. Wouldn't have 'em on no range of mine."

"I say the same thing," Kit Sanford said. "And so does Luke. That's why I waited for you here. You aren't but two days out from my land and I'm telling you to turn back now, to avoid grief further on."

That time Jimmy Miles did laugh, and without knowing why he seemed to feel a little better about everything. "I don't see how we can do a thing like that, but thanks for the warning. The road don't go on your land, just alongside of it, so you ain't got no right to say who can take it and who can't. But thanks, anyway. I guess Luke don't know about this, does he?"

The girl colored in a pretty way and her eyes became uncertain.

"About what?" she said.

"About your coming down here to warn us. Strikes me that Luke would just as soon have us walk right into whatever trouble there might be."

A big fly was buzzing around the mane of the girl's horse, and she batted at it with her hand. "It doesn't make any difference whether he knows or not," she said tartly. "I own the place, not he. But I take his advice, and that's why I warn you to turn back before it's too late."

JIMMY did not say anything immediately, because the sheep were now going past in a solid wall, and Pablo was coming up and doffing his battered old

[*Turn page*]

hat and bowing low and graciously.

"*Buenos dias,* Senorita," Pablo said, and he smiled his widest and most generous smile.

Kit Sanford acknowledged the courtesy by a quick bob of her head and a reserved lifting of her lips. Watching her, Jimmy grinned, then spoke to Pablo.

"The senorita says we got trouble ahead. She says we better turn back, pronto."

Pablo held his hat in his hand and leaned on the crook he was carrying. "Ah, so," he said. "If God wills us trouble, so be it. But we cannot turn back. The sheep, they cannot live in the low country in the heat. They must go to the mountains."

"Well, I reckon that's the answer," Jimmy said to Kit Sanford. "I done my best, but I guess we'll just have to take our trouble as we find it."

The girl Kit's horse danced ahead a few steps and Jimmy ranged up beside it. When it quieted she swung on him in anger. "Well, I warned you, mister sheepman," she said. "You can never say I didn't. I gave you your chance."

"Name's Miles," Jimmy said easily. "Jimmy Miles, and pleased to meet you. And I ain't no sheepman—I'm a cowman, just like you and any other you ever knew. But I signed on with Pablo, here, 'cause I needed work, and I aim to see him through. I don't care much for them stupid sheep, but I'll stand by 'em just like I would for anything else that had its trust in me. Miles' word is good on anything, as maybe you'll find out."

The girl looked at him for a moment in silence, the heat going out of her face, and going out of her voice when she spoke again. "All right, Jimmy Miles," she said. "I don't want anything like this, but there doesn't seem to be any other way. We can't have those sheep going past our land like that. I warned you though."

"I'm grateful for it," Jimmy said. "And now you can have my warning, too. We're going through. Straight on through the Sierra Anchas. I'll be looking for you."

It was two days later, after they had come through the Mazatzals and were wending into Borego Canyon, when the trouble started. But after the meeting with Kit Sanford, Jimmy was not in the least surprised that it happened where it did.

They were still some distance from the Anchas, and the Borego was a deep and angry slash which provided fine concealment and perfect ambush facilities. Aside from the canyon, which the army road had left its imprint upon, there were numerous off-branchings which would prove highly receptive to panic-stricken sheep. A herder wouldn't have a very great chance in the Borego desolation once his herd stampeded.

Jimmy was carrying five of the lambs in a wooly bundle across various parts of his saddle and tucked under his arms when the shooting commenced. They were deep in the Borego on a day of unshaded brightness, and two days without water had wearied the small ones to the point of exhaustion. The lambs, he had found, were not as obnoxious as their elders and he did not mind having them along with him as baggage. After he got used to them he had even let them nibble on his fingers now and then.

The gunfire came from the side of the canyon and halfway up in a broken, partially open place, and to begin with there was one gun only. It came in loud, sharp cracks—Winchester fire—and the first fusillade killed the lead goat, Sancho, and two of the ewes near him, and set the twelve hundred others into a headlong stampede.

LOOKING back upon the sudden panic and confusion, Jimmy saw Pablo and the dogs working toward the rapidly disintegrating leading head of the column, and beyond them, he saw Esteban drawing his rifle out of its scabbard and at the same time attempting to bring the seven pack burros under control. Turning around again, Jimmy dropped the lambs to the ground, swung down from the saddle and headed off toward the point of firing.

By golly, he thought, but it sure didn't seem right for that Kit girl to take up with a business of this sort. It would be one

thing for her to wait up there in the Sierra Anchas with her punchers and face them when they came, but it didn't seem to sit straight for her to lie in the rocks like a snake and indulge in willful killing of another person's stock, be they sheep or otherwise.

Trouble was, a man could never tell in just which way a woman's mind would work. Women, he had found, were a mighty unpredictable breed of man, and it never paid for a body to go making suppositions about them on the face of a quick estimation. That girl, now, she'd had a level pair of eyes and a chin which seemed to say she'd stand for no nonsense, and yet she surely hadn't appeared to be the one who would go in for ambushing and the likes, either.

Jimmy got into the first of the rocks and began to work his way up. He had long since found that his high-heeled boots were no good for sheep work, which required that a good deal of time be spent afoot and the soles were now so thin and lacerated he could feel with painful detail the outline of every stone he stepped upon.

It was a great agony and torment to go clambering through the broken canyon walls like that and it got him to thinking that Kit Sanford sure had her nerve to put him to an inconvenience like this one. Jimmy didn't mind a fight so much, but he liked to be comfortable while he was about it.

There was more firing now, but it was all from the same side and he was in no danger yet. Crawling upward among the boulders, he could now and then see the approximate points and locations from which each of the ambushers was firing, and he figured that, once at the top, he might be able to work along above them and get them one by one.

He was pretty nearly halfway up by that time, and when he paused for wind a good deal of the canyon floor was open to his view. It was the first time he'd taken a clear look since he'd begun his ascent, and he could now tell how badly the sheep were scattered and how many were lying in awkward heaps upon the stones and hard-baked earth.

Behind a fallen burro, the *campero*, Esteban, was maintaining a steady fire into the rocks. Pablo and the dogs were out of sight.

Jimmy resumed his climbing and almost immediately he saw the puncher in the rocks ahead of him. He was now filled with a dull, sullen rage against the girl and anyone else having a hand in the business and his first impulse was to kill the puncher when he saw him.

The man was stretched at length on his stomach, partially concealed by stone and brush, and it would have been an easy shot, but something inside Jimmy wouldn't let him do it without a warning of some kind. He'd never shot a man in the back before, and even a sheep war wouldn't get him started now.

He crept on hands and knees with his gun held ready in his right hand. Near a shielding boulder, he spread flat and inched along until he was less than three feet away from the other man. He was moving as silently as he could, but there was still some noise, and it was a point of astonishment with him that the puncher did not turn and see him. Coming clean around the rock, he saw the reason.

The puncher was lying flat with his head turned to one side, his mouth slack. His eyes were open and staring and his rifle was held only loosely in his hands in front of him. In the side of his head there was a smashed, ragged hole and the blood was already caking in the sun. It was Luke, and he was as dead as he'd ever be.

THE QUIET amazement filling Jimmy gave way to a feeling of urgency and dread when he realized that the angle was wrong for Esteban to have done the shooting. Also, Luke had been hit with a gun whose caliber was larger than the rifle used by the *campero* in the canyon. All at once, Jimmy Miles remembered the renegade Apaches who had dogged his trail from Deming.

What they were doing up in this wild place there was no way of telling—unless they had been tracking the sheep herd,

waiting for an opportunity to strike. More than likely, they had simply come upon them in their maraudings and had seen a good chance to wreak some havoc as they'd found it. It was Jimmy's experience that Apache renegades were seldom particular in their killings whatsoever. They generally had a short course to run and they made the most of it while it lasted.

He saw the first one a moment later, and any doubts he might have had at his first guess went up in exploded powder. He shot from the hip and saw the tawny body careen off a shelf of rock and tumble into a brush patch some fifty feet below.

A short while after that another Apache popped up and their guns roared simultaneously. Jimmy felt the close wind of death singe his hair and rip his hat off, but when the echo rocketed away he was still alive and whole, and he could have put another notch in his gun if he'd cared to keep a tally.

Jimmy got to thinking about Kit Sanford, then. He got to thinking about her and to filling with a tight anxiety because he knew she was somewhere in those rocks. He put the original thoughts about her into the back part of his mind and remembered only that she was a stranger in the country and that frontier people put their private squabbles aside when the Apaches were on the land.

He crouched there and looked around and took an estimation. The shooting had died out up on the canyon wall where he was, but the sound of it was now reverberating from a small side-canyon to his left. It was not a great way off, but he could see nothing from where he was.

Going on down at a slant, he felt the weight of the quiet all around him. He saw Esteban poke his head up from behind the burro, wave at him, then start on a careful, crouching lope toward the entrance to the other canyon. Once more, he looked for Pablo, but did not see him. Far off to the other side, he heard a dog bark, and he knew that at least one of them was still alive.

When he reached the floor again and sneaked around for a look into the narrow cul-de-sac, he saw how it was.

In the far end, a hundred yards away, gunfire was coming sporadically from behind a low cluster of rock and brush. Along either side, the Apache shooting was enfilading the shelter and Jimmy knew he had come into the rear of the enemy's positions. He did not worry about back-shooting any more. In this case it was sound military strategy.

When Esteban came up Jimmy sent him across the narrow mouth to take up the other side, and they then commenced their slow creep down toward the natural fort against the end wall. Jimmy had not done a great deal of Indian fighting in his short life, but he had learned enough from both experience and hearsay to know that no Apache enjoyed a cavalry charge, and that he was equally leery of being cornered in a hole. It was soon apparent that his learning was soundly grounded in fact.

Esteban got the first one with his rifle, and shortly after Jimmy picked off one who had twisted around to see what was going on behind him. After that it got general and pretty soon the Apaches were shooting at everything and even at themselves at times. The gunfire from the fort had ceased and Jimmy no longer had to worry about being accidentally hit from that source.

In a few more minutes he had no more worry from the renegades, either. He killed the last one not ten feet away from the fort itself, then braced himself for a look behind the rocks. He had a hard time crediting what he saw.

Pablo was back in there, as was the dog, Manuello, and so were the five lambs. And shielding them all was the girl, Kit Sanford, who seemed to be having a bad time getting the empty brass out of the old Frontier Colt.

JIMMY faced the situation with as much aplomb as he was able to muster at the moment. He didn't startle easy, but this one was a thing to get accustomed to. He had a hard time being casual.

"Well, now, howdy there, Miss Sanford," he said. "Looks almost like this fight got throwed open to the public, don't it?"

The girl put the gun down slowly, her face moving in a small, weary smile. "Yes, I guess it does," she said. "I didn't think I'd be happy to see you again, but I am."

Pablo raised to an elbow and Jimmy saw that he had been nicked in the arm. "*Si,* Jimmy, we are happy like birds when we see you coming with Esteban. Ho, how happy we are."

Jimmy put his hands on his hips and looked around. "I reckon we got 'em all. Most were in here, I guess, but there was some up in the rocks in the main canyon." Jimmy squared his face and looked at the girl. "Your ramrod's dead. I found him up there near the top."

Kit Sanford's hands knotted together in front of her. "Luke? Killed?"

"Yeah. They got him at close range, I guess. I don't figure he even knew they was there."

"I didn't either, until I came down here and the shooting started. I was trying to find Luke. He said he was going to get you in the Borego, and I was trying to stop him." Kit Sanford paused and looked at the ground. "I'd been thinking—and, well, I guess it's a public road, after all."

Pablo nodded his head and smiled. "*Si,* yes, Jimmy, I think that is right," he said. "Manuello and I, we try to stop the sheep when they run, and soon I am hit and lying on the ground and she comes to me and then we get to this place. Then, *por Dios,* she go out to get the lambs you carry on your horse! In the face of the Apaches, she does this!"

Jimmy stared and Kit Sanford made an excavation in the ground with her finger. "Well, they're helpless little things," she said, "and I'd seen what those devils had done to some of the others."

"They got feet like chisels," Jimmy said pleasantly, "and they gnaw the grass right down to the roots."

"I know. I guess I wasn't thinking about it then."

Jimmy commenced to tear up his shirt to wrap around Pablo's creased arm. "I guess we sometimes do our smartest doing and talking when we ain't thinking," he said. "Like as not, if I was to figure everything out and come to the conclusion that, since your man Luke's dead up there, you'll likely need a new foreman, and being a cattleman, I'd be just the buckaroo for the job, I'd never have the nerve to say it. But since I'm saying it without thinking, it just comes right out."

WHEN Jimmy sneaked a look at the girl she was smiling wide, her teeth white against the sun's coloring of her face. "Using the same unconscious logic, I guess I'd have to hire you," she said. "Even though you are a sheepman."

Jimmy finished with the bandage and tucked what was left of his shirt into his belt. "Like I one-time said, I'm only a temporary sheepman. Don't seem like there's really much use for me once we get the herd on the trail again. I might be persuaded to ride on up as far as the Anchas, though."

Pablo was making a great show of pursing his lips and being thoughtful. "*Si,* I think maybe you are a cowman, after all," he said. "I think if you ride to the Anchas that would be all right. I would not keep a man from his cows."

Jimmy grinned and stood up. Esteban had disappeared and was just now bringing the horses into the mouth of the cul-de-sac. "I reckon we'd better get rounded up then, and get on with it." He picked up one of the lambs, then thought better of it and handed it to Kit Sanford. "Here, maybe you better take care of these for awhile. I reckon you're more of a natural along that line."

The girl took the lamb in her arms and regarded Jimmy with raised eyebrows. "In just what way did you mean that, Mister Miles?"

Jimmy thought it over and scratched at the side of his head. "Why—I, ah—why, come to think on it—" It was the first time he had been at a loss for words in quite awhile, and he was not yet sure whether it would augur for any good.

JACKPOTS and

A Swap and Whopper Novelet

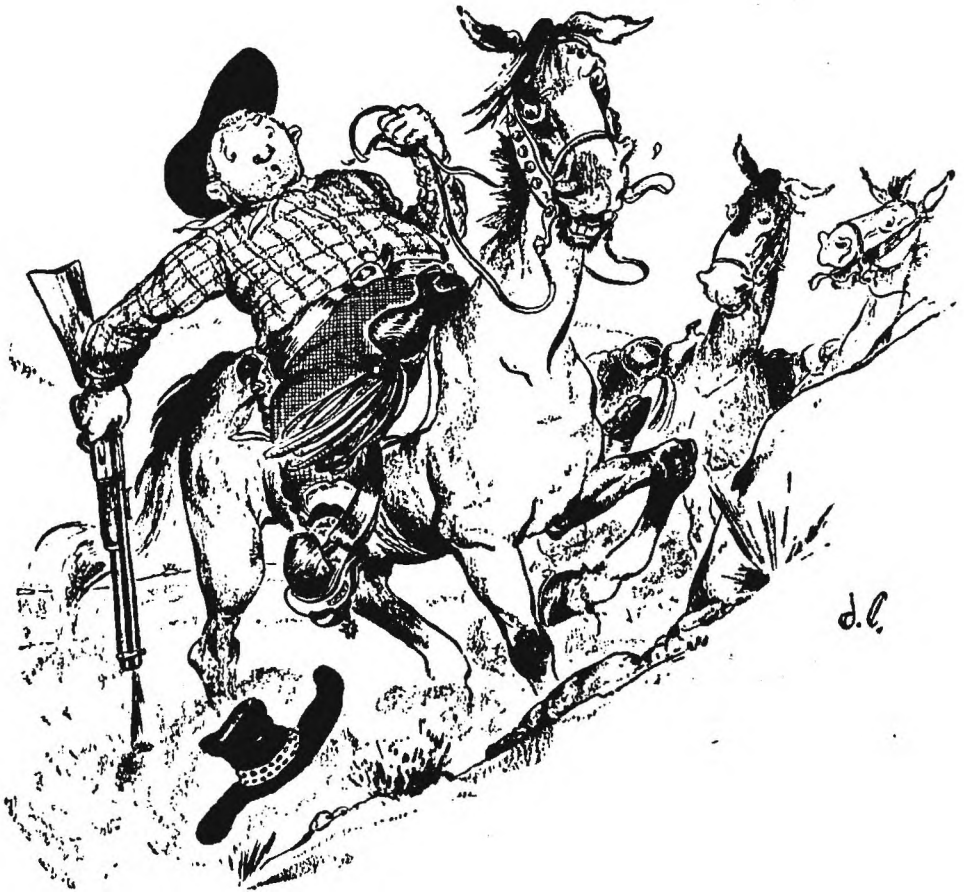
CHAPTER I

Villains or Victims?

AS THEY neared the green, settled valley, the two weary riders hunted hopefully for a stopping-place. Some secluded spot off the hurrying highway where they could rest their sinews and ease their nerves, worn ragged by the continuous whisk of traffic—big buses, roaring trucks and the endless procession of other motor vehicles so hard to escape anywhere in California.

About noontime they came suddenly onto a little-used road, hardly more than dim wheeltracks, that angled sharply off the pavement past a rural mailbox. It topped a brushy ridge, then plunged steeply into a shady draw. There a small

When the Weary Wanderers Roam Into a "Horse



CRACKPOTS

by SYL MacDOWELL

creek spilled into a deep, clear pool. On a sandy bank beside it "Swap" Bootle and "Whopper" Whaley reined up at last and stepped out of saddle.

"Goshlemity, this is almost too good to be true!" Whopper breathed gratefully as he settled down with the grace of a gaunt and ungainly camel, stretching his lean, long frame on the sun-warmed sand.

"It shore is, pardner," agreed his small, round, shabby traveling companion. "And plumb surrounded by privacy. I bet we could camp here from now on and never be noticed by nobody."

"All right, then. How about unloadin' our soogans and grubsack and cookin' dinner?" Whopper droned lazily. As he spoke he tilted his hat over his nose and rested his scraggly head in his locked fingers, which showed his willingness to

Harvard" They Land at the Foot of the Class!

entrust Swap Bootle with all the camp chores.

Swap was used to Whopper's chronic laziness. But sometimes he was pretty clever at thinking up a few good dodges of his own.

" 'Tain't healthy," he said quickly, "to bathe right after a big, hearty meal."

Whopper pushed his hat aside to give his small sidekick a troubled, one-eyed stare.

"What made you mention that?" he

SWAP

demanded. "Who said anything about takin' a bath?"

SWAP crouched down and poked a finger in the pool. The water wasn't too cold.

"Yuh know how long it's been?"

"Since what?"

"Since we had a genuine soap cleanup?" I'll tell yuh. It was Christmas week, at Aqua Caliente, up in the Tehachapis. And here it is, the middle of Spring."

"Goshlemity, yuh can't go by that!" protested Whopper. "There ain't no seasons, actually, in this mild climate!"

"Just the same, this is a good time and place. Not only to bathe but to slosh out a few things. So set up, Whopper Whaley, and peel off yore shirt and socks."

Whopper gave a despairing groan. But he had learned that there were times when Swap had to be humored and this seemed to be one of those occasions. So he dug his bony elbows into the sand, hoisted himself upright and reluctantly tugged off one worn boot, then the other, while Swap unloaded their bedrolls and camp gear and unsaddled the horses.

"I'll tell yuh what," he suggested brightly, as he pulled his shirt off over his head, "there ain't no sense in makin' a lot of unnecessary work out of it. I just now thunk up a time-savin' scheme."

Why he should concern himself about time, it didn't occur to him to say. Time was one thing that the wandering ex-cowboys had more of than anything else.

"What is it?" Swap inquired suspiciously.

"Well, s'posen you soap our shirts and things real good, then use 'em to scrub my back. Thataway, we kin reduce the effort to one simple operation, savvy?"

Swap eyed the other's skinny back and ribs.

"Mebbe yuh got a good idea there, pardner," he decided. "Yuh're shore built like a washboard. Scrooch over there into the water and we'll try it."

Whopper advanced crabwise into the pool, shuddering at his first, unaccustomed contact with the water. Then he hunkered down, arms folded against his knees, as Swap vigorously went to work.

The suds came as Swap scrubbed, heedless of Whopper's grunts and grumbling.

"It works fine!" he chattered. "Yuh're even better'n a washboard, Whopper Whaley. Goosepimples is one thing a washboard ain't got and they help to—"

Whatever they helped to do, he didn't get a chance to explain. Because just then came a rattling commotion, the rumble of a motor and squeak of brakes, and they both jerked erect to see a bright yellow pickup truck coming down at them from the brushy rise.

Hitched to the small truck was a fancy horse trailer, built along the lines of a Roman chariot. Through the plexiglas shield, they saw that the flashy metal trailer contained two horses.

The truck halted by the creek and the

driver leaned out. He was a youngish man in a neat zipper jacket and big ranch hat and he had a manner of nervous haste as he flashed a one-sided grin at the two of them, then let his restless eyes dart to their two busily-grazing horses.

His gaze lingered on the animals, which was natural enough, because they were unusual specimens. Whopper's was something between a claybank and a palomino, only it was dappled with mouldy-looking spots, and aptly described as a cheese-colored roan. Swap's mount was an equine freak of light reddish hue, with the black mane of a bay and the silver tail of a sorrel, so he called it a bay-sorrel.

"Where'd the Perfessor get them circusy nags?" the trucker asked in a rapid, rasping voice. "And where's the Perfessor? Never mind, I'm in a rush! Wade out of there, you puddle ducks, and help me dump this load! Get a jump on you!"

HE SPOKE with such brisk authority that Swap and Whopper numbly, wonderingly obliged. They unchained and lowered the tailgate, which made a platform that reached from the bed of the horse trailer to the ground. As they did that, the young trucker reached in the front, unsnapped halter chains and backed the horses out.

They were a span to bring admiration to the eye of any horseman, a beautifully matched pair of apaloosas. They upped the tailgate and the driver hopped back in the pickup, leaving Swap and Whopper standing there, in their dazzling nudity, holding onto the halters.

Whopper rubbed one storklike shank uneasily against the other as the trucker expertly backed and turned.

"Hey, friend!" he sang out. "Wh-what'll we do with these here hosses, huh?"

The trucker flashed another quick, one-sided grin.

"What d'you think?" he shouted back. "Give 'em the benefit of your education, as usual. Tell the Perfessor I'll be seein' him around. G'wan back in the old swimmin' hole."

He gunned the small, yellow truck. With a spurt of gravel, it went back over the rise, back towards the highway.

The pardners gaped at one another.

"G-goshlemity, now who d'yuh reckon that jigger was?" blurted Whopper.

Swap's shoulders jerked in a combination shrug and shiver.

"Don't ask me!"

"Wh-what'll we do with these hosses?"

"Yuh heerd what the man said."

"And the Perfessor he spoke of, how we goin' tuh locate him?"

WHOPPER

"Here!"

Swap thrust the halter chain he was holding into Whopper's hand. He grabbed up, from their heaped belongings, a smudged floursack that they used for a dish towel.

Quickly draping it around him, like a sarong, he gallivanted after their hurried visitor.

He ran as fast as his stubby, bowed legs would carry him, reaching the highway in time to see the yellow pickup and horse trailer moving rapidly, well beyond earshot.

Too late now to ask what the mysterious proceedings were all about.

So Swap leaned against the mailbox to get his breath, and to pull a sticker out of one bare foot. This done, it occurred to him to twist around and see if the mailbox offered any hint.

Intelligence dawned as he read the lettering:

HORSE HARVARD
BOARDING, BREAKING, TRAINING,
AND GAITING
PROF. STILLWATER BATES

He trudged back to convey that fragment of information to Whopper. He paused on the rise for a long gaze on beyond the draw. He saw, about a mile up in the hills, a red barn and fenced pastures. Relief shone on Swap's simple, trusting face as he rejoined Whopper, who was wringing out his clothes and spreading them on the sand to dry.

"That young feller, he mistook us for coupla hoss wranglers hired by a party named Perfessor Stillwater Bates, seems like!" he chirped cheerfully.

Whopper rubbed his long, stubbly jaw. "Fishy soundin' name, sort of. What else did yuh find out?"

"These apaloochies he left with us, he must of brung 'em for the Perfessor to train, that's all. The Perfessor, he runs a cayuse college over yonderly, seems like. We'll just tootle over there and—"

"Not till we're in shape to go callin'. And while we're waitin' for our duds to dry out, we might as well eat," decided Whopper, easing himself out full length on the warm sand again, and covering his face with his hat.

CHAPTER II

Good Intentions

THE dip in the pool briskened Whopper's appetite and he cleaned up a half skilletful of canned hash with the speed and thoroughness of a vacuum cleaner. Then they both climbed into their rough-laundered clothes and started for what obviously was the "Horse Harvard" campus, leading the showy apaloosas.

Full of hash and good intentions, Whopper took a nibble of plugcut to settle his dinner.

"It's a good thing we got this chance to do the Perfessor a favor," he remarked. "Thataway, he'll be glad to have us neighbor with him for a spell."

"That'd be fine," said Swap.

"He might even ask us over to supper."

"Or offer us jobs."

Whopper's jaw sagged.

"Goshlemity, no, I hope not!" he exclaimed. "How long has it been since we retired, anyhow?"

"Since we first met up, me and you, and took to roamin' around, seein' the country."

"And we've seen plenty, ain't we?"

"More'n we'd ever have seen if we'd kept on as cowpunchers."

"Then don't weaken, pardner, and let this Perfessor talk us into goin' to work."

"Don't worry, Whopper Whaley," Swap declared stoutly. "There's still a lot left to see. For one thing, this part of the country is all new to us."

"Now yuh mention it, where are we?"

"In Ventura County."

"That town we caught sight of, down in the valley, what town is it?"

"Ojai."

"Ohio? Shucks, yuh're mixed up, pardner. Ohio's back East."

"Not Ohio, but Ojai, which sounds like it was spelled o-h-i. And them mountains," Swap continued, indicating a rocky, fire-scarred barrier to the north, "they're part of the Santa Ynez Range. Mostly wild and uninhabited, the road map says."

As Swap delivered that brief travelogue, a vista of cleared land and fenced pastures opened up, with the red barn close ahead of them.

"And this," Swap concluded, "must be Perfessor Bates' place."

The barn door sagged open. There was no livestock to be seen. There was no evidence of life or human presence, although the premises did not appear to have been deserted for long.

Whopper rubbed his jaw again, vaguely disturbed. "Don't seem that there's anybody around, nowhere."

"Mebbe it's vacation time for hoss colleges."

That left Whopper unconvinced.

"The place looks as fishy as the Perfessor's name sounds. That cuss that brung these apaloochies, he acted fishy, too."

"What're yuh drivin' at, Whopper Whaley?"

"I dunno. I just wish we had these hosses offen our hands."

"Let's mosey over to the barn. Might be that Perfessor Bates left some word tellin' where he's at."

The barn, they discovered, was roughly divided into three sections. One side consisted of a row of empty stalls. The center contained only a scattering of hay. The other side was partitioned off into crude living quarters and a tack room, stripped of everything except a rusted cookstove, a few dilapidated articles of furniture and some useless trash, consisting largely of empty whisky bottles.

"If yuh ask me," declared Whopper as he completed his brief inspection, "I'd say that Perfessor Bates don't live here no more."

"Then we don't have to worry about him offerin' us jobs."

"But if he's pulled out permanent, why did that jigger bring the apaloochies? Also, what'll we do with 'em?"

"Well, we can't leave 'em here," said Swap. "And 'tain't right to turn such valuable critters loose to stray."

WHOPPER nodded vigorously. "It's a cinch we don't want 'em on our hands," he fretted. "I shore wish we'd found out who they belong to."

"An old cowhand like you ought to know how to find that out."

"Yeah? How?"

"Here's how. Let's head back to camp, saddle up our own hosses, turn these apaloochies loose, then foller 'em. A hoss most usually meanders back to where it belongs."

Whopper, fanging off a fresh chew of plugcut, pondered on some easier way out of it. But he failed to think up any labor-saving solution.

"Okay," he finally grunted. "We got to dangle to town right soon anyhow, and lay in a supply of grub. So let's do that and git it over with."

So saying, he found a scrap of rope in the tack room, knotted it into an Indian bridle, legged onto the bare back of one of the apaloosas and took off at a lope for their campspot.

Swap, after a moment of hesitation, got a good grip on the halter chain and heaved himself onto the other animal. He was taking a chance, he knew, of being bucked over the red barn. But the horse tootled away after the other one.

Only a well-broken horse would do that. From which it was reasonable to deduce that it had not been brought to "Horse Harvard" for the benefit of an education.

Not only was it broken and gentled, but it proved to be full-gaited. It was already a "school horse," as an old horse trader like Swap well knew. The span, being beautifully matched and marked, were plainly worth a good-sized hunk of money. Such being the case, whoever owned them would be glad to get them back, and grateful that they had fallen into safe, honest hands, he reasoned.

So the pardners left their camp gear by the creek pool, got the cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel under leather, and hazed the two apaloosas out to the highway. There, of their own accord, the piebald beauties moseyed down towards the valley and town of Ojai.

Swap and Whopper didn't hurry them. That would have defeated their purpose. Consequently, the horses paused often to nip at tempting tidbits of grass along the right-of-way.

Out of the hills, the highway flattened and straightened, hemmed in by orange groves. The air was heavy with the warm fragrance of blossoms. Bees buzzed busily. The sky was radiantly clear. At frequent intervals, neat cottages and elegant homes were tucked away back in the neat rows of trees.

The atmosphere of peace and prosperity cast a spell over Swap and Whopper and they were filled with pious satisfaction for

the good deed they were performing.

"When we git where we're going, we'll be paid a big reward," Whopper reflected confidently.

"How much, d'yuh reckon?"

"I'd say it'll be way up in two figgers."

"Twenty-five cents?"

"Goshlemity, more likely twenty-five dollars!" Whopper snorted. "This is a generous country."

"How kin yuh tell that? We ain't met nobody yet."

"How kin I tell? See that meadow lark, settin' on the fence and singing its head off? While a flock of migratin' blackbirds are on the ground, gobbling up worms? That's a sure sign that the folks who live hereabouts are big-hearted and open-handed."

SUCH reasoning was typical of Whopper. He had an imagination that was so lively that he couldn't handle it, sometimes. As a result, he was a glib and convincing liar. That was why he had been called Whopper for so long that he had forgotten his real given name.

Swap, being a more practical sort, retorted:

"It might also be a sure sign that Ojai folks are like them blackbirds. Ready to grab off and gobble up anything they can."

Only fools or philosophers could indulge in such whimsical fancies. Which category Swap and Whopper fitted into was a matter of opinion.

The apaloosas, if they were homeward bound, were in no hurry to get back. They dawdled along beside the highway, enjoying their idleness, so that the afternoon was well along before they penetrated the town.

Swap and Whopper were interested in their first good look at Ojai. The main street was flanked by arcade-fronted buildings that sheltered the sidewalks, giving shaded glimpses of stores and shops that were refined and dignified. They bore out other indications that the surrounding population was made up largely of people with expensive tastes and the means for indulging them.

"I'd say a lot of rich, retired millionaires live around here," said Whopper. "I hope they ain't jacked up the price of groceries and plugcut."

"Look, Whopper!" jerked out the little pardner. "The apaloochies, they've stopped there at that hitchrack!"

"Shore enough! They've been there before, I'd say!"

"What does it say on that building by it?"

Whopper squinted. His squint became a stare. His grizzled jaw dropped to his wishbone as a grim-looking, square-jowled man in uniform stepped outside.

"G-goshlemity!" he warbled. "It—it's the Police Station!"

The policeman leaned on the hitchrack and gave them a long, hard stare.

"Hey, you birds!" he demanded suspiciously. "What are you doing with Tony Basso's horses?"

Whopper's Adam's apple elevatored up and down his lean, leathery neck. He forced a glassy-eyed smile. It was time for some fast, convincing talk.

"W-we just blowed in from—from Perfessor Stillwater Bates' layout and—"

A ripple of dread chilled both of them as the policeman whipped a revolver out of his holster and leveled it across the hitchrack.

"I thought so!" he whooped. "Pile down and march in here!"

"But—but we're lookin' for—"

The hostile cop didn't let Whopper finish.

"And we're lookin' for that crook Bates! Got a warrant out for that horse thief! So you're part of his gang, huh? What a break! C'mon, you're pinched!"

CHAPTER III

Whopper Confesses

SCARED and confused, the pardners were hustled into a grim and unlovely jail corridor and shoved into a depressing, vault-like chamber that the Ojai police called the Interrogation Room.

In almost no time at all, they were seated on two hard chairs, surrounded by cold-eyed policemen.

"All right, now spill it!" rapped out the one who had taken them in custody. "Where's Bates?"

"We don't know!" Whopper gurgled hoarsely.

"Ain't talkin', huh?"

"Goshlemity, we ain't never laid eyes on Perfessor Bates!" blurted Whopper.

"You admitted you came from Bates' hangout!" barked the cop.

"Sh-shore! But he wasn't there!"

"You're tellin' me!" snapped the other.

"How come you had Basso's prizewinners in your possession?" demanded another officer.

"A man brung 'em and left 'em with us!"

"If you don't know Bates, what were you doing at Bates' phony horse college?"

"J-just stumbled onto it, sort of! Me and Mister Bootle, here, we needed a restup, that's the way it was."

"You'll get a restup, a good long one!" threatened the arresting officer. "Let's hear from you, little squirt!"

Swap, thus indicated, recovering a little from shock, felt a rising indignation at this hostile reception.

"Lookit here!" he exclaimed. "If we stole those hosses, d'yuh reckon we'd be loco enough to show up here at headquarters?"

It was a good point. But the answer was:

"We'll ask the questions, blubber boy! You answer 'em!"

"All right, ask me what we was doin' with them apaloochies!" Swap retorted spiritedly. "We aimed to find the owner, that's what!"

"Ah-ha! Then you knew they were stolen horses?"

"We knowed they had to belong tuh somebody, naturally, and got suspicious after—"

Another officer burst unceremoniously into the Interrogation Room.

"Just got Tony Basso on the phone. He didn't know, till a little while ago, that the horses were missing. He's coming right in with his stableman."

"Good!" gritted the square-jowled cop. "We'll have him sign a complaint. It's a simple, open-and-shut case of grand larceny and we'll sweat the truth out of these homely hooligans or my name ain't Fogarty!"

"The truth?" sputtered Swap. "Shucks, you don't know the truth when yuh hear it!"

"No? Try us!" said Officer Fogarty in a menacing voice.

Whopper rolled a quid of chewing from one hollow cheek to the other and steadied himself.

"Now, look," he pleaded. "Me and Mister Bootle, here, we was erasin' the stains of travel from ourselves when along come a truck and hoss trailer and the man asked us tuh help him unload. We did, he vamoosed, and that's how we got hold of the apaloochies, savvy?"

Officer Fogarty gave an ugly laugh. "So now a man gave you the horses, huh?"

"That's right, yessir," Whopper proceeded eagerly, "and it was after that we found Perfessor Bates' spread, on account of the man havin' mentioned him, and us bein' camped nearby, which we kin prove."

Fogarty, totally unimpressed, came back with:

"Make it easy on yourself, tall, slender and handsome. Where's Bates?"

WITH a sigh of despair, Whopper slumped in his chair. It just didn't pay to tell the truth. Nobody believed him anyhow.

Fogarty straightened him with a backhanded rap under the chin.

"Where's Bates?" he repeated, in a flat,

monotonous tone which told that he intended to stick to that question until he got a suitable answer.

The rap not only brought Whopper erect but it jolted the cud of plugcut down his throat. He tried to speak but gave forth only a gurgling sound, like a drain in need of a plumber.

Fogarty whacked him again. On the back this time. Whopper coughed, gulped, then swallowed the plugcut. That brought the interrogation to a halt. Whopper was making like a roupy, bedraggled rooster when hurried steps echoed in the corridor and the door was flung open.

Two arrivals were ushered inside. The foremost was a swarthy, keg-shaped man dressed in horsy finery that included a flashy diamond horseshoe stickpin. He puffed on a black cigar the size of a jet-propelled rocket. He hauled a handful of the lethal-looking cylinders from inside his purplish tweed jacket and passed them around, buttering up the police.

"Well, Mister Basso," smirked Fogarty, "I nailed the crooks that rustled your horses and here they are."

Basso puffed:

"Horse highjackers! Paloosey pirates! Wanna bust 'em in de snoot, Bugsy?"

The second man, until now eclipsed by Basso's bulk, sidled into full view. He was youngish, wore a trim zipper jacket and popped his knuckles nervously as he flashed a one-sided grin at the ring of police.

Swap's eyes widened.

"That's him!" he yelped shrilly, pointing a shaky finger. "That's the cuss that brung the apaloochies!"

"Bunk!" muttered Bugsy, fumbling for a cigarette. "Here's what happened. I was takin' the nags to Smitty, the blacksmith, to get 'em shod. Up the road a piece I get out of the pickup for a few minutes. When I get back, the trailer is empty, the nags is gone."

"Go ahead, Bugsy, bop 'em!" Basso urged.

"No rough stuff," ordered Fogarty. "I want these monkeys to stay in shape to make a clean confession. We gotta find a flock of stolen horses. Where's Bates, pony boy?"

"Why don't yuh pump this double-crosser Bugsy?" wailed Swap. "Him and the Perfessor was in cahoots!"

"Baloney!" said Bugsy.

Whopper was recovering from his paroxysm. So the police spurned the simple truth and took the word of this bald-faced liar, Bugsy.

The only way out, therefore, was to outlie Bugsy.

He turned mournfully to Swap.

"I reckon it ain't no use, pardner," he blatted. "Let's take Friend Fogarty to—the hideout."

"Wh-what?" gabbled Swap.

"The law, it'll go easy on us, mebbe. If we spill everything."

"Now you're gettin' smart, slats," crowed Fogarty.

BUGSY'S pale eyes probed Whopper's doleful face. He was puzzled, that was easy to see. Perhaps he was half-convinced that Swap and Whopper were Professor Bates' henchmen, after all, and was wondering where the trail would lead.

"This dope, he's got somethin' up his sleeve," he gritted. "Don't let him fool you, copper."

"Nobody's foolin' me," Fogarty bragged.

Whopper got up, bolstered by returning confidence. He was talking his way out of the police station, anyhow.

"Goshlemity, what's holdin' us?" he yawped. "Yuh been hollerin' about the Perfessor. Let's go!"

Fogarty clamped hold of his arm, and with his other hand hoisted Swap out of his chair.

"Yuh'd better borrow a hoss from Mister Basso, friend," Whopper told Fogarty. "Where we're headin' for, yuh can't drive no police car."

"Good, I got my saddle out in de Kidallac!" said Basso. "Saddle up a paloosey, Bugsy."

"This isn't any one-man job, Fogarty," objected one of the other policemen.

"Depends on the man," was the cocky retort. "If I can't handle Bates alone, my

name ain't Fogarty."

And now they were outside. Whopper took a deep, grateful breath of fresh air. He reached to his hip pocket and nibbled off a fresh chew and mounted the cheese-colored roan.

Swap, flabbergasted by their deliverance, laddered onto the bay-sorrel. Officer Fogarty eased aboard the readied apaloosa and slapped his holster.

"No funny business, understand?" he grated. "I'd just as soon drill you as eat. How far?"

"A heap closer'n yuh'd think, friend," said Whopper, prodding the roan into a lope.

Bugsy, standing by the hitchrack, watched their departure without enthusiasm.

"How'll I play it?" he asked himself, "if those punks turn up with the Perfessor? And why didn't the Perfessor put me wise before he hit for the hills?"

The three riders rapidly put the town behind them and when they reached the "Horse Harvard" turnoff, Fogarty drew his six-shooter.

The sun was low and the shadows lay long on the dim, twisting road.

"Just remember I'm right behind you and there ain't no closed season on horse thieves," he reminded them.

Swap shuddered. "Wish I knowed what you was up to. Whopper Whaley," he muttered guardedly.

Whopper winked. It was surprising how brash he could be sometimes, in moments of desperation.

"Won't be long now, pardner," he said blithely.

When they reached the sandy bank by the creek pool, Whopper reined the roan around.

"My cinch is loose, Friend Fogarty," he announced glibly.

"Then light and tighten it, slim. But don't get any fancy ideas."

Whopper swung from saddle, lifted a stirrup and fumbled with the roan's latigo. The apaloosa stepped mincingly to the water's edge and lowered its head for a drink.

BUT Whopper had counted on that. He was close to Fogarty's horse. He slyly calculated the distance over his shoulder, then gave a backward kick with one long leg. His spur needled the apaloosa's flank. The result was instantaneous. The horse snorted, humped and bucked.

Officer Fogarty, sitting loose-legged and loose-reined, was catapulted neatly. He gave a startled croak in midair, like a jumbo bullfrog.

And then there was a tremendous splash in the middle of the pool and Whopper hit leather in one bound.

"Ride, pardner!" he ripped, roweling the roan into a run along the road towards the deserted horse college.

The two of them followed this natural line of flight as though pursued by hostile savages brandishing scalping knives. Nothing invited them to tarry at the red barn. They whizzed past it, skirted the fenced pasture and streaked for the broken, brushy region beyond, which lifted to the lofty Santa Ynez Range.

Sundown brought them to a canyon trail. Another half-hour and it was dusk. Then soon came darkness.

The pardners felt tolerably safe now. Officer Fogarty was in no shape for a stubborn chase. And a pursuing posse could not be organized before morning.

"Hey, how about all our camp gear back yonder?" wailed Swap, as he hauled up alongside Whopper.

"Goshlemity, twenty-thirty bucks'll git us another outfit, and we needed new soogans anyhow," Whopper told him. "Pull yoreself together, pardner. Be glad yore name ain't Fogarty."

CHAPTER IV

At Vasquez Rock

EVER upward the trail climbed steadily. The horses soon were winded, so they made a breathing halt. This gave Swap a chance to declare his objections to Whopper's way out of their dilemma.

"That was a mighty rash

thing yuh done, Whopper Whaley!" he fumed. "Now we're in a real bad mess."

"Better'n jail, ain't it?"

"Shucks, we was plumb innercent!"

"But not a Chinaman's chance to prove it. That scalawag Bugsy, he made us the goats to save his own measly hide."

"Him and Perfessor Bates was hooked up, all right, but he wasn't real sure whether we was or not."

"Yup, that's about the way of it. Bugsy stole them apaloochies from his boss, Basso. And the Perfessor's hoss college was just a dodge tuh git hold of fine hosses and make off with 'em, it looks like. He'd found out that the law was onto him and took off," reasoned Whopper. "That's how we fell under Friend Fogarty's suspicion, when we mentioned Hoss Harvard."

"When you mentioned it," corrected Swap. "And I figure yuh're stretchin' things by callin' Fogarty 'friend.' I bet he gave off steam when he wallered out of that pool."

Whopper grinned wanly at that mental picture. "Yeah, I reckon. Such bein' the case, it'd be a good idea if we was clean out of Ventura County by daylight. So let's poke along."

They passed occasional cottages and canyon ranches, saw lights shining from the windows, and were startled once by the loud and persistent yapping of a dog. A door opened, somebody looked out, but they flitted past unseen.

At the head of the canyon, the trail rose sharply in a series of switchbacks that led, after awhile, to an oak flat.

The flat commanded a wideflung view of the glittering lights of Ojai, far below. The night air was crisp at this elevation, which sharpened Whopper's pangs of hunger. The thought of food, together with his emptiness, somehow made him tilt his long, knobby nose upwards and sniff hopefully.

He sniffed again, eagerly now. Was it a trick of his imagination or a reality?

"Goshlemity!" he exclaimed hungrily. "What's that smell? Coffee and bacon?"

He nearly leaped out of his skin when an answer came out of the darkness.

"It's not marshmallows, stranger."

Their first panicky thought was that the long arm of the law had reached out, in some incredible manner, to recapture them. Yet it wasn't Fogarty's jarring voice.

"Wh-who's there?" Whopper asked strickenly.

"Who wants to know?"

"W-we're just coupla strangers, pilgrimatin' through," Whopper babbled. "Name's Whaley and Bootle. Wh-who are you, mister?"

They heard footsteps advancing in the dry litter of oak leaves. A flashlight stabbed the darkness, exploring their scared, blinking faces and the two horses.

Then the voice again. It didn't sound unfriendly.

"Use that keen sniffer of yours, brother, and follow up that coffee and bacon scent. My camp's at the big rock, close ahead. I'm right behind you."

