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WESTERN ACES

RED RUNS THE PECOS

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

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(OR IS IT?)

BY GROUCHO MARX

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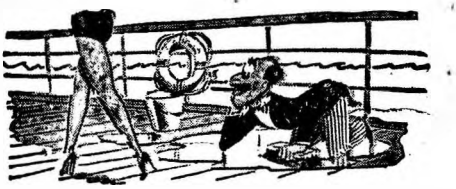

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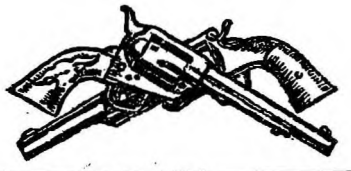
Mar. 1948

Vol. 25 No. 4

WESTERN ACES

Cover by Norman Saunders



Published bi-monthly by Periodical House, Inc. Office of publication, 29 Worthington Street, Springfield 3, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 28 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y. A. A. Wyn, President. Entered as second class matter on September 14, 1936, at Springfield, Mass., under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1947, by Periodical House, Inc. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, Inc., 28 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y Yearly subscription, 90 cents. Single copies, 15 cents. Please send all subscriptions and correspondence relating to subscriptions to Periodical House, Inc., 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

Red Runs the Pecos

By Joseph Chadwick

CHAPTER I

TEXAS cattle were cheap the spring of '66, but Texas men came even cheaper. The land was overrun with its gray-eyed sons —most of them jobless, many homeless, and almost all without hope. Defeat was something new for Texans, and it bewildered them. Few were there that saw, in the aftermath of war, a plainly marked trail and traveled it with purpose. Jeff Rigdon was one of the few.

He rode into Brazos Town of a sundown.

Brazos was garrisoned by Federals, and swarming with carpet-baggers. Jeff Rigdon ignored both. For him, the war was over and done with, and he could side-step the iron-

Jeff Rigdon's deathbed promise to his amigo brought him to Texas —and trouble. For when he'd set out to market the dead man's cattle, drouth, disaster, and drygulchers stalked that hell-bound herd.

Intriguing Novelette

fisted rule of the victors. He had shed his uniform within a month after the conflict's end, coming by civilian clothes only he knew how.

He reined in by the livery barn, about which seven or eight men loitered. They eyed Rigdon and his outfit, a big claybank mount and a pinto mare under pack, without interest. Rigdon knew them for Confederate veterans like himself. They loafed here for lack of a better place. Jeff Rigdon's nod was for them all.

"This town," he said. "It's called Brazos?"

"That's it," said one of the group, coming forward. He was gaunt-faced. "And a good town to steer clear of."

"There's a ranch close by—the Brennan place?"

"Yeah. But there's no use going there."

"Why not?"

"They're not hiring riders. Nobody

round here is taking on any riders."

Rigdon nodded to that, as though knowing it full well. He said, "My name's Rigdon. Jeff Rigdon. I served with Tom Brennan."

The gaunt-faced man turned friendly. "Mine's George Wall," he stated. "I used to work for Tom. His widow's running his spread now."

"Figured so," said Rigdon. "I've got to see her. I was with Tom when he got it at Richmond. Just before he died he made me promise to look up his wife and see if she was getting along all right. I looked for her in Memphis, after I was discharged, but she'd left there. Had some business of my own to attend to, so I'm just getting around to keeping my promise. How do I find the place?"

"Take the north road. It's only about seven miles," George Wall said, and there was some change in him. His mood had soured. "But if you just want to see Tom Brennan's widow, you don't need to ride out there. She's here in town, at the Alhambra."

"The Alhambra?" Rigdon said. "You mean—"

"Just what you're thinking," George Wall told him.

Rigdon stared at the man for a long moment, then said, "Well, thanks. I'll see you later." He swung his horses about, rode slowly along Brazos Town's main street in search of the Alhambra. He saw other idle men like those about the livery barn. He passed a five-man cavalry patrol, a sharp reminder that Texas was under military law. The Alhambra was halfway along the street, a two-storied and false-fronted plank building. A combination saloon, gambling house, and dance hall. *Now, what would Tom Brennan's widow be doing in such a place?* Jeff Rigdon asked himself.

