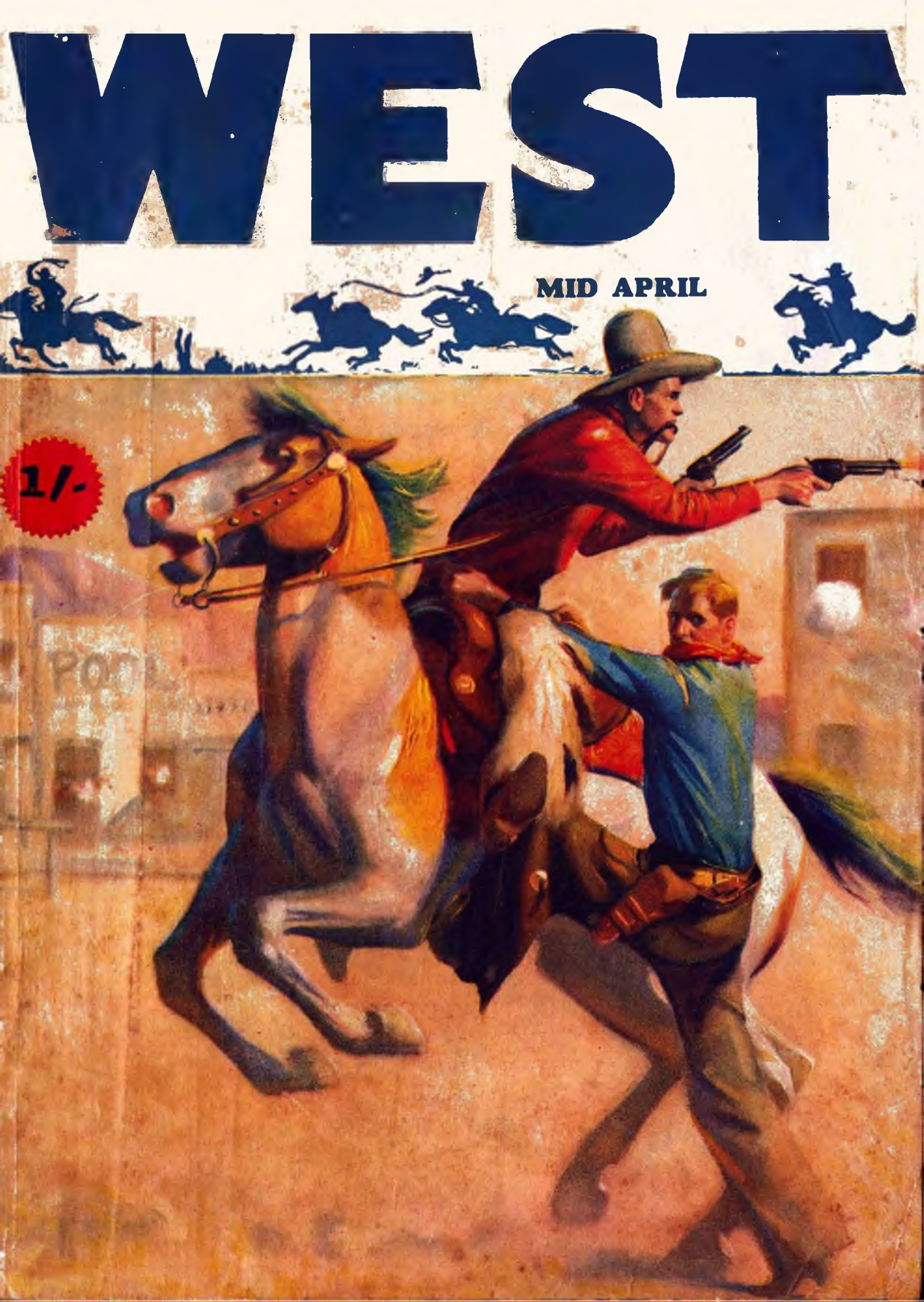
WEST

MID APRIL



THE MASTER THRILLER NOVELS

★ ★

FOOLS OF THE LEGION
J. D. Newsom

MURDER AT GLEN ATHOL
Norman Lippincott

SHARK GOTCH OF THE ISLANDS
Albert Richard Wetjen

MURDER AT THE OLD STONE HOUSE
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THREE DIED BESIDE THE MARBLE POOL
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THE TINY DIAMOND
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THE MAGPIE TRAILS
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George Bruce Marquis

MID APRIL, 1938 EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

WEST

Every Other Friday One Shilling

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MOCK MARSHAL

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

OLD Pete was in the harness-room of the Goliath Livery Stable, mending a bridle, when the big news came.

"Mayor Cully wants to see yuh," announced the sad-eyed cowboy, whose mouth was almost as wide as his forehead.

"Mayor wants to see me, you say?" Pete laid down the bridle, looking at the cowboy, whose watery blue eyes still held a glint of shrewdness. "What fer, Duke?"

Duke shook his head. "Dunno. 'Less he wants you to tell him some more about that time you was marshal of Dodge."

"Git away from here with that foolin'," Pete said good-naturedly. "Jim Cully ain't got no time fer that."

"He can take time, can't he? I ain't heard it, myself, for a whole week. Say, I'd ruther hear you lie than——"

"That ain't no lie, you young scallywag! Don't you know, when I was marshal of Dodge——"

"Uh-huh," Duke grunted disrespectfully. "You kilt half of the town an' turned the other half into grave-diggers. Better git on over an' see what Cully wants."

As he turned away, Duke's big mouth spread in a grin that reached almost to his ears. He clamped a hand to his mouth, trying to hold back the chuckles that spilled through his fingers. Hastening through the door of the stable, a strangled laugh escaped him. Old Pete, wiping grease from his hands, heard soon afterward a wild, joyous whoop. Some fool

cow-hand drinking up his month's wages, he thought.

He jammed a hat on his bald head and clumped along the sun-baked sidewalk of the little mining town. There was pride in his step, an air of importance that far transcended his shabby clothes. He walked into the Goliath General Store with that poise, that air of careless superiority which can come only to a man who has tasted the sweets of fame.

Mayor James P. Cully was wrapping up a pair of boots for a customer. He glanced at Pete and motioned with his shaggy black head to the rear of the store.

"Step right into the office, Pete. Be with you in a minute."

The office was a space in the back corner, large enough to hold a desk, a couple of chairs, a rifle-rack. A row of barrels—flour, blackstrap, kerosene, sugar —separated it from the front of the store. Bridles, hames, collars, trace-chains hanging from the ceiling, formed the other wall.

Pete sat down and bit off a meditative chew. What in thunderation did Jim Cully want to see him about?—he wondered. Henry Bly, marshal of Goliath, slouched past the window. Pete smiled pityingly. Henry Bly didn't even wear a gun. Call that marshalling a town? Take it in old Dodge now——

"WELL, Pete; how's the old warhorse this mornin'?" Mayor Cully asked, pulling off his sleeve-protectors and dropping into the other chair. His pale eyes, peeping from folds of fat, looked thoughtful.

"I'm fine as frawg hair, Jim," Pete answered. "Feel like a June colt, I do. Duke was tellin' me you wanter see me."

Cully's air became at once secretive. He turned and looked toward the front of the store. Leaning forward, he asked in a husky whisper: "How'd you like to be marshal of Goliath?"

Pete caught his breath. "Me? You mean me?"

"Sure, you. I know what you're thinkin': Henry Bly's a good man. That's just the trouble, he's too durned good. We got to have a marshal in this town that ain't so good. One that's got a rep as a gunman, I mean. All the old hell-roarin' towns used to do that—Dodge, Abilene, Tascosy, Tombstone. That's what made 'em, marshals that had a rep."

"You're right there, Jim. Jest the name of Wild Bill Hickok an' Bat Masterson was enough to draw folks to Dodge. Same way with Wyatt Earp, down in Tombstone."

Cully nodded his big head. "Ain't no gettin' around that. Marshals with a rep put a town on the map. Now, that new railroad——"

"Jest a minute, Jim, afore you go any fu'ther. Co'se, I appreciate you askin' me an' all that, but Henry's a fambly man. I wouldn't wanter do him no dirt."

The mayor smiled. "It's all right with Henry. I already spoke to him. He's glad of a chance to get back to his ranch. Now, about this here new railroad. I was talkin' to that townsite promoter, Thatcher, the other day. He's still on the fence whether to have the road come through here or Samson."

"Samson? Ain't he got that buffalo wallow outta his head yet?"

"No. And you know why? He says Goliath is too much like a grave-yard. And Gus Grady, over in Samson, is a real humdinger of a lawman. But with you doin' the star totin' here, he'll look at it different."

Pete gnawed off another chew. "I ain't as young as I useter be," he said. "But if you think——"

"I don't think. I know." Cully slid open a drawer of the desk and drew out a black bottle. He tilted it to his lips. "Here's to the new marshal of Goliath."

"Mud in yore eye, Jim."

Cully wiped his mouth and passed the bottle to Pete. "Happy days, old-timer." Cully grinned. "Let's hear some about the time you was marshal of Dodge."

Pete let the bottle gurgle a while. "Oh, there ain't much to tell," he disclaimed, and launched vigorously into the yarn he

had been telling, with variations, for the last forty years.

When a lad of sixteen, still wet behind the ears—so he said—he had ridden up the Chisholm Trail with a beef herd, bound for an Indian reservation in Montana. Stopping in Dodge City to buck the tiger a bit, he had seen the mighty Wild Bill Hickok laid low by the gun-butt of Wes Hardin—or Clay Allison, or Ben Thompson, depending on which of these immortals came first to his tongue. He had helped Wild Bill into a store and got him a doctor. Hickok had rewarded him by letting him wear his marshal's badge a whole day.

"An' here's somethin' I ain't never told a livin' soul," Pete confided darkly. "I sent three bad men up to Boot Hill that day I was marshal of Dodge."

"Do tell!" Cully looked at him, wide-eyed. "You're the very man Goliath needs for marshal. You'll start things poppin'. And get us that railroad, too, by golly!"

"I'll do it, or bust a rib tryin'."

On that, they drained the bottle.

Marshal Henry Bly idled past the window. Cully tapped on the pane, beckoning. Bly, a tall, horse-faced man of forty-odd, came in. He sniffed, eyeing the empty bottle. "I got a notion to take you both in," he said disgustedly, "for bein' such hawgs."

"Pete and me have been goin' over a few matters," Cully said briskly. "He's agreed to be our marshal, Henry. So——"

"Here she is." Bly unpinned the nickel badge from his vest and held it out to Pete.

The touch of the metal disk sent a thrill through the old man. "I don't want you to think I'm after yore job, Henry," he said. "Jim said you didn't keer."

Bly handed him a bunch of keys. "Glad to be shut of it, Pete. Tired of poundin' this street, up one side and down the other, waitin' for somethin' to happen."

Cully nodded. "That's what I told him." He stood up. "Well, so long, marshal."

Old Pete swelled a little. "So long, boys." He bought some cartridges and went back to the livery stable, the jail keys jangling with each proud step. The badge shone no brighter than his face.

Jim Cully watched until the slight figure passed through the door of his store. Then the laughter that had been dammed up in him for so long burst forth like an explosion. Gales of laughter roared from him, shaking him, bending him double. He would cough, wheeze, draw in a gasping breath, and start all over again. Bly was laughing too, until tears slid down the wrinkles grooved on each side of his long nose.

"If this—ain't the best——" sputtered Cully, and choked. He straightened up, pulling a hand across his eyes. "Golly! I ain't laughed so much since I was born." Then he brought out the bottle he had saved for this occasion.

PETE, sitting on his cot in the livery stable harness-room, was cleaning a pistol that looked as old as he. It was a cedar-butted, single-action Colt .45 that had come up the trail with him from Texas. He oiled and fooled with the gun until life came back into the trigger dogs and the cylinder spun smoothly when the hammer was drawn back. He filled the loops of the stiff, cracked cartridge-belt, and strapped it round him. Drawing his time from the stable owner, he strutted out where folks could see him.

But there was no one in the street. Three or four horses dozed at hitch-rails; that was all. Most of the town's a hundred and seventy-five population was up in the hills, digging for gold. But wait until word got around that an ex-marshal of Dodge was ramrodding the law in Goliath. That would fetch them, good men and bad. It would fetch the railroad, too. Wild Bill, in all his long-haired glory, never trod the bloody boards of Dodge with greater pride than old Pete tramped Goliath's dusty, deserted street.

The bat-wing doors of the Miner's Rest opened, and Duke stood there, staring at the new marshal. He wabbled a few steps, whooped once, and lurched against the front of the saloon. Pete crossed the

street with determined stride. He touched the puncher on the shoulder.

"I ain't allowin' no drunks in Goliath," he said. "Better go on home while you kin still set a hoss."

Duke lowered his eyes close to the shiny badge. "The mar-shal!" he said in a high, strained voice. "My! My! Ol' Wild Bill, hisself, without the hair." Tilting back his head, he cackled gleefully.

"Never mind the hair," Pete told him brusquely. "I'm the law here. An' I ain't allowin' no drunks in Goliath."

Duke eyed him reproachfully.

"Who shaid I was drunk, Pete—I mean, Wild Bill? I still got ten dollars, so how can I be drunk, hunh? Lishen, pard." Duke's manner became mushily confidential. "I can tell you somethin'. Gonna do it, too, 'cause you're my frien'. Wanter know what I was laughin' at? Hunh? Lishen."

As Duke bent his head closer to Pete's ear, another cowboy came hurriedly from the saloon, bumping into him. "Let's drag it," this man said, and pulled Duke roughly by the arm.

"All right, pard. So long, Wild Bill. Be seein' you, pard." Duke weaved to the hitch-rail.

"Didn't tell him, did you?" Pete heard the other cowboy ask fiercely.

"Who, me?" Duke gravely wagged his head. "Not me. I don't tell nobody nothin'."

Thinking no more of the incident, Pete hitched up his gun-belt and went on to the jail. This was only a log house with bars up and down its narrow windows. He unlocked the heavy door and went in. A musty smell met his nostrils. Over the little room that served as marshal's office lay a film of dust. The four steel doors facing each other across a dark passage hung open. At Pete's approach, a pack rat scurried from one of the cells, disappearing through the window.

He got a broom and set to work. Mayor Jim Cully strolled past, accompanied by a well-fed man who wore a diamond-studded horse-shoe pin in his red necktie. Cully called:

"Gettin' ready for 'em, are you?"

"Well, gittin' rid of the danged rats, anyhow." Pete looked inquiringly at the flashily dressed, self-confident stranger.

"Pete," said the mayor, with wide gesture, "I want you to meet up with Mr. Thatcher, of the Great Western Townsite Co. Thatcher, shake hands with the new marshal of Goliath. Pete," proudly explained Cully, "useter be marshal of Dodge when Wild Bill Hickok was there."

"You don't say! Old-time gunman, eh?" Thatcher's shrewd little eyes twinkled. "You can bet I'm going to walk a chalk line while I'm in this town."

"He's the real McCoy," said Cully, as Pete opened his mouth to enter a mild objection. "Hobnobbed with Wes Hardin, Clay Allison, and all them old-time bad men. He's the only man Billy the Kid ever shot at and missed. Come on in, Thatcher. Pete'll show you our jail."

"Ain't much to see yet," Pete apologised. "Ain't nobody in her."

"But there will be soon, I bet," Thatcher said heartily. "With your reputation, I shouldn't wonder if Goliath didn't need a new jail pretty soon."

Their brief inspection over, the men took seats in the office.

"The reason I brung Mr. Thatcher in to see you," said Cully, puffing one of Thatcher's expensive cigars, "was on 'count of maybe you bein' able to help me get Samson outta his head."

Pete grunted his disgust. "He ain't still figgerin' on runnin' the road through that prairie-dawg village, is he?"

Thatcher, cigar tilted in a corner of his mouth, thumbs hooked in the arm-holes of his embroidered silk vest, smiled expansively. "Not a bad town," he said. "It's twice the size of Goliath, and ten times as alive."

Pete said: "I aim to wake Goliath up."

"Don't doubt that fer a minute," replied Thatcher. "A marshal with a gun-fighting rep always did put new blood in a town."

Cully nodded sagely. "That's what I been sayin'."

"I'm gonna put Goliath on the map," Pete declared. "I seen the way Hickok handled things, an' the Earp boys, too. I betcha when word gits around that Goliath don't stand fer no law-breakin', half of Samson will move here, jest to see if they kin break 'em."

Cully and Thatcher laughed.

"You give us that road, an' we'll give you a shore-'nough town," Pete told Thatcher. "Fergit about Samson. That never was a town, nohow."

"Well, I'll think about it," said Thatcher as he stood up, lining the creases in his trousers with the dead centre of his shiny tan shoes. He held out a soft pink hand. "I'm honoured to have met you, sir."

"Same to you, Thatcher."

Lingering behind the promoter, Cully whispered to Pete: "You gave it to him straight from the shoulder, old-timer. Got him thinkin', all right. Just leave the rest to me. Between the two of us, we'll land that railroad."

"Shore, we will."

AS he cleaned the jail, Pete's mind teemed with pictures of railroad graders, tie-cutters, bummers and bull-whackers pouring into Goliath; of roulette-wheels clicking and money clinking on the bars; of fist-fights and gun-fights, maybe a man for breakfast every morning. And the only law would be that packed in Pete's holster.

He stalked forth into the empty street, head up, thin old shoulders back.

That night, as he stood watchfully on a corner near the Miner's Rest, he heard a stealthy step behind him. He whirled, clawing at his gun—and a blanket swooped over his head. Strong hands wound the blanket around his head, half smothering him. Another pair of hands pinned his arms behind his back. Helpless, he felt himself being lifted and borne away. His captors uttered no sound. After a short distance they set him down. Before Pete was able to free himself, he heard a lock click, and footsteps hurrying away.

The first thing he saw was the barred window above him. He was in a cell of the jail. He got to his feet, cold and shaking with anger. Those fool cowpunchers, Duke and that other fellow, had played this trick on him. It would be their idea of a joke, to lock the marshal in his own jail. But it was no joke to Pete. Wild Bill would have shot the eyes out of any man who tried such a trick on him. Pete wouldn't go quite that far, but he would throw a big enough scare into them.

A fierce shaking of the cell door convinced him it was locked. He crossed over to the window. But he fought down the impulse to shout for help. How would it look for him, the marshal, to be yelling for help? They would never get done laughing at that. No, sir! He would stay here until those fool cowpunchers came back and turned him loose. And it'd better be soon.

Standing there looking at the dimly lighted street, he saw dark figures of men moving swiftly. Some carried axes, some crowbars, some drove teams. Pete was filled with curiosity. There came loud hammering, a rending of timbers, and he saw the front of the barber shop fall into the street. Men swarmed over the wreckage, loading it into an ore wagon.

His face pressed between the bars, Pete saw a freight wagon back up to Mayor Cully's store. Men hurried out of the building, bowed under great loads which they dumped into the wagon, then rushed back inside. Farther down the street, another building fell with splintering crash, shaking the earth. Men—silent, dark men—swarmed everywhere. Already, there was a gaping hole where the barber shop had stood.

A string of pack-horses plodded along the street; timbers were lashed to each side of their saddles, the other end dragging. They passed the jail, digging up clouds of dust. Then the entire front of Cully's store swayed outward, and Pete shut his eyes. He could bear to see no more. Dropping into a corner, he moaned:

"Helluva marshal I be. I let 'em steal the whole town!"

He sat there, head sunk on his chest, listening to the screeching of timbers being torn apart, to their heavy fall. And he wondered what had become of all the people in Goliath. What could have become of them? He had heard no shooting. And who was wrecking the town?

He jerked erect, a wild light shining in his eyes. Men from Samson were tearing down the town! Why hadn't he thought of it before? Thatcher had told them the railroad would be built through Goliath, so they had come to destroy the town, leaving Samson without a rival. Samson men, not Duke and his partner, had locked him in his own jail. Worried, indeed, was Pete now over the fate of the Goliath folks. The very fact that they had put up no fight hinted of foul play.

Unable longer to bear the bitterness of his thoughts, Pete went again to the window. Goliath was no more. There were only heaps of lumber, with wagons creaking between. Vengeance blazing within him, he sank down against a wall. And when sleep did come, it brought no rest.

PETE awoke with the sun in his face. No sound came from out there now. He got up and looked through the window. Of all the town, there was left only the jail. Then they had left him here to starve, to go crazy? Furiously he grasped the bars of the cell door—and gaped with astonishment when it opened at his touch. He strode out of the cell. So they didn't think it even worth while to keep him locked up! Didn't think he was man enough to make them pay for what they had done!

Lying on a table in the office were his old gun and cartridge-belt. Pete smiled. Those fellows didn't figure the gun was worth carrying away. Perhaps they would see what that old cannon could do.

A blind man could have trailed the stolen town, because of the ruts gouged in the earth. As Pete had guessed, it followed the road to Samson. All that morning he tramped along the road, across denuded ridges, scarred with mine tunnels, and little valleys dotted with stumps of trees that had been used in mining operations.

Late in the afternoon he dragged his weary legs over the crest of a high divide, and looked down on Samson—or what had been Samson. For the town was not there any more.

But, about a quarter-mile down the gulch, men were working like beavers throwing up buildings, laying out streets, digging everywhere. An old trick of the townsite promoters, Pete knew—to have the town built in a new location, on lots bought up secretly by the company.

Looking down on the busy scene, Pete's face set in a grim mask. He drew out his Colt, looked at it lingeringly, and slid it back into the holster. There was finality in the gesture.

He came down into the gulch, and the first man he saw was Duke, snaking a timber toward a store building that was going up. Pete scowled, wondering what to make of this. He was still more puzzled when he saw ex-Mayor Cully, in under-shirt and overalls, come out of the skeleton structure and take hold of the timber. Drawing closer, he saw the old German who had run the Miner's Rest, and several other residents of Goliath.

"Hey, Jim—watch out!" yelled the big-mouthed cowboy, falling from his horse in mock terror. "Here comes ol' Wild Bill hisself!"

Cully gave one look, and shook with laughter. "Henry!" he choked. "C'm'ere, Henry!"

Henry Bly came running from the back of the building. He stared at Pete, and his whoops mingled with those of Duke and Cully.

Rage swept through Pete like a wind-whipped prairie fire. He saw it all now, the whole low-down, miserable trick. They had made him marshal, just to pull this trick on him. Just to make a fool of him.

DON'T take her so hard, Pete," Cully gasped, when he could get his breath. "Golly, you look like a ha'nt. Can't you take a joke?"

Pete didn't say anything. His feet had been cut out from under him.

"He brung it all on hisself, anyhow," said Henry Bly. "Always shootin' off his mouth about bein' marshal of Dodge." He broke into a fresh fit of laughter. "What'd Wild Bill say now, if he knowed his side pardner had the whole town stole out from under him!"

Cully laid a kindly hand on Pete's shoulder. "It's all right, old-timer. We was just havin' a little innocent fun. Ain't no harm in that, you know."

"An' we snared you in that blanket real gentle-like," Duke put in. "Didn't even take that ol' hawg-leg yuh packin'."

Pete felt suddenly very tired. He was old, nearing the sunset. Not good for anything except to be the butt of jokes, to be laughed at until the end of his days.

"You see, when we found out that Thatcher was goin' to have the railroad come through Samson," explained Cully, "we knowed the jig was up for Goliath. So we all moved over here. I don't know how that sandy on you got started, but we all figgered it was pretty good, and kept our heads shut about it."

"Yeah, it was purty good, all right," Pete admitted, not looking at him. "You say Thatcher was in on it?"

"When he come to see you, you mean? Sure. That was all a part of the game." Cully chuckled, which started Duke and Bly laughing again.

"Well, Pete," said Cully, "you got to admit you been askin' for somethin' like this. You done rode that marshal-in-Dodge business plumb to death."

Duke groaned. "Gosh, yes! I'm so durn sick an' tired of hearin' about that, I feel like runnin' every time I see ol' Pete comin'."

"You can run after another timber," Cully told him. "Set down, Pete, and make yourself at home. I'll treat you to the best supper in town in a little bit."

But Pete told him he wasn't hungry, and slouched aimlessly down the busy, cluttered street. Seeing him approach, men stopped to nudge one another and to chuckle. Some jeered, "Hi, marshal! How's everything in Dodge?" and "Say, Wild Bill! They tell me somebody stole your town clean out from under you!" Pete went on down the street, his features set like granite, his blood at furnace heat. Peals of laughter followed him, mocking him at every step.

Gus Grady, marshal of Samson, came up to him, a pitying gleam in his eyes. "That was a low-down trick they played on you," he said kindly. "If there was any way of doin' it, dog-gone if I wouldn't make you my deputy."

"Oh, that's all right, Gus," Pete told him. "Reckon I had it comin'." He walked away.

Where the street became again a gulch, he turned off the road and eased himself down behind a clump of maple. He was so miserable he had no appetite for a chew of tobacco. Always, he knew, that mocking laughter would ring in his ears.

After a while, there came to him a thought that brought a sparkle to his eyes. And he said aloud: "What would Wild Bill 'a' done in a case like this?"

As if he already knew the answer, he jerked out his gun. Hickok would have fought back. But how? Even Hickok could not have gun-whipped the combined populations of Goliath and Samson.

Pete hunched there motionless as a shadow, knuckles white around the butt of the old frontier gun. There was a far-away look in his eyes. Light faded from the sky, and a chill night wind rustled the maple leaves.

Suddenly Pete stood up. His eyes shone with fierce purpose. He nodded his head in short, decisive jerks. Snapping the gun into leather, he strode briskly away.

"I'll git Jim Cully, an' Henry Bly, an' Thatcher, anyway," he muttered. "I'll salt 'em down, even if I get ten pounds of lead in my carcass. Nothin' to live for now, anyhow. Might as well be dead."

PASSING the site of the old town, he saw a rider coming toward him. Even in the dim light he knew it was Thatcher. Pete muttered: "I'm settlin' with him," and drew his gun. He waited until Thatcher came within six feet, then called sharply:

"Start shootin', Thatcher!"

Thatcher jerked toward him, and Pete saw that this was not the genial, expansive promoter he had known. There was a furtive, hurried look about him. He rasped, his lips drawing away from his teeth: "Drop that gun, you old fool."

"Start shootin', Thatcher, I tell you."

Thatcher stared at him a moment. Apparently he wanted no fight. Certainly he felt no fear of this wizened old man standing beside the road. He started his horse in motion.

"I mean business," warned Pete, stepping quickly in front of the horse. "You an' some others made a fool outta me, an' I'm——"

"Wait!"

Thatcher held up a hand for silence, inclining his head. Pete, also, heard the rumble of wheels. It was the once-a-week stage-coach to Samson.

Swift as light, Thatcher's foot shot out, striking Pete's wrist. The gun fell, as the horse spurted forward. Taken by surprise though he was, Pete lunged at Thatcher. His arms clutched Thatcher's big body, his legs threshing the brush that bordered the road. Powder flashed in his face, the gun's explosion deafening him. Thatcher was falling when he made that shot. The horse swept round a hairpin curve, and both men hit the ground, rolling over the edge of the road down a steep bank. Vaguely, Pete heard the reports of Thatcher's gun; a tree-trunk had broken his dizzy slide, knocking the breath out of him.

He pulled himself up by the tree, staring into the darkness. He did not see Thatcher, but he heard deep groans from farther down the wall. In a hollow, lying limply behind a big boulder, he found Thatcher.

"My leg is broke," moaned Thatcher, and poured upon Pete a vitriolic flood of threats and profanity.

"Better save some of yore wind fer breathin'," Pete advised dryly. After satisfying himself that Thatcher really did have a broken leg, he decided to go back to town for help.

He had not gone far along the road when he met Jim Cully, Marshal Grady, and half a dozen other men, who had been alarmed by the shooting. Pete led them to where Thatcher lay, while Duke remained on the road to halt the stage. It required all the others to carry Thatcher up the wall.

As they placed him inside the coach, a tall, well-dressed man stepped down from his seat beside the driver, and bent a keen look into Thatcher's face.

"Well, Millionaire Kid," the man said, smiling, "when did you get out?"

The tall passenger said to Marshal Grady: "Has he been selling lots in Samson, representing himself to be an agent of the Great Western Townsite Co.? I heard a rumour that he was down this way. That's why I'm here."

"Why, yes," Grady answered hesitantly. "He laid out a new town about a quarter-mile below Samson. Everybody bought lots from him. Why? Ain't he all right?"

"He's the biggest rascal unhung. Worked this game on us before. Well, you boys are lucky you caught him before he got away with your money. The road's going through Samson, all right. But the company planned to have the town stay where it was." He glanced at the sober-faced men. "Who caught the Millionaire Kid? I think there's a good-sized reward out for him."

Every eye turned on Pete.

Marshal Grady said proudly: "There's the man that done it, all by hisself. I'm gonna see that he's made my deputy. Be needin' a natchel-born lawman to help me run things in Samson."

A tremendous burst of applause shook the gulch, the voice of Jim Cully leading all the others: "Hurrah for Marshal Pete!"

Razorback Round-up

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

IN the spring-wagon that rolled across the brown hills bordering the brasada, sat a lanky, snub-nosed cowboy, and on his mouth sat a grin. Through the grey of "Idaho's" eyes shone the reflection of some very pleasant thought. Once in a while his grin would widen, and he would chuckle. In the wagon's body lay two razorbacks. Their wild spirit unbroken, the hogs strained unceasingly on the ropes that tied their legs, grunting their anger each time the wagon wheels struck an excuse-me-ma'am.

Idaho drove his team of mules over a mesquite-crested rise, and his grin slowly faded. Question, shaded with doubt, drove the amusement from his eyes.

Spread in the swale that stretched from the foot of the hill was the ranch of the old Tonkawa Indian he had come to see. "Tonk," everybody called him. He stood in front of his tamarisk-shaded adobe, talking to a man in a red-wheeled democrat buggy. The man wore a Derby. Idaho recognised the buggy; it was the highly-prized property of the livery-stable in Laguna, twenty-odd miles across the hills.

As though taking warning at Idaho's approach, the man in the buggy turned the double team of high-spirited bays and drove swiftly away. Eyeing the streamers of dust, Idaho scowled. What business could old Tonk be doing with this city dude? Whatever it was, the dude would do well to watch out. Tonk was sly, and full of tricks. No one knew this better than Idaho.

Idaho drew up his mules in front of the adobe, leisurely wrapping the lines around the seat rail. "Howdy," he said.

Tonk inclined his head gravely, and with dignity. He leaned against the doorpost, a tall, thin shape, clothed in checked flannel shirt and jeans trousers. The wide brim of a black felt hat shadowed a high-cheeked face the colour of rusty iron. An incredibly-wrinkled face; so seamed and fissured that it resembled rubber rather than flesh. He was old, this survivor of a once-powerful and war-like tribe; he appeared more mummy than man. But

his eyes, mere peep-holes in the network of wrinkles, still held a glint of pride—and shrewdness.

"I brung you a present," said Idaho. He guffawed. "Two of 'em."

Tonk grinned, too. A toothless grin that pulled his chin up under his hooked nose. But there was the same old craftiness in his eyes. Idaho didn't like that look; it didn't go with the grin. He glanced at the dust-cloud that now hid the buggy.

"What'd that feller want?"

"Sellum peach-tree," Tonk grunted. "Tellum no want peach-tree. Keep comin' back."

Idaho considered this. From bitter experience he had learned that Tonk's innocent speech might cover a tone of dynamite. But he could see nothing wrong in the call of a fruit-tree salesman. He jerked a thumb toward the razorbacks.

"Thought maybe you could use a little fresh meat. Fat, too. Fat as acorns can make 'em. Want 'em in the corral?"

Tonk nodded, and moved with short, stiff-kneed stride toward a small corral formed of mesquite limbs placed upright in the ground and wired together; it adjoined a brush-roofed shed, beneath which dozed a calico horse. Idaho looked steadily at him, his whole face puckering in a grin. This time the laugh would be on Tonk.

He backed the wagon to the corral gate and opened his knife. The hog nearest him struggled to lift its ugly, pointed head, and its jaws opened and closed in a savage snap.

"She's got yeller teeth," Idaho remarked carelessly. "Let's see if the other one's got yeller teeth, too."

The razorbacks, fierce fighters, were eager to bare their fangs at their tormentor. Their long, keen teeth, from snout to end of jawbone, were of a yellowish-brown colour, as if they were gold-plated. As, in truth, they were. Idaho had made certain of this.

Trapping a razorback for meat, he had discovered that this animal's teeth were covered with gold flecks. He knew it was gold, having seen much of this metal in his native state. He knew too, that it had come from creek beds where the hogs had been rooting. Most of the streams of the West, Idaho had heard, carried flour gold in their sands. Seldom was the quantity sufficient to make panning profitable.

"Funny, ain't it?" said Idaho. "Hawgs wearin' gold teeth."

WERE it not for a slight lowering of Tonk's eyelids, Idaho might have thought the Indian had not heard him. But no! Tonk had swallowed the bait!

Idaho unloaded the protesting razorbacks into the brush corral, then followed Tonk into the house. The old man shuffled into the deep-shadowed coolness, and presently Idaho heard a thin gurgle. He wet his lips in anticipation of the potent mescal.

Soon he was listening to the story, told with bitterness even now, of how the Tonkawas, the only tribe of Plains Indians that fought for the Confederate States, were wiped out. Tonk was but a boy then, having been born in the Nations. But he remembered how a band of Delawares, Kickapoos and Shawnees, loyal to the North, had defeated the Tonkawas, the few survivors escaping to Texas.

While Tonk's harsh guttural tones droned on recounting the wrongs suffered by his people, Idaho sipped mescal and smiled contentedly in the cool shadows. He could feel no sympathy for the sly old fox. And he fell to musing on the many traps Tonk had set for him.

There was the time Tonk had sold him a horse so skilfully doctored that Idaho, who had been raised on a horse, was fooled in its age by seven years. And seed corn that did not sprout because it was full of weevils. And barbed-wire that, after it had been strung, was claimed by a neighbour as stolen property. And many another sandy.

But worst of all was the quarter section of land he had bought from the crafty Tonkawa. Brought up in a land of deep,

rushing rivers, Idaho was unfamiliar with this south-west Texas country. He made his purchase in the spring, paying a premium because of the creek that flowed bank-full across the land. Tonk did not tell him that in a month or two the stream would be bone-dry, and would remain so until next spring.

It was to sell his ranch back to Tonk that Idaho was here now. His gift of the gold-teeth razorbacks was the first step in his plan.

"I have heard the Seminoles tell," Tonk was saying, "how the razorbacks came to this country."

"How's that?" This was why Idaho liked Tonk, despite his trickery. He could make such interesting talk.

"The Seminoles had their homes in a country called Florida. They told of how a Spaniard, many moons ago, came to their country in a ship. His name was De Soto. He brought the first hogs to America. They escaped and became wild."

"Well, I be durned. And all the razorbacks scattered from here to Georgia come from them old Spanish hawgs?"

"Even so, my son."

They smoked a while in silence, and Idaho brought the talk around to a subject that tied in directly with his scheme. "Ever hear any more about that old Lost Dutchman gold mine?" he asked, closely watching the wrinkled face.

"It is here. Somewhere. Maybe right under us. Some day it will be found." Tonk went on talking about the fabulously rich gold mine which, folks said, was located in this part of the country. He could talk about the Lost Dutchman mine by the hour.

Idaho rose to go, saying carelessly: "It'd be funny, wouldn't it, if them razorbacks had found the Lost Dutchman. They'd been rootin' in my north pasture. Well, so long."

Tonk grunted.

Idaho waited ten days before seeing Tonk again.

"Just got a letter from my folks up in Pocatello," he explained. "Both of 'em are sick, and they want me to come home and take charge of things." He let sadness come to his long, narrow face. "I hate to leave this country; sure like it down here. But I got to go."

Tonk sat hunched in a chair tilted against the sunny abode wall. His gaze was fixed on a chain of distant hills that lifted their grey into the bright blue of the sky. His mouth, but a seam in his withered face, did not open.

"Seein' I bought from you," Idaho said, trying to sound crisp and businesslike, "I thought I orter give you first chance at buyin'."

No motion stirred Tonk's stillness. He appeared lost in a reverie of the aged, or asleep. But Idaho was not fooled. He thought he could guess what thoughts were moving in the cunning brain.

"I paid you seven hundred dollars for my quarter section," he went on. "With all the improvements I done put on it, the spread's worth mor'n twice what I give for it. But I ain't hawgish." He forced back a grin. "All I'm askin' is twelve hundred."

A mocking-bird swayed on the topmost bough of a hackberry-tree behind the corral shed, finished its song and glided away. Still Tonk did not answer.

Idaho repeated patiently: "Twelve hundred. Want her, Tonk?"

Tonk lifted his head. He said: "The long sleep comes too soon. My son will do well to go."

Idaho decided to let it rest at that. The next move would be up to Tonk. With a wistful look into the house, and thinking of the mescal jug, he lifted his reins and rode away.

KNOWING the Indian nature as well, perhaps, as it is given that a white man should know, Idaho did not expect to see Tonk for at least a week. But when two weeks passed and Tonk did not come, he began to think there was a flaw in his plot: Tonk had readily gussed the truth, or had missed the significance of the golden-teethed razorbacks. On the fifteenth day, Tonk came. Idaho

was down at the corral, braiding a horsehair quirt, when he saw the blanketed figure, slouched straight-legged on a calico pony, come up the path to his shack. Sharply he slapped his thigh, a low, merry laugh bubbling from him. Intently he braided the quirt, nor looked up until Tonk uttered his greeting.

"Howdy," Idaho said, and went on plaiting the black-and-white horsehairs. "What you on the war-path about, Tonk?"

"I come in peace," was the answer.

"That's the stuff." Idaho kept on building the quirt. "Twelve hundred bucks!" he was thinking. "Or a thousand, or even if I could get my seven hundred back. Boy, howdy! What a loop I'd swing down in Santone!"

Tonk's throaty voice crept across the long silence. "I come to buy razorbacks."

Idaho looked up quickly. "Razorbacks."

Tonk nodded. "All you can find. I buy um."

Idaho turned back to the quirt, braiding while he considered. But there could be only one answer. Tonk had not swallowed the bait, that the razorbacks had uncovered the Lost Dutchman Mine. Too smart for that, the old rascal. He knew that the gold on the hogs' teeth had come from the creek bottom. Now he simply wanted the hogs for the gold that clung to their teeth. Anger tightened Idaho's features. He said, a sharp edge to his voice:

"If you want hawgs, I can get 'em. All you want. But you'll hafta pay me three bucks apiece."

Tonk said: "Your corral is big. Keep um there. In seven suns I come back." A withered arm lifted from the blanket, a stately gesture of farewell. His heels thumped the calico's ribs.

"Wait a minute. I said three bucks a head."

"It is well."

"Well for you, maybe; but not for me. I bit on that one before. We're goin' to have her down in black and white."

Tonk's thin shoulders shrugged under the blanket. He gestured to the house.

Idaho grinned with savage joy. "Want me to write her down so you can make your mark. Then you can make out like you never made it. Oh, no. We're goin' to Laguna and sign up in front of a witness."

Tonk nodded, his face as expressionless as a withered apple. "We go."

"Another thing. Who's goin' to feed all them razorbacks? Not me, that's sure."

"You feed um. I furnish corn. I sell it cheap. Dollar a bushel."

Idaho understood now why Tonk had not protested the excessive charge of three dollars a head for the razorbacks. The crafty old fellow had intended to get most of it back by charging two prices for his corn. They argued long and stubbornly. In the end it was agreed that Tonk would pay Idaho a dollar and a half for each razorback captured, Tonk to supply the necessary amount of corn. They rode to Laguna, had the agreement drawn up and properly witnessed. Tonk was to come to Idaho's house in a week. Or, as he expressed it, in seven suns.

Idaho felt pleased. True, his scheme to sell the ranch had failed. He should have known Tonk would see through that. But he stood to make a couple of hundred dollars in easy money. The easiest money, probably, he ever would make. As for Tonk, he must be locoed. He could scrape hog's teeth till doomsday and wouldn't collect that much gold. As for the meat, three or four hogs would suffice him for a year. But this was Tonk's headache, thought Idaho.

The way it started out, this hog-catching venture seemed easy money, indeed. Idaho, with the help of a Mexican named Salomon, spent most of the first day in building a trap. This was a large square pen formed of cedar poles driven deep into the earth, close together, and interlaced with strips of rawhide. In one side was built a stout door that could be pushed easily inward, but which dropped shut when pressure was released. It was a good wild-hog trap; Idaho had seen many of them here in the brush country.

The trap was built in a clear space near the edge of the brasada—a wilderness of mesquite, black chaparral, tornillo, cat's-claw, prickly-pear—every variety of thorned and spiked vegetation. For hundreds of miles in every direction the brasada stretches its cruel arms, broken here and there by grassy expanses that the natives call *llanos*. Beneath its green and bitter roof live razorbacks, collared peccaries, turkeys, white-tailed deer, and perhaps a few long-horns that have escaped the brush-popper's rope.

THE pen completed, Idaho and Salomon spread trails of shelled corn through the brush, all of them leading to the trap-door. They made six of these trails before darkness fell. Idaho dumped a plentiful supply of corn inside the pen. It was Tonk's corn.

Next morning twenty-two long-snouted, slab-sided razorbacks were in the pen. One was a big boar with six-inch tusks and enormous shoulder shields that must have been an inch and a half thick. Curious to know if these hogs, too, had gold-plated teeth, Idaho roped four of them. Only one had yellow-stained teeth. Well, that also was old Tonk's headache.

"Thirty-three dollars while I was sleepin'," he chuckled. "Come on, Salomon. Let's make some more trails with Tonk's corn. Let's make 'em a mile long."

On the second morning he counted fifty razorbacks and two collared peccaries—javelinas, they are called. Idaho was jubilant. Seventy-six dollars, already. He sent Salomon to Tonk's house for more corn. The Mexican came back with part of a load, and with Tonk's message that he would furnish no more. Idaho didn't mind. At the rate he was going he could afford to feed his own corn.

They carried corn trails farther into the brush. The third night's catch was sixteen, the fourth only five. Idaho was convinced he had trapped most of the wild pigs around here. And he had three days yet to go. Well, if the hogs wouldn't come to him, he would go to them.

Morning of the fifth day broke with pale and desolate light. Cold, sullen rain soon seeped from a leaden sky. The sun would not shine this day. Idaho and Salomon made ready for the brush. They put on heavy leather-leggings, ducking-pickets and gauntleted-gloves. A rawhide shield was buckled over each horse's chest. Thus armoured, they drove the wagon to the trap, their horses following. Leaving the wagon at the trap, they rode into the savage wall of brush.

"Don't you let none of 'em get away," warned Idaho as they parted.

Salomon smiled. "I beat you," he challenged.

Idaho grinned back at him. "Let's see you do it."

He touched spurs to his horse, ducked his head, and the green wilderness closed over him. Knowing that wild hogs would likely be feeding on elm mast and acorns, he searched for a stream where oaks and elms grew. He followed a tortuous course, winding in and out of narrow, thorn-hedged lanes. Suddenly he heard a loud "Woof!" Turning, he saw a big sow standing in the midst of a mustang grapevine that had been torn from a tree. The hog's small, stupid eyes regarded him steadily. Purple juice dripped from the sides of her mouth.

Idaho took down his twenty-foot rope. He built a small loop, jerked down his hat and rammed in the steel. The chase was on. With a swift turn the razorback scuttled into the brush. Close on her heels charged Idaho. Against the bristling ramparts of gnarled and spiny lances he crashed, shreds of clothing and flesh speared to the barbs behind him. Pressing closer to the razorback, he slapped down a flat loop. The cast was perfect, but before he was able to jerk back his arm the sow shot through the noose.

Grinding out an oath, he dived into a killing tangle of dirk-thorned coma and the dreaded rat-tail cactus. The horse, a veteran of the brush, as its many scars and patches of white hair attested, tore through interwoven masses of black chaparral and mesquite, and devil's spin-cushion ten foot high. The cracking of

the brush was deafening. Closing in on his fleet quarry, Idaho again threw his rope. He caught the sow around her middle. He dragged the squealing animal to a clearing, tied her feet, and went on with the hunt.

Though he jumped several others, this was the only razorback he caught that morning. Thinking it to be about noon, he rode back to get the wagon. Salomon was there, hooking up. Asked what luck he had, he smilingly held up three fingers. They loaded the captured hogs into the wagon and shoved them through the trap-door. And went back into the brush.

At the end of Tonk's seven suns there were ninety-two razorbacks in the pen and four peccaries. The cowboy and the vaquero lay on the grass, smoking, and listening to measured beats of sound that were made by horses trotting in unison.

"Look," muttered Idaho.

He lifted his lanky body on both elbows, squinting up the wagon trace that crawled over the brown hills. A red-wheeled democrat buggy was rolling down the road, drawn by a pair of high-stepping bays. Holding the reins was a man in a derby hat. And beside him sat a blanketed figure that could be none other than Tonk.

"So-pretty horses," murmured Salomon, inhaling deeply.

Idaho didn't hear him. Doubt and suspicion settled darkly on the cowboy. What did it mean. Tonk coming here with the fruit-tree salesman? What could it mean, except that the old fox had figured out a scheme to rob him of what he had made?

HE thanked his stars that he had had brains enough to think of the contract. But would it hold? Could Tonk find some way to slip out of it? The thought stabbed its uneasiness through Idaho. As well as he remembered it, he went over the simple wording of the contract. There was no loophole that he could see, for even an eel like Tonk to wiggle through. He had caught ninety-two razorbacks, and Tonk must pay him a hundred and thirty-eight dollars.

Yet there was something wrong in Tonk's coming here with the peach-tree salesman. Idaho could feel it.

The driver, a stout, florid-faced man in grey checked suit and crimson tie, stepped down from the buggy and snapped a weighted strap to the bit of one of the horses. He turned to face Tonk, who was cautiously leaving the seat.

"Help you?" the dude asked.

Tonk did not even grunt an answer, and the man strode briskly to the pen. "Full house, I see," he said cheerfully to Idaho.

"Purty nigh." Idaho looked his distrust at the nattily-dressed stranger. His gaze shifted to Tonk's immobile face. He was convinced now of collusion between these two. But what?

