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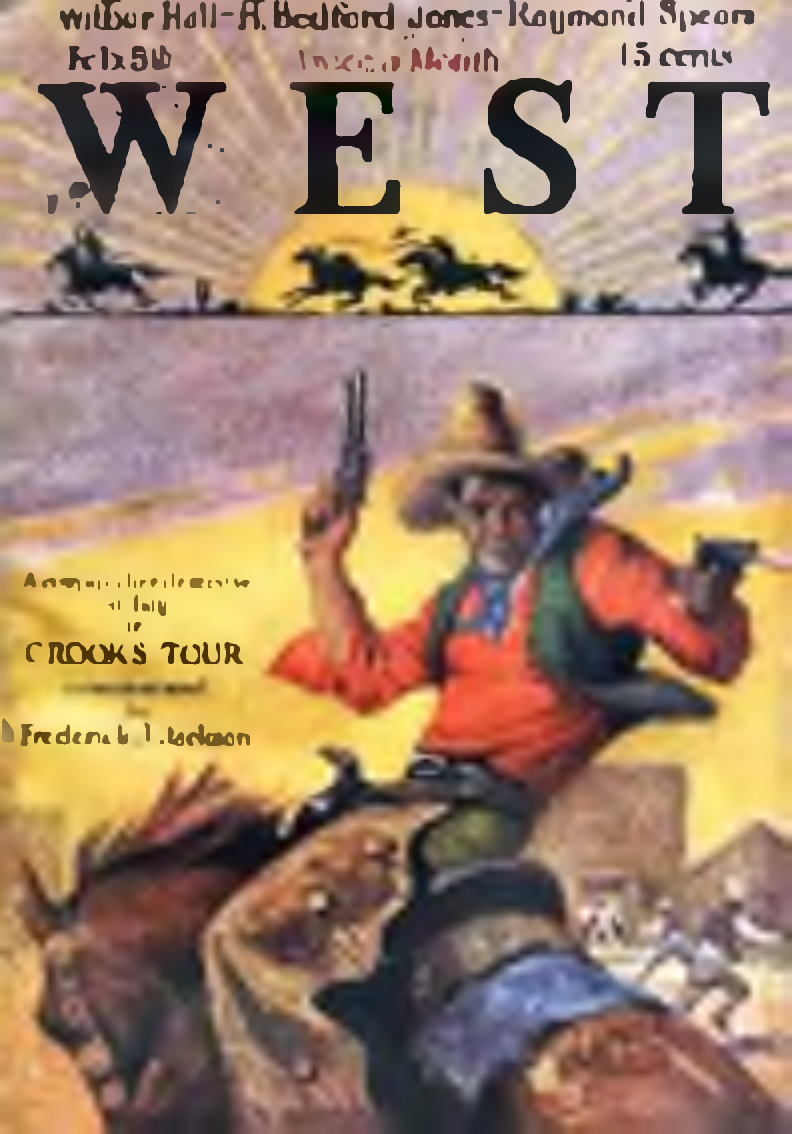

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Vol. I. No. 3 FEBRUARY 5, 1926

WEST

HARRY E. MAULE, *Editor* ANTHONY M. RUD, *Assoc. Editor*

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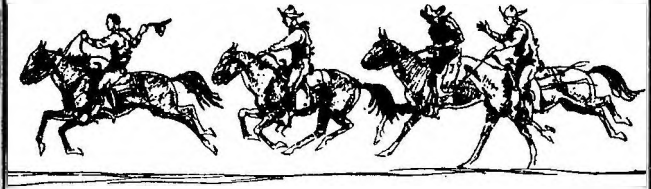

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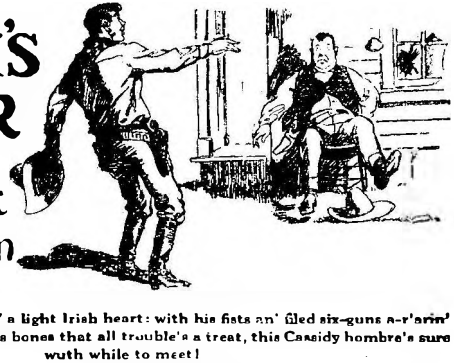
by Frederick J. Jackson



With a laugh in his eyes, an' a light Irish heart; with his fists an' filed six-guns a-r'arin' to start; with a hunch in his bones that all trouble's a treat, this Cassidy hombre's sure wuth while to meet!

CHAPTER I

ONE SHARE, CASSIDY PREFERRED

PSHAW! No more customers a-tall?" grinned Slivers Cassidy, raking in the last pot of the evening, and emptying the hodge-podge of bills and silver into the crown of his pearl gray Stetson.

"Yuh got us all down to shanks' mare an' shenanigan," responded Peaceful Pete Newton ruefully.

"Ain't two hundered bucks nothin' in yore young life?" put in Jake Casner, one of the players frozen out of the poker circle much earlier.

"To me?" demanded Slivers, chuckling as he jumped up and strode to the bar. There he turned over the Stetson, dumping his winnings carelessly on the marred cherry. "Call the house—an' *keep* a-callin' till the last shot is fired!" he directed with a wave of his hand.

And then in the ensuing uproar, he came back arm in arm with the waiter who brought drinks to the table. "To me?" he repeated, picking up Jake's question. "Hell no; that's nothin' but shoestrings for the bootleg! Me, I'm —say, Pete, tell 'em about the time I cracked down nigh a quarter million in twenty-buck gold pieces!"

Peaceful shook his head sorrowfully. "Nope, Slivers," he answered. "Yore a better liar than I ever hope tuh be. Tell it yoreself."

"By all means!" I seconded eagerly. Slivers had a reputation with me a whole lot like a yellowbacked Government banknote—ready money. "Spill it!"

"Um." He swung around to me, and I noted that the smile suddenly faded out of his eye corners. Fact, he looked baleful all of a sudden and I saw that no matter what his friends might say of his truthfulness—or otherwise—he was a man whose steel-cold nerve was up to any test, and who, in a pinch might bluff out a whole roomful of bad hombres.

"Ye-ah," he said rather slowly and impressively, "I'll spill it. But if you ever tell this one on me see yuh don't call me outa my name, an' above all *don't lie no wuss'n I do!*"

I gave him the promises with alacrity. So here is the yarn of Slivers Cassidy and the bucket of gold just about as he told it.

ROOSTIN' on yore laurels, eh?" genially inquired Peaceful Pete Newton.

"Nope!" grinned Slivers Cassidy. "I'm roostin' on my Levi Ttraus'; also on a top bar of this corral—and even that ain't laurel; it's cottonwood."

"Haw!" cackled Pete. "Durned if you're not crazier than yuh look to be. I'm headin' for town. Comin' right back. Come along?"

"Nope! I like this seat better than that weavy buckboard. Besides, my luck at poker is rotten these days. It's been rotten for a long time. If I go into town I'll get drunk or get into trouble. And me? I'm stayin' away from trouble."

"Since when?" laughed Pete. "You're a reg'lar D. T."

"Aw, g'wan; I never get that drunk," indignantly.

"Oh, D. T. means Doctor of Trouble, and that's you." Pete headed for the barn.

Cassidy continued mournfully to watch Pete's back. "Yes, siree! I'm sure stayin' away from trouble," he soliloquized. "And trouble is like death—if it's lookin' for yuh it'll find yuh, no matter where yuh go or what yuh do, or what yuh don't do. Now me? I know danged well that trouble and death go huntin' together hand in hand, so to speak. They're always lookin' for me, but I reckon that's because my weakness is action. I sure like action. Come to think of it, action usually means trouble, and I reckon that's why trouble rides miles and miles out of her way to hunt me up special." A sigh. "Oh well, death ain't overtook me yet. There must be somethin' in that about the angels watchin' over fools and cripples—and I ain't no cripple. But dang my luck! I'd like to rob a bank, or somethin'——"

Slivers Cassidy was a cowpuncher, with the usual curse of his tribe: the wanderlust and the inability to stand prosperity. Ten days before, he had been foreman of a cattle ranch in an adjoining county. It had been his first job as foreman, but three months' accumulated pay had been sufficient to give him an aggravated case of itching hoof. He had asked for his time and had then ridden over one hundred miles to Yucca City, with the avowed intention of avoiding trouble.

But no sooner had he arrived in Yucca City, avoiding saloons and going right to the courthouse to ascertain why so many rigs and saddle horses were tied outside, than he had heard Peaceful Pete Newton go on a verbal rampage. Cassidy immediately had conceived a great admiration for Pete, had joined forces with him—which meant trouble in large bunches, for Pete was fighting a combination of wholesale cattle rustlers who were backed by crooked county officials.

Cassidy practically had kidnapped an imported and crooked cattle detective, had used the latter's credentials, and had been the big wet mop in the work of cleaning up the county. So just now he was taking life easy on the ranch belonging to the grateful Pete Newton.

Cassidy probably had a few virtues and good habits, but they passed unnoticed in the shadow of his greatest fault, his belief that he could sing. He liked his own voice when raised in song. No one else did, but this failed to worry him. He was superstitious about his singing, believing that it changed his luck. If it did, it just as often changed it for the worst, or should have done so.

He probably knew the words of more songs than any man in the Southwest, but when sober knew only one tune. And this was no tune at all, being so flexible that he could adapt it to the words of any song and make all of them sound equally bad. Worse than that, a few drinks of strong liquor sufficed to make him remember parts of several other tunes and he would combine them in ways that were painfully weird. If there were prizes for the world's worst singer, Cassidy would have won all of them.

Some hours later, he again sat on the top bar of the corral. He was happy because he had just learned the words of a particularly sad song. He liked his songs to be sad, the sadder the better. For the third time in a dismal nasal wail he repeated the chorus:

"Wear-ry with ming-ling life's bit-ter and sweet,
Wear-ry with part-ing and nev-ver to meet,
Someone has gone to the bright gol-den shore!
Ring the bell soft-ly, there's crêpe on the door;
Ring the bell soft-ly, there's crêpe on the door."

"Your voice needs crêpe," announced Peaceful Pete, who had returned from town, his approach hidden by the barn and the noise covered by Cassidy's voice. "Yes, sir! Crematin' an' then crêpe. It's a moonshine—not moonlight—voice—110 proof an' *raw!* I've got a crosscut saw that needs filing; come over and sing to it."

"Aw, can't a fellah enjoy himself without gettin' insulted?" demanded Cassidy with an injured air. "I was feelin' happy. My singin'——"

"Needs ten years in a charred kaig!" interjected Pete. "Here's a telegram that was waitin' in town for yuh. Maybe it's from some pard, warnin' yuh that the sheriff's on your trail."

Cassidy looked uncomfortable as he hastily ripped open the envelope and slowly read the message. He looked puzzled as he passed the telegram to Newton. "What in blazes does it mean, that part about the hundred bucks?"

"Why, it's plain as daylight," explained Pete, after studying the message. "The manager of the Denver branch of the Nickerson Detective Agency wants to see yuh so bad that he's telegraphed yuh one hundred dollars for your expenses, to come to Denver."

"Telegraphed it to me? Huh! How in blazes can he send money on a wire?"

"Easy. You take this message to the telegraph agent at the depôt in Alamos and when you've proved your identity he'll pay yuh one hundred dollars right out of his till."

"Right out of his till? You're sure about that?"

"Sure."

"Aw, I knew there was a catch in it. There probably ain't one hundred bucks in the whole danged town—not after the poker game the other night. We tried to clean two strangers, but they danged near owned the town when the game broke up. Anyway, why in blazes does this Denver man want to see me?"

"Maybe it's because fame has got yuh in her clutches. You'd be surprised, Slivers, at what all the newspapers said about what yuh did in helpin' to clean up that gang of raiders from Yucca City. I reckon that about every paper in the world must have printed a piece about yuh. They didn't give me no credit at all. You hogged every bit of it."

Cassidy reddened beneath his tan. "Aw, shucks! Well, I ain't gonna let that stop my spendin' one hundred bucks—if I can get it free for nawthin' like you say. That is, if the agent can manage to dig up one hundred bucks. I've always wanted to go to Denver, anyway."

"Go to it," said Pete. "There may be somethin' good waitin' for yuh. As long as there's a roof on any buildin' on this ranch, Slivers, you can call it home. I'll be sorry to see yuh go, but don't let my personal feelings stand in the way of progress. You'll be comin' back this way sometime. Yuh can't take your horse and saddle clear to Denver, so you'll have to leave 'em in my care. Gimme a hand at ropin' that pair of blacks in the corral. I'll drive yuh into Alamos and identify yuh."

"I won't need yuh to identify me, but maybe you'll lend me the hundred bucks. The agent won't have it. After that poker game he said he had nothin' but his own I. O. U.'s in the till until pay day."

CHAPTER II

DOUBLE-EAGLES JEST GOTTA SCREAM!

MORNING of the second day following, saw Cassidy being ushered into the private office of the manager of the Nickerson Detective Agency. A man in his fifties, with twinkling blue eyes, arose from behind a desk to greet him. Cassidy liked the eyes. He liked the firm handclasp.

"So you're Slivers Cassidy," said the manager. "My name's Curley. I hope you're open to a job."

"That depends on the job. I won't take less than a foreman's job nowadays. And not a cent less than ninety bucks a month." Cassidy was standing pat on an almost empty pocketbook. "What's the job?"

"Something similar to what you did in Yucca City. I've looked you up rather thoroughly, and the job in hand will just suit you. It promises action. How would you like to be a detective?"

"Golly! Me? Uh-uh! No! I've been readin' some detective books and them fellahs are too danged moral to suit me. They ought to be deacons instead of officers. I won't do a-tall. I like to drink, chew, smoke, gamble and lie. I've been unlucky at gamblin' lately, but I'm still one of the best liars I know."

"That's fine," laughed Curley. "This job may need a good liar to hold it down. The main thing is that you're honest. I know that."

"All I gotta say is that someone's been fabrihoodin' about me. I ain't too honest. It doesn't pay."

"This job will pay. You'll get five dollars a day for just going down into San Blas county and keeping an ear to the ground."

"Huh!" objected Cassidy. "It'll cost me almost the whole five bucks to stay drunk enough to keep an ear on the ground."

"Oh, most of your drinks can be paid

for out of your expense account. I've had conflicting reports, and I'm curious. Now the time you went into the saloon in Yucca City and pretended to be the cattle detective, were you drunk or sober?"

"Yes," grinned Cassidy.

"That's just what I thought. And I've heard that you try to sing."

"Why, I do sing."

"Drunk or sober?"

"It's all the same. I take it both ways."

"When you're sober, can you pretend to be drunk?"

"Yeh, but I like better to pretend I'm sober when I'm drunk."

"You're certainly a cheerful idiot," laughed Curley. "You're worse than I thought you'd be—from the reports I had on you. The main thing is that all sources of information agree on the fact that for the last few years you've been a genius for losing your balance and tumbling naturally into a hot mess of trouble or woe. And just as often as not you get out of it by getting drunk, or pretending to. My information isn't exactly clear on that point. But the final result is always a few more criminals in the penitentiary or in the grave. By rights you ought to be in a penitentiary yourself for some of the stunts you've pulled off."

Cassidy grinned feebly. "You still seem friendly, so let me in on what's the secret behind all this diggin' into my record?"

"An idea of mine, that's all," smiled Curley. "I'm sitting tight here in my manager's chair because I get results. And I get results by hiring men like you. I've noticed that every so often there's a man who comes along and gets better results on pure luck than most men do on an oversupply of brains. I'm not insinuating that you have no brains, but I'd rather back your luck."

"Luck!" snorted Cassidy. "You'd oughta seen me in the poker game last week. I had three full houses, two straights and two flushes beaten. It ain't the poor hands that take your shirt away; it's the good hands that get topped. But in the Yucca City fuss, well, yuh seem to be givin' me credit for nawthin' but luck. Yuh got no idea how brains help luck along. Why, sometimes I can keep up a streak of steady thinkin' till I get plumb tired—ten minutes at a stretch, even! Then a few drinks sorta rest my brain and give it a second wind.

"It ain't all pure luck that gets the results. Maybe I oughta get insulted on your hintin' that I ain't got no brains, but I'm so interested in that mention of five bucks a day and an expense account for my drinks that I ain't takin' your insults to heart. Besides, you've got that danged friendly smile in your eyes when you insult me. I like a man who smiles with his eyes and keeps the rest of his face straight. I can't help likin' him. I've seen too many who smile with their faces and keep their eyes hard. But I'm still askin' yuh what's the big brained idea back of gettin' me to come to Denver."

"Only that I'm willing to back you and your luck—or brains—against several of my best men, several deputy U. S. marshals, a few Eastern detectives, and the sheriff, his deputies and all the inhabitants of San Blas county."

"Uh! No wonder yuh offered me five bucks a day. Do I have to fight all of them?"

"No," laughed Curley. "You'll be working with them. You've heard about the Overland Express robbery two weeks ago?"

"Yeh, I heard about it, and from what I heard I think that those bandits ain't business men a-tall. They ran up their expenses, the way they used ammunition. It sure was a shootin' gang."

Curley smiled grimly, his eyes cold. "The engineer died yesterday from his wounds. His wife was my cousin. The fireman and express messenger also were married men with families. Those two men were killed, as I suppose you know. The conductor, the mail clerk and two rash passengers are still in the hospital. As you say, it sure was a shootin' gang. I regard that gang as no better than mad wolves. I'll go to any length to get them. Two weeks have gone by, with no trace of the murderers. The officers seem to be running around in circles. That's why I sent for you. It'll take a man with luck, or brains—?" smilingly—"to land that gang. As I said, I'm backing you."

"I ain't seen no newspapers," said Cassidy, "but I heard that they got about a million bucks."

"They got exactly $225,000 in twenty-dollar gold pieces, and two sacks of registered mail. Those two sacks were

a slight mistake on the part of the bandits, for it put old Uncle Sam on their trail. Between the railroad company, the express company, the State of Colorado and the United States Government there is now a little over forty thousand dollars offered in rewards. The gang is still in San Blas county and they've still got the gold coin. They haven't spent a bit of it—yet, and they won't get a chance to."

"Why won't they? By golly, if I had all that cash I'd like to see the man who's stop *me* from whoopin' it up! Why can't they spend it?"

"Because those twenties are all new ones, dated 189-. There's not a twenty dollar gold piece of that date in legitimate circulation. Everybody in four States and Territories has been warned to look out for them."

"Nobody warned me," grinned Cassidy.

"You're not in business, and likely to accept cash from strangers," Curley pointed out.

"The dickens I ain't. I'll accept cash from anybody. But I see your point; if any of the gang try to pass those twenties on anyone who isn't friendly, it'll be a giveaway. But suppose their friends accept them?"

"Then their friends will have to give an accounting when they try to pass them on. And the bandits must have been notified in advance of the shipment of that gold. The shipment from the mint was supposed to be secret, but the gang had a string of pack mules ready to carry away the heavy load. The gold weighed about half a ton. The bandits can't get out of San Blas county with it, for every possible way of escape is being watched.

"You're going down to San Blas. Your luck may turn the trick where the best detectives have failed. City bred detectives are out of their element, anyway, down in that rough country. The county sheriff, Caplan is his name, has the best chance, but he won't work for the public good. He's working for himself, for the rewards. He'll cooperate with no one but his own deputies. He's afraid that the outside officers will want too much of a percentage of the rewards if they work with him or if he works with them."

"Yuh got any idea where the gang headed for?" inquired Cassidy.

"The bandits disappeared in the direction of the San Blas River bed. Do you know that country?"

"I hate to admit that I don't. I been doin' my dangedest to see all the territory I can, but I'm young yet, and she's a large country. Anyway, San Blas ain't a cow country; maybe that's why I ain't been down there yet. I'll be glad to go. But that five bucks a day, and drinks paid for by you—— What's the catch in it? Yuh coulda hired me for ninety a month."

"I'm just making it worth while for you; to keep you loyal to me."

"Say, listen, Mr. Man," growled Cassidy, ruffled, "the amount of wages yuh pay ain't what's gonna keep me loyal. If yuh paid me only forty a month, and I took the job, my loyalty would go with it. Savvy?" A grin. "But of course your liberal offer ain't gonna have no bad effect on my loyalty. Now that stuff you orated about goin' to any length——? Am I one of the lengths?"

"You are," smiled Curley. "A length of something over six feet."

"I'm still thinkin' there's a catch in it somewhere. Those rewards——"

"Well, that's the catch. This agency is a business proposition. We pay good salaries to our men. They are picked men, who earn their money by doing their best. But any rewards are paid to this office, understand, and we split one fifth of all reward money among the men who have earned it."

"That's plumb liberal, seein' that you're grubstakin' us, so to speak. I reckon you must draw a lot of blanks in tryin' to collect rewards."

"We do. But our eighty per cent sees us through with a nice dividend in the long run. Two weeks have passed, with no result. Forty thousand dollars is a lot of money. I've picked you as a sort of final hope for us to cut in on a dividend. You're getting good wages, but you won't draw them long. Another two weeks with no result and we'll call everybody off the job and just sit back for something tangible to work on."

"I see. Now about that San Blas country, that San Blas River?"

"At this season the river bed is a natural pass between San Blas County and the South. The water is so low that the river can be forded at almost any point. There's quite a bit of traffic up and down the canyon, sometimes a train

"Right around nine. An' bring yore beddin' an' grub. We may have to lay over a day. If she don't work the first time, she shore will the next."

"How many extra horses?"

"Three, at least."

And before the grizzled old rancher could make a reply Frank had loosened the pack horse, turned Midnight around, and stepped into the saddle. *"Adios!"* he cried and set off into the west, heading for the Nueces. Tom English bit his mustache, smiling grimly; then he, too, mounted and rode away.

THE next night, as he and five men were waiting at the end of the fill, they saw the headlight of an approaching train loom into sight and careen along, like a giant firefly, over the flat prairie. As they watched it approach they saw it cease its flickering dance and stare, without appreciable movement, directly at them. Then it dawned on them that the combination local, made up of a baggage car and day coach, was coming to a rapid stop directly on the edge of the fill.

The next instant they saw the engineer and fireman climb from the cab, behind them a tall lithe figure. Tom English chuckled aloud. "There's Fadeaway now," he said, "an' if we ain't watchin' him stick up this train then I ain't sitting on this sand. Lord, that local' just full of some of the quickest gunmen in this state, and maybe a ranger or two! We better slide down and get ready to help that boy."

A conductor and brakeman stepped off the coach and were greeted by a pistol shot; they scrambled back on the platform in ludicrous fashion. And as the brakeman swung onto the steps he saw the standing forms of the six men on the top of the bank silhouetted against the rising moon. As soon as he closed the door of the coach he yelled, "Don't any yuh buckaroos in yere get flossy! Thay's six of them babies watchin' this car from the top of the bank."

The next instant the engineer opened the door, and followed by the fireman, stepped inside. Back of them strode Fadeaway, a bandanna hiding his face, a bone handled Colt in each hand.

Of the six passengers in the coach Frank selected three and ordered them to step into the aisle. The next instant he had pulled a gun from each and tossed it through a window. This done he marched the engineer, fireman, and the three passengers out of the opposite door. Commanding the engine crew to pull away from the spot he walked his prisoners to Tom English and his men; and in remarkably fast time the entire party was mounted and ready to start.

"How did you know, Frank?" asked English.

"I didn't. But I chanced a reckon that when them babies didn't find me the next day they'd be slippin' south. Shucks, this thing's easier'n fillin' a flush. That fella's the Munson yuh wrote me about in that Cheyenne note, ain't he?"

"Yes, and the Mexican is José Medrano from Neuvo Laredo. He has a pretty good name in this country. But who is the third man?"

"Gip Andrews, a Wyomin' puncher who's so crooked he could sleep in a corkscrew without crampin' an' slicker'n a packrat in avoidin' traps. Yuh keep these men under close guard, Colonel English. I'm headin' out west now. I figger on throwin' in with some of these bad hombres, if I can keep Kelly from gettin' a squint at me. I'll see you in two weeks. That horse of mine—boy!"

Fadeaway walked to a mesquite, mounted Midnight and rode directly southwest for the Rio Grande. Tom English and his men pushed their prisoners over the road without wasting time, and by daylight had them secreted in an out of the way corner of his ranch. At noon he had returned to the railroad and telegraphed the chief special agent of the line what he had done. The holdup of the train was a matter of countryside gossip for a few days, but as no effort was put forth by the railroad to apprehend the outlaws, the local sheriff did not attempt to trail the stick-up men.

DURING the next week Fadeaway had ridden a great zigzag course, inspecting the country and getting its lay firmly fixed in his mind. Then, quartering his pack horse with a rancher friend of English near the Rio Grande, he set a course for a ford; and that night saw the lights of the little Mexican town of Victoria

twinkling in the bottom of a narrow gulch.

He boldly rode down the long single street of the village, found a stable, where he put up Midnight; then sauntered uptown and entered a *taberna*.

He was chatting with the American proprietor when the door opened and a crowd of travel stained *vaqueros* entered and went noisily to a table. Other habitués of the place joined these men and soon a rapid fire conversation was progressing which had for its theme the holdup of the train near the west bank of the Nueces. The remarks clearly indicated that some grim uncertainty had come to dwell among the gringos on the other side of the river. No one knew why the train robbers had kidnapped three men from the coach, or what had become of these persons. The gossip ran high. Then of a sudden all eyes centered on the tall form of the American cowpuncher standing before the bar. Here was something to stare at! Who was this fellow?

The leader of the band determined to explore this near at hand mystery. And without the briefest formality he strode toward his subject. "Señor is maybe riding for the Slash Circle Cross?" he offered by way of an opening.

"No," and Fadeaway smiled quizzically into the Mexican's face. "This señor rides for no man. He loves the moonlight, the high trails, an' slants along like a coyote. Too much country to be seen for a real man to spend his time gettin' up an' goin' to sleep on the same ground all the time."

The reply nettled the *vaquero*. "Señor is maybe tryin' to be fonny," he said.

"Nope," replied Frank, "*yuh* gotta grip on that act. But, seein's it's none of my business, what made yuh bust in on me for, anyhow? I thought yuh hombres taught us gringos how to be polite."

Somewhere a laugh struck into the low ceilinged room like a challenge. The *vaquero* winced under the concealed jeer and dropped his eyes to Fadeaway's boots, then lifted them slowly to his face. That glance was clearly ominous. "What you come here for?" he asked coldly.

"Just a-hurryin' across the river. Now looka yere, if yuh wanna get along right well with me, an' also want to find out what yuh can't learn, take me over to that table an' be sociable. Otherwise move away an' don't interfere with a gentleman when he's tryin' to be nice to his own self. Yuh've seen my boots an' hat an' ev'rything that's in between 'em. But yuh don't know what's in my haid; an' I do yores!"

Again the laugh and this time the *vaquero* joined in it. "Is señor a *sortilego*, what you call fortune teller or maybe *aventurero*, a fortune hunter?" The strain of the instant passed.

"No! I'm just a boy what's a-slidin' over yore country a-tryin' to get by an' have a little fun. Will you drink?"

"*Si, señor.* But my *compañeros;* they are thirsty, too. Today we had a hard ride. A very hard ride. And tomorrow——!"

"Bring 'em up," invited Frank. "Where this money was born there may be more."

During the drink Fadeaway sized up the men around him and stored away an impression of each one. Cards were suggested and during the next hour he was lucky enough to take a few *pesos* out of the game. Then it broke up and the men went their several ways. He put up at the little inn that night and at daylight had breakfast with the innkeeper, who told him somewhat of the caliber of the men he had met the night before.

Fadeaway decided that at least for a day or two he would take the time to nose around that section of the border. After breakfast he went to the stable and was rubbing down Midnight when the leader of the *vaqueros* approached him and stood leaning on a fence with a whimsical smile of banter on his lips. After a brief survey of the American's actions the Mexican said, "You ride a good horse, hombre—and very fast."

"Where I'm makin' a lotta country I like to have a lotta horse under me. An' money ain't nothin' but money, while a horse——!"

"Why bother about money when a man has a rope?"

"You *know* this horse?"

"Who don't? And no money made you thr' black's rider!"

Frank held the eyes of the Mexican for a fleet fraction of time, then turned on his heel. He passed into the stable and was laying the brush and curry-comb on a studding of the front wall

when the *vaquero's* form darkened the door. Fadeaway changed instantly into a flying demon of fury which engulfed the Mexican and flung him into a stall, and there pressed down his breast with a knee while his long fingers clutched at his slender and swarthy throat. "Yuh've been cross-examinin' me ever since yuh flung a eye on me last night. Who are yuh?"

A FRENZY of anger and fear drained the blood from the man's face; his throat convulsed; his hands made ineffectual efforts to pry open the steely fingers which had gripped him so suddenly and so fiercely. Then Fadeaway released him, jerked him to his feet and hurled him against the side of the barn.

"I'm a-ridin' that horse; an' if yuh know where it belongs yuh keep shet. I know what it means if I'm caught; but I don't figger none on gettin' jammed. Yuh babies better lay off'n me, beginning right now!"

A flush of delight drove back the color to the man's face. It seemed that hidden in the body of Frank's words there was some intangible quality which met a responsive trend in the man's mind. He reached out a hand. A smile had the effect of softening the brutal lines of his thin lips and a warm light of admiration leaped with a sparkle into his eyes.

"*Compañero*," he said, peaking entirely in Spanish, "I thought as much, but I was not sure. I did but try to prove the look of you. Now, you are my friend. And I have need of a man like thee." The use of the intimate "thee" assured Fadeaway that the man spoke earnestly and out of the sincerity of an overpowering and sudden change of opinion.

Frank replied in the *vaquero's* own speech. "I take it that you are also of the race of men who are hunted by other men on this river. If you are let me know, now. I am not to be played with like a boy at a well."

"Good! I will speak. I am on an errand where I have need for one swift rider and a horse of like kind. Are you willing to go with me and five of my women-men?"

"Talk! I make no reply out of the dark."

"I go down the river where the stage road swings into the land and heads for the east; where there are no houses and many small hills. There, we will wait, till sunup, and meet a stage, carrying a girl."

"A frolic for a piece of silk?" Fadeaway sneered.

"No! More than that!"

"I cross that river no more. Not for a while at least. A man is a fool who gets out of a trap only to step into it the second time."

"But you run no risk. And there is a chance for big money in this affair. An Americano has offered me five thousand *pesos* for this girl. A thousand of this shall be yours."

"No!" Fadeaway withered the man with a sneer.

"Two, then! I must have you!"

"That's better, but make it twenty-five hundred and we will come nearer reaching terms."

"I must have something for my men!"

"You said they were *women*-men. Then pay them a woman's wage. Make them hold the horses and give them a *peso* for the trouble."

"Agreed; the half shall be yours."

"Easy, man, easy. We agree to nothing till I know when and where the money will be paid. I want it before I ride."

"That can't be. I have no money till I deliver the girl; and that will be three days after I take her from the stage."

"Where?" The word snapped in the empty barn like the slamming noise of a door, blown by the wind.

"Many miles into Mexico where the mountains are heavy and high and there are no trails, except to my kind and to the sheep and deer."

"Where, I asked?" Once more Frank's jaws snapped like a trap.

"Sixty miles north and forty west. In a place we call Hell's Hidden Heaven."

"Who is this *Americano?*"

"Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Kelly?"

Fadeaway's turn came to sense the edge of a weakening curiosity. He felt the blood leaving his own cheeks, and to offset an involuntary surrender to this emotion he laughed and stomped a boot out of what appeared to be a sheer excess of delight. "Do you by any chance mean Big Kelly, a giant as men are grown among my people?"

"That is what he is called. You know of him?"

"I was trying my best to get somewhere, where I could meet him. That is one of the reasons I crossed here. They told me, some fellows in Colorado, that he was working a big territory on both sides the river north of Laredo."

"Then in five days, maybe four, you shall be where he now has his headquarters; but he will not be there."

"Why?"

"Because he is in a town to the east on the railroad, and stays there till I have sent him word that the girl is safe. He is like the owl, that man. He goes where he may be seen by big men who can testify that they talked and drank with him on the very day the stage was stopped. What I am about to do will wake these gringos to a fury of madness everywhere. I steal the child of a rich rancher. Then we turn her back across the river when fifty thousand has been paid; and I share in that, in addition to the money I will receive on her delivery. There is a very nice purse for the two of us in this job."

"What is her name?"

"She is the child of Tom English, the owner of the Bar Circle C and is said to be the handsomest woman in Texas. Once in our hands and her father will pay any amount to get her back. But it is for the purpose of making certain rich Mexicans join with him that Kelly wants the girl. It is this, more than the money. Once he can get the backing on this side of the river, he will run his operations for a thousand miles along this border. His connections in New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming give him a market at fine prices for every cow he ships north. That is why he wants that girl. Her capture will startle Mexico and make him the friends he now lacks."

Fadeaway reached out a hand and grasped that of the man before him. "That's the kind o' play I like. Count me in an' let's get goin'." He dropped his Spanish and spoke rapidly in his wonted manner of expression.

WITHIN an hour Pedro, the leader, Frank, and five Mexicans were winding their way along the Rio Grande, following a dim trail. It wound in and out of the sparse vegetation toward an unused ford of the river, which would allow them to cross almost at the exact point where the attack was planned. Besides an extra pony for each man, a horse was taken along on which to mount the girl.

Shortly before ten o'clock the party arrived at its destination and the men were allotted places in a cover of heavy brush growth, and instructed to protect Frank and their leader in the event of any untoward resistance. Hour after hour went by and then a few shafts of shooting light fled up from the horizon and the zenith of the sky was illumined with faint and delicately shaded lilac hues. Daybreak!

Pedro peered down the long straight road, his eyes contorted into a pucker of tense anxiety. Occasionally his shoulders shook as though with cold, and it seemed to Frank that he was on the point several times of breaking into some manner of hysteria. Not a word passed among the watchers in the brush. Then a dim, small, gray mass, cloudlike in appearance, arose above the tops of the greasewood and chaparral. It moved in a strange and twisting manner and grew larger and larger until, with a casual glance, one would have determined it to be dust.

At this instant the Mexican roused. "You, Jack," he said, using an alias given him by Frank, "you step out when the horses approach and I'll stay here and keep a bead on the driver."

"You want me to take charge of this thing?"

"If you will!" The excitement attendant upon the long vigil had temporarily unmanned Pedro. He quivered as though stricken with the ague.

"All right!" snapped Fadeaway, "but that means just what it says. I take charge and I give the orders. The first one of you hombres that gets rough with this outfit, I'll drop as quick as I would anybody on that bus. Is it agreed?"

"Here they come! Get ready! I give you full authority."

Pedro pulled up his neck scarf till it covered the lower portion of his nose. The other Mexicans followed his example.

"Your mask," shot the Mexican beside Frank, "are you forgetting that?"

"No, I ain't forgettin' nothin', hombre! I'll go into this woman stealin' with my face uncovered an' maybe she'll

take a fancy to me. Anyway, what's the good of a mask if they catches us? An' what will it do to help us get away? I play it bold, an' play it plenty. No shootin' till yuh hear my peacemaker bark."

As the stage tore around a heavy growth, directly at the right of their position, Frank stepped into the road. Leveling both his six-guns he ordered the driver to bring his horses to a stop. The wheelers swung back, and the lead animals halted dead in their tracks as the driver jammed the long brakerod home with a powerful shove.

"Get out in the sand, all yuh cushion hounds," yelled Frank.

No answer!

"Get out, I'm a-tellin' yuh!" he repeated; and he noted that the driver had fixed his form with a cold and calculating stare.

"How many yuh got?" asked Fadeaway.

"Just one," said the driver. "A lady. An' I reckon from the looks of a smart fella like yuh, yuh don't aim none to be botherin' with a woman in this man's country."

"That's just what we're lookin' for. Boys!"

The five Mexicans arose from their covert and at that instant the canvas door of the light vehicle swung out and a trim little figure, dressed in leggings and short skirt and a low necked white waist, jumped to the ground.

With a gun Fadeaway motioned the Mexicans back and strode toward the girl until his face was invisible either to Pedro or any of the other members of the Kelly gang. Then he deliberately and ludicrously winked at the girl and made a manner of grimace which was taken in by the driver. "Ma'am," he said, "I reckon yuh can see I don't hanker much for this sorta pastime; but it's business. Yuh see it's this way. Yuh an' me an' some of my men is about to ride a little. Then we'll be a-sendin' yore daddy word, an' if he's one half as smart as what they say he is, an' then divides that by two, he'll be givin' us something to bring yuh back to him."

"You mean to compell me to follow you?" asked the girl. And Fadeaway gloried in the fact that her rose-colored cheeks lost none of their crimson.

"Yuh sure is perfect at understandin' me," he replied; then to the driver, "Tear out, fella, before I start stingin' them broomtails with some of my slugs." The driver touched his leader swith a slap of the lines, released the brake, and in a cloud of dust rolled away.

The girl was placed on a horse and in twenty minutes she and her captors had disappeared from the scene. All day they rode and all day Frank saw no safe opportunity of telling her who he was or what plans lay under the deep tan of his brow. Often the girl would turn in her saddle and pierce his eyes with a deep glance of utter contempt. Once she said to him, as his horse crowded to her side, "How can a self-respecting white man bring himself to the low level that you have reached?"

But he made no reply. When a spur of piñon covered hills loomed a welcome immediately in front of them a short time before the sun went down, Pedro ordered his men to ride ahead and get a meal ready. And when a little later Frank saw a latigo hinding loose on the Mexican's rigging, and called his attention to it, Pedro stopped his horse and began to braid a piece of whang leather through the holes in the latigo end. At this opportunity Fadeaway, looking off to the west where the men had ridden ahead, and paying no outward attention to the girl, said to her in a low voice, "I'm the man yore daddy went north to meet. I could have stopped this; but I figgered that if I got into this gang's camp this was my only chance. Nothin' won't happen to yuh, ma'am. Now, don't make out they's been any change. An' don't gimme away by appearin' anxious."

"I won't," she said.

Then he turned and shouted at Pedro. In a short while the Mexican joined him and the trio rode on among the fallen shadows of the scrub timber.

BEFORE the sun arose they were once more on the way. All day they traveled and Fadeaway spent most of his time trotting with the men who formed the advance guard, while Pedro rode beside the pony of the girl.

For two days the same routine was followed, and when the party wound down into a deep ravine and along this to a steep mesa, Petro had to call Frank to guard the girl while he rode ahead to

show the other men the short cut into the rendezvous of the bandits.

When the men galloped from sight Fadeaway turned to the girl and said, "Now, ma'am, I reckon yuh believes me don't you?"

"Of course I do. I knew something was unreal as soon as I saw you give me that wink. And then, when you mounted Midnight! Oh, I was glad to see that little mare! Did you notice how she laid back her ears when she saw and heard me?"

"Yes, an' Pedro saw it, too. Now, Miss English, if yuh thought it the best thing to do, I'd give yuh this filly an' let yuh, start over the country to the river; but——"

"I'm going where you go. If you were capable enough for my dad to trust, I can trust you, too. And I do. We'll see this thing through."

"That's mighty nice o' yuh, ma'am! An' I'll shore never do nothin' to make yuh take back them words. If I was a-goin' to do much braggin' about this yere expedition I'd rather like to say that it was yore spunk what made it a success."

"What's your name?"

"Frank," he replied. "They calls me Fadeaway Frank up where yuh can pick snow flowers, an' where Jack Frost plays Dixie, crackin' open the ground."

"Why do they call you Fadeaway?"

"Yuh see it's pretty much like this. They was four boys in our family. One! two! three! four! Just like that. A two-year stretch between any pair was a heap of time. An' when we was all growin' up we had to rustle an' hustle to get what was just our'n. That taught me to be right smart keepin' outa the others' way, an' ma's, too. I raided the cupboard an' got away with it more times than I got hairs. Then along come the cholera an' I was all that was left. I come out this way from my home when I was a little shaver, an' spilled myse'f all over the West. Up in Wyomin' I was workin' for a cattlemen's association an' I had to be mighty scarce when some of them bad babies went a-lookin' for me. After that them boys hung Fadeaway to me an' it stuck. What's yore name, miss?"

"Mary Lee."

"Mary Lee!" he said. "Mary Lee! My gracious, ma'am, that's a right pretty name and I ain't heered it since I left the Cumberland Hills of Harlan County."

"Are you from Kentucky?"

"Yes'm! I was ten year old before I knowed that a Yankee didn't have horns."

"No wonder dad put confidence in you. He simply cottons to anybody or anything that ever came out of Kentucky."

"Was he from there, ma'am?"

"Right from the heart of it. He was born near Danville. So was I."

"Doggone! That explains yore grit. Yuh know, old people down thataway say that a woman from the Danville section is made up part o' nerve, part o' love for horses, and all the rest of beauty."

"Yes, you're from Kentucky, all right!" But nevertheless she thrilled at the reply and felt a bit easier in his company.

They now came to a part of the trail which ran among the loose stones on the very brink of the mesa's steepest side. Far below them appeared the twisting hairpin turns of the descent and along it they saw the men strung out at wide intervals. At last, the foremost rider rounded a sentinel rock and disappeared. The others followed. The boy stared at the girl and she at him. What they had seen looked uncanny. There was no spot where the men could hide; no place for them to disappear. Yet, not a rider was visible. It was as if the earth had opened to receive them.

"Right yere," began Frank, "is where, maybe, yuh better begin to leave us boys; I don't like the looks o' that down there."

"No," she replied. "I'm going through with it. If we are to find out the rendezvous of the gang, this is our time. And, somehow, I feel you will do what daddy needed you for. Look!"

Pedro appeared around the rock as magically as he had vanished and they saw him wave his hat at them. Then down the dangerous path they went and at last stood beside the Mexican. He was smiling and holding back a greasewood clump. Here was the mystery explained!

Behind this was an enormous hole in the rock large enough to admit comfortably a man on horseback. Fadeaway touched Midnight lightly with a spur and the filly stepped gingerly into

sheriff won't keep his promises."

"Will we?" demanded Cassidy.

"Yes. The express company and the railroad company want that money back and will make a lot of concessions to get it. The companies have plenty of political influence in Denver, and even in Washington, so they can pull wires with the governor and with Uncle Sam. The State wants that gang for robbery and murder; Uncle Sam is on the job because of those two registered pouches. If the Nickerson detectives make the arrests, Curley can fix things with the State and with the secret service men, for the express company and the railroad will be behind him. Curley can trot over himself and make a deal with the governor if he has to. If you promise that bandit anything within reason, Curley will back you up. The main thing is to beat out this high handed, money loving sheriff. To do that is a matter of pride with me."

"You mean it's part of your job," said Fletcher.

"Sure, and I take pride in my job," retorted Lawton.

"All right, I'll take your word for it. But we're still a long way from getting to see the bandit, a longer way than Cassidy thinks we are. I happen to know a lot more about Sheriff Caplan and his methods than Cassidy does. But he'll soon learn."

"So will you," grinned Cassidy. "I'll learn yuh a lot about gettin' into jail. I'm sort of gifted thataway."

"Better wait till you've heard more about the sheriff and until you've seen this jail," advised Fletcher. "Come on and have a drink on me and then see if you can look at a plate of ham and eggs without flinching. After breakfast, we'll show you the jail."

Chapter V

CONTEMPTIN' A COURT IS BLAME' ONHEALTHY!

RUNNING north and south through San Blas, and preventing the town's growth to the westward, stood a cliff of solid stone, varying in height from thirty to sixty feet. Here and there the face of the cliff was scarred and pitted deep where stone had been blasted out to provide building material for the small courthouse and a few of the other substantial structures in the town.

The jail consisted of one large chamber that had been blasted skillfully into the cliff, the loose rock being used to build the walls of the sheriff's office, which was backed up against the cliff itself and covering the entrance to the cell.

The outer entrance to this office was a strong door of heavy oak planks, bolted and criss-crossed with iron reinforcements. The building was divided into two rooms, office and sleeping quarters, the latter containing half a dozen bunks, one of which was used each night by the deputy who served as jailer. Each of the two rooms contained but one window and each window was guarded by perpendicular iron bars that were set above and below in the masonry. The one large cell within the cliff served as the city prison and the county jail, the town marshal sharing the outer office with the sheriff.

Cassidy saw the exterior of the jail for himself, the rest being described to him by Jimmy Lawton. Fletcher had disappeared on business of his own. Jimmy explained that between the office and the cell within the cliff stood a row of heavy iron bars and a door of oak that was plated on the inside with sheet iron.

They strolled by within a few yards of the sheriff's office and the fat jailer dozing in a chair tilted back against the stone wall. Cassidy tried to peer through the windows, but the reflection of light from the glass behind the bars kept the interior a mystery except for Lawton's description.

"It's a crude affair," finished Jimmy, when they had walked beyond earshot of the jailer, "but it's strong. No prisoner has ever escaped from that old jail; it was built to keep them from straying."

They were now at the doors of a saloon diagonally across the very wide street from the jail and distant about two hundred feet. Cassidy stopped and turned for a last look, but found his view cut off by a long string of freight cars that rumbled slowly through the town. The tracks ran along about fifty feet in front of the sheriff's office.

For perhaps ten seconds, Cassidy stared at the procession of cars, then turned back to Jimmy. "Le's go in and

have a drink. I'm gonna have an idea. I feel it comin' on."

They had the drink. "How's the idea now?" smiled Jimmy.

"She ain't—yet." Cassidy walked over to the door and took another long survey of the sheriff's office across the railroad tracks. He walked back to the bar to seek inspiration in the form of another drink. They had several rounds, and between each two Cassidy faithfully walked back to the door to take another look. At last he saw a pack train, laden with supplies for some distant mine, filing out of town. Two of the mules were close coupled by the slack of a hoisting cable, iron rope for use in a shaft. The weight of the one continuous length was divided between two mules, half of it coiled and lashed on a pack saddle, with a short bight running back to the following mule which carried the other half of the cable.

"They're temporary Siamese twins, those mules," thought Cassidy, wondering at the probable weight of the coiled metal rope. He saw Fletcher coming down the street, and waited for him. Together they walked into the saloon and saw that Jimmy had taken a chair at a deserted poker table in a rear corner. They sat down and motioned to the bartender.

"How's the inspiration?" Lawton grinned quizzically.

"Cookin'," said Cassidy. "Cookin'." He waited until the bartender arrived, drained his glass, then arose and started for the door, looking back, however over his shoulder. He saw Jimmy Lawton wink at Fletcher and tap suggestively on his head with a forefinger. He turned and came back to the table. "Jimmy," he spat out, "do I look drunk or crazy? Which?"

"Both," grinned Jimmy. "We both know you're both, and revere you for it."

"Is that so?" Cassidy tried to be severe, but Jimmy's grin was infectious. Cassidy's face slipped into a grudging smile. "Well, lemme tell yuh! I'm catchin' up royally on the awful hangover I had. In fact, I'm gettin' good and hungover all over again. You two jaspers have been down here for nearly two weeks, and what and where's it got yuh? Nowhere—that's the answer! Lemme alone and string along behind me and you'll wear rattlesnake hatbands!"

Cassidy recovered his dignity and again stalked to the front door.

The only moving object within his range of vision was a small boy who carried a bow and arrow and was sneaking toward a dog which lay snoozing peacefully in a patch of shade across the street. Cassidy chuckled, walked across the narrow porch and sat down to watch the proceedings. The lad, twenty feet from his quarry, released the arrow. The dog yelped and departed, still yelping, in a cloud of dust. The boy gave a war whoop and ran to recover the blunt pointed arrow with which he had made a bullseye on the dog.

His bow was a length of split and peeled willow, the bowstring a rawhide shoelace, the arrow a piece of straight soft pine cut from the side of a dry-goods box.

The lad saw Cassidy's interest. He came across the street with his grievance. "Look at this," he said scornfully, holding up the arrow. "Dad would make me only one arrow—and he put this on the end and spoiled it." Cassidy saw that the arrow had been rendered comparatively harmless by an empty brass revolver cartridge driven over the point. "It shoots straighter with this ca-tridge on the end, but I betcha I'd 'a' killed that dog if dad'd let me fix this point the way I want!"

"Well son, what's your idea on how it oughta be fixed?"

"I want a nail point stuck out through the cap place in this ca'tridge. She'd be a good arrow then. I betcha I could kill dogs every shot."

"I reckon you'd be a walkin' menace. But, son, I'm plumb disappointed in yuh. I'm surprised and shocked and grieved to discover that you're so far behind the times. Don't you know that bows and arrows is plumb outa fashion nowadays?"

"I ain't got no money for slingshot rubbers."

"That's the trouble, eh? I'll give yuh four bits for your bow and arrow outfit as she stands."

"You've bought an' outfit. Pony up your four bits, mister." The lad dropped the bow and arrow on the porch. "I kin git the best slingshot rubbers in town and a pocketful of buckshot and some packs of chewin' gum. Dad'll be surprised."

"Yeh, I'll bet he will," agreed Cassidy,

"What is it you say?" ejaculated the girl.

"He is not of this gang! He is like the lion! I saw his eye and I know he is a *man!*"

Mary Lee felt sudden fear assail her heart; she knew that the blood had drained from her cheeks. In one swift query she had told what she had promised Frank would never be divulged. Then she looked at the seamed and leathery face in front of her. Its eyes were aflame with a dancing light; the mouth worked spasmodically; the throat pounded as if a great aneurism were about to burst there.

Then the woman took the girl by the hand. "Now I will be swift," she said. "Those men, all but one, will ride away. Four will be left at the entrance to the canyon; one will remain here, with that American and me, to guard you; and the rest will go to Kelly. Now is my time! I may not succeed; but if I fail I want you to know *this.*"

She pulled Mary Lee toward the window and raised a long bony finger and pointed toward the face of the sheer cliff which was opposite the small opening in the logs. "See that tiny seam which winds zigzag up that wall?"

"Yes."

"That leads to a blind ledge. One may not see it from the floor of this valley, and but two people know it is there. One of these is my boy, the other—" she tapped her own withered breast. "If anything happens to me, get a rope and a horse and go up that trail. It is the only way. A good horse, a fine jumping animal, would be able to leap across a break in that ledge. Such a horse is that black which the *Americano* is rubbing down outside, or that little brown pony there at the far side of the corral; see! That pony would take you across. There is a runway on this end that would give to such an animal the distance to make the jump. Now I go to tell *him.*" She turned her eyes toward the place where Frank and Midnight were to be seen. A Mexican was loitering in the shade of a tree watching the actions of Fadeaway.

The old woman opened the door and after dropping its hasp approached the men. "Where is that boy?" she said to the Mexican.

"He has gone with the others. We three alone are left."

"I want a bucket of water for that girl."

"You know where the spring lies," came the retort.

"I know the mother of thee spawned a cockroach."

Frank laughed and reached out a hand and touched the shoulder of the woman. "In a moment I'll get you a bucket of water," he said.

THE woman faced about and stared into his eyes. Her back was turned to the other man and in her look was a message which Frank read to mean that she desired to be with him, alone.

He acted boldly on the strength of this hunch. "Hombre," he said to the lounging Mexican, "yuh just asked me for a cigarette. Do yuh still want it?"

"*Si!*"

"Get this good woman a bucket of water. I'm busy, here."

The Mexican sauntered toward a bench beside which a row of tin pails was visible and when he had leisurely selected one of these, he disappeared in the direction of the spring.

The old woman burst into a flood of inarticulate speech. Then she calmed.

"Where, where," she murmured, "do you come from?"

"Where the snow is like the grass, señora."

"Where did you get that?" Her voice was now raised; a finger touched the silver scarf holder.

"Why?"

"These old fingers, these fingers. I tell you, *made* that thigg many years ago! Many dead years ago. And because a man was kind and good to me, and because—" Her throat contracted she could go no further.

"A real friend gave that to me a while ago, señora."

"For the love of the Virgin do not make sport of an old woman, señor! An old woman who wants to help you because of that little silver token. Are you his son?"

"Whose son?"

"Jerry Whitcomb!"

It was now Frank's time to become amazed. He knew that no one could have known of that gift beyond Whitcomb and English. Yet, here was an old woman whom at the sight of the holder was rendered all but hysterical.

"What does it mean to you?" he asked. "For if you gave it to Whitcomb because you wanted good luck to come to him, I want to tell you that he gave it to me for the same reason. He said it brought luck."

A light welled into her eyes; a hand shot out and touched one of his riding cuffs. Then she spoke quickly. "There, up that trail is a way of escape," she said. "It is a way no man of all these men knows. A horse can go up but will have to jump a wide cleft in the rock. But it can be done and once over, the rider is safe. A horse can go up but it must be a jumper."

Frank lifted his eyes to the face of the cliff and there he saw what appeared to be a sort of slash in the rock. It arose at a ten per cent. grade and upon close scrutiny proved to be a place where a horse might indeed find a manner of footing.

Once more his eyes found the face of the woman at his side and he saw that her agitation had increased and that now she was all a-tremble. A wistful light shone in her eyes. "Señor," she stammered, "I say it who ought not to utter such speech; but I speak of a dead thing; a fine and lovely thing. I speak of love."

"Love?" repeated Fadeaway. "What do you mean?"

"Of Jerry Whitcomb. I loved him, señor; I tell you it was not at that time that I knew it, but for thirty years it has been singing in this old dry heart and it has kept me young. But for it I would have died. I married a cur and loved a—king!"

"Did Mr. Whitcomb——?"

"No!" she snapped the words into the air and they sounded like the pop of a whiplash. "He did not know; he was too great a man for the woman he found in Sonora, when he and I were young. He was, I tell you—" then she stopped, for her eyes caught the form of the Mexican approaching them with a bucket. Staring back at Frank she said, "Tonight, señor, you will take your horse when that scum is asleep and go to the top of this ridge. And then with a sharp turn to your left, and keeping always in the heaviest pine, you will come to a large mesa where the river hills meet your sight. To be seen on the other side of the ridge is to arouse the fiends of the Double Heart *rancho*. They are fiends; they work with Kelly; they guard that side from all spying eyes."

"You know me, señora?" said Frank, looking steadily into her face. "Or why I am here?"

"No, who are you?"

"I am Fadeaway Frank!"

"Whom he spoke of, the man who made you so angry just now?"

"Yes. And I'm the one that took the men from the train, which has got Kelly scared so. And I'm here to round up this gang. If you are a friend of Whitcomb's I'll try and do what I can for you; that is if you help me get the girl in there away from here."

"Señor, I belong not to these men. I came to get my boy, José."

"What José?"