He dismounted, tethered his horses at the Alhambra's hitchrail, but found himself reluctant to enter the place. He leaned against the rack, rolled and lighted a Mexican *cigarillo*, and tried to think it out while he smoked. It was growing dark, and men coming along the street turned into the Alhambra. Not Texas men. Blue-clad soldiers and prosperous-looking carpetbaggers. The few who looked like Texans, in dress at least, were Unionists back from wartime exile in Kansas.

RIGDON knew nothing about Tom Brennan's widow except what Tom had told him during their three years of soldiering together. Tom had been young, only twenty-five when he died, and there'd been something boyish about him that not even war could beat out of him. He'd walked tall, with a swagger, talked big and laughed a lot. He was the sort who made other men regard Texans as braggarts. But Rigdon had seen the good in him, and they had become friends.

Many a night Rigdon had listened to Tom Brennan talk of the girl he had married in Memphis. Tom had met Elena Venable one day, married her the next. His company had been passing through Memphis on its way to the battle front, in camp there only a week. Rigdon hadn't been with the company, then; he'd joined it a couple of months later, as a replacement. . . . According to Tom Brennan, there'd never been a girl as sweet and innocent as the one he'd married. And despite his boyishness, Tom had worried about her.

The girl was alone, her father having been killed in the war—so Tom had told Rigdon. That had been why he worried, and sent her all his pay—and what money he could borrow from Jeff Rigdon. "I'll pay you back, Jeff, after I get back to the ranch," Tom had always said. It hadn't mattered to Rigdon. He had taken the money into the Army with him, having come by it easily enough in the Colorado mining camps before the war.

But the girl had written for money time after time, and finally Tom was

in Rigdon's debt to the extent of nearly five thousand dollars. Tom once said sheepishly, "Trouble is, I told Elena that I'm a rich cattle rancher. I hated to tell her mine is only a two-bit sprad. I guess she believed that windy about me owning thirty thousand head of cattle." Rigdon hadn't cared about the money, having no wife of his own to support, and he had figured Tom's wife should have the best if she was all that he claimed . . . .

The Mexican cigarette grew short between Rigdon's lips. He was still reluctant to enter the Alhambra and face the girl.

There was a building across the street bearing a sign that read: *Room & Meals.* Rigdon decided to have supper before meeting the widow. The truth was, he was afraid of what he would find out about her.

Rigdon dropped the brown-paper butt, ground it under his boot heel, and started toward the hotel. George Wall was coming along the opposite side of the street, his curiosity aroused.

"You see her?" he asked.

Rigdon said, "Not yet. I'm going to eat first." He couldn't help noticing Wall's wolf-lean face. "How about having supper with me?" he invited.

They had their meal, Rigdon paying for it, then they crossed to the Alhambra. It was already crowded with soldiers and carpetbaggers and Unionists, and Rigdon could tell by Wall's frown that the Texan was uncomfortable in such company. They had a drink at the bar, then drifted about and watched the play at the gambling tables. At the rear of the long room four couples—soldiers and percentage girls—were dancing to the music of a piano, a fiddle and a guitar.

George Wall nudged Rigdon, drawing his attention to a dudish young civilian sitting at a side table with one of the house girls. "That's her brother," Wall muttered.

Rigdon frowned, studying the couple. The man was perhaps twenty-five or -six; he had curly brown hair, a handsome but somehow weak face. He was leaning close to the girl, whispering to her, fondling her arm, so Rigdon knew that she was not Elena.

He said, "Tom thought she had no relatives."

Wall swore under his breath. "See that faro dealer?" he said, nodding toward one of the gambling layouts. The man he indicated was older than Elena's brother, close to forty. He was nattily dressed in dark clothes in the style of men in his profession. He had an angular sallow face and there was a dusting of gray in his pomaded black hair. He was a half-handsome sort, but he had the blank expression of the professional gambler.