A howl of anger and dismay went up from the city man. Idaho turned, to see him sawing the air with his hands and yelling at Tonk: "There's only four! You told me you'd have a hundred or two. Only four, I tell you ! What does this mean?"

Tonk peered steadily through an opening between the pickets for quite a while. Idaho saw his lips moving. "Countum hundred," he said.

The man laughed; it was more like a scream. "Razozbacks! Who wants razorbacks?" he shouted. "I told you peccaries." He thrust a finger through a hole in the fence. "See that grey, speckled pig there with the white collar? See him? That's a peccary. P-e-c-c-a-r-y." His tone was stinging with sarcasm now, and Idaho cut in quietly:

"Javelinas, he means, Tonk."

"Well, you can have your javelinas," the dude said angrily. "And your razorbacks, too. I'm through," he hissed at the placid Tonk. "Wasted three whole weeks fooling with you, and then you never got it through your head what I want." With a burst of profanity he wheeled to the buggy.

Idaho looked at Tonk, puzzled; but the shrivelled face told him nothing. His long legs overtook the stranger. "Look here," he demanded. "What's all this bellerin'

an' pawin' about? What business has a peach-tree peddler got messin' with hawgs, anyhow?"

"Peach-tree peddler?"

"Sure. Ain't you one?"

"Well, that's a new one." The man's tones took on a quality of importance. "I'm field representative for the biggest glove concern in America. I wanted a bunch of peccaries, to make pig-skin gloves of." He jerked an indignant thumb in Tonk's direction. "I told that old fool, kept telling him, I wanted peccaries. And he brings me razorbacks!"

Lightning seemed to strike Idaho's brain. He saw it now. "How much," he asked, "was you goin' to pay him for the javelinas?"

"Two and a half to four dollars apiece, depending on size, age, quality, and so on. But I wouldn't give a dime for razorbacks. G'-by."

Idaho stood watching the buggy roll away, slow anger taking hold of him. This last trickery of Tonk's was a little too much. Here was Idaho, risking his neck to make a dollar and a half on each razorback, while Tonk figured to make as much, or more, without lifting a finger.

Idaho grinned coldly. Tonk owed him a hundred and thirty-eight dollars, and he could collect it. Honey-sweet was the thought. He strode to the pen, where Tonk stood like some long-discarded statue.

"Well, that's one time you put your foot into your own trap," he called.

Tonk drew his blanket closer about his thin shoulders.

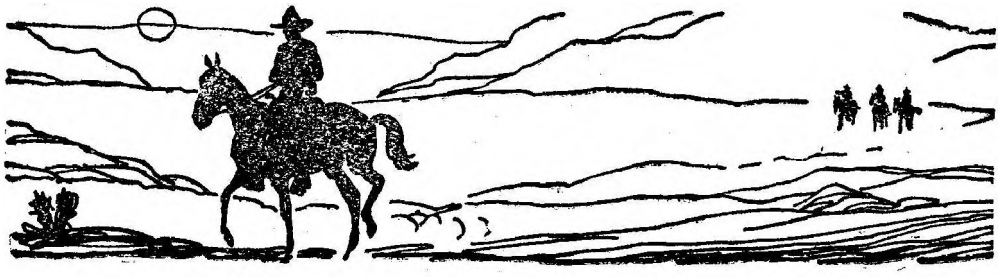
Idaho stood before him. He knew, all of a sudden, that he couldn't take Tonk's money. "It's all right," he said. "Forget about the contract."

"I payum."

"No. I don't want it." Idaho grinned. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll settle for a jug of mescal."

Tonk smiled. "I give two jugs."

"All right. Two jugs. And keep 'em at your house. So whenever I happen by to listen to one of your long-winded yarns, we can sorta rear back and take her easy. Salomon, open the gate and let them hawgs go back to their acorns and rattlesnakes."



STUMPY'S BOSS

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

SINCE old Dave had taken him in off the grub line, seven years ago, "Stumpy" had thought Dave the greatest man that ever stepped across a saddle. But never was he so proud of his boss as to-night. The stocky, square-jawed cowman, hat pushed back, faced nearly a hundred cowboys who would take part in the Red Gulch rodeo, starting to-morrow. They were gathered in a back room of the Buckhorn Saloon.

"Boys," Dave was saying, "this here is the thing I had in the back of my head ever since ol' Steamboat broke my hip, up at Pendleton, that time. I ain't no hand at speechifyin', so here she is: We're agoin' to organise the Wyomin' Cowboys' Union."

Dave paused, as a murmur filled the smoke-layered room. Happening to catch his eye, Stumpy grinned. But Dave looked clear through him, without seeming to see him.

"I ain't sayin' nothin' agin' the Red Gulch Rodeo Association," Dave went on, gesturing toward a thin-faced, carefully-dressed man who wore horn-rimmed glasses. "Mr. Church, the sec'etary an' treasurer, has treated the boys fair an' square."

Church inclined his bald head.

"But that ain't the case with all rodeo associations, as some of you boys done found out," Dave continued. "But the wust thing is, the cowboy's got to take all the risks. He pays in his money on the chance he'll get more back. That's all right. But what if he gets a rib or a leg broke, or his back hurt? Who's agoin' to pay the sawbones an' the hospital? Who's

agoin' to take care of him after he's out?" Dave paused, the lines about his mouth deepening. "I'll tell you. Nobody! He's got to do the best he can. If he's crippled up too bad, he won't never ride no more—not even on the grub line."

STUMPY swallowed hard. He saw the old man through a haze. He had never heard of Abe Lincoln or Daniel Webster. But he was ready to lick anybody who said there had ever lived a man who could handle his talk-box like the boss. Why, he could even argue a cow out of her calf.

"The nub of the whole thing is this here, boys," Dave continued. "Every member of the union puts up ten bucks a year in advance. On top of that, we're agoin' to try to get a slice of the rodeo's receipts. All that money will go in the bank, an' be used for insurance. So when any of you gets hurt, you can be took care of proper. How's that sound?"

To judge from the boisterous cheers, it sounded all right. Dave nodded to Church, who stood up, pulling down the back of his tightly fitting coat.

"I have here, gentlemen," he said in the measured, emotionless tones of a banker, "application blanks for membership in the Wyoming Cowboys' Union. I shall pass them among you. Those wishing to become members——"

"Aw, who wants to mess with them things?" broke in a big, raw-boned puncher who held the record for bull-dogging steers. "Ef Dave says it's all right, that's all I wanter know. Here's my ten dollars."

Church almost smiled. Everybody else laughed, except Dave. He looked pretty serious. A hot wave surged through Stumpy. As he afterward confidel to himself, he "dang near choked to death."

Five-and ten-dollar notes rained upon the table, faster than Church could give receipts for them. Miller, of Miller & Huggins, who supplied stock for the Red Gulch rodeo, chipped in a hundred dollars. Church thought the rodeo association might possibly contribute something; he would take up the matter at the next meeting.

"Well, now, that's a sizeable pot," commented Dave, after Church had announced that nine hundred and fifty dollars in dues had been paid in. "Reckon we sorta got things hind part afore, though. We ain't elected orficers yet."

Somebody nominated Dave for president, and that was settled. Church was the unanimous choice for secretary.

"That leaves us shy a treasurer," said Dave.

"I'd be glad to act in that capacity," offered Church. "That is, if you have no other choice."

Dave cleared his throat. "Much obliged, Mr. Church. But you already handle the money for the rodeo association, an' you got yore reg'lar job at the bank. We don't want to overload a willin' hoss."

"I could handle it without much extra work. That is, if you——" Church smiled.

"Naw. I reckon we better have one of the boys for that job. I b'lieve that'd be better, Mr. Church; thanks all the same." Dave shifted his weight to his good leg. "The man we want for treasurer is Stumpy. He ain't no 'count as a cowhand, but I done learned him how to keep books. An' he's too durn lazy to try to make off with anything. What say, boys?"

Before he knew what had happened, Stumpy heard shouts of "Speech, speech!" ringing through the laughter.

Stumpy stood up, a feeble grin on his simple face.

"Well," he mumbled, looking at the floor, "all I kin say is, if Dave wants me to ride herd on that money, I'll do it."

THE meeting adjourned to the bar. Because the saloon safe was closed for the night, Stumpy crammed the money into his pockets and took it to his room above the grocery store. He placed the money under one pillow and his gun under the other. Dave limped in.

Stumpy grinned at him. "Much obliged,

boss, for makin' me treasurer of the union."

"You ain't no 'count at nothin' else," Dave growled. "Wish I had some of the money back I done wasted tryin' to make a cow-hand outta you. But lemme tell you somethin'. If you let them cowboys' money get away from you, they'll string you up so high you can look down on the moon."

"You don't need to worry none about that."

"I ain't worryin'," Dave snapped. "That's yore pizen, not mine. Fust thing in the mornin', put it in the Buckhorn safe. Soon's the bank opens up, shove her in there." He started away.

"Say, boss. I'm shore obliged to you. I'm goin' to do my best."

"You better."

Dave slammed the door behind him so hard that the window rattled. Like an echo came the banging of the door across the hall.

Stumpy locked the door. He danced a little jig, his face glowing with pride. At last, he was somebody. Not just a wrangler or cook's helper, a button who everybody made fun of. Treasurer of the Wyoming Cowboys' Union. Gosh, that sounded about as important as being governor, or something. And the "Old Man" had put him here, over a high-falutin pencil-pusher like Church. Stumpy drifted into the happiest sleep he had ever known, one hand on the nine hundred and fifty dollars, the other on his gun.

He awoke in a cold sweat, conscious that a man was standing beside the bed. He felt a stealthy movement under his pillow. Stumpy froze, the hair on his scalp tugging at its roots. He heard the man breathing. With supreme effort he shook off the paralysis that gripped him, slid a hand toward his gun.

A heavy weight struck his skull, a shower of brilliant sparks leaping before him. But it was a glancing blow. He flung his arms wildly outward, clutched the man's body. He tugged, with tenfold his usual strength.

The man fell upon him, cursing. A moment of blind, savage struggle, Stumpy fighting to reach the throat of the invisible man. Then the weight crashed again upon his skull, and strength left him. Though powerless to move, he did not entirely lose consciousness. Gradually he became aware of a pounding on the door, of footsteps hurrying down the hall, excited voices. His fingers searched beneath the pillow.

"Gone," he moaned.

A splintering crash came from the door. They were kicking it in. Stumpy pulled himself up, clamping cold hands to his throbbing temples. He scratched a match and lighted the lamp. His stricken gaze turned to the spot where the money had been. Deaf to the angry demands that he open the door, he began feverishly to search between the mattress and the head of the bed. Some of the money might have fallen into this space.

SUDDENLY he became rigid, his eyes fixed on a piece of paper that lay on the floor. He swooped up the paper, glanced at it with terrifying attention. All life went out of his face. The door bulged inward beneath the impact of driving shoulders. Hastily he shoved the paper deep into a pocket of his Levis.

Jamming on his hat and boots, he blew out the lamp and darted to the partly open door in the side of the room. The thief had come through this door, he knew. As he came into the adjoining room, the door to his room crashed inward. Angry voices roared at his back. He ran to the window. He strained upward on the sash, until his face became corded and purple. The window would not bulge; it seemed to be nailed down. He jerked up his gun-butt, to burst out the glass. Then shouting men poured into the room.

Stumpy ducked through the pitch blackness to where the outer door would be. Groping, his fingers found the knob, and he was in the hall. No shout came at him, no bullet. He raced to the window at the end of the passage. It was open, for the night was warm. Through the window he dived, landing on the slanting

roof of the porch over the sidewalk.

High-pitched cries back there in the hall, the rush of many feet. A snatch of hot wind tugged at Stumpy's cheek. Another bullet, ripping through his opened vest, scorched his side. On his stomach, clinging to the shingles, he searched with dangling legs for a post. Not finding it, he let his body over the eaves, and dropped. Bullets screamed over him. His foot struck a plank stretched between the porch posts, and he fell heavily, rolling into the street.

Bounding up, he darted toward the protection of the wooden awnings that roofed the sidewalk. Bullets burned up the air about him, but none hit. He ducked between two buildings and came into a vacant lot. With all the speed of which he was possessed, he ran toward the livery stable. Behind him sharp cries, edged with killing rage. Cowboys, out to shoot down the one that had double-crossed them.

The thought made Stumpy wince. "They orter know I didn't do it," he groaned.

Glancing back, he saw a blurred knot of men coming swiftly after him. Fire flashed from them, the roar of their guns thundering through the silence. Never would he be able to get his horse from the livery stable before those men overtook him. Turning abruptly into an alley, he stepped into a hole and fell sprawling on his face. He leaped up and ran on, conscious for the first time that his left leg dragged a little. He doubled back toward the Buckhorn Saloon.

Crouching close to the buildings, he came in among the horses standing dejectedly at the rail. They swung back on their reins, snorting. Stumpy did not know that the horses smelled fresh blood; did not yet realise that a bullet had struck his leg. Untying the reins of a big, long-barrelled claybank, he came into the whirling saddle. A half-dozen teeth-jarring bucks, and the claybank was ready to run. Stumpy fanned it down the street, careening around the first corner.

Dark figures of men rose up before him. A sheet of fire leaped up at him. Flat against the claybank's neck, Stumpy raced through that hail of lead. Swerving into a narrow side street, he headed out of town. He thundered over a bridge, and open country lay before him.

HE looked back. He saw only dark houses walling in a ribbon of star-lit dust. But he heard, even above the steady pounding of the claybank's hoofs, the shouts of the avenging cowboys. They would hang on his trail, those happy-go-lucky cowboys who had been double-crossed, until hell froze over. Yes, and then track him down on the ice. He leaned over and patted the horse's withers.

"You got to run, ol'-timer, like you never run before. Them fellers jest can't ketch me, not yet!"

It was as though the horse comprehended the anguish in Stumpy's voice. With long, easy stride his mount came up the rise from the creek. The claybank dipped over the crest of the rise, and the scattered lights of the town blinked out. Before Stumpy stretched a boundless sweep of sagebrush, dim and dark, fading into the walls of the night.

Where to? The question left him strangely empty. He turned bleak eyes to the west. Dave's little spread lay over there among the hills, the only home he had ever known.

"But it won't never be home no more," Stumpy muttered brokenly.

He turned into a wagon-track that crawled toward the north-west. Mustang Hole, he remembered, lay off in this direction. A little-known region of twisting canyons, boiling springs, and mysterious caverns. Bad lands, refuge of the hunted, both beast and man. Once he gained the barrier of these inhospitable mountains, he should be safe from pursuit.

Pounding along the wagon-trail, he was comforted by the thought that most of the men following him were contestants in the rodeo to-morrow; they must soon turn back. But old Dave, he had a good reason to believe, would not quit until Stumpy

was either caught or run out of the country.

Stumpy was light, and the claybank a tireless, powerful runner. A lot of country passed behind them. The Big Dipper, swinging on its majestic axis around the pole star, indicated two or three hours past midnight. Stumpy eased up the terrific pace. For several hours, now, he had heard no sound of pursuit. There was a chance that he had thrown them off his trail. At the next creek that he crossed, he swung stiffly from the saddle. He would rest a little. There was much riding yet to be done.

Ordinarily, the wound in his leg would have sickened him. Now he scarcely felt it. So immense was the ache in his heart that it seemed to embrace all the hurts that could ever be. He drew from his pocket the piece of paper that, during the brief struggle, had fallen from the man who robbed him. Long he stood there on the creek bank in the darkness, holding the paper on which was written, in Dave's hand, by-laws of the Wyoming Cowboys' Union. Slowly he tore the paper into bits, and dropped them into the rushing black water.

"Nobody ain't never goin' to know that paper fell outta yore pocket, Dave," he whispered, and sank down on the grass with a weary sigh.

Clear, pitifully clear, was the whole rotten mess to him. None knew better than Stumpy, Dave's bookkeeper, how desperately Dave needed a thousand dollars. He must have it within sixty days, or his ranch would be taken over by the bank. Wyoming Cowboys' Union! Well, nobody had ever accused Dave of not being plenty smart. Of course, a man might be excused for pulling a whizzer like this—when he had to have a thousand dollars and there was no other way to get it. But—— Stumpy choked.

Making him treasurer of the union, instead of Church. And he had thought he was somebody, with all that money to watch over. The Old Man had picked him for the job because he would be easy to rob. The Old Man had beat him on the head with a gun, now was hunting him down. A great dry sob racked Stumpy. He clutched his head between his hands.

"I don't see how he could 'a' done it, with all the boys b'lievin' in him that a way," he groaned. "Why—why, he was the same as my own pa would 'a' been, if I'd 'a' had one."

TYING a wet handkerchief around his head, he mounted and rode on toward Mustang Hole. He would take the blame for what Dave had done. Even if they caught him, nothing could ever make him betray Dave. But, as the miles passed behind him, he realised that shielding Dave was not enough. He must make good the money stolen from the cowboys.

How could he get nine hundred and fifty dollars?

The problem rode with Stumpy all through the night. He thought of every kind of robbery. Each time that he passed a ranch-house, dark and lonely amid its huddle of corrals and outhouses, the temptation to rob it gripped him. But he knew only too well how empty would be a cattleman's safe. Still, there was no need for hurry, he told himself. From now on, he would follow the owl-hoot trail. When he reached Mustang Hole and became one of the outlaws, he would soon have that much money.

Against the bar of saffron that lay across the east there slowly formed a barrel-like object set on spectral black legs. A railroad water-tank. Telegraph-poles stretched to east and west of the tank. Gazing into the awakening sky, stern purpose formed in Stumpy's face. He would hold up the first passenger train that stopped here to water. Nine hundred and fifty dollars was all he wanted, but that much he would take.

He dismounted at the corrugated-sheet-iron pump-house beside the water-tank. A long, searching look into the grey mists that were lifting over his back trail disclosed no rider. He thought they had lost his trail. A day or two might pass before they again struck it.

In a pool of cold water that dripped from the tank he bathed the cuts in his scalp, then the bullet tear in his leg. The blood-caked flesh around this wound was festered and swollen. Stumpy bound it with strips torn from his undershirt.

He staked the claybank in a near-by gulch, climbed out, and stretched on the grass. The yellow in the east turned to rose, light began to creep up the wall of the sky. Stumpy frowned. He had not counted on holding up a train in daylight. Bad enough in the dark. Doubt came over him. This was a fool thing he was thinking about doing. What was the hurry, anyhow? When he got in with those outlaws in Mustang Hole—— Out of the mists to the east sounded the distant whistle of a train.

Stumpy stood up, dragging a moist palm across his forehead. In the still dawn he heard distinctly the sound of the approaching train. The red sun pushed above the swelling plain. Stumpy's troubled eyes turned to the saddle on the claybank in the gulch beneath him. Suddenly his features tensed, his eyes became slitted, desperate. He jerked up his belt another notch.

"I'm goin' to do it," he muttered. He grinned mirthlessly. "Maybe I'll make out better as a train robber than I ever done as a cowpuncher."

He limped alongside the rails. A golden halo spread up into the sky—the engine's headlight, cutting wider and wider swaths into the thinning mists. He stopped beside a big sage, tied a bandanna across the lower part of his face, drew his gun, and crouched down. The dull rumble of the train was now a roar. The headlight cut a wedge of bright yellow down the track. The engine, black and huge, charged over the hill. Light tore searchingly through the sage. Feeling the engineer's eyes upon him, Stumpy wriggled to the other side of the bush.

"Maybe she ain't goin' to stop," he thought, looking intently at the nickel trimming of the gun-butt clamped in his fingers. "Or maybe she's a through flyer, an' there won't be no way of gettin' into the day coach."

A blast from the engine's whistle. Stumpy let out a long pent-up breath. She was going by! Then came the hissing of air brakes.

COLD sweat broke out over him. Strength departed swiftly from bone and muscle, and nausea gripped his stomach. His throat became hot and dry, repeatedly he swallowed. He told himself that he was sick, in no condition to go through with this thing. A hundred excuses marshalled themselves before him. The train came on. Strange, that in the agony that tore at his brain, he should listen to a lark singing from a crossbar of a telegraph-pole.

The glare of the headlight passed beyond him, and the great drivers of the engine rolled by in a sputtering of steam. The coal-tender, the baggage-car, the mail-car, the curtained day coach crept past him. The train was a local, which had come up through Buckhorn. No use to bother with it. The thought brought Stumpy a surge of relief. People who rode this train wouldn't have any money.

From the slowly moving steps of the day coach his eyes flicked to the engine. Already the fireman was twisting the cap from the boiler inlet. In a minute he would reach up and take hold of the spout of the pipe that swung from the bottom of the tank. The engineer, leaning out the cab window, was looking forward. On the rear platform moved a brake-man.

Stumpy, looking fixedly at the steps of the day coach, wet his lips. He muttered, under his breath: "It's for you, Dave."

The thought poured strength into him. He sprang up, running toward the steps, low to the ground. There came no shouted "Halt!" He bounded on the platform, pushed open the door. A moment he stood looking at the dim rows of seats, some empty, some filled with sprawled passengers. He took a step forward, cocked gun pushed in front of him.

"Hands up, everybody!"

So loud was his voice that it startled Stumpy. First to leap to his feet was the conductor, his arms shooting up. Men and women tumbled from their seats, wide-eyed, arms rigidly erect. Children clung speechless to their mothers' skirts. Every eye was fixed on the masked bandit, who faced them from the end of the aisle.

"I don't aim to hurt nobody. All I want is yore money. Everybody face this a way." Stumpy made a motion with his left hand. "Keep 'em h'isted, an' I won't hurt you."

He moved toward the nearest passenger, a flashily dressed salesman with a huge red moustache. Suddenly a man left the line, came quickly toward him, hands high in the air.

"Git back there, you."

But the man came on. Something about him appeared vaguely familiar to Stumpy, though he could not see very clearly in the dull light. He heard his own name, in a hissing whisper. The man was Church. Stumpy's finger eased off the trigger.

"Listen!" Church came close. His thin face was tense and drawn, the eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses bright with excitement. "They're out there—Dave and the rest of 'em. You'd better go, quick."

Stumpy's eyes flicked back to the line of silent, still passengers.

"You're lyin', Church. An' if you ever open yore head 'bout me——"

"Look, if you think I'm lying." Church pointed through the window. "Look, coming up the track. See 'em?"

Stumpy saw old Dave and three cowpunchers. Behind them came the express messenger, a sawed-off shot-gun in his hands. Stumpy turned cold. Dave was playing out his bluff, even to the point of murdering him. But he would not turn against Dave.

"I'll help you get away," Church was saying rapidly. "Hurry up; they're almost here!"

STUMPY did not hear him. He did not see the line of arms extended down the aisle, the tense faces of the passengers. The Old Man was hunting him down! He turned toward the door, dropped to the ground on the side of the train away from the approaching men.

"Which way's your horse?" Church whispered, beside him.

Stumpy glared at him. "Git back in there, you fool. I don't need no help from you."

He ran up the track, ducked under a sleeping-car. A second he hesitated, gathering force for the spurt to his horse. He saw Church beside him, gun in hand.

"You blasted fool, you'll git yoreself kilt. Git back, I tell you. I don't need no help."

"I'll help you make it to your horse," Church said doggedly. The hand that clutched his gun trembled.

"You will, like——"

Stumpy struck him in the face, knocked him over backward. He ran toward the gulch. All at once, a savage cry rose behind him.

"Don't shoot him—don't shoot him!" he seemed to hear old Dave shouting. Surely it was his imagination, panting over bitter reality.

He was almost to the gulch. Guns were barking now. He glanced back. Church, the fool, was close behind him, shooting as he ran. Stumpy cursed between his teeth. He had told that blasted idiot——

Church swept abreast of him. He jerked up his smoking gun. Stumpy saw, with a stab of horror, that Church was going to shoot Dave. He flung himself at Church as the gun exploded. Together they hit the ground, rolled over, then slid down the wall of the gulch. Stumpy was still struggling with Church when Dave and the others came into the gulch. A cowboy snatched Church's gun, another jerked him roughly to his feet.

"Stumpy, we ain't after you!" yelled Dave. "We was just tryin' to head you off, you galoot, an' tell you to come on back. After we seen all that blood on yore pillow, we knowed you didn't do it. I

knowed it, anyhow. But how come you run away?"

Stumpy could not speak. How could Dave stand there, looking straight at him, and still pretend he had not stolen the money?

Then Stumpy saw, under the torn shirt of the struggling Church, a wide leather belt. At the same instant Dave saw it. He tore the belt from Church, ripped open the money-pouch. An oath of astonishment burst from him. Stumpy's eyes bulged at the sight of all the money crammed into the pouch—five- and ten-dollar notes.

"You polecat—this here's the union's money!" roared Dave. "Count 'er up, boys."

"Look, boss," Stumpy muttered, pointing to several packets of crisp, new bank-notes.

"He's robbed the bank, too, I bet! That's how come he was on that train—runnin' away with the boys' money an' the bank's, too." Dave shook a fist in Church's grey face. "You skunk, I had a hunch, all the time, you was too anxious to be treasurer of the union. You dirty, sneakin' coyote."

Church, a white line above his twitching lips, said nothing.

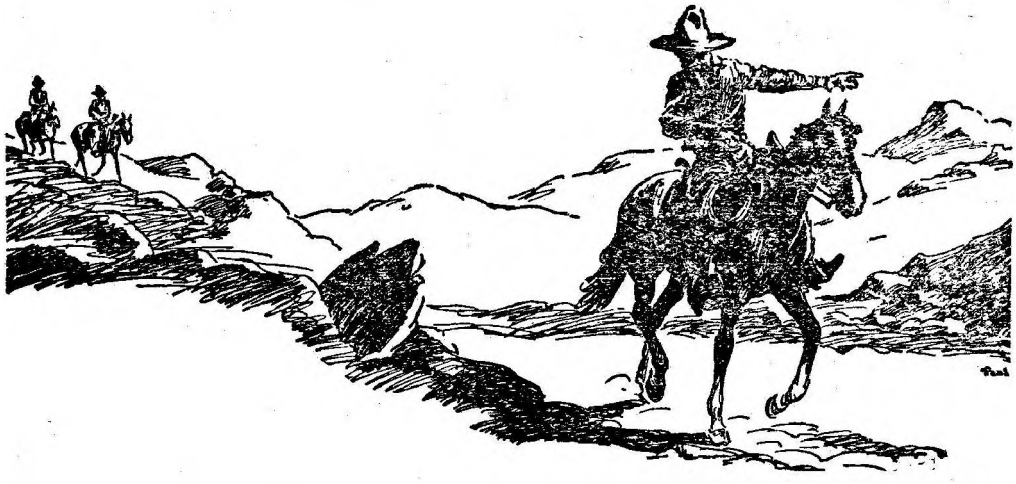
Stumpy looked at Dave with bleak eyes. "An' I thought you done it, 'cause I picked up that piece of paper with yore writin' on it that had dropped beside my bed. You know, rules for the union, an' sech. I thought it fell outta yore pocket, Dave."

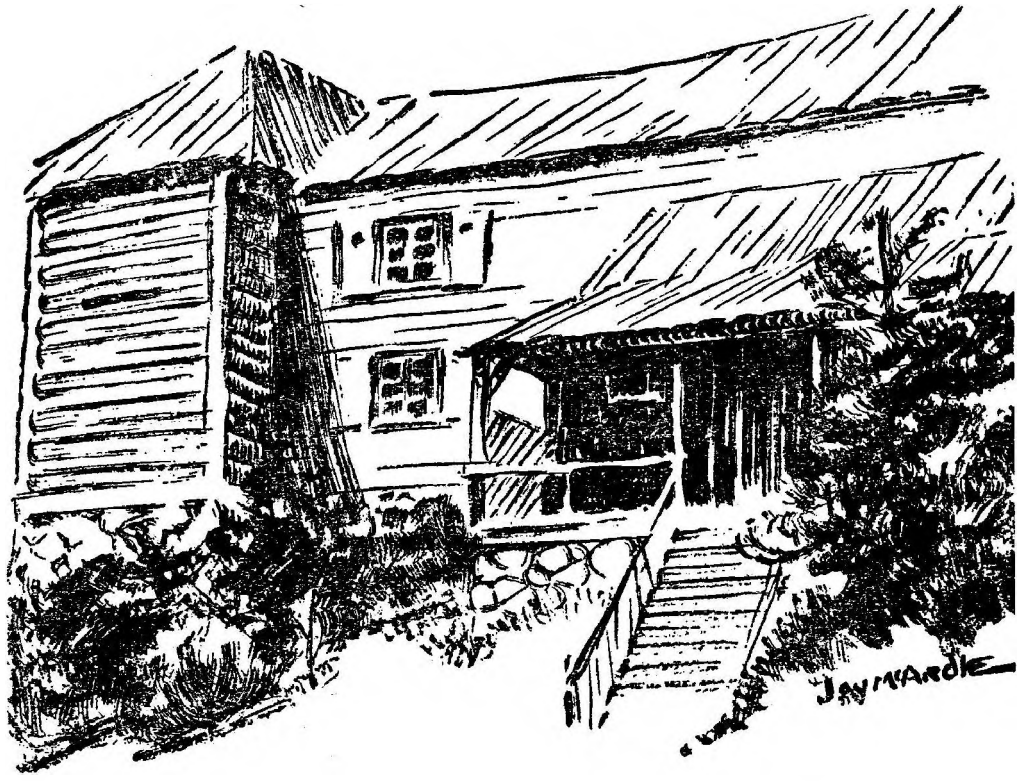
Dave stared at him. "You mean, them by-laws I give Church after the meetin'?" The old cowman's eyes softened. "An' you was takin' the blame for what you thought I done."

Stumpy looked away. "I don't reckon you need me on the pay-roll no more. Not after me thinkin' that about you."

Dave was slow in answering. "That's right, I don't. An' the union don't need no treasurer. The boys say they had enough union to last 'em for a while." He laid a hand on Stumpy's shoulder. "How 'bout you an' me startin' our own union, bein' pardners? The bank'll give us more time now, seein' you caught that crook. That's how come you boarded the train to catch him, see? We'll make it, you an' me. What you say?"

Stumpy said it with a hand-clasp that made old Dave wince.





FLOODED SHAFT

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

FOR nine months in the year old Andy Slocum washed dishes in one of the restaurants in Denver's flop-house district. During the summer months he dug for gold. He paused, on this July morning, atop a spruce-plumed ridge that slanted to a dark-green beaver meadow. From a hill beyond the meadow arose the top of a derrick. It marked Andy's claim.

His eyes brightened. He flung back his thin shoulders. A warm glow suffused him. Odours of frying grease, of stale coffee, and sweat-tainted work shirts passed from his memory, as if they had never been. He had come home. Each July, for the past thirty years he had stood on this same ridge, and had felt the wonder of this same rebirth.

"Git on, there, Jin!" he shouted at the heavily packed burro dawdling along the trail ahead. "Rufe'll be waitin' for us."

Rufe was Andy's partner. Unlike Andy, he drifted around during the months when winter's grip was upon the mountains. Mojave, Death Valley, maybe Old Mexico. But he had never failed to join Andy at their claim. And he always packed in his full share of grub.

With swinging stride Andy went up the long slope from the top of which arose the derrick. He felt like whistling, even singing. But he was a silent man. He contented himself with looking at the big

open country tumbled around him—and with thinking of the fabulously rich vein that, he was certain, lay not far under the bottom of his and Rufe's shaft. Driving the burro ahead, he came over the brow of the ridge.

There was the derrick, and beneath it a stone coping three or four feet high. At the edge of a tilted pine forest stood a one-room log cabin, a burro grazing near-by. In the doorway sat Rufe, waiting for him.

THE old partners did not call out to each other. Nor did they go through the formality of shaking hands. But the bonds of friendship between them were, nevertheless, strong and enduring.

"How you, Rufe?"

"Purty fair, Andy. How you been makin' it?"

"Oh, 'bout the same." Andy looked closely at the purple bruise under Rufe's eye, at the swelling lump on his cheek. "What happened?"

"Feller tried to run me offn the claim."

"Who?"

"Dreer, said his name was. Bought out the boys that useter own this ranch. Claims he don't want nobody prospectin' on his land."

Andy began to untie the squaw hitch on his packs.

"What's the matter with him? Ain't he got sense enough to know he don't own the mineral rights?"

"That's what I told him. He laughed in my face. Then, when I started to arger with him, he lit into me." Rufe touched the point of his jaw. "He kin hit hard."

"What kinda feller is this here Dreer?"

"Oh, a big, glassy-eyed coyote. Sorta bites offn his words, like they can't git out quick enough. He give us till sundown to vamose."

Andy snorted. "Sundown, huh? I'd like to see him or anybody else run us offa our claim."

He carried his packs into the cabin, looked appraisingly around the room, and went with Rufe to the shaft.

Things were just as he had left them last autumn. There was the windlass, wound with steel cable, the sunken circle around the windlass cut by burros' hoofs. From its drum the cable passed over a pulley in the top of the derrick; a large sheet-steel bucket, fastened to the end of the cable, stood beside the stone coping. This bucket was used to haul up rock from the shaft. Rufe had brought half a dozen single jacks and hammers from the cabin. There was also the little portable forge, used in sharpening the drills.

Andy bent over the coping, looking down into the square, timbered shaft. The five-foot-wide bore ended in a glassy black square, far below. He looked long at the water, then turned worried eyes to his partner.

"That's the most water she's ketched yet. Must be a hundred foot in there."

"A hundred an' twenty-seven," said Rufe, gnawing a chew of tobacco with his jaw teeth. "I measured her with the cable." He champed the tobacco meditatively. "That's a lot of water to h'ist outta there."

"Gosh, yes. Account of that heavy snow last winter, I reckon. We're 'bout level with the crick-bed, too, remember. Well, let's get to work."

Rufe looked across the green hills to the north, frowning. The ranch-house, now Dreer's, lay in this direction.

"Thinkin' about Dreer?" asked Andy. "Don't worry your head about him. He can't run us offa our claim."

They hooked up the two burros to the tongue that projected from the base of the windlass. They lowered the bucket into the shaft, and their work began. The burros plodded in their circle, the cable coiled around the creaking drum, the brimming bucket emerged from the deep, dark shaft. Andy tilted the bucket over the edge of the coping.

Watching the miniature torrent rush down-hill, he thought of the colossal task that confronted them. He wasn't much of a hand at figures, but he knew a column of water five feet square and a hundred and twenty-seven feet deep is a good

many buckets full. To empty the shaft would require weeks, perhaps a month, even longer. They wouldn't get much digging this year.

HIS gaze lifted to the ridge reared against the western sky, fixed on a notch in the jagged crest. Below this saddle was the big Croesus gold-mine, a steady producer for twenty-five years. He looked now to the south-east. Beyond the folded hills lay another big-paying mine, the Rankin Consolidated. Andy's and Rufe's claim was on a direct line between these mines. In imagination, he followed the quartz vein, shot with bright-yellow gold, through the hills. Clearly he saw it, only a few feet below the bottom of their shaft.

"We're goin' to strike her this year!" he said aloud.

"What's that you say?" asked Rufe, bending over the coping to sink the bucket. "Jack! Jin!" he yelled at the drowsy burros.

"I say we're goin' to strike her this year."

Rufe grinned. "You bet, Andy. Feel it in my bones." His face sobered. "If only we kin git shet of this water, an' Dreer leaves us alone."

"We'll empty her," Andy said, with conviction he did not feel. "An' don't let Dreer worry you. He's jest bluffin'. He can't do nothin' 'cept talk."

"He kin hit."

Andy thought a moment. "Well, I kin, too—if that's his game."

The burros plodded in their circle, the windlass creaked, the bucket rose and sank. Gold edged the feathery clouds that hung over the western horizon, dark grew the hollows. Straining his eyes down into the shaft, Andy could not see where they had made much progress. The water, glaring at him like some monstrous black eye, appeared no farther away.

"Here he comes," said Rufe, and Andy jerked erect. "Got a rifle."

Andy watched the rider come toward them. A big man, as Rufe had said. His head was pushed truculently forward over a barrel chest. He reined up before them, pale-blue eyes flicking from one to the other.

"Well!" boomed Dreer. "It's sundown!"

Rufe said nothing, but Andy retorted: "What about it bein' sundown?"

"I'll show you what about it, you dried-up old son of a gun." Dreer hitched his heavy body forward in the saddle. His fingers tightened on the rifle athwart his thighs. "Git, both of you."

Andy eyed him fearlessly. There was nothing of the greasy-aproned dish-washer about him now. "You ain't runnin' no bluff over us, Dreer. You might own this ground, but you don't own the minerals under it. This here claim belongs to me an' my pardner. We filed our perfectin' claims nearly thirty years ago. You kin see 'em in the county recorder's orfice, if you wanter." His voice rang out like a sharply struck bell. "I'll never let a polecat like you run us offa our claim!"

"Polecat, huh? Know who you talkin' to?" Dreer's pale eyes radiated menace.

"Got a durn good notion," Andy growled. "Run across range hogs before."

"Never mind callin' me names. You listen here. I bought this range—lock, stock, and barrel. I'm buyin' up others round here. This whole country's goin' to belong to me. And I don't want anybody else on it, see? Now, git—while you're all in one piece."

Rufe glanced at Andy, then looked up at Dreer. "We been comin' here, Andy an' me, fer thirty year. We ain't harmin' nobody. An' the claim's ourn, by law."

"Law?" snorted Dreer. "I'm the law round here." He looked hard at Rufe. "Thought I told you that this mornin'?"

Rufe, thinking of those hard-hitting fists, fell silent. But Andy eyed Dreer in defiance.

"Makes no difference what you told him. We ain't goin'. You might bully an' steal these ranchers round here into sellin' out to you, but you ain't bluffin' us. We're stayin' right here."

IN one movement, astonishingly quick for a man of his size, Dreer sheathed his rifle and swung down from the saddle. Almost as swiftly Andy and Rufe snatched up weapons from the ground. Andy straightened up, a sixteen-inch drill gripped in his hand. Rufe, clutching a four-pound hammer, whirled on Dreer. Dreer's right arm straightened out, there was a crack of bone on bone, and Rufe hit the ground on his back.

"I'll kill you!" yelled Andy, swinging the drill at Dreer's head.

Dreer ducked, and the steel bar glanced from his shoulder. Before Andy could again strike, Dreer's fist was in his face. He reeled backward, stunned. Helplessly he saw another big fist stream at him. Then he was lying loosely against the derrick, looking through a star-shot mist at the man towering wide-legged above him.

"Reckon that'll shut your big mouth!" Dreer's snarl came to him as from far away. "Called me a polecat, did you?"

Andy felt the point of Dreer's boot drive into his side. He held his cry of pain behind tight lips. Then Dreer clutched him behind the neck, jerked him to his feet. Andy struck weakly at the sneering face. Dreer laughed.

"Know what I'm goin' to do to you?" Dreer's finger dug in deeper. "You like this hole so much, I'm goin' to throw you in it."

As he was lifted clear of the ground, Andy fought silently, fiercely, like a terrier. But against Dreer's iron muscles he was powerless. His boot heels thumped the shaft casing, and there was only the water under him. His breath whistled through his teeth. Dreer laughed and lowered him deeper into the shaft.

"Skeered, ain't you? You and your big mouth. Don't like the notion of gettin' it full of water, do you?" Dreer shook him. "Well, say somethin'."

Andy did not answer.

"So skeered you can't even talk," jeered Dreer. He swung Andy out of the shaft, dropped him to earth. "Next time, I ain't foolin'," he warned. "Clear out of here, you and your jackasses. If I catch you hangin' round here again, I will throw you in that hole!"

Andy's smouldering eyes followed Dreer to his horse. He went then to where Rufe lay, still unconscious, a trickle of blood under his head. Andy drove the burros around the windlass and drew a bucket of water. He splashed it on Rufe's face, cleansed the scalp wound. It was several minutes before Rufe's eyes opened. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, staring beyond Andy.

"Wha—what's that?"

Andy looked around. He sprang up, an oath sizzling from him.

"The cabin!" he yelled, bounding away. "Dreer's set the cabin on fire!"

Dreer must have overturned the coal-oil-can on the floor, for when Andy reached the cabin, he looked through the door into a furnace. All was lost—grub, blankets, rifles, and ammunition. He went slowly back to where Rufe sat, gloomily watching the fire.

He sat down beside Rufe. In silence they watched their little home burn. They saw ragged banners of flame burst through the roof, saw the rafters writhe and blacken and fall inward. A wall caved in, shooting sparks into the boiling clouds of smoke.

Rufe reached for a chew of tobacco.

"Well, what now?"

"Stay right here. He ain't bluffin' nobody."

"How 'bout grub?"

"We'll get along. I got some money. We kin buy from some of these ranchers."

"He shore kin hit," Rufe said, touching the back of his head.

"It ain't Dreer that's worryin' me. I run into claim jumpers before. The thing——"

"Say! That's jest what he is tryin' to do—jump our claim. He must have a notion we're purty close to that vein."

"No doubt about it. But, as I was sayin', the thing that's worryin' me is all that water. How we goin' to get it out, in time to do some diggin'?"

Rufe shook his head. "Take us better'n a month, maybe two. 'Pends on how fast she seeps in."

"If there was some other way, now," Andy mused, half to himself.

AS he unlocked the burros, his mind wrestled with the problem of getting the water out of the shaft. If he had a pump—but pumps cost a lot of money. He remembered that the ranchers Dreer had bought out had owned a petrol pump, which they used in pumping water from an artesian well near the house. Those ranchers would have lent him the pump, but not Dreer. Still, he must get that pump.

"Somebody comin'." Rufe pointed to a rider cantering down the slope behind the burning cabin. "It ain't Dreer."

Andy looked, and picked up a drill.

"Reckon it's one of Dreer's men," growled Rufe, reaching for a hammer.

"Let him come," rasped Andy. "This here's our claim, an' we're stayin'."

"Dang right, we're stayin'!"

But the rider was not one of Dreer's men. He rode for a small outfit on the other side of the ridge, he explained. Was coming in after a hunt for strays, when he saw the fire. Wondered who old Dreer was burning out now.

"So he aims to run you off your claim, does he?" asked the cow-puncher, a tall, shifty-eyed man who said his name was "Windy" Ball. "Well, you won't be the first he's run off."

"Ain't got a little grub, have you?" asked Andy. "Ourn got burnt up."

"Sure. B'lieve I got a little flour an' sowbosom left. Taken some with me this mornin'." As he removed the food from his saddle-bags, Windy Ball talked steadily. "Yeah, old Dreer is plumb greedy. Aims to grab off the whole end of the county, looks like. Been tryin' to skeer my boss off, but that's one old mossback don't skeer wuth a durn."

"Dreer must figger we're purty close to hittin' somethin'," Rufe said.

"Well, maybe." Windy handed him coffee-pot and frying-pan, saying he would pick them up the next time he came this way. "But his main reason is jus' plain orneriness. You boys goin' to buck him?"

Andy nodded grimly.

"If Dreer comes round here again," Rufe threatened, "he'll wish he hadn't."

"I see." Windy Ball gathered his reins. "Well, I wish you boys luck. So long."

"So long." Andy looked thoughtfully at the retreating cowboy. "Ain't no way to talk about a man that's helped you out, but I don't trust that feller. Too much mouth."

"I didn't take to him, neither," Rufe admitted.

The partners cooked and ate supper. They spread their coats in a hollow and lay down to sleep. Rufe slept, but Andy could not. He kept thinking of all that water in the shaft. How could they get it out? It was past midnight when, at last, his churning brain gave him the answer. He sat up with a jerk. Rufe, instantly awake, muttered:

"Dreer comin'?"

"No! Listen! Ever hear tell of Gassy Thompson?"

Rufe sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Gassy Thompson? Seems like I have, long time ago. But, what in thunderation——"

"Come on!" Andy was pulling on his coat. "We're goin' after Dreer."

"What's eatin' on you, Andy?"

"Come on. I got the whole thing, clear as day. Tell you about it as we go along."

"Git Dreer, you say? But we ain't got a gun."

"Don't need none. Come on."

Rufe drew on his coat.

"All right. But I hope you ain't follerin' a blind lead."

THEY set out across the hills under a glittering sky. The big ranch-house of which Dreer was now owner lay six miles distant. They reached it in two hours. Andy saw that the pump was still in use. Then he joined Rufe, who was waiting beside the veranda.

"You stay here," Andy whispered. He held a short, stout stick.

Rufe nodded. "Don't let yore foot slip."

Andy tiptoed across the veranda, pushed open the door, and came into a hall. He walked softly down the hall, pausing before an open door on his left. He was familiar with the plan of the house. Its former owners had often asked him and Rufe to supper. He came cautiously into this room. He stopped, listening to the sonorous breathing that came through a rectangle of blackness ahead.

Starlight, streaming through the window, fell over the bulky form of a man in bed. Andy crept closer, holding his breath. He bent over the sleeper. It was Dreer. He pressed the end of the stick against the back of Dreer's neck.

"Wake up."

Dreer stiffened. Then his right hand stole toward the pillow. But Andy saw the movement. He pressed harder on the stick.

"Get them hands out, Dreer. If you make a sound, I'm shootin'."

Dreer growled in his throat, but he laid his hands on the covers.

"Now get your clothes on, quick as you know how."

As he sat up, Dreer shot Andy a quick look.

"Thought that was you. What you want with me?"

"I'll do the talkin'. Get them clothes on."

Dreer hesitated, as if he might again try to reach under his pillow. But he bent over and began to pull on his trousers. In the same instant Andy reached under the pillow. He smiled as his fingers closed over the butt of a six-shooter.

Dreer swore.

Andy cocked the gun.

"Not another sound outta you," he said.

At the point of the gun, he marched Dreer from the house. Rufe quickly gagged him. With rope they had brought, he tied Dreer's hand behind his back.

"Get goin'," ordered Andy.

Dreer muttered oaths into the gag, but he lumbered off down the hill. They came to the derrick. As though carrying out a detail of a well-formulated plan, Andy dropped Dreer's hat into the shaft. He dropped it bottom-up, so that it would float. He ripped off one of Dreer's shirt-sleeves, tore it into shreds, scattering them. Then he marched Dreer away into the pines.

Day was breaking when they halted at the edge of a hurrying stream. Andy led the way up the bank of the stream. He noticed that most of the aspen near the stream had been cut by beaver. Soon he came upon a wide meadow within the forest. A dam of mud and brush backed up the stream into a chain of willow-rimmed ponds. Beaver mounds rose from the still water.