The hint of hospitality quelled Whopper's alarm. It didn't sound like the law talking.

"Fine!" he breathed. "C'mon, pardner!"

THE trail twisted among the gnarled oak trunks to the upper edge of the flat, where a towering knob of naked granite stood out against the stars. The flashlight sent out its cone of brilliance again. Close in front of them, a spring dripped from a fern-grown overhang at the cavernous base of the rock. It was a shallow, cavelike depression and snugly sheltered there they sighted the camp. Little streamers of smoke lifted from a hastily-covered campfire.

"Light," the man behind them said, "and take it easy."

The two of them levered down out of saddle. The other advanced to the fire, uncovered the glowing embers and tossed on some fuel that quickly took hold.

As the blaze leaped, he straightened, and they got their first look at this newfound friend.

He was an amiable-looking character of generous bulk and crisply gray at the temples, under a black Stetson worn at

a jaunty angle. He wore boots and levis and a woolen plaid shirt. But what glued their attention was the saddle rifle in the crook of his right arm.

Seeing their troubled concern, he laughed sociably and leaned it against the granite.

"Just a lone wolf's custom, boys. No offense intended. I just like to make talk across a gun barrel at night. Till I know who I'm talking to. I expect you thought I was a ghost, eh?"

"Well, we was sort of jolted, that's a fact," Whopper admitted.

"You know, I felt like a spook, up here by my lonesome. The ghost of Vasquez, that's me." The man chuckled, as he picked up a blackened coffeepot and set it by the fire.

"Who's Vasquez?" piped Swap, speaking for the first time.

"You're strangers, all right, if you never heard of Vasquez. He was a noted outlaw, in early days. This place is called Vasquez Rock, because this was his favorite lookout, according to legend, where he could see what was going on down below."

"Sort of a robber's roost, huh?" said Whopper, advancing to the fire and warming his hands. "That makes it a fitten place for me and Mister Bootle, here. In a way of speakin'."

"How so?"

"We had a slight misunderstandin' with the Ojai police," Whopper said wryly.

"Not on account of anything we done, though," Swap hastened to add.

"No? How come?" inquired their genial host as he went about meal preparations.

"A low-down miscreant knowed as Perfessor Stillwater Bates got us in a turrible jackpot," Swap announced.

"You don't say!" drawled the other. "How'll you have your bacon, boys?"

"Thick," Whopper stated promptly. "Coffee the same. And if yuh got some spuds, Mister Bootle here, he'll help yuh peel and fix 'em for fryin'. Yup, that jailbait, Bates, was at the bottom of all our trouble."

The man whetted a butcher knife against the side of a boot.

"Let's hear about it," he said in a sympathetic tone.

"It's thisaway," gabbled Whopper. "Perfessor Bates is a wholesale hoss thief who run a fake training stable down Ojai way. We made camp nearby, by accident, where we got tangled up with another dishonest character called Bugsy, who unloaded a pair of stolen apaloochies onto us. While we was tryin' to find the owner, a barrelheaded cop named Fogarty grabbed us and tossed us in the cooler."

FOR a moment or two the man eyed them with twitching lips.

"Then what?"

"We made a slick gitaway."

"So it appears. This Professor What's-his-name—"

"Bates," said Whopper.

"This Professor Bates, you don't know where he's located at present, by any chance?"

"I shore wish we did know!" Swap declared vigorously.

"Why?"

"We'd fix him, good and plenty!"

"We shore would," Whopper declared stoutly. "If we ever cross trails with that varmint, he'll be sorry!"

"Figure to lug him back to justice?"

"It'd be a way tuh prove our innercence," Swap said.

"And it'd give us a heap of satisfaction, besides," Whopper growled. "Reward or no reward, dead or alive, on foot or horseback."

"I know just about how you feel," their agreeable campmate said as he turned over sizzling strips of bacon. He bestowed an admiring sideglance at the cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel, dragging rein and nibbling grass in the circle of firelight. "Besides which, you'd like to make sure that your own horses are safe."

"I ain't skeered none, fur's our own critters is concerned," declared Whopper, poking out his skinny chest swaggeringly. "It'd take a heap sight smarter hombre than Perfessor Bates tuh sneak-rob us."

"You bet," chimed in Swap. "We don't git riled up easy, but when we do, we're

bad medicine, mister."

"The more I think about it," Whopper sounded off, "the better I'd like tuh tangle with Perfessor Bates and lug him in for bounty."

"Well, let's not get our insides in an uproar at suppertime," smiled the smooth-mannered man in the black hat as he poured out hot coffee. "Something tells me that Professor Bates is going to get what's coming to him, right soon."

They dropped the subject, then. Swap and Whopper enjoyed the sociable meal and felt that they had made a worthwhile friend when he loaned them a pair of blankets and helped them to make a soft, comfortable shakedown of dry grass under the overhanging rock.

They staked out the roan and the bay-sorrel on a patch of good grazing and soon were soundly and blissfully asleep, with the relaxed assurance that their troubles were behind them.

But when they woke up, about sunrise—

CHAPTER V

But Not Forgotten

FIRST to regain consciousness was Swap. He sat up, rubbed his sleep-blurred eyes, stretched and yawned. The campspot was wrapped in stillness, broken only by the slow drip of the spring. The campfire ashes were cold. He gazed around and saw no sign of their companion. He pulled on his boots, got up and had a look-around.

He was vaguely uneasy to find no sign of camp gear—not even the sooty coffeepot. He roused the snoring Whopper.

"Our friend, he shore's a early bird," he announced. "I can't find him nowhere around."

"Prob'ly gone to tend to his hoss," mumbled Whopper. "What're we havin' for breakfast?"

"Shucks, I don't see no grub around, neither," Swap said anxiously.

"Mebbe he's got it stashed somewhere and has went after it. Me, I feel like flapjacks."

"Then git a fire going. I'll go tend our hosses," Swap said.

He was back in a hurry, as Whopper knelt and blew a smouldering heap of twigs ablaze.

"Our hosses!" he shrilled. "They—they're gone!"

Whopper, hardly awake yet, looked befuddled.

"How come? Slip their halters?"

"N-no! Picket ropes gone, too! Also our saddles—everything!"

Whopper lurched to his feet.

He fanged off a soothing nubbin of plug-cut.

"Now don't git stampeded," he said. "Our pal, Mister—Mister—"

"He didn't tell us his name, come to think about it!"

"Well, he wasn't no ghost. He's bound to be around, somewhere. Let's both make a looksee."

They made a circling search that took them to the yonder side of the lofty rock. There, warming in the early sunlight, they came onto a small, crude stone corral. It was empty.

But in and around it lay recent tracks and horse sign.

"Look!" yelped Swap. "Not one hoss, but a half-dozen was corraled here! And took off durin' the night!"

"That explains everything, pardner."

"Wh-what're yuh drivin' at?"

"Our friend's cavvy broke out o' the corral. He borrered our hosses to shag after 'em."

"Lookit here, Whopper Whaley, no man kin ride two hosses at once! Also, what become of the camp gear, the grub, and the man's gun and his own soogans, huh? Tell me that!"

Whopper extracted enough juice from his chew to decorate the top of the corral wall. Then he sat down.

"G-goshlemity!" he gurgled feebly. "It does look sort of odd, now, don't it?"

"Yuh want to know what I think?" Swap cried wildly.

Whopper dangled his legs loosely, dejectedly.

"No." he groaned sickishly. "Not specially. B-because I'm thinkin' the same thing, I reckon."

"A fine thing!" fumed Swap. "After all the brag we made tuh Perfessor Bates, about what we'd do if we ever met up with him! I bet he's laughin' up both sleeves!"

Whopper hunched over and twiddled his thumbs. "We might as well draggle back to Ojai," he said in a dull, defeated voice.

"Back to Ojai?" yelped Swap. "What for?"

"Yuh know any better chance to eat than back where we left our belongin's, including grub? Another thing, F-friend Fogarty, he'll admire tuh know which-away Perfessor Bates went."

"But our hosses! What about our own hosses?"

"While in jail," Whopper sighed sadly, "we won't have no need for hosses."

AS HE gazed lugubriously towards the valley and prepared to face that gloomy outlook, a meadow lark lit on the corral wall and greeted the new day with a burst of glad song. It didn't cheer Whopper. He didn't even seem to hear it. But as he shifted his weight to his feet, preparing to start down-trail, a wisp of blackbirds flitted out of somewhere, swooped into the corral and greedily busied themselves amid the corral's attractions.

The meadow lark's musical notes ended in a sharp chirp of protest. Whopper turned slowly. He saw it ruffle up, poise for attack, then against overwhelming odds it sailed into the blackbirds.

A dark puff of feathers lifted. The surprised raiders scattered in confusion. The meadow lark sortied again, with one challenging sound like a battle bugle. The blackbirds chittered, dodged, took wing and fled. The meadow lark perched on the wall, shook its feathers flat and warbled victoriously.

It was a small thing. But it was a turning point. Whopper's jaws stopped. They clamped grimly on the plugcut. The despair in his eyes slowly glazed over with righteous wrath.

"Yuh know, pardner," he said, "for coupla honest, trustful, good-intentioned gazabos, we git imposed on too much."

"Yuh givin' up the notion of going back to Ojai?"

"Nope. I'm still in favor of that. But not afoot and not just us alone. Instead, I plumb crave to prolong our short acquaintance with that—that hornswogglin' blackbird, Perfessor Bates!"

"He's got a awful long head start."

"It'll be easy as pie to track that cavvy."

"Yuh fergot about the Perfessor's saddle rifle?"

"There's ways to keep from gittin' shot at."

"Also, that sinful sidewinder is about twice as big and husky as you are, Whopper Whaley."

"Who cares? There's two of us!"

That was correct enough, so far as it went, which gave them better odds than the meadowlark's. But there were other prudent considerations that made Swap falter. While it was a fact that they wouldn't need their horses if they went to jail, it was also undeniably true that need would cease if Professor Bates filled them with lead and left them to the buzzards.

Just about then, as Swap's eyes strayed, he glimpsed a movement in a wide bend of the canyon. His gaze sharpened with apprehension. What he saw was a file of horsemen, coming rapidly up-trail.

The distance was too great for him to recognize any face or figure, but he was pretty sure that the leading rider looked like Officer Fogarty. The posse was on its way.

His indecision ended. "Okey, c'mon then!" Swap chattered. "Whatever we do, we better do it fast and sudden!"

With that, they hurried from Vasquez Rock and the old stone corral.

As Whopper had asserted, it was easy to follow the tracks left by a band of driven horses. That is, the sign was plain enough. But not so easy was the plodding ascent of a long ridge that extended beyond the oak flat. With the sun on their backs, the pardners soon panted and sweated from

their unaccustomed exertion.

"Goshlemity!" whooshed Whopper, sleeving his dripping brow. "These here mountains, they're lots taller than they look!"

"And it's a long ways yet to the top," panted the red-faced Swap. "Even if we do ketch up with the Perfessor, I don't think we'll be in good shape to tangle with him!"

But they struggled on, and all at once the ridge widened into an open, grassy bench. The trail led straight across. But here the horsetracks scattered in all directions.

THE sod was gouged deep by running hoofs, and to the travel-wise, range-trained pardners that was certain indication that the cavvy had been deliberately broken up and hazed every which way into the surrounding wilderness of chaparral.

To Swap, this was proof of something else. That was, Professor Bates also had sighted the oncoming posse, realized that he was being overtaken and had abandoned the cavvy to make good his own escape.

"Goshlemity, that settles it!" Whopper lamented. "We might as well give up the chase! He outsmarted us!"

Close ahead stood an ancient live oak, its spreading branches overhanging the trail.

"Let's go set in the shade," Whopper proposed. "And figger out what to do next."

Swap looked back. The pursuing posse hadn't hove into sight yet. But down at their starting point, where Vasquez Rock was a conspicuous landmark, a rising haze of dust was visible in the slanting rays of the early morning sun.

"I'll go yuh one better!" he chittered nervously. "And here's where yore long-legged squirrel build will come in handy, Whopper Whaley!"

"How?"

"Never mind. Hurry up! Give me a boost, then shinny up after me! We're going tuh have company before long, and with their eyes on the ground there's a chance they mightn't see us!"

They didn't have to wait too long. The posse wasn't sparing horseflesh. Flattened like bobcats on the rough, thick boughs of the spreading oak, the pardners' hearts thumped hard against their ribs as the law's minions burst into sight under them.

Sure enough, the loud and self-assertive Fogarty was first and foremost. And he was quick to make out what Swap and Whopper had, a little while before.

"Dang it!" he blasted. "He ditched the critters in the brush!"

Basso's heavily-accented voice came next. "Hah! Now we round op my paloosas, wot?"

"Sure, boss!" It was Bugsy talking. "No use goin' on. It's the nags we come after, ain't it?"

"To heck with that!" blazed Fogarty. "The horses'll wait! It's that hyena Bates and them slippery salamanders we're after! We're running 'em down, or my name ain't Fogarty!"

"I give reward for my paloosas," argued Basso. "Quick cash to anybody that catchum."

"There's one hundred reward out on Bates!" stormed Fogarty. "I ain't passin' that up! Make dust now, all of you! Him and his two tricky hellaroos stuck to the trail! They had to! We're stickin' to it, too! Hit 'er up, boys! Make dust!"

The posse swept past, across the bench and onwards.

"Whew!" gasped Whopper. "Nine of 'em! And bristlin' with guns! They mean bizness!"

"That ain't the worst of it!" shuddered Swap. "If that underhanded, sneaky Bugsy sighted us, he'd shut our mouths for good!"

"Wh-what'll we do now?" blabbered Whopper.

"Better stay put, right where we are for a spell," Swap advised huskily. "In case the posse turns back."

Whopper squirmed to a less uncomfortable position.

"Seems like we git deeper an' deeper into this mess," he complained. "No mat-

ter whichaway we turn."

"We played in hard luck, that's all," Swap agreed.

"Been better off if we'd stayed in the hoosegow, I reckon," Whopper admitted unhappily. "Leastwise, we'd git fed. And I could send out for plugcut. My chewin', it's about gave out."

HE TWISTED his bony frame again to reach to his hip pocket, and as he did that Swap gave a warning hiss. He heard somebody riding toward them.

Then, peering down through the screening leaves, he saw something that made him go rigid as a snake-charmed sparrow. Off-trail to the right, where the grassy bench dipped to an outcrop, a black-hatted rider popped into sight and furtively approached their tree. For a moment, Swap was seized by frantic fright, thinking that Professor Bates had heard them talking.

But he didn't look up. Now Swap saw something else that made his pulse leap crazily, longingly.

Back again, almost in reach, were their two faithful friends, the cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel! The fugitive professor was leading them.

As he came under the tree, he flung a backward glance in the direction the posse had taken. Like a sly fox, Professor Bates was back-tracking.

He carried the saddle rifle at ready, but now he started to lower the cocked hammer, preparatory to thrusting the gun in the holster beside his right leg.

Now a variety of things happened all at once.

Frozen in the precarious position of reaching for his plugcut, Whopper lost his balance. He slid from the limb, but saved himself from a fall by clamping onto the underside of the bough with both arms and legs.

But his hat dropped. It sailed down and made a ringer on the nose of Professor Bates' horse.

No horse, however well-broken and trained, could be expected to accept a surprise like that without emotion. To have its snozzle suddenly become a hatrack made the Bates' mount explode into action.

Something else exploded. As the animal reared and pin-wheeled, the hammer of the saddle rifle slipped from Bates' thumb. The report hurled echoes along the rugged mountain slope.

In about that same fateful instant, Whopper grabbed for his hat. Letting go of his dangling, batlike hold with one arm defeated his intention of remaining up there.

He lost his grip and uttered a yawp of terror as he plummeted down, hitting the ground with a rattly thump.

The recoil of the saddle gun, plus the antics of his horse, jarred the weapon out of Bates' hand and it fell across Whopper's shins. With an agonized yowl, he snatched it and reeled to his feet. It was an ungoverned reflex, wholly without purpose. He was too dizzy to know that he was pointing it at the man in saddle, so was utterly flabbergasted as Professor Bates threw up his hands and begged:

"Don't shoot, brother, don't shoot!"

Swap was in a position to recognize their tactical advantage. He squirreled from his perch and dropped. His feet hit the ground with a bounce that took him to the confused roan and bay-sorrel. He snatched the reins.

This was the stirring tableux that revealed itself as the posse, attracted by the gunshot, wheeled and tore back down across the open benchland.

Fogarty fogged onto the scene as Whopper's head quit spinning, allowing him to size up the situation in which he had become a central figure. He picked up his hat, dusted it against a leg and plopped it back on his head. He poked out his skinny wishbone and greeted the law with a jaunty grin.

"Here's yore rustler, F-friend Fogarty!" he burbled. "Dig out yore handcuffs. Goshlemity, don't set there gawpin' like a billy owl! I ain't got all day!"

"And while yuh're at it," chirped Swap, who was always the practical one, "tell us where to collect that hundred-dollar reward."

Abashed, Fogarty dutifully manacled his prisoner.

"You must be loco, Bates!" he rasped. "To think you could get away with a dumb stunt like this!"

"Far's you're concerned, I could have," retorted the chagrined rustler. "Got to thinking I was another Vasquez—until this long-legged loon came along."

Whopper, modestly ignoring the compliment, now aimed the saddle rifle with a triumphant flourish on the jerky-nerved Bugsy.

"And who'd yuh imagine you was, yuh two-faced snake in the grass?" he trumpeted triumphantly. "Jesse James or somebody? Arrest him, too, Friend Fogarty!"

"Criminy no, not my hostler!" cried the horsy Basso.

"He bamboozled yuh out of them apaloochies," declared Whopper. "How many times do I got to tell yuh that?"

"It wasn't the first time," Professor Bates verified vengefully. "Bugsy was as deep in the 'Horse Harvard' racket as I was."

Fogarty reluctantly obeyed, nudging the cursing Bugsy with his six-shooter.

"Unfang this coyote, Mister Basso," he muttered. "It all starts to make sense, now."

"Now about that hundred bucks," Swap said, as he boarded the bay-sorrel, "what d'yuh aim to do about that, Fogarty?"

"I aim to kiss it good-by," Officer Fogarty said sadly.

Whopper grasshoppered grandly onto the cheese-colored roan.

"That about winds things up. Three-four of you gents who ain't needed elsewhere kin stay here and round up the strays," he ordered, "while the rest of us head back for Ojai. Before my backbone scuffs a hole in my belt buckle. Do yore duty, Friend Fogarty."

Fogarty gun-prodded Bugsy and Professor Stillwater Bates in front of him.

"You heard what the man said. Get going," he told them.

To avenge the deaths of a marshal and a Texas Ranger, and to solve the strange mystery of a fortune in Mexican black opals, the Hawk of the Range pursues three masked men through the swamplands in—

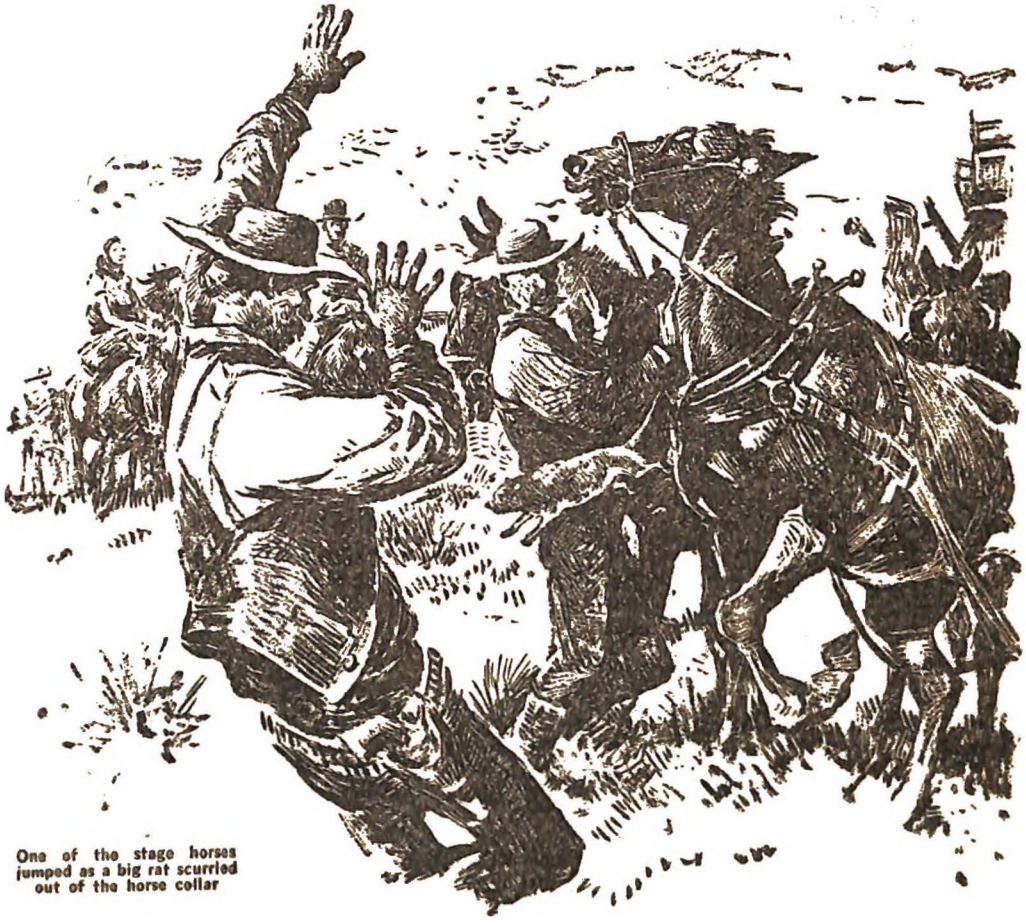
TRAIL FROM YESTERDAY

An Exciting Complete Walt Slade Novelet

by

BRADFORD SCOTT

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE!



One of the stage horses jumped as a big rat scurried out of the horse collar

Slow-Fuse Vengeance

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

Rats, cats or humans—it takes a tough breed to face those hot Santa Ana winds!

YOU THINK it's all brawn down there, do you? Think brains don't mean a thing in those parts? Well, that's a tough country, that stretch between Barstow and Victorville, worst desert in the world, grimmest place in California. Or in the world, maybe.

But it takes more than a canteen, guts and strength. A lot more. That was proved a long time ago, when that country was a lot tougher than it is now.

O'Malley and Higgins were both big, tough men. Both of 'em stood about six foot two and, leaned-down until there wasn't an ounce of tallow on either, tipped the scales at close to two hundred. You

couldn't find two men better equipped anywhere to lick a country requiring lots of brawn.

One had brains, though.

It's a Santa Ana country, see. Those Santa Ana winds, hot as the blast from a furnace door, rise in the Arizona desert and head for the sea. The closer they get to it, the hotter they get and the more they howl. There's only one or two passes in the mountain range where they can get through, and there they hit seventy, eighty miles an hour sometimes.

You take a wind like that, about a hundred and five degrees hot and carrying sand and grit—you take a wind like that, there's nothing worse in the way of weather.

Then there was earthquakes. One hit the first week O'Malley and Higgins settled there. You take and have the ground jerked out from under your feet that way—it makes a man think. A lot of men would have quit then and there. That quake knocked down the boulderstone chimney, almost wrecked the building they had half started.

O'Malley and Higgins picked themselves up and started that chimney, that building, all over again. Hard to find a couple of range bulls any tougher, or with more determination.

But only one had brains.

O'Malley and Higgins laid legal claim to a pair of the scrawniest homesteads a man could imagine. It laid right in that used to be called San Luis Obispo pass; they call it O'Malley Pass now. Gophers, cactus, joshua-trees and yucca was all they could raise there.

The three hundred and twenty acres lay right in what was then a pretty active earthquake belt. They got jolted right considerable—got to the point where they'd sleep right through one. Every now and then one of those Santa Ana winds would come whooping through. The southeast side of their place was scoured clean as a butcher's meat-block from those gravelly winds. The boards was pitted like antiques, the soft pitch scoured out so only the hard grain stood up.

QUITE a few Mexicans lived around there, but nobody else. In Victorville, they used to estimate O'Malley and Higgins was either crazy or on the dodge from the law. Nobody with any sense would want to live there.

Then they put the stage through from Barstow to Victorville, and Obispo Pass, as it was called then, was the funnel through which traveled all the westbound traffic from Las Vegas, Santa Fe, Texas points—everybody heading west and north into California from the south and southwest.

O'Malley and Higgins put in a stock of goods, some barrels of whiskey, and one thing and another. How they did prosper! It was about as rowdy a halfway house as you could imagine, but one or both was always able to handle anything that come up.

Women was always safe there, for one thing. No matter how rough things got in the harness room, where the whiskey barrels stood, O'Malley or Higgins always kept the peace in the other building, where the stage passengers nighted.

Their worst trouble was rats. Rats followed the stages, seemed like. Rats even killed off the gophers—those little "prairie schooner" types, only half as big as a prairie dog but twice as troublesome.

The rats even killed off those prairie schooners. They burrowed in and denned up, sticking close to the station itself. Wild and ferocious as catamounts—and some of 'em seemed almost as big—those rats were purely a plague in two-three years.

They trapped 'em. They offered a bonus—free drink of whiskey to anybody killed a rat. Well, they killed off the weaklings that way. Just the weaklings. The strong, smart rats survived, and bred—you know how those things go. All they did with traps and guns and poison was breed up about the savagest strain of big, brown rats you ever saw.

That's the way it is in lots of those desert places. Rats you wouldn't believe was rats, they're so big and bold. And smart! Now a rat is proof that—but wait.

O'Malley and Higgins kept a four-horse team and a big tank. Not a water tank, you understand, because they had a good sweet artesian well, the only one for fifty miles. A tank was an oversize wagon—hold a hundred and fifty bushels of grain compared to a box-wagon's sixty. It was longer and wider than a box-wagon, and the running gear had a built-in evener for tandem draft, if you understand those things.

Every now and then they had to go to Los Angeles for supplies, a week's trip—rather, eight days round trip. O'Malley usually went. One day he left and was gone ten days before he showed up. When he finally got back, he had a big chicken crate on top of his load of possibles.

"Be careful of that crate, Higgins," he said.

Well, Higgins was sore because O'Malley was late. He just kicked the crate down to the ground. It busted, and cats went yowling out in all directions. Just ordinary alley cats—gray and black and yellow and spotted and tortoise-shell—all kinds.

"You damn fool!" O'Malley yelled. "I told you be careful with that crate."

Higgins come around the wagon to where O'Malley was unhitching the team.

"Who you callin' a damn fool?"

WELL sir, that was the start of the friction between them. O'Malley, he spent them extra two days in Los Angeles roundin' up cats. Had the idea to turn them loose out there, after they got used to the place a little, and let nature take its course. And here Higgins he busted that crate and let them wild alley-cats scatter over hell's half-acre.

You take the average prospector strikes pay-dirt in any of them desert places, first thing he does nowadays is bring himself in a cat, and make it to home there. A pair of them usually, a he and a she, so they'll feel permanent. Else rats will take his claim—eat his stope timbers, his food, his clothes, even his burro or him now and then.

But O'Malley was the first to bring in cats. He cussed a blue streak, seeing them cats scatter, and him and Higgins near come to blows then. Would have, probably, with an audience. Men are more apt to fight if there's somebody around, usually. But there was only two stages a week then. This was between stages.

Anyway them cats come back, or most of 'em. "Why'd you get so many of them old toms?" Higgins complained, once he saw how well them cats did the work. "One tom's enough."

"How'd I know which was the best tom?" O'Malley said. "Let 'em fight it out. The toughest, smartest, meanest one will kill off the others. He's the one that'll beget. I didn't want just one tom, just any old tom—I wanted the toughest, smartest, meanest tom in Los Angeles."

He must of got it. For years there was an old gray tom, not too big maybe but lean and mean and one-eyed, that hung around there long after all the other toms in that crate disappeared. This old one-eyed gray tom, you didn't see much of him. There was considerable fighting and yowling for a while, until he either killed off the other toms or run 'em out into the desert to starve.

But in a few years, about all you seen around there was gray cats. They had themselves a strain of gray cats you never seen the like of. Not very tame. Ugly as sin and never seemed to put on no weight.

But they stood off them rats. They didn't kill 'em off. Nature don't seem to favor that way. They see-sawed. In a year or two there wasn't any rats at all to be seen. Still, they was there.

Because when the rats got scarce, so did the cats, because the cats lived on the rats, see. Without them rats for food, for a few years the cats didn't multiply so fast, see. So, with the cats dyin' off, the rats begin to multiply again.

Then, with more cats to live on, them mother cats got to where they could save more and more of their litters, and first thing you know the cats was numerous once more. Soft of see-sawed back and

forth. Used to be a lot of joshin' around there, after the country settled up some, as to whether this was a "cat year" or a "rat year." But them old-timers would know what was meant. They knowed how nature works them things out.

There's a kind of a law, see. You can beat some laws, but not nature's laws. I'm coming to that.

I got ahead of mystery anyway when I got on them cats and them rats. Maybe them two, O'Malley and Higgins, was bound to have trouble anyway. At first they needed each other, lickin' Santa Anas and earthquakes and heat, bringin' in that well and buildin' their stand of buildin's. No time to fight. Their first trouble come over nothin', practically, like I said. That crate of cats.

In a few months they wasn't speakin' to each other. Then one night the westbound stage come in, two stages, rather because there was a lot of emigrants that year. Sixteen people besides the drivers.

ONE OF these people was a seven year old kid. The minute he stepped off the stage, Higgins let out a laugh. That kid had O'Malley wrote all over his face. O'Malley had mentioned having a kid a time or two. He wasn't exactly the fatherly type. O'Malley wasn't. He remembered there was one of his kids around somewhere, that's about all. He married up back in Oklahoma and kind of mislaid his wife, about the time she got heavy with child and wanted to settle down. O'Malley probably meant to go back to her all along. But he didn't.

Anyway here was this kid, I forget his first name, anyway they soon got to callin' him O'Malley too. Just his last name, like his dad.

Strange, how O'Malley taken to that kid. Neglect him all his life and then go hog wild over him. A kind of a sissy kid, too, at that. His mammy had died off and he was plumb scared. Went around hangin' onto O'Malley's big horny paw of a hand, and O'Malley let him.

It was over the kid they fought. Well, O'Malley got the pleasure of his son for two weeks, anyway. Some think it might of changed him if that kid had come sooner. Womenfolks, specially, claimed they seen a veerin' in O'Malley.

But it was too late or something, because by then there was a deep grudge between them two partners. There was a dozen different stories as to what happened. O'Malley wouldn't talk. Higgins told his side of it—that O'Malley drawed on him and just wasn't fast enough for that business.

The kid said Higgins tweaked his ear and set O'Malley off, but Higgins swore he was just as kind to that kid as he could be.

But when the stage got in, there was O'Malley laid up with a .45 hole in his chest, too high to kill him quick but too low to let him live long. They couldn't get much out of him.

Whenever he'd wake up a little, he'd say, "Where's m' boy?" and they had to fetch that big-eyed, scrawny boy to him. O'Malley died with that boy's two hands hid in his big hoof.

Day he died, he looks up at Higgins and says, "Hig, you're a dirty, low-down loafer and a tinhorn crook, but you wouldn't cheat my boy out'n his share of this place, would you?"

"O'Malley," says Higgins, "I'll look after that boy like he was my own. I'm sorry it happened, but—"

"You are like hell," O'Malley says. "You been bidin' your time for a year, tryin' to get up nerve to do it, waitin' for a chance to get me off guard. But if you so much as lay a hand on this kid—if you lay a hand on a cent of what's hisn—"

Higgins swore he'd take care of that sprout and the place, too, just as if O'Malley was there. Seemed that's what hurt O'Malley worst about dyin'—leavin' young O'Malley, a weak little sisslin' kid like that, in Higgins' care.

Day he died, he called old Shorty Brubaker, master line driver for the stage line, and asked him to see that old Tio Pepe got the kid. Shorty, he drawed up a will to that effect and had O'Malley X it. Shorty was educated, he could read

and write a little.

The Mexicans kind of made Halfway House their town, see. Tio Pepe was an old, I guess you'd call him a chief, anyway he was the top man there. He worked for O'Malley and Higgins, in the stable. His daughter cooked in the kitchen and his kids and grandchildren got what other jobs there was. The Mexicans used to peddle silver and turquoise junk in front of the store.

When you think of these Mexicans, don't imagine no *Conquistadors.* If there was Spanish blood in any of 'em, I'll eat your hat. These was pure *Indio,* not even a real tribe, a kind of quiet, dark race made up of Navajos and Kilkuts and 'Paches and Hopis and all the other southwest tribes.

Nobody could figure out why O'Malley wanted Tio Pepe to have the boy. "Tio Pepe" is a nickname; it means "Uncle Joe" and almost any old wrinkled Mexican is liable to have that name. Tio Pepe just grunted when they said O'Malley had willed him his kid.

"What the hell I want with his kid?" he said.

BUT O'Malley had been kind of good to them Mexicans, at that. After he died, Higgins, he chased them away and wouldn't let them peddle in front of the store no more. So they seen it was O'Malley's fault they got to peddle that long. Higgins made 'em sell the stuff to him, cut-price, and he put it in his counter.

He never missed many bets, Higgins. He didn't look like a business man but he sure was one. Big and whiskery and hard-talkin'. He carried a gun, and drank too much now and then, and loved to bully and fight. Them kind usually live hand to mouth, but Higgins, he knowed the shape of a dime.

The O'Malley kid lived right there in the house. He done his share of the work and I reckon took a little abuse from Higgins now and then. Though Higgins usually just didn't pay no attention to him. The kid was small and hid out mostly, and Higgins just forgot he was around.

Tio Pepe, if he worried about the kid left in his care, he sure didn't show it. Tio Pepe was probably close to eighty then. What does an eighty year old Indian care about a dead white man's kid when he's got dozens of his own he can't even feed?

That place made money, lots of money, for three-four years. But them Mexicans didn't make none. It might have been the same if O'Malley lived, but you couldn't tell them Mexicans that. They dated their hard luck from the day O'Malley died.

By and by, you know how such things go, they kind of got to looking back at O'Malley as their hero, their friend. The kid was about eleven—say, four years after O'Malley died—before anybody got the idea how fur things had gone that way. Halfway House was quite a place then. Lots of traffic through there. Big crowds Saturday night.

Old Tio Pepe came up that Saturday night and said he wanted to take young O'Malley down to Victorville to church. "Why?" says Higgins. "What does he need in church? I told him to set the hoops on a barrel today and he didn't, and he don't go nowhere, Tio Pepe. Go 'long and quit botherin' me."

"But this is the day his daddy die," Tio Pepe said. "We take him down for Mass, ask Holy Mother make sure O'Malley got things easy in purgatory."

They was pretty religious Indians. Well, it was Higgins who sent O'Malley to purgatory. What did he care how easy it was on him? He seen the way things was going. He seen them Mexicans was makin' a kind of a martyr out of O'Malley. Where did that leave Higgins?

He slapped old Tio Pepe flat. Didn't have to hit him with his fist. Just hauled off and slapped him like you would a kid or a colored slave in the old days.

"No more of this damn foolishness, Tio!" he says. "If you don't get them boogerish ideas out of your heads, I'll get me some Mexicans that can 'tend to business."

Old Tio was nearly eighty then but

dried out and tough. He kind of bled at the nose a little, and got dizzy, but do you think that slap hurt him much? Got a little sand in his mouth where he fell, but he spit it out and said, "*Si.* We tend to business." He went shufflin' off with that blanket they call a serape around his shoulder, lookin' like a dog that's just been kicked.

Somebody reminded Higgins that the Mexican had the law on his side. That Tio Pepe could sue and get the kid. Higgins said, "Well, let him. He kin have the kid. And the kid's share of half the place—*the half it was when O'Malley died.* I figger this property was worth four thousand then. It's worth twenty thousand now. I'll give the kid—and Tio Pepe—two thousand cash any time they make the demand."

Just didn't seem the right way to figure it, but Higgins was a horny old rooster and nobody cared to call the turn on him. He probably had the law on his side anyway.

The next morning there wasn't no sign of a Mexican within twenty miles of the place.

The O'Malley kid was gone, too.

That was how old Tio Pepe tended to business. You wouldn't think that close to a hundred hungry, jobless Mexicans could just fade out of the middle of the desert that way, would you?

BUT remember, these was pure Indian. Probably their ancestors were kicked out of tribes all over the Southwest for pure orneriness, a bunch of outcasts that intermarried and bred up the only kind of people that could survive in that stretch of country.

Mean. Quiet, savin' their strength. And smart. Don't forget smart.

They kind of got mixed up on their dates. First thing they taken young O'Malley down to Victorville and had a Mass said for old O'Malley, but them as knew claimed they missed O'Malley's death-date a good month.

But time don't mean nothing to a Mexican Indian anyway. It's the idea that counts. That was September twelfth they had that Mass said. It was sometime in July O'Malley really died, but from then on September 12 was kind of O'Malley Day.

Nobody knew what become of Tio Pepe and the boy and the tribe, but now and then you'd see Mexicans, perfectly strange ones, wearin' one of them Saint's medals around his neck *on the outside of his shirt.* Around his throat would be a little black ribbon or something black, maybe just a rag.

You didn't need to look at no calendar. That was September 12. That's how an old hellion like O'Malley, that run off and left his wife in the family way, gets to be sainted. All because he stood up for them Mexicans, let them peddle their silver and turquoise junk in front of his store.

Why not? He got the money anyway. Who do you think sold 'em their whiskey and beans and sow-bosom bacon? Why, O'Malley and Higgins! But Higgins, he wanted it all. He tolled out a thirty per cent markup, retail, on them trinkets.

Yes, Tio Pepe and them Mexicans just faded. They had their Mass at Victorville for the repose of O'Malley's troubled soul, and then they scattered like quail. Most folks thought they went down to the Peninsula, down on Baja California. But that was plain surmisin'. There wasn't nobody knowed.

Higgins missed 'em more than he figgered. It cost him money. He couldn't get Mexicans to live around there no more, so he had to hire steady help. He had trouble keepin' help. He was a hard man to work for, and it wasn't a very good class of men would come out that far from civilization. Either they were about half-witted or they were drunks and trouble-makers.

And they wouldn't live in those old Mexican shanties. They wouldn't have a dirt floor and a palm thatch and so forth. No sir, Higgins would take men out of the gutter at Ferguson Alley or around the Plaza in Los Angeles, and those same men wanted beds and three squares when

they came out to Halfway. That meant hiring a cook, too. It just plain cost Higgins plenty, in more ways than one.

But the worst of it was the rats.

First those rats moved into those Mexican shanties. It was a long time before Higgins discovered they had a foothold there. By then the shanties were a rat city. The cats kept their distance.

Higgins burned down the shanties but the rats took to the ground. Oh, he cremated a few—maybe a few dozen, a few hundred. But once a rat gets a foothold—

They had a foothold. Year by year, Higgins fought 'em. It was a standoff. He kept those rats pretty well out of the main buildings for a while, but nothing seemed to stop them from multiplying in burrows in the ground.

And the rats attracted coyotes. Higgins had a few sheep, until the coyotes moved in. In two years he didn't have a sheep left. He had kept a milk cow, to supply passengers who ate there; she went dry when the Mexicans left and there was no one to milk her. The next year, the coyotes got her, too! And the rats picked her bones.

They did a lot of busines there. Higgins had five people working for him. There were almost daily stages for several years.

But he didn't make much money. The place had a bad name. If rats didn't wake you up in the middle of the night, eating at your shoes or clothes, or sometimes taking a nip out of your flesh, there were fights or brawls in the taproom.

HIGGINS couldn't handle that crowd alone, especially after he got a few years older. He missed O'Malley; they used to wade in back to back, swinging a couple of clubs, and settle just about anything. There never was a killing while O'Malley lived. There were five in the first ten years after O'Malley died.

And the rats!

The cats were no help. They just seemed to vanish a few at a time, along toward the last. It looked like a law of Nature working, a law that said the cats had had their inning and now it was the rats' turn.

O'Malley was missed, yes. Higgins, driven half crazy with rats, would send down to Los Angeles for a new batch of cats every now and then. For a few weeks, he seemed to gain on the rats. The cats kept 'em out of the buildings and even went foraging down where the Mexican shanties used to be.

Then, one by one those cats would disappear. "There's too many rats," Higgins used to rave, along toward the last. "They got a toeholt when them cowardly Mexicans moved out. They'll get me yet. They'll eat everything I got and then they'll eat me."

Higgins was drinking quite a bit along toward the last. Every time he got too much he'd start in on the rats. All he had on his mind was rats.

Higgins was superstitious. He blamed O'Malley for the rats. He'd get drunk and see things and yell.

"Please, O'Malley, take off the curse. I'm sorry. I'll crawl to you. Oh, why did I do it? Why didn't I let 'em pray for your soul, O'Malley? Take off the curse. Make them dad-gummed rats let me alone."

See, he thought O'Malley, from purgatory, was making those cats disappear. He got so he kind of thought O'Malley did those rats' thinking for them. Every lick a rat took at him, he blamed O'Malley. O'Malley sent rats to eat his rope, his horsefeed, his sacks of beans. O'Malley left drowned rats in his water tank. The dead O'Malley did all that. Remorse is a terrible thing. O'Malley couldn't have wished for a worse vengeance on Higgins than came after the rotgut began to work on Higgins' mind.

Or could he? Both of them had been strong men. O'Malley was also pretty smart. And if you think brains don't count in a country like that—

It was about fifteen years after O'Malley's death that this kid breezed into Victorville. The talk went ahead of him and he was expected by the time he got out to Halfway. He was a big, strapping kid

about twenty-two, say—six foot or better tall, and weighing short of one ninety-five, maybe.

Brown as a Mexican. Talked English like a Mexican, too. But O'Malley stuck out all over him. Nobody asked him his name. They didn't need to.

For he came back just about the time the Mexicans started to drift back around Halfway. They stayed off Halfway property. They built themselves new *jacals* just beyond Higgin's line fence. Old Tio Pepe was one of them. Tio was better than ninety—in fact, pushing a hundred now. Looked about the same as when he left, except he sat around in the sun more, cussed less, prayed more, and smoked stronger tobacco.

Sure, it was O'Malley's kid, a Mexican with an Irish name, Irish eyes, a face burned mahogany-dark by the Mexican sun. He had himself a little Mexican girl, too; pretty little thing, a great-granddaughter of old Tio Pepe's. Big eyes, short, with a small waist—you know the type. That O'Malley kid hung around her the way you see big, shaggy dogs watching over smaller dogs.

Higgins used to see him go past the place. Higgins' wits was pretty far gone by then. Seeing O'Malley's kid kind of pushed him over the edge. Remember, the kid still owned a legal interest in the property—two thousand dollars' worth at least, and the place had degenerated until it wasn't worth much more than that, despite all the business there was there.

HIGGINS used to grab a rifle and stay by the window when he saw young O'Malley noseying past on a little palomino mare, but he never lifted the gun to shoot. He was too scared to.

Then he laid eyes on Jesusita, that girl O'Malley was going to marry.

She hit him in the face with a whip once, when he tried to waylay her in front of the place to talk with him. Not an easy cut—she laid his face open to the bone. Called him a few names, whipped him, laughed, and rode on. Didn't tell O'Malley. Why should she? Susita could take care of herself, she reckoned.

And that night the rats, smelling blood, swarmed over Higgins' bed, biting and squealing and fighting for a place on his lacerated face. There was a houseful of guests, and they acted about as you'd expect, when Higgins came storming into the main room, screaming the rats were trying to eat him alive.

They tried to get him to at least sit in a chair and sleep. But Higgins was crazy. He wouldn't venture out into the dark and he wouldn't sit down. Wouldn't even stand still.

"They're after me!" he kept muttering. "I sent O'Malley to hell and now he's sent the rats to eat me alive. Pick my bones. Yes, O'Malley wants me et alive—but I'll fool him! I won't set down or sleep again as long as I live."

He kept that old six-gun buckled around his belly and a rifle in his hand, and he didn't sleep, either! Nor sit down.

He was kind of calmed down by morning, the way a man gets when he's done without sleep a long time. Higgins might have straightened up, the way a man will in daylight, after a bad night, except he sees this procession coming down the road.

Higgins was out in front of the store. It was fairly late in the morning, because a Santa Ana had been threatening and the stage driver didn't want to make an early start and get caught in it. He was just harnessing his team, and eight passengers were already in the coach, waiting.