"Steve Durant," George Wall said, low-voiced. "The three of them are partners, and came here together—right after the war ended. They figured Tom had left the girl a big ranch stocked with more cattle than could be tallied. When they found out what the widow had inherited, Steve Durant took a job here. I don't know what Bert Venable does, but he's always got money. The girl's the only one who spends any time at the ranch. Sometimes she's out there three or four days running."

THERE was an open stairway at the rear, and a dark-haired girl in a green dress was descending it. Rigdon found himself staring. She was no ordinary percentage girl; she wasn't the sort usually found in a Texas cowtown honkytonk. She belonged in one of the gaudier places in Memphis or Natchez, or in some *maison* in New Orleans. She was a beauty, and she had poise. She looked like the handiwork of French dressmakers and hairdressers, the way she was gowned and coiffured. Other men were staring. There was sudden applause from the crowd.

The girl smiled and, reaching the floor, curtsied.

The music stopped, the fiddler and the Mexican with the guitar leaving the platform as the girl reached it and took her place by the piano. The piano player's fingers were light on the keys now. The girl smiled at the crowd, then began to sing. Her voice was low, a little husky. Her melody was the sort to make men forget their drinks and cards for the moment. But her lyrics were in French, and the listening men could only guess at their meaning. It was tantalizing, all of it—the girl's smile, her caressing voice, the slight but meaningful movements of her partially bare shoulders.

Rigdon looked about.

Men were rapt. The few percentage girls looked slightly annoyed.

Rigdon's gaze found Steve Durant. The gambler had stopped his game. He sat there chewing upon an unlighted cheroot, his face unreadable, but his eyes greedy on the girl. Rigdon knew, then. He didn't need George Wall to say it. This was Tom Brennan's widow, the sweet and innocent girl that Texas soldier had married. Alone in the world? Jeff Rigdon silently muttered an oath. This girl could have a thousand men at her feet, and knew it!

There was hearty applause when the song ended, but the girl gave no encore. It was clear to Jeff Rigdon that although Elena was a good drawing card, the Alhambra's owners couldn't afford to have her appear too long or too often. She kept the customers from drinking and gambling —and money from flowing into the till! Most of the crowd went back to those other pursuits; only a few men watched the girl as she talked a little to the pianist and then left the platform, while only one, a young Army lieutenant, approached her.

Rigdon said, "I'll see you later," and left George Wall.

He was standing by the foot of the stairs at the rear corner, lighting one of his brown-paper cigarettes, when the girl broke away from the suddenly disappointed-looking lieutenant. She would have passed Rigdon without a glance had he not said, "One minute, Mrs. Brennan."

Maybe it was his use of that name that made her look up startled.

"Yes?"

"My name's Rigdon. Jeff Rigdon."

She frowned slightly. Her eyes were a green-flecked gray, and as clear as crystal. But they revealed nothing; their clearness was only of the surface. Rigdon made a sudden discovery: her beauty was real, but it lacked warmth. She said tonelessly, "Should I know you, Mr. Rigdon?"

Anger rose in Rigdon. He knew that Tom Brennan had often mentioned his name in letters to her. Tom sometimes had read passages from those letters aloud to him, by the glow of some far-off bivouac fire. Either the girl's memory was short, or she hadn't given her husband's letters much of a reading. Rigdon was slow in answering.

"I soldiered with your husband," he said finally. "I was with him when he died." That got her; he saw a trace of some feeling in her eyes, and a quiver on her lips. "He asked me, with his last words, to look you up—and look out for you," he went on, his voice hardening. "He didn't know how well you can look out for yourself!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Tom Brennan didn't know he married a honkytonk girl."

"A woman has to earn her keep, the best way she can," the girl said, still in that toneless voice. "It isn't easy for—for a widow."

"A widow," Rigdon sneered. "You've always been this. You sure fooled Tom Brennan. But then maybe he fooled you, with his talk of being a big Texas cattleman."