Andy went toward an abandoned beaver-house, in a dried-up pond. Rufe looked at him in admiration.

"Andy, you got sense."

"Well, she orter work. If we kin make that hole big enough to shove this here ox through."

Dreer glared at him, murder in his pale, cold eyes.

The hole at the bottom of the mound was large enough to admit only a beaver, and a beaver is a small animal. The walls, a tough mass of interwoven branches and hard-packed earth, were thick. Andy and Rufe cut into the sides of the opening with their pocket-knives. The sun was two hours high before they had cut the hole large enough. Andy followed Rufe and Dreer into the mound, drawing a piece of brush across the opening.

LIGHT, slanting through a crack in the top, showed the house to be about eight feet in diameter. The floor was littered with decaying bark and branches.

Andy told Rufe to get himself some sleep. "I'll stand guard over Dreer."

Dreer made a horrible sound through the gag. In the dim light his eyes glittered at Andy like those of an enraged beast.

Andy, leaning against the wall, watched

Dreer. Twice he heard horses' hoofs pounding across the meadow. A searching-party. But Andy was thinking more of the water in the shaft than he was of the danger of being found. When the bar of sunlight had moved to the centre of the floor, he awakened Rufe.

Rufe sat facing Dreer, the gun in his hand. Andy crawled to the creek. He drank, then filled his hat and came back into the mound. Dreer made a piteous sound. Andy untied the gag. Dreer's lips were dry, swollen. He drank greedily, spilling water all over himself.

"If you promise to keep your mouth shut," Andy told him, "I'll leave that thing offa you."

"I promise," Dreer said thickly.

"In case you hear hosses goin' by, don't fergit," warned Rufe, wagging the gun-barrel.

"I won't forget." The look in Dreer's eyes gave to his words a double meaning.

Andy rolled up in his coat.

"Wake me up 'long about five."

Rufe nodded.

When it was five o'clock, as he guessed the time to be, he called to Andy. The rope was tightened around Dreer's wrists, a belt was tied around his ankles. The gag was replaced. Cautiously the partners left the beaver mound. Gaining the pines, they hit a fast pace toward their claim.

Before they covered half the distance, they heard the *put-put-put* of a petrol engine. They looked at each other, and grinned.

They stood, at sunset, in a fringe of pines overlooking their claim. Twelve or fifteen men were clustered around the derrick. All, it appeared, were trying to look into the shaft. The pump sputtered and popped. A little stream cascaded down the hill.

Andy sat down.

"Wonder if they found him yet?"

"I wonder. Rufe pulled out his twist of tobacco. "Andy," he said solemnly, "you got sense."

"Oh, I jest happened to think about that trick of Gassy Thompson's. He was in the same fix as us."

As they sat there, watching with mild amusement the men milling around the derrick, they heard the crack of a stick behind them. Andy sprang up, gun gripped in his hand. He thought he saw the shoulders of a man disappear behind a bush, but in the vague light he was not certain.

"Did you see anything?" he asked Rufe.

"Can't say, fer shore. Prob'ly a bear, or some other varmint."

Andy went swiftly to where he thought he had seen the object. He saw no living thing. He went deeper into the pines. Rufe's shout stopped him in his tracks:

"Andy, come here!"

Alarm was in that cry, and fear. Andy ran back. From the direction of the derrick came a low, confused murmur of voices. Rufe met him, wide-eyed.

"That big-mouthed feller that come by here last night—what's his name——"

"Windy Ball, you mean?"

"That's the one. He's down there, tellin' 'em he seen us up here—the skunk! Let's go, Andy!"

"Not me. I ain't runnin' a step."

"But, man, listen! They're comin' to git us! Them are Dreer's men workin' that pump. They're liable to——"

"Let 'em come." Andy spun the cylinder of the gun. There was a fighting glint in his eyes. "I ain't runnin' a step."

AS it happened, they could not have run very far, anyway. As Andy spoke, a circle of grim-faced men closed in on them.

"Drop that gun," ordered a tall, flat-chested Texan, pointing his gun at Andy's head.

A dozen other guns came out of their holsters. Andy hesitated, then lowered the gun.

Angry men swarmed about him and Rufe. The gun was snatched from Andy's hand. Two ropes appeared; as quickly they were noosed around the prospectors' necks. In ominous silence they were led toward a dead pine that reared

its skeleton-like arms against the darkening green of the forest.

"Did you get all the water out?" Andy asked the man beside him.

The cow-puncher looked at him. "Cool one, ain't you? No, we didn't quite empty her. We'll stretch you two buzzards first, then fish Dreer out."

"You fellers is goin' off half cocked," protested Rufe, looking from one grim face to the other. "Dreer ain't in that shaft."

"Don't let 'em fool you, boys," jeered Windy Ball. "They told me last night they was goin' to get old Dreer. Get even with him for burnin' 'em out."

"Dreer ain't in that shaft," Rufe repeated anxiously. "We kin lead you right to where he's at. Can't we, Andy?"

"Sure. We got him tied in an old beaver-house up the crick a ways. I'll take you right to him."

But the men did not listen to them. They had all the proof they needed. Andy and Rufe stood beneath the dead pine. The ropes were thrown over a big limb, three men took hold of each dangling end. The partners looked into each other's eyes.

"Well," said Andy, "she didn't pan out."

"It wa'n't yore fault," Rufe said stoutly.

Now, in the still moment while the lynchers tightened their muscles for the pull, there came a crashing through the brush. Every head turned toward the sound. Every pair of eyes widened, as Dreer burst upon them. His perspiring face was twisted with rage. He lifted an angry arm, and his wrist showed raw and bleeding.

"That's right!" he yelled. "Hang 'em —hang 'em!"

The punchers looked at one another uncertainly.

"Hang 'em!" stormed Dreer, rushing forward like a mad bull. "What you waitin' on? Hang 'em, I say!"

But the cowboys dropped the ropes.

"Ain't nothin' to hang 'em about," said the tall Texan.

"No, not now," Windy Ball said loudly. "Can't hang a man jest because he got the best of you, Dreer. That don't go."

"The devil, it don't!" Dreer lunged for the dangling rope whose other end was around Andy's neck.

But the Texan stood in front of him.

"We ain't standin' for murder," he said quietly.

"But—but—— Why, you——" Dreer stopped, as if he could not find words to express his wrath.

Loose-jawed, he watched his cowboys free Andy and Rufe, and move away. One of them chuckled, another guffawed. Then all broke into laughter—gales of boisterous laughter.

Dreer scowled darkly. He shook a fist under Andy's nose.

"I'll get you for this," he warned. "Don't think I'm through with you yet. I'll show you!" He stamped off after his men.

"You boys don't need to worry none," said Windy Ball, with his flabby smile. "When folks hear how you outsmarted old Dreer, he won't dast do nothin' to you. He'll be glad to leave you alone. Anyway, I wasn't goin' to let 'em string you up——"

Andy and Rufe went up the hill to their claim. They squinted down into the shaft, then their eyes met. They grinned.

"Ain't more'n five or six foot of water in there," said Andy. "We kin start drillin' in the mornin'. I got a hunch we're goin' to strike her this year, Rufe."

"I know it. Feel it in my bones." Rufe's voice softened. 'Andy," he said, "you got sense."

RUSE OF THE RANCHO

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

THE Rancho de los Pinos lay sleeping in the June afternoon. In the adobe corral stood a pair of horses, the neck of one resting across the neck of the other.

Asleep, also, were "Sorrel" Webb and his diminutive partner, Milt. They worked for soft-voiced old Santiago Hermano, in whose family the Rancho de los Pinos had been for more than two centuries. Their deep-drawn snores blended with the drone of a bumble-bee boring into one of the posts.

Sorrel Webb lifted his head, squinting across the quarter-mile of greasewood flat that lay between him and the ranch-house. He knew he had not been dreaming. There was the horse, single-footing down the white ribbon of road to the house. Sitting the horse was "Ramrod" Cates, who owned half the valley and was out to get the other half. He knew why Cates was coming to see Santiago Hermano. Scooping up a handful of earth, Sorrel threw it against Milt's gently rising and falling hat.

"Hey, wake up. Gonna sleep all day?"

"Who's asleep?" grumbled Milt, rubbing his eyes. "Like to know who could sleep, with you sawin' gourds——" He broke off, staring at the big rider dismounting. "Ramrod Cates, ain't it?"

Sorrel nodded. In grim silence they saw Santiago Hermano come out of the house, picturing to themselves the indignation in his gentle face. Swiftly the tableau unfolded beneath the pepper tree: The old Spaniard's gestures of protest, of pleading. The uncompromising stiffness of Ramrod Cates, the flash of a paper in his hand. The sudden droop of Santiago's shoulders. The whirling away of Cates's horse, as he stepped nimbly to saddle. The old man standing there, arms hanging at his sides.

Milt broke the silence. "Well, that's the foreclosure ol' Santy was tellin' us about. Reckon she's all over now."

Sorrel got to his feet.

"Where you goin'?"

"To ketch my hawss."

Milt scowled. This was no answer,

He walked fast to overtake the long-legged waddy.

"What you up to, Sorrel?"

"Ol' Santy's in trouble, ain't he?"

Milt, puffing along beside him, did not say anything.

"Ain't nobody to help him but us. Jus' one thing to do."

A LONG look passed between them. For once, Milt had no argument. So, with few words, the details of the killing of Ramrod Cates were decided upon. It would mean they must leave for ever the little ranch they had grown to regard as home. But Cates would be out of the way, and with him his stranglehold on Santiago Hermano.

Riding fast through brushy canyons, they drew up their horses on the brow of a piñon-dotted hill that overlooked the trail Cates would take to his Crossbow spread. Not long they waited. Cates came over a ridge about half a mile away.

"We got him." Sorrel started his horse down the trail.

"Jest a second," said Milt.

Sorrel did not look at him. "Too late to start an argymint now."

"But I got a better way. Hey, wait!"

"Keep it to yoreself. Maybe you got cold feet. I ain't."

Milt surged abreast of him.

"I don't give a dang about dustin' off ol' Ramrod, an' you know it. But how do we know that'll save Santy's ranch? Won't whoever comes into the Crossbow take it, anyhow?" Milt eyed his partner. "Now, if we kidnap him we——"

"Kidnap him?"

"That's what I said. We'll hide him somewheres an' make him sign over them notes of ol' Santy's. Then we'll know we saved the ranch."

Sorrel frowned, then a reluctant smile came to his lips. "Might be somethin' to it. Where'll we keep the buzzard?"

"In the well," Milt answered. "Another thing. We'll throw such a skeer into Ramrod that he dassent squawk on us. Then we won't hafta leave ol' Santy."

That clinched it for Sorrel. The easy life at the Rancho de los Pinos fitted him like an old hat. Thought of leaving it worried him much more than the dark deed to which he had committed himself.

They guided their horses down the other side of the hill. At its foot, they knew, was a gulch which the trail crossed. Half an hour later, they hid their horses in a thicket, took down their ropes, and crept into the gulch. They were certain that Cates had not yet reached it. One on each side of the trail, gun in hand, they waited. Cates did not come. They waited for an hour; still he did not come.

"He went some other way," Sorrel grumbled. "Better had've done it my way."

"We'll get him," persisted Milt. "We'll wait till sundown, an' snake him outn his house. That's better yet."

"Well, I'll try it. But if she don't work, I'm through messin' round."

So they crept with the shadows upon the Crossbow ranch-house. Well suited was the hour for their purpose, for the cowboys would not come riding in for yet half an hour. They left their horses behind the barn, went in and got an oat sack, and walked boldly to the front of the house. Cates's horse was hitched to the rail beside the house. Sorrel whistled softly through his teeth. Milt's eyes shuttled watchfully.

Luck was still with them as they crossed the veranda and came into a hall. Opposite a doorway to the right of the stair they stopped. In the dim light before a window, his back to them, sat a man making entries in a ledger.

Sorrel nudged Milt, who nodded briskly. Sorrel pulled out his bandanna, Milt the oat sack. They stole across the room. Their victim had no opportunity to make a sound. The gag was in his mouth in the same instant a gun was against his temple. The sack was slipped over his head, his hands bound, and he was marched quickly out of the room. They gained their horses and rode leisurely off. No one had seen them—unless that *was* a Chinaman's face Sorrel had seen at the kitchen window.

IN two hours they reached the well. Sorrel jerked off the oat sack, began untying the gag. Milt suddenly let out a startled cry:

"That ain't Ramrod! Who is that?"

"What's the meaning of this outrage?" angrily demanded the man. "I'll have you hanged for this!"

"Not so fast, buddy." Sorrel stared at him. "Say, who in the devil are you?"

"James Petrikin, of Chicago," came the haughty answer. "Half owner of the Crossbow. If you know what's good for you, you'd better not carry this thing any farther. Who put you up to it—Cates?"

"Ain't nobody put us up to it," Sorrel answered. "An' if I was you, I wouldn't bellow quite so loud." He motioned Milt aside. "Now, see what you got us into! If you'd 'a' let me plug Ramrod——"

"No use cryin' over spilt milk," reminded Milt.

"Well, who spilt it? Who's always hatchin' up fool notions to get us in up to our necks?"

"Well, now, listen," argued Milt. "This thing might not be so bad. This city slicker is Ramrod's pardner, ain't he? What's the matter with holdin' him till Ramrod comes across with them notes of ol' Santy's?"

Sorrel eyed him in scorn. "How long would we last, tellin' Ramrod such a thing as that?"

"He won't even suspicion us, you bonehead. We'll write reg'lar kidnap notes, like——" Milt broke off, his eyes alight with inspiration. "I got it! We'll make out like we're Black Will!"

"Say, now you talkin'. That desperadder is s'posed to be in this country, anyhow. Milt, at last you got a idea."

"I always have 'em," bragged Milt.

They gagged Petrikin, lowered him into the well, and pulled up the rope. Pointing Cates's horse homeward, they took a roundabout route to the ranch. They would write the ransom note tonight. Apparently exhausted, they sank into their chairs at the kitchen table.

Santiago Hermano came to the door. A round-bodied little man with a kindly twinkle in his eyes. He had the straight, thin nose of the Castilian. A crest of white hair framed his sunburned face.

"My vaqueros are so verree late," he said, smiling.

"Game little devil!" thought Sorrel.

"Yeah," he drawled, reaching for another tortilla, "we dug till most dark. Then we taken a *pasear* down to the lower pasture. Good thing, too. We pulled three calves outta bog-holes."

Santiago pulled up a hide-bottomed chair and sat down. There was kingly dignity in his every movement. Even in such a lowly task as holding a calf to be branded, his heritage of the grandees was always in evidence.

"I have the so-bad news," he said.

Sorrel and Milt jerked up their heads.

"In two weeks we have no home," Santiago continued, his eyes very black in the lamplight. Then he smiled. "But we get along, no?"

Sorrel scowled. "Ramrod, you mean?"

Santiago nodded. "But do not blame Señor Cates. It is honest debt. I borrow and borrow. Now I can borrow no more." He shrugged and was silent.

"Honest debt, nothin'! Ramrod's been cheatin' yore eyeballs out, Santy. Like the time he charged you fifteen dollars a ton for hay, when it was sellin' everywhere for ten."

"An' that time you had to let him carry part of yore stock through the winter," Milt reminded him. "He charged you double, the coyote."

Santiago spread his hands. "Do not talk so. Señor Cates is business man. Me, I have poor head for business." A sigh escaped him. "I am sorry for my so-fine boys. Now you have no home."

Sorrel grinned. "Don't you worry about me an' Milt."

"Not about yoreself, neither," Milt assured him. "Ramrod ain't got yore ranch yet."

"But, no. In two weeks, I said."

"Not in two weeks, or two years," Sorrel said loudly. "You jus' leave things to me an' Milt. We'll keep yore ranch for you, an' tie a knot in ol' Ramrod's tail, to

boot. Hey, you fool!" he said savagely to Milt. "Who the devil you kickin'——"

His mouth fell open.

In the door stood Ramrod Cates, his features set, his eyes glittering like bits of mica. Two words only shot from him:

"Where's Petrikin?"

SORREL and Milt, staring glassily at Cates, made no answer. Santiago rose from the table, a look in his placid countenance the cowboys had never seen there. He came close to Cates.

"This is still my house, Señor Cates. As long as it is mine, you owe me the courtesy of remaining outside until I invite you in."

"Rot!" snorted Ramrod Cates, looking over Santiago's head at Sorrel. "Where's Petrikin, I said?"

Sorrel stood up.

"I dunno what you talkin' about."

"All right. It's up to you. If you tell me, I'd be willin' to let the thing drop. But if you'd rather tell it to the sheriff, that's your own business."

Santiago glanced perplexedly from one face to the other. "This talk I do not sabe, Señor Cates. Petrikin, who is he?"

"My pardner, from Chicago," rasped Cates. "He came out on a visit, an' these mutton-heads kidnapped him. Got him hid somewhere. I'm offerin' 'em a chance to tell me where he's hid, to save the fools from goin' to the pen."

"You make the mistake, Señor Cates," Santiago protested. "My boys take away your partner? Never! I know my so-fine boys."

Cates smiled twistedly. "My Chink cook saw 'em takin' him away. Both horses wore your brand, Hermano. That's evidence any jury will convict on." The smile vanished. "I got it! You're in with 'em! You put 'em up to it, thinkin' to blackmail me out of foreclosin' on you!"

Santiago winced. "But, Señor, I——"

"That's it!" roared Cates. "I'll have all three of you slapped into jail." He turned on his heel, calling out: "Wong! Wong! Go get the sheriff!"

With a glance of despair at Milt, Sorrel shouted: "Hey, wait a minute. You said, if we told where Petrikin was, you'd call it square?"

"That's what I said. But I ain't goin' to wait all night."

"All right, we'll show you where he's at," Sorrel said heavily. "But get this straight: Santy didn't have a thing to do with it."

"Not a thing," Milt added. "If you try to get him mixed up in it, me an' Sorrel will be hung, by gosh, before we'll tell where that jigger's at."

Sorrel gulped. "Yeah. That's right."

"But I do not sabe," Santiago pleaded. "My so-good boys steal? It cannot be. It is some joke, no?"

Cates laughed. "The joke's on them. I just accused you, Hermano, to make 'em own up. Bluffin' about Wong bein' out there, too." His manner became suddenly brisk. "All right. Let's get goin'."

Sorrel and Milt, followed by Cates on his horse, strode across the greasewood flat to the well. Santiago stood in the door, watching. Sorrel dropped the bucket into the black hole, began to unwind the windlass.

"Climb in, Petrikin," he called.

No answer. Sorrel swore, a queer feeling inside him. Again he called. The echo of his voice rattled weirdly among the invisible hills.

"He ain't down there," Milt said.

"Must 'a' clumb out, but I don't see how in Sam Hill——"

"Do somethin'! Don't stand there yappin' like a coupla magpies!" Cates stormed. "Get down there, quick! He may be dead—had a weak heart, anyway. If he is—— Get a move on!"

He pushed Sorrel into the hole with such vehemence that Sorrel grabbed wildly at the rope. The windlass whirred madly, stopped with a creaky jerk.

"Well, say somethin'!" Cates shouted, a tremor in his voice.

"He ain't in here," came the despairing answer.

"What! He's bound to be in there! Strike a match!"

A flare lighted the cylindrical walls.

Cates and Milt, leaning far over the edge, saw only Sorrel. He was gripping a piece of paper, staring at it in the dying glow of the match.

"What's that?" snapped Cates.

Sorrel read until the match burned into his thumb. His voice came dull and dead:

"Pull me up."

Milt drew him up in the bucket. Cates snatched the paper, grating out an order for him to strike a match. He bent close to the paper, reading swiftly. An oath sizzled from his tight lips.

"What is it, Ramrod?" urged Milt. "I couldn't see."

"Petrikin's been kidnapped by Black Will, that's what!"

"Black Will? How did he know?"

"Saw you bringin' him here!" Cates thundered. "Maybe you're in cahoots with him, for all I know!"

Sorrel's lean features tightened. "Mind how you shoot off yore lip, Ramrod. We brung him here, like we said. But we ain't mixed up with no Black Will."

"Well, what's the difference? Jim's gone, and here's Black Will's demand for me to pay him five thousand dollars ransom. If I don't——" He jerked out his six-gun. "You snakes are goin' to jail. Get a move on. Saddle up your horses."

"Give us a chance to locate him, Ramrod," argued Milt. "Won't do no good to stick us in jail. I give you my word, me an' Sorrel——"

"Your word—what good is that?" rasped Cates. He brandished the gun-barrel in their faces. "Turn around, both of you. No more talkin'. I'm takin' you to El Torro."

"But, listen," persisted Milt. "If you give us a chance——"

"Move!"

AS they trotted across the bridge that led into El Torro, a clock somewhere among the low buildings struck eleven. Down the wide main street Cates rode, close behind his prisoners. Along the sidewalks of the empty street men began to appear, singly and in knots of three or four. They stared in silence at Ramrod Cates, driving before him two men whose wrists were roped to their saddle-horns.

By the time the jail was reached, a crowd of fifty men had gathered there. Others were coming, from all directions. Crossbow riders, some of them. Hard-riding, hard-fighting men who answered to no law except that of Ramrod Cates. Sorrel glanced at Milt. He, too, looked worried.

The jailer, a dour man with piercing slits of eyes, opened the massive barred door. Cates spoke to him crisply. The ropes were cut from the prisoners' wrists. After being searched, they were led down a dimly lighted corridor to a cell. The jailer unlocked the cell and pushed them inside. His boots clumped hollowly down the passage, a door slammed, then silence.

Sorrel dropped on the cot with a groan.

"Don't say it!" Milt turned on him furiously.

"What's eatin' on you?"

"I know what you're thinkin'—it's all my fault."

"I ain't blamin' you, Milt. But I b'lieve you got to own up it'd been better my way."

"Well, I don't know. Funny how things work out, sometimes."

Sorrel whistled softly. "What a mess! Now Black Will's got him. We sure helped ol' Santy out!" He got up, moving restlessly to the slit of a window.

"They ain't apt to do much to us," Milt said, as if thinking aloud. "Soon as they get Petrikin back they——"

"Come here," Sorrel whispered. He pointed between the close-set bars. "Look!"

Across the street a dark knot of men stood out from the shadows. There was something sinister in the silence of these figures. Occasionally there came the flash of light on gun-metal, like the wink of a wicked eye. The prisoners, straining their gaze into the night, imagined a hundredfold more than they saw. Crossbow men, they knew.

"I don't like the looks of things," Milt muttered. "We got to get outta here."

"Got a good idea, I s'pose?" was Sorrel's sarcastic rejoinder.

"Never was without one yet," boasted Milt. He lowered his voice. "We'll tear up a blanket an' make us a rope. Raise a ruckus an' bring the jailer. Then we'll drop a loop over his head an' choke him till he let's us out. How's that sound?"

Sorrel considered for a moment. Experience had given him a hearty scepticism of Milt's flashes of genius. His get-rich-quick schemes, his short cuts to completion of a piece of work always sounded infallible, but they had a way of not panning out. Like this kidnapping business. Sorrel crossed reflectively to the cell door. The bars of the grating were scarcely an inch and a half apart. Too close for his thick wrists. But Milt could reach through. By a long chance, he might be able to drop a noose over the jailer's head.

"Well?" Milt insisted.

"She may be worth a try. Can't be any worse off, if she don't work."

"She'll work; don't worry."

They quickly discovered that the blankets, heavy and thick, could not be torn into strips. But the mattress ticking tore easily. Goaded to desperate haste by the thought of those men out there in the dark, they plaited six strips of the canvas into a rope strong enough to hold any man. The town clock struck two before the lariat was finished.

While Sorrel held a blanket over the window, to deaden the sound, Milt shook the door, calling out in a loud voice:

"Water! Water! Water!"

Like successive crashes of thunder in a canyon his shouts rang through the narrow corridor. The noise was deafening. Sorrel, pressing the edges of the blanket closer over the window, imagined he saw the Crossbow men rushing upon the jail. The entire town, he was certain, was awake now.

"Water! Water!" bellowed Milt, and the steel door rattled beneath his furious shaking. "Water! Water! Water!"

AT last a door opened at the end of the corridor. Feet came swiftly over the stone floor. Milt, holding the noosed rope through the bars, waited in an agony of suspense. His staring eyes watched the vague figure come closer and closer. Now!

His wrist snapped up and out—the cast was perfect. He swung back, banging the man's head against the bars. Springing across the cell, Sorrel snatched the taut rope.

"Unlock that door!" he said between his teeth. "Quick—or I'll choke you!"

"But, no!" came the gasping voice of Santiago Hermano.

"Santy—you!" The rope fell from Sorrel's fingers. "Gosh!"

"We thought you was the jailer," Milt apologised rapidly. "Didn't hurt you, did we?"

"It is all right," said Santiago, throwing off the noose. There came a jingle of metal, the scrape of key in lock, and the door opened. "Come, queek."

Santiago led the way back down the corridor. Just inside the outer door lay the jailer, face down on the floor.

"So sorry I must hit him with my gun," murmured Santiago. "But he make the fight when I tell him why I come."

"But how'd you get in?" Sorrel whispered.

Santiago shrugged. "I tell him I have news of this Petrikin. But come. We must hurry."

One by one they slipped through the door, crouching low against the wall. Ten minutes later, they stood in an arroyo beside two horses. To each saddle-horn hung a loaded cartridge-belt with six-shooter, and a canteen. Santiago held out his hand.

"Adios."

Neither grasped the extended hand.

"We ain't goin' away an' leave you," Sorrel said.

"That goes double," affirmed Milt.

"But, listen." With swift logic Santiago convinced them they could do him no good by remaining in this country, even if they were not strung up by the

Crossbow men, which was almost a certainty. They must leave him.

"But what's goin' to become of you?" asked Sorrel. "When they find out what you done, they're liable to string you up."

"I am old," Santiago answered. "They will do me no harm."

"I ain't so sure about that." Sorrel looked up quickly, as a shout sounded from the jail. He gripped Santiago's arm. "Up behind me! Let's go!"

But Santiago shook his head, turning away.

"I stay, *amigos mios. Adios.*"

"Let's get goin', then." Milt swung into the saddle.

Sorrel followed.

"So long, Santy."

After a short distance they climbed out of the arroyo, pounding across the dim expanse of hills that rolled to the south. Down there lay Mexico. With their lead, they should be able to reach the border safely ahead of pursuit. Only now a pale glow was stealing up the eastern wall of the sky.

As they charged over the crest of a gently sloping hill, they found themselves looking hard into each other's eyes. They drew rein, as though by common consent. Sorrel grinned, and Milt grinned back at him. They whirled their horses and raced back in the direction they had come.

"Don't know what we was thinkin' about, runnin' out on him thataway," Sorrel said above the staccato beat of hoofs.

"We wasn't thinkin', a-tall."

When they had come within five or six miles of El Torro, they saw a stream of riders surging toward them. A posse! A shout went up from those men. Swiftly though Sorrel and Milt turned their horses, they heard the cracking of rifles and the whine of bullets. Thanks to the partial darkness and the cut-up nature of the country, the posse was soon eluded.

In the grey of dawn they came within view of the Rancho de los Pinos. Lonely and unreal the old house loomed through the sea of mists. They wondered if Santy was in there, or if the swift, harsh justice of the range had already overtaken him. Now, as they cautiously drew nearer the house, they heard a horse approaching from the other side of the ridge. Quickly riding into a wash, they waited. A rider topped the ridge, stood for a moment in clear relief. It was a Chinese.

"Ramrod's cook, Wong," guessed Sorrel.

Milt reached over and pinched his horse's nostrils together.

But the cook rode north, away from them. Soon he was lost behind a clump of trees.

"Now, what's that Chink up to?" Sorrel muttered. "Had a basket, or somethin'."

Milt rubbed his chin reflectively. "I jest got a hunch ol' Ramrod's got him doin' some of his dirty work. Let's foller him."

"If it don't take too long," agreed Sorrel, thinking of Santiago.

KEEPING well out of sight, they followed the Chinese into a wooded gulch down which tumbled a noisy little stream. Their wonder grew, as the cook went on and on up the gulch, which was now an almost impenetrable tangle of brush. Then out of the dimness ahead rose the roof of a cabin. A horse stood before the door.

"He's in there!" whispered Sorrel. "Up to somethin', all right."

Leaving their horses, they crept to a window. In the darkness they saw nothing. But they heard the angry voice of James Petrikin:

"I'll have him hung for this!"

"Me bling plenty eat," came the cook's sing-song. "Last long time."

"Long time!" exploded Petrikin. "When I get out of here——"

Waiting to hear no more, Sorrel and Milt rushed into the cabin.

"We gotcha, Wong—put down that knife!" shouted Sorrel. "Grab him, Milt. Now take him outside. I'll get Mr. Petrikin loose."

"All right, Chink," grated Milt.

Petrikin did not say anything until the ropes were cut from his hands and feet.

"What's the matter? You fellows going back on Cates?"

"Goin' back on him? I don't quite savvy what you mean."

Petrikin stood up, moving his arms rapidly, stamping his feet.

"He hired you fellows to kidnap me, didn't he?"

Sorrel stared at him. "Gosh, no. We thought we was kidnappin' Ramrod when we taken you. Ramrod hired us? Say, he's doin' his best to nail our hides on the fence. But what about his Chink bringin' you grub? I can't git this thing through my head."

"Cates and the Chinaman took me out of that well and brought me here," Petrikin said harshly. "The Chinaman had seen you fellows put me in there, and——"

"Wait! You say Ramrod an' Wong brung you here? What about Black Will?"

"Black Will?"

"Yeah. He left a ransom note in the well. Didn't he bring you here?"

"Cates brought me here," Petrikin repeated. "Probably made up the Black Will yarn."

"Hey! Hurry up in there!" Milt called anxiously. "They're comin'—the whole pack of 'em!"

Sorrel and Petrikin came quickly out of the cabin.

"Give me a gun, somebody," muttered Petrikin.

But there was only Milt's and Sorrel's guns.

The grimly waiting men heard, above the cracking of brush, the sharp command of Ramrod Cates. Then there was the sound of only one horse coming toward the cabin. Cates, his face twisted with rage, drew rein before them.

"Well!" he barked at Petrikin. "What you gonna do about it?"

"Nothing," was Petrikin's prompt answer, "if you accept my price for your half interest in the Crossbow. If you don't, I'll send you to the penitentiary."

No indication of defeat showed in Cates's face. "All right," he snapped. "I'll have my lawyer see you to-day. Come on, Wong." He bent a dark look at Sorrel and Milt, wheeled his horse, and dived into the brush.

Sorrel stared at Petrikin, who was smiling. "What the devil does all this mean?"

"Well, I'd thought for some time Cates was beating me out of part of the ranch profits," Petrikin explained. "I came out to check his books. Why, he was stealing me blind. When you fellows kidnapped me, you played right into his hand. He intended to keep me here until he forced me to sell out to him at his own figure."

"See! What'd I tell you?" Milt bragged. "I knowed what I was doin'. My ideas always work out."

"Yore ideas!" scoffed Sorrel. "If that ain't the dangest thing I ever hear tell of."

"There won't be any more of this stealing the little ranches in this valley," Petrikin continued. "From now on, it's live and and let live. Plenty room here for everybody."

"You mean," Sorrel asked wonderingly, "you ain't goin' to take Santy's ranch?"

"Santiago Hermano, you mean? The foreclosure papers are already made out. But"—Petrikin smiled—"in view of what you boys have done for me, I'm going to burn up those papers. Now, let's go home."

The newly risen sun slanted a broad shaft of gold over the ridge, shattering into a million glittering fragments against the pine needles.

Sorrel's eyes met Milt's.

"Right, wasn't I?" gloated Milt.

Sorrel grinned. "Yeah. Right as the walkin'-stick in a blind man's hand."

FREEDOM OF THE WILDS

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

DOWN the white slope to the river snowshoed the giant lumberjack known as Jake. With mighty strides he came through the swirling flakes, the webbing of his snow-shoes swishing up powdery clouds. A mile or two behind him trailed a posse led by the grim old man-hunter, Sheriff Steele. Jake had killed a man in a logging camp up on the Carcajou River. For three days he had kept ahead of the posse.

He pushed through a tangle of spectral willows and stood at the river's edge. He looked expectantly up and down the swift stream, and his simple face darkened with disappointment. He had thought there was a bridge here. Perhaps it had been washed away. His hunted eyes looked searchingly up at the top of the slope, turned back to the river.

It was all of three hundred feet wide. The current, fed by melting snows of early winter, was too swift for the strongest swimmer. It raced past him in sinuous black folds, like smoothly gliding coils of a serpent, lifting its head here and there in boiling white rapids. A low sullen roar hung over the stream.

Jake would ride a log across. He snowshoed along the margin of the river toward a pine wood, black and formless behind the flickering white curtain.

Passing a clump of alders, he heard a stealthy rustle, a rattle of chains. He parted the bushes, and his face became both angry and tender. A marten was

caught in a steel trap. The reddish-brown little animal, having dragged the trap to the length of its chain, looked up at him, teeth bared.

Jake could not stand to see any living thing suffer. He sprang open the jaws of the trap, and the marten scurried away. He pulled the trap-pin from the frozen earth, flung the trap into the river.

His kindness to animals was the cause of his being hunted down as a murderer. Some lumberjacks had tied two cats together by their tails and hung them over a clothes-line. Jake's efforts to free the insanely clawing cats resulted in a fist-fight. As he ran off through the woods, he left two men on the ground. One had an eye knocked out, the other a broken neck.

"I just can't see nothin' hurt," Jake muttered, thinking of that fight.

HE went on toward the pines, looking often to the ridge over which he had come. They would never take him, he told himself. He belonged in this big, free country of forests and rivers and singing winds. Here he had been born, here he would die. Deep of lung, powerful of limb, he was as much a part of these wilds as the elk, the timber wolf, and the bear.

Half-buried in the snow was a dead pine, two feet through at its base, shaggy with limbs. Jake's only tools were his hands. He ripped, twisted, wrenched limbs from the trunk. Straining until his face grew purple, he lifted an end of the sheared trunk and struggled to the river. He went back to get a limb to be used as a balancing-pole. No posse men topped the snowy ridge. But they could not be far away, Jake knew.

He hastened back, pushed the log into the river. Eagerly the leaping little waves clutched it, swinging it against the bank. As lightly, as surely as a cat, he sprang upon the log. He poled it away from the bank, and the current gripped it, whirling it over. But Jake, as good a lumberjack as ever came out of the north woods, had little difficulty in keeping his balance.

The log shot downstream. Expert though he was, Jake could not avoid the rapids that seized the log as if with human hands, twisting it end for end, sucking it under. But he gradually guided the log toward the opposite bank.

Suddenly he was floundering in the icy water. The log had rammed a submerged boulder. He lunged for the log, missed it, went under. Swimming powerfully, he overtook the log, came astride it, then erect. Fifteen minutes later, blue with cold, teeth chattering, he leaped upon the rocky store.

A shout turned him around. There was the posse, streaming fan-wise down the slope. A bullet screeched over him. He clambered up the bank, darted behind a big boulder. While his anxious eyes watched Sheriff Steele lead his seven men down to the river, Jake unloaded and wiped his six-shooter, his only weapon. Grim was his face, desperate. Here he would make his stand.

But the old lawman, after a brief pause, headed upstream. Jake wondered at this, because every man in the posse except the sheriff had come from the Carcajou River camp. They could cross the river as easily as he. Then a gleam of comprehension came into his eyes, and he nodded his head.

"That's it. That bridge I thought was here is up-stream."

He pulled off his bearskin cap, beating it against a post-like thigh. He was soaked to the skin, but his feet, protected by waterproof boots, were only damp. He climbed the mountain. From its crest the river was a black streamer curled between slanting white walls. Eight men moved slowly along its edge. But he did not see the bridge.

Thonging on his snow-shoes, he set out along the mountain-top. He was bound for the Flathead reservation, fifty-some miles west and south. He had blood relatives among these Indians who would give him refuge. With the lead he now had over the posse, he was certain they would not overtake him. He strode over the mountain-top through the falling snow. A series of timbered benches, like

a colossal stair, led him into a dense spruce forest.

He heard now the deep, sonorous cries of ravens; almost human it sounded, yet strange and weird. *"Ho, ho, ho!"* the death birds laughed. *"Wah, wah—yah-h-h!"* Soon he saw the black birds in the branches of a tree. Forgetting, for the moment, those eight men on his trail, he angled in the direction of the ravens. They flew up from the ground, filling the air with demon laughter.

A big white-tailed buck stood there, knee-deep in snow, his antlers locked to those of a dead buck. The ravens had picked out the eyes of the dead buck and eaten a hole in its rump. The living buck, gaunt and weak, could not lift his antler-locked head, but he turned on Jake a fighting eye. Marks in the snow showed where the dead buck had been dragged.

PITY was in Jake's simple heart. He had no time to free the buck. Even now the posse must have crossed the river. Drawing his gun, he came close to the buck, which tugged furiously at the brown mass in the snow. He took slow aim behind the animal's ear. But he did not pull the trigger.

"I can't do it," he said aloud. "It's just like shootin' a man in the back."

He ejected the cartridges from the gun and sat astride the dead buck. While the ravens hooted from the spruce-tops, he hammered with gun-butt against the antlers of the dead deer. The living buck pulled and heaved, snorting. The antlers were thick and strong. Jake hammered mightily before the horns broke. A twist, a violent wrench, and the buck was free.

Wise in the ways of deer in this mad November season, Jake sprang back. Quick though he was, the antlers of the charging buck grazed his arm. He dodged behind a tree. He knew there was not much fight left in the starved brute. To his astonishment, the buck lunged past him. A shot, a loud cry. The buck had a man down, under his antlers. He was killing the man!

Jake aimed behind the buck's ear and, this time, he fired. Dying, the buck wheeled on him. Jake made a heart shot, and the deer sank.

"Good!" muttered the stranger, sitting up and reaching for the rifle that had fallen from his hands. He was a short, stocky man in rabbit-skin cap and mackinaw. His heavy boots were thrust into the thonged hold of snow-shoes. Pale, shrewd eyes looked out of a tawny-bearded face at Jake. "That devil had me!"

Jake looked at the man closely. He did not holster his gun. "Who're you?"

"My name's Lundgren." As the man came cautiously to his feet, a spasm of pain twisted his mouth. "B'lieve I got a busted rib."

"You was sneakin' up on me," Jake accused him.

"Sneakin' up on you? Me?" Lundgren laughed, broke off, pressing a hand to his side. "What for would I want to be sneakin' up on you?"

Jake started to answer, then caught himself. "You was sneakin' up on me," he repeated. "What you doin' here, anyhow?"

"Settin' my trap-line. I heard all that racket, an' come over to see what was the matter."

"Trapper, huh?" Jake hated trappers. "Maybe I ought to let that buck finish you." Without another look at Lundgren, he started away.

Lundgren's command, as sharp as an axe-stroke on a cold morning, stopped him in his tracks: "Git 'em up!"

Jake turned round. Lundgren's rifle was aimed at him.

"Git 'em up, I say. Yah! I was sneakin' up on you, you bet. I seen you rob my trap, you wolverene! An' I seen them men comin' after you. I'm holdin' you till they git here. Don't you try nothin', you big ox. I got my rifle right on you."

Lundgren moved closer. "Drop your gun on the ground," he ordered. "Mind you, if you make a funny move, I'm lettin' you have it. Reckon the sheriff don't care whether you're dead, or no."

Jake dropped his gun in the snow. Lundgren had trapped him, as he trapped all creatures of the forest. And Sheriff Steele would be here soon, to take him away. He turned blazing eyes on the trapper.

"Now, listen here. That buck would've got you, if it hadn't been for me. You call this actin' square?"

But Lundgren laughed at him. "Anything's square, when a man needs money."

"Well, I ain't got any. You can search me."

"May be a reward on you. Ever hear tell of a reward? For all I know, you might 'a' killed somebody."

JAKE was silent. He could not get this thing through his head, of a man whose life he had saved turning him over to the law for money. Money—what was that? A new pair of boots, a rifle, a jug of liquor, maybe. He said, with dogged persistence:

"That buck would've got you, if it hadn't been for me."

"Well, he didn't," snapped Lundgren. "Turn around an' start on your back trail."

As Jake turned, he noticed the expression of pain that gripped Lundgren's dour features. Just for an instant the rifle-barrel wavered. Jake sprang at the trapper, arms outspread. Lundgren leaped back, whirling the rifle in Jake's face. Then Jake's fist cracked against jawbone.

Staggering backward, Lundgren stumbled over the buck Jake had shot, fell screaming upon the branching antlers. With that shrill cry, the watching ravens flew swiftly away. Lundgren lay motionless, terrible question in his eyes. Jake lifted him. Twin blotches of blood widened over Lundgren's back.

"How bad?" he whispered.

Jake saw that no crimson stained his lips. "Missed your lungs," he said. "Went most through your left shoulder. Other one caught you in the side."

"I got a broke rib, too," muttered Lundgren. He tried to sit up, but sank back, gasping. His eyes never left Jake. "You ain't goin' away an' leave me?"

"Why not?" Jake asked harshly. "You was turnin' me over to that posse—after I'd saved you from gettin' killed."

"I was wrong, I reckon," Lundgren mumbled. But his sickened eyes never left Jake.

Jake looked through the shimmering screen of snow in the direction he had come. There was no sound, except the tiny fall of snowflakes on the branches of the evergreens. Still, men travelling on snow make little sound.

"They'll be here soon," he said.

Picking up Lundgren's rifle, he went away into the dark forest. Snow fell thickly. In half an hour his snow-shoe trail would be buried in the white floor of the forest. Before then, he felt certain, the posse would have found Lundgren.

But, coming out of the spruce upon a naked spur, he saw three men spread out over the slope beneath him. He drew back within the trees. Searching the upheaval of ridge and valley spread before his vision, he counted five more men, all going in different directions. It was the posse. They had lost his trail. Jake's bearded lips parted in a grim smile.

Then he thought of the trapper, helpless back there in the snow. The posse would not find him. He would freeze before morning. Well, let him. Had it been an animal Jake would not have hesitated to go back. But Lundgren wasn't an animal; he was a snake. He deserved to freeze to death.

Jake waited until the last of the eight men disappeared. Then, thinking of the warm lodges and steaming kettles of the Flatheads, he went cautiously down the flank of the spur.

But he could not get Lundgren out of his mind. Before he reached the foot of the spur, he stopped, brow wrinkled in thought. With a muttered oath, he turned around and went back up the slope. He would never be anything but a fool, he told himself bitterly. But he could not leave a man to die.

THE way back seemed very long. Out of the white distance came the long, smooth howl of the wolf. Jake increased his stride. He found the trapper face down in the snow, where he had fallen after a few staggering steps. The snow was stained dark-red. It was several minutes before Jake brought him to.

"Where you live?" He repeated the question over and over.

"Cabin—Lobo Gulch. Four, five mile," finally came the mumbled answer. Lundgren looked at him strangely.

"Well, you can't stay here an' freeze to death," rasped Jake. "Which way?"

Lundgren, still staring at him, pointed north-east. And the Flathead reservation lay south-west.

Jake lifted the trapper across his shoulders and started away. *"Ho, ho, ho!"* hooted the ravens, hurrying to their delayed feast. *"Wah, wah—yah-ah-h!"*

Jake ploughed through the snow.

"You turn left," muttered Lundgren between clenched teeth.

That meant a climb. A stiff climb, to judge from the treeless, snow-shrouded slope that slanted abruptly from the forest floor. Tightening his grip on Lundgren's legs, which dangled over his shoulder, Jake began the climb. It was hard going. Rocks and hollows and charred tree-trunks lay hiden under the snow. The grey puffs from Jake's nostrils became more and more rapid. Once he laughed.

"What's the matter?" Lundgren asked uneasily.

"Thinkin' I don't need snow-shoes," was the harsh answer.

Jake removed the snow-shoes, thonged them to Lundgren's back. He struggled up the ridge to the wind-swept crest. "North now," directed Lundgren. Head bowed into the wind that howled down from the Canadian wilderness, Jake fought his way along the rocky divide. A swirling white screen lay between him and the tree-tops below.

Hardened though he was to tests of physical endurance, Jake was glad when Lundgren told him to turn west. But in the gulch in which he soon found himself, the walking was even more difficult. Snow was deep, branches struck him in the face, frigid wind drove the breath back into his nostrils.

He came to a fork in the gulch. Lundgren did not answer his question as to which fork he should take. Lundgren was unconscious. Guided by his woodsman's instinct, Jake chose the left fork. A short distance, and he saw a blur of snow-stripped logs under a snow-piled roof rising from the foot of a naked rock-face. He drew up behind a boulder, warily watching the cabin. But no smoke came from the chimney.

He ploughed through the loose snow. Drifts three to four feet deep lay against the walls of the cabin. He approached from the end which had no window. Lowering the unconscious trapper to the ground, he drew his gun and went cautiously to the door. He pushed open the door. No sound from the semi-darkness. Gun in front of him, he darted through the door, flattening himself against a wall. He saw that the room was empty.

He brought Lundgren in, laid him on the bunk, and built a fire in the little cook-stove. He examined the antler thrusts. They were deep, but as clean-cut as though made by a stiletto. He cleansed and bandaged the wounds as the way of the woods had taught him. As for the broken rib—two, in fact—he could do nothing but bind a wide strip of tarpaulin around Lundgren's body.

IN the lean-to Jake found a shoulder of venison and a brace of wild turkeys. Stacked in a corner of the shed were skins—skins of mink, otter, fox, marten. Other skins were stretched on the walls. Traps, a dozen or more of them, lay on the floor.

Jake turned and looked at the trapper. Hate for the man boiled hot within him. Why should he further help this destroyer, this cold-blooded killer who, only a few hours ago, would have turned him over to the law? Here was food and

wood. Perhaps by to-morrow Lundgren would be able to shift for himself. Now, in this storm, was the time to elude old Sheriff Steele.

Lundgren was muttering in his fevered sleep. Something about his mother. It meant nothing to Jake; he didn't remember ever having had a mother. He cut off a venison steak, made up a batch of biscuits, and set coffee to boil. This might be his last opportunity to eat a good meal until he reached the reservation. But he also made a bowl of weak broth.