O'Malley was in the lead, and old Tio Pepe rode beside him, with Jesusita a little in the rear. Back of them stretched a procession of some fifty or sixty Mexicans. They were heading for Victorville and the church.

Every one of them had a black ribbon around his neck.

Not thinking where he was or who was listening, the stage driver says, "Oh yes. September twelfth. This is the day for the O'Malley Mass."

Just then one of his horses gave a jump and a squeal, and a big, fat rat scurried

out of the horse collar. He had burrowed in and made himself a nest there overnight, and he stayed there until that driver cinched up the hamestrap and made him too tight.

Higgins let out a kind of a crazy yell when that rat appeared, seeming to jump right out of the horse's shoulder. It came straight at him, ran between his legs, and into the store.

It was a religious procession, and O'Malley probably wouldn't have started anything. But Higgins did. He saw young O'Malley, and he saw old Tio Pepe, and he saw young 'Susita—and there was a girl to see, by the way, on a bright, hot September morning.

His face was all cut up from her whip and he thought that rat was going for his wounds again. He started running toward her. He couldn't talk very plain. He just kind of gurgled what he was going to do. He seemed to take it out on the girl more than he did on O'Malley.

O'Malley yelled at him but Higgins kept on going. Then O'Malley sifted down out of that saddle and ran toward Higgins, and Higgins saw him. Jesusita screamed, but old Tio Pepe only grinned and showed his gums, and O'Malley and Higgins fired together.

WELL, a crazy old man like Higgins just didn't have any business trying to shoot it out with O'Malley. O'Malley went up and looked down at him, still holding the gun. Remember, he had seen Higgins kill his dad. The kid's face didn't show triumph. Looked like he hated the job he'd done.

"I didn't go to do it, Higgins," he said. "Ain't nothing worth killin' a man for." His face showed he remembered seeing his dad killed, and hated death and killing.

Old Tio Pepe was the one that grinned —him and 'Susita.

In a few months you began seeing those lean, mean, vicious killer-cats around again, that gray alley-breed O'Malley originated. After young O'Malley took the place over it straightened up. He was a serious youngster. Decent. Maybe even a little soft. It was his wife, 'Susita, who had the spirit and grit. But they straightened that place up. They made it pay. Made big money, real big.

Old O'Malley couldn't look into the future and see how it would be done. But he wanted that kid raised like a Mexican. O'Malley liked Mexicans. He knowed 'em, too. He was worried about that kid and he thought a lot about vengeance. Folk was like that in them days. O'Malley died the hard way and wanted to make sure Higgins did too, to pay for it.

Couldn't be a much worse way to die than Higgins did, after those last few years of hell he went through. O'Malley couldn't lay out details, but he touched off a black-powder train, slow-burning but sure as sin, when he gave that kid to Tio Pepe.

He did a number of things there. He made Higgins sore at the Mexicans. He put the Mexicans on his side.

A Mexican's got a natural way with animals. A Mexican kind of fits the laws of nature himself. Them Mexicans was the only people who ever could get close to them lean, gray killer cats.

They stole 'em off one at a time and just let nature take its course. Fast as Higgins fetched in new cats, something would happen to 'em. So the rats multiplied. O'Malley, he couldn't foresee what would happen, but he knowed something would.

Took him a long time, but O'Malley, he had all eternity. And he was smart! Smart as they come. Anybody doubts how it happened, just look at all those gray killer-cats down on the Peninsula. That's where they bred, that's where the Mexicans kept 'em, against the time young O'Malley would need 'em when he claimed his property.

Down there, that strain of gray cat is called the Santa Amalia. Santa means Saint in Mexican. Amalia, the way a Mexican says it, sounds a lot like O'Malley. Saint O'Malley. Maybe he wasn't no saint, but he was smart. You got to admit O'Malley had all the brains he needed.

Tory ignored Nolan except for another hate-filled look

Measure Your Man

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Foreman Ed Nolan of the Circle B wanted the best for Tory Blaine, but it took two range killings to teach him that the "best" was—himself!

IF ANYBODY had asked what he wanted most out of life, Ed Nolan would have just grinned and shrugged. The refused answer would have been: Victoria Blaine. Ed had been in love with Tory, as she was called, ever since the day he'd noticed that she was grown up.

Wanting Tory was one thing, having her another. There was no law against a hired hand courting his boss' daughter, maybe, but Ed Nolan figured that the Old Man, Matt Blaine, had made him the Circle B foreman because he could be trusted to go the limit on the job—and no farther. Every man wanted the best

for his daughter, Ed figured, and a tough-hided, saddle-gaunted ramrod wasn't much of a catch as a husband—or as a son-in-law.

Besides, Tory was young and as pretty as a pinto filly, while Ed was as old as the hills and as about as rough-hewn.

He was over the thirty mark, by a couple of months.

By then a man who has spent twenty years in the saddle no longer knows the feel of youth. When Ed Nolan shaved, the blurry mirror in the bunkhouse showed him a weather-beaten face and a few gray hairs at his temples. It was an all right face, rugged but not unhandsome, but not one a girl with any choice would want to look at over the breakfast table. Ed was ten years older than Tory. He'd been at the Circle B, a range orphan, when she was born.

But even if she was as far beyond his reach as the moon, Ed wanted to see Tory happy. It was as he'd told the man who was going to have her, "So help me, Marlowe, I'd kill the man who gave her reason to cry."

He'd said that just this morning.

He'd said it without anger, without malice. But he'd said it to Bart Marlow 's face,in dead earnest.

There were no tears in Tory's eyes, only the happy reflection of her smile. She had wide brown eyes flecked with gold. Her hair was auburn, and the sunlight brought out all its bright coppery hue. She defied the sun; she rode with her hat hanging at her shoulders by its chin strap. She wore a flannel shirt and levis, and plain 'puncher boots. She rode like a man.

She rode up to Ed Nolan as he bossed the crew on calf roundup on the south range. The calf crop was good this spring. The Circle B ran white-faced stock, still a new breed to Arizona Territory. The Old Man was always a jump ahead of other ranchers, though it had been Ed Nolan who had put him this jump ahead. Ed had talked Matt Blaine into introducing Hereford blood into his Texas longhorn stock three years ago.

"Busy, Ed?" Tory asked.

"Well, no."

"Good. I want to talk," Tory said. "Ed, I'm going to marry Bart."

"Figured so," Ed said, looking at her now—seeing the clean beauty of her. He took out makings, started a cigarette. "I wish you happiness."

"I wanted to tell you first of all. You approve?"

"Does my approval matter?"

"Yes. For if you approve, so will Dad."

ED WAS silent. He lighted his cigarette. Tory's father was away on a trip. Tory wouldn't surprise Matt much; the Old Man knew that she had fallen for Bart Marlowe. Tory studied Ed, her smile fading.

"Ed, you don't," she said huskily. "You don't approve."

"Tory, let me out of this."

"You don't like Bart. Why?"

"I like Bart, all right. Fact is, everybody likes Bart." Ed tossed his unsmoked cigarette to the ground. "I guess," he said, "I am busy." He lifted his reins.

Tory said sharply, "Maybe you're afraid Bart wants your job!"

"No."

"What, then? What have you got against him? Ed, I want to know!"

He looked at her frowningly. "Look, Tory; your dad's not going to disapprove. Bart's the son of the best friend Matt Blaine ever had. That's all that is important to you. I'm just a hired hand, not one of the family. What I feel about Bart Marlowe is mine alone."

"Ed," said Tory again, "I want to know!"

"All right, Tory. He's weak. Somehow, there's a weakness in him."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Bart—weak? That's crazy, Ed! He was hired as a bronc buster, and he's a good one. He's been here only six months, and Dad says he's one of our best hands." She was angry now. "You've got to admit that, too. How is he weak? What is his weakness?"

Ed said, "I don't rightly know, Tory," and rode away.

HE MADE a swing down across the south range on the pretense of seeing that the hands didn't miss any unbranded calves. Actually, he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. His talk with Tory had left him in a bleak mood. It was bad enough being in love with her, secretly and hopelessly, without quarrelling with her over the man she was to marry. Maybe it was jealousy that made him doubt that Marlowe was good enough for Tory. He almost suspected it.

But he had that feeling about Marlowe. It had been with him from the day the man rode up to Circle B headquarters and introduced himself as the son of Matt Blaine's old friend, and Ed had told himself then, *There's something wrong about this buckaroo.*

It hadn't been anything Ed Nolan could put a finger on. Bart Marlowe from Texas was a good hand with horses and cattle; he was handsome and brash, quick to laugh and everybody's friend, something of a dude in his dress on a Saturday night in town. He was quite a talker. He'd been everywhere and seen everything, but it was hard to tell if he was just bragging. There'd been one thing that Ed Nolan had noticed: Bart Marlowe didn't like to be questioned too closely about his past. In town, Marlowe drank and gambled and flirted with the honkatonk girls. Still, Ed Nolan couldn't tell the nature of Marlowe's weakness. Most young ranchhands acted no different. But a man who successfully bossed a ranch crew had to know men as well as horses and cattle, and Ed Nolan had an instinct for sizing up riders who came to the Circle B—and he was seldom mistaken in his estimate.

There was a weakness in Bart Marlowe.

There was something off-color about the man.

Tory had asked, and Ed Nolan had answered her.

Two of the crew came hazing a bunch of cows and calves in from the west, and one, Hutch Burton, called, "A strange rider camped over by the Morada, Ed."

Nodding, Ed turned in the direction of Morada Creek. It was a shallow stream in a deep arroyo, the main watering place for the cattle on the south range. It flowed from springs in the low hills just beyond the west boundary of the spread, and across the hills was the malpais. Circle B did not call passing riders "trespassers," but a strange rider in camp on the Morada deserved a look. It meant that he'd either come in from the badlands or up from the Border, and mostly honest men didn't come in such roundabout ways.

The stranger was camped in the shade of a cottonwood. He'd just finished a meal cooked on a small fire, and, except for the wary look in his eyes, he was taking it easy. He sat with his back to the thick trunk of the tree, a heavy-set man with a broad and ugly face in need of a razor. His horse, a spur-scarred sorrel, was staked out in the shade. The man's clothes and saddle were hard worn. *A tough customer*, Ed Nolan decided, reining in.

"Howdy," he said. "Drifting through?"

"Maybe. If I can't get a job here."

"Sorry. We've got a full crew."

"I'll still ask for a job, mister," the hardcase drawled.

"No need to ask," said Ed. "You've got your answer. I'm foreman of this outfit. The owner is away." He wouldn't have hired this man except in an emergency. "If you're heading east, you'll hit San Marco before dark. If you're heading north, you'll come to our headquarters by sundown. You're welcome to stop for supper."

The man said sarcastically, "Thanks. Nothing like meeting up with friendly people." He took out makings, started rolling a cigarette.

When Ed turned away, the hardcase said, "I'll be heading north. I hear a friend of mine is working at Circle B."

"Who's that?"

"Name of Marlowe. Bart Marlowe."

Ed was surprised, and suspicious. He had his doubts about Bart Marlowe but he couldn't believe that the man was friendly with this hardcase. Ed said, "You

can see Marlowe at ranch headquarters. But there's still no job open here."

He rode on, wondering where and how Bart Marlowe had come to know a tough customer like that.

EARLY in the spring, Matt Blaine had bought a big bunch of wild horses from a mustanger at a dirt cheap price. He'd put Bart Marlowe to breaking them, and Marlowe worked at the Circle B horse camp up in Squaw Canyon. The bronc-buster was already in when Ed Nolan rode up to headquarters at sundown, just ahead of the crew, and the drifter was with him. They were standing in front of the adobe bunkhouse, talking intently, and Marlowe for once wasn't laughing. He was scowling.

Leaving the drifter, Marlowe came over to the corrals where Ed was off-saddling. He hadn't Ed's height, but he was full bodied. He had a ruddy complexion, brown curly hair, china blue eyes. He moved with a swagger. Usually his tone was overly friendly. Now it was demanding.

"Ed, those mustangs were supposed to be saddle broke before Matt gets back from his trip," Marlowe said. "The job's too much for one man, considering the time allowed. I want some help. How about putting Rod Barney on? He's a good hand with a rough string."

"No. The payroll is as high as Matt wants it."

"I'll fix it with the boss when he gets back."

"No," said Ed. "That's final."

Marlowe's handsome face turned stubborn. "I'm asking it," he said flatly, "because you're ranch boss. But it'll be all all right with Matt Blaine, even if you say 'no.' I'm putting Rod on."

"You put him on, and I'll run him off."

"Damn if you will. Rod's a friend of mine," Marlowe said. He didn't look happy about having his friend there. He looked edgy, a little scared. "You'd better string along with me, Nolan. I'm going to marry Tory, and when I'm one of the family, you'll need me for a friend. I'll be more than a hired hand around here. Think it over."

"I'll do that," Ed said sourly. "But Rod Barney goes."

"Show him, Bart," Rod Barney said, coming up behind him. "Show him that you're not scared of this two-bit foreman. It's time you started showing him his place, now that you're marrying the boss' daughter."

He gave Marlowe a shove, one hard enough to slam him into Ed Nolan. Ed swung his left shoulder about, braced himself, and Marlowe's chin struck the point of Ed's shoulder. Marlowe had his mouth open, yelling a protest at Barney, and the impact jarred his mouth shut. Marlowe bit his tongue, and the pain made him howl. With pain came rage, and Marlowe, blaming not Barney or himself for the accident, spat blood and then struck out. He drove two wicked punches to Ed Nolan's body.

Ed rode with them both, feeling them but not their full power. He said thickly, "Quit it, you fool!"

But Marlowe—and maybe this was his weakness—had gone berserk. He hunched his shoulders, ducked his head, lunged, both fists striking out. He bore Ed back as far as he could go, against the corral fence. There the ramrod, cornered, struck back. He was icy cool, grimly efficient. He jabbed Marlowe right and left, to the head, with half a dozen blows. He straightened the bronc-buster, then, when Marlowe shielded his face and head, Ed shifted his attack to body. He drove Marlowe away from him, then followed him up.

And Rod Barney got in behind him.

A voice cried out, Tory's voice. She came running.

Another voice said, "Don't, hombre. Don't try it!" Hutch Burton's voice. Hutch and the others had just ridden in, and Hutch had a gun on Rod Barney. There was a sickening thump, a fist striking solidly against flesh, and Bart Marlowe fell sprawling. He lay on the ground and groaned, and Tory rushed forward and knelt by him. She saw that he was

badly battered, dazed, and in pain, but not seriously injured. She looked up at Ed Nolan with a quick hate that hurt him far more than had any of Marlowe's blows.

"Don't think that this will be forgotten or forgiven," Tory said.

"Keep out of this," Ed told her. He swung toward Rod Barney. "Ride out, you," he ordered. "Don't let me catch you on Circle B range again."

The drifter backed off, then turned and quickened his step. When he was mounted, Rod Barney gave Ed Nolan—the entire Circle B crew—a sneering look. He turned his horse and rode east, toward town.

Tory was helping Marlowe up. Hutch Burton and Tim Evans dismounted and gave her a hand. Tory said, "Help me get him over to the house, boys." She ignored Ed Nolan except for another hate-filled look.

ED NOLAN was alone in the bunkhouse, sitting on his bunk, staring into space, a forgotten cigarette in his hand, when Hutch Burton came in. Hutch was old for a cowhand; he was a gray-haired, leathery-skinned man of close to sixty, and he'd been with Matt Blaine since the old days in Texas. He'd fathered Ed Nolan when Ed showed up at the Circle B as a homeless orphan, and the father-son relationship still held.

"He was faking it, Ed," Hutch said. "He wasn't bad hurt. He's playing on Tory's sympathies now. What was it all about?"

"Marlowe wanted me to hire on that drifter."

"A bad hombre, that drifter. Better watch your step until he's left these parts. Why'd Marlowe want him hired on?"

"Claims he needs help with those mustangs."

"He doesn't. It was some other reason."

"No," said Ed Nolan, and wondered why he should cover up for Bart Marlowe. It was because of Tory, of course. "No, I guess not," he added, and saw that old Hutch wasn't convinced.

Tory avoided him as though he were a drunken bronc Apache during the next few days, and that hurt Ed Nolan. He had no more trouble with Bart Marlowe, however. More often than not now, Marlowe stayed overnight at the horse camp. When he did show up at ranch headquarters, to spend the evening with Tory, on the ranchhouse porch or in its parlor, he kept away from the bunkhouse. His fight with Ed Nolan, or maybe Rod Barney's visit, had changed the bronc-buster. It was queer to see him come and go without hearing his loud talk and easy laughter. Marlowe was like a man nursing a grudge. Or like a man plagued by some sort of trouble.

It was a week after the fight, the day before the Old Man was expected home, that Hutch Burton rode in from the north range and told Ed Nolan, "That drifter's up at the horse camp."

Ed said, "So?" and saddled a horse, and rode north. When he got to Squaw Canyon, Bart Marlowe was alone and working with a roan mustang. Ed watched him for a time, and he had to admit that Marlowe was a good hand at breaking horses. Marlowe finally had the roan gentled enough to circle the corral at an easy lope. He dismounted, then, and removed saddle and bridle. He came from the corral, wiping sweat from his face. He looked at Ed without saying anything.

"Rod Barney was here," Ed said, stating the fact and not asking a question. He saw the uneasy look come into Marlowe's eyes. "I'm hoping he's gone because you had the sense to send him away."

Marlowe said, "Think what you want," in an empty sort of voice.

"That drifter's bad medicine."

"Maybe that's just one man's opinion."

"Trouble follows his kind like a shadow," Ed said, puzzled by Marlowe's manner. He'd expected a flare-up of temper. "You'd better stay clear of him, for your own good," Ed added, and still saw no signs that Marlowe was getting sore. He watched the bronc buster stand there with downcast eyes, twisting at the bandana he held like a nervous woman. He had a feeling that Marlowe wanted to say

something. Ed leaned forward in the saddle. "What's Barney want of you, anyway?"

Marlowe looked up, startled.

He didn't get to answer, if answering was his intention, for now there was a drumming of hoofs. Tory came riding up to the camp on her paint pony. As usual, her hat hung at her shoulders. Her hair was bright in the sun. She was breathing hard, and her horse was blowing. She'd known that Ed had come to the horse camp, and she'd followed him—expecting trouble. She divided a look between him and Marlowe, then gazed steadily at Ed.

"The way I understood it," she said flatly, "Matt Blaine put Bart in charge of this horse camp and told him to break these mustangs in his own way. According to that, Bart should be his own boss up here."

"I guess you're right, Tory," Ed said, and turned his horse away.

He rode to San Marco after supper that night, but he didn't meet up with Rod Barney. He made some inquiries. Irish O'Dade, who ran the Shamrock Saloon, told him, "Yeah, that hardcase has been hanging around town for a week. Spends most of his time here. Early tonight a couple other hardcases showed up. They rode out together. Trouble, Ed?"

Ed said, "I don't know," and ordered a drink.

It was nearly midnight when he got back to the ranch, and the hands were asleep. Ed went to Hutch Burton's bunk and woke the old-timer. He asked if Bart Marlowe had been there tonight. Hutch said, "He rode in with Tory at sundown. He had supper at the house, then rode out just after dark. Something wrong?"

"No," Ed told him.

TORY had the buckboard hitched up in the morning and drove off to town to meet the stage that was bringing her father home from Tucson. Matt Blaine had gone to Tucson to a cattlemen's convention, but he'd had another reason for making the trip. He'd told no one except Ed Nolan about his real purpose in making the trip; Matt hadn't wanted anybody else to know that his heart was bothering him and that he was so worried that he was going to visit a doctor for the first time in his life.

Ed sent the crew out onto the range, but he stayed at headquarters to welcome the Old Man home. It was almost noon when Ed saw the buckboard returning, and Hutch rode in from the south range before the rig came in. The old cowhand's leathery face was expressionless, but his eyes were smouldering with anger.

"What's up, Hutch?" Ed asked.

"Rustlers," Hutch said. "A bunch of those yearling and two-year-old steers we threw across the Morada the other day are missing."

"How many?"

"About fifty."

"The rest of the boys know?"

"Not yet."

"Don't tell them," Ed said. "I don't want the Old Man to know about this until I've made a try at getting those steers back. You try to pick up the trail, Hutch. I'll follow you soon as I talk to Matt."

The buckboard rolled up as Hutch swung away.

Matt Blaine was fifty-eight, a bit too florid of face and fat of body. He looked healthy, but looks could be deceiving. Any little effort made him puff. He'd complained, to Ed, of a lump in his throat and a tightness in his chest....

He told Ed to come to his office as soon as they had gripped hands, and once there with the door closed, Matt said, "The doc says I can live a long time, if I take it easy—blamed easy. I'll be riding a rocking-chair instead of a bronc from now on, Ed."

"You deserve to take it easy, Matt."

"Maybe, but I don't like the idea," the Old Man said. He sat at his desk and eyed Ed narrowly. "Victoria told me, Ed. What's your side of the story?"

"Forget it, Matt. I lost my temper, went off half-cocked."

"That's not like you," Matt said. "Look, Ed; Victoria wants to marry young Marlowe. I'm not saying I approve of him for

her, but I'm going to give them my blessing. I'd always hoped that you—" He shrugged. "Ed, you're not going to quit me when this marriage comes off?"

"You're good at mind-reading, Matt."

"I know you, Ed. Don't let that idea get the best of you. I need you. Marlowe will never replace you. He's not man enough." Matt Blaine took a cigar from his pocket, scowling at it, threw it down onto the desk. "No smoking," he grumbled. "Doctor's orders. Give me your word, Ed, that you'll stay as long as I'm around."

"I'll think it over, anyway," Ed said, turning to the door.

"Ed—"

"Yeah, boss?"

"You wanted Tory for yourself, didn't you?"

Ed gave him a bleak look. "I've got a chore to do," he said, and went out.

THEY spent the whole day trying to pick up the rustlers' trail, without any luck. By sundown, they weren't ready to call it quits but darkness would make further searching for tracks futile. Hutch Burton grumbled, "I tracked plenty of 'Paches in my time with better luck than this. Those cow thieves didn't head south toward the Border, and they didn't go west toward the badlands. They couldn't've driven rustled stock east, on account of Circle B's neighbors. You know what I figure, Ed?"

"Yeah. Those tricky sons drove 'em north."

"Right smack across Circle B range," Hutch said. "Maybe even within sight of Circle B headquarter's lights. Now who'd be that smart—and bold? You thinking what I'm thinking, Ed?"

"Maybe."

"They took the cattle off the south range instead of the north range so we'd figure they headed for the Border or the badlands," Hutch said. "They wanted us to chase 'em in the wrong direction. So they headed north across Circle B, then swung west through Squaw Canyon—"

"Bart Marlowe's up there."

Hutch ignored Ed's interruption. "They went through the Squaw, hit the badlands up there," he ended up. "But we've still got a chance to catch 'em. Let's get going."

Ed Nolan's face was rocky with anger. He was silent a long moment, thinking, then he made up his mind to something. "You head back to headquarters," he said flatly. "I'll handle this alone. Keep quiet about it. I don't want the Old Man to know about it. Or Tory, either." He cut short the protest Hutch started. "I know what I'm doing," he stated.

Sure, he knew. Because of Tory, he was going to cover up for Bart Marlowe again.

It was fifteen miles to the horse camp in Squaw Canyon. Ed covered that distance in a little more than an hour and a half, and his horse was pretty well done in when he entered the narrow canyon. He dismounted and led the animal the last half mile to the cabin, letting it cool gradually.

A patch of yellow lantern light marked the camp, the cabin's open doorway, and Ed approached it without time-wasting precautions. He knew that Rod Barney and the two men riding with him wouldn't be loafing there, not with fifty steers worth at least forty dollars a head at some mining camp, where the butcher would pay the price—no questions asked, no brands read. Two thousand dollars would keep them on the move.

Ed sang out, "Hello, the cabin! You, Marlowe!"

There was no reply, and when he finally stepped into the doorway he saw Bart Marlowe sprawled on his bunk in a drunken stupor. An empty whiskey bottle lay on the dirt floor. There was a pail of water beside the stone fireplace.

Ed crossed the room, picked up the pail, carried it to the bunk. He gave Marlowe the water, dousing him thoroughly, and the man gasped, sputtered, came around. Ed flung the pail aside, grabbed Marlowe and hauled him off the bunk. He slapped the bronc buster hard

across the face, right and left cheek, and then saw awareness come into Marlowe's eyes. Marlowe reeled away, caught hold of the plank table, and fell only as far as his knees. He looked sick.

"Lay off, Nolan!"

"How long ago did they go through the canyon?"

"I don't know what—what you're talking about."

"Never mind," Ed growled. He crossed to the fireplace, shoved a couple sticks of kindling into the bed of embers. The coffee pot was half full, and he put it on to heat. "Why'd you throw in with Barney?" he demanded, turning back to Marlowe. "Not for money, I take it."

Marlowe stared at him, sick, frightened, and didn't talk.

Ed said, "You didn't really want that drifter at Circle B. You were scared of him. You'd better be scared of me, hombre. I hate the guts of a cow thief." He drew his gun, cocked it, levelled it at Marlowe. This was all bluff, but he was counting on the man being too befuddled to realize that. "Talk'll save you, rustler, and nothing else!"

"Ed, you wouldn't—!"

"Talk, dammit!"

Kneeling there, clinging to the table, Bart Marlowe must have believed that death stared him in the face. He talked. Rather, he mumbled.

"I got in with Barney a year ago in New Mexico," he told Ed Nolan. "There were five in the crowd. A stagecoach was held up and robbed of a mining company's payroll. I got scared afterward and wouldn't take any of the loot. But I'd been in on it, and when Barney showed up here he threatened to send word to the law back in New Mexico that I'd been in on the robbery. He saw his chance to make easy money stealing Circle B beef, with me helping him. I had to do it, Ed. I—"

"You cut fifty head out of the herd on the south range and drove them up here last night," Ed broke in. "Then Barney and his two partners took them on through the Squaw." He put his gun away. "Listen, Marlowe; you're going along to get those steers back. Get some of that coffee into you while I saddle a horse for you and a fresh mount for myself. You sober up, you hear."

"Barney'll fight! You don't know Barney!"

"You'll fight, too, hombre."

"If Barney gets away, he'll tip off the law about me!"

"Barney's not getting away," Ed Nolan said. "Not if I can help it. I'm giving you a chance, Marlowe. We'll tell the folks that those rustlers jumped you, tied you up. You'll be in the clear with them."

Marlowe stared at him. "You mean—?" he muttered. "Why?"

"Because you're Tory's man," Ed said savagely. "Heaven help her, but you're what she wants. And from now on you're going to be the man she thinks you are!"

THEY rode out together—Ed Nolan grim and angry, Bart Marlowe sober now but sick and afraid. They rode at a lope through the darkness, Ed setting the pace, and in an hour they climbed from Squaw Canyon into the rock hills. Beyond the rocky uplifts lay the badlands, desert country, thirty miles across and twice as long. An immensity of wasteland in which could be hidden a herd twenty times as big as the one Rod Barney and his partners were driving. Its water-holes were few and far between, and a sudden doubt came to Ed Nolan.

"Where's Barney headed?" he demanded.

"Palisade."

"The truth, dammit!"

"I swear—"

"All right," Ed growled.

They swung northwest through the night. Palisade was a mining town, newly booming, a good place to unload stolen beef. It was forty miles distance, and the rustlers couldn't have reached it even if they'd driven as hard as they could without a single halt. Cattle traveled at a slow pace. Ed Nolan said, "Come on," and lifted his horse to a lope again.

They traveled a dozen miles across the

malpais, Marlowe hanging back time and again, and finally saying, "It's no use. We've lost them." Ed gave him a look of disgust, but he knew that they had missed the rustlers in the darkness. The cattle hadn't gotten that far. Ed reined in. "We'll wait here. We'll let them come to us."

Dawn was streaking the sky with pink when a rider topped a rocky rise a half mile away. The rider was Rod Barney. Behind him came the Circle B steers, gaunted already by being driven without rest, bawling for water. Two tough visaged riders brought up the drag, lashing out at stragglers with their ropes, cursing and shouting. Those two looked dead-beat, and the burly Rod Barney appeared to be dozing in the saddle. His head was bowed, his bristly chin rested on his chest. . . .

Ed Nolan let them come on. He was hidden amid a jumble of boulders, his horse and Bart Marlowe, also hidden, behind him. Ed looked down the barrel of his .30-30, and he had Rod Barney's chest dead-centered.

Then Bart Marlowe's nerve cracked.

The man broke and ran, raking his mount with rough spurs.

The sudden beat of hoofs roused Rod Barney, alerted his companions. Ed Nolan swore bitterly, looking after the fleeing Marlowe, then a gunshot crashed and a slug struck a boulder and ricochetted past his head. He swung back and saw Barney riding at him. The rustler yelled an order at his companions, and they left the cattle and rode to cut in around behind Ed. Barney didn't concern himself about Bart Marlowe. He fired again as Ed got out a shot, a wild one, and the slug tore into Ed Nolan's left side. He was thrown backwards against a boulder, and his side felt as though a red-hot iron was being jabbed into it.

Ed knew an instant of sheer panic, and knew himself for the fool he'd been. Trying to make a man of a weakling like Bart Marlowe. Trying to stop these trigger-quick rustlers alone when one word would have brought the whole Circle B crew along. Trying to give Tory what she wanted. Tory—Rod Barney loomed above him, ugly face grinning, gun levelled for the finishing shot. Ed Nolan fired by instinct, without conscious thought, the stock of the Winchester pressed against his thigh.

The slug, by some miracle, caught Rod Barney in the chest. It tore him from the saddle, spilled him to the ground in a lifeless heap. Teeth clenched, face dripping sweat, Ed Nolan turned and started shooting at the other two. One howled as he was bullet-creased, and swung away. The other fired a wild shot, then he too fled. They galloped off, empty-handed, looking back only to see if they were pursued, and finally disappearing.

Ed made it to the saddle, with great effort, his left arm pressed against his left side. He was spilling out his life's blood, and his strength was ebbing. He tried to gather and turn the Circle B steers, but hadn't strength enough. He saw a rider watching him from a distance. Bart Marlowe. When he went all empty inside and fell from his horse, Marlowe turned away—back toward the Circle B.

IT WAS hours later, for the sun was now overhead, though it seemed to Ed Nolan that he'd been out only a moment or two. Hutch Burton was kneeling beside him, bandaging his wound to make sure that it didn't start bleeding again. The rest of the Circle B crew were there, some looking on and some gathering cattle.

Ed said thinly, "You didn't tell Matt?"

"Not a word."

"Tory?"

"No."

Ed heaved a sigh and closed his eyes against the glare of the sun.

Hutch growled, "That lying Marlowe. We met him coming through Squaw Canyon. He gave us a story about you and him fighting the rustlers. He claimed that you got killed and he got driven off. I looked at his six-shooter and saddle gun, and he hadn't fired a shot." He finished bandaging Ed. Then added, "We

won't be bothered with him any longer. I told him not to stop, to just keep on riding—away from Circle B."

Ed opened his eyes, startled. "Hutch, Tory wants to marry him!"

"She does!" Hutch said, feigning surprise. "Why, I'll have to give her a talking to—no matter what you say, bucko."

Ed couldn't protest. He'd lost consciousness again.

THEY took him home, got the doctor out from San Marco, and for a week Ed had to spend most of his time in his bunk. The Old Man visited him a couple of times each day, and Tory, strangely subdued, came at least once a day to ask how he was feeling. It wasn't until the day Ed got into his clothes and went out into the sun that Tory really talked to him. Ed was sitting on the bench in front of the bunkhouse, and Tory stood before him with her hands tightly clasped before her. She was wearing a dress now, and there was no prettier girl in the Territory.

"I was a silly fool, Ed," she said huskily. "Hutch and Dad have made me see that. I guess it was because he—" she meant Bart Marlowe, of course— "was the only man who ever let me know that he was in love with me."

"He's no good, Tory," Ed said. "But maybe he meant that."

"If I'd known that you—"

"Me?"

"That you cared about me," Tory said, eyes downcast.

"Who told you that?" Ed demanded.

"Dad. And Hutch too."

"Shucks, Tory. I'm just Ed Nolan. Remember? Just a hired hand."

Tory looked up, and said almost grimly, "Ever since I learned that a girl could care like that about a man, it was you, Ed. But when I saw that you meant to treat me like a sister forever— Well, can I be blamed for thinking that I wanted to marry someone else? You never gave me any sign, at all. Oh, Ed; this is hard for me! If you love me—"

He spared her further humiliation.

Ed reached out and drew Tory into his arms.

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

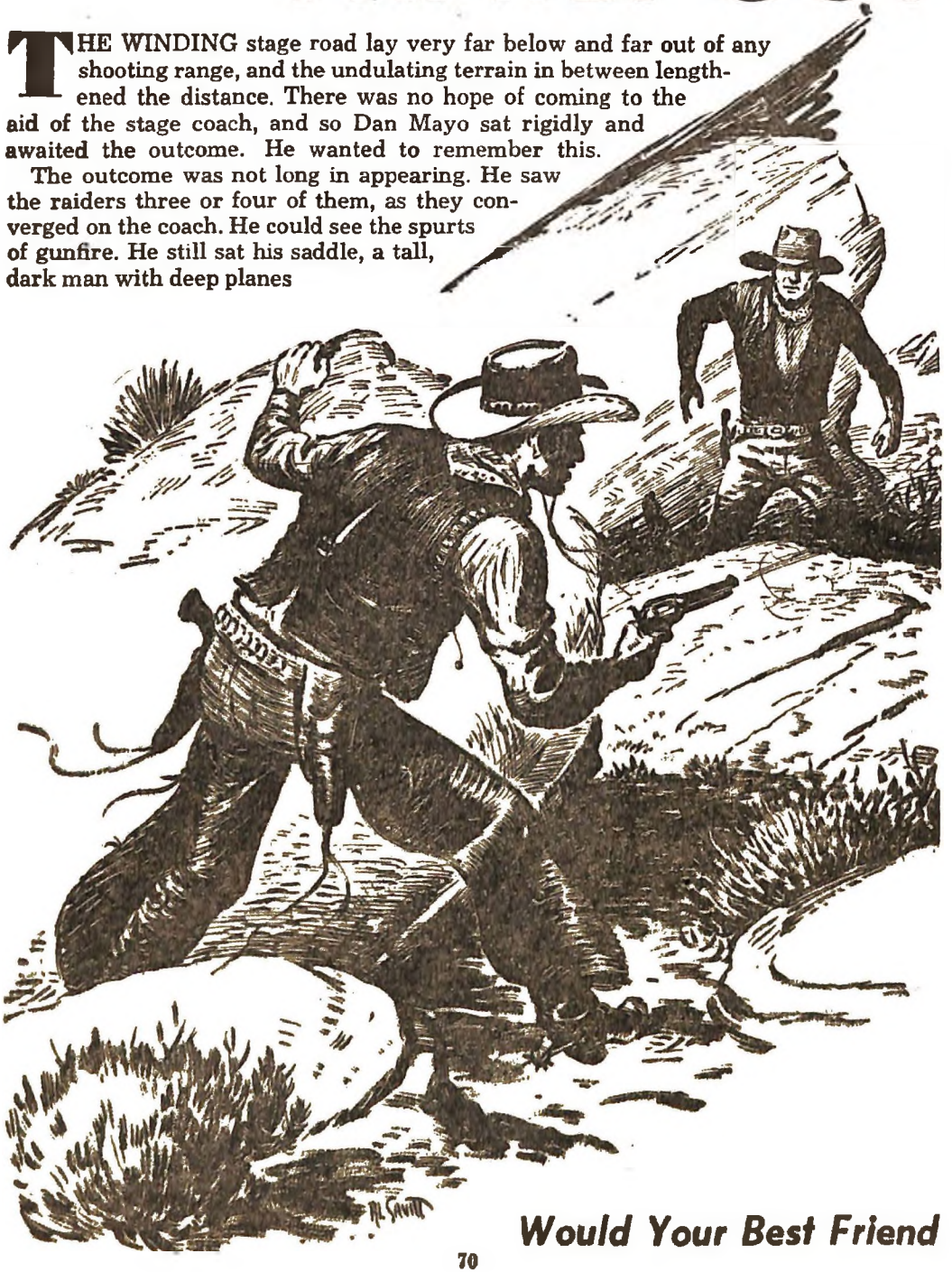
HI, READERS! Here's another chance to test your Western knowledge. There are five questions below. Each one counts 20%. If you get four correct answers, or 80%, you're a top hand. Three correct answers makes you a mighty fine cowpoke, but less than that you're a dude. Answers are on Page 145—if you must look!

1. Where did the word "posse" originate?
2. What famous Western trail was surveyed and marked by wild animals long before men—red or white—ever appeared on the scene?
3. When the telegraph wires went through, why did the Indians leave them strictly alone instead of tearing them down?
4. What city in Oregon was named by the toss of a coin?
5. What famous rock in Wyoming looms 600 feet straight up into the air and measures a full mile around the base?

TRAILPOST

THE WINDING stage road lay very far below and far out of any shooting range, and the undulating terrain in between lengthened the distance. There was no hope of coming to the aid of the stage coach, and so Dan Mayo sat rigidly and awaited the outcome. He wanted to remember this.

The outcome was not long in appearing. He saw the raiders three or four of them, as they converged on the coach. He could see the spurts of gunfire. He still sat his saddle, a tall, dark man with deep planes



Would Your Best Friend

TRIGGERMATES

By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

"I'm not going to make it easy for you two!" Mayo cried

cut in his face, while the outlawry continued.

He watched as the driver toppled from the box, the reins still in one brawny fist, after the first two lead horses had been cut down by the raiders' fire. Then the bandits took fright. They made a dive for the coach and what it must contain.

Suddenly a hail came, a hail that drifted far across the open terrain. One of the men circled frantically with his arm. Carrying only the mail pouch, the raiders hit saddle and went streaking away into the dusk of the hills.

Dan Mayo sat tensely quiet for a long moment. His big hand brushed the gun at his side, but came away.

This was one of the three stages running between Deadstop, otherwise known as Yellow Sands, and the largest town in the Territory, Quill. Quill was the start of the stage run, and what freight and veg-

Obey Orders to Kill You? Dan Mayo Finds the Answer!

etables were shipped came through there. It was the terminus of the rail spur. But Deadstop, halfway to Fort Hall, was isolated.

Dan Mayo swore under his breath. There should have been, he knew, a cavalry escort for that stage coach. The whole section knew, as he did, that the mudwagon would be carrying the post payroll, supplies for the Indians at the reservation, medicines, and a large amount of gold and currency to pay off civilian workers, who had not been paid for three months. Some disturbance must have caused the cavalry patrol to go off in a different direction.

DAN MAYO considered. Anyone in the vicinity now, provided Lieutenant Baker and his belated escort did show up, would be suspect. He didn't fear that, but he did fear what might be happening at Deadstop. Molly Dane was there, alone with her crippled uncle, the old Indian fighter who had been rewarded for his wounds by being given the stage outpost and the care of the telegraph station.

He turned the tall bay and went back at a slow trot. It was Molly he was thinking about, Molly alone. But even as he turned his back on the scene, the driver was stirring, clawing for the spokes of the wagon wheel, fighting for what remained of a life fast ebbing.

Dan Mayo was peering through the dusk and figuring on the trail of the vanished raiders, he wanted to pick that up first. But they had scattered. Topping a rise, he gazed ahead, but it was by then full dark. There was no sign of what he most hoped for—the slim guidon of the cavalry troop from Fort Hall.

That mudwagon should have been escorted. Since it hadn't been, perhaps there was some disturbance elsewhere in the vicinity. The raiders must have known of it, had made their sweep and got away. But something must have frightened them off. It was possible that a signal had come from some lookout who had seen the cavalry patrol in the distance. In that case, the raiders would have scurried off intending to return when it was safer.

Mayo rode ahead, cautiously, thinking if the raid had hit Yellow Sands Molly would be in danger. It was his duty to keep himself alive for her.

If Dirck Lytton was with the raiders, that would complicate matters. Dirck was his friend. But Dirck had gone wild and was now savoring the bitter taste of the owlhoot. Riding with Rance Bourden and his crew, so rumor said. Dan Mayo had trailed far to get on Dirck's track.

An hour later he saw once again the familiar lights that signaled the telegraph station and stage stop at Yellow Sands. Pausing, he surveyed. There were horses bunched together, but there was no sign of activity. Then, wondering if his eyes might not be betraying him, he saw the coach that he had last observed on the stage trail.

It stood drawn up in front of the station. Two horses stood in the traces, and two must have been cut away. But it was the same mudwagon!

He pushed the bay down toward the stop. Slipping from the saddle near the wrecked stage, Mayo let his eyes tell him the story. The coach he had seen waylaid had got here ahead of him, due, no doubt, to his lengthy chase through the hills. But the driver must have been less hard hit than he had appeared. Anyway, he had brought the coach on here, where there might be help, and it was possible the raiders had not got the loot they had set out for. They had been scared off, perhaps, and old Luke had somehow found enough life left in him to bring in the stage.

Luke was nowhere in sight, but Dan Mayo beleived he could understand that. He dropped the reins over the bay's head and turned to survey the back trail, then pushed at the screen door past which yellow light was showing.

MOLLY DANE was there alone. She stood in the center of the room, the light, somehow dusting her slender dark loveliness with gold. Her uncle Jethro was not in sight. Jethro's Spencer carbine stood against the wall. Molly's hand hov-

ered over the Frontier Colt in its worn, twisted belt on the table. The telegraph key was dead.

Mayo halted just inside the door, while she stared. He searched her eyes, then past her. His lips barely parted when he said: "I saw it. Did Luke get in with his load? Wagon's outside."

For a long moment she stood staring up at him. "You knew then?" When he nodded she said, her voice taut, "Yes, Luke got in with his load. But he was dead. Jethro—he's out with him now. Luke has folks, I think. We couldn't do any more than that—bury him till we know. We hid the load."

He nodded. "Don't tell me where," he said quickly. "I don't want to know. Did Luke say anything?"

"He was dying when he arrived here. He only said 'Rance Bourden.'" Molly Dane came closer, a slender, amazing lovely creature in this setting. "But Rance Bourden is a big man, Dan. It can't be Bourden in back of all this—this raiding. And it can't be that Dirck Lytton is riding with him."

"It's Bourden's bunch, I know," Mayo said. "That big spread of his is only a cover for the *hombres malos* from both sides of the Line. I just came back from there; I know. But Bourden is backed against the wall now, the Rangers have the evidence against him, and he's bound to be out for a big cleanup. This was a big load. I hope Jethro's got it hid plenty."

The door creaked when Jethro Dane came in. Jethro was old and bent. His left leg was almost useless but there was great power in his long arms.

"Glad it's you, Dan," he said. "You know what's happened?"

"I saw it. Too far away, though," Mayo said. "That load should have been escorted. But there's reasons, I reckon, why the cavalry is out somewhere else today. Trouble along here. Lieutenant Hall is around these parts but he's probably chasing false scents. And don't be blaming Dirck Lytton, if it's Rance Bourden's work—"

"Why?" the girl flared. "You and Dirck were what they call trailmates, saddlemates once, sure! But Dirck—"

He looked at her when she broke off, and said, "You always thought a heap of Dirck, Molly." His voice was soft. "One time I thought it was Dirck, with you, before anybody else. Sure, he got into trouble, and somehow Rance Bourden picked him up and they say he's riding with Bourden. But that's no crime, not yet. Bourden hasn't been convicted of anything yet. We know he's our man and so does the Law. But there's no proof. I want Dirck—I want to get him out of here and away safe, somewheres, out of this country."

She nodded. Jethro was watching him.

The sudden sound of spurring horses broke in. They all turned. Mayo made a move toward his holstered .44, but held it. Molly Dane was closest to the door when it was flung open open, and even though Dan Mayo's hand fell to his holster and old Jethro made a move toward where his Spencer stood, they all halted, frozen.

Dan Mayo knew bitterly that his hammer was back but that there was an empty cylinder under it. Most of his breed rode that way. He might take a long chance and spin that cylinder, but not with Molly Dane there. She was right in the line of fire as Rance Bourden came stalking into the room.

Bourden was a big man, with a hard cruelty about his thin mouth under a light yellow mustache. Riders were halted outside, but on his heels came two of them, with another trailing. It was Dirck Lytton who came last, hesitating.

