WEST

EVERY OTHER WEEK

Early February

1/-

"THE WILD BUNCH"

A complete Novel by

H. S. DRAGO

★ ★

A Novelette by

BENNETT FOSTER

EARLY FEBRUARY, 1933 EVERY OTHER THURSDAY

WEST

Every Other Thursday One Shilling

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WEST

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of True War Stories

Adventures

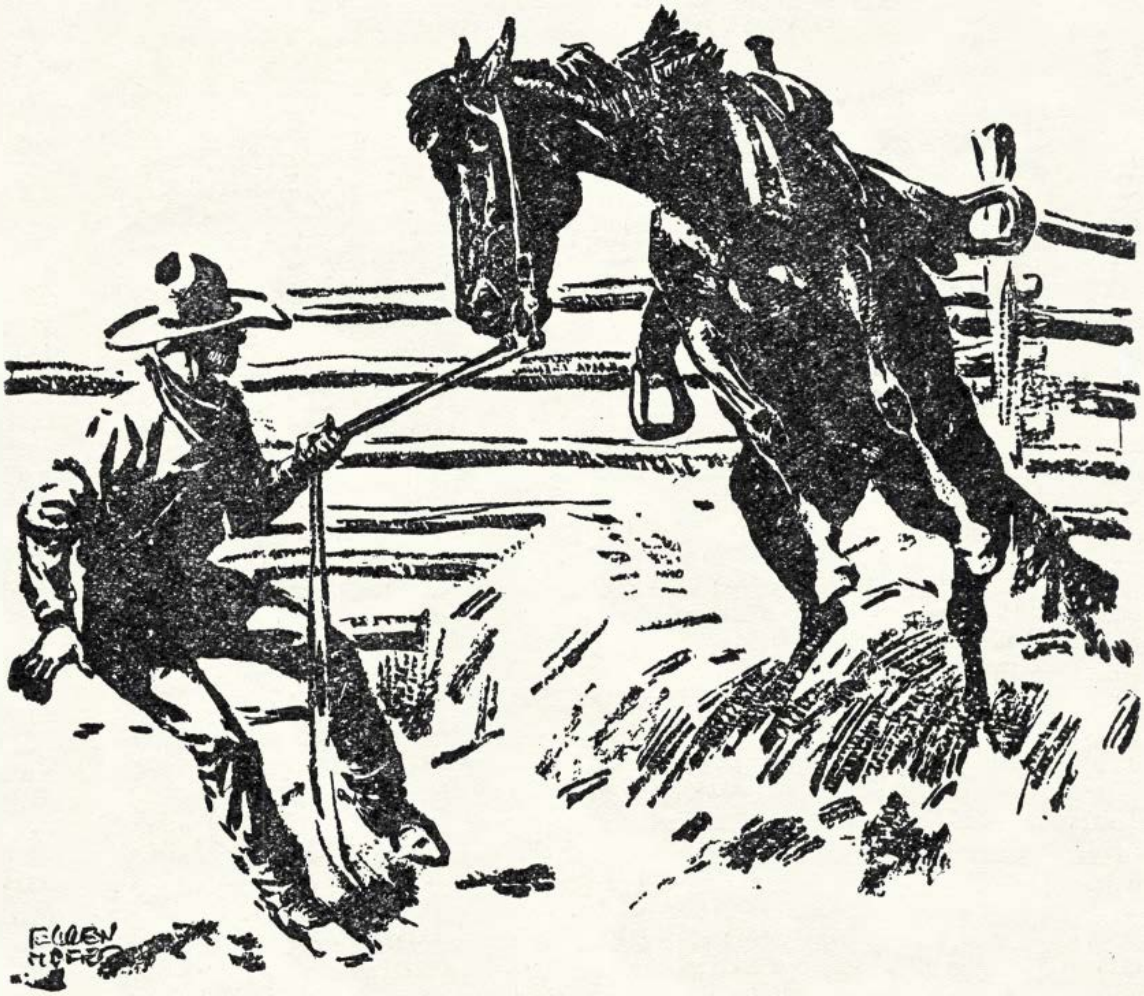
Shot down in flames . . . .

" Yesterday morning an enemy aeroplane was shot down in flames, the pilot escaping by parachute."

Paragraphs of this description appeared so frequently in the Press during the War that they became quite commonplace, reading as an official record, dull and uninteresting. Yet to those taking part it was a matter of life and death.

In MORE WAR ADVENTURES soldiers, sailors, and airmen tell the inner truth about such incidents, stories of glorious adventure and hairbreadth escapes.

TANKS ~ FLANDERS TRENCHES



THE BUSTER'S EDUCATION

By FLOYD T. WOOD

I'D HEARD the way to win a hoss was never treat him rough,
To be his friend an' talk to him, an' give him sweets an' stuff.
So fer a month I spends my time a-playin' Romeo
Unto the meanest, wall-eyed bronc 'tween hell an' Jericho.

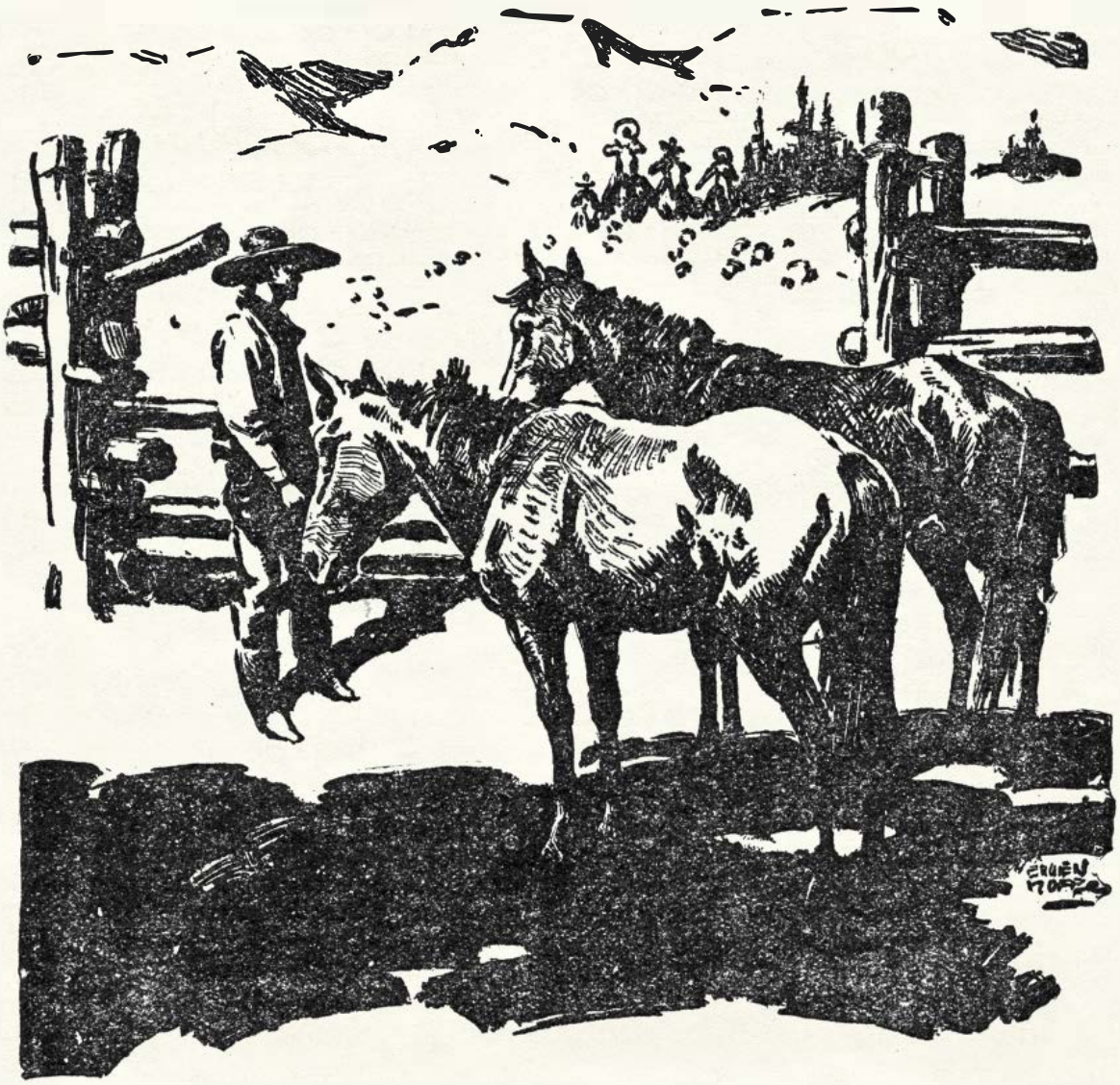
He et enough of sugar lumps to satisfy a kid,
An' choc'late creams an' chewin' gum—you bet your neck he did.
I curries him an' honeys him like some guy in a trance,
But if I didn't watch him sharp he'd grab me by the pants.

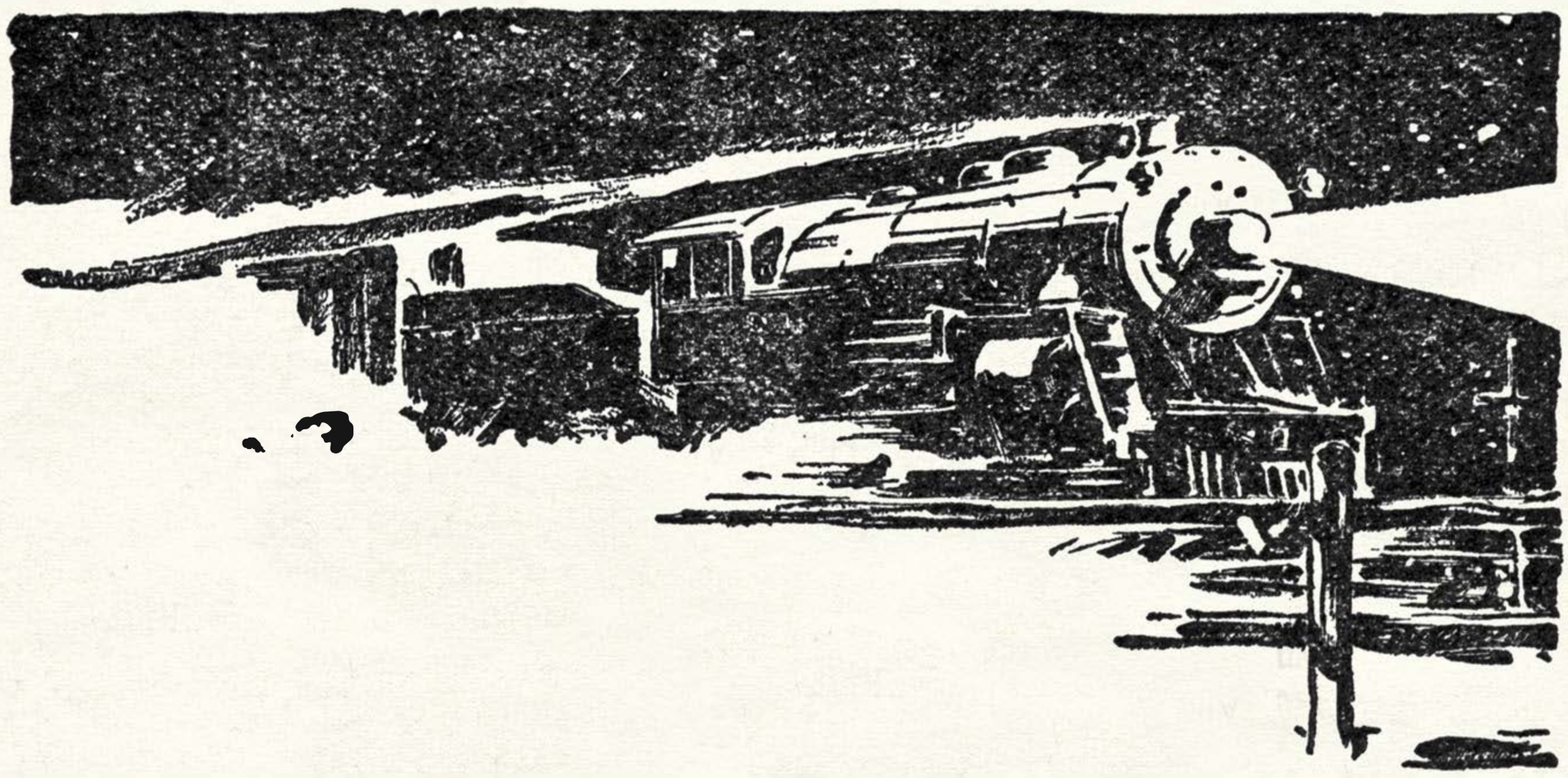
I feeds him regular with oats an' prime alfalfa hay.
He has the best of everything, an' lots of it—but say,
That critter wasn't grateful none; he dang near makes me sore;
He kicks me onc't—By gosh he did! clean through the stable door.

An' then that day I rides him first is stickin' in my mind.
I ain't a-wearin' spurs ner quirt; I'm still a-bein' kind.
That ain't no way to bust a hoss; before I fair commence
That steed he pulls a cyclone act an' hangs me on the fence.

"Enough's enough, ol' boy," I sez. "Sometimes it's too dang much."
I wipes my eyes an' clears my mouth, a few stray teeth an' such.
I dons my war clothes, spurs an' all; I'm tired of bein' tricked;
Climbs on that bronc an' rode him till he's absolutely licked.

It may be so how sugar makes some hosses kind an' sweet.
Around my spread from that day on they don't get none to eat.
I treats 'em square, like cowmen do, but nix on apple sauce.
Them broomtails on the Lazy M, they've gotta know who's boss!





THE WILD BUNCH

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Author of "Ahead of the Law," "Squaw Valley War," etc.

CHAPTER I

WHERE THE DARK ANGEL WALKS

IT WAS white winter. Far out on the great Amargosa Desert, two shadowy figures, bent nearly double against the storm that had been slashing at them for three days, trudged slowly through the murky gloom of mid-day.

Bandy-legged Nez Smith and Shorty Ducro! Two good men and true with a price on their heads! Reckoned in years, they were old men—gnarled and hard bitten like the twisted, tortured cedars that lean against the blasts at timberline. Through squinting, red-rimmed lids they peered with bloodshot eyes into the inferno of stinging sand and driving snow, so cold and sharp that it cut their faces and bit through their clothes. Hoary brows were white with rime; their lips, cracked and bloodless.

Here was no friendly cutbank, offering a respite from the fury of the storm; no rock outcropping in the lee of which they could find shelter. This was a wilderness of sand—naked and heartless—drifting about their feet, filling the air, trying to pull them down.

The wind screamed at them, and it was like the drunken revelry of the fiends of hell. The world was being made over. Greasewood and sage were disappearing before the onslaught of those marching hills of sand.

Under the angry buffeting of the relentless gale that scoured the flats the snow seemed to strike the ground and bound back into the air to be hurled half-way across Nye County before it came to earth again. In the *Malpais*, great deceptive drifts had formed, tamped down by the hurrying feet of the wind.

Every few minutes the man in the lead glanced back over his shoulder to see if the other was still following him. Satisfied of that, he trudged on. No word passed between them. Slung over his shoulder each man carried a pair of leather saddlebags.

Their food was in one bag. In the other, thirty thousand dollars in currency; for they were fresh from the looting of the Drover's National Bank of Las Animas, across the Utah line.

That they found themselves afoot in the great Amargosa Desert—called by some the Ralston Desert—was not by accident. Until the blizzard struck them, every step of their carefully planned getaway had worked out as they had foreseen it. Even in the storm they found some satisfaction, for it was wiping out their tracks a second or two after they were made.

Three days of below zero weather—of cold that struck to the very marrow of their bones—of spilt lips and cracked cheeks, of never-ending agony had not disheartened them. The little affair in Las Animas had not been the first of

Within the law or without the law, there are certain things that entitle a man to wear the man-brand.

its kind with them. Experienced hands, they had played fast and loose with the law on numerous occasions. But this time they knew they were safe. Pursuit was out of the question, and they were beyond believing that danger lay ahead.

The curtain the storm had dropped about them completely isolated them. It was impossible to see for more than thirty to forty yards in any direction. They were like motes filtering through infinitude. Fifteen miles a day! They couldn't hope to do more as long as the storm held on. Translated into days, it meant that the better part of a week must pass before they could hope to reach the comparative shelter of the timbered crest of the San Antonio Range and take their first look at the Reese River Valley, their objective.

For three days they had seen no living thing, not even a rabbit or scavenger coyote. They alone peopled that land of icy desolation.

At irregular intervals they exchanged the bags they carried. And it was enough to send them on with renewed courage—one under the stimulus of a lightened load and the other warming to the feel of that ill-gotten fortune on his back that now was so surely theirs.

AS THE short afternoon waned and the cheerless evening settled down, they strained their eyes for a glimpse of high sage or chaparral into which they could burrow for the night. An hour passed before they stumbled upon a clump of mesquite.

The bandy-legged man in the lead, held up his hand. The other nodded. Night was on them in earnest now. On hands and knees they crawled into the brush. The mesquite was holding the snow. They went in until they reached the depth of the drift. In five minutes they had made a blowout in the snow and packed it down against the storm.

They were too cold to talk. Shorty produced a flask. Both drank from it. Then they performed a miracle: they kindled a little squaw fire!

Over it they warmed their hands. Life began to flow back into their veins.

"Ain't stormin' so hard no more," said Shorty, his face haggard-looking and unreal.

"No, she'll blow herself out tonight," said Nez. He filled a blackened coffeepot with snow and set it on the fire.

Coffee and beans—that was their supper. They wolfed them down like famished dogs, unmindful of the sand that gritted between their teeth with every mouthful. For half an hour, then, they smoked and fed the tiny fire.

It could not warm them. But it was companionable. Shorty stared into its depths intently. His lips moved under his ragged mustache. "You're the one who knows this country," he said.

"Reckon you know where we are?"

Nez nodded. He was the leader.

"Mebbe ten miles out of the way," he said. "I'll git my bearin's soon as it clears." He put away his pipe. "How you standin' it?"

"Awfully cold," Shorty answered.

"Yeah, it's purty cold. But we'll make it . . . come this far." Unconsciously his eyes strayed to the bag that held the money they had risked their lives to get and were risking a second time to keep. It was a stake worth all it was costing.

He was old. Times had changed. Outlawry had gone into the discard with the coming of the radio and the automobile. The law could ride too fast now. Luck had been with them this once, and Nez knew it was this or nothing.

"Oh, we'll make it all right," Shorty muttered. And he, too, glanced at the money-bag. He was as old as Nez. And he knew what Nez knew. . . . This was their last job.

They had no blankets, but they stretched out in the snow and were still. Between them lay the two bags with their food and their wealth. It was significant of their rights—that they were to share them together.

They closed their eyes. But neither slept. Sleep was impossible, dangerous. The fire had died down. Only the embers glowed, a cold, unconvincing red.

EACH was busy with his thoughts —and they were strangely alike. Thirty thousand dollars! All of it would see either of them through to the end of his days.

Southern California, where the weather was warm and he could get the rheumatism out of his joints—rheumatism contracted in the old Federal penitentiary at Leavenworth—appealed to Shorty. He was a left-over from the days of the Daltons and Red Doolin. Man and boy, he had been outside the law for over forty years.

Half of that thirty thousand wouldn't be enough. He would need it all. And he intended to have it all. He put out his hand to make sure that it was still there.

Bandy's thoughts did not run to California. He was thinking of a land he had not seen for twenty years, but which, for all that, still passed for home with him—northern Nevada, up along the Oregon and Idaho line—McDermit, Jericho, Paradise Valley and the Owyhee Country—where he had punched cattle and won his original sobriquet of Nez Percé Smith, because he had been born on the Percé reservation.

Time had hallowed those old memories. Old faces—old places! He longed to see them again. Not as Bandy Smith, the name he had used as an outlaw, but as Nez Smith, the buckaroo, who had come home to the old friends of his youth. He pictured lazy days in the pleasant summer-time, winter nights with old cronies. . . .

Shorty and he would part when they reached the mountains overlooking the Reese River. Chance had thrown them together; self-preservation would throw them apart. Tonopah and Goldfield would lie to the south; farther west, California. Shorty would have to decide between them. Nez knew that he alone would travel north.

Thirty thousand dollars? It was a lot of money. Half of it would do, though. And he promised himself that nothing should cheat him out of it.

The thought impinged itself on his brain and refused to be dismissed. It was his first conscious admission that he was suspicious of Shorty. Noiselessly his hand went out, searching for the bag.

Their fingers met. Both men jerked their hands away and sat up stiffly, cold hostility in their eyes.

"Jest wanted to be sure it was there," Shorty mumbled. "Don't want nothin' to happen to that."

"Nothin' a-goin' to happen to it," Nez assured him.

And now they were no longer friends. In itself, the incident was trifling enough; but it changed everything between them. The bluff camaraderie that had characterized their association was gone. Each was suspicious of the other.

The night dragged on. They had little to say. That little was said without their eyes meeting. A deep restraint had settled on them. Life had suddenly become charged with a terrific tension.

Both were armed. Without any sign that he was aware of it, Nez saw Shorty's hand caressing his forty-five. There wasn't any room for doubt in his mind about Shorty Ducro. He hadn't come up to tonight without assaying Shorty to the last ounce. The man was

a slow thinker, but once he went into action, reckless and fear-proof. He'd fight as long as he could pull a trigger.

"And cagey, too," Nez ruminated. "He won't start anythin' until we're well out of this. He needs me for a day or two yet."

How long he had been staring at the sky without seeing it, Nez couldn't say. The storm had passed. The stars gleamed frostily. He spoke to Shorty.

"Yeah, been clearin' off for an hour," Shorty muttered with a preoccupied air.

Nez got up and foraged for brush. Presently he was back with an armful of dead sage. He judged it was two o'clock. He was anxious for daylight to come. They had flung themselves off a freight above the Moapa Reservation and headed across the mountains for Pahranagat Valley. Since leaving the valley and skirting Mt. Irish, he had tried to hold their course straight into the northwest. He believed they were somewhere south of the Monitors now and within two days' journey of the Toiyabe Basin.

"Better get warmed up," he advised. "We can pull out of here."

The sage blazed up. The heat felt good. Shorty warmed his back.

"This country change any when we git through the mountains?" he asked. His tone was casual, guileless.

"It ain't quite so hostile," Nez answered.

"Towns?"

"None to speak of . . . some old camps. Yellowjacket, Keefer. Easy to keep clear of 'em."

Nez let it go at that. He thought he knew what was running through Shorty's mind. Five minutes later he was sure of it.

"We'll be needin' grub. What about it?"

Nez permitted himself a rare smile. "Have to chaw sagebrush for a day or two. No groceries this side of New Boston. A man don't want to git lost over there."

The warning made Shorty hold his tongue.

They broke camp. By daylight they had covered five miles.

"Right where we ought to be," Nez announced after a careful study of the hills to the north.

Before night overtook them they had made over eighteen miles. The weather was milder. They camped in an arroyo. Shorty gathered fuel as Nez cooked. They were warm and comfortable again. Shorty's taciturnity had vanished. He put his questions adroitly, but they were all in one vein. Nez's answers were purposely vague or misleading. Both men were fencing.

As they smoked after supper, Shorty drew a rough map in the sand at his feet. It was based on the information he had won from Nez.

"Can't miss that," he said as he tossed his stick away. "We'll go easy on the grub tomorrow."

Nez's eyes were inscrutable. But he knew—understood the other perfectly. Tomorrow night they would make their last camp together.

When they stretched out he noticed that Shorty had shifted his holster around so that he could get at it in a hurry. Again the money-bag lay between them.

"Better do my sleepin' tonight," Nez told himself. And yet, he did not doze off until he heard Shorty snore. Through veiled lids he regarded him at length. He could have killed him where he lay. Wisdom whispered that he should do just that; it was in the cards that the bones of one of them would be left to whiten there on the desert.

But he shook his head. He had never shot a man in the back or killed a sleeping enemy.

"No," he mused. "I'll let him make his play—and I'll meet it head on. And I'll come a-smokin'."

Chapter II

ON THE SHELF

BY NOON of the following day they caught their first glimpse of the snow-capped San Antonio range. Shorty grunted his satisfaction.

Both men were watching each other like hawks. One no longer walked ahead to be shot down. They walked abreast, and their eyes were never still.

When the sun dropped behind the mountains they were in the Toiyabe Basin with its sand Arabesques and weird, wind-carved monuments. Shorty dropped his bag to gather brush for the fire, and he backed away, his eyes ever on Nez.

"One can of beans will be enough for both of us tonight," he said, and there was no mistaking his meaning.

Nez, squatting on his heels before the

blaze he was kindling, looked up. His smile was bland.

"Better make it two cans," he said, and his tone gave the lie to the smile that creased his weatherbeaten cheeks. "One of us ain't agoin' to have no appetite tomorrow mornin'."

It was like beating a man to the draw. Shorty could only stare at him. It had come so quickly he could not dissemble his surprise. Here was the showdown. And he was not ready for it; things were too even.

He grinned at last. It wouldn't have fooled a child. "Reckon we'll keep right on bein' hungry long after the grub's all gone," he said. "But shucks, you can only eat grub once. Dish it out if yer vitals is gnawin' at you."

It took him a long time to get it out.

Nez's answer was a non-committal grunt. He had seen men dog it before. And now he had only contempt for Shorty.

"Flattened him," he muttered to himself as the other continued to back away, pretending that nothing was amiss as he gathered an armful of brush, but always managing to keep his face to the fire. Twenty yards . . . thirty yards. Nez left the fire, too. He was too easy a target there.

The moon came up, bright and pitiless, casting grotesque shadows and turning the monuments into turreted battlements and haunted sepulchres. Somewhere a coyote barked. It was the first animal sound they had heard in days.

"Somebody else thinkin' about his supper," Nez mused.

Moving apparently without purpose, but really timing each step, they returned to the fire. Nez had reached a decision. It showed in the set of his jaw. The play had to come now. He didn't intend to wait to be potted in the back.

SHORTY dropped his armful of dead sage. The coffee pot was not on the fire. The saddlebag containing their meager supply of food had not been opened. He raised his eyes to Nez.

"What's the idea?" he grumbled.

Their eyes locked. Shorty couldn't look away. He knew he had been found out. He refused to take it as a calamity, for he, too, had made some decisions. If the odds weren't in his favor, certainly they weren't against him.

"Shorty—you're aimin' to leave me here for coyote bait, ain't yuh?" Nez's tone was singularly free of venom and bluster. He was just making a statement of fact. Shorty stared back stonily.

"Mebbe I am," he said. "Mebbe both of us have got some ideas along that line."

"Yeah?" Nez didn't try to set him right. What was the use at this late last? He knew nothing could change what Shorty was thinking. "Half of this money wouldn't satisfy you, eh?"

Shorty's face was cold, expressionless. "Nor you nor me! We ain't tellin' each other nuthin'. What are we? A pair of old mavericks . . . on the shelf right now, both on us! This time we was lucky. We'll never be lucky ag'in. If we step out, we'll stub our toe. . . . I don't aim to ever have to step out again! I ain't rottin' away in nobody's jail!"

Here was straight talk—grim, unalterable—with the smell of powder at the end of it. Smoked out into the open, Shorty knew how to take it. And he could hand it out, too.

Nez thought a long time over his answer. He was fast with a forty-five. So was Shorty. No advantage there. Nerve might tell.

"Been too much shootin' in my life," he said. "I was hopin' I was done with it."

Shorty's brows went up. It was hardly the warlike answer he had expected. Somehow he felt a little surer of himself as they continued their deadly scrutiny of each other, not a finger moving, every sense alert.

"Still got a long ways to go," Nez suggested. "You might change your mind, Shorty. We got grub enough for three or four days——"

"For one man!" Shorty finished for him. His tone was bullying now. He'd certainly been mistaken about the bandy-legged one, he told himself.

"And the grub goes with the money," Nez summed up. He seemed strangely deliberate. Shorty misunderstood it.

"That's the idea," he grumbled, and his tone was contemptuous. "What are you a-goin' to do?"

"Well, I may be on the shelf—but alive, no man's a-goin' to take my half of that jack away from me! You get

that straight, Shorty! And there ain't no sense waitin' for you to git me when I ain't lookin'. If this thing's gotta come—now's as good a time as any!"

SHORTY refused to believe him. His manner was too disarming, his voice too mild.

"Start somethin'," he dared.

Nez's lips moved wordlessly. "The fool." he thought. "He ought to know I ain't no tinhorn."

They stood like soiled statues, the firelight playing over them, their faces gaunt, hollow eyed. Seconds passed before Nez spoke. He held his tongue deliberately, watching Shorty intently. He saw him stiffen, his lip muscles tenssing nervously.

"Jest keep your shirt on, Shorty; I aim to accommodate you," he drawled. "When I yank this handkerchief offen from my neck, you grab the other end of it and begin to count. When you hit three we'll go for the hardware."

It was not at all what Shorty had expected. He could not repress a start of surprise. A chill wracked him. He had seen men shoot it out across a handkerchief. Usually it meant the Double O for both of them. A snarl parted his lips as he saw Nez whip off his neckerchief with one hand and flick a corner of it at him.

Shorty missed it purposely, his watery eyes beady with trickery. A second time the corner of the handkerchief came his way. He pretended to reach for it—and missed it again. And now his hand flashed down to his gun. But he was too hurried, too eager. It cost him a fraction of a second and the advantage he had hoped to gain.

It seemed to take Shorty a lifetime to get his gun out of the leather. Horror dilated his eyes as he saw Nez's hand come up. It was as though he knew he was too late. Desperate, tossing away his only chance, Shorty fired then. The bullet only kicked up the dust.

Before he could shoot a second time, Nez's gun spurted flame. Calm, nerveless, his bullet found its mark.

It was all over. A tired sigh escaped Shorty. The next moment he went down on his face, pawing the ground, a slug between his eyes.

"Poor fool," Nez murmured without bitterness as he stared at him. He broke his gun and blew the smoke from the barrel, and after reloading the empty chamber, bent down and turned Shorty over. He was dead.

"You'd have had a better chance if you'd shot it out with me toe to toe," he said as he pulled Shorty's boots off.

There was nothing else he could do for him. He went back to the fire then and built it up. The night was still, only the faintest of breezes stirring. To any but a desert man it was a stillness that would have been oppressive.

Nez knew he had been lucky again. Shorty had overplayed his hand . . . that was all. He stared moodily into the fire. The thirty thousand was all his now. He couldn't comprehend that fully just yet. It didn't alter his plans; he would go on, heading for Jericho and Paradise as he had always figured to do.

A jack-rabbit hopped out of the sage. It brought him up standing. He shook his head sheepishly as he saw the jack.

"Hunh, even a rabbit scares me tonight," he muttered. It was indicative of the letdown in him. He was tired, weary. Half an hour passed as he communed with himself. There was time enough for him to decide what he must do. He would bury Shorty, after destroying any marks of identification. He knew the desert had a little way of giving up its secrets. He didn't propose to have Shorty's ghost ever help the law to catch up with him.

A hundred yards from the fire he found a pocket among the crumbling granite monuments. He deposited the body there and covered it with stones to keep off the coyotes. That attended to, he filled the coffee pot with snow and cooked his simple supper.

He was hungry. After he ate, he packed the grub-bag and slung it over his shoulder. The money-bag went over the other shoulder. As a last precaution, he kicked the fire out. He was ready to go. He pulled his hat down and headed for the north.

It was after midnight when he stopped. He was among the piñon pines, far up the rocky slope of the San Antonios.

CHAPTER III

THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

PERCHED precariously on whatever offered in the way of a seat, half a dozen men were sunning themselves in front of the Overland

Club. "Club" was only an unlovely alibi for the establishment. In reality, it was still the old Overland Saloon—as all interested parties knew—an institution of forty years' standing in Jericho.

Snow lingered on the hills, but something intangible in the air said that spring was not far away. To a man, the members of that little sidewalk *junta* were buckaroos or stock-hands, some of ancient vintage. Their talk ran to the weather. Pockets were empty; spring meant work and getting back into the hills.

From where they sat they could command a view of the main street—Steve Jeanette's saddlery shop across the way, a multiplicity of "clubs" and the usual stores and unpromising-looking hotels of a busted cowtown. The price of beef was down, and so was Jericho. But for the Basque *gente* and their sheep, everyone would have been in the red, even the venerable Overland.

The morning train for the East paused momentarily on its flight toward Salt Lake. A traveling salesman and one of the Japs who ran the local laundry alighted. They walked briskly down the main street—the town sprawled out between the railroad and the river—and passed the little group of choice spirits lounging in front of the saloon.

A traveling man and Ben Ito hardly rated their attention. But almost at the same moment there emerged from the Star Hotel on the corner—it was really just a Basque rooming-house, shy on modern conveniences but cleaner than the average place of its kind—a little, bandy-legged man who sniffed the air with gusto. He aroused their curiosity, for with the keen intuition of their kind, they sensed that he was one of them.

It was Nez, of course. He had arrived in Jericho during the night and was venturing forth for the first time now. It was ten o'clock—a fashionable hour for cowpunchers out of work—and his tough old heart swelled as he caught sight of the bunch in front of the Overland. He had often squatted there himself.

He had seen enough before tumbling into bed to put a puzzled frown between his eyes. Jericho certainly had changed in the years he had been away. The hitch-racks were gone. Automobiles lined the street instead of horses. There was even a movie palace.

By day, the change was still greater. With a snort of disgust, he had deciphered the sign on the store next the hotel: BON TON BEAUTY PARLOUR! It proved to what low estate Jericho had fallen in his eyes.

New people—improvements! It was a blow to him. With sinking heart he had stepped out of the hotel, almost ready to admit he had made a mistake in coming back.

HIS shoulders went back now and he quickened his step as he headed for the Overland; in that crowd he'd find somebody he knew—Steve Jeanette, Johnnie Deems, Buff Yerkes—they couldn't all be dead.

For his home-coming he had not donned new raiment of any sort. His old clothes were priceless, because in them he had sewn the fortune that was to enable him to end his days in comfort. He knew no man could say from whence he had come, for he had avoided Austin and the Reese River ranches. Unnoticed, he had slipped into Battle Mountain and caught a freight for Jericho. He could walk with tomorrow now; his yesterdays were buried forever.

He was still some yards away when a shirt-sleeved man stepped out of the Overland and started across the street. He flashed a glance at Nez. His mouth fell open with surprise. He took a second look, and it stopped him in his tracks. He was a big man, unshaven and packing so much fat that it was hard to believe he had once had a reputation for forking broncs. He shifted his cud of tobacco with a flick of his perplexed tongue.

"Daggone, it's him, sure as shootin'!" he muttered incredulously. "Look at them laigs! Ain't another pair like 'em this side o' hell!"

His hair was pulling a bit; this was his fourth trip across the street already this morning. Eyes twinkling, he waited for Nez to approach.

"Why, you ornery old chuckawalla!" he boomed then. "Nez Smith, or I'm a liar! Rise up on them barrel staves and let's have a look at yuh!"

"Hunh?" The voice was familiar, but not that bloated body. Like a bantam rooster, Nez threw his head back and looked the big man over. Then he saw it was Steve Jeanette. And there was no one else he wanted to see quite so much.

"Well, Steve, it's me, all right!" he grinned. They pumped hands. Steve couldn't get over his surprise.

"Daggone it!" he exclaimed over and over. "Think of it! Here yuh are, crowin' just as loud as ever! We all figured you was daid. Reckon it's just a case of the Lord don't want yuh and the devil won't have yuh."

The crowd joined in the laugh. Steve called a man over from across the street.

"Know this fellow?" he asked Nez.

It was Buff Yerkes, tall and lean as ever. That made it perfect. Steve and Buff, his old cronies! Nez was the eldest. Ten years makes a whale of a difference at sixty-five; at forty it isn't so important.

Of course they had to celebrate with a drink. Nez wanted to call the crowd in, but it was not his intention to let Jericho know he was flush. That would invite questions.

"Well, where you been spreadin' your loop all this time?" Buff asked.

"Oh, Californy and Mexico," Nez informed him. He had forseen the question. Geographically, California and old Mexico were far removed from the scenes of his recent activities.

After the third round of drinks they repaired to Steve's shop. It was a carelessly kept place, slovenly-looking and down at the heel. It reflected Steve perfectly. Both gave evidence of going to pot, principally because of those countless trips across the street.

An assortment of cinches, a bridle, ornate with silver conchas, and a collection of ore samples from the Wild Horse mine decorated the window. As a matter of fact, the title of saddlery shop was a polite fiction. Steve had neither built nor repaired a saddle in years. He was really the town cobbler. It kept body and soul together and paid for his liquor.

STEVE laughed over it. Nez chuckled, too; politeness demanded that. Secretly, it rubbed a little more of the gloss off the picture he had been carrying around in his mind for a dozen years. It also made him unhappily conscious of the change in himself. And yet, in the flow of conversation that followed, he forgot to be gloomy. He was a plausible old liar, and in answer to their questions had a dozen of his own to ask.

As they sat in the rear of the shop, business forgotten, the door opened and a man with a square-cut jaw barged in. His clothes were baggy and nondescript, but there was something as formidable and relentless as a battleship about him. He was old, but his face was unlined. Twinkling eyes peeped out from under shaggy brows—eyes that had a trick of going hard without warning. It was Charlie Lamb, the sheriff of Shoshone County.

"Well, where is the little runt?" he demanded.

Nez had his back to him, but he would have known that voice anywhere. Lamb had been sheriff for over twenty years. As a young man he had ridden for the Bliss Brothers at their Kelly Creek ranch, along with Nez and Steve.

Nez told himself he had nothing to fear from him. And yet, he couldn't be sure. If a description of him had ever been sent out, he knew Charlie would have it. He felt his throat tighten.

"But shucks," he resolved hurriedly, "I intended lookin' him up. He ain't got nothin' on me."

A glance confirmed it; Lamb's eyes were dancing.

"Well, there he is, the same little runt!" the sheriff exclaimed. His voice was singularly mild for a strong man of his mold. "What do you mean, not dropping around to see me? Where you been keeping yourself?"

Nez felt a warm glow steal through his veins as they shook hands. Everything was working out as he had foreseen. The law could never trip him now.

Through Lamb, he got word of a one-room cabin that suited his purpose. There he established himself and proceeded to cache the money he carried. News of his return was soon around town. Turin Robbins, the banker, shook his head over it. He was also one of the county commissioners. "Too old to work, so he comes back here, eh?" he grumbled. "Chances are he'll be living on the county before summer's over."

NEZ only smiled when the remark was repeated to him. In the course of a week he became a fixture in Jericho again, dividing his time between a comfortable chair outside the tiny jail, swapping yarns with

Charlie Lamb, and an old bench in the rear of Steve Jeanette's shop, where he always found a group of congenial spirits. If, by chance, Steve was temporarily laid low in his incessant battle with the particular kind of liquid refreshment dispensed across the street, Nez ran the place.

It was a convenient arrangement, and one which Steve took advantage of. Nez did not remonstrate with him. Wise in his way, he knew it was too late to argue. But although he refused to admit it, even to himself, Steve was a disappointment to him.

One morning a warm Chinook wind started to blow. The snow went off the hills as though by magic. Overnight the sage turned green. The air was tonic; the skies blue and sparkling. It was spring with a vengeance.

Nez felt it. He wanted to get into the hills. Buff Yerkes caught on with the Diamond S and pulled out of town. Steve put his tools aside; he couldn't work.

"I'd be better off if I let the bank have the place and went back to buckarooin'," he grumbled. "Ain't no money in this business."

It was just the spring fever talking. Nez understood. Nothing came of it. Steve didn't have to ride the range to find escape. Two days later, he was in bed, dead to the world, when Turin Robbins walked briskly into the shop. He was a nervous little man with a pinched look in his eyes.

Nez was alone.

"Where's Jeanette?" Turin demanded bruskly. He was there in his official capacity as Steve's banker.

"Steve ain't feelin' so good," Nez informed him. To himself he added, "Wonder what this little whippersnapper wants of him."

"Drunk, you mean," Turin snapped.

"He's liquored some," Nez had to admit. Steve's drinking wasn't any secret.

"Well, drunk or sober I want to talk to him!"

The man's tone rubbed Nez the wrong way. "Reckon you'll have to wait," he got out pointedly. "Steve wouldn't know whether you was makin' him president or callin' him a hoss thief right now. . . . What's on your mind?"

Turin stamped up and down the space in front of the counter, wagging his head angrily.

"You tell him this for me," he burst out; "I want my money! I've got his note for five hundred dollars. It was due last week. If he doesn't take it up tomorrow, I'm going to court. You tell him that!"

Nez drew down the corners of his mouth. "Pretty sudden, ain't it?" he demanded reprovingly.

"Sudden nothing!" Turin flared back. "I'm sick of doing business this way. Now he can pay up or get out!"

He banged the door after him when he left.

"The old skinflint!" Nez sneered. "I bet he'd steal milk from a calf."

Chapter IV

EASY MONEY

NEZ shuffled back to the rear of the store. He was glad there were no customers. He had to think things out.

"I seem to git only one answer to this," he sighed wearily an hour later.

It was up to him; Steve didn't have any money. But that was not his problem. The five hundred meant little enough, either as a gift or a loan. But giving it to Steve would be equivalent to announcing to the world that he had money. It was fraught with danger to himself. Caution warned against it. Curiosity—suspicion: they often trod on each other's toes.

"But I can't let 'em turn Steve out on the street," he told himself, even though it meant flying in the face of all his secrecy and carefully conceived plans. Years ago, beyond Haystack Peak, Steve had saved him from being gored to death by an infuriated bull. He had never forgotten it. Truly, it was up to him to come through now.

He sat up the greater part of the night trying to find a way out. By morning, he had decided to chance it. He secured the money from under the floor and went down to the shop. Steve was snoring with foghorn violence. After thumping him for five minutes and getting no response, Nez realized that he himself would have to go to the bank.

A few minutes after nine, he repaired there. Turin had his desk in a railed-off space just inside the doors. He nodded to Nez with scant respect and busied himself with some papers.

Ten minutes passed. It was the first time in years that Nez had been in a

bank in such an innocent rôle. Unconsciously he began to size the place up as he waited.

"You waiting to see somebody?" Turin condescended to ask finally.

It didn't fool Nez a bit. He turned his eyes on him, and Turin began to fidget under his gaze.

"I'm waitin' to see you, if you're somebody," said Nez. It was uttered with a smile, but Turin squirmed.

"What can I do for you?" he asked daily.

"That little business with Steve—I'm here to take care of it."

Turin wasn't actor enough to dissemble his surprise. "You—er—mean you've got the money?"

"Yeah, we got it," Nez nodded.

"Well!" Turin melted to ingratiating good-will. "Come in and have a chair."

Nez produced a roll of bills.

"Well!" Turin exclaimed, unable to believe his eyes. "I didn't think Steve had five hundred dollars. . . . Where did he get it?"

"I'm loanin' it to him."

"Oh, I see—I see." With his fingers he drummed a surprised tattoo on his desk. Nez Smith with five hundred dollars was a little breath-taking. "I—didn't know you'd come back well fixed. You taking over the business?"

Nez looked through him.

"No, just helpin' Steve out."

"Oh. . . ." Turin invested the exclamation with eloquent disapproval. "Steve's drinking pretty hard——"

"His business, I reckon," Nez drawled with unpleasant finality.

"Sure—sure!" Turin separated the ten and twenty-dollar bank notes into neat little piles. "If you've got a little money, Nez, why not open an account here? We'd like to have your name on the books."

"Won't take any bank to hold what I got left," said Nez. The subject did not appeal to him.

"Maybe you are too modest." Turin gave him a patronizing smile. "We're here to serve, you know."

HE HAD the cashier bring Steve's note to his desk. As they waited, a pasty-faced little man, a jet black moustache of amazing proportions draped across his cheeks, entered the bank. Obviously he was not native to Nevada. His round, fish eyes blinked nervously through heavy, window-plate glasses.

Turin was expecting him. He arose and shook hands. "Be with you in just a minute, Mose. Everything all right?"

"Yah, fine!"

The cashier brought the note over. Turin glanced at it perfunctorily. With interest at eight percent it amounted to five hundred and forty dollars. But when Turin spoke, it was not about the note. His manner was suddenly confidential.

"I—suppose you're looking for a job, Nez," he said.

A job was the last thing on Nez's mind, but without having any visible means of support, he could hardly afford to say so. Therefore, his answer was purposely vague. "A man's got to live," he declared. "Somethin' will turn up."

"Exactly." The stranger had wandered over to the window. Turin drummed on his desk again. "You've heard of Sam Weinstine who runs the slaughterhouse over in Elko, haven't you?"

Nez nodded. He didn't get Turin's drift at all. The banker indicated the man at the window with a jerk of his head.

"Mose Weinstine, Sam's brother," he explained. "You may be just the man he's looking for—if you want to make a little easy money."

"Yeah? How come?"

Turin hitched his chair closer. "Well," he purred, "I've got to let you in on a little secret, Nez."

Nez cocked his eyebrows sceptically. "You ain't aimin' to lift my watch or nothin', be yuh?"

"Don't be facetious," the great man frowned. "Things are pretty quiet around town; but you know my faith in Jericho; she'll come back if we'll all put our shoulder to the wheel. Personally, I always try to do my part. It isn't known around town yet, but I've leased the old cyaniding plant out on the Paradise road to Mr. Weinstine."

Nez was familiar with the place. An Englishman had built it back in the days when old National and the mines north of Jericho were producing. For years it had stood idle, suffering from the vandalism of the town boys.

"Well," Nez declared incredulously, "you ought to pat yourself on the back if he's payin' you money for that lay-

out. . . . What's he aimin' to do with it?"

"That's the secret. . . . Here, I'll call Mose over and you can talk to him."

Mose would have shaken hands, but Nez gave him no encouragement.

"I was just telling Nez, here, that maybe he's the very man you're looking for," Turin explained. "He's an old-time buckaroo, and he understands horses."

"What's horses got to do with that layout?" Nez demanded bluntly.

"I'm going to run it as a horse-plant," Mose informed him.

STILL Nez did not understand. "What do you mean, a horse-plant?"

"Vell, there must be ten t'ousand vild horses out on the Owyhee. Nobody vants them. They're in the vay—eating up range that cattle could use. I'm going to round them up and drive them in here. I can sell them chicken-ranchers down in California all the meat I can grind up."

Nez glared at him belligerently, his old eyes fairly snapping.

"Let me git you right," he whipped out. "You're a-goin' to round up that wild bunch and butcher 'em for chicken-feed, eh?"

"Yah! T'ink of the profit! All the py-products—the oils, the hides, the glue!"

"I'm thinkin' of 'em," Nez muttered fiercely. "What in hell is this country comin' to? A few broom-tails, botherin' no man, and you're a-goin' to round 'em up and make chicken-feed outa them! That's too much for me!"

He had raised his voice so that everyone in the bank was staring at him.

"I didn't think you'd feel that way about it," Turin hastened to say. "You know those horses are worthless, Nez. Why, a good horse isn't worth his salt today. That wild bunch has been drinking alkali water so long you can't keep a shoe on their hoofs."

"But they're horses, ain't they? They grew up with the country and helped to make it what it is. Now a man comes along and proposes to wipe 'em out because he can make a few ornery dollars! . . . Hell's fire! Do you think you can pull that game here and get away with it, Turin?"

The banker started to frown Nez down but thought better of it. "It's a straight business proposition," he said. "It ought to be very profitable. Just what do you mean by saying get away with it?"

"Well, I turned my old cowpony loose when I left here. I knew he'd find his way back to the wild ones. I reckon I'd make it pretty damned unpleasant for the man that tried to grind him up. There's a lot of us would feel the same way."

"That's just misplaced sentiment, Nez. Cattle need the range——"

"Absolutesel!" Mose agreed. Nez snorted his disgust.

"Cattle my eye! I knew this country when there really was cattle here. They ain't a handful now to what they was. It's the Basko sheepmen who're ruinin' the range, not the broomtails!"

He glared hostilely at Weinstine. Mose was satisfied to only shrug his shoulders eloquently to show his disgust, although as a rule he was a loquacious person. Nez's attitude was not a surprise, his brother had encountered the same sentiment in Elko.

"I wouldn't hand out anythin' like that to a coyote, let alone a horse," Nez went on. He turned to Turin Robbins. "Just where did you figure I'd fit into a game like that?"

Turin pursed his thin lips deprecatingly. "Don't misunderstand me," he declared. "Mose needs a little capital. As a banker, I can see an excellent profit in what he proposes doing. I thought if you had a little money to invest—well, you couldn't lose, and you'd have a job at the same time. But let's forget it. If you'll excuse us, Mose, Nez and I will finish our business."

HE REACHED for the money Nez had paid him. It lay before him on the desk in the two piles into which he had sorted it. He picked up the sheaf of twenty-dollar bills and was about to snap a rubber band about them when he stiffened like a pointer picking up a fresh scent.

"Well——"

Nez felt his heart miss a beat as he saw him pick up the bill that lay on top and scrutinize it with growing interest. "Somethin' wrong with it?" he demanded desperately, his recent indignation forgotten.

Turin balanced back and forth in his swivel chair. "Strange," he murmured importantly. "The Drovers National Bank of Las Animas Utah——" He was reading the legend engraved on the banknote.

Nez's blood ran cold.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his breath short.

"This bill—issued by a little bank over in Utah." He turned it over in his hand and then passed it to Nez for his inspection.

Nez stared at it for a long while. His eyes were stony. Silver certificates, gold notes, paper money of any kind, had been just paper money to him.

It was like stepping over a precipice. Turin was staring at him, his gimlet eyes sharp and piercing. Nez knew he had to say something, cover up if he could. "Ain't it no good?" he got out, jerkily.

"It's good enough," Turin grinned. "Where did you get it, Nez?"

Nez didn't hesitate over his answer. "Down in Tia Juana—where I got the rest of it. Had a little luck with the dice about three months ago." He made it sound plausible. "What's the idea?"

Turin reached into his desk and pulled out a circular sent him by the Bankers Association. He glanced over it hurriedly. "I knew I was right," he said. "That bank was stuck up about five weeks ago. Got a report on it here."

"Yeah?" It was acting of a high order. Without batting an eyelash, Nez watched Turin run through the rest of the bills. He knew he was in a jam if Turin found others from Las Animas—and he well might, for they had been picked up at random. He smothered a sigh of relief as the banker pushed the money away.

"Seems to be the only one," said Turin.

"Yeah—seems so," Nez echoed.

"Usually, you know, a bank is able to send out the serial numbers in a case like this," Turin explained. "All they caught were the numbers on the big bills."

"Is that so?" Nez scratched his chin reflectively. "I'm mighty glad this bill's a small one."

Turin gave him a chilly smile.

"Yes," he nodded weightily. "Might have been embarrassing."

Chapter V

IN THE CLEAR

NEZ found himself on the street presently. His step was uncertain as he walked back to the shop, wondering if Turin were watching him from the bank window. His head felt as big as though he'd been on a three-day binge.

"Missin' a trick like that!" he groaned. He cursed himself for a fool. "I'll never come closer to givin' myself away."

He couldn't be sure, even now, that the incident was closed.

"If that human fish is at all suspicious, it ain't closed," he ruminated bitterly. His aversion to Turin Robbins, a matter of long standing, had increased ten-fold in the last hour. "Butcherin' horses is about his gait at that, I guess."

His old feeling of security was gone. He saw Charlie Lamb across the street. The sheriff glanced in his direction, but Nez pretended not to see him.

"I was a fool to think I was in the clear," he thought. "I been sittin' on a keg of dynamite and didn't have sense enough to know it."

Almost in a panic he reached the shop. Steve had not stirred. But for coming to his rescue, Nez might well have gone on indefinitely, confident that no man could put his finger on him.

"Reckon I ought to thank Steve," he grumbled to himself. "Gosh knows I ain't a-goin' to blame him, 'cause I'd sure have tripped myself sooner or later with them bills."

He was anxious to get back to his cabin. Only the fear that the bank might have some one watching him kept him from returning home at once.

He thought, "Turin might think it queer to see me headin' for the cabin, knowing Steve is laid up and no one to run the shop."

Normally he had the reserve and patience of an Indian. But as the day wore on with aggravating slowness, he could hardly contain himself. He wanted to go over the money. He'd destroy every incriminating Las Animas bill, no matter what they totaled.

The sheriff dropped in for a word with him about noon. It seemed that it was already known around town that Nez had paid Steve's indebtedness to the bank. The bandy-legged one held his tongue, but he was annoyed.

"Mighty white of you to come through like that for him," said Lamb. "I hope you can afford it, Nez."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. You'll hardly get it back. I figure you took quite a chance."