Night closed down over the wilderness with icy grip, and Jake was still in the cabin. Storming too hard, he told himself. He would wait until morning.

All that night the wind boomed against the cabin walls, howling and shrieking as if evil spirits were riding the storm. The spruce-trees beside the cabin lashed the roof like frantic hands. Snow, driven through the chinking between the logs, filled the room with icy powder. Wind rushed down the chimney, banged open the stove door, shooting sparks across the room. Fire as he might, Jake could not keep the temperature much above zero.

Feeble light, struggling through the snow-plastered window, told that night had passed. But there was no lessening of the storm. In solid sheets the snow drove at the white earth. The wind, booming like great bassoons one minute, shrieking the next, lashed the cabin with unceasing fury. As they hunched about the stove, the men's breath hung grey before their faces.

Toward noon Jake went out to get more wood. He found, under a dead pine, a weasel, its hind leg mangled and broken. Unable to escape, the weasel whirled on Jake, baring its sharp teeth. But he caught it behind the neck. He brought the desperately-fighting animal back to the cabin, together with an armful of wood.

"What you bringin' that thing in here for?" growled Lundgren.

"Can't you see he's hurt? Probably pulled hisself outa one of your blasted traps."

"Well, what of it? Animals is made to be trapped, ain't they?"

A dull flush showed above the beard on Jake's cheeks, but he didn't say anything. Holding up the spitting, clawing weasel, he looked admiringly at the thick fur that was changing from grey to white. The long slender body rippled with muscle. The short legs, the sharp claws, and strong jaws denoted its fighting power.

"Them's the wust varmints in the woods," said Lundgren, his eyes never leaving the glossy coat of the weasel, "Snakes, I call 'em."

"Not as much snake as the feller that sets a trap for 'em." Jake put the weasel in the corner behind the stove.

"What you aimin' to do with him?"

"Goin' to keep him till the storm breaks."

Lundgren watched, silent in his blanket, while Jake built a little pen of stove wood in the corner. "You're a queer one," he said slowly. "Do somethin' bad enough to have a posse after you, then go out of your way to save an ornery varmint like a weasel."

"You ought to be glad of it."

"Sure, I know. I ain't kickin'. You saved my neck. But I jest can't figger you, that's all. As I say, you're a queer one."

Jake laid the sticks of wood across the top of the pen and stood up.

"I don't see nothin' queer about it. Animals have got as much right to live, as folks. More right, accordin' to what I seen of folks."

"But how about a man, like me, that's got to make a livin' by trappin'? That's all I ever done, 'cept a little prospectin' in the summer. That weasel's pelt," Lundgren added, "is wuth ten dollars."

"You'd be better off leavin' 'em alone." There was an angry rumble in Jake's voice. "If all of them little animals in there"—looking at the lean-to door—"was runnin' round the woods like the Lord meant for 'em to be——" He broke off. "How's your shoulder feel?"

"Purty good."

THE blizzard continued all that day and night. On the morning of the third day, though snow fell thickly, the wind died. Jake went out to get more wood. The cold, clean air pierced to the bottom of his lungs. Spruce and pine stood from four to six feet deep in snow, their lower branches buried. Falling snow hid even the higher mountains, as it would hide him from Sheriff Steele's posse.

When he had carried in a week's supply of wood, Jake would strike out for the reservation. He drew in a great breath of air, and grinned. Wading in among the down timber, he dragged an entire tree to the cabin. He came inside, wood piled to his chin. Stacking the wood, he noticed that the weasel was not in its pen. He glanced quickly about the cabin.

"Where'd he go?" he demanded of Lundgren.

"What? That weasel?" Lundgren shook his head. "Ain't seen the varmint. Must 'a' snuck out through a hole, somewheres."

Jake would have thought no more of it, had he not noticed in the pen a spot of blood. He spun on Lundgren, his face twisted with rage.

"You killed him!"

"I never! What's the matter with you, 'cusin' me——"

"How'd that blood get on the floor?"

"Blood? I dunno. His foot, I reckon."

"I b'lieve you're lyin'." Jake towered over him, fists clenched. "I'm goin' to look around. An' if I find you killed him, I—I'll kill you!"

Lundgren laughed shortly. "Go ahead. Look all you please—if you think I'm lyin'."

"You'd better not be."

Now Jake saw a wet spot near the door of the lean-to, as if it had been freshly wiped. He jerked open the door. The skin of the weasel was not among those tacked to the walls. He drove a boot against the stack of pelts on the floor, scattering them. Swiftly he clawed the skins aside. And there, at the very bottom of the pile, still bleeding, was the skin of the weasel.

No word left Jake's tight lips. He came slowly out of the lean-to. He did not seem to see the rifle clamped to Lundgren's shoulder, nor the slitted eyes beyond the rifle's muzzle.

"Don't you come a step closer," warned Lundgren, his bearded lips drawn away from his teeth. "Better not, I tell you! I don't want to have to kill a man, jest on 'count of a weasel, but—— Git back, I tell you!"

Jake moved slowly toward the trapper. There was something doom-like in his heavy tread.

Lundgren took a step backward.

"Git back, I tell you! This here rifle's loaded an' cocked. I'll kill you—I'll kill——"

Suddenly bending double, Jake dived at Lundgren's knees. The rifle exploded. Then Jake struck him, with all the force of his powerful body. The back of Lundgren's head banged the floor. Into the fear-stiffened face Jake drove a fist. Lundgren went as limp as a wet rag. Jake picked up the rifle and came to his feet. He did not even look at the man crumpled on the floor.

A biting, burning pain across his shoulder warned him Lundgren had not missed. Stripping off mackinaw and shirt, he examined the wound. It was only a slash, clean as a knife-cut. He bandaged it, made up a pack of grub, and stepped into his snow-shoes. Only then, he looked at the trapper.

"Well, I done right," he said aloud. "That's all he ever done—kill."

He stooped and laid Lundgren on the bunk. Now he saw that Lundgren was not dead. Blood oozed from a cut in his scalp; there was a faint heart-beat. He had a fractured skull, Jake thought. Looking down at the grey face, he swore softly. If the man was dead, that ended it. But a living man—— Why had he not struck a little harder?

There was a trading-post, he remembered up on Daylight Creek, fifteen or twenty miles from here. It would not be

much out of his way. He would manage to get word to the post, and run little danger of being recognised. He would do this much, for even a thing like Lundgren.

MILES of white wilderness passed beneath the webbing of his snowshoes. He came, in the dim light of midday, into a canyon whose snow-piled rims reared half a thousand feet above him. Swiftly he went over the level snow. A little farther on, he would come to the fork where Daylight Creek entered the canyon. The trading-post was four or five miles up the creek.

He saw a man up there on the rim, sitting a horse. It was only a glance, before he darted into the cover of a wall; but he knew the rider was Sheriff Steele. The lawman's arm was in a sling; he sat the horse unnaturally. Likely, he had had a fall, which forced him to ride. From the rim there came three-rifle shots, about a quarter minute apart. Sheriff Steele was summoning his posse.

Close against the wall, Jake went on up the canyon.

"They'll never take me," he muttered. He looked hungrily at the white mountains, the dark-green trees, the strip of grey sky held between the canyon rims. "They'll never take me away from here!"

Three rifle-shots, regularly spaced, sounded from out the distance behind him. Three more, farther away. The posse men were answering. Again Sheriff Steele sent the signal thundering across the heights.

Rifle swinging in his hand, Jake strode rapidly up the gorge, keeping close to the wall on whose rim was the sheriff. His eyes were narrowed, burning with dangerous lights. The same fires that had shone there when he had killed that lumberjack up on the Carcajou, and when he had struck Lundgren.

With long, slued stride he went up the river of snow. He came within sight of the gap where Daylight Creek entered the canyon. Of Sheriff Steele he saw no more. Perhaps Jake would yet have time to leave that message at the trading-post.

A spray of snow leaped up in front of him. Even as the rifle cracked, he saw a puff of smoke above a ledge a hundred yards ahead. Quick though he was to jump behind a projecting shoulder, a bullet grazed his arm. He trained his rifle-sights on the ledge, beneath which he would have to pass. He saw no movement up there. Sheriff Steele, undoubtedly. The old fox had cut him off.

The high, steep, snow-banked walls were unscalable. There was no way except to go back. Jake went back, his eyes shuttling from one rim to the other. A mile, two miles passed swiftly behind him.

A warning rumble suddenly filled the canyon. Snow, breaking loose from its wet foundations, was coming down the wall. Halting, to determine the direction of the slide, Jake saw a saddled horse shoot over a ledge ahead of him, whirl through the air, and vanish into the deep snow of the gorge. It was Sheriff Steele's horse. Loose snow funnelled down a crevice, fanning out over the canyon bottom. Of the horse there was not a trace.

Now a deep, ominous roar sounded from the rim, swelling in volume. An avalanche was coming down the wall. In leaping waves it came, bearing on its heaving breast rocks, trees, tons of earth. Trees that stood in its path snapped in two with crackling report. The avalanche spilled into the gorge, dashing against the opposite wall. Jake smiled grimly. Old Steele was undoubtedly buried in the slide. And the posse men would not be able to overtake him.

But he stood there, staring vacantly at the slowly settling mass. He was thinking of the horse. It was alive, he felt certain. Kicking and struggling under the snow, gasping out its life.

LIKE a man driven, he ran toward the slide. Its main body had passed beyond the horse. He should be able to dig it out in a few minutes. Like a very Goliath he dug into the mass of snow and rock and twisted trees. Hear-

ing a groan under him, he worked with redoubled vigour, straining until his neck muscles stood out like ropes.

His groping fingers touched flesh. An oath ripped from him. A man was down there. Jake pulled him up through the snow. Sheriff Steele, as he had thought, his eyes closed, head lolling on his neck. Jake let him fall in the snow, went on searching for the horse.

He jerked up his head as there came a shout from the rim. Three men were up there, calling to him, their rifles pointed at him. On the opposite rim appeared a fourth man. Jake saw this man's arms shoot up, saw him tumbling down the wall, followed by a curving crest of snow.

Snatching up the unconscious sheriff, Jake struggled out of the path of the slide, and up the canyon. A bullet struck him in the back, staggering him. He dropped the sheriff and turned, facing the posse. His face was grey and drawn. But the hands that gripped his rifle were cool, as steady as rock.

"They ain't takin' me," he said.

Sheriff Steele sat up. He looked dazedly at Jake. It was long before he spoke:

"Much obliged for pullin' me out."

"I was tryin' to get your horse out, not you," Jake told him, searching the walls ahead.

"And you killed a man over a couple of fightin' cats."

"I'd do it again," Jake said vehemently. "An' say. There's a trapper up at the head of Lobo Gulch needs a doctor."

"Lundgren? I was by there a while ago." The sheriff paused. "You were goin' for a doctor?"

"No. I was goin' to leave word at the post."

The old man-hunter looked at Jake, hard. For the first time in his life, he realised the existence of a higher justice than man-made law. He caught a glimpse of something finer than the old measure of right and wrong, something that transcended even his iron-bound sense of duty, and that was beyond the power of steel bars.

"Go!" he said harshly. "Go, while you got a chance."

Jake stared at him. "You mean it?"

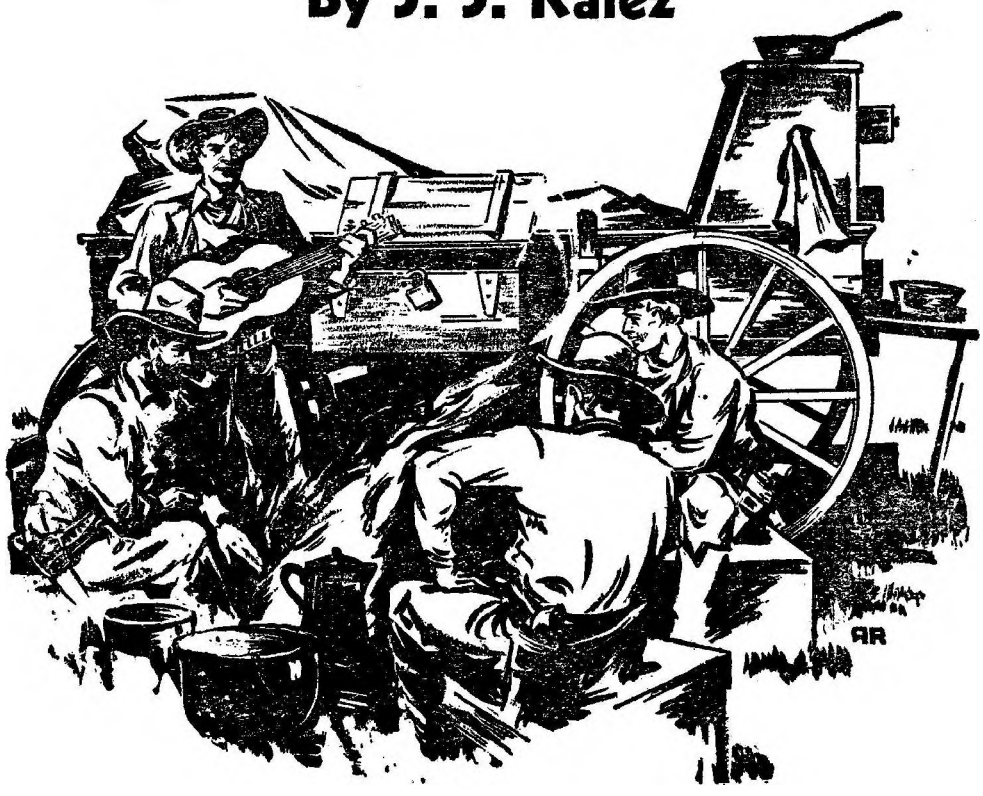
"Go, I tell you!"

"All right, sheriff. But don't forget about your horse."

Jake shouldered his rifle and went up the canyon. Sheriff Steele looked at the huge figure, as if not fully comprehending what he had done. But he was no more puzzled than Jake.

Chuck-Wagon Etiquette

By J. J. Kalez



You'd forget your home and mother when Sour-face Smith wrangled the Dutch Ovens!

OLD Sour-face Smith was the best roundup cook that ever hooked tugs to a chuck-wagon. He was meaner than a she bear huntin' for a stray cub; more stubborn than a stall-fed bull and stingier than a Mex's widow, but he could cook. He could do things with hot coals and a Dutch oven that would make a city dude forget home and mother.

I've seen driftin' hands light to rest their saddle, figgerin' on takin' the wrinkles out of their middle, stow one of Sour-face's feeds and then darn near break their neck gettin' to the Wagon boss to hit him up for a job.

Roundup crews get mighty tempershy during the two to three months grind of open range combin'. 'Tween fightin' the dust and heat from sunup 'til sundown and workin' like the Lord never meant any man to work, a roundup gives a fellah about a thousand other reasons to wish he'd never seen the likes of range critters. There's only one thing that'll soothe him down like the lick of a mamma cow's tongue across a bawlin' calf's

ear. That's the chuck you throw into him. Feed a cow-hand and he'll stick to the outfit like a sage-tick to a colt's belly.

Like the spring old man Menham throwed his Holy 7 roundup crew in with Scot Graham and his Diamond A outfit. Scot Graham was one of those big-spread bosses that believed in workin' his hands 'til their ribs showed through their shirts like riffles on a washboard and wouldn't have given a dime to see creation with the original cast. The Old Man had thrown in with him to comb for a herd of drifters that had meandered on across the divide into the timber country. We were mixed about even up with Holy 7 and Diamond A hands but old Sour-face with the Holy 7 chuck-wagon was feedin' the crew.

Now gettin' range critters out of timber is like ridin' herd on a bunch of quail. Timber country does sumpin' to range critters that makes them wild as deer and about twice as smart. A deer 'll get your scent and high-tail it to put its hide over the nearest ridge, but a timber-wise critter 'll plow into the brush and hide there until you rut him out with a spur dig across his rump.

We'd been combin' that timber country for two months with every night some of us takin' on the extra work of chaperonin' what we had bunched, on down into the open country to keep 'em from scatterin' next day. Scot Graham had been ridin' the boys pretty hard and addin' a lot of personal misery to what we already had. We'd gotten the timber pretty well cleared of cattle but there was still a good week's work ahead.

About that time Scot started gettin' real onery, so the Holy 7 crew just ups and decides that when they started to drive the bunched stuff for the open country that night, they'd all just tail along for home. All but Sour-face. Sour-face didn't waste any words or time in tellin' us what he thought about a bunch of yellow-bellied quitters that would walkout on a roundup crew. The Holy 7 chuck-wagon was stayin' and he was stayin' with it. Scot Graham might be a top-notch such-and-such but he was trail-bossin' the outfits and that was enough for Sour-face.

What Sour-face called us all didn't matter much after all we'd been called the past two months and every hand turned in with his mind made up that the next day would be his last as a brush-hound under Scot Graham. Come sundown next day and nobody'd changed their minds. That is, nobody 'til they rode in alongside the chuck-wagon and started sniffin' the air like a folded mare catchin' a cougar scent.

That scent business only started 'em weakenin'. When they set eyes on the dozen or so brown crusted pies, set a coolin' on the chuck-wagon tail gate, each with the Holy 7 mark worked in with rolled dough on the top crust, they were past the weakenin' stage. And when old Sour-face bellows out sumpin' about, "Stay way from them pies you lop-eared galoots, them's fer breakfast," the weakness was plum exhaustion. Not a Holy 7 hand could of been bribed out of camp that night.

Next day, even Scot Graham seemed to have gotten some new ideas. Maybe it was the pie and maybe it was sumpin' Sour-face'd told him, but when the crew come down outa them hills, brotherly love was just bar-room affection compared to the way that outfit put on a splittin' up ceremony.

DURING a roundup, the chuck-wagon is everything from crew headquarters to first-aid station. Usually, the chuck-wagon is as heavy a rollin' piece as money can buy. The wagon-box is rigged up with a canvas tarp coverin' and a man-high tail-gate, big enough to act as a work-bench for the outfit's cook. A couple of water barrels are usually roped on

each side of the box, and lashed on wherever possible, is fire-wood picked up while on the move.

In the front end of the wagon is the space where the crew's bed-rolls are stowed while on the move. Behind that is stowed the stock of grub. Some outfits carry a separate wagon for haulin' bed-rolls and fire-wood, but most outfits try to get along with one wagon and load it heavy enough, six horses can work up a sweat pullin' it down hill.

When the crew starts out in the mornin' the outfit's cook gets his orders from the crew's top-hand as to where they'll be bunchin' stuff that day and about where they'll be workin' them to, come sundown. Soon as the cook has his breakfast chores done up, he has the camp flunky start loadin' up while he and the horse wrangler start throwin' the harness on the chuck-wagon string.

A roundup cook doesn't only have to be a cook but he has to know how to handle the ribbons on four to six horses and know how to herd 'em over country where the sign of a road, means you're comin' into somebody's back yard. Seein' a chuck-wagon outfit start out in the mornin' is sumpin' like watchin' a cyclone get started. That's if you don't count the cuss words that smoke up the scenery around it.

ONE roundup down in the Panhandle country an outfit showed up on the range with their home-ranch cook, a shriveled-up little Chinaman that wouldn't weigh a hundred pounds soakin' wet and with his pockets full of rocks. Every hand around the first-night stand wondered how that Chink was gonna manage a six-horse-team spread next mornin'. The outfit carried two horse wranglers to handle the meanest lookin' bunch of horses any of 'em ever spotted in a cavvy string.

We were workin' mighty barren country, that roundup, and most every outfit carried an extra wagon loaded with firewood, 'cause outside of sage brush and cactus there wasn't a sign of anything that'd burn and give heat. The Chink's outfit carried such an extra wagon, loaded down pretty heavy with big scrub pine logs that they'd hack slices off of as they needed.

Every hand was keepin' his eyes peeled while ridin' circle that mornin', expectin' any minute to see a chuck-wagon come poppin' over the sky-line with six runaway horses fannin' their tails in the breeze and a scared-to-death Chink handlin' the ribbons. What they really saw when the outfit finally popped into sight, was a string of six sweat-streaked animals, gentle as so many teams of Shetland ponies, trotting along with a sober-faced Chink handlin' the ribbons and swingin' a black-snake for Pete-sake to keep 'em a goin'.

Nobody could quite figger it out 'til next day one of the hands just stuck in close to camp to get a bit of horse education from that Chink and got an eye full along with it. What that Chink did after loadin' up his wagon, was to rough-lock his wheels with some chain, then with some more chain fasten on a couple of the heaviest logs off his fire wood outfit so they'd act as a drag behind his tailgate. Then, he had the wranglers hitch up his string, climbed into the wagon and hooted for clearance. Those frisky horses out of the cavvy started to act up alright but they hadn't dragged that locked wheel chuck-wagon with its log anchor far before they got over the idea. By the time they were a mile out of camp they'd knew they'd been in harness and that Chink didn't have to holler "Whoa" more than once.

AFTER a chuck-wagon outfit moves into the new camp-site for the day, the first thing the camp cook

does after unhitchin' his teams and settin' his tail-gate, is to start riggin' himself a couple of Dutch Oven lay-outs.

First he digs himself a couple of holes in the ground and takin' a couple of shovels of red-hot coals out of the fire he's had the flunky get goin', pours them into the hole and pats them down even. On top of this goes the Dutch Oven, a square sheet-iron affair like an iron box. The dirt is banked around the Dutch Oven to hold all the heat and some more hot coals are shoveled on top of the top-lid. If there's baking to be done the cook gets busy with his dough and empty beer bottle and starts to work on his tail-gate work bench. Meanwhile, his flunky or swamper, keeps the open fire going and rigs up a support for the iron coffee pot to be placed over it.

While his bread is bakin', the camp cook hauls a hind quarter of a yearlin' out of the mess box and starts slicin' off slabs of steak, about an inch thick and about as big around as a man's hand. All the time, he's watchin' the cloud of dust across the range. When that cloud breaks into a dozen streaks, he knows the crew-boss has ordered the men to knock off for the noon meal and that the hands are racin' it for home.

Then the cook grabs up his mess of steaks and tosses them into a pan of flour. Meanwhile, a big kettle with about six inches of red-hot, cracklin' lard is buzzin' over one of the Dutch Ovens. Into the hot lard goes the flour-coated steaks. Five minutes and meat that melts in your mouth, coated with crisp brown batter is ready. Steamin' boiled potatoes are foggin' up from over another Dutch Oven and over the open fire the coffee is fumin'.

Now, out comes the eatin' tools; tin cups and plates, and knives, forks and spoons. By the time the roundup crew have dragged their saddles off their horses to turn them back into the cavvy, everything is ready.

Up they come to the chuck-wagon, one at a time, grab themselves a plate, eatin' tools and cup. Around they pass from one Dutch Oven to another loading up heavy and always watchin' for sumpin' they mighta missed. Plate loaded, they drop cross-legged on the ground and dig in. Until you've seen a roundup crew tear into a mess of grub, you ain't seen nothin' in eatin' etiquette.

THERE'S only three rules of etiquette around a chuck-wagon. The first one is never put back what you've grabbed. Watch a cow-hand eat, even if he's in a civilized place with bill-afares and everything—you'll never see him put anything back on his plate once he's stuck his fork into it. He'll eat it if it chokes him. That's chuck-wagon etiquette.

If you stab into the pickle barrel and spear a pickled onion instead of a pickle, never try to rake it off your fork and stab again. "Take 'em as they come," is the chuck-wagon rule. Break that rule and you'll find yourself hoofin' it down the trail talkin' to yourself.

ONE time over in the Saltese country we'd worked in kinda close to the reservation boundry and got wind of a big dance that was bein' pulled off Saturday night at Agency Headquarters. How we got wind of the dance, was the camp cook had got his leg caught in the wagon spokes and the boss had carted him on into the nearest town for repairs and a new cook. Result was, the crew drew straws on who was gonna act as cook for supper that night. Course, it meant who ever did, would be a couple of hours late in hittin' for the dance. He'd have to clean up everything before he could start.

Stub Rutter, pulled accordin' to size and was elected. Stub didn't say nothin' but he did a lot of diggin' in-

side the chuck-wagon box before he started things a smokin' around the ovens. What he finally dished out, was beef and a couple of skillets of fried potatoes that come out of the oven smellin' good enough to make any camp cook proud. The boys dug into them like they'd never seen fried potatoes before. They ate 'em up so fast nobody noticed that Stub was cut out of his share.

Supper over, every hand spruced up and hit leather for the dance, all a hootin' sumpin' smart at Stub, busy washin' dishes.

At the dance though, the girls didn't seem none too sociable. They'd dance with a fellah once and from then on a polite shake of the head with a cold stare was all a hand would rate. Every hand of the outfit reached the wall-flower stage when Stub finally came in on the scene. The fellahs all stood around waitin' to josh Stub when he'd get turned down like the rest of us. Only trouble was, things didn't work out that way. Stub danced every darn dance, while the rest of us couldn't beg a partner.

It wasn't till the boss showed up on the scene that we began to figure the trouble.

"What in hell you fellahs been eatin'," the old man roared at a couple of us when we come along side of him to find out how the injured camp cook was makin' out. "All you stink like so much buzzard bait."

After Stub'd been coaxed with a few head duckin's in the waterin' trough, he finally up and confessed. Cook had carried some garlic in his mess board to use in the beef, case we had to go for some fresh-kill stuff. Stub had put all the garlic in our fried potatoes and scented us up like so many pole-cats. He said he was afraid we'd have all the girls for the dances before he could get there, so he played safe. He was darn careful not to go for them garlic potatoes himself.

THE second piece of Chuck wagon etiquette is to always do honors to the "wreck pan"; that's the dish pan to you tenderfoots. The camp cook always spots the wreck pan under the chuck-wagon tail-gate. When a hand finishes his meal, he's supposed to carry his eatin' tools over to the wreck pan and drop them in. Lord help the hand that ever sets his coffee cup or tin plate down on the ground or ever leaves them on the tail gate. What the camp cook don't tell him the rest of the crew will, because where water is hauled along and the ground is your table, a bit of dirt on the bottom of your plate or cup may mean you'll be chewin' grit for the next ten meals.

ONE of the first things a cow-hand learns is never to talk back to the chuck wagon boss. His word is law around the wagon and an argument with him will probably mean your time and a suggestion you hit the trail for other parts. The camp cook is always right, and only a green hand ever thinks or speaks different.

I remember one time old Sour-face was fixin' up a mess of beans for the outfit and somehow a bar of soap got in the bean pot. I guess Sour-face saw the soap all right when he was stirrin' the mess up but he thought it was a hunk of lard or some bacon rind he had thrown in with the mess. Anyway, about the first hand that grabbed a mouthful of them beans let a howl out of him and started to spittin' them out. Old Sour-face came chargin' in. "What's the matter with them beans?" he roars.

That howlin' hand was an old range head and he was readin' the battle in Sour-face's eyes. "Not a damn thing, Sour-face," he comes back, quick like. "It's my tooth. The one you put the turpentine in yesterday. It's jumpin' like a kickin' colt."

We all ate them beans, soap and all after that remark. Sour-face might've found out the trouble later

but he never said nothin'. Only thing was, we had pie and puddin' every day for the next week. If Sour-face did taste his own mess of beans he sure appreciated the crew's loyalty enough to try and make up for his mistake.

BESIDES being responsible for feedin' a roundup crew, the camp cook is responsible for their health as well. Always, the chuck-wagon has an assortment of patent medicine pills along with a goodly supply of turpentine and powdered alum. Course, nowadays some outfits carry regular Red Cross first-aid kits and a small medicine chest, but that's only in the last few years. I remember when a boil or a carbuncle received the treatment of a hunk of chewin' tobacco tied up in a strip of flour sack, while a rope cut or burn was treated by a homemade salve manufactured by mixin' powdered alum with axle grease. Turpentine was always the remedy for open cuts, whether the cuts were on horse or man. Many a bullet wound was healed and healed nicely, with no more treatment than a soaking of raw turpentine.

I remember one time we were working a herd down the coulee country towards government range. A fellow named Sinky Johnson took a skid out of his saddle when his cinch busted on a drag and took him sailin' into a bunch of sage brush where a big rattlesnake was enjoyin' a snooze. Mister rattlesnake ups and sinks his fangs right in the back of Sinky's neck while he's still shakin' the alkali out of his eyes.

We was right near the chuck wagon and one of the boys went ridin' for Sour-face in a hurry. We all knew how to handle rattlesnake bites pretty well but this was our first run in with a bite on a spot like the neck. Usually a fellah gets nicked on the hand or leg or some place where it's possible to tie off the bite and let the blood slowly absorb the poison.

Sour-face came runnin' with his turpentine bottle. He took a look at the bite on Sinky's neck and has one of the boys kick up a quick fire of sage sprigs. Then he takes his jackknife and tells one of us to heat the long blade red-hot. Meanwhile, he borrows another knife and slices down the two fang scratches, so deep the blood starts to bubblin' out. He pours the turpentine into the cut. It would come back out of the cut almost black. After he'd bled the cut he took the hot jackknife blade and slapped it right into the opening. That stopped the bleedin' right off. Sour-face soaked on more turpentine and orders Sinky bedded down right there. Then he starts pouring whiskey into Sinky, 'til some of us started huntin' for a rattlesnake of our own.

Sinky was a mighty sick man for 48 hours and for a while it looked like he would choke to death from the way his neck started to swell. However, Sinky was too drunk to care much about what happened. Next day, the swelling started to go down, and on the fourth day, Sinky was back in the saddle, none the worse from the bite but sufferin' like hell from a hangover.

THE third rule of etiquette around a chuck wagon doesn't fit the crew, but applies to drifters and stray hands that drop in about meal time. You always hear strangers to the west talk about the hospitality of the cow country. Folks out west don't figure it that way at all. You're just given what you'd expect to get if you was in a like spot. No man is ever denied a feed and shelter for himself and mount in the cattle country. A man that did, would be rated as lower than a snake track. But the chuck-wagon holds one rule about driftin' in around feed time. That's, earn your feed.

Around a chuck wagon there's always fire wood to be gathered up or split; water to be carted from the spring or water hole; or there's always a mess of dishes to be washed up. An old head comin' into a chuck-wagon layout don't even say a word about gettin' feed, even if its between meal times. He just starts huntin' around for the ax or for a water pail and automatically the chuck-chief starts gettin' him a meal. If he rides in just at meal time, he grabs his eatin' tools with the rest of the boys, eats with them but when he tosses them into the wreck pan he stands by with a flour sack dish towel ready to do his share.

Them sort of hombres are always welcome. It's the coyote that squats and takes the wrinkles out of his belly, then mounts up to be on his way without even offerin' to scrape his plate, that gets the hook-end of the camp cook's range language.

Like one time down in the coulee country again, we had just squatted alongside the wagon for our noon feed, when a young fellow comes ridin' in on a horse that was about ready to drop. The boys were already at it, so a nod from the cook sends him after his tin plate and a helpin' good enough for two men. The young fellow never says a word while he's eatin' but we all noticed the kept a glancin' back over the trail he'd just traveled.

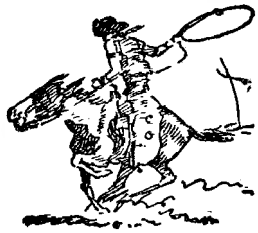
After he'd cleaned his plate, he gets up and starts stackin' the dishes in the wreck pan. About then we all spotted a cloud of dust far across country in the direction the young stranger had just popped up from. He saw it too, but he said nothin', just kept on with his dish washin' and stackin'. 'Bout the time he was through, that cloud of dust across range, was plain enough you could see it was a half dozen horsemen, ridin' hell-bent. None of us said anything but old Sour-face started cussin' more than usual and bellowed at the cavvy wrango to rope out a pinto Sour-face claimed as his own and bring it over to the chuck wagon. All this time the young fellah was still messin' in the wreck pan, gettin' kinda nervous-like but holdin' to his job.

Finally, right before us all, old Sour-face says, "Stranger, I likes the looks of that piece of horseflesh you just rode in. How'll you trade for my pinto, even up?"

Sour-face winked his eye sort of bat-like and the young fellow says, "It's a trade."

With that he changes his saddle off his worn animal and slaps it on to Sour-face's rarin'-to-go pinto. A minute and he was movin' across the range like a deer with a taste of bird shot in its rear. About that time, the party of horsemen ride up. None of us even blinked surprise when we seen it was the sheriff. We just kept our mouths shut.

The old sheriff said a lot of things when he learned the man he was after had just traded Sour-face out of a fresh mount but Sour-face soon had 'em eatin' too fast to do much talkin'. The young stranger that had stuck to his chuck-wagon rule of etiquette had just been in a shootin' scrape across country and stood a good chance of stretchin' a rope if he was caught. However, bein' caught wasn't half as important to that young ranny as showin' he knew chuck-wagon etiquette. Reckon it sorta paid him, stickin' to etiquette. Leastwise, I never heard of the sheriff bringin' back anyone to stand trial.



BLACK MAGIC

BY S. OMAR BARKER

THEY say that wagon cookin', why it's somethin' of an art,
An' the cookie's kettles is a place where troubles often start,
For cowhands that's so iggerunt they never read a book
Will practice lead-ucation on a belly-cheater cook.

YOU don't require no fluffy-duff, no pattay de fwah graw,
But when you hit the wagon, boys, you shore do aim to chaw,
An' if the cook ain't handy with his gaunch-hooks an' his pans
You'll dig a hole an' plant him with his ol' termater cans.

HE'LL feed you fried sow boozem till you're sweatin' pure lard,
But if he's got the java hot when you come in from guard,
So you can swig a blister cup to ease you from the cold,
You'll claim you've got a cookie that is worth his weight in gold.

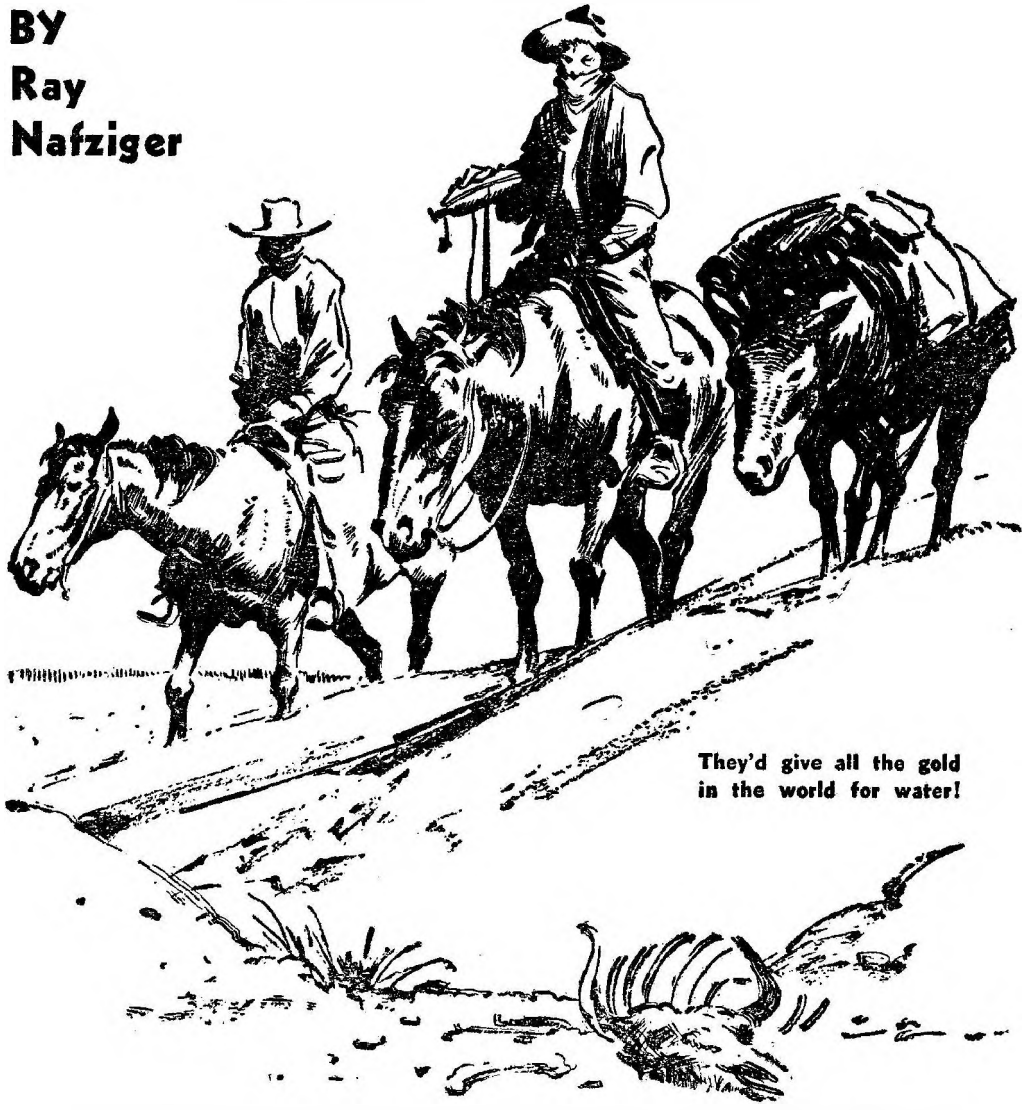
FOR puddin' let him kinder bog some raisins in some dough,
Or feed you Texas butter till you swaller kinder slow,
But if the beans is meller in his whistle berry pot,
An' the java's always ready an' it's black an' steamin' hot,
You can stand a little ashes in the sop or in the dip,
An' the gun you use for shootin' cooks will stay right on your ship.

HE'LL flap you saddle blankets tough enough to line a kack,
An' mix a hoss thief special that will bulge you front an' back,
Or sody in the biskits till your skin's a yaller hue,
Or leave the horns an' hide on when he cooks a mav'rick stew,
But still an' all you'll eat his chuck an' never fire a shot,
If when you play the java pot it's full an' black an' hot.

FOR a cookie at the wagon, he can always hit the spot,
An' he ain't no belly-cheater *if he keeps the coffee hot!*

GOLDRUSH BOOMERANG

BY Ray Nafziger



They'd give all the gold in the world for water!

Some found gold and some found water on that mad race across the desert—and some found only flying lead and a deadly sun at the end of their trail to Bonanza!

A WISPY figure of a man appeared on the white ribbon of Goss's one street. A white bearded scarecrow, his alkali-dusted clothes draped loosely on him, he stood, weaving, staring at the little huddle of buildings as if it were a mirage.

No one in the little desert town saw the wraith, not even the hound under the porch of Tat McCarrant's store.

The nearest building to the ghost-like old fellow was the little, adobe-walled, tin-roofed restaurant where two youngish punchers, Tod Collins

and Pete Brugg, had jingled their spurs.

Tod Collins, finishing his meal first, studied the two women cafe owners. Evidently, they were sisters. The older, in her thirties, with the skin drawn tight over sharp features and her stringy hair in a knot, looked forbidding. The younger sister had a face like a flower. Her hair was dark and loosely-piled.

Big Pete Brugg shoved back his plate, planked down a dollar. "And now if you give us a smile," he addressed the younger, "we c'n make out till next time."

The older sister picked up the dollar and glared angrily at Pete Brugg. Maybe it was because of the heat, Pete Brugg's plain, ugly face, or maybe, as Tod Collins guessed, it was only a protective instinct for her younger sister.

Pete Brugg guffawed at her silent anger. "You never can tell, lady," he said, "when it might pay to smile. Me and my partner might be millionaire cowmen."

"You're a pair of tough, tramp cowboys!" the woman snapped. "Probably aiming to use those guns for some hold-up."

"Yeah?" snarled Pete, who took nothing from man or woman. "Speakin' of things that's tough," he observed insultingly, "it's a tough desert yuh got here and tough beef yuh serve, and likewise the women is—"

The older woman stopped him with a gesture. "A word can have hard meanings, cowboy. My sister and I try to make an honest living in this hole of a town, and we take no insults from an ugly, ornery Gila monster like you. You and your partner vamose—"

The bearded, shadowy figure that had drifted in from the desert appeared at the open door of the restaurant. In the glaring light, he could have been a ghost of some lost prospector. As they looked at him, his knees buckled and he started to go down. Tod Collins caught the light body and carried it to the shade of the adobe wall.

He swept off the old fellow's sombrero, and a bush of white hair popped out. The eyes in the wrinkled, dried leather face were closed; the lips were cracked, and the tongue was horribly swollen.

Brugg and both the restaurant women had followed. The older sister carried a narrow-necked, porous-clay bottle used in desert country to cool water by evaporation. As she brought a filled glass to the man's mouth, Pete Brugg knocked it away.

"Want to kill him?" he growled, and then dripped a little water on the dusty, cracked lips. The eyes popped open, and clawlike, the old man's hands came up to fight for the water bottle.

By now, the arrival had caused a faint ripple of excitement in the town. "Tat" McCarrant, the paunchy storekeeper, waddled over, and from "Gravel" Kinstry's gambling place and saloon came Gravel himself, with a bartender and a trio of gamblers who waited spider-like around Gravel's gambling place for sucker flies.

"Happy Schulz!" exclaimed Tat McCarrant. "I been grubstakin' him to prospect over in the Furnaces. Who'd ever thought he'd come back in this shape; he's been through places that shriveled salamanders. His canteen must o' sprung a leak while he slept. Hyah, Happy!"

Happy Schulz blinked his faded blue eyes at Tat, and tried to talk. His swollen tongue wouldn't let him. His gnarled fingers fumbled with a worn leather money belt about his waist, and Tat, stooping ponderously on one knee, unbuckled the belt and spilled out on the ground some little dark fragments of rock—decomposed granite. In them, easy for even amateur eyes to pick out, were little yellowish specks and streaks. Free gold.

THE saloon man, Gravel Kinstry, breathed hard. "Happy's struck it!" he exclaimed. "Something big; not one of them damn' pockets you find in quartz. Over in the Furnaces, eh? Five Claw Canyon's where he's been working all winter, ain't he? In Five Claw Canyon, Happy?" Gravel asked, speaking in a half shout. "That where you found it?"

The oldish eyes blinked, but the cracked lips twisted in a futile effort to speak. Then Schulz held up one hand, with the five fingers outspread.

"Five Claw Canyon it is," breathed Kinstry, and turned to look at the Furnaces a violet haze on the western horizon.

The little crowd that had gathered, turned to look with Gravel. Nearly a score of people were there, a fair sample of the flotsam that had been washed to Goss's desert beach. A stringbean preacher in a soiled white shirt, who was traveling to a mining camp with his wife and two little girls. A pair of engineers making a survey for a borax company, and the two town loafers acting as their guides. Gravel's saloon crowd. A dozen others, including Collins and Brugg, and the two restaurant women.

All of them stared at the mountain parapet which, seen across the lights of a waterless desert, seemed but a shifting veil. In the eyes of each person, the distant range was turning to gold; each saw himself trailing across the desert, to reach that golden range.

All except the storekeeper, Tat McCarrant, who had staked Happy Schulz. Tat looked down at his heavy paunch and shook his head. Not for a million dollars would he cross the hell that lay between Goss and the Furnaces.

Gravel Kinstry, motioning to his men to follow him, started off, then swung on his heel. "You," he addressed the crowd harshly, "may be figgerin' to stampede to the Furnaces. Don't forget there's only one waterhole and five or six days of travel through pure hell. Don't expect no help from us. It's everyone for himself out there."

He strode hastily away, with his men, while the crowd broke up, with most of the people carrying away the determination to go to the Furnaces. They had forgotten Happy Schulz.

"I'll take care of Happy, if somebody will carry him into my place," said Tat McCarrant.

Tod Collins picked up the old prospector, and with Pete Brugg trailing, followed Tat into a back room of the store and laid Schulz on a cot.

They stripped the rags off the old fellow and wrapped him in a sheet soaked with cool water. Happy Schulz, with his tongue loosened by moisture, was murmuring, but it was thick-tongued gibberish. Suddenly, he slept, and the three went into the store and looked out on the street.

There was more activity in Goss than there had been for years. People were hurrying about on a trot, shouting to one another, making hasty preparations for travel. Before Kinstry's saloon, Gravel's crowd loaded pack animals, and brought up saddled horses and a bunch of loose mounts.

"Gravel owns a'most all the horses and mules in town," said Tat McCarrant, "and he's usin' 'em all. Looks like his whole crowd's goin'. Nine men an' a tough bunch."

He turned to look the two punchers over, studying their faces and the guns at their hips. "You two aim t' try your luck yonder?"

Pete Brugg looked at his partner. "I reckon," he stated. "We got a good horse apiece, a pack mule, but no money for grub.

Tat McCarrant waved a hand, putting the contents of his store at their disposal. "Was I you," he said, "I'd load light with grub and heavy with cartridges. Gravel Kinstry's bunch will tear down Happy's location notices and put up their own. I been

grubstakin' Happy an' I'll make you a proposition. You hold the claims Happy staked, and I'll agree in writin' to put you in for a third share. I can see you two are scrappers; hard cases. You can stake claims, too, but Happy got the cream, and if you two can hold them wolves off his claims, you're rich. But it'll be you two against Gravel and his eight. What say?"

Pete Brugg and Collins looked at each other, nodded, and walking to the shelves where Tat kept his ammunition, began taking down boxes of rifle and six-shooter cartridges. After that, they put up two small sacks of supplies, and added shovels, picks, canteens.

"You won't have to hold out long," said Tat. "There'll be a big gold rush and law and order over ther. News of a strike travels fast, even in the desert. Gravel will probably beat you over there, what with driving loose horses for changes. But it ain't who gits there first; it's who is still there an' alive when the law arrives."

"Just what we figure," said Tod Collins. "No hurry about leaving. Best travel in this heat will be by night."

McCarrant nodded approval. This pair of cowboys knew their way around. They got their horses and mule to give them a final feed, and after that, hunkered down in the shade to observe. The street was still a beehive of activity.

IN front of the restaurant stood a rickety, light wagon with its bows bare of canvas. A pair of shaggy, droop-headed ponies was hitched to it. The two restaurant women were loading supplies into the vehicle, and lashing kegs of water on the back.

"M'Gosh," said Peter Brugg, "the she-bear and the little bear is a-goin', too."

"Yeah," said Tat McCarrant, "the sisters is a-goin'. Bought Pedro Salazar's team and wagon. Lida and Nora Forth. Lida's the oldest. I hate to see 'em go. They don't know what's ahead. But that ain't nothin'. Look who else is goin'."