Lytton was tall, with good shoulders and a young, handsome face. His eyes were worried as they followed Bourden across the brief space and through the door. Bourden cast one look backward over his shoulder to see that his escort was bunched and ready, then he faced the room, guns thonged low.

THERE was dead silence for a moment. A smile lifted Bourden's cruel mouth, and he said: "So we're all

here. Most of us, anyways. Heard you'd hit back into the country, Mayo. I don't think you're going to like it any more."

Mayo nodded. 'I don't like it right now." He added, looking past Bourden, "I just got in. Been looking for a trailmate of mine."

Under his deep tan, Dirck Lytton whitened. "I heard you was looking for me, Dan," he said hoarsely.

"And in case you didn't know it, Mayo, he's been riding with us!" Bourden put in. "On my payroll! If the law wants him, the law's got to come and get him. You're not the law now, are you?"

"No," Dan Mayo said, "I'm not the law."

Kim Macey, a scar-faced man with hate embedded deep in his eyes, gave a harsh laugh. "That's nice! Nobody to miss him!"

Bourden frowned at his *segundo's* taunt, eying Mayo's holstered gun and then swinging on Jethro. "We know that stage load got to here. That cavalry patrol is all through the hills and so we had to leave it, temporary. We don't know if the driver come in dead or alive, but we know the load was on the mudwagon when we last saw it, and it couldn't of come anywheres but here.

"Where've you got it?" he demanded. "This is a big stake, Jethro, and we don't aim to lay down now. Some of my boys want to pull out and I reckon I do too. We need that to square it."

Jethro shook his head. "Maybe Luke made him a cache, maybe," he said. "Best we could do for him was to bury him. The body's out back."

While a momentary silence lingered in the room, Bourden's men pressed in closer. Mayo stood unmoving and so did Dirck Lytton. Chet Halliday, Bourden's right-hand gunman, licked his lips, a hard-eyed, skinny man with killer's eyes. Kim Macey stirred, his eyes burning at Mayo. "They's ways of makin' men talk, *jefe*," Halliday said. "We used 'em before." He laughed.

Bourden nodded, his eyes flickering between Mayo and the lone girl.

"They'll talk," he drawled. "I want to find out what Mayo knows. He was out there today, and he ain't conversational." He made up his mind, and all the others shuddered before something in his glittering eyes. He did not turn when he said, "Kim, I want to get Mayo out of here. You don't love him much, do you?"

Grinning wolfishly, Kim Macey made an animal sound in his bull throat.

"Bueno!" Bourden said. "I think, if he ain't here, these folk's'll talk. We can wait, anyway, till near morning. Kim, you and Dirck Lytton take Mayo out, a long ways out, and see he don't come back. *Ever!* Anywhere! I've heard of things like anthills, and a dried cowhide that can be wet and sewed up till the sun gets workin' on it. It's your fun—just so's he don't come back. We can wait here till you finish. Long before then these folks'll be ready to talk, I think."

Kim Macey gave a snarl of satisfaction. Dirck Lytton's handsome face whitened, his young lips tightened. Bourden spied that, smiled, and when Macey made a move toward the .44 still in Mayo's holster, he snarled:

"Leave it there! Do you suppose I left him with that iron for nothing? He gets killed with a good iron on him. Maybe one or two chambers empty—you can take care of that. But I want his pal, his triggermate, to be there to watch the rest!"

Mayo said nothing. He did not look at the girl, or at Jethro. He knew what was coming. He'd seen enough of it, before. With Lytton he might have had a chance, but Bourden's hatred was in his very blood and Macey shared it, only more savagely.

That was Rance Bourden's way. Lytton might have wavered on a job like this, the essential inhumanity of which would appeal to Bourden's gang. Mayo was an enemy they had all long feared and he had to be dealt with as any wild animal pack would deal with a ruthless hunter. But the essence of it all was that Lytton was being sent to do the job, sent in a manner whereby he could not fail.

Lytton might waver, remembering all that had been between him and Mayo in

the past, remembering his life was likely forfeit anyway. But it was a refinement of cruelty for Lytton to be sent there and unable to waver with Kim Macey, hate-ridden, to see the job done to perfection. With embellishments probably!

ACROSS the room, Molly stood silent and straight, against the wall. After a single look, Mayo had not glanced in her direction. She knew he would not attempt a gunfight here, even if he did have a weapon. He'd stand no chance whatever and they all knew it. And she might get hurt. But he had told her, in that single look, to stand fast.

She was understanding now, since Bourden and his gang had come in, a lot she had failed to understand before. She did not meet Lytton's look. Dirck Lytton had tried to find her eyes once but she had turned from him.

"We go now?" Macey was growling eagerly.

Bourden stood there, gun dangling from his hand, attached by a lanyard to his wrist, a cruel smile behind his naked eyes.

"Yes," Bourden was saying. "You've liked justice, haven't you, Mayo? This is my idea of it. I'm only sorry I won't be there to see it done. But I expect a complete report, with details. If I don't get it from your triggermate Lytton"—the glitter in his eyes was wolfish—"I'm sure I will from Kim Macey. . . . Get along boys. We'll take care of the rest. By the time you get back we'll know where the loot is, and then we'll make tracks out of here before that toy soldier from the fort thinks to look in this direction."

Macey fanged a grin in acknowledgment. He brushed the gun in Mayo's holster as if daring him to draw, but Mayo didn't respond. Mayo only went out, Macey at his heels, Dirck Lytton trailing. The room filled up with silence. Silence until Bourden lit a cigarette at the lamp chimney on the table, then turned to say in his smooth drawl:

"Better that way! Lytton is, has been, a fool, and he's no more use to me. He's taking orders now because he has to, like he's been doing all the time. But in case he weakens—and I hope he does—Macey's there. Macey's been nursing that hate of his for a long time, and, whatever happens, he'll see the job done in style.

"Now," he purred, "let's see how soon you're going to tell me where that cache is. Or what will be necessary to locate it. You know, Jethro, whether the girl does or not, so maybe you'll talk for her sake. After tonight, my boys scatter. The game's played out. But we'll need everything that was aboard that mudwagon, and we know it was plenty!"

Molly shook her head. Bourden swung on Jethro. In the shadows, Halliday stood bent forward, fingers crooked above twin .45s.

Molly said, as though the loot had become unimportant, "Then Dirck Lytton wasn't as bad as all that! Dan Mayo was right. It was you who got him into it all!"

Bourden dropped ashes from his cigarette. "He come to me when he was in trouble, needing a hideout. I gave him one. After that he only earned his way. It's Mayo was the fool. You can't help a man on the trail Lytton took! But in trying to, Mayo got in my way once too often. Once he almost had his Ranger friends on my neck. Now, it's my turn!

"I can make a search, you know," he said. "But I'm in a hurry. I know the loot is somewhere here, and it's a cinch you must have taken pains to hide it well. I've said why I've got to have it, and have it fast. I don't need to tell you I'm desperate, not after tonight."

He pushed across the room, a curious glitter in his eyes as he stood over the girl. But his voice, over his shoulder, was for Jethro.

"You know the story, Jethro. Do you talk, or do you want some harm to come to your niece? We're riding, my boys and me, and you know she won't be worth her purchase price if I take her across into Mexico and throw her to my dogs there!"

Her face whitened. Jehro twisted in his chair.

"Whatever I know or don't know, I do

what she tells me," he said. "That was a clever stunt, leaving Mayo with his iron. Maybe he'll find a way to use it. He's no fool, Bourden."

Bourden laughed coldly. "That's what I knew to begin with. I want him to try and use it. He'll be hoping for help from his one-time trailmate. Macey will be looking for that. I don't want either of them to come back. Mayo and Lytton, dead weight, and dead weight's no good on a dead run!"

Molly was staring. The back of her hand went across her eyes. If telling the secret would save Dan Mayo, she knew she would tell. But it wouldn't save him, and for his sake she could at least do as he wanted.

LITTLE was spoken by the trio riding into deepest shadows toward the foothills. Mayo made no move that would bring his hand near the holstered gun that he had been forced to retain, the gun with its first chamber empty. He knew Macey would want that, he knew Macey would want an excuse to cheat his fellow-warder out of the kill.

Failing that, he'd want to watch Lytton make the kill himself, with appropriate aid from him as to method, preferably a long-drawn-out process. Macey's hate for Mayo lay deep, had lasted long. He knew that Bourden wouldn't care, might even be pleased, if Lytton didn't return tonight, if he rode back alone with word of a job completed.

Macey's face, with its deep scar that vanished below his left cheekbone, was twisted as he rode. He pulled at one cigarette after another, humming a ribald cantina song.

From time to time Lytton stole a sidewise glance at the man who had once been his trailmate. "Triggermates," Rance Bourden had said contemptuously, and maybe that was close, too. Macey dragged behind, most of the while out of earshot.

"Then that was true, Dan?" Lytton broke the silence. "You went trailing down below the Border looking for me?"

"Yeah. It worked in with a job the Rangers asked me to take on for awhile. They were trying to root out Rance Bourden's partners down there. They knew he had some. But I missed you, all along."

Silence rode again with them for some distance, then Dirck Lytton said, "Too bad you didn't find me. That first mess—I might have got out of that, or else got away. But I had the bad luck to run into Bourden, and from then on I was what they branded me first—a killer. Bourden saw to that!" he ended bitterly.

"I know," Mayo nodded. "I made it my business to know. It wasn't hard to find out things, not after it was too late. Right now, I'm thinking of Molly."

Lytton's breath caught. A cigarette stub flung from the saddle behind arced past him as if in warning, and he said, low, "What do you think I'm thinking of?"

"I've wondered," Mayo retorted. "You can't be having any love for yourself, Dirck. I know you too well for that. And you'll do your job tonight, too, if you can—and I won't blame you. Bourden knows he can't let me stay alive and keep on himself. He knows I'll track him down wherever he goes, and now he sees the end. It was clever of him, though, the way he worked this out. Cancels us both out at once."

Lytton made no reply. Behind them, Kim Macey spat noisily.

"What do you mean, cancels us both out at once?" Lytton said, after a long, thoughtful interval.

Mayo spoke carefully. "You can figure it, Dirck—total cancellation. You finish me. There's Macey behind us. As far as Bourden's concerned, you're finished. When you've wound up my clock for good, do you think it's intended that you go back? Bourden doesn't trust you, Dirck. He's used you and he's finished with you. Do I have to tell you why Macey's riding behind us and why I've got a full gun in my holster, except for an empty chamber under the hammer?

"Somewhere I'm supposed to make a break, and maybe you'll try to do your job," he went on. "But you won't, not with Kim Macey behind. There'll be a shoot-

out and I'll be far behind because of that empty chamber, and then Bourden will be rid of two homres he never did cotton to, anyway. Only, you were useful to him for a while and I was the opposite. You're not scheduled to get back, and you know it!"

Dirck Lytton said nothing for a long time. His handsome face was etched in fine profile against the purple sky making a backdrop for the foothills. Hoofs struck rock.

"Bourden got me into it," Dirck Lytton said finally. "I had to go to him for help, and then, afterward, I was valuable to him, I suppose. But he never did trust me. He knew all along you were on his trail and helping the Ranger bunch."

"I was on his trail mainly because I wanted to find you," Mayo said simply. "It's too late now, though. Except for any help for Molly," he added.

SUDDENLY there came a violent cursing from behind them. Kim Macey spurred his mustang up alongside and pointed with the black gun in his fist.

"The patrol!" he grated. "Baker's yellow-legs. We're hitting off this trail pronto!"

They had come to slightly higher ground, and with the halt Macey's hunch was verified. Far in the distance, yet distinct enough in the wash of moonlight that covered the undulating foothills, a line of movement could be discerned. At first only a dark streak, then a streak that was moving, and after only a moment they could recognize a guidon, then horsemen.

"They must of got word of the holdup!" Macey exploded. "We got to git under cover. Up there, the rocks!"

He looked as if he wanted to shoot them then and there and get the task over with, but caution prevented him. A shot now would give away their position to the patrol. But what he spoke was an order.

Lytton hesitated, then obeyed the order. His face was pale and drawn. He turned his pony's head to follow the direction Kim Macey was indicating. Macey turned just then to make certain. His .45 was half drawn, his scarred face ugly.

As Lytton and Dan Mayo spurred up alongside Macey, who was waiting for them, Lytton said, "Don't try any snap shots, Dan. You know where you stand, don't you? That gun in your holster is loaded, all right, and you got a beltful of cartridges, but we both know your first chamber is empty. Just in case you get ideas!"

It might have been a warning, but Mayo nodded, said, "I know. The idea is, I'm supposed to see a long chance, take it, snap my trigger down on an empty cylinder and get drilled before I can pull again. Then if anybody ever finds my body they'll know I shot once, anyhow. Bourden, everybody, knows I keep the first chamber empty when I'm riding, like most of us do, and it would mean I had a chance to draw." He added, "It's still Molly I'm thinking about."

A cloud passed across Lytton's eyes but he shook his head. Drawing his gun, he gestured. Mayo touched spurs and drove his mount up to range alongside Kim Macey. Macey had been watching every move and gesture. He was driving for the most obvious place but an apparently safe one, unless they had been sighted—a black rock outcropping that hung above the thread of trail and commanded it, yet blended with a dark background even under the pale moonshine.

In a moment more they reached it, and so far as they could see there had been no sign that their presence in the vicinity had been suspected. They dismounted in shelter, pushing their mounts back under the overhang. It was only a matter of minutes before the cavalry patrol came into sight. Silently they watched it.

Dan Mayo thought he could almost make out the handsome features of young Lieutenant Baker, but he couldn't be sure. The three watched while eight men and their leader proceeded along at a trot. They waited a long time in silence, and then at last Macey breathed easier. He said "Hell, they ain't heading for Deadstop! That there is just a routine night

patrol! Look! They're branching off to the south. Must of set out from the fort after we cut them wires."

As Lytton nodded, brooding, Macey turned and looked over the place they had chosen for shelter, drawling complacently, "Looks like this might be as good a shelter as any, Lytton, seeing we had to stop here anyways."

Mayo remained silent. He knew what Macey meant, knew his own time was running short now. The longer they went on the better chance he might have. But not the bitterest dose was in the knowledge that Baker's patrol was not heading for the stage stop, that Bourden's gang had worked efficiently on the telegraph wires and that news of the raid had not reached the only constituted law in the vicinity. It would be sheer chance that would bring Baker to the stage stop now.

His own danger, the ugly imminence of it, was forgotten for the moment. Then the impact of Macey's words came to him. That cavalry patrol represented the last hope he had for the girl and Jethro. Back there at Deadstop, Bourden was in full command by now. Mayo had expected that news of the holdup and kill would bring some reaction from the army post, particularly as the stage had been carrying valuable supplies for the fort, along with its currency load. But he had to face it then: if Baker did know of the disaster he must be out on some angle of his own, trying to cut across the gang's course somewhere, figuring what route they might choose after the holdup.

Baker would never figure on the bandits remaining at the station. That was illogical, even if he had had news. There was the chance that he didn't know, in which case he was simply on a regular patrol mission and would turn up at Deadstop any time within the next twenty-four hours, a routine job.

MACEY'S sentencing of death had penetrated past other thoughts. Mayo saw Lytton's eyes. He saw Dirck's mouth working. Macey was turning slowly. Mayo moved then. He swerved toward Lytton, hand near his gun—the gun with its first chamber empty.

"I'm not going to make it easy for you two," he said. "If it's a kill, then you got to earn it and square it with the law yourself."

Macey snarled, leaped in. It was what he had been angling for. His gun cleared its holster in a blur, came streaking up. Lytton dropped back, drawing fast.

Dirck Lytton tried. So did Macey. Both made hits. But when the smoke began to shift away Dan Mayo was standing there weaving, and his left leg was crumpling.

Macey was coming up with his gun again, strange ugliness contorting his face while blood spread across his chest. Only then did he realize that his prisoner had found a chance to snap the cylinder of his gun one blank turn, so that its hammer was ready for a new cartridge, while they had been hobbling their horses and watching the moving patrol.

Macey fired again and he went down, and so did Mayo, hard. Mayo felt the burn of the vicious lead across his ribs, felt it as it went glancing downward, felt it smash into bone at his hip. He brought up his gun again and with the explosion of it Kim Macey fell forward, gun ahead of him, mouthing dust.

Holding himself erect by one hand against the rock face, Mayo swung his gun on Lytton, to find that Lytton was temporarily harmless. His six-gun had been fired from a numbed hand, where lead had creased the knuckles; and it lay two feet or more from where he had stumbled back against the rock wall.

"Macey—he did it!" Lytton's face was white as he gasped out "Not—"

Mayo held himself against the rock, knowing that it would be a hard job to get the plunging horses and that he was too crippled to gather them together.

"You tried to help, didn't you?" he said through gritted teeth. "You didn't want it the way Bourden wanted it."

"I didn't want it any way." Lytton lifted his shoulders, suddenly a gaunt, dispirited man whose young face had taken on age. "Man to man, I'd have killed

you if I had to—"

"I know," Dan Mayo said. He considered, then went on: "You can get to your horse, Dirck. The Border's not too far. Maybe this time, if you make it, you'll keep on going south. A man can get himself lost down there, and there's ships on the coast. I can't help you any more, but you've earned a chance. Get going!"

His eyes strayed to the horses. His voice took on urgency. "Get going! Wherever that patrol is, it'll have heard that shooting. They'll find me. Don't let them find you!" He added grimly: "You earned yourself another shot at living. You had the chance to cut me down while I was busy with Macey."

Lyton nodded. Far behind him now was the man he had been when they had ridden trails together, ridden grub lines, took on any jobs they could find. The past was dead. There was life ahead, though, and a chance of living the rest of it out for what it was worth.

Yet there was Molly. Well, the patrol was somewhere around. He knew that Bourden didn't want Molly, not for herself. Before she came to harm, Dirck Lytton told himself—but not with deep conviction—the patrol would be there. He evaded the time element, the element of chance.

Dan Mayo lay back watching him, knowing of his mental flight and its implications. He knew Dirck Lytton.

"All right, I'll hit out," Lytton said finally. "You got the call on that. I got money. Maybe I can make it and get to the coast. Maybe they'll forget me."

He moved toward where his pony stood quivering, caught him and got into the saddle. Mayo's mount was farther off and shied when he approached. He avoided chasing it farther off. He faced Mayo, thoughtful for a minute. Mayo's gun was still free and ready, but he was giving that no thought. At last he raised his hand and said, "*Adios!*" low-voiced, and pushed down the slope. He headed directly south, across that white streak of trail coming from the fort.

Mayo watched and saw that. He rolled a cigarette, squinted past the first puff of smoke to see where his horse had got to, wondered if he could make it there. He spent a few seconds in reloading his gun.

He didn't want to think any more about Dirck Lytton. Finally he tossed away his cigarette and began a slow, painful crawling toward where the tall bay stood pushing a soft nose into splintered rock crevices in search of grass. The bay stood very still while his owner got to one leg, then managed to force his way upward into the high saddle by means of the horn.

THE WAY back was long, lonely. There was weakness too. Mayo could feel his wounds draining him and all he could do was curse the fact. Finally he could make out the familiar landmarks of the stage station, and he slowed up.

Some suggestion of light was coming from there. Not much, but he knew before he reached it that Bourden and his men were still in possession, such men as were still with the raider. Two of them would never show up again, but there was still the hatchet-faced Halliday, chief gunman for Bourden, and Case, a Dakota renegade. A low fire was burning outside the station.

Mayo pushed off the road when he came near and kneed the bay to a slow walk up the deep ditch paralleling the trail. The road itself stretched white and empty. If Lieutenant Baker was near there was no sign of him.

It was a difficult job to slide out of the saddle without further injuring the smashed hip bone, but he made it. Then it was another job to worm across the roadway and over to the far side, where the scene took on a more definite shape. The bay trailed, stepping silently.

Mayo first saw Bourden. Bourden stood apart from his henchmen, the low fire painting red his saturnine features. A cigarette dangled from his thin mouth. Behind him, in shadow, was Halliday. Case squatted close to the flames, staring into them glassily, at intervals raising his hooded gaze to the figures of Molly and her uncle, together in the doorway.

Jethro sat on the wide sill, his big-

knuckled hands gripped tight, eyes smoldering. The girl's face was pale.

"It's up to you now, Jethro," Bourden was saying. "The hills will be full of yellow-legs in less than an hour, and I got to get off. Even if I was minded to, I couldn't afford much more patience. The game's up now, and I need bad what I set out to get today. Do I ride off with it—or with your niece instead? She might bring a nice price where I'm going!"

Molly stood up, her eyes blazing. "You wouldn't dare!" she cried. "They'd hunt you down wherever—"

"Not where I'm going," Bourden said.

His gun dangling from one hand, he reached across and grabbed her arm and drew her closer. Halliday grinned and moved closer. Case had a hand palmed, warming his six-gun. Jethro gave a curse as Molly shrank back from Bourden's touch, and then fell backward, inside the doorway and half concealed.

Jethro's hand, when they saw him again, held the Spencer carbine that had been leaning just inside. Halliday cursed, but Bourden laughed.

"If he wants it that way," he said, "let him have it! It'll save trouble, and argument! Case, get him!"

Case, surly and evil-visaged, stepped in as Jethro threw up his Spencer. Just at that instant a raging tornado struck.

Storming out of the dark, haggard and bloodstained, Dirck Lytton came on like a mad apparition, gun in hand.

In the shadows, Mayo gasped. He felt for his horse behind him, drew himself up by a stirrup. Then his leg crumpled under him again. But he moved, and the big mount understood.

There was the sudden thunder of gunplay, the girl's sharp cry, old Jethro's oath, as the carbine blazed. Not knowing just how he did it, Dan Mayo got to the far side of the road, pulled up and cried:

"I can take you, Bourden! Here!"

Jethro's carbine roared again and Halliday whirled as Case and Bourden swung on Mayo.

Bourden was laughing, a crazy sound, as he spoke to his henchmen. Mayo saw Lytton go down at the end of his first mad rush, go down in a burst of gunfire, saw Jethro slammed back against the side of the shack. Then he was meeting Bourden's guns across a lance of crimson.

Something struck him even as he saw Bourden reeling sidewise, and he swerved to meet Halliday's attack. Halliday was leveling at him, yellow teeth bared. He could hear a cry from Dirck as Halliday fired blindly, and knew his own shot had gone wide because he had tried another shot at Bourden.

Then Dirck's gun was speaking from the ground, and as he swung to face Halliday he let go three shots, one involuntary because he fell as he fired.

Across Dirck's body Dan Mayo fired again, and the red splash of his discharge blotted out Bourden's writhing face.

Jethro cursed, fired once more. Case crumpled for the last time, and then suddenly everything was strangely still.

Mayo clung to a post he had halted beside. A mist was before his eyes. He could see Jethro, still clutching his carbine, could see the stilled figures on the ground. He saw last, the taut form of Dirck Lytton, and he knew then that Dirck would never cross the Border on his last trip out.

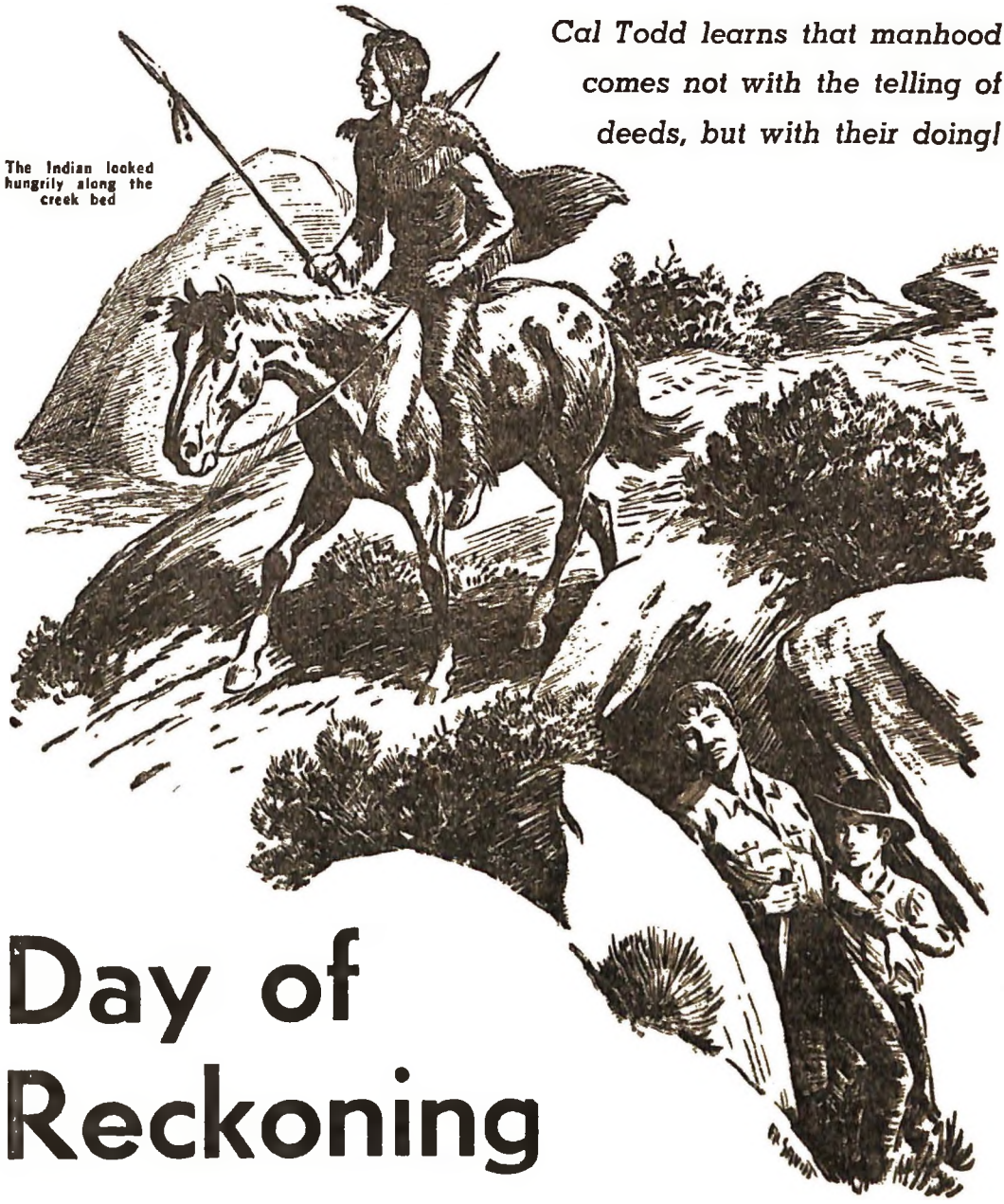
Dirck had made his choice and in the making he had reached the end of his trail. And from the little smile on his lips—the first peace Dan Mayo ever remembered having seen there—Dan knew that Dirck had chosen his way freely and at the end had not been sorry. He had crossed the Border, but not as he had begun.

Then Molly was at his side and her hands were at his shoulders, and she was saying: "Dan, oh, Dan!" while he was wondering where the strength was coming from that had left him half standing.

But it was all right, he thought then. It must be all right, or else the world would not be so still and peaceful, and there would not be Molly's low voice, so close.

"Even Dirck—he'll be all right now," she was saying against his cheek, the dark cheek that could still feel the bittersweet stain of her tears.

Cal Todd learns that manhood comes not with the telling of deeds, but with their doing!



The Indian looked hungrily along the creek bed

Day of Reckoning

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA

CAL TODD had known since they left Council Grove that one day he must stand up to Ben Stevens. It had come to him in a wave of fearful knowledge, a sense of being crushed between his dying boyhood and a manhood still beyond reach.

He was lanky and awkward, a bone-ugly boy of sixteen. Suddenly aware of himself as a person, a being, sensitive to

grinning glances, to callous words. And hiding his pain behind a defiant and sullen sneer.

Reins in hand, he stared westward across the hazy sweep of prairie. They were deep in Indian country, and all in the fifteen sway-backed wagons were surly with the awareness of threatening danger. But to Cal it meant little. The red enemy was a common danger, shared by all. Ben Stevens was personal.

The four horses pulled the wagon heavily. They were lagging, he stirred them to greater effort, shifting on the swaying seat and easing blood to his numbed buttocks. A horseman galloped up, reined hard in a cloud of dust. "Keep that wagon rollin'! Close in there; close in!"

Cal straightened, stared his defiance at Ben Stevens. Ben was eighteen, a husky fellow in buckskins, with cutting black eyes and a heavy jaw. He swept alongside the team, lashed the nearest rump with his rawhide quirt. The horses, startled, broke into an awkward run.

"You git the hell away!" Cal cried hoarsely, hate and shame in his voice.

Ben swung his horse, eyes blazing. "Don't fly at me, kid! Just do as you're told!" He galloped ahead.

Cal looked after him, blinked away the gathering haze behind his eyes. He swallowed, feeling alone, a stranger to himself. From the wagon, his mother said, "Cal, you mind what you're told," in a fretful voice.

He sat in hot silence, urged the team to a faster pace. A small, tousled head appeared at his side; his younger brother Jim, aged five. He gave the small boy a sullen look. "Git back inside."

"Can't I sit with you? Can't I, Cal?"

He softened instinctively, reached out with a long arm, helped his younger brother onto the seat. "Sit quiet," he ordered.

"Where's Pa? Pa hunting? Pa lookin' for Injuns?"

Cal's eyes swept the prairie where the red sun was lowering. In its dying glare he saw two horsemen trotting toward the train; he recognized his father's erect figure on the chestnut, and beside his father, Casey, the scout. As he watched, Ben Stevens intercepted these two, the three riding on as one.

THESE three, for Cal, represented the wagons, his world. His father, strict, a disciplinarian, somehow a stranger he could not reach. Casey, slow to smile, yet the only one to favor him with man-to-man greetings. And Ben Stevens, carrying himself with the assurance of a grown man, bragging in the evenings around the fire about having made this same crossing, two years before.

Cal raised on the seat, looking back. They were tenth in line. To one side, a couple of boys with sticks were driving a half dozen mangy cows. He saw his mother, bulky in the full cotton dress, climb from the back of the wagon to walk with Mrs. Harvey; and he knew without need to listen that they would be worrying over the lack of fresh meat.

For two weeks now, they had sighted no game; the hunters had returned empty-handed. Buffalo chips were few, it took time to fill a sack, and time was precious. The crated chickens, a few hogs and three of the cows had been butchered to feed the men, women and children. Now, only the six cows were left, bones sharp and cutting beneath mangy hides.

The sun dropped in the west, dropped in its own banked fire. Shadows lengthened, an evening breeze cooled the parched land. The lead wagon cut to the right, started a circle, a ring of defense against the enemy. Horses, oxen and cows were staked. The dark blue twilight was cut here and there by small, buffalo-chip fires. There was the clatter of tin plates as women busied themselves with the frugal meal.

His mother came around the wagon. She said irritably, "We need chips. See what you can find. And, mind you, don't stray."

He jerked a sack from the back of the wagon, full of resentment, inward fury. Even his mother saw him only as someone to do chores.

"Lemme come, Cal!" his brother Jim called, and came running.

"You stay with your maw!"

He ducked past the wagons, instinctively moving away from the smaller boys and one old woman hunting chips. He was tall as a man, and it shamed him to be doing a boy's work. Over yonder, in the mysterious haze of evening, loomed a rocky rise, its top blending with the purple sky.

He stared, lost in the bigness of this land. Behind him, the glow of cooking fires, his home in the wagons, and out there— Did it go on forever? He saw himself scouting far in advance of the wagons, the enemy coming in a rush. He felt the feathered shaft sink deep, felt the killing pain as he swung his horse, turning once in the saddle to down the first screaming savage as he raced to warn the wagons.

"Cal! Where in thunder—"

His father approached with long strides. He bent quickly, searching the ground, feeling guilt and confusion. As if his father could read his thoughts.

"Let's see the sack," his father ordered, and then, "Damnation, boy! What've you been doin'? I swear I'm gonna lick hell outta you if you don't show some gumption!"

His father breathed hard, bending over and throwing what chips he found into the sack. He was a big man, square-faced and hard-eyed. His temper was short after a long day in the saddle under a broiling sun, and once he straightened and stared at his son as if to carry out his threat. He gave the sack an angry kick and said, "You be out and show me this sack full before sunup tomorrow. An' no excuse."

Cal watched his father stride back to the wagons. Resentment, hot and beyond control, flooded him. The shadows were gone, the land darkened, and he did not hear the footsteps coming toward him.

"Nice evenin'."

Casey was slim and lithe in buckskins. There was a little sucking noise as he drew on his pipe, and the glow from its bowl gave his lean, leathered face a look of mystery. Cal had heard talk. Some said Casey was thirty, others put him nearer fifty, but none knew for certain. And Casey never told.

"Night comes fast," Cal said. He felt his size, talking to Casey, but not in the way he was conscious of himself with the others. He saw Casey's nod.

"That's a job," the scout said, pointing the stem of his pipe at the sack. "Fire's mighty important come a cool night. Does more than just warm folks."

"It's a job for kids," Cal blurted.

Casey sucked on the pipe. "Takes a man not to kick at doin' a boy's job," Casey said. "Well, be seein' you at the meetin' tonight."

He was gone and might never have been there. A warmth stole through Cal. He found a few more chips, enough for the night's cooking, and hurried back to the wagons.

CAL watched the men drift slowly toward the largest fire. They spoke softly but half angrily, as if ridding themselves of the tension that was building day by day. Old Captain Claiborne called out; the talk dropped to murmurs, then died away completely.

"Casey's got a few words," he said. "If there's any questions, hold 'em till he's through."

Casey moved to the center, half smiling, his eyes warm. "Reckon we've been lucky," he said slowly. "No Injun signs. Them diggers'll be huntin' meat, same as us. Only thing to worry 'bout now, is that some of their scouts don't spot us. And that ain't likely. We got two, two and a half days' travel to reach the Fort. So I figure if we get a long night's sleep, check over our wagons and gear come mornin', we can push on an keep goin' until we get there."

Some of the men grumbled. One called out, "Cain't see the need for killin' our teams. No Injuns, you say. So what's to keep us from takin' it slow? Send more men out. Get meat in camp."

Casey had the ghost of a smile on his face. "Could be there's Injuns out there now, watchin' us. Can't argue that. One buck spots us an' he rounds up the rest.

Then they'll be on us. Meat that important?" He shook his head slowly, looking at the circle of faces. "I reckon you all can do without fer a day or two."

"Casey's right," Claiborne said.

Ben Stevens rose. "Reckon he is. Time I crossed, two years back—"

The men listened as if they hungered for Ben's talk. Cal drew back. He'd listened to Ben before. But the men listened, and that was because Ben had something to brag about. Ben had been through it once. He could talk about the fighting, the hunger and thirst, the dangers. And the men would have a look of respect about them as they listened.

If there was only something, Cal thought, he had done, could do. Something he could brag about. He remembered Casey telling of Indians returning from battles, from hunts. They painted their faces, sang and chanted their triumphs as they strode through the village. He saw himself walking inside the circle of wagons, a hero after the attack.

Ben was saying, "Come Injuns, there's only a handful of us men to fight 'em." His eyes found Cal, he grinned wickedly, raised his voice. "Some boys I know'd find theirselves a pile o' buffalo chips an' dig under 'em mighty quick."

Faces turned to him, grinning and laughing faces. He saw his father's eyes on him, angry, baffled. And he stood, rooted, unable to speak. Body angular, awkward, big hands empty and useless as his blurred brain.

"Man don't always prove hisself by talk," Casey said quietly.

That broke it up. He was alone again, the echo of laughter taunting him. He stumbled to the wagon, sat beneath it, wheel spokes bracing his back. He wanted the earth to open and swallow him—the way he could not swallow past the choke in his chest.

His fingers curled, found the sheathed hunting knife in his belt. His weapon. He lived the scene over, saw himself tossing the knife contemptuously between him and Ben, blade quivering in the ground.

The fires died to glowing coals. His father came to the wagon, clambered heavily inside. He heard his father's hard voice, his mother's answer. After all was silent he rose, cold and stiff, and climbed to his place in the wagon. He tugged the blanket beneath his chin, living over the entire day, fighting to sleep.

HE WOKE, raised his head, saw the colorless light of dawn creep up the sky. He rose quietly, testing the rhythm of his father's deep snoring. And reached for the gunny sack. Full at sun up, his father had said, and had meant it.

"Cal. Cal, where you goin'?"

Jim's tousled head emerged from beneath a blanket, eyes wide. "Can I come, Cal?"

"If you don't make no noise." Four hands could fill the sack quicker than two.

Jim slipped out, fully clothed, knuckled and blinked his eyes eagerly. They slipped beneath the wagon, into the half gray darkness of dawn. The wiry buffalo grass was stiff beneath their feet. Cal shivered, eyes misty with sleepiness. Jim scampered ahead, thoroughly awake, finding this an adventure.

Thoughts of his father's anger brought life to Cal, movement. But buffalo chips were few. He moved forward, bent over, dragging the sack. Once he straightened, looked back. The gray light was moving up the sky. A few stars blinked in the east, and the circle of wagons stood out clear and lifeless.

After that, he forgot time. There was himself, alone out here, and yet not alone. There was little Jimmy, face flushed now, running ahead, then back, his arms filled. And there were the wagons, his small world torn from another, larger world, heading westward to a place unknown, unreachable. There were fear and eagerness and not understanding. He forgot the humility of last night and continued his chore.

The small boy running up the slope, over yonder. Cal called, "Come back, Jim! Come here, drat it!"

His younger brother didn't hear. The tousled head disappeared. Cal slung the

half-filled sack across his shoulder, broke into an awkward, stumbling run. Mumbling threats against his younger brother. This was no time to be playin' cowboy and Injuns!

He ran up the slope, called out with panting breath. The slope grew steeper, his ankles turned on the smooth rocks, he cussed under his breath. There was a sudden drop into a long-dry creek bed, a line of high, gray brush following the opposite side. He saw Jim scuffing sand in the dry bed, saw him look up and grin and make to scramble up the incline, saw movement there beyond the brush, felt his heart pounding with sudden panic of this fear they had lived with for so long. The fear they had lived with and had never seen.

He glared at Jim, put a trembling finger against his mouth, dropped flat. He snaked head-long down the incline, dust choking him. Jim crouched, tense with eagerness at this new game.

"Don't yell," Cal whispered fiercely. To his right, a cluster of boulders lay half buried in the sand of the creek bed. Cal crawled forward, motioning his younger brother to follow. He felt the boulders under his hands, cold to the touch, slid over and behind them. "Down," he whispered. "Don't look up."

"What is it, Cal? What is it?"

"A new game," he said hoarsely. "Ain't fair lookin' up."

"You're lookin' up."

"Next time's your turn. You git down there an' do's I tell you."

He raised his head between two boulders and saw it again, heard it—brush moving, being crushed, and above the brush the dark face, the tangled black hair and single feather.

A pony broke from the brush. The Indian riding him bare back looked small, cold, pitiful. He sat hunched, looking hungrily along the creek bed. A skin covered his shoulders and the top of a quiver and bow showed there.

Still as a lizard, unafraid in this moment, Cal watched. A run of questions tumbled through his mind. Could he trust Jim not to become impatient, to cry out? Was this dark little man alone, a scout for a hunting party? Did he know of the wagons below the rise?

FOR the first time, scarcely knowing what it was, something welled up in Cal. He felt instinctively close to all in the wagons, no longer alone. He saw the Indian straighten suddenly, alert. He turned his head slowly, saw the thin line of drifting smoke that had caught the Indian's attention, saw the dark man slide from the pony's back, down to the creek bed, saw the effortless way in which he wormed up the rocky slide to disappear amongst the larger boulders that covered the crest of the rise.

A small part of the fear returned, caught at Cal's throat. The palms of his hands were suddenly wet with the knowledge of what he had to try. *One buck spots us an' he rounds up the rest. Then they'll be on us.*

"I'm goin' up ahead," he whispered, "and you're stayin' here."

"How long you be gone, Cal?"

"Be right back. An' you'll stay here, the way you are now, not lookin' up no matter what happens till I get back. Promise?"

The boy nodded eagerly.

His heart pounding, he took the hunting knife, clamped it between his teeth. He inched over the boulders, leather scraping. He turned his head, reached back and removed his shoes. Then he crawled slowly up the bank.

For the first time, he was not aware of himself as an awkward being. The rapid breathing, the near panic, was not his own. He reached the top of the bank and paused, the blood pounding in his ears. He raised to hands and knees, moved his eyes slowly along the crest—and saw the Indian, flattened against a boulder, peering intently at the circle of wagons below.

Cal rose slowly to his feet and moved forward at a crouch. His hand reached up, gripped the knife. The Indian was motionless, part of the boulder against which

he rested. Cal stepped cautiously, his stocking feet muffling his steps. Suddenly the Indian turned like a cat. Cal lunged in, his left arm out, his right, holding the knife, bent back of his shoulder. As the Indian's hand flashed to his waist, Cal caught the wrist and pulled it up.

The dark little man was slippery as an eel. His wiry body twisted, but Cal hung on. The knife plunged down blindly. The Indian's tight face broke apart. His eyes flickered with the same unknown cry that raced through Cal's chest. The knife struck again and again, and the blade came out dark and dripping. And a dark stain spread from the jagged rents in the deerskin shirt. The Indian seemed to relax all over. He made no outcry but his eyes still looked at Cal, glazed and afraid and terrible. And then they rolled crazily and the body slumped.

Cal looked down, breathing hard, fighting sickness. He saw the knife still in the body and he turned away, retched, needing to cry, unable to associate his old self with this moment, sensing the change. He looked at his hand, bloody to the wrist, and reached down to wash it furiously with dry sand. Scraping until the skin itched. Then he turned to where Jim was hidden.

A HALF dozen fires sent up smoke from the circled wagons. Jim ran ahead, shouting. In the east the gray sky turned golden with the first sun, and a whisper of life came from the prairie. Men moved against the wagons, leading teams to harness. And the women hurried to prepare breakfast.

Cal approached the wagons at a long stride, his head up. He saw a man come clear of the circle, recognized his father, heard his younger brother cry out. He saw his father glance toward him, then approach with his shoulders set. His father came up to him, wrath dark on his face. He said, "Playin' games! Work to be done an' you're playin games!"

He saw his father's heavy hand come up and he stood straight, defiant, staring full into his father's face. His father's hand dropped, the baffled look cutting through anger. "Come along," he said gruffly. "Work to be done."

Cal knew he had to tell but he wanted to hold this newness close a little longer. What is was, he didn't know, but he knew it was there. He felt it, he had seen it in his father's eyes.

He followed his father, and as they reached the wagons a shout and running hoofs turned them. Casey rode hard from the direction of the rise. "Claiborne," he called, "get the wagons movin'. Eat on the way!"

"What's up?" Cal's father said.

"No time now. Harness your teams. Talk later." He looked hard at Cal, galloped away.

A half hour later they moved out. Cal sat on the high, swaying seat, his lead horses close in on the next wagon with the newness in him, the pride.

They made short camp that evening before pushing on. As Cal dropped from the seat, Casey rode up, slim and straight and warmly smiling. He reined in, said, "Reckon you forgot something this mornin'," and handed Cal the knife.

"Reckon I did," Cal said.

His father rode up, concern and pride on him. "Why didn't you tell, boy?" he demanded.

"Wasn't no need after Casey found out," Cal said. "No need gettin' everybody upset."

Later, as they moved on into the growing night, he saw Ben Stevens ride by. Ben grinned in a new way, lifted his hand. Cal grinned in return.

Behind him, his mother said softly, "Cal, you ain't hurt—you ain't been thinkin'—"

He turned his head and smiled at her through the darkness. "Thinkin' about how it's gonna be when we git where we're goin'," he said, and he heard her sigh.

He looked ahead at the wagons swaying like gray ghosts. For a little while he had thought of how it would be when he told. Then he knew it wasn't in the telling. There was no need for brag. Not when a man had found himself.

TROUBLE RIDES A MARE

By JACKSON COLE

The girl had a surprise for Ward—and he had a couple for the strangers who were following her!

BRUCE WARD sat his saddle with the casual ease of a tophand. He was a big, strong faced young man dressed in neat but worn range clothes. The gun he wore in the holster on his right hip was well-oiled and had seen a good bit of use. There was a saddle-roll tied to the back of his cantle, for this rangeland through which he was traveling was new country to him.