"José Medrano. Our home is in Neuvo Laredo; but this Kelly——"

"He was one of the men I pulled off that train."

"You did not hurt him?"

"No. He is safe, but he is guilty and maybe——"

"It was that Kelly and the *aguardiente, señor!* He is so little!"

Then suddenly her face went gray; the color of fear swept over it. "Ssssh!" she whispered. *"Madre de Dios,* I forgot——!"

"What is wrong, señora?"

"This spot is like an echoing place. If one talks here above a whisper it can be heard at the creek. The sight of you made me forget. This man—" she indicated the man approaching with the filled bucket, "if he has heard us—we are lost. But wait, I will know when he comes near. I will tell from his eye and if he has heard I will tell thee and then thy gun will silence him."

"I'll watch him," assured Fadeaway.

THE man approached. Staring casually into the eyes of the woman he set down the bucket. Frank turned to his horse, threw down a lass rope preparatory to taking out a kink and was just on the point of tightening a latigo when, as the woman stooped to pick up the bucket, the Mexican with a sudden ferocity of movement whipped out his gun and covered Fadeaway. "Step to the head of that horse, hombre," he ordered, "and make no move with those hands. Stick them in the air, high. I heard, down there,

Anything else?" he inquired, turning questioningly to the county attorney.

"I'm not prosecuting this case, but what you mentioned sounds like more than enough. Go ahead."

"Prisoner, you have heard the charges against you. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Yes," grinned Cassidy. "Somebody mushta told yuh."

"Guilty, as charged!" pronounced the magistrate, frowning severely, then leaning over to let the sheriff again whisper in his ear. He did a little figuring with the stub of a pencil, and finally announced. "The fine for being drunk and disorderly is ten dollars, and likewise ten dollars more for disturbing the peace. Resisting an officer——"

"I didn't resist anybody!" was the interruption.

"Resisting an officer," continued the justice, "will cost you exactly twenty dollars more. The fine for malicious mischief and for destruction of public property, including the cost of replacing the latter, will be fifty dollars. Court costs are nineteen dollars and forty cents, a total sum of—let's see—of one hundred and nine dollars and forty cents. Either pay that or spend one hundred and nine days in jail."

By this time Cassidy was so indignant that he forgot he was supposed to be drunk. "You goat-bearded old snake!" he burst out. "In fact you're worse than that, and I'll bet yuh made a mistake in your arithmetic. Yuh slipped up on ten dollars of the cash the sheriff is holdin' for me. Maybe yuh misunderstood him when he whispered to yuh."

"The fine for contempt of court will be ten dollars," calmly announced the magistrate. "A total of one hundred and nineteen dollars and forty cents. Is that amount correct, Sheriff?" A confirmative nod. "And since funds to the amount of the fine are available, the sheriff is ordered to pay over the prisoner's money to the court." The sheriff placed the cash on the desk.

"I protest!" shouted Cassidy. "That ain't law. That's my hard earned money and I wanta keep it. I've got my choice about payin' the fine or goin' to jail."

"Not in this court, you ain't," declared the justice. "And you're lucky that it's summer. If you'd busted that window in the winter time you wouldn't be here now; you'd be layin' over the coroner's office. You wild cowpunchers have an idea you can come 'way down here where you don't belong and ain't wanted and that you can raise hell here and get away with it. When they get in this court we change their ideas. This town is peaceful and civilized and we aim to keep it that way. You are given until daylight tomorrow morning to get out of town. Court is adjourned." His honor gathered up the cash on his desk and departed by a rear door for his harness shop.

Cassidy sheepishly remained standing in his position before the desk. There were a lot of things he wanted to say, but the magistrate's tirade and swift departure left his mind a bit disconcerted. To state that Cassidy was angry would be like saying that white hot is slightly warm. But a foolish grin started to spread on his face. He was beaten, and beaten badly. He did not want to be a good loser, but his sense of humor arose and crowded out the anger.

Right on the heels of the magistrate's departure, one of the spectators arose from a bench in the center of the room. "Hey, Sheriff," he called out, "ain't that man got any money left?"

"Evidently not," smiled the sheriff.

"Then he'll walk out of town! He don't get his mule till he pays the feed bill."

Cassidy turned and recognized the livery stable owner.

"He has a pretty good watch," replied the sheriff. "You might dicker with him for it."

"Why didn't yuh tell the justice of the peace about my watch?" was Cassidy's ironic question. "He might have slapped another fine on me for carryin' a watch."

"You get out of here!" snapped the sheriff.

Cassidy walked away, boiling mad. Lawton and Fletcher met him in the street. They had difficulty in dissuading him from picking up rocks and breaking every window in the courthouse. They were both secretly grinning at Cassidy's abject failure to get into jail, but discreetly concealed their mirth. They outwardly sympathized, and led Cassidy to the nearest saloon and bought him a few drinks.

"The penny liftin' thieves!" raged Cassidy. "Talk about your raw deals! D'yuh ever hear of anythin' like it? They even took away the forty cents;

they wouldn't leave a man the price of a cup of coffee before chasin' him out of town. And you two jaspers, with your finicky ideas and ethics, you objected to my pet scheme of —"

"Shut up!" cut in Fletcher, warningly. Then in a lower tone, "Come over to my room. I don't know how Jimmy feels, but if he doesn't feel about it like I do, I'll make him feel that way. Not another word here."

Cassidy, starting to object, looked into Fletcher's eyes and saw a curious gleam in them, warning, anger, deviltry and humor combined. Cassidy immediately swallowed the words that were choking him. The three men went to Fletcher's room and into low voiced conference.

"I've got an idea that they don't want you in their jail," said Fletcher, restraining a smile. "It was a raw deal; that trial was a farce. I had to laugh at you, Cassidy, but at the same time I resented what they handed you. Right now I'm in favor of showing that their jail is a farce. I'm willing to go through with your wire rope program, if it can be done."

"The same here," said Jimmy Lawton. "Taking that last forty cents away—coffee money—was what got under my skin. Only, Cassidy might have bought whisky instead of coffee with it."

"I'm glad you've had your minds changed," growled Cassidy. "I'd be in that jail right now if it hadn't been for Jimmy, here, bein' so much brighter than the rest of us. He made me put that dodger down in the linin' of my coat, where the sheriff didn't find it when he searched me."

"I'm glad I did," retorted Jimmy. "For right now we seem to be of one mind. I'll telegraph immediately for Curley to mail one of those dodgers to Sheriff Caplan. Think of how he'll kick himself when he gets it in the mail at one o'clock tomorrow afternoon. He'll turn all sick inside, thinking of how he had a bank robber supposed to be worth fifteen hundred dollars in his hands, and then chased those fifteen hundred dollars out of town!"

"Well, they got over one hundred out of me, at that. I'm plumb broke," mourned Cassidy.

"Never mind that. We'll take a gamble on your jail breaking idea. It's a crazy one, I'll admit, but it'll probably work. I don't know where I'll get off for taking a hand in it, but I don't care. I can automatically resign my job by leaving for parts unknown without giving notice."

"The same here," said Fletcher. "That foolish trial today gave me a line on the caliber of the officials in San Blas. I resent stuff like they pulled off under legal guise today. Legal? Good Lord! It was awful."

"Let's get down to business," suggested Lawton. "If Cassidy shows up in town tomorrow afternoon he'll get arrested and thrown into jail immediately. The officers aren't going to pass up any chance of getting fifteen hundred, per the dodger. If the prisoner in the jail is really one of the Overland Limited robbers, everything will be fine. His horse and pack mule are over in Hawley's stable, where Cassidy's mule is. The groceries he bought, and the two jugs of whiskey, are locked in the harness room."

"And the Western Express hesitates briefly in San Blas at two o'clock every morning," put in Fletcher. "The rear car must be somewhere near the jail when the train stops. Not over one hundred feet away, at a darned good guess."

"How about the bow and arrow?" inquired Cassidy.

"Oh, I wrapped them in a paper and hid them in the rear of the saloon," said Jimmy. "I'll get them as soon as I can. The bartender saw me with them, so if this trick goes through be sure to bring the arrow with you when you get out of jail. If you don't it'll be damning evidence against me. If I get rid of the bow and you lose the arrow somewhere in the mountains, the sheriff can suspect all he wants to; he won't be able to prove anything. In fact, I doubt if he has brains enough to suspect that a bow and arrow were used."

"How about the stable?" asked Cassidy. "How will yuh take care of the night hostler?"

"Easy. I can get a small bottle of chloral hydrate crystals from the druggist."

"What's them?"

"Knockout drops. I'll load a half pint flask of whisky with the chloral and slip it to the hostler. That'll put him to sleep safely and soundly. Before we go over to the jail we can saddle your mule and the bandit's horse, also load

the supplies on the pack mule. Everything will be ready for you to sneak over to the stable and get a quiet start out the back way."

"Be sure to hang my belt and the gun on my saddle," said Cassidy. "And come to think of it, won't this robber be suspicious if everything is fixed like that for us at the stable?"

"Why should he be? Can't you think up a good lie to cover it?"

"Nope, but I've thought up a little action to cover it. You and Fletcher need exercise, anyway; you're gettin' fat and sassy and short in the wind. Yuh gotta cover our getaway from the jail and yuh might as well make a good job of it. You two can be about a hundred yards from the jail when the big bust happens. The minute yuh see or hear that door to the sheriff's office go open yuh wanta yell 'There they go!' and maybe shoot a few times as yuh chase off up the street to the north. And north is the direction me and the bandit *won't* go. Just keep a-runnin' and a-yellin' and shootin' once in a while to draw the officers off that way."

Fletcher interrupted with a laugh. Lawton grinned at the idea.

"And while you're doin' that," continued Cassidy, "me and the bandit'll sneak over to the stable. My mule will be saddled all ready for me, but there's nothin' ready for the bandit—at least he won't think it's ready. But yuh have his horse and pack mule in the stalls right opposite that big oat bin. Have his two saddles layin' alongside the bin, with his whisky and groceries handy to slap onto the pack saddle. It'll only take us two or three minutes to load everythin' and get out that back door."

"So far, so good," commented Lawton. "But after you ride out the back door with the bandit, what then?"

"Over the hills and far away,——" smiled Cassidy.

"What then? What can you do single handed?"

"I might sneak back and lead your posse to where the gang is hidin' out."

"Sounds easy, but it might not be practical. Then again, the gang may be right here in town. A little thinking now may be the means of saving a lot of grief later on."

"I don't think that the gang is in San Blas, or anywhere near it," said Fletcher. "Otherwise some more of those twenties would have showed up. Isn't there some way by which Cassidy can leave a trail for us to follow when dawn comes?"

"Leave a trail? Huh!" Cassidy's brow wrinkled as he studied the problem. "Well, there's the oat bin. I might fill a pocket or two with oats and drop a little string of them as we leave the stable to show the direction we take, and drop a few more on the trail now and then to keep yuh goin'."

"That'll be sufficient," conceded Fletcher. "But this thing, so far, works out so darned well on our lips and in our minds that I'm getting suspicious. It sounds too easy. You know how it is; no matter how well you plan a thing in advance, so well that you don't see how anything can go wrong, some foolish little detail puts on a pair of skates and leads the whole scheme onto thin ice where it breaks through. Now that wire rope. Are you sure of how much strain it will stand?"

"You two wait right here," ordered Cassidy. "I'll be back pronto. While I'm gone, you do your dangedest to think up some more possible flaws." With that, Cassidy left the room.

Ten minutes later he returned. "I've been over to Hawkins' store," he announced, "lookin' over his stock of cable. He's got a piece that's made to order for us, about one hundred and ninety feet that he'll sell cheap at forty-five bucks. And it's five-eighth inch plow steel wire rope. That's half again as strong as half inch. A breakin' strain of *fifteen tons!* Figger that out in case yuh got any doubts. That's strong enough to yank the whole courthouse on its ear. It'll bend and yank those bars out of the jail without knowin' that it's been put to work."

"It probably weighs too much for us to handle easily," objected Fletcher.

"I wondered about that, myself, but I lifted that coil off the floor a little ways. And Hawkins agreed to hold it for me for half an hour. Shell out some of Curley's expense money. Yuh know I ain't a cent in my Levi Straus's. And gimme enough money to buy two big steel hooks and some clamps. I'll bring the cable back here, and we can work to fix a hook at each end of it."

"I'll give him twenty-five; you pony up the same," suggested Lawton to Fletcher. "And Cassidy, we were talk-

ing and planning while you were gone. To fix the night stable man I'll have to get a bottle of knockout drops. They're white crystals that dissolve easily. I'll need very little to fix a half pint bottle of whisky, and we voted that you take the rest of the bottle with you. Also a little money, so you'll find a package right on top of the grain in the front left hand corner of the oat bin. Better let us have your pocket knife, too. We'll leave it on top of the package. You can hand your knife to the bandit and tell him to cut every cincha, bridle, hackamore and latigo in the stable. That'll delay pursuit for a while, in case any officer gets the bright idea of saddling up in a hurry. You can pocket the bottle and get all the oats you want while the bandit is busy slashing."

Cassidy thought this over. "You boys ain't half bad when it comes to plannin'" he finally acknowledged, grinning. "I'm beginnin' to understand why Curley lets yuh draw wages. If I'd known this before, I could 'a' saved an awful strain on my own brain. As it is, I'm goin' into jail with a lot of confidence in you boys. I think you're both as smooth as two beaver hats!"

Chapter VI

IF YUH CAIN'T LEAVE JAIL, MAKE THE JAIL MOVE AWAY!

CASSIDY had not left town by daybreak the following morning. Until two o'clock in the afternoon, however, he kept out of sight of the officials. At two o'clock he was playing cribbage with Jimmy in the latter's room, when Bill Fletcher walked in.

"Now's your time, Cassidy." he announced. "Caplan is coming down the street. You step out of the front door just as he comes along. When you see him you want to act surprised or scared or do whatever you like."

"If I did what I'd like to do I'd drop a brick onto him from that window," replied Cassidy.

"Hurry down those stairs. You'll just have time to make connections."

"But suppose he shoots," objected Cassidy.

"I'll have a bead on him from the window," promised Lawton. "Stick up your hands quick and he won't shoot. If he tries, I'll shoot first."

Cassidy raced down the stairs and stepped casually from the doorway onto the narrow sidewalk, almost bumping into the sheriff. Caplan was quicker witted than Cassidy had given him credit for being. One glance at Cassidy was enough; the sheriff dropped his right hand onto the butt of his Colt, with his left he seized Cassidy's right arm and headed him back toward the jail. "Keep walking!" he ordered.

Two minutes later the heavy cell door had slammed shut.

"Hey!" yelled Cassidy. "I still want to know what I'm arrested for. I want to see a lawyer."

"Go to hell!" responded Caplan.

Cassidy turned to size up the other occupant of the cell, a hard faced young chap with gleaming brown eyes. The flinty expression on the young fellow's countenance was made all the worse by several days' growth of bristly black beard, together with a pinched, miserable, desperate look.

"Hello," said Cassidy. "I didn't know I was gonna have a likely lookin' roommate like you. Maybe I'll like this jail better than I thought I was gonna."

"You won't like it," rasped the other. "They ain't give me a bite to eat or a drink of water since I got thrown in here. Got any eatin' tobacco?"

"Not a bit. I only had half a sack of Bull and some papers, but they took those away. Why ain'tchuh made a holler about gettin' no water?"

"Sure, I've been hollerin' my head off —but what's the use?" bitterly. "This sheriff and his deputies and the jailer, they ain't got no heart at all. They're trying to starve me and giving me no water to make me weaken. They're trying to make me confess that I'm a train robber. Of course I ain't, but they won't believe me. If I was, I'd see this damned sheriff and his gang in hell before I'd say a word. They're trying to make me round on my pals. I'll dry up to dust before I'll do that. And my tongue feels like it's sticking out about a foot right now."

Cassidy tore one of the large buttons from his coat. "Here, suck that; it'll help to moisten your mouth. And by golly they ain't got no right to treat yuh that way. It's against the Constitution of the United States, or somethin' like that. They've *got* to give yuh water!"

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear it, but if you can make them do it you're a bet-

ter man than I am. This button helps a little."

Cassidy looked out through the cell bars. His gaze went across the office and through the bars guarding the glassless window opening. Three men walking down the street came within his limited range of vision. "Hey!" he yelled. "You out there on the street!" The three men stopped. "We want water!" Cassidy bawled out loudly. "One man here ain't had none for two days! This damned sheriff is breakin' the law! He's starvin' a man here, and givin' him no water! Spread the word about town that Caplan is lower than a damned Apache! He's——"

"Shut up in there!" The sheriff, boiling with wrath, had entered the office from the other room. He turned to the window and addressed the interested citizens. "Don't pay any attention to these lies you hear. I know how to treat my prisoners. They're mad because I'm too smart for them; because I arrested them. You men helped to elect me; I've always done my duty. Just pass on your way and let these coyotes yelp."

"Coyotes is right!" yelped Cassidy. "There's half a dozen coyotes in this jail, and Sheriff Caplan is all six of them!"

If the citizens had been inclined to pass on about their business, Cassidy's flight of hyperbole was sufficient to make them pause. They wanted to hear more.

"There's a man here who ain't had a drink for two days," shouted Cassidy. "That's against the law. And I want to see a lawyer. Caplan won't let me. That's against the law, too. Get me a lawyer!"

By this time the saloons and other nearby places of business had given forth nearly a score of interested listeners. The sheriff was raging mad.

"These bandits are lying!" he told the citizens. "I'm upholding the law. I'm only doing my duty for you men who helped to elect me."

"I didn't help to elect you," came a voice from the throng. "I know what you are. You're a dirty skunk!"

"Go to the head of the class!" bellowed Cassidy, grinning, as the crowd edged up close to the broken window. "But you're only half right; he's two skunks! You're citizens; this sheriff is only your servant, or supposed to be. Come in the office and see whether he upholds the law. There's a man in here who hasn't had a drink for two days. Caplan says I'm lying. All right, come on in. If Caplan gives us somethin' to eat and drink I'll admit that I'm a liar. Could anything be fairer than that?"

Apparently nothing could. Over twenty men crowded into the office, and the sheriff dared make no move to stop them. Food and a jug of water came forth. Several of the citizens offered tobacco to the prisoners. An attorney pushed forward and offered his services.

"Not today," smiled Cassidy. "The sheriff has just proved that I'm a liar. Come back tomorrow; maybe I'll give yuh a job then. And take a look at me now, all of you men. I'm not banged up, or anything. Take a good look while you're at it, for I want witnesses in case the sheriff comes in here after you're gone and tries to beat me up."

Cassidy grinned at the helpless sheriff, then spread a bit of soft soap. "Caplan is a good sheriff; I'd vote for him myself if I got a chance. He sure does his duty, I'm provin' that by bein' here behind the bars. But he's gotta be impressed with the fact that he can't starve his prisoners or refuse to give them water. Outside of that, he's a sheriff yuh oughta be proud of. Vote for him next time, boys—and I'll lead three cheers for him now." The cheers were given, and the citizens filed out toward the nearest saloon, taking Caplan with them.

"Jumping Joseph, but you're a humdinger at ridin' sheriffs!" said the other prisoner admiringly.

"Aw, shucks," grinned Cassidy, "it's just a matter of practice. I've been in better jails than this, but I've never had a bigger jailer." He grinned at the fat deputy who was standing, listening, in the outer office. "Caplan ought to give me a vote of thanks for those cheers. I made him solid again with the voters—after gettin' the grub and water we wanted. And if it ain't a secret, what do they call yuh when you're home or maybe when you're somewhere else?"

"I'm Al Berendo. I got jugged for nothing at all. They ain't got no evidence on me. They claim I passed a twenty dollar gold piece that was taken in the Overland Limited robbery. Why, I won that twenty in a poker game, but nobody'll believe me."

"I believe yuh if yuh say so. I'm a victim of mistaken identity, myself."

"That so? If it ain't a puffessional secret, what did you get jugged for?"

"Aw, they claim that I'm Slivers Cassidy." Seeing that the fat jailer had gone outside, Cassidy brought forth from his coat lining the wrinkled dodger from which he had torn the corners to make it look as though he had snatched it away from where it had been tacked up on a wall. "They claim that I'm the hombre whose pitcher is printed on this. Uh course they made a mistake."

"Well, I don't blame them," grinned Berendo. "If that ain't a picture of you, then I'm the sheriff of this county. Bank robbery, eh?" He eyed Cassidy with obvious respect.

"That's what it says. Maybe that's my pitcher, maybe it ain't, but I'm tellin' yuh that the sheriff made a mistake in arrestin' me. He'll find that out when he takes a look into this hole some mornin' and discovers that I ain't here."

"What do you mean? An escape? Hah! It can't be made, out of this jail —not unless you've got a gang as big as a young army what'll ride in and stick up the town to make a jail delivery."

"I ain't got no gang. I never work with one; when I bust a bank I never have to split with nobody. The stuff I get is all mine. But I give a little here and lend a little there, and never insist on gettin' it back."

Cassidy smothered a grin; he was thoroughly enjoying himself in drawing the long bow, in giving his imagination full rein. "But I've got friends all over, and my friends have brains. So have I. Why d'yuh suppose I called that bunch of citizens into the office a while ago? That was a double barreled scheme. It got you the water you craved and it also gave a coupla my friends a chance to see what was what. One of them slipped me the wink when he passed some tobacco to us. My friends will get me outa here, if they hafta take the whole danged jail apart from the roots up."

"It sounds fine, but it's hard to believe. Nobody ever got out of this jug."

"That's because I never been in it before. Stay around here a day or two, maybe only till tonight, and you'll get a chance to see what brains'll do."

Berendo laughed. "Gee, you make funny remarks. There's no chance of my not staying around here a day or so. But you've got so much confidence that you're giving me hope. Will there be any chance of my getting out along with you?"

"Sure. If I get out, how can I stop yuh from followin'? Tell yuh what; you come along with me. I've got a dandy hideout where we'll lay low for a few days and then we'll go out and do a job. I got a fine bank all picked out and all the details planned. I could do it alone, but it'll be an easier job for two men. I can use a likely young fellah like you. What d'yuh say?"

"Well, I've got friends, too, and they've got a better hideout fixed than any you ever dreamed about. If we get out of here, you'd better come along with me. We can slip off and do that bank job later."

This was better than Cassidy had hoped for, but he gave no sign of elation. He appeared to be doubtful. He argued in favor of his supposed hiding place and finally allowed Berendo to persuade him into fleeing to the bandit's stronghold.

"You're sure a confident man, Cassidy. I still don't see a chance of getting out of here, but you've had me arguing just as though we really could bust out of the jug."

"Aw, call me a liar," growled Cassidy, "if that'll make yuh feel better. But wait—that's all, just wait."

AT FIVE O'CLOCK that afternoon the sheriff returned to the jail. He was drunk, very drunk, and knew he was drunk. He had been getting drunk for political purposes, making himself solid with the hilarious citizens by getting drunk with them. He had outdrunk them all and had thereby gained from them some measure of admiration and respect. By sheer will power he had kept a clear brain and a pair of steady legs. But he was lurching wildly as he came into the jail office.

"I'm through for a while," he told the jailer. "Go over to my home and tell my wife that I'm called out of town over night. Unnerstan'?" Caplan braced himself and concentrated, a final stand. "I can't let her see me like this; she'll busht my head. Unnerst-t——" Caplan reeled, his knees buckled. He fell to the floor and lay there, breathing stertorously.

"He sure was game to the last," com-

mented Cassidy. "I know just how he felt, but he fought her off to the last ditch."

The jailer stood over the sheriff, then tried partly to lift, partly to drag the sheriff to the northern room of the office, the sleeping quarters. Caplan also was a very heavy man, the effort on the part of the jailer threatened to overtax a fat man's heart. The jailer gave it up and stood scratching his head. He desired to protect the sheriff, to get him out of the office before someone came in and found him in that condition.

He glared at the prisoners who were gazing interestedly through the bars. He solved the problem. "Come out of there," he ordered, drawing his Colt and then unlocking the cell door. "Pick him up and carry him into the next room."

The prisoners perforce carried out the order, the jailer cautiously standing back the width of the room as he covered them with his Colt. "Now drop him in a bunk. That's fine; get back to your cell." They were locked in again.

Within a few minutes arrived a deputy sheriff to relieve the jailer while the latter went out for supper. The jailer returned. He and the deputy started a game of cooncan in the outer office.

In the cell was a bench, an oak plank supported on four pegs. The plank was six feet long, nine inches wide and two inches thick. Cassidy and Berendo pulled this up to the bars. They sat on it as they watched the officials play. Then came a waiter from a nearby restaurant, carrying supper to the prisoners. It had been ordered by Caplan before he became drunk, and was purely a political play to convince the voters that he did not starve his prisoners.

Darkness came; the officers lighted a lamp and continued their card game. Hour after hour passed. Midnight arrived, and Cassidy had begun to grow worried, before the jailer and the deputy broke up their game and took the lamp with them into the sleeping quarters. Shoes thumped on the floor, the creak of a cot sounded, the lamp was turned low, and another bed creaked beneath the weight of a man. Within a few minutes both officers were snoring tenor to accompany the baritone of the sheriff.

The prisoners still sat on the bench, conversing in whispers. They gazed between the bars and through the darkness of the outer office to where the glassless window opening was visible against the dim reflected glow of saloon lights farther down the street.

The town had grown comparatively quiet, except for an occasional loud argument of festive outburst from some saloon and the intermittent blare of music from a dancehall. There were short periods when the only sound to be heard was the snoring from the officers.

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and there came the whistle of a locomotive approaching the town. A moment later, the music started again in the dance hall. Cassidy saw the head and shoulders of a man arise above the sill of the barred window opening. The form was indistinct, but Cassidy knew it must be Lawton.

A faint *twang*, and something bumped lightly on the rock floor of the cell. Cassidy's groping fingers encountered a piece of string, then the cloth muffled arrow. He hauled in on the string; a piece of thin manila rope came into his hands. He pulled slower and with care. There came a weight on the rope.

"What is it?" whispered Berendo.

"Shut up! My friends are busy. We'll be out of here pronto."

By this time the five-eighth inch wire rope had reached his hands. The cable was wrapped with strips of burlap to prevent undue noise. Wrapped in several thicknesses of burlap on the end of the wire rope was a large steel hook.

Cassidy did some rapid thinking. His original intention had been to draw the cable in around three of four of the stout iron bars and then place the hook over the cable outside the bars—to literally noose several bars with the wire rope. Fifteen tons was the breaking point of the cable. It had seemed ample, but now when he felt the slenderness of the wire rope compared with the iron bars he decided to take no chances. The bars were a little over five inches apart. If only one bar were torn away it would leave an opening more than ten inches wide. He and Berendo could easily squeeze through this, but it might take a few more vital seconds of time. He thought of the three officers sleeping not more than sixteen feet away.

Two bars. That would be better. With two bars snatched away, the opening would be almost seventeen inches.

He thought of the weaker bars on the window opening. Again he wondered. The cable might slip through them. He did not know that Jimmy Lawton and Bill Fletcher had already done the thinking and wondering for him. The arrow had been shot through the opening between the masonry and the window bar farthest north. The first effect of the pull on the wire rope by a train going south would be to rip out every one of the window bars.

Cassidy took no chances. "Hey, Berendo," he whispered. "Hold this bench right where I put it against these two bars." The bench was slanted at an angle of better than forty-five degrees. The wire rope went over it, at one end behind the two stout oak pegs. The strain on the bars would come on their weakest part, the middle, half way between the floor and the roof. Cassidy reached out and hitched the steel hook into the wire rope, the latter now encircling two iron bars and one end of the oak bench. With a piece of the string that had been attached to the arrow he moused the hook, to be certain that it would not slip off the steel cable. He then reached down and fumbled on the floor until he recovered the arrow. He shook the cable three times, the agreed signal to Lawton that everything was ready.

"Say, what's the scheme?" inquired Berendo, unable to restrain his curiosity. "A team of horses? They won't be able to budge these bars."

"Shut up!" was Cassidy's polite answer. "I ain't sure, but I think maybe you can hear the scheme rumbling outside."

"Oh, my gee!" breathed Berendo. "*A train?* You win the pot!"

By this time the train had drawn up to its customary fourteen seconds' stop in San Blas, and as usual during this brief halt the rear car was not much more than one hundred feet from the jail. The music had temporarily ceased in the dancehall, and the momentary comparative silence, above the hiss of steam and the snores, Cassidy heard the conductor call out, "All aboard!" The clang of a bell, a sharper intermittent hiss of the steam, then the clank of couplings and rumble of wheels moving at increasing speed on the rails.

"Get ready," whispered Cassidy. "Follow me through and out that window. When I hit the ground I'm gonna crouch and stay crouched as I sneak around the south corner of the building and back to the cliff."

"Why?"

"We'll lay low there."

"And get caught like rats. I don't like——"

"We won't get caught. My friends ——"

The train had taken up the slack of the wire cable. In less than half a second, all six of the window bars were torn from their sockets with six separate growling wrenches that sounded somewhat like drawing a stick rapidly along a picket fence. Almost immediately the two heavy cell bars were torn out at the bottom to the accompaniment of a ripping, smashing crunch. The bars bent outward until the loop of the cable slipped from their lower ends and, taking the oak bench with it, thrashed and bumped across the office and out the window.

Cassidy was out of the cell before the cable had jerked the bench through the window. Berendo was right behind him. They leaped through the window opening with the speed of prairie dogs flopping into their burrows. On hands and knees they crept silently around the corner of the building and back into the deep black shadow of the cliff. The oak bench at the end of the cable smashed and bounced down the street and out of town like the tail of a mad comet.

From within the sheriff's office had arisen excited shouts, the thump of feet, the clatter of the sheriff's boots as he leaped from the bunk, half dazed with a hangover. Then a profane exclamation of alarm as the jailer, having turned up the lamp, brought it into the office and enabled the officers to view the wreckage of the cell bars.

Two pistol shots roared out, two more, and two more. Six shots, fired in pairs, were a signal of dire emergency to every deputy in town. The sheriff opened the office door and for a moment stood listening and peering up and down the street. He was joined by the deputy, who had donned his boots. They ran out and again stopped to listen. The jailer came thumping out across the porch.

From a point to the north up the street sounded running footsteps. A shout. "There they go!" A few scat-

tered shots, fired north, more running, more shouts and now and then another shot. The three officers immediately joined the supposed pursuit.

Cassidy and Berendo had made their way south along the cliff, in a sort of alley between the rear of buildings and the face of the rock. They came out from the rear of a saloon and found the coast clear enough to dare an attempt to cross the street. By this time, the shouts and the occasional shots fired by Jimmy Lawton and Bill Fletcher had drawn the officers several hundred yards to the north. Unmolested, the two jail breakers made their way across to the stable.

Chapter VII

THE TOUGHER THE BETTER

THE wide, sliding front door was closed but not locked. Cassidy opened it enough for them to slip inside. He closed the door and slipped a hasp into place. They walked toward the middle of the building, where an overhead lantern burned dimly. Cassidy turned it high. By its light he saw his mule standing saddled, his gun belt hanging on the horn. He buckled the belt around him, pulled out the Colt from the holster and assured himself that it was loaded.

"I feel more natural now," he commented. "My friends had everything ready for me. Throw a hull on one of these horses and le's get out of here."

"Why, here's my horse and my mule!" announced the other. He looked around. "And here's my stuff." He pawed over a neat pile at one side of the oat bin.

"Get saddled," ordered Cassidy, sharply. "We ain't got all night to do it in. Never mind your mule. The sooner we hit the breeze the better."

"You saddle the horse for me," suggested Berendo, carrying bridle and saddle to the stall. "You do that, and we won't waste time. I'll sling the stuff on the mule in no time at all. I ain't going out of here if I can help it, without taking along this grub and these two jugs of whisky." As he spoke he was already at work. Cassidy got busy on the saddle horse.

"Where's the night man here?" inquired Berendo, as he led his mule from the stall and over to the pile of provisions.

"I ain't worryin'," responded Cassidy, lifting the off stirrup from the horn. "After what my friends did in gettin' me out of jail, d'yuh think they'd leave a night man here to bother me?"

"I guess not." Berendo threw a hitch on the pack saddle. "Say, they are sure wonders, the way they thought out using a train to bust open the hoosegow!"

"Yep, they're lulus. And if there's jugs in those two sacks, don't let 'em bang together that way. Yuh ready? Then open that back door."

"My gee, I wish I had a gun," declared Berendo. "I guess the sheriff took personal charge of my hardware."

"Hev, wait a minute." Cassidy had lifted back the cover of the oat bin and found his knife. "Take a cut at each of those latigos and bridles. One cut apiece will do—no use slashin' 'em all up. One cut in the right place on each will help a heap to delay those damned deputies from gettin' on our trail."

"Good idea." Berendo got busy. Meanwhile Cassidy pocketed a small paper wrapped package from the bin and then dropped two or three pints of oats into his side pockets.

"Le's go. I hear 'em yellin' up the street. They're comin' back after their horses."

They led their animals out through the rear door into a corral, where they opened a gate, then mounted and rode across a sloping open field into the foothills. As they rode away they heard shouting and someone kicking at the front door of the stable. Cassidy laughed. "They'll hafta go clear around the block to get to that back door." Berendo having taken the lead, Cassidy seized the opportunity to sprinkle a handful of oats on the trail. He did it again at the top of the hill.

Below the crest, he told Berendo to pull up. "We'll go north across that little notch you can see on the skyline," announced Cassidy. "I got a lulu of a hideout about fifteen miles away."

"Your hideout may be a lulu," answered Berendo, "but ours is a ring tailed wonder. It's got the Hole-in-the-Wall skinned to a thin whisper. And it's only a mile and a half or so from San Blas. It takes ten or twelve miles of travel to reach it; that's one reason it's so good. We've got a fine cabin and

a supply of horse feed. Here on my mule is plenty of grub and two jugs, six gallons of whisky. You better come along with me. You'll meet a fine bunch of men. They'll be glad to see you, and we may be able to get together in a puffessional way."

"I still think yuh oughta go with me," answered Cassidy, "but this ain't no time for arguin'. We could argue this thing over till the sheriff caught up with us. Get goin'; I'll follow." As Berendo, leading the pack mule, headed to the southeast, Cassidy sprinkled some more oats on the trail. As he rode he tried to use his brain, recalling every word Berendo had spoken that could possibly be construed as pointing to the fact that Berendo was one of the gang that had held up the Overland Limited. "He ain't admitted it in so many words," cogitated Cassidy. "But there's that gold piece as a starter, and this gang that's hidin' out. Shucks! There ain't one chance in a hundred that I ain't on the right trail." With that, he sprinkled some more oats and urged his mule forward to keep up with Berendo.

They were about four miles from San Blas when Berendo led the way up a high steep ridge and down on the other side to the bottom of a canyon, which they followed due west until Berendo pulled up, dismounted, left Cassidy to hold the horse and pack mule, and went ahead on foot to reconnoiter. He returned in a few minutes.

"All clear," he announced. "A gang of riders just rode south—might have been a posse, for all I know, or care. We're going down into San Blas Canyon and riding back toward town for a ways. If we meet anybody, we'll just bluff it out, for we won't be recognized in the dark, and nobody'll suspect it's us when we're headin' toward town. And after we leave the canyon all the damned officers in the world can't trail us."

Cassidy wanted to ask questions, but wisely decided to refrain. They rode onto the stony river bed, across it and then north for perhaps half a mile. At every turning Cassidy had faithfully sprinkled more oats to give the direction.

"Here's where we leave the world behind," announced Berendo. "I get my bearings from those two peaks on the skyline." He headed into the black depths of a smaller canyon that ran west from the river bed. And this time Cassidy was lavish with the oats.

The canyon bed led upward. Its walls narrowed. Finally, with the river nearly a mile behind them, Berendo announced that they would dismount and wait for dawn. "How about breaking out one of those jugs?" he proposed. "Just a couple of snorts, to celebrate our clean getaway."

Cassidy agreed. "But why do we have to wait?" he inquired.

"Because I don't want to risk our necks tryin' this trail any farther in the dark; and besides I'd as sure as hell get lost in what we call the 'Puzzle.' It's one of these labyrinth things; you come to three or four canyons and have to pick the right one; then some more canyons, all blind but one. You get through that and then you run into another puzzle. Regular badlands, only worse. Savvy the idea?" As he talked, Berendo untied the sacks.

"Sure." Cassidy raised a jug and tilted it in the crook of his arm. He passed it over and Berendo swallowed in turn. "But why is this hideout so good, at that?"

"Because it's not over a mile and a half from San Blas in a bee line—and about two thousand feet above it. This is the only road into our hideout, unless you come in from the westward, from a point about forty miles away. That back door trail ain't as intricate as this, but she's sure rough. I came in that way. I blundered down through the puzzle trying to get to San Blas. I was prospecting, those days, and wore a beard. I used San Blas as headquarters—would ride in once in a while for more grub—and spent all the rest of that summer in trying to get through the puzzle back to where I was in the mountains. I thought I'd found a mine up near where our hideout now is."

Berendo took another drink. "Say, do you know?" he continued. "I couldn't find my way back. The only reason I kept on trying was because I knew there was a way. I'd come down it; that's how I knew. Why, I drew maps and sketches of the puzzle; I made chalk marks on the canyon walls and on prominent rocks so I'd know where I was on my maps. It took me over three months to find and mark on a map the right canyons and the turns to make.

Anybody can come down through the puzzle; it's all plain from above. But I'm the only man who can find his way up."

"Sounds like your hideout ain't so bad, at that," admitted Cassidy.

"Bad? Man, it's good! We got a strong pair of spyglasses, and from our lookout point we can see the posses searching the country all the way down the river bed. We laugh at them, for they never think of looking close to home. The only thing we can't see in San Blas is the jail and the other houses that are built near the cliff. We can't see the railroad tracks, but we can see the tops of the cars when a train comes through. The rest of the town east of the tracks is spread out before our eyes."

They each took a turn at the jug.

"It sure sounds like a lulu of a hideout," agreed Cassidy, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

"She sure is." Berendo took another turn at the jug and handed it back to Cassidy. A few more drinks, and Berendo grew talkative.

"So your specialty is banks, eh? I've thought about them myself. Maybe the gang will go in with you and jump one for a change. Or maybe just you and me'll be enough."

"No gang," said Cassidy, firmly. "A few thousands go a long way when yuh don't hafta split it with a gang. Besides a whole gang is too conspicuous; it'll cause suspicion and start trouble where a man can play a lone hand and get away with it fine. But I've got in mind a coupla big jobs where two of us could do it better than I could alone. I don't know whether to take yuh in with me or not. When yuh team up with me, young fellah, yuh gotta have a reputation to start with. I can't take chances on amateurs."

"My picture ain't on no dodger," confessed the other. "But that shows I'm clever. I ain't been caught and recognized."

"That's sure too bad," grinned Cassidy. "When I first saw yuh I got the impression that yuh *had* been caught. Maybe I was wrong."

"Aw, go to hell," growled Berendo, good naturedly. "I ain't in your class at all when it comes to swift and clean jailbreaks."

"That shows you're an amateur," Cassidy pointed out. "Anybody is liable to get arrested, but a careful man, who has the right kind of friends, ain't gonna stay long in any jail."

"You've got me skinned there," confessed Berendo. "But when it comes to a reputation, maybe I've got you beaten. I've got a double barreled record. Ever hear of 'Albuquerque Al'? That's me. Or maybe you've heard about the Santa Fé Kid. That's me, too. I'm both of them."

Cassidy appeared to be impressed. "Yuh gotta 'scuse me," he apologized. "But how'd I know but what you were an amateur? If you're both them fellahs, and can prove it to me, why uh course I'll admire to take yuh along on a little bankin' trip—maybe I'll make a special one, just to break yuh in."

They started at the first pink of dawn, crossed the pass at the head of the canyon and for the next half hour threaded their way through a myriad of steep, high sided gullies. Sometimes they progressed along the bottom of a ravine; again they followed the narrow ridges, and always underneath was solid rock that would leave no trace of their passing. And carefully at each diversion from a straight path, Cassidy sprinkled a slender trail of oats, meanwhile, lest he be caught at it, sharply watching Berendo, who always rode ahead. He became more and more frugal with the oats, but at last ran out of them entirely.

By this time they had crossed another pass and headed north. They rode along below the crest of a bushy ridge, following a well defined path. Half an hour later, Berendo pulled up.

"Get off and take a look from the summit," he said. "Don't show yourself."

Cassidy dismounted, scrambled twenty feet up the slope to the top of the ridge and carefully parted the brush to peer through. Berendo's description had partially prepared him, but all the same he was surprised at the clear view he had of the sprawling town of San Blas, less than a mile and a half below. He went back to his mule.

Some time later they hit a small basin, crossed it to the lower end, went around an immense rock the size of a cottage, and arrived at the hideout. There was a crude corral of heaped-up brush and trees and a still cruder cabin of logs with a dirt roof. A small stream ran across

the flat and went winding down through one corner of the corral. Several horses and mules were in the inclosure. Three men were visible in front of the cabin. A wisp of smoke rose from the rough mud and stick chimney.

One of the men walked forward to meet Berendo and Cassidy. He was tall, broad shouldered, with thin hips, thin shanks, narrow brown eyes. He wore a dusty and soiled black broadcloth suit, the trouser legs thrust into fancy russet boots. He approached truculently, both thumbs at his hips, thrust into his gun belt.

"Hello, Al, where yuh been all week?" called out one of the other men. Two more of the gang appeared in the cabin doorway.

"That's it, where've you been?" repeated the truculent one, continuing to walk forward. "You've been off on a two day drunk when you knew we were almost out of grub. You——"

"Listen, Mart," cut in Berendo, "don't say anything you'll be sorry for. I've been jugged for two days. I got arrested for trying to pass one of those twenties."

"A likely tale. I'll believe you've been jugged for two days, all right enough. You've been emptying a jug."

"No. This is Slivers Cassidy with me. It was his friends who emptied the jug. We were both in it."

"What do you mean by bringing a stranger up here? You ought to know better."

"Mart, you'd better shut up until you've heard the story of what's happened." Berendo's voice was even and low, but his eyes blazed. "I've lost my hand gun and the carbine. The sheriff still has them. Wait till I've got another Colt, and then you're welcome to get on your high horse all you damned please. Here's the grub and six gallons of whisky." Berendo jerked on the halter and urged the pack mule forward. He tossed the halter rope to Mart, who unwillingly was forced to catch it.

"Come on, Cassidy." Berendo rode on to the corral. While they unsaddled, the five men of the gang, including Mart, were passing around one of the whisky jugs. Mart quickly became in a better humor.

A little later, with one man busy at slicing bacon and another stirring up hotcake batter, Cassidy was introduced to the gang. In the cabin, so that the cooks could also hear it, Berendo told the story of his arrest and escape. The gang hilariously received the story of the wrecked jail.

"It's a good yarn, a hell of a good yarn," said Mart, grinning. "It's so damned good that I can't quite believe it. There's no use lying to me, Al. Is this a straight story?"

"You never believe anything or anybody, do you, Mart?"

"No, I don't!" snapped the other. "I get along in this world a whole lot better by not believing."

"You'll believe me now, Mart, or this is coming to a showdown. I've stood just about enough from you. You're not the whole works here, even though you act as though you were."

Cassidy stepped back against the cabin wall, his hand on the butt of his Colt. He was almost sorry he had come, fearing that Berendo, unarmed, would pass out of the world right then and there in a belch of smoke from Mart's gun. He ignored the rest of the gang, centering his attention on Mart, ready to shoot him down if he made the slightest move toward drawing on Berendo.

But Mart, after glaring for a moment, laughed hollowly and turned away. Not until then did Cassidy see that Berendo had a Colt in his hand, having obtained it quietly within the last minute from another of the gang.

"It's this way," said Mart, half apologetically. "We all got worried sick when you didn't show up. Then a while ago we saw you coming; we watched you through the glasses from the lookout. We saw you had another man with you. Yesterday, especially, we were worried, and we were out of grub. I'll admit that I got boiling mad this morning, thinking you'd been on a drunk. I'm willing to believe that you've been in jail, but that ain't no excuse for your bringing a stranger up here. You ought to know better. Why did you do it?"

"Because I didn't want to lose him. He's a bank specialist. We may need him in our business. Cassidy didn't want to come up here, anyway. He's got a hideout of his own, and he wanted me to come with him. I wouldn't go with him because I had to get this grub up here to you. So when he saw that there was no chance of my going with him, he finally agreed to come with me.

And a hell of a welcome he got."

Mart still looked suspicious as he again sized up Cassidy.

"Where would we be now if it wasn't for my having found this hideout?" continued Berendo. "That last job was too bloody; the whole State, and especially this county, has been turned upside down in a search for us. There's rewards stacked up for us higher'n Pike's Peak. That damned sheriff was starvin' me and giving me no water and deviling hell out of me to try to make me round on you. It's thanks to Cassidy's friends that I'm here now with grub and whisky for you."

"It looks a little queer to me, yet," grumbled Mart.

"Cassidy, if you've still got that latest picture of yourself you'd better show it," suggested Berendo. "But of course," with a triumphant smile, "Mart won't even believe *that*."

Cassidy felt around in the lining of his coat and finally located the dodger, now more soiled and creased than ever. Mart carefully studied it, the other members of the gang crowding around to peer over his shoulders. "Yes," he finally conceded, "I admit that you may have done all right, Al."

"Thanks, Mart," sarcastically. "Maybe you suspected that I was bringing a detective in with me."

"Better come and get it," called one of the cooks. "It's all on the mahogany."

The table was as crude as the cabin itself. Six feet apart in the dirt floor two pairs of stakes had been driven, each stake at an angle across its fellow to form an X. The tops of these long stakes had been connected by small straight tree limbs, and on top of these had been nailed more limbs. The whole was completed by the sides of wooden packing cases nailed down to the limbs to give a smooth surface. The table was about three feet high, the same in width and more than twice that in length.

With Cassidy accepted as one of the gang, thanks to the convincing evidence of the printed dodger bearing his picture, they sat down to eat. The seats were empty wooden boxes. The meal consisted only of fried bacon, hot cakes and coffee, most of the gang lacing the beverage strongly with whisky. Berendo had brought a gallon of syrup and plenty of sugar.

Breakfast over, and with a pan of beans covered with water and allowed to stand to soak, the gang felt better. In fact, even Mart was in good humor. And Cassidy was introduced to a new gambling game, which he mentally regarded as an advanced version of spitting at a crack. He did not join in the game, at first preferring to watch, his total capital being limited to forty dollars, which he had found in the oat bin wrapped up together with the bottle of chloral hydrate crystals. To begin with, he did not want to disclose that he had forty dollars, for Berendo might wonder where he had obtained the money. Cassidy could have covered that with a good alibi, however, and the real reason he kept out of the game was because forty dollars was mere ante money.

The limb of a tree lay on the ground, and perhaps eighteen feet in front of it two galvanized iron buckets had been placed in line, one in front of the other. Each participant dropped a twenty dollar gold piece into the first bucket. They all walked back behind the limb that lay on the ground. It was a sort of goal line. In turn from behind the limb each player pitched another gold twenty. If it fell short of either bucket, the player walked forward and recovered his coin, there being no penalty for a short pitch. If he successfully flipped it into the first bucket he took out the pitched coin and another one from the kitty. If his cast went too far and into the second bucket he forfeited his coin, which went to fatten the kitty in the first bucket.

The first round resulted in two short pitches, two penalties and two successful casts. The kitty still contained one hundred and twenty dollars, the two penalties for pitching into the second bucket evening up for the two successful flips. Cassidy watched for an hour. Sometimes there would be several hundreds of dollars in the kitty, again, after a number of successful casts mingled with short pitches and therefore no penalties, the kitty would run dry. When this happened, each player would donate another coin to the bucket.

From the first, Cassidy had been normally certain that this was the gang that had held up the Overland Limited. The plentitude of large gold pieces and the careless way in which they were handled served to solidify his belief. There was no doubt in his mind, but he wanted to see the date on one of those twenties

merely as a final proof that he was right. But he remained seated near the cabin, his back comfortably against a form fitting rock, rolling and smoking cigarettes as he watched the game.

"Better get in," suggested Berendo for the second time.

"I'd sure like to," answered Cassidy, "But you'll remember that I didn't want to come here in the first place. I wanted to go to my hideout. One of the reasons for that is because I've got a lot of money cached up there. Now I'm broke."

Berendo, who had been winning, counted out ten gold pieces, walked over and dropped them into Cassidy's hand. "There's a little stake to start on. I'll give you more if you need it. Go drop a twenty in the kitty. I throw last; you follow me."

In his turn, Cassidy threw short. He walked forward and recovered his coin. Surreptitiously he examined some of the twenties in his hand. They all bore the same date; they were part of the loot from the express car of the Overland Limited.

Chapter VIII

STUD POKER A LA ROCKEFELLER

THE game continued until sundown. One of the gang had lost nearly twelve hundred dollars. Cassidy, with a good eye for distance and a hand to match, after a little practice had become an expert. At the breaking up of the game, after paying back the two hundred to Berendo, he had nearly six hundred dollars in his pocket.

Throughout the day, from time to time one of the gang had left the game to mount the ridge and use the binoculars to survey all the lower terrain. Once he reported, "I saw two posses." Invariably, however, his other method of reporting the news was to use the single word, "Naw!" Until the middle of the afternoon Cassidy had been hopeful that Lawton and Fletcher, leading a posse of detectives and government officers, would follow up the trail of oats. And mingled with his hope was anxiety and a lot of wasted brainwork. If any officers approached the hideout, the advantage would lie all with the bandits, who were cool desperadoes, well equipped with firearms and perfectly willing to use them.

At one point of the trail, not over three hundred yards from the cabin, the bandits could stand off an army. Cassidy realized this, therefore his anxiety and more than a little fear. He had formed and discarded in turn half a dozen plans as to his own course of action in the event of a posse finding its way through the lower maze of badlands. Armed as he was with only a Colt, he could not hope to stick up the whole gang. It would mean his own death if he tried it. He was good with a Colt, but not a super gunman. He might get one, two, or even three of them if they called his bluff, which they would be sure to do, but in the meantime the rest of the gang would have made a lead mine out of Cassidy. "Uh-uh! Nope! Not me!" thought Cassidy. "I may be crazy, like I've been told I am, but I'll be danged if I'm plumb foolish —yet."

"I'm here," he continued his soliloquy, "and all I can do is to string along and see what happens. Yep, that's the wisest —just string along."

At the supper table, one of the bandits voiced his discontent. "Now look here, Mart Sprott, I'm jest about fed up on layin' around this hole when I've got over thirty-five thousand dollars to blow in. Some of the other boys think the same way. We're ready to go out the back trail."

"You only think you are." The leader's voice was hard. "In the first place, Al is the only man who knows the back trail. Next, Al is backing me up in that no man can leave until this thing blows over. You damned idiots think that all there is to a big haul is to get the money and then start spending it. It's because of fools like you that the State's prison is full of men right now. The men that last longest in the game are the ones who have leaders who do the thinking for them. I knew we'd stirred up a big stink because we did so much shooting in this last job. And you fools made it worse by grabbing those two sacks of registered mail. I know better than to touch government stuff."

"Now listen, Mart," growled the discontented one, "we're fed up on bein' called fools."

"That's what you are, when it comes to thinking!" retorted Mart. "I've been

trying to keep you safe. And was I right? Look what happened to Al, the minute he stuck his nose into a town. I didn't know that those twenties were marked by their date. I was playing safe, waiting for the thing to blow over, for things to quiet down. We're safe here; nobody can get to us. I knew that. You know it, too. And look at the fool luck I played in! If we'd scattered, what would have happened? Every one of us would have been picked up when he tried to pass those twenties.

"I wonder if you appreciate what I've done for you? My forcing you, on general principles, to play safe is all that's saved you. Six men! And there's always the chance that one man out of six hasn't got real bottom to him. One of you—I'm not saying that any of you would—but there's always a chance that one man out of six will weaken and give the rest of us away. The officers would have had an absolute certainty of the guilt of any man who was picked up for trying to pass those twenties. With that certainty of guilt, do you think they'd be gentle in their methods of trying to force a confession? They won't!"

"Mart's right," affirmed Al Berendo. "For nearly two days that damned sheriff down in San Blas didn't give me food or water. He come in now and then and deviled me, tryin' to make me confess. He offered me a lot of things if I'd turn State's evidence. You go two days without eating or drinking, and I won't blame you if you squeal. You boys ran wolf wild on that last job; you shot to kill, and that was against my advice. You're all facing death if the law gets you; your being penned in here can be regarded as a mild punishment for your reckless killing. Now, here's Slivers Cassidy. He's a good bank man, with his picture in print and a reward out for him. Let's hear what advice he has to offer on the question of whether or not we should stay here."

"I can't improve on Mart's way of puttin' it," declared Cassidy, "when he said that you boys stirred up a hell of a ruckus. Why, yuh made it so bad that an honest bank robber like me had a hard time makin' his way around the country. Every man who didn't know me sized me up as a suspect for the Overland Limited job. Every time I'd spring a twenty dollar gold piece on a man he'd squint at it to see what date it was. And I wouldn't have got arrested in San Blas, the chances are, if you boys and your work hadn't made the sheriff sit up nights a-thinkin' up suspicions against innocent strangers. I remember once a long time ago when I went to church because there wasn't anything else to do, and the preacher read from the Bible, 'I was a stranger, and ye took me in.' I felt foolish, because I was the only stranger *in* that church and everybody there turned and looked at me.

"That's the way it was in San Blas. I was a stranger and they took me into jail. That's the way it'll be in every town around that you fellahs'd hit. Me? Right now, since I'm one of yuh because I've got some of those marked twenties in my pocket, I'm in favor of stayin' away from anywhere where I'd be taken for a stranger. A coupla or three weeks more, and I'll take a chance, but right now? Uh-uh! Nope! Not me! I'm stayin' right here. You've made it tough for an honest bank robber to go through life, or through this State. It'll be tougher for you fellahs. I'm hivin' up right here, and I'd advise all of yuh to do the same."

A brief period of silence, broken finally by Mart Sprott. "Maybe you'll listen to Cassidy's words of wisdom. He's been out and around."