"I'll say I did," Nez laughed. They were not thinking of the same thing. "But bein' a millionaire, with all my yachts and diamonds, I won't miss it."

BY LATE afternoon he had Steve sober enough to turn the shop over to him.

"Gee, I must 'a' got stinkin' this time," Steve groaned. "I gotta get off that red-eye."

"Mebbe you had. You been hittin' it pretty hard, Steve."

The cancelled note was in the cash-drawer. Nez said nothing about it.

It was a sharp ten-minute walk to his cabin. Despite his exaggerated desire to be cautious, he found himself swinging along as though he were hurrying to a fire before he was half-way home. In sight of the place, he tortured himself with the thought that maybe someone had broken in during his absence and discovered the money.

He found the cabin locked as he had left it. He let himself in and barred the door. In a very frenzy of anxiety he tore up a floor-board and unearthed the stolen money. On hands and knees he spread it out on the floor.

Perspiration began to bead his forehead. . . . One note after another had been issued by the Las Animas bank.

"Over five thousand dollars," he sighed. He put the bills into a pile by themselves and replaced the balance in its hiding place.

He picked up the money he had left out. His fingers were icy. "Five thousand dollars," he repeated. "And I got to burn it up!"

The fresh, crinkly notes seemed to fascinate him. He stared at them for minutes without moving. At last, without a word, he got up and trudged over to the stove.

"Some bonfire," he groaned as he watched the bills burn. The flames licked them up greedily. Nez shook his head. He was back in Las Animas—riding away from the bank—down on the Amargosa Desert, Shorty trudging along by his side. . . .

He closed his eyes; those memories, so poignant with danger and tragedy, had been burned into his soul. He was still standing there, stove-lid in his hand, when someone rapped sharply on the door.

Unconsciously he fell back a step, eyes widening with alarm. His gun was under the blankets. On tiptoe he got it and trust it into his shirt where he could go for it in a hurry.

"If they're after me they'll never take me out of here alive," he promised himself.

He started for the door, then paused to make sure that the cabin was in order. Everything looked all right—the floor-board in place, the tea-kettle singing on the stove.

With remarkable agility he threw the bolt and leaped back into the center of the room.

"Come in!" he called.

The door opened slowly and Mose Weinstine stood there, blinking his eyes owlishly. Had he been entering a den of lions he could not have stepped in more cautiously.

"Well, what do you want?" Nez screeched at him. He had hardly expected to find Mose Weinstine there. He would have been less surprised had the sheriff walked in.

HIS manner was so fierce and unfriendly that Mose actually trembled, apparently half afraid that Nez was going to throw him out. "Pleece—I haf come down to haf little talk vid you," he whined.

Nez's first thought was that Turin had sent him there to snoop around. The next instant he wondered if the man was what he pretended to be and not a detective.

"Mebbe all this talk about my openin' an account at the bank and investin' in this horse business is just a plant to thaw me out and make me admit I got some jack," he thought. The next moment he dismissed the idea. "That twenty-dollar bill is all Turin's got on me. No sense gettin' panicky." He addressed himself to Mose. "So you want to talk to me, eh? What about?"

Mose sat down gingerly. He had caught a glimpse of the butt of the forty-five peeping out of Nez's shirt-front.

"Mr. Robbins esk me to come down," he said.

"Oh—Mr. Robbins, eh?"

"Yah. I make a deal vith him for the

money I need, and he vants you to change your mind about going to vork for us."

"Oh, he does, eh?" Nez queried suspiciously. "Why's he so anxious about me?"

"Vell, he t'inks maybe you're right; maybe there vill be some feeling against us——"

"And he wants me to drag the chestnuts out of the fire, eh?" His voice dripped contempt. "Figures folks wouldn't think it was so rotten if I was mixed up in it. Well, you tell him to go to hell! And if that's all you came here for—git out!"

"Vy talk like that?" Mose spread his hands pleadingly. "A job's a job, ain't it?" The vork is easy—and ve pay you a hundert and fifty dollars a month. That's goot money! How can you turn it down?"

Nez smothered a curse. The man got on his nerves. He was as oily and unsavory as his business.

"You know, ve can get plenty men for that money," Mose went on. "I vouldn't pay it myself; but Mr. Robbins——"

"Come on, git a-goin'!" Nez interrupted. "It's all I can do to keep from slammin' you now. Don't say any more!"

Mose threw up his hands in despair.

"All right, I go!" he exclaimed. "But remember this—it vouldn't hurt you any to do a favor for Mr. Robbins. He's a big man——"

"He's a big——" Nez checked his hot tongue. "Wait a minute," he ended weakly. "Let me think this over."

"Sure, take your time——"

Nez walked over to the open door and stared across the flats towards Paradise. It was a witching hour. Purple shadows danced across the sage. The rimrocks of the distant Santa Rosas were all red and gold.

IN HIS abstraction, Nez failed to notice. In his mind there was room for only one thought—how could he afford to antagonize Turin Robbins? If Turin took it into his head to communicate with the Las Animas bank, there would be an investigation, no matter what he said.

"And I can't stand investigation," Nez thought. "I was seen in Las Animas. The cashier would recognize me."

Mose was certainly right—it wouldn't hurt him to do Turin a favor. A hundred and fifty a month was mighty good wages. Turning it down would be enough to excite suspicion in itself.

Slaughtering horses—the thought made his blood boil. He had done much that was outside the law, but he had never been mean nor small. This was all of that and worse. In his time he had seen the barbed wire hit the country.

"I grew up with the grandpaps of them broomtails," he reminded himself. To make war on them was like turning on old friends, plunging a knife into them when they weren't expecting it. But it might mean his safety—his freedom.

There was a faraway look in his eyes. He knew what his decision would be—what it must be—and his lips curled into a snarl of contempt for himself.

"Bein' a worthless skunk, I'll try to save my own hide," he mused bitterly. "I'll take the job, and I'll pretend to like it."

"Goot!" Mose exclaimed when he heard his decision. "You start to work on Monday. Got to build some corrals and get ready for the machinery. But ve talk that over in the morning. There'll be plenty to do. I'll get some Mexicans to help you. In ten days I expect my first bunch of horses. My brother's got some fellas out now for me."

"All right, I'll see you in the mornin'."

They parted without any formal farewell. Mose shuffled back to town, a hunched-over, hooked-nose shadow in the deepening twilight. Nez stared after him until he was out of sight. He slumped down on his door-step then, his head in his hands. All his scheming and dreaming had come to naught.

"I never should have come back," he muttered unhappily. "Things ain't like they was. They're a-changin' all the time, I reckon, and when a man gits so he can't change with 'em, he's lived too long."

It was night before he arose and went inside. The fire had gone out. He rekindled it. It had a friendly glow, but it failed to warm his heart. He had sold out his heritage, and for the first time in his life he knew what it was to feel shame.

"I'm in the clear now." he thought, "but that ain't all I am. I'm an ornery, snake-eatin' hound."

CHAPTER VI

RENEGADE!

NEZ said nothing about the plant or his connection with it. He knew the news would get around soon enough without any help from him. It broke even sooner than he expected. Turin called in Warren Spitzer, the publisher of the Jericho *Gazette*. Warren obliged with a front-page spread and headlines.

CYANIDING PLANT LEASED TO ELKO MAN
JERICHO TO HAVE NEW INDUSTRY

"Turin Robbins shows his faith in Jericho again," the article said. After giving him the usual puff, the facts as they pertained to the future activity of the old plant were given. Further, Nez Smith had been engaged as superintendent.

Nez crumpled the paper into a ball and rammed it into the stove. He was in the shop. Steve was across the way again.

"I never thought I'd back water for any man like that," Nez muttered fiercely. "Goin' to the pen can't be much worse than this."

The usual crowd was lounging about the Overland. They were just getting the news. Through the dust-laden window he could see them. It was not difficult for him to surmise what they were saying. Snowy Williams was reading the article aloud for those who had forgotten their specs or were unable to read.

Nez caught the hostile glances they levelled at the shop. They knew he was inside.

"I'll be lucky if they don't put the tar brush on me," he mused gloomily.

As he watched, Steve came out. Evidently the news had been digested within. He was bristling with indignation. Someone called to him, but he refused to let anything stay him as he stalked toward his shop, his beefy jaws clamped together forbiddingly.

"Sore as a boil," Nez muttered.

The next moment Steve opened the door violently. It shook the whole building.

"Nez!" he boomed. "You gotta get a lawyer right off!"

It fooled Nez. "Hunh?" he gasped. "What do I need of a lawyer?"

"The *Gazette!*" Steve looked around for the newspaper and failed to find it. "You got a suit ag'in 'em, I'm tellin' yuh!"

"Oh——" Nez subsided weakly.

"Where is the *Gazette?*"

"I—stuck it in the stove."

HIS complacency made Steve draw back, a baffled look in his eyes.

"Then you've read the paper, eh?"

"I read it, all right——"

"And what you got to say for yourself?" Steve swallowed hard. "It ain't true, is it?"

"Well, I didn't know I was to be called the superintendent; but I've hired out to 'em, if that's what you mean."

Steve could not speak for a moment; his heart was bad. He fell into a chair, gasping for breath.

"I can't believe it," he groaned. "When Fales told me, I called him a liar; I couldn't believe it about yuh, Nez. I—I can't believe it now."

Nez's mouth was grim as he looked away. "I ain't got nothin' to say. I'm just lookin' out for myself."

Steve could only stare at him aghast.

"I'll say you are," he sneered, and he put into it all the contempt he felt for him. "It can't be the money that's in it that got yuh."

"No——?"

"No! If you needed money that bad you didn't have to come through for me! What the hell! Let Turin Robbins have this dump. I don't want no man to bust himself so flat for me that he's got to turn rat twenty-four hours later in order to get by."

It blanched Nez's leathery cheeks. Only the fact that the charge was true kept him from giving voice to the explosion rumbling in his brain. He got up and walked to the door. They were watching across the street. He came back to the bench, a hounded look in his eyes. It was idle to accuse Steve of being ungrateful. Steve was grateful enough; Nez knew that.

He thought, "He's only sayin' what I'd be sayin' if the tables was turned."

Steve floundered to his feet and glared at him. "I'm only the town drunk, but you shamed me! Ain't you got nothin' to say? . . . No excuse er anythin'?"

It shook Nez, but he realized there could be no compromise; he had asked for cards, and he had to play them now.

"Better let it go at that, Steve," he rasped. "Don't crack the whip too hard. I'm responsible for what I do—not you! You get that straight! You been bearin' down purty hard——"

"You don't have to like it!" Steve's tone was threatening.

"Mebbe I do. . . . We been friends a long time. You saved my life——"

"And what a mistake that was!" Steve began to curse incoherently, whipping himself into a towering rage. "You of all men!" he bellowed. "You damn well know it's the Weinstines and the Turin Robbinses who made a shoemaker out of me and farm hands out of the rest of yuh! What do they care for the country, for you or me? Not a damned thing! Rip out a dollar or two in a hurry, that's all they're after! And you got to help 'em along."

NEZ couldn't have expressed it better. It echoed his own feelings perfectly. He tried to find something to say and failed miserably.

"You can git out of here now—and don't come back!" Steve roared. "Just git goin'!"

Nez's head went back as though he had been struck across the face.

"You—mean that, Steve?" he asked hoarsely. He suddenly felt helpless and alone.

"You heard me! Pull your freight!"

It was a moment before Nez could move.

"All right," he murmured. His throat was so tight it strangled his words. "I—won't bother you no more."

He had lived a reckless life. He had looked death in the eye a number of times without flinching. Danger had never found him running away. But this thing crushed him. Alone, old, useless, it was all he could do to reach the door.

The crowd across the street spotted him instantly. Every eye was trained on him, and there was only hatred and contempt in their stare. His first impulse was to slink away and pretend to ignore them.

"No," he declared, "I won't do that. Whatever I am, I ain't no coward."

Some of his old fighting spirit came back to him. He squared his shoulders resolutely. No matter what it cost, he had to show them he didn't give a damn for what they thought. He gave his frayed Stetson a tug that brought it down low over his eyes and marched boldly across the street.

They saw him coming. It failed to stampede them, but the low murmur of their voices fell away and a chilling silence descended.

Nez reached the opposite sidewalk. Snowy Williams lounged in the doorway of the Overland.

"Step aside and let the superintendent in," someone called out mockingly.

Snowy did not budge an inch. Nez came up to him. They glared at each other, toe to toe. Something changed Snowy's mind of a sudden—some subtle warning of danger in those faded blue eyes—and he stepped aside.

Clint Fales was behind the bar. Nez flopped a silver dollar on the polished mahogany, but Clint pretended not to see him. Others were present, their talk stilled.

Nez waited half a minute.

"It's been a long time since a bartender had his innards ventilated in this town," he said then. "In fact, it's been almost too long."

Clint understood him. So did the others. A bottle of rye and a chaser of water were forthcoming. Nez poured his drink and dashed it off noisily.

He looked them all over as he picked up his change. Nobody had anything to say. His hand flashed to his hip pocket. He was only reaching for his handkerchief, but Clint ducked down behind the bar.

"Guts," Nez sneered as he started for the door, "is something that went out of style in this town a long time ago."

A steely glitter in his eyes, he swaggered down the street, looking neither to right nor left.

"And I was to sway to public opinion." The thought won a rueful chuckle from him. "I sure made a hell of a start."

At the corner, Turin Robbins came out of the bank.

"Well, Nez," he called out cordially, "just in time! I'll drive you home. Suppose you saw the *Gazette*. Gave us a nice send-off."

"Yeah, fine——"

"I thought you'd appreciate the title of superintendent. Sounds good."

"Yeah, fine." Nez wanted to slam him on the jaw. Turin opened the car door.

"Get in," he urged.

Nez shook his head. No, I'll walk," he said. "Got to git hardened up a little."

Chapter VII

THE BROOMTAILS

WITH half a dozen Mexicans and big Johnny Pine, the Piute, Nez rebuilt the corrals and got ready for the arrival of the first bunch of horses. The machinery was set up in a day or two. Mose had drawn reinforcements from his brother's establishment, practical men to whom canned horse was no novelty.

Turin came out repeatedly, rubbing his hands like a money-lender as he saw with what dispatch things were going forward. He knew the feeling around the Overland, but he dismissed it lightly; he wasn't interested in what a few floaters thought. Work being so slack, chances were they'd be around looking for a job before summer was over. With a few exceptions the rest of the town seemed to have no feeling in the matter. It was very convenient to be able to say that Nez Smith, an old-time buckaroo was superintending things. It argued against cruelty or that there was anything reprehensible about the business.

It cost nothing to slap Nez on the back and tell him how pleased he was. Nez accepted his praise without comment, hating himself more and more as the days passed.

A new pipeline was laid to the river. That completed, they were ready for business, and none too soon, for late Sunday morning the first *caballada* arrived, stallions, mares—some with colts—and colts who had lost their mothers. They were a ragged-looking bunch, still wearing their winter coats, and, as usual with broomtails, due to inbreeding, undersized, their heads often grotesquely large for their bodies.

The men who brought them in—all strangers to Nez—had kept them moving without let up, but they were still wild as hawks. It took over an hour to put them in the corrals. Once inside, they did their best to escape, kicking the gate to pieces. Hazed away from it, they stood stiff-legged, eyes rolling and snorted their fear and rage.

It was the first bunch of broomtails Nez had seen in years. They brought to him the very essence of the unrecallable youth he was seeking, of the days that were so surely gone forever. For a moment he forgot why they were there. Eyes shining, he climbed to the top of the corral and looked them over with a critical eye. A big *palomino,* not a blemish on him, caught his attention. The animal was at least four hands higher than any other horse in the bunch.

"Some Morgan blood in him, all right," Nez mused, unmindful of the clouds of dust they were kicking up. "Mite too big for a cowpony, but Lord love you man, look at them legs! He could take you places!"

Another stallion edged near the *palomino's* mares. With a snort of rage the big one whirled on him. They met with a thud. Teeth flashed, and the interloper retreated, squealing with pain.

"No cuttin' in on you, old-timer, eh?" Nez muttered. "Yuh old savage, you're the Brigham Young of this outfit."

One of the Mexicans climbed up beside Nez.

"What do you think of that *caballo,* Hernando?" he queried. "Some horse, ain't he? Bet I could have forked him once."

Hernando shook his head as the *palomino* reared, his eyes rolling and ears laid back flat.

"Outlaw," said Hernando.

"Sure, outlaw! Why not?" Nez's vehemence made the Mexican draw back a little fearfully. "He wasn't askin' anythin' of no one till these vaqueros came along and begin throwin' the prod into him and his family."

Hernando nodded silent assent.

"Not seeing the high places again," he said. "Not knowing he be killed so soon. . . . Making chicken meat."

IT BROUGHT Nez back to unpleasant reality with a sickening thud and wrung a blood-curdling oath from him.

"Chicken meat!" he screeched insanely. "Chicken meat!" He invested the words with loathing that was more terrible and forbidding than the blackest blasphemy. "Grind 'em up! . . . By gosh, I'd like to feed the weasels that started this into the knives! I'd like to hear 'em squawk when the conveyor grabbed 'em!"

Hernando's face paled. Truly these gringoes were hard to understand.

"You see that they git some water," Nez ordered as he slid to the ground.

In Jericho, where even the arrival of a barn-storming airplane was excitement enough to stampede half the town to the big flat south of the tracks, the arrival of the horse herd was hailed as an event extraordinary. Being Sunday, the citizenry decided to make a real holiday of it. By early afternoon over a hundred men, women and children had gathered at the plant. Most of them were content to remain in their cars and view the proceedings from a distance. A few hardier souls had helped themselves to points of vantage about the corrals. Among the latter, Nez recognized Steve Jeanette and the bunch from the Overland.

"Somethin' may happen awful sudden here," he told himself. "They're pretty well liquored up."

The horses were quieter now. The colts nickered plaintively as they tried to suckle their mothers and were nosed away. Some of the mares were chewing the poles and rails of the corral.

"The whole damn bunch is starvin' to death," Nez grumbled. "Reckon they ain't had nothin' in their bellies beyond a little sage-brush since they left the Owyhee. That was four or five days ago. 'Bout time they was gittin' a little hay."

He looked around for Hernando. The young Mexican appeared presently, driving a team of heavy work-horses, hitched to a single-tree to which a chain had been attached. Nez knew they were there to drag away the warm carcasses as soon as the killers had done their work. It gave him a wrench.

"You'd think it was a bull-fight," he groaned. He questioned Hernando. "Did you water 'em as I said?"

Hernando shrugged his shoulders eloquently.

"No. Boss say not bothering to water them."

"What?" It was a bellow of incredible indignation that drew the attention of all. "You mean to say we ain't a-goin' to water and feed them horses?"

Hernando shrugged his shoulders again.

"The boss say——"

"What boss?" Nez barked. "Weinstine?"

"*Si.* He say we killing those horses mebbe tomorrow, next day. Why feed them—dying anyhow."

Steve Jeanette, Snowy Williams, a dozen others heard it as well as Nez. An angry mutter came from them. It was drowned out in the roar of righteous rage that exploded in Nez:

"The dam' rat! Leave 'em here starvin'! Them little fellas! Good gosh, no! What kind of a polecat is this thing that calls hisself a man?" He felt for his gun. He was unarmed. No matter, he didn't need a gun for this. "Where is he, Hernando?"

"Inside——"

STEVE and Snowy exchanged a baffled glance. They couldn't understand Nez. This was hardly what they had expected of him. There was no time for consultation. Sensing that somehow they had been wrong about him, Steve stepped forward and laid his hand on Nez's shoulder.

"If you want anybody to back up your play, we're here," he informed him. Nez was too consumed with rage to be surprised.

"I'll take care of this in my own way!" he cried. Like an avenging fury he charged the sliding, sheet-iron doors that led into the plant.

Through the window of the little room that was to serve them as an office, Turin Robbins had witnessed the scene outside, even though he had not been able to understand it. He beckoned to Nez the moment the big doors closed behind the little fellow.

"Nez!" he cried. "What's wrong? That crowd out there—they won't make any trouble, eh?"

"Why should they?" Nez sneered. "This is a legitimate enterprise, ain't it?" The words were Turin's. Nez laughed unpleasantly as he saw him squirm. "Where's Weinstine?"

Instead of answering the question Turin hastened to say:

"You might let them know that we paid out a little over sixteen hundred dollars to the vaqueros who brought these horses in. Not bad money, divided among six men for only four weeks' work. Their only expense was their grubstake. It might interest them, Nez, for we'll be sending men out right along on those terms."

"Yeah, it might interest them if money was what they were lookin' for," Nez rasped cryptically. To himself he

added. "It's beginnin' to come up on him already."

Mose popped in at that moment. He was like a malevolent little spider, darting here and there. The day was not warm, but his face was shiny with perspiration. The nervous energy he had expended in the past several hours had left him hollow-eyed. Johnny Pine, the Indian, was with him.

A repeating rifle stood in the corner, Mose handed it and a box of ammunition to Johnny.

"Ve can't use over tventy-five head today. That'll keep us busy until night. Don't vaste eny shells, Johnny."

"Nagh!"

The Piute went out and Mose turned to his partner. He saw Nez for the first time then, but failed to sense the white fury that gripped him.

"Vell," he burst out sharply, "ve're too busy to haff you loafing in here, Nez! Get outside and get on the job!"

"I got a little job right here that I'm a-goin' to finish first," Nez informed him. His voice had a dreadful whine. Mose foolishly tried to run rough-shod over him.

"Do vat I tell you!" he ordered. "Ve got steam up! Ve're vaiting!"

"Just a minute," Turin interrupted as Nez started to speak. "Mose, do you have to shoot those horses outside?"

"Vell, of course!"

"I don't like the looks of that crowd out there——"

"Bah! Ve can't afford to spend all day roping those horses and dragging them in here. Ve shoot them in the corral. I vaste too much time already." He started for the door. Nez grabbed him and spun him around violently.

"Wait a minute! I want to talk to you!" His tone was so fierce it worked a surprising change in Mose.

"Vell, vat is it?" he whined. "Vat you vant to say? Don't you see I'm busy?"

"Yeah, and you're apt to be a lot busier in the next few minutes. Did you tell Hernando we don't feed them horses?"

"Feed 'em?" Mose cried shrilly.

"I said feed 'em! They're chawin' up the corrals. They ain't had nothin' to eat for the better part of a week now. It'll take you four or five days more to use up the whole bunch. Them colts can't get a drop of milk out of their mammies."

MOSE threw up his hands in despair as he turned to Turin. "And I should feed 'em yet! Ve bring 'em here to kill them, and I should feed them!" Face working nervously, he whirled back on Nez. "Ve pay eight dollars a head for them, and you t'ink ve can afford to buy hay for them? Un—un—not a chancst!"

"Mebbe you'll change your mind," Nez droned ominously. "They're yours—you paid for 'em—and you can kill 'em; but by gosh, you can't starve 'em to death!"

"Now gentlemen, let's not get excited," Turin cut in. The fear that was gnawing at him robbed his voice of some of its usual unctuousness. "Maybe we could have a little hay sent out. It—it might look better, Mose."

"Not'ing doing!" Mose answered doggedly. "It's a vaste of money! Absolutesel! My brother don't feed 'em. I don't——"

Whatever he was about to say was cut short by the sharp bark of a rifle. Nez glanced over his shoulder. Through the window he could see Johnny Pine standing at the head of the chute that led off from the main corral, smoke curling from the gun Mose had handed him. The horse that had been hazed into the chute was not down, however. Rearing on its hind legs, trying in vain to leap out of its prison, the wounded animal screamed its agony.

Turin's face was white. "What's the matter with that fool Indian?" he exclaimed anxiously. "Why don't he kill that horse?"

The Piute was backing away from the chute and giving every evidence of being badly frightened. Steve Jeanette and a dozen others were slipping off the corral and starting for him.

"They got after him and he lost his nerve!" Nez cried. He pushed Turin out of the way and fumbled with the window. "There'll be more'n horses killed here if someone don't take a hand!"

He got the window open at last and leaped through. The Piute was brandishing his rifle at the men trying to surround him.

"Get back!" he shouted. "Me shoot!"

It took Nez only a moment or two to reach his side. With a savage twist he wrenched the rifle out of the Indian's hands and jerked it to his shoulder. Steve and Snowy were only a dozen

paces away. They stopped in their tracks. The others fell back a step. Before they knew what was happening, Nez fired, putting the animal out of its misery.

He was utterly beside himself with rage. They saw him catch the rifle by the barrel and start to swing it over his head, intent on smashing it to pieces against a corral post.

Mose ran up, divining his intention.

"Giff me that rifle!" he screamed. "Giff it to me!"

"I'll give it to you," Nez screeched, "—right in the belly in a minute!" He rammed the muzzle into Mose's stomach. "Now you talk fast, fella! Do these horses get fed or not?"

"Vell——" Mose was still trying to hedge.

"Yes or no?" And now Nez was calling on the crowd to witness his answer. Mose swallowed hard.

"Yes——" the muttered with an effort.

"All right! And don't let your memory play any tricks on yuh! It's Sunday—but you can git a truck-load of hay out here in an hour. . . . You want to git it! And git enough! You owe me a week's wages; pay for it with that. I don't want your dirty money!"

He swung the rifle over his head again, and this time he brought it down against the corral post with all his force. The blow shattered the stock and jammed the trigger and trigger-guard. He tossed it to Mose.

"There's your gun!" he cried. "To hell with you!"

Superb in his wrath, he started across the flats for town.

Chapter VIII

"Talk Is Cheap!"

NEZ sat on his doorstep. The evening shadows were growing long again, the whippoorwills sailing low over the sage, their mournful cry, always soul searching, reaching him with a peculiar poignancy tonight. He didn't regret what he had done. He was only sorry that the stand he had taken must be so impotent. They would go on as they had planned; men like Mose and Turin did not give up easily if there was a dollar to be made.

Nez realized that if Turin could make him any trouble he would not have long to wait now. Somehow, it no longer mattered very much; life had lost its savor.

"I'd give myself up tomorrow if it would stop those butchers." He thought about leaving Jericho. "Wouldn't do any good," he mused on. "The trouble is with me—I don't fit in any more."

Down-town, the lights began to glow. Unknown to Nez, Jericho was in a fair way of finding itself. It had needed something like he had done to pull it out of its decadence and make it realize and respect the fact that it was really just a little Nevada cowtown. Wherever men gathered, they spoke of Nez. They were for him to a man. In the Overland, he was quite a hero.

"Showed us all up," Steve Jeanette boasted to those who were drinking with him, "I'd done it if he hadn't. I was just itchin' for trouble."

The crowd nodded perfunctorily. They knew it was only talk. Whisky was no longer a brave maker where Steve was concerned. He drank with gusto tonight, and his talk grew more extravagant with every drink. He finally reached the point where he decided he must see Nez. Sober, he would not have ventured it, for since that day in the shop he had reviled him at every opportunity. But all that was fuzzy in his mind now.

"I'll bring the little runt down here!" he promised.

Nez saw him coming, his step unsteady. It brought home afresh the disappointment Steve had been to him. He bore him no malice; but pity was a poor substitute for the warm regard in which he had always held him.

Steve greeted him hilariously. "Hi, Nez! Whatcha sittin' here in the dark for, makin' faces at yerself?" He gave him a hearty slap on the back. Nez was not in any mood for that. "Git your ole war-bonnet on and come on down-town; the bunch wants to have a look at yuh!"

Nez said no. "A-goin' to shuffle up a little grub presently." His aloofness got to Steve.

"No hard feelin's, Nez?" he queried.

"Not a one, Steve," Nez muttered, eyes on the ground. "Everythin's lovely." He looked up suddenly and stared at the big fellow. "Weinstine git that hay like I said?"

"Brother, you just know he did! That rifle you busted up—" Steve laughed drunkenly "—the only one they had! Didn't kill a horse today! Nary

a one! Puttin' up barbed wire tomorrow to keep the crowd out. Think of that! The dirty buzzards! Somebody ought to touch a match to the place ——''

"What'd you say?"

"I said somebody ought to burn 'em out! That'd stop 'em!"

"Yeah——"

Steve talked on, but Nez hardly heard what he was saying. "It would be cinch to creep across the flats tonight and burn the damned place down," he thought. "Only Hernando and his brother sleepin' outside in a tent."

"Ain't got a drink in the cabin, have yuh?" Steve inquired.

"No——" Nez wished he would go. Presently Steve heaved himself to his feet.

"Come on down-town," he pleaded. "Got to make medicine tonight. Show Turin Robbins where he heads in."

Nez begged off, but Steve hung on for another ten minutes before he lurched away alone. When he had gone, Nez glanced at his watch. It was only a few minutes after eight.

"It would stop 'em cold," he mused. "I'd be suspected, but if I had an alibi they couldn't tie anythin' on me. I could empty some shells and get powder enough to make a time-fuse."

The longer he nursed the idea the better he liked it. He figured it wouldn't take him over half an hour to cover the distance between the plant and town. He could make a slow-burning thirty-minute fuse and be back in Jericho before the blaze was discovered.

HALF an hour later Nez stole away from the cabin. Ten o'clock found him seated in front of the jail, talking to Charlie Lamb. Because he was watching for it, he saw the sky redden to the north half a minute before the sheriff noticed it. He said nothing.

"Look!" Charlie cried, unusually excited for him, "there's a fire over there!"

They ran up the hill in back of the jail. They could see a long way.

"It's the horse-plant!" Lamb exclaimed.

"You think so?"

"Sure! Ain't nothin' else out that way!" The fire whistle was blowing. "They'll never save it," said Charlie.

The sky bled. Even in town the crackling of the flames could be heard as they licked up the dry timbers, and rising above it, shrill and blood-curdling, the screaming of the fear-crazed broomtails.

By midnight, the old plant had been reduced to a mass of glowing ruins. The horses milling frantically in the corrals, had come through unharmed.

No one could be sure the fire was of incendiary origin, and aside from Turin and Mose Weinstine, no one seemed to care very much. "Depend on Turin to have the place insured to the hilt," folks said. In the Overland, the bunch staged a celebration.

"It took fire, flood or an act of God to stop 'em," Steve declared as he addressed them. He was very drunk, but his brain seemed to function as well as usual. "And so we had a fire! All those in favor say Aye!"

"Aye!" they boomed together, shaking the rafters with their noise.

They took it for granted that the plant had been set afire, but they ventured no surmise as to who had done it. Maybe it was Steve himself, or Snowy —Nez Smith—any one of twenty-five men they could name. Whoever was responsible was safe as far as they were concerned.

The following morning, Turin called Sheriff Charlie Lamb over to the bank.

"Nez Smith set that place afire last night," he declared without preamble of any sort.

"No, he didn't! He was sittin' out in front of the jail with me when the fire broke out," said Charlie.

"What?"

Lamb had to repeat his statement.

"Pretty risky to accuse a man without any facts to back it up," he added. He didn't have to say any more. Turin gulped nervously, and the interview was over.

Later in the day, Steve encountered Nez on the street. He called him over to the edge of the sidewalk.

"Some fire last night, eh?" he queried confidentially. "Funny, me speakin' about it to you last night——"

"Yeah——"

Their eyes met in a glance of deep understanding. Steve's eyes said:

"You burned that place down, Nez."

The cagey twinkle in Nez's eyes answered, "Mebbe I did." Aloud he said,

"I was talkin' to Lamb when the fire started."

It didn't change what Steve was thinking. He knew beyond doubt that Nez alone had destroyed the plant.

"Wonder what they'll do with them broomtails now?" Steve asked. Nez shook his head.

"Don't know. Mebbe they'll turn 'em loose." It was a wish rather than a hope .

" Well, drop in, Nez. Don't be a stranger."

NEZ said, "Yes"; but he never went back to the shop. The jail became his hangout. He heard that Mose Weinstine had left town hurriedly, his destination unknown. Turin Robbins was as much in evidence as ever. When they passed each other, Turin would glare his hatred and try to frown him down. Nez would glare back. In fact, those accidental meetings became the high light of the day for him. He knew he had nothing to gain by walking wide of the man.

"Let him turn me up if he can," he told himself more than once. "It don't matter so much any more."

One Thursday morning, he arose later than usual to gaze across the flats to find the corrals empty. He went downtown at once and learned that Mose Weinstine had returned the previous evening. The horses had been put aboard the cars and shipped to Petaluma, California—destined to become chicken-meat after all.

A tremendous sense of defeat weighed on Nez. He went to the jail. Lamb's manner was graver than usual, but it was not the broomtails that the sheriff had on his mind.

"I got to close Steve up," he volunteered, tapping a paper on his desk. "Court order."

Nez bristled, the hurt Steve had given him forgotten.

"Who's doin' that?" he demanded sharply.

"Firm back in St. Louis that he's been buying his leather from. Judgment for almost two hundred dollars." Lamb reached for his hat. "Too bad," he murmured. "You can't beat the game Steve's been bucking."

"Lord, I know it," Nez sighed. "But a man can't let it go at that and walk out on him. . . . How soon you got to attach him, Charlie?"

Lamb gave him a shrewd, penetrating glance.

"See here, Nez," he exclaimed, "I know what you're thinking. You better forget it; it won't do no good. This ain't the Steve Jeanette we used to know. You might as well face the facts; a gullet and stomach is all that's left of the man who used to ride range with us. If that wasn't so he'd never taken your money—knowing he couldn't pay it back."

"What are you talkin' about?" Nez flared. "He ain't never asked me for nothin'."

Lamb hesitated before he unburdened himself further. What he was saying was well meant and no more than he felt should be said.

"Maybe he didn't ask you for it, but he took it, and he's been tanked up ever since. Now you're figuring to come through for him again. I don't think you've got the money to lose. I see you sitting around smoking those cheap two-for-a-nickel cigars and skimping by; you don't waste much on yourself. Maybe you've got some plans; but we ain't kids no more. Jobs don't come so easy at our age."

Charlie had said enough to remind Nez that he had a rôle to play, one that seemed ever more difficult. His instinct to cover up cooled his irritation.

"No use tryin' to make you think I got any money to throw away," he drawled thoughtfully. "But I reckon if the tables was turned and I needed a dollar, I'd get it if Steve had it."

LAMB shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man who had done his duty.

"Go on let him have the money if you've got a gold mine somewheres," he said. "I'll do something else to keep me busy for an hour."

Nez had to go to the Overland to find Steve. He called him outside. Their conversation was to the point.

"But what can I do?" the big fellow grumbled.

"You can lay off the liquor. You'll be flat if they take the shop away from you. What'll you do then?"

"Git a job, I suppose——"

"No you won't! It's a dry year; ain't no jobs! The boys are comin' in already. You want to watch your step."

Pride was not quite dead in Steve. His mouth straightened sullenly.

"I don't want yuh to throw the prod into me," he muttered.

"I ain't aimin' to do that. If you'll promise me you'll go easy on the rum, I'll let you have this money and a mite besides so you can get back on your feet."

"You mean that, Nez?" Steve was suddenly very humble. Tears welled into his eyes. "I been an awful dog," he whined. "Drunk all the time—I'm goin' to stop that. Ain't another soul in Jericho would come through for me."

"You needn't talk like that," Nez growled. "You go back to the shop and git on the job and show me you mean business. I'll bring the money down directly."

There was very little Steve could find to say. "I'll pay you back," he promised. "May take a little while——"

"Don't worry about that now. Just remember this will have to be the last time."

Three hundred dollars in cash! Steve glowed to the feel of it. It seemed a shame to turn the major part of it over to Charlie Lamb in payment of leather that had gone into soles and heels long since worn out. He had but to recall that they were playing stud across the street to be rendered utterly miserable.

"And I got to hand it over to Charlie," he sighed.

As a matter of fact, he didn't intend to do anything of the sort; not even from the start. But it took him a quarter of an hour to still the small voice of conscience.

He closed up and left by way of the rear door. With the stealthiness of a prowling cat he made his way down the alley, crossed the main street a block away and eventually arrived at the Overland via the rear entrance. By evening, the money was gone and the sheriff in possession of the shop.

At forced sale, it didn't bring enough to pay the creditors. Before the week was out, Steve was panhandling his friends for a two-bit piece.

Nez refused to go down-town. He felt he didn't want to see anyone, not even Charlie Lamb. Through the columns of the local paper he kept in touch with what went on. It meant very little to him until he read one evening that Mose Weinstine was in Jericho organizing a big outfit to round up wild horses on the Owyhee, intending to ship them to California. That night, Nez went down-town.

"Hear Mose Weinstine is a-goin' after the broomtails ag'in," he said to Lamb.

"Yeah," Charlie agreed. "Pulled out tonight for Midas. Had eight men with him."

"So?" Nez pretended to be occupied with lighting his cigar. "Was—he one of 'em?"

"Steve was one of them."

"I figured he would be," Nez murmured tonelessly. He puffed his cigar for seconds before he spoke again. "And after all he said——" He shook his head at the memory. "Talk's awful cheap, ain't it?"

"'Bout the cheapest thing in the world," Charlie declared.

Chapter IX

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

THE days rolled into weeks. The dust devils began to dance across the flats. Nothing happened. Nez knew he was safe; he had feared Turin Robbins for nothing. But that wasn't enough to overcome his bitterness over what he termed Steve's treachery. He seldom stirred away from the cabin any more. From morning until night he could be seen outside it, his chair tilted back against the wall, moving around with the sun just enough to keep in the shade.

A tremendous and bitter preoccupation rested on him. Mentally, he never got very far away from it. It had to do with the day that would see Steve and the others returning to Jericho, driving their big *caballada* of broomtails ahead of them. From the meager reports that had drifted into town, Nez knew they had been unusually successful—from their standpoint. They were moving toward Paradise now, doing about twenty miles a day.

"They'll be here before the week's out," he told himself. The knowledge upset him so that at times he could not contain himself. The boy who delivered his groceries noticed the change in him. He mentioned it when he got back to the store.

"That old guy's nuts," he declared. "Sits around mumbling to himself all day long. I tell you he's crezy."

In a way, it wasn't a great exaggera-

tion. Nez had been trying in vain to find an answer to his problem for so long that in his desperate mood he could hardly have been called sane. In some way he intended to return those horses to the desert. That was to be his answer to Steve. How he was to do it, he didn't know. If he discarded one plan after another it was not because of danger to himself. That had no place in his scheming.

And then one morning they arrived. Rising clouds of dust beyond the sand hills apprised him of their coming long before he could distinguish the *caballada!* Between four and five hundred head! Evidently, Steve Jeanette's knowledge of the Owyhee had come in handy.

It was a sight to be remembered. It took more than punkin rollers and dude wranglers to ride herd on that bunch. If Nez could have forgotten the sorry ending to this business he would have thrilled to its drama. As it was, it filled him with rage and horror.

He watched for hours as they jammed them into the railroad corrals.

"If they don't put 'em aboard the cars tonight I may have a chance to do somethin' even yet," he muttered grimly.

The railroad yard was below him three hundred yards. From his doorstep he could see the watching crowd, the sweating men and hear the squealing and snorting of the fear-maddened horses. He could even identify Steve.

"Him!" he groaned. "He'll never spend this money!"

They had them corralled at last. With a shout, Steve and the others set sail for town, their ponies running with manes and forelocks flattened out in the evening breeze. It was like an outfit hitting town in the old days. It won a grunt of satisfaction from Nez.

"A-goin' in to tank up!" he thought. "Let 'em git a taste of likker and they'll never git that bunch on the cars tonight!"

FATE was playing into his hand at last. His brain was clicking again. He was living. It made him realize that he had a plan; had had it for days. It had needed just this little break to make it feasible.

Hours semed to pass before the sun dropped behind the Sonomas. The twilight was endless. At last, however, it was night. The westbound San Francisco Limited was not due until nine-twenty. No sightseers would be around the corrals at that hour. It was going to be awfully important to him, for the arrival of that train was to play a vital part in his plans.

When it came time for him to leave the cabin, he strapped on his holster. It felt good to be wearing a gun again. He might need a hammer, too. Without striking a light, he found one. Steve had given it to him.

On leaving the cabin, he started toward town, but soon he was circling back through sage. He approached the corrals on hands and knees, moving as stealthily as an Indian. Every sense alert, he waited until he was sure no one else was lurking in the shadows.

The horses began to mill as they scented him.

"Raise all the hell you want to," he muttered. "I'll have you outa there directly."

There were four gates. He didn't expect to find them padlocked; but he had to be sure. Luck was with him. The hasps had been secured only with wooden pegs driven through the staples.

"I can knock them out in half a minute," he told himself. "I'll crawl back into the brush now and wait till I hear the train."

The tracks curved just beyond the corrals so that the blinding white headlight would be on them for several minutes.

"Ain't no trains passed since they was put there," Nez thought. "When they see the light rushin' at 'em through the darkness and hear the roarin' of that train and the screechin' of that whistle they'll think hell's let loose. I'll open the gates, and they'll come stampedin' out of there fit to be tied. Not that they wouldn't go out anyway, but the train will give them an extra shove. Once they find themselves in the open, they'll savvy what to do. They'll be high-tailin' it for the hills in a hurry."

Some would be recaptured; others would get away. Nez had to be satisfied with that.

The minutes dragged by as he waited. Perhaps the train was late. Then he heard it blowing as it flashed past the Wesso flag-station.

"Just three or four minutes now," he sighed.

Presently, he caught his first glimpse of the headlight, slashing a slice out of the night. He got to his feet and went to the gates. He knocked the pegs out with the hammer.

The rails were beginning to hum already. The horses began to rear wildly. Suddenly a piercing blast of the whistle shattered the stillness of the night. Now the headlight, a glowing eye, blinding in its intensity, blazed on the corrals.

Colts nickered shrilly. The mares trembled. A stallion lowered its head. With a maniacal snort it charged the unlocked gate. Back it went, torn from its fastenings. The stallion did a hoolihan in the dust. But he was up a second later.

The train was almost on top of the corral now. The whistle was deafening. Another gate went down. The maddened brutes were beginning to pour out of their pens. Nez tried to swing a third gate open. The horses were charging at him. They were quicker than he. He saw his danger, but he couldn't get out of the way. The heavy gate came back with a bang as they struck it.

It knocked him flat. In a moment, horses were flowing past him as though he were a rock dividing them in two currents.

"I hope you make it," he groaned as he sat up. The horses were spreading out for the hills already. His head throbbed painfully. It was all he could do to pull himself erect. Hanging on to the corral, he gazed after the fleeing animals. A smile creased his battered face.

"Some of them is a-goin' to make it," he said. "Yes, sir!"

Banged up though he was, Nez knew he must get away at once. He tried to find the hammer. It was gone. He found his hat, however, and started to limp away. A pair of headlights began to race in his direction.

"Car comin' from town," he thought. "They're welcome to what they find."

IN THE morning, somebody picked up the hammer Nez had dropped. Steve recognized it at once. He hadn't needed that to tell him who had done this to him. The matter was strictly personal as he looked at it. He didn't care what the others had lost or what Mose was out. His share would have run over five hundred dollars. Nez had burned the plant, and by the same token, he had turned this bunch out of the corrals. The hammer only proved it.

He wasn't interested in trying to recapture part of the *caballada.* Blind, unreasoning rage ruled him. He wanted to get even with Nez. No sense of gratitude remained.

"I'll slam that little ant into jail for this!" he bellowed.

"I should say ve vill!" Mose agreed.

They struck a Tartar in the district-attorney.

"What's the charge?" he wanted to know. "It can't be robbery; he didn't steal your horses. You'd have to prove possession for that. He didn't create a disturbance; no one in town was bothered. Nor was it trespassing. The railroad never has legally posted those corrals against trespassers. Strikes me, gentlemen, that all you've got is a civil suit—if you think Nez Smith has anything you can collect on if you get a judgment."

That ended it. Jericho howled. Warren Spitzer sent the story to the Reno paper for which he acted as local correspondent. They ate it up and asked for more. Down in San Francisco, re-write men put a sob into it. Nez was grand copy. "Old-time cowboy fights to save wild horses!" They asked for "art"—photographs.

It left Nez a little giddy. He didn't know what to make of it. Lamb warned him to look out for Steve.

"He says he's going to get you, Nez. Ordinarily I wouldn't pay any attention to it; but the town's laughing at him, and he can't stand it."

If it worried Nez it was not because it held any promise of danger. It went deeper than that.

And then one day a stranger arrived in Jericho and went directly to the district-attorney's office. It seemed that the newspaper stories about Nez Smith, the old-time cowboy, had had a wide circulation. The sheriff was called over a few minutes later. Charlie's hand trembled as he folded the warrant.

"I'll go up and get him," he said. Never in his long years as sheriff had he been asked to do anything that hurt quite so much.

"Those newspaper pictures, Nez," he explained when he had arrived at the

cabin, "somebody recognized them in Las Animas."

Nez took it stoically.

"The money's under the floor, Charlie."

They gathered it up together before they went back to the jail.

"It's all I can do to turn the key on you, Nez," Lamb got out huskily.

"Don't feel that way about it," Nez murmured. "I had it comin' to me."

"Just don't waive extradition when you're arrainged this afternoon," Charlie insisted. "Something may happen."

Chapter X

THE END OF HIS TETHER!

IT WAS breath-taking for Jericho. Nez Smith with a price on his head! It made Turin Robbins actually ill to realize he had let the reward money slip through his fingers. He sat up half the night trying to decide whether he should say anything or not about the twenty-dollar bill Nez had given him. The following day it was in the paper, with elaborate details and an alibi for his stupidity. It seemed, according to the article, that he had been suspicious at once and had put the bill aside, intending to communicate with the bank. In the press of business he had forgotten it.

Lamb met Steve Jeanette on the street.

"He's just where he ought to be," Steve declared virtuously. "He might of got me into trouble——"

"And he might be walking the street today if it wasn't for you," Charlie finished for him. "Funny, Steve, you can give a rattler a little warning and he'll be decent enough to let you alone, or if you give a starving dog a bone, he'll lick your hand. . . . That ain't true of polecats—is it?"

Steve's face flamed a dull red. "You're lucky you're the sheriff," he muttered.

"So are you," said Charlie.

Nez was Charlie's only prisoner. Every evening between five-thirty and six he took him out to exercise him, walking him back and forth between the jail and the rear of the court-house.

"They'll be taking you away tomorrow, Nez," he said as they walked. "The papers arrived this afternoon. I was hoping the Governor wouldn't sign them. Sending you to prison for fifteen years isn't going to make you a better citizen. The only reason you came back here was because you were through with that stuff." He sighed heavily. "That's what gets me! Here you are—in the clear—and you toss it away over a few broom-tails."

"What's wrong with that?" Nez demanded gruffly. "I ain't sorry. Mebbe it'll do some good."

"Maybe. Funny how a man will live outside the law for years and then decide to go straight. Man to man, that ought to be enough; but the law won't look at it that way; it's got to have its pound of flesh."

The conversation was decidedly too serious for Nez. "You ain't approvin' of crackin' banks, are yuh?" he asked lightly. Charlie frowned at him.

He found it very difficult to put into words exactly what he wanted to say. He tried it again a moment later.

"I've done a few things in my years as sheriff that some folks wouldn't approve of," he said. "But I was satisfied I was doing right, and I'm willing to answer for them to the Judge we'll all have to face some day." His voice trailed away to a faint murmur. "I guess we can figure this is just another one of those things."

Nez gave him a puzzled glance. "What is it, Charlie?" he asked.

"The bars on your cell window—they can be pushed out, Nez. The mortar is all rotten." For some reason, Charlie had difficulty rolling the cigarette he had in the making. "Any time after midnight would be all right." He might have been talking to himself. "There'll be a saddled horse in the barn back of the Jap Laundry."

They reached the court-house and started back toward the jail once more. Nez had given no sign that he heard, but his step was quicker now. Charlie tagged along at his side, his face unusually glum.

"I'd hide out on the Owyhee until the noise blows over," he advised. "You know the country. Later on, I'd head north. Lot of room up there——"

AS CASUALLY as though the whole town were watching, Charlie locked Nez up. There was no hand-shaking, no last-minute advice, no sign of farewell. When he had

gone, Nez sat down on his cot and smoked a cigar, trying to think clearly. Fifteen minutes must have passed before he strolled over to the cell window. Charlie was right; the bars could be pushed out. He had not bothered to notice before.

At midnight, Rollin Stout, Charlie's deputy came on duty. He went back to the cell. Nez was there, apparently asleep. In the morning, when Rollin brought in his breakfast, he was gone.

The alarm was sounded. Lamb pretended a great indignation.

"You can't lock a dangerous man up in that shack and expect to keep him," he declared. He had said it before, but no one had offered to build him a new jail.

In that country, where distances were great and the telephone swift, escape was usually soon terminated.

"We'll pick him up," Lamb said with great confidence. "He's grabbed a freight out of here, sure as you were born." He began to put in calls for Battle Mountain, Elko, Reno. He was very busy, but up to the time the paper went to press, Nez Smith had not been apprehended.

"Any old day he slid outa here on a freight," Steve sneered as he read Lamb's statement. "Somebody helped to ease him outa town—somebody who's doin' a lot of talkin' right now." It was hardly safe to voice the thought to others. In his own mind there was no room for doubt. "I could tell 'em where to find him," he mused.

About the time that Lamb was beginning to admit defeat, it was announced that the old reward for Nez's capture, dead or alive, had been reinstated.

Twenty-five hundred dollars! Steve began to get ready. In the cool of the evening he saddled his pony and headed once more for the hidden canyons of the Owyhee.

"Water he's got to have," he argued. "It's a dry year. Ain't so many places where he can find it. Won't take me long to run him down."

Chapter XI

Where the Winds Blow Free

THREE days passed before Nez knew for certain he was being trailed. The imprint of a shod hoof and the still warm ashes of a campfire at the creek's edge left no room for doubt. He had come down for water for himself and his pony.

"I'll have to be movin' on," he thought. "Ain't nobody droppin' in here by accident. I sure got to keep away from the canyons now."

Rifle in hand, he watched as the horse guzzled the water thirstily. He drank then, himself, listening for the slightest sound that should warn him of approaching danger.

The wine of the desert winds had rubbed some of the years out of his faded blue eyes. His step was springy again. He was really home at last. Men might change, towns be made over, but the Owyhee had not changed. Its hidden canyons and the labyrinths of the lava beds were unalterable.

Once away from the tiny creek, he felt safe enough for the moment; no one knew the Owyhee better than he. The lava beds became his refuge. There, he could move about without leaving any sign that he had passed. Water—that was his need. In vain he searched for a hidden "well" or spring.

And all the time Steve waited. He was still-hunting now. He knew he had Nez staked off. No need to try to smoke him out.

"He'll come out! He's got to come!" he told himself repeatedly.

He could hardly lose. Springs that seldom failed were dry this year. The tiny creek in the box canyon where he prowled was the only water in miles. Nez would know about it—he was one of the few who did.

From his aerie in the lava beds, Nez studied the world below him for glimpse of any moving object. His nest was impregnable; he still had some food, thanks to Lamb; but thirst was beginning to pull at him. In the end it would be his need of water that would betray him, sending him down to the canyon below where death or worse waited to ambush him.

"I'll chance it tomorow," he thought. "I reckon I got to. Once we git our bellies full of water we'll head for the north."

Steve expected Nez to come in the evening when he would have the night to protect him. He was dying with thirst, too, and not for water. Without the stimulus of alcohol his beefy jowls drooped and his skin hung in little folds

as though it were too big for his face.

Little devils wracked his flesh. Only thought of the twenty-five hundred dollars he was to gain chained him to the canyon. He had spread his tarp among a clump of aspens. It concealed him from above and left him in a position to command a view up and down the creek.

He had long since decided that he would not risk taking Nez alive.

"I'll end it right here," he promised himself as he waited. He knew Nez had been in the canyon four days back. "He can't wait much longer," he thought. "He'll be comin' soon—mebbe tonight."

But it was in the morning, at the crack of dawn, that Nez crawled to the edge of the rimrocks and scrutinized the creek bottom. Nothing moved below him. No trace of smoke or warning smell drifted on the air.

"Don't seem to be no one down there," he thought. "Mebbe they pulled out, figgerin' I'd moved on."

His pony was thirstier than he.

"Take it easy!" he warned as the horse sniffed the water. They were picking their way down the wall. "You're rollin' enough rocks down there to wake a dead man!"

The ledge on which they found themselves was narrow; haste dangerous. Nez was ahead, but the pony continued to try to crowd past him. Nez threatened the animal with the flat of his hand as another rock went rolling down to the creek.

"Will you stop that?" he entreated.

Steve had been asleep. It was enough to arouse him. He threw back his tarp and grabbed his rifle.

Nez caught the movement.

"Him!" he gasped. "Out for the reward money!" Even now he found it hard to believe.