Elena winced. "Have your say," she said thinly. "All of it."

RIGDON reached into his pocket, brought out a sheaf of papers. "I want more than that," he said, bitter with his dislike of her—rather, of her kind. "Tom sent you money during the three years he was married to you. A lot of money. Some of it was his Army pay, and some of it was cattle money. But most of it was my money—borrowed from me."

He thrust out the papers for her to see.

"Sometimes he'd want two hundred from me, sometimes five hundred," Rigdon went on. "All in all, it was nearly five thousand dollars. He signed a paper for each loan, so that I was protected."

The girl watched his face, but said nothing.

"If you'd been what Tom believed, I wouldn't have told you about these IOU's," he said flatly. "But now that I know what you are, I can guess the money was squandered on fast living—by you and your brother and that tinhorn gambler. So I mean to collect on the debt."

Still Elena did not speak.

But a man's voice said, "Just how do you expect to collect, Mister?"

Rigdon turned, saw Steve Durant. The gambler had come up behind him, and must have heard what he had said. Durant still held an unlighted cheroot between his teeth. He was smiling, but the angles of his face seemed sharper.

"Well, Mister?" he prompted, an edge to his voice.

"She owns Tom Brennan's ranch," Rigdon said. "It should be worth even more than five thousand. I'll levy on that."

"You're pretty hard on your friend's widow, Rigdon."

"She's no more his honest widow than she was an honest wife to him."

"Too bad young Brennan isn't alive to answer that," Durant said drily. He turned to the girl. "Look at his papers, Elena," he ordered. "I'm pretty sure you'll find them forgeries."

The girl's eyes flicked to Durant before she took the papers from Rigdon, showing that she caught on. Rigdon too got it. She was to deny the signature upon the IOU's. She glanced at several of the papers, but only casually. Rigdon felt that he was licked, that they were too tricky for him. He could see Steve Durant allowing himself a thin smile.

The girl looked up. "It's Tom's signature," she said.

Durant swore softly.

He glared at Elena, then turned on his heel and strode to the bar.

She returned the IOU's to Rigdon. "I accept them as Tom's indebtedness," she said. "But how I can pay you back, I don't really know. I planned to drive out to the ranch tonight. If you'll come with me, we can talk it over there—and come to some settlement. Will you please wait for me?"

Rigdon nodded, watched her mount the stairs.

He was jolted. He hadn't expected the girl to give in so easily. Across the room, Steve Durant had downed a drink and now was walking toward the table Bert Venable and the percentage girl occupied. Durant sent the girl away. He sat down and began to talk earnestly to young Venable.

Elena returned almost immediately, having merely wrapped a velvet cloak about herself. She gave Rigdon an unsmiling look, and led the way to the front entrance. Outside, she told him that she must go to the livery barn for her horse and buggy.

"I'll follow, with my horses," Rigdon said.

George Wall came out as Rigdon mounted the claybank and caught up the pack mare's halter rope. Rigdon said, "George, I'm going out to the ranch with her. Maybe I'll have some sort of a job for you, if you want to come out there in the morning."

"I won't work for her and her carpetbagger friends," Wall growled.

"You'll be working for me, if there is a job," Rigdon said.

He nodded and rode along the street, and at the livery barn, the hostler was already hitching up a sorrel mare to a buggy. Elena climbed into the rig, settled her voluminous skirts, and the hostler handed her the reins. She drove from the barn, then pulled up when her brother came striding up through the darkness. Bert Venable showed signs of having been drinking heavily. He staggered a little, his face was flushed, and his eyes had a blurry look. He halted by the doorway lantern.

"Sis, where you going with this man?" he demanded.

"To the ranch, Bert."

"I don't like it."

"I'm sorry," said Elena. "But there are many things I don't like."

She started out again, lifting the sorrel mare into a canter. Rigdon rode after her, ignoring Bert's shout of, "Look, you—"

They left Brazos Town behind, took the dark and lonely road north. Rigdon watched the girl ahead of him as he rode along at an easy lope. She hadn't lifted the hood of the velvet cape, and Rigdon could see the gleaming darkness of her hair and, now and then, the curve of a white cheek. He felt his pulse begin to race. He called himself a fool. . . .