"Yeh, and I was *in*; don't forget that," grinned Cassidy. "It's only luck that I happened to have a coupla friends in San Blas who have brains and know how to use them." He told them of the strength of the San Blas jail. Most of them knew of it already, for the jail had more than a local reputation of being a bad place to get into. He repeated Berendo's story, with more details, of how a wire rope hitched to a train had ripped out the strong bars. "Yes, sir," he wound up, "that jail got plumb ruined. And after we got out, my friends yelled 'There they go!' and ran down the street and clear out of town, cuttin' loose once in a while with their guns. They drew the whole pack of officers after them, leavin' the coast clear for me and Al to sneak over to the stable. My mule was waitin' for me, all ready with a six-gun hangin' on the saddle. Uh course my friends didn't figger on Al gettin' out with me, but we took a chance on takin' the time to saddle his horse and load up the pack mule. The grub and

stuff was right there in the stable, and Al wouldn't come away without it."

"Where was the night man at the stable?" demanded Sprott.

"I dunno. He wasn't there, that's all we know, or care about. And while we were at it, we slashed every latigo and bridle in the place."

"Good idea, that," agreed Mart. "I guess that's why you didn't get chased." Mart smiled at Cassidy in a real friendly way; since Cassidy had given his advice to the gang to stay holed up, Mart had dropped his air of half veiled hostility.

They finished eating almost in silence, each man apparently busy with his thoughts. Cassidy had another wild idea, wondering if later in the night he might be able to sneak away, climb the ridge and make his way down to the cliff at the western edge of the main business street of San Blas. From the top of the cliff, by shouting, he might be able to summon Lawton and Fletcher. He would take with him enough rope to haul the two detectives up the cliff. They would steal back to the cabin. Three armed men might succeed in sticking up the gang, where one would fail.

"Say, Al," inquired Mart Sprott, "I hope you didn't forget candles?"

"No. I got six dozen. I forgot nothing. First grub, then whisky, tobacco, cards and candles."

"Trot out a couple of candles. I feel lucky tonight," said the leader. Then, turning to the discontented member of the gang, "I hope you've got over your grouch. Maybe Cassidy's words of advice meant something to you, even though mine didn't."

"Yes, Mart," was the answer, "I've been thinkin' it over. You were right. You ain't done bad by us at all—except that you're damned stingy with that whisky." A grin.

"Well George, you know why that is. If I'd let you, you'd all be laid out stiff, and what would happen then if a posse showed up? I'm doing my dangdest to do right by all of you. It ain't no more fun for me to stay here than it is for you boys. Just remember that. You've all got friends in the pen—how'd you like to be in there with them? Go your own gait, and you're liable to land there. Take my word for things, and it'll be a longer life and a merrier one for all of us. Tonight, you can have all the drinks you want, within reason. We'll have a good game; I sure feel lucky, and I hope all of you feel the same."

One by one the members of the gang had gone out of the cabin, to return with their pockets filled with twenty dollar gold pieces. The loot had been divided, and each man had been careful to hide his share at some distance from the camp. Four lighted candles adorned the table, one at each corner. Partly because of the dim light, they decided to play stud instead of draw poker. A man could get a squint at his hole card, shielding it with his hand, with less chance of observance of the card's value by the player adjoining him than would be possible in draw poker, where each player had to study five cards and then draw to them.

The gang's invitation for Cassidy to sit into the game had been cordial. Fearful of a continuance of his recent run of bad luck at cards, he had hesitated, then the thought had occurred that he had nothing to lose no matter what happened. So he sat in, stacking up twenty-nine gold pieces in front of him, these representing his winnings of the afternoon in the bucket game.

It was a seven handed game, with all of the players except Cassidy feeling loose, liberal and lucky. Cassidy won the first pot on a pair of kings, increasing his capital to the extent of eight hundred dollars. He stacked his winnings, almost holding his breath at the swiftness of a game in which twenties served as white chips, red chips, blue chips and yellow chips.

"Winning the first pot is sure sign of bad luck," observed Mart. "I'm glad I didn't win it."

Cassidy felt gloomier and more pessimistic about his luck. But he raked in the second pot, and the third. There followed a few poor hands, on which Cassidy dropped out early in each deal. Then he ran hog wild. Almost before he knew it he had nearly ten thousand dollars stacked up in front of him. He had started building them up in regulation stacks of twenty coins each; now he began adding five to each pile, making five hundred dollars to each stack. He had nineteen piles of coins, and a good start on the twentieth. He won a few more pots.

"I'll be back in a minute, boys." He left his money on the table and went out to the corral, returning with one of

the buckets that had served in the coin pitching game that afternoon. Toward evening, the buckets had been utilized to feed oats to the horses and mules.

The game was table stakes, meaning that no player could bet or be raised more than the amount of money he had on the table in front of him, unless he had previously declared himself by saying that he was playing such and such an amount behind his stack.

Cassidy resumed his seat, placing the bucket on the floor between his feet. He counted off ten of the stacks that had bothered him by their bulk. He dropped them into the bucket. "Just gettin' them out of the way, boys," he announced. "That five thousand ain't sunk; I'm still playin' it. You saw me count it out—an even five thousand."

The players began to drift out of the cabin and return with more money. Cassidy stayed in a pot that was repeatedly raised by Mart Sprott. Cassidy's hole card was a queen. In sight he had a nine, a ten and a jack, of different suits. Sprott, on the third card in sight, had a pair of aces. He bet one thousand dollars. Cassidy called it, the other players dropping out. The last cards were dealt. Sprott's was a queen. Cassidy caught a king, making a straight, from the nine upward.

Sprott studied a while, then bet another thousand. Cassidy called this and announced, "I'm raising five thousand." He lifted the bucket from the floor and placed it in the center of the table.

"I'm calling for all I've got in front of me. I don't believe you have a queen in the hole," said Sprott, pushing several stacks toward the center of the table. He drew back his hands, and waited.

Cassidy flipped up the queen. "It's expensive not to believe me," he remarked, lifting stacks from the table and counting aloud as he dropped the gold pieces into the bucket. "That makes ten thousand in reserve. It's still in the game; I'll be using it again to tap any of you boys who get too proud of your hands." Cassidy arose to lift the bucket and lower it to the floor. "Golly, the bottom ain't much more than covered with these twenties, but they weigh almost as much as a sack of flour."

Sprott cursed, then kicked back his seat box and started for the door. "You'll have that bucket on the table right pronto," he growled. "You can't ride this game with what you've got in the bucket. I'm a rough rider myself; I'm coming back with enough coin to give you something to think about."

"The same goes for me," said another bandit. "I'm not sittin' in this game with jest tobacco money in front of me. I'm goin' to get enough yellow chips to be able to tap that bucket." He followed Sprott out of the cabin.

"Sprott's mad clear through," grinned Berendo, lowering his voice. "He's a plunger, but a damned poor loser. I'm going to string along on this couple of thousand for a while and see what happens to it."

The three other bandits dug into their pockets for more gold. None of the four, including Berendo, had over twenty-five hundred dollars in front of him.

"Let's fool Mart by having a drink while he ain't here," suggested one of the quartette. The jug went the rounds and was replaced on the floor near where Mart had been sitting. It had already been passed around three or four times during the game, but under the strict supervision of the leader.

Sprott and the other plunger returned at almost the same time, arriving at the cabin from opposite directions. They took their seats. "How about a drink, Mart?" inquired the man who had suggested the round during the leader's absence.

Mart lifted the heavy jug, balanced it skillfully in the crook of an arm and gurgled several times. "There'll be no more drinking from the jug," he announced. "Get one of those tin cups. I can't check up on what you take from the jug—and I'm judging the amount of liquors you boys can have. I'm right, too. If a posse shows up tomorrow, I'll be damned if I'm going to fight them off alone because all the rest of you are sodden drunk." Mart poured the tin cup almost full. It was a twelve ounce cup. "That's one round," he declared. "And there'll be very few more rounds."

"I'm gettin' fed up on this high handed business of yours, Mart," blurted out one of the gang. "You're goin' too far, when yuh count our drinks, and *measure* 'em."

"Yes, George, you get fed up on something about twice a day," drawled Mart. "I'm not going through all the same arguments again. I'm keeping all

of you out of jail, that's all—and my say goes!" Mart's voice turned hard and he thumped the table for emphasis. He looked around at each man briefly in turn.

"Whose deal is it?" he finished briskly.

The game was resumed. Mart and the other plunger had returned with staggering loads of gold, each man carrying two small canvas bags filled with twenties. The bags when dropped onto the dirt floor thumped heavily, solidly, with a bare suggestion of a dead clink. They opened the bags and stacked pile after pile of coins on the table.

"And I'm playing with this other sack of twenties behind me," announced Sprott, cautiously peering at his hole card.

"That goes for me, too," voiced the other plunger.

Cassidy's run of luck had ceased temporarily. He dropped out by turning down his first exposed card. No poker game is really friendly, despite assertions to the contrary. Penny ante comes the closest to being a friendly game, but even where the stakes are low the rivalry may run high. Quickly this game played by the bandit gang, although friendly at the start, became one for money or blood. Sprott and the other man with the large bank roll by the sheer weight of their bets soon forced out the men who had attempted to stay in the game with a small stake. Three of them lost their table stake in one pot, won by Mart.

"Why don't you dig up some real money if you want to play here?" sneered Sprott. "You've got the cash. Go get it, unless you think you're out of your class in this game. But the house gets no rakeoff, and there's no tinhorns here. It all stays in the family. This is the biggest and the squarest game in Colorado tonight. Come on—either spit or swallow your cud."

"You can't make me look like a four-flusher," said Berendo. "This game has got into my sporting blood, and I'm aiming to show that you just spoke out of turn, Mart. You're acting so high and mighty that I'd like to kick the props out from under your conceit. Let's take Mart into camp, boys. I'm going out and dig up all of my gold. Why don't the rest of you get a real stake to back your cards. Mart wants a *real* game. Let's give it to him—and make him sorry." Berendo laughed and walked out of the cabin.

The three pikers of the gang looked at each other questioningly. "Well, I ain't gonna let 'em show me up thataway," remarked one of them, getting up and leaving the cabin. "Same here," said another, arising. "Oh, well, easy come, easy go—and maybe easy get a lot more," said the third. "Give me a candle. My stuff is planted so safe that it'll be hard to find."

"She looks like a big night," said Cassidy, grinning at Mart. "You sure rubbed it into the boys enough to bring their gambolierin' blood to the surface. What say to a little drink for the three of us. And I wanta say, Sprott, that you're all wrong on jug against tin cup. It's so danged much easier to drink out of the cup that they get more down their throats than they would if you allowed 'em just one gurgle apiece outa the jug. I'm in favor of the jug. Fill the cup with water. This stuff of drinkin' without a chaser may be all right, but yuh can drink twice as much and not get as drunk if yuh take a good chaser along with every shot of whisky. And I arise to remark that these boys all hold their liquor danged well. I'm feelin' fine on what I've had; but lemme have a good drink of water between times so's I'll keep on feelin' that way."

"The water is more plentiful, and cheaper," smiled Mart. "Here's the cup. Help yourself from the water bucket there in the corner. I'm in favor of the boys takin' the edge off the whisky with water, but I've never been able to make them see it that way. They want it straight."

"Yes, and they get drunk quicker and feel worse when they wake up. I'll lecture 'em on the virtues of a little water along with their whisky. They listened to me before; maybe they will now. I want to play poker not to get drunk and I'll take drink for drink with any of yuh." Cassidy winced as he thought of his attempt to outdrink Jimmy Lawton. "Maybe I'll want an extra drink or so," he continued.

"I'm not dry nursing you, like I am the rest of the boys," answered Mart. "Keep the jug over there, if you want to. You might put it in the bucket to hold down your frisky gold. But even that won't help you. I'll tap that bucket

before the night's over—and the man who wins the pot gets the bucket, too."

"Sure, whisky jug, gold and all," grinned Cassidy. "That's all right with me. I'm aimin' to get this bucket so danged full that I can't lift it."

"Deal up the cards," suggested Mart. "Let's have a few rounds of three handed stud. Maybe you'll lose some of your confidence with the stacks I'm going to take away from you."

"I can lose my confidence easier than I'll lose what's in the bucket," retorted Cassidy.

Play was slow in the three handed game, Sprott winning most of the pots through the sheer size of his bets. But Cassidy smiled. "You're just diggin' your own grave when yuh bet wild like that," he told Mart. "Sooner or later I'll get the cards that'll bury yuh." A minute later, he won a pot containing nearly three thousand dollars.

One by one, the other four members of the gang returned carrying heavy bags of gold. And now, with the exception of one hundred dollars, the entire loot of the express car was within the walls of the cabin. The missing one hundred dollars had been taken by Berendo to San Blas—five twenties. Of these, one had been spent at the grocery store, another had gone for whisky, and the sheriff had taken the remaining three from Berendo's pocket.

Cassidy's luck held good and by midnight he had won nearly eighty thousand dollars. He and Sprott were the only winners, the losses being sprinkled fairly evenly among the other five. The bets were getting higher and wilder. There had been another round or so of the jug. Cassidy was enjoying himself hugely. He began to be sorry that he was a detective. Eighty thousand dollars! With that he could buy a fine ranch and enough cows to become eventually a cattle baron.

His mood turned to gloom. What was the use? Recklessly he bet all the coins stacked in front of him and reached down into the bucket for several more handfuls of twenties which he stacked up and shoved into the pot without caring whether he won or lost. The fifth card turned in his favor, winning him over twenty thousand dollars.

Twenty thousand! Six or eight hundred more cows! Or he could add several thousand more acres to the ranch of his dreams. Without opposition he won another small pot. A detective's job was a sneaking job, anyway. Thus ran his thoughts. He began to despise himself for sneaking in under false pretences and gaining the confidence of this gang of fine fellows and good sports. He was supposed to be a bank robber. Why not keep on acting like one? Then he could take his fabulous poker winnings, steal away to some distant territory and realize his ambition of being a wealthy stock raiser.

Everybody stayed in the next pot except Cassidy. Sprott won it, raking in at least fifteen thousand dollars. On the next deal, Cassidy won nearly this amount from Sprott alone. "Now, take Mart Sprott," reflected Cassidy. "Sure," agreed Cassidy's sense of humor, "you're takin' him right along. He wins from the others and then you take it from him." Sternly he repressed this flippant thought within himself. "Now take Sprott seriously," he cogitated. "He's a good man in his line. He keeps the gang toein' the mark, which keeps 'em outa jail. And he's sure a high bettin' fool. He's a good sport! Now me an' him, and Berendo, too; I betcha we could clean out a bank and get clean away with it. Now ain't I a hell of a low down jasper for sittin' in here and gettin' friendly with good sporty hombres like them—and all the time plannin' how I can arrest 'em? Shucks! I feel like a danged skunk! And what's the use of winning this gold, anyway? It's wooden money as far as I'm concerned. I'll have to turn in my winnings. I'm workin' for Curley—and I'm danged sorry I took the job!"

Cassidy was still in the same mood when Mart Sprott started to whoop up the betting. "Bein' a detective is bad enough, but bein' sorry for it is worse," brooded Cassidy, as he morosely pushed in stack after stack to call the wild bets of the leader. He expected to lose. He did not care if he did. He was sorry for himself. Not until the fourth card had been dealt to him, the deuce of diamonds, did he look at his hole card—It was the two of clubs. He looked around the table at the various hands; every player had a pair in sight, except Sprott, whose three exposed cards were an ace, king and ten of various suits.

The man with a pair of queens in sight promptly bet one thousand dol-

lars. Sprott raised two thousand. Two players dropped out of the pot. Cassidy continued to call every bet that was made, shoving in every stack of coins in front of him and then digging into the bucket for more. The last cards were dealt. Cassidy's fifth card was the two of spades. Mart Sprott now had a pair of tens in sight. The man with the pair of queens had not improved his hand visibly. Another player had two pairs, jacks and sevens.

"Three deuces," thought Cassidy. "She's sure a good little hand, but there's a lot of poison out this time. The boys have been brave with their bettin' and I've got my suspicions. But what's the difference? I might as well lose now as lose it later when I'll have to turn it over to the express company."

The holder of the two pairs passed. Sprott bet two thousand dollars. Another player dropped out of the pot, after Cassidy had seen the two thousand and raised five thousand more. It took several minutes for Cassidy to count out the five thousand after he had announced his raise. The other players had plenty of time in which to think it over. The holder of the jacks and sevens despairingly saw the bet. Sprott said "If it was anybody else, I'd raise. But I'm just seeing it." The man with a pair of queens likewise called. "I've got queens up. Yuh got a third deuce in the hole?"

"Aces up, here," said Sprott, hopefully. "Aces and tens."

"I guess I'm the worst bred dog in the bunch," exclaimed the man with jacks and sevens, disgustedly turning down his cards. "All I've got is in sight."

"Yep, a third deuce. Three little twos win the pot," chirped Cassidy, flipping up his hole card and raking in the large heap of gold coins.

And his luck continued. When Cassidy stayed out of a pot, Mart Sprott almost invariably raked the other players fore and aft for large sums, only to lose it later to Cassidy. Three of the players went broke, losing every gold piece they possessed to Mart Sprott. They were good losers, however, being, as Sprott jeeringly put it, used to it. Another man went broke. Then Berendo put his last gold piece into a pot and lost it to the leader. It was four o'clock in the morning when the game had finally settled down to a duel between Cassidy and Sprott.

None of the gang had gone to bed. They sat around to watch the game. Two of them had tried to sit behind Cassidy, but he had sharply objected on the ground that he considered it a jinx on his luck to have a man sit behind him. He moved his stacks of coin around to one end of the table and attempted to take with him the five-gallon bucket which now held nearly one hundred thousand dollars in gold. He couldn't lift it at the first effort. He straddled the bucket and strained with both hands on the pail. The thick wire handle bent and tore loose in his grip as he exerted all his strength. He straightened up, smiling whimsically, then tossed the useless handle to a far corner of the cabin. "Grab it, boys, and see if yuh can lift it onto the table. Right at one side and toward me a little from the middle."

Four of the bandits laid hold of the edges of the bucket and hoisted it onto the table. Cassidy dumped several more stacks into it. "Sprott, there's an even *one hundred thousands bucks* in that bucket. I'll be bettin' the whole works, any minute now, so watch yourself."

"The same to you!" laughedSprott. "Better keep a double watch, for I want that bucket and what's in it."

The game went on, with this difference between the two players: Sprott was now playing more carefully and cautiously than he had ever done throughout the night, while Cassidy, to put into words his own thoughts, "didn't give a damn." Three times within the next half hour he said "And I raise you the bucketful!"

Sprott did not dare to call the bet, for if he held the low hand he would lose all his money. He was waiting until he had Cassidy studded before daring to risk calling the big bet. And two of the three times Sprott had been bluffed out, for Cassidy, after raking in the pot, had deliberately exposed his worthless hole card. Sprott was losing slowly, losing his temper as well as his money. Cassidy changed his ideas and also his style of play. Not until the first flush of the real dawn had dimmed the candles did he again repeat his raise of one hundred thousand dollars.

Mart Sprott licked his lips nervously. His eyes hardened as he stared across the table for a while at Cassidy's stiff

face. Cassidy stood the scrutiny for at least thirty seconds, then his face slipped into a grin. He couldn't hold it straight any longer. He had two nines in sight and a third one in the hole. Sprott had a pair of eights face upward on the table. One of his other two exposed cards was a nine spot. The chances were very much against Cassidy's having the case nine in the hole. Sprott frowned darkly and again moistened his lips. It was only the size of the bet that made him hesitate. If he lost, he would be broke,—absolutely. Cassidy probably had two pairs. Yes, that was it. "You've tapped me—and I'm calling you," he announced hoarsely. "I've got three eights!"

"Not quite good enough," was Cassidy's cheerful answer. "My hole card happens to be the case nine."

Sprott turned pale around the lips. He half arose, then dropped back into his seat and leaned forward over the table as he banged the table with his fist and barked out, "I think you're a dirty cheat!" His right hand went back to the edge of the table, within a few inches of the gun butt projecting from his holster.

"That so?" inquired Cassidy mildly. "You ought to know. You dealt the cards."

Sprott was tense like a coiled spring. Cassidy nonchalantly kept his easy pose. He was seated on a low box; his legs were beneath the table. His right hand was in his lap. "If I were you, Mart," he advised softly, "I'd go easy. *You're covered!* One move toward your gun and I'll let daylight through you. My Colt is in my right hand, cocked and ready. You'd better pull in your horns."

"All right; I'm covered," grated Mart. "What good does that do you? D'you think you can get away with all this gold? We killed three, four—I don't know how many men—to get this money. And now we've only got to kill one man to get it back and divvy it all over again with the boys. You're as good as dead—*right now!*"

"Start your killin'," invited Cassidy. "It's a tinhorn play on your part to invite the boys now to finish what you've started. Call 'em off, quick! If one of them makes a move, my finger crooks—and that means that you'll never live to divide that gold again."

"Freeze, boys," advised Berendo hastily. "I don't want to see Mart die."

"I'd like to," said Cassidy. "My God, but I hate a short sport! This Mart Sprott is the shortest of the lot. What's the use of lettin' him live?"

"Go easy, Cassidy," requested Berendo. "I'm for you." He turned on the rest of the gang, all of whom appeared rather dazed at the swift turn of things. "I'm for Cassidy," he repeated. "Even against Mart and all you boys. I'm sure disappointed in Mart. He's just showed himself up to be a yellow dog. Cassidy won this money fair and square. A man can win that way from me, can win every cent I've got, and I'll still feel friendly toward him. When a man wins in a poker game, it's a matter of honor with me. I'll treat him as I would expect to be treated if I had been the winner."

"With me it's a matter of money!" yelped Sprott. "He's not one of our gang—and the rest of us aren't going to let him get away with it!" He looked around, but saw none of the gang nodding in agreement. "I'd just as soon hold you up, Cassidy, or kill you, to get back that money," he continued. "You'll be an easier job than holding up the train."

"That so?" drawled Cassidy. "The train didn't have you covered. I have. And I'd rather shoot through the table at you than shoot in the open. The slug will do a messier job." Cassidy was the picture of self confidence, but at the same time he was very, very glad that he had Berendo on his side.

Mart Sprott raised his hands shoulder high. He stood up and again looked around at the rest of the gang. He walked away from the table. "If he shoots me in the back, get him!" he barked out.

Cassidy felt helpless at this move. "Golly," he thought mechanically, "this Sprott sure has a bunch of cold nerve with him."

"Any objection to my leaving the shack?" demanded Sprott.

"Hop to it; glad to get rid of you," said Cassidy, bringing the barrel of his Colt above the edge of the table.

"Come on, boys," ordered their leader. "I want to talk with you—outside."

Cassidy, mentally, was all at sea. He was more than worried. He did not know what to do or say. His left hand dropped into his side coat pocket and

encountered the cold shape of the small bottle containing the knockout drops. He tensed, as abruptly into his mind flashed a scheme. He almost laughed aloud. "Jimmy Lawton was right when he said they might come in handy," he thought.

Four of the gang followed Sprott out of the cabin. Only Berendo remained. With two sweeps of his gun Cassidy knocked the candles from the table, leaving the room in the dim, gray light of dawn. "Go to the door and watch 'em, will yuh, Berendo?" asked Cassidy. "I don't want to be potted through the doorway."

"Oh, they'll talk it over first." Berendo went to the door.

Cassidy got busy. The whisky jug was on the floor within reach of his left hand. Quietly he twisted out the cork and upended the small bottle over the mouth of the jug. The chloral hydrate crystals poured down into the whisky. He dropped the empty bottle into his pocket, replaced the cork in the jug, laid his gun on the table and used both hands to shake the jug. Berendo looked back into the room.

"Must be over a gallon left in this," said Cassidy, pulling out the cork again and pretending to take a long drink. "What they doin' out there?" Berendo turned away, and Cassidy shook up the contents of the jug all he could before replacing it on the floor.

"They're over by the corral, listening to Mart Sprott," said Berendo.

Picking up his Colt with his right hand and the jug with his left, Cassidy went over to the doorway. "Is this Mart Sprott tough as he seems to be?" he inquired.

"Say, he's worse. He's colder than a snake, and the rest of them ain't much better. Sprott gunned up the engineer and fireman of that train. The rest of them emptied their guns at everybody who showed up. They shot to kill. I went through that holdup with every shell in my Colt the same as when I started. I never fired a shot. All that unnecessary killing made me feel a little sick." Bitterly, "But I suppose I'll hang with the rest of them if we get caught."

"You've gotta get caught, first," replied Cassidy. "And I ain't so well off myself, right now. Maybe I'd better offer to split up this gold again with the boys. Every one of them—except Sprott—can have his original share back again. Me? I'll keep Sprott's share for myself."

Berendo laughed. "You don't seem to like Mart none too well. Neither do I. You'll be raising hell, though, in trying to knock him out of his share. You'll have to bump him off, for he'll come gunning for you. And he's a bad man with a gun. I'm warning you, so be ready."

"Thanks, Al. It'd make me feel at peace with the world to stick him up, take his gun away and kick him outa camp."

"And that would be the worst thing you could do. I tell you that this Mart Sprott is a snake. If you kick him out, he'd be as liable as not to lead the officers up here. We were his pals, but that would make no difference to Mart. He's low down and mean. He'd cheerfully see the rest of us go to hell, just to get *you*."

"I'm kinda low down and mean, myself, when I deal with a man who's showed himself up to be a short sport like he is. Don't worry. I'll take care of Mart. I'll stick right here in the shack, thereby keeping all the advantage, including the grub, the gold and the whisky, with me. But shucks! Some of the boys are half drunk and may need a bracer. They ain't had a drink in over an hour. S'pose yuh take the jug over to 'em, and along with a couple of drinks yuh can tell 'em that they're gonna get their gold back."

"Fine! That's the best thing we can do. The jug will help a lot, and your offer to split with the boys will knock the pins out from under Mart's arguments. He ain't popular to start with. He's a good leader because he enforces his own ideas, but he's got a way of doing it that's made everybody hate him. Give me that jug."

Berendo swiftly walked across the intervening sixty feet to where Mart Sprott was vehemently haranguing the bandits. Sprott's face was contorted with venomous anger, but he kept his voice low. He turned at the approach of Berendo. "And you, you——"

"That's enough, Mart!" interjected Berendo. "Don't pick on me because you're a bad poker player and a worse sport. Better have a drink first and then listen to Cassidy's offer."

"I'll listen to nothing!" snarled

Mart. "That gold belongs to us, and we're going to get it back!" The leader snatched up the jug and took a long drink. The jug went the rounds, ending with Berendo.

"Yeh, Al," said one of the gang. "We've decided to bump off this Cassidy and get the stuff back."

"Cassidy did the deciding for you, long before you got around to it," retorted Berendo. "He decided to give back your original share to each of you boys." A wave of the hand that did not include the leader.

"So he weakened," sneered Sprott. "I thought all along that he had no guts."

"Where does Cassidy get off, if he gives us back our shares?" suspiciously inquired another bandit.

"Oh, he's decided to keep Mart's share for himself," answered Berendo, drawing his Colt. In the momentary silence, the click of the hammer being drawn back sounded plainly.

"What?" gasped Mart hoarsely, unbelievingly. His mouth for a short time stayed half way open in amazement.

"Haw-haw-haw!" chortled the man known as George.

Mart wheeled swiftly, potential death in the venom of his glance and in the spasmodic movements of his right hand. Within two seconds, Mart's hand fluttered and jerked three times, each movement bringing his fingers nearer to the butt of his Colt, while common sense struggled with stark, raving anger. Two other bandits had started to laugh, but their mirth abruptly ceased, their hands darting toward their holsters. Mart saw the movements. His hand came away from his gun. He gave a weak laugh. He realized that he had been very, very close to meeting death at the hands of his own men.

He saw only the two men who stood ready to shoot him down. But his lieutenant, Berendo, had been far ahead of these two. Berendo's Colt was poised rigidly at his hip, the hammer drawn back beneath his thumb.

"Come out of it, Mart!" snapped Berendo. "If you'd touched your gun, I'd a plugged you. The other boys are back of me. Wake up! Who in hell do you think you are? Cassidy has put the joke onto you. You can't get away with shooting a man because he laughs. This thing is funny as hell, but I suppose you can't see it that way. But the rest of us are out of it. It now lies between you and Cassidy."

Mart tried to moisten his dry lips with an equally dry tongue. "So you're all against me?" he queried hoarsely.

"No, we're not," answered Berendo. "You're a rotten poker player and a damned poor sport, but you're a brainy leader for the gang. I'll admit that, even if the rest of them won't. You've done well by us, but you've got yourself in a hell of a hole. I'm afraid we'll have to dig the hole—if this Cassidy shoots like he plays poker. I'm callously neutral. He's put it right up to you. Do what you like about it. And I'm afraid Cassidy got kind of brash not knowing how you can throw a gun."

George had taken the jug, and it again had gone the rounds, each man stealing a swig while he kept one eye and both ears open to the argument. Mart swayed a little and took a step backward to keep his balance. "That's powerful liquor," he muttered. "Gimme a snort to steady my hand. I feel queer, but I'm going to see this through right now!" He took a drink and then started for the cabin, where Cassidy nonchalantly waited with one shoulder leaning against the wall. His right hand had its thumb against his hip, the fingers spanning down and partly curled over the butt of his Colt.

Mart Sprott had taken but a few steps, when he began to sway. Behind him, two of the gang had quietly collapsed. Berendo suddenly decided to sit down, and fell asleep in that position on the ground. Sprott rocked on his feet, but tried to keep advancing. He marked time for three steps; his knees slowly buckled; he fell sideways, literally onto one ear as with a final effort he checked the sag in his knees. One of the gang viewed with alarm this phenomenon; he started to run toward the top of the ridge, but reeled and collapsed before he covered thirty yards. The other two went to sleep in their tracks, slumping gently to recumbent positions.

For a minute or two, Cassidy retained his easy pose against the wall. He was scarcely able to believe his eyes. "Golly!" he finally exclaimed, "that's sure strong stuff." He walked out to the nearest man and prodded him in the ribs, suspiciously. The sleeper made no movement.

Cassidy arose, tilted his hat over one ear and scratched his head with his left hand, his right hand still clutching his revolver, as he slowly allowed his gaze to rest in turn upon each of the other five sleeping beauties. "I wouldn't believe it if I didn't see it right now," he mused, pulling his hat forward over one eye. "Well, I'll take this jasper as a sample and try him out." Cassidy shoved his Colt back into the holster, knelt upon one knee, pulled open a reluctant eyelid of the bandit and touched a forefinger to the eyeball. The man was so dead to the world that not a muscle quivered. Cassidy rolled him over, plucked away his Colt and heaved it toward the cabin door.

One by one he likewise disarmed the other bandits. He looked them over again from where he stood as he thoughtfully rolled a cigarette. "By golly, the battle of Waterloo musta looked like this afterward; but Napoleon sure had it on me—he didn't haf ta hoist the bodies onto horses. I saw my duty and I done it. So did the knockout drops." Cassidy grinned, leisurely finished his cigarette, then went into the cabin and tapped the other three-gallon jug.

He needed inspiration and physical strength, having gone two nights without sleep. What bothered him the most was a fine problem in ethics. After two drinks he went out and dragged Berendo into the cabin. He found the stub of a pencil and on a piece of wrapping paper wrote the following:

"Dear Al:

You'd better grow another beard and go back to prospecting. Also change your name because one of this gang might weaken and mention it. Don't go back to train robbing because there is a detective who is smarter than you. I am him. Yours truly,

"Cassidy"

Cassidy placed this note on the table and weighed it down with the forty dollars that Jimmy Lawton had left in the oat bin. "Yes, sir," he soliloquized, "that squares my conscience. This boy will go straight now that he's got another chance. I'm givin' it to him. I've gotta do that much, because he stood by me in a pinch." He looked down at Berendo's form on the dirt floor, then lifted him onto a bunk and drew a blanket over him. As an afterthought he again licked the pencil and added a postscript:

"This is honest money. If I had more on me I'd leave it. But there's grub enough here to last you quite a while."

His wandering gaze saw the corner of a striped canvas bag under a bunk. He investigated and dragged forth the two sacks of registered mail that had been stolen. They had not been cut open, for Mart Sprott, upon discovering that one of his men had been foolish enough to take government property, had taken away the bags, tossed them beneath his bunk and threatened death to the man who touched them. And Mart himself had let them severely alone, intending later to sneak them away as his own private perquisite. If he had cut them open he would have been forced to divide their contents with the gang. Therefore he had let them remain locked, and had heaped recriminations and threats upon any man rash enough to mention the bags of registered mail.

Cassidy looked at the bucket filled with the coins and at the huge sprawling mass of gold upon the table. A big bucket heaped up high barely held one hundred thousand dollars. Five thousand twenty dollar gold pieces! Three thousand good cows! Or almost that many. Why, he could buy more good range land than he could ride around in a day, and the range would be well stocked.

Cassidy sighed. Physically and mentally he was tired, awfully tired. It took a distinct effort to remove his gaze from the table. "Aw, what's the use of thinkin' what I can do with all that?" he groaned.

He carried a sack of oats into the corral, dropped it on the ground and slit the bag lengthways. Six horses and five mules crowded each other to get at the feed. He filled a bucket with oats and set it down a little distance away, slipped a halter onto a mule and led it to the bucket, where it stood feeding while he cinched the pack saddle. One by one he bridled and saddled the animals and tied each one to the fence. Going back to the cabin, he dumped the gold coins into the canvas bags and tied each bag securely. He felt more tired and sleepy than ever, and took another big swig of whisky to keep going.

His hardest work was to lift the limp form of each bandit and drop him face down across a saddle. He took care to lash each drugged man so that by no possibility could he slip off the saddle. In turn he tied the horses together, nose to tail, and went down the line to tighten each saddle girth. He puzzled for a moment over the fact that he had an extra saddle horse. He couldn't account for it at all, until he thought of Berendo.

"Golly, I'll bet Al wants his own horse." Cassidy unlashed Mart Sprott, eased him to the ground, took Berendo's horse out of the line and back to the corral. He cast off the saddle and turned the animal loose in the enclosure. Cassidy went back, led up the extra horse and loaded Mart Sprott onto it. That extra work called for another drink. Then the gold was loaded onto the mules, Cassidy meanwhile wondering if he should leave a pack animal for Berendo. Three mules could carry the load easily. "Nope," Cassidy finally decided, "I'll sprinkle the load among four. Al don't need a mule, and I've already done enough for him."

AT DAYBREAK of the day before, Jimmy Lawton and Bill Fletcher had quietly gathered a posse of nine, including themselves. There were four detectives in the employ of the express company, one deputy United States marshal, and two operatives from the Post Office Department. With the first light of dawn they had started out to follow the trail of oats from the livery stable.

The trail was plain and easy to follow for several miles. Cassidy had done his work well. Now and then, marking each change of direction, the posse found the oats, until they had covered over four miles and had arrived, after passing down a side canyon, at the San Blas River bed. And there, instead of finding oats to mark the direction, they had flushed a covey of willow grouse. Carefully the members of the posse had searched, hoping to find even a single grain to tell whether Cassidy had gone up or down the river bed. But the grouse had been at work since dawn and had searched with equal care. The trail had totally disappeared.

The members of the posse during the ride had congratulated Jimmy Lawton on his idea. But now they waxed both profane and humorous. The posse split, a few of them covering both sides of the river bed in the direction of the town of San Blas, while the rest of them had gone for many miles down the canyon. They had flushed several coveys of grouse, but not a grain of oats was to be found. Finally they had gone back to spend the night in town, to ride forth again at daybreak in their vain search.

An hour before noon, they decided to give it up. At noon they were riding up the river bed at a point about four miles below the town. They pulled up their horses, to watch in amazement a strange cavalcade file onto the river bed from a side canyon. In the lead came a sleepy rider, hunched forward and weaving at times until it seemed a miracle that he stayed in the saddle. His mount was a big gray mule. Behind him, tied nose to tail, every animal carrying a burden of some kind, came nine horses and mules. Slung from the rider's saddle horn was a brown stone jug.

Jimmy Lawton recognized the big gray mule. He trotted forward to intercept the caravan. "Hey, Cassidy!" he yelled.

Cassidy straightened up and pulled his mule to a halt. Jimmy approached, a wide grin spreading on his face as he took in the burdens carried by the string of animals. "Wow! You got them, boy, didn't you? Good work!"

The posse rode up. Cassidy blinked sleepily. "Got what?" he demanded. "I gotta an idea that I made a mistake."

"A mistake? How?"

"'Cause I didn't tie myself onto the saddle like I did the rest of 'em. I sure wanta sleep." The jug had a whang leather through the handle. Cassidy lifted this off the saddle horn and raised the jug. He took a long drink, and shuddered.

"I'm beginnin' to hate this stuff!" he exclaimed, hanging the jug back on the horn. "'Sall right to drink it for pleasure, but it don't taste the same when yuh hafta take it for medicine to keep awake. 'F you're judicious it'll keep yuh awake, but if yuh make a mistake by one 'jude' it'll put yuh to sleep. My gosh! but I'm sleepy."

"Get off and walk around a little," ordered Jimmy.

"Dunno's I can," objected Cassidy. "It's hard to think, and it's hard to talk,

Walkin' may be askin' too much. I ain't had no sleep for a coupla months. Seems that way, anyhow." Cassidy stiffly dismounted, but kept one hand on the horn to steady himself as he gazed owlishly around. He blinked, straightened up and helped himself to another swallow from the jug.

"Who's your friends?" he demanded, turning around and surveying the eight riders as though he had not noticed them before. "Oh, hello, Bill," as he recognized Fletcher. "And I wanta say that you're a helluva bunch of detectives. Yuh kept me up nights worryin' about yuh. Why didn't yuh follow the oats?"

"We did," explained Jimmy. "We followed them fine until we hit the river bar about half a mile below here. But from there on, the willow grouse ate up your trail. Every grain."

Cassidy took his time about thinking this over. None of the posse interrupted his thoughts. They were looking down the line of pack animals, at the limp burdens carried by the five horses, at the unmistakable small but heavy, printed canvas bags on the mules, and at the two mail pouches.

"Yeh, grouse *will* eat oats," announced Cassidy, as though he had made a great discovery. "Say, how's Sheriff Caplan; I don't see him with yuh." A grin. He let go his hold on the saddle and stood up as though suddenly sobered. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Jimmy Lawton. "Say, yuh think I'm drunk, don't yuh? Well, I ain't! I'm sleepy, tha's all. How'd the sheriff take it, havin' his nice jail split wide open?"

"He's wild, of course. He suspected Bill and me. He thought we had a hand in that jail break, but he couldn't prove it. Hawkins doesn't like Caplan and he agreed to keep his mouth shut about our buying the wire rope. We ain't heard a thing yet from the train crew. Now with us, here's——" Lawton introduced the members of the posse.

"Looky here," said Cassidy, "these gents ain't got no split of the rewards comin'. Yuh can let 'em share the credit, but not the cash. You and Bill splits the cash with me. I did all the heavy thinkin' and all the hard work, and I ain't gonna stand for no split nine ways. If they think they're gonna horn in on it, they got another think comin'." Cassidy's hand dropped to his Colt and he stared belligerently at the seven strangers in the posse.

Most of them laughed. "I guess we're just earning wages," said one of them. "I'm glad I'm here. The funniest thing I've ever seen in my life was Cassidy leading this string out of the canyon."

"Well, it ain't funny to me," replied Cassidy. "I never felt as poor in my life. I'm all in. I can make San Blas all right, so the rest of you gents can just ride on."

"You stay out of San Blas," ordered Jimmy Lawton. "That fool sheriff is liable to shoot you on sight. He's mad clear through over the way his jail got treated. Everybody's laughing at him."

"I can do some shootin', myself," orated Cassidy. "That sheriff can go to blazes for all I care. What happened to his jail ain't half enough to pay for what happened to me when I tried to get into it. They took over one hundred dollars from me. That's enough money to do a coupla repair jobs to his jail. The laugh'll be on him bigger'n ever when I lead this string into town. I ain't worryin' about what happened to his jail. He and his jail had it comin'. It'll be a lesson to both of 'em, what happened. I'm ridin' right into town."

"You're drunk as hell," said Jimmy. "Take my word for it. I ought to know when you're drunk. Didn't I put you to bed the other night?"

"Well, yuh needn't rub it in," complained Cassidy. "I wanta get to sleep. I want credit, tha's all—to make sure that I'll get the cash. You can take the whole string, but I wanta receipt. Tha's it, a receipt. I'm like Mart Sprott—tha's him draped over the roan—I don't trust nobody. Count the cash and the bandits and the two locked mail bags and then gimme a receipt that I delivered 'em in good order."

"We're not going to count the cash," began Lawton.

"Yuh are so gonna count it!" Cassidy belligerently straightened. "Yuh got all afternoon to do it in. I wanta get to sleep, but I wanta see that money counted first."

And Cassidy was not satisfied until the posse had removed the canvas sacks from the pack saddles, dumped the clinking golden coins onto a flat rock and started counting them. "Pile 'em up—twenty-five to a stack," ordered

Cassidy. "Tha's the way I learned was the best way to stack 'em."

"Why are you so particular?" asked Fletcher, grinning.

"What's so danged funny? Lemme tell yuh, it ain't funny to me. Every dollar of that was *my* money; I won it all at stud. I busted the gang. I won every dollar that they stole. I had a bucket fulla gold. I'd raise 'em the bucketful—one hundred thousand dollars at a clip!"

"Cassidy, you sure are drunk," said Lawton.

"Drunk, nawthin'! I'm sleepy, tha's all. But I sure would raise 'em the whole bucketful. And the bucket kept gettin' fuller. Say, that sure was one lulu of a poker game. And yuh don't know about the ranch—" Cassidy turned away to obtain the jug and try to drown his grief at the memory of the thousands of phantom cows with which he had stocked his air castle ranch.

The posse quit counting money. They demanded details of the poker game. Cassidy gave them, almost tearfully. "And to think," he finished, "that I won all that gold, and hadda turn it in. Honestly, it's a hell of a handicap in this world when a fellah discovers for the first time that he's honest. Yep, I never knew it before. I always suspected that I wasn't. I was a rich man, and look at me now. All I want is sleep, and I can't get it because you fellahs are too danged slow in countin'."

Cassidy was such a woebegone object that the posse laughed and whooped hilariously. They took the jug away from him and passed it around. They finished counting the money, and found the sum to be exactly $224,900. "That danged sheriff's got sixty of the missin' hundred bucks," explained Cassidy. "Promise me that you'll take it away from him. And I wanta receipt."

Jimmy Lawton on a page from a notebook wrote a receipt for the money the mail bags and the persons of five bandits in good condition. Every member of the posse gravely signed it. They even humored Cassidy when he demanded two more receipts. They wrote them out and signed them likewise.

Cassidy gave one receipt to Jimmy Lawton and another to Bill Fletcher. "Show 'em to Curley," he requested. "And don't let any bandits hold yuh up on your way to town. Me? I'm gonna sneak off to a soft spot and sleep for a week. When I get caught up on sleep, I'll go through the hills east of San Blas, so's I won't have to shoot the sheriff if he catches me, and I'll show up finally in Denver."

Out of the corner of his eye Cassidy had seen a suspicious move. Jimmy Lawton had sneaked the jug to his own horse.

"No yuh don't!" yelped Cassidy, jerking out his Colt in a businesslike way and leaping forward to regain the jug. "Over my dead body is the only way you'll get away with that whisky."

Jimmy wisely first surrendered the jug and then attempted to argue. "Cassidy, you shouldn't have that. You're drunk right now."

"You're a danged liar!" retorted Cassidy. "I'm a heart-broken man, tha's all."

"Now, listen."

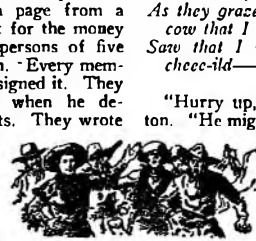
"Listen yourself," Cassidy blurted out. "Did you ever win nearly a quarter of a million dollars in one night—and then discover that you're so darned honest that you'd hafta give it back where it belongs?"

"Well, no," began Jimmy, grinning.

"Then shut up!" snapped Cassidy. Carrying the jug and a mournful look he walked toward his mule. A minute later he had disappeared up a narrow canyon. But his voice, a doleful wail, came echoing back:

"For my care, last night, by no sleep beguiled,
In the fair dream light, my cows upon me smiled,
As they grazed through the dew, every cow that I knew,
Saw that I was a sleepy and weary cheee-ild——"

"Hurry up, boys," said Jimmy Lawton. "He might sing some more."



BACK-FIRE

By Wilbur Hall

Author of "Shotguns at Sycamore Flat," etc.

Whit Walton knew the stern issue before him when red terror swept the timbered hills. In the path of the flames he faced it with a courage few could summon.

IN A quiet corner of McPherson's Whit came unexpectedly on Sarah Macken. She was never out of his thoughts; everything he did and had and was he had dedicated to her long since, in spite of the hatred borne him by her stepfather and the two sullen, furtive half-brothers. Whit's long, good humored face reddened at sight of the girl. For a moment, before she saw him, he stood feasting his eyes on her slight frame, her healthy color, the long lashes that shaded her gray eyes under her coiled corn colored hair. She fingered a piece of plum red silk, wistfully. Unconscious of an audience she raised the stuff and held it across her bosom, turning to get its effect in a flyspecked mirror McPherson kept beyond the millinery counter.

Impulsively Whit Walton swung up behind her, catching both her hands in his and holding her prisoner. "That's the sort of dresses I'd buy you, Sarah," he said hoarsely.

For just a breath she let herself relax in his arms, then she struggled free. "You mustn't, Whit. I—I can't." The girl avoided his eyes, returned the bolt of silk to its place. "You only make it harder for me when you talk that way."

An angry color deepened the red in his sunburned cheeks. "Do you hate me, too?" he asked. "Why does Crum hate me? The boys, too?" It was an old problem, with no answer. They had hated his father before him, and old Delos Walton had died without understanding that enmity of his neighbors. Whit sighed. "It doesn't matter, Sarah," he said gently. "I don't mean to pester you."

"I'd better go," she said dully.

"All right," Whit said. Then, "But I want to ask you one thing Sarah. Frank Grove says you sometimes take the night watch in the fire tower. Is that so?"

"Why, yes, Whit."

"Because you want to?"

"No. Oh, no; I don't want to. I'm afraid of the stairs. And the lookout rocks so in the wind." She shivered.

The tower was a skeleton of steel sixty feet high that stood above Whit Walton's Sunnybank Ranch, on the highest point in the west end of the county. It had been erected by the State four years earlier to accommodate a fire warden who stayed there summers to keep watch over the great spread of mountain and timber land of the region. For the first two years Whit himself had been the watchman, then some political arrangement had resulted in his discharge to make room for Dirk Crum, Sarah's shiftless half-brother. The new appointment had amazed the countryside, who knew Dirk for the most untrustworthy youth in it; but Whit himself had asked no questions and made no complaint. Now, however, he was distressed and angered at this latest development. The steep, open flight of steel stairs, doubling back and forth on themselves in the dizzying height of the tower were dangerous for Sarah. The night watch in that swaying lookout at

the top would try the nerves of many strong men.

"You hate it, Sarah. No wonder! It's a man's job. Dirk has no right to send you up there."

"It's easier to go than it is to have them nagging me."

"Sarah. Why don't you leave it all? Why can't you take me—?"

She checked him. "I have to go, Whit. I'm expected home."

She slipped by him and away. For a while he stood musing, swallowing his anger against the ne'er-do-well stepfather and those two mysterious sons.

The Crums were making money. It did not come through any increased labor on their part, or from their neglected fields and half starved herds. The Bodega country said the Crums were handling smuggled liquor, brought in to their place on the cove of Half Shell Bay and moved on to the city up Deep Canyon and the highway. Plainly Dirk Crum had not taken the fire wardenship through necessity. Why else?

Whit shrugged uncomfortably. He turned and picked up the bolt of plum colored stuff Sarah Macken had been coveting, and when he could find a clerk, bought enough of it for a dress pattern. With this and his own week's supplies in his wagon he started driving homeward.

He became conscious on the way of a sullen, still heat that was settling on the evening under a heavy, lead gray sky. It was good forest fire weather, Whit thought. This turned his mind again to the Crums; suddenly he realized that, if the three surly men at Half Shell Bay were, indeed, liquor smugglers, the watch tower of the warden would serve as an admirable lookout against the approach of enemies, whether whisky thieves or Federal officers. The suspicion dovetailed with many things Whit had heard or imagined. It was with difficulty that he could keep his anger down when he thought of that gentle, frightened girl in such a den and under such a regime as old Jake Crum's.

Nor was he to be quit of the tribe that evening, it appeared. As he turned his team off the highway into the hill road that led up to Sunnybank, he looked down to a shelf below, on the fork of his road that led through Deep Canyon to Half Shell Bay, and saw there a group of hard looking men with two motor trucks and a touring car, and Dolph Crum, the elder of the two brothers, among them. Voices came up to him thick with liquor; one of the group glanced to the road, raised a bottle, and boisterously invited Whit to come down and sample its contents.

Dolph Crum spoke in a shrill, hateful voice. "Knock him off'n the seat with it, Meggs."

The drinker laughed, swung his arm, and hurled the bottle. It struck the wagon bed and was shattered, some of the liquor splashing into Whit's face. He steadied the team, which shied wide, then he stopped them. "Your camp fire's in a bad place there, Crum," he said, restraining his impatience and speaking quietly.

Crum, with an insolent laugh, kicked the burning sticks, which flew into the tinder dry weeds and started a dozen feeble tongues of flame. "You ain't fire warden now," he scoffed.

Whit had already jumped from his seat. He went plunging down to their shelf of ground and stamped out the spreading ring of fire. "Build on that bare spot, Dolph," he said sternly, "or don't build at all."

Another of the party slouched forward, weavingly. "Who t' hell ask'd you t' butt in?" he demanded with truculence.

"I own an orchard in this canyon," Whit replied, determined to keep the peace if he could. "Dolph Crum knows better than to take chances with fire on a sultry evening like this, in September."

"We don't need any of your jaw," the belligerent party announced. He clawed out at Whit in a clumsy attempt to slap him.

Whit promptly knocked him endwise under a truck. "I can stand just so much," he observed. "Any other customers?"

One of them reached for a heavy stick; another rose and began fumbling under the seat of a truck. But Dolph Crum intervened, in a panic. "Lay off, you guys," he stammered. "Ain't you got no brains?" To Whit he said hastily, "I'll move the fire. Get on your way, for God's sake!" And he began to shift the smoking kindlings to the ring of blackened stones Whit had indicated.

The orchardist faced them for a moment, feeling, in his present mood, a little disappointed that they had not

forced a fight on him. He gave them a short goodnight, however, and went back to his wagon.

NIGHT closed in swiftly, close, hot, heavy. A puff of wind struck him and he turned toward the north. It was a hot, electric blast such as came occasionally in this late summer time; if it continued it would suck up all traces of moisture and leave the country prey to any chance tongue of flame that might lick it. The breeze dried the skin, too. Whit began to feel his cheeks draw, and his lips and nostrils burn. Turning into the home place and the neat five room house he had finished that spring, always hoping that it would become Sarah's house, and always disappointed, he felt restless and a little irritable. After he had put up the team and finished his chores he put together a sketchy supper, but he could eat little. He tried in vain to read, recognized that he was too high strung to sleep, and decided to get a lantern and his shovel and walk up the hill to finish the irrigation work on his young orchard. As always the task absorbed him, for he loved Sunnybank and relished the labor it exacted. He felt better; he forgot the Crum men and thought only of the time when his patience and affection would win Sarah Macken from their untidy house and doubtful practices.

The work led him gradually upward, following the contoured ditch lines. The hot wind, which forced its blasts through his thin clothing and scorched his skin, suddenly brought him the unmistakable odor of wood smoke. Beyond the next rise he thought he discerned a dull glow. He stumbled that way, broke into a run. He breasted the higher slope.

Toward him from the northeast, driven by the wind and licking fiercely at the underbrush, came a fire. It was running forward and sidewise with a great smoke, leaping and flashing and shooting its sparks on before it under the lash of the wind. Even as he watched, the advance line of the fire jumped the Guinness Road and its roar in the young pines could be heard faintly. With a rush the body of the flames poured over the crest, spreading on every side, its heat sucking in the air from the valley and fanning the holocaust.

Even as Whit turned to run for the house he had oriented himself. Beyond question the fire had started from that camp of Dolph Crum's rowdies. And it was sweeping up the hill at a twenty mile an hour pace straight for the orchards and little ranches in Deep Canyon. But, except for him and his neighbors, that was not the worst. Once in the canyon it would take a bitter fight to check it; once past the canyon it would be in the redwoods, the twenty thousand acres of them that lay to the south, and would almost certainly doom El Mar and Rincon and all the mountain camps, lodges and hotels between, as well as the railroad to El Mar. It would, in short, prove just the devastating catastrophe which the State had feared exactly here and to ward against which it had built the Bodega fire tower. Where was the warden of that tower now?

Whit reached his telephone breathless. He could not raise the fire tower. The telephone operator in Bodega cut in. "There was another call this evening for the tower," she said, "but I couldn't get any answer."

"Let it go now," Whit said. "Listen, Miss Ames. There's a bad fire burning south from my road. I'm going up to the tower to get on the private wire to headquarters and the ranger's stations. Will you get everybody you can to turn out from Bodega and Smart's? And you'd better call the folks in this canyon, too. I'll have to leave that part of it to you."

"Go ahead, Mr. Walton."

Whit dropped the receiver and ran for the barn. By this time the angry red of the sky was plain to see. A sick terror caught him by the throat. There was one way to save the timber to the south. If Deep Canyon and everything in it were sacrificed the fire might be checked. And that would mean that his home, Sunnybank——

The probability caused him to turn aside—to take time to open his chicken yard gates, to drive all his horses and cows into the orchard and close the doors against them, and to lift the traps of his pigeon houses. When these things were done he jumped to the bare back of his sorrel and turned him up the hill road at a gallop.

At the fire tower he called, but with little hope of an answer. He ran for the stairs, mounting the skeleton frame rapidly. The wind increased as he reached the top until it was like a gale, reeking with smoke and carrying a fine ash before it. Whit pushed on the trap-door leading into the little four walled platform from the stairs. It gave slightly as he bent his back and heaved. Some inert body rolled from the door and Whit clambered up and in, switching on a light. At his feet lay Dirk Crum, dead drunk and helpless. An empty bottle rolled under foot and there was another, partly filled, on the map table. All this he saw at a glance. He reached for the telephone at once, and gazed anxiously out to the northeast.