Steve had not located him yet. Nez brought his gun to his shoulder. He knew—as he had known when he faced Shorty—that one of them would not leave there alive. Only the hyphen flash of death could square their account.

"Ain't no forgivin' this," he thought. "I'll kill him as he deserves!"

It needed only the pressure of his finger to make it a fact. He aimed and aimed, but he did not fire.

"I can't do it," he sobbed. "He deserves it—but I can't do it!"

Steve had found him. For a horrible moment they gazed into each other's eyes . . . scorn and betrayed friendship meeting hatred and greed.

In that moment some realization of his infamy must have come to the weak, debauched hulk that once had been Steve Jeanette. But it wasn't devastating enough to stay his hand. With a snarl he put all conscience from him, and fired.

Too late Nez tried to throw himself flat on the ledge. Unseen hands seemed to spin him around and slam him down on his face. . . . He was free at last.

The shot shattered the stillness, reverberating up and down the canyon until it was lost among the crags and rimrocks. A tiny wisp of smoke curled upward from the muzzle of Steve's rifle. His face was a ghastly yellow. He couldn't seem to get his breath. That moment, so charged with realities had been too much for him. Unconsciously his hand went to his heart as he leaned against a tree. His rifle fell unheeded.

"Got him!" he gasped. "I—I sure got him!" A stab of pain wrung a groan from him. "What—what's the matter with me?"

He could see Nez's lifeless body hanging over the ledge, face downward. He stared and stared. But his eyes were losing their ability to see. A new wonder was in them now. This was death—swift, noiseless, inexorable! Something was strangling his heart, squeezing it to pulp. No more sprees—Doc Leroux had warned him.

LAMB and Stout found them weeks later—found what the coyotes had left—and drew the right conclusion.

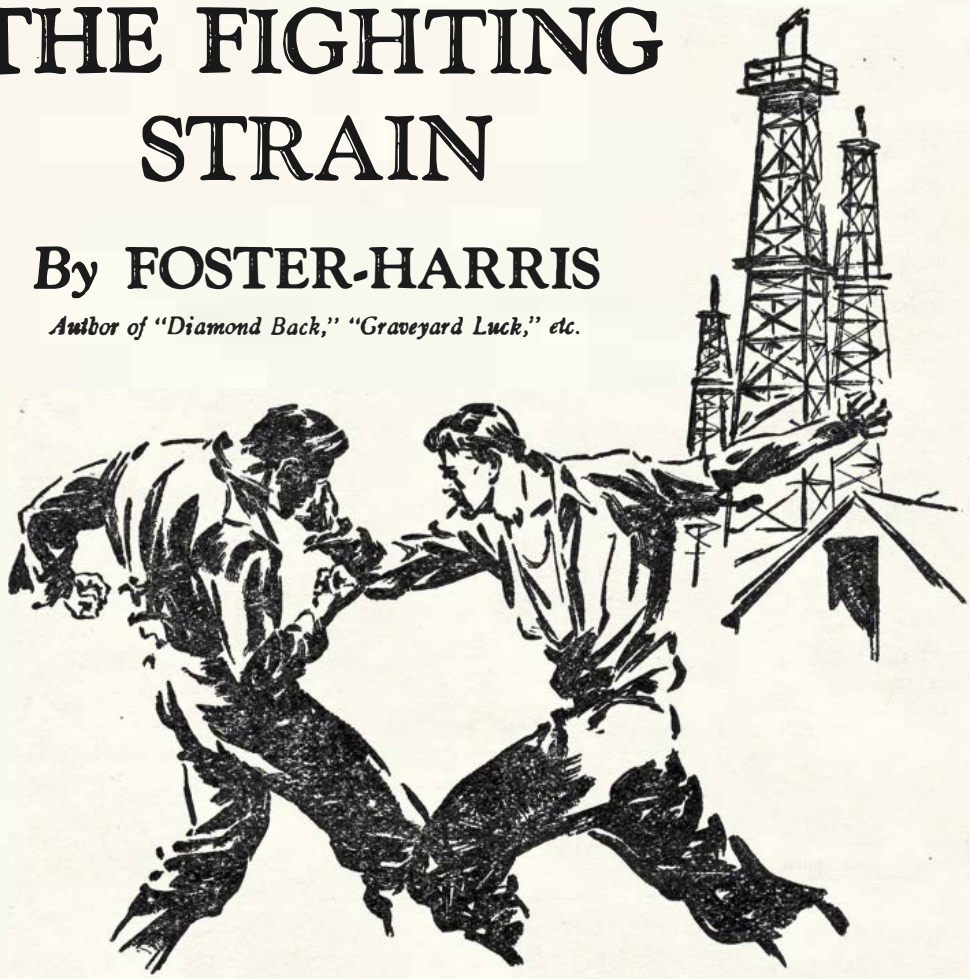
"It's the best thing could have happened—best for both of them," said young Rollin. Lamb had never liked him so well.

"Yeah," he said, "all the mistakes and meanness are forgotten. They're out on the Big Range, riding for the Boss of the cowboys now."

THE FIGHTING STRAIN

By FOSTER-HARRIS

Author of "Diamond Back," "Graveyard Luck," etc.



Says Tom Mahoney, "I've got lots of good friends, but a good enemy is rare and worth hangin' onto."

YES sir, guy you were lucky. You got to see the red Mahoneys get together again. They don't do it very frequent any more, just about once or twice for each new oil boom. But when they do it's a battle the oilfields talk about for the next ten years. Classics of the oilfields, those battles. And you were lucky enough to see one.

You don't think so, huh? Well, if you hadn't stood so close you wouldn't have got socked. Long Tom, he's generally pretty careful about throwing things and hitting innocent bystanders like you by mistake, but Big Jim, he just gets too joyful and triumphant sometimes. Anyways, you was standing right on Long Tom's ear, yelling like a wild Injun. Aw, no, he was throwing at Tom.

He's a good hearted guy, Big Jim, though. Soon as they let him out of the hoosegow he'll hunt you up and tell you he's sorry you got hit with that chair. And he'll pay half on the chairs and table they busted, too. Sporting hombres, the red Mahoneys. They always pay for everything they bust in their little reunions—and they've busted enough chairs, dishes, tables and windows, I guess, to seat the whole Chinese army and let 'em eat chop suey in an all-glass house.

The trouble is neither one of them can lick the other and make him stay licked. If one could, you understand, they'd probably be regular bosom friends. But as it is they're probably the best-known enemies in all the oilfields. It just rubs each of 'em raw to think the other's as good and maybe better at fightin' than he is. The first time I ever saw them together they was having a regular ole knock-down and drag-out, just like they did in here. And in all the time I've known 'em I can only remember once when they

come together and didn't act like two strange bulldogs with only one bone.

That was the time of the big blaze, over in Grandsand, when the Templeton gusher caught fire and—hot hades? *Whoo!* you would of thought the world was coming to an end that night—rivers of fire in the streets and smoke and heat and those two red Mahoneys

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Huh? No, far as I know or them either, they're not blood kin at all. They're both named Mahoney though, and they used to both be called Red Mahoney. That was how the war started.

Say, have another cup of java, you'll feel better. That bump on your head's coming up right pretty. Makes you look like an oil man.

The Red Mahoneys? Yeah, well it started up in Oklahoma, in the Cromwell boom. A right nice little play, that Cromwell. Tough, too, while she lasted.

It was right in the middle of the boom. I was working for Consolidated Southwestern then, and that freckle-faced one, Long Tom, he was a roustabout on the same lease. They just called him Red Mahoney then and he was a good worker, but, man, he was a holy terror to every tough guy in the whole field!

Oh, I don't mean he was one of these hard babies, always picking himself trouble. Red Mahoney then was just like he is now, he'd make friends with anybody who'd let him. Or he'd let you alone. But if you was just simply cravin' some two-fist excitement now, you never had to look any further than Red. Generally he'd supply enough in one session to last a man the rest of his life and leave over some as a heirloom for the grandchildren.

WELL, boom oilfields just seem to draw guys who like to fight, so Red, he never lacked any exercise. And then, in come Red Mahoney Number Two, the original streak of destruction.

Consolidated Southwestern was making a big play in Cromwell, developing a whole bunch of leases. It had so many guys on the payroll that some of 'em never did anything but come in and get their checks, rest of the time they hid out and, by golly, they got away with it for weeks! A lot of strange guys and the usual wild, hectic rush you find in boom oilfields—that was the way I suppose it happened.

One morning I was just driving by the company's supply yard when I heard a wild whooping and yelling and men started piling out the doors and windows of the office like a cyclone had just struck inside and then—*bam!*—here came a whole, wild gob of men out the door, head first, feet first, every which way and there in the middle of 'em was the cyclone.

I could see red fists flying in the air and red heads and black hats and once a pair of Number Fourteen boots, waving with the feet in 'em and—well, it looked like a wildcat convention into which turmoil and dissention had entered plentiful and enthusiastic.

A herd of wild elephants couldn't of kicked up more dust. All around the warfare a mob of guys was jumping up and down and climbing on each other's shoulders and yelling. I thought it looked interesting, so I stopped and got out and collared me a roustabout I knew and asked him what all the riot was about.

"It's Red Mahoney," he said. "He's fightin' a bozo claims *he's* Red Mahoney. And, by gad, both Mahoneys is winnin'!"

It did look that way.

Just about this time here came three of the town's John Laws and a couple of watchmen and a guy with a piece of two-by-four and behind him Slicker Edgeworth, the field superintendent. Edgeworth was yelling for the guy with the two-by-four to jump right in there and stop this murder and the guy with the two-by-four was just burning up to obey.

So he charged in, swinging the two-by-four for all he was worth. The dust kicked up a little higher, here came the two-by-four through the air, end over end and then here came the guy who'd been swinging it. He was scuttling on hands and knees between the legs of the crowd, going like a hound dog with his tail on fire. And was he a mess!

Well, they finally got 'em separated, about six or eight men on each of them. And, seeing they were held good and tight, Slicker, who was that kind of a guy, breezed in between, all important and big he-field-boss, and began snarling what was all this about?

I knew Red Mahoney, of course, that

is the one who'd been working on our lease, Long Tom. But the other red-headed, wild bull elephant—I knew I'd seen him somewhere before, but that was all.

"I'll fire the man to blame for this!" Slicker yelled. "You, Mahoney, explain this!"

They both started to yell at once. Somebody clapped his hand over the other big boy's mouth, and it was the Red Mahoney I knew who got his testimony in first.

"That big hunk of spoiled tomato was stealing my job! You told Check Walters to make Red Mahoney a gang pusher. That's me, Red Mahoney! That bozo there told Walters he was Red Mahoney and I come up here and found him starting to boss my gang!"

The other guy gave a big heave and lifted three or four husky roustabouts right off the ground. He didn't get loose but he did get his mouth free.

"He's a dirty liar!" he roared. *"I'm* Red Mahoney! Tryin' to steal my job! I'll sock him into——"

"Turn him loose!" invited the Red I knew. "I'll show him who's Mahoney! The bozo that thinks he can take my place——"

Just then here came Check Walters and Bob Evans, the farm boss from our lease. Slicker Edgeworth spun around to them and held up his hand, very important.

"Still!" he yapped. "You, which one of these men is Red Mahoney?"

"That's him," said Check, pointing to the other guy. "This one is him," said Evans, pointing to our Red. "I'm him," spoke up both battlers. Everybody speaking simultaneous.

Slicker's jaw dropped. "Aw, they're both named Red Mahoney," said somebody. "Which one'd you mean, boss?"

SLICKER looked at Walters. Walters was looking from one Red Mahoney to the other, with a sickly kind of grin on his face. There was murder in those two Mahoneys' eyes and somebody was going to get the benefit. Check passed the buck right back.

"You sent me an order to make Red Mahoney a gang pusher," he told Edgeworth. "I found two Mahoneys on the payroll, but I figured you knew which one of them was called Red. So I told the boys to send me in Red, and this one here showed up. Didn't you know there was two?"

Slicker Edgeworth took a long breath. He couldn't tell the truth and say no, he hadn't, because he should have known. It was his brag he kept an eye on every last man under him. He didn't have any idea which one of these Mahoneys he'd meant, because he really didn't know either one. What he'd done, I suppose, was his usual he-boss trick of firing some poor devil of a gang pusher and naming another one off hand, the first name popped into his head. Maybe he had heard somebody saying what a good man this Red Mahoney was making Consolidated Southwestern and that was just about the way he'd promote guys.

Slicker looked at our Red and then he looked at the other Red, and then he began to smile that sickly sort of grin, like Walters. The Red Mahoneys weren't saying anything, but he could tell by their eyes they had him sized up down to the last letter. The one he didn't pick was just going to beat him into a pulp, if possible, and then go try and finish up the other Mahoney.

"Ah, uh, there's obviously some mistake," said Slicker feebly. "Come into the office, you two. No fighting now! I won't have fights in this outfit! No sir! We'll settle this."

The Red Mahoneys and Slicker and Check Walters all went into the office, and Bob Evans, he looked at me and grinned.

"We're either gonna have two Red Mahoney gang pushers or a funeral, one," he predicted. "Slicker has started something right."

Well, he was dead on the mark with both barrels. That evening I heard there were two new gang pushers, both named Mahoney and that said gang pushers had had another grand fight, just after getting off. The fight, the boys said, was a draw but, gents, it was a lallapaloosa!

Ole Slicker Edgeworth with his Napoleon, he-boss stuff had started something. And stopping it was just a hoss of two other colors including red and wildfire.

They were both good gang pushers, right from the bat. They got along with their gangs fine, but whenever any tough baby just didn't want to get along, they took him aside and per-

suaded him different, fist and skull. A couple of wildcats, those Mahoneys.

Lots of hard, hard babies in these oilfield gangs, as hard as you'll find 'em anywhere on earth and more than one of them thinks whipping the boss is the grandest pastime there is. It didn't take long, however, for the Mahoneys to learn their boys different.

They could lick anything in the field —except each other. And it looked like, right from the very start, they hated each other like poison. Both Red Mahoneys, neither one of 'em able to smack the other guy down and get it over with, and both of 'em convinced, I reckon, that the other guy had tried to steal his job. Man, the fights!

They got to be regular classics. They worked on separate leases and didn't see each other in the daytime, but nights the John Laws would gang up and keep a weather eye out to see if the Red Mahoneys was going to be in town together. And if they were, pretty soon you'd hear the sounds of conflict rising and here would go the John Laws and the crowd and after a spell here would come five or six John Laws with one Red Mahoney and five or six with the other.

WELL, Cromwell faded, just like they all do, and the big push drifted on to newer fields. We'd started calling the Red I knew first "Long Tom" and the other one "Big Jim" to tell 'em apart, before I took out for Texas. I lost track of both of them for a spell, but then I began to hear the tall tales about the Red Mahoneys.

Yeah, you can hear those yarns about the Red Mahoneys in every oilfield in the Mid-Continent now. You'd think, to hear the stories, that each Mahoney was a sort of combination of David and Goliath, with Sampson, a wildcat and two quarts of nitroglycerin throwed in for good measure, and that they'd been fighting in every oil pool since old Colonel Drake drilled the first well. Of course that's a lot of tall lying——

You think there's a considerable lot of truth in them yarns? Well, yes, the Mahoneys did put up a pretty good scrap in here. But compared to some of the battles I've seen 'em stage, say when one had come out ahead a little in the last scrap and the other was on the prod for certain—Grandsand? Oh, yes.

I suppose you read about the day and night Grandsand burned. No? Well, maybe the papers outside the oil country didn't carry so much about it. They generally don't. But it was the wildest night I ever spent, and I saw two or three in France and one in particular, down in Mexico, that would stack right up beside most any.

Grandsand was out in West Texas, in the sand country. Nothing but chewed up ridges of bare rocks and sand, mesquite, cactus, snakes, on the back side of nowhere. The field in the breaks of the Tinajos River—it runs into the Pecos, you know and its water's so hard with alkali they claim you can skate on it in the summertime —wells up on the bluffs down in the canyons, out in the mesquite—tanks, lease shacks, supply yards scattered promiscuous everywhere. And down there on the flat west of the river, Grandsand, the boomtown. Boy, what a burg!

The railroad had a spur built in when I got there, and on just beyond town, the Texas-Tennessee people were putting up a whale of a big refinery. There was a tankfarm right against the refinery ground, with a flock of fifty-fives and eighties—fifty-five and eighty thousand barrel tanks, yeah—and over to the left a casinghead plant, where Magnus Oil was taking the gasoline out of a whole lot of natural gas.

A big wind blowing, the sunset I drove into that burg. It was kicking up the dust and sand, all up the valley, bringing it in great, yellow clouds. You couldn't hardly see the town at all and the stuff I ate at supper that night had more sand in it than anything else. I was to find out that that was the way it was most of the time in Grandsand.

There was a dance hall just across the street from the cafe where I was eating. I could hear the old walking beams thumping and the hiss of boilers popping off, sort of mixing with that hiss and sand in the wind, and the jazz from that dance hall was coming over sort of in throbs between the gusts of wind, and it was getting dark.

There were lots of men on that long, sandy street. That was just about all there was of Grandsand, just one long street. Men and cars and trucks were packed as thick as sardines in a can,

only moving a little too lively for sardines. I finished up my sandy steak and came out and stood on the walk a while, watching the night come over that field.

Well, you know that always gets you, somehow, seeing night come in a boom oil pool. You see the strings of lights come out on the derricks, and the floodlights on the yards and offices here and yonder, and there's always some waste oil burning somewhere and it sends up a wavery, red glare against the black, and thick, flying smoke.

Always makes you think of some old Babylonian city, with the fires burning in the temples and on the walls and the old priests and warriors and kings and guys stalking around—I saw a movie once with all that in it and it sure reminded me of an oilfield.

I WAS standing there, just looking, when a big hand comes down on my shoulder and swings me around, just like I was a doll. And there's a big, red face grinning at me. It was one of the Red Mahoneys, Long Tom.

"Horse liniment for sore eyes!" he boomed in that cellar floor, hog calling voice of his. "Guy, am I glad to see you! It's been—yes sir, three years. When'd they let you out?"

"They never convicted me," I grinned back. "Had a friend on the jury, he hung it and I beat it. What you doing down here?"

"I'm a tankie now," the big boy told me. "Working on the Magnus tank-farm out yonder. Just here waiting for my brother to come by for me."

That was news to me. I'd never known he had a brother. I said so.

"Oh yeah, he's the youngest of the family," Long Tom explained. "Rest of us got the muscles, he got the brains. He's an engineer out there at the refinery. He's a Doctor of Science, Joe is." You could have put your hand on the pride in the big boy's voice.

"That so?" I said. "Sure don't take after the rest of the family, does he? By the way, what ever happened to your, uh, friend, the other Red Mahoney?"

A sort of chilly, green look came into Long Tom Mahoney's eyes and he doubled up a fist just a little smaller than a whole ham.

"I don't know," he told me, in a quiet kind of tone. "Last time I seen him was in Borger. He hit me with a piece of pipe, right over the ear. Knocked me cold."

His big fist came up and I had a picture of what was going to happen to the other Red Mahoney next time they met. That is, it would if Long Tom got his druthers. And I thought right there, funny, these two bozos try to beat each other to death every time they meet, and yet neither one ever uses a gun, or a knife or anything like that which would really do the job permanent. I wonder how much they actually do hate each other?

Well, we stood there chewing the rag over old times for a while and Long Tom's kid brother came by in his car. I met him and to tell the truth, he surprised me.

He was just a little bit of a runt, not more than five feet three or four and he wore horn rimmed glasses and looked like the wind might blow his frail body away any minute.

But you could tell he was a Mahoney the minute you laid eyes on him. Same fire-red mop of hair, same blue-green eyes and big nose and way of closing his jaw like a bear trap, also the same way of grinning. When he grinned, you couldn't help liking him.

He was a whiz of a refinery expert, I found that out afterwards. Had three or four college degrees, but nothing snooty about him. A nice little guy.

We talked a while and he wanted to know if I wanted a job. I told him no, I was already staked out with the Magnus. Starting on in the morning as a driller.

But, as it turned out, the drilling rig hadn't come in yet and it was three days before I began work on one of the Magnus wells, away out in a side canyon in the north end of the field. So for three days I just loafed.

IT WAS the evening of the second day, just after sundown and I was standing on the corner waiting for Long Tom to show up—him and me and some other guys had a poker session slated that night—when from the dance hall across the street I heard a wild, Irish yell that sounded mighty familiar and then another to meet it that also sounded like old times and then the noise of glass busting and tables going over and chairs sailing

through the air and the crowd whooping it up.

I didn't need to go over or have somebody tell me. I knew right then. The Red Mahoneys had met again.

Of course I did go running over and I can tell you it was a wow of a fight. They like to beat each other to pulp before about a dozen big huskies to each one separated 'em. I remember, that night there was guns saying on the street that there was sure going to be a murder, and maybe two, next time those big babies met. It was that kind of a battle.

Nothing happened the next day and the next I went on the afternoon tower of that Magnus well. The afternoon tower, you know, works from noon until twelve midnight, which just about ruins a day for you, as far as doing anything sociable is concerned. So I didn't see the second fight.

But Long Tom came out with seven stitches in his head and a dislocated shoulder and Big Jim with a broken nose, so I suppose it must have been right up to their usual par.

A couple of days later I found out something else. Big Jim was working on the refinery, a gang boss for Joe Mahoney, Long Tom's brother. And he and Little Joe were friends.

Now that's just not according to Hoyle. In most of these fighting families, especially Irish, a man who's an enemy of one of the boys just naturally is an enemy of all the rest too. But here was a different case.

It seems that Long Tom had told Joe this was strictly a private and personal war between him and Big Jim. Joe was to keep out of it. And Joe was keeping out. He was even a friend of Big Jim's.

I wondered how long that would last. Blood's always thicker than friendship, you can't deny that. And when a man's brother and a man's friend are the worst kind of bitter, fighting enemies——

Well, those old red gods that always mix things in the oilfields, they took a hand and the wheels began to turn.

Up on those big, savage bluffs north of town, just beyond the crowded pack of tanks and refinery stills and casinghead plant and everything they were drilling wells, lots of them. The derricks were perched on the tops of those big walls and stuck on the sides and more away down at the bottom. And even right in between the buildings of the town itself there were more wells, drilling on townsite lots.

ALL these boom oiltowns, you know, are built like this one we're in now. Board and tarpaper shacks and firetrap buildings and oil running down the ditches and gas in the air all the time and of course no water mains or any real way to stop a fire once it gets started big. And anyway, water won't stop burning oil. The oil will float right on top of it and burn and the water just helps spread that hell fire and—well, sometimes right hectic things happen.

Something did happen. It was curious—just like a lot of wooden soldiers, all lined up, and you push the first one and he knocks the next one down and he knocks the next and so on down the whole line.

Out there in that part of Texas it's generally dry as a banker's glass eye. But not always. Sometimes it rains, regular old gully washers. The clouds boiled over us for three days and then we had one of those rains, pretty near a cloudburst. Everything was soaked and running with water.

That was the first soldier in the line. Number Two was the Templeton well, away up on that towering, rock wall, north of town.

It was completing for a tremendous, big well when the rain came. They had it under control when the rain started about noon, but a flood of water drowned out their boilers, washed under the foundations of the derrick and about five o'clock that afternoon the well went wild.

It was raining then like I've never seen it rain before. Solid, blinding sheets, the wind roaring and already it was dark. Streaks of lightning slashing through that rain, booming like sixteen-inch artillery. I remember Trap Simmons, our tool pusher, fighting his way into our derrick about six o'clock to tell us they was having trouble with the Templeton well and everything down in town was just about drowned out. You couldn't see him fifty feet away.

About nine o'clock that rain began to slack, but the wind was coming up and the lightning was just tearing that whole, black, boiling sky apart. There were derricks going down by now. We

were out in the rain, battling to hold our guy wires when I saw that red flare go slashing up from the direction of town. Frank Sparks, my tool-dresser, turned and started to yell. The wind was yanking his words right out his teeth, flinging 'em away and I could hardly hear him.

"There she goes!" he was yelling. "That Templeton well's caught fire! Look out below!"

Yeah. And down below that big, screaming torch was the T. T. refinery, the tankfarm, the Magnus gasoline plant, wells with their flow tanks full of oil, tanks of gasoline, the town, field camps of some of the companies. All flooded with a cloudburst nobody had built for or even dreamed would happen—why, you might as well have looked for a snowstorm in the Arctic Ocean—I knew something was going to happen.

At about ten o'clock a man came by and told us to let our well go to hell—the company was needing men down there at the farm and cashinghead plant and we better hightail, swim or fly down there pronto.

We took out on foot, fighting along the tops of the ridges. The bottoms were raging rivers. The rain turning into just an ordinary downpour as we went along, but the wind coming up and coming up—boy, the howl of that wind!

We were down in the valley, running along the flat in knee-deep water when soldier Number Three in the line went over. A five-hundred-barrel tank of casinghead gasoline—you ever see that much gas go off?

Well, it looks like the flash when a photographer sets off some flashlight powder to make a picture. Only this flash lights up everything for miles and it don't quit in just a split second. It stays that way for two or three breaths maybe. And if you're close, no matter if you are set for it, it makes your heart jump up in your throat and your feet say to each other, here boy, right now is a fine time to make tracks towards elsewhere.

WE COULD see the Templeton well, a big blowtorch roaring up against that boiling black above and the wind bending that flame like one of these Turkish swords. Flow tanks just below the well were burning and streams of liquid fire were running down that hill, like streams of lava. Racing, brown water carrying that burning oil.

There was that awful, white glare over everything and I could see fire on top of one of the Magnus tanks—gasoline blowed over there from the exploding casinghead tank I guess—and little dots of men with shovels fighting like fury to get that sluicing hades draining off to one side or the other, away from the tanks.

Then the big fifty-five tank ripped its top plates off and spouted more fire into the night and I could see men running back.

The town was raving crazy. People packed in the streets, big trucks and cars stuck body deep in the mud, that rain and wind and lightning and fire—made a fine picture of what hell looks like, I'm telling you.

Black smoke was so thick on the ground you couldn't hardly see ten feet ahead when I run through the gates of the tankfarm. Somebody stuck a shovel in my hand and I could hear old Bull McCarthy yelling, "C'mon, boys, c'mon!" so I took out after him.

We came to a line of men working like Turks to throw up a dike between that burning fifty-five and the next one in line and I pitched in. There already was dirt fire-walls around the tanks, you understand, but those depressions was just lakes, water running over the top—and that water carrying burning oil.

Steam and smoke and rain and that fire—it'd boil up and here'd go a pillar of flame a hundred feet high maybe, a hundred feet thick, flames rolling over and over. You ever look inside a blast furnace? Imagine one of those things rolling toward you; and you with a shovel to stop it!

Another fifty-five let loose. I don't know what happened. There was a boiling wall of fire jumped at us and we hightailed out of there pronto. I heard somebody shout the whole town was cut off, burning oil running down both sides and the old Tinajos River raving out of banks behind. Next thing I knew, I was with a gang of guys shoveling wet dirt between the casinghead plant and the refinery.

There wasn't any company organization by this time. All the outfits was just mixed together, the gang bosses raving and everybody working like a crazy man, wet as a drowned rat,

clothes steaming in that heat—murderous, that heat was. If there's anything makes a hotter fire than oil I don't want to see it.

Down the line I heard a wild yell. I straightened up. Gasoline was burning, making a white glare over everything. And there, on the line was the Red Mahoneys, side by side and fighting, but for the first time not with each other. Side by side they were shoveling mud.

Dynamite was slamming somewhere behind us then, as some outfit blasted ditches to bypass some of that oil, maybe, or cleared a lane to hold the fire. Next thing, I was right beside the Mahoneys.

THEY was glaring at each other as if they wanted to start cutting throats any minute. Each one trying to out-do the other guy shoveling. And was the mud flying! A ditch digging machine would have looked slow and feeble beside those two giants just then.

Just behind us was the refinery, a mess of buildings, finished and half finished and just begun, stills and engine-house and pumphouse, office and all that. The refinery had been operating, you understand. That's the way with a refinery, it don't wait until everything's finished until it starts, it builds and runs at the same time. And the Texas-Tennessee had spent and was spending a regular mint of money on that plant.

There was steam up in that big plant and the pumps were going, pulling distillate and kerosene and gasoline from tanks in danger.

From somewhere, burning oil began to run down along the outside of the dike we'd built and we pulled back toward the refinery. You couldn't face that heat, not that close. It would just cook you to death.

I saw a guy race by behind us and disappear among the buildings. A little guy it was and I recognized him. Joe Mahoney. He'd just whipped out of sight when from the direction he had gone came a storm of death and destruction that made every one of us figure our last second had arrived.

There was a white flash, we jumped around and there, flashing above the buildings, was a great wave of fire. It looked just like that, a wave, racing toward us, its tip curling over, breaking and falling, a solid, tidal wave of fire and us underneath it, you understand!

"Run!" somebody screamed. "My gosh, run——" He might have saved his breath, because before he got it out of his throat we were all doing just that and were we traveling! With fire on our right, too, we were a little restricted as to where we could run but we could go back towards town and nobody was doing any hesitating.

I was going like a scared rabbit. I looked back over my shoulder and saw that stuff slam down over the buildings. It was burning gasoline, a rain of flame from an exploding tank, and it drenched down over everything, burning everywhere it hit, running over the ground. I saw I was far enough away not to be in it, so I stopped and turned.

The gang I'd been with had scattered like quail. Just two or three around me. From the nearer buildings I could see a few poor devils running out, beating at their burning clothes with their hands, and screaming—I saw one guy run right into a lake of fire and go down—the heat was curling the skin off our faces.

I heard a sort of bellow. "Joe, you crazy runt! Joe!" And there, fifty feet closer to that hell was Big Jim Mahoney, starting back in after Long Tom's kid brother!

Well, you couldn't have stopped him. He was in that running fire, and gone just like that. Just a black, jumping shadow. I knew nothing could be alive in there and sure nobody could go in and live. I made a sort of dazed move to take off my hat which I'd lost long since.

Big Jim Mahoney had been willing to die trying to save Long Tom's kid brother. A man, that big fellow.

There was a guy running toward us, his back blazing. Crazy with pain and fright. I jumped and made a flying tackle for him, got him by the ankles, dumped him and started rolling him over and over to put out the fire. He was one of the refinery boys who had been near the edge, not bad hurt, but clear out of his head and he fought me like a crazy scared man will. I heard a deep, roaring voice:

"Where's that damn Mahoney? Didn't I see him go in there? Didn't I see him——"

I turned. It was Long Tom. Skin

all gone from his face, his eyes glaring —man, he was a red fiend from the pit that minute. A giant devil.

It hurt me to say it. But I did. "Yes, he went back. After little Joe. They're both dead sure by——"

"Went after my brother!" You could have heard Long Tom a mile if it hadn't been for the wind. "Why, the dumb idiot! Joe ain't in there! He got his whole gang out! They're over here. I'll go tell the damn fool—he think he's smart enough to look after my brother!"

He burst into a roar of laughter. Beat his knee and boomed. I thought he'd gone loony as a bedbug. He straightened up, jerked his arms up over his face and before I could make a move, there he went. Laughing, plunging into that fire, after the worst enemy he had on earth.

YOU ever see a man run deliberately into hell? Oh no, of course not, things like that don't happen in ordinary life. It's the oilfields that produce cockeyed things like that. Here was two in about as many breaths, one going to death for his enemy's brother, the other for that enemy. And the brother safe all the time.

Twisting snakes of fire were streaking toward us then and I grabbed my man and started dragging him back. He couldn't or wouldn't stand on his feet, but he squirmed and twisted and fought.

Back in where those two Mahoneys had vanished it looked like a solid lake of fire. You couldn't see anything but flame, smoke and steam. A couple of guys came running over to help me carry my man. I looked back at where those two Mahoneys had gone. And there was the absolutely impossible happening.

You've heard of these salamanders, kind of lizard animals they claim can run all around through white hot fire and not get burned? Well, that's what I thought of. There, coming out, was the Red Mahoneys.

Roaring flame of gasoline behind them and somehow it made 'em look forty feet high. Little rivers and pools and lakes of fire covering the ground all around them and the two of 'em, arm in arm, running, jumping over walls of fire. One of the guys helping me screamed out just what I had on my tongue.

"My gosh!" he screamed. "Can't the damn fools burn!"

Just then I saw one of those giant, black figures go down. The other never paused, just whipped that falling figure up on a shoulder and it looked like that old guy Atlas lifting the world. On he came. I saw him make a jump—carrying that guy, mind you—a jump that must have been fully ten feet.

He was out of the flame and on the ground, rolling to put out his blazing clothes, rolling over and over and that other fellow locked in his arms. A little fellow was coming in from the left toward them, coming like a streak—I could see his face and it was little Joe Mahoney—I let the two other boys take the guy I was helping carry and run in after Joe.

Three or four of us got there together. The giant that had been doing the rolling had staggered up and was coming toward us, dragging the other guy. It was Big Jim, though you wouldn't have known it until you heard him speak and even then his bellow was just barely recognizable.

"Take care of this fool, boys! Take care of him!" Big Jim said. "I got to whip him—he hit me with a wrench!"

He started to fall like a derrick going down and little Joe Mahoney caught them both in his arms. I remember he looked just like an ant trying to swipe a pot and kettle off the fire.

We got 'em out. What had happened, as we found out afterwards, was that Long Tom had found Jim in there, crazy with burns but still looking for Tom's brother. He couldn't make Big Jim understand or come along till he hit him with something, maybe it was a wrench, and called him a lot of names. Then, coming out, Tom had dropped and Big Jim had carried him the rest of the way. Who saved who is something nobody can figure.

We got 'em down to the hospital. By that time the upper side of the town was burning, but the lower end, where the hospital was, still looked good for an hour or two anyway and the wind was slacking up.

Well, the rest of that night don't matter much as far as the Red Mahoneys is concerned. The wind quit about midnight and by dawn we had things pretty well under control. About half

the town was gone and three-fourths the burnable stuff in the refinery and the casinghead plant and a flock of derricks burned, yeah, and four big tanks and that gusher on the hill still lifting oceans of fire toward that gray, smoky sky.

Sort of scorched and hectic, that daybreak in Grandsand. As they say after most of these oilfield fires, we'd mainly saved the ground and whilst it was considerable scorched, still, with care, it could be used again.

The big tanks, of course, had to be let burn out, but they shot the Templeton gusher out with two hundred pounds of guncotton three days later. And then, when they rebuilt, they threw fire guards around everything, dikes and ditches that would have stopped the Mississippi. And all those dikes ain't even been well sprinkled down since.

But the Mahoneys. The docs down at the hospital, not knowing them by reputation and thinking they was brothers or something, put 'em side by side in the same ward. And about four days later they was sufficiently recovered to have a fight and just about wreck half the hospital.

They was fighting over who saved who and how and why in that fire!

They got well and they been fighting ever since. Just like they did in here.

Huh? Crazy? Oh, sure it looks that way. I told Long Tom that, once; told him I couldn't for the life of me see why they couldn't make up and be friends.

"Oh, I got lots and lots of friends," says Tom, which is true. "But him—why, he's the best enemy I got! It's worth something to a man to have an enemy like him!"

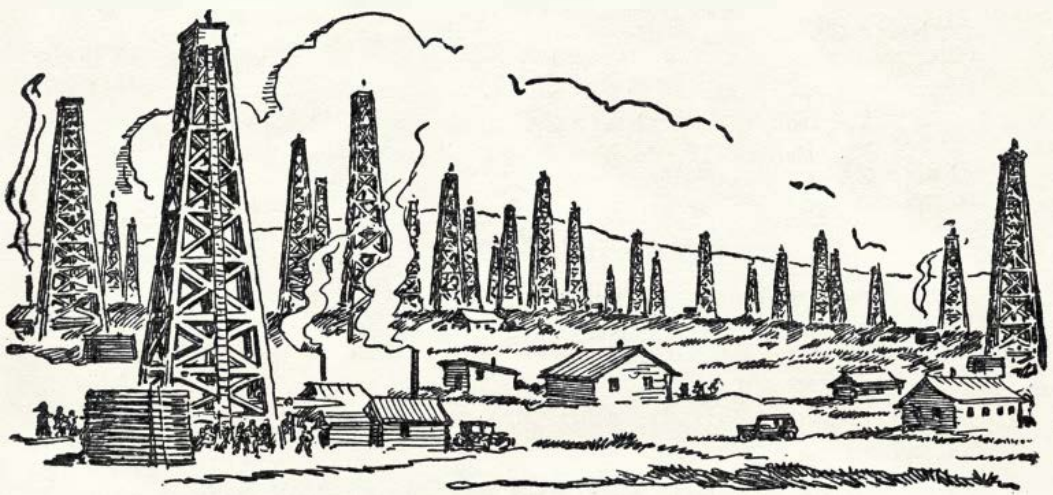
So that's the Red Mahoneys. Let's have some more java.

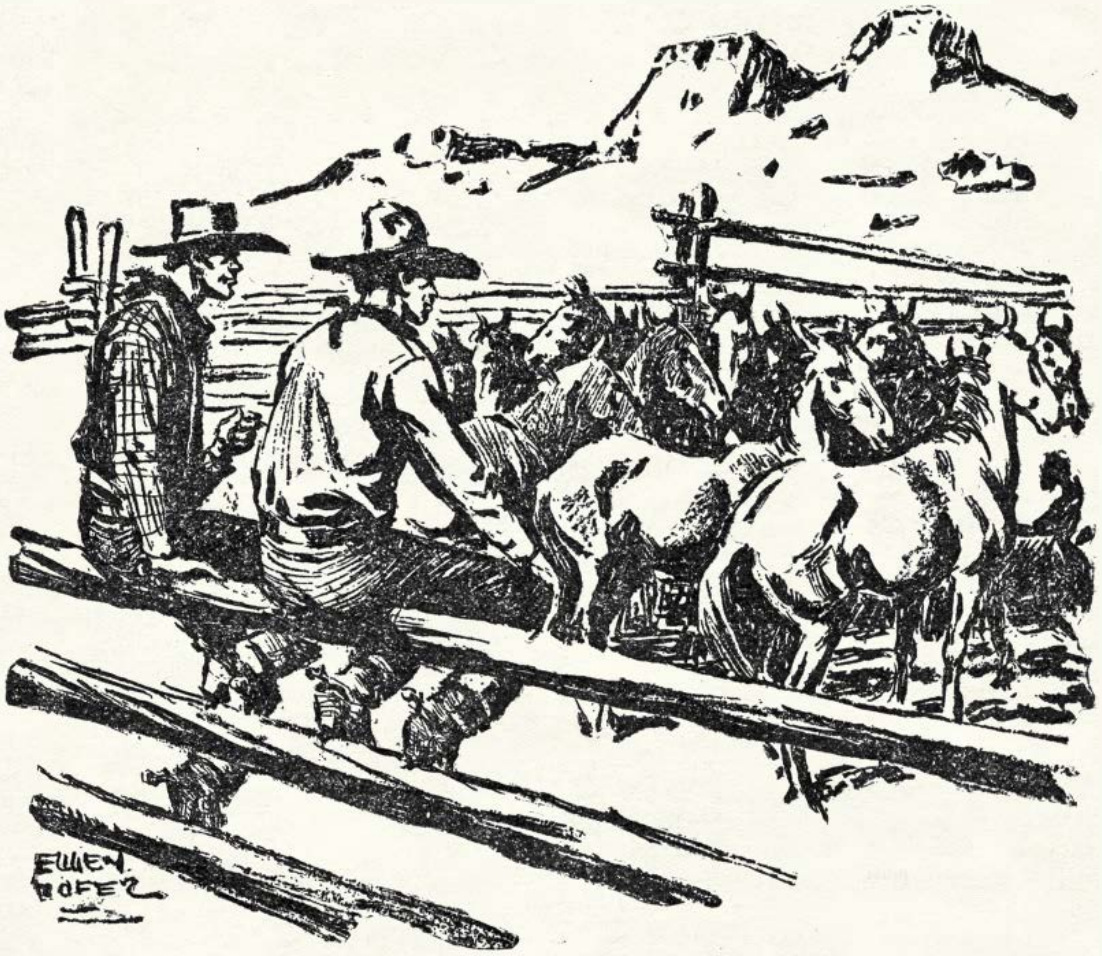
ANTLERED DOE

EXPECTED annually during the open season on deer, are the usual human fatalities, miracle shots and the vast number of "if's." It fell to the lot of Leslie L. McClay, of San Jose, California, however, to produce an unusual and bonafide freak, the past deer season.

While hunting on the Mason Ridge, near Mount Hamilton, in Santa Clara County, he knocked over a large deer and found it to be a doe. But, the doe had horns—antlers the experts called 'em—but they were just horns to Leslie when he spotted his game and shot it; horns that many a male deer would be proud of in any man's mountains.

The dead doe, which was a blacktail weighing around 150 pounds, had two points on each side, approximately fifteen inches in length and with a fifteen-inch spread. McClay immediately reported his technical error to the State Division of Fish and Game and received exoneration, it being unlawful to kill a doe.—O. O. Oldham.





JERICO TAKES THE ROUGH STRING

By BENNETT FOSTER

Author of "Windmills," "Wagon Boss," etc.

Next time certain parties steal any horses, they'll make sure they aren't professional buckers—nor in the care of Jerico Jones.

JERICO JONES hung his chin on the top bar of the corral, looked inside and then brought a freckled hand up to rumple the unruly shock of brown hair that no barber's comb had ever been able to subdue.

"I'll be damned!" announced Mr. Jones. "I sure will be damned!"

There was a noise on the stoop of the "Manassa House," behind the self condemned Jerico, and he turned quickly to ascertain its cause. A sleepy eyed, somewhat obese, and rather greasy individual stood on the stoop. Jerico beckoned to the man.

"Come here," he commanded, and then, when the greasy gentleman had gained his side: "Say, did I or didn't I put twelve horses into this here pen last night?"

The greasy one eyed Jerico dubiously, looked into the corral, rubbed his eyes, and answered.

"Why, yeah," he said. "Yuh put

twelve horses in there. Why? Ain't they here?"

Jerico shrugged broad shoulders eloquently. "Do yuh see 'em?" he countered. "They sure ain't here. I reckon them broncs must of sprouted wings or somethin'. The next time I pen a bunch of horses I'll put 'em to bed an' sleep with 'em, by golly! I'll——"

Jerico did not finish his sentence. The man from the hotel was hoisting his bulky body over the corral rails and Jerico paused in his speech to watch him. The hotel man dropped heavily inside the corral, started to stride across it and half-way stopped suddenly, stooped and picked up a clod. He examined the bottom of the clod, looked at the place from whence it came and then stooped again and put it back.

"Find 'em?" questioned Jerico, interested.

The greasy man looked at his questioner with dull eyes. "Why no. . . ." he began. "Say, they ain't here, are they?"

"I been tellin' yuh," replied Jerico, patiently. "Is horses in the habit of disappearin' around here? I'd say that this country sure makes free with a newcomer."

The man in the corral looked at Jerico, his face a blank, then looked away again toward the open door of the saddle shed behind the corral. Something he saw caused him to move toward it.

Jerico, following the man with his eyes, swore softly again to himself. The greasy man stopped at the further side of the corral.

"They's some saddles gone, too," he announced complacently. "They was six saddles in the shed last night when yuh run yore horses in, an' now they's only one. I reckon——"

Jerico craned his neck and peered across the corral into the saddle shed. "An' the one that's left ain't mine," he announced. "By damn——"

From the highway, stretching in front of the Manassa House, an automobile horn sounded hoarsely. Looking toward the road Jerico could see a dust cloud whirling under the early morning sun. The cloud resolved into an automobile which drew rapidly nearer and presently stopped with complaining brakes. From the front seat of the car a heavy set man ponderously detached himelf and nodded curtly to the driver who sat motionless behind the wheel. From the rear seat four men, each bearing a rifle, swarmed out. The hotel man in the corral lumbered across the enclosure toward Jerico. One of the men from the rear seat of the car, ran down the road, rifle in hand, and disappeared behind the hotel. Jerico faced the approaching newcomers and waited. A star, revealed by his swinging coat, gleamed on the vest of the ponderous man. Flanked by his companions the star bearer approached Jerico and stopped.

The unkempt man in the corral, seemingly aroused from his lethargy, spoke. "Howdy, Sheriff," he said. "Out kinda early, ain't yuh?"

The pompous man grunted.

The hotel man tried again. "Lookin' for somebody?" he asked.

"I'm lookin' for five men that held up the Farmers' and Stockmen's Bank in Littlecreek last night." The sheriff's voice was a heavy rumble. "You seen anythin' of a car come from that way last night or early this mornin'?"

The hotel man paused and considered the question. Presently he answered it. "Why," he said brightly, "I dunno."

"You dunno nothin'." The sheriff snorted his contempt. "Didn't yuh see a car? Didn't yuh hear nothin'?"

The hotel man scratched his head and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Presently the sheriff got his answer. "I dunno," the flunky again announced.

"Hell!" said the sheriff.

The posseman who had gone behind the hotel, came breathlessly around the corner of the building and hurried toward the group.

"There was a car through here, Purdy," he announced as he reached the standing men. "Come through just before you telephoned Hyson last night. I reckon it was them."

Again the sheriff said, "Hell!"

"Musta been them," insisted the posseman. "Hyson said he stayed up the rest of the night, watchin' an' there ain't been no other cars."

"Where's Hyson?" demanded the sheriff.

"Comin'."

The official turned a cold and lackluster gray eye in Jerico's direction. Apparently he noticed Mr. Jones for the first time. "Who are you?" he demanded abruptly.

"Jones," said Jerico, instantly.

"Jones, huh? Why didn't yuh say Smith? It's commoner. What yuh doin' here?"

"Just listenin', up to now." Jerico's tone was tinged with sweetness. "If yuh got time I'd like to tell yuh that twelve horses I had back in that corral last evenin', are done gone."

"Gone?" said the sheriff.

"Gone," repeated Jerico. "Vamosed, went. I don't talk Dutch or I'd tell yuh in that."

The sheriff overlooked the insult. "Twelve of 'em?" he insisted.

"Twelve of 'em," replied Jerico. "Nice horses, too. They had tails and four legs, every one of 'em. They's five saddles gone, too."

The sheriff pondered. The posse remained silent. Jerico waited and the hotel man bent over and picked up a straw which he chewed assiduously.

Presently the sheriff began to rumble again. "They took 'em," he announced. "Them five that robbed the bank. They come through town here, stopped, an' come back an' then rustled your horses. Didn't they, boys?"

Two of the four possemen nodded, one said, "Yes," and the remaining one, the youngest of the group, remained silent, a grin overspreading his face.

"Yuh got 'em well trained," observed Jerico.

The sheriff paid no attention to Jerico's remark. He stood deliberating for a long instant and then lifted a heavy hand and pointed a ponderous finger at the youngest posseman.

"You, Tom," he said, "you stay here an' find out about this feller's horses. Look around. Mebbe them fellers will come back. There ain't no doubt about it, they're the bunch that robbed the bank, an' they took to horseflesh here. The rest of us will go out to the Half Triangle an' get mounts. We'll circle an' cut their trail between here an' there. Come on boys."

Jerico started to speak, thought better of it, and grinned while the ponderous sheriff turned and, still flanked by his cohorts, made his way to the waiting car. The posse climbed into the machine, there was a growl as the driver meshed his gears and let in the clutch and the car moved away down the road. Jerico turned to the posseman who had remained.

"Do yuh think they'll come back, mister?" he asked, his lips quirking in a smile.

Tom, the youngest posseman, jerked his hat from his black thatched head, flung it down viciously and swore. "Of course they won't come back," he said when he had finished his tirade. "Of course they won't. Purdy, damn his time, allus leaves me when there's anythin' interestin' comin' up! I allus get the jobs of findin' pet dogs that's lost or horses that's strayed. By the horns of hell——!"

"Now, don't yuh go losin' yore temper," consoled Jerico placidly. "It won't do yuh no good an' yuh may need it. Let's you an' me look into this horse matter a little. Mebbe them fellers will come back after all an' if they do, an' if they're the birds that took my horses, I'll bet yuh two bits that somebody gets shot!"

The young deputy sheriff stared alertly at the speaker. There was something in Jerico's tone that told more than the spoken words. The deputy asked a question. "What do yuh mean, mebbe they'll come back?" he demanded. "What do yuh know that yuh ain't said?"

Jerico smiled gently. "Why," he said, "them twelve horses I had in here was part of Lew Madrid's buckin' string. There was three horses that could be rode an' the rest of 'em was plumb broncs. Nope. I'd say off hand that them fellers ain't gone far if they're dependin' on my horses to carry 'em!"

The deputy stood open mouthed staring at Jerico. In the corral the fat hotel man put a foot tentatively on the bottom bar. "Well," he said, "I got to get breakfast," and then began to climb over.

Jerico put his hand on the deputy's arm. "You an' me, too," he said, echoing the roustabout's sentiments. "Let's go eat an' I'll tell yuh about the horses an' you tell me about the bank robbery. How's that?"

The deputy nodded. "I'll go yuh," he announced. "I'm hungry as a she wolf, an' I'd sure admire to know how you come to be with Madrid's buckin' string. Why didn't yuh tell the sheriff about it?"

"Did the sheriff ask me?" countered Jerico. "Nope. He said for you to find out about the horses an' yo're findin' out. Come on."

He moved off in the direction of the Manassa House.

The two went into the dining room of the hotel and the deputy hung up his hat. Jerico, having left his room in haste when he had discovered the empty corral from his window, had no hat, and went directly to a table. The deputy joined him and they sat down. Across the table they sized each other up and each liked what he saw.

Jerico spoke first. "My name is Jones," he said. "Jerico Jones. I'm from Texas an' I'm goin' to Littlecreek. I met Madrid in Uvalde last year an' when I drifted up this way I looked him up. He was sendin' his string to the rodeo at Littlecreek an' I drifted 'em over this far for him to save shippin' charges. That explains me, I reckon."

The deputy across the table nodded. His black eyes were bright, staring into Jerico's blue ones. "That explains you, I reckon," he concurred. "I'm satisfied an' if Purdy ain't he can wire Madrid. My name's Barr, Tom Barr, an' I'm just a damn' enough fool to be a deputy for Purdy 'til somethin' better turns up."

Jerico solemnly extended a hand and Barr took it. They shook and both smiled.

A waitress coming from the kitchen, approached the table and the two broke off their conversation to give their orders. When that was done Jerico addressed Barr again.

"Tell me about this bank robbery," he urged. "When did it happen?"

"Last night," replied Barr. "Must of been about six o'clock."

"An' yo're just gettin' out here?"

"We didn't find out about it 'til around midnight." Barr was apologetic. "Purdy 'phoned all around an' as soon as it was light we started."

"How did it happen, anyhow?"

Barr leaned forward on the table. "Why," he said, "seems like las' night, when the bank was closin', five fellers drifted in. Old man Pruit, that owns the bank, keeps open late at the end of the month as a general thing, so it was around six-thirty or mebbe seven when this happened."

"That's right, today is the first, ain't it?" interrupted Jerico. "Excuse me, go ahead."

"Well, Pruit was in his office an' the feller that works for him, Gibbs is his name, was behind the counter. Pruit heard somethin' outside the door of his office an' he went to it. He just had time to see that there was five men when a gun was stuck into his middle an' a blanket throwed over his head. Next thing he knowed he was tied an' slung on the floor. We got all this later from Pruit, you understand?"

Jerico nodded. "What about the man that was workin'?" he questioned. "Gibbs, yuh said, didn't yuh?"

"I was comin' to that. It wasn't 'til about twelve o'clock that Pruit managed to squirm around an' get his feet against the window. He sure kicked the glass out an' raised a rumpus. Somebody heard him an' went for the sheriff an' when Purdy got there an' broke in, he found Pruit still tied in the blanket an' Gibbs was behind the counter, deader'n a herrin', with a knife stuck right square in his gizzard." Tom Barr paused dramatically.

"Dead, huh?" Jerico spoke musingly. "Sounds kinda like a—never mind. Go on with yore yarn."

"Well, the vault was rifled. They had about twenty-thousand in it, Pruit said, an' everythin' was gone except some silver an' some coppers. They'd made a clean haul an' got away."

"How'd yuh come to learn that they'd took a automobile?"

"Pruit heard one leave from in front of the bank after the door closed. He figgered that the robbers had gone in it."

"He was right, likely." Jerico stared blankly at the table cloth. The waitress brought their orders and distributed them. Both men fell to eating. Presently Jerico poised a fork full of sausage before his mouth and asked another question.

"Didn't Pruit get any description of them fellers at all?"