From a mesquite-covered lot where he had camped, the stringbean preacher drove his outfit, which included two old mules and a light wagon with a patched canvas cover and, in faded letters on the cover, "JESUS SAVES." A flat-chested woman sat beside the preacher, and two peaked-looking girls of seven and possibly ten, peered from under the canvas. The preacher stopped before the store.

"You'll grubstake us, I guess," he said to McCarrant.

Tat McCarrant waved his short, fat arms. "Grubstake you, hell!" he said. "So's you can take your wife an' kids 'crosst that desert? You ought to be lynched."

"The Lord will provide for his lambs," said the preacher.

"The Lord ain't set up no sheep ranch 'tween here and the Furnaces," said Tat McCarrant.

Disappointed at not getting a stake at McCarrant's, the preacher drove across the street to the little store where he had better luck.

Gravel Kinstry and his party were the first to get started, leaving on a jog-trot, driving loaded pack mules and extra horses before them. The others followed stragglingly, all heading toward a cone-shaped black peak which marked the only water to be found, at this season, on the way to the Furnaces.

Lida and Nora Forth drove out, and Tod Collins had a final glimpse of the pretty oval of Nora's face. The puncher shook his head; the girl had no business crossing the desert. No more than the preacher's family, which soon left.

Men and women and children, gamblers, preachers, crooks and honest men—horseback, in wagons and afoot—the lure of gold drew all alike.

The desert took them in an embrace which might mean death.

Collins and Brugg were the last to leave. They were entering the desert warily, knowing the deadly threat of its sheathed claws, not forgetting what it had done to an old sourdough like Happy Schulz. Even then, they were not prepared for the full force of the heat that came from the baking sand and rock.

"Who left the front door of hell wide open?" asked Pete Brugg.

FOR two nights Collins and Brugg traveled toward the cone-shaped peak and the waterhole at its foot, one which had the reputation of never being dry. There was a faint, wagon trail leading from Goss, but Collins who knew this desert valley from having hazed a horse herd along it, picked a shorter route for himself and his partner. He was able also to find some water for their horses in the potholes of a rocky ridge, and a little coarse grass.

Nevertheless, it was plain hell, and it was with relief that toward noon of the third day, they neared the cone-shaped peak. Pete Brugg pointed. Gravel Kinstry and his party were topping a pass to the west of the cone, hurrying on after a stop at the waterhole, starting the last stage of the journey to the Furnaces, the longest and hardest of the two. The mountain range looked as far distant as it had from Goss.

Brugg and Collins still had a canteen of water left; it was against their experience to get down to the last drop, even if there was a never-failing water supply ahead.

They came within sight of the little basin in the rocks where there should be the gleam of water in the sun—but saw nothing except the glare of stone. And when they rode down with a rattle of hoofs over the loose stones to the tank, they found it as dry as a bone.

Picks and shovels had been used a few hours before to tear out a section of the retaining wall which had damned up the basin. The released water had flowed from the tank to sink in the sandy trough below, leaving not even a trace of moisture.

Gravel Kinstry's party had planned that no one would follow them to the Furnaces, but they were not stopping Brugg and Collins. The pair might stagger in afoot and half-dead, without their animals, but they would get there. And when they did, there would be a gun settlement. Emptying a waterhole was a greater crime than stealing a man's horse.

"The devils," growled Pete Brugg, and suddenly burst out into a low cursing. He would kill Gravel Kinstry, Pete declared, after having first forced the gambler to eat a peck of dry sand.

Tod Collins rolled a cigarette. "Those folks comin' behind us are going to be in a tough spot," he commented. "If they turn right around and start back for Goss, they c'n make it. But they'll be so gold crazy, likely they won't turn back. Not even those two Forth sisters. Nor that fool preacher and his family."

"That'll be their funerals, not ours," said Pete Brugg. "Everybody for himself in the desert, as Gravel Kinstry said. And as the damn' polecat will find out. We still got a canteen o' water; we'll make 'er last. Le's go, Tod."

They left the waterhole, climbing up the low ridge beyond which lay a flat, broad valley which stretched to the distant uplift of the Furnaces. As they stopped on the summit for a moment and looked back, they could scarcely see the bows of the Forth wagon, and close behind it, the preacher's outfit. Strung out along the trail were small specks—the men who had gone afoot, either weighed down with packs, or punching slow-moving burros ahead of them. The straggling

procession of people looked like the forlorn, lost remnant of a battalion of ants.

Tod Collins, as he rode on with Pete Brugg, kept seeing them—a helpless bunch of folk with no desert savvy. When they found the waterhole dry, what would become of the two children of the minister and his ailing wife, and young Nora Forth with her pretty face under the mass of black hair?

"It'll shore be tough on them horses," observed Pete Brugg. "The buzzards might as well start comin' for 'em all." The rough-hewn Brugg had experienced a hard life as boy and man. It had made him hard, with only two weaknesses, his liking for horses —and for his partner, Tod Collins.

"What them people gits, they got comin' to 'em," went on Brugg. "While them horses, they don't want no gold, but they got to suffer and die jist the same."

Tod Collins was not like Pete Brugg; he wasn't worrying about horses and mules. He was remembering his mother who, even in her last illness, had gone out to nurse an ailing neighbor. She had taught Tod that when you were strong, you should share your strength with the weak.

Coming to a sudden decision, he drew his horse to a stop. Pete Brugg followed suit. "What now?" asked Brugg.

"That bunch of people back there," said Collins. "I keep thinkin' about 'em. Hell, without sense enough to turn back, they'll all die tryin' to cross to the Furnaces. They don't know what they're up against. Pete, I'm going to quit you and go back."

"You will like hell!" roared Brugg. "When we got a fortune waitin' for us—a third interest in the claims of Happy Schulz and Tat McCarrant's."

"That'll have to wait as far as I'm concerned. I'll join you later, Pete. What that gold would buy wouldn't make me forget a bunch of pilgrims that died of thirst. Take the canteen, Pete, and the pack mule. I know of some springs to the southwest—in a range of hills—where I can get those folks to, and from there maybe work 'em over to the Furnaces."

In the moonlight, Brugg's ugly face puckered up as if he were about to cry. Instead, for the first time in their partnership, he cursed Tod Collins. "You damn' quitter," he bellowed. "What's them people to you, alongside what you and me been to each other? I'd of froze that time in Wyoming if you hadn't kept me slapped awake."

"And I'd of drowned in the Colorado if you hadn't pulled me out," returned Tod.

"You ain't no real man," said Brugg. "Not with that soft streak in you. If you want to get rich, you got to be hard—tramp down people. Those fools got into a mess; let 'em get out."

Without another word, Brugg seized the lead rope of the pack mule and rode on past Collins, heading for the Furnaces.

TOD watched his partner for a long time, and then turned back toward the ridge above the waterhole. It was dark when he reached it, and as he topped it, he could see small brush fires springing to life below. A red moon was rising over the range behind Goss.

Behind him, he heard a sudden click of hoofs, and he waited until Pete Brugg trotted his horse down the slope, dragging the pack mule after him. Pete was whistling.

Tod grinned to himself, but said nothing as Brugg fell in alongside. "Come on, yuh pilgrim rescuer," growled Brugg. "Hell, what's a million dollars? It's nothin' to bust up a partnership like ours."

Near the fires below they found the people who had straggled out of Goss. They had gathered in one spot, near

the Forth wagon. Men had been digging desperately for water in the sand below the emptied tank. The search had been futile, and now they were all in a squabbling group near the Forth wagon. Lida, the older sister, was standing up in the back of the vehicle, guarding the water kegs with a rifle.

"It's not our fault you didn't bring your own water," she was declaring. "My sister and I need the little we have left, to go the rest of the way to the Furnaces."

"How'd we know this waterhole would be dry?" whined the tenderfoot bookkeeper from McCarrant's store. "We counted on this waterhole; we hadn't no way of knowin' Gravel would empty it."

"You can't refuse your fellow men, Miss Forth," rumbled the preacher. "What God gave to one, He gave to all. Water is one of the Lord's free gifts to his creatures."

The ring of men moved in behind the wagon, and the younger sister, Nora, stepped out, leveling a small pistol. The men, under the double threat of the guns, stepped back.

"We'll give you enough water to take you back to Goss," the girl stated. "But not a drop, if you don't promise to turn back."

Collins stared. Nora Forth looked soft, gentle, but she would fight. He had not thought of her as a fighting woman. He rode to the edge of the little semi-circle. "And the same turning back goes for you and your sister," he broke in. "You can't reach the Furnaces either—with no water for your team."

"We'll walk," said the older sister sharply. "And why should we listen to your advice? Why should you take an interest in us?"

"You and me both on that," said Pete Brugg as he swung from his saddle. "I dunno why he should take an interest in you, but he did. I told you, Tod, you was a damn' fool to come back to try to help these pilgrims. They won't let you help 'em. They're all crazy."

"You said it: crazy!" exclaimed Lida Forth, standing in the back of the wagon, still holding the rifle. "We're just crazy enough to either find gold or leave our bones out here."

Tod Collins looked at her and then at the girl, standing by the wagon, weary, fagged, but determinedly holding the absurdly small pistol. "You aren't the only one to be considered," Tod told the older. "Your sister is not as crazy to get gold as you are."

Lida Forth turned savagely on him. "Why shouldn't she be?" she snapped. "It's her one chance for a decent life. What kind of future has she got in this country—in that restaurant, being insulted by men, maybe marrying a cowboy like you some day. A cowboy that might buy her a new dress every two or three years."

Rebuffed here, Collins turned to the preacher. "How about you, Parson?" he asked. "You're surely not taking your wife and two children on to the Furnaces?"

"The Lord will provide," returned the man sanctimoniously.

"You're all a bunch of damn' fools," growled Tod. "You can't make it to the Furnaces—none of you. The Lord will provide you with sun, sand, heat, but no water or shade. He'll provide a hell out there for you."

"That's blasphemy, young man," thundered the preacher.

"Blasphemy or not," returned the cowboy, "you and the rest are going with me, southwest to some springs in a range of hills. The Rock Pools, they're called. From the Pools, we can make a fresh start for the Furnaces."

"And let the big crowd stampede in ahead of us," protested McCarrant's pale-faced bookkeeper. "Not me! I'm goin' on—water or no water."

Other voices joined the man's, and Tod was filled with an angry disgust. Pete Brugg laughed jeeringly.

"If you don't show any more sense than cattle," Tod shouted, "you got to be drove like cattle. Get started—south. I'll take charge of the water kegs, Miss Forth. We've got to save every drop." He moved his horse in, and the older sister raised her rifle to point it at his chest.

"Get back," she ordered. "We're going to the Furnaces."

Pete Brugg came in from the side, moving so fast his big body was a blur. He seized the rifle Lida Forth held, jerked her from the wagon. She fell with a cry and the younger sister, Nora, rushed in, the small pistol gleaming dully in her hand.

"Stop hurting her!" she cried, and trained the weapon on Pete Brugg. Tod Collins flung himself from his horse, putting himself in between the gun and Pete. The girl, startled, desperate, pulled the trigger. Collins felt a pain, like a dull knife, ripping through the flesh of his left arm.

Nora Forth dropped the pistol, and put her hands over her mouth to half-stifle a scream. Then she ran forward to take his arm. "I didn't mean to do it," she cried. "It went off before I knew it. Can you ever forgive me?" Suddenly, she gave way to a spasm of weeping.

"Oh, sure," said Pete Brugg, "he'll forgive you and apologize for gettin' in front o' that bullet. Git outa the road and let me look at it."

Nora Forth, however, was already rolling up Tod's shirt sleeve, exposing the bloody arm below.

"It's nothin' serious," protested Collins. "That pop gun won't do any more than stiffen it up a little." The bullet had gone through the flesh, leaving a clean hole. Blood was flowing, but not enough to need a tourniquet. Over his opposition, they used some of the water to wash it out, then Nora Forth brought out disinfectant and bandages.

One thing the shot had done: strangely it had terrified the gold-seekers as no amount of talk could have done; had brought to them the danger the desert held.

They measured the water in the kegs, estimated how long it would last with careful use. Pete Brugg lectured them profanely. It would be a race to the Rock Pools—with Death. There was no further talk of going on to the Furnaces.

Gold took its proper place. A ton of it could not be traded for life, for even a pint of water. They put themselves and their supplies into the keeping of the two cowboys.

TO the weary people straggling over endless leagues of rock and washboards of ravines, the moonlight night became a hideous dream. The click of weary hoofs and the shuffle of human feet were broken by the restless wailing of the sleepless children.

Near midnight, the preacher's old mules quit, and after that, the three women rode in the other wagon, while Collins and Brugg each carried a child on the saddle.

Tod Collins had lost more blood than he had admitted; for him, the moon swung across the sky like a crazy pendulum.

Morning found them plodding on, weary, silent. The sun scorched them an hour after it was up, and the little group wilted before it. Their few drops of water only aggravated their thirst. In the mid-morning the Forth team gave out, and Pete Brugg put the preacher's wife and one child on his horse. The other child was carried on Tod's horse by the Forth sisters, who alternated in riding.

Feverish under the heat and his arm wound, Tod Collins set his teeth, shuffled on. When he staggered, he always found Nora Forth by his side to steady him. There was steel in the girl, fighting courage below her pretty face and gentle voice.

Toward noon, a little wind which

was a hot blast from a hellish furnace, sprang up, and rising steadily, brought a dark fog of dust out of the southwest. The party had to take shelter in a ravine where they waited endless hours that seemed like days.

When the storm died away, as suddenly as it had come, and the sun shone down unmercifully again, they went on. Within a mile the preacher's wife had fainted, and Nora and Lida Forth took charge of her until she could again go on. The two sisters had a deep reservoir of strength in them, a capacity to endure that Tod knew often surpassed that of men.

He was not surprised when a man was the first to crack under the strain—the preacher who turned into a mumbling, half-crazy man whom they had to tie in the saddle of Brugg's horse. That left Collins' horse for the woman and her larger daughter; the Forth sisters walked, while Pete Brugg started off carrying the remaining child.

"And this is your idea of a gold hunt," scoffed Brugg as he walked by Collins' side. "How far to those Rock Pools?"

"We ought to make it by midnight," Tod replied.

"And by then you'll be carrying half these pilgrims, and I'll be carryin' the other half," growled Brugg, but Collins knew Pete had saved his share of water for the child he carried.

During the nightmare of darkness, Tod Collins, with Nora Forth's arm supporting him, heard a rustling of leaves overhead, and looked up to see the branches of cottonwoods. They had reached the Rock Pools.

Brugg and Collins fought back those who would have rushed to drink themselves into sickness, perhaps death. Nora Forth bathed Collins' arm with fingers that were gentle, and spoke to him with a voice that held the same caress as her fingers.

After drinking their fill, they soaked their bodies in water and went to sleep, too exhausted to eat.

THE ache of his punctured arm awakened Collins shortly after sun-up. He looked about him. The others were scattered about, all asleep. He went to one of the pools to soak his arm, and there Nora Forth joined him, fresh, her weariness gone. She examined the healing wound and applied a fresh bandage.

They were the only ones stirring in the encampment, and they looked about the rocky canyon in which the pools lay, close under a slanting rocky slope. Leading out from the upper pool was a well-worn path that had not been here on Collins' previous visit. Curious, he and the girl followed the trail.

Ahead, in the face of a cliff, was the black mouth of a prospect tunnel, with a rock dump in front of it. At one side was a little pole shack, thatched with bear grass, and at their feet, a small heap of rocks, a monument inside of which would be the name of the man who had staked the claim. Collins investigated and found a tobacco tin. He opened it, and drew out a slip of paper.

At first, the scribbled words made little sense. But after studying it carefully, the words revealed it was Happy Schulz's claim.

Tod went inside the short tunnel and, striking a match, found the same decomposed granite, streaked with yellow, which Happy Schulz had brought into Goss, a wide vein of it.

When he came out, Tod was laughing. "It wasn't Five Claw Canyon where Schulz found that ore," he told Nora Forth. "It was right here. He must have left the Furnaces months ago, but when Gravel Kinstry asked him where he'd found the ore, Happy was smart enough to hold up five fingers and make Gravel think it was Five Claw Canyon. Gravel's bunch

headed the wrong direction. We're at the strike."

Pete Brugg, who had awakened also, climbed lumberingly toward them.

"Speaking about the proper way to get rich," Tod told his partner, "you might be interested to know this is Happy Schulz's claim."

"Wha—what?" exclaimed Brugg. "You're crazy! It's over in the Furnaces. The desert's got you." But when Pete went inside, he came out with his eyes popping.

Tod couldn't resist rubbing it in. "Yessir," he said, "the way to get rich is to be hard enough so you'd refuse to turn back and help a bunch of pilgrims."

"I can't believe it," said Pete Brugg, still goggle-eyed.

"Me neither," agreed Tod. "There's some catch. You don't get things this easy. You've got to pay for what you get—in one way or another."

He had scarcely spoken when, through the hush of the morning came the click of hoofs, and below, coming off the desert into the canyon mouth, they saw a line of riders. It was Gravel Kinstry's outfit, who should have been reaching the Furnaces by now.

"No, you don't get things easy," agreed Pete Brugg. "There's a catch. Gravel Kinstry."

Brugg turned and ran down the trail, shouting to the pilgrims, while Collins and Nora Forth followed.

The Kinstry riders, catching sight of the group by the pools, spurred their horses to a lope. Brugg promptly sent a rifle shot over their heads, and Gravel's men dropped from their saddles to take cover in the rocks and brush.

"Four rifles against their nine," Brugg remarked to Tod. "And you with a bum arm and a bunch of pilgrims to look after. We'll earn whatever we get out of this."

"Yeah," admitted Tod. "But did you notice they didn't bother to take their canteens from their saddles? That means they're empty, savvy? Those birds are hard up for water. And we got a corner on the only water in forty miles. If we can keep 'em away from water, we've got 'em."

There were, besides the four rifles, half a dozen six-shooters in the little group, but they had cached part of the ammunition when the teams had given out. Gravel's crowd opened up with a savage fusillade, with Collins and Brugg holding their fire.

After the first burst of shots, as if they intended only to show their strength, the Kinstry bunch stopped firing and a man waved a fragment of white cloth on the end of a stick. Gravel Kinstry himself appeared, striding toward them.

He halted when Brugg shouted the order at him. "Why the shooting?" the gambler demanded hoarsely. "All we want here is water."

"You sure that's all you want?" asked Tod.

Gravel grinned. "Not quite. We met a prospector who told us Happy Schulz pulled his freight from the Furnaces three months ago and came over to the Rock Pools. We're guessin' this is where Happy found that gold ore."

"We landed here first, Kinstry, and we're handing back to you what you gave us," said Collins. "As far as you skunks are concerned, these pools is the same as drained—just like the waterhole you emptied. It's back to Goss for you."

"We need water, and if we can't get it peaceful, we're takin' it," Gravel's voice was so thick and hoarse it was plain he wasn't lying about their need for water.

"Only way you can get it peaceful," offered Collins, "is for you to surrender your guns first. Then you can fill your canteens and head for Goss. We don't want you around while we're locating our claims."

Kinstry's face flushed turkey red.

"So that's your answer? Think yuh got the whiphand? We'll wipe out your whole bunch before we're done."

"And that," said Pete Brugg, as Gravel retreated, "is no bluff. Dig in, you pilgrims," he called. "There's a lead cyclone headed our way."

WITH the shovels they had brought to dig gold, they dug earth and rock to build a low semicircular wall in front of the Rock Pools. Meanwhile, the Kinstry guns were crackling a savage fire, sending shots whistling over their heads or smacking into the rocks.

The gambler crowd split up, crawling along the opposite canyonside, trying to pick them off. But it was a game that could be played by both sides.

Pete Brugg, whose eyes were as keen as an Apache's, hit one of the gamblers as he crawled among the rocks. That left eight, plenty to wipe out two cowboys and a greenhorn bunch with a scant supply of ammunition.

The battle settled to a tedious sniping affair, in a heat that all but cooked the rocks. Under the cottonwoods, behind their barricade, Brugg and Collins and the others gulped water, and complacently watched the sun get hotter and hotter, knowing that Gravel's men, exposed to the direct rays of the sun, were suffering the tortures of the damned.

Some of the gamblers and saloonmen could be heard arguing with Gravel.

"We got 'em," predicted Tod Collins. "They're going to quit. They'd have us, if they kept fighting until it was dark enough for 'em to sneak up on us, but they haven't got sand enough in their craws for that."

Shortly afterwards, the men, with Gravel Kinstry sullenly in the rear, marched toward the Pools to surrender their guns and get water.

They begged to be allowed to stay to stake claims, but Collins' original offer stood. They were given water, and without their guns, sent on their way back to Goss.

When the riders of Gravel's party were small in the distance, Pete Brugg turned to Tod Collins. "You win," he admitted. "Your turnin' back for these pilgrims was one time when it paid to act generous, but it was only one in a million."

"It would have paid anyway," said Collins, looking at Nora Forth. "I found a girl, Pete, and she and I are going to get married. And findin' her is worth more than all the claims I could stake out here or anywhere else."

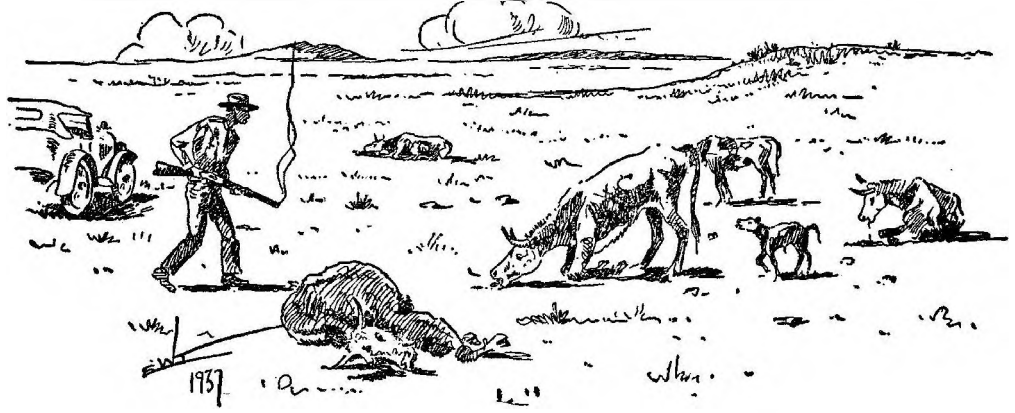
THE END

Cow Country Savvy

By E. W. THISTLETHWAITE

WILD MUSTANGS HAVE BEEN RUN IN NEVADA WITH AIRPLANES!

DURING THE HOOF AND MOUTH PANIC OF 1924
GOVERNMENT AGENTS SHOT DOWN THOUSANDS OF HEALTHY CATTLE MERELY AS A "PRECAUTIONARY MEASURE"



TRIGGER

From champ bronc-buster to outcast bum was one quick fall for Bill Granite—It was the way back that was hard and slow, where he found the jibes of one-time friends were harder to bear than the most punishing bucker, and even his foes no longer thought him worth their enmity

CHAPTER I
Doped!

THERE was a hard fight in the offing, but Bill Granite wasn't thinking of that now. He sat on a bale of straw before the stands of the rodeo grounds in this suburban town outside of Omaha, a deep sense of frustration running inside of him.

He put a moody attention on Lola Rawls, practicing a trick horse in the infield. She tossed the reins to a flunky and came toward him now, a wildly beautiful, dark woman of cat-like grace; a trick rider who mastered men and horses alike.

"What're you mooning here for?" she demanded, stopping before him. Her attitude was belligerent, with feet, in costly handmade boots, planted wide apart.

"Me?" Bill Granite grinned. "Why, nothin'. Only—"

He sighed. There was frost in the

TEMPER

By James P. Olsen

The horse shot from the chute and sunfished. Bill choked, reaching out blindly, then—grabbed air.

air and, high above, Manawa cranes circled out of Council Bluffs. It was autumn, and the time when a man should be figuring on roundups and such.

"Only—what?" she demanded impatiently.

"I been checkin' up." He waved the little notebook in his hand. "Two years now, an' I been draggin' down big money. I'd won the Cowboy Championship last year, if it hadn't been for that busted rib. Stand to win this year."

"Maybe," Lola said pointedly. That "Maybe" meant a man named Chick Ordin, who'd been riding a different circuit this year; he was due here today to start contesting for the championship this afternoon.

Patiently, Bill Granite pursued his point. "We ain't got a cent to show for these two years, Lola. These high times, bum friends, likker an' stuff ain't so good. Now, sayin' I win the championship: suppose we take the extra money, put it down on a little spread, get married an' really live?"

Lola pushed back her number seven Stetson and two big diamonds flashed in the morning sunshine. Her tailored clothes, those diamonds had been paid for by Bill Granite. A hard, selfish expression set the woman's face.

"Aren't satisfied, huh?" she snapped. "Plenty men would be glad to have had my attention these past months. But you—you gripe. Bury me on a two-bit spread? Hell, Bill Granite, you're crazy. You complain of spending a little money on me—"

"No, I don't," Bill protested. He felt sort of mean and like a brute. "It's just that we ought to get married. We could take the money I get by winnin' the Cowboy Championship—"

"Who'll take what?"

Bill blinked, turned, stood up. The scattering of performers and contestants around were quiet—almost like they paid tribute to a king. And Chick Ordin, repeating, "Who'll take what, I asked?" swaggered like he was a king.

"Chick," Bill smiled. "It's fine to see you. I been hearin' a lot about you."

"You'll be hearing more, and won't like it," Chick Ordin sneered. "You remember how it was, back in Lonesome Bar, Montana?" Chick turned and smirked at Lola. "I used to take his girls at the dances; used to beat him out at those little rodeos we had up around there, too. Just like I'll beat him here."

YES, Bill Granite remembered. He'd been a top hand for the Star Ranch and Chick Ordin had sponged off an uncle who ran a small spread close by. They hadn't been friends; Chick, loud and flashy; Bill, quiet and unassuming. Bill wasn't one to raise hell or make a needless fight.

He always said, "A man should never let go his temper when he's messin' with a trigger." Bill's father had, when he was all likkered, and had wound up in boothill.

Now Bill shrugged. "We'll see," he said. "You heard from Sam an' Mary Starr lately?" There was a hungry note in Bill's voice. He wasn't a hand at writing and hadn't heard from the owner of the Star Ranch, or his daughter, since he'd left to ride the rodeo circuits.

"How should I know about them?" Chick grunted. "Don't think I got such things bothering me, do you? I ain't been back there since I left."

He hadn't either, because his uncle had died and Chick had sold off the stock, got drunk and shot a man. Chick had been invited to leave the vicinity of Lonesome Bar.

"You might introduce us," Lola complained, fashioning a special smile and look for Chick. She had Bill hooked and blinded, and she saw no reason why she shouldn't toss a spur

into Chick. Either way, then, she'd have the man who dragged down the championship and the money that went with it.

Bill mumbled an introduction, then said, "Well, we got to get some lunch, Lola. It's been nice meetin' you again, Chick." He offered his hand.

Chick ignored it. He said something to Lola, and she nodded. Bill Granite felt the eyes of everybody on him as he stood there, sort of numbed and bewildered, watching Chick Ordin and Lola walk away together.

"I reckon I made her mad, talkin' about money," he decided.

He worried about that. It was on his mind during the calf roping that afternoon, and Chick Ordin beat his time. And Hard Luck, hanging Damoclean above his head, stepped in. He got a tough bronc in the first draw, while Chick got a flashy one that makes a rider look good. He made a flashy ride, and men who cussed him for the grandstander he was, had to admit that he was good.

WHEN the stands emptied that evening, Bill hurried to meet Lola at the gates. But she wasn't there this time. Worried, Bill hurried to the little hotel nearby. He started inside just as Chick and Lola were coming out.

"Allee same old times, with girls and riding," Chick jeered.

For a moment, Bill's face whitened and muscles twitched under his eyes. He held his temper, though.

"Lola, I want to talk to you," he began.

"Talk to you about saving, and two-bit cow spreads!" she said cruelly. "Nothing doing. Chick's taking me out for a spree."

"Spree," Bill mumbled. He went to a saloon on the corner, and stood there, his mind a muddle, until he couldn't even try to think.

He had a hell of a hangover the next afternoon. And it seemed that everybody eyed him queerly, like they thought he was afraid of Chick Ordin. Chick was beating him; taking his girl. Bill was doing nothing. He did worse today. The pound of a bucker jarred his aching head and he made a sloppy ride, while Chick Ordin, grandstanding as usual, piled up more points against Bill.

Bill dragged away from the grounds that night. Someone called to him. He waited while a small group of entrants came up. "Bill," a spokesman growled, "we bet *dinero* on you. Damn it, are you doggin' 'er on us?"

Bigot, no man could ever say Bill Granite had dogged it! Bill's right fist lashed out, cracked on the point of the man's jaw. He took a look at the fallen one, sighed, turned and ambled off. There was no pleasure in the act, and no easing of the dull feeling inside of him. He was sorry he'd lost his temper. Dogging it? He'd show them, damned if he wouldn't.

He went to bed early, after sitting around the lobby awhile. Lola wasn't around. She was out with Chick Ordin again tonight.

It was along about midnight when someone rapped on Bill's door. When he opened it, Chick and Lola, gooeyed and wobbly, staggered in. Chick had a quart of whiskey in one hand, and he sat it down on a stand beside Bill's bed.

"Bill," Lola burped liquor fumes in his face, "you're going to be the first to con—congratulate Chick and me. I guess I'll be Mrs. Champion Cowboy pretty quick. You're lost all ready, and I married Chick tonight."

"You're drunk," Bill croaked.

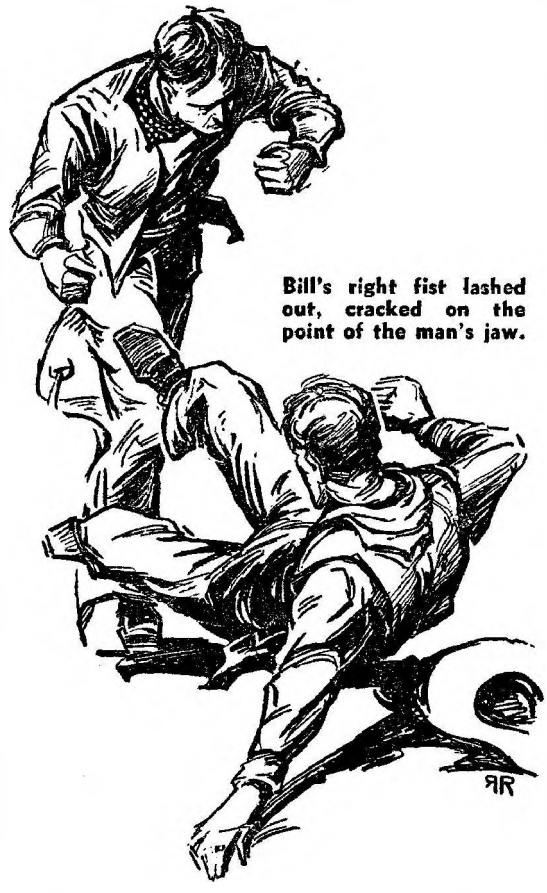
"Don't you call my wife drunk," Chick snarled.

"I'll call anybody all I want to," Bill rasped, the tone of his voice jerking Chick up. Bill gripped the foot of the bed. He had thought he loved this woman; had, this past year, laid all his plans around her. Now, her true nature was revealed, and it was like

turning a knife in Bill Granite's back.

"I—I expect," he groaned, "you'd better get out; before I break your neck."

They had sense enough to hurry out of his room, and Chick left that bottle of whiskey behind. But it was no oversight; nor was it accident that liquor was doped . . .



Bill's right fist lashed out, cracked on the point of the man's jaw.

AN IRATE, cussing rodeo official was shaking Bill when he awoke next day. He gagged when he sat up, and things whirled and hammered inside his head. Cold sweat poured off his ashen face and he trembled all over as he labored into his clothes. The threats of the official fell on deaf ears. He never dreamed a man could be so sick, yet live. Only the fact he couldn't, must not quit, mustn't dog it, kept him on his feet.

He was in a nightmare conceived in hell when he entered the rodeo grounds. Crowd noises seemed to split his skull, and he didn't give a damn about the mumbling about him, the close looks everybody gave him.

He found a patch of shade behind a saddling chute and laid down. Someone came to stand close by, and then Chick Ordin's hoorawing voice tortured him.

"That's the way you'll be in a few minutes, Granite. Then you can go back to chasing cowtails. That's where you belong."

Bill heard the announcers call his name as he sat up. He set his teeth, sucked in a breath of air that seemed fiery, then crawled up on the chute. He'd show them; he'd show Lola, and Chick, and all the world. And then, to hell with—

The horse shot out of the chute. The roar of a packed grandstand was lost to him; everything was blurred, spinning. He felt the rise and fall of a vicious, fighting body between his knees, and he set his teeth and compressed his lips as his poisoned stomach rebelled.

Blood streamed from his nose as his skull, seeming to swell and swell until it must split, wobbled loosely on a neck that seemed limber as a rag.

He choked and reached out blindly, then—grabbed air. Booing, cheering, rush of wind—these sounds he heard. The ground was coming up at him. Ah, they couldn't understand that a human body can stand only so much. He hadn't quit; he'd tried where many and many a man would not. The ground . . . coming nearer . . . hit him hard.

His brain was dazed.

Bill Granite struggled to his feet and limped away. He wasn't going to stick around, to have the rodeo officials kick him out. He knew he was done and hadn't the heart to even care right now.

CHAPTER II
Fighting Words!

A SODDEN bum, bleary-eyed, smelling of cheap whiskey, leaned against a pen in the South Omaha stockyards. Cattle bawled, and trains ran out of here—ran toward the northwest and the range this bum once had known.

His clothes were secondhand, picked up in alley shops. A week makes changes in a man. His saddle, his own good boots and duds had gone, and the money was spent for booze. He hadn't had a drink for three hours now. He shook and trembled and ran a shaking hand over the stubble on his face.

Down the yards a little ways, blooded Herefords were being poled into cars. Maybe he could pick up a few dimes down there. Bill Granite pushed himself away from the pen and stumbled that way. He made his way uncertainly between boxcars, not caring about the two men he approached. They hadn't seen him yet. Their attentions were for a slender girl who'd come away from where the Herefords were being loaded.

Yard buzzards, that pair; the kind who haunt railroad yards, robbing hoboes of their tobacco and pennies when they piled off incoming freights and cattle cars. They exchanged thin glances, nodded, stepped out toward the girl.

Bill Granite heard her scream, looked up in time to see her stagger as one shoved her and the other grabbed her purse. The girl clung to it, and Bill Granite, who seemed to have no spunk at all, suddenly admired the way she fought. Instinct belonging to another Bill Granite put him in motion. He hardly realized what he did until his fist connected with an unshaven jowl and his arm went numb.

He went down gasping when a foot drove against his stomach. He grabbed a leg and jerked. Hard blows rained on him. In a biting, rolling, cursing whirlwind, Bill and the yard buzzards rolled in the cinders between the tracks.

Someone yelled and the blows and kicks ceased and the two men were up and running across the railroad yards. Bill Granite, one eye swelling, his disreputable clothes ripped, sat up. High-heeled boots came in his line of vision and someone was helping him to his feet, and saying,

"Mary, you should've waited on me. Hadn't been for this tramp—I mean man—you'd—Bigod! Bill Granite!"

Bill Granite raised his head and stared at old Sam Starr. He made a feeble effort to smile, to straighten himself. A hot wave of shame engulfed him as he looked at the girl. Yes, it was Mary Starr, but not the young colt who'd tagged around after him two years ago. Now she was a hazel-eyed, dark-haired young woman who tried mightily not to show how hurt she was, how sorry she felt for him.

"Uh, hello, Sam. Howdy, Mary," he mumbled. He looked at the oldster, a hand he'd once ridden with, who came bowlegging up. "'Lo, Pete."

Pete Arley just scowled.

"Bill," Mary cried. "We tried to find you. We came to town just a little while before the contest that last day. We aimed to meet you after you'd won—I mean ridden. You disappeared."

"Uh—yeah," he admitted bitterly. "Disappeared, with everybody yellin' I quit to Chick. Well, let them beller. It don't make no difference now."

He cleared his throat. "Guess I'll be goin' now," he said.

"Hold on, you jackass," Sam Starr growled. "When you left me, I told you the corral bars would always be down to you. That goes. I'm needing a man, anyhow. I got a load of pure-blood Hereford breeding stock ready to roll today. You're shipping along, to help Pete out with it."

Bill Granite shook and his eyes got more blurred. He heard Sam tell Pete to go with Mary, and then Sam had him by the arm and was steering him away from the railroad yards. He didn't see Mary lag behind and pick up a lot of bits of pasteboards that had fallen out of a torn pocket of Bill's coat. Pasteboards that told of the pawnshops Bill had visited.

Sam took Bill shopping, got him new levis and boots and hat and things, ran him into a barber shop, where Bill had a bath, haircut and shave. He took him to a saloon, then, tossed a couple drinks of good liquor into him, then made him eat a steak, threatening to kick his tail if he didn't gulp it all.

Bill wasn't so shaky, and he looked a hell of a lot better when they got back to the train. And just before the train pulled out, Sam handed him a bottle and told him to ride it easy.

"Mary and me'll leave tonight," Sam told Pete and Bill. "We'll be waiting for you at Lonesome Bar, ready to take the Herefords on up on the river boat."

Bill stood on the platform of the caboose as the train pulled out, waving at Mary Starr. He turned to meet Pete Arley's questioning eyes. "I never figgered you one to quit," Pete muttered. "Maybe somebody is wrong. Anyhow—well, Mary put some things in the caboose for you."

He found his saddle, his paw's gun —last thing he'd pawned—and his other effects inside the caboose.

He stood there, head bowed humbly, damning himself for ever thinking of a woman like Lola when there were Mary Starrs in the world. Let them call him a quitter if they wanted to. He aimed to show them otherwise, if for no other reason than to prove Sam's and Mary's faith in him.

SOUTH OMAHA . . . Montana . . . the Upper Missouri, and then along Silent River to Lonesome Bar . . . the train brought Bill home.

There was a big crowd of folks in Lonesome Bar when they landed the Herefords on the siding. Sam Starr was departing from the usual and had a fortune in this small herd. There were a lot of people who claimed Sam was heading for trouble, sure as hell.

Bill Granite leaped off the caboose and greeted Mary and Sam Starr. He tried to thank Mary for getting back his saddle and stuff. She stopped him. "Seeing you like this, and just having you back—" she began. Then she blushed and turned away.

Here and there were some who gave Bill curt greetings. For the most, they shunned him. Once they'd bragged on him because he was a big figure as a rodeo rider. Then he'd let them down; quit cold, so they'd heard. So to hell with him.

Bill stuck out his chin and faced it. He turned to Sam and, fishing in his pocket, dragged a full bottle of liquor out and put it in Sam's hand.

"It's the bottle I gave you in Omaha," Sam remembered. He understood, then. He stepped mighty proud when he walked away. Bill, close behind him, almost bumped into Sam when the latter stopped suddenly.

A dour, gray-haired man was there, a tall, dark man beside him. They were scowling through the slatted cattle cars. Bill couldn't see why the gray-haired man, old Jeff Fergus, was looking like that. Nor Blackie Polk, Fergus's JF Connected foreman, either. He was soon to learn.

"So you got them this far," Fergus grunted. "Bigod, Sam, you're doddery in your old age. I told you so—"

These two, neighboring big outfits

for years, never saw eye to eye; always a quarrel between them. Yet it was a quarrel that never came to a crisis. They ran cattle on the same range, worked together, and folks had come to know their quarrels were expressive of a sort of friendship.

"I told you," Sam Starr cut in, "this kind of stock is the coming thing. Brings better prices, feeds up better. The days of running dogies that're a mix of Brahma, longhorn and what the hell is done. Texas cowmen've seen it, an' you'll see the day you'll wish you'd gone in with me on these, like I asked you to."

"I will not!" old Jeff bristled. "Wait'll some old range devil jumps them bulls you got there."

"Ain't going to. I'm putting these Herefords on the range where Dark Coulee runs down to Silent River. Aim to fence them off until I get a start and they're all the kind of cattle there are on this range."

"You'll never see that day!" Fergus howled.

"Barbed wire!" Blackie Polk cursed.

"Then why don't you see these Herefords—" Sam began, getting hotted up himself.

"I see you aim to spoil the range. And how about the cattle that go down to water through Dark Coulee. You can't—"

"It's my land. Run your steers to water some other way!" Sam snarled. "I'm fencing up there. And I aim to put a camp there, with Bill Granite in charge. Let somebody try cutting that wire!"

"Granite, eh?" Fergus jeered. "Then I reckon it won't be long before you've *quit* this foolishness."

Bill choked but held his tongue.

CHAPTER III
Threat!

THE little steamer that plied Silent River from Skeeter Point, where the Silent ran into the Missouri, took on the Starr Herefords at Lonesome Bar and puffed its stern-wheeled way ten miles to the mouth of Dark Coulee. The JF Connected lay on the Lonesome Bar side of the coulee. Upriver about five miles, was Skull Canyon. There were the deserted buildings of the spread Chick Ordin's uncle had run.

The steamer made many trips in carrying the more than three hundred head of prize stock up that ten-mile drag, and then came up with lumber, wire and supplies. Fence posts were set, barbed wire glistened and a shack was built under cottonwoods that grew about a hundred yards from the river's sloping banks.

JF Connected and Starr riders weren't supposed to speak to each other now; when they met, they swapped time clandestinely and wondered how long it would be before they'd be swapping lead. Some opined they never would; either the Herefords would take on, and the spreads would make it up, or they'd fail and the fence would go. They didn't expect a real, open break between Jeff Fergus and Sam Starr.

Bill Granite moved into the river shack, and Sam sent a man named Onion Brouk to handle it with him. Brouk was a sullen, quiet, shifty-faced, bald devil who never got along well with the other riders. The last time Bill had known him, Brouk had wintered in Lonesome Bar, hung out in saloons, and cleaned out the livery stable whenever he needed money.

It took a lot of caring for those Herefords. Fence had to be closely watched, and you had to close-guard them to keep them from getting bogged down in the river.

Bill Granite took a lot of care and a lot of pride in dry nursing that bunch of beef. When he wasn't doing that, he was riding over to the home ranch, eating a lot of meals Ma Starr cooked and talking with Mary quite a lot.

HE'D gone down on the boat with Mary and Sam to Lonesome Bar today. A month had high-tailed it behind and it was getting pretty cold. While Mary shopped in the one store of the little place, Sam and Bill went into the saloon.

They were standing there when a puncher came whanging in, his eyes popping. "You heard?" he bellowed. "Folks, Chick Ordin's come home. Just got off the train. 'Magine 'er: World Champeen Cowboy usin' around!"

Sam looked briefly at Bill. Bill had gone a little white around the mouth, his eyes were smoky and he had a fast grip on his whiskey glass. He said nothing; he gave no sign he was aware some were looking at him, like they expected him to turn tail.

There were loud voices outside, and the doors opened to admit Chick Ordin and a flock of admirers. They swept toward the bar. Somebody told someone else: "Chick got smashed up in a fall. Doctors told him to take 'er easy for a spell. So he's movin' up on his place."

It didn't look to Bill like Chick was crippled. The red in his eyes, the sagging lines of his face told of dissipation which was the real reason Chick was here. Folks didn't know it, of course, but Chick had hit the fanfare trail too hard after he won the championship. He'd been drunk when he got bucked, and though he wasn't hurt much, the fall had run the yellow up in him.

"Beat it, before folks that pay to see you find you out," the rodeo officials had ordered. "Get sober and start out next spring."

Chick was almost busted too, which was another reason he'd come back. But he came as a champion and a crippled hero just the same. He wasn't going to let anybody know how near busted he was.

Somebody ordered the drinks for the bunch. Bill Granite did not take one, did not lift his own glass with the rest. Someone nudged Chick. Maybe Chick had noticed Bill, but he hadn't shown it until now. He slapped his glass down, hitched at his belt and came slowly along the bar.

His voice was sneering, falling loud into the silence that had set up. "What's the matter, Granite?" Chick Ordin snarled. "Ain't you man enough to take your whipping without being a surly dog?"

Bill Granite's face beaded with sweat and his lips trembled. He ached to smash Chick Ordin down and then stomp out his guts. He wanted to let folks know—as he'd let Sam and Mary know privately—about that doped whiskey. But what would be the use? They'd not believe. And if he beat hell out of Chick, Chick would be more the hero and Bill more the sullen loser.

It would be bellyached he'd popped a crippled man . . . Damn Chick, anyhow!

Bill couldn't trust himself to speak. He smashed his glass to the floor, whirled and went out. Sam slowly followed him. He could hear Chick Ordin's loud voice as he left, bellowing something about Bill Granite being yellow all the way.

"Easy, Bill," Sam cautioned as they walked up the street. "I savvy how it is." Yet even his voice had a doubtful note in it. Bill was mighty glad to meet Mary at the store. The very sight of her eased him.

"I heard Ordin returned," the girl said. "Don't let it bother you, Bill."

He thanked her with his eyes, and filled his arms with her purchases and followed her. There on the porch before the store, more of the past came up to pester him.

Lola Rawls was coming up the steps. She gasped, caught her breath, and then was beside him. "Bill, dearest!" she cried. "I didn't expect to find *you* here. Perhaps it won't be so lonely, after all."

He blinked at her. Lola's beauty was fading, and her face bore hard, deep lines of worry and high living the same as Chick's. He wondered anew how he'd ever fancied himself in love with her.

"H'do," Bill muttered. "You're lookin' fine. G'bye."

He bolted after Mary, who seemed to have swallowed a ramrod, so stiffly was she walking away from there.

"If she thinks I'm goin' to keep her from bein' lonely," Bill snarled, "she's crazier than I ever thought."

"Bill," Mary was emphatic, "I hope you keep your word."

HE heard that Chick had moved onto his old place, about a week later; heard Chick was spending a lot of time in Lonesome Bar, and was drinking a lot. He put Chick out of his mind, forcibly, and put his entire attention to the Hereford herd and his visits to the home ranch.