"What in blue blazes!" Ward muttered as his roan topped a rise and the man in the saddle stared down the other side of the hill. "That gal is plumb loco!"

Down below a pretty girl dressed in a flannel shirt, short leather fringed skirt, and boots and Stetson was seated on the back of a big long-horn steer, her gloved hands clutching the horns as she tried to twist the animal's neck around.

Ward took one good look and then sent the roan tearing down the hill at a swift gallop. That crazy girl was trying to bulldog the steer and she was likely to be killed doing it. Bruce Ward felt he had better get to her aid fast.

"Hang on!" he shouted. "I'm coming!"

It was doubtful that the girl either saw or heard him. She was too busy struggling to twist the steer's head far enough around so that she would force the animal to drop to the ground. Evidently she did not have quite enough strength to succeed.

Ward was close as the girl lost her grip on the horns. The steer bucked wildly and the girl went flying through the air. She landed on her back on the soft ground, her legs waving wildly.

The steer turned his head, ready to gore the helpless girl as Ward flung himself out of the saddle. His gloved hands caught the steers' horns, gave a powerful twist, and the longhorn went down with a heavy thud.

The girl scrambled to her feet. She had more sense than Ward thought, for she

headed for a bay mare that stood a short distance away, grabbed the horse's dragging reins and swung into the saddle.

WARD released his grip on the steer's horns and got away from there fast. He raced to his roan and flung himself into the saddle. The steer got to his feet, then snorted and looked around with horns lowered. When it finally dawned on him there were no longer any people on foot around that he might charge and try to gore with his horns he lost interest in the whole thing and trotted away to disappear in some brush and trees.

The girl rode over to where Bruce Ward sat in the saddle of the roan. "Thanks very much—I'm Martha Tilford," she said. "Who are you? Can you lend me five thousand dollars?"

"Bruce Ward to the first question," Ward said. "And no to the second." He looked at her with a puzzled frown, wondering if she was as crazy as she was pretty. "Why do you want to borrow five thousand dollars?"

"So I won't lose the Leaning T," said Martha Tilford. "That's why I was trying to learn how to bulldog a steer." She sighed. "It seemed like a good idea at the time, but I guess I was wrong about that."

"You were," Ward said dryly. "Just what has bulldogging a steer got to do with your losing the Leaning T?"

"I thought maybe I could learn steer wrestling, enter some rodeo, win first prize money and get five thousand dollars," Martha said. "Of course I would have to do it all in a hurry as the mortgage on the ranch is due next week. I guess it was just a dream."

"Sure was," Ward said with a grin. "When you find a rodeo where the prize money for the bulldogging event is five thousand dollars, we'll both enter it."

Martha didn't seem to be paying much attention to what he was saying, but she was studying him intently. Finally she nodded as though coming to a decision.

"Are you married?" she demanded abruptly.

If Bruce Ward hadn't been sitting in the saddle he would have jumped. His mouth opened and closed, but he said nothing.

"Speak up," Martha said with a smile. "You're among friends. I asked if you were married?"

"No, I'm not married," Ward said. "I'm a stranger in this part of the country, looking for a job with some outfit."

"Good!" said Martha. "I'll give you a job on the Leaning T as my husband. You see this is Monday, and Friday is my birthday. I'll be twenty-one." She nodded, as though that explained everything.

"I wasn't figuring on getting married this week," Ward said a bit dazedly.

"Neither was I up to now," Martha said. "But ride back to the ranch while we talk it over, won't you please?"

"All right," Ward said resignedly as she swung the bay mare around and headed southward across the rolling rangeland. He rode beside her on the roan. "Maybe we better talk it over and then forget the whole thing."

"My father and mother died two years ago," Martha said, paying no attention to Ward's remarks. "Since I was an only child I inherited the Leaning T. The ranch was in good shape, but since then we have had a couple of bad winters and I lost a lot of stock. Last year I needed cash to keep going so I got the bank in Cooperville to advance me five thousand, and gave Jeff Mason, the banker, a mortgage on the Leaning T."

"I see," said Ward, relieved to find that the girl was beginning to make sense. "And the mortgage on your ranch is due this week, and this Jeff Mason is an old skinflint who aims to foreclose and take your Leaning T away from you."

"He is not!" Martha said indignantly. "Jeff Mason is an old dear, but the bank needed money so Jeff sold the mortgage on the Leaning T to Carl Heath. Carl owns the Bar H north of the Leaning T and he has the idea of combining the two ranches and making one big spread out of them."

"Sounds like this Heath hombre is a

range hog," Ward said thoughtfully. "Better tell me more about him. What's he like?"

"He's a little older than you are, I guess," Martha said. "He is a bachelor and wants to marry me, but I suspect that is because he wants to get the Leaning T and because he knows about the clause in my father's will."

WARD stared at the girl in surprise. "What clause is that?" he asked.

"The one that says I am to receive twenty thousand dollars when I am twenty-one, provided that I still own the Leaning T and am married then," Martha said. "That's why I asked if you were married. I had a wild idea of hiring some stranger to marry me so I could inherit that money, use it to pay off the mortgage, and save the ranch. After all, my father's will doesn't say anything about my not getting a divorce after I am twenty-one."

Ward started to speak and then lapsed into silence as five riders swung around a clump of trees. The horsemen saw the cowboy and the girl and headed toward them.

"Carl Heath and four of his men," Martha said tensely. "Carl doesn't like strangers, particularly when they are with me. This may mean trouble."

"I don't like strangers either," Ward said calmly. "And all these hombres are sure that to me."

Ward and the girl continued riding southward, but they were in no hurry about it. Carl Heath and his four riders were moving much faster and quickly caught up with them. Ward decided he didn't like the looks of any of the Bar H outfit, and that went double for the owner of the spread.

As they drew closer the five men spread out so that two of them silently rode beside Ward, one beside Martha, one behind them and the tall good-looking man with the dark mustache, that Ward was sure was Carl Heath, swung in ahead of them.

"Don't look now, Martha," Ward said. "But we've got company."

"So we have," Martha said in pretended surprise. "I do believe it is Carl Heath and his men. Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Bruce Ward."

Heath swung around in his saddle and stared hard at Ward, but he said nothing. He faced forward and rode on. The other four men just silently kept on riding. Ward's hand flashed down. An instant later his gun was aimed at Heath's back.

"Getting right crowded around here, Heath," Ward said coldly. "Maybe you better tell your men to run along about their business. Don't figure you need them right now."

Heath again glanced back and frowned when he saw that Ward had him covered. The other four men suddenly became very much alive.

"You know what happens if you start using that gun, Ward," said the man who rode nearest him on his left. "You'll die right suddenlike."

"Not before I put a bullet in your boss," Ward said. "Which will be too bad for you would-be gunmen. If anything should happen to Heath who would pay you your wages?"

The four Bar H men looked at each other. Apparently the thought that they would be out of a job if anything happened to their boss had never occurred to them before. It was quite obvious that they didn't like the idea. Evidently Heath paid them very good wages.

"Ward is right, boys," Heath said calmly. "We're not looking for trouble, and I don't need you now. You might as well head back to the ranch by the South Trail."

"All right, boss," said the man who rode next to Ward. "But I'd feel better if this hombre would put his gun back in leather before we leave."

"I'll do just that soon as you get out of shooting range," Ward said. "So run along, boys."

"Go on, Frisco," Heath said impatiently. "Do what I told you and don't argue about it."

Frisco nodded and rode away, the three other cowboys trailing after him. They headed on southward. Ward, Heath and

Martha halted their horses and sat watching the men go. When he felt they were far enough away Ward dropped his gun back into the holster.

"Don't know just how you fit in around here, Ward," Heath said quietly. "Since you appear to be an old friend of Martha's, I reckon she's told you that she is going to marry me."

"I did no such thing!" Martha said impatiently.

"Aw, honey, don't be like that," Heath said in a pleading tone as he edged his horse closer to Martha's mare. "You know that I'm plumb crazy about you."

Ward sat in the saddle watching them, a faint smile on his face. He was sure that Martha could handle the situation without any help from him.

ABRUPTLY Heath reached out, grabbed Martha and dragged her out of the saddle. He held her in front of him on his own horse with one arm as he faced Ward, and he drew his gun with his right hand.

Ward's hand flashed to his holster, but Heath's gun roared before he could draw. Ward felt a searing pain in his right arm and knew the bullet had hit him. His arm and his hand went numb and he found he could no longer hold his gun—though he had it drawn now. The Colt slid from his fingers and dropped to the ground.

As Heath held her Martha managed to wiggle around. The owner of the Bar H wore two guns. Martha grabbed the second one out of the holster. She lifted it and swung hard. The barrel thumped against Heath's forehead, and he went limp as the blow knocked him unconscious.

Martha and the unconscious man slid off Heath's big sorrel and landed on the ground in a tangled heap. The girl quickly leaped to her feet. She made sure that Heath was still unconscious, and then grabbed up his guns. Ward discovered he was growing weak from loss of blood. He slid out of the saddle and managed to pick up his gun with his left hand.

"You hurt bad, Bruce?" Martha asked.

"Don't know," Ward said. "My arm is bleeding quite a lot." He glanced southward. "Blazes, here come those four men of Heath's. They've seen him lying there and figured I downed him, I reckon."

"They had orders to try and get us anyway," Martha said. "Heath told them to go on back to the Bar H by the South Trail. That trail leads directly to the Leaning T, and is the long way around to get to the Bar H."

"That's it," Ward said. "I wondered why Heath was so willing to let his men go. They were to wait and try and get us along the trail." A thought stuck him and he glanced at Martha. "Suppose that Heath and his men had grabbed you and held you prisoner until say next week, Martha?"

"Why I wouldn't be able to make any effort to get the money to pay off the mortgage," Martha said, watching the swiftly approaching riders. "And since I wasn't married I couldn't inherit the twenty thousand either."

"Heath might have figured some way to make you marry him," Ward said.

He fired a warning shot in the direction of the four waddies as a signal for them to keep away. Then suddenly dizziness swept over him and he fell to the ground, the smoking gun still in his left hand.

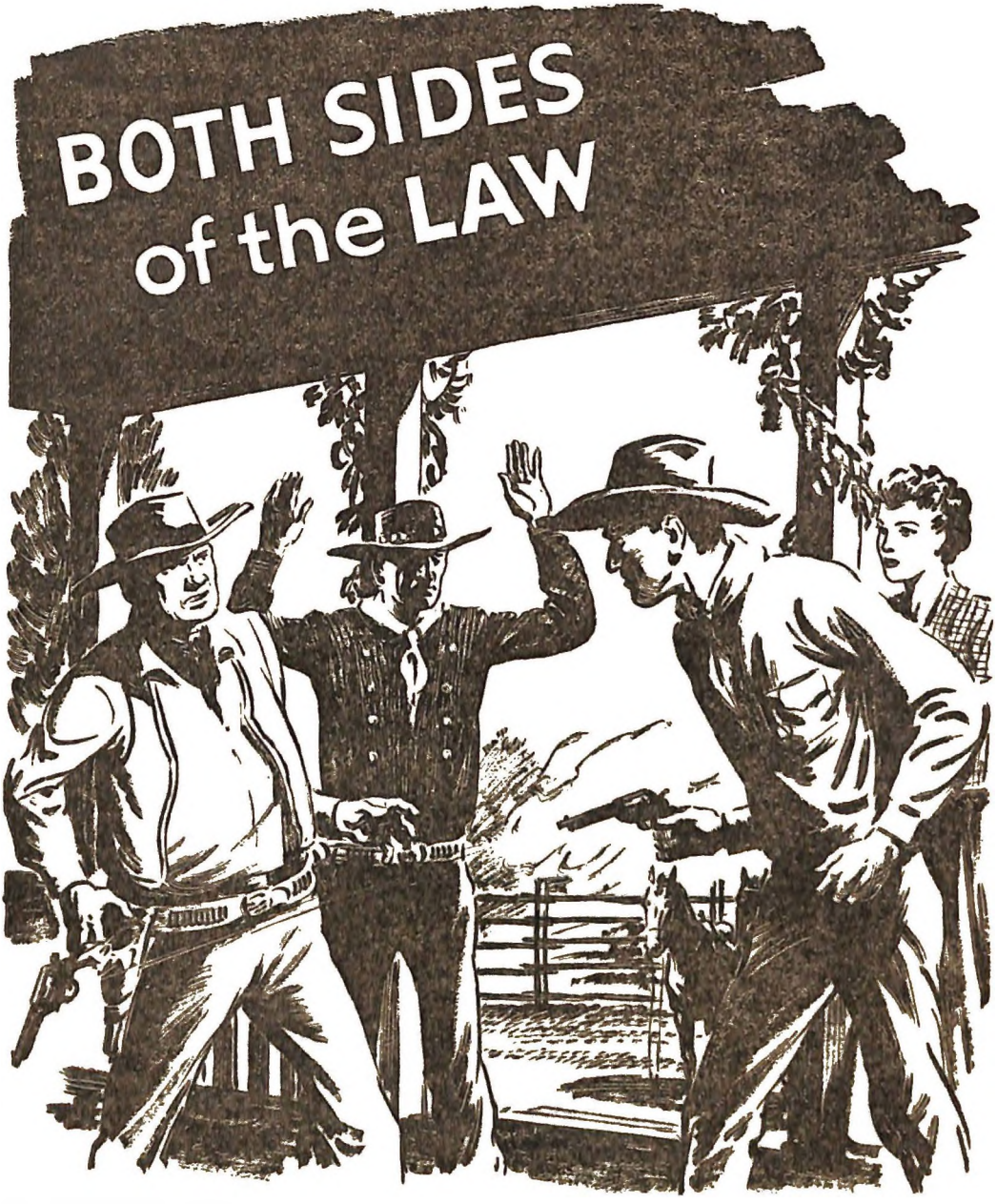
Martha dropped to one knee behind him and began blazing away with the two guns she held in her hands. The four men reined their horses to a halt, and then suddenly whirled their mounts and dashed away, heading northward in a hurry. From the south another bunch of horsemen loomed into view.

"Here come some of the cowboys in my outfit," Martha said with relief in her voice. "I don't think we will have any more trouble."

"That's good," Ward said as everything grew black and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

When he again opened his eyes he found he was lying in a bed in what was evidently a bedroom in the Leaning T

(Concluded on page 146)



A NOVEL BY

BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

A SELECTED CLASSIC OF THE WEST

Bing Miller, Deputy Sheriff of Coldwater, had to solve a range mystery involving a big rustler, a stage-coach bandit and a land grab—while at the same time fulfilling his solemn promise to a pard!

CHAPTER I

Off With the Old Job—On With the New

SINCE midnight "Bing" Miller had twisted and turned, unable to sleep, and prey to conflicting emotions. With the first glint of dawn he arose, dressed, sat down by a window that overlooked the main street of Coldwater. Cool sunrise airs wafted a pleasant smell from flower beds before the hotel. The flooding color of sunrise, the cool hush before another day of heat and perhaps turmoil, soothed Bing.

"Well, there's only one thing to do and I'm goin' to do it," he murmured with sudden resolution.

Elbows resting on the sill, Bing saw swampers brush litter out of saloon doors, men begin to emerge from houses, storekeepers open for business. Then he went down to a restaurant, ate hot cakes with rashers of bacon.

Finally he sauntered to where two square brick buildings, the Coldwater County courthouse and the county jail, sat in a green square well back from the street. He went down a wide corridor, turned into an office. A middle-aged, square-shouldered man with sandy hair and drooping mustache of the same color sat with his feet on an oak desk smoking a cigar.

"Mornin', Bing."

"Mornin', Gil."

Bing sat down, made himself a cigarette.

"What rests so heavy on your mind this mornin', Bing?" Gil Freeman asked.

Bing groped in a vest pocket, produced a silver-plated deputy sheriff's badge and laid it on the polished desk.

"I'm quittin'," he said briefly.

The big man grinned, methodically shook the ash off his cigar.

"First of April's done gone a long time," said he. "Try a new one, Bing."

"I am herewith tenderin' my resignation from the sheriff's staff of Coldwater County, Colorado," Bing said evenly. "I mean it, Gil. I'm through."

FREEMAN'S eyes widened in surprise. "I thought you were joshin'. What's up?"

"Nothin'," Bing murmured. "I'm just quittin' a good job, that's all."

"What's hit you?" Freeman persisted. In his tone were both anxiety and annoyance. "What do you aim to do?"

"Punch the gay and festive cow here and there, I guess," Bing replied. "I'm tired of roundin' up boys that have gone wrong and puttin' them in jail."

Freeman snorted incredulously. "Bing," he said, "boys that go wrong have to be put in jail. They know that's what's comin' to 'em when they break the rules of the game, which is all law amounts to. For over two years you have been in as decent and honorable an occupation as a man can have—servin' the public. What is there for you in punchin' cows? You make and

The man, holding himself erect with both hands, made a feeble movement toward his gun (CHAP. XII)

save money as a deputy in this county. You're too hard-headed to quit somethin' with a future to just go around on the range with cowboys."

"Nevertheless, I'm quittin', Gil," Bing said flatly.

"Lissen," Freeman went on earnestly. "I come into this country when the buffalo was king. You come here when the longhorn is king. The longhorn and the cowpuncher'll go the way of the buffalo. In a few years this'll be a county of farms and orchards and mines, and them that grow up with the country will be somethin'. I've been sheriff of Coldwater ever since she was organized into a county. In all them years I have never had a deputy that was half as smart and reliable as you are, Bing. Other men besides me in Coldwater know that.

"I'm goin' to serve only one more term as sheriff. Then I'm goin' to run for the legislature, and this county'll elect me hands down. You could run for sheriff and your election is a cinch. You got education enough to run the office and brains and nerve enough to go farther than I'm likely to go. The sheriff's office is worth ten thousand a year of honest money—and the job will be more important as time goes on. That's what you're walkin' off from, Bing. I'm talkin' turkey to you, son, because I like you. Don't be a fool, and follow some notion because you're maybe curious where it leads."

"Nevertheless, I'm going," Bing de-

clared. "I don't know where, but I'm on my way."

"Nobody ever talked you out of nothin', I guess." Freeman stared at Bing. "Well, I'm blame sorry to lose you. You can always come back, Bing."

"I can, but I doubt if I will," Bing said slowly.

"You got some bee in your bonnet, I suppose," the sheriff grumbled. "Look out it don't sting you. I'd got so I banked on you, Bing."

"Don't ever bank too much on anything, or any man, Gil," Bing Miller said with a curious intensity. "Gimme a voucher, will you, so I can draw what pay I got comin'?"

And when he had cashed the last pay check he would ever get from Coldwater County Bing Miller went down the street to the livery stable where he kept two horses.

He rode out of Coldwater within the hour, riding a deep-chested blood bay, leading another bay bearing his bed and all his personal belongings in a pack.

He took a trail that ran north. Away on the far horizon he faced, the sagebrush flats ran out to rolling foothills yellow with bunch grass. The foothills lifted to a long range of jagged mountains clothed with pine, split with tremendous gorges, over which scores of saw-toothed peaks stood bluish purple against a hot, bright sky.

At noon he rode into the Ellison ranch. The roundup crew was out on the range, but a few riders were busy about the place. Bing loafed around, watching them all that afternoon. He ate supper with them. He didn't mention that he was no longer a deputy sheriff on Gil Freeman's staff.

In the dusk somebody suggested draw poker. Bing took a stack of chips, played with varying luck until the game ended after midnight. He slept in the Ellison bunkhouse until the clamor of the cook beating a tin dishpan with an iron spoon wakened them for breakfast. And when that meal was over Bing saddled up, packed his bed, and rode away, rode straight for those purple-blue peaks that were not so distant now.

* * * * *

IN A SMALL clear space by a tiny trickle of a mountain spring Bing Miller squatted on the ground beside a man lying flat on his back on Bing's outspread blankets. A drawn face turned up to a bar of sunlight filtering in through the conical tops of a scrub pine forest that spread for miles about them. On the opposite side of the wounded man sat another who stared impassively at the ground, and from whom Bing's eye never strayed far, even though it were but to glance from one corner.

This third individual might have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty. Above a thin visage browned to the color of saddle-leather his hair was almost white. He didn't stir. Hands clasped over one crooked-up knee he stared at the earth carpeted with pine thicket.

Rifles stood against a tree. Six-shooters thrust out of holsters belted around their hips. Part of their silence was born of caution. Impassive as "Whitey" Soames seemed, he was listening, listening—while they waited, waited at Bing Miller's insistence, for a man to die.

For the man, who was little more than a boy, a year or two younger than Bing himself, who was only twenty-six, was dying. He knew it. They knew it. They were ninety miles from a doctor and it was not, as Whitey Soames said, a case for a sawbones anyhow.

Bing Miller wet a handkerchief in a cup by his hand and wiped Bob Cochran's mouth. His breathing was hoarse, wheezy. The pinkish froth that Bing wiped away kept forming between his lips.

Bob Cochran looked at Bing, motioned to the water. Bing gave him a drink.

"Listen, Bing," he said feverishly.

"Don't talk," Bing soothed. "You'll only start your lungs bleedin' again."

"Don't matter," he whispered. "I'm a gone goose anyway."

Neither of his companions contradicted that. They knew it was true.

"You will do that for me, won't you, Bing?" Cochran asked. A pleading note stirred in his voice.

"I've promised, and you never knew me to break a promise," Bing said slowly. "Don't worry. I'll deliver."

"I didn't go into this just because I wanted easy money quick," Cochran moaned. "You know I didn't, Bing. I want the family to get my share of the plunder. And without knowin' how I come by it. You *sabe*? The old man's out of the picture. Ted's wilder than I ever was, but Lois can pull the fat out of the fire if she gets that money. Tell her I sent it, and don't tell her nothin' more. She wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole if she thought it was crooked coin. You'll head straight for there and do this?"

"Yes, I'll manage it somehow," Bing promised again, for the third or fourth time. "If I can manage it without puttin' my foot in a trap, Bob."

"No chance," Cochran said eagerly. "You were headin' north anyway. The trail's blind, blind as a box canyon. Nobody knew. Nobody was tipped off. Nobody has followed. You got to, Bing. It's the last chance I'll ever have to do anything for my own folks."

"Be easy in your mind," Bing assured him softly. "It's a promise."

Cochran closed his eyes. Whitey Soames altered neither the expression of his face nor the immobility of his body. Only when Bing looked at him with a questioning glance one corner of Whitey's mouth drew up a trifle. Bing could almost feel the silence that settled on spring and forest and the encircling mountains for more than half an hour.

Then young Cochran, who had lain for twenty minutes in what seemed a state of coma, began to twist his head from side to side. His eyes rolled until little but the whites showed. His mouth opened wide in a grimace of agony. He coughed sharply. With the spasm, blood gushed from his mouth in a flood no human power could have staunched. A half minute of that crimson gush and he lay still, white, speechless.

"He's gone," Bing whispered.

Whitey Soames nodded. "That slug went through his lungs all right," he said. "That cough finished him. Yeah, he's gone. We better be gone too, Bing."

"I don't like the job he wished on me," Bing muttered. "But a promise is a promise."

"You're a sucker," Soames said indifferently. "You've been almost like a woman about Cochran."

BING'S eyes rested on Whitey Soames. "It's a good thing for you, Whitey, at that. Otherwise—" Bing left the sentence unfinished.

"Well, from that angle, yes," Soames admitted. "But listen, Bing." Soames leaned forward, running his fingers through his white hair with nervous eagerness. "Listen. The Cochran outfit on the Frozen Fish is all in the clear. Shucks, they must have two-three thousand cattle. I was there one time, m'self. They don't need this money. Let's you and me split it."

"Uh-uh." Bing shook his head. Soames' dark eyes had taken on a peculiar glow. "That part of it goes as Bob wanted. You got yours, ain't you? Better figure yourself lucky to be alive, making a safe getaway."

"You're the doctor," Whitey shrugged. "I am not havin' no run-in with you over that."

"How good you are to me," Bing said softly, "and me just one of the Miller boys from Oklahoma."

"You don't need to get sarcastic," Soames growled. "I'm satisfied. I just suggested it."

Bing brooded, squatting on his heels for a minute. No matter how he turned or how he seemed to move he never quite got in a position where he couldn't see Whitey Soames' thin, agile hands.

"We'll bury him," he said at last. "If we leave him lay and somebody should find his corpse, why the fat's in the fire right off. Blast such business! I never was intended to be on the wrong side of the law, or I'd have been given a different set of nerves."

"I don't see nothin' wrong with your nerve," Whitey muttered grudgingly, "but I could improve a lot on your judgment, Bing, about some things."

"About sticking up stages and getting away with a dead partner's share of the loot, I suppose?" Bing flung at him. "Thanks for the compliment."

CHAPTER II

A Promise Made Is a Debt Unpaid

WITH a hand ax Bing and Whitey made sharp stakes out of a pine pole and dug and scraped in a patch of loamy soil until they had a trench deep enough to hold a body. In this they laid Bob Cochran with his saddle-blanket for a winding sheet. They trod the place level and strewed pine needles over the disturbed earth until it was like all the forest floor.

And then Bing faced Whitey Soames over the meager pile of Bob Cochran's belongings.

"Bob's share of the loot wasn't on him," Bing said crisply. "It wasn't in his saddle-pocket where he said it was. So you've got it. Come across, Whitey."

They faced each other, erect, tense. Soames' eyelids fluttered slightly. His right shoulder seemed to lift a trifle. And suddenly, with that quickness of the hand which deceives the eye Bing Miller had his gun leveled on Whitey Soames' middle. A queer smile crinkled his pleasant young face.

"You have only an outside chance with me in this kind of an argument, Whitey," he said. "You don't mean anything at all in my young life, and Bob Cochran did. Come through."

Soames' face contorted with anger. But he came through, after Bing had drawn Whitey's gun from its scabbard and cast it aside. From inside his cotton shirt he handed Bing a flat package wrapped in brown paper. Bing opened the parcel without lowering his gun and riffled over the contents. He shoved it inside his waistband.

"Come again," he said grimly. "I want it all. Every red cent. This is one job, Whitey, where instead of you chiseling your partners out of the proceeds, you get chiseled yourself."

Whitey Soames' mouth opened to curse, whining and protesting. And Bing walked behind him and felt over his clothing until he located another packet, which he took.

An hour later they emerged on a slope where the pine forest ringed an open grassy basin, two miles in diameter. Whitey Soames rode ten feet ahead of Bing, and Bing's packhorse tailed the big bay.

"Pull up, Whitey," Bing called, and they halted. "You see this basin? Well, you just keep ridin' right out into the middle of it and don't bother lookin' around until you're sure you're out of rifle range. Right here and now we part company forever."

Whitey Soames glared sullenly over his shoulder—once. Then he faced ahead and kept riding out on that grassy sea until he was a small dark spec on the yellow grass.

Then Bing turned aside into the shadowy needle-carpeted aisles of the forest and rode steadily along ridges where the feet of his horses left no trail that even an Indian's eye could follow. . . .

Bing Miller rode out of a hollow, climbed two miles and gained the low crest of a ridge. He had been doing that since sunrise and the sun was dropping fast to the western skyline now. He had crossed miles of such country. Jog down a gentle slope, cross a creek, climb a ridge, down another slope to another little valley threaded by a small stream, or perhaps just a dry watercourse, and up again.

"I never did see so darned much grass and water lyin' around loose, and so little use bein' made of it," he muttered. "But it looks like there's one pioneer in this wilderness. That river there ought to be the Frozen Fish. And that place ahead might possibly be the Cochran ranch. Anyway it's a place to stop overnight, and get some information."

The sun struck bright flashes on windows in the valley below. House, outbuildings, corrals. The silver gleam of water.

Bing looked back. He had been looking backward for nine hundred miles. Then he shook up his tired horse. The equally tired pack animal came up on the lead-rope. Bing passed through a lane dividing a pole fence pasture on one side and a hundred-odd acres of hay meadow on the other, and came into the dooryard of a ranch as empty and silent as the little valleys and low ridges he had been crossing all day.

MORE so, because on that rolling land wild horses had fled at his approach, equally wild cattle had bunched to stare as he passed, or bands of antelope had bobbed away waving their white flags. All the way from the Yellowstone to Frozen Fish, stock grazed. The range had seemed to him singularly devoid of human life, that was all.

But this ranch was barren, in pasture, yard, stable and corral, of anything that lived and moved. Bing stared at the house, a fair-sized house solidly constructed of small cottonwood logs. The roof was shingled, the window-trim painted. Sturdy pillars upheld a roomy porch. A vegetable garden full of green growing things lay in the rear. Flowers made bright patches of color within a low stone wall. But no one moved amid those gardens, nor answered when Bing called loudly:

"Hello, the house!"

But Bing Miller had come to silent ranches before, without smelling mystery. The sun was half under in the west. Bing's horses were tired. Where night fell on the range a man made his home. So Bing rode to the stable. Not until he stepped outside to a stack to get an armful of hay for his horses did he get a real shock, fathom why something more than mere silence and emptiness gave that place an atmosphere that had troubled him.

He sniffed. An odor of something decaying, as a dead animal lying too long unburied in the hot sun. Bing's eyes followed his nose, turned finally upon a man's body, the booted feet only a yard off the ground, hanging by the neck from the high cross-bar of a corral gate, just beyond the stack.

Since mankind first began twisting fibers to form a rope hanging has always seemed a grisly death, the dire end reserved for malefactors of the worst degree. A chill swept over Bing. Fear he did not know, but he was as susceptible to horror as the next man.

Yet he mastered his feeling and approached that body. The man had been young, and red-headed, like Bob Cochran. Even on that face blackened by strangulation Bing could see a resemblance.

He had been shot through one shoulder as well as hanged. The conviction that he had indeed found the Cochran ranch and come to it on the heels of tragedy alone kept Bing from resaddling and shifting hurriedly from that ghastly place.

"He's a Cochran, all right," Bing muttered. "Hangin' to the cross-bar of his own corral. I wonder—"

Wondering answered no questions. So Bing stared. Then on impulse he cut the rope. One slash of Bing's knife let the body fall. Gingerly he took hold of one booted foot and dragged the corpse aside. Then he took an armful of hay and covered that dreadful sight.

Bing walked slowly to the house. At least he would cook himself a meal before he rode on. And he was not sure he would ride on. This, he felt sure, was his destination. He had a mission to perform here for a man who had been his friend. If this was the Cochran ranch, then tonight, tomorrow, or soon, someone would appear. Ranches are not abandoned because a man is hanged.

Bing looked all through the house. Three bedrooms, a rider's bunkroom, a large room that was kitchen, dining and living room combined. It was all in order, immaculately clean, the sort of cleanliness a woman creates. The beds were neatly made. Wood in a box by the stove. Clean dishes on shelves, food in a roomy pantry. Comfortable chairs, a couch, hooked rag rugs on the floor. Mounted game heads over a stone fireplace. Even a few books—

and a guitar hanging on one wall. A substantial comfortable ranch home, not just a place to eat and sleep.

Bing stood in the middle of that living-room and wondered unavailingly.

Then he lit the fire. He found coffee, bacon, bread not yet stale, and plenty of canned stuff. Once or twice as he moved he froze to attention, listening. A sound, or the impression of a sound near at hand. Yet when he listened he heard nothing but the beating of his own heart, the faint crackle of the fire in the stove. And presently his food was ready.

ON THE oilcloth-covered table where Bing spread knife, fork and spoon, his cup of coffee and his fried bacon lay a small hand mirror. Bing had pushed it aside. Now over his last cup of coffee and a cigarette he drew this hand glass to him and stared at his face, darkened by three days' growth of beard.

He stiffened. In the mirror which, laying flat on the table, reflected a patch of the ceiling directly overhead, Bing saw more than his own face. The room was still bright with the afterglow of the sun.

And Bing, bending over that mirror saw the oblique reflection of a small opening in that ceiling through which a single eye regarded him steadily. An eye fringed with long lashes. A segment of white forehead tipped with hair. Below that eye peeped the round black muzzle of a gun.

Bing's hair began to bristle at the back of his neck.

The eye, that tiny corner of a face, that hollow ring which was a six-shooter muzzle, didn't move. Nor did Bing. But his brain worked double time. He did not relish a bullet between his shoulder-blades. So in a deliberate, thoughtful tone he began to speak.

"It's the devil of a note," he said conversationally, as if talking to himself, "to ride into a ranch to deliver an important message to them that own it and to find the place not only plumb abandoned, but with a dead man that looks enough like Bob Cochran to be his brother, hangin' by the neck from a gate post cross-bar. I don't hardly know what to do."

And after a few seconds' pause he added:

"You might be able to tell me, partner, up there in the ceilin'. You got a nice eye, but I sure don't admire your artillery trained on my back thataway. I'm a peaceable and friendly wayfarer, not an enemy."

No answer. No move.

"I see you in this mirror," Bing explained. "There's no mystery about it. I haven't got eyes in the back of my head. If I'm not welcome give me a wink and I'll ride on. If you feel like talkin' to me come out in the open. I'm harmless unless irritated."

Eye and gun muzzle disappeared silently. Bing sat rigid, expectant. The afterglow was becoming a pearly shadow. He heard a light clatter above and resisted a temptation to look. Eyes on the mirror he saw a double width of the ceiling board move aside. A head, neck, a hand firmly clasping a black Colt appeared.

Bing Miller caught his breath. It was a girl's face, and it seemed to Bing the loveliest face he had ever seen. Fine-textured skin over a daintily oval face, a mass of coppery red hair that lay in waves and twisted in curls. Gray-green eyes and a grim-lipped mouth, lips red over parted teeth. Her neck was like a small creamy pillar. Yet on that delicately beautiful face there was a look of resolution, and no hint of fear.

"Who are you?" she asked in a deep, slightly husky tone. "What was that you said about an important message for people here?"

"I'm Frank Miller," he drawled. "Folks call me Bing. I've come from quite a ways south of here. I may have exaggerated the importance of my business, but I have a message for some people named Cochran from a man named Bob Cochran. If you're Bob's sister Lois, why don't you come down and talk to me? You needn't be scared."

"I'm not scared," the girl answered calmly. "I've been watching you ever since you rode in. I saw you cut Ted down."

"Was that Bob's brother?" Bing asked. "Then this *is* the Cochran ranch on the Frozen Fish, eh? What has come off that the place is deserted except for a girl in an attic and a dead man? Is there anything I can do about it, or for you?"

"Have you," she asked, "any interest in doing anything about it?"

"Well—" Bing hesitated— "Bob Cochran was just about the closest friend I ever had, lady, or I wouldn't be here at all."

CHAPTER III

Parley in the Dark

THE GIRL stared down in silence and Bing swung in his chair to gaze up at her. Their eyes met searchingly, critically.

"Come on up here," she said after a time. "You'll find a trap-door in the ceiling of the pantry. You can climb through that by stepping up on the shelves."

"Why don't you come down?" Bing inquired.

"I can't," she answered coolly. "I'm crippled in one leg."

"I can help you down," Bing offered.

"Yes," she replied. "That's what I want you to come up for."

Bing found the trap-door in the pantry ceiling. From an up-ended case of tomatoes, with one foot on the second shelf, he thrust the door aside, caught the framework and hauled himself up into an attic running the full length of the house. Dim light filtered through a small dusky window set in one gable. The girl sat on some boards laid across unfinished rafters staring intently as his eyes sought hers.

"You're one of the Cochran family?" Bing asked, as he returned her stare with frank admiration.

"I'm Lois Cochran," she told him. "I guess I'm the last of the Cochrans—if Bob's gone."

"I didn't say he was gone," Bing protested.

"You said, 'Bob Cochran was just about the closest friend I ever had.' *Was*, remember. I have hunches. Something has happened to Bob, too."

In the face of that uncanny intuition Bing nodded.

"And now Ted," she said. "Oh, we're a lucky family—God help us!"

"You said you were crippled," Bing said, to change the subject.

"I got shot in the leg," she told him.

"Then how in Sam Hill did you get up here?" he asked.

"The same way you did," she answered. "Because I had to. It seemed the only safe place. And my leg hadn't got all stiff and useless then."

"What kind of trouble started here, anyhow?" Bing inquired. "That you get shot in the leg and a man gets hanged in his own yard."

"If I could answer that I'd be a lot wiser than I am now," Lois replied. "A week ago the last two riders we had quit for no reason. Then day before yesterday, after dark, some riders came up in front of the house. One called, 'Hey, Ted.' When Ted stepped outside they grabbed him. He got his gun out, but when he only fired one shot I knew they had him. So I grabbed my own gun and ran out the back way and sneaked up on them. They were getting busy over by the corral so I cut loose. They shot back at me plenty every time my gun flashed. Finally one shot hit me in the leg. It made me so sick all I could do was crawl away and lie down in the grass. After a while I heard them ride off. I limped over to the corral. You know what I found there. I would have saddled and ridden then, but they had cleaned every hoof of stock off the place."

"Horse thieves?" Bing inquired.

"I don't know," she said. "But horse thieves, rustlers, don't start in hanging ranch owners in order to steal."

"True," Bing agreed. "Well, that was three days ago. You been holed up here ever since?"

She nodded.

"Good glory!"

Bing stared around the dusky attic, with twilight closing in. A few pieces of discarded furniture littered one corner. Lois was sitting on an old quilt. Otherwise, there was nothing but bare boards and roof joists, filmy with cobwebs.

"Nothin' to eat or drink?" he asked. "How'd you stand it?"

"I brought up three or four cans of tomatoes and a box of crackers, when I came," Lois said. "After the first night I got so stiff I couldn't get down again. I wouldn't have come down anyway. I was scared they'd come back. Ugh!" She shivered. "I don't scare easy, either. But it's awful to be helpless. In the dark was the worst, knowing Ted was swinging out there."

"I'll lower you down," Bing said decisively, "if you can stand usin' that leg at all. You can be comfortable in your own bed, after I get you somethin' decent to eat and drink. No stranglers is goin' to do any successful business either day or night while I'm here. That may sound like big talk, lady, but once in my career I was a deputy sheriff, and I grew accustomed to dealin' with hard citizens. Slide over here."

ONCE Bing got Lois out of the attic and into the living room he said cheerfully,

"Now, just as a precaution I'm goin' to blanket these windows before I light a lamp or stir up a fire."

From a spare bedroom he got a variety of covers. Lois told him where to find a hammer and nails. Bing hurried. Dark closed in fast. But his nimble fingers smothered every window in the big room before it got too dark to see what he was doing. He lit the lamp then, and slid a low table over to where Lois lay on a couch, so that the light stood at her elbow.

"You hear a voice or footsteps outside, blow out the lamp and leave the rest to me," he instructed. "Nobody is goin' to get inside this house until we know who it is and what's their business."

Bing fried bacon, and warmed up coffee. He sat beside Lois and watched her eat.

"My, but that did taste good," she sighed at last. "If my leg didn't hurt so I'd feel like a new woman."

"You ain't a woman," Bing blurted. "You're just a kid."

"I'm twenty-two," Lois said slowly. "If I'm not a woman now I never will be. My mother had three children before she was my age."

"Your mother livin'?" Bing asked.

"Dead, years ago. Dad went off with pneumonia this spring. Ted hung by stranglers. Bob—what happened to Bob? You haven't told me yet."

"It'll keep," Bing frowned. "I was supposed to say he was all right, but you seem to have a queer way of smelling things, so I won't lie about it. I helped bury him not so long ago. Seems to me more than its share of disaster has overtaken this Cochran family."

"And more to come, I'm afraid," the girl murmured. "So something did happen to Bob. I just knew it, the moment you spoke of him."

"Let me see the wound in your leg," Bing said abruptly. For all her voice was low and steady and her face impassive, he knew there was constant pain nagging at her.

Lois hesitated. A touch of color crept into her cheeks. Then she drew up her skirt until she bared a bloody bandage halfway between knee and hip. As deftly as a trained nurse Bing cut away that blood-caked cloth, to expose a red-rimmed entrance hole and a wound of exit at the back of the leg, a trifle larger.

"I've seen worse, a heap worse," he commented. "She's a clean bullet-hole with no sign of infection. Hurts like blazes, I expect, but not as much inflamed as I thought it might be. Got any carbolic handy?"

Lois told him where there was a medicine closet. He brought a basin of water, bathed that damaged leg with that stinging antiseptic and rebound it with clean linen.

Then he rolled a smoke. He knew now which was Lois' bedroom. Presently he went in there with hammer and nails and

extra blankets to cover the windows. Then he carried the lamp in. Feeling his way back to her in the big room he said:

"You gotta rest. You need sleep. This house is like a fort. One man could stand off twenty behind these log walls. It's more comfortable in your bedroom, so you're going to get in your own little trundle bed right now. Put your arms around my neck and I'll carry you."

Under different circumstances a pair of soft arms about his neck and a woman's heart beating against his might have given Bing a definite thrill. But now he might have been a mother putting a sleepy child to bed. He laid Lois gently down.

"Tell me in which of these bureau drawers do you keep your sleepin' things," he said.

Lois pointed silently.

"Got any slippers?" he asked. "You might have to rout yourself out, you know. That leg'll carry you in a pinch."

"Under the bed," she murmured.

BING got down on his knees and found the slippers. He hunted in a drawer until he uncovered a nightgown with frilly lace around the neck. And when he came back to lay that on the bed Lois Cochran was looking at him with a tremulous smile and big tears were squeezing out of her eyes.

"Say, what the—you ain't scared of me, are you?" Bing voiced his first impression.

She shook her head.

"What then?" he demanded.

"Oh nothing much." She smiled. "Remember I've been alone here for days, helpless, with nothing but ghastly thoughts for company. I was scared and hurt, and not a soul could I reach. And then a man I never saw before walks in and takes care of me as if I were a baby."

"And you don't like it, eh?" Bing grinned. "Well, I don't blame you. I've been in a hospital twice—and it was sure tough on nurses. But this can't be helped now. You'll be on your feet pretty soon and you won't need any babying."

"But I do like it," she protested. "You don't know, I couldn't tell you, how glad I am you're here. Some men—" She shrugged.

"Most men, I've noticed," Bing drawled, "are generally ready to go the limit for a good lookin' girl in trouble. It's a pleasure to do things for you, but if you were sixty, and homely as a mud fence and in the same sort of jackpot, why, I'd be just as useful, I expect. I like to think that of myself, anyway."

"You're a white man," Lois murmured.

"I hope so. I never heard of any other color in the Miller family." Bing grinned. "Well, you get to bed. Tap wood when you're ready to blow the lamp out."

"Where are you going to sleep?" she asked.

"Right under this window at the foot of your bed," Bing said. "With a rifle handy and a six-gun beside my pillow. If we do have to hold the fort we got to be within speakin' distance of each other."

Out in the big room when Bing heard Lois tap on the wall he took a mattress and blanket and his rifle into that inky-dark room, drew aside the window coverings and let in the glimmer of a starry night. Then he took off his boots and lay down.

But not to sleep. Bing lay there relaxed, resting. He could have slept after fourteen hours in the saddle. But he had to be on guard. He didn't know what lay behind this strangling visit. They might come again, and Bing Miller had no notion of being found dangling from a rope-end by his neck.

Lying there in the semi-gloom he presently heard Lois Cochran's breathing become deep and regular. She slept—an unconscious tribute to the protective instinct of the male—and Bing smiled. Good girl!

CHAPTER IV

Wanted!

DAWN rolled up night's curtain, touching the sky and scattered clouds with fiery fingers. And when all these shades and tints had faded the sun stabbed with golden spears across Frozen Fish, and meadow larks began to carol from fence posts. Bing watched dawn come to full day with his elbows resting on the low window sill. Then he tiptoed in his sock feet to the door. Glancing back over his shoulder he saw Lois looking at him, wide awake.

"Well, she's another day." Bing smiled. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Not near so sore and stiff as I would if I'd lain another night in that attic."

"You'll feel still better after some java. How'll you have the morning egg?"

"Try to find an egg," Lois said lightly. "We ate the last one ten days ago. This is a cow ranch. We don't range chickens."

"You don't range hogs, either," Bing retorted. "But I notice you have lots of bacon."

Half an hour later he came back to the bedroom with a tray of hot cakes, bacon and coffee.

"Anything you don't see don't ask for," he observed.

"What I see looks good enough," Lois replied. "Come back when you've eaten. I want to talk to you."

But Bing was back before he had finished his coffee.

"There's a bunch of riders comin' down the east bank," he told her. "Can you tell one crowd of men from another around here?"