"Not much of a one," Barr answered. "Pruit's near sighted and he didn't have much time to get a look. He says that they was five of 'em, that they all wore dark suits an' caps, an' that's about the limit of it. Purdy thinks that it was some city gang."

Jerico masticated the sausage. "I reckon he's changed his mind about now," he announced when he had swallowed. "No city gang would of took horses."

Barr nodded. "Yo're right," he said. "I want a description of them horses, too. Purdy said to get one."

"I'll give it to yuh," assured Jerico.

"Say let's you an' me do a little thinkin'. It ain't painful an' sometimes it's right productive."

Mr. Barr nodded and wiped his mouth, signifying that he had finished his meal. "I'll go yuh," he replied. "Let's get a drink before we do it, though. Thinkin' is sort of dry work."

Jerico nodded. "All right," he replied. "Say, I'll pay for breakfast an' you buy the drinks. How'd that strike yuh?"

It seemed to strike Mr. Barr suitably, and the two rose from the depleted breakfast table. Leaving the dining room they went into the hotel lobby where Jerico paused briefly to pay the proprietor who lounged behind the desk, and then, accompanying Mr. Barr, pushed through the door which led into a wing opposite the dining room.

It was a narrow barroom they entered. Behind the bar, which ran down half the length of the room, was an amiable man who was nonchalantly polishing a glass. He nodded a greeting as the two entered.

"Hyah, Billy?" greeted Tom Barr. "Got any whisky that's fit to drink?"

"I *allus* got good whisky," announced the bartender. "Want some?"

"A drink apiece, Billy," assured Mr. Barr. "This here is a friend of mine. Mr. Jones, Mr. Holmes. He's had a little hard luck."

Billy Holmes set out two glasses and a bottle. "That's what I heard," he said. "Kelden was tellin' me that him an' you found yore horses gone this mornin'. He says that Purdy thinks the bank robbers stole 'em. Purdy's wrong, I reckon. Them robbers was city dudes. They wouldn't steal no horses."

Jerico, his drink poured, nudged Tom with his elbow.

Barr, pouring his drink, appeared to choke suddenly. "What do you know about the holdup, Billy?" he asked, raising his drink and nodding in Jerico's direction.

"I heard about it from Hyson last night," returned Holmes. "He come in an' tole me. He was out lookin' for the car them fellers got away in."

"Much goin' on around here, Billy?" asked Barr.

The placid Mr. Holmes shook his head. "Big poker game upstairs yesterday an' most of last night," he said. "Six handed. Tipon, from the Half Triangle, an' Moss from the store, an' a couple of Tipon's cowhan's an' Burrel from over by Littlecreek, an' another feller in it. They kept Kelden hoppin' most of last evenin' cartin' 'em up drinks."

"Kelden the night man here?" questioned Jerico.

"General flunky," replied Holmes. "I guess there was some big pots in that game. They was sure quiet."

Jerico nodded. "I didn't hear 'em," he observed.

"You wouldn't," Mr. Holmes moved the bottle invitingly toward his two customers. "They had it up in Tipon's room, over the bar. He keeps that room just for poker parties an' such. It's off from the rest of the hotel."

"Uh-huh." Jerico appeared incurious. "Say, Tom, I got to be goin'. Got to go to the depot an' send Madrid a wire, an' then I'll browse around a little. I'll be seein' yuh."

"Goin' to do anythin' about yore horses?" Barr swung on one elbow and faced Jerico who had moved toward the door.

"I reckon the sheriff will find 'em," replied Jerico placidly. "Anyhow, I'm goin' to send that wire. I'll see yuh before dinner," and with that he was gone.

When he left Tom Barr and Billy Holmes, Jerico went on out into the little lobby of the Manassa House. Here he paused briefly to exchange comments and surmises with the proprietor of the hotel. The hotel man was sorry about Jerico's loss and said so. Jerico also was sorry. The tall Mr. Jones managed to break away shortly and went up stairs to the room he had left so hurried at an earlier hour. Here he rummaged in a pair of saddle bags which were his sole luggage. From one of the bags he brought out a shoulder harness and a scabbard containing a very short-barreled Colt. Without more ado Jerico put on the harness and followed it with his vest. He pulled the scabbard through the arm hole of the vest, fastened the bottom tab to the top of his trousers and then slipped into his coat. After trying the gun in its spring clip holster a time or two, Jerico was satisfied, and picking up his hat he left the room. He felt now that he was properly dressed for company.

Again passing through the lobby and leaving word for Barr to wait for him, that he would be back soon, Jerico sal-

lied out upon the single short street of Cisco.

The street was short enough. There were, beside the hotel, three stores, another saloon and, at the end of the street a depot. Toward this yellow painted building Jerico made his way. He went in, got a blank from the agent and, after chewing a pencil for a short time, wrote a telegram to Lew Madrid. Having paid for his message and informing the agent that a reply would find him at the Manassa House, Jerico went out of the station and back up the street. He had something on his mind and stopped at the first store he saw.

Entering, Jerico inquired of a clerk if the establishment had any ready to wear clothing. There being none in stock, Jerico went on out and sought the next store. Here again his question brought a negative reply and again Jerico passed on in his search.

His next stop was at the third store, a larger and more imposing edifice which bore a sign across its front bearing the slogan, MOSS' GENERAL MERCHANDISE. Again Jerico engaged in conversation the clerk who waited upon him. The clerk was elderly and not overly bright. Finding that Jerico wished to purchase ready to wear clothing, the clerk led his customer back into the dim recesses of the building and stopped beside a show case.

"We might have some," he said, opening a showcase. "I think we got in a shipment a while back but I didn't unpack 'em."

He reached inside the case and brought out a hanger. On it were three suits of clothes. These the clerk exhibited with some pride.

"Ain't many stores in little towns like this that carry anything but overalls and shirts," he announced. "Mostly the fellers around here go in to Littlecreek to buy their clothes."

Jerico fingered the suits, saw that they were either gray or brown and decided not to buy. He thanked the clerk and left the place, going on down the street. At the corner of the building that contained Moss' Store, Jerico stopped as though struck by an idea. He paused a moment and then turned and walked down the building to the back. Here he stopped again and stood looking over the litter that was in the yard back of the store. There was a packing box there, a new box with "Smart Clothes Co.," stenciled on its side. Jerico nodded with satisfaction and went on toward the Manassa House.

In the lobby of the hotel Jerico found his friend Tom Barr waiting for him. Barr was somewhat impatient. "Did yuh wire Madrid?" he questioned, when Jerico came up.

"I did," returned Jerico.

"What'd he say?" demanded Mr. Barr.

"How do I know?" retorted Jerico. "I telegraphed him, I didn't 'phone him. Likely he'll cuss a little when he gets my wire."

"How about a description of them horses?" questioned Barr practically.

Jerico shrugged. "It ain't important," he answered, "but I'll give yuh one."

Barr brought out a pencil and paper. "Have at it," he invited. "I must say yo're a curious jigger. Yuh seem to think that them horses will come back by themselves."

"Not by themselves," corrected Jerico, "but they'll be back. Well, here goes." He fell to describing horses and brands and Barr made notes. When Jerico had finished he rose from the chair in which he had been seated and grinned down at Tom Barr.

"Now," he said, "I seen a pool table in that saloon down the street. What do yuh say we go play a little rotation?"

Barr scowled at Jerico, glanced around the lobby and then nodded. "Might as well," he replied. "I ain't got nothin' to do 'til Purdy comes back."

"I got a idea he'll be back pretty soon, too," announced Jerico. "When he comes back he'll likely want to go into Littlecreek an' organize a big hunt. Yuh might as well go on in with him, but if yuh really want to do some huntin' I'd suggest that yuh resign from his posse an' come back out to Cisco. Yuh got a car, ain't yuh?"

Barr, puzzled, nodded. "Yeah," he said.

"Get it an' come on out," advised Jerico. "This is about as interestin' a town as yo're apt to find, an' anyhow I need somebody that knows the country around here."

Barr stared at his companion. "Yo're the coolest duck I seen for a long time," he announced at last. "Here yuh lost a string of horses an' yore saddle an' all yuh do is wire the feller that owned the broncs. Well, it's yore funeral."

Jerico shook his head. "I ain't been to my funeral yet," he observed placidly, "an' I don't aim to go to it for quite a while. By the way, when yo're goin' in with the sheriff yuh needn't say nothin' about them horses bein' Madrid's buckin' string, unless he asks yuh. Somehow I don't like that sheriff much."

Barr grunted. "I won't," he assured. "He'll probably know it anyhow. Come on, let's go play that pool game."

They played the game of pool and four others. Jerico bought a drink and Barr returned the compliment. They had exhausted the time killing devices of Cisco and were squatting against the front of a building, smoking and simply loafing, when the car with Purdy and his possemen returned and stopped before them in the street. The sheriff leaned over the door and gestured to Barr without alighting.

"Couldn't find no trail," he yelled as Barr arose. "We're goin' in to Littlecreek an' organize a regular manhunt. Come on, Barr."

Jerico looked up and winked at his friend, and Barr, a scowl on his tanned face, shook his head. "I'll be back," he said, low voiced, and strode out into the street and got into the waiting car. From the other side a man, carrying a rifle, climbed down, and with a clash of gears and a roar of the exhaust, the sheriff's car was gone.

The man with the rifle strode over and stopped before Jerico.

"You the feller that lost the horses?" he demanded.

Jerico nodded. "My name's Jones," he said. "I take it that yo're Hyson, the deputy here."

The man with the rifle nodded in his turn. "That's me," he said briefly. "We didn't find no sign of yore saddle stock at all. We went out to the Half Triangle an' got mounts an' then come back toward town. We circled, figurin' to cut the trail, but we never cut it. I reckon the fellers that took yore horses hit out on the highway. It's hard surfaced an' there's no sign on it that we could read."

Jerico nodded. "It beats me," he observed, "why them fellers would take to horseflesh instead of stayin' with a automobile. If they wanted to take to the hills yuh ought to of found some sign of 'em leavin' the road."

Hyson grunted and spat. "We would of if we'd had anything but a damn' belly wabblin' politician for a sheriff," he replied. "That damn' fool Purdy don't know as much as a hog knows about Sunday. Well, I hope yuh get yore stock back."

"Thanks," said Jerico, rising. "Mebbe I will. 'Bout time to tie on the nose bag, ain't it? I reckon I'll go down to the hotel an' see what the cook's ruined for dinner. So long."

Jerico ate his noon meal at the Manassa House and, chewing a match, left the dining room and again repaired to the lobby. He exchanged a few words with the fat proprietor and then asked a guileless question.

"That feller Kelden that works here," he said, "he around?"

"Out in back, I guess," observed the proprietor. "Want to see him?"

"I might," replied Jerico and moved over toward the door that led to the hotel barroom. "I'm goin' to have a drink; have one?"

The hotel man shook his head. "Never use it," he said. "Thanks just the same."

Jerico nodded and drifted out of the lobby. He went to the back of the hotel and there encountered Keldon sitting on the back steps of the kitchen engaged in peeling potatoes. Jerico sat down on the steps beside the man, reached into his pocket for his knife, opened it, and then fell to peeling potatoes.

"Quite a time we had this mornin'," he said cheerfully.

Kelden nodded. "That damn' sheriff thinks he's smart," he said, placing a peeled potato in the dishpan beside him.

"Uh-huh," said Jerico. "You musta been pretty sleepy last night."

"I was. Them fellers an' their damn' poker game kept me up most of yesterday an' last night."

"Soooo?" soothingly.

"Yeah. About every fifteen minutes they'd want a drink an' I'd have to take it up to 'em."

"Did yuh see much of the game?"

"Not a damn' bit. They'd stamp on the floor an' Holmes would fix up a tray with glasses an' send me up with it. Burrel would take it at the door an' shove out a tray with the empties an' I'd go back down. He never let me in once, never give me a damn' cent neither."

"Kinda close is he?"

"Hell, he's closer than the next second. Everybody knows that Burrel's a damn' tightwad."

"Kinda funny that he'd be takin' in the trays all the time."

"Not if yuh know Burrel. He'd want to be sure that he got his drink first."

"I wonder why they didn't buy a bottle an' keep it up there." Jerico put a peeled potato in the pan and reached for another. "That would of saved yuh a lot of steps."

"They wasn't worryin' about that," replied Kelden, bitterly. "Hell, I'm just their dog. I'd have to go out an' up them dark steps every trip, too."

Jerico looked toward the wing of the building that contained the saloon. The hotel was three storied with two sprawling wings and above the saloon there was a half story, roofed and windowed, with an outside stair leading up to its door. The Texas man shrugged.

"You been up since they left?" he questioned.

"No, but I got to go pretty soon. I got to clean their damn' mess up before tonight. Tipon told me they was goin' to play some more."

"Let's go up an' do it now," suggested Mr. Jones. "I'll help yuh. Likely they left some money up there for yuh for a tip."

Keldon rose to his feet and straightened the flour sack that he wore for an apron. His dull face brightened. "Mebbe they did at that," he said. "Come on."

The two left the potatoes and with Kelden in the lead, went up the steps that led to the room above the barroom. Kelden opened the door with a skeleton key and they went into Tipon's room. There was a bed in one corner of the room, but it had not been occupied. In the center of the room was a round poker table with a slot for the banker. There were a few cigar and cigarette butts on the table's edge, chairs were pushed back from it, and there was a litter of cards on its green surface. Across from the bed and table, and closer to the door, was a cupboard. While Kelden, with some profanity because there had been no money left for him, began to clean up the floor about the table, using a broom which he took from a corner, Jerico strolled over to the cupboard, opened it and looked inside.

"Seems like them fellers would of used the liquor they had up here instead of makin' you trot them stairs," he commented, peering into the cupboard.

"What liquor?" snarled Kelden. "They didn't have no liquor up here before they began to play. All they got was what I had to carry."

"Is that right?" Jerico appeared interested. "How do you know?"

"Because Tipon never keeps no liquor in this room; an' anyhow," defiantly, "I looked in here yesterday mornin' before they began their game an' all I seen was a couple or three empty bottles."

"Musta brought it up with 'em, then," said Jerico.

"They didn't do that, neither. They all met in the bar before they come up an' I know they didn't have no liquor."

"Well, there's some here now," said Jerico. "Here, lemme have that broom an' you straighten up the chairs an' the table."

He took the broom from the willing Kelden and while that worthy set the table and chairs to rights and generally straightened up the place, Jerico finished sweeping. When they had finished, he accompanied the hotel employee down the stairs again and left him to his potato peeling. Jerico walked around to the front of the Manassa House, entered the lobby, and there, sitting in a chair leaned back against the wall, and with his hat tipped down over his eyes, devoted himself to some serious thinking. It was in that position that Tom Barr found him when he entered the lobby later in the afternoon.

Jerico was glad to see Tom. He got out of his chair and invited the young deputy to have a drink. Tom, who had left his car outside, accompanied Jerico into Billy Holmes' Bar and they indulged in a modest libation. With that accomplished they returned to the lobby. Barr had a good deal to tell Jerico and Jerico was more than willing to listen.

"They ain't found out nothing more in Littlecreek," announced Barr. "The State Bankers' Association has got out a reward of a thousand dollars apiece for the fellers that done the job, an' Purdy has got a posse 'most organized. They'll be out through here, some of 'em, right away. Purdy thinks now that the bank robbers might of gone some

other way. There was a car with men in it that answered their description, that went out of Littlecreek headed south right after the robbery. He thinks that mebbe yore horses have just been stole by some local talent or mebbe a drifter. He heard that there'd been some stock missin', an' when he was out to Tipon's Half Triangle, Tipon told him that this was part of Madrid's buckin' string."

"Nice an' obligin' of Tipon, wasn't it?" questioned Jerico, his blue eyes narrowed in a squint. "How'd he know they was Madrid's horses? I didn't tell him."

Barr shrugged. "How do I know?" he said. "I didn't tell him neither, but he knew all right. What you find out?"

"I found out that there ain't no ready made suits in this town," replied Jerico, "but there's been some. You know——" he broke off abruptly. "Say, do you like to play poker?"

Barr was plainly puzzled by the sudden change of subject.

"Why . . . yeah," he said. "Say, what's playin' poker got to do with all this? What you drivin' at?"

"I like to play a little, too. Do yuh reckon we could get up a little game?"

Barr scratched his head, ruffling his black hair, and squinted at Jerico. "We might," he replied finally. "Yo're just too damn' agile for me. Your mind skips around like a flea on a griddle. What do yuh want to play poker for?"

"For instruction." Jerico was grinning broadly. "Let's you an' me go into the saloon an' do some talkin'. I'd like to get into that game that Tipon is puttin' on tonight in his room."

Barr shook his head. "No chances for that," he said. "Didn't you hear Holmes say that it was already six handed? That game's about full up."

"But it mightn't be tonight," urged Jerico. "Come on. I'm a optimist."

Followed by the puzzled Barr, Jerico went into the saloon that adjoined the Manassa House. There, after buying a drink, he indulged in considerable conversation, flashed a sizable roll of bills, and otherwise laid himself open to inspection. Jerico was adroit. Tom Barr followed his leads and, with such gentle manipulation, it was Billy Holmes himself who suggested that Jerico's pining for a game of chance might get its fulfillment when Tipon and his party arrived.

"If Tipon's game ain't full up," said Holmes, "yuh might get into it. I'll ask him when he comes in. You goin' to be around?"

"Later on in the evenin'," replied Jerico. "I'd sure be obliged if yuh'd suggest it to him. Let me know, will yuh?"

Holmes said that he would, and Jerico and the puzzled Tom Barr left the saloon again and returned to the lobby. The hotel dining room was open and the two went in and ate supper together. When they returned to the lobby after the meal, it was almost dark outside.

"Let's go in an' see how our chances are for that poker party," suggested Jerico, crossing the lobby. "I hope that they're comin' all right."

"Yo're sure rarin' to lose some money," grumbled Barr, following Jerico. "Damn it! I'm about ready to quit yuh an' go home! I don't think ——"

"Wait 'til mornin' before yuh quit," urged Jerico, opening the door to the barroom. "Gosh feller, don't run out on me now. I need yuh."

At the bar they found Holmes talking to a bulky, somewhat gray man who turned and scanned them with cold gray eyes as they entered. Barr nodded shortly. Apparently he knew the gentleman talking to Holmes. The bartender beckoned Jerico over and introduced him.

"This here is Mr. Tipon, Mr. Jones," said Holmes. "I was just tellin' him about yore wantin' to play a little poker tonight. He thinks mebbe he can accommodate yuh."

Neither Jerico nor Tipon extended a hand. Both nodded, each to the other, and each stared with steady eyes. Tipon was the first to speak.

"I reckon we might get yuh in," he announced, his voice a hard rasp. "The game's six handed if everybody shows up, but we could make it seven."

"I'd take it mighty kindly," Jerico drawled. "It's kind of lonesome just waitin' with nothin' to do."

"Yo're the feller that lost the horses, ain't yuh?" Tipon asked abruptly.

Jerico nodded.

"Heard anythin' of 'em?"

"Not yet, but I'm expectin' to most any time. I'll be droppin' around later. I got a little business to 'tend to an' then I'll look yuh up. I'm shore obliged." Jerico half turned.

"What time will yuh be comin'?" Tipon's words checked Jerico's movement.

"I reckon around nine or nine-thirty if that's all right with you," Jerico answered the question. "I'll try to make it by then."

"We'll count on yuh at nine-thirty." Tipon was definite in his statement. "I'll look for yuh then."

Jerico nodded. "Nine-thirty it is," he said. "Come on, Barr. I'm shore obliged Mr. Tipon." With Barr trailing him, Jericho went back to the lobby. Well away from the saloon door he stopped and whirled on the sulky Barr. "You dressed for business?" he snapped.

Barr stared at his questioner. "Why," he said, his puzzlement showing in his voice. "I got a gun in the car. Do yuh want me to get it?"

Jerico shook his head. "Yuh heard him say nine-thirty, didn't yuh?" he snapped. "Let's go!"

With Barr hurrying after him, he almost ran from the lobby and climbed into the seat of Tom's car. Barr slid in behind the wheel and clicked the ignition switch. "Where to?" he questioned.

"Out towards the Half Triangle," said Jerico. "I'll tell yuh while we're goin'."

With the car started and sliding smoothly up the road toward the north, Barr ventured a glance at the man who sat beside him. Jerico was staring straight out into the headlight's beam and, despite his promise of a moment before, was singularly uncommunicative. Barr impatient with his status, spoke somewhat sharply.

"Well," he said, "yuh said yuh'd tell me. Do it!"

Jerico took a long breath and expelled it. "I'm afraid to think I'm right in what I think," he said, somewhat ambiguously. "Still, it's got to be that way or else my brains are lyin' to me along with a lot of facts. Tom, what would yuh say if we run into my horses out at the Half Triangle?"

"I'd say that they'd picked 'em up for yuh," responded Barr promptly.

"Yeah," dryly, "so would I. About one o'clock this mornin', or thereabouts."

"What yuh mean? Do yuh think that Tipon an' the Half Triangle men stole 'em last night? Why, yo're crazy!"

"Somebody's got to be crazy. If Tipon didn't take them horses or else order 'em taken, then I'm shore enough nuts!"

"You shore are!" Barr slowed the car. "If yo're goin' out to the Half Triangle figgerin' to find yore horses out there, I'd say yuh were plenty loco."

"They're there if they are in the country." Jerico was very positive. "You trail with me, Tom, an' I'll prove I'm right!"

"Then yuh think that Tipon an' them fellers was the ones that robbed the bank in Littlecreek? Why, they couldn't of done it! They was all up stairs over Billy Holmes' place playin' poker when the bank was robbed! They couldn't of."

"I told yuh it sounded crazy," reminded Jericho. "Listen, Tom. This mornin' I made some inquiries concernin' ready to wear clothes in Cisco. I found out there wasn't but a few in town but there had been some at Moss' Store *an' they hadn't been sold!* Not only that but Tipon was mighty anxious to get me into that poker game tonight. Then, this afternoon, before you come back, I got to visit Tipon's room a little an' I found some liquor there. That set me thinkin' more than ever because Kelden had been busy all last night cartin' up drinks. Tom, I'll bet yuh that Tipon an' his Half Triangle men not only took my horses but I'll go further than that: *I'll bet they was in that bank robbery at Littlecreek!*"

Tom Barr took his foot off the gas and the car drifted along, losing speed. He stared at Jerico, his eyes incredulous in the light from the dash. Finally he spoke. "Yo're crazy!" he said hoarsely.

"I told yuh," reiterated Jerico. "Just the same, when I was in the Rangers I've gone on crazier things than this. I——"

Barr's eyes widened. "Are yuh *that* Jones?" he snapped. "The feller that run that bunch out of Uvalde an'——"

"I'm that Jones," interrupted Jerico. "Speed it up a little, will yuh, Tom?"

Barr made no reply save to increase the speed of the car, and they tore along the level highway in silence save for the noise of the motor. Presently Barr slowed and negotiated a turn from the main road. They struck off to the right on two narrow, deeply printed ruts. Jerico stirred in his seat.

"This the road to the Half Triangle?" he questioned.

"Yeah." Barr was laconic.

"Stop before we come to the ranch," requested Jerico. "Mebbe it would be a good thing if yuh stopped before they could hear the noise of th' car there."

"I still think yo're bughouse," reminded Barr, "but I'll go with yuh a piece. Wouldn't do to have a nut trailin' off alone. I'll stop in plenty of time."

"That's all I'm askin' yuh to do," retorted Jerico. "It won't be long now before we see whether I'm crazy."

Barr grunted.

The narrow road twisted and turned. Presently Barr took his foot from the throttle and began to apply the brakes. "We're about a quarter of a mile from the ranch," he said. "I——"

In front of Tom Barr the windshield shivered into a thousand pieces. Concurrent with the crash of glass came the smashing report of a rifle. Jerico, his short barreled Colt in his hand, dived over the door and lit sprawled in the road. Behind him the runabout came to a halt. In the dim light of the dash lamp Jerico could see Tom Barr opening the left hand door. Another rifle shot came with its accompanying tinkle of glass and the right headlight went into darkness.

"Yuh all right, Tom?" Jerico called softly.

A muffled curse came in answer and Jerico grinned in the darkness. Barr was all right or at the worst had a very slight wound. The tall Texan wormed his way from the car toward a clump of soapweed close to him. "Stay down!" he warned, low voiced.

His answer was a shot from the rifle that whined by, singing shrilly. Jerico hugged the earth. From the other side of the car a Colt began a hoarse bellowing. Apparently Barr had taken his gun with him when he had left the car. The staccato roar of the Colt was punctuated by the sharper, more emphatic crack of the rifle. Jerico saw a red flash, and in the next second was on his feet, running toward it. He zigzagged in his run, felt the hot breath of a bullet in his face, replied to the shot, and the next instant was upon a man who half rose and tried to meet him. The short Colt in Jerico's hand described a swift arc that ended on a head. Jerico felt the man beneath him go limp and, breathless, Jericho crawled to his feet.

"Quit, Tom!" he called. "It's all over!"

Barr, stuffing shells into a gun, crossed the beam of the single headlight and came toward Jerico. "What in hell was this all about?" he demanded as he came up.

"We didn't start stoppin' soon enough," explained Jerico. "This feller didn't want no visitors."

Barr lit a match and bent over the man on the ground.

"Why, it's Stuffy Ellis," he exclaimed, amazed. "What in hell could have put him on the prod?"

"Know him, do yuh?" questioned Jerico.

"Yeah. He works for Tipon."

"He's the feller that was goin' to bring back my horses, chances are," observed Jerico, busying himself with a neckerchief which he took from his captive. "We'll tie him up an' go a little further into this."

"I'm commencin' to believe yuh, Jerico." Tom Barr's voice was grim.

"Uhhuh." Jerico tugged a knot tight on Ellis' wrists. "Let's take him over to the car an' go on to the ranch. If I'm right it's goin' to get more interestin', an' it shore looks like I'm right!"

Barr was lifting the inert man's feet as Jerico took up his head. "Interestin'?" he asked. "Mebbe yuh could call it that, but I want to know——"

"An' you'll find out," assured Jerico. "What yuh worryin' about? Yo're havin' a good time, ain't yuh?"

"Oh shore," sarcastically. "I'm havin' a regular whale of a time. Here's the car. Do yuh want to put him to bed in it?"

"Nope." Jerico heaved his end of the body onto the seat. "I just want him to rest easy. Now, let's lash his feet to the steerin' post an' go on about our business."

While Jerico acted on his own suggestion, Barr opened the hood of his roadster and lit a match. The match went out but Barr's profanity rumbled on.

"Ruined!" he announced. "That slug that hit the lamp went on an' plugged the vacuum tank. We're stuck!"

Jerico came around the car. He had finished his tying job and now, he too lit a match and bent over the engine. Tom had been right; the vacuum tank of the car was pierced by a jagged hole.

Jerico blew out his match, and he, too, straightened. "An' I got a date to play poker at nine-thirty," he said softly.

"An' I got a ruined car." Barr was so mad that he was almost crying. "By damn, Jones! This is the blamedest, craziest——"

Jerico interrupted the tirade. "One good thing," he said softly, "they'll be a place in that poker game for you now."

"I don't give a damn about that poker game. My car's shot an'——"

"We'll all get half shot when it's over," assured the hopeful Mr. Jones. "Come on. Let's go to the house an' see if we cain't find somethin'."

Tom Barr was too mad for further speech. Without a word he set off along the road, and Jerico, grinning placidly in the darkness, followed his seething companion.

It took the two men perhaps ten minutes to reach the Half Triangle ranch-house. There was a light in the kitchen window and Jerico, after a cautious investigation, returned to Barr and informed him that there was no one at home in the place. Barr didn't care and said so. He had lost his temper very thoroughly and he sullenly followed Jerico around the house and to the barn beside which was a corral. There were horses in the corral, that shied and moved away at the approach of the two.

"That's them," asserted Jerico. "That's that damn' bunch of wild eyes I was trailin'. I'd know 'em any place. I'll bet they wasn't here when the sheriff come out. Tipon had 'em cached an' brought 'em in tonight."

"Yuh cain't see," reminded Barr. "Yuh don't know for sure. I *still* think yo're crazy. What the hell would Tipon be doin' with Madrid's buckin' horses?"

"He didn't want Madrid's buckin' horses," explained Jerico, patiently. "He'd never of took 'em if he'd knowed they was a rough string. That's why he was goin' to return 'em tonight. When I was peacefully gettin' rooked at poker about ten o'clock, these horses was due to be delivered at the Manassa House corral. Come on. Let's go see if we cain't find a saddle."

"But I don't figger——"

"If I had time, I'd draw yuh a picture," snapped Jerico. "I'm right so far, ain't I? Well . . . now, where in hell is that saddle shed?"

Silenced, Mr. Barr conducted the way toward the desired room in the barn. Once inside the tack room Jerico lit a match and looked around. His glance fell upon a familiar object and he stepped toward it, picked it up, and held it out toward Mr. Barr.

"Here's my saddle," he announced triumphantly. "Now, what'd I tell yuh? This—— Ouch! Damn it!" The match he held had burned his finger and the rest of Jerico's speech was unintelligible. Finally he took his finger out of his mouth long enough to command aggrievedly, "Get yuh a saddle," and, lugging his own furnishings, tramped out of the saddle room.

When Barr, carrying a saddle that he fondly hoped would fit him as to stirrup length, joined Jerico beside the corral fence, the tall man was unfastening his rope from his saddle and whistling tunelessly.

"I'm goin' to get yuh that gray horse," announced Jerico, placing a foot on the bottom rail of the corral. "See him?"

Dimly in the darkness, Barr could discern a gray object in the corral. "Yeah, I see him," he said.

"Well," Jerico crawled over the corral fence and dropped inside, "he don't pitch much. I'll snare him out for yuh."

"What one you goin' to ride?" Tom could see Jerico's arm move as he shook out a loop.

"I dunno that I'm goin' to ride." Jerico's voice was dry. "I'm goin' to make a hell of a effort though. Most any of them hellers is bad enough, but we ain't got time to be pickin' an' choosin' tonight. I'm goin' to spread a wide loop an'—— Ugh!" This last as his rope fell and he dropped the end across his thighs and set back on it.

"Here's yore gray horse, Tom."

Barr swung his saddle up on the fence and climbed over. He was beginning to believe that his companion was right in his wild guesses. Jerico was going up the rope, hand over hand, and the gray horse stood quiet.

When Barr had slipped a bit into the horse's mouth and fastened the throat latch on the bridle, Jericho took off his rope.

"Lead him out a ways," he requested. "I'm apt to fasten on to a wil'cat this time."

Barr did as requested, leading his horse over toward the fence and his saddle. When he had adjusted the blanket and was swinging up his saddle, he heard Jerico grunt again and knew that a second horse had been roped.

Apparently Jerico was having trouble with this one. Barr heard a thud and a scramble and some lurid profanity. He tugged tight his latigo, and fastening the reins to a fence rail, hurried to help his companion.

But Jericho did not need help. "He's standin' like a old cow, now. Just fought a little at first," Jerico informed Barr when the latter came up. "I'll get my saddle on him all right, but I don't know what from then on. The way he's actin' I think he's Ol' Blue an' if he is I'm in for it." As he spoke he started up the rope, gingerly. Barr stood still and awaited developments.

"It's Blue, all right," announced Jerico cheerfully. "I won't need no help to saddle him. I wish yuh'd open the gate."

"These horses will drift out," objected Tom.

"They won't go far from water," replied Jerico, "an' anyhow I'm goin' to need a couple of acres to ride this devil in. Whoa! Yuh damn' jughead! Don't yuh swell under this saddle!"

Barr untied his own horse and leading him, went to the gate. He let down the bars and awaited developments. There was still some speech inside the corral. Apparently Jerico was trying to talk the blue horse out of the notion of bucking. Barr chuckled and swung into his saddle. He was pleased to find that his choice had been good. The stirrups were long enough and the saddle was easy. There was a commotion inside of the corral, a wild yelp, and then a horse and rider shot out of the gate toward the house.

Where the light from the lamp in the window gave a dim glow, the blue horse stopped his sudden bolt, ducked his head and went to work. And there, before an audience of one, Jerico Jones put on an exhibition. He rode that blue horse free and easy. He raked him and beat him with his hat while the blue tried to drive his feet into the hard earth and arch his back to the skies at the same instant. The blue sunfished and fence rowed, reared and stood almost straight on his front feet, and then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. The blue horse bawled once and his head came up. He lunged out of the light and his feet beat the mad tattoo of a gallop. From the dark Jerico's voice floated back to Tom Barr.

"Come on! Let's go to town!"

Barr, awe in his face, kicked the gray horse into a run and set out after Jerico.

When Tom Barr caught up with his companion the blue horse was bucking again. Barr could tell by the erratic pound of hoofs and the thwacks as Jerico's hat struck the blue, that there was a ride in progress but he could not get close enough to see much of it. Jerico yelled to Barr when the blue let down a little in his pitching, instructing him to go to the car, see if their captive were still tied fast, and turn off the single remaining headlight. Barr spurred ahead to perform Jerico's wishes, and had just made sure that Ellis was still securely fastened, when the blue horse pounded by. Barr flicked the car light into darkness, swung up on the gray, and followed.

The blue roan bucked spasmodically all the way into Cisco. At times he would run madly, then down would go his head and up would go his back. It was a much pounded and shaken Jerico Jones who managed to climb down from the blue close by the Manassa House and led the horse toward the corral. Tom Barr, without instructions, followed Jerico's lead. They stripped the saddles from their mounts inside the corral and Jerico hastily made what toilet he could in the light that came from the Manassa House windows. When he had rearranged his attire and straightened himself up as best he could, he spoke earnestly to Tom Barr.

"Now, listen, Tom," he said. "I'm goin' up to that poker game. You come along. You foller what I say an' don't make no comments. If it comes to trouble, remember that there's times when one man alone has a big advantage an' don't yuh go hornin' in. I've damn' near been killed twic't by well meanin' friends tryin' to save my life. Yuh trailin' with me?"

Barr nodded. "An hour ago I thought you was plenty crazy," he said ruefully. "Now, I reckon *I* am. Findin' them horses at the Half Triangle has plumb upset me. I don't know nothin' an' I'm not a damn' bit sure of that. I'll foller yore lead, Jerico."

Satisfied, Mr. Jones turned and went toward the outside stair that led up to Tipon's room. There were lights in the room and Jerico as he progressed toward it, furtively felt under his coat and made sure that the Colt was in its holster. A thought struck him and he

stopped, jacked an empty shell from the gun and replaced it, then slipped another shell into the chamber that he usually kept empty. With that done, he resumed his progress, reached the stairs and ascended them. Barr followed close at his heels.

At the door of the room, Jerico knocked and a voice from within demanded his identity. Jerico answered and was bidden enter. He pushed open the door and went into the lighted room. Just inside he stepped to the right and Tom Barr came in. Jerico blinked until his eyes adjusted themselves and then he nodded to Tipon who had half risen from a seat at the table.

"I brung Barr up with me," announced Jerico. "He hadn't nothin' to do, an' I thought he could loaf here awhile. That all right with yuh?"

"Why. . . ." Tipon hesitated. "I reckon so. Yuh don't want to play, do yuh Barr?"

"No." Barr shook his head. "I'm just killin' time."

"That's all right then." Tipon sank back, apparently relieved. "Stuffy Ellis is comin' up later, an' I told him I'd save him a place. That'll make the game seven handed. We could take in another but——"

"I don't want to play," Barr said again. "I'll just sit around a while an' look on."

Tipon turned from Barr to Jerico. "Yuh don't know these fellers, do yuh Jones?" he questioned. "This here," pointing to a heavy set man at his right, "is Ross Gates, my foreman. That's Moss that keeps the store here. This here's Burrel," he continued, indicating a long, lank man with a drooping mouth and a great predatory nose. "Burrel runs a garage at Littlecreek. That there is Cartwright from San Antone. Fellers, this is Mister Jones. Now we're all acquainted an' we can play some cards."

As Tipon spoke, he had pointed out each of the men named. Moss was short, his hair graying, and deep lines were etched in a rather white face. Cartwright was a wiry man of medium height, and one eye squinted badly. He looked steadily at Jerico as if seeking some sign of recognition, but Jerico's face remained impassive. Jerico nodded to each man in turn; then, when the introductions were finished, stepped to the table and pulled back a chair. Tom Barr, his face as blank as Jerico's, stepped half way around the table and took an empty seat, tipping back in it. Jerico, in that moment admired the black-haired, black-eyed Wyoming boy. Barr was good. He was in a place and a situation that he didn't know anything about, but he was backing the man who was with him. Jerico turned to Tipon.

"What we playin'?" he asked.

"Draw," replied Tipon. "It's the only game there is that's worth while. We play straight draw with no joker runnin' wild nor nothin' else. Every time the deal goes clear around we play one hand of stud. That suit you?"

"Suits me," replied Jerico. "Table stakes?"

"Yeah," Tipon told him, "an' yuh can play back as much as yuh like. The ante's a dollar an' it's a fifty dollar limit. Let's cut for deal."

Jerico nodded and settled into his chair. From his pocket he brought out a roll of bills, peeled off a hundred dollars and shoved the money toward Tipon who sat at the banker's slot. "I'll take that in chips," said Jerico, "an' I'm playin' a thousand back of it."

The other men in the game bought chips, stacked them neatly before themselves, and the cards were cut for deal. Moss won the deal, riffled the cards and slid them out.

As a poker game it was interesting. Jerico played a leather vest game. He trailed in the betting, losing his ante time and again in order to see how the men about the table played their cards. It was half an hour and the deal had been clear around, before Jerico loosened up. Then, when the stud hand was dealt, he bet, caught a pair back to back, got the third one on the fourth card, and won the pot. As he gathered in the chips he grinned.

"My first pot," he announced. "I'll buy a drink on that. Yuh got any liquor here?"

Before Tipon could answer he was on his feet and striding to the cupboard in the corner. The filled bottle he brought out was plainly astonishing to the men about the table. Jerico was grinning cheerfully as he brought it back.

"Didn't expect I'd find no liquor, did yuh?" he observed. "Now, where in hell's the glasses? Glasses? Glasses?" He stared about the room. Tipon had

slid back his chair and was staring at Jerico and the full bottle.

"There's another where this come from," assured Jerico cheerfully. "Don't appear to be no glasses here. Oh well, we can drink from the bottle, cain't we Squint?"

At the question, Cartwright half rose and then slumped back again into his chair, his face a mask of hate, and every muscle tense.

Jerico uncorked the bottle and, holding it in his left hand, passed his right across the mouth to wipe it. "Yuh know," he remarked conversationally, "it's a heap better for us to take a drink like this than it is to keep Kelden trottin' up an' down them stairs like we done the other night. Besides we don't need no alibi, tonight, do we Burrel?" He half raised the bottle.

Burrel, his face white, managed a question. "What . . . what'd yuh mean?" he half gasped.

"Oh, nothin' much." Jerico lowered the bottle and stood it on the table. "Yo're shore tight, Burrel. Yuh ought to of got rid of this whisky and not tried to save it. But hell, that's nothin'. You fellers all made plenty of mistakes."

Cartwright was crouched in his chair. Moss was tilted back, the tips of his fingers touching the table. Gates sat and stared, his slow wits not equal to the task confronting them.

Tipon rasped a question. "What are yuh talkin' about, Jones?"

"I'll tell yuh," replied Jerico easily. "Before I do that though, I want to compliment yuh. Havin' a poker game is shore a slick way of dividin' up the loot. I'll say that." He paused. Not a man about the table stirred. Jerico noted with satisfaction that Tom Barr had put his chair upon all four legs and was sitting tense in it.

"Several mistakes,'" resumed Jerico, his voice musing. "Leavin' that packin' box that the clothes come in, out back of yore place, Moss. That was a mistake; an' Burrel's savin' this whisky. My . . . my! Then pullin' Squint Cartwright in on the deal. The knife play had all the ear marks of that job yuh done in Laredo, Squint. Yo're name wasn't Cartwright then, though. Mistakes? Hell, the whole damn' thing was full of 'em, but I reckon the worst one, outside of robbin' the bank, was stealin' my horses. Tryin' to steal a rough string. I cain't figure——"

But Squint Cartwright, with a squeal of rage, had leaped from his chair to the table top, a knife glinting in his hand. Tipon was on his feet, his hand flashing back toward his hip. Moss had dropped to the floor and rolled under the table. Burrel was up, tugging at a gun. Only Ross Gates, a vacant expression on his face, still held his seat.

Jerico's hand dived beneath his coat and the short-barreled Colt came out in a dull blue arc. It crashed once and Cartwright, on the table, folded in the middle and went down, finished, a slug where his belt buckle should have been. Tom Barr came out of his chair as if on springs. A gun flashed in his hand and bellowed, and the light, hanging over the table, swayed wildly and crashed down. As it fell, Jerico could see Barr going under the table after Moss. With the fall of the light came total darkness. A gun flashed redly to Jerico's left, and he threw a swift shot in reply, dropping to his knees immediately after he had fired. Apparently he had missed for the gun flashed again. Following its crash came a scream, unearthly and awe inspiring, and then a thud. From the direction of the scream a voice came harshly:

"Damn it, yuh killed Gates!"

Jerico fired twice in the direction of the voice, dropped flat, and rolled swiftly. He was just in time for three guns answered his fire. The table, heretofore still standing, fell with a crash and there came the thud of a blow.

Jerico, flat and still on the floor, moved his hand out cautiously. His fingers encountered a booted foot. Jerico grabbed the boot and jerked with all his strength. The man above him toppled, tried to recover his balance, and fell. Jerico, rolling cat-like, was on top of him swinging his Colt. The first blow missed the man's head, but the second went home. Jerico was left with two opponents and a possible third. He discounted the latter possibility, however. He had seen Tom Barr go under the table and he believed that Tom had taken care of Moss. From somewhere above him and to his right, came a hoarse panting. Jerico, coming to his knees again, listened intently, swinging his Colt in the direction of the sound. He had fired three times. There were three more shots in his gun. When they were gone he would be at the mercy of

the men about him until he could reload.

Steps pounded up the stairs outside. Jerico waited, holding his breath. The hoarse breathing near him changed its position. The door of the room swung open and a lamp was thrust inside. For a moment the room was lighted and in that moment Jericho saw Tipon, still on his feet, swinging his big body toward him. Both men were off balance, both out of position, still two shots roared together. Jerico felt a burning pain along his side, and lurched. The lamp was swiftly withdrawn—went out. Again there was utter blackness. In the room a man groaned. There was a staggering step and then a heavy thump as a body struck the floor. Again there was silence.

The silence lasted forever, it seemed to Jerico. It beat and pulsated about him. He wanted to scream, to shout, to pull the trigger on the remaining shots in the Colt. Still he waited, his iron will controlling every jumping nerve in his body. A voice spoke softly and yet it roared in his ears:

"Jerico."

Jerico did not answer.

Again came the voice. "Jerico. This is Barr."

"You all right?" questioned Jerico. "There's another one, Tom. Yuh——"

A match flamed from behind the table and Tom Barr rose to his feet. "They're all down," he said softly. "Yuh damn' heller!"

Again came the thud of feet on the stairs. Light flooded in through the open door. Billy Holmes, holding a lamp in one hand and a cocked double-barreled shotgun in the other, stood in the opening.

"What the hell?" he demanded angrily. "What. . . .?"

"Come in, Holmes," said Jerico wearily. "Come in. This, I reckon, is the end of the bunch that robbed the Littlecreek bank."

ABOUT two o'clock that afternoon, seated in the lobby of the Manassa House, Jerico Jones, his feet stretched out before him, spoke softly to Tom Barr who sat at his side. In the corral back of the Manassa House were twelve horses, part of Lew Madrid's string of buckers. On the road to Littlecreek were two cars. One of those cars contained a much-puzzled sheriff named Purdy, two deputies, and two prisoners, Moss and Stuffy Ellis. The other car held a disgusted deputy sheriff and four dead men, Tipon, Cartwright, Ross Gates and the lanky Burrel.

For the third time, Jerico was explaining things to Tom Barr.

"Now yuh see," said Jerico patiently, "they took my horses to throw the sheriff off the track. They had to return the car they'd used, because it was Burrel's, an' he couldn't have it turn up missin'. So they borrowed my horses to make it look like they'd took to the hills. Tipon's men had come in horseback, an' they just drove my broncs out, dodgin' the deputy that was watchin' the road for a car. The saddles went in Tipon's car, and the deputy let it get by without searching it, because it was a local car. They'd had Moss order them blue suits. He could do it, bein' in the business, an' their wearin' clothes like that was a good disguise. Nobody'd ever seen any of 'em in them kind of clothes. Moss leavin' the packin' box outside his place where I could see it, was a mistake, like I said. Cartwright done the knifin'. I figgered that when I seen him, an' Moss said so. Cartwright pulled a knife stunt in Laredo when I was in the Rangers. He called hisse'f Carrel, then. We caught him an' he was sent up for life, but he made a getaway an' drifted up here. He was shore a bloodthirsty little cuss. They left Burrel here to call for drinks an' act like there was a poker game goin' on. That was their alibi. Kelden trotted up an' down them stairs most of the night, cartin' whisky, an' Burrel was too damn' stingy to throw it out. That saved whisky helped hang it on 'em."

"Funny about Burrel," commented Tom Barr. "He just died of fright, I reckon. The coroner didn't find a scratch on him. Said he had a bad heart an' it quit on him."

"I reckon," said Jerico absently.

"But how'd they get out an' leave here?" questioned Barr, after a moment's pause.

"It wasn't hard," replied Jerico. "That outside stair made it pretty easy. They just kept goin' up an' down 'til Holmes an' Kelden got used to it an' then, one at a time, they'd forget to come back. They had Burrel's car cached outside town an' when they all

got congregated, they went off in it."

"Ummmmm," Barr sighed thoughtfully. "I'm awfully dumb, I reckon."

"Yuh ain't too dumb to make a break that give me a chance," rejoined Jerico. "Shootin' down that light wasn't a dumb stunt by no means!"

"Ummm," again Barr sighed, then he straightened in his chair. "But how'd yuh know they was goin' to bring them horses back last night?" he demanded.

"I didn't know," returned Jerico. "I just figgered they would. When Tipon seen the brands by daylight he was bound to know that they was Madrid's horses. Tipon had followed the rodeos some, Moss said so, an' havin' done that he'd know the horses. I figgered he had 'em hid when he told the sheriff they belonged to Madrid. He didn't want no truck with a bunch of outlaw broncs. They didn't fit into his scheme so he was goin' to turn 'em back into the corral. That would of muddied things up a lot more. Don't yuh see?"

Tom Barr shook his head. "No," he said, "I don't see. That is, I don't see how yuh doped it out, but then, like I said, I'm dumb. What yuh goin' to do now, Jerico?"

Jerico scratched his head, then reached meditatively for the makings. "Go to Littlecreek for the rodeo, I reckon," he replied. "Then . . . say, Tom, yuh said a while ago that yuh was figgerin' on a little ranch some time pretty soon. I been figgerin' the same thing. Why don't you an' me take what we got an' go look for one? Think yuh could stand it?"

Tom Barr grinned at his companion. "I dunno," he said slowly. "If the last two days is a sample of yore goods, I dunno whether I could stand the pace or not. But I'll tell yuh, Jerico, we'll try it a whirl!"

HILLS WITHOUT END

By GLENN H. WICHMAN

It's not what you're prospecting for that counts, it's what you find.

MY PARTNER, Hep Gallegher, was probably the hopefulest man that ever lived and, at the same time, the biggest damn' fool. Early in life a Gipsy fortune teller had told him that he would find something of great value if he only looked for it hard enough. Whatever it was, was supposed to be on the other side of some hill. The idea had stuck fast in Hep's head. Not even the solemn contemplation of the number of hills there were could get it out.

"The process of elimination," Hep was saying, "is, when you stop to think about it, a wonderful thing. So far this mornin' I've eliminated from further consideration three good sized valleys and four small ones. I won't be bothered with 'em any more."

"What'll life hold for you when you run out of hills and valleys?" I asked.

"Nothin'," answered Hep. "Absolutely nothin'. I'm a born explorer. Just wonderin' about what'll be down in the next draw's got me all jumpy."

"Save yourself from havin' the jitters," I advised him. "There won't be nothin' but rocks an' mesquite an' greasewood."

Hep wasn't paying any attention. He was urging his roan up the rise and there was nothin' for me to do but follow. When he felt a hunch descending upon him he was always in a hurry.

The arroyo proved to be about a hundred yards wide, flat on the bottom and spotted with waist-high mesquite, just like a few million other arroyos. But right in the middle of it was a young woman, furiously wielding a spade. She seemed as out of place there as I would in a duke's bedroom.

"She must be nutty," I said.

"'On the contrary," said Hep, "she presents an interestin' enigma or somethin'."

Just then the young woman spotted us. She was dressed in khaki ridin' clothes and wore a black Stetson, which she pushed back on her head. One glance in our direction and she moved ten or twelve feet down the arroyo and fell to diggin' again. A little pinto was tied to the greasewood nearby.

SO FAR as I knew we were miles and miles from any habitation. As I have said before, one of Hep's pleasant habits was never to follow a road. More than once we had wandered around for days trying to find out where we were. When we did actually get lost he always considered it a

sign of good luck, although nothin' had ever come of it.

"If she don't bust her back, she'll get sun struck," said Hep. "The least I can do, as a gentleman an' future millionaire, is to offer her my assistance."

We slid down the steep bank of the wash and onto the flat. The woman pretended not to see us until we were a dozen feet away. When she did look up her lips were quivering and it seemed to me that she was kinda pale. It was pretty evident that she wished we hadn't showed up.

"Hello, boys," she said, pleasantly enough, "want a job?"

"Diggin' post holes?" asked Hep.

She let out a laugh that was too high strung to be natural. Good lookin' girl, too, mebbe about twenty-three or -four. And there was worry all over her pretty face.

"You probably think I'm slightly goofy," she said, "but I'm not. I'm an archaeologist. Once you get it in your blood it's hard to get it out."

"Too bad," sympathized Hep. "It's a dirty shame. Ain't there no cure for it that'd be easier 'an what you're doin' now?"

"Oh, no," she said. "When you once get bitten by the bug you just have to go on and on and on. But there's no reason why I can't let somebody else do the digging. I'll give you a job, if you really want one."

"Never needed one more," answered Hep, "but shovels ain't exactly in my line. However, I ain't for seein' you fracture a vertebra."

"Lady," I said, "we never was noted for havin' strong minds but our backs ain't half bad. What's the proposition?"

The young woman sat down on a boulder and wiped her face with a 'kerchief. "According to my researches," she said, "one of the seven cities of Cibola is situated right where you're standing."

Hep glanced around. "Can't be much of a town," he said.

She laughed. "Oh, it disappeared from sight centuries ago. It was one of the cities built by the Aztecs and was fabulously rich. The Spaniards, when they first came to Mexico, looked for it but never found it. The wealth of those early Indians was untold. My investigations as an archaeologist——"

"In other words," interrupted Hep, "you think you know where those Injuns put what they held out on the bankers?"

She pointed to the hole from which a few shovels of dirt had been taken. "That's the exact spot. I'll pay you men five dollars a day and board if you'll promise not to say a word about this to anyone."

"Gimme that spade," said Hep.

"You'll promise, on your word of honor, not to tell anyone?"

Hep and I both promised. Why shouldn't we? The poor soul was out of her head.

"I'll go right back to town and get another shovel," she said. "Just spend the time until I get back enlarging the hole. I'll bring you out something to eat and a week's pay in advance."

Hep offered to help her onto the pinto but she swung up unaided. We stood and watched while she trotted up the arroyo and finally over a ridge.

"Kick me," said Hep. "Mebbe I'm asleep an' havin' a nightmare."

"If you are, I am likewise," I answered, "so it wouldn't do either of us any good. Assumin' that we're still in possession of our faculties, what do you make of it?"

"Well, I never heard of any place called Cibola and I don't know any Injuns named Aztecs. An' I can't imagine anybody lookin' for a town with a shovel. But I got a lot of respect for the higher education an' I'm with the gal a hundred an' twenty per cent. Leastwise, I'm not turnin' down any five bucks a day durin' this present state of unemployment."

Hep grabbed the shovel and began shoveling. I sat down and watched him.

"While you're developin' a crop of blisters," I said, "let's do a little deducin'. I read a piece in the paper once about people who dig up buried towns. They're keen for diggin' holes but nobody ever heard of 'em coverin' up a hole. There's no fun in that. If you'll take the trouble to glance to your left you'll see where our young student of ancient history dug a hole an' covered it up. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"Nothin'," answered Hep, "except that she's a genuine lady an' don't want to leave the landscape scarred up."