CHAPTER II

AHEAD, the darkness was patched with a square of lamplight. It was the window of a squat 'dobe bunkhouse. The other ranch buildings were dark. The pole corral by the barn held half a dozen horses. The ranch house was off by itself, a small one and another 'dobe. Rigdon guessed the darkness hid the ranch headquarters' run-down look. The bunkhouse door swung open, and the stooped figure of an oldish man was limned there. Peering into the night, he called out:

"That you, Mrs. Brennan?"

"Yes, Hank," the girl said, her voice subtly changed. It had lost the huskiness with which she sang; the chill that had been in it when she talked with Jeff Rigdon had thawed. This was as though she had one voice, one personality, for the Alhambra, and another for the ranch she had been left by her husband of less than a week. "There's someone with me, Hank. A friend of—of Tom's. Will you come into the house, so that we can talk?"

"Yes'm," said Hank. "Soon as I pull on my boots."

Rigdon remembered Tom's telling him that he had left an old-timer named Hank Jessup to look after things at the ranch. He noticed that the old man and Elena Brennan were on friendly terms, that there was a mutual respect between them. Rigdon wondered if Hank didn't know about the girl's job at the Alhambra. . . . He dismounted by the corral, began to off-saddle. Hank came with his boots on and carrying a lighted lantern. They faced each other in the lantern's glow.

Hank was a small, gray man with a seamed-leather face. "A friend of Tom's, were you?" he said.

And Rigdon told him, "We soldiered together."

"A good soldier, was he?"

"One of the best, Hank."

"Hmm. Well, I'll unhitch the boss's mare."

They turned the horses into the corral, then walked to the house. Elena had lighted the ceiling lamp. There was but a single room—a fireplace at one end, a bunk at the other, and a plank table and benches in the center. It was an unmarried man's house, but evidences that the girl really stayed here at times were easily noted. The table was cloth-covered, the one window had calico curtains, and everything was tidy. Elena asked Hank to light the kindling already set in the fireplace.

When that was done, she said,

"Hank, Mr. Rigdon is here because Tom borrowed money from him during the war—to send to me. I want to repay that debt. Somehow, we've got to raise money on the range stock." She paused, and her face took on a determined look. "I won't let the ranch go, unless there's no other way to get the money," she went on. "Can we do it, Hank?"

The old man gave Rigdon a sour look. "Thought you were a friend of Tom's," he said accusingly.

Jeff Rigdon was feeling a bit guilty over the stand he'd taken. Maybe the girl was actress enough to fool him, but she appeared differently to him here at the ranch. He liked the way she had said that she wouldn't let the ranch go. The Elena he had met at the Alhambra hadn't seemed the sort who would care about a two-bit cow spread. But—unless she had him fooled—this wasn't the same Elena.

Hank Jessup said, "You could maybe sell the ranch to some danged carpetbagger at a giveaway price. But if you don't want to do that, there's only the cattle. Tom Brennan didn't leave any money—none except what the Confederacy owes him for beef supplied the Army, and now that'll never be collected. As for cattle—"

The oldster gave Elena an uneasy look. It was clear that he didn't want to tell Rigdon about the cattle, but the girl said:

"Tell him, Hank."

"WELL, we've made a gather this spring," Hank said reluctantly. "I took on half a dozen hands who were willing to hire on for chuck—and a promise of wages later on. We've rounded up a thousand Slash B steers, and are holding them a couple miles north of here. A lot of them were mavericks that we put our Slash B brand on.

"We aimed to drive them north, to the Missouri markets. It's the only way Mrs. Brennan can hold onto the spread—by selling that herd. But, dammit"—sudden anger shook old Hank—"if she's got to hand over the biggest part of what money the herd brings, there's no sense in us making the drive. It's a danged long trail drive to Missouri!"