The fire was beginning to lick the top of the ridge of the north wall of Deep Canyon now. Once in the canyon it would burn more slowly, perhaps, feeding down grade, until it reached the creek. But there it would leap into the redwoods that began on the south bank, and there would be no checking it then until the great sweep of undulating uplands, thick with beautiful timber, the pride of the central part of the State, was a charred waste, and all the camps and resorts and summer homes destroyed. In the distance, too, Whit could see the gleaming beads that were the electric lights of El Mar and Rincon. Whatever happened the fire *must not* cross Deep Canyon!

A voice on the telephone answered. Whit spoke distinctly. "This is the Bodega Tower," he said. "There's a bad fire where the highway crosses Deep Canyon, below Bodega. It's heading toward the redwoods."

"How long has it been burning?"

"Probably an hour or two."

"Probably? What the devil do you mean, Crum?"

"This isn't Crum. He's—sick."

"Who is it, then?"

"Walton. I used to be the warden here."

"All right, Walton. You take charge. We'll send you help as soon as we can get there; right now it's up to you."

"But I'm not warden now. I have no authority——"

"Use Crum's badge. Take all the authority you need, and the State will back you up."

"All right."

Whit stooped, threw Dirk Crum over and took from his vest the metal shield of office he wore. He called Bodega then—the telephone operator had started a small force and would send more. But they would be slow in arriving, because John Grove had telephoned that the fire had jumped the highway and was burning on both sides, temporarily closing the Bodega route.

"Mr. Grove is fighting along the highway. He thinks he can handle the blaze to the east."

"Thanks, Miss Ames. Keep them coming."

As he started down through the trap-door again Whit felt the superheated breath of the furnace of flame on his face. There was a bare possibility that the fire would reach the tower, and very roughly he dragged the besotted fire warden out and half carried him down the steep skeleton stairs. At the bottom, a little angrily, he soused the upper part of Dirk Crum's body in a barrel of water, holding the youth there until he began to struggle violently. Whit let him up.

"Damn you, Walton," Crum mouthed, partly sobered; "I'll fill you full of holes for that!"

"Do you see the fire?" Whit asked sternly, pointing. "It may come this way. Take care of yourself." He jumped for his horse.

Crum cried out. "Fire! My God, where is it? I was—was drunk. I got to telephone——"

"You're about two hours late, Crum," Whit exclaimed, giving away to his anger. "Your precious brother got drunk and started the fire at the highway this evening—you were drunk here, on the job, and let it get into the canyon. Now you can stay here and burn or you can run away or you can fight fire. I'm through with you."

He set off at a gallop again, straight for the Crum place.

WHIT had already decided on this move, because he knew that the other neighbors in the canyon were already out by this time, conducting their own campaigns. The Crums would do nothing unless forced and there were always a dozen or more hanging about the house. Old Jake Crum would certainly not take kindly to orders from a Walton. But this was

no time for diplomacy and thinking of the two worthless sons of the bitter old men, the two who were mainly responsible for breeding this menace, Whit was reckless of their attitude. His sweating horse bore him into the Crum homestead, where smoke was beginning to swirl, where the heat was oppressive, and where the white ash was already sifting to the ground.

Despite these alarming signals, however, there was no one about; some pressing business held the men of the place within doors. Whit's mount cantered around a motor truck, another, a touring car. He uttered an exclamation. Dolph Crum and his party of hoodlums had come on from the highway after making a brief camp. Why? But Whit could not delve into enigmas now. He pulled up.

A high, shrill voice, that of old Jake Crum, came to his ears. "If I ever get my hands on you for this, you yellow dog, I'll break you in two! Hijacking me—your own father!"

Whit heard the taunting, throaty laugh of Dolph in reply, indistinguishable words. He swung from his horse.

His own name was called, sharply, insistently. "Whit! Whit! Come back!"

Sarah Macken came running up from the shadow of the house.

"I mustn't waste time, Sarah," he said. "There's a bad fire——"

"I know. But you mustn't go into the house. There's bad trouble there!"

She caught his arm and he felt her trembling. "What is it, Sarah? What's scared you so?"

"Dad—Jake Crum has been running whisky through here for over a year. He and Dolph had a quarrel a while back; now Dolph has come—he's turned on Dad. Go somewhere else for help, Whit."

"There's no time." Whit took a step forward. The girl threw her arms around him, clinging to him desperately to hold him back. "Sarah, let me go. The fire's heading for the big timber."

"What does it matter? What's a fire? You'll get killed in there."

"No, I won't. Don't worry about that, dear."

He pulled her hands away from his neck. She ran beside him. "Have you got a gun?"

"No."

"Then wait for me!"

She plunged ahead of him. Before he reached the steps of the porch she was there, holding out a heavy rifle. In her other hand she carried a revolver.

"I don't need—" Whit began.

"Take it," she whispered, tensely.

Angry voices had been coming from the house; they rose now to a torrent of bitter words. Whit crept along the front wall and peered in the window.

A crowd of men were in the room. Old Jake Crum leaned over a table mouthing hysterical imprecations at Dolph. Behind him stood Serro, a Portuguese hand, in his eye a gleam of anger.

The man named Meggs, sneering, reached across the table to push the old man back in his seat. Before Whit could move, the Portuguese cursed and a knife flashed. Instantly a shot echoed in the room with a crash and the Portuguese screamed as he fell back clutching his arm.

There followed a brief scuffle, but the other hands recoiled before the menace of drawn revolvers. One of the gang coolly ejected an empty cartridge from a rifle and replaced it. Collapsed in his chair, his face now purple and his eyes set, old Jake Crum sat unheeding.

"All right, boys; they'll be good," said Meggs. "We got to get rolling." He turned on old Jake. "Cough up them keys, now," he snarled, advancing a step.

Crum did not move. He sat there, staring horribly into space.

His son went closer. "He's shot!" Dolph cried.

"Shot hell! It's the Portygee that's shot. Your old man has had a fit. That's all. Frisk him. Get the keys. We ain't got all night."

Dolph reached out, timidly. But his father continued to sprawl in his chair without moving. Gaining courage the scapegrace put a hand in the stricken man's pockets, presently brought out three keys tied together on a dirty string. "That's them," he said, jumping back with relief. "Come on."

Outside Whit Walton lowered his rifle into the open window. "Hands up!" he cried, sharply.

The whisky thieves swung about, one dropping his revolver, another ducking, the man Meggs blazing out at the window, point blank. His bullet whistled by. Without a breath of hesitation Whit

shot Meggs through the hand, with deadly aim. "Put your guns on the table—quick!"

The men in the room were looking out of the light into darkness, seeing only Whit Walton and someone else, and two leveled guns. They were trapped. They obeyed orders.

Whit stepped through the low window into the room. "Turn out, now," he said. "Dolph and his gang started a fire near the highway and it's coming this way fast. You're going to fight it."

Dolph Crum swore. "It's a lie," he cried. "Where'd you get that star, you spy? Where's Dirk?"

"He was drunk and asleep while the fire you started was getting out of control beyond the canyon. I'm acting warden, but if I weren't, you'd fight fire. Get started."

They filed out, uttering cries of astonishment and terror when they saw that spark-shot pall of smoke above them. Only old Jake Crum remained motionless, still staring into space, his mouth sagging horribly. Sarah moved by Whit's side, and Dolph Crum, catching sight of her, spat curses at her. But he was herded with the rest.

"Go by the barns, Dolph," Whit ordered. "You'll need shovels and sacks." He spoke to Sarah without taking his eyes from his prisoners. "Get back, dear. I think Crum has had a stroke. And there may be trouble out here."

"Mrs. Ramirez will take care of him," Sarah said, simply. "I'm going with you."

"You can't!"

"I must."

She kept pace with him sturdily, her face white and her lips set, the big revolver clutched in her hand.

IN AN hour Whit saw that direct attack on the rushing fire was hopeless. The whole canyon was like a tinder box; as fast as one little stretch was won the fire was flanking them.

"No use, boys," he shouted, suddenly. "Come on back. We'll go down the hill."

They needed no urging. They abandoned their tools and the scorched sacks and fled incontinently. Whit herded them like sheep, with Sarah Macken keeping close to him.

"This is far enough," Whit shouted. "We'll start a backfire."

Dolph Crum stared at him, open mouthed. "Here? It'll run up the hill—take your standing barley and your house!"

"I know that. Go ahead."

But the slow wits of the Crum youth now perceived another fact. "No, by God!" he screamed. He raised his hand, pointing. "The old store house will go, too. There's fifty thousand dollars worth of—of stuff in it."

"Start your fire," Whit replied, unemotionally.

Despite his threatening rifle they grouped, calling to one another, shouting protests. For the moment both old Jake Crum's crew and Dolph's city hijackers made common cause. One of the gangsters suddenly leaped at Whit, smothering his rifle. The others ran desperately. Dolph, passing, kicked out savagely and Whit caught the blow in the stomach and went down, his hoodlum atop of him. Sarah Macken rushed up, her face like death. She raised her revolver and twice she brought it down on the head of the rum thief. He fell aside and Whit leaped up.

Before he could recover his breath and sense of direction, however, they both heard a motor started, its roar rising above the noise of the approaching flames. A second engine turned over, barking sharply. The two, with the men clambering aboard, were turned up the hill from the Crum house toward the old wooden barn on the road above.

"Stay here, Sarah," Whit said, suddenly. "I'll be back."

He ran across the fields, striving and staggering up the hill. As he vaulted a fence a grape stake broke in his hand, and he held to it, throwing his rifle aside and clubbing the seasoned redwood cudgel, reckless now of anything the gangs might try. At the storehouse he plunged into the group, striking right and left. Two or three of them fled, promising to come back with their guns. Dolph Crum stumbled and fell down, cowering, his hands up.

"I quit, Walton," he quavered.

"Get up, then; take that sledge there. Come on."

He found an old ax himself. With the sweat filling his mouth and eyes, his clothes scorched and his hands badly burned—with only his nerve to drive him he flew at the heap of boxes, casks and demijohns that filled the old build-

ing. In a moment the rotten wooden floor was saturated; alcohol fumes choked him. He lighted and dropped a match, another.

"All right, Crum. Get out."

The floor caught instantly and the flames ran through the place in a breath. Before they had stumbled away to a safe distance there was a sharp explosion, followed by a cannonade. The storehouse burst with flames. The burning liquor was thrown along the dry grass by the roadside. A piece of blazing wood hurtled through the air and fell into Whit's ripe barley, across the fence, and a thin ribbon of smoke rose and thickened. The flames ran along the uncocked windrows; the whole field became engulfed. The fire raced, whispering, up the hill. It reached his home fence; leaped it; ran through his yards. Through a rift in the thick smoke that swirled behind it Whit saw the little house catch, roof and walls almost at once.

But presently, as he stood weakly there, leaning on his ax, his breath sobbing in his seared, racked lungs, the new fire kindled at the old storehouse met the forest fire that was sweeping down. Their combined gases flared high, making the whole countryside lurid. They burned together—a terrible union. Licking out for new fuel, they found themselves despoiled. On the lower hillside was only the smoking stretch of the fields; above nothing but the red hot embers of the wildfire that had come down so far. The flames sank down. They flickered. They burned out, and only smouldering heaps, charring trees, glowing coals, and the ruined heaps that had been Whit's house and barns remained.

Whit turned wearily. Sarah Macken was standing a rod away, watching him. He smiled at her.

They both heard shouting and turned to see, coming down the canyon, a crazy automobile overloaded with men blackened and seared by a heroic stand made above. The Grants, Ramazzini, old Joe Nickerson and his boys, and a group of men from Bodega. Whit waved to them.

Sarah gave a little cry, pointing the other way. "In time!" she gasped.

Whit looked down on the Crum place. Before it stood a knot of men—the rum runners and the whisky thieves of Dolph's companioning. They had recovered their guns and had been gathering together for a charge up the hill on Whit, feverish with hatred. Now they wavered.

Sarah and Whit saw Dirk Crum run down the hill and into their party. In the lights of the motor trucks they could see the two brothers come together in a fight. Dirk was clubbed from behind by someone. There were shouts. The city crew ran for the trucks, clambered up, roared off toward the bay on the rocky road that would lead them southward into the darkness. They heard Dirk crying at them, screaming curses at Dolph for a sneak and a traitor. Presently a lantern bobbed along the road to the beach; it was carried into a boat and two or three men pushed off and began to row away.

There was silence, the silence of desolation and death, on the Crum homestead.

Whit turned to Sarah. "You can't stay here now," he said. He stretched a hand to her.

She flung herself into his arms. "Dad's dead," she said. "I came past the house. The boys—they won't dare come back. I'm—left alone."

"Did you, too, hate me?" Whit asked, incoherently. He was holding her close, forgetting that he was blackened, grimed, sick with physical exhaustion.

"Hate you?" she repeated. "I always loved you. But if I'd gone to you the Crums would have thought we would give them up. They would have killed you. That was why——"

"Oh, that was it?" Suddenly he laughed. He lifted her free of the ground and kissed her, hungrily. "Well, I haven't much to give you. Not even that purplish kind of cloth you were looking at in McPherson's. I bought it for you."

"Whit!" she cried. This simple thing choked her. She stroked his face, gently, like a child tired by weeping. "But, dear," she said, "you can have all Jake Crum's land if you want it. And you will be fire warden again. And all the county—all the State—will know——"

"I need nothing," he said. "I have riches—riches. I have you, Sarah, haven't I—little Sarah?"

MANACLED MILLIONS

By William H. Hamby

Author of "The Mayor of Black Butte," etc.

Part III

Soledad, the "Mountain of a Thousand Tongues," looked down upon a fascinating race for fortune—one in which the colors were the black of sinister intrigue, and the red of outright murder.

CHAPTER XXII

STRANGE GENEROSITY

LA PALOMA was turning out silver again. Lafe had picked his men one at a time, with a view to their fighting qualities as much as to their skill with pick and drill. The mine had been in operation for two weeks, and at last he had a full crew and everything was going smoothly. Two young dare-devils from Colorado slept in the tent by the mouth of the tunnel, while Lafe, with a China boy as cook, had moved into Pedro's cabin.

For the first ten days, Lafe had been on a constant tension, watching at every turn for intrigue or attack. But nothing had happened, and no matter how imminent a danger may be, after a certain length of expectancy the fear of it wears away.

After sundown Tuesday evening, Lafe started down to Bingham alone. It was the first time since his release that he had risked a night trip to town; but on this evening lonesomeness overcame his caution.

No matter how busy he was, Lafe could never escape that spot in his heart that longed for close, intimate friendship with someone that thought a lot of him. His whole starved youth craved appreciation and warm personal contacts.

Tonight the road down the gulch was entirely deserted; the darkness seemed a little thicker, and the stars more remote than ever before. Lafe was thinking bitterly of Miriam. Thoughts of her touched the sorest spot in his heart. He had reasoned that she had a right to hate him because he had occasioned the death of her brother; but the fact that she should appear often in the company of his bitterest enemy, Adolph Blucker, he could not forgive. Surely she was not so utterly innocent and unsophisticated as not to see the sort of man he was. And really, did she have any right to hate?

"Oh, hell!" he burst out aloud, grabbed up a rock and flung it violently against the wall of the canyon.

A moment later something slipped from a thicket of willows, and moved toward him. Lafe's hand was on his gun in an instant, but he did not fire. Even in the thick dusk, he saw the figure was a woman's.

"Oh, Señor Hason."

"Maria!" Lafe seized both her hands. "Where did you come from?"

"I hide, and watch for señor."

"Maria," he said, still holding her hands, "you saved my life by bringing Diego to my room."

"No, no!" She was surprised. "I no see Diego. I no bring heem."

"You didn't! Then who did?"

She shook her head. "I no know." Then releasing her hands and snatching a paper from her bosom, "A letter from

Pedro. He say you give me money to come Mexico."

Lafe took the message, and emptied his pockets into Maria's hand. "I haven't much with me, but if you'll come tomorrow night, I'll give you plenty."

"*Gracias*, señor, eet ees enough. I go." And she darted back into the willows as the sound of other feet came up the road.

BLUCKER had been moving cautiously since his attorney had given him that scare about the Mexican's confession. He saw that not only was he entangled with Muck, but also with the tools Muck employed.

They had, he understood, taken steps which eliminated Diego; but Muck was still on his hands. He could not get rid of Muck now, no matter how badly he wanted to be free of him; and anyway, Blucker needed him. If one must trust any man to carry out certain irregular details of his ambitions, Muck perhaps was as good as any. He doubled Muck's wages, and restrained himself from some of the withering abuse he wanted to heap upon him over his failure to get rid of Lafe Jason.

At every turn that damned Jason had stumbled across his path! When Blucker had first wanted to search the mine, Jason had been in the way. After he decided on deeper measures to remove Pedro, again Jason was in the way. Then after Pedro was wiped out of the plot, and they had Jason headed for the gallows, along came that cursed Mexican with his confession, and Jason was loose again!

But the last drop of Blucker's poisoned wrath was distilled when he, about to step in and take the La Paloma on the forfeiture clause of Pedro's lease, again was balked by that cursed meddler reopening the mine. And because of the confession and other information which Attorney Sample held, Blucker felt it would not be safe to take immediate steps to remove Jason as they had Pedro.

There was still another reason why he held back Nevada Muck and his gang from summary vengeance on Jason. That was Miriam Tilbury. Blucker's previous experience with women had been almost entirely with the sort that could be bought or scared into compliance with his wishes. He never before had tried to win one by gallant attentions or by exhibiting admirable traits. Miriam was as different from any other girl he had ever known as a smooth

MANACLED MILLIONS

WILLIAM H. HAMBY

Synopsis of Previous Chapters

To the mining town of Bingham, in the valley of the Great Salt Lake, young Lafe Jason comes from the Ozarks, looking for a job. He gets one with the Mexican, Pedro Mascajon, who is operating the Paloma silver mine.

A powerful mining man of Bingham, named Blucker, sends his henchman, Muck, a deputy sheriff, to spy out the value of Pedro's mine, and Lafe is able cleverly to prevent Muck's learning anything, thus earning Blucker's deadly enmity.

At the Paloma mine Lafe meets young Amos Tilbury and his sister Miriam, whose father, a Mormon, is an inventor.

Lafe, who shares a room with Amos, finds him badly beaten up, one night, by some thugs of Blucker's who had plainly mistaken Amos for Lafe. Blucker intends to get the Paloma mine, even if he has to kill both Pedro and Lafe. But Blucker's main ambition is to get Soledad Mountain. If a cheap enough process of working its low grade copper ore be found, it would be a bonanza.

Lafe's friends, Steve Johns and Jerry Dever also have their eye on Soledad, which is owned by one Joshua Waters, who, as it happens is Miriam Tilbury's grandfather. Waters has no relations with the Tilburys, however, because of his displeasure at his daughter's having married a Mormon.

Waters tells Steve he will give him and his friends an option on an interest in Soledad if his terms are met. Pedro brings home the $50,000 necessary for this venture, one night, but next day he is attacked by tools of Blucker's, and killings occur as the result of which Pedro, Lafe, and Amos Tilbury have to flee. Pedro goes his own way, but hands over to Lafe the $50,000.

Lafe gets the wounded Amos home to his parents, but Amos dies. Presently Lafe learns that the man he thought he had killed—Nevada Muck—has recovered, so he returns to Bingham.

young birch is from a decaying banana plant.

She was appallingly ignorant of the world. Doubtful speeches, insinuations and dubious proposals simply passed her by. She did not know what they meant, and took them merely as a puzzling sort of jest. But she had brains. She could follow almost any sort of reasoning; she could comprehend business details, and she seemed fair minded and honest.

The oftener Blucker saw her, the more he wanted her. There were only two things in the world he wanted more—money and power. And, while Miriam had referred to Jason only once or twice, Blucker had gathered the impression that if it should come to her that he had smashed Jason, it might influence her unfavorably. Hence, he had ordered Muck to let Jason alone at present. In fact, Muck had blundered so badly that Blucker had decided to take the handling of Jason into his own hands.

That afternoon, Blucker, with Miriam in the roadster beside him, took the winding road that led up the high mountain ridge back of the Pinto and west of Mount Soledad. The road looped back and forth, ascending gradually until it reached the crest.

"What is that?" Miriam pointed to what looked like a huge wooden caterpillar that climbed up from the south, crossed the mountainside, and ran down toward the northwest.

"That is the flume of the Mid-Mountain Smelting Company," replied Blucker, stopping his car on the very top of the mountain. "It syphons the water up from the river down yonder, and delivers a stream six feet in diameter to the smelter nearly twenty miles away."

Miriam took off her hat and smoothed the thick dark hair back from her forehead. "Is that Soledad?" She pointed to the lower mountain to the east.

"Yes."

"I hear they have started to open a mine there, and build a mill," she remarked casually.

"A fool project," he scowled. That was another of the annoyances that had angered him the past two weeks. "It won't amount to anything. A young fellow named Steve Johns is back of it. He has been hanging around here two or three years—never accomplished anything. Hasn't the experience or the capital for a job like that. They are merely getting Joshua Waters tied up so he'll lose everything he's got. Too bad, too, after holding on as long as he has."

"But if the mountain is not worth anything," she said, "how can he lose it by them trying it?"

"It is worth something," he replied. "A great mining company with millions of capital and great engineers, might make something of it. By the way," he changed the subject, "you know the fellow Jason that worked for Pedro—the one who got your brother killed?"

She winced, and looked off so he could not see her face. "Yes."

"I have heard," he said with a judicial tone, "that he really is not as bad as people thought. I discovered some things about him before the trial that changed my opinion. In fact, I caused the case against him to be dismissed. Told the prosecuting attorney I did not think he was guilty."

Blucker stopped and extracted a cigarette from his vest pocket and lighted it.

"I like to see a young man have a fair chance. I wish the first time you see this Jason you would tell him to come and see me. I've got a place for him in the Pinto where he can really make good if he tries hard."

"Thank you." She did not know why she thanked him, but somehow it was such a generous thing for him to do. "I'll get word to him."

Chapter XXIII

LAFE MAKES TWO VISITS

A MESSENGER brought Lafe the note. He was superintending the loading of a flock of trucks with silver ore, and did not stop to read it until the last truck was headed down the gulch road.

The message contained only three typewritten lines, and ran:

Mr. Blucker wishes to see Lafe Jason at the offices of the Pinto Mine on important business.

"Who sent this?" He turned to the messenger.

"Mr. Blucker." The boy gave the reply as instructed.

"All right." Lafe clicked his jaw. "Tell him I will be there at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

Lafe entered the general office of the Pinto Mine at exactly four o'clock. Blucker's secretary looked relieved, as though he had not really expected him.

"I'll see if Mr. Blucker can see you." The secretary went into the inner office, and returned a moment later. "Have a seat. He'll see you directly. He's busy just now."

"So am I." Lafe turned and started toward the outer door.

"Wait." The secretary was worried. "I'll see if he can't see you right now." He hastened back into the private office. He was back in a moment and nodded for Lafe to go in. "He'll see you now."

Blucker was leaning over his desk absorbed in an elaborate cost sheet, as Lafe entered. He waited a moment, but only a moment, before turning to his visitor.

"Have a chair," he nodded. For the first time he connected Jason with the audacious greenhorn who had stalked into his office months ago and asked for a job. He recalled that he had been perhaps a little more curt than usual on that occasion, but it caused him no uneasiness. Fellows like this were used to snubs, and he would be all the more flattered at a little attention now. Lafe sat straight, his head up, his right hand busy wrapping and unwrapping a piece of string around his left forefinger. Blucker suppressed a smile at this. The fellow was scared and nervous. He would not be hard to manage.

"You work at the Paloma Mine?"

"How did you guess it?"

"The manager of the mill who handles your ore told me how much you had increased the output."

"Are you interested in La Paloma?"

"Oh, no." Blucker indicated that the Paloma was too small to interest him. "But I am interested in men——"

"Even Mexicans?"

Blucker could not mistake the insinuation, and his mouth twisted sardonically.

"When I'm the boss, yes. But I never work for them."

Lafe got the thrust. "Nor for what they have?" he came back.

Blucker felt that he was running into some sort of a mental obstruction that was neither muddled nor soft, but he hid his discomfiture.

"From what the mill man said of you," he went on, "it struck me you are too useful a man to be wasted on a one horse mine like the Mexican's. I can give you a job at the Pinto where you will have a chance to do something for yourself."

"And also have something done for me," added Jason.

"I can start you in at $175 a month."

"Almost as much as a deputy sheriff," Lafe remarked.

"Jason," Blucker's hate was about to override his caution, "I asked you to come to my office that I might offer you a job with one of the greatest mining corporations in America. It is a job that any sensible, ambitious young man would jump at. You seem to take it as an occasion for insinuation. I do not know what you mean—and care a damn' sight less. The point is, do you want the job or do you not?"

"Blucker," Jason's brown eyes lost their mildness, and his tone took on that cool, incisive drawl of a mountaineer about to shoot, "thanks to your murder gang, I have control of the La Paloma. That is my job."

Blucker arose. For once his almost absolute, cold self control was gone. His muddy eyes looked murder. "You damned, insolent fool," he said hotly, "you don't know who you are talking to."

"No?" Lafe's tone was drawlingly ironical. "Then come on up to the La Paloma some evening, and we'll get acquainted."

DURING his boyhood, there were times when Lafe would be seized by a feeling that he had to do something—and he would have to. These impulses might be foolish and ridiculous, but he simply had to carry them through. Once the visiting preacher was discussing at the dinner table the folly of other religious denominations, and the impression came over Lafe that he had to interrupt by naming the Presidents backward. He struggled with the feeling for five long minutes. It would be dreadfully embarrassing and bring down on him severe reproof, but, no matter, it had to be done. The visiting preacher's mouth

opened to quote a verse on baptism, stayed open, while Lafe trailed from Roosevelt back to George Washington.

He had never been able to explain these impulses. He did not know what would happen if he failed to obey one of them, for he had never failed to obey. He could not. No doubt it was subconscious will, released by some errant whim.

Going down from the Pinto Mine to Bingham after the interview with Blucker, that old impression came over him. It was different from the usual well ordered determination, in that it came suddenly and without any reason—simply puffed into the mind otherwise occupied. It came this time in the form of words—a mental command past any reason or explanation—"You've got to see Miriam!"

For weeks he had carried about a secret grievance against Miriam. But he marched down into Bingham and headed straight for the Paris Café.

Miriam looked up from the cash register as Lafe suddenly appeared before her. For an instant she stared questioningly at his stern, set face. "What is the matter, Lafe?" She blushed hotly at the use of his name.

"I want to talk to you." He breathed as though under great stress.

"I have to work late, tonight." She glanced down at his hands. He was rapidly wrapping and unwrapping the corner of his handkerchief around his left forefinger.

"How late?"

"Until about eleven."

"And do you go out on these streets alone at eleven o'clock?" he demanded.

"Mr. Gregory said he would take me home," she answered.

"Tell him he need not bother. I'll be here at eleven." And with that he stalked out with an air of defiance.

It was very nearly midnight when Lafe and Miriam left the café together. Everything was closed except the gambling places. They walked for a block in silent restraint.

"What is it you wanted to talk to me about?" Miriam was the first to speak.

"Nothing." Lafe felt a personal resentment at Miriam for allowing that Greek to keep her at work until near midnight. Any girl, no matter how sophisticated, ought to know better. "I didn't want you to go home with that damned Greek," he snapped. "He isn't fit company for you."

"And are you?" she countered.

"Probably not, but at least you are safe with me."

"I am sorry I said that." She laid her hand on his arm as they crossed the street. If Lafe had relented then, she perhaps would have told him the whole story. But he remained glumly silent for half a block.

"Are you doing well with the mine?"

"Yes."

"Do you think Pedro is dead?"

He did not answer.

They were almost to Miriam's two-room apartment, and she made one more effort to break the ice. "I've heard a good deal of talk that Pedro was not really to blame—that somebody was trying to get his mine. What do you think?"

"I don't think. I know."

"Who?"

Again he refused to reply.

Miriam's rooms were at the end of the long, one story frame structure containing a half dozen two room apartments. They had reached the steps. She turned and looked back at the crooked street, and beyond at Mount Soledad looming darkly against the starry sky.

"Miriam, you are Joshua Waters' granddaughter. Your mother was the daughter he cast off because she married a Mormon."

"Yes," the reply was almost whispered. "How did you know?"

"I guessed it from your look that night when we entered the café; and I knew it when you sent him that note. Why did you do that?"

"I didn't want him cheated."

"Why do you think I am a rascal and a traitor to my friends?" he asked hotly.

She stood swinging her foot, lightly tapping the wooden step with the toe of her shoe. "I wonder if I do."

"Who told you that we were going to cheat your grandfather? Blucker?"

She did not reply.

He started away angrily, but seeing she remained standing on the step he turned back. "Miriam, if Steve Johns and Jerry Dever and I succeed it will mean millions for your grandfather. There is a risk in it, but no trickery. And the risk is all ours."

"I hope you will succeed, Lafe."

"We have got to," he said fiercely.

"Don't you think," she suggested timidly, "that Mr. Blucker could help you?"

"Blucker!" The scorn in his tone was blasting. "Good night."

CHAPTER XXIV

"WE'LL HAVE TO CLOSE"

ONE day a very shrewd, independent wholesale coffee dealer in Chicago, on the eve of an outbreak of one of our periodic trade wars, was called into consultation by three fellow independent dealers. "Do you know," they said, badly agitated, "that a huge coffee trust is forming this week, and they'll squeeze us small companies dry?"

The shrewd one shook his head. "Gentlemen, I am not scared of the competition of the biggest trust in the world. The sort of competition I fear is, if one of my own lean, hungry salesmen with about four hundred dollars should start up for himself, and go after my customers."

It is that sort of fierce, personal interest, generated by unlimited ambition and very limited finance that fired Lafe Jason and Steve Johns in building their experimental mill.

Rarely did the first light of the morning sun brush the top of Soledad before Johns was on the grounds. Lafe spent the day superintending the Paloma, but every evening he came to town, and often one o'clock at night found him and Steve bent over blue prints and details of construction and endless sheets of figures.

Their first problem was water. The shoulder on which they had located their mill was near the foot of the mountain, on the southeast side. And yet it was four hundred feet above the bottom of the canyon, along which ran the creek. To get water by gravity, they would have to lay over a mile of pipe, and wind it about along the face of the mountain and across to the other side of the gulch, and thence up the wall of the narrow gorge to meet the head of the stream.

"Over half of the way," pointed out Lafe as they scrambled along the mountain side tentatively locating the water line, "it will not be on our land."

"No," said Steve, "but it is government land. Water is free and we can't hurt the land by laying a pipe on the surface. It would take about forty years to unravel enough red tape to get governmental permission to lay the pipe. Let's go ahead."

"All right," said Lafe. "If it would take forty years for us to get it to their attention, it ought to take a reasonably long time for them to discover it themselves. Anyway, it is our only chance to get water."

They made a good team; for while Steve had vastly more technical knowledge, Lafe's long habit of life in which his only resources were his own thoughts, had developed a mental ingenuity superior to his partner's. He was resourceful in experiments, and could think on every side of a problem. He might make a half dozen impractical suggestions, and then hit on exactly the right one. And Steve's technical engineering knowledge enabled him to test Lafe's idea with figures and discard the unworkable, accepting the practical ones. Jerry Dever was away most of the time scuttling for bargains in mining machinery.

One evening Jason and Steve were at the mill after all the workmen had gone. The heavy wooden framework was up, and part of the machinery in place.

"It looks good to me," Lafe said proudly. "I think you are a great mill builder, Steve."

"Thanks, you are a great help. It was a lucky day for me when you walked into Glick's. By the way, have you seen our friend Nan lately?"

"Have not seen anybody lately," replied Lafe.

"You are not very strong for the girls," Johns laughed.

"No, I guess not."

"Ever play poker?"

"No," replied Lafe.

"Great game if you know how to let it alone," commented Steve. Then as Lafe did not reply, "You don't seem to have any vices. You know a man isn't good for much without a vice or two."

"You mean," granted Lafe, "that most real men have a vice or two. But it isn't the vice that makes them worthwhile men."

"Their weakness makes them human," said Steve.

"I suppose," remarked Lafe, "that when you get your mill done, you hope

the machinery will have two or three weaknesses."

"No," laughed Steve, "I don't want any machinery to be human. Nor, on the other hand, do I want my humans to be machines. Let's go down to Glick's and I'll teach you how to play stud poker."

"All right," said Lafe, after a momentary hesitation. "It is all in the cause. I need education if I am to be a real Binghamite."

Steve suggested as they went down into the town that they have dinner first at the Paris Café.

"Not at the Paris," Lafe objected. That night when he had taken Miriam home still rankled. He had seen her only twice since, and then only in passing on the street.

"Why not? Quarreled with the cashier?" Johns poked him in the ribs with his elbow.

"Not exactly," replied Lafe.

"I eat there regularly," said Steve. "It's worth the price of a meal just to get to pay that cashier. She's some peach. And she's not so darned slow, either."

Anger unreasoningly flared up in Lafe, anger and fear. He wanted to ask Steve what he meant by Miriam not being so slow. Usually, when a fellow spoke that way of a girl it was more of a compliment to her good-fellowship, flipness, than to her character. Was Miriam being demoralized by the loose standards of the camp?

Lafe's anger at things in general and at Miriam in particular gave him a feeling of recklessness as they entered Glick's. After sauntering around to the dance hall where they met Tennessee Nan, he and Johns returned to the gambling room, and got seats at a table of stud poker.

Lafe proved an apt pupil, and also he had the proverbial beginner's luck. In half an hour the five dollar block of chips had grown into five similar stacks. Lafe was flushed and excited. Nothing is quite so thrilling as a streak of luck.

The player who sat at Lafe's right, asked between deals, "How is La Paloma getting along?"

"Fine. Turning out some good stuff."

"No trouble up there lately?"

"Not a bit."

After the first few hands, Lafe's luck did not hold up as well. At eleven o'clock he had only twenty dollars' worth of chips. Then he got an ace in the hole. On the fourth card he got another ace. All dropped out but the fellow at his right. He had a pair of kings showing. He pushed out ten dollars' worth of chips, and Lafe called him. The fellow had another king in the hole, and took the pot.

"Time for us to be in bed," said Steve. They cashed in and left.

"I'm still five dollars to the good," remarked Lafe, as they went out on the street.

"And that is awfully good for a poker game," laughed Steve. "No matter how much you like it," he admonished, "don't ever imagine it is a money making game. And never go into it with more than you can afford to lose."

"Turned exhorter yourself?" laughed Lafe. "Don't worry about me."

They said goodnight, and as Lafe started up the street toward the hotel where he stopped when detained late in town, his face grew hot, wondering again what Steve had meant by Miriam not being "so slow." Just as he started to turn in, he met one of the truckmen employed at the La Paloma.

"Hello," said the truckman. "I've been up to the mine looking for you. They told us at the mill this evening not to bring any more ore—that they couldn't handle La Paloma stuff any longer."

"Not take our ore?" Lafe saw now why things had been so quiet lately. This was a new way of attack.

The truckman told him profanely, picturesquely, what the mill man had said. "And there is no other mill in thirty miles."

"That means," said Lafe, "we'll have to close."

CHAPTER XXV

LAFE TURNS FINANCIER

LAFE and Steve spent two days talking to the mill men and interviewing lawyers. There was nothing could be done about it. The mill superintendent claimed that handling the ore for La Paloma was not profitable to them. Of course, everybody concerned knew that was a lie, but that did not help matters.

"Blucker again," said Lafe. "If we shut down he gets the mine." They

were walking up the street from Sample's office.

"Steve," Lafe turned on his partner suddenly, "how much of the machinery we are putting in could be used in milling silver ore?"

"Most of it."

"Then let's enlarge our mill. Have one part for experiments in copper, the other to handle La Paloma silver."

"It's a fine idea," said Johns, "except for one thing. It can't be done."

"Why not? The profit on handling the silver ore will help us carry on our experiments."

"It is not that," said Johns. "It would cost at least another $50,000, and we haven't got it."

"I think we can get it," Lafe said, recklessly.

"I'd like to know where."

"So would I," Lafe admitted, "but there must be somebody with money that would build a mill if we can show him it will be profitable."

"We could do that," admitted Johns.

"All right," said Lafe, "you go up to your room and begin to draw plans, and I'll start to see if I can smell out any money."

After Steve left him, Lafe stood on the corner of the street trying to think which way to go. "Doggone it," he said to himself, "this is another time I've bit off more than I can swallow." Of all the jobs he had ever tackled, this one of raising $50,000 seemed the most impossible. "I'll go see if Jerry is back," he concluded. "He'll have some friend who will have the money."

Jerry was back. He had got in, he said from a very long, hard trip buying stuff for the mill. But he did not look travel stained. His white trousers were freshly pressed, and his silk shirt without a stain. He sat by the open window with his feet on the sill, thrumming a guitar. Jerry eased his feet down and turned to face Jason. "Well, old horse, what is on your mind?"

Lafe pulled up a chair, straddled it, resting his elbows on the back.

"Jerry, have you any friends with money?"

Jerry's fattish face creased with laughter. "Old top, I've got a half a dozen friends that could buy out the United States Mint."

"But have you one that would lend us $50,000?" Lafe had been growing less and less confident of Jerry's great influence in the world of finance and achievement.

"$50,000?" Jerry's mouth opened and his eyes grew wider. "Why, what the devil do we need to borrow $50,000 for? I thought we had all the money we needed."

"Got to enlarge the mill." Lafe did not want to go into details. He and Steve had agreed this shift of the plans must be kept a dead secret, and Jerry was not very discreet. "We've got to have the money. Where can we get it?"

Jerry looked about restively and shook his head with mature deliberation. "I don't like to borrow money from my friends."

"Don't expect you to," said Lafe. "Lead me to them and I'll do it."

"That would be the same thing." Jerry was again reluctant.

"Then just give me the names, and I'll go alone."

Jerry studied over this a moment, and frowned.

"There is Massingill at Salt Lake. He's worth forty or fifty million."

"Friend of yours?"

"Y-e-s—oh—yes. Jim and me are good friends. But I wouldn't want you to use my name."

"Do you think he might lend me $50,000?"

"Mi-i-ght—if you could get to see him—and get him interested."

Lafe asked more questions about him, and others of Jerry's rich friends. Pinned down to actual facts none of them struck him as real prospects. He gave Jerry up directly, and went back on the streets. He went to four or five men in business that he had come to know casually. None of them knew anybody likely to loan money on a new mill.

Steve and Lafe went over the situation that night. "I haven't any sort of a lead," admitted Lafe, "but I haven't given up."

"How much ore does the La Paloma turn out a day?"

"Oh, anywhere from thirty to fifty tons, and it is rich. Runs near $60 a ton in silver."

"You can afford to give a large slice of that for the milling rather than to have to shut down."

"Yes, at least $20 a ton."

"Here *is* a rough estimate." Steve

passed a sheet of paper across to Lafe. "If we can take $20 a ton out of the ore for the mill, we can save up enough to pay back the $50,000 in less than a year."

"I'll take this down to Salt Lake to the banks," said Lafe in a desperate resolve. He would much prefer to risk himself in a lion's den than a banker's office. But the situation was desperate. "There is one thing, though, I've got to find out before I go, which banks love the Pinto."

"That's an idea," Johns nodded briskly. "Find the bank that the Pinto runs. There is sure to be such a bank. And then pick out their strongest rival."

"Lawyer Sample ought to know," said Lafe.

Next morning Lafe went to the attorney's office before starting for the city.

"Yes," Sample said, "the Western Metal Bank is largely controlled by the group who own the Pinto Mine. They probably have stock and deposits in two or three others. The Metal Bank's closest competitor is the Mid-Continent Bank. John G. Cummins is president. He's a pretty crusty old customer to deal with, but if you can once get him lined up with you, he's a friend for life."

"How had I better go about it?"

"Just walk in on him. His private office is to the left of the lobby. You'll see 'President' marked on the door. Don't knock or anything; just walk right in, and the more scared you look the better. He's suspicious of slick ones."

Lafe got in Salt Lake on the stage at one o'clock, and went to the bank direct. It was a big institution and its marble lobby swarmed with important looking customers—a busy and fearsome place.

He went to the door marked "President," and paused before it. His hand would not turn the knob. He walked on by, his heart thumping, and leaned on the marble counter behind which busy clerks were at work. No one paid any attention to him. Once more he turned to make himself go to the president's door; instead he went on to the front door and out.

He needed lunch anyway; and it would give him a chance to wash up. He went to the hotel, got a room, and spent a half hour grooming himself.

It was past three when he got back to the bank. The door was closed. He turned away not knowing that the side door was open, and that a bank transacts much business after closing hours. Anyway, he was relieved that he could put off the interview until morning.

Lafe wandered about the city all the evening, walking, and riding street cars, alternately. It was a beautiful place with wide streets; clear streams of water ran by the curb. There was grass and shade trees and clean, beautifully colored buildings. The brisk air and lovely starlight gave him a feeling of delight.

He went back to his room and spent two hours thinking up arguments to put to the crusty old banker next morning. He arranged two chairs at different angles—the imaginary banker in one and he in the other, and practiced his speech aloud. "Mr. Cummins, I come to you with one of the most gigantic propositions——" He stopped and kicked the leg of the chair. "Hang it all, that won't do."

He got up and walked the floor, the imaginary banker being sternly seated. "Mr. Cummins," he started again, "we are three young and inexperienced men, but we are ambitious, and we've got a lease on Mount Soledad——"

Again he stopped. That was a little better, but not right yet. He tried it sitting down this time, speaking very measuredly.

"Mr. Cummins, Steve Johns, a good mining engineer, Jerry Dever and I have started to build an experimental mill ——"

No, that would not do. Anything experimental would not appeal to a banker.

After he went to bed, Lafe lay awake still making up speeches to the banker. But none of them seemed exactly right.

At ten next morning he was waiting at the entrance when the door opened. He would go through, with it this time if he died in his tracks. The president's door was partly open and that made it a bit easier.

The banker turned his head a fraction and glanced up out of the corner of his eyes as Jason entered the private office.

"Good morning." Lafe swallowed after he got the words out as though they had been choking him.

"Good morning," the banker responded civily enough, half turned in his

chair, and looked up waiting for the caller to state his business.

Lafe's brain worked frantically to call up the best of all his prepared speeches, but his thoughts stumbled over each other and left him speechless. Perhaps his silence lasted only twenty seconds but it seemed minutes to him, and he grew increasingly embarrassed under the sharp, expectant waiting of the banker.

"I want to borrow $50,000." Lafe's frantic mind grabbed the end of all his intended speeches instead of the beginning. But it happened to be the best possible of all introductions. For that is what banks are for, and it got immediately to the banker's attention.

"Sit down." The banker nodded to a chair. "A stranger here?"

"Yes. My name is Lafe Jason. I am out at Bingham."

"Mining?"

"Yes."

"What is it you want the $50,000 for?" Cummins happened to be one of those intelligent bankers who are more interested in the man than the security.

"Build a mill."

"Where?"

"On Mount Soledad." Lafe had perception enough to see he could get along faster merely answering the banker's questions.

"Mount Soledad?" Cummins was surprised. "Has Joshua Waters sold at last?"

"Only a two-fifth's interest. There are four of us who have bought a forty per cent. interest in Mount Soledad. We are going to build a mill and start mining."

"It has been my understanding," said Cummins, "that the ore was too low a grade to work profitably."

"Steve Johns has discovered a process."

"Is it sure?"

"No. But if it doesn't work, we are going to find one that will."

Cummins laughed. "You have faith, but faith alone, you know is not bankable. Tell me about this process."

"I can't," said Lafe. "It is secret. We don't expect you to lend on the process. It may fail."

"On what then?" asked the banker.

"This is the situation," Lafe explained with earnest enthusiasm. "We've got this option on Mount Soledad, and one of our partners has put in $50,000. It is enough to build the experimental mill, but I am operating the Paloma silver mine for Pedro Mascajon. It has been clearing nine or ten thousand dollars a month. But Blucker, of the Pinto Mine, wants to get La Paloma, and also Mount Soledad. He has started in to ruin us. First he tried to kill both Pedro and me—literally. Now he has got control of the independent mill and they have refused to handle our silver.

"Steve Johns and I propose to enlarge our experimental mill, and handle the ore from La Paloma. That will earn enough to pay all our operating expenses. It will take an additional $50,000 to do this, but we feel sure of being able to pay it back within a year. We will give you a mortgage on the whole mill and all our equipment."

"Have you any estimates?" Cummins was interested.

"Yes." Lafe gave him Steve's figures on the cost of the mill, and the probable profit it would show.

Cummins studied it a few moments. The mining game is a fascinating one; and he had a personal enmity toward the chief stockholder in the Pinto. He turned and picked up the telephone and called his garage.

"Jim," he said briefly, "bring my car around to the bank." Then, pushing the phone to one side, he turned to Lafe. "I'll run out with you and have a look."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE ORE MOVES AGAIN

THE banker spent the afternoon at Bingham looking over the mill and Mount Soledad. During the evening he sat with the three partners listening to their plans and arguments.

At nine o'clock he made a move to indicate the matter had come to a conclusion. "I tell you frankly," he said, "your proposition is shaky. You have plenty of low grade ore, but I am not convinced that your mill will handle it cheaply enough to insure a profit."

Lafe's heart beat sickeningly.

"However," the banker continued, "there are two favorable situations. The La Paloma is making money. The milling of the ore should show a nice profit, and after meeting you young men I am convinced that it will. Tomorrow the three of you come in to the bank at Salt

Lake City, and sign the note and the mortgage, and I'll let you have the $50,000. I like your spirit, and believe you'll make good."

When the banker was gone, Steve and Jerry proposed they go out and celebrate. But already the weight of responsibility was taking the exuberance from Lafe's spirits.

"The time to celebrate is not when you get a loan, but when you pay it," he suggested. "Anyway, I'm going to my room and get a good night's sleep. We've got our hands full now."

Lafe felt relaxed and tired as he went up to his hotel. At the hotel door he looked back down the street. The electric sign in front of the Paris Café still stood out in vivid red. He felt hungry and lonesome—heart hungry. He wished he could tell Miriam about this. "I wonder," he mused, "if she is still at work."

He turned and went back down the street, and entered the café. Miriam was seated before the cash register and a man with loose fitting clothes and thick gray hair leaned on the counter talking earnestly to her. Elisha Tilbury!

Lafe and the father shook hands warmly. Presently the three left the café together and went up to Miriam's flat.

"Just come over to Bingham today?" Lafe asked when they were seated.

"Yes. Came over after my daughter."

Queer, the effect of getting one's wish. It is not nearly what one expects. Lafe had advised Miriam to go home. He had wished a dozen times lately that she would leave Bingham. But now that brief statement of her father filled him with consternation. And the effect was not much less disturbing on Miriam.

"But, Father," she protested, "I've got a good job."

Elisha Tilbury shook his bristly head decisively. "This is no place for a girl."

"But I don't see why," said Miriam. "I can take care of myself."

"A mining camp is not a fit place for a pure girl," repeated Tilbury.

"You are a Mormon, aren't you?" Lafe asked, seeing the distress in Miriam's face.

"Yes." And the light of near fanaticism shone in Elisha Tilbury's eyes. "It is the only true revelation, the one perfect plan of salvation."

"As a Mormon," Lafe spoke reasoningly, "you are willing to make sacrifices for the faith. You yourself came from your native country a long way into a strange land, and among strange people."

"I came among brothers in the faith."

"Brigham Young and his small band went among strangers and savages and into a wild, fierce land of desert and drouth. His womenfolk were not afraid, nor were they left behind in safety and comfort."

Tilbury ran his fingers through his bushy hair. Lafe saw he had scored. The man had streaks of genius, but on emotional subjects his reasoning was that of a child.

"This is a wicked camp," Lafe continued, "but may it not be for the good of the camp for her to remain here?"

Earlier in the day Elisha Tilbury and Miriam had fought it out, and although Miriam had yielded, she was bitterly disappointed that she could not stay. And Elisha, having won, loving her as he did, felt guilty over her unhappiness. Now, Lafe's plausible, but spurious argument, gave him the chance to reconsider.

"There is something in what you say, Jason." He said solemnly, at last. "If —if Miriam can, by her influence, bring the real faith into the camp—I—why, she can stay."

This question disposed of, Tilbury and Lafe talked about the mill and the problem of concentrating the ore cheaply. The fire of Tilbury's inventive talent was touched. He promised to go out next morning and look at their mill.

TO ENLARGE the mill, to get machinery and install it, and to rush the work to a finish in time to save the La Paloma lease from forfeiture, taxed Steve and Jason to their last ounce of energy and endurance. Toward the last, there were days when one or another of them was on the job twenty-four hours. It was a Wednesday morning at ten o'clock that Steve Johns announced, "She's ready." Lafe telephoned the La Paloma to have eight or ten tons of ore sent down for a tryout after dinner.

"It's none too soon," declared Lafe. "If I didn't resume operations at the La Paloma in a week, she's lost."

The trucks from the La Paloma began to arrive at half past twelve. At one o'clock the power was turned on, and the jaws of the rock crusher began that loud crunching noise that was music to the young men. At six o'clock they shut down.

"Let's go celebrate," proposed Dever joyfully.

Even Lafe did not object this time.

"We'll make Blucker and his mill look like a yellow cucumber," said Jerry Dever as they started down the road toward town.

"I wonder who that is?" Steve Johns stopped. Three men were coming up the newly opened road. "They must be looking for us. The road doesn't lead anywhere else."

"What do you suppose they want?" Lafe had a sort of all gone feeling in the pit of his stomach, for one of the men was an officer, and another was Adolph Blucker!

"I think, boys," he said fatalistically, "something is about to happen!"

Chapter XXVII

TRESPASS

BLUCKER'S was a cool, cunning mind, but his hate was a positive physical thing. When a man got in the way, he wanted him knocked in the head or stabbed in the back. He had wanted to send Muck's gang up there and wipe Jason from the canyon, but his attorney had warned against violence, and advised strategy.

Blucker had known every move they made at Mount Soledad. He sat back and watched with greedy eyes the borrowing of money, the building of the mill, the opening of a body of ore on the side of Soledad. Dollar by dollar he knew this money was going. Pedro's money left to Lafe already was gone. The money from the bank would be used up by the time the mill was ready for its first load of ore.

Word came to Blucker on Tuesday the mill was nearly done. He sent a wire to a man in New York. That man hastened to Washington. The next day a message came to the United States marshal at Salt Lake City and he sent a deputy out to Bingham. It was with this deputy and a city policeman, that Blucker climbed the foot of Mount Soledad toward the new mill that had started grinding silver ore that day, and met the three young men in the road.

"Which of you men is named Steve Johns?" It was the deputy marshal who spoke.

"I," Steve acknowledged. "And this is Lafe Jason, and the slim one, Jerry Dever."

"Is it true," said the marshal, "that you have run your water pipes across government land?"

"It is," admitted Jerry.

"I have," said the marshal, "orders for you to remove them at once."

BLUCKER felt so good he was almost jovial. As he twisted the wheel of the roadster to dodge a milk wagon on the narrow, crooked street of Bingham, he jostled against Miriam, who was riding with him. He turned and grinned at her, and winked. "Say, I've got something funny to tell you!"

"What is it?" Miriam asked rather stiffly. She had drawn away from his shoulder as it pressed against hers.

Blucker wanted to tell her how smart he had been, but on second thought decided it might not be best. "I guess it can wait," he said, a little huffily. The car slipped out from the mouth of the canyon and he headed it across the plain toward the visible towers of the magic city of the desert.

"Where are we going?" Miriam turned a surprised face to him.

"Salt Lake City. I am taking you in to see your grandfather. He wants to talk to you."

"Why, he doesn't know me!" The girl exclaimed, "I never spoke to him in my life."

"He knows you," Blucker nodded wisely, "and will believe you, and I want you to tell him to break with those three young men who are trying to swindle him out of Mount Soledad."

"Do you think they are?"

"I know they are," he laughed sardonically. "I know the breed!"

"And you want me to advise him to take the mountain back now?"

"That is it," agreed Blucker readily.

"And then," she added casually, "I suppose I should urge him to sell it to somebody else."

"Yes—to somebody who will really develop it."

Miriam thought this over for twenty

minutes. They were nearing the fair green streets of the city—the city that rose like a dream from the level plains at the foot of majestic mountains.

"Just why, Mr. Blucker, are you so interested in grandfather?"

"I told you he did a great favor for me once," replied Blucker shortly.

"He does not remember it, does he?"

"I told you he would not."

"How long ago was it?"

"Many years ago—about twenty."

"And is this the first time you have ever tried to repay him?"

"Why—no. I've often thrown things his way."

"They must have been pretty small things," Miriam remarked, "or he would have noticed them."

"Miriam," Blucker's tone froze, "do you mean to imply that I have been lying to you?"

"I have not been implying, Mr. Blucker. Merely asking questions." She looked at him quickly. "Are you interested in Pedro's mine?"

"Certainly not!"

"I had heard you own the land on which it is located."

He bit his lips to keep back an oath. "Of course I do not. Who told you I did?"

"The county recorder."

"Damned meddlers!" Then explanatorily, "I had promised to keep that a secret, but now that you know, I confess, I do own that mine."

"And did you cause the mill to refuse to take the ore?"

"See here—" Blucker slowed up and slewed around in the seat and glared at her.

"I beg your pardon," Miriam hated to hurt anyone's feelings—and Blucker seemed genuinely hurt. "I did not mean to insinuate anything. Only I hear so many rumors one way or another, and I wanted to get at the truth."

Blucker did not take her to see her grandfather after all. He got out at the hotel and telephoned and came back and reported that the old man was out of town for the day.

Miriam wondered if he really had intended she should see him at all. It was after dark as they drove back. It was a shivery sort of adventure for her. Blucker put his arm around her once, and she could not very well evade it. But when he found no response to his lovemaking, he released her. He left her at her apartment, then drove on up toward the Pinto Mine.

"Damn women!" he said aloud. "I'll give her something that will tame her!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

LAFE RAISES A GHOST

IT WAS Sunday afternoon and Lafe climbed the mountain back of Soledad, to be alone. Three days of fruitless suggestions, and futile rebellion against their luck with Steve and Jerry, was all he could stand. They were licked and no doubt about it. They had spent all the money they could raise, and the mill without water was as useless as a dead tree in an empty pasture.

They had finished their disaster by all getting drunk last night. It was the first time in his life that Lafe had ever been drunk. He could not remember now how he had acted or what he had done. It was well along in the morning when he came into Glick's place for a pick-me-up. He found Tennessee Nan there, and she smiled at sight of him.