"For a guy that's been around a lot," I came back, "you're still plenty dumb. The only reason she put back the dirt

was to remove somethin' from the vulgar gaze of a chance passerby. She had just finished when we hove in sight. Bingo—she moves down a few feet and starts another hole. Not bein' as big a goat as you are, she thinks up the buried city story and offers us a job to dig the town out. Come to think of it, that gal's no fool, or at least not a very big one."

Hep wiped his forehead while the idea soaked in. "In other words," he finally admitted, "you don't think she'll be back with the five bucks or the grub?"

"When she passed over that hill we saw the last we'll ever see of her," I said. "Like most hot-air stories hers wasn't without its flaw. Bend your back, fella, an' we'll find out what she planted. That'll be a damn' sight more interestin' than a town called Cibola that disappeared from sight a thousand years ago."

HEP went to work and inside of half an hour had uncovered a pair of leather saddle bags. I helped him pull them out and, believe me, they were heavy.

"There's money in 'em, or I'm a liar," exclaimed Hep, as he fumbled at one of the straps. He was shakin' like a leaf. "This is what I've been lookin' for for twenty years. If it's Injun gold nobody's got more of a right to it than me. The fortune tellin' lady said somethin' about buried treasure."

I pulled out one of the little canvas bags and opened it. It was full of twenty-dollar gold pieces.

"Nothin' Indian about these coins," I said. "The United States hadn't been thought of when the Aztecs was runnin' loose. An' that young woman didn't bury it here hopin' that it'd grow, either."

In addition to the coin there was any amount of bills. We lost track tryin' to count it.

"There's thousands an' thousands," whispered Hep. "I had a feelin' this mornin' that somethin' was about to happen."

It made me feel kinda nervous and prickly. "No two ways about it," I said, "it don't belong to us. Where the young woman got it I don't know, but it appears she was afraid somebody was goin' to take it away from her. She didn't look to me like a highwayman or the daughter of one or even the wife of one."

"I'm plumb puzzled," admitted Hep, "an' bitterly disappointed. If it was only ours, we'd be sittin' pretty. But the redskins didn't have bank notes drawn on Kansas City. An', besides, I ain't runnin' off with any young woman's mazula. But my luck's changin'. I'm on the right track."

We sat down in the shade of a mesquite while we tried to figure out what we should do. Didn't seem quite right to put the money back and leave it there. How'd we know but that it hadn't been stolen. The young woman looked honest enough, but looks don't go too far even with women. It was a plain cinch that she had been spoofin' us about a town bein' buried under the arroyo.

A GUN banged! Just like that, an' twice as fast. As the slug passed overhead, a twig of mesquite dropped down on my lap. Both of us started to get up but it was rather late. To all intents and purposes, we had already been captured.

"Don't either of yuh move a muscle!" said a not very pleasant voice behind me. "Yuh birds are due fer inspection. Won't no harm come tuh yuh—if yuh can pass."

There was more than one man walking through the gravel. First came a long legged hombre with a sheriff's star. Trailin' him was half a dozen fellas, evidently the posse.

The first thing the lawman saw was the money. "Ah-huh," he said. "I guess we won't have tuh go no further. Boys, we've got the birds that held up the bank."

The posse gathered around, cacklin' like a lot of hens. I didn't blame 'em much. It must have looked to them as though they had us dead to rights.

"Now look here, sheriff," I said, "you're barkin' at the wrong rabbit hole. Me an' my partner was just debatin' what to do with this money. We found it in that there hole. We're as innocent as you are an' mebbe more so."

"Horse feathers!" grunted the lawman. "Yuh mean yuh dug the hole tuh hide it in."

"When was this alleged holdup?" I asked.

"About three hours ago," answered the sheriff. "We've been ridin' hell-bent after yuh ever since."

"We must've been ridin' fast, too," I came back. "If you'll be so kind as to take a look at those two nags of ours you'll find they ain't even in a sweat."

The horses were right near and anybody with half an eye could see that they hadn't been hard ridden.

"Mebbe yuh had fresh mounts staked out," came back the sheriff. "Anyhow, where did yuh get the money?"

"We hired out as diggers to a young lady," put in Hep, "who was lookin' for a lost township. We didn't find the town but we did run across the money. If you'd rid up twenty minutes earlier you'd have seen us dig it out. 'Tain't ours. We never lost it."

The sheriff was tapping his forehead with his knuckles. "These birds are loco," he said. "Come on, boys, we'll take 'em back to Bernicia an' have their heads worked over."

It was a young fella in the posse that pointed out that neither Hep nor I looked anything like either of the holdup men. Then the whole posse went into conference and decided that one member would take us and the money to town while the rest of them took up the trail again.

Hep and I had our guns pulled, the posseman took the money up in front of him and we started off, ridin' ahead of him. The sheriff seemed to have a lot of confidence in that guard.

"What are you aimin' to do?" I asked Hep, in a whisper. "This was your idea in the first place."

"It's got me worried," answered Hep. "Seems like we ought to find the young woman an' get the straight of it."

"Mebbe," I said, "we ought to pull out an' forget about the whole business. We're liable to get in a jam if we ain't in one already. I take it we're headin' for the calaboose."

Hep was worried enough, but in the wrong direction. "Money entails a certain responsibility. I've always known that some day I was goin' to find a lot of it but I didn't think it was goin' to be such a bother."

"It's a curse," said I.

"Ditto," answered Hep.

THE guard obligingly let Hep get down to fix the cinch on his saddle and lived to regret it. Hep engaged him in pleasant conversation and the first thing the guard knew he was flat on his back, arms and legs tied and a bandanna over his mouth. We put him and his horse in the shade and moved on into Bernicia with the intention of looking for the young woman.

Before we got to town Hep thought we should take an inventory of the boodle. There was something over forty-two thousand dollars. This made him all the more nervous.

"The gal couldn't have got it in the holdup they was talkin' about," he said. "She must have got it before. Looks like it was fresh from a bank; bands around the currency and all that sort of stuff. An' now there's that guy back in the brush bound up. He'll get loose sooner or later."

"You've always wanted to be a capitalist without havin' the bother to work for it," I said. "The fortune tellin' lady was right."

We were in a fix an' no foolin'. Havin' been disrespectful to the law we'd have to keep a weather eye out for sheriffs and posses. Somebody owned that money and whoever it was wouldn't take the loss of it lightly. Forty-two thousand isn't anything to shake a finger at. And at least six men in this world knew that we had it.

We rode into town and put the horses up at the hitch-rail in front of the saloon.

"Mebbe we'd better inquire to see if somebody's been buyin' a supply of shovels," said Hep.

We looked around for the general store. It was across the plaza and next to it was the bank. There was a crowd around the bank, no doubt, on account of the holdup. An old snoozer stopped us.

"If yuh boys," he said, "have got any money in that bank, yuh might as well kiss it good-bye. A run's started. They're plumb out of loose change."

Hep was carrying the saddle bags. Just as we came up, the crowd gave 'way and a young woman came through the opening. She was the same one who had been looking for the buried city. Her eyes were red, for she had been cryin' and she was still cryin'.

Things began to happen so fast that I can hardly remember 'em. When the girl saw the saddle bags she went as white as a ghost.

"Get out of here, quick!" she said to Hep. "Hide those bags! Do anything! Run for your life!"

"Here's your money," said Hep, holding out the bags. "It's got me in enough trouble already."

There was a man dressed in store clothes right behind the girl. He, too, saw the bags and when he did he bristled up like a lion.

"Thief! Thief!" he called, an' pointed an accusing finger at Hep. "There's the bird that's got the bank's money! It's in them bags!"

There was a roar from the crowd. Most of those people stood to lose by the holdup, I suppose. No wonder they was excited.

Hep had had the foresight to fill his empty holster with the posseman's gun. He backed up against the side of the general store and got the iron out. The young woman had thrust something into my hand. It was a nickel-plated twenty-two revolver; about as much use in a riot as a bean-shooter would have been.

Hep expended one-sixth of his ammunition knockin' the nearest man's hat off. It proved a good move because the crowd backed up and cooled down pronto.

There were some bags of beans piled in front of the store. The girl climbed up on top of them. "There's nothing the matter with the bank now!" she shouted. "We can pay all accounts in full. These gentlemen," indicating me an' Hep, "have come to make a deposit. They have forty-two thousand in cash to put in and they're not afraid to do it either—are you, boys?"

"I should say not," said Hep. "We're tickled stiff. And if any of you people want to get funny an' be rough I'll do what I can to show you a good time. This gent who says we're holdup men is a cock-eyed liar——"

The fellow in the store clothes was backing away.

"Who's that guy?" said Hep to the girl.

"My uncle. He's been running the bank while dad's up in the mountains trying to get well."

Suddenly Hep began to cuss. Then he let out a whoop and started for the uncle. It was necessary for Hep to use another sixth of his ammunition. The uncle halted only when he felt one of his ear lobes disappear in thin air.

"Say, fella," said Hep, as he grabbed the man, "how in hell did you know the bank's money was in them bags? They were a long ways from here before the holdup took place."

The crowd was millin' around an' made conversation difficult. I collared the fella an' we elbowed our way into the bank. Hep used up two more shells in getting the people who had crowded in after us out of the place. No sooner had he done this, than they broke in again. Things were in the devil of a mess and it was a wonder somebody didn't get shot. Nobody seemed to understand anything and I understood less than that.

THE safe door was wide open. Hep and the girl had a few words and then Hep pitched the saddle bags into it, slams the door and twirls the combination. Then, apparently, because he couldn't find anything else to do, he up an' bangs the uncle on the jaw an' puts him to sleep.

"We're movin'!" he said to me.

I followed him to the rear of the bank and out the back door. We ran around the town and came in on the opposite side where our horses were. Ten minutes and we were high-tailin' it south. We'd put many a mile behind us before Hep slowed up.

"For a naturally gallant fellow," I said, "you had a lot of gall to run out on the gal."

"'Twas to save her a heap of explainin'," answered Hep. "It was a sort of family affair. Her paw went away and left the uncle in charge. Uncle took the money. There wasn't any holdup at all. He just said there was. Girl got wind of his plans in advance and found where uncle had put the saddle bags that he intended to vamoose with after things quieted down. She took them out and buried them. We came along and you know the rest. The uncle'll be a good boy from now on. Nobody in that town ever will get the straight of it. The family honor's been saved. Those rich people seem to have the devil——"

"Those are good hills over there," I interrupted, pointing off the road to the west. "It might pay to look 'em over. You've always wanted to be in among the money barons."

"Shut up," said Hep, an' wouldn't even look.

THE ROUNDUP

A MAN IN CHARGE

THE newly formed Cattlemens' Association had taken over the conduct of the great roundup. Bob Corson, as sheriff of Cactus County, was responsible that no renegades or rustlers should chisel in on the tally; as owner of the JC ranch he had the biggest personal interest in the success of the local cattle business; and because he was in love with Alice Meadows he hated terribly to be obliged to suspect her family of being big-time cattle thieves.

The first inkling of something wrong appeared when one Slade, BLR representative at the JC wagon, cut his string, and turned his cut of cows loose where they could easily be picked up by rus-

(Conclusion)

Fighting Bob Corson holds the smoldering Cactus County range in the grip of his iron control, while he masterfully brings to a successful solution all the public and personal problems with which he has been wrestling.

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of "Mesquite Jenkins, Tumbleweed," the "Hopalong" Cassidy stories, "Bar 20 Days," etc.

tlers, and, on his way home, went through Lucas Arroyo where was situated Black Jack Meadows' little ranch, which seemed to have no particular reason for, or means of existence. Black Jack, Alice, and the four sons were rumored to get along on a remittance check from the East that arrived quarterly.

Bob Corson promptly put aside his personal feelings and scoured the range. There was no question about the fact that the roundup was tallying short, but where the missing cattle could be was a puzzle. The range had been especially well combed that year. One bunch of animals, apparently ready to be driven out by rustlers and abandoned on

changed roundup schedules that made it dangerous to move them, were found. But they left no clue that led to any results. Matters, however, developed a little more rapidly along other lines.

Corson was forced to disable Slade in a gunfight. He was attacked in Bently by some gunmen, and finally the marshal of Bently discovered that one of the Meadows boys was lying up every day on a bluff overlooking the town with a buffalo gun covering his office. Evidently the Meadows family were not overlooking any possible setback to their plans.

Alice Meadows did not know what was going on, but she did know that it was dangerous for the sheriff to visit her, and she was getting worried and suspicious. One night, shortly after a visit from the sheriff, when the men had been away on one of their mysterious absences, she went to bed with a troubled mind, and dreamed troubled dreams. Sometime during the night something awakened her.

Chapter XVIII

"HOME SWEET HOME"

SHE stirred restlessly, opened her eyes and struggled to orient herself. She had been dreaming a distressing dream and for a moment she did not know where she was. The room was pitch black, and the murmur of voices came to her faintly and indistinctly. Gradually she recognized the tones, and knew that she was in her own room. She had no idea of what hour it was, and neither had she heard the men when they came in. She was wide awake now, and coherent and connected thoughts began to pass through her mind. The men were at home again, after an absence of three days and nights. The window in the next room went up with a squeaky protest, and the voices became distinct.

". . . . had another talk today," said Mort's voice in a growl. "I'm gettin' right suspicious about that damn' old fool of a marshal. He knows more than he lets on, an' I'm willin' to bet that he's tellin' that damn' sheriff everythin' he hears. It's purty near time we got rid of him, an' I'm all set an' ready to do it, too."

"Th' sheriff don't know a thing that amounts to anythin'," said Matt, contemptuously. "He rides around, pokin' his itchin' nose into other people's business, but he ain't found out nothin' that we've got to worry about. An' if he does, we won't miss him th' fourth time."

"We wouldn't a-missed him before if we hadn't been careless," growled Maurice, angrily. "An' Slade! Slade, th' gunman, th' tough hombre! Huh! If he'd just waited till his shoulder got well, so he wouldn't flinch when he fired, he'd be alive today, an' th' sheriff, dead."

"Matt's wrong, dead wrong," stated Black Jack, flatly. "Corson knows a lot more than he's let on. His wagon will be through in a few days, an' he can turn his outfit loose. They're a tough gang. We got to get th' cattle branded, an' out of th' country before then. If I reckoned that Mort was right about th' marshal, I'd give th' word. That long-nosed old coyote picks up a lot of loose talk in town, an' he can put two an' two together. Him an' Corson are right thick. Why shouldn't they be? They're friends an' brother officers, ain't they?"

"Tell you one thing, Pop," said Matt's voice, argumentatively and determinedly. "When we get this present bunch away, we're shore goin' to sit back an' play honest for a while. We got to let things simmer down."

"Or else get Corson!" snapped Mort. "He's th' burr under our saddle. We made a damn' clever play, an' so far, it's worked out all right; but we got to look out for him. An' when we get him, it's got to be over in his own part of th' country, as far away from here as possible. He's pizen dangerous."

"Hell!" snorted Matt. "We'll get him where we can. We can allus pack him away, an' dump him where we want him to be found. Th' main thing is to get him before he can stop us, an' mebby kill some of us. He's a bad hombre."

"If he'd only give us a little more time," said Black Jack, "we could be all through here, an' be ready to leave th' damn' country. About two more drives, an' th' job would be done. There ain't no use of leavin' here, where we've got everythin' set, an' lined up, till we get all we need. This range was just made for us, an' I'll be damned if I'll leave it till I've made my pile. Two more drives, an' then we'll pull out; an' nothin' from heaven or hell is goin' to stop

me from makin' them drives. If Corson gets in th' way, he'll just get hisself killed. Can't we make a play over west, that'll take his mind off of this part of th' county?"

"Hell," growled Maurice, disgustedly. "We've made plays over there, an' all they did was to head him this way."

"Oh, he'll get in th' way, all right," laughed Mort, viciously. "Him an' that damn' marshal are doin' a lot of pow-wowin'. I come right near pullin' trigger on that old fool today. Since Denver was killed, he's been stayin' inside his office; but he'll be driftin' back to his favorite place."

"It might be a good thing if you did whang him," said Black Jack, thoughtfully. "It'll not only stop his mouth, but it'll make other folks mind their business, an' start 'em thinkin' in other directions. Besides, he killed Long Bill, didn't he?"

"Give me th' word, an' I'll drill him," said Mort, eagerly. "I got that range figgered down to a hair, an' that 'scope is th' sweetest thing I ever saw. His chest just busts right up at me on th' cross-hairs."

"You shoot any time you figger you oughta," said Black Jack. "That's up to you. But you remember this—after you shoot, you be damn' shore to ride north. You savvy that? You ride north! An' don't you try to circle back ag'in until yo're dead shore that you ain't bein' followed, not if it takes you a month. We'll mebby have troubles enough of our own, without you addin' to 'em. There'll be hell to pay an' no pitch hot when you kill him."

"Don't you worry none about me!" laughed Mort, boastfully. "I been tellin' you right along that both of them fellers were in our way. I'll get th' marshal, all right; let's see if you fellers can get th' sheriff. An' Pop's right about th' drives—we got to make two more before we're ready to leave this country. We'll never find another layout as good."

"All right," growled the father. "We've had enough talk, for tonight. Let's go to sleep—gosh knows I need some."

THE talking ceased. Alice found her heart beating like a thing gone mad. The little room seemed to suffocate her, but she did not dare move, did not dare get up and open her door. She had heard too much to risk making a sound. It seemed to be days rather than hours before the darkness lessened, before the side of the draw near her window began to reveal its details in a ghostly, gray light.

While she lay there, waiting for the proper time to arise, her mind raced over the problems which were hers to solve. After what she had just heard, she could no longer remain under this roof. Thieves were bad enough, but assassins——! Bob Corson was the sheriff! He had been shot at four times, and some of them by the men in the next room, if she had heard aright. Oh, it was impossible; yet, it was true. She could hardly be expected to question the truth of their own admissions. And now they were going to shoot down the marshal, and without giving him a chance to fight back. They were going to kill her splendid rider. Perhaps, but not if she could do anything about it, and she felt that she could do considerable.

The room grew light and she slipped out of bed, hurriedly dressing. She would catch one of the horses in the corral, saddle up, and be in town before her menfolk learned of her absence. Where she would go after that, she did not know, and did not care very much. The deadly apathy of hopelessness was settling down upon her. There was one thing she must do, and that was to get to Bentley and warn the marshal, and have him warn Bob Corson, and give him the facts as she knew them.

The kitchen somehow looked strange and unreal, notwithstanding the hours she had spent in it, the long, dreary hours. And on this morning, of course, the fire was slow to start. She had told them that the chimney needing cleaning out. She turned from the stove at a sudden thought—she was only wasting her time here—she could eat in Bentley. Let them fool with a foul chimney and get their own breakfasts, themselves.

The thought sent her swiftly toward the door, and her hand was on the latch, when another thought stopped her in her tracks. If she fled now, they would know it, know it too soon, and also know that she must have overheard some of their conversation. They would be forewarned. Which was the better course? Slowly the answer came to her, the right answer. She must

be here when they rode away, just as she always had been here. She must be the same, outwardly, as she always had been. Nothing must be unusual, no word or action must be different. Could she do it? It was not a question of whether she could or not—she must. If she let them leave first, it might be two or three days before they would return, before they would know that she had gone.

To say that time dragged would be to greatly understate the facts. Time barely moved, and each grudging minute was added torture to her. The sun was halfway to the meridian before she heard a stirring behind the closed door. More torturing minutes passed, and then Black Jack—she could no longer think of him as her father—stepped into the sitting room, rubbing heavy eyes with the backs of his hands.

He yawned and dropped heavily into a chair, groping on the floor for his boots. Again he yawned, and glanced carelessly out through the open kitchen door. This sudden sizzling which assailed his eager ears was a pleasant sound, and the smell of the cooking bacon made his mouth water.

"Smells good, Alice," he said, standing up. He loafed to the connecting door and leaned against the casing. "Wake you up, last night?"

"I seldom hear any of you come in, after I've gone to sleep," she answered, trying to keep her voice natural. She beat up the batter expertly, and dropped a spoonful on the smoking skillet.

"We try not to bother you," he said, yawning again. "Seems like I'll never get caught up on my sleep," he growled, and then brightened suddenly; "but th' time is shore comin' when I will get caught up, when we all can take life easy. It'll sure be time."

"But you've said that so many times before," she replied, smiling. If the blood would only quit pounding in her head!

"Yeah, I know," he admitted, easily; "but this time I'm talkin' good medicine. We'll be kissin' this damn' country good-by before you know it. Just got a few things more to do, an' then we start. An' we leave all this stuff right where it lays."

"A few more things to do! Yes—kill Bob Corson and the old marshal, and steal two more herds! Just a few more things like theft and murder,"

"By the time you pour your coffee, I'll be ready with a flapjack," she said, steadily, casually; and turned the cake deftly and without a tremble. Not only was she the daughter of a thief, and the sister of thieves, but now the terms included murder. After she had reached town and given the warnings, she would just ride off in any direction at all. It did not matter where she went, or what happened to her—Bob Corson would never see her again.

"That shore smells good," said Matt's booming voice as its owner stepped through the connecting door. "An' mebby I ain't ready to eat! Alice, you're a wonder."

"Pour your own coffee and sit down," she ordered with a laugh. Her dear brother Matthew, scheming right now how he could safely put a bullet into the heart of the man she loved. "This cake is your father's; you're next."

"Serves me right for bein' second," he chuckled, and reached for the sugar bowl. He looked up at his father. "What are we goin' to do today, Pop?"

"Nothin'," grunted the older man, reaching for the blackstrap. "There ain't nothin' to do with our few head. Might as well go to town, an' see th' boys."

"That suits me," said Matt, his eyes on the smoking skillet. "Let it brown more for me, Sis."

"All right," she replied, smiling to herself at the futility of this last little conversational gem spoken for her benefit. They spoke about riding to town, and then lacked the wit to carry out their pretense, by riding off toward the head of the draw instead of down it toward the arroyo trail. She looked up to see Mort enter the room, and heard Maurice close behind him. They were talking and laughing as easily as if their consciences were clean. A sudden feeling of revulsion swept over her: she could cheerfully poison them all!

The ordeal finally came to an end and she began, mechanically, to clear up the dishes and put things in order. She saw them get their horses, and saddle up. This time they rode off down the draw toward the arroyo trail, and she found herself listening to the noise of the hoofs. Soon after they had dropped out of her sight most of the noise abruptly ceased, but one set of hoofs died out slowly, and then came back to

her in the echo she had learned to listen for.

Three of them had turned to the right and were riding up the trail toward the Gap; the other, down it, toward Bentley. This, of course, would be Mort, on his way to keep watch over the marshal. She would give him half an hour's start before she followed. This question of time bothered her. She wanted to get to town as soon as she could, to reduce the marshal's danger by as many minutes as possible; but she did not wish to get within sight of Mort. An hour would be better. She glanced again at the cheap alarm clock, and nodded. She would wait an hour.

Chapter XIX

"A pert young snake"

DOWN in Bentley the marshal had made his more or less perfunctory morning rounds and was seated inside the office, his thoughts on the innocent looking eyebrow up on the slope across the road. He was wondering whether or not the sharpshooter had changed the cartridge in his gun, when he heard the steps of a horse coming down the street. Many horses passed that way and he had no particular interest in this one until it stopped before his door. He looked up curiously. It was not Corson. He had known that since the sounds had first become audible—unless the forefeet had been shod.

He shifted a little on the chair to face the door squarely, and waited. And then he was standing up, looking with surprise at the woman who stepped into the room. The brightness of the sun outside on the gray-white street threw her into silhouette, and the dim light of the room made it difficult for him at once to see who she was. She did not leave him in doubt.

"Perhaps you remember me, Marshal," she said in a tight, strange voice as she slowly took the chair that he was quick to offer her. "I'm Alice Meadows."

"Yes, ma'am. I shore do remember you," he replied, studying her rather closely. Seated as she now was, with the brighter light on her face, he was no longer handicapped in the matter of visison.

"I'm riding—I'm riding off to visit some friends," she continued, hesitantly, with embarrassment. Her face flushed suddenly, and strengthened the marshal's peculiar ideas that truth did not abide in a woman. He was justified in this, somewhat, since that had been his own, personal experience; and, besides, Alice Meadows did not lie easily.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and waited patiently.

She did not know just how to proceed. As she had ridden toward town it had seemed a simple thing; but then she had been considering generalities. Face to face with the task, she found it difficult, and it was made more so because of her emotions upsetting her balance. Her face was set and drawn, and her eyes were desperate.

"Yes, ma'am," prompted the marshal, calmly studying her. "Yo're goin' to visit friends. On hoss back?"

"Yes, on horse back!" she replied quickly, too quickly. It was an exclamation, which was not necessary. Again she flushed, and her eyes grew more desperate.

The marshal was reflecting that from what he knew and had heard about the Meadows family, it had no acquaintances within horseback riding range. If Alice Meadows was going to visit friends, then she would have to take the train, down at Carson, and ride many hours on it. An oblique thought impinged upon his consciousness: Mort Meadows, up there behind the eyebrow, must be doing some rough-and-tumble conjecturing about now. Then another thought broke through—perhaps he wasn't; perhaps this was part of a carefully thought out plan. He became even more alert.

"Is that what you rode in to tell me?" he asked her, watching her face through half-closed lids. He did not like the paleness of it between flushes, the drawn look, or the expression in her eyes. Had Mort changed the cartridge in that rifle?

"No, I just—just mentioned that," she said, her words so low that he had a little difficulty in hearing them.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, encouragingly, watching the nervous twisting and untwisting of her slender fingers.

"I came in to—I have a message for —I just came in to tell you that—that——" she said, and became suddenly mute. Her tongue refused to function.

"You have a message for me?" he

asked curiously, mentally up in arms. Did Black Jack think he was a damned fool?

"Yes, for you and—and the—the ——" again she faltered, and stopped. She was rapidly going to pieces.

If it was a cooked up message from Black Jack, then it would very likely concern the sheriff. Damn any blackguard that sent in a woman to tell his lies, to bait his traps!

"Sheriff?" he prompted, sitting erect in his chair. Her part in it was innocent, he decided, intuitively; and then he became a little anxious—she was threatening to lose control over herself, and he now believed that whatever resolution she had made, it was a desperate one. Going to visit friends on horse back!

"—I've come to warn you—to tell you that—that——" her voice died out. Her throat was dry, and she swallowed laboriously to moisten it. That, he knew, was caused by fear. This was a matter that would call for all his wits.

"Miss Alice, you just take things easy; but you shore got th' wrong chair," he said, stepping forward quickly. Perhaps Black Jack had no hand in this unexpected visit, and there was Mort up on the slope with a rifle trained on that door. Before she could get up or even understand his purpose, he had dragged her, chair and all, a full pace backward toward the side wall, and farther from the open door. He was ready to risk his own hide on that doctored cartridge, but not hers; Mort might have slid in a fresh one of his own.

"Wrong chair?" she asked with surprise. "I don't see what that——"

"No, ma'am; you wouldn't," interrupted the marshal, smiling reassuringly and moving away from her. He talked as he moved, hoping to calm her, to get her thoughts into healthier channels, to give her time to get better control over herself.

"You see, th' boys are kinda wild, here in town," he continued. "There ain't never no tellin' just where a bullet is goin' to go. Of course, they're just playful, but you ain't got no idear, a-tall, how reckless some of 'em are. A bullet might come right smack through that there door any minute, *now*, except that th' light in here is kinda dim."

HER hands were clenched, and she was staring at the door as if fascinated by it. Somewhere up on that peaceful hillside slope Mort Meadows was lying, with his rifle trained on this building. She shuddered a little and turned her head quickly to look at her companion, and caught him assuming his poker face.

"Why, you mean——" she asked, her fingers twining again.

"Yes, ma'am," he interrupted, calmly, kindly. Black Jack had nothing to do with this visit.

"You're not guessing?" she persisted, her voice strained and unnatural.

"Not much," he said, the smile growing.

"Then you *know?*"

"Yes, ma'am. I know quite a lot," he assured her, a certain grimness changing the pleasantness of the smile. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened.

"You got any particular place in mind where yo're goin'?" he suddenly asked, flinging the question at her and watching closely for its effect. He counted a little on the abrupt change of subject.

"Oh, yes! Yes, of course I have!" she answered, but her eyes evaded him, and again the flush became noticeable.

This was one woman who did not make a practice of lying, he thought. She was having such a hard time of it that he felt sorry for her.

"Hum! Y-e-p. Of course you have," he said. "As an officer of th' law, I'll have to ask you to tell me just where that is, where I can find you, if I need to," he stated, keeping his face grave and serious. He felt no pride, somehow, in this trickery; but it was necessary.

"Where it is—where I am going? I must tell you that?" she asked, incredulously. Her face had paled again and was set.

"Yes, ma'am; or not leave town."

"But I can't stay here. I can't stay here!" she exclaimed, almost in a panic. Her eyes were wide from fear.

"Well, you could stay on th' JM," he suggested with offhand carelessness, but he was missing nothing that her face might tell him.

"I can't stay there. I can't go back; but I must leave here, and I must go somewhere!" Her panic was growing, and he felt sorry for her. "I can't go

back there, now. I just can't stand it any longer!"

"You won't have to," he quickly assured her, now quite certain of at least one thing, and strongly suspecting others. "Have you any particular place in mind?" he demanded. His gaze locked with hers, and she shook her head without realizing it.

"Yes, of course," she answered, desperately. "Of course!"

He nodded understandingly, and his smile became gentle and friendly, a warm smile, inviting confidence. He was quite certain of his footing now.

"Well, ma'am, you can go. There ain't no reason why you can't. All you have to do is tell me just where yo're goin', an' promise me to stay there till you hear from me." At something in her look he shook his head reprovingly.

"Now, look here, Miss Alice—suppose you just listen to me. I'm old enough to be yore father. Yo're in a pile of trouble, an' it ain't no fault of yore own. Just a minute, now! You listen to me. Yo're in touble, but you ain't goin' to stay in it very long. You said you came in to tell me somethin'?"

"Yes; but I don't know just how to begin."

"Y-e-p. Reckoned so. I don't want you to tell it to me. I don't want you to tell me anythin' that you might be sorry for, later on. Yes, yes—but you just let me do th' talkin' for a few minutes, because *I'm* goin' to tell *you* a few things, a few things that you mebby rode in to tell me; an' then you won't have to say 'em a-tall. An' then I'm goin' to take you outa town, an' leave you where you'll be safe, an' well taken care of. Yo're to stay right there till I come after you, or send a messenger for you. You pomise that you'll stay there, like I just said, if I help you to get outa th' trouble that yo're in, right now?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, her fingers twisting desperately. She could never see Bob Corson again, did not dare to, for she knew that she could not hold out against him in the long run. "I was just going to—just going to go—oh, I don't know what!"

"Yes; that's just about what I reckoned," said the marshal, his smile like a beam of sunlight. He was now definitely arrayed on her side, her side and Bob's, horse, foot and artillery. "An' that's just what I'm figgerin' to stop. But you wouldn't go to do that if it wasn't necessary, would you?"

"Why, no; certainly not: but it is necessary. There's nothing else to be done."

"Looks like it, mebby; but if we find that it ain't, then you won't have no reason to go, will you?" he persisted. He wished he could put his finger on the mainspring for her actions.

"No, I guess not; not if we find that it isn't."

"Then there ain't no doubt about that," he said, nodding. "This is a kinda game. It's a game I know, an' you don't. Suppose you let me play th' cards, an' you watch how they run, an' fall. You don't know how to play 'em, but I do. It's kinda right in my line. Now, you give me th' promise I asked you, an' then I'll tell you what I was goin' to."

SHE nodded miserably, her eyes on his; and then a faint gleam of hope eased the tenseness of her expression. She felt a growing confidence in this old man.

"Yes, I'll promise that," she said in a low voice.

"Why, we're gettin' along right fine," he said with enthusiasm. "There ain't no real reason for you to get all upset an' panicky; not none a-tall—not now. Not with me an' Bob Corson settin' into this game."

At the mention of the sheriff's name her eyes opened wide and a look of fear flashed into them.

"Now you just take things easy," he said, soothingly. "Take things right easy. There ain't no reason for you to get scared. Not none a-tall."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't know. It's so——"

"So easy," he interrupted. "Now suppose we straighten everythin' all out, so you'll keep that promise, an' won't get all upset?"

"Can we?"

"Yes, Miss Alice, we can. There ain't no question about it. You want me to tell you what I was goin' to?" he asked, patiently, and smiled again as she nodded.

"All right; but first, Black Jack's yore stepfather, ain't he?"

She nodded.

"An' them boys are yore stepbrothers, ain't they?"

Again she nodded.

"An' there ain't no real blood relationship between you an' th' rest of th' Meadows family, is there?" he persisted, driving the thought home. This was the crux of his argument, and he had to drive it home, to establish it firmly in her mind. After that, everything would be easy.

"No, there's none at all," she answered, her wide, questioning eyes trying to read his inscrutable old face.

He nodded at her reply.

"Thought so. Well, that makes things kinda easy for me; an' for you, Alice. 'Specially for you, an' Bob Corson. We don't want to forget Bob; he's th' hub of *this* wheel. One of th' wheels. If anybody was to ask me, I'd shore say that yo're th' hub of th' other wheel; an' there ain't no reason why them two wheels can't turn in th' right direction. That right?"

"I—I don't understand you," she said, but her expression was becoming less tense, and hope was gleaming faintly in her eyes.

"Why, th' cattle-stealin' wheel sorta turns around Corson—or it will, right soon. That won't make no difference to you, not now; not after you've slipped yore hobbles, an' left th' JM. You didn't have nothin' to do with that, an' now you've cut loose from everythin' connected with it, an' showed that you have."

"Yes; but I'm the daughter of a thief, and—murderer," she protested in a whisper, and her face paled again.

"You ain't nothin' of th' kind," replied the marshal, flatly. Here was the mainspring he had been searching for. "If you was to tell that to Bob Corson, he'd just laugh at you. There ain't no reason for you to ride off an' disappear. Not none a-tall, an' there never was. If you did that, then th' other wheel couldn't turn, an' that wheel's th' best one. It wouldn't have no hub. Don't you get them two wheels mixed up. You keep 'em separate, each on its own axle."

She was shaking her head slowly while he spoke, and now he shook an old, gnarled finger at her, much as he would admonish a child.

"Don't you shake yore head like that," he said. "What Black Jack an' his boys have done, or are goin' to do, can't be laid at yore door. What Bob Corson, an' mebby me, does, ain't got nothin' a-tall to do with you or yore kin. After th' trouble's all over, then I figger you an' Bob oughta give each other an even break. Nothin' else would be fair, would it?"

Her head was still shaking, slowly but persistently, and her answer was so low that he could not hear it, but he knew what it was, and smiled reprovingly.

"I've been doin' a lot of talkin'," he said, apologetically, "which is somethin' that I ain't a great hand at; but when I've got to talk, I can hold my own. I ain't got around to what I want to say, even yet. But I'll get there, right now."

"But I must tell you what I came in to say," she said, hurriedly. It would be much easier now.

"Don't you say a word!" he exclaimed, cutting her short. "Not a word, till you've heard me, anyhow. Black Jack an' his boys are mixed up in cattle stealin'. Some of us figger that they're th' leaders in it. It looks that way, anyhow. Bob Corson found out quite a lot of things that didn't look right. They all pointed one way, like th' dust of separate wagons on a trail. Then, when he was ridin' up Crooked Creek trail, three or four hombres took some long-range shots at him. You didn't have nothin' to do with that, did you?"

HE CHUCKLED at her quick indignation, and wagged his finger at her again.

"Course not," he said. "Not nothin' a-tall. All right. Then Bob an' Slade had words, at th' Baylor wagon, an' Slade's draw was a mite too slow, or he shot too quick. Bob coulda killed him, but let him off with a hole in his shoulder. You didn't have nothin' to do with that, did you?"

This time, instead of being indignant, she smiled a little.

"Thought so," he chuckled, as if he had just made the discovery. "There's a lot more, Alice. One night, a little later, three men tried to trail Bob right here in this town, tried to dry-gulch him in th' dark. It didn't work out th' way they figgered. An' you shore didn't have nothin' to do with that. Bob killed one an' wounded another, which didn't touch you no place. This last trouble took place in my jurisdiction, an' it was my job to finish it up. I did. Long Bill figgered that he had a lop-sided break in his favor, an' went for his gun. I killed him. Had to. He was actin'

for Black Jack, too. When I shot Long Bill I wasn't no enemy of your'n, was I? An' Long Bill wasn't nothin' to you, was he? An' when Bob killed Squinty, he didn't do *you* no harm, did he?"

A little laugh broke from her, and she shook her head emphatically.

"Thought so," continued the marshal, complacently. He was driving home his points very well, he thought. "That was self-defense an' a matter of duty. Once in a long while duty an' pleasure ride th' same hoss. All three of them ambushin' snakes were workin' for Black Jack; but Black Jack's stepdaughter didn't have nothin' to do with it, did she?"

Again she shook her head. She was rapidly getting into a better frame of mind.

"Slade was workin' for Black Jack. He went over to Corson's home range, killed some cows, an' left a plain trail. It was so plain that Corson was too smart to foller it; but Slade figgered he would ride through Packers Gap—got to suspectin' that at th' Baylor wagon, where they had their first run-in—an' Bob did ride through it. Slade put a bullet through Bob's hat, an' got a slug through hisself in return. This one didn't go through no shoulder. It was dangerous to waste any more lead on him. Slade's dead, an' mebbe buried, by this time. You follerin' what I'm sayin'?"

Alice nodded, her eyes opened wide from surprise. The marshal seemed to know all that she did, and more, even to small details. Then, of course, Bob Corson knew as much, or perhaps even more. It was rather anti-climax so far as she was concerned. It made her feel rather flat, and this served to steady her.

"All right," continued the old man, placidly and with a measure of relish. "Corson an' me have been pow-wowin' kinda steady, accordin' to looks. Somebody got to figgerin', mebby, that I knowed more'n I let on, me movin' around town like I do, pickin' up a word here, an' a word there. Corson was ridin' around th' whole country outside of town, also pickin' up a thing here, an' a thing there. Then we looked like we was puttin' our heads together. An' remember that I got one of th' three skunks that was gunnin' for him, that night. Somebody figgered that our pow-wowin' meant trouble. They couldn't let it go on. So what did they up an' do?"

Alice was about to speak, breathlessly eager to, but her companion's swiftly upraised hand stopped her.

"You let me tell you, instead of you tellin' me," said the marshal, quickly. "What did they do? Why, they put a sharpshooter up on that little hill, outside, with a Sharps special buffalo gun an' a telescope sight. At that distance he can see th' buttons on my vest, or what's left of 'em. First time I showed my hand real plain would be th' last of me. We'll see about that, however. I ain't no infant."

Alice was sitting with her hands clasped tightly together, staring at the speaker in a sort of fascinated interest. She followed his glance and saw the great rifle standing in the corner, and the glint of brass on the telescope, where the black enamel had been worn off.

"That's what I——" she began, in a very low voice, but he again swiftly stopped her.

"Don't say it!" he almost snapped. "I'm tellin' you all this so you'll know that you don't have to say it, an' won't say it. If you do, later on you'll mebby get to blamin' yoreself for th' deaths of folks that ain't no kin of your'n. Mort Meadows is layin' up on that hill with a buffalo gun, an' I reckon he's got th' range figgered to a hair. Shootin' from a long rest, with most of th' barrel touchin' it, an' with a telescope, an' a gun like that, he shouldn't miss no target as big as I am; but I'm gamblin' that he will miss it. I quit cuttin' my teeth years ago, an' I cut 'em on ca'tridge shells!"

ALICE was nodding gently, and her fingers and her hands were still, lying quietly in her lap. Her expression showed a great relief.

"Well, let's go on an' get it over with," continued her companion. "There ain't much more to say; not near as much to say as there is to do. Black Jack an' his boys have got to kill Bob Corson, an' Bob will take a sight of killin', lemme tell you! They got to, or throw in their cards an' get out of th' country. Looks like things have been goin' right well for them, an' now they're figgerin' to play out th' hand. Corson knows it. He mebby knows more'n I do; anyhow, he oughta."

She was a little pale now, and her hands were tense.

"Don't you do no worryin' about Bob Corson," he said, watching her closely. "An' th' folks that oughta be worryin' ain't no kin of your'n. You just let me take you off to a place where you can stay, an' be safe, an' think things over for yoreself. When th' time is right I'll come after you, or send somebody in my place. You've made me a promise. You figger on keepin' it, now?"

"Yes. I'll keep it," she answered, her eyes wide and moist and filled with hope. Her terrifying problem was terrifying no longer, and it almost had ceased to be a problem from any angle, thanks to this lean, tanned and not overclean old man.

"You got any place in mind?" he asked, considering her wishes, now that they would work no harm.

"Is there a Turkey ranch?" she asked, and flushed deeply.

He studied her for a moment, and smiled suddenly.

"Yes. Turkey Track. Owen French owns it, but it's a right long ride from here," he said. "You'd get all tired out an' mebby crippled up, settin' a saddle so long."

"Does the distance really make much difference?" she asked, watching her hands.

"Not to me," he answered. "But it's a long way for you, a mighty long way. We can't make it before late tonight." He thought for a moment. "Mebby it'll be nearer mornin'."

"Well, then, we can't go there," she said, trying to hide her disappointment. She would like to have gone where Bob had suggested. "That would take you away from town too long."

"Then we start for th' Turkey Track," he retorted, "an' we start right soon. But before we do start, let me take a look at th' weather; it might be stormy."

He stood up and moved toward the door, feeling that Alice Meadows' visit would be the weight which would spring the trap. His left hand reached out and gripped the great rifle; and then, still holding it, he moved his body squarely into the doorway, and stopped there.

The expectant interval seemed to be a very long one, and many thoughts passed through his head. Most prominent among them was whether or not Mort Meadows had changed the cartridge in the gun. The interval really could have been spanned by a slow count of ten. It takes time to steady on a target and get set. There came a heavy, black powder roar from up on the hillside. A puff of dust, directly in line between the eyebrow and the marshal, sprang from the sand full fifty yards short, and the heavy bullet whined high above the marshal's head.

The old man moved like a striking snake. He jerked the heavy weapon through the door, threw it to his shoulder as he moved sideways, and for a moment his outstretched left hand held it steady and solid, clamped tightly against the door casing. The roar of it filled the room and the street, and crashed back from the hillside; but the barrel did not drop at once. The old man's eye was peering through the telescope at the wavering cloud of smoke above the eyebrow. Then, briskly nodding, he stood the gun back against the wall, and turned to his visitor.

"Weather's all right," he said. He motioned her forward. "I'll saddle my hoss in a shake, an' be with you right quick. We'll relay at th' Bar W."

"Was that—was *that*——" she whispered, a hand pressing against a breast. She could not finish the question without pausing, and she did not have to finish it.

"That was a pert young snake, with murder in his heart," said the marshal, grimly. "I said it would be better if I told you things, 'stead of you tellin' 'em to me. Let's get movin'—we got a mighty long way to go."

Chapter XX

Black Jack's Hole Card

THE GAP lay at an altitude of about forty-eight hundred feet. Sixteen miles southwest of it was the highest part of the ridge, four hundred feet higher, and in places all of eight miles across. Running up the middle of the north slope of this higher plateau was an arroyo, which slanted down to the north for about six miles; and then, turning abruptly, ran due west and pitched down into the wide valley of Crooked Creek. From no point in the lower valley could its upper section be seen, and neither could it be seen from any other direction where roads and trails lay. In width the arroyo varied from a few hundred yards at its

upper end, to more than a mile along its middle reaches.

The lower half, which pointed west, was deep, constricted and had a steep grade; the arroyo here became a canyon. It opened out upon the Crooked Creek trail about two-thirds of the way between Iron Springs and the old, 'dobe trading post; and directly across the trail and the creek arose a tumbled mass of rock, isolated spires and small buttes, backed by a mesa. The canyons and arroyos in this wild country made a veritable maze, and of them it was said that a man could meet himself half a dozen times in a two hours' ride.

The Crooked Creek trail was well traveled. At one time it had been part of the California Trail. In season, herds of cattle moved leisurely down it from the ranges lying to the south and southwest. The road, itself, was a narrow ribbon ground out by wheeled vehicles; but it lay on a wider, if fainter, ribbon that had been beaten by the hoofs of many cattle in the years that had gone. With care, a stolen herd could be driven out of the canyon, judiciously led on to the trail, and then judiciously edged off it, and become swallowed up by the rough country across the creek without leaving too plain signs of its passing. After that it could move in secrecy and security. One herd already had gone this way, irrevocably lost to its proper owners.

The morning following the death of Mort Meadows found three important things going on at distant points, but simultaneously.

Corson, having scouted in vain over the end of the ridge north of the gap, had slept in his blankets under the stars, and awakened to a new and important day.

Nueces, with Shorty, Burns and Bludsoe, the cream of the JC fighting men, had covered the arroyos and draws on the Crooked Creek side, and spent the night in the old 'dobe post. They ate a hurried breakfast and saddled up, and now Nueces was bidding the others goodby, and leaving them to ride over the Gap trail and to join his boss at the appointed place. The remaining three would continue their scouting.

Southwest of them Jerry, the Baylor foreman, having left his wagon to pick up its odds and ends, had taken three men with him and ridden in to spend the night at the ranch. He was now leading his companions toward the Broken Jug trail, to search for the cattle he had spoken about to the sheriff.

Corson passed Shell Canyon and, following up the little draw on the right of the road, stopped when out of sight of the thoroughfare, and waited for Nueces to join him. On the far side of the great ridge and about eight miles away as the crow flies, was the JM ranch. He also was less than half a mile, as the crow flies, from that high, masked arroyo which was the very heart of the JM cattle business. It lay up on the top of the plateau, unsuspected by those who rode or drove along the main wagon road below it.

Corson was early. Nueces was not due to show up for an hour or more, if he had gotten away at the regular time. Unknown to the sheriff, the horse-faced deputy had gained an earlier start. Corson had nothing to do but just sit there and wait. Time would pass too slowly, and he was keyed up for action. He looked up at the escarpment hemming him in on three sides, idly scrutinizing it. When Nueces joined him they would return to the road, follow up Jerry's pet Broken Jug trail, and gain the top of the plateau from there. This little used trail marked the southern end of the ridge, and would lead them to heights from which to look down upon the great backbone.

Time dragged, and the waiting became unbearable. Movement, action was what he needed, if just for the sake of doing something. Again he studied the escarpment. At no place within sight could a man ride up, but there were any number of places where it could be climbed by a man on foot. Perhaps it would be an hour before Nueces would arrive, and that is a long time to be idle. He dismounted, left the horse where his friend easily could see it, and went ahead on foot.

THE draw forked, and he chose the left, or main stem. It ended abruptly against the lower escarpment, which here was about twenty-five feet high, and rich in hand and foot holds. Next came a steep slope for another half hundred feet, and then the second escarpment, this one nearly a hundred feet high. When he had pulled himself over the last rim rock and looked around, he found himself on a secondary plateau, above which the main

ridge arose at quite some distance away.

He now could see the wagon road north and south of him. A horseman was coming down it from the direction of the Gap trail. It might be Nueces. All right—if it were, he had time to look around him. The trail up the Broken Jug lay almost under his feet, to the south. He traced it until it led around a shoulder; and he did not know it, but half a mile beyond that shoulder, Jerry was leading his three companions to search the little basin of which he had spoken so much.

Corson turned and walked to his right, toward a sharp angle of the rock wall. He reached it, started to round it, and instantly dropped to a knee. Faint clouds of dust were climbing up out of a depression perhaps a quarter of a mile away. They were not dust devils, of that he was certain. Moving wagons or bunches of cattle would more properly account for them. Seeing that this was cattle range, the answer was obvious.

But the answer automatically asked another question—why should a number of small bunches of cattle be moving in concert and so steadily? The only answer which suited this question made his face go hard. Right here, then, in the very heart of the open range, surrounded by ranches, roads, trails and grazing grounds, was that impossible herd of cattle, of which he had been so certain. All the separate puzzle pieces shifted easily and fitted into this completed pattern. But how had it been managed?

The Baylor straw boss had combed every rod of this ridge. Because of the escarpments on the Kiowa side, the Bar W could not sweep that part of the watershed, and Jerry had met that line and covered that portion with his own riders. And yet he, and all of them, had overlooked a stolen herd!

Jerry had done nothing of the sort. If the herd had been here he would have found it. Where was it? What had happened? Corson let his mind run back.

The Baylor outfit had taken the ridge in three parallel lines, throwing the worked cattle behind them on the downhill side. What had that to do with it? Throwing the cattle behind them on the downhill side—huh. There seemed to be no answer there.

They had worked the ridge in three parallel sweeps. Anyone who knew this could prophecy their movements for days ahead. And anyone could know it by just watching how they went about the work. What would such knowledge profit him? Three parallel sweeps, and throwing the worked cattle—*hah!* One and one make two, just as well as two and two make four. The answer popped into his mind automatically. A human is overly disposed to search for the difficult, overlooking the easy and almost obvious. He had been guilty of this fault, himself.

All anyone had to do was to watch his chance, shift the stolen stuff from above, throw it below the roundup crew's next sweep, and scatter it well. If the cattle had been up here, there would have been plenty of time and opportunity for that. After several days, the Baylor crew swept back again, along the middle benches. They would ignore scattered cattle well below them. Then the crew turned and went back again, this time along the top of the ridge, overflowing it to the escarpment at the Bar W's line.

As soon as the outfit was a few days farther along, the scattered cattle would be rounded up, bunched, and driven up to this little basin, where they would be safe from discovery on ground that had just been worked over; and from here the thieves could derisively watch the roundup operations going on down on the flatter range below them. It would be like playing tag with people who did not know they were in a game, or that there was any game at all; so absurdly simple that the more a man thought over the puzzle, in the abstract, the less likely he would be to hit upon it. All this thinking had taken but a flash of time.

Corson moved cautiously forward. The job was at hand even sooner than he had expected. He dropped to the ground and crawled toward a mass of rocks and boulders from where he could get a better view of the basin. Exact knowledge was what he wanted now.

The whole scene lay before him, and he could trace the arroyo far down the slope. He thought he knew where it cut into the main valley along the creek. He had noticed the canyon in his riding, noticed it idly, giving it no measure of its real importance.

THE cattle numbered about three hundred. Six men were at work, driving in small bunches toward the main herd. To be branded, they

would have to be thrown and tied. They were just lighting the fire for the irons. The work would go on slowly, since this was open range branding of grown animals. They had rounded up and held the heavier beef, for most of it looked to be two and three years old. There were no corrals or chutes to help the work along. They could not risk the discovery of such material and permanent affairs.

As Corson watched one of the riders who came closer to him than any of the others, he stiffened from surprise. It looked like Franchere, one of his own punchers. Yes—it was Franchere. The last time he had seen that puncher had been in the Cheyenne, back in Willow Springs. Apparently Franchere had cut his string that day. Franchere worked his bunch back toward the herd. Black Jack Meadows left the gather and rode toward the fire, where Matt was busy with it. Matt stood up and moved toward his horse, and then came unexpected action.

A three-year-old steer broke from the herd, dodged the nearest rider and started on a lumbering run up the hill toward the sheriff. Running is not a natural gait with cattle, for they never run if they can walk; but when a range steer wants to get somewhere quickly, he can cover ground with surprising celerity; and before Corson really felt the threat engendered by the animal's escape, it was heading directly toward his hiding place, and half way up the slope. The steer, itself, did not matter; but something else did.

Black Jack, being the rider nearest the animal as it passed the fire, whirled in pursuit; and Matt, vaulting into the saddle, joined in the chase. Black Jack was now on its heels, swinging his rope, but reluctant to use it, hoping that he could cut around in front and head the steer off. Behind him rode his son, at a more sedate pace, working off to his left to keep the fleeing animal from breaking past in that direction.

The steer plunged on, straight for the mass of boulders sheltering Corson, and now Black Jack was even with it, forcing it a little out of its course; but the sheriff could see that his hiding place soon would be a hiding place no longer. To make matters worse, Matt was now crossing over to take advantage of the steer's change of course, and riding along the chord of the arc. They both were due to pass his hiding place within a score of paces. Well, why not? He was armed only with Colts, while every man there had a rifle slung to his saddle. He dared not face them all at the ranges they could and would choose. Here was a choice of the lesser of two evils, a chance to engage two of them at his own range, and perhaps reduce the odds by a third. After all, that was what he had come for, that was what his job meant in a showdown; and if this wasn't a showdown, he never had known one. Why wait until he was discovered, with the odds two to one? Surprise would be a valuable ally. The two men were passing him at less than twenty paces, when he suddenly stood up, hands resting on belts, and called out to them.

"Hey!"