Falling silent, Hank glowered at Rigdon. Elena too watched the tall, rocky-faced rider.

Jeff Rigdon squirmed mentally. He could find no fault with her for the way she was handling the ranch. And suddenly he knew that he had judged her too quickly, too harshly, with too little evidence. If she wished to hold onto the ranch, it might be that her marriage to Tom Brennan had not been merely the act of a mercenary adventuress. No man had a right to cast stones, as it were, at a woman who earned her livelihood in a honky-tonk—for no man could know what circumstances forced her into such ways. Jeff Rigdon saw himself as a self-righteous fool.

"I just came down the trail from Missouri," he said. "Every cattleman in Texas is heading north with cattle."

"So what?" muttered Hank Jessup.

"So the northern markets will be flooded with Texas cattle," Rigdon said. "The price of Texas cattle is never high in Missouri, and it'll drop every time a herd crosses the line. Maybe you'll get eight or ten dollars a head—or maybe you won't even find a buyer."

Elena looked worried.

"It's a chance we've got to take," Hank growled. "It's up the trail or call it quits. Texas is cattle poor. We can't sell here."

"The thing, then, is to find a better market."

"Meaning the Southern States?" Hank said. "That's no good. They need beef, but they've got no money to buy it. It's Missouri, dammit!"

Elena said, "Wait, Hank. What market are you thinking of, Rigdon?"

"The Colorado mines."

Hank swore. He called Jeff Rigdon a locoed fool. A herd of cattle could-

n't be trailed across Western Texas: That was Indian country. The Comanches and Kiowas were cattle thieves; they traded with the New Mexican Comancheros, and their trade goods were Texas stock. And the Comanches hated Texans with a murderous hate. Besides, it was an unknown trail. No cattle had ever been trailed across the Pecos wasteland and the waterless high plains. Hank Jessup knew, for sure. He'd freighted out there, over the Santa Fe Trail. It was a long harangue for the old man, and suddenly he ran out of words.

"It can't be done," he said, looking at the girl.

"It can be done," Rigdon stated, he too turning to Elena. "I've been out to the mining country since the war ended. There's plenty of money and a scarcity of food. I saw a rancher from the Colorado River bottoms sell two hundred head of beef cattle for thirty dollars a head."

"Thirty dollars!" Hank exclaimed.

Elena's eyes had widened, were aglow with eagerness. "You'll help with the drive, Rigdon?" she asked. "It's your chance to be repaid the money you loaned Tom. Will you, Rigdon?"

Rigdon wondered if he was being another kind of a fool, now.

He assured himself that this was how he could keep that promise made to Tom Brennan—he could help the widow hold onto her ranch.

"That was my idea," he said.

THEY talked it over for a while, making their plans, then Rigdon and Hank said good night and went to the bunkhouse. Rigdon picked up his bedroll at the corral, and tossed it onto one of the bunks. None of the beds was occupied.

Rigdon learned from Hank that his newly hired crew was guarding the cattle, which had been running wild in the brush so long such a guard was needed day and night. Too, it wasn't safe to leave any cattle without a guard. The Tallying Law, enacted by the carpetbagger Legislature, had turned even some honest cattlemen into thieves. No matter what their brand, any cattle unguarded on the range could be seized by any riders—so long as a tally was later made at the nearest courthouse.

Rigdon untied his bedroll.

Hank sat on his bunk and started pulling off his boots. The old man was still in a sour mood, and said, "I don't like it, Rigdon. I just kept my mouth shut because the girl was so keen about it. But I'm saying here and now, we'll be taking a trail to hell when we start out for Colorado. We'll be lucky to get through with our hides whole, let alone get the herd there."

Rigdon gave him a wry grin, but it quickly faded.

"Rider coming," he said.

"Now who'd that be?" Hank wondered aloud.

The next moment, they found out. Bert Venable was out there, bellowing his sister's name. "You send that son out here, Elena!" he shouted. "Else I'll come in for him with a gun! You hear!"

Rigdon said, "Why, damn him!"