"You were sure funny last night, boy," she laughed. "I never would have guessed you had it in you. You got on the bar and made a speech that took down the house. You said things about Blucker that will probably make him shoot you on sight."

Two hours of stiff walking along the mountainside, climbing higher and higher, somewhat abated his disgust with himself, and the mountain wind blew most of the fumes of last night's spree from his brain.

They had all taken a crashing tumble, but he had learned one thing. A man with fighting qualities who evolved a good idea and put it in convincing shape could get financial backing. Other men, reflected Lafe, had failed on their first venture, and even the second and third, and yet succeeded.

Another hour's climb, and he was near the crest of the long mountain ridge. He sat on a huge rock beside the road, to get his wind. Bingham and its winding canyon lay far below him. To the north beyond the lower mountains stretched the plains of the great Salt Lake, and to the northwest on the far rim of the hazy plains lay outlined the great Mormon city.

There might be, he found himself

stubbornly reflecting, some other way for the mill to get water. And he began to plan. Also there might be some process to handle the ore, even though Steve Johns failed.

Lafe started on to the top of the ridge. Coming around a short twist in the road, he saw a hundred yards ahead, a machine standing on the crest of the mountain. A man and a woman stood side by side, looking over the view. The man was pointing across toward Salt Lake City. Lafe stopped and watched them for a moment. Both figures seemed familiar. The girl stepped a little away, and leaped lightly upon a low ledge of rock. It was Miriam! The man was Adolph Blucker!

They were getting into the machine. The motor sounded sharp and clear in the thin mountain air, and the roadster headed down.

Lafe felt a turbulent swirl of hate, and in its wake, shame and anger. He did not want to meet them. After last night he did not want to face Miriam. And after the whole week of disaster he was afraid to meet Blucker—afraid of himself, if he did.

The two in the machine saw him at the same time. Miriam gave a start and grasped Blucker's arm. Blucker merely lowered his chin, thrusting his head forward, and slowed down the machine.

Lafe had stepped aside as the roadster came to a stop. Blucker for a moment sat and glared at him with malignant hate in his muddy eyes. "I heard," he said coldly, "what you said about me last night at Glick's. I pass it over because you were drunk. But if you ever repeat it when you are sober——"

"I repeat it now, you damned yellow cur!"

"Your manners," said Blucker coolly, "are as bad as your morals. You forget you are in the presence of a lady."

The machine started on. Lafe's sense of wrong and injustice burst all bounds. He reached for a rock and let it fly with a deadly speed. It missed Blucker's head by inches, passed between him and Miriam and smashed a jagged hole through the windshield as though it had been a cannon ball.

Blucker merely ducked his head and sped up without looking back.

Lafe felt so weak his knees would scarcely hold him. The fit of rage had passed. He might have hit Miriam! And he had made such an idiotic ass of himself. She would be done with him forever. Sick with disgust he turned and climbed on up the crest of the mountain.

While he stood on top, still abusing himself for his idiotic outbreak, his eyes searched the valley to the south, along which ran a swift white stream of water—a mountain river. Water—water! If only they had a little part of that stream! Then again his eyes fastened on a huge, snakelike pipe that climbed up from that river, and topped the ridge, and ran down toward the southwest. The great siphon of the Western Smelting Company!

He walked west along the ridge until he came to the huge water serpent, six feet in diameter, sucking a river by the force of gravity over that ridge four thousand feet high and sending it swirling across those undulating lower hills, to disgorge it at the great smelting works.

"If we could only tap that," thought Lafe. "Here on the crest a ten inch pipe would carry all the water we could use, down to Soledad. But I suppose they are the smelters for the Pinto ore. And in that case—not a chance."

Nevertheless Lafe was deeply engrossed in this problem of the huge siphon when he got down to Bingham, a little before sundown.

He went to Steve Johns. "Steve," said Lafe, "who smelts the copper ore for the Pinto?"

"The Consolidated Smelting Company."

"You sure?" Lafe's voice rose sharply. "Doesn't the Western handle any of it?"

"Not a ton. There is an old feud between them."

"No!" Lafe began to walk the floor. "Steve, if you've got twenty dollars, let me have it!"

"Better lay off any more redeye, fellow." Steve shook his head lugubriously. "You go too strong when you do go. One drunk in a lifetime is enough for you. Pull yourself together, and we'll get a job somewhere."

"The devil! I'm not going to get drunk!" Lafe said hotly. "Give me that money. I'm going to hire a machine, and be at the Western Smelting office when the gates open in the morning. Sober up, and be ready to buck the line by the time I get back!"

Without further explanations Lafe took the twenty Steve dug up out of his trouser's pocket, and tore off downtown.

CHAPTER XXIX

NEVADA BRINGS NEWS AT NIGHT

THERE are combinations in events that spell bad luck for the most careful of men, and others that mean good luck for the most reckless, though the intelligent man works straight through as though every turn was according to rule and reason.

Lafe's arrival at the offices of the Western Smelting Company was at the luckiest possible hour.

It was true, as Steve Johns had said, that they had a bitter grudge against the Pinto Mine. The Pinto had made a contract with them ten years ago, and then, on being offered a lower rate by the New Consolidated Smelting Company, wormed out of it on a technicality. This had left the Western plant without half enough ore to keep it busy. For over a year they had been running less than half time and prospects were not bright for the immediate future.

It happened that the morning Lafe Jason arrived, the superintendent, the general manager, and a vice president of the financial concern which controlled the smelter, were in an early morning conference to determine their future policy.

Lafe had no difficulty in getting to see the superintendent. A smelter that wants business badly does not keep a man who looks like a miner sitting outside very long. Lafe started to outline his proposition to the superintendent.

"Wait." The superintendent lifted his right hand. "I want the general manager and Mr. Wighan to hear this." He took Lafe into the private office. "Now tell Mr. Jameson and Mr. Wighan what you told me."

Lafe was so full of his plans that he forgot to be embarrassed. "Our borings," he explained, "show that in Mount Soledad there are millions of tons of copper locked up in porphyry rock—low grade ore, but we have built an experimental mill and expect to develop a process that will handle it profitably. With a process proved, we'll get more capital and build a gigantic mill—one that will handle twenty or thirty thousand tons a day! We'll have freight cars running back and forth across the face of that mountain like the weaving of a shuttle. And we'll shoot cars of concentrate to your smelter so fast you can't sleep." He paused and moistened his lips. "Adolph Blucker, of the Pinto is trying to break us. He has tried treachery, intimidation, even murder. Now he has cut off our water supply. That is why I came to you. I want to run a pipe from your siphon on the crest of the mountain down to Mount Soledad to our mill. I want you to sell us water. And we will give you a contract to smelt all our ore."

These smelters were hard, practical men. Oratory did not count. But Lafe had not meant to be oratorical; he was just in earnest. They began to ask questions, and found he was ready with facts as answers.

Wighan was the quickest of the three to catch the possibilities. "I think this is worth looking into," he nodded decisively. "It is a gamble, of course. This process may not work, but somebody's will. And if we are furnishing water, we'll be in a position to get business."

"Anyway," said the general manager, "it would not cost an awful lot. We probably could get water down to them for twenty thousand."

"Suppose," suggested the superintendent, "I send a couple of engineers over with Jason to make a report."

"I wish you would," said Jason. "We need water immediately."

"I think," said Wighan, "we can promise, if they report the plan feasible and not too expensive, you will get water immediately."

Three days later Lafe got Steve Johns and Jerry Dever and started on a walk up the road that wound to the top of the mountain. He had told them nothing of why he had gone to the Western Smelting Company, nor of the result. He did not want to arouse false hopes over a mere flash in the pan.

"What the devil are you taking us up to the mountain top for?" said Steve.

There was a shrill honk from behind them, and they stepped to one side of the road to let a big truck pass with a load of six-inch pipe.

"Where is that going?" asked Steve.

"Going up," answered Lafe.

Ten minutes later another truck passed. Six went by before they had gone two miles.

Jerry was out of wind and wanted to turn back. But Lafe urged him on. "If we get to the top we can catch a ride back on a truck."

Two hundred yards from the top they heard the sound of hammers on iron, and saw a swarm of workmen along the mountainside.

"What is going on here?" Steve asked curiously.

"They are building a pipe line," answered Lafe deliberately, "to furnish water to an ore mill."

"Whose ore mill?" Steve grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around.

"Ours," answered Lafe.

NOTHING could have happened more to Adolph Blucker's liking than that outbreak of Lafe Jason's on the mountainside. It afforded a chance to let the girl know the other had been drunk, without him having to tell her direct. And his display of cool self control must have seemed marvelous to the girl.

"I am sorry," he said suavely as he helped her from the machine in front of her flat, "that you were subjected to that annoyance. I like all our little excursions to be delightful to you—as they are to me."

"It is kind of you to take me," Miriam replied sincerely, "and what happened was not your fault."

"How about a little ride Wednesday evening?" He smiled ingratiatingly. "Suppose we drive in to Salt Lake City and have dinner with your grandfather."

"I'd like that," she answered softly, "if he would want me."

"I'll arrange it," he said with a self complacent assurance.

Blucker sat in his office at dusk a few evenings later, and looked out of the window at Mount Soledad outlined against the sky. He moistened his lips with satisfaction. He had played the game wisely. Steve Johns and that damned Jason had come to the end of their rope. They had stripped a wide body of ore and built a mill—for him. Without water they could not go on. They would throw up their lease, or sell it to one of his agents for a trifle.

And Jason had gone on piling up silver ore in front of the La Paloma, ore he could not sell. The fool did not know that the lease called for a royalty on each ton of ore taken from the mine. Just when he was sure that Jason was broke he would demand payment of all royalties on that unmilled ore. That would be the end of the La Paloma lease.

Best of it all, the metallurgist whom he had working on secret processes of concentrating that low grade porphyry ore, had made a discovery. And Blucker had set two engineers planning a mill that would use the new discovery.

Even that was not all. Blucker was not imaginative, but in the dusk he could see Miriam Tilbury sitting there on his knee, his wife. Through her, he could control Joshua Waters' interests in Mount Soledad.

There was a stumbling sound in the outer office, and an oath. Blucker turned quickly in his chair. It was Nevada Muck, and he had stumbled over a chair in the dark. The mills were not running at night and the office was supposed to be closed after six o'clock. What was he doing here? Blucker had not sent for him.

The door of the private office opened slowly—Blucker had left it unlocked—and Muck's bulk showed in the doorway. He stood for a moment peering into the dark corners of the room.

"Well!" Blucker's tone cold as a knife blade cut the dark, and Muck jumped and bumped against the door jamb.

"I was looking for you," gasped Muck.

"You are a damned liar," said Blucker. "What were you looking for?"

Muck started to speak, but halted. Blucker reached out and switched on his desk lamp and turned the reflector so it threw the light straight into Muck's face.

"I—I—" he was yellow with fear—"I was looking for you, honest to God I was!"

"What for?" Blucker arose and crossed slowly, directly in front of the huge Muck. "To try to get something on me?" His muddy eyes fixed on the scar-twisted face. "Now listen. If you were trying to double-cross me, I'll kill you!"

"I'll never double-cross you, honest to God I won't! I came to tell you tonight, that Jason has got the Western Smelting

Company laying water pipes to his mill!"

CHAPTER XXX

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

IT HAD been a bad day at the Paloma mine. A February storm was on the snow covered mountains and drifted along the sides of the gulch. A man had been hurt in the tunnel, the belt of the delivery chute had broken, a truck load of ore had stalled in a snowdrift at the bottom of the gulch.

Lafe climbed up toward the cabin, after dark, tired and sore, and the cutting northwest wind drove sleet into his face like volleys of fine shot. But the China boy had the stove roaring in the cabin, and a good supper on the table.

After Lafe had eaten, and the boy had cleared the table, he took a day-book and a sheaf of reports from a tin box on a shelf and spread them out under the lamp.

He added three long columns of figures twice, frowned at the result, added them again, and shook his head. It was right; he could not make anything else out of it. The result was very disappointing. He had been running La Paloma nine months. They had got out a great deal of ore, and it was rich. Yet the profits were astonishingly small. In order to keep the mill at Soledad running, he had to pay a very large price for the milling. But even after that, it seemed he ought to have made more profits.

The last few months, Lafe had not only worked, but ate and slept at La Paloma. Blucker and his emissaries were too active for him to relax his vigilance a moment. And the success of the Mount Soledad experiment depended upon the silver ore from the La Paloma. He had left the Soledad end entirely to Steve Johns and Jerry Dever. For two weeks he had not even had a chance to talk things over with them.

The winter wind whistled about the cabin. Lafe sat staring down at the disappointing figures. A year ago it would have seemed like a fortune; but with the new mill, and mine, and experiments at Mount Soledad eating money by the mouthful, these profits seemed more like crumbs.

A sharp knock at the door, and Lafe jumped. As he unfastened the bolt with his left hand, his right was on that gun in his pocket.

"Hello, old man of the mountains." It was Jerry Dever; and in his wake entered Steve Johns.

"I'm sure glad to see you hoary headed coyotes," said Lafe, as the two pitched their overcoats on a box and drew up chairs to the stove. "Has Glick's been closed by the sheriff?"

Steve laughed. "Lafe, you always seem to hit the nail just where it will bend. You guessed it; this is no social call. It is business. How much money have you salted away, Lafe?" Steve turned on him an anxious look of inquiry.

"Not much," Lafe answered with a shade of reluctance.

They waited a moment, but Lafe did not continue. Steve stooped over and picked up a sliver of wood and marked on the hearth of the stove with it.

"You know that $50,000 note of ours comes due at the bank in two weeks. And the mill hasn't netted much to apply to it. We've had to use up the profits we made on milling ore, in our experiments on the Soledad copper."

"I was just figuring," said Lafe, "when you came in. The total net profits for the Paloma since I took charge are only $45,000."

"Fine!" Jerry slapped his leg. "We can dig up the other $5,000 some way; or if we can't, the bank will extend the time on the rest."

Lafe seemed to withdraw himself—went into the silence, as Jerry expressed it. "At most," he said, at last, "only fifteen thousand of that belongs to me. The rest is Pedro Mascajon's."

"But Pedro is dead!" exclaimed Jerry.

Jason, looking down at the toe of his shoe, merely wiggled his foot.

"Anyway," said Steve, "Pedro owns a third interest in our Mount Soledad Company. It is as much his interest as ours to keep it going."

Lafe shook his head slowly, decisively. "Boys, it can't be done. Under the conditions of Pedro's assignment of his lease to me, I am allowed one third the profits. $15,000 is mine. You can have that to chuck into the rat hole. Nothing more."

"But, see here, Jason," Dever flared hotly, "you can't mean that. We got to have that $45,000. It's our only chance.

We'll be closed out. I saw the banker the other day—had a talk with him ——"

"You had no business to do that." Lafe scowled. "I got that loan, why didn't you leave it to me?"

"I went to him with a friend," countered Jerry, "and asked him if he would extend it, and he said he was sorry, but he couldn't. Now, we've got to pay that note or lose our mill and the lease and everything. Even the $50,000 Pedro put in at first will be gone. That would be a fool move—hold back $30,000 when he is dead, and lose the $50,000 he put in when he was alive."

Again Lafe shook his head.

Steve kicked Jerry's foot under the table, and took up the argument in a different tone. "Lafe, I know how you feel. I'd feel the same way if I were in your shoes. It is not the sort of a thing that a fellow likes to do. But even if Pedro is not dead, it is after all part his company, and you are acting as his agent. It may be technically a breach of trust, but morally it is not. You know if he were here, he'd do it in a minute. You are merely carrying out his wishes. In fact, Lafe, it is our only hope. With this money we'll pull through—and be so rich in two years that we can pay that $30,000 back twice over and never miss it."

"No," Lafe's chin set stubbornly. "Take mine—all of it. But that is all."

Jerry Dever lost his temper. "You think more of a damned dead greaser than of your friends."

Lafe's self restraint snapped. He turned abruptly on the fattish young man. "How much have *you* put into this?"

"I—why—I've done my share," spluttered Jerry.

"Yes," said Lafe cuttingly, "of spouting hot air. I've already put in $5,000 of my profits here, and am staking $15,000 more, while you——"

"Don't, fellows!" Steve broke in. "Don't let's stir up bad feeling among ourselves."

"Well—" Lafe's long, hard fight, the annoyances of the day and his disappointments carried him beyond control —"it is time we had some plain facts. Just how far have you gone in the experiments? Does it take a year to find out whether your process will work or not? How do I know, if I chucked all this money in, it wouldn't go like the other $50,000 of Pedro's?"

A slow red burned in Steve's cheeks. He was near enough breaking under the strain of his hopes and fears to be exceedingly touchy himself. "Do you mean," he glared, "that I have been stalling?"

"I don't mean anything," answered Jason. "I'm asking you."

"And I'm telling you," Steve's voice rose, "that I've worked like a slave on that thing, and when I can see daylight you turn me down for the ghost of a dead Mexican. If that's the way you feel, the quicker we bust up the better. Let's go, Jerry!"

As Lafe closed the door after them, a swirling gust of wind blew out the lamp. He felt his way to a chair and sank down on it. All his resilience seemed gone. These two, particularly Steve Johns, had befriended him from the start. Now, they were estranged.

Money and success mean so much to some people they can fight for it alone. It was not so with Lafe. The pleasure of any achievement meant to him sharing it with someone who would rejoice over it with him. The human contact—friends, fellowship, love—meant more to him than anything else.

He got up and lighted the lamp. He could not stand this isolation. He must see some friendly face, hear a sympathetic voice. He put on his overcoat and cap and blew out the lamp. He would go down and talk to Miriam, and see if he could not clear things up so they would be friends again. Nothing seemed worth while unless he could be at least friends with Miriam.

In spite of the thick clouds, the snow on the ground made it light enough to see his way. Half way down the side of the gulch he remembered he had left his revolver, a thing he had not done for many months. He turned back to get it. Fifty yards from the cabin, he stopped in the snow and peered ahead. Something near the corner of the cabin moved. It was a man, a big man, slipping up to the door.

"Guess I'll go without the gun," Lafe thought, and took a quick, light turn down the slope.

Down Bingham's main street Lafe trudged through the snow, heading straight for the Paris Café. He had made up his mind. He would take Mir-

iam home, and then, pride or no pride, he would try to get back the friendship he had lost. At least he would learn why she misunderstood him.

The door of Glick's place opened as Lafe passed, and a man came out—Steve Johns. Lafe quickened his step to get by without seeming to see him.

"Lafe!"

He stopped, and Steve came toward him, his hand outheld. "Let's forget it, old man," said Steve huskily. "You were right and I was wrong."

"I don't blame you, Steve," Lafe said feelingly, "and I wish I could do what you want. But you know when a fellow feels strongly that he ought not do a thing, he oughtn't."

"That's it," agreed Steve, "a man's got to be honest with himself or he isn't worth an empty powder keg. Come on up to my room, and let's figure what is the next best thing to be done."

Lafe hesitated, and his eyes turned toward the Paris Café. "I——"

"Oh, come on." Steve took him by the arm. "We've got to settle on some course, and now is the time."

Lafe yielded and they went up to Johns' room. Steve had left a fire in the small wood stove, and the room was pleasant, but Jason was impatient to get away.

"If we fall down on this note at the bank," said Steve worriedly, "the jig is up. They'll foreclose on our machinery, and Joshua Waters will cancel our option on Soledad. It'll mean our finish."

"I'll take my $15,000 profits from the Paloma," proposed Lafe, "and go to the bank before the note is due. I think by paying that much I can get the note renewed."

"Do you?" Steve brightened. "That would give us another breathing spell. Within two months at least, I'll know definitely whether or not our process will work this ore."

Lafe looked at his watch. It was half past nine. "All right, Steve." He arose. "I'll do the best I can. I've got to run along now, and do some errands before everything closes up."

Lafe went down the street, walking rapidly. Now if only he could once more be friends with Miriam. He hurried toward the café, his heels crunching into the snow.

MIRIAM'S work was done at nine. Gregory had told her she might go. But for some errant reason she did not analyze, she lingered by the desk, pretending to check over the meal tickets that had been cashed. Twice she glanced at the clock. Finally at nine-twenty, she got down from her stool and took her coat from the hook in the corner back of the counter; put it on slowly, readjusting it to her shoulders and buttoning it up around her chin, the while glancing out of the window at the snowy street.

A man with a big fur coat passed in front of the plate glass window, looked in and then entered the door.

"Hello, little one." It was Adolph Blucker, and he smiled familiarly at Miriam. "Just in time for the last picture show. Come on."

Miriam hesitated. "I don't believe I can go tonight."

"Oh, come on," he urged.

But Miriam shook her head. "Not tonight, Mr. Blucker. I'm tired."

"Then I'll take you home," he said.

She offered no objection to this. And they went out together. And just as they stepped out on the walk, they came face to face with Lafe Jason. The unexpected meeting upset Miriam unaccountably. She felt weak and trembly. For a block she did not speak.

"I wonder," she said at last, "why he was going into the café?"

"For a cup of coffee, maybe," laughed Blucker, "or to see you perhaps. I hope though," he added seriously, "he is no friend of yours. For that young man is about due for a tumble."

"What do you mean?" She caught her breath sharply.

"Nothing much. Wait and see."

CHAPTER XXXI

A VISIT IN VAIN

THE last truck was loaded, at the La Paloma, and José, the big gray haired Mexican driver, turned over the heavy motor. Lafe, standing by watching, called to the Mexican. "You needn't come back tomorrow. The mine will be closed for a few days."

"So?" José turned his head quickly and looked at his boss. He was one of the new men who had been on the ore run only a few days. Lafe noticed the alert movement, and the sharp ques-

tioning tone. It seemed out of keeping with the gray hair and beard of the driver. He had felt a bit suspicious of this man before. He might be another of Blucker's secret agents.

"Yes," repeated Lafe, "the mine is closed until further notice."

It was a little after sundown. He followed the last truck on foot down the Canyon road. He wanted to walk, to be alone. It was spring again, and its aching loneliness and its torrent of unfulfilled desires were in his heart. Success had come and gone. He had been on the mountain top, and now was in the deepest abyss of despondency. Catastrophies gather momentum like a snow slide.

Just before the note at the bank had come due, Lafe had gone to Salt Lake City and paid $15,000 on it, and then asked for an extension. It had been regretfully refused. The bank was sorry, but their reports from the mill were not satisfactory. A month or two at the most was all they could grant.

Last night, three weeks later, Steve Johns called Lafe and Jerry Dever in, and confessed that his process would not work. Mount Soledad was still a sealed mountain to them. The mill would have to close Tuesday, and La Paloma would have to close with it.

Lafe had sent his China boy away, and shut up the cabin. He felt tonight as he went down to Bingham, that he would probably never return to the mine again. The fact was, that in the last two days he had discovered they were at the end of the vein of good ore in La Paloma. Even if the mill had not closed down, the mine was about finished. He had not told anyone this, not even Steve Johns.

Lafe's money was gone. He had nearly $35,000 in the bank that belonged to Pedro, but less than a hundred of his own.

Bingham was alight, and the streets astir with the early evening medley of the mining camp. Lafe turned aside to the frame rooming house standing back from the street, and asked for his old room, the one he and Amos and Miriam had shared in those first days. The room happened to be vacant, and the landlady was glad to have him back.

Lafe climbed the outside stairway, opened the door, and turned on the light. He stood looking about the room. It was very much as they had left it. He switched off the light, crossed the room in the dark, and dropped down on the couch. For a long time he lay on his back staring up into the dark, thinking of—Miriam. He had not spoken to her since that night he had gone to the café to see her, and met her leaving with Blucker.

By and by Lafe got up and went out, locking the door behind him. At the top step he saw a man slipping away from the foot of the stairway. His bulk and movements suggested José, the truck driver. Once more Lafe's suspicions were sharply aroused. Some final, sinister move of Blucker's was in the wind.

Lafe drifted over to Glick's Place. The door was wide open, a medley of clinking glasses and rough voices came out into the spring evening. Inside, Lafe leaned on the bar looking about the room much as he had that first night. He knew many of them by name, and nodded casually or spoke to a dozen or more, but avoided conversation.

Bingham was full of rumors that night. Rumors of the shut down of La Paloma had already spread about town. Other rumors were that the Mount Soledad bubble had burst and that Adolph Blucker was to be made general manager of the Pinto. Lafe overheard some of these, particularly those about Blucker.

"Old Adolph is in luck," remarked a bearded member of the bull gang to a powder boss as they stood sipping their bootleg stuff at Lafe's elbow. "He'll own the Pinto in a few years. And they say he is going to marry the cashier down at the Paris Café."

Lafe moved quickly away, crossing the room to the cabaret. Tennessee Nan saw him, and came directly to his side. "Hello, fellow. You look as though you had seen a ghost."

"I feel as though I had swallowed one." He tried a rueful smile.

"Come on back." Nan gave her head a jerk, and Lafe followed to a quiet part of the room. "Lafe Jason," she said with a wry laugh, "I don't know why I take such a sisterly interest in you. You've never shown any appreciation."

"Nan," and he reached over and took her hand and held it tight, "you can't half guess how much I appreciate your kindness to me."

"That's all right, old boy." She smiled

and patted his hand. "I was only kidding. But it seems I put in a good deal of my time warning you——" Her eyebrows puckered. She turned on him abruptly. "What do you know about a Mexican called José?"

"Nothing, except he has been hauling ore for me."

"Keep an eye on him," warned Nan. "Keep two eyes on him. There is something devilish on foot here again. He's getting together a gang. He drifts in here, and meets one, and goes away; and by and by comes back and meets another. Hell's brewing in Bingham town once more. You better watch four ways at once."

Lafe sat staring moodily at an advertisement on the back of a magazine that lay on the table.

"If I had taken your advice and left a long time ago, I'd have saved a lot of trouble."

"Take it now, and save a lot more," she suggested.

Again he shook his head. "Nan," he broke out abruptly, "have you heard that Miriam Tilbury is to mary Blucker?"

"Oh, that is the ghost you have swallowed, is it?" She laughed. "Yes, I've heard it. But I've heard of a lot of weddings that never came off, my own included. Blucker got her and old Joshua Waters, her grandfather, together Sunday—the first time they had ever met—and the girl's father came over yesterday. That is one reason they think the wedding is to come off this week."

As Lafe left Glick's, he passed Steve Johns coming in. Steve turned to speak to him, but Lafe, looking more than ever as if he had seen a ghost, brushed past. Steve turned and looked after him, frowned and shook his head. He did not like the look in Lafe's face. There was something so eager and primitively honest, and finely responsive in this half shy, fierce young man, that it would be a tragedy for him to go to smash. Steve left Glick's place and went to the Paris Café.

"Has Lafe Jason been here?" he asked Miriam.

"No." She shook her head, but her eyes instantly filled with anxiety. Steve had noticed that any mention of Lafe stirred some swift emotion in the girl. "Why?"

"I met him a while ago." Steve leaned an elbow on the lunch counter by the cash register, and picked up a toothpick. "He looked sort of wild eyed, and I thought maybe he had been here—and heard something."

Miriam shook her head. The blood had left her cheeks quite pale.

"Is it true, Mr. Johns, that your mill is closing down?"

"Sad, but true." He attempted to reply lightly.

"And that La Paloma is going to shut down, too?"

"Closed tonight."

"And is—Lafe—broke?"

"We all are," Steve answered.

Miriam looked down at her hands thinking for a moment, then, looking up, asked in a lower tone, "Do you know where Lafe is staying?"

"He took the same room he had when he first came, up at Mrs. Snyder's rooming house."

Directly after Steve Johns had gone, Miriam slipped into her light silk sweater, left the café and hurried up the street toward the Snyder rooming house. She climbed the outside stairway two steps at a time, and still breathless, knocked at the door. There was no response. She glanced back down the stairs, and in the darkness saw something was moving, slipping away. Her heart beat so fast she could not count it. She knocked again faster, louder. Still no response.

"He is not here," she thought and turned down the stairs.

Lafe, lying sprawled on the couch, heard the knocking. "They are after me again," he thought. "I'll lay low and let them come in if they want to."

Then he heard the step on the stairway; a rapid, light step. Curious, he got up and looked out through the open window.

The figure flitting off into the darkness wore a light dress. A woman!

"I wonder," Lafe peered after the retreating figure, "who that is?"

(*The conclusion of* MANACLED MILLIONS *appears next time*)

The Panther Stalks

By H. Field Leslie

Author of "The Law Immutable," etc.

Cruelty, craft and greed came with this killer who fled the purlieus of San Francisco for the clear air, safety and loneliness of the High Sierras. But the mountains have a way of taking care of their own.

THE rough and narrow trail that whipsawed its rugged way up toward the somber heart of High Sierras was sore punishment to feet accustomed only to the level smoothness of city pavements. Fallon was finding it so. Stumbling, he cursed bitterly the necessity that was hounding him on.

Among the denizens of San Francisco's underworld, and to the police, Fallon was known as the Panther. A lone prowler. Swarthy, silent, strong and supple and swift to strike, when the odds were with him, he was in every attribute that predatory beast whose name he bore.

But now, as he toiled along the flank of a mighty slope in the wilting heat of midday, there was little about the man to suggest the grace and agility of that lithe muscled cat. His shoulders sagged with weariness under the light pack of food he carried. His feet, thinly shod, were bruised and blistered from their battle with the rough mountain trail. With every forward step he limped painfully. After a while he slipped the straps of his pack and sat down against a boulder, to rest.

The Panther was tired, wearied almost to the point of exhaustion; but as he looked back down the way he had come, there was upon his dark face a leer of grim satisfaction. He had fooled them! Fooled completely those flat-footed dicks who even now would still be sniffing for his lost trail among Frisco's docks and byways, whining like a pack of baffled hounds. His getaway had been clean, he reflected pridefully. Before him lay all the great, lonely sweep of the High Sierras in which to lose himself, in which to lurk hiding until such time as he should deem it safe to slip back and ferret out the lowdown snitch who had set the dicks on him and made necessary this irksome flight. He was almost sure that he knew who had done it. A cruel twist writhed across his thin lips as he lay back in the sun, closed his eyes, and pictured the penalty he would exact for that double-crossing.

A soft monotone of sound, a murmuring continuous and almost inaudible, lay under the golden silence of the day. By its very persistence that inconsiderable sound forced itself at last upon the attention of the Panther. Though his ears were untrained to mountain voices, that faint murmuring suggested running water.

He opened his eyes and sat upright, listening keenly, trying to locate the source of the sound. It seemed to come from below him and at no great distance ahead. The Panther was thirsty; he got stiffly to his feet, shouldered his pack again and angled away down the slope toward that faintly audible promise of refreshment.

With the growing melody of tumbling water luring him on, the fugitive crossed a wide and timbered gully that lay at the foot of the slope. Shortly he found himself at the mouth of a narrow can-

yon slicing down from the gaunt hills. A small stream, cold and clear, was singing along its rocky channel in that great cut. Beside the stream a dim trail led away up into the remoteness of the shadowy canyon.

After he had quenched his thirst the Panther opened his pack of food. Traveling light and fast, he had brought only a few bars of chocolate, some hardtack and a half a dozen tins of a French concoction, concentrated nourishment. He had entertained some hazy notion of being able to procure game in the mountains with the automatic that nestled in his pocket; but, so far, he had seen nothing larger than an elusive squirrel. He opened a tin of the smelly foreign stuff. A grimace of disgust crossed his face at the first mouthful; such fare was not to his liking. The Panther craved fresh meat.

After his unsavory meal the Panther lay there by the stream a while, resting and considering. He had left the trail that had brought him up from the foothills; but here beside him was another, a trail that promised shade and water and a measure of comfort on the way. He shrugged his shoulders and got to his feet. One path was as good as another, as long as it served to carry him deeper into solitude. He chose to follow the stream up the canyon toward its source.

Cool dusk was dropping when at last the Panther emerged from the shadows of the canyon into a sweep of small mountain meadow dotted here and there with clumps of straight young pine and quivering aspen. The stream he had been following cut straight through this upland park; in the tender grass along its margin two gray burros were browsing lazily. At the upper end of the meadow and close under the flank of a mighty slope that reared sharply upward until it seemed to touch the sky, stood a small cabin of logs. The structure was roofed with sod. Along its front ran the low overhang of a long porch supported by heavy timbers. Behind the cabin, a little way up the slope and atop a great heap of raw earth and shattered rock, the mouth of a small tunnel yawned black in the twilight.

With a sinuous twist of his body the Panther slipped aside from the trail into concealment among the slender boles of a handy clump of aspens. From that screen of quivering leaves he had his first view of a miner's cabin, and the inscrutable mouth of a tunnel boring into nature's treasure vault. But the cabin and that hole in the hill were nothing, then, to the Panther—nothing beyond a sharp reminder that he must be cautious. A habitation argued the presence of men; men meant danger, always. The Panther's eyes were aflame with suspicion as they swept the meadow from end to end, then centered on the little cabin, alert for any movement there.

As the Panther watched, the door of the cabin swung open and a man stepped out into the twilight. He was roughly dressed—in overalls of faded blue tucked loosely into the tops of heavy boots, and coarse shirt of washed-out red. Although the Panther could not at that distance distinguish the features of the man on the porch, he knew him for an old man. The beard that fell upon his shirt front was a dull white splotch in the dusk. As the old man made his way to the woodpile in front of the cabin, the Panther noted the stoop of his square shoulders, the apparent frailness of his entire body.

"Nothin' to fear from that ol' rat," exulted the Panther as he watched the old man cut an armful of wood and, with it, reenter the cabin. "I wonder if he's alone?"

The hidden man strained his ears for sound of voices, for conversation within the log walls. He heard only the clatter of stove lids. Shortly a thin ghost of wood smoke crept skyward from the cabin chimney. Again the old man came from the cabin door; this time he carried a tin pail which he filled at the cold stream.

"Nobody else in there," decided the Panther. "He's alone."

When the door again had closed upon the old man, the lurker stepped out upon the trail and headed for the cabin. He'd get food there, something more satisfying than hardtack and chocolate and that messy stuff in tins. Safe enough to approach, too; an old man alone was odds to his liking. The Panther walked boldly enough—but in a pocket of his coat one hand was closed upon the flat grip of his automatic.

With eyes and ears alert—always caution!—the Panther drew near the cabin. He was about to set foot upon the low log step when from around a corner of

the building came ambling what he judged to be a monstrous dog, a dog the like of which Panther had never seen. Brown and shaggy, the brute was, and so fat that its gait was a rolling, shambling, awkward walk. To the Panther, dogs were beasts of evil. He hated them with all the midnight prowler's hatred for anything that serves to interfere with his lawless business. His fingers tightened on his gun. The approaching beast seemed friendly enough, but as it drew near the Panther swung back his foot; and when the brute was close enough he kicked out savagely. With a squeal of surprise and pain the rotund animal fled, whimpering.

With his lip curled in a venomous snarl the Panther watched the animal disappear around the cabin corner whence it had come. Then he turned again toward the step, to find the old man standing quietly in the doorway. His faded eyes were fixed upon the Panther in a look of mild reproach.

The Panther knew the old man must have seen him kick the animal; he erased the snarl from his lips and offered quick explanation of his conduct. "I thought yer dog was goin' to nail me. That's why I kicked 'im."

The old man shook his head slowly, and smiled. "Chub ain't no dog, stranger. He's a b'ar."

"A bear!" echoed the Panther.

"Yeah. A b'ar cub." The old man chuckled in his beard. "I reckon its a good thing his maw wa'nt around somewheres handy when he squealed. She's right choice of thet little feller. But come on in, stranger, an' have a bite o' supper. It's 'most ready. Gosh a'mighty, I ain't set eyes on a human bein' for more'n two months! Come in."

Without waiting for the Panther to voice acceptance of his hospitality the old man turned back into the cabin. The flare of a match lit the dusky room as he touched fire to the wick of a lamp. The Panther's survey of the one room cabin was swift; within the minute after he had followed the old man across the threshold the place and its furnishings were so clearly fixed in his mind's eye that he could have found his way about, could have laid his hand unerringly upon any object there, in blackest night.

The old man set a place for his guest beside his own at the table of hewed pine, and busied himself at the stove. A bright kettle was steaming and bubbling there. Soon the tang of bacon frying filled the room.

"Gosh a'mighty, but I'm tickled to pieces to have somebody to talk with," declared the old man as he bustled about. "Lonesome up here in these hills with only a pair o' wuthless jacks an' Chub an' his maw for company. An' *she* ain't very sociable nowadays. Gettin' crabbed, sort of. I ketched her five-six years ago over on Deadhead Creek. Wa'nt so big as Chub, then." The old man chuckled. "Funny, you takin' him to he a dog! I brung his maw up on condensed milk an' beans until she was big enough to ketch most of her own grub. She's a whoppin' big b'ar now. You'll see her in the mornin', like enough. I reckon she's off now mousin' 'round after somethin' for Chub's supper. Takes pretty good care of that little feller, him bein' the only cub she ever had. Well, the beans is ready an' the bacon will be in a minute. Pull up yore seat, stranger."

During the progress of that meal the Panther made little talk. He did not need to; the old man, deprived of human companionship for weeks on end, made the most of his opportunity and kept up a running fire of conversation. As he ate, the Panther studied the old man covertly. Hair and beard and brows were white as frost. His kindly face was seamed with countless tiny wrinkles, brown as weathered leather. His hands were of darker hue, gnarled and toil worn. Curiosity prompted the Panther to ask a question.

"Whadda you do to make yer livin' up here in these mountains?"

The old man laughed with frank amusement. "Evident you ain't much used to the hills, Mr.—what name might I call you?"

"Morgan," supplied the Panther readily. "I ain't used to the mountains. I'm a city man, hikin' around fer m' health."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Morgan. Mine's Jackson, Jeff Jackson. I'm minin' a little. Didn't you notice the mouth of my tunnel up there on the hill?"

The Panther nodded. The old man's faded eyes took on a glow of quickened life in the lamplight.

"Thet's the Jackson Belle, one o' the most promisin' mines thet lays out-

doors," he said proudly. "I struck her two hundred an' seventy three feet in. Thet was a little over two months back. I had samples assayed then. Not so awful rich, but stiddy. She's a sure proposition, but I'll have to have a lot o' machinery before I can work her—stamp mill an' such. Thet'll cost a powerful lot o' money."

He fell silent. For a moment he was just an old man, tired and worn and a bit discouraged. But only for a moment; then his cheery optimism returned. "I'll make it somehow, sooner or later. She ain't big enough to interest capital, but I got me a start towards thet machinery." He pushed back his chair and got to his feet and crossed the room to his bunk. He fumbled a moment beneath the blankets, returned with a leather sack in his hands. "Ever see any gold, Mr. Morgan? Raw gold, I mean?"

Gold! The eyes of the Panther leaped wide for a moment; then his dark lids drooped to veil the emotion set rioting in him by that magic word. Raw gold!

The trustful old man sat down at the table and drew a clean saucer toward him. He loosed the thong that bound the mouth of the sack and spilled a portion of its contents into the white dish. Grains of yellow, dull in the lamplight. He stirred them slowly with a gnarled forefinger.

"Thet's gold, Mr. Morgan. Raw gold."

The Panther caught his breath sharply. His eyes were fixed upon the yellow metal. Odd eyes, those of Panther Fallon, and cruel. Small amber orbs set close on either side of the bridge of his thin nose. As they stared at the contents of the saucer they seemed to flicker with tawny glints of some fire of evil burning deep within his angular skull, kindled there by sight of those few grains of raw gold.

For a long moment the Panther held silence. Then he moistened his thin lips with his tongue, and asked, "Did you get that stuff outa yer mine up there in the hill?"

The old man shook his head. "No; it's placer stuff. I panned it down along thet stream here. Thet is, most of it. Some of it come from over the divide. I had it when I located here." He sighed wearily. "Ain't much there to show for a dang good lot o' hard work."

"How much you got in that bag?" asked the Panther, his flaming eyes still devouring the dust in the saucer.

"Oh, three-four hundred dollars wuth, I sh'd say. Have enough sometime, mebbe, to get me the machinery I'll be needin' to work the Belle. I quit pannin' when I struck thet lead there in the hill. I been peckin' away at it hopin' I'd run into a streak o' rotten stuff so's mebbe I could pound out what I need. Ain't struck none yet, though."

The old man poured the gold back into the sack, and tied it carefully. "Heavy stuff, gold is," he said, passing the bag to the Panther. "Heft it."

Jewels and silver and gold in many forms had found their way through the Panther's deft hands, but never had the same indescribable emotion been kindled in him as was set flaring by the feel of that small buckskin sack of raw gold. His swarthy hand trembled when he passed the sack back to the old man. His lids were half closed over smouldering eyes and on his face was unbridled greed when the old man turned his back to restore the gold to its hiding place beneath his blankets.

They sat for a while smoking, the old man and the Panther. The Panther was in no mood for conversation; he listened unheeding while the old man talked on of days long past and of his hopes for the future. The Panther's mind was upon that sack of raw gold. He meant to have it. It would be easy enough to pump a bullet into the old man and take the gold and go. But there was no hurry about it. Here was lodging for the night and someone to prepare breakfast for him in the morning. After that——

There were two bunks in the cabin. The old man made up the spare bed and they turned in, finally. The Panther lay long awake, until the old man drifted off to sleep and the faint stridence of his breathing filled the room. The pull of that sack of gold beneath the sleeper's head was a strong pull. Once the Panther half raised from his bunk, almost on the point of creeping upon the old man in the darkness and finishing the job. But he relaxed, and a sinister smile twisted his lips.

The Panther was awakened in the morning by sound of the old man building a fire in the stove. His eyes shot

at once to the old man's bunk, as if drawn there irresistibly by a powerful magnet. The bed was made up, the blankets neatly smoothed in place. Vividly, in the eye of his mind, the Panther saw that sack of gold beneath the covers —gold waiting the clutch of his hand.

"Sleep good, Mr. Morgan?" inquired the old man cheerily when he saw his guest was awake.

"I slept," answered the Panther shortly. "Breakfast ready?"

"Won't take me long to get it," the old man informed him. "It's only bacon an' beans again. Sorry my bill o' fare ain't got more fancy dishes on it."

Without relish the Panther ate that breakfast of beans and bacon. After the meal the old man cleared a space upon the table and set about washing up the dishes. The Panther sat comfortably beside the stove, for the mountain dawn was crisp and cool. A smoldering cigarette drooped from one corner of his thin lipped mouth, and his eyes were narrowed to slits of cruelty as he watched the old man and considered how best to do away with him. He appeared so frail in the full light of day that cutting him down with a bullet seemed a needless waste.

The old man stood with his back toward the Panther, bowed low over his humble task. Early sunlight slanting through the small window above the table illumined his white hair—touched, with a peculiar fascination for the Panther, a spot bald and smooth upon his venerable head.

Softly the Panther got to his feet. Soundlessly he took the half dozen stealthy steps necessary to bring him within striking distance. From its place of concealment in a sleeve of his coat a blackjack leaped into his hand. His arm swept up, came down swift as light.

It was a true blow and a vicious one. Under its deadly impact the old man crumpled, pitched forward sprawling amid a clatter of dishes on the table top. For a moment he hung across the table's edge, then slid down upon the cabin floor.

Thin nostrils flaring, the Panther stood for a moment alert above that grotesque huddle of bones and flesh and clothing that was old Jeff Jackson. He paused there only long enough to assure himself that the old man was done for. Swiftly, then, he crossed the room and tore the blankets from the bunk. Gloating, he took the sack of gold into his hands. He unfastened the rawhide thong that bound its mouth, allowed himself the pleasure of feasting his eyes upon the thin stream of yellow grains that came cascading into his cupped palm. Raw gold! Poison that makes men kill!

For one quick moment the Panther thought of disposing of his victim and staying on and working the mine. But he dismissed that thought as quickly as it had come. He knew nothing of mining—and besides, to tarry there was too great a risk. He must be away, deeper into the shielding mountains. He quickly filled his pack with what food he could find and, with a last glance at the silent old man on the floor, stepped outside the cabin.

Morning sun, yellow as the gold that lay snug in his pocket, was pouring its warmth into the mountain meadow. A little way from the cabin, on the litter of chips beside the woodpile, lay the brown bear cub asleep. A pleasing thought flashed across the Panther's mind; here was fresh meat for his journey! He looked swiftly about to make sure the cub's mother was not close by; then he crossed to the woodpile and seized the ax that was sticking upright in a log of pine.

The cub stirred as the Panther approached; came wide awake and scrambled to its feet as the ax flashed up. That move spoiled the accuracy of the Panther's swing. The weapon struck the cub a glancing blow upon the skull. The dazed animal went down floundering and squealing. The Panther leaped forward to finish it. But before the ax could fall again a rumbling storm of wrath burst upon his ears. Out of the tail of his eye the startled Panther glimpsed a great brown bulk of fur launching out from the low roof of the cabin porch. The old female had been sunning herself there unnoticed. Her onslaught was swift and furious. The Panther recoiled. He dropped the ax and whipped out his automatic. Before he could snap the safety and pull the trigger the great bear was close upon him. His hasty bullet ripped a ragged furrow along the jowl of the furious beast. She never flinched, never faltered in her raging charge. The Panther

had no time to place another shot; he fired wildly, once. Then panic took him. He turned and fled on desperate feet toward a nearby clump of pines. If he could only reach a tree and swing himself up out of reach of the frenzied beast——

With speed amazing in a creature of such bulk the great bear closed upon the fleeing man. The Panther reached the shadows of the pines but a leap ahead of her. Gathering all his strength in one last desperate effort, he lunged upward with hands clutching frantically for hold upon a branch he had glimpsed above his head.

That carpet of pine needles beneath the trees was treacherous footing. The Panther slipped as he leaped. His fingers merely brushed the branch and he came down floundering, gibbering aloud in the extremity of his terror. Above him the great bear reared to attack, eyes blazing red fury, jaws dripping foam

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THE sun was high overhead when old Jeff Jackson opened his faded and bewildered eyes. Either the Panther had misjudged the force of his blow or he did not know the timber of which the old man was built—seasoned oak, tough and all enduring. He stirred where he lay upon the cabin floor, sat up groaning, and rubbed his aching head. After a while he managed to get to his feet. The stove, the chairs, all the familiar objects in the room were spinning dizzily, and black nausea had him in its grip. Staggering, he achieved his bunk and sat weakly down.

"Gosh a'mighty, what's the matter with me?" he mumbled thickly. "I must've had a stroke."

It was a long time before he could make his brain work at all. But when his head cleared a little and he saw the blankets he had spread so carefully on rising that morning were now in disarray, a numbing thought struck him. He reached for his bag of gold—could not find it. He fumbled for it. It was not there. Gone!

It was a hard blow for the old fellow. He slumped back upon the bunk and held his throbbing head between bony hands and tried to think, to piece things together. Gradually out of his mind fog emerged the conviction that his guest of the night had struck him down and robbed him. After a while he got himself a drink of water and went out into the sunlight.

Close by the woodpile the old bear was fondling her whimpering cub, licking the wound upon its head. The old man saw the jagged slash where the Panther's bullet had ripped along the side of her jaw. Wondering, he drew close. He spoke to the old bear kindly. She growled surlily and turned toward him a muzzle and front all spattered with blood. He noticed the ax lying close by upon the ground. Although his head ached terrifically and his full faculties had not yet returned, the old man read aright the story revealed by the wounded bears and that misplaced ax. Patiently he set about searching for some mark that would tell him the direction in which the thief had gone. Shortly he found blood spots on the ground and browning grass blades, a sanguinary trail that led away toward the nearest clump of trees.

The old man found his guest among the shadows of the pines where the old bear had worked out her rage upon him. One arm was mangled to a pulp. All down the front and one side of his battered body the clothing was torn to shreds. The man's swarthy countenance was set in lines of grim terror.

"Gosh a'mighty!" exclaimed the old man in a hushed and awestruck voice, "The old lady raised p'ticular hell with him, now didn't she!"

A little way from the dead man old Jeff found lying on the ground the sack that had held his gold. He picked it up. It was empty—slashed from mouth to bottom by a ripping claw of the bear. Flecks of yellow dust were scattered wide among the brown pine needles. The old man sighed. If he worked the ground over carefully he could recover part of that spilled gold, but he could not hope to find it all. Machinery for the Jackson Belle seemed a long way off. He turned back toward the cabin, an old, old man with dragging feet.

With eyes upon the ground the prospector took one forward step, another; and then he halted, his attention caught by a torn fragment of paper beneath his feet. He picked it up. There was printing on it, but without his glasses he could not make it out. More scraps of paper scattered about caught his eye.

They had fallen, apparently, from the shredded pocket of the thief's coat. The old man gathered up all the pieces he could find and carried them into the cabin. There he put on his glasses and spread them out on the table and began to fit the torn edges together.

A great wonder grew upon the wrinkled face of old Jeff as he worked. At the end of half an hour a sharp exclamation broke from his lips. Again he read the amazing story unfolded by that sheet of matched pieces on the table before him. A soiled sheet from which looked up at him the dark face of the stranger—unmistakably the ingrate who had struck him down. And in bold black print were the words, "$2500 Reward!" Followed a description of one James Fallon, alias The Panther, wanted in San Francisco for burglary and murder. The man had broken into the home of a wealthy resident, stolen a valuable necklace of matched pearls and killed the butler who had caught him in the act and tried to prevent his escape. Twenty-five hundred dollars would be paid for his capture, dead or alive. A description of the necklace was appended, together with the offer by the owner of an additional reward of like amount for its recovery and return.

The old man regarded the pictured face of the Panther curiously. "Huh," he grunted finally. "You must of been mighty proud of thet job to carry this here paper 'round in your pocket."

Almost in a daze of disbelief that good fortune should thus come to him, old Jeff caught up his burros and made ready for his trip down to the nearest settlement with that gruesome burden that lay back under the trees. It was not a pleasant task, that bundling of the dead man in old ore sacking, but Jackson set about it grimly. And as he worked his hand encountered something curiously like a small bag of beans in the lining of the dead man's coat. He ripped it out—a small chamois bag sewed securely at the mouth. It was but a moment's work to cut the threads. The old man's mouth opened but no speech came when he saw what lay within the tiny sack in his hands. Coiled there like a shimmering snake nestled a lustrous necklace of pearls! Wordless, old Jeff considered the gems. Then his eyes turned toward the body of the Panther.

"Twenty-five hundred dollars for you, dern your pesky hide!" he said slowly. "An' twenty-five hundred *more* for these gimcracks soon's I can get 'em back to the one they was stole from! Five—thousand—dollars! Good gosh a'mighty—*Hallelujah!*"

REMINGTON REPEATING PISTOL

THIS firearm is one of the best examples of the influence of a successful feature on subsequent invention.

The well known Remington rifle action, one of the simplest and safest ever made, often called a double hammer action in that the breech block was operated like a hammer while the true hammer in turn locked the block against any possible "blow back," was, in a modified form, used in a very novel but too delicate repeating pistol.

In the pistol the double hammer idea was incorporated, except that both hammer and block were pulled back at one time, a slight lead of the true hammer releasing the blocking hammer, while at the full backward swing the true hammer was caught by a sear and the block allowed to snap back to closed position, to be, in turn, locked by the fall of the true or firing hammer. The backward motion of the blocking hammer operated the lifting carriage, taking cartridges from the tubular magazine under and parallel with the barrel, its reverse motion forcing the cartridge into the chamber in the barrel.

These weapons leaked no gas at the breech, so the ammunition gave better results than the same charges in revolvers. They were flat and comfortable to carry and reasonably fast in operation, but very delicate and prone to give trouble. They were made in but one caliber, an extra short .32 rim fire, with slight variations in barrel length and consequent magazine capacity. They enjoyed but a limited popularity in the late '70s and early '80s.

M. L. WEAVER.

TWO DROPS OF BLOOD

by

H. Bedford-Jones

Author of "MacGregor's Partner," etc.

Two tell-tale drops of white blood on his new *capote*, two drops of white blood in his Cree Indian veins. These were the disturbing factors that made of Pete Lareau, first a trapper with a vision, and second a fugitive from the grim, indomitable Royal Northwest Mounted Police.

FROM a white man's viewpoint Pete Lareau was a fool, absolutely. Viewpoint is much a matter of heredity plus the dollar sign, however. Among the Crees Lareau was a prophet—an insane kind of dreamer who did the things other men dared not do. So, in his own time, the Hebrews named Elijah, say those who know.

Pete Lareau had brought in a few—a very few—beaver pelts; more mink; a few more marten, and a scattering. But in the scattering was a silver fox. On his way in to the post he had stopped at the independent trader's and found exactly what he could get for that "dark fox," then he had come on and waited until Jim McBean's offers reached one notch above. The upshot of this matter was that Lareau had a pan of bullets to trade out. Each bullet represented a "skin." Formerly the beaver skin had been the standard unit of value in the north; now the beaver was practically gone, the name remained. Money was of course unknown. Pelts were brought in to the post and traded out on the spot.

Had not Pete Lareau fallen in with a party of white hunters that fall, staying among them three weeks, he would have gone about his trading in the way of his fathers and his name would be forgotten today. But he had listened to the talk of the white men and the two drops of blood from some far white ancestor were pulsing beneath his swarthy skin.

The trouble began when old Jim McBean made mention of the debt remaining from the previous winter. He got down his books and began to take bullets from the pan.

"How much?" asked the Indian quickly. McBean shot a pained look over his iron rimmed spectacles. He was not accustomed to having his honor impugned.

"Ninety skin." He continued counting out the bullets.

The other watched, motionless. How many bullets went out he did not know or care, for the figure ninety was beyond his comprehension. It was a debt, and debts are things to be paid first of all. A simple philosophy, and one ground into the Hudson's Bay country since Groseillers brought the first H. B. C. flag into the great bay.

Lareau could count up to ten, so, while McBean took the bullets from his pan, Pete Lareau calmly reached over the counter and sorted them out in tens. McBean stood back, scandalized. After getting three tens made up, the Indian paused in much perplexity and finally shoved the lot across the counter in childish petulance.

"Mebbeso him right," he grunted, angered at himself for trying such a thing. "Me pay'um plenty debt, huh?"

"Oh, that's it!" The factor repressed his anger. Being pure Scotch, and Presbyterian Scotch at that, his mind resolved the problem very simply. Pete

had not doubted his honor—had merely wished to pay the debt with his own hand.

"All right, Pete. You're a good hunter. Now, you want grub? How about this silk handkerchief?"