He came to see Mary one afternoon, and while he was gone, Onion Brouk had a visitor. It was Chick Ordin, on his way from riding out from Lonesome Bar. He'd ridden past several times before, and always had paused across the river to eye the Hereford herd on the other side. Chick Ordin needed money—desperately.

Maybe Chick knew Bill wasn't around today. He hailed the shack and hit the ground when Brouk stuck a complaining face out the door. Brouk's expression changed.

"Howdy, Chick," he greeted. "You remember me? I was in the livery stable a couple winters back."

"Sure I remember," Chick agreed. "Been aiming to get around and see you. Where you been?"

"I got to sit here nursin' these damn shorthorns while that Granite goes sittin' up with Starr's girl," Onion snarled.

"Figures he's big, huh?" Chick sneered. "Well, he ain't knee high to real men, Brouk. Let's have a drink on that." He pulled a quart of cheap, strong whiskey from his slicker roll.

"I dunno," Brouk mumbled. "Granite never stands for no likker around."

"You let him tell you!" Chick cried.

"Here." Brouk grabbed the bottle and tilted it. He was pretty drunk when Chick Ordin rode away. A few more visits, Chick figured, and Brouk would be his man. Brouk and those Herefords and a certain butcher down at Skeeter Point spelled the cash Chick Ordin had to have.

It was almost dark when Bill Granite came back that night. He rode straight past the cabin to the river, where a heifer bawled with fright. He shook down his rope and pulled her out of the sand. His face was grim when he came into the shack. Brouk snored in his bunk. Bill let him sleep it off. He didn't say a word next morning until breakfast was over.

"Outside, Brouk. I'm goin' to fist-whip hell out of you an' then send you tailin'. You got boozed up an' damn near caused us to lose a heifer. Come on out, I say."

"Damn right. An' I'll haff kill you," Brouk blustered. "I got a right to drink with Chick Ordin—"

"Him, huh?" Bill exploded. Brouk found out he'd made a damned bad mistake. Mentioning Chick didn't help his cause. Bill Granite unleached all his bitterness, let his pent-up temper run its way, and then stood there, blowing on skinned knuckles—but laughing happily—as he watched Brouk, battered and wobbly, climb his bronc and ride away.

"You better pack a iron," was the last thing Brouk yelled back. "Bigod, I'm goin' to be on the gun for you!"

CHAPTER IV
Range War!

SAM STARR sent Pete Arley to the river camp to help Bill with the breeding herd. Things ran smooth-

ly for the next few days, and Bill, when he rode over to see Mary, noticed the boys at the home ranch treated him a lot more respectful. Onion Brouk hadn't been an example, when he called for his time, that would encourage a hairpin to climb Bill Granite's hump.

One of the riders told Bill that Onion had nosed around Lonesome Bar, drinking up his cash and credit for several days; Chick Ordin had done some drinking along with him; that Brouk had disappeared. Bill forgot it as soon as it was told.

He might not have dismissed things so easily if he'd known that Onion Brouk was staying up in Skull Canyon with Chick Ordin. They stayed drunk most of the time, went downriver once and had some lumber shipped up and did a lot of tinkering with an old motor boat.

Lola, half tight herself, hoorawed the pair when she heard what was up. "All the beef and outfits, and you whack at those blooded cattle, you fools!"

"Damn right!" Chick snarled. "Because those Herefords will bring better price, butchered; and I'll be taking a whack at that gawddam Bill Granite—the fool. You don't have to say it. You're aching to get him hooked again."

"I owe him plenty, myse'f," Brouk also snarled.

Lola had let it rest there. She didn't like the look in Chick's bloodshot eyes, or the way he doubled up his fist.

Then hell broke loose, and range war reared its ugly head. It was a morning of cold rain that presaged winter. Bill and Pete rolled out early, and while Bill started breakfast, Pete pulled outside to do the few needed chores. He came tailing back inside, gasping for words, reaching for his gun.

Bill, his face gone all white and set when he found out what was up, got out the old bone-handled .45 that had been in his old man's paw many years ago and strapped it on.

Out there in the steady rain, proddy range cattle ranged in Dark Coulee. Starr's beef, the JF Connected dogies had come in through long breaks in the barbed wire fence and a lot of the Herefords had drifted out on the range.

Fence posts had been uprooted; wire cut in short sections. There were no tracks; the rain had washed them out.

An hour later, Bill pulled his steaming horse up at the home ranch. He slammed into Sam's office, snarling the bad news before he was really inside.

"Two bulls dead, an' one gored all to hell," he ground out. "Cows scattered to hell-an-gone. Pete's out doin' all he can, but he'll need help."

Sam was cinching on his pistol. He stormed out, yelling for riders to high-tail to Dark Coulee. He slammed aboard his horse, cussing and griping for Bill Granite to hurry up.

"Hold 'er, Sam," Bill cautioned. "They's somethin' about this don't seem right."

"Hell no, it ain't right. And that damn old son, Fergus, is going to find it out. You come with me."

"Sam, it ain't like Jeff Fergus to do a stunt like this."

"You afraid?" Sam bawled, beside himself. Bill blanched, set his teeth against the harsh, hot words.

"Who else could or would've done it?" Sam snarled. He put his spurs to his horse. Bill, frowning, a little perplexed and one hell of a lot put out, followed him. They pulled up beside the porch of Jeff Fergus's place a while later, and Sam Starr's bellow brought old Jeff and his foreman, Blackie Polk, outside.

"Fergus, you're a—" Sam loosed a blistering run of oaths. "I knew you was stubborn and mean, but I never knew you was skunk low enough to

cut that fence. You'll pay for it, and the dead and injured stock."

"You're crazy. You're aching for a fight," Fergus gave back when he grasped the extent of what Sam was getting at. "I never cut that fence—though it's a good idea, at that. I'll not pay you one damn thing—unless it's with lead for saying JF did such a thing."

"I'll give you about forty-eight hours. And then—"

Sam choked, gigged his horse and went away.

"I thought you had a real, tough hombre guarding them?" Fergus yelled as they rode away. Bill stiffened but made no retort. Sam, though, was regarding him dubiously.

THE cold rain continued throughout that day and during the night. Bill and Pete took turns riding the hastily-repaired fence during those dark hours. It was about ten o'clock the following morning when Bill came in and Pete went out again. Bill was warming coffee and himself when someone knocked, then entered.

He stood up, scowling, as Lola Ordin closed the door and came toward him. Sudden pity ran within him. She was aged, and her efforts to pretty herself had made her a little ridiculous.

"Bill," she cried, "aren't you glad to see me?"

"I'm not," he forced himself to the truth. "How about Chick, Lola? You think he'd care about you comin' here?"

"He's drunk," she snapped. "Him and Brouk. Yeah, Brouk's staying with him now. They sleep all day, it seems. Bill, I made a mistake. If you'd let me make it up, I might help you a lot."

"Ain't nothin' to fix, Lola. An' I'd take 'er kindly if you'd stay away from here."

"Fool" she stormed. "You—Ah, Bill, I'm glad you want me."

She flung herself forward and locked her arms about his neck. Bill's back was to the door, Lola faced it. She'd seen Mary Starr come past the little window, and Bill had not!

Bill tried to push Lola away. She shrugged and stepped back and Bill swung around. Mary, her eyes wide and hurt, swayed in the doorway. The basket in her right hand slipped from limp fingers and rolled out into the mud, spilling pie and cake.

"Sorry, Bill, darling," Lola said lightly, her eyes thin, mean, triumphant.

Bill groaned. God, how he wished he might knock her teeth right down her throat.

"Mary!" he choked, starting toward her. The girl sobbed brokenly, turned and fled toward her horse. Lola hurried out. She didn't want to be alone with Bill now.

Bill Granite stood there in the doorway for a long, long time. He cussed, kicked the basket Mary had dropped plumb across to the little corral.

"Bigod!" he raged. "I'm gettin' plumb stuck with this, an' sick of it. A little more—"

His palm made a slapping sound against the butt of his gun.

THAT night, as he rode the fence, cold, damp as he hunched in his slicker, he was hoping somebody would try to cut the fence. But nobody made that attempt. Daylight came dismally. He didn't go in until smoke had been coming from the shack chimney for quite a spell.

He put up his horse and was walking to the shack when Pete Arley came to the door to look for him. Pete started to go back inside, suddenly stiffened, let out a warning yell and reached around inside the door. He grabbed the carbine he had sitting there.

Bill Granite turned. Headed by Blackie Polk, three JF Connected men were riding down on them. They

carried rifles across their laps, their faces were grim.

"You, Granite!" Polk snarled, pulling up and looking down at Bill. "You damn, lowdown, butcherin' skunk, go on an' drag that gun."

"Give 'em what for, no matter why," old Pete yapped.

"Hold it," Bill said quietly, his voice too level. "Polk, I want to know why you're on Starr Ranch range, an' get a reason for this talk."

"You don't know, huh?" Polk raged. "You don't know that this outfit stampeded about twenty head over that high bank a couple miles down the river? You don't know there's steers drowned, busted up, bogged down on the bar below that bank? Hell you don't. So that's what was meant when old Starr said JF would pay—when we never touched those damn Herefords or that fence."

"That's a lie!" Pete yelled. "Bill, bigod, we don't take this. Unlimber—"

"Starr never done no such thing, Polk," Bill Granite said, cutting in on Pete's outburst. "Cool off. This ain't no time for fight an' fight talk. Things is too touchy now. You want to set off a range war—"

"Hell, men," Polk snarled, "come on. We'll report this to Jeff, an' let him have a look at them dead JF dogies downriver. This yellow skunk, here, I doubt if he *would* have guts enough to kill a steer."

They wheeled their horses and rode away. Bill turned slowly. Pete had ducked inside the shack. He came back out now, shoving into his slicker.

"Where to, Pete?" Bill said dully.

Where to? Bigod, to the home ranch. I ain't stayin' near anything so yaller as you."

"If you wasn't so old," Bill groaned, "I'd shove that down your throat. You're a fool, like all the rest."

"Maybe. But I ain't no quitter or a coward!"

He left Bill Granite alone. Slowly, Bill went inside. He got a rag and some oil and sat down to clean his six-gun. If holding his temper had failed, maybe letting it go, with a trigger to boot, would work from here on. He aimed to see.

CHAPTER V
Gun-Thunder!

BILL expected to see Sam Starr come high-tailing it to the coulee. He didn't do much figuring on what Sam might say or do. He occupied his mind with trying to figure the whys of all this trouble: maybe some little outfit from far up-river; maybe somebody who hoped to profit by a war between two big outfits.

Bill Granite couldn't believe the JF had cut the fence. He was certain the Starr hadn't run JF Connected cattle into the river. It might be rustlers—

Bill grunted to himself, slung his hull on a horse and went out to ride the range. Four hours later—and still no sign of Sam—Bill Granite came back in. A double check on the Herefords had told him something that nobody but he knew: there were eighteen head of those prize cattle unaccounted for. Just plumb gone up in smoke!

He was debating if he should hell it to the home ranch and tell Sam—which would mean leaving the herd unguarded—when the question was answered for him. Pete Arley came riding back. He glared at Bill, and passed the terse message: "Sam wants you. He said you might's well spool your doofunnies. You ain't comin' back here no more."

"What the hell?" Bill's face tightened.

"Nothin', except they's a damn sweet mess of lead-slingin' shapin' up. Either JF settles quick, or we go

after them. An' I doubt Sam wants a quitter, or somebody he's likely come to wonder about, gettin' in the way."

Pete sniffed and rode on.

Bill didn't stop to get his few belongings. There was no expression on his face as he rode to see Sam Starr. A man tried to keep down trouble, and what did he get? What did it matter, anyhow? It wasn't his fault that folks thought he'd laid down to Chick Ordin back in South Omaha; no fault of his that he refused to go off half-cocked now, and start something a lot of folks would regret to beat hell; and he had no control over the fact Mary believed there was a lot between himself and Lola.

He debated with himself as he went along: should he tell Sam about the missing eighteen head? He couldn't see that it would help. It would just shove things along. Who in the hell could be rustling those Herefords? And *how?* Bill was damned certain they hadn't been taken through the fence at any point.

He grunted, teeth worrying his lips as he pushed and hauled a sudden idea around inside his skull.

He knocked on the door of a sudden resolution. Bigod, no matter what they thought, he wasn't going to quit! Maybe Sam aimed to kick his tail off the Starr spread, but he wouldn't give up. He'd show the whole yapping pack of them! Yes, and Mary, too, before he left this country for good and all. The thought of Mary, though, was conductive to a dull ache in his heart.

IT was Mary who opened the door when he reached the house. Her pulse pounded in her throat. He started to speak. She lowered and shook her head and turned hurriedly away. Heavily, Bill went on in to see what Sam had laid out.

Sam Starr didn't say so much. He flipped a check across his battered desk. "Your time, Granite. The corral bars of Starr ain't down for you no more. You know what I think. No need saying it. You showed it all through. This morning, when you took all that from Polk, right in your own pasture, was the last straw. Fergus claims we killed his cattle. He lies. He'll settle with us all the way, and quick. I've warned him, passed the word. You won't near fit in with what's a-coming up."

"No," Bill Granite agreed, his voice causing Sam to blink. "I won't fit in that."

"You seem damn glad to move out," Sam mumbled. "I'm wondering some, Granite. And I'm warning you, I'm going to check on you."

"Check an' be damned!" Bill snarled. He turned and slammed out of there.

IN the day's dying light, he reached Lonesome Bar. Old Captain Jens' little river boat was tied at the end of the dinky landing. Bill left his horse and walked out to the boat.

Jens was having his supper below when Bill "Helloed" and followed his voice down the companionway. A garrulous, kindly old cuss, he answered Bill Granite's question readily enough.

"Boats on the Silent, you say?" He laid down his knife. "Why, let me see. Now, about twenty mile up, the Rafter Anchor has a cable ferry running across. And there's a few rowboats. That's all, unless Chick Ordin's got his scow finished."

"Ordin, got a boat?" Bill throttled a rising eagerness in his voice. "I didn't know—"

"Oh, he never said he was building a boat. But I hauled up timbers and oak planking for him. Remember, now, his uncle had an old motorboat, one time. Guess the hull rotted, though, and—"

"Thanks," Bill cut in. He went hastily away, leaving old Jens blinking stupidly after him.

Bill was dead tired, wet, hungry. He

stopped in Lonesome Bar just long enough to have a drink, eat a hasty meal and hire a fresh horse. It was getting late when he rode out of town. He took off upriver again, making slow time because of the night's blackness, sleet and rain and treacherous footing.

He eased across JF Connected range, and came phantomlike across Star open range, close to the upper fence around Dark Coulee. His horse whinnied, and beyond the fence someone yelled a challenge. He saw tiny, winking points of gunflame as a rifle sent chattering echoes into the storm-lashed darkness of early morning.

Slugs whined high above him as he leaned low and kept soundlessly on his way. Those challenging bullets to the sound of a horse indicated the temper of the men who rode this range; a temper that would not be long controlled.

Five miles further upriver he came to the sloping run of Skull Canyon. He hunkered on the rim, cold, weary, yet determined, and watched reluctant daylight push back the dark. He led his horse down the shaled, sloping canyon side and mounted when he gained the bottom.

He rode through small timber, rock and brush, his rifle across his knees, his ears and eyes alert. The sound of the storm and the sog of his mount's hoofs were the only sounds. Otherwise, Skull Canyon was like a tomb.

He continued down the widening canyon. If cattle had been run up here, the rain had washed out sign. Yet in a dull, stubborn, sort of hopeless way, he continued his search.

HE stiffened, stopped, turned in the saddle, then rode back a hundred yards to a point he'd just passed. Thick brush lined the side of the canyon here, and as he pressed into it, the sound that had brought him back sounded again, the bawl of a hungry cow!

His expression, save for a rising glow in his eyes, didn't change one bit as he noticed that not all of the thick brush had grown here; part of it had been cut and blended thickly with the growing part.

He broke through into a little pocket cutting the side of the canyon. He drew a long breath, turned his horse and rode steadily out and down toward the river, where the tumbling buildings of the old Skull spread stood.

"Eighteen head—all of them," he said aloud, a cold flatness in his voice. "That's all I got to know."

He left his horse up the canyon from the old ranch buildings, dragged his six-gun from the holster and went ahead on foot. His nerves tensed and he readied himself to hear guns roar, feel the hellish impact of slugs.

He reached the rotting stable, and paused. There were no sounds around that told of the place being inhabited; no smoke came out of the tipsy chimney on the house. Bill set himself, leaped out and broke into a run. He gained the alcoved back door, and still nobody had shown.

The sound of his gunbarrel thudding against the door echoed inside the house. He waited, pounded again. Something moved inside. His thumb was on the hammer of his gun as the door opened slowly. He caught his breath and swung ahead.

"Bill!" Lola gasped as he caught her, saving her from falling to the floor.

"What—" he began, lowering her into a chair. She sagged, then straightened, gasping as she held one hand to her side. Her left eye was closed, her dress ripped, her lips swollen.

"Chick done it this morning," she snarled, "because I told him what a low, crazy fool he is. He beat and kicked me, then he and that snake, Brouk, rode off for Lonesome Bar. He swore he'd kill me if I left this place. I'm afraid he'll kill me, anyhow."

"I don't think he will," Bill rasped. "I found those Herefords up the canyon."

"Bill," she begged, "help me. Help me get out of here. I'll tell you what went on; tell how he did it. I'll sign papers, go to the sheriff—if you'll help me beat it. I can come back; go back to the rodeo game again—"

"I'll do what I can," he agreed. "Where's your coat? You got to get to a doctor. An' if Chick an' Brouk're in town—"

"Busted ribs. I couldn't ride," she wheezed. "Faster by boat, anyhow. Yeah, Chick's got a motorboat hid in some willows under a cutbank down below the house."

Down there, Bill found the boat, helped Lola in and shoved it out into the current. As he worked to start the motor, Lola huddled in the stern—a stern decorated with a heavy post—and gasped out the whole plot.

"They cut the fence, run those JF cattle over into the river to start trouble that would cover them," she revealed. "Then, they'd ease up at the Dark Coulee bank, rope the animal nearest the bank and drag it into the river. They'd snub it's head up to this post so it couldn't sink and tow it back up here. Made six trips one night!"

"Leavin' no tracks, an' runnin' easy while we was out ridin' herd on the fence," Bill snarled as the motor broke into a roar. The boat seemed to take wings as it swept down the Silent toward Lonesome Bar.

THE landing was deserted when Bill ran Ordin's boat in and tied it up. Lola's pained expression was mixed with fright when he helped her out. "They'll be around," she whimpered. "There's somebody coming upriver on Jens' boat today. Going to meet them here and arrange to buy butchered stuff delivered by night at Skeeter Point. Bill—I'm scared. I—"

"You won't meet them," he assured her. "We'll go back of Main Street, right to Sheriff Carbon's office. This's for him to handle, I reckon, after all."

They ducked out of the slanting, sleety rain into the rear door of the little courthouse and their footsteps rang hollowly in the hall. Carbon's office was as empty as Bill's future, and Bill cussed under his breath. Bigod! didn't things ever break his way?

He left Lola, crossed the hall and went into the County Clerk's office. The old man blinked over his spectacles, yawned and allowed "Carbon an' his dep'ty rode downriver las' night. Some fool cowhan' got likkered an' shot another'n. Don't know when they'll be back."

Hesitantly, Bill went out. Head bowed, he stood in the hall, wondering what move to make. He jerked erect, frowning, and then started toward the sheriff's office. He heard Lola snap, "You're a fool, I guess. I came to Bill that day, and he told me to leave. I—"

Bill busted in. Her small face wet and strained, Mary Starr whirled. "Bill!" she cried. "Bill, help me. Get the sheriff, quick. I sneaked off this morning. Dad checked up late yesterday and found a lot of those Herefords gone. He sent word to Fergus this morning that he was coming over to clean his range!"

"I found them Herefords," Bill said heavily. "Mary, the sheriff ain't to be found. I reckon they's one thing to do. Let Ordin an' Brouk alone now. I'm ridin' upriver. That fight's got to be stopped!"

"You can't leave me!" Lola cried.

"I'll take you down to Ma Eagen at the hotel. Mary can stay with you. You'll be safe there."

"You'll take her, but I'm going with you," Mary said determinedly. "Bill, Dad would shoot you on sight. He swears you sold out to Fergus."

"No time to argue," Bill gave back. "Come on."

THEY came out of the courthouse, attention turned to helping Lola down the steps. They didn't see Onion Brouk as he rammed up the street. He saw them, though, and dived inside the saloon. He fairly ran the length of the place and to the table where Chick Ordin sat.

"Steamer wasn't there," he panted. "But, migod, Chick, the boat we had hid is there. An' Lola, with Mary Starr an' Bill Granite, is comin' out of the courthouse now. They musta come down in it. That means Granite knows. That Lola—"

Chick Ordin's reddish eyes were almost closed as he came spurting to his feet. "I reckon they ain't going to chase us no farther if we get Granite and close his mouth. Maybe a bullet could get Lola accidental too. If I got to run, I'm not leaving them behind. Come on."

They started for the door.

Chick hissed, "Don't draw in here and have all them following us. Wait'll we hit the walk."

They went through the winter storm-doors, slammed them shut and faced up the street. Scant yards away, Bill Granite jerked to a halt.

Mary choked; Lola whimpered and cried, "Oh, God!"

Bill leaped ahead of them, hand slashing for his pistol. Here was no quitter. Here was no hanging back. A snarling curl on his lips, a barking, savage curse rolling out of his throat, Bill Granite let his temper and trigger finger loose!

Onion Brouk leaped into the street, slipped to one knee. His face gone slack, Chick Ordin made a squeaky sound as his gun came up. Bill Granite let his hammer fall and the smashing report seemed to paralyze the little town. Chick Ordin stumbled backward, tripped and fell, gun spinning from his hand.

Another pistol laid its report heavy in the storm. Bill Granite, sideways to that shot, gasped and flinched as the slug bit through his flopping saddle slicker, his jacket and shirt, and tore the flesh across his chest. Another bullet whispered past his head as he spun.

More gunsmoke blossomed from his gunbarrel, more rolling gun-thunder echoed over Lonesome Bar. Onion Brouk, rocked on one knee, his eyes came very open, very wide, and he shook his head as though to deny . . . that he was toppling . . . and was dead.

DOORS were opening and men were pouring into the street. "Answer them, then see a doctor," Bill Granite bawled at Lola. His slicker billowing behind him, he ran toward the livery corral. Mary Starr was at his heels.

Then they were riding toward the trail that ran along the Silent; a trail that would end where dead men marked the site of a range war.

There was no time for talk, save that one time when Mary managed to pull alongside him where the trail widened. "Bill," she cried, "they'll likely meet somewhere along the line—"

"I know it," he barked. "That's what I'm headin' for."

Color seemed to drain out of his set face as those mad miles thundered past. He buttoned his slicker over his chest and set his teeth. Something warm trickled inside his shirt and gathered around his belt; cooled and became sticky then. Bill Granite fought a rising giddiness.

He lost his hat somewhere along the trail. He was pulling away from Mary, pushing his laboring mount to the utmost, when he whipped up the slope from the river and reached the level range where JF and Starr met.

A half mile away, on the JF Connected side, old Fergus and his men had drawn up in a loose, uneven line. In the same formation, Sam Starr and his men rode slowly toward them.

Bill Granite pushed on, yelling, sick

with the effort against his failing strength.

He swayed as he yanked to a sliding stop squarely between those two close lines of armed, grimly determined men.

"You damn fools!" Bill Granite croaked. "You want to do somethin' crazy you'll always be sorry for?"

"Get on your own side, you thieving, yellow—" Sam Starr began to bawl.

"Don't you sic your trash over here," Jeff Fergus cut in.

Bill Granite's hand came up, holding his six-gun. "I'm goin' to knock the horns off the first fool that makes a play. You got to listen."

"Once more, I'm warning you," Sam Starr snarled.

He cussed and twisted in the saddle. Mary brought her steaming horse up alongside Bill's.

"You fools!" the girl cried. "You're ready to go at each other, get yourselves and your men killed, wreck everything for something neither side did. And it took a man who had sense enough to hold onto himself, despite all of you, to get the truth.

"Chick Ordin and Onion Brouk did all the damage, and were rustling cattle by towing them upriver behind a boat nobody knew they had."

"If that's so," Jeff Fergus yapped, "where's Ordin and Brouk?"

"Dead, bigod!" Bill Granite snarled. "This gun you're lookin' at, it done the trick." He swayed perilously and his voice rose. "Damn you, you called me a quitter an' a coward. Yeah, an' thief. If there's any one of you want to try that again—come on—come on, damn you to—"

HE slumped. Mary grabbed him, kept him from falling until Sam Starr, Jeff Fergus and Blackie Polk got over there and lowered him to the ground.

They opened his slicker and jacket, baring his blood-smeared, wounded chest. Mary Starr choked and fought to get to him.

"It ain't fatal, but he sure took a beating and lost a lot of blood," Jeff Fergus muttered, wiping Bill's chest with his scarf.

"I called him yellow. *Him!*" Blackie Polk croaked.

"And he busted them two and then took all this to save us from killing each other—after we'd done him like that," old Sam half sobbed.

Mary was kneeling, staunching the flow of blood. Bill Granite opened his eyes and essayed a feeble grin. "Losin' gore is all that ails me," he said. "An' I did let my temper plumb go for a second. If you'll help me on a hoss, I'll make it, though. An' all of you stop that blabbin'. You make me sick."

He sat up, slowly, with the aid of Mary's arm around him. "You two old fools," he jeered. "Look at you, now."

Jeff Fergus and Sam Starr hung their heads. Then they eyed each other in a shamefaced way. "I—I'm sorry, Jeff," Sam gulped.

"Yeah. Me, too. I was thinking, Sam—before this come up—of some way I could join you breeding up a different range stock. I was too—uh—bullish to come right out and give in. You know, seems like we could go together on them, and fence off a big place for that purpose. Hell, make a sort of third ranch out of it and put somebody in charge. Then you and me—"

"It sounds good," Sam Starr agreed. "You wouldn't have a man in mind, would you?"

"Well, you take Bill Granite, here. He wouldn't stand no butting in or quarreling out of any of us, and he wouldn't quit until he'd made things go. Bill, does that make sense to you?"

Bill Granite looked at Mary. Her little chin came up. "It might, with a house thrown in," she answered for them both.

Sam and Jeff grinned.

The Cactus City Gazette

BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

VOL. 24 No. 71

GUESSING GAME

Doc Donnelly Doublecrosses his own Diagnosis

A DIPLOMA, a set of tools, a spade beard and a lot of confidence don't necessarily make a doctor.

In order to be a downright successful sawbones a man has got to have a knack for guessing right and also have plenty of luck on his side. In fact, if he has got plenty of the last two he don't need the first four.

Now, I ain't making no aspersions about Doc Donnelly's ability. Making such would be plain foolish in view of the fact that Doc's last two patients is still alive and liable to recuperate completely. But that fact just proves what I said about having a lot of luck.

When Latigo Lee went to see Doc about those awful pains in his middle, Doc right away figured Latigo had appendicitis and advised him to drop around on Monday for a operation. (Monday is Doc's operating day, you know. His wife makes him go to church Sunday nights, and consequently Monday is the day that he don't have no hangover and his carving hand is steady.)

Anyways, Latigo showed up Monday, full of misery and red-eye, and Doc proceeds to slice him just as soon as he was through with Mrs. Conran, who also was having a operation that day.

Well, Doc did a very fancy job on Latigo, but he had no sooner got him sewed back together than he discovered that he had sort of double crossed hisself. He had got the two operations mixed up and had operated on Latigo for kidney stones instead of

(*Continued next column*)

appendicitis, and vice versa for Mrs. Conran.

Now, a man with only a diploma would have worried considerable right then. But not Doc. He just rubbed his rabbit's foot and waited. And sure enough, his luck held good; it turned out that the operations he accidentally gave to Latigo and Mrs. Conran was just the things they needed. The wrong thing was the right thing for each, and they will both recover.

Now, after things turning out all to the good like that, you would think that Latigo would be very happy. But he ain't. He feels very low indeed. He says he can't help thinking what would have happened to him if he'd dropped in for a appendicitis operation on the same day that Doc was handling a maternity case.

(Well, maybe a situation like that wouldn't appeal to Latigo, but to the rest of the population the results of same would be mighty interesting indeed. But at that, I think Latigo is just a pessimist, because not even Doc Donnelly can do the impossible.)

CORRECTION, MAYBE

MAYBE you folks read in the last issue of this here newspaper that that skunk-smelling son of a steer-stealing so-and-so, Nugget Nolan, had returned to town from a prospecting trip.

Well now, folks, that was a slight typographical error. I don't mean he didn't come to town. He did. What I mean is that Nugget ain't a son of a so-and-so—that is, he ain't if he keeps his promise and tells me the location of them highgrade ore samples be brought.

But if he don't then everything I said previous goes double.

DANG THE DUST!

Sand-blind Citizens Suffer from Storm

EVERYBODY is hoping that the Santa Anna we are having will blow itself out pretty dang soon. The dust has been so thick that folks is practically blind and can't see their hands in front of their eyes.

Naturally, the thick dust causes a lot of mistakes and embarrassment. Bull Billings, for instance, went out in his corral, slapped a saddle on a mount and rode six miles before he found out he had saddled up a steer.

And when Utah Timmons went out to read his mail order catalogue the other morning, he got lost in the dust and had to apologize to Mrs. Dinwiddie and three other neighbors before he got back on his own property. And of course by that time, Utah was so upset he didn't want to read anyhow.

It was the Deacon Diggs who started home from church the other night and had got undressed and in bed before he discovered he was in the wrong house. (Fortunately this happened to the Deacon, not some other gent, because even a Lady's Husband will believe a Deacon.)

However, even though this storm is terrible, you folks ought to be glad that you wasn't here during the Sand Storm of '66. (Yeah, that's right. Forty-niner Finnegan says so.) According to him, the dust was so thick in '66 that when you met a man on the street, you couldn't tell whether he was a Democrat or a honest citizen, except by the smell. And even then you couldn't be sure because even some Democrats took a bath once in a while —in them days, that is.

PLEASANT RELIEF

Looked Like Tragedy, But Wasn't

WHEN Rawhide Rawlins sighted a flock of buzzards wheeling through the air over his north range, he got mighty worried because he thought maybe the vultures was after the remains of his favorite horse, that gray gelding. You see, Rawhide had lent that gray to his brother-in-law the day before, and neither of them had come back, and Rawhide figured maybe the horse had fell and broke a leg.

However, when Rawhide rode out to investigate, he was plenty relieved at what he found. It wasn't the gray gelding at all—it was the brother-in-law which the buzzards was working on.

NO NEWS

THE Mesa Ora stage was held up again yesterday, but only one man was killed. And because he didn't have nothing to leave to his surviving relatives, I know it won't interest anybody so I won't bother with the details.

FIRE FATAL

But Sanders Saves His Saddle

THAT was a mighty bad fire which burned down Sassafras Sanders' place the other night. The blaze had a good start by the time Sassafras woke up, but by working fast he managed to save his saddle, that silver mounted one which he won at Salinas two years ago. Also he rescued a Navajo saddle blanket which he thought a heap of, as well as a hand-plaited headstall with silver conchas on it.

However, by the time he had got that done, the house was blazing so bad he couldn't go back in it no more, so his wife got burned up. Which is very sad indeed.

ASKS FOR INSULT

Presuming Old Party Pops Off Plumb Previous

TRYING to rope and brand a bunch of wild mavericks, while a bunch of dudes is standing around and getting in the way, is a mighty ornery task. And trying to do same without cussing makes it even tougher. But the rules at the Six Point Shooting Star and Crescent Dude Ranch demand that the boys never insult a paying customer.

So that is why one of the crew was so careful of his language when he hollored, "Hey, Rusty! Dab yore loop on that troublesome ol' heifer with the baggy hips an' knock knees, an' I'll tail 'er down while you slap her hip with a iron!"

Now, that seems like mighty choosy and elegant language for a busy cowpoke, but one Female Dude who was looking on managed to make it into an insult as she suddenly shrilled, "If you boys lay a hand on me, I'll scream!"

LADIES LOCO

Or Is That News?

LEAVE it to the empty-headed females to fall for a sucker scheme. They are lined up ten deep at Shortweight Weston's store and fighting for a chance to spend their money. All because Shortweight is giving a coupon with every dollar's worth of grub they buy, with the promise that when any one of them gets ten thousand of same, she can turn them in for a grand piano.

But what Shortweight failed to mention, and what the ladies ain't able to figure out for theirselves, is that by the time they collect ten thousand of them there coupons, they won't have any use for a grand piano; they'll be needing a harp.

REPTILE REBOUNDS

Crew at the Crazy K Cooks up a Joke

IT'S a mystery how the foreman at the Crazy K gets any work out of his crew, because that bunch of buckaroos spend most of their time fixing up jokes on one another. Their latest endeavor was a joke on their cook. They shot a rattler and then coiled it up very natural-like in the grub box of the chuck wagon.

But until they read this, they won't know that their joke worked all right because the cookey didn't give them no satisfaction. When he found the dead rattler he ignored it. He just set it aside and cooked it up in the stew he gave the boys for supper that night.

EASTERNER EQUALED

JUST about every Rich Dude who comes out to this country from the East tries to put on airs to show everybody how high class he is. The last one to try it come strolling into the Metropole Hotel wearing yellow gloves on his hands and yellow mittens on his feet (which Professor Hoenshall says is called spats.) With a sneering look on his face he signed the register, using three lines and a lot of flourishes:

PERCY PULSIFER and Valet
Four Oaks Manor,
Longchamps-on-the-Hudson

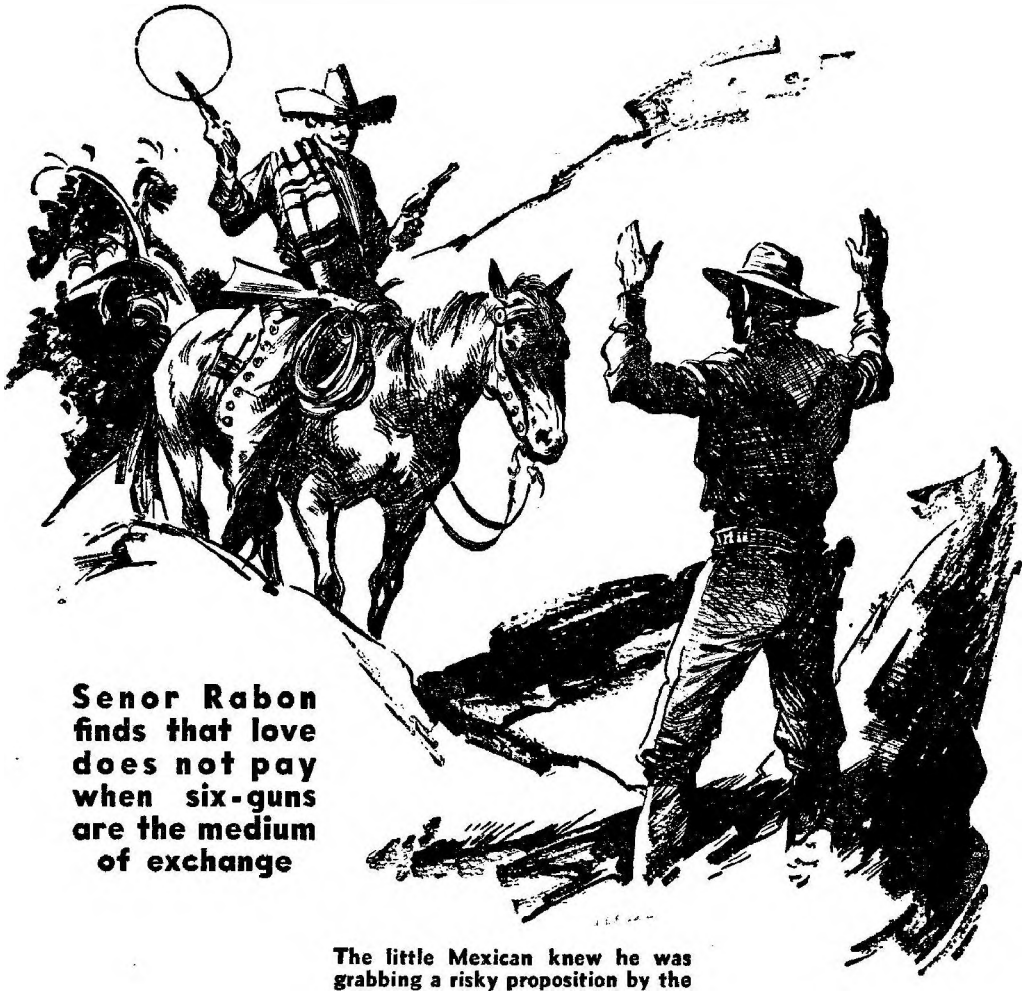
Right after this dude came Horsey Honsaker, who saw the whole performance. And not wanting any uppity Easterner to outdo him, Horsey also puts a very good sneer on his face as he waves the pencil and writes:

HORSEY HONSAKER and Valise
Four Oaks and a Juniper Bush,
Log Shack-on-the-Creek

That's seein' 'em, Horsey! You're one juniper bush ahead of that uppity dude!

PISTOL PAYDAY

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR



Senor Rabon finds that love does not pay when six-guns are the medium of exchange

The little Mexican knew he was grabbing a risky proposition by the hot end, but he didn't shoot.

HUMMING a Mexican love song, *Senor don* Pablo Rabon jogged along the rimrock trail. Of a certainty, he was telling himself, moonlight is a fine thing for the hombre who does not care to advertise his presence by traveling during the day. And yet, for a lone *caballero* with maybe too much romance in his system, moonlight has a way of rousing memories of smiling *senoritas*.

Rabon sought to put aside those memories, by fixing his attention on the tall, straight rider who was quartering across the Verdugo plain far below. Maybe the tall one had much *dinero* on his person. And Rabon was regretting the fact that his business code was not flexible enough to cover road-agent work, when he saw the tall one jerk and spill from the saddle as his horse bolted in terror.

The Mexican pulled his own bronc to a quick halt, listened intently for the sound of the shot. But the strange part of it was that no sound came.

However, there was a subtle stirring beyond the rocks at the next bend of the trail. Rabon touched silver-mounted spurs to his horse. And with that skill which made him ideal for the little *caballero's* devious business, the bronc "catfooted" quietly around the bend while Rabon drew and cocked his gold-plated persuader.

The young man, who was crouched at the outer edge of the trail, spun to his feet, swinging his rifle. But Rabon's face could be forbidding when he wished it so—and in his manner of holding the gold-plated iron there was an alert warning. The young man froze, slowly lowered the long gun.

"*Hombre.*" The *caballero's* challenge was a deep croak. "Ees not the good idea, to shoot from cover, even w'en you got the gon which not make the talk. Say, you show Rabon how that gon work, ha?"

"I didn't shoot him!" In spite of his deep tan, the young man's face showed pallor. Yet his eyes were clear, his wide mouth retained a stubborn twist. "I was lookin' for him tuh take this trail, an' aimed tuh have a showdown right here—but the dirty tinhorn fooled me."

Rabon pursed his lips, gave his thin moustache a critical twitch. "The *hombre* ees tinhorn, ha? You an' me go down there, pronto—he maybe 'ave plenty *dinero* on him, an' I collec' also the reward for turn you een, ha? Good business! You not got a *caballo?* Then walking, ees good—*andale!*"

ALL the way down the slope, the youngster kept protesting that he had fired no shot. And Rabon, after taking charge of the rifle and giving it a wary once-over, was inclined to agree.

This was disappointing and slightly alarming. The real killer must be skulking somewhere near—but Rabon, who knew that tinhorns generally carried considerable money, wasn't being stopped. By the time the *caballero* and his prisoner had threaded through the collection of huge boulders which lined the base of the slope, he had learned that the youngster's name was Task Wildo, that his prisoner had done some unwise gambling and had, as a result, been disowned by his father. More than that, Wildo's *padre* had taken his broncs from him and had left the youngster afoot, with only an all-gray outfit to his name.

Under the weight of that ultimate disgrace, many a young man would have sneaked out of the country. But this one was built of different timber—and besides, there was a certain girl in Verdugo—

Rabon, who knew his own weaknesses, stiffened. He was downright determined to conduct this deal on a strict business basis, allowing his penchant for romance and hard-luck yarns to interfere not at all.

DRILLED by a 30-30 slug, the tall gambler was very dead. Rabon fixed in his mind the angle from which the bullet had come; then he rose, peered back toward those forbidding boulders at the base of the slope.

Young Wildo, his face taut with anxiety, followed that glance. "Bimer's drilled plum through the ticker," he said hoarsely. "He couldn't of rid a yard after he was hit—so the hombre that done it must be mighty near—"

Rabon made a slight, warning gesture. But then, since he could distinguish no movement nor sign of life among the rocks, he knelt again beside the corpse. Systematically, he went through the dead man's pockets.

He found only a few disappointing dollars in cash. But also he found a bit of paper which he unfolded and

laboriously read the writing on it.

He whistled softly, pushed back his huge straw sombrero with the muzzle of his gun. *"Hombrecito!"* he said, peering up at young Wildo. "You 'ave written this? Eet say you sign an' convey to Scott Bimer your 'alf-interes' een the Rolling W trail herd! Ees sign, Task Wildo!"

"Yeah," the youngster said heavily. "Bimer was headin' toward Dancin' Coyote Butte, where Dad's got our herd bunched, tuh claim that half. Dad a'ready knowed about the paper —he'd of kilt Bimer, likely, the minute the tinhorn showed his face at camp. Listen, give me back my rifle, let me smoke that killer hombre outta the rocks! I've made some fool remarks—now it's a case of nail the drygulcher or stretch twine myself!"

Rabon glanced back toward the rocks, and did not quite succeed in suppressing a shudder. "The gon which don' make the talk, ees bad thing to go up agains'. Mos' bes' we—"

A sudden drumming of hoofs, and a chorus of yells, pulled both men around. A bunch of horsemen had spurted up from a gully farther out on the pain. Rousing a long dust-plume, the bunch tore down on Wildo and Rabon.

With just one bronc between them —the dead man's horse had bolted and was out of sight—the two could do nothing but wait. They did that—but Rabon kept his gold-plated gun in his hand.

The bunch nearly rode them down, before pulling to a halt. A squat hombre with a flat black hat swung down from his hull, stirred the corpse with his boot. "Kilt the tinhorn, did yuh, Wildo? Expected somethin' like this, after the talk yuh made in town. Well, me'n the boys aim tuh teach you trail-drive hombres that it ain't healthy tuh gun down Verdugo folks. We got a rope an' a tree waitin', back there in the gully. He turned a savagely suspicious glare upon Rabon.

"Where'd you blow in from, greaser?"

The ornaments on Rabon's vest glinted as he scratched vigorously behind his ear with the muzzle of his gun. "Me, I 'ave this hombre een custody—I'm take him to the *Senor* Shereef een Verdugo, for maybe collec' the reward."

The squat hombre laughed. "Yuh sawed-off wonder—fog it outta here, afore me'n the boys take a notion tuh blow yuh apart!"

Rabon's eyes, in the heavy shadow under the brim of his cover, flicked a glance toward the mounted men. They were stirring, edging hands down toward guns. But before they could do any fancy shooting, they'd have to steady horses that were tense, shying, spooked by the smell of still-warm blood and death.

The little Mexican knew that he was grabbing a risky proposition by the hot end. But he didn't shoot—instead he kept his gun centered on the squat hombre, and let out a terrifying warwhoop.

That yell was the last thing the riders expected. And it finished the job of spooking the broncs. The horses reared, bucked in spite of everything the riders could do toward controlling them.

The squat one, fearful that the broncs would run him down, turned his head. And Rabon's heavy gun impacted promptly against that *cabeza.* The squat one groaned once as he went down.

"The bronc—fork eet!" Rabon flung at Wildo, gesturing toward the squat man's horse which, being ground-hitched, had not yet bolted. The Mex threw a couple of shots into the jostling bunch of riders, just to keep things going; then he swung into his own hand-tooled, silver-mounted tree.

Wildo and the *caballero* were hammering across the plain with a quarter-mile lead by the time the would-be hang party got itself untangled.

GUNS crashed behind the fleeing pair. Blue whizzers wailed narrowly past them in the moonlight. But they dipped into a gully, swung, arced behind a low butte and lengthened their lead some.

"Man, thanks!" young Wildo said fervently.

Rabon fixed a guarded gaze upon his prisoner, gestured with the gold-plated gun. "Don' sling the *gracias* too fas'," he advised. "Ees not because I give the small damn about w'ether you stretch the twine that I 'ave bring you along. To me, you mean *dinero*—an' I inten' to collec'. That *Senor* Spraddle'-Out weeth the black 'at, who he ees, ha?"

"That's Leeson. Hangs around Verdugo with plenty of likker money—but they tell me he does anything rather'n work."

Rabon sighed. "An' thees paper," he said, tapping the vest pocket where he had cached the note he'd taken from the dead gambler. "How come Bimer to 'ave eet, ha?"

Young Wildo shifted uneasily in his hull. "I went intuh Verdugo tuh sluice the trail-dust from my throat. Bucked Bimer's game, just for the hell of it—an' when the chips was comin' my way, I went out like a light. Woke up nex' mornin' in the alley, stiff as a board and soaked with dew. I figure they slipped me a knock-out drink. Well, Bimer fronted me on the street with that I. O. U. thing which I either signed when I was blotto, or else they forged. He says he's sorry, but either I make good what I owe, or he'll have tuh take my half of the herd. I told the tinhorn where tuh head in at—but Dad found out about the mess—" The youngster's face worked convulsively—and more bitterness than one so brash ever should feel came into his eyes.

"Ees mos' strange," Rabon stated soberly. "The *Senor* Bimer 'ave not the look of wan w'at would do thees thing." But he shrugged, adjusted his gaudy *serape*. "Ees not my business. All I wan' ees to collec' any reward that ees float' aroun'."

"Yeah?" Wildo retorted. "Yuh know damn' well I didn't kill Bimer! But look here: yuh gotta do me one favor, no matter what happens. See Lu Bimer, make her understand that I didn't kill her father!"

Rabon's eyebrows soared. "Your girl, ees the *hija* of the *Senor* Bimer? Ees mos' bad! I'm theenk—"

"Never mind that!" Wildo said savagely. "Promise me you'll see her!"