Black Jack's answering action was reflex. He pulled the horse up short as he turned in the saddle, and then his hand dropped swiftly to walnut. Matt replied to the hail by swinging his mount around and also reaching toward his holster.

The shots smashed out across the basin, were played with by the towering upper ridge, and sent crashing out over the range, multiplied until they sounded like a fusilade. Only three were fired. One of them spanged from a boulder just above Corson's head, and screamed into silence. Matt was a fancy, gun-thumbing, gun-rolling shot, excelling in exhibitions; but he was cleanly killed by a man who thought only of plain, straight shooting. Black Jack's horse, suddenly freed of a hundred and thirty pounds, dashed away at better speed, Matt's piebald crowding it. Corson dropped down again and prepared to face a deadly rifle fire. He was in a tight corner, but he had been in tight corners many times before.

THE riders down with the herd had whirled at the sound of the first shot, and now were gathered together, the cattle behind them and forgotten. Then Franchere yelled a warning, and the group spread out swiftly, each man racing for cover. The herd heaved, broke, and set off on a run down the arroyo, gathering speed as panic and momentum got hold of it. The thunder of its hoofs shook the plain.

Maurice Meadows crept from rock to rock, boulder to boulder, his eyes on the pile of rocks, his rifle at the ready.

Franchere was a hundred yards to his left. They hurriedly had decided upon a plan of action, and now were putting it to the test.

Over on the other side, far to their right, Red and Slim were creeping through their own cover, intent upon gaining the high ground behind the rock pile. The four rustlers had worked it out pretty well, each pair for itself—there was but one man behind those rocks, one man who had seen too much. Perhaps he was the only man who knew what was going on up here. His identity was easily guessed. The long-deferred job that they had set for themselves was here, right at hand. This time there would be no bungling. Maurice glanced out over the basin and swore angrily as his gaze settled on the quiet figures huddled on the earth. He would soon pay up for that.

Franchere, being farthest from the rock pile, pressed on more rapidly. He had to gain his position before the sheriff could figure out a way to crawl back and shift his hiding place; not knowing that the sheriff already had done that to the distance of a dozen yards. Franchere peered cautiously at the rock pile, and then estimated his next advance. It was a five yard dash across the open ground, to the next tumbled patch of rocks. He turned his head and called out in a voice he hoped would only carry to his companion.

"I've got to make a dash. Cover me, Maurice."

"Go ahead!" came the answer, and Maurice fired at a gray hat moving up over the top of a distant rock.

Franchere arose with his feet gathered under him, and leaped forward. From the innocent east side of the rock pile there came a burst of powder smoke, and the runner finished his dash in a headlong dive, killed instantly by a lucky snap shot over a range of forty yards. It was a lucky shot, but not for Franchere. Again Maurice threw down on the hat, but held his fire. Tricked! Fooled by a moth-eaten trick as old as hats themselves!

He squirmed with rage and chagrin, desperately resolved to get this sneaking dog of the law. He did not believe that the sheriff's shot had made a hit. He raised his voice.

"Work around more to yore left, Franchere! We can work th' cross fire, then, an' drive th' devil out, or kill him."

He, himself, was working slowly but steadily in the other direction to make the cross fire even more effective. There was no reply to his words.

"Franchere!" he called, in a louder voice. "Franchere!"

"Franchere's in hell, waitin' for you," said the sheriff's voice. "How you like this little party? Hey! Yo're movin' th' wrong way. *I'm* over *here!*"

"He's waitin' for *you!*" shouted Maurice, reversing his direction and crawling swiftly back the way he had come. He'd fool the badge-toting skunk! He'd work quietly over to where Franchere had started his dash, and then lie still. And as he planned it, he brushed against a sage bush; and ten minutes later, as he settled down in his new cover, he brushed against another. The jiggling twigs flashed their messages.

MEANWHILE Nueces jogged up the draw, saw his friend's horse, and drew rein. Corson's boot prints led straight to the bottom of the lower escarpment.

"Huh! Got restless," chuckled the horse-faced foreman. He dug out tobacco and papers and leisurely rolled himself a cigarette.

Around the great shoulder of the mesa, Jerry and his riders had searched the basin in vain. The little bunch of cattle had not returned to their favorite grazing ground on the Broken Jug. He looked up at a place where the escarpment had crumbled, and growled.

"They shore would never climb up there, with good grass down here. They must have worked south, to our open range."

"Yeah," said a companion. "They've been all choused up by th' roundup, an' scattered to hell an'——"

The shots sounded plainly above their heads, and each man instinctively ducked. Who was shooting, up there? What was there up there to shoot? Corson's forebodings came to Jerry's mind, and he acted on impulse. He slipped from the saddle, his rifle in his hand, and his companions followed on his heels toward the break in the great wall.

Nueces had the flaring match half way to the cigarette when the shots made him freeze. In his case there was no doubt, at all. He knew that his friend was up there, and shots meant shots, which was enough. Before the

match had struck the earth his horse was running at top speed toward the end of the draw. Nueces climbed with the speed, but not the grace of a frightened lizard; but for reasons known only to himself, he did not choose the place selected by the sheriff.

Corson's thoughts were not on Maurice, now in Franchere's old cover. There was a sterner threat than that. Somewhere up on the slope of the main ridge, two men were working persistently among the rocks and along the ledges, striving to get on the higher ground behind him. Their shooting would be done at ranges hopeless for accuracy with a Colt. He wriggled around on Maurice's side, keeping low and under cover of the rocks. It would be a joke on Maurice to seek safety almost under the muzzle of his gun. The thought was intriguing, and he tried to develop it. Perhaps it could be done. Perhaps he could get away from the prominent rock pile and lie low. And in doing this he would shift Maurice's range from rifle distance to that of Colt, and perhaps give that person the surprise of his life. And if the two men on the hill stalked the rock pile, they might give him a shot at a closer range. He was very careful to make no noise, or to touch any growing thing.

There came a voice from the upper slope, nearly behind the pile of rocks, and perhaps four hundred yards away.

"Where is he?"

There was no answer. Franchere could not speak, and Maurice did not care to. The damn' fools! Let them do their own stalking! Here he was, all snug and ready for a big surprise, and they wanted him to answer them!

"Where is he?" came the query again, this time a little louder. Slim waited a moment for the answer. It did not come, and he grinned at his companion.

"Layin' chicky," he grunted.

"Yeah," grunted Red. "Don't blame 'em. That coyote has got a buffalo Sharps. We want to watch ourselves. He can shoot like th' hammers of hell."

"Then he ain't used it," countered Slim. "Them was six-gun shots. *I* know th' shound of a Sharps buffalo gun."

"That's right," admitted Red, without any particular enthusiasm. "He ain't, yet; but he *will*."

"Not on me," grunted Slim, crouching a little lower.

"He ain't got a chance to get outa this," commented Red with a deal of pleasure. "With them two layin' down there, we got him in a double cross fire; but we don't want to forget that Sharps."

"Lookit that damn herd!" said Slim, swearing wholeheartedly. "Run to hell an' gone. We'll have to round 'em up all over ag'in."

"Hell with th' herd," retorted Red, who was thinking in terms of Sharps buffalo guns.

MAURICE was becoming suspicious. He reacted to danger as keenly as a hound to scent. Something was wrong. If Red and Slim, now up on the hill, couldn't see the sheriff, and if *he* couldn't see him, then that double-damned arm of the law had either turned into a tumblebug, or had moved away from the rock pile: and Maurice did not believe in such miraculous metamorphoses as sheriffs turning into any kind of bugs. He inched backward, bearing to his left, and away from the now suspicious rock pile. He made good progress, but he was still careless about bumping into weed stems, and little waving things like that. He did not know any better, not being range raised. Therefore it was with utter and panicky surprise that he heard three words in a strange but hearty voice behind him.

"Well, well, well!" said Nueces grinning over the top of a rock.

Maurice's mouth popped open as his rifle slewed around, but it closed again almost instantly. It closed upon the passage of a hunk of lead that never touched a tooth.

"Chew on *that*," growled the horse-faced foreman, and slipped back again into the shelter of the rocks, ready to hunt himself a brand new job.

Red and Slim suddenly realized that they were alone in a cold, cold world. Judging from the last shot, that coyote down below could spread himself over more territory than a scared jack rabbit. They almost expected to hear his cold voice behind them. Their loneliness was farther emphasized when they saw three punchers riding around the distant herd, heading up the arroyo as fast as they could travel. The herd, having run itself out, was now getting back some of its breath. The feeling was still further emphasized when they

heard voices above and behind them, and the significant sound of rolling pebbles clicking down the slopes. It was plain enough, now—they were surrounded. While the damned sheriff had kept their thoughts on the doubly-damned pile of rocks, his triply-damned men had been moving according to plan.

"I'm through," said Slim, and he raised his voice. "Don't shoot!"

"Why not?" came the ironical reply, followed by a short laugh.

"My hands are up, an' empty!" shouted Slim, earnestly.

"Keep 'em that way," called out another voice. It sounded like it belonged to the foreman of the BLR.

"Watch his pardner!" came a bellow from below, where the still invisible sheriff seemed to be keeping an eye on things.

"Watch yore gran'mother!" yelled Red, indignantly. "*My* hands are up, too! Think I'm a damn' fool!"

"Then step out where we can see you," ordered the Baylor foreman, not quite certain what it was all about; but there seemed to be no harm in keeping a man covered.

Slim and Red, weaponless now, obeyed, their hands reaching toward the heavens.

JERRY slid down the last ledge, gun in hand, and stopped before the two men. One by one his companions followed, and joined him. Nueces popped into sight not far away, and the sheriff slowly gained his feet. The three riders were now close at hand, and looked to be disappointed.

The prisoners and their escort worked down the slope and met the sheriff on the lower bench. Shorty, with Bludsoe and Burns, drew rein alongside.

"What's it all about?" asked Jerry, thirsting for details. He was soon told.

"Rope these boys an' take 'em in to Bentley," ordered Corson, turning to the three riders. "Nueces an' I have got to go 'round th' other way—our horses are down below, on th' Kiowa side."

He turned to the BLR foreman.

"Can you get yore hosses up here? Yeah? Then mebby you'd better ride herd on those cattle."

"All right," said Jerry. "We'll hold 'em, an' send a man back to th' ranch for help. Accordin' to my way of thinkin', that damn' Association ain't got no claim to this bunch. They shore won't have, if they don't hear about 'em. No tellin' how many we've lost. These cattle were plumb stole from all of us."

"Suits me," growled the sheriff, revising his definition of mavericks. "I'll get word to th' other outfits, an' they can send over their reps. We'll divide 'em up th' best we can, an' throw a few cold hands for what's left." He looked at the figures on the earth, and let his gaze slowly drift over the rocky cover where two more lay. "I'll send out for *them*, too," he said. Suddenly he turned to Nueces.

"When did Franchere cut his string?"

"That time you saw him in th' Cheyenne. He didn't come back. Why?"

"He's over there, among th' rocks. I made a lucky shot on him."

"Yeah? Well, he won't have to bust no wild ones now," drawled the JC foreman.

"All right, boys; get started. We'll see you in Bentley," said the sheriff, and he turned toward the distant rock pile. "See you as soon as I can, Jerry."

"Take yore time, Bob," said the BLR foreman, with a smile. He watched the sheriff and the long, lanky deputy walk toward the edge of the escarpment. Then he looked down the arroyo, where Shorty and his friends were on their way to town, their prisoners ahead of them. Then he looked soberly and long at the huddled figure nearest to him, out on the edge of the basin.

"*That's* th' time yore hole card was a deuce, Black Jack," he said.

CHAPTER XXI

"After the Roundup's Ended"

THE two friends mounted and rode down the draw, Nueces' face wearing a look of extreme satisfaction. Various little puzzles had been cleared up, puzzles which had bothered him, and while he had had little to do in their solving, he had done his own job with neatness and dispatch. His friend ought to be very well pleased with his own part; but something seemed to be wrong.

"I knowed that just as soon as they begun to figger you was loco, you'd clear it up," he said, glancing sidewise at his companion.

"Yeah," grunted Corson, moodily, his

eyes fixed steadily on the ground ahead.

"How'd they keep them cattle up there, with Jerry's crew sweepin' th' ridge?" asked the deputy.

Corson told him, as briefly as possible.

"Huh!" mused Nueces, letting the play run through his mind. "An' so Franchere was in with 'em, all th' time, huh? Only wish I'd knowed that before!"

The wagon road moved steadily toward them, and the sheriff urged the bay into a lope, his companion's sorrel keeping head to head with it.

"I'm turnin' in my badge, an' resignin'," said Corson, abruptly, as the Shell Canyon road went past.

"Huh?" exclaimed Nueces, incredulously, doubting his ears.

"I'm quittin'. To hell with th' job!"

"Great land of cows!" marveled Nueces, turning sideways in his saddle. *"Quittin'!"*

"Yes."

"But you just won th' game, hands down!" protested the deputy.

"Yeah; an' lost a damn' sight more," growled his friend and boss.

"Yeah?" inquired Nueces, turning this surprising bit of information over in his active mind. Their friendship, oak-ribbed and copper-riveted, gave him certain rights. "How's that?"

"There's a Meadows girl," growled the sheriff. "I've just killed off her men folks."

Nueces reflectively chewed on this chunk of information and after a few moments made adequate reply.

"I'll be eternally damned!"

The road to the Gap went swiftly past, neither of them giving it more than a glance, but the sheriff bitterly thought that it made no difference, now, how many shoes were worn by the bay. The Jackson Canyon road forked to the right, and was past. A mile and a half farther on they took the left-hand road leading up to Saddlehorn Pass. The trail up from David Canyon, leading to the same point, was steadily bearing toward them. As the two routes drew close together Nueces saw a horseman riding rapidly along the trail, heading in their direction. His big hand slid out toward the stock of the scabbarded rifle at his leg.

"Wonder who *that* is?" he suddenly asked, his eyes on the stranger.

"Huh?" demanded Corson, stirring out of his bitter reverie. He looked toward the trail, and grunted. "Marshal of Bentley. A friend."

"Oh," grunted Nueces, and drew his hand back to rest on the horn.

The tired, stiff and sleepy marshal, returning from the Turkey Track, urged his tired mount into a little swifter gait, and reached the intersection of trail and road as the other two drew up. His old, but keen eyes, were on the sheriff, reading dejection, bitterness, rebellion.

"Lick you?" he asked, craftily.

Corson stiffened indignantly.

"Like hell!" he snapped. "Got 'em all. Th' two that are alive will be waitin' for you to open up th' jail."

"I ain't done so much ridin' in years," growled the marshal, trying to hide his satisfaction over the successful conclusion of several enterprises; "but I reckon I'll live long enough to open up th' jail. Who was they?"

Corson told him, briefly, sullenly.

"Huh! Then they *are* all gone," said the marshal, almost smacking his lips.

"All but Mort Meadows," grunted the sheriff. "Somebody else can get him. I'm turnin' in my badge, by mail."

"Reckon that's all you can do," agreed the marshal, winking slyly at Nueces. "Nobody's got to get Mort. *I* got him, with his step-sister watchin' me do it. Th' skunk woulda killed her th' minute she stepped outa my door. He tried for me, instead, with a *de*fective cartridge, an' I blowed him to tell an' gone before he could try ag'in. Now she ain't got none of them coyotes to break her heart no more."

CORSON was staring at the old man, the expression on his face undergoing bewildering changes. Had he heard a-right—killed Mort Meadows, *with his step-sister looking on!*

"This is Sat'dy. There won't be no mail leavin' Carson till Monday mornin'," said the marshal, chuckling. "You'll have plenty of time to make up yore mind about turnin' in that badge. You comin' along with us, or are you figgerin' to set here all day?"

"Neither!" snapped Corson, wheeling the bay. "See you both in town before dark!"

"Hey! Not th' Gap!" shouted the

marshal, in quick alarm. "She ain't there no more!"

Corson checked the bay, and whirled again.

"What you say?" he asked, incredulously.

"She's cleared out. Cut plumb loose from th' JM an' everythin' belongin' to it. She rode down to town to tell me all about them coyotes, an' was worried near sick for fear they'd kill you."

"Where is she' then; Bentley?"

"Bentley was too close to home," shouted the marshal. "She could smell th' stink of it from there."

"Damn you!" yelled the sheriff, impolitely. "What have you done with her?"

"Took her where you said for her to go," shouted the marshal, nudging Nueces in the ribs. In a low voice he said to his bewildered companion; "Lookit him r'ar an' snort!"

"Where *I* said to go?" yelled Corson. "Where 'n hell was that?"

"Turkey Track—she was hell-bent to go there, long ride or no long ride, because you once told her——"

"Great gosh!" yelled the sheriff. "You let that woman ride sixty miles!"

"*Let* her!" shouted the marshal, indignantly. "She damn' near drug me all th' way! We changed hosses at th' Bar W, an' yore own ranch. I'm near dead, right now; but she didn't look no tireder than if she'd just come from a dance."

The only reply to these remarks was a partial wheeling of the bay, and a string of dust shooting along the David Canyon trail like a low-aimed rocket.

"There!" said the marshal, with smiling satisfaction. "We shore got rid of *him*. Now let's ride on, slow an' peaceful. You must be that Nueces feller. I've heard a lot about you; how come yo're still alive?"

THE Bar W foreman loafed to the door of the bunkhouse, wondering what was up. The sound of hoofs bespoke the urgency of a horse race, but there was only one horse in sight, and it was coming down the wagon road as fast as its fanning legs could carry it. The horse slid to a stop with the sure facility of a trained cutting-out animal, and foam slipped down its heaving sides to drop to earth.

"Want a fresh horse," said the sheriff, crisply, as he reached toward the cinch buckle.

"Shore," replied the foreman. "Somethin' up?"

"Yes. Rustlin' is. It's all over, down in this part of the country. Th' gang's cleaned up."

"Good! Find any herd?" asked the foreman, somewhat derisively.

"We shore did. Take my pick?"

"Yeah; but that black's th' best in th' corral," replied the foreman. Then he scratched his head, and grinned faintly. "Hope folks don't get th' idear that this ranch is a damn' relay station. Anybody else comin' along that wants to swap for a fresh horse?"

"No," answered Corson over his shoulder, but without checking his stride.

In a moment he had the black cut out, and outside the bars. Another moment saw the hackamore in place and the saddle on. His fingers were moving with the swiftness and sureness of instinctive motions. He swung up, wheeled the animal, and raised his hand.

"So-long, an' much obliged. I'll send one of th' boys to swap back."

"So-long," grunted the foreman. "You will if you don't kill th' black!"

At the JC bunkhouse the cook's choppy, bow-legged stride took him to the door to see what the trouble was. His hopes flared suddenly—that sounded like business. He patted the gun on his thigh, and poked his head out of the door. Yes; it was Corson, riding as if the devil were after him. Whose black was that, and what happened to the bay?

"Roan in th' corral?" shouted the sheriff as he slid to a stop near the corral gate.

"Naw; but that chestnut is damn' near as good," answered the cook. "What's up? Where you goin'?"

"Where's th' roan?" demanded Corson, impatiently, slipping off saddle and hackamore.

The cook shifted uneasily and tried his hand at evasion. He had felt that he should not lend that animal, felt it in his bones.

" 'Tain't here," he said. "Gimme that rope, an' I'll get you th' chestnut."

"Where's th' roan?" insistently demanded his boss, vaulting the corral gate, the rope in his hands.

"Loaned it to a lady. She was with

th' marshal of Bentley. He said it was all right. Said you told him to swap here. Come bustin' in here after I was asleep, an' wouldn't take no other hoss. Said that hoss had made so much trouble that it oughta work it out. What th' hell he was talkin' about, I didn't know; but it was all right, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Get outa th' way!"

The cook sighed with relief and barely escaped the quick leap of the chestnut.

"Great gosh!" he said, his mouth sagging open in wonderment. His boss didn't care whom he ran over.

Corson's hands were swiftly working with straps and buckles, and almost before the wondering cook knew it, his boss was pointing a little cloud of dust up the trail leading to Horsethief Pass.

Placidly grazing cattle, with the indignities of the roundup fresh in their minds, raised their heads and uneasily watched the chestnut comet streaking along the trail. Their fears were groundless, for the animal rocked steadily ahead.

The cook had been right, thought Corson—the chestnut was a mighty good horse, nearly as good as the roan. Mile after mile slid behind. The Alkali Holes were ahead, to the side, and then in the rear. At the fork of the road Corson swung to the left without drawing rein, and flashed down into the little hollows and up over the little hills on the last stretch of the run. He swung sharply around the last shoulder and raced along the creek which ran past the Turkey Track ranch buildings. Then the buildings, themselves, popped into sight, and he was shooting down the last, long slope straight for the ranch-house door.

Owen French was just stepping out of the house, his wife telling him to be sure to fasten the chicken house door, or the coyotes would get every last one of them. Then they both looked up at the sound of drumming hoof beats.

"Land sakes," she said with a smile. "Ain't that th' sheriff?"

"Reckon so," grunted French. "He must want to kill that hoss!"

"Huh!" said his wife. "There was a time when you woulda killed a hoss! Let's clear out; them young folks won't want us to clutter up th' house. Hurry, Owen; you *are* so slow!"

Corson drew the chestnut to a swift stop, leaped to the ground and then lost all urge for speed. He stepped slowly into the house and found no one in sight. There came a sound from the other room, and he moved toward the door.

She stood near a window, gravely, wistfully studying him. She quickly raised a hand, and he stopped, his hungry eyes full of fear, a fear that cut her like a knife.

"I knew you'd come, of course," she said, her voice low and strained. "But you should not have come, dear. It's very hard to have to pay for something that I've never done. Very hard. I just don't know what—I just don't know."

"Mebby it's still harder to pay for somethin' you *have* done," he answered, bitterly, and held out his hands, palms up. "To have to go to th' woman you love with th' blood of her——"

"Stop, Bob! You must not say that! I won't let you! It was your duty—you could do nothing else."

"But they're not clean, Alice, dear; not clean enough for you to touch."

"They never were, and they never will be unclean to me!" she replied, swiftly. "It is I who am—who am ——"

She was unprepared for it, but no amount of warning would have done any good. There was no use to struggle in those iron arms, so she did not struggle. And then, slowly her hands crept up his vest, passed his shoulders, and came to rest on his cheeks, his lean, tanned face tightly gripped between them. His head bent down.

Through the open window came the voice of Owen French's wife, although they two did not hear it.

"If you'd put hinges on th' gates of this ranch, instead of that eternal bailin' wire——"

But the roundup was over, and this story with it.

THE END

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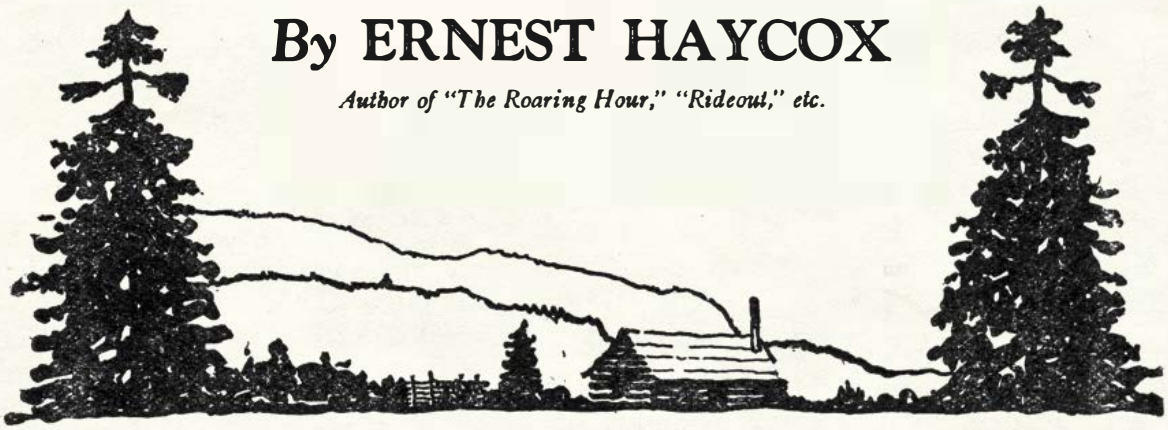


In those days people earned their property rights!

TOM CRUZE was in the cabin clearing chopping out fence rails when the warning reached him through the drizzling November rain. He dropped the bitt of his ax upon the cedar log and stared around the stump-littered field; there was nothing to be seen or heard that justified the vague, indefinite suspense in him. Yet in response to it—for he never disobeyed these instinctive danger signals—he swept the tangle of underbrush that choked the tree trunks of the encircling forest with a half-narrowed eye. Still there was nothing.

The northeast wind fell into the open space and slatted through the fir boughs, picked up earth mold and flung it against the rough cabin walls, twisted the chimney smoke into a crazy spiral; not far away in the trees a swollen creek slithered and dashed between its rocky banks. A dead tree fell afar, rumbling. Signs and portents of the hard Oregon winter to come; but of other dangers no definite witness until Cruze saw his buckskin pony under the barn lean-to jerk suddenly against the rawhide tether. At that the pioneer wasted no movements. He dropped the ax and in a single scooping gesture seized his rifle sheltered beneath a cedar shake; keeping his eyes upon that forest rim he began a slow retreat toward the cabin.

The pony trumpeted and worried at the tether. Out of the brush popped an Indian buck, closely followed by a file of six, keeping a quick pace, heads bowed and bodies swaying with a cradle-like rhythm as they advanced. Seven of them Tom Cruze counted; he halted his retreat and brought up the muzzle of the rifle. The file swayed toward him; the black, plaited polls of hair glistened with the rain. Then of a sudden the file leader stopped at a distance of ten yards and raised a hand, palm outward. For the first time his head came up and he stared squarely at the white man's face.

"Peace," he said in the clicking, guttural Chinook jargon.

Cruze returned the impassive stare. Like all settlers in the Oregon country, he understood the jargon; it was the universal tongue between white and red man west of the Cascades and north of the Rogue Nation, each tribe flavoring the language with its own idiom. In the present instance the Indians were of the Molalla tribe, possessors of the foothills and mountain fastnesses of the Cascade Range. Unlike the valley and river tribes, they were farther from the influence of white missionary and trader and hence kept their original character more nearly intact. The missionary Indian shrunk and died; the Molallas were plump, belligerent with all the old tribal fire.

"It is time to speak plain words," said the spokesman after a long deliberate pause. "We have watched the white man come into the valley below us. The tribes there starve and die. The game goes away, and comes no more. The white man's sharp stick

turns over the ground and makes bad things. The Indian is sick with many white sicknesses. They were not here before the white man came. All these things we have heard. This is our land. The sun and stars have looked down on Molalla people for many moons. My father was happy here and his father before him. If the white man comes the Indian will starve and die of white sicknesses. Molallas will not be like Calapooiahs and Multnomahs who now are falling like autumn leaves. White man, you must go. Go back to the valley where other white men are. Leave the forest and hills to the Molalla."

A silence fell over the group. Cruze gripped his rifle and stared at the solemn group. Leave all this labor behind and retreat? It was not in his blood to do that. True enough, there was land in the valley below him. The fertile Wallamet soil would grow double the crop that this fern-ridden bench land might produce. But the incoming settlers were taking the best of the valley claims and prices were beyond the reach of a poor man. Besides—and all the sacrifice and toil of one breed of pioneer might be summed up in this reason—he was a forest man.

Others might love the open prairies and seek the river bottom; Cruze had the vision of the cathedral firs forever before him, and the sound of the creeks dashing down-hill, and the cold air sliding down from the snow-capped peaks beyond. In the wilderness was game to sustain him, solitude and elbow room to content him. He was master of his domain. Like others he had traveled two thousand miles to find his heart's desire, one of a vast human stream bent on finding the rainbow's end. He had found it. Now must he leave?

THE rain whipped around the group, but they might have been statues for all the visible movement. Indian etiquette, this, which commanded silence for mature thought. Cruze heard the cabin door opened and turned. On the threshold stood his wife, tall and young, stamped with the same restless, invincible Western breeding. A cameo-clear face surmounted by heavy golden hair, set with sober eyes.

"Tom, you be careful! If there's trouble I'll use this pistol."

He broke the silence with a soft, velvet voice.

"You shet the door, Amy, or you'll fotch a cold," he called to her. "Thar'll be no trouble."

Then, when she had disappeared, he turned toward his grave audience and dropped into the barbaric jargon. "It is bad medicine for the white man to run. I came in peace. I spoke always to my friend, the Molalla, with a single tongue. My heart is good. Why should I go?"

The leader's heavy face was illummined with an unexpected show of feeling. "It is the white man's way. One comes with a sharp stick to stir the ground. Then two come. Then ten come and the red man must go. The Molalla is no fool. It will be the same with him unless he stop the stream when it is young."

"I speak with a single tongue," reiterated Cruze, the line of his long chin growing sharper. "My heart is here. The big father at Washington says this land is for all. I stay."

"The big father's eyes are too weak to see the Molalla. Have care, white man, of the Indian's patience. I watched you come here with two horses, a white-faced squaw and a dog. See what you have done with the forest! You cut trees with your ax and stir the ground. Bad medicine! The Molalla is no fool. Take your squaw, your dog and your horse and leave."

"I reckon I'll have to stay," repeated Cruze.

The spokesman of the Molallas drew himself up, and anger sparkled in his dark clouded eyes.

"You are a fool, white man!" he warned. "Take your things and go! The Molalla speaks no more until the sun is gone. Then he speaks with the arrow."

Cruze shook his head slowly.

"I come with peace in my hand. I kill no game for sport. It is not bad medicine to stir the ground."

"I have spoken!" The leader raised his hand to the sky. "When Molalla comes again it will be with arrows."

They turned silently in the file and trudged away, heads bowed as before, while the jet hair glistened with rain. There was a sibilant rustle of the leaves at the clearin's edge; then they were gone and nothing marked their passage save the horse's uneasy watchfulness. Cruze sighed, his eyes clinging to the bushes, and his calloused hand slid up

and down the stock of the gun. "Thar's trouble afoot," he murmured. "Trouble aplenty fer those who ain't lookin' fer it."

"Tom, come in the house!"

He came at his wife's beckoning and barred the door against the storm. From without this cabin looked like any other, rough-surfaced and chinked with mud; within Amy Cruze had worked a transformation on the rough appearances. A white spread was smoothly drawn over the rustic bed; above the wide-mouthed fireplace hung pots and pans in a neat, shining row; the improvised chairs were backed with tanned deer-hide to ease the rough frames. Such softening as could be done to the rawboned atmosphere of the cabin had been done; the puncheoned floor had a rag carpet; the hewn table was covered over with a cloth of scarlet interwoven with white patterns; the tallow candles beamed from the center. It was only mid-afternoon, yet the day was dark and the oilskin windows were inadequate things at best.

"Tom, what is it?" she asked. "Indians don't come out of sociableness."

He set to work wiping the gun. "Why now, ain't nothin' to worry about much," he declared, looking down at his weapon. "They're a little upset about white folks comin' in."

"And they told you to leave?" She was not to be put off. "I knew it would fall! Remember what Dan Mumpower said last month when he came through? Said there'd be trouble soon enough."

"It ain't him." Cruze smacked the table with his fist. "It's Cockstock's doin's. Cockstock allus was a renegade. Even little Chief John ain't powerful struck with him." He stared at the blazing fire. A wrinkle of doubt crept along his cheek. "But he's an eloquent varmint, sartain. He'll turn the Injuns crazy with talk—and then we suffer."

"What did you tell him?"

"Well, why now, what could I tell? Think I'll give up arter all we've done? I said I'd stay."

They were not demonstrative folk; the deeds they did stood sponsor for their emotions. The metal from which they were made was hard and durable; capable of tremendous strength; hard to heat, but glowing hot when once fanned and slow to cool. Perhaps in younger days they had made more display of love and affection; since then the seasons had tempered them until they were fit protagonists of the frontier. Tempered so that Tom Cruze might say, "Sartain, I'll stay. They'll not skeer me off." And so that his wife might quietly move to the simmering pot on the crane and nod.

"If it's to be a fight, Tom, you'd better lock the horses in and bring up water and wood," she advised.

" 'Twon't be fer long. 'Tain't Injun nature to conduct a siege. It's the sudden, stealthy way a man's got to watch." Nevertheless he rose at her bidding and went to fill the empty pails at the creek. At the door he had another idea. "Sartain, ef it's to be war, then Mumpower an' Oldring an' Conyers'll all be primed. A few dead Injuns'll put sense in Cockstock."

THESE were the other settlers whose cabins stood like outposts along the heavy green forest rim. The nearest was Mumpower, eight miles beyond Rocking River. Cruze totalled up the possible man power of these four families in case of trouble, as he trudged toward the creek. Considering himself, there would be four men and ten boys. Enough to withstand nearly any kind of attack, if combined; but combination was next to impossible. In these dark woods and this somber ground the battle was both lonely and solitary. He filled the buckets at the brawling stream and went back to the house, whose dim glow of light and chimney sparks seemed the only cheerful sight in all the dismal, twilight day. He lifted the latch, stepped in, and dropped both buckets with a precipitate oath.

"Amy!"

She had gone to the bed and was staring at him with wide, unfrightened eyes. The message of urgency was in them when she raised a hand. "Run and get Mrs. Mumpower, Tom," she commanded. "And hurry. There—there ain't much time."

HE DROPPED down awkwardly and ran a clumsy hand across her hair.

"Why—Amy, I didn't reckon—why, cuss me, I'd told the bucks I'd go ef I'd known this was to happen so soon." It left him in a sudden suspense of fear; he fingered the bright yellow hair while the beads of sweat sprang to his

rough skin. "Sartain, we'll ketch up and leave right off. We'll make the settlement by ten o'clock."

"No." The slow unhurried drawl of that word seemed to quiet his panic. "I can't travel, Tom. You run away now and get Mrs. Mumpower to come. Hurry. I——"

He was up on his feet, staring from corner to corner.

"Amy, gal, I can't pull out with you hyar alone," he protested. "Thar's apt to be trouble."

"Never mind. You can't stay now. Run along, Tom. Bring me that pistol and heap up the fire. I'll get up after a bit and bar the door right well."

He gripped his rifle, and at sight of his wife lying so helpless, so unable to use his strength or his willingness, his panic revived. It was two hours to Mumpower's and two hours back. The Molallas had given him until sundown, and beyond this drizzle and murk of rain the sun was approaching the western line. When darkness fell they would come again. Perhaps he might reach the Molalla village and appeal to Little John. Cruze dismissed the idea at once. There would be only squaws at the village; the fighting men were out in the dark woods, waiting for the hour to strike. Certain peril to leave his yellow-haired wife so helpless in that bed; certain peril to remain. The time had come when she could use only the ministrations of her own kind or of a doctor.

"Tom, you look to have seen Old Nick. It isn't so bad—if you'll hurry. They'll not get in, right off. If they come I'll shoot through that window and they'll be mighty slow to rush in. 'Tain't dry enough to set the house on fire. Don't you grieve, Tom. Run now!"

"Amy, ain't thar anything I can do?"

"No—no! Go 'way! Hurry for Mrs. Mumpower!"

He stared at her with his jaw muscles bulging outward and his hazel gray eyes half hidden beneath the shady brows; some urgent impulse bent him over. He impressed a fleeting, shamefaced kiss on the woman's forehead and, without looking back, rushed for the door.

"I'll bustle right along," he reassured her and opened the door.

Next moment he had slammed it behind him and was out in the storm.

The door faced upon the dim trail to the settlement; on the opposite side of the clearing the upland trail entered. So, in a way, Cruze was sheltered from savage eyes if they were lurking about; the day was momentarily growing grimmer and the storm clouds blacker, more ragged in design as they scudded eastward to the hills. The creek rattled under the sudden bursts of rain and the trees whined in stress. Cruze stared about him and of a sudden dropped to all fours and crawled quickly to the nearest clump of bushes. If he could avoid being seen leaving the cabin it would for a little time deter the savages from making an outright attack upon the place; the knowledge that but a lone woman was within would surely hasten their aggression.

He gained the shelter of the brush and was inundated with a cascade of water; plunging down a graveled slope he breasted the turbulent creek and waded across. On the far side a thin trace led through the wilderness of fir and hemlock. He set out upon it at a dog trot, the gun balanced in his right hand.

In the clearing there had been a kind of twilight; here a dismal dusk settled. High up the treetops caught the storm and sent the report down as a distant roar. All the sport and gusty vehemence of the elements filtered through the heavy boughs and became a persistent dripping rain, marked now and then by a shower of small limbs. And, like the signal of distant artillery, the infrequent detonation of a falling tree arrived in successive whorls of vibration.

He broke through the breast-high thicket, keeping his moccasined feet on the sinuous trace. By courtesy only could it be called a path. It was less than that. Indians used it in paralleling the foot of the Cascades; it was the frayed string that linked the widely separated outposts—Cruze, Mumpower, Conyers, Oldring. And beyond them others unknown. It wound in and out of draws, skirted and crossed rivers, entered meadows, taking always the line of least resistance until it finally crossed the range and, several hundred miles south, arrived at a tall butte called Yainax, where each fall the tribles from all the Northwest and California met for trade. And it marked the highest surge of a white tide that had washed Cruze

and his remote neighbors toward the mountain fastness.

NEVER did Cruze break his step until he arrived at the Rocking River. The rifle swung back and forth, his breathing became more and more labored, he ran with a divided mind, half dwelling at the little cabin behind him and half warning his eyes to be on the alert for wilderness prowlers. He had always been on more or less friendly terms with the Molallas; yet, like all pioneers, he had that kind of trust in savage nature which was bolstered by sharp observation. There was a great fear upon him, a fear that speeded his legs and put added vigor in the whipcord body; not of Indians, but for his wife.

So he ran until he broke through the saplings and brush to face the turbid, yellow Rocking River hissing along the top of its banks and carrying the sediment and drift of a summer's collecting. It was not so very wide; ten yards measured it at this particular point, which at normal times was a ford. Now no man could venture over on foot. Cruze remembered a deadfall that spanned the stream a little above, and once more set out at a trot along the turbulent waters; when he had gone two or three hundred yards he saw the middle of the deadfall sagging perilously into the water. It would do him no good to try that route unless he had some kind of purchase to the farther shore. Looking around and above him, he shook his head in a kind of desperate disappointment and, turning, ran back to the ford.

There had been growing on him that vague, uneasy feeling of danger again. No particular sound in the maelstrom of booming river and groaning trees arrived to warn him; it was, as before, the indefinite call to his instinct of self-preservation. He slipped noiselessly back into the fringe of grape and salal bushes, crouched on his knees and stared across at the gloomy thicket. Nothing out of ordinary that he could determine; the wind whipped the leaves and boughs; the rain pattered down. Still he rested, his body taut as an Indian bow, the rifle gripped across his thigh.

"God A'mighty!" he growled, and shifted uneasily. "No time to fool around with every little thing I hear."

He had the stalker's patience. At any other time he would have rested there, immobile, voiceless, until the impalpable warning had dissolved, or the quarry came into view. But fear was on his shoulders and urged him to hasten; he gave another long scrutiny to the far bank, strained his ears for the minor notes in the storm's cannonading, and then rose out of the covert. Below the ford a dozen yards stood an alder whose trunk, undermined by the freshet, canted toward the other shore. The treetop extended three-quarters across the water, and on the far side was met by the out-reaching boughs of a hemlock. Cruze passed another swift glance through the darkening haze and leaped for the tree. He crawled up through the branches to the very top and looked down at the livid current. There was a hiatus of four or five feet across to where the fir boughs stretched their shelter, perhaps ten feet below his present perch. He swung the treetop back and forth, clung to his rifle with a death's grip, leaned far out on the return swing of the alder, shouted "So-ho now!" and leaped through the air.

HE MADE an arc through the dismal sky, cleared the open water gap and fell a-sprawl in the fir boughs. They momentarily broke his fall; then they gave way and he started a crazy, head foremost descent to the ground. The fir needles scratched his face; he sought to check the fall with the free arm and was conscious of a hot slashing pain from shoulder to forearm. The rigidly held gun caught crosswise between two limbs, snapped his body around like a top, turned him end for end, spun him, and catapulted him through the last ring of boughs to the ground in a dizzy heap.

It knocked the breath from him. That tenacious fire of self-protection, however, set him to movement almost automatically. He pulled one foot from the river's edge and weakly crawled toward deeper shelter, dragging the gun along. There he fell against a bush and for a moment relaxed. It was only for a moment. He seemed to hear a high, thin, new-born cry thread its way among all the varying noises of the storm, and he sprang up, terrified, running at full strength toward the trace.

A shadow rose up full against him, shutting off the small light of day; for a third time that ill-starred afternoon

the surge of warning spread through the nerves of his body; this time the proximity made the shock and reaction more intense. He jumped aside and brought up his rifle, pulling the trigger as he advanced. The savage shouted, "Hey!" and swung a war-club. The rifle's hammer ticked forlornly against metal, and the wet powder refused to ignite.

"You damned varmint!" yelled Cruze. "Git outen my path!"

The war-club banged against the gun's stock and knocked it aside; the savage spread out an encircling arm. Cruze drew off and pulled his hunting-knife. His arm flashed up.

"Hey!" shouted the buck, and fell with a weird cry.

Cruze leaped over the body and fled down the trace. Mumpower's was ahead.

Time, after that encounter, was for Tom Cruze a great leaden weight that dragged at his feet and pressed against his chest. Overhead the storm beat with an increased fury against the treetops and the cannonading of distant windfalls increased. He ran on, undeterred by the turnings and dipping of the trail, plunging over logs, brought up by vines. Endlessly he ran, with the great fear freezing his heart until, through a long dark vista, he saw a solitary gleam of light and presently heard the baying of dogs, full-throated, menacing.

"Hyeeeee! Dan! Hyeeeee!" he shouted at the top of his voice, scrambling over a rail fence.

The comforting spark of warmth dipped and died, leaving the cabin utterly dark. The dogs closed in.

"Who's that? Sing agin!" an answering yell came across the clearing.

"Hyeee, Dan. It's Tom Cruze! Call off them thar dogs an' let me in!"

"Down, down, you curs!" a powerful voice sent out warning. "Git down! Belle come back hyar afore I bust a rib!"

Cruze ran up.

"It's my wife, Dan!" he blurted. "I reckon I'll have to ask yore wife to come right over. And them cursed Molallys give me warning just afore I pulled out."

MUMPOWER stood in the doorway. He was a short man with a barrel chest and an iron-rust beard that masked his face, but a blaze of anger sparkled in his eyes and he turned a club-like arm into the cabin.

"Hyar, you boys, git up the guns. Maw, it's Miz Cruze needs yore help. Ed, saddle a hoss fer maw. The rest of us'll use shank's mare. Tom, yo're shakin' like a pizen pup. Maw, whar's the coffee pot? Injuns out, eh? Wal, by hell! We'll blast 'em!"

Cruze gulped down the coffee.

"They give me to sundown," he informed between swallows. "'Twasn't but a half hour later that the missis went to bed. Dan, what time is it now?"

Mumpower pulled out a big silver timepiece and squinted. "It's five-thirty. Sundown wouldn't rightly come ontil about six, ef thar war a sun."

The sweat rolled down Cruze's face.

"Ain't no time to lose," he muttered. "The missis——"

A clap of thunder overbore his last words. Mumpower's five sons tramped in the door, armed and ready. Mrs. Mumpower, silver-haired and plump, was swathed in a blanket. "Laws, Mumpower, git yore hat an' come. We ain't no Methodist party. That poor little girl all alone!"

"Maw, you'd best put suthin' more on. Hit's goin' to be tarnal wet."

"Hush up, Paw Mumpower, and don't stand thar like a bump on a log. Don't you see how Tom Cruze is fumin'!" The good lady went out and got to the saddle. "Wet! Now you'd think I was Queen o' Sheby. Ain't I been wet afore? Shet that door tight."

"Hold," said Mumpower. "I reckon the Rockin' River's plumb overflowin' ain't it, Tom?"

Cruze thought a moment. "Can't take that horse across. But if we had a forty-foot stretch of rope——"

One of the boys called out of the blackness ahead.

"I got it," he called. "Reckoned we'd sort o' haul maw acrost."

The dogs bayed and slumped off ahead of the horse. Indian-file the party returned down the trace. Cruze cut around the other men and took the lead. Mumpower was directly behind, with his sons following, one leading the horse.

"How's that deadfall across the creek?" asked Mumpower.

"Sunk in the middle."

The elder pioneer held his tongue for a half mile before he solved the problem.

"We'll tie the rope end to Elvy—he swims best—and let him try the log," he decided. "With the rope across we c'n each tow over an' pull the hoss through with maw on it."

That was the end of talk until the river was reached an hour and a half later. It was seven, and a torrent of water splashed between the trees. The stream tugged and groaned at the banks. Some jam of logs not far above created a cataract that resounded above the lesser noises. Cruze burst through the salal and arrived at the deadfall. It was barely distinguishable, a dark strip extending downward to a stretch of creaming water.

"Give me the rope," said Cruze "I'll tie it around my ribs and make the jump."

Mumpower rubbed a bald, sopping head and calculated the distance. "She's a good eight or nine feet an' under water in the middle. Ain't sech a shucks of a jump, but the powerful part is to land on the other end o' the log 'thout bogglin'. Elvy's spryest. Let him go."

But a fury of haste possessed Cruze. He was fastening the rawhide line around his waist.

"Give me plenty of slack," he said and walked out upon the log. Mumpower let out the slack and turned the other end around his club-like arm. "Ef you slip I'll haul back!" he shouted.

All creation seemed to stand at a pause and it appeared as if the roaring river and the pounding storm held their voices in abeyance for one significant moment. Out of the shadowy wilderness ahead, sounding faint but certain, echoed a sudden burst of shots, perhaps a dozen in unison, followed by a ragged volley. Then a complete silence in which Cruze threw up a shaking arm.

"Hark!" criew Mumpower.

One lone echo swiftly bore down on the wind.

"It's Amy firin' back!" cried Cruze. "By God, if we're too late I'll stalk every Molally in these mountains!"

He drew back up the log a piece, ran ahead and leaped at water's edge.

"Ho!" yelled Mumpower by way of assistance and stood ready to pull the line.

Cruze had fallen flat on the farther incline, grasping the bark surface with both hands. The curling water licked at his moccasined feet and the log teetered perilously. In another instant he was up and on the farther shore, tying the rope to a sapling.

The boys went across, one by one, each with the rope's end around his waist and fighting the current as they whirled down and across the turbulent current. Mumpower stood behind and hitched the rope around the horse's neck.

"Now, Maw, you hang tight in this hyar saddle and the hoss'll do the rest," he directed.

"Don't you get skeered for me, Mumpower," replied the woman. "Oh, that poor lamb! Git along, horse."

The animal approached the water and reared back. Mumpower thwacked him on the rump, and next instant the current took animal and rider; for a time Mumpower raised both arms in suspense. The woman clung to reins and pommel, while the horse's head shot down the creek, bobbing above and below the surface, eyes wide with fright. Cruze and the four young Mumpowers pulled at the line, hauling it shoreward.

Cruze threw the line across for Mumpower and presently the elder was with them. "Waugh, cold water ain't my style nohow!" he roared in distaste.

"A leetle extra washin' ain't goin' to hurt you, Mumpower," retorted his wife. "Oh, that poor lamb in the cabin! Hurry!"

Cruze shouted a tremendous curse and ran into the brush with the others following behind him. Once more a staccato volley of shots resounded in the forest and once more, after a long, hesitant pause, came the single, lonely reply. Cruze was pouring out a steady stream of oaths, fighting aside brush and limbs.

OF A sudden a bright mushroom of light spread through the forest, turned to a yellow blob and leaped pointedly to the sky. Cruze screamed a warwhoop. In return the forest in front of him echoed with Molalla cries. The pioneer stopped in his tracks and threw up an arm, dimly seen, to the rest.

"It ain't the house they fired, it's the

old lean-to I used fer a barn," he said. "They did it from cover and I reckon they figger it'll catch the house."

"Hyar's fightin' to do," rumbled Mumpower. "Yore wife's safe fer a little while."

"How do you know?" retorted his wife. "The poor lamb, I ought to be there right this minute."

"Maw, you git off that horse and be quiet a second. Boys, you all spread out and sneak for'd. The Injuns'll all be right on the clearin' edge. Whack 'em from behind. Elvy, you stay with yore mother."

The burning lean-to illumined the whole clearing and set the oiled skin windows to gleaming. The Indians raised a bedlam of noises and the firing became general. Cruze brought up the butt of his rifle and without ceremony dashed forward. Mumpower dropped to the ground. A shot banged out and whistled through the leaves. Cruze's gun descended with a solid thump.

"Thar's one Injun skull caved in," muttered the elder and rose up.

Both pioneers were creeping along the fringe of the trees, watching for the little jets of red that announced gunfire. Dead in front of Mumpower a savage rose and grunted, "Hough!" Before the white man could raise his rifle he was overborne and sent to the earth with the Molalla on top. The little copse seemed to become instantly the focal point of battle. The bushes rattled and a dozen warriors popped into sight; the reflection of the burning building revealed their dripping, half naked bodies and made them seem like satanic creatures sprung from the earth. Once more the guttural shout of victory.

Cruze whirled about; the rifle crashed down on another skull; Mumpower shoved his knee in his opponent's stomach and lifted him clear.

"Take that, you cuss!" he muttered and, rolling over, sank his hunting-knife hilt-deep.

"Comin', Paw, comin'!" Elvy Mumpower's cry rang through the glade.

Three of the boys converged upon the fight. The rifles burst out; the short orange flame thrust weird fingers into the semi-lit place. A great, prolonged cry of death shuddered from one Molalla throat, wavered and fell away. It seemed to be the turning point of the fight. The rifle shots stopped; the brush rustled under many moving bodies; within the count of ten the place of battle was deserted and silent, leaving only the dead upon the field. Mumpower got to his feet and shook himself like a bedraggled dog.

"Cuss me, I felt my top-knot come plumb loose that time." Then he turned upon his youngest son. "Elvy, I told you to stay with yore maw!"

"She's cached in the brush. Told me to come ahead and help out."

"Now, Mumpower, don't you scold him," from the thicket came the woman's reply. "He's got to shoulder a gun sometime or other."

Cruze was running across the clearing. Even before he got to the door it swung open to meet him, and upon the threshold stood the tall, thin, raw-boned figure of a man dressed in preacher's black. It was Joab Porter, itinerant preacher and doctor, who made it his duty to visit all the solitary and outlying places in the hills and valley.

"Amy?" Cruze cried out his question.

"Doin' tolerable well," was the slow rejoiner. "Yo're the paw of two more Oregon citizens now, both male, fat and healthy."

Cruze wiped his forehead.

"How'd you come to be hyar?" he asked.

"Was heading thisaway when I heard talk o' trouble back at the settlement. Thought if I pushed on in a hurry I might help. I got hyar plumb in time, it appears."

From within came a steady wailing cry. Cruze felt suddenly weak and humble, and Porter must have read his feeling for he clapped a hand on the pioneer's shoulder.

"God's will," the steady, kind voice boomed comfort. "Down on yore knees."

And there in the flickering light of the fireplace, with the wind whipping through the open door and the rain beating relentlessly down upon the roof, the two men knelt silently while the newborn cried. The burning lean-to fell apart with a hissing sound, and in the remote distance a gun banged a departing challenge.

THE THIRD EYE

By RAYMOND W. PORTER

Author of "Bear Meat," "A Weakness for Windmills," etc.

"What can you do with an hombre you can't down by shootin' him plumb between the eyes?"

AS JOHN RAGWEED stared into the face of the man lying on the ground before him, his small wiry frame stiffened and he took an uncertain step backward. One hand sought his bearded face as if to hide it, though there was none to see, none but the unconscious man who lay amid the rocks of an arroyo in the Hammerhead Hills.

The eyes of the latter were closed, but squarely between them was a bullet wound and above it was a crescent scar that resembled an eyebrow. John Ragweed had an uncanny feeling that this was a third eye, born at the moment of death, staring back at him with crimson mockery.

This illusion was imaginative and fleeting, but the crescent scar and the bullet hole were not. They were grim and mocking facts.

Ragweed bent forward and touched the scar on the forehead. It formed the upper portion of an inverted U. It was etched clearly, the kind of permanent scar that results from a deep burn.

Ragweed gently probed the wound. The bridge of the nose had been crushed. It was a thinly chiseled nose with wide sensitive nostrils.

The forehead was high and wide and still bore the print of the sombrero that lay a few feet away. The face was that of a young man, strong and purposeful.

Ragweed placed his hand over the wounded man's heart and found that it was beating fast and steadily. He tied his bandana across the eyes and the wound.

"How in hell," muttered the little bearded rancher, could a man get shot in the head like that, and live?"