It was a mistake. Lareau's eyes glistened at sight of the gaudy purple silk, but there was a lowering anger in his high boned face. He had heard those white men talk about how the Company made its profit by selling hunters what they did *not* want.

"Mebbeso. Want grub first. Plenty grub, plenty ca'tridges, moose-gun."

Now McBean turned to his barrels, and for a space Lareau took no thought for his pan of bullets. He wanted to make up a small and very complete pack, and he got flour and tea and bacon, grease and peas and tobacco—each cupful and piece taking a bullet from the pan. All this mattered nothing until the factor was measuring out the sugar.

"Take 'um thumb out," Lareau said stolidly, the two drops of white blood creeping farther through his brain.

McBean glowered up from his sugar barrel, thunderstruck. Of course he had measured with his thumb inside the cup—had it not been done always?

"Say!" he snapped, straightening up. "What's the matter wi' you, hey? Mebbe you think I'd cheat you?"

This probability had not occurred to Lareau. He had merely objected to paying for the thumb.

"You take 'um thumb out," he reiterated. Very dimly, the two drops of white blood were reflecting on the suggestion of cheating. He could not quite comprehend it, but he was making a very hard effort.

"See here," and McBean showed his anger, which was another mistake. "If you want sugar, you'll take it the way I measure it. Nobody else makes a kick and you won't neither, see? If you don't want to trade, you know what you can do."

"A'right."

Pete struggled for a moment, though he gave no outward sign of it. Then, with never a thought of intimidation and in absolute sincerity he pushed away the pan of bullets, left his purchases, and turned to his furs farther down the counter.

"Mebbeso I make 'um trade up-river," he said stolidly.

"Huh?" McBean had visions of that silver fox pelt going to the independent trader, and sweat broke out on his forehead. The Indian continued to bundle up his furs, and in desperation McBean shoved a plug of tobacco over the counter.

"Hold on, Pete Lareau—you take 'um gift."

Pete hesitated. His swart hand closed over the plug.

"You take 'um thumb out?"

"Sure!" The factor turned back to his sugar barrel.

A blind wave of triumph surged up in Lareau, with those two drops of white blood on its crest. He had done a thing no man had dared hitherto—forced the factor into compliance with his will!

McBean cursed beneath his breath on detecting that veiled exultation, for he realized that he was in Lareau's hands. He was far from understanding what had come over the breed, but he was helpless. When flour and sugar had been measured out, Lareau affected to examine his scrawny coat, then turned to a red slashed blanket capote on the wall.

"How much?"

"Twenty-four skins."

"Huh! Mebbeso get 'um up-river twenty skin."

Thus Lareau staggered the factor anew. Asking prices—comparing them with those at the independent post—why, the thing was unheard of! McBean's wrath rose anew.

"Me want heap plenty ca'tridges." Abandoning the capote for the present, Lareau traded for thirty-thirty cartridges for his moose-gun—four at a time, four to each bullet that the factor took from the pan.

Half an hour later Pete Lareau was a changed man. He had all things necessary for a long hunting trip, and there were still plenty of bullets in his pan. But the two drops of white blood had receded momentarily, and he had not secured the red slashed capote he coveted so fiercely.

Once again he struggled with himself. McBean craftily got down the capote and spread it on the counter. Then Lareau remembered that triumph in the matter of sugar. Again the two drops of white blood reached out amid his brain cells; having asked a price, having compared it, he vaguely asked himself

why he should pay the Company more than he would pay up-river.

"Got plenty bullet left?" he asked heavily.

"Sure—plenty." McBean glanced idly down at the pan. "You're a good hunter, Pete. I'll give you a good debt; say, four hundred skins, if you want to trade it all out now. You haven't got any handkerchiefs yet."

Lareau began to grow angered, away down deep in his heart. Why should he trade out a debt when he still had bullets? Why should the Company always want him in its debt? The question was not at all clear cut in his mind, but it was there—born of those two drops of white blood.

"Got 'um how much?" he asked suddenly.

The factor stared, then repressed anger and counted the remaining bullets.

"Ninety skin."

"Huh!"

McBean lovingly caressed the red slashed capote with his horny hands, but Lareau paid no heed. He was grappling with a tremendous problem, and slowly the answer was coming. He looked at the capote, at the bullets in the pan, at his purchases, and then at his pile of furs. Once more he turned to the latter and shoved his goods across the counter. He guessed shrewdly that McBean wanted the silver fox skin.

"Mebbeso me go up-river," he said stolidly, speaking this time with cunning mind. "You take 'um beaver, mink, marten, pay 'um debt. Mebbeso me take 'um dark fox up-river for trade."

This was absolutely square. He would pay his debt because it was a debt, and if his threat failed he would go up-river with his best skin. But the threat did not fail. McBean positively gasped—and gave in.

"Good Lord! Here, come back—you can have the capote for twenty skin, man!"

Lareau affected to hesitate. Then the wave of exultation throbbed into his brain once more, he flung the factor a contemptuous look, and reached out for the capote. When he had it on, the two drops of white blood had conquered him absolutely—had swept away all the rest in a wild burst. Instead of taking out a debt, he would carry off what bullets remained and trade them out when he came back to the post again!

Without a word of explanation he began stowing the remaining bullets in his pockets. The dumbfounded factor stopped him abruptly, more furious with himself than with Lareau.

"Put them bullets back! What's the matter with you, Lareau?"

"Huh?" The other stared, insolent. "Mebbeso I get drunk, come back tomorrow, trade 'um out."

That was pure insult, for he could buy no liquor upon which to get drunk. The thought behind it, however, was past McBean's comprehension, and his anger burst all bounds.

"You will, eh? Confound you, who do you think you are? You'll do nothing o' the kind—mebbe you'll put more bullets back, eh? Mebbe you cheat, eh?"

Lareau gazed at him blankly, trying to understand. Such a thought had been far from his mind, for of course he had meant to keep those bullets religiously apart.

"Cheat?" he repeated. "How?"

McBean laughed scornfully and started to gather up the bullets. Lareau must be drunk, he concluded, though where the whisky could have come from was a mystery. Not to leave the "debt" in the Company's hands, not to trust the Company's honor, was a thing beyond all comprehension. So he merely laughed, being still furious with himself for his own weakness, and not perceiving his danger.

"Make 'um cheat? How?" A little flame flickered in Lareau's deep eyes.

"Mebbe you put more bullets back than you've got now—see? No, no, Pete Lareau! You can't come that over Jim McBean!"

"Huh?" Light glimmered into Lareau's brain—light due to the two drops of white blood which now had reached out to all his brain cells. "Den—den me leave 'um here, mebbeso *you* put 'um more bullets back, huh?"

He could not clearly express it, yet he had actually grasped the converse of the idea. If he might cheat, why might not the factor cheat? So tremendous was the thought that it staggered him. If he could not be trusted, why should he trust?

"Bah goss!" he cried swiftly, the flicker growing in his eyes. "Bah goss!"

McBean laughed again, harshly.

"You're a sly dog—you're a sly dog!"

He intended no insult—he was merely exulting over having pierced to the heart of Lareau's cunning, as he thought. He could not know how Lareau had seen one white man half kill another for using some such term.

McBean laughed again—then groaned and sagged down beneath the counter, choking. Lareau wiped his knife, jerked down a pair of blankets, and made up his pack. He then put out twenty-four bullets carefully—the price of the blankets—and left the post. He had paid his debt. His conscience was quite clear in this important matter.

II

IT WAS not yet winter, although there had been a light fall of snow which was too light even to gather between the dogs' toes. None the less, it soaked Lareau's moccasins and made him curse under his breath. That was another sign of the two drops of white blood which had reached out and touched all the rest, even as leaven leavens the whole lump. Two weeks before he would merely have grunted heedlessly.

He was out in the hills now, on his own grounds, and would meet the first group of his own people that night. He had ten very good dogs, each carrying a small load of ten pounds, so that he had traveled hard and fast, bearing nothing but his moose-gun. There was enough grub in the dogpacks to last him and them a long time, and he hardly reckoned on doing much trapping that winter. The two drops of white blood had finished their work. Pete Lareau was a new man—a man with a vision.

Of pursuit he did not think. Of course it would be inevitable—the red coated trooper was as certain as the frost; but it would be slow. Two weeks earlier Lareau would have cringed at prospect of that relentless fate, but now he merely laughed and flicked at the dogs with his hand. He was a man with a vision. His father had been with Louis Riel, and had been shot by a trooper, but wavering and uncertain though the vision was Lareau felt it driving him onward.

Fired by the thought of rousing his people to revolt, of making them hold back all furs from the Company and force the independent traders to raise prices, he came that night into the little village where a dozen families had met at the falls and were making canoes to take their furs down-river to the post. His business had been finished early; the others would not be ready to start for their hunting grounds until the real snow was at hand. That silver fox pelt had been a lucky accident for Lareau.

Getting out his tent skins, with the help of a distant cousin he was settled soon after dark. Then it was that he made a mistake. Any other man would have held feast and used up his substance, confident in its abundance. Two weeks earlier Lareau would have done it, but now he was looking ahead. By a curious intricacy of the law of compensation, the tremendous vision which inspired him had lost him his focus on his own people, on the very ones to whom he brought his vision, at the very moment when he needed all his Cree blood to back up that vision. So, resisting his first impulse to throw open his packs, he merely opened tea and tobacco when the men crowded in to visit him.

Lareau still wore his new blanket capote, of white slashed with red. It was a fine capote and drew many glances. In fact, it drew too many; finally old Jean-Marie Alexander, disappointed at getting only tea and tobacco from this Croesus, put the glances into words.

"Pete Lareau has killed a rabbit coming up-river, huh?"

"No," answered Lareau.

He looked down. There, beside the gaudy sash where hung his knife, were two flecks of blood. He had not noticed them before, since his vision had driven him onward to the exclusion of all else. He filled his pannikin with hot water.

"It is blood," he stated calmly. "White blood."

Something like a shiver passed around the circle. Lareau did not observe it, for he was gazing into the depths of the fire, absorbed in his vision.

"I killed the factor at the Company's post three days ago," he went on slowly. "He called me a dog."

Uneasy glances passed around. It seemed quite certain that the Great Spirit had laid his finger on Pete Lareau's brain. It was no insult to be called a dog, except among white men. Lareau, as everyone knew, had only the two drops of white blood which had come down to him from six generations

back. Old Jean-Marie Alexander cleared his withered throat, filling his pipe carefully.

"That is not good," he declared sententiously. "There will come a red coat and he will ask questions. Did any man see?"

Lareau shrugged his shoulders carelessly, for he was thinking of other things. More uneasy looks passed around; something was certainly wrong with his brain! He was acting more like a crazy white man than an Indian.

Gradually Lareau's mind cleared, for the sudden association with his people and the influence of their presence had clouded his vision somewhat. Now the great scheme reasserted itself and he remembered what he had meant to say. With that remembraice the law of compensation smote him again; he said his thought in white fashion and not in the way of the Crees, who do not blurt out words and thoughts together.

"My brothers, I have discovered something. I do not call the factor my great father any longer. I have discovered something."

He flung back the blanket capote and rose in all the glory of his outer rags and inner vision. Blank silence dwelt around him.

"My brothers, I have been a fool. We have been fools like our fathers, because we trusted the great company. This summer I heard white men talking and they also said that we were fools. They told how the Company cheated us. We buy things by the skin, but white men buy things by what they call dollars. At the post I bought one cup of flour for one skin. I was cheated. The flour is not worth one skin."

At this amazing statement there was a general frown of perplexity. It was true that the skin, a standard of value primarily based on a beaver pelt, varied considerably among different posts; but this was a thing for white men to bother about. To a Cree, a skin was a skin. After a thoughtful pull at his pipe, old Jean-Marie took up the rebuttal.

"I do not understand, Pete Lareau. A cup of flour is worth one skin. In the days of our fathers it was also worth one skin. Long ago I have heard that it was worth two skins, three skins. I do not understand."

It was the old cry of the red man who had no prophet.

"But I will open your eyes, my brothers!" flashed out the other, heedless of the nods drawn forth by the old man's speech. "We go to the post and we trade for things. We pay two skins for a pound of powder. We pay five skins for a handkerchief. These things are not worth so much. The factor buys them for, say, a skin each. He cheats us!"

Jean-Marie waved his pipe with a shake of the head. The others exchanged puzzled glances. Lareau's thought was too complex and involved.

"Our fathers paid three skins for a pound of powder, Pete Lareau. We pay two skins. That is all I understand. We must have powder. A skin is a skin. Our fathers paid three skins. We pay two. The Company does not cheat us."

Sucking noisily at his pipe, the old man relapsed into silence. The others nodded.

"My brothers, a cup of sugar is worth one skin." Lareau licked his dry lips, a little staggered by the finality of that counter argument. He made another mistake in jumping abruptly from powder to sugar. "But what is this skin? The white man says it is made-beaver. He says a bullet represents a skin, a beaver pelt. A mink or marten is not worth a skin; a dark fox is worth many skins. Explain this, Jean-Marie Alexander!"

The old man shook his head.

"A skin is a skin, and a cup of sugar is worth a skin. I do not understand what you are saying. Our fathers had many beaver and we have few, but a skin is a skin."

Lareau was not quite sure now that he understood himself. He was losing his grip on his vision. Abruptly he took up another trend of thought.

"But the debt! My brothers, the factor sells us things we do not want. They make us go into debt for our outfit. When we come back we pay our debt first, which is right. But always we are in debt; every winter it is the same.

"My brothers, the Great Spirit made the animals for his red children. He did not make them for the white men. Yet we kill them and sell the skins to the white men."

Now indeed was he reaching the heart of his vision, and it led him onward in

a swirling flame of enthusiasm. He was even beginning to understand it, and did not heed the muttered word that passed around the awed faces. He thought that they were awed at his vision, for he was out of focus. In reality they were awed at him, on whose brain the Great Spirit, Kisamunito, had laid a finger.

"Is this right, my brothers? What does Kisamunito think when we take his gifts and trade them to the Company? It grieves him; his heart is sorrowful because we do not keep them and use them as our fathers did, because we do not follow the ways of our fathers. We should take no more pelts to the Company for a winter, two winters; we should keep them until——"

Taxed beyond all self-control, old Jean-Marie came to his feet with a snarl.

"Pete Lareau! Listen to me. I do not know what you are talking about. I know that if I need food or powder or blankets, the Company gives me a debt. I know that unless I have powder I cannot kill a moose. I cannot get powder from the Great Spirit. I cannot take a dark fox skin to Kisamunito and get powder, blankets, food, for it. I do not understand."

Two drops of white blood do not go very far, or last very long. Lareau saw his vision torn into shreds on a sudden; he knew absolutely that it was a vision to be followed, but under the concentrated influence of the red men around him he felt oddly perplexed and doubtful. He could not carry his argument out to its logical conclusion, because red blood can not do this. Yet he made a brave effort.

"Your eyes are darkened, Jean-Marie Alexander! I say that the Company cheats us as it cheated our fathers. There are black tobacco posts where the Company does not want our furs to go. What we must do is to—see—to visit these posts, to visit the post up-river from the Company's post, and say that —that no more pelts—that we——"

He came to a floundering stop as his vision was rent down the wind of irresolution. He groped after it feebly in the darkness and found it not. What was it that his conquest over Jim McBean had taught him—something about the Company needing furs? What was the great vision of all his people holding back their furs for a season, not trading on their debt, forcing the Company to—it was lost, lost! He could not find the trail.

He stood there licking his lips, sweat standing out on his face, swaying pitifully as he wrestled with himself and struggled to make those two drops of white blood rise again in clarity to his brain. But his cousins were all around him, concentrating their thought on him; the influence of the many dominated and drove back the two drops of white blood.

None the less he still groped after his vision desperately, his features tight drawn in agony. With a little grunt of disgust old Jean-Marie Alexander stepped into the outer darkness, not forgetting to fill his pipe from Lareau's tobacco before he went. After him passed the others one by one, compassionately pitying this straight gazing hunter on whose brain Kisamunito had laid a finger. But Lareau did not know they had gone.

He was fighting, fighting with all his soul for the vision which had gone from him, staring with unseeing eyes at his tent. What was it? How were his people to force the Company to do right, as he had forced McBean to take his thumb from the cup? Little by little he picked up the trail, now that he was alone and unhindered. He remembered the thumb in the cup, he remembered the blanket capote, he remembered the whirlwind of exultation that had settled upon him when the factor was beaten. Finally his clenched fingers relaxed, his head came up, and he glanced around him in confident poise, for his vision had returned to him.

Then he saw that he was alone, abandoned.

In stubborn determination he stepped to the tent door, resolved to force the thing through. He paused suddenly, catching a faint muttered whisper that murmured among the lodges—"Kisamunito has touched the brain of Pete Lareau!"

It was the voice of his people, and it smote his heart with coldness and emptiness. He felt as though a force had suddenly gone out of him. After all, had his reasoning been good? His people had not understood. They called him crazy, and perhaps he had been crazy. Surely the Great Spirit had smitten him when he killed Jim Mc-

Bean—had marked up a debt against him!

Standing there and looking up at the stars, all the greatness of his vision waned and sank away to some far depth beyond his ken. All about him were the hills, the stars, the tumbling waters rose up from the river and sang the two drops of white blood into peace. Once more he thought with the red man's mind; his thought was that beyond the sentence of these his own people there was no appeal. A white man would have spurned these folk who deemed him crazy and would have taken his vision to others through the length of the land; but Lareau was an Indian.

In the silence of the night the stars told him that a red coat was coming—somewhere, sometime, yet coming as certainly as the snows were coming. He left the tent standing as it was. Dumbly he put the packs on the dogs, picked up his rifle, donned his capote with its two spots of blood, and went forth into the night.

III

A MAN was tramping through the silences of the hills—a white man with fur hood and fur trimmed parka, a revolver belt around his waist. He had six dogs and a sled laden with provisions. For two months he had been getting deeper into the silences, while behind him had spread apprehension and fear and wonder. Before him had gone a whisper after the manner of the hills—a slow wisp of smoke fading into the sky. Pete Lareau had caught that message and had fled. He was a Cree, and following him was the Law.

Behind Lareau was all the dumb force of his people's thought. The scattered hunters talked of him, the men who came in for the Christmas trading talked of him, the girls and squaws talked of him. They wished him well because he was a Cree of their own blood. They did not understand why the Great Spirit had touched his brain, but they sent out their thoughts to him, and Lareau felt the impulse to flee again.

His vision had departed from him utterly, and he knew only that smoke wisps told of snowshoes upon his trail. It was only one man with six dogs, but the fur trimmed parka stood for relentless, implacable justice. Traditions, old tales, fearsome stories of what other men in such parkas had accomplished—these drove Lareau to flee onward into the silences of the hills.

Once or twice at odd times of night, it occurred to him to kill the man who followed, to kill the others who would come, to flee hence into the north and find new lands where there was no law. This was when his two drops of white blood would rise faintly and feebly. Out in the sunlight and the snowglare it was different. His Cree blood told him that the Great Spirit had marked up a debt of life against him; it was marked up in those two flecks of blood upon his capote.

He tried to cover the trail and fled onward, for wolves following an old caribou trail will go off upon newer scent of a fresher kill. But there had been no elusion. His food was gone, and thirty-thirty bullets do not kill rabbits in such a way as to leave much for food. There was no time for trapping, wolves had driven the caribou to the east, and Lareau faced facts. Also, there were his dogs.

The law of compensation, which is really far better understood by Indians than by white men, is the most irresistible thing in the northland—even more so than the mail or the law, those two terrible facts which are merciless. It works in queer ways. In the case of Lareau it worked through the dogs. They had come with him to the post, a valuable asset; that same night they had left the post with him, having had no rest to speak of.

There were seven left—gaunt, half famished things, still bearing the shrunken packs. Now there was no food left to give them, yet they were absolutely essential to their master's well being. His white blood told Lareau that he might eat these dogs, but his Cree blood warned him off. He fought out the question in his camp in the gully between two hills.

What should he do? Gradually he felt a cold hand tightening on his heart. He realized that he could not shake off the law, that his only hope lay in meeting it and overcoming it, yet it was something which his larger nature shrank from. While he hung wavering in the balance, the dogs swirled into a fight. Instantly his hand went out to his whip and he was among them—but he did not strike. He merely kicked them apart

as a white man would have done. It was the decisive thing, and Lareau flamed up with all the outraged anger of a white man.

"I will face him," he muttered, counting his cartridges. "I will stay here and trap, and when he comes I kill him. Then I will go on."

With this, he gave over completely to the dominance of his far white ancestor. Building up his camp that night, he went after meat in the morning. He carried his rifle. He did not make deadfalls for mink and marten and fox, or set rabbit snares down in the sapling filled gullies as his cousins would have done; he shot valuable bullets in quantities which would have broken an Indian's heart. He got game, plenty of it.

Having secured meat enough for the present, his white strain counselled him to store up some against the future. So he left camp and returned after three days with a caribou frozen on its travois behind him. With each day he was losing his Indian ways, and when at length he detected a faint thread of smoke against the southeastern horizon he took his blankets and rifle and dried meat and went forth to meet the law.

How completely the white blood now dominated him may be inferred from the fact that instead of shooting the policeman down, he merely halted him two hundred yards away by dropping a bullet into the snow.

Lareau's position was good—hidden in a clump of scrub pine at the brow of a hill, the policeman and his dogsled out in the clear open basin below. The parka clad figure stood looking up at him, carbine holstered on the sled, and the Indian's finger itched on the trigger. Then the impulse born of Cree blood died out. He swiftly cased his rifle, slung it under his arm, and started down the hill.

The policeman waited quietly, his hood rimmed an inch deep with frosted breath. He was a gaunt, hard mouthed man, but he knew the Indian mind better than had McBean, for that was his business in life.

"I am Pete Lareau." The Indian halted four yards away, warily. He gave no salutation, which sprang from the two drops of white blood pounding in his soul. "I am Pete Lareau. Have you come after me?"

"I arrest you in the King's name for the murder of Jim McBean," returned the policeman in English, taking a step forward. Lareau's rifle slithered from its case.

"Mebbeso you stop," he said thickly. The policeman paused and spoke, but did not stop. His hand rested on his revolver.

"Lareau, you owe a debt." With those words he struck into the Indian's heart, as he intended. "You have killed a man. You have his blood on your capote. You must pay the debt you owe."

The thirty-thirty went up in line with the policeman's eye, halting him.

"Mebbeso you stop!" Lareau's voice was thicker than before. This talk of debt confused him, broke his resolution. "You plenty fool. De Company, he's make 'um cheat, make 'um cheat Injuns, make 'um debt!"

"Debt?" The white man began to perceive why Lareau wavered. His hand fell from his revolver, his other hand held out a pair of jingling handcuffs. "Debt? You owe a debt which must be paid. Lareau. You killed a man. You owe the Great Spirit a debt of your life for his!"

"Are you the Great Spirit that I should pay you?"

Lareau lowered his rifle slightly and fell into the Cree tongue.

"No, but the government is His agent. You must pay your debt. Your life for the life you took. It is a debt that you owe."

That magic word "debt" sent a wave of blackness over Lareau's brain. He gazed silently into the blue eyes of the policeman. He was fighting to glimpse his vision again, but the word "debt" was paralyzing to him. A debt was a debt, and he was a man of honor. Vaguely he felt the other was right.

"Mebbeso," he muttered, struggling for light. "I—I do not understand!"

The dumb agony of his face fascinated the white man. Lareau lowered his rifle, all things forgotten in the conflict that swayed him. Suddenly he looked up, gripped at the prayer sticks in his belt. He was once more a Cree, his mind as simple as that of a child in its dealings with affairs of honor.

"Mebbeso you stop here," he said confidently. "I make 'um talk wid

Great Spirit, two smokes. Mebbeso I come back, make 'um pay debt."

The other would certainly have agreed, for he knew the Cree mind; but at that instant his dogs snarled and leaped into a fighting mass behind him. He had been on the trail for two months; he was worn to the bone; his nerves were on edge, and his white reason drove the knowledge of things Indian from his head. It was maddening to have this Cree go back to his own camp when he was here for the taking. He stepped forward again, hand on revolver.

"No. You come with me. You make 'um pay debt now."

The thirty-thirty flashed up, but the policeman shot from his hip and leaped forward. Lareau felt the bullet tear through his arm. As his rifle touched the policeman's breast, he pulled the trigger.

"Bah goss!" he ejaculated slowly, staring down at the motionless fur trimmed parka and the crimson snow around it. "Bah goss!"

This account was settled. The policeman had fired first, and here his conscience was absolutely clear. But he owed the Great Spirit for the life of Jim McBean; he still had a debt to pay! That was indisputable, and he leaned over to pick up the policeman's service revolver. He was wounded, though not badly, and he had paid for the wound with death. Now he must pay his own debt, as he had been quite ready to do upon remembrance of it.

He calmly strode up the hill to his place of waiting under the trees. Stripping a little new birchbark, he set it upon the clean snow and placed his new made praying sticks on the bark. Then he stood up, erect and confident.

"Kisamunito, it is Pete Lareau who calls you!" he said, looking at the blue-white sky. "Why should I pay my debt to the white man, when I owe it to you? I do not understand! I do not understand!"

He wailed out the words, the old words which his people had muttered helplessly through so many generations. Then he gathered himself together and held up the revolver, for he was speaking with the Great Spirit and must show no weakness.

"Kisamunito, Pete Lareau has always paid his debt honestly. He would not cheat you, Kisamunito. It is the white man who said, 'Pay me instead of Kisamunito,' for the white man wished to cheat you of your debt. Pete Lareau does not cheat, Great Spirit. *Pekoohum oo missinuhikun*—he pays his debt!"

A queer bursting crack rang out, for the frost had gone into the steel and it gave way beneath the shot. Quietly, Pete Lareau sank down to rest over his praying sticks; down across the two drops of blood on his capote crept a crimson-black stream. The white blood was washed out. The debt was paid.

Ridin' the Lower Line

By J.U.Giesy

Even though Kid Glenn's short temper and quick six-shooter had landed him in the Socorro jail, Kit Carson saw in him the ideal rider for the lower line of the San Mateo range—a line across which both cattle and riders all too frequently disappeared.

"AW, DRY up!" In much the same manner he would have used in eliminating a persistently annoying fly, Kid Glenn brought the butt of his six-gun in contact with the track foreman's head.

Immediately thereafter the track boss slumped limply into the sawdust of the Palace saloon floor and the dreamless indifference of one very neatly knocked out.

Many hands laid hold of the Kid and removed his clasp from the barrel of his gun, so that he stood disheveled and disarmed yet still sputtering scrambled profanity, much like a cat on which someone has turned a garden hose.

A deputy sheriff dragged himself away from the congenial employment of watching a poker game, divested the Kid of his belt and holster and what loose change he still chanced to possess. Then, followed by a bunch of the Palace hangers-on, he haled the Kid to the 'dobe jail and thrust him into a room.

The Kid glanced disgustedly at the backless stool, a pail of stale water and the cheap cot.

"This is a helluva hotel you're runnin'," he complained in a voice of wounded dignity. "Sheriff, ain't you all goin' to leave me nothin' to smoke?"

Grinning, the deputy gave him the sack of tobacco and the papers he had removed from his pockets a few moments before, shut the door and left him to smoke and meditate.

This the Kid proceeded to do. He ran a hand through his thatch of wind burned light hair, narrowed his green-ish gray eyes and drew his rather thin features into a frown. Just off the Short Horn Cattle Company's drive from the Mexican market at Chihuahua, he had drifted into Socorro and endeavored to remove the effects of much dust and shouting and hard riding in many drinks of the particular brand of redeye the Palace saloon dispensed.

During the eradicating process, the Irish track boss had engaged him in argument, about just what the Kid now seemed to forget. At any rate the man's loquacious garrulity roused the Kid's always sensitive temper, with the result that he had closed the discussion by introducing that unanswerable authority, Judge Colt. That he had used the butt of the gun, goes to show that he had no really evil animus in the act. The foreman had simply grown tiresome, and the Kid had desired a respite from the chatter. He felt that he had acted very mildly and exercised great control. He felt unjustly dealt with now as he sat and smoked and gloomed in the adobe jail.

Only after much meditation and several cigarettes did he realize that perhaps the trackman's friends might have a right to object to having him knocked in the head. When the idea fully developed, he rose, took a drink from the water bucket, swore feelingly to himself and stretched out on the cot. After a time the fumes of the redeye mounted to his brain like an anaesthetic, and he slept.

He woke with a clearer mind—to a

number of things. A good deal of the Palace brand of poison had oozed from his skin during the hot night, or had been dissipated through the process of respiration.

After trying to alleviate a sensation of inward drouth at the pail of brackish water, and awaking a feeling of extreme nausea, the Kid decided that he certainly was in bad. In the light of a saner consideration, he was now ready to admit that his conduct of the night before had been lacking in diplomatic finesse. If instead of hitting the Irishman he had simply poisoned him with a few more drinks of Palace whisky, he could see now that he would have silenced the fellow's too fluent tongue, equally effectively, and at the same time maintained his own freedom of action. Freedom of action in a six-by-eight cell was a limited affair at best. And all at once, because he couldn't have it, freedom of action appeared a very desirable thing to the Kid. He wanted to mount his mustang and ride out where a cigarette would taste cool. He wanted—well, all sorts of things he had never known the full value of before. He swore and sat down on the cot after kicking the backless stool.

Over his breakfast of bread and black coffee he ruminated some more. The worst of it all was, he was not one of the regular Socorro crowd and hence had no license to break Socorro laws. Therefore they'd make an example of him. They'd take him before a justice and fine him good and plenty. If he only had some money he'd pay their old fine, but the money he had made with the Short Horn outfit had gone in buying forgetfulness of the vicissitudes of that job.

And all at once the Kid caught his breath. There was that Texas affair—the florid-faced, sandy haired man the Kid had shot. In that episode he had not exercised the control he had exhibited last night. He had used the other end of the gun in its intended fashion, and after that he had fled across the border into Mexico, on the run. If word of it had drifted out here, they might even try him for murder! They might hang him. The bread turned pasty in his mouth. His head began to ache. He lifted his voice and yelled like a wild beast in a cage for the sheer physical relief of the act.

Still thoughts of the Short Horn job induced others. He turned them over while he smoked a cigarette. After it had gone out for lack of attention, he grinned. There was a man who, if he so elected, could get him out of this hole and do it quick. His name was Carson and he had been buyer and drive boss for the Short Horn people when the Kid joined them at Chihuahua the previous winter. After the drive Carson had gone over to the San Mateo Cattle Company and was with them now. Glenn fancied Carson had always liked him and wouldn't be above lending a helping hand. If he could get word to him it might be arranged. He nodded, got up, began yelling again and kicking on the door. He had a definite purpose in creating a good deal of a row.

Presently that purpose was fulfilled. The jailer arrived with a suggestion that the Kid stop that noise.

Having gained the other's presence, the Kid obligingly complied. "Say," he suggested, grinning, "seems to me I seen Charlie Edwards in town, old hoss. Cain't you all git him to come 'round heah?"

"I dunno," the jailer considered. "What was you wantin' with Charlie?"

"I wanta git word to a friend of mine," the Kid made frank explanation. "I don't belong on this range no way. You all git Charlie an' I shore will be obliged."

"Well—maybe," the jailer conceded. "On'y don't you-all make any more noise."

"Shore," the Kid assented and went back to his seat on the cot.

Later Edwards arrived. The Kid had known him for some time. He stood and gazed into the cell and fumbled his hat. After a bit he nodded. "I was comin' anyway," he affirmed; "on'y las' night I set into a game. Kid, you shore hev done it good an' plenty. What you-all goin' to do now?"

"I ain't goin' to do nothin', Charlie," said the Kid. "I reckon you're goin' to do it, old hoss. They'll be puttin' me to work on the rock pile less'en you-all kin git me out'en this. I ain't got nothin' to pay a fine. I'm broke. Looks like they had me both ways from the jack. But jus' you listen to me."

"All right," Charlie agreed. "I'm listenin'. Git it offen your chest.

Whad'je want to hit the Mick fer any way, Kid?"

"I shore oughta hev coppered thet bet," Glenn admitted. "But see here. I'm in, an' I wanta git out. Now ef I could see Kit Carson over to the San Mateo outfit, he'd shore pay my fine an' take me out to grass. I want you-all to ride up thataway an' find Carson, an' tell him I'm heah in a room I don't like. You-all jus' tell Mistah Kit the Kid sont you an' I'll bet he'll mosey right back with you an' pay me out. You-all git a move on, Charlie, 'cause I cain't no ways stand this heah place."

"All right, Kid. I reckon I can light out this evenin' shore." Edwards slapped on his hat and turned away as though his errand might be only across the street, instead of a thing involving a ride of many miles.

In those days men thought little of riding far in order to help a friend. If Carson could get the Kid out of his trouble, Edwards considered it as up to him to get Carson to the Kid. Therefore he lost no time. He walked to the door of the jail.

"S'long," called the Kid.

"The Mick's all right today," Edwards flung back information.

"Shore," Glenn accepted it grinning. "I done knowed he was a bonehaid. That's why I hit him whar I did."

After that days went by and they tried Kid Glenn. It was merely a matter of form.

"Kid," said the judge, "did you hit the Mick?"

"Jedge," said the Kid, "I shore did."

"What fur did you-all hit him, Kid?" his Honor inquired.

"I was plumb tired of his jaw," the Kid explained. "But—lawsee, Jedge, I on'y guv him one leetle tap on the haid. I didn't hurt him, Jedge. I didn't want to. I never seen him before, an' I ain't no hand to hold a grudge."

The trackman, however, had numerous witnesses to prove that had nature endowed him with brains, they would have been sadly disarranged as a result of the Kid's unexpected assault. Popular opinion was decidedly against Glenn, and Justice was not so blind but she could read the popular mind. Referring to the Constitution of the United States which guarantees free speech, the judge deduced that in stopping the foreman's utterance, Kid Glenn had obtruded the rights of that person's citizenship, and thereupon sentenced the Kid to fifty dollars or fifty days. Having no money, the Kid of necessity elected the latter choice. But as he stoutly asserted that a friend would shortly arrive with the specified number of dollars, the judge suspended execution of sentence for a few days. Dollars were preferable in Socorro County in those days, when there was material in plenty from which to enroll rock pile recruits. The Kid, escaping hard labor for the moment, went back to his cell to smoke and wait.

At the end of a week, Carson rode into Socorro and dismounted at the jail. He was a heavy-set individual with a hooked nose, very dark brown eyes and straight black hair, hinting at a strain of Indian blood. He knew exactly what he wanted, and usually got it with few words. The jailer took him to see the Kid.

"Hullo," said that individual, grinning in a crestfallen way.

"Played hell, didn't you, son?" Carson returned as he took the backless stool.

"I got stuck fer a fifty dollar fine an' I ain't got a red cent," Glenn made rueful admission. "Say, Mistah Kit, give me a job on the range an' pay me out'en heah."

Carson narrowed his brown eyes slightly. He appeared to turn something over in his mind. After a time he nodded.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll git you-all out an' you kin come out to San Mateo an' work. I 'lowed that was what you'd be wantin' when I started over. Well, we're needin' a man like you to ride the lower line."

"I don't keer whar you-all put me," the Kid declared, "jus' so it's off somewhars by myse'f. Ef I've sorter got the hull landscape to my lonesome I git along fust class. But I jus' ain't no use at all in a crowd. Seems like folks jus' nacherally pick on me when I git into town. An' I cain't stand havin' nobody crowd me. I wanta git off to my lonesome right now."

"You'll do it," said Carson, rising. "On the lower line at San Mateo you'll hev twenty miles all to yourself, barrin' a run in with some rustlers maybe. You shore ought to hev room enough to keep you from bein' crowded down thar, I guess."

"Suits me," the Kid accepted on the instant. "When do I git out?"

"We'll be startin' back tonight," Carson told him as he walked out of the cell.

"Sounds good," said Glenn and stopped, grinning. "Lawsee, Carson, they was goin' to put me to work for the county ef you hadn't showed up."

But Carson merely smiled in a somewhat inscrutable fashion and walked off. To tell the truth he was glad of the turn which had brought the Kid into trouble and so given him a much needed man. He lost no time in settling with the court and thereby gaining the Kid's allegiance and service for what he hoped might prove a considerable time.

TWO ranges of mountains run south and west from the town of Socorro. On the east are the Magdalenas proper. To the west the smaller San Mateo range, according to local nomenclature at least. The atlas gives them both Magdalena, and the inhabitants name them to suit themselves. Toward their northern end, these ranges are connected by a cross spur making the top of a truncated prism and forming the boundary of what in the early 80's was the San Mateo Cattle Company range—the San Mateo Valley, so called. From the valley the trail to Socorro crossed this northern range by the Almatares Pass, so named from several cottonwood trees beside a spring. Farther along the range at Texas Springs the company had a rock house and several corrals and maintained the headquarters of their range. The valley lying between the east and west ranges and open to the south was an ideal grazing ground, covered the year round with brown green gramma grass kept fresh by seepage from the hills. Its one salient fault was the open southern end, which made it easy of access to the ever-busy rustler and required an eternal vigilance on the company's part against across the border raids.

On the east are a third series of springs near the mouth of a gorge known as La Perdicita Canyon. In the San Mateo range twenty miles to the west is Canyon Colorado—the red canyon. Here, too, the company had a house and some corrals. An imaginary line connecting these two points constituted the lower line of the range. It was kept patrolled constantly by hardy riders, whose duties consisted in keeping the drifting herds north of the line and the rustlers to the south. Riding the lower line was no sinecure of a job. More than one man so employed had disappeared along with numerous cattle in the past.

One may see then, why Carson was glad to get the Kid, proven rider, quick of temper and equally quick on the trigger, for this particular work. Starting from the canyon on the west, a rider customarily covered the forty miles to Perdicita and return the same day, unless something happened en route. It required a man of nerve and endurance to stick to the task, and Carson felt he had secured such a one in the Kid.

He explained matters to him on the way from Socorro to Texas Springs. "Kid," said he, "there's been a lot of rustlin' goin' on down our way of late. Them feller's is gittin' pretty bold. They don't even take the trouble to run 'em across the line no more. They takes 'em down an' sells 'em at San Marcial. You-all want to keep your eyes peeled."

"What do you-all do with 'em ef you cotches 'em, Mistah Kit?" Glenn asked in softly drawling tones. "In Texas we-all don't 'low to cotch 'em alive at all."

"Nuther do we," Carson told him. "Less'en they surender, that is. Mostly they show fight, an' quite a lot of 'em hev got hurt now an' ag'in."

"They wouldn't do nuthin' to me then ef I was to 'get' a rustler?" the Kid inquired in musing fashion.

"Not unless they guv you a medal," Carson said with a thin lipped smile and a glint of satisfaction in his eyes.

Glenn nodded. "All right. I'll keep a lookout fer 'em," he agreed.

As a matter of fact, he took to his new occupation like a pup to sucking eggs. He had asked to be alone, and never was a wish more fully gratified. Twenty miles to Perdicita. Twenty miles back to Colorado, and never a thing to do, save keep his eyes on the cows. Kid Glenn, pushing his mustang through the grass, sang at the birds in a high sweet tenor and turned the drifting cattle back from the line, and smoked and thought of all manner of things. Over at Perdicita he would unsaddle and let his pony rest, eat a bite and sprawl in restful ease. And after a bit he would start back to Colorado. Nobody molested him and he was con-

tent. Carson's headquarters at Texas Springs were miles to the north. The Kid rarely saw anyone from there unless he needed provisions, or some order was sent out to him. In those days Kid Glenn lived the simple life.

And he did his work well. Not only did he feel an obligation to Carson, but he knew very well that Carson could measure his movements from the Texas Springs ranch-house, through what the Kid denominated as "them bi-norculars of his'n." It was in such fashion that he referred to a pair of high powered field glasses which Carson always carried with him and through which he was in the habit of inspecting the condition of affairs in the valley and the daily drift of the herds. The glasses gave Glenn a sense of being under his employer's eye, though it is to be doubted if he would have acted differently than he did had they not entered the equation at all. In those days of ready friendship or hatred, men were usually friend or foe to the end. It is therefore probable that the Kid would have been just as loyal to the man who had paid him out of the Socorro jail. Be that as it may, they saved Carson many a mile of riding —and then took him on a wholly useless journey.

Because there came a day when, sweeping the plain with their lenses, he failed to pick up the spot which should be the Kid riding west in the afternoon.

There had been a clockwork regularity about Glenn's schedule. Hence, when the glasses failed to show man or pony, Carson began a systematic survey of the plain.

As always in the afternoon the herds were drifting far south and close to the lower line. So much Carson saw and then began to follow back along the Kid's route from Perdicita, expecting to see his man appear. Instead he picked up three horsemen riding in from the south. A vague uneasiness filled his mind. The riders were approaching with the easy yet rapid gait of men to the saddle born, although even the powerful glasses failed to reveal their identity. Once more Carson searched for the Kid and finally found him, just leaving the concealment of the hills at the canyon mouth and riding in such a way as to intercept the other riders' course. Apparently he was in no hurry, merely letting his pony amble along.

Little by little the three men and the single rider approached. Presently Carson saw the three stop and, in a moment, the flirting of a handkerchief. It was the plainsmen's signal of peace. In those days when men went armed with six-guns and suspicion, others meeting them declared their state of mind before coming into range.

The Kid evidently accepted the token at face value, because he rode up to the group and stopped.

But from a quiet beginning the drift of conversation appeared to take on a more serious tone. Carson saw the strange riders gesticulate and point, while the Kid sat seemingly unmoved. In the end the three put spurs to their mounts and galloped off toward Perdicita. The Kid rode slowly westward again with an occasional backward glance.

After a time the riders were lost to sight behind the point of hills from back of which Glenn had emerged. The Kid stopped, stared at the spot where they had vanished, and then glanced at the sun. Abruptly he wheeled his horse and started back along his own track at a lope. Patently to the watcher Glenn had made up his mind as to some sort of action.

Carson frowned. More and more as he watched he had become filled with uneasy speculation. Riders along the lower line other than San Mateo cowboys usually meant trouble. For some time the rustlers had been quiet, too, which seemed an ominous sign. Furthermore, the horse of one of the three men had tallied fairly well, in so far as he had been able to determine, with the description of the mount of a noted rustler and outlaw, one Curly Jake, a halfbreed ruffian of the worst frontier type.

A noted cattle thief, the man plied his calling in the open because of his evil reputation and the fact that no one with sufficient temerity to attempt the ending of his career, had been found. He had made the San Mateo people much trouble, running their cattle away in bunches and openly laughing at their attempts to prevent his raids. The outlaw had a band of companions similar to himself, and, like wolves, they generally hunted in pack. It was suspected, if not actually known, that Curly Jake knew the fate of more than one rider of the lower

line who had disappeared in the past, and Carson had had Curly in mind when he employed the Kid.

Now he debated his course. As was his custom when inspecting the range, he had ridden well along the hills from the house at Texas Springs. And he was alone. But—he had told the Kid to be on the watchout for men of the rustler type, and Glenn's actions had said as plainly as words that he had deliberately let the strange riders disappear into the mouth of Perdicita Canyon for just one reason—to set himself on their trail and follow it at his own discretion. That would be like a man of the Kid's youth and stripe. And Carson reached a decision.

Whirling his horse, he set off for Texas Springs at a run. He had recalled the saying that "in numbers there is strength," and it seemed likely to him that if the Kid followed the three horsemen very far he was likely to need help.

At the springs Carson found Jack Rhodes and a second cowboy, recounted what he had seen and ordered them to get their horses and accompany him at once.

"I don't know what the Kid's up to, of co'se," he observed as they started. "But he followed them hombres back to'ards Perdicita an' I reckon he may need help in playin' his hand."

"Ef one of 'em was Curly Jake, the Kid won't be in no shape ter appreciate it when he gits thar, mos' likely," Rhodes, who rode next to Carson, opined. "Thet Curly's a bad man, Kit. I reckon the Kid's about due to get his'n."

"I don't know it was Curly for shore," Carson pointed out. "I was on'y jedgin' by his hoss—too far off to make sartin. Still, I dunno. The Kid's greased lightnin' with a gun. Trouble is he's too quick, mostly——"

"He couldn't be ef it was Curly shore 'nuff," Rhodes maintained and sank his voice as he continued. "Listen. You-all don't reckon we don't *sabe* his play, an' he's aimin' to cotch up an' throw in with them?"

"No, I don't," Carson said shortly and drove his horse down the trail toward the sweep of grass covered plain.

Dusk found the ranch men sweeping across the plain. It was Carson's purpose to follow the general line of the Kid's daily patrol, past the point of the hills back of which the hypothetical rustlers had disappeared and so come eventually on Glenn or his body or some sign of the men he had trailed. Rhodes' suggestion that Glenn might have decided to join forces with the men he had been hired to frustrate had occurred to Carson already. But he had thrust it mentally from him then, just as now he had thrust it aside in words.

Dusk deepened into night as they rode. Now and then they passed the dark hulked mass of a part of the drifting herd. Now and then a horse stumbled, lurched, evoked from its rider a low toned oath. The mouth of Perdicita Canyon came closer, loomed dark in the flank of the Magdalenas, and Rhodes dragged his horse to a plunging halt.

"Listen!" he called tensely. "Did you heah thet?"

"Shore." Carson assented. Somewhere a horse had nickered softly. "Reckon it might be the Kid's mustang," he suggested. "He might hev left it in the cave. Le's have a look."

Close by the mouth of the gorge there was a recess known to the ranchmen as the "cave"—though in reality it was no more than a space roofed by an overhang of rock.

Carson slid to the ground and his companions followed. They crept toward the face of the cliff.

Again the pony nickered from below it, and a moment later the three men found him with hanging reins, standing in the rocky pocket.

Carson struck a match. "It's the Kid's," he declared an instant afterward. "Looks like he'd left him an' followed them jaspers into the canyon on foot. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad notion fer us to follow suit."

"Maybe," Rhodes agreed. "Ef he lef' his hoss heah, I reckon it can't be fur, an' ef we was to ride in we'd shore make some noise."

"Correct," said Carson. "We'll leave ours heah with his."

Returning to their mounts, they led them to the cave and, leaving them there, essayed the dark gorge of the canyon on foot.

Possibly half an hour had passed, when suddenly Carson paused. "Hold on! Look thar!" he hissed and pointed to a dull, unsteady glow against the canyon wall before them, a flickering radiance.

"Campfire," Jack Rhodes breathed beside him. "Wall—thet settles it. They're thar. Thar's a spring up thisaway as I remember. Looks like they'd camped beside it. But whar in hell's the Kid?"

"Dunno," said Carson. "Anyway, thet fire's jus' beyond the next turn. Come on an' le's have a look."

He moved forward and his companions followed to a point where a rocky shoulder marked an angle in the canyon. There they once more paused and hugged its shadow and peered around it—at a camp fire with three men seated about it in the midst of a little boulder strewn flat. The firelight flickered upon them, and showed in its sheen upon body and bridle and saddle where, a little space back from the fire, their horses stood.

"That's them," Carson whispered. "That's the hoss I seen."

"Yep, an' one of them hombres is Curly Jake," Rhodes added. "I seen the jasper once. Well, I reckon thet settles it. Ef the Kid come up with 'em, I reckon they got him."

"I dunno," said Carson, studying the scene before him.

"Nuther do I for sartin, of co'se," said Rhodes. "It jus' seems likely. Wall, what do we do now; jump 'em an' shoot it out—or quit?"

"Wait," Carson admonished. "I ain't so shore but what the Kid may be up somewhar hereabouts jus' the same. Him leavin' his hoss an' trailin' 'em on foot like he done, looks like he'd knowed jus' about what he was up against. Maybe——"

He bit off his words and strained forward staring as, from out of the darkness beyond the circle of firelight, there came a shouted challenge.

"Hi, you coyotes! Grab your guns!"

"The—Kid!" Jack Rhodes mouthed.

Then tragedy stalked upon the scene. Things happened swiftly after that warning shout. The three outlaws by the fire seized their weapons and sprang erect, firing in the direction from which it had come. Yellow spurts of flame flashed from their guns. And out of the night beyond them, came other, answering stabs of flame.

Pop! Pop, pop! Pop, pop, pop!" the sounds of the firing came to the watchers' ears, caught up, magnified, flung back in heavy reverberations from the canyon walls.

Then one of the men by the fire was sagging, was bending at the knees, was sinking down as one suddenly very tired. And one of them plunged face downward in the way a man falls when death overtakes him on his feet. The last of them was kneeling, still firing, but weaving drunkenly as he knelt, until he swayed quite over and sprawled upon his side. Next Kid Glenn was striding into the circle of the firelight, was bending in its flicker apparently to inspect—the crown of his Stetson hat.

HI, KID! Kid Glenn!" Carson was bawling, running toward him, his companions at his heels.

"Hullo, yerself. That you, Mistah Kit?" Glen straightened, turned toward Carson's voice at the sound of his approach.

"Yep." The ranch boss strode into the firelight, bent and inspected one of the three examples of Kid Glenn's markmanship, then turned to where the Kid was standing. "Been havin' a leetle trouble?"

"Well, yes, a leetle." The Kid fumbled his hat.

Carson's lips twitched grimly. "Know who you got?" he demanded.

"Well, yes—I reckon. I 'low the hombre you was lookin' at jus' now was this heah Curly Jake I been hearin' right smart about," Glenn said. "The other two, Jake called Johnson an' Red—which, as applyin' to the last, wasn't his moniker at all, seein' as I knowed him wunst, though I ain't seen him fer quite a spell. They was pardners of Jake's all right."

"Just how did this play come up?" Carson asked.

"Why, it was thisaway, Mistah Kit." The Kid replaced his hat. Briefly he recounted the meeting Carson had witnessed through his glasses that afternoon. "What do you all reckon them coyotes wanted with me, Mistah Kit?" he asked at last.

"Wanted you-all to throw in with 'em most likely," Carson suggested.

"You called it," Glenn assented, nodding. "They done 'lowed as how tonight they was due to run a right smart bunch of beef across the line. An' they guv me a invite. 'Lowed they'd split with me ef I'd come in. But, lawsee, I couldn't see it, so I turned 'em down."

"Why?" Carson queried sharply.

"Why—" the Kid produced tobacco and papers, began rolling a cigarette and grinned—"I was still owin' you-all some money on thet jail fine—an' I 'lowed as how you might hev them bi-norculars of yours turned thisaway this evenin' like as not."

"I did," Carson told him gruffly.

"Then I reckon thet's what brung you-all ovah." The Kid lighted his cigarette and pinched out the match.

"We thought you might need help after I saw you take the back track," Carson said. "Go on—spill the rest of it, son."

"Well, when I didn't agree to chip in they got real hostile," Glenn resumed. "First off they ordered me not to drive no cows back away from the line but to jus' let 'em drift, an' then they tole me to do some driftin' out'en this part of the country myself. 'Lowed ef I didn't, they'd shore come back an' git me some dark night. Then they rid off, which looked plumb foolish to me. 'Cause ef I told a man I was aimin' ter git him, I wouldn't hev postponed the exercises none at all. So, after they left, I got to thinkin', an' the more I thought, the more it looked as if I was in some danger of gittin' got. That bein' the case, it 'peared as though if there was any gittin' to be done I might as well buy a stack in the game myself. So—well, I 'lowed I'd go back. It was gittin' late an' I hurried right smart, an' when I got to the mountain I lef' my hoss an' snuk up here on foot quiet like.

"An', lawsee, it was jus' like I knowed it would be, Mistah Kit. These heah rustlers hed builded 'em a fire heah at the spring an' was cookin' grub while they waited fer it to git dark enough to pull their raid. I crept up close an' I could see 'em good. An' I had to laff. Their talk of gittin' me shore did look funny, when you looked at it like I did from whar I was lyin' behind a rock. I could have got 'em easy from thar. Me not bein' an Injun, though, I waited a while an' then I stood up an' yelled at 'em to go fer their guns an' we shot it out. But them hombres was powerful slow' 'ceptin' Curly Jake. It was him shot me through the hat. He done thet first off, an' then I turned loose my wolf. An' that's all."

"Yeah—that's all," Carson said in a tone of admiration. "We heard you invite Curly Jake an' two of his men to a shootin' bee, an' then git 'em three to one in a fair squar fight. That's all, but it looks like it had been enough."

"Fer them," Kid Glenn agreed, nodding. And suddenly he smiled in self-conscious fashion. "On'y it ain't quite all of it, Mistah Kit, I reckon. The rest of it makes me feel plumb foolish."

"As how?" Carson eyed him.

"Well," the Kid flung the stub of his cigarette into the fire, "you all remember my tellin' you I'd killed a man in Texas 'fore I stampeded down Chihuahua way whar we met up?"

"Shore," Carson nodded. "What about him?"

"Nuthin'. 'Ceptin'," the Kid jerked a hand toward one of the bodies sprawled in the flickering light, "that's him. The one Curly called Red. I told you I done recognized him this evenin' an' I did. Seems like thar musta been some mistake about my killin' him in Texas, 'cause it wasn't ontil tonight I really finished the job. What about these heah bodies, Mistah Kit? Reckon we oughta cover 'em up?"

Carson nodded again and the four of them set to work. An hour later the burial was completed, the site of it marked by a pile of rocks, and the four men were stumbling down the canyon to where they had left their horses.

They found them, swung to the saddle and rode west to a point where the men from Texas Springs turned north.

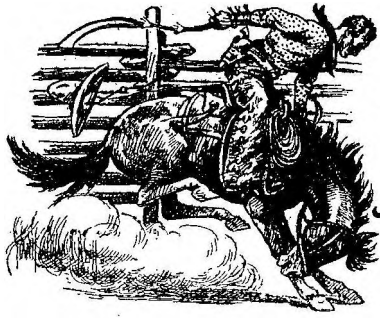
"Reckon I'll be late gittin' to Colorado," the Kid said then. "But I reckon there won't be so much beef goin' over the line after this. Well s'long."

He rode into the night and presently they heard him singing:

"Oh bury me not on the lone prairie-e-e-e——
Where the wild coyotes howl over me——"

It was part of one of the innumerable verses of the "Cowboy's Lament." It was the requiem of Curly Jake and his fellows sung in Kid Glenn's clear, high pitched tenor voice.

"The danged gun-slinging', singin' fool," Jack Rhodes chuckled as he rode along with Carson and his comrade, underneath the stars.