He crossed the room, flung open the door. Bert Venable was over by the house, a gun in his hand. He kept on shouting, and now a lamp was lighted inside Elena's house. Rigdon remembered that Bert had been half drunk when he showed up at the livery barn; it was apparent that he was more drunk now. The ugly thing that was in the youth's mind could only come of whisky—and of being primed, maybe by Steve Durant. Rigdon thought he could see the pattern of it.

He called out, "You looking for me, Bert?"

Bert gave a start, jerked his horse about, came riding toward the bunkhouse. "I'll show you, Rigdon!" he yelled. "I'm not letting my sister—"

"Who sent you—Durant?" Rigdon broke in.

"What if he did?" the youth demanded.

He jerked his horse to a stop within five feet of the doorway, swung his gun up, and took wavering aim at Rigdon. Across the way, in her doorway, Elena screamed. Rigdon had time to get his own gun drawn, but instead he leapt forward with empty hands. Bert's gun roared, its shot missing Rigdon by scant inches. Rigdon grabbed the youth, dragged him from the saddle. Even as Bert hit the ground, Rigdon's nst caught him solidly behind the left ear. It was a savage blow, and Bert stretched out limp and flat.

Hank came, picked up Bert's gun, and growled, "The ornery pup!"

Elena came running through the darkness, a wrapper pulled over her nightdress. Suddenly a rifle cracked somewhere out in the blackness. The slug shrieked over Rigdon's head. He yelled, "Hank—Elena, get down!" He drew his gun, dropped low.

The rifle cracked again, and Rigdon saw the powder-flash.

The rifleman was in the brush alongside the road where it ran into the ranch headquarters. Rigdon crouched low, ran weavingly forward. A commotion broke out in the brush thicket. One man swore angrily, another let loose a yell of pain. Then the thrashing-about ended, and a voice — George Wall's voice — called out:

"All right, Rigdon! I've downed the sneaking son!"

RIGDON found that the gaunt-faced Wall had flattened a man with a blow of his six-shooter. "A hardcase named Jack Graves," Wall said. "He's a Unionist. Hangs out at the Alhambra, bootlicking for the carpetbaggers."

He explained that he had seen Bert Venable follow Rigdon and the girl to the livery barn from the Alhambra. He'd watched Bert return to the saloon, talk with Steve Durant, drink some more, then join up with Graves. "I moseyed along after them," Wall said, "figuring Durant sicked them on you."

"Lucky for me that you did," Rigdon said. "Disarm him, then let him take his horse and ride out."

"You still want me here?"

"Sure—more than ever. I've got that job for you."

"All right," Wall said. "Then I'll bunk here."

Rigdon nodded, returned to the bunkhouse. Hank and the girl had gotten Bert inside and onto a bunk, but the youth was still unconscious. Despite Bert's shaming her but a few moments ago, Elena was concerned about him. She was bathing his face with a cloth she frequently moistened in a pail of water. Rigdon felt his pulse begin to race again as he watched her. To take his thoughts off her, he busied himself with rolling and lighting a cigarette.

Bert groaned finally, came around with a violent start. He was sobered somewhat and, seeing Elena there, he looked sheepish.

"I'm sorry, Sis," he muttered. "I guess I was drunk."

"It doesn't matter, Bert."

"That Rigdon—"

"He's going to help me get the cattle to market," Elena said, and now her tone was defiant. "I don't care what you and Steve say. I'm going to hold onto the ranch. I'm not going to sell out. It's the only home we've had since we were kids, and—"

"All right, Sis," Bert said, whining it. He turned away from her, lay facing the wall. "Have it your way."

She left him, gave Rigdon a look, and he followed her outside. They faced each other, and Elena said simply, "I'm sorry, Rigdon. Bert doesn't really mean any harm. It's just that he lets Steve Durant influence him."

"And you?"

"I'm done with Steve Durant," the girl replied. "For good."

She turned away, walking toward the ranch house. Looking after her, Rigdon wondered just how much Durant had been influencing her.