He looked about. On an abrupt slab of granite nearby was a fresh mark, as though a bullet had ricochetted from it.

"So that was it," mumbled Ragweed. "The slug lost its force before hitting him.

Ragweed's high-headed sorrel stood, nervous and fretful, a few yards away, and he led it up to the fallen man. Ragweed underweighed the wounded man at least forty pounds; but, after some delay got his unconscious burden in the saddle.

THREE hours later he reined up before his ranch-house and shouted "Ellie!"

A girl came to the door. She was small and dark and possessed an air of alertness and strength. There was not

much to mark her as the daughter of the man who called her unless it was this wiry quality, this suggestion of an unwavering strength and self confidence.

She ran out into the yard with an excited query, which was ignored and a question was flung at her instead.

"Ain't Clinker and Joe got in yet?"

"No, they're late. Who is he? What happened?"

"I don't know who he is. I found him laying out in the Hammerhead Hills. Help me get him down. That's it hold his head up. No, no, I'll carry him in the house, open the door. Damn it he's as heavy as a horse."

Ragweed, panting and cussing and talking as fast as he could, gave the girl little opportunity to ask questions. She brought hot water, clean white rags, and dressed the wound in a much more efficient and sanitary manner. In the process of bandaging the wound, both of the victim's eyes were blindfolded.

"Don't see how I kept from killin' him by bringing him all that distance on a horse. Ought to come back and got a spring wagon, I reckon, but thought I could save time this way. Was afraid he'd die on me any minute."

"I'll go for the doctor," Ellie said.

Ragweed nodded. "You can make the trip as quick or quicker than I can. I'll stay here with him, in case he comes to. Dammit, Clinker and Joe are always late when I want 'em to do anythin'."

"Supper is most ready," Ellie called from her room, as she hastily changed to riding clothes. "Watch that pan of biscuits in the stove."

"You better grab somethin' to eat before you go," Ragweed said.

Ellie ignored this suggestion, however, and rushed from the house a few minutes later to get the swift, powerful bay gelding which she preferred even for casual rides. In the dusk of the evening, she headed for Buffalo Butte, sixteen miles away.

Ragweed put another pan of biscuits in the stove, muttering short, explosive curses under his breath. He paced between the kitchen and the living room, where the wounded man lay on a couch, until the arrival, about thirty minutes later, of Clinker and Joe, the only two cowhands employed on the Ragweed ranch.

THEY stared at the figure on the couch and heard Ragweed's brief explanation of how he had found the man lying out in the Hammerhead Hills.

"Found him layin' out in the Hammerheads, huh?" mused Clinker an old saddle drifter who had done extremely well to hold his present job for six months. "You don't know who plugged him, huh?

"No, I don't know who plugged him," Ragweed said.

"Where's his hoss?" asked Joe, a dependable old timer who had worked for Ragweed many years.

"Seen his nag runnin' off in the hills, but I didn't have time to catch 'im," Ragweed said.

"Maybe we could tell somethin' about who he is if we had the hoss."

"Maybe so," said Ragweed. "Tomorrow we'll see if we can pick it up. Go on and eat your supper. Ellie's gone for the Doc. Had to send her because you-all wasn't here. Where the hell you been?"

"South prairie, like you told us."

Ragweed refused to eat, but strode about the living room, keeping a close watch on the man on the couch. When the latter groaned and began to show other sings of returning consciousness, Ragweed was immediately at his side.

"Lay down there now, dammit," the rancher counselled. "Take it easy, I say."

The wounded man was weakly trying to rise. Ragweed easily forced him to lie still.

"Get 'im a drink of water," he ordered Joe.

The wounded man gulped the cold water from a dipper and put a groping hand on his bandaged forehead. "Where—am I?"

"You're ridin' easy," Ragweed advised him. "Just take it easy till the Doc gets here. It won't be long now."

"Who was the skunk that shot me, and where's Donohue?"

Ragweed stiffened and glanced at Joe., Where's who?" he asked sharply.

"Donohue," repeated the other. "Do you know Donohue. He's a cattle buyer. Who are you?"

"I'm John Ragweed. And if Donohue's a cattle buyer, then I'm the damndest thief in west Texas."

Again the wounded man tried to rise. He was pulling at the bandage

over his eyes. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean you better let that rag alone if you don't want to bleed to death," Ragweed warned. "Where did you meet up with Donohue, and what's your name?"

"My name's Colt. I'm from New Mex, and I just hit this country. Hired to ride for Donohue. What do you know about him?"

"What's your first name?" demanded Ragweed.

"Clyde. Why?"

"Just wanted to know, that's all."

"Was you in the fight?" asked Colt.

"What fight?" asked Ragweed.

"We was gatherin' some stock that Donohue said he had bought. Man named Pickering was along, too. He had sold the cattle to Donohue, he said. Somebody opened up on us with a rifle. I saw him, and rode towards him. Didn't have anything but a six-gun, so I had to get within range. Before I could get a shot at him, he caught me. But I saw his face, damn him, and I'll know him the next time I see him, if it's ten years from now. He was a scrawny——"

"You've only known this Donohue for a few days?" Ragweed interrupted.

"That's all. This jasper Pickering was sellin' him the cattle. I saw the bill of sale."

"Maybe so," said Ragweed, "and again maybe not. Pickering ain't got none too good a reputation in this country. Donohue pretends to be a cattle buyer but he's a damn thief. You just got into a jam, that's all."

COLT was silent for a few minutes. Ragweed stared at the groping hand which was still fumbling with the bandage.

"Well, if that's the case." Colt said, "I reckon I was just a damn fool to hook up with somebody I didn't know. But it looked all square enough to me, and I needed a job."

"How long since you left New Mex?"

"Couple of months."

"That your home?"

"The cow country is my home, and I'm not particular what they call it on the maps."

"Your folks live in New Mex, do they?

"Both dead," said Colt briefly.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three. What is this? A workin' over? I tell you that this jasper Donohue hired me, and if there was anything crooked about the deal, I wasn't in on it."

"The deal was crooked all right, if Donohue was in on it. I can tell you that, although I don't know anything about it."

"If you don't know anything about it, where did you sit in on the play?"

"I just happened along, and saw you layin' out there with a bullet between your eyes. I brought you up here to my house and have sent after a doc. Now lay still and leave that rag alone."

There was another short period of silence. Then Ragweed spoke again. "You said you saw this hombre that plugged you, and that you was goin' to start gunnin' for him immediate. Now if it is proved that you was stealin' this gent's cattle, even if you was in the clear so far as you knowed, you couldn't get very far with it, I'm thinkin'."

"If I was in the wrong, I didn't know it," Colt said. "And the hombre that plugged me didn't give me time to do any explainin'. I'm settlin' with him, right or wrong. Can't no man throw down on me like that without me havin' somethin' to say about it."

"You mean you're settlin' with him if——"

"If what?"

"Well, you got a right smart sized hole in your head."

Colt pressed the spot experimentally. Suddenly, he tore the bandage aside. "I'm goin' to see it," he muttered. "I'm goin' to——" He paused, blinking his eyes.

Ragweed stared into his face. "Yes?" he prompted, "You're goin' to what?"

Colt put a hand to each eye, now free of the blindfold. "Say," he whispered, "Is it dark in here?"

Ragweed glanced at the lamp on the table, then at the two cowpunchers standing near. "Dark?" he repeated.

"Yes. I can't see a blamed thing."

Ragweed's eyes widened. He was staring in fascination at the third eye again. "You—can't see," he repeated. "Of course you can't see. We got you in a dark room, and it's about ten o'clock at night."

TWO days passed. Colt was still in a dark room in-so-far as he was concerned. It began to look as though he would spend the rest of his life in darkness.

"I've been in a lot of scraps," he told Ellie, "and I've been creased up some. Got a bullet through my middle once, and was laid up for a long time. It ain't pleasant, just lyin' still and doin' nothin' for days at a time, especially when a man has been used to ridin' and roamin'. But I didn't kick about it then. I downed the jasper that got me. I was satisfied. It was a fair and square fight."

Ellie nodded, then realized that she must speak aloud. "I understand," she said quietly.

"If a man rides on the wrong side of the fence, he usually knows what he is doin'," Colt went on. "He knows he is takin' a risk, and is willing to run a risk. If he gets it in the neck, he's got to take his medicine without hollerin'."

"Of course."

"Maybe Donohue was on the wrong side of the fence, but I didn't know it. I wouldn't have been workin' for him, if I had. Not that I got any wings on me, or anything like that. But stealin' cattle just ain't in my line, that's all."

THE girl waited for him to go on. She had been that way during the past two days, two days of the blackest kind of hell, two days of bitter realization and gnawing resentment. She had spoken infrequently, but she had understood.

But Colt had to get it off his chest. He had to be sure that she understood. He didn't want her thinking that he couldn't take his medicine, however bitter it might be. But he did want her to know why his resentment was so deep.

"If I had got it in the neck for doin' somethin' that was shady, and that I knew was shady and that I was runnin' a risk in doin', I wouldn't be kickin'. I'd be sayin' that I had gambled, and lost. If I had got it in a fair fight, I'd be sayin' the same thing."

"You might say, then," she reminded him gently, "that you gambled on Donohue's honesty, and lost."

"Maybe you're right about that," he agreed. "Maybe I took up with him too quick. But he offered me a job and I had no reason to believe there was anything crooked about it. Even saw the bill of sale, and this jasper Pickering, who said he was sellin' the cattle, rode with us. I thought we was on Pickering's range and was gathering Pickering's stuff."

"Pickering has a ranch next to ours, but he's a crook like Donohue. Was there anybody else with you?"

"Only one. A puncher they called Singletree."

"I never heard of him. Guess he's one of Donohue's men."

"It seems funny to me why your dad can't find out somethin' about it. If I had two good eyes, I could find out in a mighty short time who done the shootin'."

"He is doing the best he can to find out for you," Ellie said. "But he can't find any trace of Donohue or Pickering. They wouldn't tell him anything, even if he could find them, in my opinion."

"But he could ask all the other ranchers hereabouts. Some of them did the shootin'. Whoever done it will likely be braggin' that he chased off a gang of thieves and plugged one of them through the head."

"Possibly so," Ellie agreed. "Dad is out now getting what information he can about it. But what can you do when you do find out who shot you?"

Colt smiled bitterly. "I ain't much account right now, I'll admit. But I'll find a way, somehow, to square things with the hombre that plugged me, plugged me without givin' me a Chinaman's chance."

THAT evening Ragweed returned from a trip about the country. He had no news. The men he had talked to hadn't heard anything about any shooting in the Hammerhead Hills. That section was open range, too poor for grazing and not much stock was to be found there.

"I talked to the doc down at Buffalo Butte about you," Ragweed told Colt. "And he thinks we better take you down to Ft. Worth to a specialist."

"What's a specialist?" Colt asked.

"Well, it seems that in big towns where there's a whole herd of folks they sort of divide 'em up accordin' to what ails 'em. If a man has got hoof and mouth disease, for instance, he is cut out from the rest of the herd and run into a corral with a lot of other jaspers with the same trouble."

"Then what?"

"Well, this jasper that doctors up the hoof and mouth herd and don't do nothin' else finally gets so he don't know nothin' else, so there ain't no use to go to him with the bellyache or the blackleg. Likewise he gets to where he knows more about hoofs and mouths than the ordinary breed."

"This doc that come out from Buffalo Butte says this jasper in Ft. Worth knows more about how to fix me up than he does?"

"That's it exactly. Says the other gent can fix you up if there is any chance at all."

"Then I might as well go down and let 'em look me over," Colt decided. "If you'll take me down to Buffalo Butte and put me on the train."

"Better than that, I'll go right along to Ft. Worth with you," Ragweed said.

"Nope," said Colt. "I'll go alone."

"Like hell you will," snapped Ragweed. "You think I'm goin' to turn you loose in a herd like that. They'd run you down."

"No, I reckon not," Colt said.

"Well, I'm goin' with you, anyway."

"And so am I," said Ellie.

"You are not," said Ragweed decidedly.

"Why not?" she asked, somewhat petulantly.

"You know why as well as I do," said her father warmly. Then he added, with a significant look at Colt. "You got to stay here and do the cookin' for Clinker and Joe."

"They can do the cookin' for themselves," Ellie began, but was drowned out by a string of popping cuss words from Ragweed.

She left the room angrily. It was evident that both daughter and father had another common characteristic—a flaring temper. Fortunately, it died down as quickly as it flared up.

"There's somethin' I been wantin' to ask you," Colt said awkwardly.

"All right," snapped Ragweed. "Ask me."

"What does she look like?"

"Ellie?" Ragweed popped.

"Yes. You see, I just been wonderin'."

Ragweed glared at the questioner. Colt, although not able to see the glare, divined it.

"She looks like me," Ragweed said shortly.

"What do you look like?" Colt asked.

"Like a dried-up peanut," snapped the rancher.

"You mean to say your daughter looks like—like a dried-up peanut?"

Ragweed snorted. His words didn't sound well in another man's mouth. But he didn't want Colt developing any romantic ideas.

"What's it to you, young feller, what my daughter looks like?" he said testily.

"I was just wonderin', that's all," Colt replied.

"Well, you start wonderin' about somethin' else—this trip to Ft. Worth, for instance."

"What is there to be wonderin' about that?"

"Whether it's goin' to do you any good to go or not, and where we're goin' to get the——" he broke off with a couple of crackling oaths.

"Where we're goin' to get what?" Colt asked. Receiving no reply, he went on, "I've got the money, if that's what's worryin' you. If I didn't have, do you think I'd be figgerin' on takin' the trip?"

"How much you got?"

"About a hundred and thirty dollers."

"Humph!"

"That ought to foot the bill, hadn't it?"

Ragweed shook his head sorrowfully. He knew something about the expense of such a trip. A few years previously he had taken his wife to Ft. Worth. There he had learned about specialists and about expenses.

"Sure," he said, "That will be plenty."

THE next day, Ragweed made another trip to Buffalo Butte. There he talked to Philip Kesson, who ran the bank.

"How many head of cattle have you got now?" Kesson wanted to know.

"About four hundred," Ragweed said, "countin' everything."

"And you owe four thousand now. You say you have to have another thousand. I think you're gettin' softheaded in your old age. Far as I can figure, you just picked this young fellow up. Don't know who he is, or nothin' about him."

"Yes, I do know who he is," Ragweed said, a bit wearily. He had exhausted all his peppery language to no

avail. "This young jasper is the son of an old partner of mine."

"That so?" said Kesson encouragingly.

"Yes, that's so," Ragweed said shortly.

"Never heard you mention no Colts before."

Ragweed looked as though he was sorry he had mentioned it at all. "Reckon there ain't no use to go into that. It was a long time ago. What's gone is gone."

"What's gone is not always gone," Kesson said shrewdly. "But if it's somethin' you'd rather not talk about, all right."

"Do I get the thousand, or don't I? The stock is worth double the mortgage that's on them."

"And half of 'em, or the whole caboodle, for that matter, might get blackleg and die. Or they might all be run off by thieves."

"Tain't likely," snapped Ragweed, "as long as I'm watchin' them."

"That's the reason I'm lettin' you have the money," said Kesson. "But you can't borrow any more until you've squared up."

WHEN Colt asked Ragweed, on his return to the ranch if he hadn't learned something about the mysterious ambush in Hammerhead Hills, the rancher offered only an irritable and impatient negative.

"I'll promise you one thing," Colt said slowly. "I'll find out some time who done that shootin', and when I do....."

"When you do, then what?" demanded Ragweed.

"Then I'm puttin' a bullet where he put his—right between the eyes."

The next day, Ragweed, Colt, and Ellie rode into Buffalo Butte. Ellie went along to bring the horses back. The two men were taking the afternoon train to Ft. Worth.

It cheered Colt considerably to sit in a saddle again, to feel the wind whipping his face, and to hear the clop-clop of hoofs on beaten trails. He knew, without being able to see, that they were riding over a rolling prairie which stretched away to the northward into the Hammerhead Hills and which extended to the southward to Fillaree River. He knew they rode past scattered heards of cattle, that jack-rabbits bounded up at their coming, ran to a safe distance, then continued a bit farther in a twisted, three-legged gallop which showed their disdain of such slow traveling objects. Though he could not see these things, he knew they were before his eyes, and the knowledge gave him some measure of satisfaction.

Ragweed was a strange combination of barking impatience and kindly consideration. He attended to Colt's needs, doing little things which Colt could not do for himself, with tactful alertness. Never did he make Colt feel dependent or embarrassed over such slight services. His combustible profanity was enlivening, and his sharp retorts were spiced with droll humor.

Ellie was still disappointed because she could not make the trip with them. She was keenly interested in the outcome, and the trip to Ft. Worth, in any event, would be a pleasant diversion. She didn't know which of these two incentives was the stronger. But when her father privately explained to her in his customary forcible manner that he simly couldn't afford to take her along, she said no more about it. Unlike the banker, Kesson, she had not intimated that Ragweed was getting soft-headed. To her, the fact that Colt was seriously injured and in need of immediate treatment was sufficient reason for Ragweed's part in the affair. It did not appear to her as strange that her father should be willing to help any one who needed his help, whether friend or stranger. And Ragweed, for reasons of his own, said nothing to her or to Colt about his having once been a partner of Colt's father.

When the train pulled in, Colt extended a large groping hand to Ellie. "I'll be comin' back soon," he said, "to *see* you."

"And I'm betting you will, cowboy," she said, cheerfully enough, though it was well Colt could not see her eyes.

"All right, dammit!" snapped Ragweed. "You don't need to shake hands like you was pullin' her out of a boghole or somethin'. Break away. The train is ready to pull out."

As soon as Colt boarded the train with its unfamiliar noise and motion, he began to twist about nervously, like a horse with blinders on hearing an unfamiliar noise behind.

"Yo don't need to be skittish," Ragweed said. "She'll buck a little at first,

but will quiet down as soon as we get over on the main line."

"I know how a steer feels when he is prodded into a stock car and feels the blamed thing tryin' to jump out from under him," Colt replied jocularly.

"Maybe I better board up the winder so you can't jump out," Ragweed suggested.

"You better see that I don't get down in the car and get tromped on."

It was rough, crude banter, just the thing Colt needed to buck him up. But he continued to chafe under his new environment. As long as he had been at Ragweed's ranch, he had felt that he was in familiar surroundings, though he had never seen the place. Ellie and her father had made him feel that way, to a large extent. Yet his environment then *had* been a familiar one. His handicap had not seemed half so great until he got away from all the well-known sounds of the rangeland.

ARRIVING in Ft. Worth, the situation grew worse. Colt's uneasiness mounted. He was like a spirited range horse, put into the traffic of a city. Strange and blatant noises actually frightened him. He cursed himself for a fool, and Ragweed likewise cussed him, though in a more practical and comforting manner.

Out of the train and through the crowded station they passed. Getting away from the crowded streets as quickly as possible, Ragweed halted him.

"This says 'Fetherbed Rooming House'," the little rancher explained. "How does it sound to you?"

"Hell of a lot of noise around here, but I reckon we can't get away from that."

"Not unless we get clean out of town. You might as well get city-broke now as later."

"I been city-broke lots of times. Never went to any town of any size yet that I didn't leave it broke."

"This one ain't goin' to be no exception, either. The bigger the town, the harder they step on you. Come on, lets bed down here. It don't look very high-powered."

Two hours later, Martin Fetherbed, proprietor of the establishment was startled by a peculiar sound coming from the second floor. It was unmistakably the bellow of a bull. He listened intently for a moment, then rushed upstairs.

Fetherbed was built more for rolling, than for running. When he reached the head of the stairs he was breathing heavily. "Comin' from that old cowman's room—Didn't like his looks anyhow—And that jasper he had with him was all tied up like he'd been in a fight—Drunk, of course."

CONDUCTING hotels and rooming houses for thirty years, mostly in frontier cow towns, had given Fetherbed a pretty good idea of what he might expect from eccentric or intoxicated guests. Hilarious cowpunchers had ridden horses into his place several times. But he drew the line at playing host to a bull.

He hammered a pudgy fist on the door of the room assigned to Ragweed and Colt, shouting, "Hey! What's goin' on in there?"

The bellowing inside the room ceased, and a small whiskered face with angrily snapping eyes appeared. "Well, doughface, what you want?"

"This is a roomin' house," Fetherbed puffed, "And not a cow barn. I don't know how you got the blamed thing in there——"

"I was makin' that noise, you cantankerous old loon," Ragweed barked.

"You?" panted Fetherbed. "What for?"

"So my partner here could go to sleep."

Fetherbed snorted in disbelief and pushed inside the room. He looked at Colt, lying on the bed, with a bandage on his face. "You hombres are either drunk or crazy," he said, "and I ain't hankerin' to have you around here. Get out."

"Like hell we will," Ragweed snapped. "We paid for this room, and we're stayin' here."

"I said get out, or I'll call the police."

Ragweed rushed at the rotund rooming-house man. There was a brief struggle which was terminated by two strong groping hands, one of which held firmly the fuming little rancher and the other the puffing proprietor.

"Just cool down, you two," said Colt evenly. He shoved Ragweed aside. "I can explain to the gent, and maybe he'll understand."

Even under the handicap of his blind-

fold, Colt was master of the situation. He kept his grip on Fetherbed's collar.

"Listen here, you," Colt went on. "There ain't no call to get hostile and try to throw us out. If you got any kick about the noise my friend was makin', he'll stop. It was my fault, and his idea."

"I'll call the po——"

"You won't call nothin'," said Colt shortly. "Listen to me. I got a slug in the forehead a few days ago, and now I can't see. We come down to Ft. Worth to see a doc. As long as I was back on the ranch, it wasn't so bad. Up there I knowed what was goin' on just from the sounds I heard. Down here everything was different. So damned much noise, and every noise was a new one. I couldn't see what made it. I reckon I got scared, I don't know how else to explain it. Seems crazy to you, I know. But I thought if I could just hear a cow bawlin' or a horse nickerin', I could kind of get a hold on myself. You probably don't savvy that, but Ragweed seemed to. So he—well, he just begins to beller like a bull."

He laughed in an embarrassed manner. "Funny, ain't it. Reckon it sounds crazy as hell to you."

There was silence for a moment. Fetherbed was impressed, both by the powerful arm which held him as easily as if he had been a sack of cotton, and by the quiet, halting words.

"Why didn't you tell me that in the first place," he muttered.

"You didn't give me a chance," Colt reminded him. He loosed his grip. "Now go on back downstairs. We won't bother you no more."

Fetherbed backed out of the room, and Ragweed slammed the door. "The danged old fool," the rancher exploded. "I didn't tell him, because it wasn't none of his damned business."

"This is his joint," Colt said, "And if he didn't want us to beller, we better not beller."

"I'll beller all I damned please," said Ragweed.

"It ain't necessary," said Colt. "I feel better now."

UP UNTIL the moment he had taken a hand in the little ruckus he had been floundering about in a sea of strange noises. Suddenly his feet were on solid ground, confidence returned. He took a deep breath and flexed his arms.

"I ought to punched his nose, just for exercise," he lamented. "Seems I ain't turned a hand for a month."

"If you'd let me alone, I'd have worked him over myself," said Ragweed sharply.

"He felt like a pretty good sized bruiser," Colt demurred.

"Size ain't everything," snapped Ragweed. "I've licked a lot of men twice my size. And I could lick a pen-full like him."

But in that short scuffle, Ragweed had not come off so well. His face was bleeding from a deep scratch. It had probably been inflicted by Fetherbed's fingernails, which were long and pointed.

"You ain't washin' your face, are you Ragweed?" Colt asked in mild surprise.

"You tend to your own business, will you, and I'll tend to mine."

Colt stretched out on the bed, and smiled into the darkness. All his restlessness was gone. He felt confident, eager to face what the future had in store for him, good or bad. Life held much for him, regardless of the outcome of his present dilemma. Intangible things, for the most part, but more vital than any he had known before.

There was Ellie, for instance. He had never seen her. Ragweed said she looked like a dried-up peanut. But looks didn't count. Colt realized that now as he had never realized it before. He could know people without seeing them at all. Really know them, possibly better than if he could see them. At any rate, he felt that he knew Ellie and her blasphemous little father better than he had ever known anybody before. He could count on them, to the limit. They were worth more to him than his two good eyes. They had made him see things that he had never seen before.

Perhaps Colt was deluding himself with false and sentimental reasoning. Perhaps he was preparing himself to make the best of a situation that had at first seemed unbearable. At any rate, he was getting his first dose of true contentment and serenity—a contentment and serenity not based on material and physical welfare.

Just a glimpse, that was all. The usual passions and desires still held full sway with him, lead him into other channels of thought. Thoughts of ven-

geance stirred him deeply. He had sworn to even the score with the man who had shot him. This was the most important task which faced him. If the world to him was to remain forever dark, he would be under a big handicap in his mission of vengeance. But his desire for vengeance and his hate for his assailant would be as deep and as lasting as the eternal darkness which surrounded him. And perhaps his newly-found friends would help him locate this mysterious and unknown enemy. Perhaps they would lend him their eyes for the occasion. That would be all he would ask. He didn't want any one else to settle the score for him. There would be no satisfaction in that. He would settle his own accounts some way.

"I'll know him, if I ever see him again," he muttered.

"What you say?" asked Ragweed, wiping his whiskery face.

"The hombre that shot me," Colt explained. His voice was low, but passionate. "I can see his coyote face right now. It burned itself into my brain."

Ragweed snorted. "You ain't got no brain. Shut up and go to sleep."

The gruff words of Ragweed were almost as soothing as his imitation of a bellowing bull. That voice and one other were Colt's horse, saddle, and six-gun. It was the wind whipping his face. It was the rolling prairie, the canyons, and the rim rocks. It took the place of all the things of which he had been deprived. Colt smiled again, and the turbulence in him was not so strong. Hours later, he slept.

THE disturbance between Fetherbed and Ragweed had attracted the attention of some of the lodgers. One of them was an employee at the stock yards. He recounted the incident the next day, and it reached the ears of three men who had just arrived with a shipment of cattle. They were Donohue, Pickering, and Singletree.

"Sounds like it might be Ragweed," observed Donohue to his companions as they lolled near their pen of bawling cattle, waiting for the arrival of buyers and the brand inspector. Donohue was a large hard-eyed man with a sinister, half-paralyzed face, which was the result of a dash of cold water thrown on him while he was unconscious from sun stroke. As a consequence only one side of his face was mobile and he spoke from one corner of his mouth.

"What of it?" asked Pickering, a smooth-shaven, middle-aged man of good appearance except for closely set, crafty eyes.

"I hear he's been lookin' for us," Donohue returned with a half-smile. "Maybe we better go down and see what he wants."

"If he's lookin' for me, he knows where to find me—when I'm at home."

"Which ain't often, is it Pick?"

"I'm at home when I haven't got business elsewhere. You're not so easy to find, yourself, I notice."

"I usually have business elsewhere, when they start lookin' for me," Donohue grinned. "Right now I feel another business trip comin' on."

"Ragweed didn't come down here lookin' for us," said Pickering, "And if he did——"

"Of course not. And I ain't lookin' for him. If this is him we heard that hombre tellin' about, he come down here to bring that crazy young fool who got himself shot up in the Hammerhead Hills."

"He was a crazy young fool, for a fact," Pickering agreed, "Swung his horse around and rode hell bent toward the hombre that opened up on us with a rifle. I'd of like to get a look at him, myself, but not that bad."

"The trouble with most folks is, they don't know when to fight and when to run," Donohue declared.

"Nobody ever accused you of not knowin' when to run," said Pickering sarcastically.

"I noticed you was right on my heels when this dry gulcher opened up on us with a rifle out in the Hammerheads."

"A six-gun is a mighty poor argument against a rifle at long range. You had a carbine on your saddle."

"Yeah. Well, the point is Ragweed is in Ft. Worth now, and so are we," said Donohue reflectively.

"I don't see any point to that."

Donohue glanced at Singletree, a lanky, furtive individual who had taken no part in the conversation but had listened attentively. Singletree was, in fact, a sort of professional listener. As a hireling of Donohue's, he seldom got a chance to express his own opinions when he was around the talkative Donohue. Besides, Singletree preferred to listen. He was a snooper by inclination

and a fairly successful one. He could listen, and he could keep his mouth shut. Donohue found him very useful in getting information, but not to be counted on when the going got rough.

"Singletree," Donohue said, "Does this Ragweed gent know you?"

"Don't think so," said Singletree.

"Then you take a pasear down around this roomin' house and see if Ragweed is there."

SINGLETREE sought out the Fetherbed rooming house, made inquiries about rates, and got the rotund proprietor to talking. Before Singletree had got the desired information, Ragweed showed up. So changed was the rancher's appearance that neither Fetherbed nor Singletree immediately recognized him. The thick, bushy beard was gone and one side of his face was adorned with an adhesive plaster.

He paused in front of Fetherbed, comfortably seated in a rocking chair, bunched his wiry little body, and barked. "You're pizen!"

Fetherbed came to his feet ponderously, and with some show of nervousness.

"I said you're pizen!" repeated the rancher. "You scratched me, you big puzzy cat, and a friction developed."

"I—a—what?" demanded Fetherbed.

"A friction," snapped Ragweed. "That's what the doc said. He made me shave, and plastered me up."

"Are you that little bellerin' bull who come in here last night?" asked Fetherbed, beginning to breathe heavily just from the prospect of exertion.

"I may not be as big as a bale of cotton," Ragweed replied, "but I can roll one mighty damned easy."

He took a threatening step forward and it looked for a moment as if the rolling would start. Fetherbed, however, was staring at him in a peculiar manner. Something in the fat man's manner caused Ragweed abruptly to change his belligerent attitude, and touch his newly shaven chin in a nervous gesture.

"I ought to wallop you good and plenty," he growled, "but I ain't got time. I come back for my war bag, and to tell you that I'm movin' down the street to a livery stable, where it's clean and comfortable."

"What did you say your name was?" asked Fetherbed.

"I said it was Ragweed, if it's any of your damned business."

"From Buffalo Butte, wasn't it?"

"It was," snapped Ragweed. "What's it to you?"

"Funny," mused Fetherbed. "I used to know a little runt named Northrow over in New Mex. who was a dead ringer for you. Younger, of course, than you are now. But that was several years ago."

"Humph." said Ragweed. "Too bad you ever left New Mex, too bad for the roomin' house business in Ft. Worth."

He stalked up the stairs, and came back presently with a dilapidated cardboard suitcase. He would have gone on without another word to Fetherbed, but the latter hailed him.

"Is your partner checkin' out too?"

"He's done checked out," said Ragweed shortly.

Singletree had been an interested observer. He reported to Donohue, and the latter chuckled with satisfaction.

"Ragweed in Ft. Worth, huh?" he mused. "That means we are heading back to Buffalo Butte pronto. What did the old boy say about Northrow of New Mex?"

"Said Ragweed looked like him, with his beard shaved off."

"I wonder," reflected Donohue. "That might be worth while findin' out about. What do you think, Pickering?"

"Folks are always easier to do business with when you got somethin' on them—easier and safer," said Pickering.

"Then," Donohue decided, "You'll go out with us tonight, Singletree, but you won't get off at Buffalo Butte. You'll go on to Duncoat, New Mex, see Dexter, who's in with the cattle association detective out there, and find out about this Northrow business. As soon as you find out, you'll come back and meet us at Pickering's ranch."

A WEEK later, Ragweed got off the train at Buffalo Butte. He was changed in appearance and manner. His small bright eyes darted restlessly over the familiar faces of the few loiterers about the depot.

Poke Davis, hotel hackman, who always met the train more from idle curiosity and habit than from any hope of getting a passenger, was the first to spy the diminutive ranchman.

"Well, well, well," he cackled,

"Who'da thought it! Old Ragweed has done gone and turned dude on us."

Ragweed came clumping across the high wooden platform that surrounded the depot. The accusation of having turned dude did not rest on any sartorial excellence, for he wore his accustomed rough boots, baggy trousers, wrinkled coat, and worn Stetson. But it was the absence of the chaparral beard that had caused the comment.

"You go plumb to hell, Poke Davis," grunted the rancher. "I reckon a man's got a right to shave once in fifteen years if he wants to."

"They's a woman behind this, you can bet on that," observed another. "Old Ragweed wouldn't shave off his whiskers for no other reason."

Ragweed glowered. Without the bushy beard, his glower wasn't so effective as before. "If it's any of your damned business, I'll tell you why I shaved," he said. "I got scratched across the face, which you'd see if you wasn't blind as a bat, and they had to shave off that side to do some doctorin'."

"You got scratched?" Poke Davis repeated. He shook his head sorrowfully. "There ain't no fool like an old fool, I've heard."

Ragweed ignored the implication, and started toward town.

A RIDER was coming toward the depot at a rapid gait. Ragweed looked up and grunted with satisfaction. "How'd Ellie know I was comin' in today?" he muttered. "Didn't have time to write to her."

The horse, winded and sweating, came to a sliding stop before him. "Hey!" he barked. "What the devil do you mean ridin' that horse that a-way?"

"It *is* really you." Ellie spoke as though she, too, had been running. "I was coming to send you a telegram. Oh, I'm glad you're here!"

Ragweed's shoulders went up a trifle, and his head a fraction downward. Bad news was coming, no question of that.

"Clinker and Joe, they——"

She paused, as though reluctant to finish the speech.

"They what?" prompted Ragweed sharply.

"They're dead. Shot. Lyin' out there in Hammerhead Hills. I just came from there."

"Who?" "How?"

The terse, double-barrelled question was so characteristic that it was reassuring. But Ellie only shook her head. "I don't know. Where—where is he?"

"He? Oh, I left him there. When did you find them?"

"This morning. Is he—how is he?"

"All right, dammit, all right! Tell me about Clinker and Joe!"

"You say he's all right? You mean he—can see?"

"Yes! Yes! What about Clinker and Joe?" Ragweed shouted.

Ellie stared at him, her eyes large and dark, but in them the shadow of tragedy was like a heavy cloud being filtered by sun. "They're dead, that's all I know. What did he say when he——"

"I'm goin' to yank you off that horse and turn you over my knee!" barked the little rancher. "Right here on Main Street. Clinker and Joe. Wasn't there no sign? When did it happen? How about the cattle?"

Ellie's eyes flashed. "Keep your shirt on," she said. "I don't know about the cattle. The shooting must have happened yesterday. You don't look like yourself. I can't get used to you that way. First time I ever saw you shaved." She closed her eyes, whispering, "Oh, I'm so glad."

"You don't need to be glad about it. I shaved because I had to. Did you tell the sheriff?"

Her eyes snapped open. They were much brighter, and the lashes glistened. "I wasn't glad about that. You look like a——"

"Never mind what I look like," snapped Ragweed. "Why didn't you bring me a horse. We'll have to get one at the livery stable. Come on."

HE STARTED up the street at a run. Ellie whirled her horse and followed.

"You say you didn't tell the sheriff?"

"No, I just got to town."

"Then we won't tell him," said Ragweed.

"Won't tell him?"

"No. I'll settle this thing myself. It must have been Donohue."

"Why Donohue?"

Ragweed did not reply to this, but led the way to the livery stable, where he procured a mount. Accompanied by Ellie, he rode first to the ranch, thence to the Hammerhead Hills. They found the bodies of Clinker and Joe lying in

twisted positions, as though they had been shot from their saddles. One of their horses had shown up at the ranch that morning, and Ellie, after spending the night alone, had started the search. Both men had been killed the preceding day. Both had used up a good deal of ammunition. Clinker's lifeless hands still held his six-gun. Joe's weapon, with four spent cartridges in the cylinder, lay not far from his body.

Ragweed examined the bodies in strange and unnatural silence. Then he began walking slowly about the vicinity, head down. His daughter watched him as though she were watching a suspicious stranger. When anything untoward occurred, Ragweed always ripped and snorted. Ellie had never before seen her father calm in moments of great stress. There was nothing comical about him now. Often his fumings and curses had been. But the calmness that was on him now was more terrible than his curses had ever been. He walked in a wide circle, head down, apparently seeing nothing.

It was Ellie who broke the silence at last. "Why," she asked gently, "didn't you want me to notify the sheriff?"

Ragweed paid no heed to her. She repeated her question more insistently. He stopped and looked up at her, looked at her with something of a mute appeal in his gaze. For a moment, he seemed utterly crushed. Then he lifted his slight, wiry shoulders and his head sank into a belligerent attitude.

"I'll handle this thing myself," he said shortly.

"But why?" persisted Ellie. "Surely the sheriff ought to know, as well as our friends and neighbors. They'll help us."

"We don't need help," said Ragweed with an oath.

"Now you're talking more like yourself. Probably that's the reason you are quite wrong. We do need help."

"You go back to the house," barked Ragweed. "I've cut sign, and I'm follerin' these tracks."

He caught up his horse and mounted.

"I'll go back to the house," said Ellie, "then I'll go right on and notify the Browns and the Sugdens, and I'll ask somebody to go back to Buffalo Butte and get the sheriff."

"You go back to the house and stay there!" ordered her father.

Her quirt descended sharply, and she rode away. Ragweed looked after her for a moment, then rode off in the opposite direction, following the trail of a small herd of cattle.

He picked up an occasional horse track which indicated that three or four riders had been driving the herd. The trail led back into a grassless region where stock seldom drifted on their own accord and were never driven by those who shared the range.

RAGWEED rode muttering to himself. His words seemed to have no connection and were interspersed with popping profanity.

As he rode past huge clumps of rock and mesquite a voice hailed him, "Hello, Northrow."

Ragweed drew up his horse sharply. His hand fell back to his holster but remained motionless there. He was looking into a face that smirked on one side and was devoid of expression and movement on the other side.

Donohue held a carbine carelessly, though it covered Ragweed. "Where you headin', Northrow?" he inquired.

Ragweed's words clicked like a stick drawn sharply along a barbed wire fence. "I'm headin' for a bunch of stock which somebody run off with while I was gone. But my name ain't Northrow, as you damned well know."

"When did you have it changed?"

"What's the play?" snapped Ragweed.

"You know what I'm talkin' about," said Donohue, "and there ain't no use to act like you don't. You're Northrow, cow thief and killer, wanted for the past fifteen years in New Mexico and Arizona."

"You're a damn liar!" shouted Ragweed, "And a cow thief, yourself!"

Donohue's hard, greenish eyes narrowed above his peculiar half-masked face. "You're goin' to eat all that, one little word at a time, chew 'em up and swaller 'em. Unharness!"

Reluctantly and profanely, Ragweed complied.

"Now come along with me," Donohue ordered.

They rode back into the hills for two miles, where they were joined by Pickering and Singletree. Ragweed showed little surprise at the appearance of his neighbor. He managed to smother the cuss words that arose so naturally to his lips.

"He swears and be damned that he ain't Northrow," Donohue began.

"Let me handle this, will you?" interrupted Pickering. "It seems to me you've messed things up enough."

He turned to Ragweed. "Have you notified the sheriff?"

Ragweed shook his head, not caring yet to trust himself to speak.

"I didn't think you would, if you got the news first. It was all a mistake. We were gathering some stuff. Your men got the wrong idea, and started shooting. Too bad, that's all."

Ragweed screwed his lips together more tightly.

"I think you can help us out," Pickering went on. "If you play with us, we'll do what we can for you. Of course, your secret will be safe, if you cooperate with us."

"What secret?" Ragweed asked.

"We got all the dope on you from the cattle association in New Mexico. Don't take up our time now making fool denials."

"I don't know what the cattle association of New Mex has got to do with this business," said Ragweed. "But what's your game? What do you want me to do?"

"I think it would be very nice if you would sign a bill of sale for, say, about four hundred head of cattle, giving proper descriptions. That would make it plain that your men just made a mistake when they saw us driving off some of your stock."

"You think that would be nice," Ragweed repeated. "You think that would be nice, do you? Well, I'll be damned!" He had been stopped up over-long. A stream of curses poured from his lips. But curses, however adept and caustic, were impotent in the present situation.

"Of course, if you feel that way about it, there's only one thing for us to do."

"You're right," Ragweed said grimly. "There's only one thing for you to do, and that's to go plumb to hell!"

"Not exactly. We're not in a bad fix at all. Nobody can prove a thing on us. We'd like to make a little profit, however, on the transaction."

OWING to Donohue's impatience and rough-shod methods, things had not worked out according to schedule. The raid on Ragweed's herd offered more chance of success if launched while the fiery little cattleman was gone. Donohue had insisted on going ahead in this matter, without waiting for Singletree to return from New Mexico. Pickering had reluctantly agreed. Clinker and Joe had stumbled upon the raiders.

Singletree had returned shortly afterward, bringing information that definitely proved that Ragweed had been living under an assumed name for fifteen years, that his real name was Northrow, and that he had fled from New Mexico after a band of rustlers led by himself had been wiped out.

Pickering and Donohue had seen at once that they had acted hastily. Ragweed, if handled properly, would agree to most any terms they might make. Their terms would be entirely mercenary. Ragweed had no money, but he did have a nice herd of cattle. They could force Ragweed to give up peacefully that which they had planned to take by force.

"I'll see you in hell first!" raved Ragweed, defiant to the last.

"I don't think you've had time to think it over," said Pickering. "This is a very important decision you're making, and you're in no condition to think calmly. If you were, you'd think not only about the disgrace you yourself are facing, but about your daughter. What will happen to her, if we turn you in? She will share your disgrace, and she will be left alone."

"A fine horse's heel you are to be blatherin' about my disgrace!" shouted Ragweed. "Everybody in this country knows you're a snake."

"But nobody has ever proved anything on me," Pickering reminded him. "And proof is the thing that counts. We've got the proof on you."

Ragweed knew it. There were big cattle interests back in New Mexico that would push these old charges against him. He had thought he could bury his past, but he had lived with it for fifteen years, and now it was facing him in the open. The trouble had originated when Ragweed, always fiery and rebellious, had resisted the incroachments of the first big cattle companies. He had gathered his neighbors in what had seemed to them a righteous cause. But like most lost causes, it now wore the shroud of infamy. There had been stealing and killing on both sides. Both sides were fighting for their interests. It was inevitable that the losers should be

branded thieves and murderers and that the winners should be absolved of blame.

Henry Colt had been one of the losers in that fight. He had lost everything, including his life. He and Ragweed, cornered by five of the enemy, had made their last stand together. Only one man came out of that fight alive. His name was Northrow. But no one ever heard of Northrow again.

Then out to west Texas came John Ragweed, a little man with a bearded face, excitable and blasphemous, but a very good neighbor and friend. And throughout the years he had won the trust and confidence of all who knew him.

The first echo of the past had come to John Ragweed in the form of a scar on the forehead of Clyde Colt. The son of Henry Colt had fallen on a branding iron, and had received a permanent scar. It was directly between his eyebrows and looked at a distance like a third eyebrow. With the bullet hole now, directly beneath, the fantastic third eye was complete.

A vivid remembrance of all these things came to Ragweed as he sat on his horse and listened to the ultimatum of Pickering.

"I reckon," he said at last, "the profit is all yours, Pickering. Go with me to my ranch and I'll fix up that bill of sale."

When they arrived at the ranch, Singletree was instructed by Donohue to remain on the porch and keep on the look-out for any possible interference. The horses were tied behind a shed, where they could not be readily seen by any one approaching the ranch. Donohue and Pickering had gleaned the information from Ragweed that Ellie had gone to spread the news of the killing. They wanted to get their business transacted with the rancher and get in hand something tangible on which to base their claim that Clinker and Joe had jumped at the wrong conclusion, attacked them without giving them a chance to explain, and that they had to fight back.

Ragweed led Pickering and Donohue to a back room where he had a desk containing the meager records of his ranch. He motioned them to sit down and opened the drop leaf to the rickety little desk. He drew some tallies from a pigeonhole, then reached for paper and pen.

Instead of grasping the pen, however, his hand darted to a drawer and came up with a six-gun. Before he could aim and pull trigger, Donohue had his gun in the rancher's ribs.

"I was lookin' for some sort of monkey business," snarled Donohue. "I ought to blast you, but you've got some writin' to do first. Drop that smoker and get busy."

Singletree, attracted by the commotion in the back room, had approached the partition door and stood listening. By nature Singletree was a snooper, and he stood to one side of the door eavesdropping. The row within the room continued.

"It's blackmail, you damned skunks, blackmail and worse!" shouted Ragweed. But he picked up the pen.

COLT rode a freight train out of Ft. Worth. His money had melted away with incredible swiftness. And this, though Colt did not know it, had been supplemented by the money Ragweed had borrowed at the bank.

"Blame his old hide," ran Colt's thoughts, as he crawled in a half-filled rack in a stock car. "What did he run off from me for, right at the last minute. Didn't even wait for them to take the blindfold off'n me. Just took them jaspers' word for it that everything was goin' to come out all right. Well, it did. And I owe it all to Ragweed, the old fire-eater. Got to see him, and make it up to him, somehow. Got to see her, too. Ragweed said she looked like him, and said he looked like a dried-up peanut. H-m-m. There's somebody else I'm hankerin' to see, too. Right between the eyes, he let me have it. And that's where I'm givin' it back to him."

All night he rode, and part of the next day. He arrived at last in Buffalo Butte, weary and hungry. He sought out the livery stable and tried to hire a horse, promising payment when he returned the animal the next day. The livery owner, however, was cautious. He asked numerous questions, some of which Colt answered evasively.

"You got anything on you to leave for security?" he demanded. "I ain't never seen you before or heard tell of you, and you come bummin' your way

in on a freight train and expect me to turn a hoss over to you."

"I got nothin' but my boots, pants, and shirt," Colt said sarcastically. "I might turn them over to you."

The livery man inspected Colt's boots. They were a good pair. He appeared satisfied. "All right," he said, "You leave me your boots, and I'll trust you with a hoss."

"Don't you want my pants, too?"

The cautious proprietor inspected them briefly. "No," he said, "they ain't worth over two bits."

Colt was strongly persuaded to help himself to a horse, but decided the wiser course would be to accede to the livery man's demands. He rode out of town, without boots or gun, on a horse that was worth about fifty cents less than Colt's boots. A hell of a way, he decided, to go out to meet the girl of his dreams.

He had never seen Ragweed's ranch, but he knew that it lay sixteen miles west of town. Houses were few and far between, and he had little trouble in locating the right one. It looked about as he imagined it would. The square frame house stood boldly on the prairie, scorning protection of cliff or tree. Marshalled behind it were corrals and outbuildings, all sturdy but small.

"Looks mighty peaceful and quiet," mused Colt. "Don't see a sign of anybody. Ragweed is probably out on the range, with them two riders of his. Ellie will be in the house, gettin' supper. Hm-m-m."

He put up his horse and approached the house. Still he saw no one. He stepped up on the porch and crossed to the front door. Bootless, he made very little noise.

COLT had not intended to slip up to the house in this manner. Still, the surprise would be greater, if she were there. He would open the door and step inside. This might be a bit presumptuous, but he felt more at home here than in any place in the world.

He turned the knob of the door and pushed it open. Instead of seeing Ellie, or an empty room, as he half expected, he saw at the other side of the room, beside a door, a tall man lolling in an eavesdropping attitude. Then he heard the barking words of Ragweed, coming from the room beyond: "It's blackmail, you damned skunks! Blackmail and worse!"

Colt tensed. The eavesdropping Singletree had not seen him. Colt began a cautious treading across the floor. The butt of Singletree's holstered gun protruded invitingly.

Colt got close enough to grab the gun before the other man was aware of his presence. Singletree felt a swift tug at his holster, then the gun barrel nosing into his side. He nearly toppled over in surprise, recovered himself, and swallowed the ejaculation on his lips as Colt hissed a warning in his ear.

The scene in the adjoining room appeared to Colt slowly, as he eased himself toward the half-open door. He saw two men whom he recognized, standing on either side of the third man who was seated at a desk. Colt knew Donohue and Pickering. He had seen them before. He had never seen Ragweed, but he knew Ragweed's voice, and knew that the seated man must be he. As Ragweed's back was turned at the moment, Colt could not yet see his face.

Donohue looked up suddenly. Colt, realizing he had been seen, literally threw Singletree into the little room. His thought had been merely to prevent Singletree from getting away, while he dealt with Donohue and Pickering.

As Singletree went forward under the impetus of Colt's shove, Donohue became confused and frightened. He grabbed his gun and opened fire. Singletree fell before his first bullet.

Colt, with gun already in hand, returned the fire. Donohue quivered, remained motionless for a second, then crumpled. Pickering was clawing for his gun. He drew, and Colt dropped him.

Now Colt was staring past the three bullet-pierced bodies into a face that had burned itself into his brain—into the face of the man he had sworn to kill. It was the man who had shot and blinded him. It was the man who also had taken care of him, and made it possible for him to regain his sight.

Ragweed was staring back at him out of haggard eyes, his small, pinched face set grimly. His gaze was unflinching, even a bit challenging.

"You!" muttered Colt thickly. "It was you!"

Ragweed was silent.

"But why?"

Ragweed glanced toward the form of Donohue. "You was ridin' with him. He was runnin' off some of my stock."

"But why did you take me in?"

"I found out who you was. That little U, upside down on your forehead, do you know how you got it there?"

"Fell on a brandin' iron when I was a shaver."

"Sure, I know. Do you remember a man named Northrow, that your dad used to ride with a good deal?"

Colt shook his head. "I don't remember. Who was he?"

Ragweed looked at the three forms on the floor. There was no indication of life in any of them.

"Why Northrow was just a jasper that used to ride with your dad," he said. "He's dead now, been dead for several years."

COLT'S third eye was the center of a deep frown. He was still dazed, and uncertain. He had sworn to have vengeance on the man who had shot him. Now he was facing that man. But there was no rancor in Colt's heart against Ragweed.

"But what's all that got to do with you and me?" Colt asked.

"Nothin' much, still a right smart," said Ragweed enigmatically. "You see, Northrow was a mighty good friend of mine, and he was a good friend of your dad's. Your dad saved Northrow's life in a fight with rustlers, and lost his own life. I knowed your dad, and had seen you when you was a shaver. I remember the time, in fact, when you fell on that brandin' iron and burnt your forehead. It marked you for life, and I knowed you when I got close enough to see your face, after I had shot you."

A running horse pounded into hearing. Colt and Ragweed moved to the outer door.

"That's Ellie comin' now," Ragweed said. "You ain't never seen her, have you?"

Colt, whose nerves had been steady while he faced two hostile six-guns, looked nervously about.

"What you lookin' for?" Ragweed demanded.

"Nothin'," muttered Colt. "Nothin' at all."

Ragweed turned his head suddenly toward the back room. "What's that?" he asked sharply.

There came a scraping noise and a low moan. Ragweed and Colt hastily crossed to the door of the little back room. Singletree was moving one foot. He lay on his face, and was trying to speak.

Colt bent over him and examined a hole through his chest. He caught the words the dying man was trying to utter. "Take—off—my boots."

Understanding the dread of all outlaws of dying with their boots on, Colt complied with the request.

"It's all my fault the poor devil got shot," Colt said regretfully. "I shoved him in here, after liftin' his gun, so he couldn't get away."

It was not Ragweed's way to speak ill of a dead or dying man, so he made no comment of retribution, as he might have done. Instead, he turned back to the front door.

He stepped out on the porch to greet Ellie, as she reined her horse to an abrupt stop. Colt peered through the two doors, looked at the boots in his hands. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled on the boots. He needed them, and Singletree didn't.

He heard the girl's voice, "I heard the shooting—what has happened?"

Then he heard Ragweed's terse explanation, ending with a curt command. "No, don't go in there."

"But Colt, you say he's in there?"

Colt crossed the living room slowly and stepped onto the porch. He looked long and thoughtfully at the girl. "It's funny," he said at last, "to see an old friend—for the first time."

She took an eager step toward him. "You are—quite all right?"

"I told you he was all right," Ragweed said impatiently, then to Colt, "Well, you caught me in another lie, didn't you? She don't look no more like me than the man in the moon, does she?"

Colt was frank. "No, she don't. She's mighty lucky that way."

Ragweed swore explosively. "You think so, do you? Humph!" He looked sharply from Colt to the girl, then back again. "Aw hell," he said in disgust, "What's the use? What can you do with an hombre you can't down by shootin' him plumb between the eyes?"

LAW OF THE RANGE

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Author of "Migrating Old-Timer," "The New Marshal Inspects," etc.

Tib Carney and the Texas Rangers make a bad combination for range-ruffians.

WHEN Millie Breslow married Tib Carney, Perry Genong swung up into his saddle to ride away. Perry was a good man; no bluffer, never a bit of pretense about him; and for five changing years the Slipping Rock Canyon country down near the Rio Grande lost his work. Then with grim purpose Perry came riding back again as quietly as he had departed. He hung up his saddle and turned his horses loose just as though he had been away not more than a week.