Sonny

By

Murray Leinster

Author of "Fog," "Sagebrush Slings The Bull," etc.

Gunpowder was a specialist in concentrated hellicusness, the type of outlaw horse that could buck and whirl on a quarter—and have twenty cents left over. In the long search which lay ahead of him, Sonny Holman needed just such a fiery mount; so in payment he embarked upon a dangerous duty for the sheriff of Helada.

SONNY HOLMAN was worth a thousand dollars to anybody in Helada on the morning he rode in, whether they got him dead or alive. But nobody seemed to know it. He thought he was ahead of the alarm for him, so rode on to where he saw something like a crowd. There was a black and white horse fighting like a fiend to dismount his rider, in the center. Sonny looked at the horse and stiffened. Then he rolled a cigarette and watched the battle. All the town was watching, apparently. The fight was taking place in the small corral attached to the livery stable, and there were quite forty citizens leaning against the corral rails or perched on other points of vantage.

The man on the horse was beginning to weaken before Sonny rode up. As Sonny struck a match to light his cigarette, daylight showed underneath the rider. When Sonny had taken his first puff, the rider grabbed wildly for the horn of his saddle. When Sonny drew his first inhalation the rider lost a stirrup. Sonny's discarded match stick and the rider of the black and white horse struck the ground at the same time.

A yell went up from the onlookers. The black and white horse whirled and reared up, to come down with sharp fore hoofs upon the fallen man. A lariat fell across its head, and the man on the ground rolled out of the way at the same instant. A moment later the horse was being dragged across the corral, fighting madly every foot of the way, and the man on the ground had struggled to his feet and was limping to the gate.

"That's a right nice hawss," observed Sonny.

"Nice hawss?" queried a citizen by the corral gate. "He's hell on wheels, with all kinds of equipment. Nobody ain't rid him yet."

"Hm," said Sonny reflectively. "What might you folks call him?"

The citizen spat. "His official name," he stated, "is Gunpowder; but I'm inclined to think that Buck, yonder, is callin' him somethin' different."

The limping man came out of the gate rubbing his shoulder. Sonny surveyed him thoughtfully. "That your hawss, brother?" he asked.

"Not much," rasped Buck. "If I owned the devil, I'd fill him so full of lead he'd have t' use a block an' tackle to hoist his tail for a fly flap!"

"I'd admire," said Sonny tentatively, "to try forkin' that animal. He hadda trick or two I ain't seen before. There was a kinda shimishewabble in the middle of a steamboat turn that looked right intricate."

"Go ahead," snapped Buck. "I bet yuh regular money y' don't stay on as long as I did."

"No," said Sonny sorrowfully, "I

ain't got any widow for you t' collect from if I was to lose."

He slipped off his own pony and went over to the horse. He seemed wholly at ease, but he was acutely aware of each glance that was bent upon him. When one is badly wanted, even if one is ahead of the news, caution is desirable—especially when honor likewise is at stake. But nobody showed anything but curiosity. Gunpowder had been blindfolded, now, to be edged into the stable. Sonny stopped the two men who were handling him. No more than half a dozen words and he was granted a free ride, with smothered grins at his apparent confidence.

"Want y' own saddle?" queried one of the men at Gunpowder's head.

"That one's on tight," said Sonny. "Let 'er go!"

The men jumped back. Nothing happened. Sonny sat upon the most placid of horses, one which gazed curiously around at the men watching it. Sonny puffed twice and then ran a caressing hand under its mane. "A li'l action, Gunpowder," he suggested mildly.

WITHOUT warning Gunpowder exploded. He bucked and at the same time spun around like a pinwheel. He made half a dozen monster leaps, landing stiff-legged from every jump. He whirled, and stopped short with a jerk. He plunged full speed for the opposite side of the corral, and five yards from the fence dug his hoofs into the ground and slid. His object was to shoot Sonny over his head either above or into the corral fence. He failed. Sonny stuck like a leech, and to add insult to injury, slapped Gunpowder's flank with the palm of his hand.

Gunpowder shook himself, walked deliberately to the center of the corral again, and without warning became a veritable tornado. He bucked, he plunged, and in the middle of a plunge he bucked again. He fought like a demon, desperately, fiercely, infuriatedly. For a good three minutes not one of the onlookers saw Gunpowder as anything but a whirlwind of horse in the middle of a cloud of dust. Buck after buck, jumping with his back arched—everything in the line of plain and fancy devilishness that long experience could suggest were exhibited in quick succession.

And daylight had not yet appeared between Sonny and his saddle.

Gunpowder was panting, now. A very few minutes of such battling as he had been doing will wear out any horse. He began to gasp a little. Sonny touched him with the spur. Gunpowder seemed to go mad with rage and determination, bucking, plunging—everything the mind of a horse has yet conceived in the way of wickedness. Suddenly he plunged for the fence. Sonny lifted his right leg to avoid being scraped off, but instead the black and white horse flung himself down and rolled up flat to the fence. It was deliberate and it was devilish, an attempt to crush the man against fence or earth with Gunpowder's full weight.

Sonny jumped just in time, but he had to make it across Gunpowder's upturned belly to escape. He sprawled on the ground, and when he got up there was a nasty cut on his forehead from a plunging hoof.

"Hold on, there!" he snapped. Men were running with lariats, and one or two with poles. "I'm tendin' to this here."

As Gunpowder struggled to his feet again Sonny leaped upon him, and his face was no longer pleasant, but definitely grim and determined. Now he was not content to let Gunpowder wear himself out. He fought the animal with cold determination.

"Naughty li'l son of a gun," he said grimly when the bucks had lost their first energy. "A li'l more action, Gunpowder."

He touched his spurs in. The horse was galvanized into a fresh and frantic outburst. When he slackened Sonny spurred him again. And again and again he forced the wearying animal to battle until at last horseflesh could stand no more.

Gunpowder was defeated. He stood with hanging head, exhausted and beaten, and Sonny slipped rather stiffly from the saddle and went around to his head.

"Dawggone!" he said admiringly. "Gunpowder ain't no name for you. You're Dynamite from now on, an' saye-th no man to the contrary. Who owns this critter? I'm aimin' to buy him."

There had been one man watching, standing apart from the others. He came forward now, and Sonny saw a

bright metal star on his shirt. Sonny's right hand fell inconspicuously to his side, hard by his six-gun. There was a thousand dollars reward for Sonny, and he meant to be careful. For the time it would take to locate a man he once foolishly had trusted, he intended to remain at large.

"I own him," said the sheriff curtly. "Maybe we can make a deal."

"How much?" asked Sonny. He watched alertly, without seeming to be on guard.

"The price is three hundred," said the sheriff shortly, "but he ain't for sale for cash. Can you shoot?"

"I've pulled a trigger now an' then," admitted Sonny.

The sheriff turned to regard the group, who had been watching the taming of Gunpowder. His eyes met emptiness. Every man had walked away. Several could be seen turning into the Jackrabbit Saloon.

The sheriff turned back with a grim smile.

"The law, you might say, ain't especial popular right now in Helada," he observed. "All my deputies got shot or run away. An' I need one 'r two that can ride an' shoot. Stick with me a month an' if you ain't perforated I'll give you the hawss. I can't ride him."

Sonny, for whom a reward of a thousand dollars, dead or alive, had recently been posted; Sonny, who had ridden into this town liable to find his picture posted on the nearest fence, frowned thoughtfully. To occupy his hands he started to roll a cigarette. But it is not every wanted man who is offered a job enforcing the law. And besides, Gunpowder was a horse. A real horse, such as every man hopes to find and few men come across.

"You'll probably be plugged inside of a week," said the sheriff curtly, "but I c'n promise yuh some action. What say?"

Sonny licked his cigarette and nodded. Somewhere in this region there was a man who earnestly hoped not to meet Sonny. The latter approved of a chance to search—and likewise hide out from those who sought him—as a limb of the law.

"I'm on," said Sonny. "Do I wear a badge?"

THE sheriff tossed the makings across the desk to Sonny, and dropped a curtain made of flour bags across the window, which arrangement let light into the office but prevented anyone outside from looking in. It was a typical office for a Western sheriff. Posters pinned untidily on the walls, describing men wanted, a calendar or two, a heap of dusty documents on the desk, a .45-70 carbine in its saddle sheath in one corner, and two pairs of rusty handcuffs hung on a nail in the wall.

"You're sworn in," observed the sheriff. "Now I'll tip yuh off on how to live—bein' a deputy sheriff—in Helada. The first thing is, never put yuh' back to a door, or a window that somebody can shoot through. The second is, shoot first. The third is, don't b'lieve all yuh hear."

"Sounds right simple," conceded Sonny. "But what's the situation gen'rally, that calls for all them precautions?"

"They'll tell yuh I'm rustlin'," said the sheriff grimly.

Sonny blinked and looked up from the cigarette he was rolling. He studied the sheriff's face. His eyes dropped to the sheriff's hand, clenched fiercely upon the desk.

"And are yuh?" he asked.

"No," said the sheriff. His tone was quiet enough, but the knuckles of his hand whitened. "The evidence against me is pretty good, just short of hangin' evidence. I'd believe it against anybody else. So folks are layin' traps for me instead of the real rustlers, an' they're gettin' right lawless. One or two of 'em have tried t' plug me."

"An' when you get a deputy," said Sonny, "folks figure you got him to help you rustle cattle, instead of helpin' stop it. An' his health gets poor, if not fatal."

"That's it," said the sheriff grimly. "But you put on a pretty show of ridin' Gunpowder. Most folks like a good rider. Maybe they'll b'lieve I slipped up in takin' yuh on. Maybe they'll help you catch them rustlers when they won't help me."

Sonny twisted the end of his cigarette paper and put it in his mouth. He struck a match. "But," he objected, "I might be in town t' produce some more evidence sayin' you was rustlin'. How d'you know?"

"I don't," admitted the sheriff, "but if y'are, I'll plug you as sure as Gawd made li'l green apples!"

Sonny lit his cigarette and inhaled thoughtfully. "I think," he said meditatively, "this is goin' to be interestin'. Right interestin'. Bein' suspected, you can't find out anythin'. That's up t' me. If I find anythin' 'gainst you, you'll plug me. If I find anythin' against anybody else, they'll try t' plug me." He paused. "Right interestin', Sheriff. I'll mosey around an' see what I can see."

"Go ahead," said the sheriff. "I'll give yuh Gunpowder an' my share of the rewards for the rustlers if yuh catch 'em. But if yuh ain't in cahoots with 'em, you better not stan' with your back to a door."

Sonny went out, frowning thoughtfully. He stopped just outside the door and surveyed the town. Adobe houses, a few frame buildings with false fronts and a whitewashed jail. That was the town of Helada. Now the town was burning up with heat. A red hot sun glared down from a brazen sky. The cowponies hitched before the jackrabbit saloon drooped beneath the glare. The horizon was rippling from the heat and all the world was like an oven. Not the barest breath of breeze was blowing.

"Helada," murmured Sonny, "meanin' 'froze,' is what I'd call a kinda sarcastic name for this town."

He made his way toward the saloon, the fine alkali dust his feet kicked up rising nearly to his knees.

"An' me takin' a chance like this," he added severely to himself, "with all that reward out for me! Just because of Gunpowder an' kinda likin' that sheriff. It's foolish. But I never yet saw a man that clenched his fists while he was lyin'."

He turned into the saloon and blinked in the sudden semi-darkness. A bald bartender polished glasses behind the bar. Flies buzzed somnolently against the ceiling. Four cowpunchers with a marked family resemblance to each other and the man who had been trying to ride Gunpowder that morning were lounging about a table.

Sonny's features grew curiously hard as they looked at him. But no one gave a sign of recognition, except Buck.

Sonny waved his hand. "Folks," he said pleasantly, "meet your new deputy sheriff. This here is the first town I ever rid into where anybody thought I was li'ble to stop trouble instead of startin' it. The drinks are on me. Will yuh join me?"

There was a moment's hesitation. They looked at each other. Then Buck, still stiff from his fall from Gunpowder, grinned. "I rec'n," he admitted, "the drinks ought t' be on me. You sure forked that hawss, stranger."

"Thank you, suh," said Sonny profoundly. "As my step-great-uncle, late Secretary of the Interior in General Grant's cabinet, used t' remark, the main thing in ridin' a hawss is to say on top. Here's how."

He put down his glass.

"Where you from?" asked one of the four brothers abruptly.

"Heaven is my home," said Sonny, "an' I'm a long ways off. Right now, though," he added gently, "I'm representin' the majesty of the law, an' I'd say it was up to me to ask questions 'nstead of answerin' 'em."

The four brothers glanced at each other again. "You'll last maybe a week," said one, and buried his nose in his glass.

"Why?"

"Sheriff'll shoot you," said another.

"An' if he don't—" began a third.

Buck grinned again. "Somebody else prob'ly will. We're right curious that way around here. There's rustlin' goin' on. Folks say it's bein' directed from the sheriff's office. You got ambitions in the way of rustlin'?"

"Not any," said Sonny with ironical bitterness. "Holdin' up stages is my line, they say. I'm pretty good at that, though, to hear 'em tell it.

"Too bad," said Buck. "If y' don't help the sheriff drive off a few head now an' then, he's likely t' plug yuh. An' if yuh do, somebody else is more than apt to sling some lead yore way."

Sonny smiled. "When suggestin'," he said gently, "that I might consider rustlin' cattle, I'd be obliged if you'd smile. Real much obliged."

Buck grinned once more while the others scowled a little.

"I'm smilin'," said Buck.

The four brothers rose. "Rec'n we'll be goin'," said one curtly. His eyes turned upon Sonny. "S'long, in case we don't see you any more."

The others clattered out in his wake. Sonny frowned after them. "Seems

like I'd ought t' know them fellers," he confessed, "but they didn't know me. Who are they, anyways?"

"Name's Jackson," said Buck idly. "Four brothers. Come here a year or two ago. Own the Double H ranch an' run it mostly by themselves. They run a couple thousand head, maybe more."

Sonny frowned at his glass and twirled it absently in the wet spot it had made on the table.

"Say," he said suddenly, "what have you folks got on the sheriff? He acted like a regular feller to me."

Buck considered, and regarded Sonny thoughtfully for a little while. "He changed, I rec'n," he said at last. "Folks used to think a lot of him. But all of a sudden some rustlin' began that he couldn't never catch up on. He seemed mighty vexed, he did, an' rid his hawss' hoofs off tryin' to catch 'em, it seemed like. But all of a sudden there was a kinda raid on the Lazy L herds. Caldwell owns that ranch, an' he himself come on his foreman shot plumb through the head with a .45-70 bullet. An' the sheriff is the only man in the county has a .45-70 gun. See?"

Sonny nodded, twirling his glass thoughtfully.

"Then them Jackson fellers," said Buck. "They lost four hundred head—pretty bad for them. They let one of their han's go. Ham Curtis, it was. He come in an' he got a job deputyin'. An' a coupla weeks later the sheriff plugged him. Said he was pesterin' a Mexican girl. The girl swore to it, too. Said that the sheriff was her preserver. But then the Jackson boys, they up an' said that they'd turned Ham loose just to get that job an' see if the sheriff was crooked. An' they said Ham'd sent 'em word he had the goods on the sheriff. But he was shot before he could tell 'em anythin'. That looked kinda bad, too."

"Pretty bad," admitted Sonny. "Pretty bad."

"An' they foun' some rustled cattle oncet in a li'l canyon," Buck added, "with nobody around, but some fancy brandin'-irons in a cabin, an' a pair of the sheriff's ol' pants was in there, too. The sheriff, he said he'd give 'em to a Mexican, but it looked rotten bad."

"Right bad," said Sonny dreamily, "but I happen t' know somethin'——"

"An' so," Buck pointed out, "nobody believes the sheriff is so awful anxious to have them rustlers caught. The evidence against him bein' in cahoots with 'em ain't open-an'-shut, but it's sure plentiful. And consequent, when he cottons to somebody, other folks look him over careful. You, f'r instance. The sheriff swore he wouldn't never part with Gunpowder, though he couldn't ride him. But when you blew in an' rid him, why, the sheriff right away said he'd let yuh have him."

"It looked like a set-up, huh?" said Sonny shortly. "Like I was one of that gang, that come in an' rid Gunpowder for a gran'stan' play, for an excuse to take a deputy's badge? An' me an' the sheriff could pull off somethin' real big in the rustlin' line."

"That's it," said Buck. He faced Sonny squarely. "I kinda liked the way you rid that hawss. If y' don't like the way I talk——"

"That's all right," said Sonny briefly. "Does anybody know where Gunpowder come from?"

"No."

"Hm," said Sonny. He tapped on the table. "If anybody asks about me, you c'n tell 'em that I'm not only goin' after them rustlers, but I happen t' know somethin' that tells me right where t' look. An' I happen to know where Gunpowder——"

There was a deafening explosion from the partition at the rear of the saloon. Sonny's hat jumped a little and settled back on his head slightly askew. In one heartbeat from the noise of the explosion, and before the plaster the bullet dislodged had reached the floor, Sonny was out of his chair and racing for the cloud of smoke, a gun out and in his hand. Buck was slower, but he came plunging after with his own gun out and ready.

There was a second explosion, a crashing, and a man plunged out and was running and dodging among the buildings of the town. Sonny stood deliberately in the doorway and sent six bullets after him. The fugitive rounded an adobe corner and vanished.

Sonny blew the smoke from the muzzle of his gun. "The sheriff didn't tell me any lie when he promised action," he observed.

"Le's go get that son of a gun," said Buck eagerly.

Sonny shook his head. "We couldn't pick him out," he said regretfully. "He's

sittin' down amongst his frien's by now, his gun all reloaded, an' they'll swear he was there all the time. But I would like to be real certain," he added meditatively, "whether that feller shot at me because I said I knew where t' look for the rustlers, or—or because I said I knew where Gunpowder was stole from. Yep," reflected Sonny, "it would be right interestin' to be positive."

NIGHT had fallen upon Helada. A full moon was sailing slowly upward in the eastern sky. The angular adobe dwellings and the still more ungainly wooden ones took on a fictitious beauty from its silver rays, and the dust and sagebrush that began abruptly at the edge of the town looked curiously inviting. Bright stars shone down. Far and far away a thin noise began, to which the dogs of the town responded spitefully. The coyote stopped, then began again, and the dogs barked once more. Their yapping changed its timbre as the plodding hoofbeats of a weary horse drew near and entered the village.

The town was still, except for tinkling, jangling music from the Jackrabbit honkytonk. A dozen or more cowponies were hitched to its tethering rail, but there was little noise of festivity aside from the tune that went thinly out into the distant spaces.

Sonny, in the sheriff's office, wrote by a dismal yellow lamp light. He was writing in a rather peculiar fashion. In the midst of the dust and disorder of the office he held a pencil in his fist, instead of his fingers, and he did not form letters in the usual fashion. He was printing laboriously upon a sheet of ruled paper torn out of a tablet. He was half smiling as he did so, and certainly there was no hesitation over the words or painful working of a protruded tongue such as the illiterate writer finds so helpful. Besides, Sonny seemed to be copying.

A sheet of creased and greasy paper lay on the table before him. He was copying its crude capital letters, and if he did not combine them into the same words, he looked to his model for every one.

He stopped and compared his work with the original. There were certain small differences in the sense of the two, but the first lines were identical with the original, and one would have to read it through to note the difference.

Footsteps sounded faintly in the dust outside. Weary, discouraged footsteps. Sonny thrust his copy in his pocket. He was rolling a cigarette when the sheriff came in. The sheriff was covered with dust. He was saddle weary, and there were grim lines on his face.

"Howdy," said Sonny pleasantly. "A lot o' news since I saw you this mornin'."

The sheriff grunted. "I'm kind of inclined," he observed grimly, "to advise you to move on. There ain't any use you stayin' here an' gettin' shot. There's goin' to be shootin' soon, with me on the receivin' end. I coulda shot it out with four different men today. Caldwell, of the Lazy L, in particular. He used to be a good friend of mine, but he's got me down for a rustler, now, an' when he believes that, there's goin' to be somethin' doin'. You better stop deputyin' an' go where the law is more popular."

Sonny glanced at half a dozen envelopes on the table—the day's mail for the sheriff. One of them, Sonny had reason to believe from the postmark, would inform the sheriff that there was a thousand dollars reward for a certain Sonny Holman, dead or alive. He grinned faintly.

"I'd hate t' go without Gunpowder," he observed. "I like that hawss, sheriff. Sell him to me for cash?"

The sheriff nodded, and settled down heavily in his chair. He reached out for the mail.

Sonny drew a roll of bills from his pocket. "Here's your cash," he said, carelessly thrusting the mail aside while he counted out the money. "Say, sheriff, 'ud you mind tellin' me where you got him?"

The sheriff smiled ruefully. "I'll give yuh a paper sayin' yuh bought him from me. I bought him," he admitted, "from a Mexican. I kinda think he was stole some time or other, but he was too durned good to let stay in a greaser's han's. There was just a chance that the greaser come by him honest, though."

"He was stole," said Sonny, "from a ranch up in Arizona."

The sheriff paused, then held out the bills again.

"You goin' to take him back?"

"Not me," said Sonny, a deadly glitter coming into his eyes for a moment.

"He b'longs to my brother—my half-brother. An' that jigger owes me somethin'. I ain't goin' to tell you where the hawss belongs," he added quickly, "so you might's well sell him."

"Oh, I'll give him t' you," said the sheriff wearily. He looked up suddenly. "Why didn't y' tell folks he was stolen? The way folks think about me, if they knew I had a stolen hawss, that would ha' clinched things."

"I gotta lot of respect for the law an' all its officers," said Sonny, grinning. "I kinda think there's proof of it in the mail. Don't open that mail just yet, sheriff."

The sheriff stared at him. Sonny tossed over the greasy folded sheet of paper he had used as a model.

"Found that on the table when I come in here this afternoon," he observed. "Read it."

The sheriff picked up the sheet. He read it, and blank bewilderment showed on his features, then anger. Printed crudely was a note:

There's been some fellers scoutin around too much like they had a hunch. It was the Jackson brothers. It's up to you and the sheriff to head them off. You better do somethin. We aint sendin the sheriff cash for nothin and we got six hundred head in the canyon we aint been able to get across the border yet. You-all better do somethin or there'll be a mess.

"What's this here?" demanded the sheriff. "A joke?"

"I kinda think," said Sonny deliberately, "it's intended t' be a joke on me. It would kinda puzzle me, ord'narily. But some feller shot at me today. Just suppose somebody found that in my pockets. Wouldn't you kinda think they'd call it proof that you an' me was in cahoots with a rustlin' gang somewhere?"

"I would," said the sheriff grimly. "Where'd you get it?"

"Somebody left it on the desk here," said Sonny. "I rec'n they left it the same time they stole your .45-70 carbine."

The sheriff jerked his head around to the rifle holster in the corner. It was empty. He clenched his fists. "Now," he said coldly, "somebody's goin' to be found plugged, an' that gun beside him. Then folks will come after me. You clear out right now. I'm goin' to pass out shootin', even if it is my best friends that are aimin' to hang me. You better get goin' pronto."

Sonny stood up and nodded his head. "You're a white man, sheriff," he observed. "I kinda expect to leave t'night, but if things don't break right I—well, dawggone if I don't come back an' shoot it out alongside yuh!" He held out his hand.

The sheriff took it reluctantly. "You'll be plumb foolish if you do," he said grimly. "I aim to get right thorough perforated if folks come after me. I'm used to goin' after folks."

"I'm goin'," said Sonny, "to talk to some fellers in the Jackrabbit. There's a kinda meetin' there tonight. Ranch-owners, y'know, to sort of discuss this rustlin' business an' settle on how to end it. They ain't invited me, or you either, but I rec'n I'll horn in. My step-great-uncle, late Secretary of the Interior in General Grant's cabinet, he used t' say bashfulness was right cute, but it never made anybody President."

HE WENT out, slipping out of the narrowest possible opening of the door and closing it instantly after him. It might have been merely a coincidence, of course, but he had offered a very poor target to anyone who might have been looking for one.

His progress toward the Jackrabbit, too, was not the forthright stride of a man on the way to get a drink. His hand was always close to his hip, he clung to the shadows as much as possible, and he rounded no corner without having first peered before him.

When he reached the brightly illumined saloon, however, he swaggered inside cheerfully. He went up to the bar and took the bottle the bartender offered. He poured with meticulous care. And then he asked confidentially, "Got any objection to a li'l shootin' in here?"

The bartender looked at him uneasily. "What kind of shootin'? Folks or dice?"

"Neither," said Sonny. "Rustlers, most likely."

He up-ended the glass. A sudden quietness had fallen in the saloon when he entered. There were many men in the place, nearly as many, it seemed, as

had watched the riding of Gunpowder. Most of them were eyeing Sonny peculiarly. Every man had heard his exchange with the bartender.

"Here's some folks," said Buck, suddenly at Sonny's elbow, "that'd like to talk to you, if y' don't mind."

Sonny turned with politeness, possibly excessive, but Buck's face was wholly friendly and Sonny smiled amiably upon the others. He saw two of the Jackson brothers glaring at him.

"Delighted t' meet the gentlemen," drawled Sonny. "I am always pleased t' meet the representative citizens of a hustlin' little city. An' though I only got here this mornin'——"

"What we want to know," a deep voice boomed, "is, who are you, and what do you intend to do about this rustling? Are you helping the sheriff, or are you for us?" A big man, six feet and more, sat astride a chair barking at him.

"I'm for law an' order an' other desirable things," said Sonny politely. "An' if you folks pledge me yore votes for public dawg-catcher——"

"We aren't fooling," said the big man curtly. He was Caldwell, of the Lazy L. "We know enough about our sheriff to want to know about his deputies. Who are you? Where'd you come from?"

"That's a kinda hint," admitted Sonny, "but I got to disappoint you. I ain't a rustler, though. Stickin' up stages is said to be my line, like I told Buck an' my friends the Jacksons this mornin'. But that's about all I got to say."

Caldwell grunted. "It might be healthier to speak up," he observed pointedly.

Sonny smiled frostily and moved away from the bar toward the big man. One of the Jackson brothers moved uneasily to one side to give him room. Sonny seized him suddenly and held him by the shoulder.

"Frien' Jackson," he said softly, "I was thinkin' this mornin' that I'd seen you somewheres. Could you tell these folks about me?"

Jackson wrenched himself free and backed off. Sonny regarded him expectantly for a moment.

"Shucks, Jackson," said Sonny sorrowfully, "d'you think I'd tell on yuh?"

He reached Caldwell's side and beamed on him. Buck struggled through the sullen crowd and joined him.

"I'm bettin' on yuh," he told Sonny. "Caldwell, I c'n answer for one thing. This feller told me t'day he had a hunch who the rustlers are, an' right then somebody tried t' plug him."

Caldwell grunted. "Then let him tell us, now. We got fifteen hundred up for the man who names those rustlers an' proves it."

Sonny grinned expansively. "Stan' aside, gentlemen," he called. "I'll tell yuh! Fifteen hundred bucks for the names of the rustlers is two hundred an' fifty dollars a word. It only needs six to tell yuh! Folks, the rustlers are——"

Bang!

A window at the side of the saloon blew in. The thunderous report of a forty-five seventy carbine filled the saloon, and Sonny clapped his hand stupidly to his chest and fell as a tree falls.

MEN stared for the fraction of a second, then rushed for the door. All but Buck. He fought his way through a knot of men and leaped at the window with drawn gun. He crashed through it. Sonny lay still on the floor. The noise of a panic-stricken horse plunging violently sounded outside. Caldwell, the big man, heard sounds outside that told clearly of a rush for the spot where the marksman had stood. He bent over Sonny. But one of the Jacksons was first. He pushed his way to Sonny and knelt.

"Plumb through the heart!" he panted excitedly. "I bet the sheriff plugged him t' keep him from splittin'!"

He swore suddenly and stood up with a greasy paper in his hand. He glanced at it and swore again. "Listen t' this!" he shrilled triumphantly. "Listen here!

"'There's been some fellers scoutin' around too close. They was the Jackson brothers. It's up t'——'

"Caldwell, this here is proof that this feller an' the sheriff was in cahoots with them rustlers!"

He thrust the paper into Caldwell's fingers. "It's from the rustlers to him!" he shrilled excitedly. "An' it says that this feller an' the sheriff got to keep me an' my brothers from huntin' for 'em any longer. It says the rustlers are payin' the sheriff money! It says—— If it ain't proof this feller an' the sheriff

are in with that rustlin' gang, I'm a maverick!"

"Which," said a gentle voice from the floor, "is what y' are. It don't say nothin' of the sort."

Sonny rolled over and rose, his revolver inexplicably drawn and bearing steadily upon Jackson. He scrambled to his feet, smiling frostily, with the muzzle of his gun never wavering from its aim. There was no sign of any injury upon him.

"I'm callin' on Mistuh Caldwell to remember what you said was on that paper," added Buck softly. "I didn't like the first one, Jackson, so I writ another."

A sudden uproar arose outside the saloon. Shoutings, curses, a sudden scuffle and a shot.

"That Buck feller," observed Sonny cryptically, "he evident reads trails good, when the sign's clear."

Men began to pour back into the saloon, dragging one man with them and carrying another. The foremost bore a rent and shattered rifle, so shredded by some unknown force as to be recognizable only by its stock. Buck came with them, raging.

"Pluggin' that feller," he raged, "from outside a winder! Hell!"

He stopped short and swallowed, staring at Sonny, who nodded without removing his eyes from the ashen faced Jackson under his gun.

"I'm right side up, Buck," he observed. "Much obliged. You sure did some quick thinkin'. Would yuh mind takin' this feller's gun?"

Buck dazedly moved to obey, but paused as the sheriff stalked coldly into the saloon.

"I heard shootin'," said the sheriff grimly. "You folks been fussin' with my deputy?"

"Just a mite, Sheriff," interposed Sonny. "Mistuh Caldwell, judgin' by his expression, he's aimin' to read somethin' aloud."

Caldwell had read the note extracted from Sonny's pocket and had blinked over it. But the truth of its statements were already before him, in the riven gun, one Jackson brother unconscious, another disarmed and raging, and a third ashen faced before Sonny.

"M-my Gawd, sheriff!" gasped Caldwell. "We came near making a mistake. Look here. This Jackson pulled this note out of this man's pocket and said it was proof that you and your deputy were acting for the rustlers. And —and it reads——"

He swallowed, and read:

There's been some fellers scoutin around too much like they had a hunch. It was the Jackson brothers. It's up to whoever finds this note to look 'em over right careful. One of them is wanted in Dos Almas for breaking jail and horse stealing. And one of em ought to be banged up some. He stole the sheriff's .45-70 to shoot me with, and I've plugged up the barel with mud.

"All of which," said Sonny pleasantly, "has turned out. There's the gun, you all heard the shot, an' there's the feller, banged up somethin' scandalous. Did I hear somebody tumblin' to a few facts?"

Men began to stir a little. Sonny waved his gun oratorically. "If somebody will take this hombre's gun," he said plaintively, I'll speak my li'l piece an' move on.

"This feller here, he was in the same jail as me, once, when I was in for assaultin' an' batterin' a feller I didn't like. He was in for hawss-stealin'. An' his brothers they come an' got him out of jail, leavin' me in durance vile. So when I saw 'em this mornin' an' they pretended not t' recognize me, why, I figured if there was any dirty work goin' on they was in it. An' after a li'l while one of 'em tried to plug me, while Buck was sittin' talkin' to me. Somebody take his gun," he added, "because he's tryin' to get up nerve to pull it, an' I'll hate to waste lead on him."

Someone disarmed the third Jackson brother and clutched him firmly. Sonny replaced his gun and sighed.

"Well," he said, "I rec'n that explains it. When I said I knew who the rustlers was, one of 'em, who was listenin', he tried t' plug me. It'd got kinda necessary for them to see me buried, by then. An' to keep from spoilin' folks' belief that it was the sheriff who was in with the rustlers, why, they went an' grabbed the sheriff's gun to plug me with. They didn't have time t' go back to their ranch for the .45-70 they's got out there. I figured they'd want t' use the sheriff's gun, so I went an' I got me a li'l piece of mud, an' I poked it down

the barrel. Filled it plumb up, I did."

"You came here," boomed Caldwell, "and made a target of yourself so the gun would burst——"

"Precisely, suh," said Sonny. "You are a gentleman an' a scholar, suh.

CALDWELL of the Lazy L turned to the sheriff with a rather red face. "Tom," he boomed, "I'm a durned fool, and I admit it. I apologize for thinking—what I thought, and I'll shoot any man who repeats anything I've said about you. There you are. Shake hands?"

The sheriff gravely took his old friend's hand. Other men crowded about him, but he raised his voice. "Look here, fellers," he called, "we got three of these Jackson fellers, but we want to get the fourth, an' we' still got to sweat out of 'em where they hid out the cattle. Who's comin'? Git your animals, boys!"

The saloon emptied instantly, the men angry at the Jacksons and rather ashamed of themselves They would make up to the sheriff later for their suspicions of him. Caldwell lingered a moment.

"Wait a minute, Tom," he boomed. "I'm goin' with you. First I want to take your deputy away. Want a better job than you've got?" he demanded of Sonny.

"No, thanks," drawled Sonny. "I resigned. I'm movin' on."

"You can pick your own job out at my ranch," boomed Caldwell. "I need men who can use their heads. What's your line?"

"Like I told yuh," said Sonny, smiling faintly, "right now—though it ain't so—I'm renowned for stickin' up stages. Seriously, suh, I'm movin' on."

The sheriff turned to Buck. "I'm deputizin' you, Buck," he observed, "to look after these here prisoners until I get back." He handed an envelope to Sonny. "I ain't read that," he said firmly. "Not a word of it! There ain't no need for you to hurry."

"I'll be movin'," said Sonny gratefully, "but I'm much obliged."

"Go to blazes," said the sheriff gruffly. "Them miners ruin the country anyways."

He swung out of the saloon. There was a yipping and yelling and the highly impromptu posse set off. Sonny rolled a cigarette and lighted it with care.

"Say," said Buck. "You ain't really leavin'?"

"Yep." Sonny tossed over the envelope the sheriff had given him. "That there's a right good likeness."

Buck frowned, but Sonny nodded for him to open it. Glaring type showed. "$1,000.00 REWARD!" Beneath was a picture of Sonny. "Holding up stage —robbing payroll of Aztec Mine—assaulting manager——"

Buck blinked and drew back. "What yuh givin' me?" he demanded. "This ain't you!"

"Sure is," said Sonny. He sighed faintly. "I hadda uncle, a old desert rat. He found that there Aztec Mine. Filed on it, an' the Aztec people jumped him. They shot him, by the way, tryin' to get him off It was dirty, but it was legal. Everybody'll admit that. An' so—well, my half-brother got some of it back with a gun an' a mask That was O. K., only—he planted some evidence what hung the deadwood on *me!* I'm kinda lookin' for that hombre!"

Buck stared, and then he said emphatically, "Well, I'm sure glad I ain't him! Got plenty of grub? Need some blankets? Extra gun? Anything I c'n do t' help yuh?"

Sonny grinned and took his hand. "Nothin', thanks," he said. "I'll be ridin' Gunpowder an' trailin' my other cayuse behind. Maybe I'll come back this way sometime. Meantime I'll be driftin'—an' lookin'. *Hasta la vista.*"

He turned and went out of the saloon. A little later Buck left his prisoners to take care of themselves while he went to the door. Sonny was coming out of the livery stable corral, mounted on Gunpowder. And Gunpowder was bucking madly, and plunging, and trying every trick known to the equine race for unseating his rider.

He fought his way down the single street of Helada and out into the moonlit distance. The other horse followed patiently.

"An' there's a thousan' dollars reward for him," murmured Buck, "alive or dead." He felt of himself where Gunpowder had thrown him that morning. "Well," said Buck, "if that hawss don't collect the reward, there sure ain't nobody else is likely to."

PAPER WADS

by

Raymond S. Spears

Author of "The Square Shooter," "Mystery Range," etc.

One of the most cruel and ingenious games ever played by a rancher, was old Banshay's delight. It took young Hayley and his band of vacation workers to point out the flaw in his greedy strategy.

PAPER WAD BANSHAY watched his threshing crew blowing golden yellow straw into the skies, laughing to himself as he figured what his 20,000 bushels of wheat was worth. He owned the fork acres between Thief Creek and the deadwater of the Kiowa sloughs. That meant the flatiron peninsula tract to the county road along the north side. Besides his rolling wheat land he had a lot of corn, grown to feed hundreds of hogs on the black bottom pasturage—right visible means of support.

The toot of the threshing engine echoed shrilly through the ridges and down the running stream. Banshay was mighty well satisfied with himself, for he was quite an elderly man, coming sixty, and able to tell the world the public is a darn' fool. He had proved to his own satisfaction he could get away with it, and them.

Slick, that was the answer. Banshay looked toward town, where the bank was waiting for him to come in and settle for his final note. The wheat would do it. The threshing season was finished. Swede Landeune had rented the outfit cheap, with a wink in the eyes. Banshay had hired lively boys to do the work. A long job had been well handled. The wheat beards were like porcupine quills, the dust as bad as ragweed, giving them all flooding hay fever. Yet those debonaire youths had harvested the wheat, hauled in the huge bread loaf stack, and now they were carrying the last of the full green box loads down the country road, across the bridge to the big elevators by the railroad; and not one of them had drawn a cent of his wages! Thrifty lads they were, figuring on pocketfuls of money.

No wonder Banshay laughed. They were a picked crew. Men had come along looking for work, and Banshay had chosen these boys. He liked the frank look of their faces, their youth and innocence, and they were willing workers. The transients were inexperienced, eager and fools.

Banshay had fed them great quantities of rich, nourishing food. What more could they ask? What more did they want? Some had put on weight, in spite of their grueling toil. The farmer was well satisfied with this food question, for it was a good point to argue with his soul. Probably not one of the hands ever had fed better, if so well. The least paper that Banshay owed any of them was $112.50. The most he owed any was $175. The total of his indebtedness to these men was $1,533, as he figured it, and this would pay the interest on a rich man's note, now, wouldn't it?

As they were green in the business, an oldtimer was needed to break the babies in right. Paper Wad himself had had a good start in life, with the right experience to open his eyes. A man needs nerve to get on in the world. Paper

Wad Banshay grew up in a school of which he was proud. He'd cut his own eye teeth, helped by life's lessons.

Few knew that when the Bad Lands & Rattlesnake Butte Railroad went through it was the making of old Paper Wad. Nesters had gathered small bunches of cattle on limited pastures through the broken country. Four or five big ranches had their beef on the adjacent prairies, and Paper Wad had been an ambitious cowboy. He knew cows and trails, and he soon made the acquaintance of the construction gang contractor, who needed meat—and the rest was easy.

When the railroad was finished, Paper Wad had $15,000; and a lot of homesteaders were looking for steers lost in the buffalo bushes and coulees, while some ranch owners were wondering what in blazes and who in thunder—and where in time a lot of their choice stock had vanished to? The answer was that Banshay had taken his first big exception to an old adage, that honesty is the best policy.

Since that time Banshay had been buying acres, adding much to his possessions. He was rated away up in the wheat country as regarded financial resources which was all the reputation he considered to be important. His neighbors wondered at his ability to pick hired hands he could use in his own way. He kept his secret of feeding them so well. He wanted no competition that way.

The taper off at hand, Banshay took three men in his automobile for a three hours' ride in the tart evening. Heated by the day's work, chilled in the frost, ill clad and tired out, the hands found themselves away yonder where they were unfamiliar with the lay of the land.

"Well, boys," Banshay remarked genially, "here we be! A good place for you! Here's your luggage; run along! I'll be with you immediately. Right up the path there. Tell Boxer I'm coming in a minute!"

Another job for them—a fine man, this farmer! The three walked to the house with the bright lights, and as they trampled on the front porch, they heard Banshay's car start and roll away. They stood in doubt, as dogs came tearing around the house, raising a hullabaloo. When the door opened, an ugly old man with a shotgun snarled at them, ordered the three to begone, would listen to no word; and the men, fighting off the dogs with their suitcases realized for the first time that they had been bilked out of about $400 wages.

Broke, inexperienced and in a strange land—one from Massachusetts, one from Ohio, and one from West Virginia, all young, strangers and not so overly bright, they huddled together out in the roadway dejected and defeated. Just so life had always done to them. But what could they do? They drifted away together toward the south, hoping for warmer weather.

Banshay returned home. Six hours' auto driving to save $400—surely that's good business! No suspicion could attach to him in the minds of his remaining workers. They'd stay on, cleaning up. The farm would be spick and span by the time the last extra man was gone. The regulars, in their cosey cottages were in the know, anyhow. They'd say not a word. They'd better not. Banshay dealt harshly with blabbers; he knew who to handle and how to manage.

In the following week, Banshay was a busy man. Dropping hired men out in the country fifty or eighty miles away at night, like baby kittens, is a job. He was figuring that these fellows who own their flivvers and come to hire out in threes, fives, were spoiling his own business. Time had been when he'd not have hired any one with even a bicycle or motorcycle, for that kind need go only around the first bend, when ordered away. But he had two of these, now, one with a fine motorcycle, and one with a bicycle. He could give the bicycler his wind up ride, well enough. He looked the motorcycle over to see whether it could be fastened onto the automobile easily.

He decided it could, and so having gotten rid of the threshing crew, and seen Swede Landeune roll away with the string of his power and threshing outfit, Banshay had only the two riders to dispose of. One was Frank Hayley and the other Bike Crogen. Hayley was a light youngster, with a clear blue eye, who was always bragging about his motorcycle. He claimed he could haul a wagon with it, but no one ever took him up. He had such a merry laugh that Banshay regarded him with disgust and contempt. Surely a rascal who takes life easy, while working like two men,

has no reason to be smiling at the miseries of existence. The hired man was happier than his employer; now wasn't that a devil of a note?

To be rid of Hayley was a problem, but Bike Crogen was easy enough. Sixty miles away, over below the Lincoln Highway, all Banshay had to do to him was drop him out of the automobile on the river flats and give him a kick. Then, by driving over both the bicycle wheels to leave it beside the road, Banshay was easily rid of his hired man, and the necessity of paying the $137.50 due. Bike Crogen was crying when Banshay left him—baby that the fool was, not taking his misfortune like a man! Banshay had never known one to come back!

All the way home, Paper Wad Banshay reflected with contempt on the fellow who cried at being left alone in the dark. Weakling—bah! When Banshay was a boy, many a hard knock he took from cruel fate, and when the day came, he turned on the scoundrels who had swindled him and had no grit to stand trouble.

"I had my revenge," Banshay told himself. "Nobody ever said I squealed. Weaklings need hard knocks to open their eyes, making strong men of them. Why, every one of those boys'll be better for the lesson I've given them! Yes, they all will!"

Nothing was quite so comforting and reassuring to Paper Wad Banshay as the great good he was doing in the world, teaching youngsters to look out whom they dealt with, and how. He gained materially and they gained in experience. Surely, experience is worth more to the young than money.

Thus reassured and self satisfied, Banshay arrived at home. When he rolled into the yard after midnight, he looked at the place with much pleasure. Great trees surrounded his three story and basement house. Against the side of his barn loomed two huge silos. And as far as he could see the moonlight shone down on the golden stubble of grain, paving a shimmering pathway across the wide, dense fields. It was a beautiful spectacle.

But the wind was in the northwest. It was warm, dry and even in the night, carried a bit of dust with it. For weeks it had been rainless, making a fine, rich harvest after a wet spring. Out in the fields, where the threshing machines had done their work loomed huge, shapeless mounds of straw fallen from the blowers. Out of the corner of his eyes Banshay saw something. He jerked to look, but not a thing moving appeared when he glared square faced in that direction.

His lips were ashy with thirst. He started the windmill going to take a fresh drink. The water table was away down deep, and the creaking of the wheel, the *clinking-clank* of the plunger rod sounded long in the whispering silences before the water began to belch out the hydrant, as though the earth's heart itself was bleeding.

He rinsed the glass which he kept at the pump with a semblance of hospitality, and drank. He glanced toward the dormitory for the men out between the corn house and the big barn. A light gave him a start. Fool that he was to have that building there in danger from smoking fools setting it afire and burning the big barn!

He rushed over to look in. He found the motorcyclist sitting by the table, with a lamp lighted. Frank Hayley was wide awake, sitting facing the door, blue eyed, slender and boyish, hardly half the size of the huge farmer.

"What do you mean, up this long? Suppose you fell asleep and upset the lamp?" Banshay shouted, shaking his fist, "I'll have none of it; get out!"

"All right; pay me and I'll go!" the youth replied.

"You leave, or I'll throw you out!" the big fellow retorted, pulling his old revolver, which he always carried in case of accidents or trouble when dropping farm hands off yonder.

"Without my pay?" Hayley asked, quietly.

"Move, I tell ye!"

The youth turned to glance around the room. Then he walked toward the door as though some ogre had the drop on Jack the Giant Killer. With suspicion, Paper Wad Banshay watched every motion. The youth wasn't even picking up his duds, eh? What did it mean?

Suspicion deepened, for outside in the moonlight the youth had his motorcycle ready, its luggage carrier heavily loaded. The scoundrel was ready to move, was he? What did that mean? Paper Wad looked after the departing youth with mingled doubts. Surely something was

wrong; the farmer was a great believer in hunches.

But now Paper Wad Banshay had accomplished his object. He had beaten the game of hired men who expected to be paid as well as fed. At the same time he wondered how it happened young Hayley had been ready to ride away. The doubt, the question, kept him awake a long time. He arose to look around the northern to the western horizon a number of times. No red glow was there to alarm him. At the same time he was nervous.

In the morning his foreman Datch Clobretch came to breakfast.

"How come the motorcycle feller sat up, ready to roll away?" Banshay asked.

"Oh, him? Why some feller telephone here, when you was gone. Dey tol' heem someding. He joost hung oop when I come in. He didn't say 'wat dey was wantin'. He call de feller Bike, dat's all I know. He say tell dem feller 'I'll come der.'"

"Why didn't you grab the telephone, you fool!"

"I was goin' to, but dat Hayley have a revolver, so I mind my own business, like he said. So I went to bed by my house. An' he say keep away."

"He had a gun, you say?"

"Yes by golly, a dom big gun, too!"

All that day Banshay looked over his shoulders at intervals, and he watched the highway lane. The dust was lifting in the hot northwest wind, swirling down across the tall stubble. Paper Wad figured on paper with a stub pencil. He had saved $1,533. That was worth saving. Sure it was good business! Who were hired hands, anyhow? None but the scruff and riffraff of vagabond panhandlers. Why didn't they do like Paper Wad and turn a good trick, make a good stake and settle down? Bah! Weaklings, they made a man sick! Only Paper Wad knew how to get anything out of those lazy hoboes.

That night Banshay slept no better than he had the previous night. He was more restless, walking the floor and watching the upwind. The weather was bad, dry and dusty. Banshay admitted fear of only one thing in the world, and that was a prairie fire. On a night like this he called himself a fool. On $25,000 worth of perishable property, he had only $5,000 in insurance. If fire started away up there in the northwest, with that driving wind whimpering and whistling through the hollow tips of those cut wheat stalks—he shuddered at that weird song of lifeless throats.

Nothing is quite like the wail of wind through wheat stubble pipes. The single stalk make a tiny hissing, but all the stalks, vibrant as catgut strings of a fiddle and every one whistling, give music to the rolling lands which has its like in forests of pine, the humming of telephone wires and fall of sleet on straining trees, giving forth such a warning and wailing refrain as brings the carefree to their toes in joy, and makes the guilty cringe.

Paper Wad went for his shotgun. He loaded it first with black powder, then with a ball of dry newspaper and finally with shot, topped with another paper wad. The muzzle loader was his talisman. He had stolen it when a boy and saved it all his years. He called it his good luck, believing when he should lose it he would be ruined. Nevertheless, he was ashamed of it, keeping it usually in his own closet, out of sight. He could depend on his six-gun when dropping hired men where they whined like kittens. But at night he needed a shotgun, should he see some prowler coming around for chickens or pay.

"I'd kill anybody if he came stealing from me!" Banshay growled. "I'd be justified—any jury'd justify me. They couldn't prove nothing, and I'm reliable. Any judge'd believe me. I'm a leading, important citizen. I'm rich. I'm a thrifty, saving benefit to the county, getting rich. Who'd ever have developed this farm the way I have, but for me? Yes, sir, all they'd done was spend their money, if I paid them. That's all. I keep it where it's useful, to be lent around, and so on. If it wa'n't for us rich citizens, what'd become of the country, anyhow? But I wonder——"

His eyes looked across the dry stubble. Never in his life had he been so worried. He had a hunch. He was afraid of this batch of hired men, that they might come back, somehow. The departure of that blamed Hayley had been ominous. The scoundrel had a gun, and hadn't used it, or even showed it!

"Why didn't he? He'd ought to made a play, if he'd been a man." Banshay blinked, sorry he hadn't known about that gun. What could be more suspicious than a man packing a gun and not

using it? The night was long. No one came to verify the hunch. In the morning, Banshay went over to look at his hog pasture. They were sure wonderful, his porkers, showing what a man can do if he wants to be thrifty and saving.

Then Paper Wad decided his hunch was a false alarm. He felt that probably he had been working to hard, figuring and planning, conducting the enormously intricate business of the farm and getting rid of the trash help without trouble, peaceably. He decided to run downtown to take up his note the next day. That'd round out the season beautifully; and then he would eat some ice cream, probably buy a café dinner, and so on.

He started for town, as planned. As he turned into the county road he saw ahead of him a strange spectacle. This was an old buckboard, with three seats holding seven men. In the hills was a motorcycle, pounding along, stirring up the dust. Banshay stopped his car. The outfit was an apparition. He blinked at the men. As they came up to him, he recognized every face. Eight of his hired men had come back!

He knew them, but somehow they looked different. They were older. They had a sort of nonchalant expression. They looked at him level eyed and with cool insistence. Before those sharp, direct stares he found himself glancing from side to side, finally turning to Frank Hayley, who was proving to all the world his incredible boast that his single tracker would haul half a ton over a dirt road with much loose dust in it.

Hayley was in fact as well as in spirit leading this bunch along the highway. The eyes of his companions reflected his own cheery good humor. Hayley smiled easily. He was right glad to see the old wheat and hog farmer, and he was very polite. He showed a proper deference to the big fellow. He waited for Banshay to speak.

Banshay looked till he saw that among the seven on the old buckboard was Bike Crogen. The bicycle ruin was tied on behind, too. Sight of this rider made him mad. That scoundrel of a weakling had come back, had he? Did he think Banshay was afraid of him? What did these blamed fools mean, making themselves ridiculous in an outfit like that?

Banshay looked more closely. He saw that each of the seven men had a match or two in his hand, and when they weren't looking impudently at Banshay, they were gazing at the matches. About all of them smoked—that didn't mean anything. Banshay let in his gears with a crash to head on his way, angry to think he had actually stopped at sight of those scarecrows. They didn't amount to anything. If they had any brains, they would have stopped in town and been laughed at, telling their stories to the authorities. But probably the fools were bright enough to know it wasn't any use for no-accounts to complain against leading citizens, not anywheres in that region, anyhow, where farmers stood by one another.

Banshay went into town. He started for the bank, but turned to have some ice cream, first. It didn't taste good. He drank some soda, and this was awful stuff. He bought some candy, and nearly broke his teeth on it. He wondered what those hired men were doing now.

He headed for home, and he found the motorcycle and the buckboard beside the road. The eight hired men were all smoking. That made Banshay angrier yet. He would stand for no such jeopardizing of his property. He wondered what they meant, stopping there at his lane end? "Hey, you!" he shouted, stopping short on screaming brakes, "you be mighty damn' careful how you throw them cigarette stubs around!"

"You bet!" the eight replied quietly.

Banshay caught his breath, as his hand went into the side of the car out of sight. Not one of the eight made a move. Every boy just looked at him. He had thought, believed, and hoped they were weaklings. Now he knew better. He wondered if they could be college boys earning money to go through courses in universities? Or perhaps they were runaway sons of influential wealthy people who had just started off to see the country and find experience. Well, they had experience all right. But if they were crooks they might be dangerous. They must be a regular gang, who had a meeting place. If they were crooks they wouldn't have any respect for the law, one could be

sure. He would have to be cautious.

Banshay depended on the law to protect him against violence. The menace of those cool, grim boys was bleak. The shrewd farmer blinked. He reflected there was nothing criminal in not paying hired hands. That wasn't anything but a civil matter, for the action of a jury of handpicked talesmen, good fellows who liked their $3 a day, and who knew how to stand in with leading, influential citizens. It wasn't larceny, it wasn't any form of stealing not to pay hired men on farms. It wasn't even a misdemeanor; but if these fellows were crooks, they might do something really criminal.

"Well, what do you fellows think you're going to do?" Banshay demanded, truculently.

The eight flipped their burning cigarette stubs into the road dust, where they smoked, glowing in the wind. Banshay, who always rubbed out every dead match end in his horny palms, who had caps on all his pipes, and ground every spark into the bare earth, shuddered as he glared at that debonair carelessness in a time of prairie country drought. At the same time his fearful glance ran along the line of the eight hired men he had dropped unpaid and far from his farm. There they were, come back like old cats, instead of staying lost like kittens. And each one drew a match from his pocket and squinted over the safety heads with reflective aim in the direction of straw-stacks, granaries, barns and other buildings down there in the forks between Kiowa sloughs and Thief Creek.

"Do you think I'm going to have anything to do with you?" Banshay demanded with shrill anxiety and bravado.

"Yes, sir, I think you are," the hired hand named Hayley replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I think you are going to pay us," Hayley replied. "And you are going to pay each of us $300, now. You're getting off cheap—if you pay in cash."

"Three hundred dollars!" shrieked Banshay. "You lie, for 'tis only $145 you could claim on a civil suit, and I'd beat you in that!"

"This isn't any civil suit in a fixed rube court, Mr. Banshay," the young fellow replied, his voice low. "You've made us a lot of trouble. You have tried to cheat us out of our wages. Our bill is $300 each, $2,400 for the lot of us. That's all—and it's a cheap price for having had us to save your wheat crop."

Banshay listened with cunning impatience. He was gathering his wits at last for this return of those he had never expected to see again. His predicament was serious. How could a man pay these scoundrels and yet not do it?

"I'll call the sheriff!" he declared, with angry hopefulness, his voice hard tempered.