And Rabon, because he had maybe too much romance in his system, nodded.

VERDUGO was situated in the middle of a sagebrush flat, with one part braced against the prevailing winds. A battered, but defiant sort of a town; but it came instantly to life when the town riders, followed at a distance of a mile or two by a howling, powder-burning mob, fogged down the drag. Doors were flung open, heads peered from windows.

Rabon herded his prisoner to the sheet-iron-covered jail building. "*Senor* Shereef!" he yelled.

There was a light in the jail—it flung a fan-shaped area of yellow radiance across the street when the door was swung open. Two men came out. One was pot-bellied, slow-moving under the weight of his own importance, with a star glinting on his shirt. The other was a gaunt oldster with a longhorn moustache—one of those fierce-looking hombres who rarely pan out to be as bad as their bark.

When Task Wildo saw the gaunt one, he gave a low exclamation. But Rabon let that slide. "The *Senor* Bimer," he told the sheriff, "ees dead. Thees one I fin' on the rimrock trail, right above place w'ere the tinhorn get *muerto*. Them hombre' behin' us, they wan' to make the 'ang party. Get the prisoner inside pronto, ha?"

"Damn yuh, Pratt!" young Wildo flung at the lawman. "Yuh can't hang this on me! The Mex has my rifle an' it'll show—"

"That's as may be," the rotund sheriff snapped, eying the mob's dust-plume. "Shuck outta your hull, get inside."

Regretfully, Task dismounted and stalked into the jail. The gaunt old range-wolf stood aside for him, then followed him.

Rabon handed the youngster's rifle to the sheriff. But Pratt's attention still was on the mob. "Leeson's bunch!" he complained, as the riders came nearer. "They'll be hell tuh pay. Wildo, lock your pup in that far cell, in there!"

Startled, Rabon peered into the jail. There had been something about the gaunt oldster which suggested to the keen-eyed *caballero* that the man was all busted down, inside—yet the frame of the man was erect, even as he locked his son in a cell.

The Mexican's eyes swung back to Pratt. There was a little dribble of sweat coursing down the lawman's flabby cheek, as he faced the handful of curious townsmen who had gathered.

"Young Wildo went an' kilt Bimer!" the sheriff orated. "Leeson's hankerin' for a necktie party. F'God's sake, gents, he'p me make a stand f'r law an' order. You, Tilley—" The lawman aimed a fat and trembling forefinger at one of the townsmen. "Yo're a lawyer—pitch in an' he'p me here! Leeson an' his sidekicks'll tank up on Sol Grinder's likker an' go wild!"

Rabon turned his glance upon Tilley—and saw that the lawyer was a thin, chalk-faced hombre who slouched and let his lower lip sag away from tobacco-stained teeth. He had a string tie that once had been white; and somehow he made the *caballero* think of a morose ghost. But the lawyer's eyes didn't match up to that likeness at all. They were heavy-lidded, slyly satisfied—and they were looking up at the elder Wildo, who had come out onto the jail porch again.

"Reckon, now, that's a duty," Tilley stated, putting bony hands to the lapels of his coat as he looked at Wildo and spoke to Pratt. "But what's Long John Wildo's stand here? Trail-drivers stick together—and young Task's his son. How do we know he ain't aimin' to sneak the prisoner out of our jail, soon as danger of this necktie party blows over?"

That drew an uneasy rumble from the townsmen. And Wildo answered it. "I'm backin' the law, plumb down the line!" he boomed. "Naturally I'm grieved that my son's gone tuh the bad—but I aim tuh see him given the same treatment as anybody else. The thing is, I call for a fair trial."

Tilley gave the townsmen a langorous, appraising glance. "That ain't good enough for me. Bimer was my friend—an' the father of the man that murdered him is in cahoots with the law. Leeson's brand of justice suits me, in this case." Abruptly the lawyer turned to meet Leeson's bunch.

The townsmen looked at each other. "Bimer staked me, once!" one man yelled excitedly. "By hell, le's go talk tuh Leeson!"

Pratt piped a shrill protest as the townsmen deserted him and flocked down the street. But it did no good—and the lawman squinted first at Long John Wildo, then at Rabon.

"Gents," he said in a weakening wheeze. "Yuh gotta he'p me!"

"*Si, senor,*" the Mexican said, watching Leeson's bunch come to a halt and confer with Tilley. The squat Leeson had picked up Bimer's bronc—and now he kept looking at the jail and at Rabon, even while he spoke to Tilley. "But *Senor* Shereef, I 'ave jus' remember, I got the small detail to take care of firs'. The *Senor* Bimer, w'ere at he 'ave live?"

Pratt waggled a plump hand. "Hotel, end of the street. But man, yuh can't leave me now, with hell due tuh bust loose—"

Rabon's grin was broad, dazzling. *"Gracias! Senores, adios!"*

THE *caballero* jogged along the street, dismounted at the hotel, went into the small lobby. No one was there—no doubt the clerk had joined up with the bunch of excited townsmen. But as Rabon pivoted uncertainly, a girl of about twenty came down the stairs.

She was not tall, but she carried herself with that dignity which gives the impression of height. Her beauty was such that she needed no more decoration than her simple dress afforded. Anxiety lurked in her eyes.

Rabon bowed, pushed back his sombrero. "Thees momen' I will long remember," he said. "I am *Senor don* Pablo Rabon y Veras, from right now the servan' of the lovely lady. You are the *Senorita* Bimer?"

"Yes." The girl gave the little *caballero* a grave, straightforward scrutiny. "What's going on out there in the street?"

"Ees small matter," Rabon said, shrugging. But for once in his checkered life, he groped for words before a lady. *"Senorita,* eet make pain een my 'eart, that I got to tell you—"

"I know." The girl's chin lifted. "Dad's—dead?"

The gaudy Mex nodded, dumbly.

And Lu Bimer gripped the bannister. "Dad knew—it was coming. Before he left, he told me to get set for—anything."

Rabon explained what had happened, as best he could. "Ees the strange thing," he added, "w'en the gon not make the talk. Nobody know w'en eet kill again, nor from w'ere. I would like to 'ave the look-see among them boulder w'ere the killer hide—but when the *Senor* Task an' me lef', we had some haste."

Lu Bimer's eyes had widened with fear. "But those men out there are yelling lynch talk! And Task didn't kill—"

Rabon's smile was grimly rueful. "The *Senor* Leeson, he ees not care much about that detail. I'm theenk he show up mighty 'andy, on that plain, weeth rope along too—"

The girl caught the *caballero's* arm in a frantic, pleading grip. "We've got to help Task!"

"Seguro. But firs', you 'ave know that your *padre* win from the *Senor* Task the paper which give title to half the Rolling W herd?"

"Of course—Task told me. Dad never talked about his—business."

A slight, puzzled frown creased the *caballero's* forehead. "But eef your *padre* 'ave know he might not come back from ride tonight, w'y he go?"

The girl bit a lovely lip. "I sure don't know. Dad had been acting strange for a week. Task and I—"

Outside, an ugly roar that was compounded of many shouts swept through Verdugo. The roar of a mob that had gathered its strength and was ready and hungry for blood.

RABON gave the girl a smile of reassurance. "Jus' you stay here, w'ere ees mos' safe. For the lovely *senorita,* Rabon ees honor' to put the mob een eets place!"

He clapped his sombrero onto his head and darted out to the street. He had gone a considerable distance before he slowed down enough to realize that he had taken on a large order.

The mob was converging upon the jail, with a log that would soon batter down the door. Leeson broke away from the mob, confronted Rabon. The man's flat, black hat was tipped carefully to one side now, so that it wouldn't press against the ugly bruise which Rabon's gun had left along the side of the former's head.

"What's the rush, greaser?" Leeson

demanded. "Wasn't thinkin' of tryin' tuh tell the boys that Task didn't kill the tinhorn, was ya? They might get the idea you was in it with him—an' he'd have company at the hang tree."

The little *caballero* looked at Leeson's suggestively-sneering mouth, and shrugged. "Ees not my business. I 'ave deliver' to the shereef the prisoner—I am entitle' to reward. W'at happen now, ees the tough luck of the *Senor* Shereef, *no es verdad?*

Leeson squinted, then laughed mockingly. "Smart hombre, hah? Tryin' tuh trap me. Well, I'm givin' yuh twenty minutes tuh get out of Verdugo. If yo're still around when the boys'n me get through with our little party, I'll come a-gunnin'. Savvy that?"

Rabon nodded meekly. And Leeson, missing the faint twitch of the *caballero's* moustache, swaggered back to the mob.

The Mex looked over that bunch, as best he could in the moonlight, and failed to see Tilley among the excited men. And then, with spurs tinkling musically, Rabon crossed the street, darted through the shadows between two buildings.

He was trying to tell himself that he was taking long chances solely to protect his investment in Task Wildo —with the prisoner lynched, it was certain that no reward money would cross the counter. But the *caballero* knew mighty well that his real motive sprung from those twin weaknesses of his: romance and underdogs.

HE PROWLED through the night, approached the window at the rear of the jail, tapped cautiously on the bars with the barrel of his smokepole. There was no door back here.

Sheriff Pratt had turned out the lights inside the jail; but Rabon could make out that the head which bobbed into view was Task Wildo's.

"Ees Rabon," the *caballero* whispered. "The outfit, fork eet over."

"What?" Wildo demanded, gripping the bars.

"All of eet," Rabon insisted. "The sombrero, the ves', the shirt, the pants, the boots. I 'ave the need for eet mos' bad."

"Are yuh loco?" the prisoner demanded. "Maybe I stretch twine t'night, but I sure as hell ain't gonna do it in my birthday suit!"

The log battering ram began insistent impacts against the jail's door. Sheriff Pratt yipped shrill entreaties to the mob.

Rabon continued pleading in a voice that was a confidential croak.

"Eef you do like I say, maybe you not 'ang at all, *hombrecito*. Me, I am a *caballero*—'ave for me the trus'."

"Hell, what have I got tuh lose?" Wildo said bitterly. He handed over his gray outfit, piece by piece. Rabon took the garments eagerly, gave Wildo's hand one silent, reassuring grip, then scuttled away in the darkness.

AT a hitchrack a healthy distance down the street, the little *caballero* helped himself to a horse. And as he led the animal into the protecting darkness of the alley, he heard the mob let go a triumphant roar. That would mean that the jail door was giving way.

Rabon worked with frantic speed now. He found a three-foot stick, lashed it to the saddle horn of the bronc he had "borrowed". Then he found a shorter stick, lashed it crosswise on the first, about a foot from the top. On this framework he draped the gray outfit of Task Wildo, tying the boots to the stirrup straps. With tumbleweeds he filled out the dummy, gave it a startling semblance of life.

The result was the likeness of a man leaning anxiously forward in his saddle, with his hat pulled low to conceal his face.

Gunfire crashed and roared at the jail, just as Rabon led his borrowed bronc into the street. Long John Wildo's gaunt frame was blocking the jail's splintered doorway, with a shred of gunsmoke eddying around his proud old head. Leeson was down, wounded, on the porch. But the resistance had only added to the mob's fury—and the sullen, gathering roar which swept through Verdugo sent a chill down the little *caballero's* back.

He headed the dummy-laden bronc down the street, belted it across the rump with his *serape*. The horse, high-strung because of the night's excitement and the howls of the mob, lit out like something fired from a gun.

Rabon hauled his gold-plated smokepole, waited until the bronc shied past the unheeding mob. Then he fired twice.

"Senores!" he yelled. "Wildo, ees escape!"

The shooting, the shout, and the frantic drumming of the bronc's hoofs pulled the mob around. One look at Task Wildo's gray outfit, in the moonlight, was plenty for the excited hombres. They took out after the fleeing dummy, afoot, and wasted considerable powder in wild shooting.

Rabon gave his moustache a deft twitch, swaggered across the street and got his own bronc from the rack in front of the hotel. Lu Bimer was not on the porch—and the *caballero* felt a twinge of regret, that she would not witness his triumph. He shrugged though, and touched spurs to his bronc.

The mob parted to let him through. Some of the townsmen, with presence of mind enough to realize that they'd get nowhere afoot, were scattering to get mounts. But Rabon was far ahead of them—and with the encouraging shouts of the rest of the mob ringing in his ears he pulled out ahead of them, following a reeling dummy down a shadowy street that suddenly had taken on a grim menace.

He saw the dummy jerk, as if under the impacts of well-placed lead. Yet the mob had stopped shooting—and in an eerie silence that was underlaid by the drumming of the horses' hoofs the *caballero's* keen eye raked along both sides of the street, and spotted the stabs of crimson flame that reached out, furtively, from a second-floor window.

The shots made only a tinny, coughing sound which would not be identified with gunfire except by one who had seen the flashes. But that was enough for Rabon. He hauled his bronc to a rearing halt, swung from his fancy tree, legged straight toward the building.

The man who was hidden up there saw the move, realized its grim significance. A cruel stab of muzzle-flame reached down toward the Mex.

But Rabon, with an icy prickling on the back of his neck, was running at an erratic, dodging gait. The bullet ticketed for him passed so close to his head that he felt the heat of it.

He dug his high heels into the dust, came to an abrupt halt. And in that split-second which was necessary for the hidden gunman to lever a new shell into the chamber of his rifle, Rabon's gold-plated smokepole descended in a graceful arc, centered on the window, roared out shot after shot.

The shadowy gunman let out a strangled scream. He managed to fire one more shot, which went wild. Then he spun around, toppled against the window-sill, spilled out. His body struck a shingle sign, set it to flapping wildly back and forth. The sign read:

VANCE TILLEY
Attorney at Law

THE lawyer's body landed in the dust with a thud that had an awful quality of finality. Rabon

darted forward, pulled money and papers from the dead man's pockets, snatched up the rifle which had fallen into the dust.

It was an ordinary-looking weapon, this one, except for the two tin cans which had been soldered end-to-end and fitted over its muzzle. The cans were bulged by pressure, worn shiny where they had rubbed against a horse's side.

The *caballero* straightened, faced the bewildered mob. These townsmen and ranchers thought that they had been cheated of their gallows-prey; and they were in an ugly mood. Most anything might have happened, had not a girl's clear voice lifted, behind the mob:

"Stop in your tracks, all of you! We can prove that Tilley killed my dad, with that silenced rifle! No honest man fixes a gun like that!"

It was Lu Bimer, with a rifle held capably in her hands. And Long John Wildo came out of the shattered jail, backed the girl's bold play. The mob, with Rabon's gold-plated smokepole in front of it and those other guns behind it, cooled down pronto.

"Yuh been fooled, men," Long John Wildo boomed. "My son's right here in the jail—an' here he stays till he's proved guilty or innocent. Now scatter!"

The crowd was agreeable.

Rabon offered his arm gallantly to Lu Bimer, helped the girl up the jail's steps.

Sheriff Pratt was collapsed in the protesting swivel chair, industriously fanning his chalky-white face with a sheaf of reward dodgers. The wounded Leeson was stretched out on a bench, receiving the half-hearted ministrations of Verdugo's doctor.

But crimson froth welled from Leeson's nose and mouth—it was mighty plain that his rope was spun short. "Yuh—dirty greaser son!" the squat man husked to Rabon. "I'll kill—"

Rabon placed Tilley's silenced rifle on the sheriff's desk, for Pratt's pop-eyed inspection, and twirled his own gold-plated persuader. "Mos' bes' you die, pronto," he advised Leeson. "The *Senor* Tilley, ees very dead. But he talk plenty, before he pass out—an' I'm theenk you stretch that twine you 'ave been so anxious to use. *Verdad!*"

Lu Bimer looked at Rabon, startled by the *caballero's* smooth lying. But the Mexican's dazzling grin diminished not at all. Every *caballero,* he knew, must know when and how to lie like a gentleman.

"Y'mean he accused *me* of killin' Bimer?" Leeson husked. "He lied like hell! I can prove it by the boys that was with me in the gulch! Tilley sent us there—he was hid in the rocks, an' kilt Bimer an' then chased back tuh town— Why, I even fixed that rifle for the coyote! Learned the trick from a sheepherder. An' now Tilley turns around an'—" Leeson sank back, exhausted.

Lu Bimer gave a little cry of thankfulness when she realized that Task Wildo was cleared. She ran back to the cell where the youngster was hurriedly wrapping himself in a blanket.

RABON grinned at Long John. "Love, ees wonderful, ha?"

Wildo nodded—but his leathery face was creased by a frown.

"I shore don't savvy this," he growled.

Rabon shrugged, spread his hands expressively. "Ees simple. Tilley give to your *hijo* the knockout drink—then he forge the I. O. U. which give over half the herd, make Bimer take eet. Then he kill Bimer, so he can accuse you an' your *hijo* of eet, give you the lynch, an' help heemself to the whole herd, *sabe?*"

"But how'd yuh spot his play?" Wildo wanted to know.

"*Senor,* like some *pobrecitos* got the rheumatic een the knee, I got the curiosity. I'm wonder w'y Bimer go

out at night to claim hees half of the herd—an' w'y he not take along the law to back heem up. Then, een town here, I'm wonder w'y Tilley throw een weeth the 'ang-mob—*Senor,* w'en the lawyer back the lynch-party which ees cheat him out of the court trial which mean maybe fat fee, ees something rotten! From that, I figure eet."

Long John said, "Why's Bimer toe the mark for Tilley? It don't stand tuh reason—"

"*Senor, quien sabe?* Ees many thing we do not know, about every hombre. We let eet go at that, ha?"

Wildo's face twitched as he nodded. "I reckon I'll—go back an' see my son an' his gal," he stated.

Rabon sighed deeply as he went outside to his horse. Once he was mounted and well away from Verdugo, he took from his pockets the papers he'd obtained from the dead lawyer.

Among them was a reward notice, frayed and yellowed, dated twenty-three years back. It offered one thousand dollars reward for the capture of one Chet Sayman, wanted for killing a man in Ogallala—which meant nothing at all. But it carried a picture of the wanted man—and that meant everything.

The man was Bimer. This, then, was the club which Tilley had held over the gambler's head.

The little *caballero* crumpled the dodger, built himself a cigarret, thumbed a match expertly into flame. He touched the flame first to the reward notice, flipped the burning paper aside, then lit his smoke.

He was thinking that this hadn't been much of a pistol payday for an earnest gun-business man. But hell, for the *caballero* who has maybe too much romance in his system, there can be pay of another kind.

He straightened in his silver-inlaid tree and hummed a Mexican love song as he rode on.

A Full-Length Action Novel

THE DEVIL'S

What caused the three most easy going gents in Travadore Town—the Sheriff, a button, and a Chinese cook—to become the Devil himself, and his blood-hungry deputies from Hell?

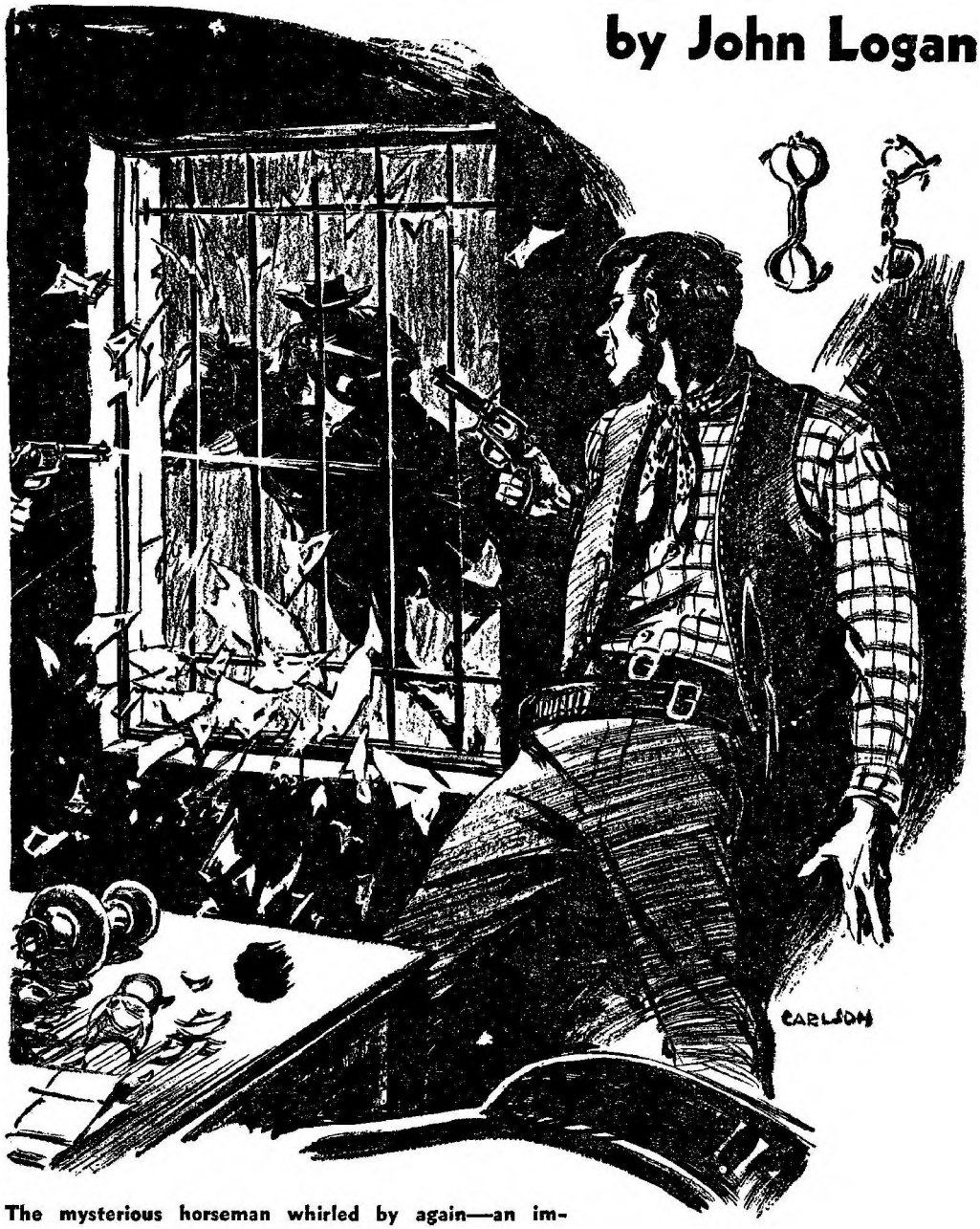
CHAPTER I
Waiting for Murder

PANCHO GONZALES knelt on the edge of the big rocker and rested his sharp brown elbows on the table while he studied the chessboard before him. The sheriff's queen had Pancho's king in check.

Frowning, the Mexican youngster pushed his castle into the adjacent square. "I guess that does it!" he said.

OWN DEPUTIES

by John Logan



The mysterious horseman whirled by again—an impossible target in the gloom.

"I guess it doesn't!" Sheriff Bill Watts reached out to pick up Pancho's rook, and in its place he put his own queen. "Checkmate, Deputy!"

The kid grinned broadly, his white teeth flashing in the lamplight.

"But I can take the ol' lady with the king, sheriff."

"Yeah?" The big lawman ran his hand through his yellow, curling hair. His gray eyes smiled softly. "If you'll foller the old lady's trail you'll see something." He pointed to a bishop in the lower right corner. "Never let a dame ride alone into enemy territory."

"Aw, heck." The youngster's wide grin turned to dismay. "I never seen that bishop."

"You've got to keep your eyes open for enemy men," the sheriff told him. "Playing chess is just like sheriffing. You've got to plan ahead. The feller who wins is the lad who keeps his eyes open—the waddie who covers his back trail and opens the trail ahead before he moves on."

"Heck!" Pancho began gathering up the men and putting them into their wooden box. "I never thought of chess like that. I thought it was a game like checkers."

"It is," Bill went on. "But if you look at it like sheriffing, it's easier to understand. Take King Seltzer and his ramrod, Sanchez, for instance. They were ridin' this range high and loose, but we caught them off guard. Now we've got them in the coop. That's like being in check. Pretty soon, when the trial's over, we'll take them down to the Big House to serve their term. Then they'll be in checkmate. But until then, Deputy, they've got to be covered. That's Deputy Bat's job: standing over them like a rook so they can't go on with the game."

"Hell!" Pancho caught himself. "I mean, ding-bust! They sort o' do match, don't they?"

The sheriff had picked up the little Mexican kid in the hills months before, the day when Butch Walker the outlaw had turned on Pancho's father, the leader of the gang, and shot him in the back. He had wounded the kid too, then ridden off and left him where Bill Watts had found him. Ever since that day little Pancho had lived in the small room out back which he paid for by sweeping out the sheriff's house. He and Sheriff Bill were great pals, and so were Pancho and Sally Bolton whom the sheriff was going to marry. Though Bill called him "Deputy" only in fun, the kid knew way down in his heart that he'd be a big lawman some day, and he knew that the sheriff believed it too.

"Maybe . . ." Pancho's dark eyes suddenly flashed. "Maybe Tony Ling is a sort o' bishop. Maybe he's on horse-faced Seltzer's side and we ought tuh keep an eye on him. I seen Ling today when I was down at Jimmy O'Neil's tendin' horses. He rid in on a buckskin hoss."

The sheriff leaned forward abruptly, stared intently into Pancho's pinched dusky face. "Tony Ling?" he snapped. "You sure it was Ling?"

"I ought tuh know! Wasn't he one o' Papa Al's pals down in Sonora till they had their fight?" Pancho's dark eyes snapped. "When I was a little kid he used to shoot off my boot-heels just for the heck of it. But Papa Al got mad at him one day an' smacked down with his gun-sight. An' now Ling's got a crooked scar on his forehead that makes him look kinda cockeyed."

The sheriff's eyes closed slightly as if he were looking off into the misted distances. Tony Ling, smartest of the border outlaws—gun-runner, cattle rustler, lightning gunman. . . . He could see Ling's dark face on the old yellowed "Wanted" poster . . . he could remember the scraps of reputation that drifted up from Sonora and the Big Bend. . . . He whistled softly. If Tony Ling was in Travadore . . .

"Do you think you can find him for me?" he asked suddenly. "If it's Ling, he ain't up here for any good."

"Sure, I can find him. He's probably down at the Ranchers' Bar gettin' drunk. He was always doin' that down in Sonora."

"Okay!" The sheriff jumped to his feet. "You go down an' see if he's

there. Meet me in ten minutes at the jail. But don't let anyone see you snooping."

Pancho's heels clicked down on the floor as he slid from the chair and ran over to the hat-rack for his pint-sized J. B. He limped slightly when he ran, for the leg that had been broken by one of Butch Walker's .45 slugs had never fully mended. At the door he slapped on his hat and swung back to the lighted room.

"Be seein' yuh, Sheriff!"

"Right, Deputy!"

BILL WATTS, too, clapped on his Stetson. But a moment behind Pancho, he strode out of his house, down the boardwalk to Jimmy O'Neil's livery stable. A thoughtful frown creased his forehead as he saddled his big black.

For a long time Seltzer and Sanchez, owner and ramrod of the Crown, biggest spread in the county, had had things pretty much their own way. They had ridden roughshod over the smaller ranchers, had gobbled up their range. They had rustled cows from the small outfits and had not even stopped short of murder, in their greedy fight to get a strangle-hold on the county. But then Bill Watts was elected sheriff. With Doc Bolton and a few of the nervier small ranchers like Frankie Payson backing him, Seltzer and Sanchez at last had met their match. They had ended up, after plenty of gun-smoke, behind bars. They were in the jug right now!

But Tony Ling was in town—and his coming was certain to have some connection with the men in jail.

The sheriff had his mind made up by the time he reached the jail. His deputy, Bat Furness, grinned as he came in and took his lanky legs off the sheriff's table and clumped them down on the floor.

"How's the free man?" he asked.

"He ain't free." Bill settled down on the edge of the desk, one leg hanging over the side and swinging slowly. "Where's that resignation I passed over to you last week when I slapped Sanchez and Seltzer in the jug."

Leaning back in his swivel chair, Bat fished out a long white envelope from the flat-top drawer and handed it over to the sheriff. "Yuh want to read it an' see if it's really true?"

Walker casually ripped the envelope across the middle. Then, putting the two pieces together, he ripped them into half again. Then into eighths, and let the pieces dift slowly into the wicker waste-basket.

Bat's mouth hung grotesquely open. "Yuh mean it?" Bat asked. Then the wind-tanned lines around the corners of his mouth creased and deepened in eager anticipation. Some people said that Bat was a bit thick, but nobody denied that he was intensely interested in his job. "What's up, Bill?"

"I can't quit with a half-done job on my hands, Bat," the sheriff said. "While you've been making smoke-rings to hang around yore new badge, and while I've been building castles, the only real lawman Travadore's ever had has been snooping."

"You don't mean Pancho's scared up another rat?"

"I do," the sheriff answered. "And a mean one. About twelve, midnight, you're going to be shot at. Somebody's going to try to bust out Seltzer."

"The button tell you that?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Pancho didn't tell me this. I just figgered it out from what he did tell me. While I'm celebrating the end of my job the boys will strike. They all know I'm supposed to go out of office at midnight. Can you think of a better time to be made into buzzard bait?"

"But there ain't a man on the Crown Ranch with nerve enough to try an' bust the place," Bat said, "even if there was one who was interested."

"But there are plenty of others in the world." The sheriff sat back.

"Seltzer sold the cows he rustled off the little fellows. We always knew he had a mighty close tie-up with somebody down on the border, even if we didn't know who. That hombre couldn't afford to let his best client hang—especially not if Seltzer was willin' to pay good money to have the said hombre bust him out of jail."

Bat deliberately nodded his head. He was trying as usual to see through the complex reasoning of the sheriff.

"And this somebody has shown up," the sheriff ended quietly. "Pancho saw him tonight."

"This somebody?"

Silently Bill Watts pulled open the bottom drawer of the desk and took out a sheaf of old brittle "Wanted" notices. He thumbed through them, finally laying one on the table in front of his deputy. Bat leaned forward, studied it briefly, and looked up.

"Tony Ling?"

"Right!"

"Bad meat!" Bat whispered.

There was a quiet shuffling sound in the hall, then the broken tread of someone walking with a limp. Little Pancho slid in through the doorway so quietly and quickly the sheriff could hardly believe that the kid had even stopped to open the door.

"He's down there!" the button whispered. "He's standin' over to the left o' the bar with one foot on the rail."

"Good work!" The sheriff stood up and jerked at the heavy gun-belt that was slung around his hips. "I'll be back, Bat. And you, Deputy . . ." He turned to Pancho. " . . . go down to Jimmy O'Neil's and keep your eyes open. Don't move from the place unless the Ling's buckskin is taken out. If Ling comes back wait until he leaves before you come to tell me."

"Okay, Sheriff!" The Mexican kid's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Right!" Watts turned back to Bat as the youngster vanished again. "Don't shadow yourself on the window-blind," he warned his deputy. "We've got work to do tonight and we don't want to begin it with a funeral."

Quietly the sheriff slipped out. Bat leaned forward to turn down the yellow-flamed lamp. Beside the lamp was an old tin alarm clock whose hands pointed at nine forty-five. Grinning at his joke, Bat set the alarm at twelve, then settled down to wait . . .

CHAPTER II
The Snake Strikes

NODDING to the boys and smiling, the sheriff walked across the crowded floor of the Ranchers' Bar to the mahogany counter and the brass rail. This saloon, owned by the jailed King Seltzer, had never been one of Bill Watts' favorite hangouts. It was naturally the place where Seltzer's men, and the men who sympathized with him, got together. . . . But tonight was a big night, and even the men who had so bitterly fought Watts' election three years back, the men who had constantly obstructed him, greeted him tonight with open smiles. For tonight Bill Watts was quitting his job, and tomorrow a new man would be sitting in his chair, a man whom they thought would be easier to handle.

The head bartender ran up carrying a bottle and grinning until he was red in the face. "On the house, Sheriff!" he said. "Yuh put the boss in the coop, but it's on the house just the same!" Still holding the bottle in his left hand, waving to the small crowd with his right, he went on in a high voice, "Come on, boys. A toast to the sheriff! The house is doin' the buying!"

They lined up at the bar, held their glasses high after the perspiring bartender had rushed the length of the bar filling them up. And the bartender, mopping his broad brow, held his glass and proposed a toast.

"To the sheriff!" he said. The whole room was silent, and the word "sheriff" seemed to ring out strongly.

The crowd cheered, downed their drinks. In the mirror the sheriff could see a lean, dark-faced gent standing at the far end of the bar. He could see a ragged scar on the dark man's forehead, a scar that cut down towards the left eye. It was Tony Ling, all right, and Ling tipped his glass with the rest of the men, and looked straight ahead.

The crowd surged back when somebody yelled for a speech. The sheriff, holding his head modestly down, stepped into the open space and held up his hand.

"Thanks, boys!" he said. "Be good to Bat until the next election comes around."

He glanced swiftly over the ragged ring of cowmen, his eyes passing quickly over Ling's dark face, and finally coming to rest on the grinning, pink-cheeked bartender. "Thanks," he said again, setting the empty glass down on the polished bar-top. Then, turning on his heel, he walked through the crowd and out of the door.

HE WAS on the boardwalk when the bartender began collecting the glasses, and so did not see that hombre's almost imperceptive nod to Tony Ling. He did not see the gunman pull his black Stetson down over his dark eyes and casually work his way out of the saloon on the sheriff's heels. But right now Bill Watts was following the advice he had given to Pancho tonight. When the gunman stepped out onto the boardwalk, he was crouched and waiting for him.

Ling stepped lithely forward like a catamount setting out on a journey. His left hand nestled over the dark butt of his .44, his sharp eyes searched the night for any sign of the recently departed law-dog of Travadore.

"Ling!" The sheriff's voice came coolly from the shadows by the saloon-front. "Don't move, Ling!"

The gunman turned from the hip, held his pose, while Watts took a short step forward, barely showing himself in the dark street.

"I guessed wrong, Ling!" The sheriff's voice was low. "Thought you were up here for my successor. Not for me."

"Don't savvy!" The gunman was on his toes. "I'm a stranger here. Never heard of this Ling waddie."

"Never heard of him?" The sheriff's tone arched with his eyebrows. "Everybody's heard of Ling. Hoist your hands, brother. I want to borrow your artillery."

The gun-tosser's hands crept slowly toward the bright stars. In the faint flicker of light from the Silver Moon across the way, the sheriff could see the livid scar on his dusky face, the quick winking of his eyes, the quiver of his thin nostrils, and the lean, dark hands which stopped moving at about shoulder height.

"You've got your nerve on tonight, Lawman!" Ling said softly. "It takes a lot to disarm a feller without even pulling your iron."

"I don't need it." Watts smiled enigmatically. "I can get it quicker than you can pull yours. It makes me nervous to finger it, that's all."

The dark, lithe man laughed shortly. "I wisht I had a nerve like yours."

"You have," the sheriff answered grimly, "if you live up to your reputation." They were standing about three feet apart looking deep into each other's eyes, and for a brief moment neither man moved. Then, slowly, the sheriff reached for Ling's guns. But his gray-steel eyes did not waver as he slipped the left .44 into his waistband and held the gun from the right holster balanced in his hand.

"The jail's the big adobe shack on the south end of the street heading west," he said. "Or maybe you know where it is already?"

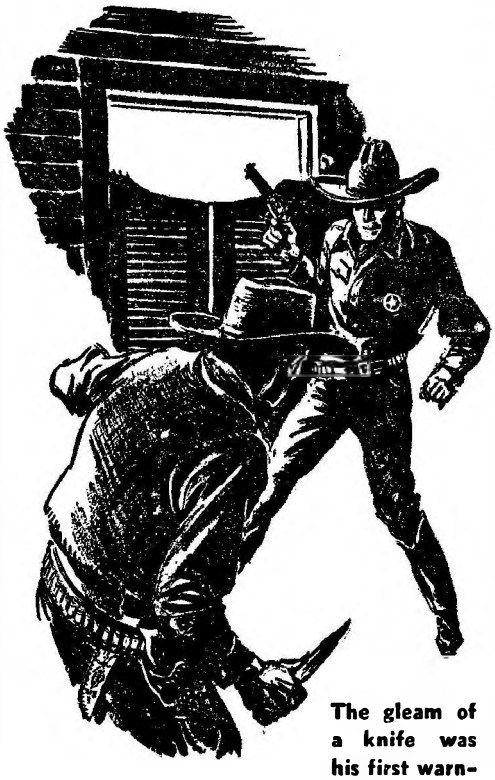
"Can find it!"

"Good! You lead the way and I'll follow."

Ling's dark eyes moved, seemed to search the side of the road for the jail. He shifted his balance to his right foot — and suddenly, with no other warning, he bent double. His lean brown hand slicked up his back, his head twisted strangely sidewise, and his arm and hand recoiled. The sheriff stepped in triggering the .44. Ling laughed.

There was no explosion of the gun!

Just a hollow clicking sound as the hammer fell on an empty shell: just the click and the fugitive's laugh as his arm swept forward and the sheriff saw the faint glitter of a knife arcing through the shadows. Swiftly he ducked, snapping up the hand that was holding the revolver and deflecting the blade. The steel rang sharply on the empty .44 and caromed from the gun, licking across Bill's face. The weighted shaft cracked into his temple and filled his head with snapping sparks, but he held his ground, and with all the power in his brawny arm flung the .44 straight for the knife-thrower's sharp face.



The gleam of a knife was his first warning!

In the thick darkness neither man could clearly see his adversary. But the sheriff, his eyes smarting from a trickle of blood flowing down from the knife-cut, was at a disadvantage. And when he sprang in for the clinch Ling jumped aside, and unseen by the sheriff snapped up with his hard, angular knee. Watts jerked back under the impact, stumbled and fell. Then he pushed to his feet again and for a moment stood groggily weaving with his hands held before him.

Ling had vanished. . . .

BILL WATTS quickly circled the Ranchers' Bar, came back and stood by the swinging doors. He had been bested at his own game, and only the sheerest accident would enable him to find this eel of a man. Ling was as good as his reputation. The split second had been enough for him. He'd hug the shadows now and keep out of sight.

A couple of cowpunchers came out of the Silver Moon across the way, laughing and joking between themselves. The interminable arguments on cattle-raising continued unabated in the Ranchers' Bar. A lone rider pulled up before the Dance Palace and called cheerily to the two punchers. While the sheriff watched, they laughed together and the rider slid from his horse and disappeared into the open door of the honkytonk with the two punchers. The fight had been so swift, so quiet, it had attracted no attention.

The Silver Moon and the Dance Palace—the crowds in there were for

the sheriff. They didn't need to be watched. Maybe that was why Bill failed to look at the lone arrival more closely. Even had he done so, distance and darkness would most likely have kept him from seeing that Tony Ling had tricked him again, was even now setting the stage for his next move on Travadore's chessboard....

Warily he searched the shadows for the knife and the .44. The bowie was glittering brightly in a ray of light from the saloon doorway. But it took him a long time to find the. 44. That toss he had given it had been no mean throw. The revolver had landed in front of Joe Bean's Undertaking and Furniture Store, nearly seventy-five yards away. Then he went slowly on toward the jail.

As he opened the door, he saw that Bat wasn't alone. He caught the glint of golden curls in the lamplight, heard the tinkle of silver spurs.

"Sally!" He stepped through the door, blinking at the flickering light of the oil lamp. He tried to smile when the girl's high heels clicked across the floor in a fluttering tattoo; but the smile didn't quite come off.

"Bill . . .!" The girl's hand went up slowly to touch his forehead where the sharp knife had left a beaded line of dried blood, and worry clouded her blue eyes. "What's happened?"

"Got scratched." The easy smile was coming back. He stepped past Sally to the desk, and taking the two .44s from his waistband and the knife from the belt, laid them down on the desk. "Ran into a curly wolf—an' yanked his teeth."

Sally edged around in front of him again, looking into his eyes, and Bat Furness glanced from the captured weapons to the sheriff with an expression of mixed wonder and admiration.

"An' I suppose yuh want me to fetch the corpse!" he said. "Or is Joe Bean takin' care o' that?"

The girl laid her hand on Bill's arm.

"It's all over now, Bill," she said. "I'm glad it's all over." There was a happy note creeping into her voice. "It's nearly twelve. Why don't you quit the job now? You don't have to wait until midnight." She swung around towards the deputy. "Does he, Bat?"

"Course not, Sally. Course not! An' the boys will be expectin' him down at the Silver Moon!"

The sheriff's eyes lowered to the battered alarm clock. And the clock's face was blurred.

"It's just beginning, Sally gal." His words were slow and stiff. "It ain't all over. I pulled the lobo's teeth. But the lobo got away with his pelt uninjured. Ling is as free as the wind. And probably got a new set of pals by now . . . and a new set of artillery."

"Oh, Bill . . ." He saw the blue eyes darken, sensed the flood of unhappiness in her words. Bat must have told her about his tearing up the resignation; but she had refused to believe it.

"Ling got away?" Bat couldn't understand it. "Disarmed . . ."

"Sure." The sheriff laughed harshly. Briefly he told them of the fight, of the knife-thrower's surprise attack and escape. "He must of had ahold of that bowie all the time. I didn't see it."

"But yuh can hang up yore guns just the same," Furness said quietly. "He's got his scare. He won't come back for a spell anyway."

"That's right?" Sally Bolton grasped eagerly at Bat's suggestion. The wide blue eyes sparkled again; her smile was encouraging. "That's all over. You scared him off, anyway."

The sheriff's face clouded; he shook his head. "Nope," he said with finality, "I can't bust out of office with a job half done. Ling's coming back tonight. I've got to be here waiting for him."

"But he won't—" Furness began.

"But he will." The sheriff had read Bat's thoughts. "He's smart, that rannie. Look how he had his guns loaded

tonight. Three empty cartridges in each, and three full. They're ready for him to use—and they fill a feller like me with false hopes. Ling plays with a stacked deck. He's won once tonight and he'll ride his luck. He'll be back because the cards tell him that we won't expect him."

Slowly Bat nodded. As usual his boss was right.

"So you take Sally home, Bat, and then wander on down to the Silver Moon. Anybody looking will think it's me. But I'll be here waiting when Ling comes."

"Listen, Bill . . ." Bat jumped to his feet.

"I won't do it" Sally cried. "If you're staying here, I am!"

"I'm playing this hand," the sheriff answered coldly. "I'm sticking until Seltzer and the redhead are in the big house. And I'm playing it out alone because it's the only way of getting the outside men along with the ins." Then, as if in afterthought, he added, "Besides, there ain't no danger. The Silver Moon gang are our friends. They'll be expecting me pretty soon to help them celebrate. And if you go down there, Bat, and get them ready, they'll throw a circle around this town the second the first shot busts. Ling's gang will run their heads into a trap of their own making."

"But—"

The sheriff silenced Bat with a gesture. And in the silence the three could hear the sounds of roistering fun downtown. It was getting near midnight, and a couple of punchers were staging a mock shoot-up on the lower end of town. Other cowboys were joining in on the fun, yelling for the sheriff to come and stop the riot. And girls from the Dance Palace laughed shrilly at their friends' antics.

Down at the end of the dark hallway the two men imprisoned in the steel cages began rattling their barred doors. Bat stuck his head out into the hall.

"Pipe down!" he yelled.

"That sounds like a lynching getting underway!" King Seltzer yowled.

"It does, don't it?" Bat laughed.

"What're yuh goin' to do about it?" The rancher's voice carried the overtones of fright mixed in with his natural arrogance.

"Turn yuh over to them," Bat jibed. "We don't want the jail tore down."

Suddenly the alarm clock mechanism clicked and the bell buzzed raspingly. The lawman and the girl tensed automatically, then laughed, and Sally ran over to turn it off because she was nearest to it. For a moment, while she pulled up on the little lever, she was silhouetted between the lamp and the shaded window. The buzzing stopped, and then Sally, as if she had been bitten by a snake, stiffened abruptly. Her face paled visibly, she gasped, clutched at her shoulder with her right hand.

The two men stood frozen, staring at her, while she took her hand away and stared wide-eyed at it. Blood dripped from her fingers....

The sheriff jumped from the desk as the girl began to fall. In one movement he picked her up and carried her beyond the circle of the lamplight. In the same split-second Bat Furness smashed down at the lamp with his bare hand, smashing the glass globe and plunging the room into blackness. A second bullet crackled through the window, whined over their heads and shuddered into the adobe wall. But none of them heard the explosion of the shot: the celebration downtown, in full swing now, had killed the sound of it.

CHAPTER III
Jail Break

IT WAS all over in perhaps two minutes. From the darkened room, Bat and the sheriff peered out into the street, hands on their .45s. One

of the sheriff's arms was around the girl's limp form. "Sally . . ." he kept saying. But she didn't answer.

Then, lead was pouring into the room again as a man on horseback swept past. They fired at—but it was only a swift-moving shadow, and both knew that their bullets were wasted. It whirled and came back, firing again. Window glass shattered and tumbled down in a cascading torrent. They had to crouch low to avoid the hail of lead. For a moment they couldn't even return the rider's fire, and while they hunkered there they heard the roar of new hoofbeats.

"It's Ling, all right," the sheriff muttered. "He drove off our horses then. He's fixin' for a getaway. . . ."

Now the crowd of shooting cowboys down the street was coming nearer, having their innocent joke on Bill Watts who they thought was resigning tonight.

"Where's the sheriff?" yelled someone in the mob.

"Let's get him!" another shouted.

The lone rider was gone now, or swallowed up in the crowd. Bat peered out as the crowd stampeded, roared down on the jail in an avalanche of galloping horses and carefree, celebrating men. But as they drew closer they seemed for the first time to notice that the jail was dark, the windows smashed into black jagged holes. The guns of the leaders silenced. The laughter slowly died.

"Bat . . .!" came suddenly from Bill Watts. "Seltzer and Sanchez—go in and look for them. They're not making a sound . . .!"

Bat was already howling to the mob for help. Two men dismounted, leaped up the short flight of steps and came into the jail. It had all been a joke—to mock at shooting up the town in farewell fun for the sheriff who had served them so well! A joke in which Ling had seen a long chance to twist to his own ends. . . .

Bill heard them telling it to Bat, while he held Sally in his arms. He kept saying her name over and over, and still she didn't answer.