Lois shifted to look out a window. The mounted men, a dozen or more, were at the end of the lane. All but three turned south along the fence. The trio came toward the house.

"That's the IT roundup," Lois said. "Yes, that's Sam Bigelow on the gray horse. Look in that closet, quick. Give me a dressing gown that hangs on the back of the door."

"You're not goin' to get up an' walk around," Bing protested.

"I'll have to talk to Sam, and I don't want him in my bedroom," Lois said.

Bing got the dressing gown, held it for Lois to slip into. Then he picked her up bodily and carried her to the couch in the big room.

"You keep your weight off that leg," he growled. "I knew a fellow that like to ruined himself walkin around with a wound like that before it healed proper."

He sat down to his unfinished breakfast, just as the three horsemen rode up to the front gate. Spurs clanked on the porch. A voice, stridently cheerful, called:

"Hello, everybody."

"Come in, Sam," Lois answered.

Bing went on industriously smearing syrup on a hot cake. But he was infinitely more alert than his casual manner indicated. There were sound reasons for that, even if those reasons were not obvious.

The man who walked into that room was physically of a type that Bing Miller intensely disliked, instinctively, on sight. Any man with a swagger to his stride, black curly hair, bold dark eyes, a ruddy color, and olive skin could always be sure of a critical appraisal from Bing, and a cool reception besides. It was invariable. Bing just never had been able to get on with men of that definite type.

And Sam Bigelow fitted that description precisely. A bold, dark handsome devil with an air of authority—which was not assumed, since he handled forty thousand cattle with thirty riders at his beck and call.

"Howdy, Lois," he greeted cheerfully. His eyes took in Bing, and he stared. A prolonged, critical stare. "Ted around?"

Lois Cochran looked at him silently for a second or two.

"Three nights ago, late in the evening," she said, "while Ted and I were here alone someone called him outside. There was a fuss. I ran out and got shot in the leg. In the morning Ted's body was hanging to

the cross-bar of the corral gate."

"Quit stringin' me, Lois," Bigelow protested grinning. "That ain't no kind of a josh so early in the mornin'."

"Josh?" Lois' voice trembled. "Am I a fool? I'm telling you the truth!"

BIGELOW'S tone changed to profound concern.

"Why, Lois, who'd do that, an' why? Ted didn't have no enemy mean enough to do that. You poor kid! And you say the dirty dogs shot you in the leg? Who'd pull stuff like that?"

"I'd give a lot to know," Lois answered sharply. "There's a law in this country, even if it is far away."

"Unfortunately, the law can't bring a dead man back to life," Bigelow growled. "By gosh, this knocks me all in a heap . . . Say, excuse me a minute. I'll stop the boys goin' on circle. We'll look into this." He moved with an unconscious swagger to the door. "Mike," he called, "hotfoot after the boys and bring 'em back. There's been tarnation to pay here. Pronto!"

Then he came back and sat down on the end of the couch.

"First thing," he asked, "where was your riders when this happened?"

"There weren't any," Lois explained. "They'd quit a couple of days before."

"Why? Cowpunchers don't just up and quite an outfit at this season."

"I don't know. They didn't say. They just asked for their money and left."

"H-m, that might mean somethin'." Bigelow frowned in thought. "Say, you ought to have lookin' after. I'll get you to a doctor."

"I don't need a doctor now," Lois declared. "I was shot three days ago. It's on the mend now."

"Well, then, you better go over to the IT home ranch. The ranch boss' wife is good as a trained nurse. You can't stay here alone, crippled, after a thing like this."

"Why can't I?" Lois asked. It seemed to Bing that she was slightly on the defensive against this masterful man. "It's my home. And I'm not alone."

Bigelow's black eyes turned searchingly on Bing, who sat back in his chair, smoking in silence.

"Well, it seems not," Bigelow remarked presently. "I don't think I know your friend here."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Lois said. "Mr. Miller, Mr. Bigelow. Frank, runs the IT, a neighboring cow outfit."

Bing stood up. So did Bigelow. Formally, their hands met. Bigelow stood three inches taller than Bing. He had a forty-five-inch chest. The muscles in his arms and wrists corresponded to his bull-massive torso. And he used that great paw to clamp Bing Miller's knuckles in a grip that just about crushed them. Bing didn't wince. Though the pain shot up past his elbow and he knew that his right hand—his gun-hand—would be paralyzed for five minutes, and that it was being done deliberately, he looked Sam Bigelow impassively in the eye and said:

"Glad to meet you."

"Stranger in this neck of the wood?" Bigelow asked. "Punchin' cows your trade?"

"Sort of," Bing answered briefly.

"I'm kinda short-handed for fall work," Bigelow said in a businesslike tone. "I could put you to work—if you can ride?"

"I'm ridin' for the Cochran outfit," Bing said curtly, and saw Lois Cochran's eyes widen a trifle.

Sam sat down on the couch again to renew his persuasion that Lois either go to town or to be taken to the IT, until a clatter of hoofs in the yard heralded the arrival of the "boys." They were, Bing could see through the window, a pretty flashy outfit, good riding gear with plenty of forged steel and silver-inlay trimmings. They rode fine horses.

"The IT is goin' to look into this," Bigelow said. "There's not goin' to be any dirty work pulled on this range if I know about it."

He walked to the door, turned and beckoned Bing. Outside he lowered his voice to say:

"I didn't like to bring up any horrible details before her, but what was done with

the body?"

"I cut it down and threw some hay over it last night," Bing told him. "I only blew in about sundown m'self."

"Oh," Bigelow commented. "And how happened you to blow in here?"

Bing measured glances with those bold dark eyes.

"Bob Cochran sent me here," he said coldly.

More words trembled on the tip of his tongue, but he kept quiet. And Bigelow didn't quiz any more.

FOLLOWED by the IT men Bing led them to that pile of hay and racked it aside to expose the blackened features. The rope was still sunk in the swollen flesh of the neck, and Bing pointed out the place where young Cochran had been hanging and where he had cut the rope. Bigelow stood thinking.

"Take four days at least for any authorities to get here," he said finally. "We got all the evidence there is. This body won't stand layin' around any longer. Boys, we'll bury him. Right now. Hunt around for pick and shovels."

Bing walked away to the house. Ted Cochran was better underground. Bing told Lois, and got a clean white sheet and a square of heavy canvas to wrap the body in. No one had touched the corpse when he returned. The IT cowboys were digging a grave in a sandy patch just north of the lane, inside a pasture.

Bing got down on his knees to wrap that winding sheet about the murdered man. He took off and coiled the death-rope, a common hard-twist in common use on the range. That is, it was a plain rope except for the hondo, the eye through which a man reeves his noose. That was a work of art, a peculiar and elaborately braided hondo, at which Bing stared for a few seconds, and then shoved the coil of rope under the loose hay. Then he folded the sheet and canvas about the remains of Ted Cochran.

With the last shovelful of earth in place Bigelow issued crisp orders. All but two riders departed—the same two who had come in with him—and Bigelow himself got on his horse and trotted back to the house.

Bing had marked this pair. Something about them differentiated them from their fellows. He had heard the IT riders address them as Mike and Dave. They were men between thirty and forty, cold-eyed, medium-sized customers. They looked alike, tremendously alike. There was some subtle quality besides personal resemblance that they seemed to share. Offhand, Bing Miller would have classed them as highly dangerous, in a cold-blooded implacable fashion. Bing didn't fancy either of them.

They had nothing to say to him. So he drifted after Bigelow and sat down on the steps of the porch when he got to the house, suddenly conscious that those two in the living room might have something to say which he, a stranger, should not interrupt.

Bigelow, coming out after a lapse of fifteen minutes, stopped beside Bing and looked down at him, narrow-eyed.

"So you're goin' to ride for Miss Cochran, eh?" he drawled.

There was an inflection in his tone that netted Bing afresh.

"That's what I said, wasn't it?" he replied.

Bigelow stared at him hard, searchingly, as if he were something under a microscope.

"You know, Miller," he said at last, "your face seemed just a shade familiar as soon as I saw you. Do you know why?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Bing.

"Maybe this'll give you an idea."

Sam Bigelow drew a folded paper from inside his breast pocket, opened it, looked it over with a smile, looked at Bing and nodded. Then he handed the seven-by-nine sheet to Bing with a slight uplift of his eyebrows.

Bing didn't reach for the sheet at first. He could see what was on it, the way Bigelow held it before him. A circular setting forth below an excellent photographic reproduction of his own face these words:

The sheriff's office of Coldwater County, Colorado, will pay the above Reward for information leading to, or the apprehension, dead or alive, of Frank C. Miller, known as "Bing" Miller, wanted for the robbery of the Freegold-Coldwater stage on June seventh.
Communicate with,
Gilbert Freeman, Sheriff,
Coldwater, Col.

CHAPTER V

No Margin

A REASONABLY accurate description of Bing was on the wanted circular, and the photograph was lifelike. Bing's blue eyes blazed. Yet he laughed, and took the sheet out of Bigelow's hand in the same motion that brought him to his feet. Bing could move with the speed of lightning with no apparent effort.

"Well," he said indifferently, "what are you goin' to do about it?"

"I'm runnin' a cow outfit," Bigelow said loftily. "Not runnin' down outlaws. I offered you a job a little while ago. I'm still offerin'. I'm short of men. I'm not particular about their records. I can see that they behave themselves while they're punchin' cows for my outfit."

"I told you I was ridin' for Miss Cochran," Bing reminded.

"I'm tellin' you I don't think you will," Bigelow retorted.

"That's for her to say, not you," Bing said.

"You're a cool customer!" Bigelow said grudgingly. "Or else a plain fool. You're on the dodge and your life's not worth that"—he snapped his fingers—"if I was to show somebody that circular and tell where to locate you."

"Well," Bing drawled, "it would be my funeral, not yours."

"Listen, me bold buckaroo!" Bigelow lowered his voice, hunched his head menacingly and took a step nearer Bing. His black brows drew together. "If you don't choose to go to work for the IT your best bet is to burn the earth for distant ranges. I don't give a hoot about a reward, and I don't bother catchin' stage-robbers for sheriffs who aren't smart enough to catch their own. Even if said sheriff happens to be my brother-in-law, which is how come I get this circular in the mail. But if you do stick here you better walk a chalk-line as far as Lois Cochran is concerned, or I'll land on you like a ton of brick."

"That's what's eatin' on you, is it?" Bing contrived to make his tone as disagreeable as he could, deliberately. "Well, Mr. Bigelow, when the ton of brick falls on me look out some of 'em don't smash your toes."

"You heard what I said," Bigelow repeated curtly. "I'll be keepin' cases on you."

He strode away to his horse.

"Now, I wonder," Bing muttered, as he watched the boss of the IT ride away, flanked by his twin satellites, "just what's back of all this?"

After one frowning look at that circular, he folded it, tucked it in a pocket, and walked into the house.

"Did you mean what you said about riding for me?" Lois asked, as soon as he was fairly in the room.

"Well, if I ride for anybody in this country I'll be for you," Bing hedged. "It certainly won't be for the IT. I wouldn't hitch with Mr. Bigelow."

Bing flexed his fingers. They ached a little yet from that deliberately crushing grip. He couldn't help thinking disconnectedly what those iron fingers would do to a man's neck.

"Oh Sam's all right, only he's sort of aggressive and abrupt sometimes," Lois said. "I'll need riders."

A shaft of sunlight through one window settled on her hair. It wasn't red, it wasn't gold—it had shades of both metals in it—and it glowed like a flame in the sun above that thoroughbred face. Bing recalled the way Bigelow's gaze had rested on her with a hungry look. He could understand that. If Bing had had less on his mind he knew he would have responded far more readily to her manifest charm himself. But he was tying together in his brain things

that might mean liberty and even life to him, while he listened and answered.

"Whatever is done here now is up to me," Lois said, and wrinkled her brows. "Can you take orders from a woman?"

"A hired man takes orders from whoever pays his wages," Bing said. "If you're the last of the family, I suppose you naturally fall heir to the Cochran outfit."

"What's left of it," she muttered. "If any.

"If any?" Bing echoed.

LOIS answered Bing's inquiring inflection with a nod.

"I'd better explain," she said. "In the first place, I'm the only one of us that got much of an education. Bob and Ted never wanted to do anything but ride. Dad sent me away to school. For the last three years I've handled all the accounts, been sort of bookkeeper and general confidante of Dad's. He seemed to be able to talk to me about things better than he could to Ted. Bob hasn't been home for three years. So I know exactly how everything stands and they don't stand so good. There's this ranch and supposed to be about a couple of thousand cattle on the range. A bunch of stock horses that are useful but of no great market value.

"One thousand head of those cattle are Texas longhorns ready to ship for beef this year. Dad bought them as two-year-olds. We'd come through a hard winter not so long before. Our range stock had been trimmed badly. He didn't have capital to pay cash for this herd, but they were a bargain, and so he borrowed money from the Big Dry bank—thirty thousand dollars—giving a mortgage on ranch and our brand as security. That falls due in October, about the time beef should be shipped. There won't be any extension if that obligation isn't met on the due date."

"A thousand beef steers delivered in Chicago would pay that and leave you a margin of at least ten thousand," Bing pointed out.

"From all the signs there won't be half that many to ship," Lois declared.

"How come?"

"That's what we've been asking ourselves since early spring," she said. "We had three reps out with different roundups. Ted and two riders checked up close on the stuff on our home range. We've had two mild winters. But all told they could only get track of less than five hundred four-year-old steers in our brand. If more don't turn up on fall roundup—well, it'll take just about all our stock cattle as well as beef to pay off that debt. And that would be the finish of the Cochran outfit. I might even lose the ranch, too."

"Those critters just sort of vanished without rhyme or reason, eh?" Bing commented.

"Just vanished," Lois said. "They were all on the range within fifteen miles of home last fall."

"And then your men suddenly decide to quit. When the population of this ranch is down to yourself and a kid brother a bunch of stranglers swoop on you in the night and eliminate the youngest Cochran." Bing frowned, recalling Bob Cochran's plea to him.

"Tell me," Bing asked. "Did Bob know how things were shaping up here?"

"He did," she answered. "I only found out where he was a couple of months ago. He used to write to me once in a great while. Bob didn't get along at home, but he'd have done anything in the world for his own people. I wrote and told him just how things stood. I wanted him to come home."

So that was what Bob had meant. Bing's face saddened. And that was why Bing had come north with twenty thousand dollars in his possession that had cost Bob Cochran his life. That clarified something that had been puzzling Bing Miller.

"No suspected rustlin' operations, eh?"

Lois shook her head.

"The IT has dominated this range for years," she said. "Nobody who tried rustling stock on the Frozen Fish ever lasted long."

"I'd figure Bigelow would be pretty high-handed naturally, and particularly

with rustlers, or anybody that interfered with his operations."

"He is, I suppose," Lois answered. "But he has always been awfully nice to us. The boys never took to him much. But Dad liked Sam a lot."

"Do you?" Bing asked casually.

SHE colored a trifle.

"I like him well enough—yes," she admitted. "He's quite a person."

"He seems to think so himself," Bing commented. "Does he own this IT outfit?"

"Oh, no. It's owned by a St. Louis crowd. Sam just runs it."

"Absentee owners, eh?" Bing said. "Well, the curly-haired buckaroo might steal you if he got a chance, but I don't suppose he'd steal your cattle. Have you any idea how you're goin' to cope with this situation?"

"There's nothing much to be done, except get some riders, and ship all the beef that can be gathered," Lois pointed out. "If we are short of the proper number we'll have to sell enough stock cattle, if we can, to meet that obligation, or the bank will sell us up. That's the long and short of it."

"Us?" Bing observed. "There's only you. You're sole heir. It's you yourself that breaks even or goes broke."

"I keep forgetting that there's only me now," she whispered.

"What you ought to do," Bing suggested, "is to get yourself appointed administrator of your own estate, and turn stock and ranch into cash as soon as possible. A girl can't run a cow outfit, even a small one."

"*I* can," she replied with a touch of asperity. "If I can get men who will do what I tell them. I can make it go. I've got to—if I can once get over this hump. What would I do in a town with a few thousand dollars? Sit around and wait for someone to marry me, so I'd be taken care of? I should say not! I grew up on this ranch. It's my home. In spite of the difficulties, in spite of the terrible thing that has happened to Ted I'm not going to abandon it, unless I have to."

"I admire your spunk," Bing said bluntly, "and I'll do my blamedest for you as long as I last. There's only one thing I couldn't do, and that's ride for you on roundup under Sam Bigelow. I may as well get it off my chest. I'd tangle with him in short order. I don't like his style to begin with. In the second place he knows, or thinks he knows, somethin' about me that isn't exactly good news. I'll be polite when I meet him, but I won't either work or play in his yard. I don't suppose that's very satisfactory to you."

"He sort of hinted you might be on the dodge or something," Lois admitted. "But I thought he was just trying to bluff me into letting him look after me for a while."

"It might be, at that," Bing said drily. "But it won't hurt me for work. If I ride for you I'll be a good rider, same as I would for anybody I hired out to. If anything does come up, why it doesn't concern you. I was a stray hand lookin' for a job and you hired me, that's all."

Lois Cochran looked troubled at this tentative admission. She stared at Bing a long time. When she did speak she said simply:

"I find it hard to imagine you doing anything you'd be ashamed of."

"Don't try," Bing told her. "Because I wouldn't. Now, let's get down to cases. You ought to go to town."

"Why?" Lois demanded. "My leg is as good as I could expect. I'll have to go around on crutches for a while. Ted's buried. Sam is going to send word to the county authorities. Someone will come and investigate. What more can I do?"

"It's all right about your leg and Mr. Bigelow's intentions. But if I were you, I'd do this: Get in touch with your county seat, wherever it is and make a complete statement of what happened yourself. Get your lawyer, if you have one, to apply for letters of administration of the Cochran estate—unless your dad left a will."

"He made a will long ago," Lois said. "He left everything to Ted and me. Ted didn't get control of his share for five years after Dad's death. Ten per cent of the appraised value of the property was to

be paid in cash to Bob. I am sole executor under the will."

"Now they're both gone." Bing nodded. "If you have not already done so, get that will probated. And you have to hire three or four men."

LOIS spoke up quickly.

"This will was probated," she declared. "I'm legally in control. I was going to let you attend to hiring cowpunchers, and later on three or four men to put up some hay. I was going to explain to you what has to be done and let you go ahead and do it."

"In that case I'll pick my own men," Bing said. "But don't you see you have to make a move personally? You've had cattle disappear. A killing has been done. Anything you can do to protect your own interest, through the law, or in person, had better be done at once. The whole thing spells somebody with a deep-seated grudge or some kind of an infernal ax to grind."

"Whenever cattle range there is always someone trying to steal," Lois said slowly. "But I simply can't imagine any motive for doing away with Ted. Perhaps I had better go to town."

"You couldn't stay here alone if I went, and somebody must go," Bing went on. "Where do we go? How far?"

"Big Dry," Lois told him. "Forty-five miles north, on the Big Muddy. Custer City, away south, is our county seat, but I can telegraph from Big Dry. That's where all our business is done, anyway."

"Then we better be on our way," Bing suggested. "I saw a buggy by the stable. It has a cushioned seat that you could ride in without bein' too uncomfortable. You must have some work horses loose on the range, close by."

"Yes," Lois said. "We had half a dozen saddle horses and couple of teams in the pasture, too. They disappeared that night. But there are some more broke horses running with a wild bunch two or three miles down the creek. I guess you'll have to go and hunt for them."

"What's your brand?" Bing inquired as he rose.

"Bar C Bar on both horses and cattle," Lois answered. "You'll know this bunch by an old pinto mare with a club foot. There should be a pair of white-legged sorrel driving horses with her. But pick up anything of ours that looks broken to saddle or harness that you find."

CHAPTER VI

That Blamed Money

JUST two miles down Frozen Fish Bing found the pinto mare with her band, about thirty strong. The white-footed sorrels were there and a dozen other Bar C Bars with saddle and harness marks on them. He had the bunch corraled in less than half an hour. He roped out and led the sorrels up for Lois to identify through the open window.

"They're the ones," she said. "I see you got most of the horses that were in the pasture too. So they weren't stolen."

In less than an hour they were rolling. Before sundown they had put that forty-five miles behind them, reaching Big Dry on a ferry that slid across the wide river on a cable.

Big Dry was much more of a town than Bing had expected. For an isolated town in the heart of a sparsely settled cow country it seemed both busy and populous. Stores, saloons, two hotels, a considerable cluster of dwellings. It had brick building and wide plank sidewalks.

Bing, with that circular in his pocket and Sam Bigelow's words still vivid in his mind, wondered if Big Dry would have officers smart enough to recognize him from that description. His manner didn't alter as they drove into town. But he knew he was taking a chance, and more than once he wondered if he were not an utter fool.

Bing shrugged. He was a little at sea on some scores, but profoundly certain on others.

He would have felt a good deal easier

in his mind if he had not still been carrying in a money-belt next to his skin all that currency which he had taken from Whitey Soames at the point of a gun, the plunder for which Bob Cochran had paid with his life.

It was continuously in his mind during his stay in town, and was still with him when he went to sleep in the Big Dry hotel that night....

The next morning Bing sat on the side of his bed, dressed, staring at the floor while he waited for the breakfast hour, pondering deeply. That blasted money, lying against his ribs under a Texas holster that carried an extra gun tucked neatly away within his shirt under one armpit! It had seemed a simple enough task to ride up to the Cochran ranch, hand that currency to a member of the family and ride on. But the simple had evolved into unlooked for complexities. He couldn't just hand it to Lois. Brief as their acquaintance had been it had shown her with an intelligence too acute to swallow any yarn Bing could concoct to explain how Bob Cochran suddenly possessed twenty thousand dollars in cold cash, and had died with his boots on with equal suddenness.

"I shoulda cached it somewhere around the ranch, I guess," Bing muttered. "What I ought to do is keep right on ridin.' But I'll be hanged if I do—not till I have to."

What Bing did next was the result of an inspiration acquired halfway downstairs. He went straight to the livery-stable where he had put up the team. The buggy stood wedged in between two high wagons. The top was up. There wasn't a soul in sight or hearing. When he put his head and shoulders inside that buggy top no human eye could see what he did.

His fingers groped down behind the loose spring cushion and felt the bottom of the tufted upholstery that covered the back of the seat. Bing loosed three or four tacks. Back of the thick padding and coiled springs he made a space, thrust in three flat packages of currency, and pressed the tacks back home.

He strolled nonchalantly off to his breakfast, smiling. Not a chance in ten thousand that that upholstery would be disturbed during the life of that buggy. He was rid of some incriminating evidence and he could get it when he wanted it.

WHILE he ate breakfast he dwelt on the origin of that printed circular. He knew that stage hold-up had been a practically perfect crime. Outside of himself, Whitey Soames, and Bob Cochran no human soul could know, or likely guess, the identity of the men who had held up the Freegold-Coldwater stage in the dusk of a Colorado evening. There was not, Bing felt certain, a solitary clue. It had been accomplished with one lightning stroke. Then a wild shot from an excited passenger as those masked men rode away had hit Bob Cochran under the right shoulder blade. Even so, they had left only a blind trail.

There could be only one genesis for that circular—Whitey Soames. If Whitey had been taken on any charge whatever he was cunning enough to try shifting the onus of that crime to the man who had stripped him of his plunder.

Bing shrugged. He had started something, and he was going to see it through. He had a definite instinct for standing by his friends and waging war on his enemies. He was, in effect, standing by his best friend's sister. In the Frozen Fish country and Big Dry he walked in constant danger because of his association with Bob Cochran and Bing knew it, but was prepared to accept the consequences.

"Walk a chalk-line, eh?" he thought as he got up from the table. "Bigger and better men than you have been laid low tryin' to make me do that, Mr. Bigelow!"

Bing had disliked Sam Bigelow on sight. Subsequent events had accentuated that feeling and added profound distrust to the score. Consequently it was not exactly soothing to run into Bigelow in the hotel office.

"Hello, Miller," Bigelow greeted.

"Howdy," Bing answered curtly.

With the man, like twin shadows, were the same two riders who kept by Bigelow at the ranch. Bing went on upstairs and

finding Lois Cochran's door open, went in.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine!" she smiled. "The doctor was in a minute ago. He says I'll be walking in ten days."

"Anything I can attend to for you while I circulate around picking up some men?" Bing asked.

"In that block across the street, just below the bank," Lois said, "you'll find the office of a lawyer, James B. Coyle. Tell him I'd like him to come and see me."

It was earlier than a professional man was likely to be at his desk. So Bing roamed up and down, sizing up Big Dry. He wandered into various saloons, talked to bartenders. Yes, there were a few jobless riders in town. Bing located three and hired them. The livery-stable man told him of two bronco twisters finishing a horse-breaking contract just outside town, who might take jobs.

At ten o'clock, Bing hunted up Mr. James B. Coyle. He found him a shrewd-eyed middle-aged individual with a rather brusque way of speaking.

"You were the first person at the ranch after this—er—tragedy, I understand," he said, as soon as Bing delivered his message.

"Yes," Bing admitted. "You've heard about the hangin', eh?"

"Big Dry's buzzing with it," Coyle said.

"That'll be Mr. Bigelow," Bing observed, "doin' a little advertisin'. From my limited contact with him I would say he sorta likes the ring of his own voice."

"I would say you didn't admire Sam Bigelow greatly," Coyle observed.

"I never did take kindly to aggressive men," Bing said slowly. "But that is purely a personal slant. It's nothing against Sam Bigelow, I guess. He helped bury this boy. He's a friend of the family, I understand. I am ridin' for the Bar C Bar temporarily, and Sam Bigelow means nothin' to me so long as he don't tramp on my toes."

COYLE stared appraisingly at Bing for a few seconds, but said nothing except, "Tell Miss Cochran I'll be over in a few minutes."

Bing turned back from the door.

"Miss Cochran told me you'd been the family legal adviser for a long time," he said. "You know about this plaster the Big Dry Bank has on her outfit?"

Coyle nodded.

"Is she right in assumin' that the Big Dry Bank will crowd her for full payment this fall, if she don't ship enough beef to pay up?"

"That is not an assumption—it is a fact," Coyle said. "The head of the bank has so stated."

"What's the idea?" Bing asked. "If she can pay part of it, the balance is secure. That isn't general range bank practice. Why should the bank force her into a position where she has to take a bigger loss than necessary?"

"Because sometimes, in the bright lexicon of Horace Mortimer, it is much more profitable to crowd a debtor to the wall than to extend banking accommodation at any rate of interest whatsoever."

"Then if she doesn't cough up thirty-odd thousand dollars in October, he'll squeeze her?" Bing suggested.

"Without compunction," Coyle replied. "It's business."

"Business!" Bing snorted. "I got another name for a deal like that—in the case of a girl that's lost every male relative that would be likely to protect her interests."

James B. Coyle tugged at a small tuft of whiskers in the exact center of his under lip.

"Young man," said he, "your attitude and your words interest me. But I would suggest that you keep your very proper notions to yourself, about the bank, about Sam Bigelow, about Miss Cochran's difficulties. Especially around Big Dry. This latest outrage has peculiar aspects. I am not prepared to commit myself farther, but in three months much may happen."

"In plain English you suggest I should keep my mouth shut and tend to my own business," Bing said. "I usually do."

"It is an excellent practice," Mr. Coyle said, and turned to his desk.

CHAPTER VII

"I Crave Action"

BING found Sam Bigelow parked in a chair beside Lois' bed. They were chatting genially. Bing delivered Coyle's reply and walked out. He got a saddle-horse from the stable and rode down-river in search of the two bronco twisters the liveryman had mentioned.

He found them a pair of young lean-waisted, reckless riders who were quite prepared to take on another job. So Bing stayed and had his mid-day meal with them. Late in the afternoon, beds packed on spare horses the three rode back to Big Dry. In the morning, Bing reflected, he could head back to the ranch and begin riding the range.

But Lois Cochran vetoed that.

"Send them out to comb the ridges and gather all the Bar C Bar saddle horses they find," she said. "But you stay over and drive me home day after tomorrow."

Big Dry was no healthy place for Bing Miller, but that was an order and he obeyed. No one had looked hard at him yet, except Sam Bigelow. Maybe Bigelow had been the only one in that section to get hold of that reward poster. Maybe Bigelow would let it ride. If he didn't, officers could find Bing Miller at the Cochran ranch as easily as in Big Dry. Funny, that Bigelow should be Gil Freeman's brother-in-law. Bing had never heard Freeman mention his brother-in-law, Sam.

Bing joined his five cowpunchers at supper. Two of them, Jim Sears and Mark Duffy, had each a couple of hundred dollars and since they were going out on the range they frankly proposed to kick up their heels that night. The other three announced that they were going to bed early, and one of them borrowed five dollars from Bing to pay his hotel bill in the morning.

"Come on over to Curly Root's and watch us take the stripes off'n the tiger," Duffy jocularly suggested to Bing.

"Curly Root?" Bing snapped back. "A gambler? Short, heavy-set hombre about forty or so, with a little yellow mustache?"

"That's the hombre," Duffy declared. "He's got a swell joint for them that like to roll 'em high and sleep in the street. Know him?"

"I did know a Curly Root once," Bing admitted. "I'll go along anyway."

In a big room above a saloon, a place with comfortable chairs and every sort of gambling game common to the frontier, Mark Duffy pointed out the proprietor. Bing no longer felt a stranger in a strange land with a Nemesis on his trail. For "Curly" Root's round, florid face lit up like a rising sun when Bing sauntered casually up to him.

"Why, you tow-headed son of a horse thief!" Curly beamed on him. "Say, I'm sure glad to see you."

"Don't be too glad in public, Curly." Bing lowered his voice. "Just kinda lean up against the wall and let on like I was a casual customer. I got some troubles I want to pour into your ear—unless you got troubles of your own."

An idea, complete to the smallest detail, had leaped into Bing Miller's agile brain.

"If I had troubles of my own, which I ain't," Curly said, lowering his voice, too, "your troubles would still be mine if you wanted to share 'em."

"Maybe you'll change your mind after you hear 'em," Bing said grimly. "If you do, just say so."

"I'm listenin'," Curly replied. "Oh, hello, Sam."

Bigelow was passing, headed toward a poker game in one corner. And with him, teetering on their high-heeled riding boots his same two riders. Bing's eyes followed them.

"You know anything much about Sam Bigelow?" Bing asked Curly.

"As much as anybody knows, I guess," Curly answered. "He's the big boss of the IT and he always acts the part."

"Does he keep them two frozen-faced pills as a bodyguard or what?" Bing inquired.

A FAINT smile fluttered about Curly Root's mouth.

"You said it, son," he murmured. "At least that's my private hunch. Sam's rasped some people in this country till they'd like to take a fall outa him. Officially the Hurley boys are just IT cowpunchers. But their duties seem to consist mostly of ridin' herd on Sam. You ain't favorably impressed with the Honorable Samuel, eh, Bing?"

"Are you?" Bing countered sourly.

"How long you been in this part of the country, Bing?" Curly asked.

"I hit Frozen Fish forty-eight hours ago," Bing said, "and came into Big Dry last night."

"And already you have formed ideas about Sam Bigelow." Curly grinned. "Well, you always were speedy, Bing."

"I have bumped into him four times in thirty-six hours," Bing stated. "We have not hitched. Every time but one, them two was lingerin' close in his vicinity, like a couple of watch-dogs. That's all."

"The Hurley twins, Dave and Mike, are I should say a couple of first-class watch-dogs that would bite without barkin' should the occasion arise." Curly nodded. "That's the way I size 'em up. Sammy's the big he-coon of the Frozen Fish country. If he likes two tails to his kite why he's in a position to have 'em."

"Well, that isn't what's on my mind. Listen, Curly, and if you don't like my proposition I won't be sore if you turn it down."

"Empty the jug, old son," Curly said.

Bing let his eyes rove about the room while he talked. To any observer it was no more than the proprietor of a gambling-house exchanging ordinary civilities with a cowpuncher. Curly's face didn't alter a particle, nor his eyes flicker at Bing's recital, although for the ten minutes Bing talked with that deceptively casual manner he was relating matters that would have made any listener gasp. And proposing as a finale something that Curly Root, in full possession of the facts, might well have shied away from with an emphatic, "No, siree!"

What Curly did say in the end was a casual, "Sure, I'll do it, Bing. I can arrange it."

Bing Miller looked at him for half a minute.

"By glory, you're white, Curly. I didn't really think you'd stand for that."

"I got a good memory," Curly Root said simply. "I don't forget things, Bing. I'm glad of a chance to do any little thing I can. Besides I see no risk to me. You're the one that's takin' desperate chances. In fact you're takin' desperate chances on being in this territory at all, if Sam Bigelow decides he can't make use of you, and thinks maybe you might be inclined to poach on his preserves. You'll need eyes in the back of your head, son, if Sam starts to go after you."

"I never died a winter yet," Bing muttered. "Well, I'll drift out, and after a while I'll drift back an' take a whirl at the bank."

"When you get goin' I'll take the deal myself," Curly said. "I can't let any of my faro dealers in on this proposition. I'll handle the box myself. When the time comes I'll take off the lid."

Bing nodded. "How'm I goin' to get this money into your hands without anybody noticin' any sort of transaction?"

"How long will you be gone?" Curly asked.

"Twenty minutes maybe," Bing told him. "Perhaps only ten."

"At the head of the stairs on the left as you come up," Curly instructed, "there's a door that opens into my private office. In fifteen minutes I'll begin to watch for you through a peep-hole. When you come up—provided nobody's in sight—I'll let you in."

"All set," Bing muttered, and sauntered away.

Duffy and Sears were rolling the bones at a crap game. Bing watched them a minute, smiling as Duffy crooned to the dice like a Mississippi stevedore, and then he moved along.

ONCE on the street he hurried to the livery stable. In the dark he felt his

way to where the buggy stood. He groped until his fingers pried that money from its hiding place, and stowed it inside his shirt. Then he went back to Curly's.

Twenty minutes to a second. Two men climbed the stairs at his heels. Bing paused on the landing to strike a match for his cigarette—which wasn't out. And when the two passed into the gambling room Bing stepped quickly through a door that opened silently on his left.

Curly went through those flat bundles. Sheaf by sheaf he counted. He snapped a rubber band around the lot, stopped to work the combination on a small safe sitting beside a large one. He threw the package in and banged the heavy steel door shut. Then he sat down in a leather-upholstered chair by a desk and looked at Bing.

"Well, Bing!" he said at last. "You shouldn't of done it. It ain't worth the chance. It ain't worth the risk. It never is."

"I did, and I've told you why," Bing said flatly. "I have to accept the consequences—if any. No use preachin' to me, Curly. When I get my neck bowed I go through with a thing as I see it."

"Yes, darn you, that's your trouble," Curly grumbled. "Well, I can do this for you, Bing. But I can't be your guardian, either public or private. You sure need one."

"I'll try and get along without one for a spell," Bing said, and smiled faintly. "Now, if the coast's clear, I'll move."

Curly Root stepped over to the door, slid aside a tiny panel and applied his eye to the hole that appeared. He swung the door open quickly. As quickly Bing stepped out on the landing, and two strides took him into the gambling room.

The clock stood at ten. Three poker games were filled. Here and there small groups of players bucked the bank games. The room was full of the faint clatter of chips, the slithery riffle of cards, the muted hum of voices—except where Mark Duffy and Jim Sears loudly implored Long Liz and Big Dick from Boston to bring the bacon home. Bing stopped by the crap table to look. His bronco twisters had half a hatful of silver sprinkled with five- and ten-dollar gold pieces before them.

"Get on the line," Mark Duffy advised him. "We're right. Lay your money on the line, old-timer, and let 'er ride. It won't grow in your hand."

But Bing shook his head and passed on. A glance showed him Bigelow's eyes on him over a triple stack of blues. Bing took a seat at the faro table. Two or three men were playing, betting a red chip here and there, amusing themselves as much as gambling. One kept cases and he made five-dollar bets with methodical regularity. Bing stacked ten twenty-dollar gold pieces in front of him and studied the layout.

He put a twenty on the jack to win and the same on the seven to lose. The deal was just beginning. When it ended Bing was three hundred winner.

"Bull luck," he thought.

He got a second favorable deal, winning, phenomenally, three-fourths of his bets. There are a variety of losing and winning plays in faro as the cards come one by one under a slight pressure of the dealer's forefinger through a slot in the side of a silver box.

He was seven hundred ahead when Curly Root stepped up beside the lookout, the house man who sits in a chair a little above the faro table to see that the dealer overlooks nothing on that thirteen-card spread. Curly watched through two deals during both of which Bing, to his intense astonishment, continued to win. He scarcely looked up when Curly sidled into the dealer's chair, picked up the deck, shuffled, and passed them over to be cut.

Bing was betting the limit now on every play. He broke even on Curly's first deal. On the second he won nearly every bet. Men began to gather silently behind his chair. He was fifteen hundred into the bank.

In the middle of a turn Bing said crisply:

"Stop the deal!"

Curly stopped, the smooth fingers resting lightly on the silver box. He looked at Bing without a word.

"This is a piker's game," Bing said brusquely. "I crave action."

"You're gettin' it," Curly drawled.

"Am I?" Bing sneered. He dug down in a pocket, brought out a small leather bag and dumped a handful of gold on the table. "I got fifteen hundred in chips and about a thousand in gold. I'm no piker. I want to bet money!"

CHAPTER VIII

Money Man

CURLEY ROOT leaned back in his chair, his face expressionless. The poker game in which Bigelow sat suspended play. Bing had raised his voice a little.

"All right," Curly said presently. "For you, yourself, by special request, the sky's the limit. Make it one bet if you want. You other fellows cash your chips, please. For the time bein' this gent monopolizes the faro layout. He craves action. Give him the right of way, boys."

"I'll own this joint before long!" Bing taunted.

"To gamble is my business," Curly said softly. "If you can clean me you're welcome."

Bing drew down what bets he had scattered over the layout. He stacked all his gold in even piles and divided the whole in four. He seemed to hesitate a little over his bets, watching Curly eagle-eyed. Finally he placed his four bets.

"Deal the cards," he said.

The jack won. The nine lost. The ace won. He called the turn on the last two cards out of the box for a thousand dollars and was paid two for one. Bing leaned back and smiled while Curly shuffled the deck again. Bing had trebled his capital.

From all about the room players came to group about the faro layout to watch this bronzed cowpuncher with the fair wavy hair and blue eyes who bet a thousand dollars on a card as coolly as if he were betting nickels. Bing sat half-crouched before the case rack. He neither smiled nor frowned nor spoke. He watched Curly Root slide the cards out of the narrow slot in the silver box and placed his bets. Rows of stacked blue and yellow chips grew before Bing. Three out of four deals he won heavily. If he lost a small bet he won a bigger one. He could hear men breathing heavily in their absorption.

And after an hour's play once more Bing said abruptly:

"Stop the deal."

He gathered in his bets, counted the stacks with extended forefinger.

"I have hunches," he said. "I'm through. Cash 'em."

Curly turned to his lookout man.

"Go into the big safe," said he. "Bring me two sacks of gold."

He counted the stacks while the other gambler went after funds. Stack by stack he sized them up.

"Twenty-eight thousand dollars," he said, and Bing nodded.

Out of those canvas sacks Curly counted and piled in a serried row of yellow pillars the money for those chips. A little buzz ran through the watching crowd. Eighty-nine pounds of gold by actual weight.

"You can have the sacks, too," Curly said pleasantly. "Or, if you like, I can give you a check which you can cash at the Big Dry Bank in the mornin'. I like to have a bankroll of gold coin in the house."

"A check will be handier," Bing agreed. "Though them rows of twenties is a pleasant sight to see."

Curly drew out a checkbook, filled in and signed a green slip. Bing put it in his pocket.

"Be glad to entertain you again," Curly said courteously. "You seem to have a good system."

"I don't play no system," Bing said, and let his gaze wander until it turned on Sam Bigelow. "What I play is hunches, and cinches."

Waiters came from the saloon below with liquor on trays. Bing lifted a short drink of whisky and said to Curly Root:

"Here's lookin' at you. And good night."

Setting down the empty glass he walked out of the place. And there was no one by to mark the amused grin on his face as he went out into the quiet night. . . .

IN THE morning Bing slid Curly Root's check through a wicket and said to the cashier:

"I want to open a current account and leave this entire amount on deposit."

While Bing stood at the counter stowing a new checkbook and an acknowledgment of the sum to his credit in a pocket, he heard a booming laugh. It came from a cubicle which he guessed to be a private office. And the voice was Sam Bigelow's.

Even as he turned the door opened and Bigelow came out. At his heels followed two other men. One, in the garb of a rider, was an extraordinarily tall, lathlike figure with high, red-spotted cheek-bones on a thin, freckled face. He stood a head above Sam Bigelow who was taller than Bing, himself no dwarf. The other man was bare-headed, middle-aged, wore good clothes and horn-rimmed glasses. He had an arched nose and a cold blue eye, which fixed on Bing inquiringly.

"Oh, hello," Bigelow greeted. "Doin' business with a different kind of a bank this mornin', eh?"

His tone surprised Bing. It was almost genial.

"You were sure bad medicine for Curly last night. This, Horace," he explained, giving Bing the key to the older man's identity as Horace Mortimer, the banker, "is the enterprisin' hombre that took Curly Root for twenty-eight thousand at faro last night in about an hour."

"Which I'm leavin' on deposit," Bing said evenly. "Banks bein' safer than my pocket for that much money. I was lucky."

"You certainly were, Mr.—er—"

"Miller," Bing supplied.

He turned away. The lathlike rider remained talking to Horace Mortimer. Bigelow followed Bing to the sidewalk.

"You were lucky," he repeated, and his tone changed perceptibly. "But you better not crowd your luck, Miller."

"No danger," Bing answered. "One break like that against a faro bank is all a man ever gets in one lifetime."

"I didn't mean gamblin' luck," Bigelow growled. "You're crowdin' your luck stayin' in these parts at all."

Bing stopped, looking Bigelow straight in the eye.

"You must have some special reason for wantin' me to vacate the premises," he drawled.

Bigelow shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"I'm a friend of Lois Cochran's," he said. "I don't like the idea of any outlaw with a price on his head mixin' in her show."

"Listen," Bing answered flatly. "Any time your feelin's overpower you, you can try removin' me. I have no intention of removin' myself unless Miss Cochran tells me to hit the trail." He continued impudently, "I don't think anyone in this country is likely to recognize me, and you, for reasons for your own, appear inclined to keep quiet about who I am."

Bigelow glowered at him. Bing wondered what was going on behind that dark face. Bigelow's heavily fringed eyelids blinked rapidly. He was, Bing reflected, a handsome brute. And dangerous, if he decided to be. Cool, and determined, arrogant as a prince.

"I might collect that reward myself." Bigelow made his tone a threat.

"Hop to it," Bing answered recklessly. "You can always find me."

"Lissen," Bigelow took a step toward Bing and sank his voice to a venomous whisper. "You clear out of this country and do it blame soon."

"Or what?" Bing asked, with a tantalizing smile.

"You'll find out."

BIGELOW walked on, after that curt phrase. But he hadn't taken more than four steps before he wheeled on Bing.

"You told me the other day that Bob Cochran sent you up here," he snapped. "You got any way of provin' that?"

"If I had to, yes," Bing answered truthfully. Only Whitey Soames knew how he

could prove that statement, but he didn't have to explain that to Sam Bigelow. "But I don't have to. *I'm tired of you woof-woofin'* at me, Bigelow. Lay off unless you want to work up a mess of powder-smoke."

"Where is Bob?" Bigelow demanded.

"None of your cussed business!" Bing snarled.

His temper was getting frayed. For one brief second he hoped Sam Bigelow would take that as a personal affront. A less keen man might have believed he had intimidated a swaggering bully. But Bing knew better than that when, after one searching look at him, Bigelow went on without another word.

"What the devil's he getting at?" Bing fumed. "Why doesn't he put the county authorities on me if he's so blessed pure in heart? That son-of-a-gun has something up his sleeve about the Bar C Bar that he doesn't tell. Or he's crazy jealous about Lois. Is he a fool or just plumb foxy? Which?"

Bing was still trying to decide that question in his mind when he drove back to the ranch with Lois the following day. And it kept simmering in his brain as he combed the surrounding range with five riders for three successive days, until the pole pasture held seventy head of Bar C Bar saddle horses.