The eight for reply laughed lightly. Hayley raised a match in his hand and looked over the head at the buildings down the lee of the tall, golden wheat stubble.

A terrible fear struck the heart of Banshay. He could pay $2,400 or he could lose in flames what would cost $30,000 to replace—and he had scrimped on insurance. "I've no money with me," he grinned cunningly, "I'll give ye checks!"

"Your name is no good on paper," Hayley replied bluntly. "You'd stop payment, or the money'd be gone, none on deposit. We'll take cash, and only cash. You've time today to go to town and draw it. And don't you bring back a sheriff's posse with you. Four of us will be waiting for you, and four will be scattering, hidden up the wind. And mind you, $300 for each of us, not one dollar less. We saved your wheat, and we'll be paid the fair wages due us—which is $300 each!"

Banshay drove back to town. He glanced back anxiously over his shoulder fearing the hateful sight of lifting yellow smoke against the western sky. He had never driven with such speeding recklessness. Till he saw the bank ahead he had thought to go to the sheriff to bring out a great posse, rounding up the scoundrels. But the arrest of four he remembered in time would loose four firebrands in that tall stubble, which would burn like a powder train. The scoundrels had him in their wild rage, unless he could outwit them with strategy.

He obtained the money, but drove back to the edge of the Kiowa sloughs, instead of along the roadway. He crossed the grass hummocks to his house, where he caught up his old cap and powder shotgun, which he knew was well loaded. Then he dashed back across

the swales to his car, and presently drove not too slowly to where he found only four of the scallawags waiting for him.

His cunning eyes swept the landscape. Up the northwest, somewhere, were the others waiting. Four boys were nothing for a shrewd old man to cope with. He would get the boys to fighting among themselves, four against four.

"Sure," he told the four waiting for the money, "I've brought your money. 'Twas a good joke I was playing. Here I have the whole amount, but first give me a receipt so you'll not be cheating your four too trustful mates, claiming I did not pay you the full amount, or their share, too."

"You've some tricks up your sleeves, Mr. Banshay," Hayley laughed in the wheat grower's face, "but I'll sign for all of us. Only listen, we'll write the receipt ourselves."

"But I have one all ready, for the $2,400!" Banshay hesitated.

"Here's the one I'll make, and I'll sign for all," Hayley retorted. "Listen to this: 'I hereby acknowledge receipt in full for total sum as agreed for harvesting the wheat crop of the Banshay farm.' That's more like, Mr. Banshay."

The farmer's eyes glittered. His own receipt might perhaps have enabled him to have recourse to law for extortion, afterward. The leader of the gang was no fool. At that, the receipt was a receipt.

"Here's the money," Banshaw offered the brick of currency, and Hayley coolly counted it to the last bill. Then he handed over the signed receipt.

Banshay went to his automobile quickly. The four stood in a group staring at the almost unbelievable evidence of their success in getting their pay. It was in a way quite beyond their hopes or dreams.

"Hands up!" Banshay shouted from his car, and the four looked over their shoulders to find themselves in the face of a shotgun law, as the man snarled adding, "'Now we'll take back the money, boys. I've my receipt, you know."

The four stood dumbfounded, white faced and abject.

"Come on, now, you Hayley with them precious bills!"

Hayley started. He appeared to stumble weakly and fall into the dust, but he rose quickly to his feet holding the brick of currency still extended in his left hand. And Banshay reached greedily to seize it. On the instant his face was filled with the fine, gritty sandy dust that Hayley had picked up with his right hand. The farmer, choking and gasping, bounded, yelped and the four took to their heels down the road to the motorcycle and buckboard. As they ran, Banshay unable to see, took a shot in the general direction of the dodging scuttlers for safety. But they were all gone.

Feeling that he had lost the zest of life in that not quite unfair wage payment, Banshay flung his car into reverse and started for home, down his long two rut lane, all hunched up, full of regrets that he had not shot first and taken the money. Then he could have claimed the scoundrels had tried to hold him up. Curse his slow wit; he would not be robbed! He sped to his telephone, called the sheriff, quickly telling how he had been robbed of $2,400 just drawn from the bank. Then he realized the boys could have burned him out, if he had taken the money from them. Perhaps his luck was not yet gone!

"We'll come right out!" the sheriff promised.

Banshay laughed. Now the scoundrels would serve years in prison for robbing an honest farmer. Grimacing, he stalked up and down his big room, waiting the posse who would round in the thieves. With luck, he'd get back his $2,400 in cash.

And then suddenly he smelled smoke. Dashing to look, the great gale was blowing, a sweeping, relentless wind down the prairies, whimpering through the stiff high stubble. One glance showed him a red line of flame a hundred yards wide away this side of the highway. It spewed up yellow and bluish smoke, and as he stood horrified, it swept into his upper straw stacks, where the first threshing had been done. The huge heap seemed fairly to explode as the whole surface lifted as thin-smoked flames ran writhing into the sky to come raining in torch tufts alee the stubble. The scoundrels had burned him out after all!

Banshay's fear for life above all else now drove him dashing to his automobile and heading downwind through the stubble to the point, with the blaze roaring after him. Daring not to stop, he

crossed the sandbar into the gravel bottomed stillwater of Thief Creek; then he leaped from his submerging car, struggling across the stream to safety, where he stood screaming and jumping in safety, cursing and weeping, for the fire was leaving only a bare, black waste and foundations of his wooden buildings. He ran up the creek to the bridge. The sheriff, seeing the big smoke, raced his posse, and met the farmer at his farm lane head. The V-course of the fire had begun right there.

"My hired men burned me out!" Banshay screamed. "They fired my stubble. They robbed me, and they fired my stubble! They destroyed my property!"

"How come?" the sheriff asked, as his eyes looked at the many tracks in the roadway.

"I tell you, holdups robbed me!" Banshay cried, "I had my money for paying off, and they robbed me.

"Your hired men robbed you of the pay?" the sheriff asked, puzzled.

"I meant four holdups did it!" Banshay gasped, "I mis-spoke myself. I tell you, they stopped me there, and they held me up. They took my money."

"Do you mean to say you intended to pay your hired men?" the sheriff inquired.

"Did I intend to pay them?" Banshay blinked. "Sure I did!"

He drew his handkerchief, and a posseman picked up a slip of memorandum book paper that fluttered away. The posseman grinned as he read it, having no respect for the farmer's private affairs.

"Sure he paid them," the posseman exclaimed, "here's the receipt, signed by that fellow Hayley. 'Receipt in full for total sum as agreed for harvesting the wheat crop of the Banshay farm.'"

"Look here, Banshay!" the sheriff's voice was cold and hard, "you tell me the truth. You drew your money to pay the hired men, $2,400—the highest wages you ever paid, if you ever paid any. You have your receipt for the money there. Now you say you were robbed of the money? What's the answer."

"Say, Sheriff," another of the possemen said, "here's a wad of paper in the road, blown from the barrel of a shotgun. You can see the shot marks in it. But the wad from the powder is gone. There's shot marks in the dust away up the road, there. You know the old muzzle loader Banshay always had?"

"You've been shooting at your hired men, after you paid them, Banshay," the sheriff accused. "The powder fired the newspaper wadding and it fell in the wheat stubble beside the road. Look and see 'f I'm right, boys, will you?"

Wheat belt and prairie grown men, the sheriff and his posse studied the ground. They read the signs. They found where the fire had started, beginning in a space the size of the hand at the roadside. Here Banshay had plowed and sowed ten feet over the highway line to the edge of the wheel ruts. And there, lying in the hollow of a wheel rut made in the spring mud they found a little round disk of black and gray charred pulp paper. It had flamed in the stubble, and started a flickering of running fire tongues down the wind. The paper wad carbon remained in its original shape. On the top of it, the practiced eyes of the men could see the very dents and sheen of lead shot, No. 1's. The wad, fired by the black powder, had started the fire, and nothing else. They all knew Banshay's oldtime muzzle loading shotgun. He was even nicknamed Paper Wad for his economy and belief in that barrel packing.

"You did not drop your hired men far enough away," the sheriff suggested. "They came back for your pay, Banshay. I saw them myself coming through town in an old wagon, drawn by a motorcycle. They gave you a receipt for their wages. Here it is. Shall I bring them back to accuse you of shooting at them with your old shotgun, or have you been satisfied now for the bad name you've given this part of the country on account of your not paying your hired men their wages? Speak up, man!"

Banshay hunched up his shoulders disconsolately. He stared shuddering down the wide fan-spread of the fire black his shotgun wad had started. His beaked nose and protruding chin pecking and jerking like the beak of an old hawk caught in a trap.

"We'll drop the case, Sheriff!" Banshay licked his lips, and then he shuffled down his lane to where the ruins were smoking in the sunset, as the wind began to go down in the day's end.

The Bee Sting Cure

By Romaine H. Lowdermilk

Author of "Tucker's Top Hand," etc.

Richard Lake, cornered bandit, held an automatic with one loaded clip. The beehive bombshell launched at him by line rider Jess Conley, housed thirty thousand angry, stinging projectiles, however.

IT WAS seven miles from the OJ line shack where Jess Conley lived to the ranch of Ezra Streator. Twice a week Jess made the trip. Always he started out in high hopes, a smile on his bronzed face, eager anticipation in his dog like brown eyes, his wide shoulders confidently squared. At such times he was Jesse A. Conley, Esquire. But coming back! Defeated, discouraged, heavy of heart, he was just plain Jess Conley, cowboy, with no prospects—the best he could hope for was some day to have a little place of his own.

Little. That was the word that fitted Jess as he rode homeward, his wide brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes. He felt little, he had little, his future loomed little. Only his love for Mabel Streator was large—very large. But it seemed increasingly difficult to awaken a like feeling in Mabel. Somehow she always managed to inject a financial aspect into their love making.

"Cow ranching is so slow," she would say right in the face of his telling her what a fine ranch he could make out of the old Tucker place provided he could save up a thousand dollars with which to make the first payment. "Couldn't you go into something else? Now, there's Archie Harper. He left the ranch and went to town; he's writing insurance now. Why, some weeks he earns two hundred dollars. He's got a fine big car and all——"

She had said that again tonight.

"Writin' insurance," Jess muttered in agonized tones. "Wonder how yuh learn?" He wagged his head perplexedly, and sighed so explosively that it frightened his horse.

He had reached the highway which he would follow a mile or more before turning off on the little trail to the OJ line shack, when the lights of a motor car shot out of the darkness. These lights behaved queerly. Instead of boring straight along they roved from side to side of the road, drunkenly. Jess reined out of the way as the car flitted past. It was an expensive looking, heavy tired roadster, hugging the wrong side of the road. Farther on it veered to the center, held it for a space, then angled to the right, bounced into the ditch and roared across it. Veering halfway around so that Jess could again see the lights the car lumbered to a halt, its shining nose pointing toward French Louie's bee ranch down along Gringo Creek.

Jess reined his horse to the car. The lights still glowed, but the engine was silent. In the seat sat the lone occupant, a young man, his untanned face illumined by the dash light. He was good looking and fashionably attired, as would be expected of one in such a fine car. His hat was off and his long dark hair hung over his face.

"Looks like he's fainted," grunted Jess, dismounting with an easy swing. "—er dead, er sumthin'."

He peered in at the young man, then

touched his arm. "What's the matter, stranger?" he inquired. "Sick?"

The young man sat unheeding. His eyes were closed and his breathing heavy and regular.

"Wake up," Jess urged. "Yuh're off the road an' it's a wonder yuh ain't upside down. Got sleepin' sickness?"

The young man grunted drowsily. "Sleepy," he mumbled comfortably. "Just went to sleep along the road. Couldn't hold my eyes open——" He settled more deeply in the upholstered seat and dropped into peaceful slumber.

"Dead f'r sleep," exclaimed Jess sympathetically. He remembered a cattle drive when he stood guard every night until he went to sleep in the saddle and fell off his horse. "Go ahead an' sleep."

Suddenly the young man was almost awake. "How long have I been here?" He scanned the ground in a futile search for the road. "Where's the road?" he asked vacantly. "I must have gone to sleep and drove off it."

"I seen yuh wabble an' turn off," Jess replied. He pointed toward the highway. "There it is."

The engine roared and the car careened back to the road where, with a click of changing gears, it shot back over the route it had come.

"Goin' the wrong way," grunted Jess. "That feller got turned around an' thinks he's still headed west. Guess he'll find out when he hits Goldton." Jess mounted and headed his horse toward home.

By sunrise the following morning Jess had a pair of half broken horses hitched to a light wagon and was on his way to town. Once a month Jess rattled the twenty-six miles to Goldton and came back with camp supplies, grain for the saddle horses, and rock salt to be packed horseback to the salt licks for the cattle.

A twin line of ruts connected the OJ shack with the highway. His was the only rig that passed that way, for French Louie's road turned off farther along. Jess had progressed barely a mile when he came upon the roadster pulled out of the trail in a secluded spot. Nearby lay the young driver sprawled upon an overcoat, sound asleep.

"Yuh're the sleepiest son of a gun I ever seen," mused Jess as he pulled up the team. "H-m-m-m, New Yawk license. Long ways from home, ain't yuh?"

The youth awoke with a start. He rose on his elbow and glared at Jess in a manner anything but friendly. Jess noted that his right hand grasped a heavy automatic, half concealed in the folds of the overcoat.

"Hello, stranger," Jess greeted him genially. "Don't reckon yuh remember seein' me last night?"

"No."

"Yeah. I seen yuh run off the road. Yuh started back the wrong direction before I could tell yuh different."

"Oh. So you were the cowboy. I didn't get my bearings until I hit a town I'd passed through. I turned around and came back this way. I was nine-tenths asleep, so I took the first side road. I simply had to have some sleep."

"Go ahead an' sleep," urged Jess generously. "Help yerself."

"Don't know a place where I could get room and board for a few days—out here some place?"

"Dunno. There's a dude ranch over the other side of Goldton."

"I don't want that. I'm fed up on crowds. Haven't you got a camp somewhere that I could stay? I'll pay well. You see, I'm out here for my health. I've—ah, got rheumatism."

"Uh-huh. Well, my camp's down that way—" Jess swung his arm toward the tumbled hills behind him. "Foller the road an' take a squint."

Jess drove on to town. He arrived there about eleven and had his load on before noon. While his horses were feeding at the corral he hastened over to the Saddlerock Restaurant for his usual once a month noon meal. He had eaten at the Saddlerock as far back as he could remember and of all the waitresses who had come and gone he had never noticed one who seemed what he could call pretty. But this time!

The girl at the counter was a slender, sweet lipped blonde. Her eyes were blue—not a babyish frivolous blue, but a deep honest blue. Jess' eyes were attracted to her the moment he entered the place. Unconsciously he attempted to quiet the rough clumping of his high-heeled boots by an awkward tiptoeing. A piece of tin nailed over a hole in the floor proved his undoing. He tripped and fell flat.

The pretty waitress smiled, of course.

But there was a touch of concern in her eyes. She waited on him almost tenderly. She gave him an extra pat of butter, an extra cup of coffee and his T-bone smothered in mushrooms had more lettuce and cress garnishing tucked about it than he had ever enjoyed before. At the finish she gave him an extra large cut of cocoanut cream, his favorite pie. He forgot his fall and went out of the place feeling better than he had for months. As he drove home he was conscious of a singularly warm feeling about his heart toward the gentle little waitress.

Arriving at his shack Jess found the young Easterner awaiting him, the roadster in a sheltered nook behind the shack. Jess prepared supper, glad for companionship. "My name's Conley," Jess offered. "Jess Conley."

"And mine is Lake. Richard Lake."

The young stranger offered his hand and Jess shook it warmly, astonished at the plump softness of the other's palm. He wondered if he wrote insurance like the Archie Harper of whom Mabel talked.

Jess did not let company interfere with his work. He kept on as usual, branding calves, packing salt, snaking wild steers into the strongly fenced pasture, where they could be driven out with the fall roundup. Sometimes Richard Lake rode with him. Within two weeks the Easterner had acquired a coat of tan. Jess noticed that he always carried the automatic pistol.

"Jest like a dude," Jess grumbled. "Prob'ly packs a gun for fear of Injuns. Bet he's skeered tuh pull the trigger."

Twice a week Jess saddled up after supper and rode away to the Streators, patiently, unsuccessfully striving to win Mabel's love. Twice a week he pressed her to marry him.

"I ain't a-makin' no two hundred doll'rs a week," he admitted, "but Mabel, old man Tucker'll sell me his old home place soon's I can pay the first thousand doll'rs down. Then I—we—uh, could make a good livin'. Kain't yuh marry me, Mabel? This fall, mebby?"

"I don't know, Jess," she would reply. "Sometimes I feel that I love you, and then at other times I—I don't know. How much of that thousand have you got saved up, Jess?"

"Not none," he replied truthfully. "But I aim tuh begin—if—if you'll——"

"I can't say, Jess. I don't know myself. I like men who can accomplish big things," Mabel declared. "Ranching is such a pokey business. If I was a man I'd want to get out in the world and do big things, make thousands of dollars."

A lifetime at handling colts and mean tempered horses had developed in Jess the patience of Job. No horse was so stubborn or willful that Jess Conley could not master him without harshness. Patiently, methodically he conquered one after another. He just outwaited them, men said. But with Mabel Jess thought the waiting never would end. A horse usually showed some improvement from day to day, but Mabel fluctuated alarmingly. One day she was certain she loved him; the next she had a thousand doubts. Jess' steady patience was not thrilling—at least not to Mabel Streator. Mabel was piquant and vivid, with a color that needed no artificial touch, a health and buoyancy that required no dieting or studied exercise. She had been the center of attraction wherever she went. Mabel had gone away to college, there she was ever in the limelight. She went with the gayest crowd. Many of her escapades would have been the undoing of another girl, but Mabel had a way of carrying off her adventures with a dash and fling that captivated everyone. Jess, who had worshipped her from the days when they went to the little country school together, was sick with jealousy every time one of her city friends came out in his big car. He began to wish that he, too, owned an automobile. Such a desire even eclipsed his aspiration for the one thousand dollars with which to commence the purchase of the old Tucker ranch.

"I gotta get her sumthin' that costs a lot—a fine automobile er sumthin'," Jess decided on one of his agonizing trips home. "I gotta get her sumthin' she's never had, er never seen, er kain't get no ways else." His heart grew heavier. "I gotta do sumthin' *big!*"

ONE day Jess returned from his day's ride and found Richard Lake missing. A saddle and a horse also were gone. Jess, concerned lest perhaps his guest had lost his way, climbed the hill above the shack and

built a bonfire to guide the traveler home. He was preparing a late supper when Lake returned.

"Just took a ride," Lake explained. "You didn't need to build the fire. I kept camp spotted all the time by the location of that black peak. I won't get lost."

Jess was glum. This was his night to visit Mabel and the delay had put him an hour late.

Mabel greeted him with more than her customary warmth. In fact, she met him at the corral and piloted him immediately to a secluded spot amid the grapevines at the end of the front gallery. She kissed him without waiting for his usual timid advances. Jess wondered if she intended going ahead and asking him to marry her. He'd heard sometimes a girl will hold a man off for months, then suddenly decide to marry him and tell him so. But Mabel did nothing of the kind.

"Who is that goodlooking young man staying at your place?" Mabel wanted to know. "He rode over this way and stopped to inquire the way back. We had quite a little talk. I think he's a keen chap. Bring him over with you next time you come, won't you?"

Jess' heart sank. Mabel not only was stringing him along but she was using him for a footstool. He went home sick at heart.

"My spirits is lower than a rat's tail in a wagon rut," he confided to himself as he rode homeward through the darkness. He went about his work the following day like a man in a trance. He came in two hours earlier than was his custom. Lake was gone again.

"The dirty houn'!" Jess cried. "He's went an' gone over tuh see Mabel again. Gosh! An' him just there yesterday. My gosh!"

Jess' arms hung inert from his shoulders. A vision of Mabel and her quick likes flashed over him and left him weak. "Suppose she falls in love with that dude!"

On the table near the door of the shack a tiny white spot caught his eye. It was paint—white paint.

Jess rubbed his finger into it and sniffed. There was no mistake. It was real paint. Now, Jess knew that never before had any such commodity as paint been at that particular OJ line shack and he wondered how came that drop on the table.

"That dude's makin' sumthin'," declared Jess with conviction. "I betcha. I bet he's a-makin' a present f'r Mabel!"

Jess angrily went out and kicked through the pile of empty cans flung at the edge of Gringo Creek. Sure enough, there was a small can that had contained white paint. A brush, its handle broken in two places, lay among the rubbish, still damp with paint.

"He brung that paint along with 'im," exclaimed Jess. "He had it in his car. Brush, too. Now, what yuh reckon?" He stuck the can and the brush under the shack and sat down in the doorway, his spine propped against the door casing.

Jess' meditation was broken by the clicking of shod hoofs on the stones of Gringo Creek. Presently old Roany poked into camp, saddled but riderless, the reins still over his neck. Roany stopped, waiting to be unsaddled.

"Whe-e-ew!" whistled Jess. "Roany, yuh done went an' bucked that dude off an' then run away from 'im. I hope yuh killed 'im."

In spite of his bloodthirsty remark, Jess mounted Roany and took the back track.

He found where Roany had shied at the bones of a dead cow. Roany had shied at that same dead cow regularly every time he went past it, for three months. Lake evidently had sought to stick on by digging his heels into Roany's sides for there followed two long buck jumps and a depression in the sand where Lake had landed. Lake's footprints turned off up a broad wash which led toward camp, but which narrowed with abrupt, steep sides so as to make it impassable. Jess could hear Lake's voice calling hoarsely for help, an exhausted croaking, weak but regular.

Riding up the wash he soon made out the form of Lake clinging to the canyon wall high above the wash. He was standing on one of the rock shelves that ran in front of a series of shallow caves that lined the canyon on both sides, hollowed by wind and ancient waters.

"Hang on," Jess encouraged. "Stay with it. I'm here tuh help yuh."

"*Bees!*" Lake's anguished screech left no doubt as to his suffering. "Bees! I started to climb and look for the black butte and I ran into a crevice full of

bees. They're all over me. They'll sting me to death. It's always that way. Bees hate me. Help! My eyes are swelling shut!"

Jess knew from experience the vicious attack of the native wild bees. He wondered that Lake had not fallen from the cliff in the first frenzy of pain occasioned by their attack.

"Them bee stings'll cure yer rheumatism," Jess cheered. "Jus' hang onta that rock till I c'n figger how tuh get yuh down."

"Throw me a rope," wailed Lake. "Throw me a rope! Go up on top and let down a rope. Bees always did sting me worse than anyone else. They're killing me. I can't see!"

"Thay ain't a rope this side of Goldton long enough tuh run from the top of that canyon tuh the bottom," Jess replied. "Besides that, yuh couldn't slide down a little thin lass rope, nohow. I'll just pack yuh down. Hang on till I gets there."

Jess picked his way up the perpendicular malapai cliff. He chose a route by which he could return, and marked each step in his memory. At one place was a shelf of rock cut off from the wall above it by a loose slide of broken lava. Jess rested on the shelf, then scrambled up the slide and caught a projecting shoulder. It was growing dusk. The canyon loomed dark and bottomless below.

"I'm comin'," he panted from time to time as he slowly climbed toward Lake. "Hang on, oldtimer, I'm a-comin'."

The wild bees buzzed angrily about him. One settled on his lip. He did not attempt to brush it off. Others settled on his face and hands, he was careful not to disturb them. His hand, closing upon a jutting shoulder of rock pressed a bee. It stung him in the palm. He forged past their hive in the rock and reached a point just below where Lake perched on the narrow rock ledge. Across the canyon he could see numerous similar caves in the sheer wall. He settled himself firmly.

"Step this way, oldtimer," he directly cheerfully.

"I can't see," moaned Lake. "I can't see."

"Keep a-comin'," went on Jess, guiding the Easterner's feet with his hands. "That's right. Now yuh're standin' almost straddle of my back. Jest settle down. Easy, boy. Now I got yuh."

Jess held the blinded man on his back, legs astride his hips, Lake gripping him desperately about the neck. Jess started back down the canyon wall. He puffed with the unwonted exertion. Bees that had been on Lake were pressed against him and stung viciously.

"The bees," moaned Lake. "They're stinging me to death."

"Huh," consoled Jess. "Yuh just oughta tackle some of French Loue's. They sting like scorpions. But them bee stings is good f'r yer health."

At the lava slide Jess squatted and let himself go. Lake cried out with fear as they scooted downward. Jess braced himself for the drop to the ledge and it took all his control to prevent their combined weight from rushing them over into the abyss beneath.

On the ledge Jess rested. But his tired muscles seemed only to become more fatigued so he took up his burden again. It was quite dark now. Down he labored from rock to rock, following the course he had chosen. Stones and shale cascaded constantly from beneath his feet. His throat became dry with the black lava dust.

As in everything he did he was thorough. This had become his duty and so he carried it out successfully. He got the Easterner to safety in the sand wash below, hoisted him to Roany's saddle and, leading the horse, went back to the shack. It required almost an hour to get to camp. There, with adobe mud, Jess plastered Lake's swollen flesh and relieved his own.

"It's a good thing I set out tuh find yuh," Jess declared thickly through applications of mud. "If I'd left yuh alone like yuh said fer me tuh, yuh'd fell off that cliff an' killed yerself."

Lake groaned.

"An', by jingo," Jess went on, "yuh want tuh be keerful about these hosses. They all shy an' buck. Mebby now yuh'll get hurt plumb bad some day. Mebby yuh'd best not ride out any more."

Jess hoped his suggestion would frighten the Easterner. Perhaps he could thus eliminate Lake from Mabel's visiting list.

But it worked the wrong way. Instead of causing Lake to cease his visits it only prompted him to abandon the saddle and take to driving over to the

Streator ranch in his car. Though considerably farther by way of the road, Lake could drive it in half the time it took Jess to go on a horse.

The time rolled around for the monthly excursion to town. Jess found himself hoping that the little waitress would still be working at the Saddlerock. He made the earliest start he had ever made and as a result had two hours in town instead of one.

When Jess lounged into the Saddlerock and draped himself over a stool the little waitress recognized him and smiled. Jess grinned happily. He ordered with abandon.

"My name's Jess Conley," he told her during the course of his meal. "I live out on one of the OJ places. It's twenty-six mile out or I'd come in town oftener. I'm a-goin' tuh be in town f'r the cowboy contests, though. I reckon I'll be here the whole three days. I'm a-ridin' in the buckin event. Yuh aimin' tuh be here f'r the contest?"

"Oh yes." The little waitress replied as if interested in Jess' halting sentences. "I wouldn't miss seeing the rodeo for anything. I don't have to go back to school until the middle of September and during rodeo week Aunt Minnie will need me more than ever."

Jess turned his eyes a trifle apprehensively to the proprietress of the Saddlerock who presided over the cash register near the door. He had always been afraid of that woman. She looked so capable.

"Is—*she* yuh're aunt? Yuh're real aunt?" he inquired.

"Yes," the girl smiled, "my real aunt —Aunt Minnie."

Jess scratched his head. He was of the opinion Aunt Minnie did not have a very high regard for common cowboys. He remembered the time Aunt Minnie had hit him over the head with a bottle and put him out for scuffling at the counter with Buck Taylor. She put Buck out, too. Jess sighed. How a man's past does rise and trip him up! But the little niece hadn't learned of it yet and before Jess left for camp he had learned her name.

"Linnie Tully." Jess repeated the name fondly. He flapped the lines over his horses and progressed a mile or two, his mind dwelling on blonde little Linnie Tully of the Saddlerock. Then he said "Mabel Streator." And his mind turned to the dark eyed, vivacious Mabel.

The owner of the OJ sent a daily paper to each of his cowboys who occupied an isolated line camp. Jess got his in a bundle once a month and spent the following month reading them through, using them afterward as an aid to quick kindling of the morning fire.

Crumpling a sheet for that purpose a morning or two after he had been to town he noticed that a clipping had been cut from it. He smoothed the sheet wonderingly. He remembered having seen the picture of the lady over in the right hand corner; the page had been whole. He glanced accusingly toward the bunk where Lake still slumbered. He put the sheet in his own bed and went on with the morning's tasks.

Two mysteries! First a spot of white paint, now a clipping.

"Too much goin' on around here," he mumbled.

THE annual rodeo at Goldton was barely two weeks off. Jess started in on the string of broncs that were in the pasture. He rode two each day. That way he got plenty of practice and at the same time was doing his duty toward breaking them. Lake was interested.

"I believe I'll attend the rodeo," he told Jess. "I've seen such things in shows, but never the real thing. Could you let me have a horse so I can be around with the contestants. I don't want to just sit in the stands, I'd rather be close to it all."

"Sure," replied Jess. "They always lets everybody intuh the arena what's forkin' a cayuse. Yuh'll be clost tuh it, all right."

The day before the opening of the rodeo he saddled two horses. "Come on, let's be ridin' tuh town," he called.

"I think I'd better go in the car," Lake decided. "If I rode to town I'll be worn out before the fun begins tomorrow. Would you mind just to lead my horse in for me?"

"Suits me," Jess agreed.

Jess was secretly glad Lake did not care to ride, for Mabel had proposed they all ride in together. Now, he would have the long trip in company with Mabel. He smiled in pleasant anticipation as he rode toward the Streator ranch. There, Mabel's horse was saddled, standing in the corral.

"Mabel!" Jess called loudly. "Hey, Mabel. Come on!"

The door opened and old man Streator came out. "Mabel left her pony fer y'u t' take in," her father said with a note of apology. "She said y'u'd be comin' along anyhow an' she had a chanct t' ride. Thet Easterner come along with his automobile!"

Jess took Mabel's horse, thanked old man Streator, and jogged on toward town, leading the two horses. It seemed his duty, one was for his boarder, the other for Mabel.

It was late when Jess reached town and put up his horses at the stable. By the time he had visited rodeo headquarters and entered in the riding event the Saddlerock was closed. He ate a disappointing meal at an all night lunch counter. Early in the morning he was at the Saddlerock. The little waitress was very busy though Aunt Minnie had three other girls helping her. Jess managed to slip to her the ladies' pass which each contestant was given. She thanked him with a quick smile.

When the rodeo program opened Richard Lake appeared in the arena togged out in an outfit that gave Jess a pang of envy. Lake's chaparejos were studded with silver, his shirt was of silk and the most gorgeous checkboard pattern; his hat was of the finest beaver, wide of brim and decorated with a horse-hair band of intricate design. Jess would not have known the youth save for the fact that he was astride Roany. Mabel Streator rode at the Easterner's side.

The roping, bullriding and bareback riding had been carried out with a whirl and dash that put the grandstands on their feet. Jess, waiting near the chutes for his turn in the bronc-busting event heards yells and shouts of laughter farther down the arena. From a colorful group old Roany issued, bucking to the best of his ability. Lake, his wonderful outfit flapping, hung for dear life to the saddle horn.

It was great fun for the onlookers. Lake was having a terrific time to stick on; each jolt sent him higher. The crowds howled with delight, they thought it a clever bit of clowning by someone hired by the management. Old Roany pitched his rider almost upside down. Lake clung a moment, then spread his arms for the fall to the ground. But the expected fall did not materialize. Instead, the stout leather belt of his new chaps caught over the saddle horn and he dangled, head downward. Roany, frightened, shied and whirled, Lake bumped perilously about his legs. Slowly the saddle commenced to turn.

Jess leaped to his horse and spurred toward the flapping figure. Careful lest he crush the unfortunate Easterner with his own horse Jess reached down and seized the youth's checkerboard shirt by the back and hauled him up.

"Grab around my waist," shouted Jess. "Grab me quick!"

Lake's arms closed about Jess' waist. Jess caught Roany's bridle and hauled him up. His own horse, snorting, pulled aside.

"Shake yer foot outa the stirrup," Jess bellowed. "Yer left one. Shake! Or yuh'll get pulled in two. Shake yer foot!"

Roany's sadle had slipped low, but Lake's foot came free as Jess hauled him to safety. Lake's grasp gave way and Jess was obliged to let him slip to the ground. Lake had fainted.

A crowd gathered. Someone flung a bucket of water on Lake's head and shoulders. He stirred and sat up groggily. Jess helped him to his feet. Lake glanced at the crowd about him and clapped his hat on his head.

"I'll go sit in my car awhile," he told Jess. "Just tie my horse to the fence, won't you? I'm all in."

Ten minutes later Jess had completed his ride on the outlaw he had drawn for the day. There were many contestants who entered several events, but Jess entered in but one. He was a bronc rider, and he conserved his strength for that event alone. Save for one or two professional contest riders Jess was counted by the local sports as the logical winner of that event. Jess was hard, bronc wise and experienced. Besides, he had the calm determination to win.

A heavy hand was laid on his arm as he hurried toward the grandstand where he saw Linnie Tully.

"You know the fellow that go thrown off the roan?"

The man who touched his arm was a tall athletic man with clean molded limbs, a hard chin and piercing dark eyes.

"Yeah," Jess replied wonderingly. "Why?"

The man exhibited an officer's badge. "We're working out of the sheriff's office," he stated in a kindly voice, but in a tone that brooked no argument. "You're deputized."

"Deputized?" Jess gulped. "Me?"

Two other men hurried up. One was a short, heavyset man in a dark suit whom Jess recognized as a local deputy sheriff, the other was attired in a stylish gray business suit. The tall deputy indicated the man in the light suit. "This is Mr. Stone; he's a Government officer. He thinks he recognized that dude of yours as a mail bandit he's looking for. Mr. Stone, this is Jess Conley. That dude's been staying out at his camp." The deputy tugged at Jess' sleeve. "Come on." He turned briskly.

"Well, if I gotta, I gotta, I reckon," breathed Jess. He sensed a new duty to perform. "Say, mister," he caught Stone's coat and hesitated. "I paid twenty doll'rs entry fee inta this buckin' contest. Yuh'll let me come back an' ride tomorrow?"

The Government officer laughed, but hurried Jess along to a big car that awaited them at the gates.

"Remember now," Stone admonished him as the big car swept into the road. "You're a deputy. You're just as much an officer as any of us. That fellow pulled out of here in a roadster soon after the horse bucked him off. If he's the fellow I think he is, he's a New York gangster, one of a bandit crew that held up the mails just out of Altoona and killed two trainmen. We're countin' on you to help us get that man. Understand?"

"Sure," replied Jess dazedly. "Yeah. I—I s'pose so." He pointed to the road rippling back beneath the speeding car. "Them's his car tracks. He's ahead of us."

As the officer's car roared past the place where Jess' little trail turned off the highway Jess poked the driver excitedly.

"That way!" he pointed. "He turned off. Hey! Stop!"

The car veered across the rough flat and fell into the little road with a speed Jess could scarcely believe possible. They sped silently down toward the little OJ shack.

"Yonder he goes—yonder!" Jess caught a glimpse of the Easterner's wild west shirt as it vanished over the bank of Gringo Creek. Lake's car stood in front of Jess' shack. The New York license plates had been removed and in their place were Illinois plates having white numbers. Though the paint was new they had been daubed with grease and spattered with adobe mud until they appeared to have been in use for months. The car would readily pass inspection at the California line. Lake's suitcase and bag had been piled into the car. Apparently he had not been expecting such prompt pursuit, though Roany's untimely action had placed him, hatless, in a position where he was the center of interest. His coating of tan, the strange attire and the big hat would have been ample disguise in any company had it not been for Roany's disclosure. Fearful lest an officer might have observed him Lake had evidently decided to depart.

"Come on," Jess called, "we c'n run 'im down. He's afoot."

"Be careful," Stone warned, "that fellow's a crack shot."

Jess halted suddenly. He turned and ran toward the shack where he got his six-shooter from his bed. He brought the newspaper along.

"See that paper?" he pointed to the place where the clipping had been removed. "Was that sumthin' about this feller?"

The local deputy glanced at the sheet. "Yes. I remember it. His picture was there and an account of the holdup. It said he'd been seen passing through Gallup."

Jess, hurrying ahead of the officers found that Lake's footprints turned up the canyon where they had encountered the bees.

"He's goin' tuh hide in them caves, I betcha. Say! Don't stick yer heads around that bend. From them caves this wash lays like a billiard table. He'd pick us off like a dog snappin' flies."

"We can get men to surround the place and starve him out," Stone declared.

"It'd take a thousand. Come night an' there's a million chances tuh slip out over the top an' sneak down through the rocks an' brush. The back part of that rim's in the OJ steer pasture an' she's rough as all getout."

One of the deputies sneered at Jess'

talk and walked boldly around the point into the canyon. He had barely progressed a dozen steps when the sharp report of the automatic echoed from the rock walls and the deputy whirled, flung up his hands and collapsed upon the warm white sand.

STONE peered through the rocks at the still figure and drew back abruptly. "He's gone," he said. He removed his coat and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Hot down here, isn't it!" he exclaimed.

"I'll get 'im out f'r yuh," Jess blurted suddenly. "One of yuh wait here an' keep 'im from comin' out this way. The other'n of yuh, go back tuh the house an' climb on top the back way an' watch he doesn't slip off over the rim. Watch an' find what cave he's in an' keep 'im in it, by shootin'. They're so shallow he kain't go from one to the other in daylight without yuh fellers seein' 'im. I'll be back pretty pronto."

Jess went back to the shack, got a rope, caught up a horse and set off bareback toward French Louie's.

An hour passed before Jess returned. He carried a hive of bees balanced carefully in front of him, the entrance blocked with screening so none of the bees could escape.

"Didja find which hole he's in?" he inquired of the officer keeping watch over the upper end of the canyon.

"Down there." The deputy cautiously pointed to a certain dark depression high on the face of the cliff. Jess and the officer stood almost on the rim of the canyon wall, but a bend in the face of the cliff made it possible to see the cave in which Lake was hiding.

Shouldering the hive, Jess left his horse among the cedars and with the rope in hand went on foot to a point above the cave. Tying his rope about the hive he lowered it over the edge. When he had paid out most of the rope he leaned cautiously over the rim to see if the hive was over the right ledge. A A shot sounded below and Jess' hat went spinning from his head and floated to the canyon below. Jess jerked back, his face white. But he had seen enough. He let the hive drop. It broke open on the ledge and the angry bees swarmed out.

An agonized cry came from the cave. Dispassionately Jess yanked the hive up and let it fall until it dropped free of the rope.

"Throw yer gun down inta the wash," Jess shouted down. "Or I'll send down another hive of my bee sting cure." In his anxiety to see what was going on down below Jess leaned out again. The gangster's automatic sent a leaden slug whizzing close to his head. In return Jess rolled a large stone off the rim, then another.

The gangster, driven to desperation by the stings of the bees left his hiding place and began a frantic descent of the canyon wall. When he exposed himself Stone fired from the opposite side below.

"Throw down your gun," the government officer commanded.

The youthful mail bandit clung to the cliff as if undecided which way to go. He turned his white face upward. There, he knew Jess awaited him. Below was the officer, and at other points men might be stationed. With a sudden cry he leaped from the wall, his body turned sidewise in the air and he crashed into a great willow tree that grew at the foot of the bluff. Jess saw Stone running across the canyon floor toward the willow. He joined the other deputy and together they led Jess' horse back down to the shack and went down Gringo Creek toward the juncture of the blind canyon.

They met Stone walking with the mail bandit, half-blinded by the bees.

"He was a gay bird while he lasted," grunted Stone callously, "but he didn't fly far. He lit in that willow and landed safe and sound."

Jess looked inquiringly at Lake as they trudged back toward the shack. He felt a great pity for the youth. But the young bandit returned his gaze with a flash of hate.

"Yah, you dirty sneak," Lake flared. "You turned me in. I'll get you for this." He cursed Jess viciously.

The officers handcuffed the youthful gangster and put him in their car. The deputy sheriff took the wheel.

The government officer indicated the roadster. "We'll just leave that car here," he stated decisively. "It's a stolen car, but it would cost more to return it to New York than it is worth." He turned to Jess. "Just treat that car as if you owned it. This man stole it—" he

motioned toward Lake—"but he's got a couple of murder charges hanging over him, so he's not likely to need it," he finished significantly. "Here," Stone moved Jess toward the roadster. "You get in. I'll go with you and show you how to run it. We'll follow the big car back to town. Get in your car."

Jess drove the roadster the last fifteen miles into Goldton. He hurried to his hotel room where he bathed and arrayed himself in his best attire. But by the time he reached the Saddlerock it was closed. He hastened across to the Pastime Hall where the cowboy dance was well under way.

Mabel Streator was there. As Jess entered the gaily decorated hall she was with a group of her city friends near the door. "Why, Jess," she exclaimed, "I'm so glad you're back safely. I was so afraid when I learned where you'd gone." She squeezed his hand. "I was afraid you might get hurt. I—I worried all the time!"

Jess' eyes were searching the gay throng. Suddenly they found the slender little waitress. He moved abruptly toward her.

"Oh, that's all right, Mabel," he smiled back over his shoulder. "I wasn't in no danger. Yuh needn't of worried about me."

He went straight to the little waitress and whirled her away among the dancers.

"Twenty-six miles ain't so much, now," he said, "since I got a car. I—I reckon I'll be in town right often."

"I'm glad," replied the little waitress. She nestled in his arms, her own clinging to his shoulder. "You're so capable; so able to do big things."

"How'd yuh know?" exclaimed Jess, admiringly.

To prove that her faith was not misplaced, Jess went ahead in the two days that followed and won the bronc riding event.

The rodeo was over. The crowds had left town. Jess and the little waitress had driven out along the highway.

"It's six hundred doll'rs, cash prize, I got outa that bronc-ridin'," Jess told her proudly. "I'm a-goin' tuh save up till I get a thousand, then I'll make a payment on that ol' Tucker ranch. Then, don't yuh reckon we—uh, you an' me could mebby——"

Linnie Tully heard what he said, but she kept her face straight ahead, looking out along the shining hood of the car as they rolled along. Her eyes were starry.

"But you don't have to wait—to save," she said in a small frightened voice. "You see, I've been saving, too. I can make up the thousand—right away. We—we——"

"Woah!" Jess steered the car out of the road and pulled back on the wheel. "Woah!" He tramped awkwardly on the foot brake and clutch. The car came to a halt. It seemed to settle down for a good long rest.

COLOR OF THE MESAS

IT IS inevitable—and even desirable, too—that in tales of the West such as will concern this magazine idiom more or less unfamiliar to readers far from the scene must occur. There are words, phrases, grammatical twists born of indigenous needs—expressions of color, pungency and efficiency which all the masterly English of a Ruskin or a Pater scarcely could improve. There are Indian words adopted, phrases from the Spanish, and all the thousand and one coined or changed expressions. Often these are part of current speech in one locality or during one period of the West's growth, and unknown in another.

So, without making pretensions to ultimate authority, WEST herewith begins a chatty sort of glossary, one which will be run, as space allows, for some time. Since we hope to keep the whole project as far from the cut and dried as possible, no attempt at alphabetical arrangement will be made—until that possible day in the future when all emendations have been made, all disputes settled, and gathering the material into form of a book seems desirable.

The items in this issue were contributed by Romaine H. Lowdermilk, Arizona rancher and well known writer of fiction, whose story, "The Bee Sting Cure," appears in this number. In respect to the venture, a department for which we invite the submission of manuscripts from all, Mr. Lowdermilk writes:

Editor, WEST,
Garden City, New York.
DEAR SIR:

Thank you for the hint about the glossary department of WEST. I've often noted—and smiled at—the way many Western idioms are used in stories, and sometimes in lists purporting to explain their meanings. I don't claim to know more about the subject than anybody else, but I do know when and why many such terms are used.

There's nothing funny about a good deal of it. The bleakest day of a desert man's life is when he realizes his only hope for food is the chuckwalla. That lizard has saved many a desert man and Indian from starvation.

If I may mention it without seeming to try to be smart I'd like to point out that "chuckwalla" is properly "chuckawalla," the Indian pronunciation. Also "romal" is not romal at all but "*ramal*," pronounced "r-r-rah-mahl" with accent on last syllable, it being a Mexican word meaning only the one thing for which it is intended—*el ramal*.

Romaine H. Lowdermilk.

We may add, in respect to this ferocious appearing desert dweller, *sauromalus ater*, a description of which follows, that its name is spelled by the Standard Dictionary, without the parenthesized "a." No information concerning derivation is given in that place, however. Possibly readers will be able to supply it from further sources.

CHUCK(A)WALLA

THE old prospector squatted by his campfire, managing a skillet and coffeepot when I rode upon his lonely camp.

"A chuckawaller is about the most uninvitin' varmint I ever looked at with view to makin' a meal of," he replied in response to my inquiry concerning the lizard known as the chuckwalla. "But folks eat more chuckawallers than any other kind of reptile," went on the old prospector genially, "because they're plentiful where there is any an' they're easy to hit with a rock where they're plentiful.

"They're a flat, pot bellied lizard 'bout the color of a horn toad—somethin' be-

tween the color of old ashes," he pointed to his ash dump of the night before, "and that rusty piece of *lámina.*" He referred to a scrap of corrugated iron by its common Mexican name. "They're anywhere from five inches to fourteen long, with sometimes mebbe half a pound of meat on 'em. They're good eatin', all right, if yuh can get it out of yuh're mind how they looked before yuh went to fryin' 'em. Besides bein' ugly bellied they got a head shaped like a rattler, and their hide's loose and dry and wrinklylike. Yuh'd think they were dead a week, sometimes, to see one lyin' in the sun by a rock. But they're good as chicken, pervidin' yuh're memory ain't none too good.

"It's a dark day for a pilgrim the first time his grub runs out on the desert an' he begins eyein' the rocks for a chuckawaller to eat. I've seen camps with chuckawaller bones scattered around like herring bones. It's a Injun name, an' there's many a tribe lived on 'em, too."

The old prospector delved into one of the burro packs and brought out a canvas bag of precious ore samples. He exhibited with pride the flecks of gold that showed in the broken rock.

"I've got a real good prospect hole," he stated modestly. "I'm on my way out now. I can sell this property. But if it hadn't been for them chuckawallers I'd never found it."

He uncovered the skillet and, with a fork turned the savory meat. He shook the coffee pot and set it off the fire. Then he tipped the skillet toward the rising sun and peered within. There *seemed* to be a pair of nice fat catfish sizzling in it, brown and tasty! The old prospector held it back over the coals and nodded solemnly.

"Yeah, if it hadn't been for them chuckawallers," he stated solemnly, "I'd never found it. They pulled me through."

COWBOY OUTFITS

A BIG cattle company in range parlance may properly be termed an "outfit." Too, if prospectors or a camping party buy supplies and load pack animals for a trip they are "outfitting," getting together their outfit. A ragged urchin mounted on a shabby burro for a joy-ride is a "comical lookin' outfit." But to the cowboy his own personal belongings which he uses as the tools of trade constitute his "outfit."

When you're considering the cowboy outfit don't include the clothes in his war bag, or his hen skin bedding in its canvas tarp, although each and severally is an outfit, but confine the inspection to his saddle, chaps, bridle, saddle blankets and all the various appurtenances thereto.

For instance here in one little section of the Southwest I can point out several different cow-dogs, each with a distinctive outfit. Each thinks his outfit is the proper thing. For instance, there's Henry Reeves, who hails from Texas. Henry uses bridle reins nearly an inch in width; and when he dismounts he drops one rein and leaves the other still over the horse's neck. His pony understands and remains "tied to the ground" until the loose rein is picked up. He rides a double rig saddle and carries a quirt and slicker. He also ties his half-inch rope hard and fast to the saddle horn and ropes with it that way until it breaks off. His batwing chaps are grain side out, and his spurs straight shank, hand made, unmounted. His bit is not fancy, but the headstall is good and heavy. Henry is just as good a cowhand as you'll find anywhere in the world, and can hold his own in any contest you happen to name.

Then there's Randy Miller. He is typical of the opposite school. Randy has worked mostly in California and Arizona. His bridle reins are barely a quarter inch wide, tied together, and with a long romal dangling. When he dismounts he leaves the rein snubbed back over the saddle horn, and his horse, neck arched, waits there until the rein is released. Randy rides a single cinch saddle with small, rounded skirts. He seldom has anything tied to it, and the strings are short and often tied up altogether out of the way. When he ropes he uses a keen rawhide riata and takes his dallies around the horn, freeing and re-taking as long as needed to throw the animal or lead it in. His chaps are the shotgun variety, flesh side out, with a leather fringe down the outside. His spurs are heavy and bent downward, ringed and overlaid with silver. His bit is silver mounted and there are conchas on the headstall, which is of a very narrow but fine leather. Randy is just as skilfull a cowpuncher as Henry.

Only he has different ideas about his outfit.

THE HACKAMORE
(*La Jáquima*)

"NEVER put a bit in a horse's mouth," said one successful bronc trainer, "until he's plumb broke and will neck-rein about as good with the hackamore as he'd ort to with a bit. Then he'll never fight the bit and get hard mouthed.

"Aw, you hackamore fellers!" grumbled another bronc trainer equally successful. "Gimme a snaffle bit every time. Get 'em reinin' in half the time."

The hackamore versus the bit has been debated over and over in every community of the cattle country. Each side has its supporters and its advantages. But the most successful bronc handlers don't stick to either one. They use whichever seems to suit the particular disposition of the bronc they're working on. Some horses that will fight and fall back with the hackamore will go all right with the bit, and the reverse is true. The good horsemen suit the gear to the horse.

But *la jáquima*, to give the hackamore its original name, is as much the part of every rider's outfit as his bits. The hard plaited rawhide noseband is a good thing to handle wild horses with. Given a hackamore, properly adjusted about a bronc's nose, with good stout cheek straps and brow band, with a soft mane hair rope fitted on for reins and the loose end as a drag rope, most any bronc peeler can haul a raw bronc this way and that, halt him when he stampedes, and gradually wise him up to the fact that when the rein comes against his neck he must turn. After a few good lessons the bit may be used in conjunction with the hackamore until the horse becomes accustomed to the feel of it.

THE ROMAL

THERE is a little town down across the line in Mexico where tourists visit a white plastered adobe house, vine shaded, that stands in the midst of a squash patch. Attached to the house is a thatched bower beneath the spreading branches of cottonwood and alders where labors a lean American. This artisan is blind in one eye, his face is scarred by a dozen desperate knife battles and gunfights, he limps and is totally deaf. All day he plaits rawhide articles—bridles, reins, headstalls, hackamores, hondas, ladies' purses, quirts, whips, riatas, watch fobs and *ramales*. One Mexican is kept busy softening and removing hair from rawhides while two others work at cutting and trimming the strips for braiding. It is quite a business.

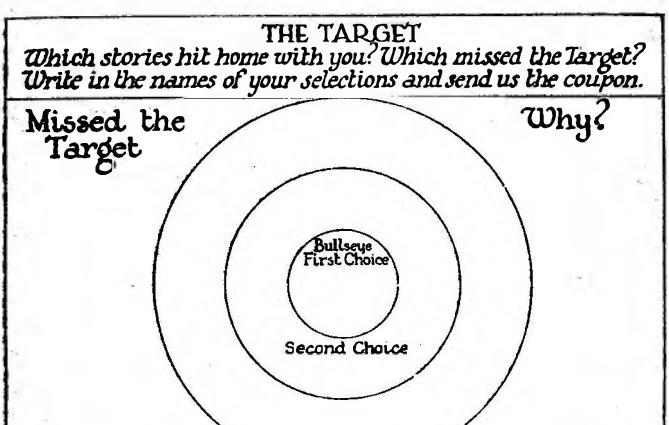
Few tourists buy a *ramal*. Few readers know the word when they see it, for the Americans have it "romal." But cowboys all over the cattle country use romals. Whether it is one plaited by the above mentioned American expert on Mexican soil, or one made in a saddle factory in Montana, or if it is merely a piece of leather or a strand of rope attached to the bridle reins, it is a romal.

For the romal is nothing but an elongated quirt with none of the quirt's heaviness as to handle. In Spanish the word is spelled *ramal* and pronounced "r-r-rah-mahl" with the accent on the last syllable. *El ramal* means literally a branch road, a division or a ramification. So, attached as it is by a loop to the bridle reins, the *ramal* becomes but a ramification of the rein, a handy addition that may be used as a quirt and dropped from the hand without fear of being lost, and one with which the fortunate possessor can larrup both sides of a horse. And for ropers who "dally" instead of "tie" it serves to keep rein ends clear from entanglement in the wraps of the riata about the saddle horn.

KACKS, HULLS, AND GELDING-SMACKERS

THE above title embraces a few of the pet cowboy names for a saddle. Aside from that the cow saddle is often classified as a rimmy, three-quarter and center fire according to the arrangement of the cinchas. Then there's the Visalia, Ellensburg, Contest and a dozen others referring to the shape of the tree that forms the foundation for that especial saddle. A cowpuncher's favorite kack may be built double rigged on a Montana tree.

In some portions of the cow country certain styles, due to long usage, have become the standard, and an outsider coming in with a different sort of sad-



dle is made to feel that his particular choice is about the poorest on the market, until he falls in line with the rest. A few big outfits allow only single cinch saddles, others only double rig. But as a rule a man is not judged by the number of cinchas on his saddle but by his ability and "savvy" as a cowhand.

A few years ago when bronc riders were permitted to use their own special saddles in contest events there came into vogue certain saddles, concave as to cantle and form fitting of fork, which received the apt and euphonic title "man-trap." They were built with one and only one object in view: that of being easy to stay in when cinched down on a bucking horse. The style grew so unfair to the horse that the modern contest tree was adopted; "c'mittee saddles" they're called, and are about as difficult bronc saddles to ride as could be devised. Contest events have also brought out a special roping saddle, fine for range work, too, that has a low cantle and strong, sloping horn, easy on the horse's back and good for swift dismounting.

THE CHUCK-WAGON

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With this novel comes also the smashing wind-up of William H. Hamby's copper mine serial, "Manacled Millions." Then, there is a sheep dog story of poignant appeal, "Chula," by John Briggs; another tale of those humorous pardners, the Long-Un and Runt, called "The Passing of Death's Head Dorsey"; the story of an Oregon sheep war, "Twists of the Long Trail," by Howard R. Marsh, and tales of merit by Allan Vaughan Elston, Leslie McFarlane, and Murray Leinster.

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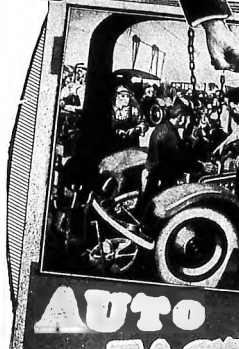

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