In the interval, however, a number of changes had taken place. Tib was now a wealthy man. The cattle business had been good during those lively years. He had increased his beeves from annual sales of three hundred to something more than five thousand. From rather less than a thousand acres, a mere patch on the cluster of Slipping Rock's mountainous hills, he now owned all the range except about nine hundred acres which belonged to Perry's mother, Mrs. Lucy Genong, who was being pressed in an effort to force her to sell her lands—in order, as Carney explained, to "straighten up the gap in his own wide spreading tracts.

Carney wanted to own all that group of irregular hills in the midst of a bare, desolate and difficult country. For one thing the Genong spring was a fine flow of sweet water. It hurt Tib to be obliged to buy the drinking privilege at the deep water-hole. At the same time he very plainly was going to be hurt a good deal more if he had to pay a fair price for clear ownership title. In truth, the Genong property was worth more than ten times as much for equal acreage as Carney's own possessions. The outlying alkali, red gravel and wash-down desolation was thin grazing, and useless without water.

Where Mrs. Genong had in the past been selling an average of a hundred head annually her roundups now fell below fifty selling beeves. Thus she was obliged to send for Perry, and when he came to look around he could not avoid the conclusion that Tib Carney was bleeding the Genong herd in some way.

The situation was unpleasant. Perry had no wish to go into the matter. His mother had undertaken to run the ranch against Perry's wishes. Before he went away she might have sold out at a good price, but she had refused to do so, preferring to live out there with two or three riders and the inevitable crowding to which a widow alone was sure to be subjected when opposed to a man like Tib.

Perry had been clear up the line across western Oklahoma, through the old Panhandle of Indian Territory and on into Montana. Of his work on the northern border nothing was known at the home ranch. The opinion expressed was that people could depend on it that a wandering cowboy wouldn't,

amount to much until he settled and did something in the money making line. The fact that he came in on a beautiful horse, with a bunch of six others did not make much difference in the guesses of his own territory, now that he had drifted home again.

Now, of course, every one knows that the better a man is at looking after stock, figuring on working his riding crew and looking after the sales end, the less he is apt to talk. Perry already knew that his mother was letting trifles bother her day after day, when what was important never did get to her mind —until she was confronted by the indubitable fact of only forty-nine steers shipped, when she had counted on at least a hundred, and hoped for seven score. Nobody is ever disappointed who knows he is going to run shy probably ninety per cent on his expectations. So Perry started in feeling that the Genong ranch was just about a one hundred per cent loss.

He knew his mother was still a land owner. At the same time, he went over to the county seat to look over the land records and found that Tib Carney had slipped over a tax-sale on her. About a month was left for redemption in the matter. A tax had been levied which the old lady had never paid, and probably had never heard of. The old scoundred would have to be paid twenty-five per cent profit on his $16.83 investment, and Perry paid it on the spot to a county clerk who wet his lips as the cash came over the counter. However, he had to make out a receipt.

"Now, Mr. Lorese," Perry asked the county clerk, "I want to see the proof that my mother's ranch was advertised, properly—notifications mailed, and all the legal rigermarole."

"Oh, yes," Lorese nodded. "Here—see? The Red Gravel *Welcome,* right here."

Perry read the advertisement and he promptly went around to the newspaper office and asked to see the files of the *Welcome* for the previous autumn.

Immediately Perry found that the notice of the tax sale had not been printed in the paper's own copy of the September eleventh issue. He said nothing about his discovery. He knew that the whole county was rotten politically. He went home, bouncing along in the Genong ranch truck, and put the papers into his own suitcase, which he locked.

DOLCE PASSO was a first-class hand, and when he was fired by Tib Carney he sought and found a job on the Genong ranch. He rode well, and when he worked washes, gulches or canyons for cattle, he brought the cows all out. And every once in a while during the day's work he would pull a gun to whack away at a rattlesnake, a dicky bird or even at some fancy bit of stone or other mark. That was a good idea, so Perry began to shoot too. He used a twenty-two caliber automatic pistol, rim fire, however, instead of a forty-five caliber revolver.

Passo made fun of the pistol.

"That all the gun you got?" he inquired.

"What more do I need?" Perry grinned, "All I want it for is snakes, you know."

"Oh, it'll do—for that!" Passo admitted, rather promptly. "I just tote mine for old times' sake."

They shot often in competition. Passo was good with a revolver and could let go at a snake, landing two shots out of five from the saddle at ten or fifteen feet—and, no matter what anybody says, to hit a snake from the saddle is good revolver practice. Perry was shooting ten or fifteen times a day with his twenty-two, and he was reaching out fifty or sixty yards, the same as Passo—and, when Passo was around, missing rather oftener.

So word went around that Perry Genong was a twenty-two gunman, and his old-time friends on the other ranches remonstrated with him for spoiling his reputation in that way.

Tib Carney was saying things. He didn't talk to Perry Genong; he didn't talk to Perry's old friends; but the rumor crept along the ground that Perry had come back to Slipping Rock country because of another rumor. Millie Breslow and Tib Carney had seemed to be a first-class match five years before, but now the region was not quite so sure, despite the man's financial prosperity. Millie spent a good deal of her time over with her parents. There had been no open break, but the young woman was spunky; she was proud and somebody was wrong.

Despite his malicious slander Carney had to have water for about a thousand

head of three and four year olds. He came over to the Genong ranch one day when Perry was away in town.

"Well, Mrs. Genong," he greeted Perry's mother, "you're sure looking fine today. Passing by, so I dropped in. How about letting me water my north herd here, the next three months?"

"Well, Tib, I'll tell you just how it is," Mrs. Genong hesitated. "You'll have to talk to Perry."

"What! He ain't bought the place?"

"Oh, no. I own it, but he's the manager now," she laughed.

"So I've heard. Well, I want that water. I'll see Perry."

Carney rolled away, heading for Red Gravel. He met the new Genong manager as he was aware he would. He stopped his own car in the two ruts and walked over to see the son of the ranch owner.

"Hello, Perry! See you're back!" he greeted.

"Yes, I'm back, Tib."

"Saw your mother. Told her I wanted to lease water for my north herd —shipping stock for this fall and winter."

"Sorry, Tib. Can't let you have it. Need every drop myself," said Perry.

"Well, I've been counting on having that water. I'm overstocked."

"Yes, I know you've been figuring on that water, Carney," said Perry.

"And, now, knowing that, you hold me up! What do you think you're getting into? Now how much for that water?".

"Oh, for trail herds—twenty-five cents a head every twenty-four hours."

"Why you—hell-damned——"

As he began his oath Carney went for his gun. But a forty-five caliber six-shot revolver emerged above the fore-door of Perry's car and leveled down at a rangy angle looking into Carney's eyes.

"Why, that's a—" Carney gasped.

"Drop your belt, Tib!" Perry ordered, and the rancher unbuckled the two tie-straps and let fall his armament.

"Now what?" Carney lifted the corner of his lip.

"We'll go over and take your rifle, too," the man with the drop remarked, "and you're going to pull clear out to go around, instead of grabbing all the roadway. Why, if I hadn't stopped, we'd sure hooked wings."

Carney saw his thirty-three caliber magazine rifle taken from his car, and he preferred to move the expensive car, to having it shot through the vitals with his own rifle and being obliged to walk twenty miles to town. In the side pocket of the Carney car Genong found another revolver, a long-barreled forty-five caliber. Confiscating this, Genong sent the bully on his way, going home himself. He knew Carney would buy more firearms in town. The quarrel meant war, but there was no help for it.

ON ARRIVING home Perry carried the captured weapons into the main building and was lucky enough to escape his mother's attention. Only when he was looking over the big double-holster belt did he realize what luck had done for him. The cinch was a trick girdle. Removing every fifth cartridge of the double loops let through a series of fasteners for a flap, and under this were three long pockets of a hidden money belt. But other things than money were in the pockets, among them a payroll.

No wonder Tib Carney was making a big stagger at ranching! The son of a widow with no influence, his own friends little fellows, and his own resources meagre, Perry sat a long time on a rail over by the corral. He did not sit where he was silhouetted against the sky, either, but rather in a dark shadow of the night. In the morning he waited till after breakfast was eaten and the boys waiting around had their work assigned to them.

Then Genong turned to Passo.

"You're through here, Passo," he said.

"What? What for?"

"For the reason you're still on Tib Carney's payroll."

"Why, you Go——"

"Hold on!" Perry interrupted. "Get out!"

The gun Passo was looking into had a muzzle of awful size for a .22, the cowboy reflected, and his eyes flickered. Only when he saw the details of the cylinder, the half-moon sight, and other revolver features did he realize how badly fooled he had been. Genong had practiced countless times with a .22 automatic, but for business he was wearing two conventional .45s, and they were held steady and pointed right.

"All right, sir," Passo nodded, shrugging his shoulders. "I'll be going."

"Now, Mother," Perry turned to the woman who had appeared, startled by the sudden sharpness of her son's voice, "I'm pulling my freight. You'll have to look after things. Don't lease any water to Carney, on paper. If he comes, let him water here for a dollar a head a month—and you do the counting yourself. He's pretty apt to come. You can afford to let him pay you three thousand dollars for three month's water. Or any other price, for it's velvet, anyhow. But hold him to it, and make him come through with cash in advance."

"You're going away, son?" she asked, tremulously.

"Got to, Mother!" he replied. "I'm going to take four of my horses in the bull-truck, and Jack can run me over to Red Gravel and on to the river road in a day. It would take me four days to ride through on horses."

"But—about us?" she insisted. "You know the way things are——"

"That's exactly why and precisely it," he reassured her. "You didn't think I was quitting on you, did you? The further I am from these parts, the more use I'll be to you—just now."

She did not understand him any more than did the two riders and farm hands. In the few months he had been home Perry had introduced the land to the overflow of the spring hole, and he had made plows friendly with the soil. His mere presence had changed the ranch from a starving to a thriving proposition again.

But now Perry rolled away with four of his horses, his saddle and pack. He stopped in Red Gravel only long enough to eat a hearty dinner with the cowboy who had brought him. Then the truck carried him and the horses on forty miles further, dropping him in the valley.

"Well, I'll see you later." Genong promised Jack, and, having saddled one of the animals, he drove his other three on their way westward.

TIB CARNEY, as expected, rode over to demand water. He stood gaunt, hungry, set-jawed, an ugly man as he faced the proud widow.

"I've got to have water," he said.

"I've got to be paid in advance for the water, Tib."

"Ain't I good?"

"While you last a free man, your word is likely good," she replied, "but I've no desire to have debts against your estate or your trustees."

"My estate—what do you mean? Is that boy of yours gunning for me?" he demanded hotly.

"Not at all," she replied tartly, "but before leaving about his private business he let me know the scheme you had to steal my ranch with a secret tax sale title, and how you paid a hundred dollars to have the county clerk's filing newspaper changed while the circulation ones had not the same advertisement in them, making an illegality legal."

"You lie!" Carney gasped. "You know——"

"I tell you to your face, Tib Carney," she retorted. "But if you killed me, 'tis all a matter of record, now, the oaths made and the facts are so planted that you could not save your own neck for killing a woman. A dollar a head per month for watering, Tib Carney. Take it or leave it."

Tib Carney flared angrily. At the same time she told the truth. They would stand much from him in those parts, but not the killing of a widow to steal her water. Besides, the son was still alive. The coward had fled. It was a pity that in the old rivalry days Tib had let him get away. But then the boy was only a boy.

"I'll take the water," Carney said. "A dollar a head, a month, then it is. It's a high price, though. The herd'll run about fifteen hundred."

"I need the money to protect my farm and ranch interests," she said smiling naively. "I do not want the cash here. Bring me my bankbook with the money credited to my account in Mr. Farone's institution; he's an honest man, you know."

Carney blinked. Yet she had him. Cattle could not grow without water. His eyes turned to the alfalfa longingly. If he had that for his cattle, now, he could ship half-fats, instead of dry leans for feeders. He was caught in a drought, and he himself deposited to Mrs. Genong's credit more money a month than her ranch had netted in years. Yet he loved money more than anything else in the world.

He had been crowding the widow. He had been gnawing away, back in

the hills, till the widow's herd was but a milch-like bunch with no milk. If he could have had another year there would have been no more beef stock. But the coming home of Perry had changed it all. Carney could neither grab nor skin the land with a cowboy on the job who knew the tricks.

THE papers coming out on the stages carried an announcement which was interesting in the Red Gravel country. The son had gone away to some purpose.

NEW RANGER APPOINTED

Capt. Bladesoe has found a new recruit for his West Belt company of Rangers. Perry Genong, son of Col. Davis Genong of the Lily-Rose brand ranch, and who has served in the Revenue Patrol along the Northern Border, comes with wide experience and several feats to recommend him. Knowing the whole of the Red Gravel country, Perry can readily break into the particular and special Ranger requirements and tactics in these parts.

Following this announcement, the main cabin of the Widow Genong's ranch outfit was blown up by dynamite. Mrs. Genong had gone over to Red Gravel court for two or three days. The three farm hands then on the place were in the dormitory. They claimed they had heard and seen nothing till suddenly the house went up in a terrific explosion which destroyed the building.

Mrs. Genong's answer to this was a bungalow on a handsome, up-to-date scale. The explosion had messed up everything, but she salvaged a good many odds and ends. Proudly she declared she wouldn't be driven off the ranch or give up the spring water. The sheriff and a posse came over and fussed around, looking for clues. When they had begun to shake their heads, the widow went to where the five men were standing by the big county car.

"You're getting ready to say you haven't the faintest idea of who could have done a thing like this," she told them angrily, "and you expect people to believe you. But you know in your souls what has happened, and you have no excuse to offer yourselves. And you'll know, too, every time you look an honest man in the face, that he surely has his opinion of you."

She turned her back on them. They were good men. A cousin of Tib's was among them, and he was ashamed, even though his cousin had had him named deputy sheriff to help put things over. Without another word the sheriff and his men clambered into the car to ride on their way back to Red Gravel. What could they say?

Tib Carney was in town that night, on their arrival. He came to turn sharp eyes on each of the men, making sure. The big fellow found himself looking into the level gaze of the possemen, who were expressionless for the moment.

"What'd you find out about that blow-up?" Tib demanded.

"We found where some blackguards and scoundrels destroyed a widow's home," the sheriff replied evenly. "Three men came on horseback from the southward, and one horse had an off-set caulk, to prevent a side-slip. We've an idea we know whose horse was stolen by scoundrels to do the work with—if it was stolen—and get him blamed for it, Tib."

Tib set his teeth, lifting his lips from them. Just when he was about to be called for being a condemned fool, the sheriff saved himself by suggesting a party of thieves had stolen Tib's own saddle horse to go blow up the house. At the same time the sheriff did not smile; neither did any of the other members of the posse. It was bad business. Attacking a woman was no joke, no matter how it was put—Tib saw that plainly enough. He grunted and went home, and he was angry all the way, glad that he hadn't trusted to mere political and financial gratitude to keep those fellows right.

The rancher had not figured right in his clandestine affairs. He had been expanding, making ten per cent notes at the banks. Just when he had figured on being a millionaire, the arrival of Perry Genong with his knowledge of the intricacies of nightfall transactions had forced a suspension. Instead of paying off short-term notes, Tib was with a wry face obliged to pay the interest and renew them.

The amity of the Rangers with the Federal revenuers was embarrassing. As a rule the state and the Federal customs departments could each go their

own way, each performing their own duties. Always, on special occasions they could alternate their patrols for certain purposes. But it took broad-minded men to forget the antagonisms and rivalries between state-right and national workers. Now it was mighty white of the Rangers, keen and experienced local men, to throw in the way of their fellow law-enforcers straight tips which led to much confusion for a band of international cattle rustlers who were operating in the Red Gravel country.

Through the Red Gravel district rumblings were heard. Interferences with local affairs was surely becoming too promiscuous. But there was no doubt as to just which Ranger was making a lot of the trouble, perhaps out of personal spite, perhaps out of sheer honesty of feeling. The Sliding Rock country could laugh or swear, according to its fences, for the rumors left in all minds a pretty definite idea as to the need of doing something—doing it right.

THE telephone in Capt. Bladesoe's Ranger camp told the news, one day, that Tib Carney's ranch was having trouble with its cattle. The foreman told the head Ranger that rustlers were cutting his herds. Suspicion, Dolce Passo explained, had been aroused some time since, but nothing definite had been discovered. According to Passo, it looked as though small bunches of cattle were being cut out and run away either eastward into the mesquite or possibly southward into Mexico.

"We want somebody to look the country over," the foreman explained, "Better be somebody who knows all this country—the lay of the land."

"Well, now, just who do you s'pose of my men'd be particularly able thataway?" Bladesoe inquired, with gentle willingness to oblige.

"Personally, we haven't much use for young Genong," Passo replied, after a minute of hesitation, "but he's local and he's a first-class man."

Capt. Bladesoe considered the suggestion thoughtfully. Rangers generally had bad friends all over the country, but, when it came to a pinch, even the worst of personal prejudices were pocketed as against troublesome conditions. And among the little that Bladesoe didn't know about that region's affairs the strained relationship between the Genongs and the Carneys—past and present—were not included.

"All right, I'll see. Don't know 'f I can send Genong, but I'll have somebody going that way, presently," the captain answered finally.

If suspicions meant anything, the Federal and Ranger patrols had been particularly embarrassing and timely in the district south of the Slipping Rock country, although no definite results had been obtained by the quickening alertness since Genong came into the force.

"I say, now Perry," Bladesoe greeted his rider, who was shooting at a mark with his ridiculous little .22 automatic, "do you know anybody who steals cattle down around the Slipping Rock country?"

"Most anybody down there would pick up a maverick," the rider grinned.

"I know, but small bunches, ten-fifteen head, say, feeder cuts?"

"Beefers for the mines, they might." Genong studied his captain's face. "And they might even to feed guerrillas below the border, and perhaps for blotching out among the nesters, quarter section settlers, starting herds of their own in a hurry. They might thataway, probably."

"You reckon they'd be rustling Tib Carney's herds—those that know him and his outfit?"

"I shouldn't say so, Cap'n," Genong shook his head, thoughtfully. "I don't think that anybody down there is apt to do that. It wouldn't be reasonable."

"Well, Passo telephones in they're missing small bunches, though."

"You say they told us—you—about it?" the Ranger exclaimed.

"Just exactly so, Perry. They inquired for a particularly good man, too."

"But I don't see—why, it must sure be some desperate man that'd lay into those brands, Cap'n. Why, say, I'd a heap sooner tackle one of those spotted jungle tigers down below barehanded, 'n take one of Tib Carney's babies, even. Why, you know he always handles those things himself."

"That's what puzzles me, sure," the captain replied, thoughtfully. "But Passo asked particularly for a good man, somebody who knows the Slipping Rock country. He said they hadn't any personal use for you, but they think that Genong can sure do the work right."

"What!" Perry stared at his superior. "They asked for me? They humbled themselves to ask for me to help them?"

"My ears haven't faded much; that's what Passo said," the captain asserted.

"Well, all right—I'll go."

"Now hold on a minute, Genong," the captain suggested; "I can send another man. I'm not just satisfied about that request. You want to remember you've been doing right smart work down in those parts. I expect if anybody around these parts is particularly unpopular along the Slipping Rock fords and to'd the northward, it's you."

"I'll go, Captain."

"Don't rush off, Genong. Do you know what you might be up against?"

Perry Genong turned to look eastward. The red desert, the beautiful valley, the great wonderland was sunny and full of enchantment that day. He did not mention some other features of the landscape.

"Yes, Captain, I know," Genong replied. "Tib Carney tricked me out of a lot I had a right to expect from life. I don't know yet who killed my father. I found my mother's cows and calves in his branding round-ups. I found the proof of his swindling scheme to tax-sale my mother's ranch from under her feet. And when he picked a row with me I took his guns away."

"What? How come that, boy?"

"He wanted the spring water for his cattle. Out in the desert he met me head on, demanded the water, and went for his gun. I'm wearing his belt now. These were his six-guns. That .33 box-magazine was his, too."

"But how——"

"Why, you know, he thought all I could use was a .22 automatic," Perry grinned.

"Well, by gad—that's how come! You know, boy," the captain chuckled, "I'd heard and wondered about that blamed .22 of yours. When you come for a job, I just had to look't that belt, those holsters, myself. But I'd better send another man down for Carney."

"I'd rather go, Captain."

Capt. Bladesoe extended his hand to shake. He did that on the rarest of occasions, when one of his boys offered something which particularly pleased him. If this was a frame-up it might mean anything. It might be a real summons for help in a baffling cattle-thieving proposition, or it might be seeking a chance to be rid of a man whose side-line friendliness to the revenuers was embarrassing to the border traitors. Bladesoe had lively doubts.

THE arrival of Ranger Genong at the Carney ranch within the same day of the call for him was contrived by the transportation of Genong and his favorite horse. The Ranger's horse-truck dropped the rider just around the mountain shoulder from the ranch. There he saddled and cantered from the main trail into the Carney valley and up to the buildings just twenty-four hours sooner than he was expected. When he arrived three automobiles and eight or ten horses were there, so Genong walked into the big living room.

He threw his hat against the base-log and looked Tib Carney in the eye.

"Cap'n Bladesoe told me you had a job for me to do for yuh, Tib," he said.

Quiet, terrific silence, surrounded him. He stood in the center of the big room, with nearly a score of riders sitting along the walls, every last one of them staring at him tense with astonishment. They knew Rangers, but, damn them, they carried a surprise in their activities all the time. They might have known Genong would come in the ranger truck, but that he would appear among them a day sooner than their figuring had provided for—well, there he was, and what did they have up their sleeves?

Genong himself was astonished. Here were five men for whom the Rangers had been looking. They sat in the corner by the fireplace. He recognized Whinsey, who had killed a man over in Llano country; he saw Crapes, who was supposed to be staying below the Border—and he slithered into position in the prompt ranger fashion.

"Up!" Genong ordered, and, as he was a Ranger, he was obeyed.

"Reckon, Tib, this'll help about these cows you've been missing," Genong remarked. "These boys have probably been double-crossing you, friendly daytimes and cutting beef at night. They've always been rustlers."

The five prisoners went outside. The others sat immovable in the big room. True, there were seventeen, all told. They could have massacred four or five Rangers—perhaps. It would have been,

naturally, a right costly killing. Even Perry Genong, with the start in his guns, would probably have left his mark, shooting as far as he could with the twelve shots in his cylinders. But no one raised a hand, except the five who were told to put them up—and ten hands went up. Genong's unexpected arrival had crimped any scheme to have him run into a bunch of unknown cattle-rustlers—if that was the big idea.

Outside, Genong fired twice in the air. Whereupon the Ranger truck presently swung around the point as if the driver were afraid he'd be late if he didn't hurry. But Capt. Bladesoe himself was quite unprepared for what awaited him. Tarrying around, out of sight, he was anxious. And finding five rewarded scoundrels all lined up, peaceable and astonished, the captain burst into laughter for the first time when on a job like this. Looking for war, he'd found lions lying down like lambs to the very look of intrepid Rangerhood.

So, leaving the five prisoners disarmed, disconsolate, and manacled under guard in the ranger horse truck, Captain Bladesoe and Genong re-entered the ranch cabin. They found the twelve others sitting where they had been, looking at the center of the floor before them. A good deal of the Ranger superiority is due to celerity—being there just a bit quicker than expected or believed possible, whether with bullets or with horses or even with wits.

"Howdy, Tib," the captain greeted. "We arrived just in time, didn't we? Why, hello, Deering—I just plumb forgot you was due to be out of the Huntsville penitentiary last fall? And you Lamber—what you doing back in these parts, now?"

"Why, I—I've been riding, cowboy," Lamber spoke up, quickly.

"I didn't like the way you dropped out on us when we needed you as a witness, Lamber. How about it?"

"Well, suh, I just plumb had to saddle and go——"

"Yes, I know," the captain nodded. "They paid you one hundred dollars and told you to ramble and you did. If you'd stayed you expected to be shot. Next time I send for you, you'll come?"

"Yes, sir!"

"What's the trouble, Tib? You say you're losing cattle? How many? What kinds—and what brands?"

"Over east on the main range I've a small water-hole," Carney began promptly. "We keep about six hundred head there, about all pepperbox brands, mostly two-year-olds, no she-stuff or babies, for it's a long way to grass and they work out ten to twenty hours, and back-feeding. Big country, middling open, and mesquite east. Next water probably fifty miles. Looking them over, as they're scatterings, Passo noticed herd looked thin. We tallied them, and they are below four hundred. We circled the boundaries and found three places where small bunches had been driven east, and by three horses there. 'Course, we could have tracked through ourselves. Same time, we're paying the state taxes for protection."

"Yes, we'd rather have the work to do, ourselves, Carney," Bladesoe nodded, "Mighty fine of you not to take the law into your hands any more."

"Any more! What do you mean, Captain?" Tib bristled.

"Those two travelers in their car who killed a calf on the Top of the World Trail," Bladesoe opened dogmatically.

"We didn't—" Tib interrupted.

"We followed the riders from the camp where they did the killing down into the Slipping Rocks, Carney," said Bladesoe. "Well, Genong will see what there is to this rustling. He's a good man, Carney. Much obliged for letting us know when to come in right. We've wanted those boys outside quite a while. Wish more ranchers would tell us when to call."

With that Bladesoe shook hands with the rancher, whose hand was like a snake, dry and cold. The gratitude of the Ranger captain was about the most deadly poison Carney's mind had absorbed in a long time. With those boys sitting around, to be thanked for tipping off the Rangers when to come—Carney wondered if the captain's innocence was as blandly naive as it seemed?

The two Rangers went out together. The captain waved good-by and Genong slipped into his saddle as the Ranger truck and its indignant passengers rolled for the camp and jail. The rider headed eastward where his cattle-rustler hunt seemed to lie. As he did so he saw a figure on the front

balcony of the new bungalow staring at him. It was Millie Breslow. She had changed from a gay and happy-go-lucky girl into a grave and handsome woman. Five years had elapsed since the two had seen each other. Their eyes met, now, and held for an instant as he bowed and passed on his way to work.

IT WAS true. Carney's east water-hole herd had been drained of two hundred and sixty-three pepperbox brands. Genong, because he knew the country, and because he had Ranger luck, cut into the trail of fifteen of the animals and found one where it had died away down the line, probably from starting thirsty. At the Gunsight crossing he found where many head had gone across the border. Of course, he wasn't supposed, as a Ranger, to go below the line. But he interpreted the national boundary as elastic and undetermined on those bottoms. Six days after leaving Carney's ranch he counted the lost two-year-olds in the Hacienda de Quien Sabe pastures. Returning to the nearest telephone, he told Captain Bladesoe.

"All right, go tell Carney, too," the Ranger chief ordered. "Don't forget that Tavine, from the Quien Sabe was one of the visitors that day at Tib's place."

"All right, Captain," Genong replied.

"Well, what'd you find out?" Carney demanded, when Genong arrived.

"Case for the Government," Genong replied. "There are over two hundred pepperbox brands, nearly all two-year-olds, on the Quien Sabe pastures below the river. They were driven in small bunches from your water hole and crossed at the Gunsight ford. I noticed a funny thing at the river bank, Tib. One of the riders was on a horse stolen from my mother's ranch. I'd know the track anywhere. And when the rider went down to drink, he was wearing Passo's heel-brace and sole-patch boots. You know, he always runs an X-line of brass tacks along the bottoms of the boot soles he repairs himself."

"Do you call Passo a thief?" Carney demanded.

"Oh, no!" Just the man that wears his boots, that's all."

"You know too much, Genong," Carney said, unable to hold his tongue.

"Not quite enough, Carney," Genong replied. "You'll have to take the matter of the cattle below the border into Federal hands."

Carney made no answer. He was afraid. The Ranger had read the trails of the cattle only too clearly. The report that the Rangers had been called in and that many beef animals were traced below the border would do no good to Carney. It was very impolite to try and make out that the Tavine ranch was receiving stolen beeves. Tavine would be highly indignant at the miscarriage of the half-laid plans whose completion had been interrupted by the inopportune arrival of the Ranger and the capture of the five wanted men. The rancher could say nothing. His rage was equaled only by his helplessness.

"Well, I'll be going," Genong concluded, turning away.

"Have dinner!" Carney explained, shamed by the idea that any man, even Genong, should fail to notice the fragrance of barbecued beef.

"All right," Genong assented. "My horse needs a feed."

"I saw Garcia throw down alfalfa for him," Carney said.

Five sat at the table that midday meal. Millie was across from Genong. Carney was at the head, and two hands were the others. Over them hung the pall of past and present. Feeling ran three ways. Genong was glad to finish his last cup of coffee, Carney to bolt his last hunk of shredded beef, and Millie, having nibbled and picked about acting as the hostess, struggled to contain the emotions that welled within. Not once did her eyes meet those of Genong, and not once did his seek even to glance at her hands. He turned to Carney as they went to the corral for his horse.

"You're satisfied, Tib," he asked, "about the cattle?"

"Yes," said the beaten ranchman.

"Well, good-by."

"Good-by."

There could be no handshake. In three minutes Genong was up and on his way. The moment he was out of sight, Carney dashed to a stable where a horse, led out for him, was ready for his surprisingly agile jump into the saddle. Tib Carney could permit no such report as Genong had to make. He must at any cost silence the Ran-

ger's lips before he reached headquarters. Carney galloped up the canyon north from his outfit and cut through a gulch up a divide over a low pass, down a terrific gorge of stone and slipback to come through clusters of rank weedy shrubs and dwarfed trees. Passo's track had betrayed them all, the final touch following the capture of the border bandits in confab with Carney.

He knew that Genong, jog-trotting along, would make the ranch roadway circuit around the Slipping Rocks foothills in something more than an hour. Carney could get into place in something less than fifty minutes, despite the rough going over the short-cut of three-fourths of the distance. Once he had Perry Genong killed, he would figure out the rest of it. If need be he would burn a thousand acres of this waxen shrubbery to destroy the evidence of the bushwhack murder he planned.

Tib Carney's secret was now out. He was a big fellow. He stood to lose everything, especially freedom, for if Perry Genong had counted all those Carney catle on the Quien Sabe pasture he had not failed to see the scores of cattle which had belonged to Mrs. Genong, recognizing unquestionably the blotched brands of the Lily-Rose—which anyone could have identified, no matter how well over-scorched.

Into Carney's face came the expression of grim and murderous despair that marks the cattle country crook making his last effort to hang on. No one undertakes in a light mood to kill a Texas Ranger. That is the last resort of a criminal, trying to cover up. Tib raced down to the place he had picked for ambush.

COMING around a short turn in the narrow gorge, where he could look down at his ranch cut-out roadway, he found himself dashing down at three men who had started up from where they were cooking a snack as they waited for—what?

The rancher recognized them—Captain Bladesoe and two of his Rangers. They had come in the horse-pullman truck with their mounts. Carney understood now. They had come here to receive Genong's report, organized to raid Carney's own ranch and arrest all hands for stealing the widow Genong's cattle and perhaps all the other cattle the Carney outfit had been running below the border in these recent years. The Ranger must have discovered those things when he somehow followed the blind trails to the Quien Sabe pastures where the rustled beef had been hidden.

Rage filled the rancher. The hope of complete desperation filled him. As easy get three Rangers as one—and so Carney went for both his new forty-fives and bore down on the camp smoking right and left. While it lasted it was a right lively fusillade, but Carney had been economical in one way. He had neglected to practice quite as much with his forty-fives as he should have. A trailed-down grafting badman, Carney was only pretty good.

He almost hit each of the three men. He really nipped the lobe of Bladesoe's ear. He sent a bullet between Carter's left arm and body. He put two bullets through the other Ranger's hat, parting the hair with a diagonal line shave.

But a Ranger bullet hit his heart, another smashed his shoulder, and a third centered his body. The rancher passed out in midair, and his horse, hit through the jugular, threw itself up, sunfishing in frantic struggles, and sprayed the place with a double jet of spreading purple, like red pearls raining in the bright sunshine.

Genong had come faster than Carney had figured. Rangers do outrun the estimates. He heard the shooting, recognized its savage purport and galloped in upon the scene at top speed in time to see the stricken horse rearing on its hind legs, while the dead man went over on the ground.

Captain Bladesoe began swearing earnestly as he fondled his smarting and mangled ear tip.

"Shan't I look'n see'f you can wear an earring in it, now, Cap'n?" one of his men inquired.

Bladesoe glared, indignant and hilarious in one expression. His Rangers always were insulting his equipoise. At the same time, the captain looked up at Genong, who sat with his big revolver drawn looking down at the quivering body of the man.

"Now, Mr. Man," Bladesoe drawled, "you just turn right around and get back out of this. It ain't your funeral. You go right back to Carney's ranch

and tell Mrs. Carney you want to see Tib about something you done forgot to inquire into, understand?"

"But, my God—Captain!"

"You obey orders—git!" Bladesoe ordered, and shooed the Ranger on his way back to the ranch.

Two miles back along the trail, Perry met a woman bearing down upon him in an automobile which she was driving at top speed over the spur. As she discovered him, she stepped on the brake till it screamed and the drive wheels stopped, throwing the alkali dust high as the machine swerved in a terrific skid. As the car came to a stop, almost against his horse, he saw it was Mrs. Carney, and that she was throwing up her hands toward him as she fell in a faint into his arms.

When she opened her eyes, she was in the shadow of the car on the red gravel, Genong cooling her brow with his silk neckerchief wet from his canteen. For a moment she blinked, trying to remember.

"Oh, Perry!" she gasped. "Look out—Tib's riding through the hills cutoff to bushwhack you all."

"You'd—you'd warn me?" he exclaimed. "You'd let me know that?"

"I'd let you know anything in the world," she replied, sobbing, "for I learned too late for me to help myself that he was a crook——"

He kissed her. He felt he had the right to do it now, and a little later, when Captain Bladesoe came along bouncing in the Ranger car carrying its tragic burden, the old fellow's eyes twinkled, for there was a lot of understanding now in the young man's expression.

"I've hard news for you, Millie," the Ranger chief said. "Tib's shot dead. He come down into us, shooting as he came."

"He was aiming to waylay Perry!" she cried. "He rode to bushwhack him—oh, I'm so glad Perry turned back. I'm glad it wasn't him against Tib—it'll make all the difference in the world, his not shooting him!"

"Tha'so?" Captain Bladesoe blinked.

"You Rangers think you're awful smart!" she clicked her teeth at him, as she turned with a sigh to rest her head on Perry Genong's shoulder.

WILD BURROS SLAUGHTERED

WANDERING herds of desert-bred wild burros are diminishing, falling before the guns of migratory workers stranded on the desert in their quest for work on the Boulder dam. Desert travelers are noting the inroads into the droves of the wild creatures, identified with the days of pioneer prospecting in the West. Great droves of the beasts have been seen, until recently, in the Panamint and Funeral ranges whose far-flung lengths wall in Death Valley.

An old-time prospector returning from a trip over the Mojave desert said, "I did not see but a single burro, and was informed that the burro had become bootleg meat that is helping to keep a lot of people from going hungry in the Boulder dam and desert sections."

He stated that burro meat was found to have a good gamelike flavor. **—O. O. Oldham.**

BRANDS AND EARMARKS

By CHEYENNE AL MacDOWELL

I WAS loitering around the chutes at the World Series Rodeo last fall, where a crowd of spectators milled about through the long line of stalls, and I was rather amused at some of the comments passed by various people, for it was plain to see that very few of those folks savvied cows. The crowd was enthusiastic, they asked questions pertaining to the big event and a number seemed particularly interested in the stock, their brands and ear marks, but few among that vast throng could read the seared writing of the cow-country.

There has always been more or less confusion regarding stock marks, and during the period of my connection with the game I have been asked many questions regarding the same, so for the benefit of those interested I will endeavor to explain, *How to read brands and ear marks.*

Historians tell us, that in 1521 the first bunch of cattle was imported from the West Indies to Vera Cruz, and that documents written as early as 1600 make mention of the fine condition of cattle in New Spain. Spanish adventurers penetrated the wilds of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and parts of Kansas, bringing with them horses, mules, cattle and sheep which was really the first introduction of stock raising into the so-called New World. The Spanish Dons turned their peaked front saddles into broad, flat-horned affairs, built rawhide *"lareatas"* and went into the cow business, so from those early explorations a great industry was born. Cattle roamed the ranges in thousands and the stockmen took to branding and marking their cattle which was the only possible means of identification.

The old-time cowmen were not satisfied with brands alone, especially when the brand was old or in winter when the hair was long. What appeared to be scratches or roughened hair on a critter was a brand that must be read and that was a difficult problem when trailing wild cattle through rough country. However, somebody noticed that when a rider approached a bunch of cattle, the latter stood for an instant with their heads up and ears forward, so the idea of notching the ears with various marks was originated. Ear marks are very useful as means of identification, but if used alone would offer little protection against theft, because of the fact that they are easily changed. But when used with a brand they make an ideal combination.

In Wyoming there is a great deal of duplication. This is explained by the fact that when the county recording of

brands was done away with in 1909, it was discovered that ranchers of different counties used the same brands, and all brands on record had to be recognized according to law and placed in the State books, but since 1909, duplicates are not permissible.

Branding is generally done with a long-handled iron stamp, commonly referred to as a branding iron. When heated and applied to the critter it leaves the full impression, and if properly done will mark the brute for life. When there are occasions to brand an odd animal on the range, a piece of iron rod, or an old cinch ring answers the purpose very nicely. These are usually called running irons. This type of branding iron has always been popular among rustlers in all parts of the range country.

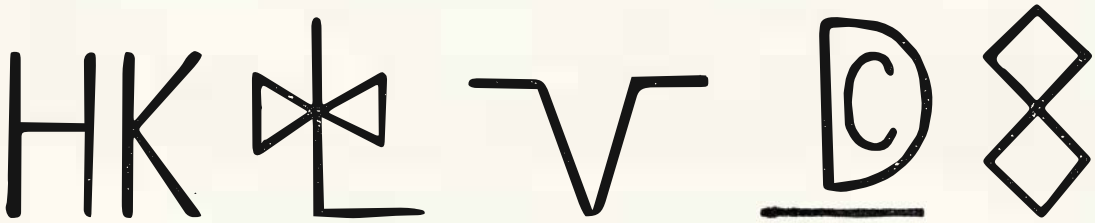
By carefully observing the illustrations, the reader will get a pretty good idea of brand reading. Brands should be read from left to right when the marks run in horizontal order or when a mark appears on the left of two or more vertically arranged marks. Also in cases where the letters are run together. When a mark appears above the letters the brand should be read down and from left to right as shown in the cut which illustrates the Bar E.D. brand. To put the bar below or to the right, would make it the E.D. Bar.

Letters that lie down in a horizontal position are referred to as "lazy," such as the Lazy H.K. Straight lines on each side of a letter or number represent wings and is often spoken of as "flying." Note the Flying V.

When two letters or objects of the same character are used, such as two diamonds, the brand is known as "double," hence the Double Diamond. Letters or figures inclosed in a box, triangle or circle are referred to as the Box 4, Triangle F, or Circle H, according to the figures or letters enclosed. There are also a number of brands in which one letter is worked into two, such as the Y.J. Other objects are often used, like the El-Bo or Y Cross. Brands are located on the hips, ribs, shoulders, necks and jaws, on the right or left sides according to the location preferred by the owner at the time of recording brand.

There are also many ways of marking a critter's ears. The illustrations show a few of the methods used by Western cowmen. The heavy lines indicate the various ways of marking. It must be understood that no two outfits in the same district use exactly the same marks. One rancher will underbit the right ear and over split the left. Another will over split the right ear and underbit the left. One will over split both ears, while his neighbor under rounds the right and swallow forks the left, etc.

A lot more could be written on the subject but space does not permit. However if the life of the cowman appeals to you, I suggest that you study the instructions carefully and if by chance you attend a rodeo or spend your vacation on a Western ranch, you will be able to savvy brands and ear marks.



NEXT WEST

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THE WILD BUNCH

REGULAR readers of WEST will have been following Powder River Jack Lee's crusade to stop the wholesale slaughtering of wild horses throughout the West. Powder River will sure enough like The Wild Bunch, Harry Sinclair Drago's complete novel in this WEST. It's about a cowboy who agrees with Jack plumb to the last breath. And there's a heap more than wild horses in it. Those of you who read Mr. Drago's story Squaw Valley War, will expect a lot from this one, and they won't be disappointed. It will take wild horses to drag you out of this story once you bury your nose in it.

THE CHUCK WAGON

AND next WEST carries on the same quality. We're proud to announce that the lineup will include Tom Roan, Clarence E. Mulford, William Byron Mowery, Henry Herbert Knibbs, and Frank C. Robertson. Who would have ever thought it possible to get so many crack Western authors into one issue.

Many of you have been besieging us with letters asking for another of *Tom Roan's* thundering great serials of the outlaw trails. We've got one at last, *Wyoming.* It's as good as anything Mr. Roan's ever written. Some of you will think it's his best. All the strength, excitement, true Western atmosphere and real Western character which have made Tom Roan's stories so much in demand are at their best in *Wyoming.*

And you'll be glad to welcome back another of your old favorites, *Frank C. Robertson.* He contributes the complete novel, *The Wild Riding Lashaways.* It's a story of family loyalty, and blood-stirring bravery that will hold Mr. Robertson's old friends and make for him many new ones.

And for a very special treat we're serving up A Tonto Kid novelette, the best one yet. In *Three of a Kind, Henry Herbert Knibbs* has done a story that's guaranteed to drive the depression blues scuttling hell for leather out the window. Tonto Kid and his sidekick decide to settle down. They do for as long as a pair of grasshoppers. Three of a Kind is the sort of story that can extract a laugh from the most determined pessimist, and for all of that is exciting from start to finish.

William Byron Mowery's story is a Northern novelette. No one but a man familiar with the Northland from personal experience could possibly have written it. It tells about some prospectors, two not so good, and one as upstanding, honest and not to be whipped a gold hunter as you'll meet. Don't miss *Borealis.* It will cool you off.

We believe that people want plenty of humor in their reading this year, and so we've given you in addition to The Tonto Kid, another of *R. E. Hamilton's* Boston, Pill, and Vermilion stories. This one's called *Vermilion Sells The Mare.* The three wandering waddies find there isn't much to choose between Death Valley and Hell—especially if you're afoot.

And to top off as fine a selection of stories as one could ask for there's a fast-moving rodeo story called *Son of a Champ* by a new author to WEST, Arthur Hawthorne Carhart, another of William Well's true stories of the old West, and other good things.

Hold on! We almost forgot *Frenchy,* by none other than *Clarence E. Mulford,* himself. We've been darn lucky

to obtain so much of Mr. Mulford's work for WEST lately, and judging from the flood of readers' comments we've received, we'll try to keep it up. Frenchy's a trail-herding yarn, and you've got to go a long way to find anyone who has more dope on the old-time trail herds hidden away in his mind than Clarence E. Mulford.

There they are. They'll be in the Mid February issue, published on February 2nd. Come early and be sure to get your copy. But if you can't, be sure to let us know. This is an issue no one ought to miss.

READERS' LETTERS

THIS issue Frederick J. Jackson, author of the popular Slivers Cassidy stories, settles a couple of controversies regarding the habits of rattlesnakes. Mr. Jackson won't let us print his address, because when we do, he gets so many letters from readers to answer, that he can't turn out any stories—which would be a catastrophe for WEST.

Editor, WEST,
Dear Sir:

Last summer, we removed back to the mountains. Cometh a guest. That evening, after dinner, I sat chatting with him. He had shifted footgear to a pair of low slippers.

"If you wear those in the morning," sez I, "watch your step. We've been away from here nearly ten months—and the rattlesnakes have moved in."

I highly suspect that he thought I was "kidding" him. I wasn't. Uh-uh!

Shortly after the sun came over the mountain the next morning, I heard a peculiar sound. It didn't sound exactly like a snake.

"Gosh," thinks I, "the high pressure has busted a water pipe." I went to investigate. Water pipe? No. The tiger-striped young hunting cat that I'd raised from a kitten to bring along and help clean out the pack rats and other vermin that move into an abandoned ranch was actually sparring *with a coiled rattler within a few yards of the door to the lower part of the house, the door out of which the guest might have stepped carelessly with slippers on.*

The peculiar sound was caused because this old rattlesnake had lost most of his rattles. By his size he rated 16 or 18 rattles, but the rattles had been busted off so that only six were left. I yelled to bring out the guest, to show the goods and prove that I hadn't been kidding him. I shoved the cat away with a foot, so's the cat couldn't get struck. Cometh the Irish terrier in a mad dash to investigate what all the fuss was about. I had to kick the dog to divert him from his silly rush right at the snake, which certainly was all hot and bothered and on the prod. Then, with the guest and my wife as witnesses, I killed the snake with a stick. I had the rattler cold *in an open space; he couldn't get away.*

A few days later, in exactly the same spot, right close to the house, the same cat is doing the same thing—sparring with a rattler. I'd been waiting for the second one. They invariably come in pairs that way—after you've killed one, you can look for another to show up. This one made a "whir-r-r-r-r" that was unmistakable.

I grabbed a .22 repeater and hurried out. Same thing. Had to kick the cat away. Took a shot at the snake's head, which was moving. Just nicked its neck. The thing about a rattlesnake lining its eyes on gunsights, so's all you have to do is point a gun and pull the trigger, is a lot of hooey. I've tried it, at various ranges, dozens of times. I've tried it a dozen times, shooting from the hip with a .22 on one snake. Finally had to take aim to plug it.

I missed this snake. I had fired several hundreds of "shorts" in this twenty-two. Then had filled the magazine with "long rifle" shells. Try it yourself sometime and see what happens. The breech will get fouled from the "shorts" so that a long-rifle shell will stick—*it won't extract when you work the trombone repeating mechanism.*

That's what happened this time. I got out my jack-knife, opened it and tried to pry out the empty cartridge. Meanwhile, I had stepped a few feet away from the rattlesnake. My wife was watching from the kitchen screen porch on the upper "deck" of the house. She let out a loud HOLLER of alarm that made me jump first and investigate afterwards.

I looked over my shoulder—after I'd jumped. So help me! if that slightly nicked rattlesnake hadn't straightened out to come right at me. That was a new *one. Years ago I lost count on rattlers I have killed—the number is well over 100—but this was absolutely* the first time *in my experience that a rattler went out of its way to go at a person. I'd heard of it, but had never seen it before. Every rattler, in my opinion, had put up a bluff of being combative—but had been willing to crawl off into a hole or beneath a log or some brush if given a chance to do this.*

Frederick J. Jackson

ASK ME AN OLD ONE!

"Dear Soogan:

"I hear all sorts of conflicting stories about Ben Wright, the old Indian fighter. Some say he was a model of fairness, and others that he was a devil in human form. Sometimes the stories about him are so that I wonder if such a man ever existed, or if he's just a myth like Paul Bunyan. Can you straighten me out on this?

"Orgath Bueall,
"Weed, Calif."

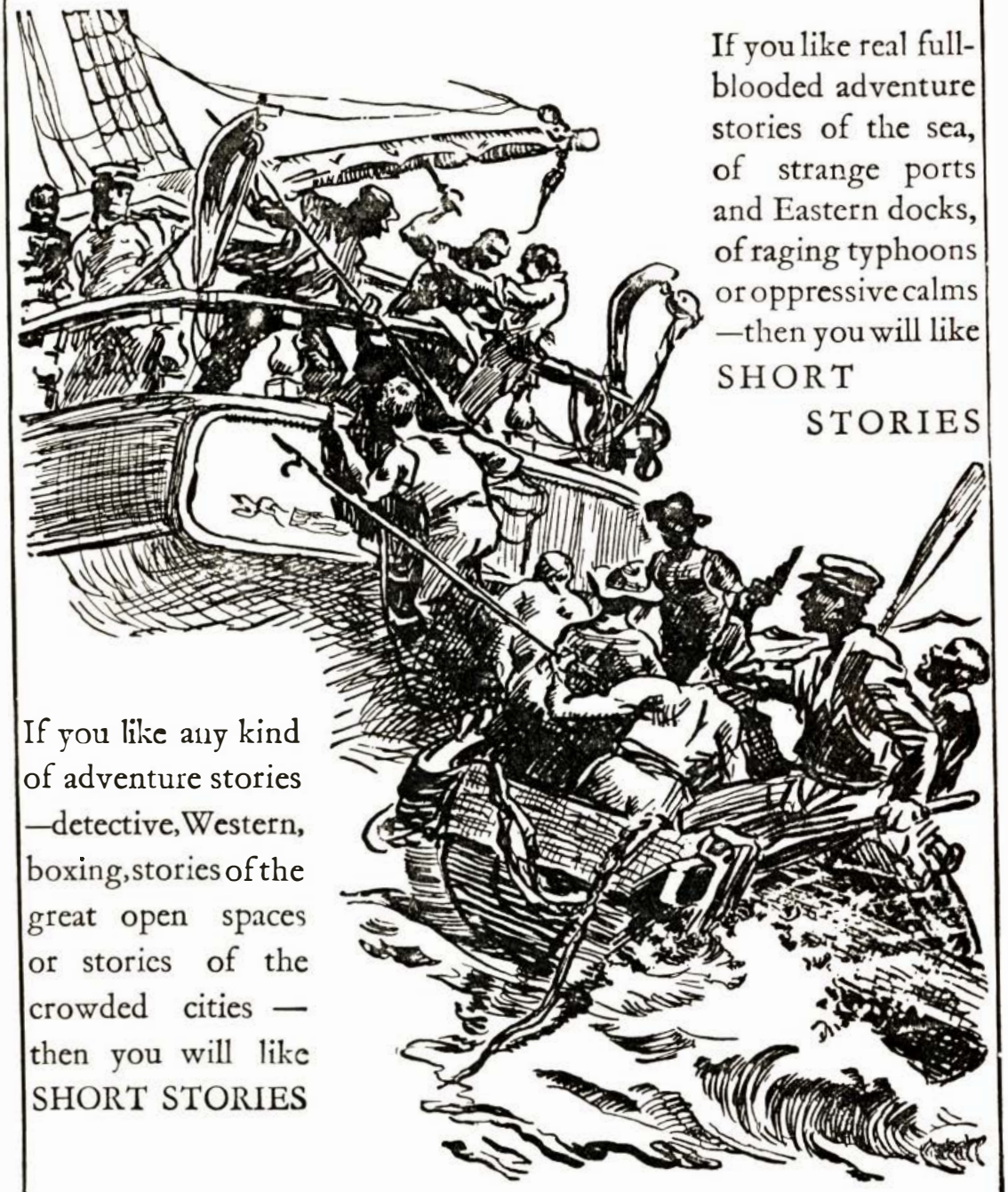
IN the early 1850's, emigrant trains deviated from the beaten trail that led into California over the High Sierra, and wound westward over the Warner Mountains from Fort Hall, into the isolated Modoc country. Here the covered wagons would camp near Bloody Point on Tule Lake, at the mercy of the Indians. The helpless pioneers would fight off for a time the showers of poisoned arrows from hidden bows. Then, from the west, into the midst of their despair would come a little band of galloping horsemen—red and blue shirts, broad slouch hats, handkerchiefs waving as a sign of peace and aid—Ben Wright and his band of Californians, dashing upon the Modocs to send them scuttling, a line of lifeless braves on their trail.

Indians upon Lost River would steal cattle and terrify lonely settlers. Again Ben Wright would come, dressed in buckskins, long black hair hanging, often mistaken for an Indian. More silent than his lurking foe, he would creep through the tule swamps, reconnoitre among the tents of the unsuspecting savages, and returning, lead his band to surround and exterminate the Modoc rancheria. A massacre on Pit River, another on the Klamath—Ben Wright, the pugnacious son of gentle Pennsylvania Quakers, was often chosen the avenger. He followed the American frontier westward in the forties, and became an outstanding figure in California and Oregon when law was a matter of bullet and knife.

His friends called him fair, just, and admired his uncanny skill in tracking down any man whom he had sworn to punish, His enemies, who included many of the whites and most of the Indians, called him atrociously cruel. Their stories of his exploits vary as greatly as their views upon his character, but even the most generous admit his part in the vital encounter of his career, the Ben Wright massacre in the winter of 1852-53, when he drew forty-five Modocs together under a flag of truce and massacred most of them by means of fighters held ready in ambush.

Later, however, as a Government subagent among the Indians in southern Oregon, Wright was known for his fairness and kindliness to the natives. In 1856 he was lured from his cabin and instantly killed by a band of Indians contemplating a general massacre. His body was mutilated beyond recognition. The Indians later told that they had cut away his heart, cooking and eating it in the hope of gaining for themselves the honoured courage of Ben Wright.

Short Stories



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