The mode of operation was simple. Bing divided the mounts, twelve in each man's string. He sent two riders to join the IT roundup already gathering beefs. One man went west to rep with the Musselshell Pool. Bing kept the two bronco fighters, Sears and Duffy, to ride from the ranch, throwing Bar C Bar cattle closer home within such radius as they could cover between sunrise and sunset.

"Outside of a ten-mile circle there won't be ten per cent of our stuff," Lois told him. "There aren't so many that they scatter over the earth. Get as close a check as you can, Frank, on what beef is in sight."

In ten days, during which he rode with his men from morning till night, half-looking for riders to come up over the ridges looking for him, and waked many a time at night sitting up in his blankets at some sound in the darkness, Bing knew just what stock was fit to market and about how many.

Lois began to limp about outside. Against Bing's protest she went to work, cooking better food than they could prepare for themselves.

"You ought to keep off that leg," he warned.

"Fiddlesticks!" she retorted. "In another week I'll be riding. I'm not made of glass." She switched abruptly. "The IT roundup ought to be along any day. Sam is going to ship all my beef in the first trainload. How many do you figure are in sight, Frank?"

Bing had never told her that because he had been known so long by his nickname that his own seemed strange.

"About four hundred of those longhorns and less than a hundred natives," he told her bluntly.

Lois turned her gray-green eyes on him with a worried look.

"I hope they pick up a lot on the outside," she said. "I'll be in a fix if they don't. And somehow I don't think those cattle are going to turn up as myseriously as they disappeared."

"Haven't you any notion what might have become of them," Bing asked.

She shook her head. Her copper-gold hair shone like burnished metal, lying in little waves across her head. Bing had a queer impulse to stroke it. He made a face at that impulse and got busy with brown paper and Durham tobacco.

"Why don't you sic a stock detective on the job?" he remarked.

"The Yellowstone Association has two men covering this range all the time," she told him. "They can't even give a guess. Ted was stumped, too. The cows were around early last winter. Now they're gone. That's all I know."

"The bank'll probably renew that note if you pay off half of it—which you can easily," Bing suggested.

"Not Mortimer," she said. "I went with Mr. Coyle to see him a month ago. He

said the bank was spread out too much already. It would have to be paid in full when due."

"And if you don't he'll attach the whole outfit, get a judgment of foreclosure, an' sell you out to satisfy his judgment," Bing observed. "It's been done in the banking business before. Get a fellow in a tight place and squeeze more out of his assets than you're entitled to."

"Mortimer has done it to others," Lois answered with a touch of anger. "He says no woman can run a stock ranch, and the bank can't extend credit on such a basis. I don't want to lose this ranch. The land alone will some day be worth a lot. Dad always said so."

BING shook his head, and smiled. "Don't worry," he said softly. "If it comes to a showdown there may be a way out. I'll lend you the kale I won off Curly Root. Unless you figure gamblin' money is tainted."

"Life is a gamble, as well as business," Lois said. "That's good of you, Frank, to offer it. Sam would lend me the money, too, he says, but he hasn't got enough to be any use. But he said"—she laughed lightly—"that he might be able to put enough fear in Mortimer so he'd renew that loan for another year."

"Does your friend Sam," Bing drawled, "make a specialty of putting fear into people?"

Lois looked at him sidewise. "Has he been saying things to you?"

"He doesn't have to say much," Bing answered. "His attitude is plenty. He seems to be quite put out because I'm around here."

"Sam's funny some ways," Lois declared with a self-conscious little laugh. "He's jealous as sin of me, with no reason at all to be jealous. Men are funny, sometimes. But Sam's a good head, just the same. Don't get into any trouble with him, will you, Frank, please? Because I know if you two quarrelled it would be sort of deadly. I know how Sam Bigelow can perform and you act like a man who could be pretty bad if you wanted to."

"I can, but I don't want to be," Bing muttered. "Only nobody can shoulder me around to suit his convenience."

"By the way"—she changed her tone abruptly—"you never have told me what it was Bob asked you to look us up for."

"It wasn't anything much," Bing evaded. "I'll tell you sometime. Has Sam Bigelow been talking to you about me?"

"He started to, but I shut him up," Lois confessed. "I form my own judgment about people most of the time. Sam would like to run this ranch and me, too, but I prefer to do it myself. And he can't seem to get that through his head."

Bing listed his eyes to the east bank of the Frozen Fish, high above the fringe of willows lining the creek that ran silver in a gravelly bed.

"Speak of the devil," said he, "and right away he appears."

CHAPTER IX

Mr. Bigelow Loses a Prisoner

SAM BIGELOW flanked by only one of his twin shadows was riding in. And Bing had a sudden strange presentiment, with no tangible foundation. He smelled trouble. It was in the very air.

So he was wary, watchful when that pair dismounted at the front gate. They walked up, doffing their hats as they came to the porch. Bigelow and Hurley both nodded to Bing. Bigelow stepped past Bing to shake hands with Lois.

"Roundup's camped on Barberry," he said. "We've covered all the east range."

"Pick many Bar C Bars?" Lois asked eagerly.

Bigelow shook his head. "They were mighty scatterin'," he said. "It sure does seem like there's blamed few beefs off your home range, unless they've drifted to the dickens and gone."

"It looks as if those cattle have really vanished, Sam," Lois declared.

"Does kinda," Bigelow agreed. "I got—"

He had fished a piece of paper out of his pocket. It seemed to flutter from his fingers. He stopped hastily to retrieve it. His head and shoulders bent below the level of Bing's waist. And when he straightened up he lunged and grabbed Bing's right arm. In the same moment Hurley clutched the left and like a flash doubled it behind Bing's back. They had him fast.

Bing gave one savage twist in an effort to free himself and the weight of a powerful man on each side nearly tore his arms from their sockets. Bing stood still then, a sneer on his face.

"Sam Bigelow, what's the meaning of this?" Lois demanded.

"Don't get excited, Lois," Bigelow placated. "This wandering stockhand is an outlaw from Colorado, with a price on his head. Put them hands above your head, Mr. Miller!"

Bing obeyed. Bigelow drew his gun and stepped back.

"Take his gun-belt off, Dave," he ordered.

Hurley unbuckled Bing's cartridge belt and holster. He felt Bing's pockets for hidden weapons, but his searching hands didn't go quite high enough to encounter the hard object tucked snugly under Bing's left armpit, inside his shirt.

"You can put 'em down," Bigelow said magnanimously. "Now, Lois, I'm not just makin' any high-handed play. This man robbed a stage in Colorado and the authorities want him. I have his description and photograph, so there's no mistake. He isn't the sort of party you want around here."

"I don't believe Frank is a robber!" Lois cried. "And when did you get to be a sheriff to make arrests?"

Bigelow smiled. "You'd give the devil himself the benefit of the doubt. Look this over."

He handed her a duplicate of the circular he had shown Bing. Lois looked at it a long time, then at Bing.

"It isn't true, is it, Frank?" she faltered.

"You can draw your own conclusions," Bing said evenly. "Anything I said would be discounted anyway, right now. Whatever I may be I've shot square with you . . . What do you aim to do, you black-faced tin god of the Frozen-Fish? Hang me to a corral post."

"I'm not in the hangin' business. I'm—"

"Oh, aren't you?" Bing lashed out. "I had a hunch you combined the capacities of hangman and undertaker both."

"You make another crack like that an' I'll ram your teeth down your throat!" Bigelow snarled. "I'm goin' to take you to Big Dry and throw you in the hoosegow till the Colorado authorities come and collect you."

"Well—" Bing made his tone indifferent, but his gaze never left Sam Bigelow and Hurley. "You seem to have all the best of the argument. When do we start?"

"Right now," Bigelow said. "Walk ahead of us to the stable an' saddle a horse!"

"We-ell," Bing seemed to hesitate, and he looked direct at Lois.

"I'm sorry, Frank," she said in a low tone. "I just can't believe it."

"Plenty of good men go wrong here an' there," Bing answered, with a shrug. "Will you shake hands with me before these highly virtuous an' respectable citizens start me on the way to the penitentiary?"

"Of course I will!"

LOIS took a step toward him, holding out her hand. Bing took two steps to meet her, putting nearly nine feet between himself and his captors. Bigelow and Hurley had put their guns back in their holsters. Apparently they disdained to hold six-shooters on a man after they had disarmed him.

"I enjoyed working for you," Bing said, with a smile. "I'd like to have had a chance to keep on until you were out of the woods." Then swiftly, in a mumble that could convey nothing to the men watching, he said. "Don't get scared now."

His back was to Bigelow and Hurley. His right hand had stolen up to his breast as he spoke. He spun on his heel and the gun from the Texas holster turned its black muzzle in their faces so close

that a palsied man couldn't miss if he pulled trigger.

"Up with 'em!" Bing gritted.

The mere fact that he gave them a choice instead of shooting may have influenced Bigelow. He was either a brave man or an impulsive fool. Hurley's hands shot aloft almost before Bing's lips framed that command, but Bigelow went for his gun. And Bing fired as the cattleman's fingers closed on the grip.

Bigelow's hand flew up and out. His gun clattered to the floor, the bone grip plates shattered.

"Up!" Bing snapped. "Next one through your middle."

This time Bigelow obeyed. Blood dripped from his fingers as he held them high. His face was a picture of blind rage. Hurley blinked his agate-hard eyes.

Bing sidestepped. Out of one corner of his eye he could see Lois, and also the bunkroom where his riders lounged.

"Turn your backs to me," he commanded Bigelow and Hurley.

From the rear he removed their artillery, making sure that he made no such mistake in search as they had done with him.

"Face the door," he ordered. "Walk into the house. Right through the big room into the pantry."

When they came in the pantry he instructed:

"Lift up that cellar door and go down the steps, Mr. Bigelow. You after him, Hurley."

They vanished into that dark pit, glaring at Bing with such futile rage that Bing laughed.

"I'm going to be around here for half an hour or so yet," he told them. "So sit quiet unless you want me to throw a few slugs through this kitchen floor. When I'm gone, Miss Cochran'll let you out."

Bing closed that trap. He looked once at Lois who was watching him from the doorway, uneasiness drawing her lovely face into troubled lines.

Bing chuckled. The cellar was ten foot square, with a stone wall to the floor joists. He had them like badgers in a burrow. All he needed was to stop the entrance. And he proceeded to pile cases of canned goods, and sacks of flour, until four men could not have budged that cellar door from beneath.

Lois moved silently aside as he walked through the living room. Looking out a window he saw his bronc buster riders standing by the door of exit from the bunkroom. The other three were far out on the range. These punchers were wondering, he knew, about that single shot. But they would not mix in. Curious as they might be they would keep their distance unless some commotion arose. So Bing turned back to Lois.

"Will you give me a pen and ink?"

She brought them both. Bing took out the new checkbook from which he had not yet torn a single leaf, and made out a check for twenty-five thousand dollars payable to Lois Cochran.

"Here," he said to her. "This, added to what you'll get for the beefs that are in sight will square you with the bank and leave enough cash to carry you till next summer. I'm lending it to you. Next year you can pay me back. Or the next."

SHE stood looking at that check drawn on the Big Dry Bank. Her lips quivered.

"I oughtn't to take it," she said slowly. "Is it true, Frank, about that stage robbery?"

"What difference does it make?" Bing parried. "This money is legitimate. Everybody knows I won it playing faro in Curly Root's joint. You're in a jackpot yourself." He put the check in her hands. "Watch your Ps an' Qs. Frozen Fish is no place for you."

"Why?" she asked. "Now any more than another time?"

"I won't be here, for one thing." Bing frowned. "I have nothing much but hunches and suspicions to go on, but I think there's some definite connection between the Bar C Bar bein' in debt, those beef cattle disappearing, and your brother bein' hanged in the dark. Somebody scared

your riders off, and that may happen again, if they're the kind that will scare. Unless you can put your finger on the parties responsible for all this—and eliminate 'em—you better sell out before you're cleaned out."

"If I keep this money," Lois asked, "how will I find you to repay it, and where?"

Bing looked at her earnestly.

"I'll be back," he said at last. "That's a promise. If I don't keep it I'll send you word. An' if I never claim the money, it's all right anyway. Now I've got to hit the trail."

"Did you rob that stage, Frank?" Lois moved quickly over to him on her crutches. "Did you?"

Bing hesitated. There were so many angles to this thing, and you could never tell about a woman. He wasn't through with the Frozen Fish. Bing knew he wouldn't be as long as Sam Bigelow was the kingpin of that range. And there was, besides, a proud and wilful streak in Bing Miller.

"I'm not on trial yet," he said soberly. "So I'm not goin' to plead either guilty or not guilty. I think it happens to be pretty convenient for that hunk of dark meat in your cellar if I have to go on the dodge. I didn't come here asking for trouble. I came here as a friend of your brother's, and when I found the Cochran outfit in trouble I stuck around to see if I could help out. What I may have been or done before I came here has nothing to do with it. What difference does it make whether I'm this or that?"

"It makes a lot of difference to me," Lois said quickly. "Because I like you. You've been good to me. You still are, with your life and liberty in danger."

"Thank you," Bing said softly. "I'll remember that. You like Sam Bigelow, too."

"Yes," Lois answered truthfully. "But I might like a man a lot, and still despise him if it turned out that he was crooked. And I can't imagine either you or Sam being tricky, or dishonest, or cruel."

"I can," Bing said grimly. "But then I was always cursed with a lively imagination. Maybe neither of us is worth the powder to blow us to perdition, as far as you're concerned. Anyway, I got to be ridin' instead of talkin'. I'm goin' to take a little grub, Lois. Give me a half-hour start, will you, before you let those jaspers out of the cellar?"

Lois nodded, without speaking. She watched him throw bread and bacon and coffee in a sack and the look on her face tried Bing. He wanted to tell her things, and prudence dictated silence. And he hearkened to the voice of prudence, because for him, as well as for her, there was a good deal at stake.

"So long, and be good," he said over his shoulder, as he went out.

AND from the top of the ridge to the east Bing looked back with an amused smile. Something just struck him as both funny and impressive. He had seen the look on the faces of both Hurley and Bigelow when he shot that gun out of Sam's hand. To them it was uncanny shooting. To both men it spelled complete deadliness with a six-shooter, and neither Bing knew, would ever forget that fact.

Bing laughed to himself because that shot was a miraculous miss. He had snapped at Sam Bigelow's middle, where he looked the biggest, when Sam reached for his gun-belt. Bing had meant to drop him, because he knew Bigelow would kill him if he could. And that misdirected bullet had nipped Sam's fingers and shattered his gun.

Bing was, in fact, only an average performer with a six-shooter. He laughed out loud now, looking back.

"Just as well it turned out the way," he reflected. "It would have been kinda tough to have to kill him right before her. Now I get a reputation for bein' a dead shot, and merciful besides. It just goes to show how a man can get a reputation for shootin'—and other things—which he don't deserve."

CHAPTER X

One Shadow Passes

IF BING'S departure from the Cochran ranch leaving two angry hornets buzzing in a dark cellar was a flight, it had a purpose beyond mere flight. A certain plan had been taking form in Bing's mind. It might take a month, but it would enable him to throw off one shackle that fettered his movements.

It involved getting to a railroad where he wasn't likely to be recognized and apprehended. So now he bore straight east from Frozen Fish, heading into the notch of the Great Fork where the Yellowstone joined the Missouri near the Montana-North Dakota line.

Noon of the third day found him skirting a region which must have been used to dump the leftovers when the Northwest was made. All the spare gulches, patches of alkali, boggy springs, wallsided cutbanks, box canyons, odds and ends of a world in the making, had been dumped in disorderly confusion. The sun and wind and rains of a million years had burned and eroded and washed the dump-heap until grass had taken root, sagebrush clothed the shadowy depths of melancholy ravines, scrub pine masked miles of side hills with their somber ranks. The Bad Land area of the Northwest, a topographical nightmare of unexpected precipices or soft ground to bog the unwary.

Yet grass and running water made it a refuge for wild cattle in winter storms. They came down from the plains in thousands, and drifted out with the first breath of spring. No wheeled vehicle could travel there, but a mounted man could traverse that maze without great difficulty. It had indeed many times afforded sanctuary to men on the wrong side of the law until they could safely shift to pleasanter surroundings.

Bing rode on rolling ground. The little grassy draws fell away into deep canyons on his left. Dusk came and Bing drew into the head of a canyon to make camp on a level plot by a spring.

He was up and riding at sunrise. Less than a mile on his way he dropped into a hollow. Straight ahead loomed a saddled horse standing by a little grove of aspens, pale-green trees whose leaves shivered and rustled eternally in the lightest air. In the short grass near the horse he could see a man's prone figure.

Bing wanted no traffic with any man on that ride—not until compelled to enter a camp or town. Lone riders on the range looked closely and remembered well. But this horse and sleeper, or whatever he did, were square in Bing's path. He judged it more prudent to keep on than to turn aside.

So his course took him within ten feet, and he saw that the seat of the saddle, the shoulder of this gray horse, and his ribs, were stained with dried blood. The beast, tied to an aspen, had been so tied so long he had pawed a bare patch with impatient forefoot. He nickered softly at Bing.

Even at that shrill sound the man lying prone did not lift his head. Bing rode nearer. The gray horse bore on his shoulder an IT. A pair of clouded, hollow eyes looked at him out of a pale, drawn face. It was the second of Sam Bigelow's twin familiars—Mike Hurley.

And he was a dying man, dying with his boots on and his face to the morning sun. The grass under and about him was stained with fresh blood and dried blood as if he had lain there for hours. His lips moved, but his voice was no more than a husky whisper.

Bing lifted his head and braced it with a knee. The man's mouth was parched. Bing laid him down again to go in search of water. Hurley beckoned with a crooking forefinger and Bing bent over him again. He had to put his ear almost to Hurley's lips to hear.

"Tell Sam. They got me. Mortimer's doublecrossin'—the outfit. Holed up—ten miles east. Box canyon. All there."

His eyes, which had been staring, closed. He moved his hand slowly to his breast

where his wounds were. Bing spoke to him. He made no sign that he heard. And Bing swung on his horse and scouted down that hollow till he found water. He came galloping back with the crown of his hat full.

BUT Hurley was beyond need of water. His eyes were wide open now, sightlessly staring at the sky.

Bing squatted on his heels by that body for full five minutes.

"Tell Sam. They got me. Mortimer's doublecrossin'—the outfit. Holed up—ten miles east. Box canyon. All there."

Who and what was all there, holed up in a box canyon ten miles east and what was it Hurley so desperately wanted him to convey to Sam Bigelow?

On the surface to Bing, it was merely a case of one gunfighter going the way of the gunfighter. He didn't have much interest in what happened to any of Bigelow's gunmen. Yet if Hurley had recognized him, and Bing was quite certain he had, why should he hope that Bing Miller would trouble to carry any information whatever to Bigelow?

Mortimer was the Big Dry Bank. According to Curly Root Mortimer ate out of Sam Bigelow's hand. And Mortimer was doublecrossing the outfit! What outfit? The IT?

Bing rose at last. He dragged Hurley's body into the aspen grove. He had no tools to dig a grave, but he broke off boughs and raked leaves and grass and earth enough to make a covering mound. And he unsaddled the gray and laid the saddle and bridle on that mound. In the very act of placing it, the hondo of the reata buckled on the saddle-fork caught Bing's eye. He stared at it, examined it, carried it out into the sunlight and continued to stare at that hondo of braided rawhide.

He went with it in his hand to his own mount, felt in an anquero flap and brought out the ornate rawhide hondo he had cut from the noose that had strangled Ted Cochran. They were as like as peas in the same pod, unmistakably the work of the same hand, and a hand skilled in manipulating rawhide strips.

"It looks to me as if that settles it," Bing muttered. "And still—"

He hung the reata across his own saddlehorn. The IT gray had moved off a few yards and was grazing hungrily. Bing mounted and rode slowly on. About ten miles east, in a box canyon, lay the answer to those choked-out phrases. And Bing had a conviction that it was important for him to discover what business had brought Bigelow's right-hand men a hundred and fifty miles from his home range to be shot and crawl away to die in a lonely hollow.

Bing skirted the edge of that broken country for two hours at an easy jog. Then he turned down into the brakes, threading his way, doubling and twisting, turning aside from impassable declivities, which was often.

Of box canyons he saw a dozen. They were common to the region. But most were empty of all life. In one he saw a small bunch of wild cattle that scuttled around a bend when he appeared.

But Bing persisted. And in the end, at mid-afternoon, he rode up to the rim of a cleft that fell straight from his horse's hoof nine hundred feet below the general level. A mile and a half long. Three hundred yards width of grassy bottom threaded by a slinking stream. Bing's eyes glowed with interest. At the distance he could read neither brand nor earmark. But a range man's eye told him there was neither cow, calf nor bull in that sunken pasture full of cattle. And mature beef steers do not segregate themselves like bachelor seals herding compactly in isolated spots.

Bing drew a pair of field-glasses from a saddle-pocket. He was focusing them on the grazing stock below when a bullet whined past him. Away across the box canyon a gun cracked.

Bing didn't tarry to look. He knew better. As his horse whirled, another bullet spatted the earth beside him. Bending low, with the pack-pony dragging on the lead-rope, Bing raced for the nearest

cover, a belt of pines, little more than sizable Christmas trees, but an effective screen.

This tiny forest fringed the edge of a steep gulch for a mile and Bing rode more slowly in that bush until it ran out into a point of sage. Thus he paralleled the box canyon almost its full length. He pulled up in the edge of those pines to consider his next move. With the memory of Hurley's glazed eyes before him Bing didn't want to take unnecessary chances. But he was determined to look at those cattle.

THOSE shots had come from across the canyon. The range warning to sheer off was invariably heeded by prudent men. Bing had acted like a prudent man. He still exercised prudence. He sat still, conning the lay of the land. From the edge of the pine thicket a heavy stand of sagebrush led to a grassy plateau that ran to the rim of the canyon. Bing nodded.

He tied his horses deep in the pines. Rifle in hand, glasses slung by a strap about his neck he crept like a hunter stalking antelope, up through that masking sage. And when he reached the plateau he found bunch grass stirrup-high through which he could crawl like a snake on his belly, and so peer at last through a fringe of grass at what was spread below.

His glasses were nine-power prism binoculars. He could count the rings on the horns of those steers. The individual hairs on an ear-tip were plain under that great magnification. So were the brands. Bar C Bar. Every one.

Bing laid down his glasses with a sigh of satisfaction. He had solved the mystery of Lois Cochran's missing beef cattle. And he lay there thinking.

"Mortimer's doublecrossin'—the outfit."

Bing dwelt on that sentence. Perhaps Mortimer and Sam Bigelow were in on this. Mortimer with a financial grip on the Cochran estate. Bigelow with his palpable craving for Lois, and his undisputed control over a vast range. Bigelow could do almost anything in the Frozen Fish country without arousing suspicion. Bing had known range bosses who ran cow outfits for absentee owners to grow ambitious and use their opportunities to get rich quicker than was natural.

If Mortimer and Bigelow were together on this they could play it safe. They didn't have to steal those cattle. They didn't have to work over a single brand, nor ship a hoof. All they had to do was keep this beef off the range until fall roundup was over and Lois Cochran had failed to meet her obligations at the Big Dry Bank, then close the Bar C Bar out at a forced legal sale. After which they could market an extra five or six hundred beefs legitimately and split the proceeds.

But where did the doublecross come in? Mike Hurley hadn't mouthed dying phrases just to hear himself talk. Whatever cross-purpose Mortimer played at it had cost Hurley his life, and he had died trying to tell about it. Not that Bing Miller wasted any sympathy on Mike Hurley, not when he thought about Hurley carrying on his saddle-fork a reata with a hondo that was duplicated on the very rope that had cut off Ted Cochran's breath.

Bing crawled back to the pines. He mounted and traveled south under cover of pine and gulch until he cleared the Bad Lands. On an open knoll commanding a wide sweep of the outer plains, where no one could come at him unseen, Bing pulled up and debated with himself.

Then he turned in his tracks and headed westward again, back to the Frozen Fish, three days' ride.

He knew where Lois Cochran's cattle were. That was all he needed to know. The rest didn't matter, except that before he left the Frozen Fish for good he had rather expected to shed a little light on the rest. As he rode Bing's brain was busy with a mode of action which, if it worked, would give him a free hand long enough to get those cattle shipped for Lois Cochran's account, and perhaps allow him to dehorn Sam Bigelow personally.

After that—well, Bing rode soberly,

without any particular uplift of spirit. Death seemed to be always near him lately. First Bob Cochran in the Colorado hills. Then Ted Cochran swinging, a thing of horror, to the cross-bar of his own corral gate in a rosy sunset. And now Hurley, who probably deserved what he got, but who must have died many deaths before he breathed his last in that lonely place.

"Man that is born of woman," Bing quoted grimly, "is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. But I guess I've invited most of mine to come and camp with me."

CHAPTER XI

Play in the Devil's Garden

LOIS listened soberly to Bing at the Bar C Bar Ranch.

"So there it is," Bing said. "Add it up to suit yourself. Mortimer holds this indebtedness over your outfit. If you can't meet it the Big Dry Bank sells you up, and buys it in. With your last male relative put out of the way, you're a lone girl with no chance to square yourself the way a man might. A cinch way to fix it so you'll be short of funds is to haze off a big share of your marketable beefs to some secluded spot where no roundup will find 'em. It's easy for Sam Bigelow to arrange that your cattle do the disappearin' act without bein' mixed in it personal. If you can be squeezed out he and Mr. Mortimer split a good stake between them. And they're safe as a church. Nobody could prove a thing. Even I can't prove a darn thing I say, except that I have found those cattle. I can take the three riders you have here and get those cattle—ship 'em straight to Chicago from the nearest railroad point."

"Wouldn't it be better to get the county authorities to act?" Lois suggested.

"No," Bing said wearily.

He was tired. He had burned the earth back to the Bar C Bar and come to the house stealthily under cover of a moonless night. He sat back out of the light, away from windows, facing Lois who had discarded her crutches and walked with only a slight limp. What he had told her made her eyes widen with amazement and her face pale with anger.

"No," he repeated. "That would take time. The law would take twice as long to move as I can move with men like those bronc busters, Mark Duffy and Jim Sears. I can get those shipped while a sheriff is organizin' himself. Besides, I've got to lead the way to this place, and mixin' with deputies an' stock inspectors might be awkward for me."

"You might be recognized and arrested and taken back to Colorado," Lois whispered. "Can they convict you, Frank for —for that?"

"For robbin' that stage?" Bing finished for her. "We-ell, partly yes, but mostly no. I don't think when the thing came to a showdown that they can. But whatever I may have been mixed up in, Lois, I was Bob Cochran's friend. And I came up into this country for a specific purpose. When it's accomplished I fade away. I just haven't the inclination right now to make definite explanations. I don't know that I could—to you. You aren't concerned with me so much as you are with gettin' out of the hole you're in from crooked people's dealin's. I can do part of that without callin' on the law—do it better an' quicker."

"I am concerned with what happens to you," Lois said soberly. Her eyes rested on Bing with a curious intentness. "You're an outlaw, by your own admission. There's a reward for you, dead or alive. You take desperate chances to stay here on the Frozen Fish and help me out of a hole. Sam Bigelow told me he recognized you right at first and warned you to move on. You don't defend yourself. You don't deny or explain. Frank, I can't feature you as a desperado, any more than I can picture Sam Bigelow stealing from me and plotting against me. You're both—"

She threw out her hands as if to ward off the unbelievable, the inexplicable.

"Sam Bigelow's crazy about you and you know it," Bing said bluntly. "He shapes up to me like a man who is accustomed to having his own way and don't care a hoot how he makes things come his way. Many a man has maneuvered a woman into a tight corner before now, because he wanted her. If Bigelow could fix it so he could get you and a stake besides, wouldn't he be tempted? I think so. If he got away with it, you'd never know the difference."

"I can't believe that of Sam," Lois exclaimed. "It isn't possible. I can't think that."

"Don't think it," Bing said despondently. "Forget it. Talk gets nobody nowhere. I've located your missin' stock. If you're willin' to have me do it, I'll take your men and get these cattle. The rest will straighten itself out. Pay off what you owe the bank. Pay me back the money I lent you. Get out of the cow business here. There are too many wolves on the range."

LOIS sat staring at the floor.

"Wolves can be trapped and killed," she said slowly. "This is my home."

After another brief silence she arose.

"I hired another rider yesterday," she said. "Les Burgess. He's just a youngster, but more dependable than many men. I'll tell those three boys you're here, and you can explain to them what you want to do. Sears and Duffy think a lot of you. I think you can trust them as far as you need to. I wish I could do something about this myself."

"You don't have to," Bing assured her. "Just leave it to me."

And so at sunrise next morning Bing left the Frozen Fish again, this time with three riders primed and joyously eager to swoop down on a parcel of thieves. But before he left the ranch Bing saw that Lois Cochran got in her buggy behind the white-footed sorrels and started for Big Dry.

"You can't stay here alone," he pointed out. "It's wiser, besides, for you to see your lawyer and tell him exactly what I've uncovered and what I'm doin' about your stock. He can keep his mouth shut until he hears I've shipped these cattle. If we can get hold of one of the men that have held these Bar C Bars in that hole we might persuade him to talk. But in any case don't come back to this ranch until you hear from me, unless you bring some men you can depend on."

Lois nodded agreement. Looking back from the crest of the first rise Bing could see her buggy rolling north, becoming a speck on the ruts of the Big Dry trail.

The third rider was a red-headed youth of twenty, who rode like a centaur, wearing the perpetual grin of a sanguine heart, and was, so Sears assured Bing, Hades on wheels at anything he undertook.

Mark Duffy turned sideward in his saddle as they jogged behind a few head of extra saddle horses and two pack animals.

"So you're worth a thousand dollars on or off the hoof, it appears," he drawled.

"Try and collect it," Bing answered lightly.

"Any man that can take Curly Root's faro game for twenty-eight thousand dollars, get the drop on Sam Bigelow and shoot his gun out of his hand instead of drilling him through the wishbone, and then ride calmly on about his business after stowin' two tough gazabos in a cellar, is welcome to go on forever attendin' to his own business as far as I'm concerned." Duffy grinned. "The man that puts it over Sam Bigelow commends himself to me. I have entertained the notion of takin' a fall outa that curly-haired tin god myself, when the sign was right. I always did figure him too good to be true. He has stepped on too many toes and got away with it. Gee! Did he foam at the mouth when I let him outa that cellar? Lois had to get me to lift that stuff off'n the trap-door. Too heavy for her. That yarn he blatted about you is just a pipe-dream, ain't it Frank?"

Bing laughed.

"Maybe," he parried. "But this expedition we're on is no pipe-dream. Nor any Sunday-school picnic, either."

Nor was it. Straight as a crow in flight

Bing bore east, toward where the Missouri and the Yellowstone converged. The box canyon lay within a day's ride of the Great Fork.

Though he had taken his bearings on every landmark he could note at the time, Bing had to hunt for that place again. That Bad Land country looked so much alike. Miles of gaunt, desolate confusion. In the end, before they had located that canyon holding the Bar C Bar they stumbled on men in camp where no honest men would likely be holed up in mid-summer.

They had halted on the lip of a gorge like many others and sat silently looking down. A few horses grazed on a small pocket meadow. Smoke drifted faintly from what looked like a hole in the ground. Bing unlimbered his glasses.

"Two men cooking over an outside fire," Bing said. "There's a dugout in the bank. Above here begins to look familiar. Maybe this draw they're in leads up to that box canyon. We'll ride down and interview them. . . . Oh, there's another fellow ridin' in."

"Lemme have a look." Mark Duffy reached for the glasses.

"Aha, I know that jasper foggin' for the camp," Duffy said instantly. "He's lookin' up at us, so I can see his face. Gee these are great spy-glasses. Yes, one of them by the fire used to ride for the IT. Hung around Big Dry a lot. Long Tom Taylor is gettin' off his horse. They're all lookin at us. Say—they're goin' for their horses. Looks like they're excited about somethin' Taylor has told 'em. Yep, they're saddlin' in a hurry."

BING took the binoculars again. One rider was already on his horse, looking up at them. The others were tightening cinches. Bing saw a rifle barrel glint as it was thrust in a scabbard under a stirrup-leather. The man mounted. The third turned, hands to his face, doing exactly what Bing was doing, looking through a pair of field glasses. He made a gesture at last and reached for his stirrup. They rode abreast at a sharp trot down the canyon bottom.

"We'll join up with those boys," Bing said decisively, "and have a parley. If they're on the square there won't be anything to that. If they're holdin' the bag them Bar C Bars are in they'll have recognized you, Mark, seein' you know 'em. They may be hard to come up with."

They were. Bing, Duffy, Sears, Les Burgess, his freckled face glowing, loped along the lip of the gorge, looking for a slope down which they could ride to intercept that trio. They left their extra horses and pack animals to shift for themselves.

And the three below suddenly whirled about and rode back the way they had come, past the dugout, picking up their loose horses as they went by, heading up toward a narrowing of the deep hollow which Bing had a hunch was the lower end of the very box canyon he sought for. Bing and his men paralleled them on that high bench.

Suddenly the riders broke into full gallop. They whipped out of sight around a bend, and when Bing spurred out on that point only a thin cloud of dust showed below. They had come out on a point, a jumping-off place where a deep canyon slanted in from the east. Bing grasped their strategy.

"They've headed up this one," he said. "Leads to high ground. Sears, you and Les stay right here. Mark and I'll head 'em off if we can. If we do turn 'em back and they won't stop when you hail 'em, smoke 'em up. If you hear us get down to bombardin' come running!"

Bing and Mark gave their mounts rein. They could outrun on that upper level anything breasting the uplift of the gorge below. And so just before that ravine opened in a series of easy slopes Bing and Duffy plowed headlong to the bottom three hundred yards ahead of their men. That trio couldn't climb either side. They had to come on or go back or fight.

They elected their choice without a moment's hesitation. Three guns cracked. Mark Duffy's horse squealed and began to spin on his hind feet, blood spurting out his nostrils. Bing flipped out his rifle and pulled on the nearest rider. He was the

rearguard when Bing fired, and missed. Because with the shots they wheeled and doubled back, weaving in and out among sparse clumps of serviceberry until an angle in the ravine shut them off.

"Hell's bells and mustard pickles!" Mark Duffy cried. His horse was down kicking in the death agony. "I'm afoot."

"Stick your toe in my stirrup and climb up behind," Bing commanded. "We got 'em between two fires now."

With Duffy behind his cantle Bing set sail. Mark's right hand clutched his rifle. His left hand clasped Bing about the waist. A powerful bay horse carried that double burden in twenty-foot leaps. Duffy's hand brushing Bing's body felt something wet and warm.

"They hit you!" he exclaimed in Bing's ear.

"It don't hurt, so it can't be much," Bing gritted. "Like a bee sting at first."

Duffy's fingers explored.

"Round the top of your hip," he reported. "Must be just in the flesh. These boys are bad Indians."

"They'll be good Indians before long unless they can sprout wings and fly the walls of this canyon," Bing said. "I wish Sam Bigelow was among 'em, that's all."

"Too foxy, that boy," Mark grumbled. "Whoops! The ball's open!"

CHAPTER XII

Battle in the Badlands

FIRING awoke echoes in that silent place. The loose horses of those fleeing men were turning aimlessly on the narrow ravine floor. Neither mounted men nor saddle horses were in sight. High on that point the mounts of Sears and Les Burgess stood bold against the sky, ears cocked, saddles empty. There wasn't a man in sight. But unseen fingers were pulling triggers in that bottom.

A bullet smacked on the earth wall beside them as the bay set his forelegs stiff and stopped in two jumps. Bing and Duffy fell off rather than dismounted, lay flat, peering for the enemy, for their own companions.

"We got a stand on 'em somewhere ahead," Bing muttered. "Sears and Les musta scrambled down that hill and headed 'em off. Woof! That was close."

A bullet snipped a twig from a sagebush three inches from Bing's face. Those staccato gun voices spoke from hiding.

"Got to worm up closer," Bing declared.

They crawled for a hundred yards, screened by short, thick sagebrush. Bing ventured a peep. Ahead, close, at brief intervals a deep-noted shot would boom, then instantly two or three thin, sharp reports.

"That's Jim's black-powder cannon," Duffy told Bing. "Old Barkin' Betsy. She's a thirty-eight, fifty-five. Them other fellers is all usin' thirty-thirties. Wonder where the kid is?"

Bing had been scanning the sharp slope above. He hunched down and pointed silently. Duffy looked. On a bare patch halfway up a man's body sprawled, arms outspread. The sun gleamed on red hair.

"They got Les!" Duffy breathed. "Beefed him as he came down the hill. Well, I don't care who they are or why they're here—they'll warm their feet in perdition if I can get at 'em!"

They moved on, crawling with infinite caution toward those intermittent reports. Eventually, creeping and listening and peeping through tiny openings they located their men lying in a boulder patch at the foot of a cliff wall. Their saddled horses were indistinct shapes in a serviceberry thicket, less than sixty yards away. Jim Sears was hidden among the sage on a flat below. Every time Sears fired, a bluish wisp of smoke floated up and the stand-offs fired at that. But Sears never shot twice from the same spot.

Neither Bing nor Duffy had pulled trigger during that creeping advance.

In an hour the sun would set. To rush that crowd was suicide. Once dark shrouded that canyon their quarry could steal away unseen. And when Bing felt the occasional twinge that shot through his leg,

when he glanced up at Les Burgess' dead body on that bare space his teeth set tight.

He whispered with Duffy. The binoculars were slung to Bing's gun-belt. He focused them on that patch of boulders, white chunks of sandstone three and four feet high, that had tumbled from the cliff above under the erosion of wind and rain. He could see them so plainly that fine cracks in each stone stood clear.

Presently he marked a gun-barrel rising slowly. Back of that an arm and a bit of shoulder appeared. Bing dropped the glasses.

A man's body lurched into view when his bullet went home. Duffy, rifle ready at Bing's elbow, fired on that larger target. The man dropped in a huddle. Bullets ripped through the sage around them, a dozen quick shots. They lay still, heads down, flattened close to the ground.

"That made 'em nervous," Mark Duffy whispered. "Three little outlaws gettin' in a stew. One showed hisself too long and then there were two."

Two were still a crowd. Sears' .38-.55 boomed at intervals. Bing lay watching through the glasses. His eyes tired and Duffy took a turn. For a long time no gun spoke. The sun was dropping fast. In a little while it would be a red ball on the skyline. Shadows would begin to fill those deep gorges.

BING and Duffy shifted inch by inch until they were almost up to the boulder patch. The area covered by those rocks was clothed with heavy grass, ripe yellow, tinder dry.

"Duffy," Bing said, "crawl away around and get to Sears. You can holler to him when you get in speakin' distance so he won't take a shot at a rustlin' sagebrush and wing you. Then work in as close to that boulder patch as you can and put a match to the grass. The wind's this way. It will work up to them. They have to come out. Whether they break up or down we get a chance at them. *Sabe?*"

"That's what it is to have brains." Duffy grinned. "Say, that's pure inspiration. Ha! Brother Miller, watch my smoke."

He vanished noiselessly. Not a twig stirred above him so deftly did he weave through the screen of gray sage. After a long wait Bing heard voices for a second or two. Then silence again. And finally a little upcurl of smoke that lifted and spread and ran until it touched the heavy stand of grass on that boulder patch and became a line of dancing flame four feet high, making a muted roar like distant surf.

Bing crouched with his gun ready, tense, eye flickering over the rocks. No man could lie still in that line of burning grass, nor breathe in its smoke. It marched on its own draft and the up-canyon wind.

When it had eaten half-way through that cover two figures darted, stooping, from rock to rock until they reached the brush. The smoke obscured Bing's vision. He fired at what he could see. They came out of that brush on their horses straight at him, one man swaying in his saddle, clutching his reins in one hand, holding to the horn with the other, no hands for a gun.

Bing rose among the sage and pulled on the other. He felt the wind of a bullet zip by his head, but only one. The gunman folded up and pitched off his horse. The other man pased within twenty feet. He seemed to see nothing, give heed to nothing, holding his seat by blind instinct, sheer will to live and escape.

Bing didn't fire. He was fighting mad, but not with a mere lust to kill. And he wanted somebody to talk. So he let the man gallop on while he ran to the fallen outlaw's horse, swung into saddle and pursued, yelling to Duffy and Sears to follow him.

In less than two hundred yards he overtook a man, blood pouring out of his breast, holding himself erect with both hands now. He made a feeble, uncertain move toward his belt-gun as Bing ranged alongside and Bing plucked the six-shooter from his holster before those groping fingers could draw. He caught the horse by the reins and brought him to a sudden stop.

The fellow was the tall, lath-built man Bing had seen talking to Mortimer and Bigelow the morning he deposited his faro winnings in the Big Dry Bank.

He slumped now, and slid to the ground like a loosed pack-bundle.

Out of the smoke which rolled like a smear of London fog Mark Duffy and Jim Sears came galloping, double on the third man's horse which had been left tied in the brush.

"Keno!" Jim Sears said briefly. "You done cleaned up!"

"What about the other two?" Bing asked.

"Both finished," Mark Duffy answered. "They'll singe back there but that won't hurt 'em now."

They looked at the wounded man who was staring at them, his lips drawn back in a defiant snarl. They stared speculatively at that fire, coughing a little in the thickening air.

"It's pretty bare ground above and below," Bing said. "It should burn itself out before long."

Sears and Duffy nodded assent.

"Heave this hombre on his horse," Bing continued. "We can hold him in his saddle till we get back to my mount."

Bing's horse stood quiet on dropped reins. Well out of the smoke, Duffy and Sears laid the wounded man gently on the ground. His teeth were set. No sound escaped his stained lips.

ONLY then did Bing think of his own wound which, when he explored, proved to be only a shallow rake across his thigh. His trouser leg was soaked and his boot full of blood but the wound was nothing to trouble him. He made a pad of a clean handkerchief and bound it with the silk scarf that fluttered from his neck. Then he turned to the wounded prisoner.

"Who set you to holdin' those Bar C Bar steers in that hideout?" he asked.

The man lifted glazing eyes. His lips curled.

"Go to blazes!" he croaked.

After that he resolutely refused to open his mouth. They bent over him, opened his shirt. A soft-nosed bullet had gone through both lungs. He lived only by some miracle of vitality. And he did not live long. They sat by and watched him go out with the sun, like a wolf, silent, without a sign except the hate in his eyes which presently faded into sightlessness.

Bing shuddered. He had shot this man and it wasn't pleasant to sit and watch him die. No matter that Sears told him how when they began to clamber down hill calling on the others to stop they opened fire and killed Les Burgess with the first shot. It oppressed Bing. It made him remember too vividly sitting beside Bob Cochran and watching the life-flame gutter out.

He stood up.

"We'll leave him lay," he said. "We have no time to play undertaker to cow thieves. We have to bury Les, somehow, and find those cattle."

"There's cattle in the main canyon above where they turned up this," Jim Sears said. "Me'n Les saw a bunch while we waited on the hill."

And when they had gained the bench, picked up their loose horses and lashed Les Burgess' body, wrapped in a blanket across his own saddle they rode down to find that the dugout did indeed command the lower end of that box canyon from the rim of which Bing had looked on those Bar C Bars a week before. They were in there still, hundreds of fat long-horned steers.

They rode among them a little while in the paling light, making sure. The upper end of that box canyon was blind, impassable for any four-footed thing but a mountain goat or a squirrel. Across a constricted neck at the lower end ran a fence of poles that held the cattle in.

Bing and his men camped where a trickling stream of bitter water crossed the fence, with their horses inside that natural pen for the night. They buried the red-headed boy, while dusk turned to darkness, with a shovel taken from the dugout as they passed. And they lay wakeful, sad, without a fire that night in case more than the trio had a hand in this crooked deal, and they might be hanging

around to pot one of them in a fire-glow.

With the first glimmer of dawn they were up and away. They punched that herd up on a narrow plateau which led them at last out on the rolling plains, clear of that sinister network of deep canyons and somber stretches of scrub pines that for all they knew as they trailed those cattle might still harbor sudden death for any of them.

With open country spreading on every hand they grew easier in their minds. Bing headed that herd straight for Custer City, whence they would roll east in slatted cars to fatten Lois Cochran's bank-roll. But Bing had to confess as he and Duffy and Sears talked it over that though they had taken the cattle they were no nearer a solution of how and why those Bar C Bars were hidden in that lonely sunken meadow.

THEY never would know, Mark Duffy declared.