Cowpunchers' high heels clicked sharply on the pine flooring of the hall, and Bat reappeared with the two men. Standing on the small stoop he gave out quick, decisive orders.

"They've busted jail—Seltzer and Sanchez! While the shootin' was goin' on, somebody come out back with horses and yanked the bars and a big chunk o' wall out . . . ! We've got to find 'em! You're all sworn in as deputies. Montana an' Slim, here, will lead the two posses. An' make her fast!"

The punchers flung aboard their plunging ponies, pulled together two groups from the crowd and whirled down the main street of Travadore town, and the hollow pounding of half a thousand hoofs shook the rows of false-fronted buildings to their foundations.

Bat stood there in the doorway a moment, watching them go. Then Bill Watts saw his big bulk moving slowly back into the silent office. He stumbled, breathing heavily, toward the wall-bracket. The flame of the lamp fanned out, threw a yellow light over the room.

"Is Sally hurt bad?" Bat asked softly.

The sheriff had placed her in a chair, holstered his warm .45. In the darkness he had opened the collar of her white, blood-stained shirt. Now, with fingers that trembled, he ran his finger over the sticky blood on her round shoulder, carefully avoiding the ragged, open wound.

And then, it seemed for the first time in a long while, he breathed—a long, deep breath.

"It ain't as bad as I thought," he said. "It ain't much. An' the bleeding's stopping. She'll be all right, Bat!" He glanced up at Bat but seemed to be seeing him. Then he stood up, his arms still about the girl. After a little, he spoke again.

"So the prisoners busted out, huh?"

"They must of had half a dozen horses," Bat informed him. "Pulled out the whole rear end of the jail."

The sheriff looked down into the girl's deathly white face framed by its golden, wind-swept curls. Her eyelids were flickering slightly, her cheeks were twitching.

"It should of been me, not you!" he said.

Sally's eyes opened suddenly. The wide blue of them was wet and fresh like the prairie skies after a rain, and her red lips parted in a little smile.

"No, Bert," she said simply. "It had to be me. You still have work to do . . . and I must stay at home and wait till you come back to me."

FOR a moment the sheriff was speechless. This woman of his had a heart and strength beyond his comprehension. He couldn't think of the proper answer, and he covered up his confusion by asking her:

"Where's your father? We've got to find him to tend to you."

"No. I'll be all right," she insisted. The glow was returning to her cheeks, she trembled in his arm as the pain in her shoulder began to throb again and the numbness of unconsciousness surged from her slim body. "Take me home and I'll be all right!"

Silently the sheriff left the jail and strode down the boardwalk towards Doc Bolton's house, carrying Sally in his arms. His mind was wandering: from the girl to the man who had shot her, from Sally to little Pancho who must be still waiting down at the stable, to Doc Bolton who had not shown up all evening.

"Where's Doc?" he asked again.

Through the darkness the girl's answer came faintly.

"He went out to the Oxbow this afternoon. Somebody rode in to say Frankie Payson wanted to see him. But he should have been back long ago."

"Payson was okay this morning when I rode by." The sheriff stopped himself. He was putting the puzzle together. Frankie Payson and Doc Bolton—the two who'd ride through hell with him . . . the two men he needed at a time like this . . . Payson had been badly shot up in the battle they'd had when they rounded up Seltzer and Sanchez—but he was mending all right. Now . . .

Just in time he had caught himself, kept from showing his fear to the girl. "But Frankie wasn't wholly mended, yet," he added quickly. "Guess he had a relapse. Maybe Doc fixed him up and stuck around to play some poker."

"Maybe," the girl answered.

And Pedro, he was thinking . . . Ling must have come and gotten his horse. Funny the kid hadn't showed up before now, especially with all the shooting. . . .

They had reached the Doc's house and Bat went ahead to light a lamp. Briefly the sheriff held the girl closer while his lips brushed hers. Then the lamp flared up and he set Sally down on her bed and put the pillow under her head. Before he left he and Bat washed out her wound and bound it temporarily.

"Doc will be home soon and do a right job of it," he said in parting.

"Thanks, Bill."

On the front porch he stopped for a moment listening to the now quiet night. Bat was standing silently beside him, waiting for further orders, but for a long time the sheriff said nothing. He was thinking of the conversation he'd had that afternoon with the Mexican kid. Plan ahead . . . keep your eyes on the back trail and open the trail ahead. Don't move until the ground's cleared and you are sure your plan will work. Those were the rules for sheriffing and chess-playing . . . the rules for jail-busting and banditry. Tony Ling knew the rules, all right; he knew his game and he'd

done a beautiful job of it tonight. Who but Ling would have had the artistry to remove Doc Bolton and Frankie Payson from the game without making it suspicious?

"And another good rule is:" he said to his startled deputy, "always keep your eye on the board. Remind me to tell that to Pancho."

LING had ridden into the crowd before the Silver Moon Saloon after shooting up the jail, and he had quickly swung his buckskin around and begun yelling for the sheriff. In the darkness and the packed mass of men and horses he knew that he was safe for the moment, and he had made the best use of that temporary safety. Still yelling, he had edged his horse over to the rail before the Dance Palace and slid unobtrusively to the ground, and by the time the first contingent broke for the jail he was completely lost among the men and girls thronging the boardwalk.

It was easy enough then to get over to the Ranchers' Bar, to get a slug of whiskey from the bartender, to leave a hurried order and to edge out through the back door, around the dumps and across the street again. Ling had been in scrapes like this before. He knew how to confuse his trail: but more important, he knew how to keep from being caught. He knew that the men who are tracked down are the men who run; for the men who run are those who are chased.

He had a quiet laugh with himself over the uproar that followed the discovery of the hoax and the finding of his buckskin horse before the Dance Palace. And, when a cowpuncher looked queerly at him on the boardwalk his glib tongue had had a ready comment.

"They'll never find Ling in there!" he had told the cowboy. "He's too smart to leave his horse standing outside like a calling card."

"He ain't so bright," the native came back. "A bright man wouldn't ride a hoss like that. Yuh could tell it in a million."

A third man chimed in a bit ruefully: "He ain't so bright? He lifted my gun a while back, while I was holdin' Laredo Lucy on my knee, and neither of us would of ever known it if—"

"Yuh was both too oiled . . . an' too busy!" the other came back.

Ling had gone on his way then, his black Stetson down over his eyes to hide the scar on his forehead, his horse left behind to decoy the mob, and when the two posses swept through town into the open country he joined the homeguard and began hunting for himself. He rooted through the dumps and brush behind the town, always working towards Doc Bolton's house. At the back door he glanced hurriedly around, then swiftly slipped inside and stood in the dark entry-way by the wood-pile listening to the ebb and flow of the search. He listened while it swept past, then sat down on a kerosene can and waited.

The night slowly quieted. Two men clumped up the boardwalk and into the house. One of them came to the kitchen to pump some water into a pot. A moment later the other came in too and for a couple of minutes they talked together in guarded tones.

". . . why the Doc didn't come back?"

There was a partial silence; then some more unintelligible words ending with: "Don't take it that way, Bill. It ain't yore fault Miss Sally was hit. . . ."

Another silence, and, "It's hot enough now."

Then: ". . . stick around till Doc shows up. I'm ridin'."

Ling waited patiently. He heard the men leave the kitchen. He heard the front door swing back on its hinges and the sound of someone walking

across the veranda and down the walk. That meant the sheriff was leaving. A rocking-chair began to creak . . . and then, with the quiet stealth for which he was noted, Ling opened the kitchen door and silently crept into the house.

HE had to go through the main room to get to the bedroom that had been described to him by the bartender in the Ranchers' Bar, and in the big main room he found Bat Furness slowly rocking in an armchair before the dead fire. Quietly he edged across the carpeted floor until he was standing directly behind the chief deputy. Bat stirred uneasily as if sensing the man behind him. The gunman softly whispered:

"Furness!"

Bat twitched, glanced up straight into Ling's eyes, and then Ling's .44 crashed into his temple, knocking him slumped and nerveless in the chair.

Ling moved rapidly, then. He opened the door to Sally's room and stepped inside. In the pale light of the low-turned lamp the doctor's daughter was sitting half-undressed on the edge of the bed, her wide eyes startled, her hands clutching at the discarded clothing in an attempt to hide her nakedness.

"You'd better not holler," Ling purred. "It would bring Furness and I'd have to kill him."

"What do you want?" The girl's voice was a tired sob.

"You're coming with me," the gunman said. "But you won't get hurt. I've never harmed a lady yet."

Sally felt the pulsing throb of the wound in her shoulder. She knew that this was the man who had shot her . . . but looking into his sharp crafty face, strangely softened by the lamplight, she knew instinctively that she'd be safe in his hands.

"Then what do you want me for?" she asked.

"My job's only half done," he told her calmly. "We need you to help us get out of the country. That's all. I'll let you free at the border."

"But suppose—" she began.

"I'm in a hurry," Ling cut her short. "Put on your clothes."

He lowered the lamp until it hardly burned, and sitting silently on the bed beside her he stared at the wall while she dressed.

CHAPTER IV
A Chinaman's Chance

FROM Doc Bolton's Sheriff Bill Watts walked down to Jimmy O'Neil's. He would get a horse there, find out if Pancho had seen Ling, or had any idea of what had become of the escaped men. This Mexican youngster had an uncanny way of picking up all sorts of information. He liked to slink around in dark places like a weasel, and many a time he had found just the clue that rounded out the sheriff's case.

The stable seemed deserted. "Pancho!" the sheriff called. There was no answer.

Then, a moment later, he heard footsteps. Old, bent Jimmy O'Neil hobbled up from the shack at the side of the barn where he lived, looking dazed and sleepy. "Hello, sheriff," he said. "You lookin' for the kid? He's around somewheres."

"I'm beginning to doubt it," said the sheriff worriedly. "But we'd better look."

"Huh?" Jimmy's face showed his surprise; he wagged his ragged gray mustaches as if, like the antennae of an ant, they were used to feel the way. He picked up a lantern. "He ain't here?"

Sheriff Bill had gone through the stable by now. "He ain't here," he answered. "When did you see him last, Jimmy?"

Jimmy was still trying to gather his thoughts together. "Why," he said

finally, "come to think of it, I ain't actually seen him since the dark gent was here for his buckskin. That was before the shootin'. I left Pancho saddlin' that feller's hoss and went off to bed. Where do you figger he could've gone, Bill?"

"If I knew," said the sheriff, "I wouldn't be standin' here. . . ."

Jimmy had paused perplexedly, half-way down the length of the stable. Now, suddenly, he started on again.

"Maybe the drunk'll know," he muttered. "The dark gent toted in a drunk with him when he first come, left him sleepin' in a stall." He peered around him. "I don't know about that rannie. The gent with the buckskin said he was no pal of his. Picked him up on the side o' the road. But I ain't sure. Anyway, he's went too, so yuh can't ask him."

"Which is the brightest thing you've said tonight," the sheriff commented.

"Maybe." Jimmy wagged his gray old beard. "That other feller, the dark one, looked like a decent gent to me. But he packed a brace o' hawg-laigs an' hung them low, an' by the looks o' that scar on his face I guess he's used them oncet on twicet. But I'm boogered for a left-handed jack-rabbit if I can figger how the kit an' kaboodle o' them got out the front door without me seein' them."

"They might of gone out the back door," the sheriff suggested.

That hadn't occurred to O'Neil. Repeating "yessir, yessir," to himself he turned up the lantern and waddled around the barn, checking up on the saddles. The sheriff followed him through the windy barn and out into the corrals, and carefully examined the soft ground for any evidence that he might be lucky enough to find.

"Danged if the drunk's hoss ain't gone, too . . . an' two, three others. An' Pancho's saddle—" Jimmy rattled on to himself"—an' a couple of the best Myer's I ever owned. Damn that spic! I never thought Pancho'd—"

"He didn't!" The sheriff had taken the lantern from O'Neil and was tracing out the story in the ground to the left of the barn. "Look here, Jimmy. Pancho took a run for himself. Those little prints are his. And here he went straight up in the air, both feet at once. You don't get on a horse that way. Somebody put him on the cayuse."

"They abducted the button!"

"They did. Fetch me a horse, Jimmy, and a decent saddle. My horse ran away."

The old man waddled off. When he returned he was leading a magnificent black almost the twin of the sheriff's lost horse, and on the animal's back was the beautiful saddle that Jimmy had last ridden in before he was thrown by a bronc and smashed almost to death. This saddle hadn't been used since that long past day. But . . .

"I hope yuh find Pancho," Jimmy said quietly. "The button's sort of like my own kid to me. Wisht I could ride with yuh."

"I know. It's okay, Jimmy." The sheriff smiled down at him, looking more confident than he felt. "I'll bring him in kicking and hollering." He took the bridle. "Can I borrow your lamp, too, Jimmy?"

"Sure. Anything. By George, if yuh don't find . . ."

"I'll find him, okay." Sheriff Bill swung into the saddle, holding the lighted lantern in his right hand. "Be seein' yuh."

TRAILING Ling was easy enough at the beginning. There had been, aside from Ling's, but four horses. Two of them would have been for Sanchez and Seltzer, one for the captive Pancho. The other—well, it was obvious that the "drunk" Jimmy told about had really been a pal of Ling's, not drunk at all. He was the one who had busted out the jail. Walker found

where they had stopped for a while in the shade of a huge cottonwood, where they had proceeded across the small open space behind the jail while Ling was raising hell out front, and where they had pulled out a couple of bars and a huge chunk of adobe jail by hitching all four horses to it. Then the "drunk" and the youngster, along with Seltzer and Sanchez, had left at a high lope straight for the open prairies.

The sheriff had been fooled twice tonight by this Tony Ling, by this cleverest of all bandidos, but he swore he wouldn't be fooled a third time. He paid no attention to the well-marked trail across the range. The escaped men were sure to swing off when they hit Cherry Creek, and long before that one of the posses sent out by Bat Furness would have discovered and obliterated the spoor while they pounded on their way, hot for the kill.

So Sheriff Bill headed alone on the law-trail to catch the coolest and smartest product of Sonora outlawry. He was trying to outsmart Tony Ling. And he never dreamed that, as he rode, close on his heels Tony Ling himself, and Sally Bolton, were loping along on horses provided by the pink-faced bartender. The best way to keep from being followed, Ling figured, was to follow the man who was hunting you.

THE sheriff decided to locate Payson and Doc Bolton first, since these two had often fought by his side. He headed for Payson's Oxbow Ranch. Hours later, he swung to a stop beside the frame house that served as ranch headquarters. Dawn was just breaking in the east, a faint orange-gray streak over the horizon, and above, the stars were fading slowly, blinking and dying one at a time.

There was no reply to the sheriff's pounding on the door. Cautiously he pushed up the latch and stepped inside. It was darker in the big main room than it had been outside, and he waited a moment while his eyes grew accustomed to the dusk. Nothing seemed to have been touched in there. It was as neat and clean as Charlie, the Chinese houseman, could make the place. But over it all hung a feeling of mystery.

He found Frankie Payson in bed, tied down tight with a pillow over his head. Quickly he loosened the ropes and pulled back the blankets. Frankie was breathing very faintly, but his old seamed face was pale. The sheriff worked swiftly, rubbing the old rancher's arms and legs, trying to get the blood to circulate again. From time to time he stopped to listen for the strengthening heart-beat.

A spear-head of light finally jabbed into the dark room as the top edge of the sun cleared the horizon. Bill stopped working on Frankie for a moment, glanced up from where he was working near the bed. A faint movement from the door caught his eye. A sudden lightning flash like the sun striking a mirror half-blinded him, and he heard the swift swish of a knife hurtling through the air. He dodged back behind the bed while the knife seared past his head and clattered against the wall. But before he could get to his guns the quick patter of feet closed in on him, and the bore of a rifle settled into his back.

He half turned his head. Abruptly, he began to laugh. . . .

HE was looking up into the round, yellow face of Charlie, the Chinaman.

"Thought you was . . . thought you was velly bad man!" Charlie let the muzzle of the gun slide down to the floor. "Dahk-face man come tie up missie Flankie, missie Doc, an' Cha'lie. Then he go away an' don't come back. But somebody come last night an' swipe all Oxbow hosses an' I hear you an' get mad an' bust out of ropes."

The sheriff gained control of his nerves while Charlie told his quaint little story. It was just what he'd expected, and finding himself confirmed gave him confidence.

"So you thought I was a couple of other people? Where's Doc?"

"Down cella. I get him!"

Charlie vanished as swiftly and silently as he had come, and the sheriff, still jittery, turned back to his patient. Frankie had begun to brighten up a bit, the color was coming back to his cheeks. But he was too weak to move . . . almost too weak to talk loud enough for the sheriff to hear what he was saying. Bill leaned closer.

"And this was to be your wedding day!" The outlaw smiled.

"Doc Bolton knows the head man," he mumbled. "Guess they took Doc with them. Was cleaning out all your friends before they set to work. Wanted plenty of room to move around in. Git me a drink."

The sheriff ran outside to the pump and came back with a dipper dripping in the morning light. Frankie drank eagerly. He said no more. His eyes closed and he slept, his breathing deep and regular. The sheriff went out into the big main room and pulled the door closed behind him. As he turned towards the center of the living-room, the huge form of Doc Bolton loomed up in the kitchen door. Doc was rubbing his numbed hands together, trying to force the cold blood into movement.

"It was Tony Ling!" Doc started in without preliminaries. "It was Ling, Bill, and he's up to hell if he ain't already busted loose."

"He's already busted." The sheriff's gray eyes narrowed. Briefly he told the doc what had happened, and even more briefly what was coming next: "So you better fix up Frankie and then ride in to see your girl. She ain't hurt bad. But even a blister is too bad hurt for Sally."

Doc snapped his hands as if trying to shake water from them. They were tingling sharply.

"Okay, Bill. I'll patch up the gal an' the old hunk of rawhide next door. But I don't want to be winding you up, too. So take her easy when you go Linging. There's a lad without nerves . . . a cross between a sidewinder and a lobo wolf . . . . with a little bit of mountain-lion mixed in. You can pull him down if you outthink him. But don't try to outfight him. He's too handy with a gun, and a knife, and he likes to shoot people in the back if it's the handiest way of removing them. He ain't got a heart, Ling ain't. And don't know how to scare. So take her easy, Bill!"

"I'll do that." The sheriff shook hands with old Doc Bolton, and he knew from the laxness that Doc's hand was still numb, that Doc must be suffering terribly from being so tightly bound in the cellar all this time. But Doc was one who never thought of his own troubles or hide: Doc was always looking out for the other man. "You can take my horse, Doc. Charlie and me will go afoot

until we can pick up a couple of likely cayuses. We're going up the creek to the valley behind Needle Peak."

"Butch Walker's old hang-out?" Doc broke in. "You'll never find him there. That's the first place they'd expect you to look."

"Sure." Sheriff Bill's smile was tired and thin. "Probably one of Bat's posses have already ransacked the place. But Ling knows well enough that posses don't search a place twice. When the law-forces clear out he'll move in . . . and find Charlie and me waiting there for him."

The sheriff breathed deeply, and stretched a bit of the weariness out of his big frame.

"If we ain't back by sundown send Furness and a bunch of his boys out there hunting for us. We might need lugging home. Or maybe," his smile broadened ever so slightly, "we'll need help bringing in the bacon, as the feller says. Charlie and me, we've turned a trick or two before together. . . ."

"Yessir . . ." Charlie beamed with interest. The little Chinaman had done his part in the trouble with the Crown Ranch. "We bling it in allee light." His evil-looking knife slid from his waist-line and flashed in the morning sun while he looked down on the broad blade.

"Right, Charlie!" Doc shook with the Chinaman too, and followed him and the sheriff outside into the new morning. And with a final farewell from Doc, the oddly assorted pair trudged off for the hills.

CHAPTER V
Honeymoon Fortress

SALLY BOLTON rode on through the dawning by the side of Tony Ling. All the recent bloodshed had sickened her, and the constant upheaval of her life had wearied her, and now she followed along docilely in the hope that once Seltzer and Sanchez and Ling were safely out of the Travadore country, then her man would settle down to peace once again. It was only after they had taken a great curve and crossed the western road from town that she began to feel uneasy about her predicament. The rolling hills and scattered clumps of juniper and the many small pine groves were becoming familiar.

"Where are you going?" she asked as they loped along. The shadow of a new terror began to lurk in the patient bravery of her face. "You're not going to take me to . . ."

"Where else?" Hawklike, Ling peered straight ahead through the gossamer morning mists. Hardboiled in many years of border-brawling, sure and deadly in the hot conflict of battle, he dared not turn to look at this girl in the early freshness of dawn. For Ling, like most courageous men, good and bad, had a soft streak in him.

They rode swiftly up a small valley between two hills, then curved left and climbed to the pine-topped ridge. There they stopped for a moment to breathe their horses, to look far to the west where the white-capped mountains rose in jagged peaks to the blue sky, and to look down on the dew-washed green below. In the broad valley the water of a curving stream sparkled brightly through the trees, and on a knoll that the stream half-circled, a rambling log house and a picket corral shone with the new-yellow of freshly-cut wood.

"They'd never hunt for us here," Ling said, "and we've got to stay some place while I get word to the sheriff and while he assures us that we can move on without being bothered. And if they find us here . . ."

"But you can't . . ." the girl broke in. "Bill and I were going to—"

"I know," Ling answered quietly. "A new house . . . and lots of ideas

about it . . . you and your man starting out together in your brand-new house . . . getting married the day after he quit being sheriff. Today! Too bad, kid . . . your wedding day. . . ." His eyes darkened and his sharp face thinned. "But we can't think of that. He built the place like a fortress. If we should be found there we could hold off a siege behind those ten-inch logs . . . and with you along the chances are that they wouldn't dare to attack. We were going to take Frankie Payson and your father, at first. But Payson would have died . . . and the Doc wouldn't have played ball. You ready to move?"

There was a hint of a tear in the girl's eyes.

KING SELTZER was waiting for them on the second floor of the house, sitting with a rifle across his knees, gnawing at his ragged gray mustache. He had always gotten what he wanted by force and this endless plotting and planning of Ling's was alien to him.

"So yuh came?" he said.

"Where's the rest?" Ling asked. "Where's young Gonzales?"

"You didn't take Panchito, too?" Sally was startled.

"Sure!" Seltzer leered down at her. "And your old man, and Payson and Payson's chink cook. The only one left to bring in is yore Watts. And it won't be so hard finishin' off that two-bit sheriff. And then . . ." A bitter, predatory glint showed in his dusty eyes. ". . . maybe we won't have to go all the way to Mexico. Dead men's evidence will be no good in a Crown-run Travadore."

"You're getting loose in the mouth," Ling snapped at him. "Can that kinda talk!"

The girl glanced swiftly from Seltzer to Ling, and in the glance and the ringing echo of Seltzer's words a new and more terrible story was told. Her willingness to follow broke in a flash. She felt that she had been tricked by this dark-faced gunman, and suddenly she had to get away and spread the warning. She lashed out with her booted foot and cracked Seltzer in the shin. As he jumped back under the fury of her attack she leaped past him for the window in a desperate effort to break away.

But Ling was ready for such a move. He flashed across the floor and pulled her back, holding her arms behind her and his knee in the small of her back.

She kicked and twisted while Seltzer stood holding his rifle and smiling thinly, enigmatically down on her. Then she had to give in again, for the pain of her shoulder had become too great to bear and a flood of weakness surged over her.

"That's what I like to see in hosses and women," Seltzer observed coldly. "Hot blood is harder to temper . . . but it's more interesting."

Ling laughed then, and his laugh was filled with derision.

"You talk as if you'd never been throwed," the man from Sonora jeered. "But maybe it's because you've never rode a real blooded horse." His face clouded over. "But you're not going to get the chance this time, Seltzer. The girl's a business proposition . . . not loot!"

Cold hate twisted at Seltzer's usually suave face and gave silent answer to the man who defied him. It was a hatred for all mankind, but mostly for Sheriff Bill Watts, and for this man Ling who had been hired to rescue him. The King had never been dictated to before . . . he couldn't get used to the idea now. . . .

"Where's that Gonzales kid?" Ling snapped. "I've got to be on the way."

"I'll get him." Seltzer stepped over to the window and pulled the shade half-way down, then he strode to the door and stood there with it half open, his rifle under his arm.

"They'll be here in a minute," he said. "Jake's tendin' him outside. Didn't want the kid to know where we were."

LIKE a wooden Indian, Seltzer stood guarding the door, and his face held even less expression than those crudely-carved cigar-store effigies. Ling sat down in a rustic chair opposite the bed and stared at the doorway, while the girl leaned back on the bed on her elbows trying to relax. Then Jake—the man who had yanked out the back of the Travadore jail—appeared, walking silently on his bare feet so the click of heels would not give away the secret. In his arms he was carrying the blind-folded Pancho.

"Here he is," he said unnecessarily.

Ling nodded his hello and sat still in his chair and spoke in a quietly modulated voice.

"Do you know where you are, Pancho?"

The kid shook his head.

"That's good," Ling said. "Miss Sally is here with a message for you to take to the sheriff. We're going to let you go." The girl glanced swiftly at Ling, but the gunman avoided her eyes and went on: "You're to tell Bill Watts that we've taken Miss Sally prisoner but that we won't hurt her. She's a hostage, that's all. And if Watts will let us leave the country we'll cut her loose at the border. You tell him that and leave him to guess what we'll do if he gets in our way." He hesitated to let the meaning sink in. The silence surrounding the small group was deadly.

"If he'll play ball tell him to come to the waterfall where Cherry Creek runs out of the mountains and shoot his gun exactly six times at exactly six o'clock tonight. Savvy?"

"Sure," Pancho said. "But . . ."

"Say something to Pancho, Miss Sally," Ling cut in, "or he'll think that you really aren't here."

"I'm here," the girl sighed. "They took me away last night when Bat was supposed to be guarding the house."

"That's right." Ling was still staring out through the open doorway. "And if Bill Watts thinks my word is no good what will you tell him, Pancho?"

The youngster's answer caught in his throat.

"I dunno! Papa Al used to say that Ling an' louse meant the same thing . . . but . . . he used tuh say that Ling never went back on his word . . . if he gave it." The kid wriggled uncomfortably in Jake's big arms. "That what yuh want me tuh say?"

"Not exactly," Ling laughed. "But it's pretty good."

"But the same story don't go for Seltzer!" Pancho suddenly exploded. "He's a snake an' a buzzard an' a—"

The rancher flashingly came to life and slapped down hard on the helpless kid's mouth.

"Who's askin' you . . ."

Ling jumped to his feet. Quickly as he moved he was silent as a catamount, and as terrible. His thin strong shoulders hunched forward, and his dark eyes glittered with ice.

"Can it, Seltzer!"

Hate flooded back into Seltzer's face, but under the cold glare of the inhuman border-hopper he backed down. There'd still be time enough later to make his move . . .

"Take the kid back, Jake. And saddle up a couple of fresh horses," Ling ordered calmly. "I'll be along in a minute."

Jake withdrew noiselessly and Ling waited until he was clear of the house before starting to follow him. At the door he stopped, standing with one foot on the threshold.

"And remember, King . . ." His sharp face hardened into granite. ". . . remember what I said about the girl. . . . She's a hostage . . . not booty!"

Seltzer's thin lips tightened into a flat smile.

CHAPTER VI
Death Rancho

THE SUN rolled higher into the sky, sending its hot rays down in more direct shafts to warm the ground, to drive wriggling heat-waves up from the prairies, and thin mists from the scattered marshy spots and the tortuous river. Under the willows along the bank of Cherry Creek, and on the sandy bed where the stream was low enough to make walking possible and the dappled shadows gave a feeling of coolness, the sheriff and the little Chinaman tramped slowly toward the hills.

In heading for Needle Peak Sheriff Bill was following out what he called "the psychology of the other feller". His term wasn't quite right but the idea was okay. He'd picked it up from an itinerant gambler who'd drifted through Travadore once and had passed out a lot of big words and new ideas. As the tinhorn had told him: "In gambling you'll bring home the bacon by thinking with the other fellow's mind. If you can find out what he's thinking you got him beaten. It's not what you would do in his place . . . but what he'd do!"

And the same rule was good in sheriffing . . . and in the tactics of chess which he tried to teach to little Pancho. . . .

The creek broadened and deepened for a spell. It was unusually high for this time of the year because it had rained so hard a couple of days back. So the sheriff climbed up the bank to sit under the willows and rest for a spell before tackling the open stretch. Charlie slid down beside him, beaming like the sun.

"Velly bad wa'm weather!" Charlie said.

Bill wiped the sweat from his forehead. Up through the green-leaved willow branches he could see the deep blue sky and the white sun climbing on towards ten o'clock. By eleven it would be worse . . . by twelve? And the rim of hills now looming in the blue were still an hour away.

"We ought to have a couple of nags, Charlie."

"Yessir, missie She'ff." Charlie immediately stood up, and pulling his long butcher knife from his waistband he ran his thumb over the honed blade. "Cha'lie know how find hossie!"

"Save the pig-stabber for Sanchez," the sheriff warned.

"No?" Charlie looked disappointed. "Okay!" He reluctantly shoved the knife back. "I getee hossie just same."

"But don't let nobody see yuh take it!" the sheriff warned. "We don't know where Ling and his boys are . . . and we don't want them to know that we're moving around."

"I sabbe!" Charlie started off along the creek-bank.

"And I'll meet you where the creek runs out of the arroyo," the sheriff called after him.

IT WAS only a moment later that a slight movement far down on the first sandbar before the turn caught the sheriff's eye. The dark body of someone following their trail showed dully for a moment on the dazzling white sand, then vanished up the creek towards the fringe of willows.

Keeping to the brush he skirted the creek, running as quickly as he could for nearly half a mile. Then, hunkering down, sheltered by the bank, he pulled his .45 and waited. Soon he picked up the faint pad of feet and a swishing in the brush . . . and then the quick sharp breathing of a winded person. He lifted his gun, clicked back the hammer. . . .

"Up they go!" he snapped.

Little Pancho staggered to a stop, his dark eyes owlish.

"Deputy! Where'd you come from?"

Swallowing hard, the kid tried to grin a welcome. He was so fagged he couldn't manage it. His beloved flowered cowboy boots, and the gift of the sheriff, were missing, and the button was limping badly. He had gone all the way to the Oxbow, then because Payson had half-consciously heard the sheriff's plans, he had struggled the rest of the way.

The sheriff, who was still on his knees, put his arm around the dusty youngster's shoulder to steady him.

"What have they done to you, kid? What's happened to your shoes?"

"They ain't done nothing tuh me!" Pancho was becoming dizzy. "Ling shot the heels off'n my boots an' turned me loose. That's why I ain't got no shoes. But Ling hid under Miss Sally's bed while they was huntin' for him. Then he took her away without Bat knowin' an' told me tuh come an' find yuh an' tell yuh about it!"

"Tell *me* about it?" The sheriff's face paled; yet he was too deeply startled to at first get the full significance of the kid's story. "Where'd they take her?" he asked automatically.

"I dunno!" Pancho shrugged wearily. "They had me blind-folded, an' they carried me up a hill an' let her speak. But I didn't know where I was. It smelt as if people had been cuttin' down trees or peelin' logs. An' we had tuh go over a river . . . an' the hoss climbed a little rise before they took me off'n him."

"Was it a steep hill?"

"I guesso! But I don't know. Uncle Jake was sort o' winded."

"Who's Uncle Jake?" The dull, stunned look was passing from the sheriff's face; he was peering into Pancho's eyes as if in an effort to look beyond them and see what the kid had been unable to see on his long night ride.

"He's Ling's pal. A heavy-set feller. An' on the way out we chased off somebody's hosses, an' crossed a river again, an' they drove somebody's cows across tuh hide the trail. . . ."

The sheriff stood up, towering over the diminutive Mexican boy, but still holding to his shoulder and supporting him.

"You better come along, kid. I'll carry you. You can't walk any more barefooted. And it won't be far. Charlie's going to meet us with mounts."

"Sure I can walk!" Pancho's eyes flashed assurance. "An' we got tuh hurry. Ling says they're holdin' Miss Sally for a . . . a hostage . . . an' he says if yuh give the signal that yuh won't get in his way he won't hurt her. Frankie says they mean she's a prisoner. But Seltzer seems tuh have ideas. . . ."

CHARLIE was waiting in the arroyo when the sheriff stumbled up the pebbly creek-bottom and set Zantole down in the shade of a clump of alders. The kid had come to during the slow, jogging ride, and was beginning to show signs of life again. But he remained silent while Charlie brought out an old spavined plow-horse and a balky mule that he'd managed to steal.

Then suddenly, he said: "It's funny, Sheriff, I can't figure where those punks took me."

The sheriff had been going over and over again the few facts Pancho had been able to bring him. He stared at the kid and repeated that which had been whirling through his mind: "You crossed a stream . . . and went up a rise . . . and smelled new-cut timber?"

The little Mexican youngster nodded.

"But I couldn't see nothin'. They had me blind-folded."

The sheriff cupped some of the clear water from the stream in his broad hands and drank deeply. He splashed water over his face to cool

off the burning in his head . . . and drank again. "New-cut . . .

"Good God, kid!" He jumped to his feet trembling violently. "Of course! Nobody'd hunt there. Get on the hoss, Pancho! Come on, Charlie!"

"Where we goin'?" the youngster asked, climbing up over the horse's tail.

The sheriff jumped on behind him. "To the hoss-ranch!" he said. His rowels tickled the plug's ribs, and the crow-bait lumbered ahead. "They never even went near the old hang-out!"

The sun was already low on the jagged mountains to the west when they pulled up to a stop in a small ravine edged with juniper and pine. The big blond sheriff and the diminutive "deputy" slid to the ground, and for a moment they stood by the great barrel-bellied plug looking at each other and smiling wearily.

"He got us here," the sheriff whispered.

Charlie slipped off the mule—looked grimly at his long butcher knife. His almond eyes gleamed as he whispered: "Sanchez!"

"Save it!" The sheriff's nerves were snapping. He led his little band down the ravine to a spot where there wa a clear sandy space and swiftly drew a map with his finger. There was a knoll with a house on it, a bunkhouse and a couple of corrals, a grove of pines, and a ravine behind a small hill. South of the house was a road and a river, and a drive leading up the knoll to the house.

"We're down here." The sheriff pointed to the pictured ravine as his two aides leaned close to study what he'd drawn. "Pancho, you climb the hill and lie down on your belly. If you see anyone move look twice and make sure it's not Charlie or me. If it's somebody else whistle like a bob-white. Savvy?"

The kid nodded, stirring uneasily, eager to be on the way.

"Charlie an' me will circle the house. And Charlie, you meet me here in this piñon grove!" He pointed again, and the little Chinaman's dark eyes gleamed with thoughts of what he'd do when he found Sanchez.

"They may not be there," said the sheriff. "But we gotta know for certain before we go up to the house."

He straightened then, and at the head of his band crawled up the small hill to point out the landmarks shown on his crude map. He pointed to the big house, shining in the low sun, surrounded with the bark and chips that were still bright from the newly-hewn logs. He pointed out the new corrals which were still empty while waiting for the shipment of blooded horses, and the dark bunkhouse that had not yet been filled with singing, squabbling punchers. He did not dare stop to think of what all this had meant to him, of what it meant now. Beyond the house, standing black against the sky, was a hill topped with pines.

"We'll meet there, Charlie," the sheriff said simply. "As soon as you can get there. You stay here, 'Deputy'."

BILL circled the hill toward the south. On the new roadway he discovered the first bit of direct evidence. It had rained a couple of days before and since then, as far as he knew, only he and Sally had ridden out to the new house. But as plain as if it had been sketched on a huge sheet of paper, he could see six more sets of tracks, six going in and six coming out.

He was smiling grimly to himself as he dodged into the brush beyond the road and wormed along toward the pine-topped hill. The invincible Ling had slipped two times: once when he let Pancho smell the new wood . . . once when he so carefully made these tracks. Six going in . . six coming out. . . .

"They're in the house, Charlie," he whispered to the lynx-eyed Chinaman when they met under the pines. "Maybe not the whole set of them. But the important ones. One's with the horses down the valley . . . maybe one's hanging around the hills playing outlook. But the rest are inside."

"You see 'em . . . the hosses?"

Bill shook his head.

"You ready to move in, Charlie?"

The oriental slowly pulled his long, wicked-looking knife from his waistband. The red of the setting sun glinted on it, stained it as if with blood. And Charlie's slanted eyes shone in the ruby light.

"Me ready!"

"Okay." Now the sheriff stood up, flexing his knees. Then, suddenly, he grabbed the Chinaman's arm.

"Look!"

Through the lace-work of the long pine-needles they could see the house sitting on the rise, glowing in the setting sun as if it was on fire. And from the north a swift shadow flitted between two clumps of juniper, vanished, flashed into sight again and then disappeared behind the log house.

The round notes of the quail's call drifted over the knoll.

They had been seen and whoever had run across the line of their vision was carrying the warning to those inside. But Bill was too near his goal now to take a chance on a faulty move, so he crept down to the house in the crimson glow of the sunset, followed by the round-faced little cook. At the wide porch he stopped to whisper hurriedly to Charlie, then he cat-footed on, his own whispered words echoing in his mind:

"Keep behind me . . out of sight . . . cover my back . . . these gents are . . ."

There had been no need to finish. Charlie's slanted eyes told him that he understood, that Ling and Sanchez and Seltzer always preferred backs for targets. Now he was standing in

the big main room of the new house, and Charlie was haunting the doorway like a shadow. The place was deadly still, too still. Thinking of Sally, Bill's heart seemed to go dead within him. Not a whisper, not the slightest sound but the soft sunset wind broke the silence as he edged ahead with his long body supplely aware and his eyes keened. The kitchen was empty, but someone had stopped long enough to light a fire in the stove and cook a leisurely meal. The dirty pots were in the sink . . . the thick smell of fried foods clung to the air. It looked as if they had come and gone. . . .

The front room, too, was empty, but on the top of the new desk, the desk that the sheriff had not yet used, was a bit of brown wrapping paper weighted down with a .44 cartridge. The lead of the bullet was shiny from being used as a pencil.

"Thought we'd borrow your house. The lady is well. Thanks. Ling."

Charlie, ghost-like, waited at the door while the sheriff crept out again, and the two stood in suspended motion . . . listening. . . .

The wind sighed softly . . . the glare of the sun died slowly to a soft pink . . . then suddenly grayed and left the house full of colorless shadows. Bill started up the heavy staircase. Each step was made of a split log, and the railing was heavy, hewn square. The sounds of the sheriff's movement were swallowed into non-existence, and the atmosphere of the house grew thick with listening.

He was on the top step now, his two .45's were swinging in readiness before him, and his gray eyes were following the shadows of the balcony that ran over one side of the great main room. The two doors at the ends of the balcony were closed. One of the other pair of doors was slightly open. . . .

Motioning Charlie to follow, the sheriff stepped ahead. Silently he

eased past the first closed doors. His shoulders hunched forward, and the Colts settled down solidly in his capable hands.

The soft call of the quail drifted in once more on the evening wind, and behind Bill the latch of a door rattled as if buffeted by the breeze. Swiftly he stepped past it and swung in a half-circle in an effort to cover his back trail.

Too late! A stranger was standing on the far end of the balcony, and in his hands he held a short-barreled shot-gun.

"Yuh quittin', law-dog?" Uncle Jake asked smoothly.

The liquid notes of the bob-white sounded again. They were closer this time, and were swiftly repeated.

CHAPTER VII
The Knife!

FEELING, rather than seeing, the sheriff caught the glint of steel, and a quick, smooth movement from the stairs. At the same moment he plunged for the half-open door and kicked it smashing back on its hinges. The shot-gun bellowed behind him, snapping buckshot into the ceiling. And the cry of a man in mortal agony broke in mid-career into a soft hot gurgle. Charlie's knife had picked its first victim. . . .

Dimly Bill was aware of a sharp jerk at his leather vest, of the bite of a bullet into his heavy pectoral muscle as he burst into the room beyond. He was too highly tuned to the fight now to feel anything short of a crippling wound. The acrid smell of gunsmoke filled the air and the lances of burning powder stabbed at him as he stepped forward. But he couldn't be stopped now. . . .

Sally, with her arms bound, a blindfold over her eyes, was sitting on the sill of an open casement window. Half-standing, half-sitting beside her,

with one leg out the window and the other on the floor, was the rancher, King Seltzer, blazing away at the slowly advancing sheriff.

Then Seltzer's face darkened and his lips thinned, and he turned one of his Colts to the girl's back, jabbing the black muzzle into her soft flesh. And, as the sheriff stopped shooting, Seltzer eased his trigger-finger, and slowly brought his other gun into more accurate line.

"You won again." Bill smiled bitterly through the swirling smoke. "You can always win by hiding behind a woman's skirts, Seltzer. You couldn't fight like a man."

"No?" Seltzer's pale lips curled. "A man don't win by throwing away his best cards." Seltzer squinted his eyes to see his adversary in the darkening room. "Hoist your hands, Sheriff, or Miss Sally . . ."

The sheriff's hands edged up. Sally sat silently still as if she had already met her end. Then from outside came the hissed whisper of Seltzer's companion.

"He's coming in with the horses. Watts ain't mounted. Come on down without the girl. It's duck soup!"

Seltzer shoved his left gun into the holster. It was no longer needed as a cover for the sheriff: the Colt boring into Sally's back was good enough for that.

"Coming!" Seltzer called through the corner of his mouth.

He slid up over the window-sill, catching his toes in the chinks of the logs and clinging with his left hand to the window.

"If I'm goin' to be hanged for murder . . ." His eyes gleamed strangely, his pale lips twisted as he spoke, and that deadly right hand gave meaning to his threat. "I might just as well make it a good one!"

The girl's breath came in a tight sob as a sixth sense brought the significance of Seltzer's announcement. The man outside called again, and the sound of horse-hoofs rolled softly up to the log house. Seltzer's trigger finger started to tighten again. . . .

Bill leaped forward like a wolf closing in for the kill. His left Colt, triggered too quickly, spat lead into the ceiling, but his right leveled with the speed of sheet lightning, and as it came down bucked twice in his big hand. The lead hissed through the air: one shot tearing into Seltzer's right arm, the other blasting the gun out of his fist just as the hammer released. The gun spun jerkingly through the air, sending out a stream of orange fire and wild lead.

The sheriff pulled the girl hastily inside and dropped her on the floor; then he followed Seltzer's falling body out into the first darkness of the night. Ling, who had been waiting outside, met him with a shower of lead and a wall of flame. But it was too late now . . . he seemed charmed against the effect of bullets, and those that found their way home hardly slowed him at all.

Now his guns were empty and he flung them for Ling's face. Now Ling turned to run, overcome by the careless crazy-man on his heels. Bill caught him by his flying coat, but Ling wriggled loose, and then the outlaw turned at bay, his guns bared like the teeth of a catamount. Bill ran between the twin flames, reaching for Ling's throat.

The gunman's laugh was a blood-mad coyote's when the lawman's powerful arms closed around his neck. He bent forward, his head down, and smashed up with his knee. The sheriff went flying over his back and slid down crashing into the ground. Ling swung back into the fight and the sheriff came up again grappling for his antagonist. The outlaw tried the same stunt again when the sheriff charged. But something went wrong.

In that first mad rush the sheriff's hands had fallen for a moment on a peculiar ridge high on Ling's back.

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He knew what it meant, and though his mind was dulled by the jump from the window and the weakening loss of blood, he found enough strength to go into the second rush with a purpose. One arm swung around Ling's neck . . . the right hand closed on the handle of a lean, razor-edged bowie, and when Ling twisted forward in his smart tumbling trick and the sheriff spilled over to the ground, the knife slid out. The sheriff jabbed down.

Ling screamed. . . .

THE horses that Ling had spoken about came up at a fast, dusty gallop. But they weren't the horses that Ling had been expecting. Red Sanchez rode in the lead, all right, but his arms were lashed behind him and Doc Bolton rode to one side while Bat Furness rode on the other. Behind came the rest of the posse. They had been heading out for their rendezvous at the valley when the first shooting drew them aside. And half-way up from the creek they had run into Sanchez bringing in the outlaws' horses. . . .

Bill Watts rose like a ghost from the ground as they swirled up, and then the round-face Charlie and little brown Pancho emerged from the shadows, bringing the golden-haired girl with them. And Ling too showed up, for he hadn't been killed as he thought, and he stood before the empty guns that the sheriff had taken from him, tasting the bitterness of his first defeat, and feeling the throbbing in his back and shoulder where his own knife had gouged to the bone.

"We're all here." The sheriff was weary. His hands fell to his sides, dropping Ling's stolen .44's as the fresh posse took over his captive. "All but this Jake feller and Seltzer. You better go huntin' around the house for them, Bat. They ain't in very good health." He knew that he was talking rather loosely but somehow the words wouldn't come right and he really didn't care whether they did or not. Then he saw the girl standing before him with her hands out and her wide blue eyes shadowed by the night. Her face was pale.

Smiling wanly the girl stepped up to him, and he began going weak in the knees and a couple of posse-men ran over to support him.

"I'm okay!" He was trembling strangely but couldn't give in even with the battle fought and won. Taking the girl's hands he answered her smile and said: "It won't happen again, Sally girl. Me and my posse, here, will keep our eyes on you. What say, Deputies?"

Pancho grinned bashfully just as if he'd done nothing, and a round smile flooded Charlie's face. The cowmen cheered, and four of them lifted the two heroes onto their shoulders.

Then Charlie saw his arch-enemy, Sanchez . . . and Sanchez saw Charlie. The Chinaman's face blanked . . . and Sanchez purpled. And though the gunman's hands were bound behind him and he was practically helpless, he jabbed his spurs into his horse's side and ripped through the posse to the open ground. Charlie dove from the shoulders of the two men who were holding him, and like a terrier snapped for the horse's tail. The mustang squealed, pawed high in the air, and when Charlie climbed up towards the saddle the added weight pulled the horse over backward. Sanchez tumbled to the ground on top of Charlie, but by the time the horse had found its feet again and was plunging madly off into the night, the little oriental was sitting on Sanchez's stomach.

"No killee!" Charlie soothed his captive with a flourish of his gory butcher-knife. "No fun killee right off. Save you for stretchee neck!"

Sanchez writhed uncomfortably as the grinning posse looked down on him. The sheriff laughed.

"My deputies," he said, "don't know when to quit."

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