"I'm willing to string with you that Sam Bigelow had a finger in this pie, or that Mortimer helped engineer it," Duffy said. "But there's nothing but our guess for that. No proof. Long Tom Taylor was an IT man for a while. So was one of the others. Long Tom was on Mortimer's payroll once lookin' after some stock the bank seized. But how can you connect it all up? No, you'll never hang no part of this on either Sam or Mortimer."

"There's another thing," Sears cut in. "I dunno's I'd mention it, Miller, only it may give you an angle you maybe never got. There was whispers around Big Dry last winter and this spring that the IT had somethin' on young Cochran, that he'd been doin' a little rustlin' on his own account, and Bigelow was overlookin' it because he was just a kid. Furthermore, Ted Cochran was supposed to have made the crack that he'd get somethin' out of that estate soon, even if his dad did leave full control to his sister."

"Was Ted inclined to be wild?" Bing asked with deep concern.

"Wild?" Mark Duffy echoed. "Wild as a hawk. But crooked? No. I knew that kid long before you did, Jim. I don't care what he was supposed to have said or done. He was too smart to be crooked. I know what he felt about Lois. Anything she did was the right thing. And he didn't like Bigelow rushin' her, and made no bones about it to Sam. No, there wasn't a crooked bone in Ted Cochran's body."

"I didn't say he was crooked," Sears explained. "I'm saying what was said about him. Maybe there was somebody interested in havin' it said."

"Well, as she lays," Mark Duffy grumbled, "it looks like Bigelow and Mortimer all the way through, with hired men doin' the dirty work for some dirty money. But try takin' a fall outa Sam Bigelow in the Frozen Fish country! Yeah, try it, an' see what happens to you. He'll be top dog to the end of the chapter far's I can see, unless somebody opens a personal feud and snuffs him out with a forty-five. Which is simpler to talk about than do. It's been tried without too much success."

Bing rode looking straight ahead over the broad backs of the marching cattle, thinking a little grimly of what was still before him. He had his own private ideas about Sam Bigelow continuing to be top dog on the Frozen Fish. But he wasn't voicing such notions as he entertained about that.

CHAPTER XIII

Loose Ends Tied

ONLY ten days later Bing, Mark Duffy, and Jim Sears ambled over the crest of a rise which gave them a long look down the Frozen Fish, in that curious radiance which comes sometimes between sundown and dusk. Their loose horses trotted ahead, sniffing home pastures. They could see the buildings and fence lines of the Bar C Bar. Beyond that, a mile or two downstream the snow-white specks of roundup tents and the black bulk of a grazing herd.

"That'll be the IT roundup," Mark Duffy said.

"Likely," Bing agreed. "It looks like Miss Cochran has come home and got busy. They've been haying, too."

A new stack loomed in a field. Smoke drifted from a chimney.

"Suppose the Great Bull of Bashan starts pawin' the earth when you appear?" Duffy suggested. "Chances are he'll be at the ranch if Lois is there. It's evenin' and his daily work is done. Do we dehorn him, pronto?"

"Leave that to me," Bing said quietly. "If this was *his* smooth scheme, it has failed. We have no proof, and we can't indict him legally on mere appearances. But if he's there I'll tell him a few things. If he gets on the prod that's his personal affair with me."

Bigelow was there, in the living room, a cigarette in his fingers when Bing came to the door. Dave Hurley sat stiffly in a chair at one side. Bigelow was talking earnestly to Lois.

Dusk had given the three of them access to corral and stable unseen. Bing, with Duffy and Sears at his heels, came up to the porch quietly. Through one unshaded window they marked Bigelow and Hurley in the lamplight.

" 'Evenin' everybody," Bing said casually.

Lois sprang to her feet with an exclamation. But Bing's eyes were on Bigelow and Hurley. Both men froze, wary-eyed, uncomfortable.

"The cat came back," Bing said to Bigelow. "Because he couldn't stay away."

He moved into the room. Duffy and Sears stopped just inside the doorway, impassive-faced, ominously silent.

"I found your missin' beef cattle, Lois." Bing made his tone dry, matter-of-fact. "We trailed them to Custer City and shipped them to Chicago. You should get your check in a few days now."

"You what!" Bigelow started to rise.

"Sit down!" Bing snapped. "You're goin' to hear a lot more you won't like." He turned and spoke to Lois, but his eyes rested watchfully on Sam Bigelow—Hurley he left to Mark and Jim. "These cattle were being held in a box canyon by three men away down in the Big Fork. They killed Les Burgess. So we cleaned them—all three. They were once Big Dry and Frozen Fish riders, all of 'em."

Bing stopped to stare at Bigelow with a grim smile.

"Go on," Bigelow muttered.

"May interest you more to know how I came to locate these cattle in the first place," Bing commented. "When you and your man Friday here made the mistake of thinkin' you could lead me off to jail like you'd lead a bull by the ring in his nose . . . By the way, how did you enjoy a spell of broodin' in a dark cell, Bigelow?"

Sam Bigelow didn't answer nor move. But his dark eyes began to glow and a flush crept up in his swarthy cheeks.

"Did it strike you that was the sort of hole you meant to get me in for several years, and collect a thousand dollars for doin' it?" Bing drawled. "When you disarm a man that has a price on his head you should make sure he *is* disarmed, Mr. Bigelow. Anyway, when I left here I headed east on my own business, since you made it impossible for me to attend to any more business on the Cochrane ranch. And three days' ride toward Dakota, just outside the edge of the Bad Lands I came across your second man Friday—the other Hurley twin."

BING had a coiled rawhide rope in his left hand. He threw it into Hurley's lap.

"Recognize that?" he demanded.

"It's Mike's reata," Dave Hurley said, small deep-set eyes fixed on Bing. "Where is Mike? How come you with this rope?"

"He's right where I found him, I expect," Bing answered slowly. "His horse was tied to some aspens. And he was all but dead when I found him. He'd been shot twice through the body. He died inside of fifteen minutes. I covered his carcass with loose stuff and left him, because—"

Bing felt in his coat pocket and drew

out a braided rawhide hondo and tossed it to Hurley.

"Compare that with the hondo on Brother's Mike's reata," he said through his teeth. "I cut that hondo off the rope that was around Ted Cochran's neck. They were made by the same hand."

Hurley stared at the beautifully plaited rawhide. Then he looked straight at Bing.

"They were," he said. "And I know whose hand."

"I expect you do." Bing said curtly. "Well, as I said, he was dying when I found him. But he lived long enough to gasp out a message for you, Mr. Bigelow, with his last breath. He said: 'Tell Sam, they got me. Mortimer's doublecrossin' outfit. Holed up ten miles east. Box canyon. All there.' This has a meanin' for you, Bigelow?"

"Go on," Bigelow said hoarsely.

Bing shot a glance at Hurley. The man's hands were doubled tight, fingernails pressing into his palms. His face was as bleak as a cloudy sky.

"It didn't mean so much to me, except that it made me wonder what one of your personal watch-dogs was doin' away off there gettin' himself shot up like that," Bing proceeded. "It made me wonder what was holed up in a box canyon full of Bar C Bar steers. So I came back here and got three Cochran riders and went down and took them cattle. So you and Mr. Mortimer lose—you sneakin', stealin' hound!"

Bing's voice sharpened like a knife. All the anger he had been bottling up for days freighted each biting word.

"Frank—Frank!" Lois cried.

"Be quiet while I tell this snake in the grass a few things," Bing rasped harshly. "Though I can't prove 'em in court. The tools you used, Bigelow, kept their mouths shut, but somebody shifted these cattle off this range and kept them hid to put the Cochran outfit in a hole. Mortimer eats outa your hand, Bigelow. Mortimer could close the Cochran outfit out if the money for that beef wasn't forthcoming this fall. You could have any number of cattle shifted around on this range with no one the wiser. Somebody scared off the Cochran riders. Somebody came here in the night and killed Ted Cochran so there was only a girl left to deal with. Somebody undertakes to run *me* off as soon as I start to mix in Cochran affairs. Who's behind all this? Who does it look like? You —Bigelow. You, you false alarm! You're a liar and a thief and a killer and—"

Bing took two catlike steps. His right hand hovered, fingers curving, six inches above the butt of his six-shooter. His left palm popped with a loud smack on Bigelow's mouth. And as quickly Bing stepped back.

SAM BIGELOW neither spoke nor stirred. His hands, stretched on his knees did not lift. They lay there trembling a little.

"You worm!" Bing said contemptuously. "Won't nothin' stir you to make a move?"

"This house is no place to settle this kind of difference," Bigelow said. "You're all wrong, anyway."

"You weren't so considerate of this house the night you came here to nail me," Bing sneered. "You're a yellow dog, Bigelow. There's plenty of room outside if you feel it too cramped in here for your peculiar style."

"I am not goin' to make any move to settle anything with you here and now," Bigelow answered morosely. "You may believe what you're sayin', and some of it is correct, but it don't mean what you think it does. You have just got the wrong bull by the tail. I can prove that, but I can't prove anythin' by shootin' this out with you."

Bing stared at him, filled with angry contempt.

"I'll make you a proposition, Miller," Bigelow said at last. "Meet me tomorrow afternoon at the Acorn Hotel in Big Dry. Choke down this here natural desire to take me to pieces until you hear what one or two other people have to say about this. If you ain't satisfied you can begin hostilities then."

He stood up, hat in hand. He looked at

Lois and he looked at Bing with a dignity and self-possession that made Bing Miller marvel.

"I have not stolen cattle, nor conspired with anyone to defraud Lois Cochran, nor did I have any part or knowledge in this hangin' of a defenseless boy," Bigelow said slowly and clearly. "I am not afraid of you, Miller, nor of any man who ever lived. I am more interested in clearin' myself of these things you bring up against me than I am in givin' you the personal satisfaction of shootin' at me. And I know only one way of doin' that. Will you drop this personal war on me until tomorrow afternoon in Big Dry?"

"If Big Dry suits you it suits me," Bing answered coldly. "I have business there, anyway. I suppose you'll have a couple of deputy sheriffs on hand to make the arrest you fell down on yourself."

Bigelow turned and walked past Bing as if he had not heard. In the doorway, between Mark Duffy and Jim Sears he faced about.

"You've canceled that," he said cryptically, and stalked out into the night.

Hurley rose also. In the doorway he, too, halted to speak.

"Was Long Tom Taylor in that bunch you fellows cleaned out?" he asked. "And Press Wayne?"

"Taylor was," Bing said curtly. "I popped him off myself."

"Yeah, Press was one," Mark Duffy said. "And Roy Deems."

"Thank you all," Hurley said in a curiously polite tone that, strangely enough, seemed to Bing charged with a genuine note of thankfulness.

"I wonder what Bigelow meant," Bing said, after Hurley was gone. "Canceled. Mr. Bigelow is as deep as the Grand Canyon."

"I still can't believe it," Lois breathed.

Bing saw the brightness of unshed tears in her eyes. Into his troubled heart came another of those queer impulses to take her in his arms and comfort her—or comfort himself. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders and stood listening to the *klippetty-klop klippetty-klop of* hoofbeats getting fainter.

"There is no proof, as I told him, that would stand in court," Bing said. "I've stated facts, Lois. You can draw your own conclusions. You have your cattle—or you'll have the money for them pretty quick. And I have made my talk. The rest is up to Bigelow. I think this Big Dry meetin' is just a stall. But I have to go to Big Dry anyway. So—"

He spread his hands expressively. There didn't seem any more to say. He and Lois were alone now. Sears and Duffy had followed Hurley out. Bing had heard them clank into the bunkroom. Bing stooped to pick up the rope and the hondo which Dave Hurley had left lying on the floor.

WHEN he straightened up Lois was at his side. She put both hands on his arm. Bing stood silent, outwardly unmoved, an armor of immobility over the turmoil that began to stir in his breast at her nearness.

"You mustn't go, Frank," she said. "They'll take you this time. One of those circulars is up in the postoffice. Everybody knows who you are. Tell me—is it true?"

"That I'm wanted in Colorado for robbin' a stage?" Bing said. "Yes, I'm wanted. But that's not sayin' I'm goin' to be had for any such crime. Oh, no."

"Why, *why,* did you stay on here and come back repeatedly just to do things for me?" Lois whispered.

"The old eternal why," Bing answered lightly. "A man can't always explain things, Lois. Sometimes I don't know myself just why I do things, although I generally do. I know why I have to go to Big Dry. It isn't just a grandstand against Sam Bigelow. I don't want to shoot my way out of anything. But I have started somethin' and I have a hankerin' to see it through. I never started anything in my life that I didn't make a stagger at finishin'. Even if you were not concerned, if Sam Bigelow was a dead issue, if a dozen sheriffs were waiting for me in Big Dry, I would still have to go. I have somethin' to attend to there. Afterward, may-

be I can come back and sit here on the porch an' tell you all about it. Maybe not."

"I'm going with you to town," she said.

"Why should you?" Bing said. "Your problem is solved as far as it can be. I'd rather you weren't around to see whatever Sam Bigelow may think he has in store for me.

"I am going!" Lois stamped her foot. Her gray-green eyes flashed and she shook Bing as an angry nurse might shake a refractory child.

Her vehemence silenced him. Why should she flare up like that? There was never any accounting for a woman's lightning change of mood. Bing had an uneasy feeling, for he was always at a disadvantage with a woman.

But, he reflected as he walked around a dark corner of the house to the bunkhouse wing, he knew how to deal with men—with men like Sam Bigelow. And there was a deep satisfaction in that.

CHAPTER XIV

Winner Take All

WHEN Bing and Lois drove up at two o'clock the next afternoon, Sam Bigelow and a square - shouldered, middle-aged, sandy-haired man, who was a stranger to Big Dry, but no stranger to Bing Miller, sat in chairs on the porch of the Acorn Hotel. The two men looked at them without stirring.

"The reception committee is on hand," Bing said to Lois in an undertone. "You go right up to your room and stay there until the tumult and the shoutin' dies."

"You'd joke at your own funeral," Lois reproached. "I don't like it, Frank."

"I don't much myself," Bing said gravely. "But I asked for a showdown. I believe I know now what friend Sam thinks he has up his sleeve. If I'm right he's due for a disappointment. So just sit tight till the palaver's finished."

Lois went in. Bing, as wary and expectant as when he hunted in the Bad Lands, drove the team in behind the hotel and turned it over to a stableman. Then he walked around the corner. Bigelow and his companion sat there on the porch.

"Hello, Gil," Bing greeted.

"Hello, Bing," Freeman answered. "You weren't expectin' me, were you?"

"I came here expectin' almost anything," Bing replied coolly. "From the advertisin' you've done and the company you're in, Freeman, I suppose you have business with me. It'll have to wait until I've transacted some business of my own."

Freeman glanced at Bigelow. The cattleman wasn't even looking at Bing. He was staring down the street.

"I come all the way from Colorado to get hold of you, Bing," Freeman said. "Big Dry's a small town, so I ain't in a hurry. Provided I know where to find you when you have attended to your business."

"I'll be here," Bing promised. "I give you my word."

"That's good enough," Freeman nodded. "I'm a plumb outsider, but I know what has come up between you'n Sam. Don't go off half-cocked."

"Did you ever know me to do that?" Bing asked coldly. "If I had that weakness your brother-in-law wouldn't be sittin' here now. He'd be gettin' measured for a wooden nightshirt."

"Tut, tut, Bing," Freeman drawled. " 'Tain't like you to talk that way. Now—"

"What are you waitin' for?" Bing interrupted roughly, turning on Bigelow. "I meet you here to hear somethin' you claim must be talked about. Are you waitin' for me to repeat some of the things I said last night? If you've got anything up your sleeve or on your mind, unload."

"I'm waitin' for Dave Hurley," Bigelow explained, in a curious flat tone. "When you came he and I and you and Gil Freeman were goin' over to have a talk with Mortimer. Just hold your horses till Dave shows up. He won't be long."

There was something about all this that puzzled Bing. How did Gil Freeman happen to be here? He had no more authority

in Montana than any plain citizen, to request Big Dry officers to arrest Bing Miller. Bing, liking Gil Freeman, felt a strange regret that Freeman was a connection of Sam Bigelow's.

He felt also that if this waiting in a surcharged atmosphere tightened his nerves, it was worrying Sam Bigelow even more. He fidgeted and frowned.

Suddenly the comparative quiet was broken by a shot. Then three more, quick as a finger could pull trigger—*pow, pow, pow*—muffled as if they came from an interior, but distinct.

Bigelow sprang to his feet, with a curse. "Blast his fool soul!" he cried. "He beat me to him!"

He leaped off the porch and ran toward the Big Dry Bank. Men were popping out of stores. Heads were thrust out of upstairs windows. Freeman heaved himself to his feet.

"Let's go over there too, Bing," he suggested. "It looks like somethin' has happened different from what Sam expected."

PEOPLE were gathering in front of the bank. They cluttered the doorway. Freeman shouldered them aside and Bing followed him in.

Against a polished counter behind which a teller stood with horror-stricken face the Big Dry town marshal and Sam Bigelow were supporting Dave Hurley. His head lopped over on Bigelow's shoulder. His face wore a peculiar mixture of pain and satisfaction, and his right hand still clutched his six-shooter.

Half-in, half-out the threshold of his ground glass cubicle Horace Mortimer sprawled, limp and still, a white-handled Colt three feet from an extended hand that would never lift gun or pen again. A creeping stream of blood oozed out from under him.

At sight of Bing, Hurley straightened up a trifle. He beckoned slowly, and Bing came close.

Lois Cochran burst in through the door. She stopped, her breath coming in short gasps, then came up close to Bing. He motioned her to silence. Hurley was smiling at him.

"Wanted to thank you, Miller," he whispered hoarsely, "for what you did for Mike. "And for givin' us the right steer."

"Dave—Dave," Sam Bigelow broke in. The pain and grief in his voice startled Bing. "Don't speak. Save your strength. You should have left Mortimer to me."

"I come first," Hurley choked out. "Mike was my brother. I gotta talk, Sam, while I can. Gotta put Miller right." He talked straight at Bing then. "There was one man you didn't get—in that box canyon. When you told me about Long Tom Taylor and Press Wayne and Roy Deems I coulda named a fourth. The four of 'em have hunted together before. When we hit town at noon I found out he was back in Big Dry—come back to report to Mortimer that it was all off. You got on the wrong track, Miller, just as we was on the wrong track about you, I guess. So I edged this hombre into a shack back of Curly Root's. I made him talk. You'll find him there yet. Mortimer promised 'em a thousand apiece. They moved them cattle down there last spring. Mortimer ribbed 'em up to come outa the brakes and hang Ted Cochran to make his play strong. Ted had showed signs of scoutin' the Big Fork for them cattle, same as Mike went down there to do. Long Tom Taylor made that reata for Mike two years ago. When you showed me that hondo off the rope that hung the kid, I knew whose 'lass-rope carried that hondo. They shot Mike when he located 'em. What Mike tried to tell you was that Mortimer was double-crossin' the Cochran outfit. It never struck Mike you suspected the IT. Nor me either, until you broke out at Sam last night.

"So I didn't come back to the hotel to meet you-all. I come here when I'd got it all outa Mortimer's right bower. It was my business. I come here to give Mortimer just what his hired killers give my brother. And I'm glad I did the job right even if he did get a slug into me first. You got it straight, Miller?"

"Yes," Bing answered.

"I don't give a cuss whether it's straight or not!" Sam Bigelow declared. "You're

not goin' to stand here spittin' out words and your life at the same time. Shut up! Here, you fellows give me a hand. We'll carry him over to the hotel and put him in bed. Somebody tell Doc Sawyer to come to the Acorn right away."

Hurley nodded assent. He was white and trembling. The effort of continued speech had sapped his strength. Bigelow, Freeman, the town marshal and Bing made a cradle of their arms and carried him across the street, up to a bedroom. Doc Sawyer was at their heels as they gained the first floor.

"You bear a hand, Miss Cochran," the doc said. "The rest of you clear out. *Vamos.*"

The four men trooped downstairs. On the office floor they stopped to look at each other. Sam Bigelow's mouth had a savage twist.

"In a shack behind Curly Root's," he said. "You fellows come with me."

IN A twelve-by-fourteen log cabin they found a man stretched on the floor, gagged, his hands tied behind his back, ankles lashed together. Unharmed save for one thick welt across his head, and certain brownish streaks across the soles of his bare feet.

A fire burned in an iron cook stove. The handle of a poker stuck out from under a lid. Knowing what he knew, guessing what made those singes on bare soles, Bing drew out the poker. Its tip was cherry red. And at sight of that hot iron the man on the floor began to heave and squirm.

"Take the gag out of his mouth," Bing said. "No wonder he talked. Maybe the sight of this will loosen his tongue some more."

It did. And the tale he told was a detailed repetition of what Dave Hurley had gasped out to Bing in the bank. Only now they heard chapter, book and verse as to Mortimer's cold-blooded engineering of a rotten deal.

"You take care of him, Provine," Sam Bigelow said at last to the marshal. "If this county don't hang him, by the eternal I'll hang him myself!"

Bigelow watched the fellow limp away with the town marshal. Still without speaking he started back for the hotel, tramped into an office and said to the clerk:

"Go up and ask Doc Sawyer how Dave's makin' it."

But before the man set foot on the stairs Lois Cochran came down.

"Doc says Dave has a little better than an even chance," she told him. "He's resting easy. He didn't have to probe for the bullet. It went right through. Oh, I'm sure he'll be all right, Sam."

Sam Bigelow smiled for the first time. "I feel kinda bad about those two boys, Lois, because I sent Mike down there just on the chance he might run across somethin'. If I'd had any idea I'd have gone with a roundup crew. So I feel responsible. I'd much rather have gone after Mortimer myself. I meant to. You know I had nothin' to do with any dirty work, don't you, Lois?"

"I didn't believe it, even when it looked as if you might have," Lois declared staunchly. "It was just a mistake."

Bigelow shot a triumphant look at Bing.

"I get you," Bing said slowly. "You had nothing to do with runnin' off Bar C Bar cattle. You had nothin' to do with hangin' Ted Cochran. Mortimer was the villain of the piece. You're all in the clear. My mistake. But from where I sat, and the way you acted right from the first time you saw me, appearances were against you, Mr. Bigelow. When I expressed my opinion of you last night, I was dead certain I was right. It seems I was wrong." He finished up with a little edge creeping into his tone, for Bigelow had put one arm around Lois with a protecting gesture, and she stood there staring at Bing, making no effort to withdraw from that tentative embrace, "And that is as far as I go. You didn't give me the benefit of any doubts, Bigelow, when you undertook to collect my scalp. So far as I can see we're about even. If you aren't satisfied, why—"

Bing shrugged expressively and turned to Gil Freeman.

"I've transacted my business," he said

brusquely. "Now what's yours?"

"As sheriff of Coldwater County, Colorado," Freeman answered with great deliberation, "suppose I was to announce that I was goin' to arrest you for robbin' the Freegold-Coldwater stage of forty thousand dollars in U. S. gold certificates. What would you say?"

"Knowin' you as well as I do," Bing replied in an indifferent tone, "I'd say you were a plain fool."

"Oh?" Freeman lifted his sandy eyebrows quizzically. "Let's step out on the porch and discuss that point."

THEIR eyes met. The sheriff's left eyelid drooped perceptibly. Bing stalked silently out, the sheriff at his heels. They moved to the porch railing and seated themselves side by side.

"Now, why'd you reckon I'd be a fool, Bing?" Freeman asked in a friendly tone.

"Because," Bing replied without hesitating, "after two years under you as a deputy, I know your methods pretty well. If you got suspicious that a man committed a crime you'd check up on his movements, about and after said crime. If you did that, you'd know I couldn't have stuck up the Freegold stage. Consequently if you arrest me, you're a fool. Just logic."

"Your logic is plumb sound," Freeman nodded. "I did check up on you, Bing, from the time you left my office. You were playin' poker in the Ellison bunkhouse with four other fellers at the exact minute the stage was held up thirty miles away. You got a cast-iron alibi."

"An' still you sent out circulars offerin' a thousand dollars for me dead or alive," Bing reproached. "You nearly got me killed by this big brother-in-law of yours. An' it was just a fluke I didn't snuff him out when he made his play to take me."

"I stampeded m'self into that." Freeman's tone was one of profound regret. "I made one grand mistake in bein' so hasty. But I'd been puzzlin' for days why you quit like that, an' where you disappeared to so sudden."

"What made you come up here after me," Bing asked, "when you know I had nothin' to do with it? Bigelow must have let you know I was on the Frozen Fish."

"Well, I'll tell you." Freeman wrinkled his bushy brows. "You didn't hold up no stage. But you know who did. You know who got the money. I come up here hopin' you'd know somethin' it's important for me to know."

"How did you come to offer a reward for me?" Bing asked, ignoring Freeman's statement.

"About a week after you vanished a storekeeper on Cherry Fork was held up," Freeman told him. "We got Whitey Soames red-handed for that job. And he comes across that him and you robbed the Freegold stage, and that while you-all are makin' your getaway you stick him up and make off with the whole forty thousand. On top of the way you acted quittin' and vanishin' I swallowed his yarn and scattered them circulars. Then I traced your movements that day. I find I'm up a tree. But I can't get rid of the notion you can solve that mystery for me, Bing. That's why I'm here."

"Two men held up that stage." Bing picked his words with care. "Whitey Soames was one. "Did you begin makin' a guess who the other man might have been?"

"No." Freeman shook his head. "I wouldn't have had any lead at all if Whitey hadn't coughed up voluntarily."

"I know who Whitey's partner in that hold-up was," Bing said deliberately. "I am not going to beat around the bush with you, Gil. I'm tellin' you this between ourselves. I will never testify to anythin' in court. When they dashed away from the stage a wild shot hit Whitey's partner. He died about thirty hours later. He was a friend of mine. I helped bury him."

"How come?" Freeman asked simply. "By thunder—"

"Keep it to yourself," Bing said quickly. "The law can't reach him now. He wasn't a bandit after easy money. He was just tryin' to do something from a mistaken idea—and it cost him his life. I'm comin' clean about this, Freeman."

Sheriff Freeman nodded.

"I had a suspicion somethin' like that was comin' off," Bing went on. "But I wasn't sure, and I had no way of stoppin' it. If I stayed on your staff, and that robbery was pulled, I know who was responsible and I would have to hunt him. I couldn't do that, and I couldn't stay on as a deputy drawin' county pay and keep what I knew to myself. So I quit. It was my intention to get myself a job where what I suspected would be my own private affair.

"That's how I was headed north. One direction was as good as another to me. That's how I come at the Ellison ranch. I rode on north the next mornin' because I was uneasy an' restless, but not knowin' there had been a holdup. I blundered on Whitey and his wounded partner. I stayed with them till he died. This man begged me to do somethin' for him, and I promised. I *sabed* him, and how he felt. And when we buried him, I did stick Whitey Soames up and take every cent of that plunder.

"I did that deliberate. I couldn't take Whitey in and give him up, but I could pull his teeth, and return the money to the Freegold in a roundabout way. But first I had somethin' more important to do, and I set out to do it. The Freegold could wait. I have it stowed in a safe place. They'll get every dollar presently. So your hunch was pretty sound, Gil."

Freeman looked at him in wonder.

"You don't do nothin' half-way, do you Bing?" he said. "I could guess your friend's name, and give a guess at your business on his behalf. I have been here three days, and I have used my brains as well as my ears. From what you tell me and from what Sam told me today, I can put two and two together. But we'll let that ride. We'll put Whitey Soames where he belongs without any evidence from you. I can arrange to return that money to the Freegold, so they'll never connect you with anythin'."

"Thanks," Bing said. "Did you tell Sam Bigelow that reward was a mistake?"

"Yeah," Freeman nodded. He whacked Bing on the shoulder. "Let's go have a drink, son, I'm takin' the evening train home with a load off my mind. If it wasn't for seein' the way you look at this red-headed Cochran girl I'd hold out inducements for you to come back to Coldwater and get on the county pay-roll again. I sure miss you, Bing. But I reckon it wouldn't be no use. You're thrown and hog-tied."

"I don't know about that," Bing answered morosely. "I may be back clamorin' for my old job before long. Let's go get that drink."

But Bing was fated to wait a long time for that friendly drink with the sheriff of Coldwater County, for as he moved off the porch beside Freeman he turned, on impulse.

Lois Cochran was standing, framed like a picture in an open window, and when Bing looked back she held out both hands to him in a gesture that made Bing's heart leap.

He took the steps in one hop and strode straight for the door. In the entrance, he met Sam Bigelow emerging. Bigelow stopped, facing Bing who had the peculiar impression that Sam Bigelow for once looked small, felt small.

"Lissen, Miller," Bigelow's words were a deep-throated growl. "I done told her what Gil Freeman told me about you awhile ago. Far as I'm concerned the hatchet is buried. What's happened is past. I don't like you personally, and I probably never will. I don't want to shake hands with you and pretend friendliness I don't feel. I'm willin' to admit you got all the nerve any man's entitled to. You had brains enough to solve somethin' that had me beat. I don't feel no overpowerin' affection for you on that account either, but you'll never have occasion to say I was a poor loser. You win!"

He stalked on past Bing, without waiting for either reply or comment. And Bing paid him the tribute of a momentary admiration. Because, looking to where Lois Cochran waited with shining eyes and hands outstretched, he knew exactly what Sam Bigelow meant.

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

down. Then Joratz gets an order for another iron.

There's racks o' odd shaped tongs all over the shop. It's the law that the letters o' each brand be registered with the state. The smithy is mighty careful to check each registration with the state before makin' a duplicate, unless he's familiar with the brand. Yessuh, fellahs and gals, that shop proved to be the most interestin' place o' business in that no-hoss town, betcha!

What Is Cabrito

And now, folks, gotta get right down to answerin' some o' the swell letters what's been comin' in durin' my meanderin's. It's fine to go aroamin' 'bout the country, but it's durned good to be back with the old Hitchin' Rail outfit again.

First inquiry on the stack is from Jackie Metcalf o' Pueblo, Colorado. Jackie's been hearin' from a lady friend down San Antonio, Texas, way 'bout a special dish o' vittles called "Cabrito." Jackie's girl friend tells what she had to eat for dinner at one o' the city's hotels. "A special dish called Cabrito," she says. "A roast leg, with special sauce and side dishes. It was sure swell eating," she comments.

"What the heck is this 'Cabrito' she's yappin' about?" Jackie wants to know. "Is this dame pullin' my leg?" sez he.

Good Vittles

Well, son, I got an idea she wrote like that to confuse you some. Maybe it's the lady's way o' bein' sure she'll get an answer to her letter, if just to ask what the heck. Smart girl! But they eat "Cabrito" all right down in San Antone as well as in other towns in the state o' Texas. Cabrito is the meat o' the goat—that's all. And, lemme tell you, it's larrupin' good vittles. I've eat it, many a time, and way back when goat meat was called nothin' but "kid." I'd sure like to have a mess right now. Makes my dry old mouth start waterin' when I think about it.

You'll find the words "Cabrito" and "Chevon" in Webster's dictionary o' today, though they're coined words. Cabrito is used to cover the term "goat meat" of any kind, and

[*Turn page*]

"Chevon" designates the meat o' the six-weeks old goat—the "kid." It's like designatin' between "chicken" and "broiler."

Folks found there was need o' some name to take the place o' the homely word "goat." There's somethin' about the sound o' the words "goat" and "kid" that just ain't appetizin'. So, to meet the need o' butchers and restaurant men to make the meat popular with the public, the terms cabrito and chevon were coined.

Yessuh, Jackie, when you go courtin' down San Antone way, like I suspicion you'll be doin' one o' these fine days before long, you'll be able to order cabrito and chevon with what the French folks calls nonchalance—like you'd been doin' it every day o' yore young life. And you can be sure you're gettin' grub what's fit for a ranny as knows his vittles. Yon can get it on the menu o' the biggest and finest hotels as well as in the simplest restaurants.

Here's a Recipe

Maybe some o' you ranny-gals would like to know how the meat of the goat is prepared for cookin'. One o' the recipes for roast chevon used by most all eatin' places is this:

Sear any cut of roast on both sides, using its own fat. Sprinkle with salt and red and black pepper. Slice one onion and place on top of the roast. Add two cups of water and cook meat until tender. Then sprinkle with flour, turning until each side is brown and the gravy a thick sauce. Serve hot with some dish such as macaroni and cheese, and cabbage salad, bread, and peach short-cake, or the like, for dessert.

That's just one o' the many recipes to be had down Texas way. Cook it any way you choose and you'll find yourself ba-aaing for more of the same, betcha life!

Mad Foxes

Next letter on the stack is from Sarah Mercer o' Fayetteville, Ohio. Sarah's just finished her schoolin', and is teachin' her first term in a rural district o' the state. She's readin' and thinkin' o' lots o' things and places, seems like.

"Is it true," she writes, "that foxes sometimes get rabies the same as dogs?" Sarah has heard o' wolf dogs goin' mad, but seems to doubt that wild foxes ever do.

Well, Sarah, up in cold climates foxes ain't so apt to go mad. I'm not surprised you never heard o' rabied foxes before. But down in the great southwestern part o' the United States where the old sun pours down oven heat with a generous bounty, foxes, as well as dogs, go mad, and even foxes can prove a menace to humans.

The Pied Piper

Just this year the folks o' Henderson County, Texas, become alarmed by the number o' mad foxes in the vicinity, and a call was sent out for help. Judge Spencer o' the town o' Athens asked a specialist in the business, Adam Lindsey o' Brownwood, to come to their assistance.

Adam is a right interestin' fellah. Folks call him the P i e d Piper o' Brownwood. Some years back he discovered that foxes are strangely attracted to the sounds of music, the more weird the notes the better. Forthwith he got hisself a cow horn and went out into the fox country and experimented. Sure enough, the bushy tails began comin' noiselessly up from the thickets and hollows, and Adam knew his guess had been correct.

'Bout five hundred men—hunters and pipers—scattered over the country in Henderson county when Adam Lindsey reached town, and such a tootlin' o' horns was never heard before. The catch was over a hundred foxes. The bushy tails would come up at the sound o' the horns, and the hunters promptly shot 'em down with their rifles.

That's the way it was down Henderson county way, fellahs and gals. If you're livin' in a fox infested country, better polish up

a good, sound cow horn, and learn how to tootle!

Adios for now, ever'body!

Buck Benson

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

STARTING off the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN in a blaze of action is TRAIL FROM YESTERDAY, a pulsating *El Halcon* novelet by Bradford Scott.

Trouble begins when a sailor attempts to deliver a package from Juan Rojos, the Mexican revolutionist, containing fifty thousand dollars' worth of Mexican black opals, to Tol Grundy, a storekeeper in Dallas, Texas. The sailor is trailed to Grundy's store by three masked men. But a marshal and a Texas Ranger are on watch for anything suspicious and follow the three masked men into the

[*Turn page*]

store just as the outlaws get the package containing the opals away from Grundy and the sailor. Here is a taste of what happens then:

"Elevate!"

The three whirled as a single unit. Facing them were two men who also held drawn guns. There was an instant of crawling inaction. Then the room fairly exploded to a roar of sixshooters. Red flashes gushed back and forth. Clouds of blue smoke powder swirled in the dim light.

Tol Grundy went sideways from the counter and came up clutching a cocked sawed-off shotgun. He flung the weapon to his shoulder. A slug took it squarely in the stock and knocked it from his hands. His convulsively clutching fingers pressed the triggers as the scattergun spun away from him. Both barrels let go with a crashing roar. The double charge of buckshot smashed the window to splinters.

Outside, merry-makers scattered and fled with yells of terror. Rows were not uncommon in Deep Ellum, but not such a row as was going on inside Tol Grundy's store. When two men, guns in hand, leaped over three sprawled bodies and into the street, not a man, woman or child was in sight.

The two men bounded across the street and headed for the railroad yards, where a long freight was rumbling slowly westward. As they vanished into the shadows Tol Grundy appeared in the doorway and blazed six shots after them. Rumbling curses, he turned back to the store, which was a shambles. Three dead and one desperately wounded man lay on the floor. The walls were pitted with bullet holes. The hanging lamp was swinging and guttering by one chain.

Outside sounded shouts and the pad of running feet. Five minutes later the whole section swarmed with peace officers, searching, questioning. . . .

Later, when things have quieted down and the officers have learned very little, Walt Slade, the mysterious rider of the dim trails

known as *El Halcon,* appears on the scene. With the help of little Mose Wagner, an old Negro who sells a mis'ry cure, Slade takes up the trail of the men who killed the marshal and a Texas Ranger. He learns that an outlaw named Cullen Baker may be the leader of the band.

With Mose Wagner leading the way, Slade travels through the wild swamplands in search of the killers. What happens during the quest makes TRAIL FROM YESTERDAY a yarn filled with thrills and suspense from start to finish!

Swap and Whopper

They are at it again! Guess who? If you say Whopper Whaley and Swap Bootle, you will be quite right. They manage to get into plenty of trouble as usual in THE ROAMING RIDERS, the amusing novelet by Syl MacDowell which also appears in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN.

It all starts when the two wandering cowboys camp for the night and Whopper decides to sleep without his pants. During the night a big wind comes up and blows Whopper's levis off the bush on which he has hung them. It also blows them against the radiator of a big passing truck—and the truck goes on its way, carrying the pants with it.

Losing the pants is bad enough in Whopper's estimation, but when he hints that all the money the two partners possess happens to be in a pocket of those vanishing levis—Swap also finds it's time to be perturbed himself.

In their search for the pants, Swap and Whopper find themselves in a spot where they are forced to paint a house for a real estate agent, and get tangled up with a large and very much alive elephant who turns pink right before their eyes.

There are plenty of laughs in THE ROAMING RIDERS, and you will enjoy every moment of it!

Also in the next issue will be SCORPION, an engrossing classic novel by Will James. It is a thrilling saga of the cow country—and a horse and rider who are outlaws both.

And of course, there will also be a care-

[*Turn page*]

ful selection of short stories and interesting features to complete the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN. Plenty of good reading for everyone—in a grand number you're sure to enjoy!

LETTERS FROM READERS

LET'S hear from you! Which stories did you like best in this and other issues of THRILLING WESTERN? Which did not appeal to you? We value the opinions of our readers, so write and tell us what you think. We can take a knock as well as a boost; and knowing your likes and dislikes in fiction helps us to select the type of yarns that will suit you best—so let's have all your suggestions, comments and criticisms! And now let's look at some of the letters we have been receiving!

I have been reading THRILLING WESTERN for quite some time now. Started with the January 1944 issue and still wait eagerly for the next copy of the magazine to appear. Just to be different I am going to give you a list of my favorite authors among those who have appeared in the magazine instead of telling you the titles of the stories I particularly liked. They are: Bradford Scott, Syl MacDowell, Chuck Martin, Johnston McCulley, W. C. Tuttle, Hascal Giles, Cliff Walters, Stephen Payne, Tom Curry, Dean Owen, Hal White, Joe Archibald, Louis L'Amour, Barry Scobee, Steuart M. Emery, Allan K. Echols, Wayne D. Overholser, Gladwell Richardson and Walker A. Tompkins. They all write nice stories.—*John Marshall, Chicago, Ill.*

That's quite a list, John, and we agree with you, those authors do turn out some nice yarns. Thanks for writing.

You said you wanted the readers to write and tell you which stories they liked best in THRILLING WESTERN so I am doing that right here and now. I particularly liked THE GHOST OF RESACA BAY by Bradford Scott, RED TAPE RANGE by Syl MacDowell, LAW COMES TO PISTOL GAP by Chuck Martin, JUDGE OF CHARACTER by Burl R. Tuttle, BLIZZARD TRUCE by Samuel Mines, and FIGHTIN' MEN by Oscar J. Friend. And I

think THRILLING WESTERN is swell!—*James Ward, Boston, Mass.*

Thanks, Jim, that is an interesting list, and we are grateful for your letter.

I have been reading THRILLING WESTERN for over ten years now and it remains my favorite magazine. Of course there have been some stories I have liked better than others—that is only natural, after having read so many of them, but all in all I agree with you when you say, "plenty of good reading."—*Fred Lawrence, Denver, Colorado.*

Thanks for your letter, Fred. Glad you like THRILLING WESTERN so much.

You know what? A friend of mine bet me that if I wrote a letter to THRILLING WESTERN it would not appear in the magazine. I told him he was wrong, and that I was going to write not only to prove it but to tell the editor how much I enjoyed reading all the good Western yarns in THRILLING WESTERN.—*Dan Baker, Jacksonville, Fla.*

Your friend loses his bet, Dan. We always try to publish as many letters from our readers as we have room for in each issue of THRILLING WESTERN, and if a letter doesn't appear right away, it may appear in some future issue.

That's all for this time, but let's hear from more of our readers. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks to everybody. See you all next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

Answers to Questions on Page 69

1. Unlike most Western terms, which come from the Spanish or Indian, posse comes right out of ancient Latin. The legal phrase was "posse comitatus", meaning a "body containing legal authority." Posse means "to be able" and "comitatus,' a power of the county.

2. The Overland Trail.

3. They thought the voice of the Great Spirit spoke through the singing wires.

4. It was a dead heat between the names of Portland and Boston. The coin toss made Portland official.

5. The Devil's Tower. It was considered a place of refuge to the Indians who told a legend of a princess who escaped from a bear by scaling the grim walls which today show the claw marks of the baffled bear.

TROUBLE RIDES A MARE

(Concluded from page 90)

ranchhouse, and it was dark outside the open window. Martha stood smiling at him and she was now wearing a pretty dress instead of her riding outfit.

"The doctor has been here and fixed up your arm, Bruce," she said. "The bullet broke a couple of bones in it—no wonder you were so weak. He said you will be all right in time though."

"What about Heath and the mortgage?" Ward asked anxiously.

"I rode into town and saw Jeff Mason at the bank this afternoon," Martha said. "He told me he felt guilty about having sold the mortgage to Carl Heath. He had no idea that Heath wanted this ranch. Jeff loaned me the money to pay off the mortgage. So I don't have to worry about that any longer."

"I'm glad," Ward said with a smile. "Sure wish that you hadn't told me about that twenty thousand you'll get when you are twenty-one from your father's will."

"Why shouldn't I have told you?" Martha asked in surprise.

"Because I sold my ranch down in Texas a couple of months ago and have the ten thousand I got for it, decided to look for a riding job before I settled down again," Ward said. "But now if I asked you to marry me, you might think I was doing it for your money."

"What money?" demanded Martha as she leaned over so he could kiss her. "A girl shouldn't be bothered about things like that when she is going to marry the man she fell in love with at first sight!"

"Reckon you're right," Ward said as he kissed her.

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

TRAIL FROM YESTERDAY

A Walt Slade Novelet

By BRADFORD SCOTT

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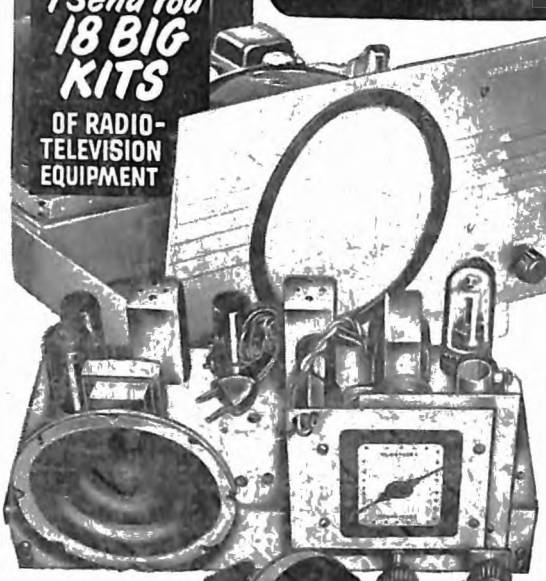

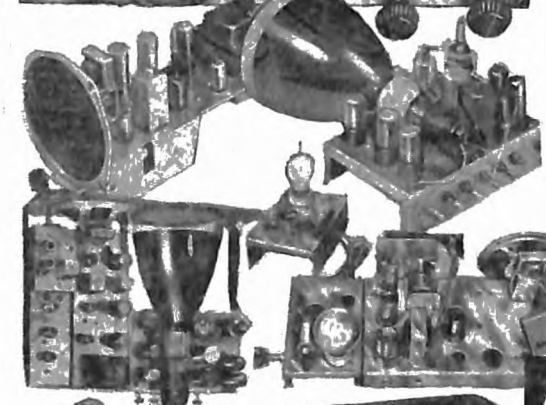

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