CHAPTER III

HANK JESSUP rustled up breakfast, and he and the two newcomers to the Slash-B ate before the sun was up. They went to the corral, dropped loops over their mounts, saddled up.

Rigdon said, "I'll be with you in a minute. I want to talk to Bert."

"Talking won't change that young pup," Hank growled. "You were too easy on him last night, Rigdon. And on that hardcase who was with him. He tried to kill you, and you let him ride out—like he'd been here to make a social call."

"Durant sent him," Rigdon said flatly. "So it's Durant I'll settle with—in my own good time."

He strode to the bunkhouse, shook young Venable awake.

Bert sat up on the edge of the bunk, a sulky look on his boyish face. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had a sickly pallor.

"What you want, Rigdon?" he muttered, holding his head in his hands.

"You sure shamed your sister last night, friend."

"Well, how'd I know—seeing her go off with you."

"You'd better quit letting Steve Durant put crazy ideas in your head," Rigdon said. He knew this youth was a weakling, yet wondered if something couldn't be done with him. "You work at anything, Bert?"

"Not right now."

"Then you'd better pitch in and do some chores around here."

"Me work on a ranch?" Bert said, offended. "Nothing doing!"

Rigdon felt like cussing him out. He said, "We're driving cattle to Colorado. You change your dude clothes for some work duds, and come along. It'll do you more good than hanging around the Alhambra."

"Save your preaching," Bert sneered. "You'll never get away with taking over Elena's ranch like this. Steve Durant won't let you—see? Steve figures Elena's his private property, and he doesn't like the way she took to you. He'd never have let her marry that Tom Brennan if he'd known what kind of a ranch it really was."

"So Durant was fooled by Tom's bragging talk?"

"Brennan fooled Elena, and she made Steve and me believe he owned one of the biggest ranches in Texas," Bert said sourly. "Steve has always wanted Elena, but he figured it was a big chance for all of us—her marrying a rich man who might be killed in the war." He paused, gave Rigdon a mirthless grin. "We kept out of the picture, Steve and I, giving Elena her chance. Steve knew that if the war didn't make her a widow, she could become one after the war—by accident."

"Durant planned on killing him?"

"Like he will you, Rigdon!"

Rigdon stared at him. Drunk or sober, Bert Venable was Durant's man—loyal even though just last night the gambler had tried to get him, with the help of that hardcase, to do murder. Durant was conscienceless, but Venable was dangerous because he was weak and a fool.

Rigdon said savagely, "You go back to Durant, if you're too damn good to work as a ranch hand. But from now on, don't ever cross me up. As for Durant, you tell him that we'll settle this thing the next time I get to Brazos Town!"

He turned, strode to the door.

Bert called after him, "Like Brennan, you're a big talker, Rigdon! . . ."

Jeff Rigdon began outfitting the Slash-B for the trail. He and George Wall went on a horse-buying trip. They built up their remuda with animals obtained from other Texas ranchers who, being short of cash and long on livestock, were willing

to gamble on being paid later. Rigdon hadn't money enough to pay cash for the horses.

His trip to the Colorado mines hadn't netted him much profit. His prewar partner in the freighting business had sold out and gone back East, leaving only eight hundred dollars on deposit with a bartender for Rigdon. What was left of that eight hundred dollars would be needed for a stock of provisions and gear for the trail. A wagon, too, would be needed.

THE wagon was a rebuilt Army rig, and George Wall got it from a friend down at Bosque. It was acquired like the horses, on credit, and with it George received a dozen oxen. Half the bulls would serve in yoke, with the others remaining in reserve. Six more trail hands were hired, each man carefully chosen. George Wall brought them to the Brennan ranch, but Rigdon hired them only after making sure they were frontiersmen as well as cowhands. All were that, and were either Confederate veterans or ex-members of the State Troops.

All else ready, Rigdon sent the ox-drawn wagon to Brazos for provisions and some gear. George Wall and Hank Jessup went along with Luke Summers, the colored man hired to do the cooking and handle the wagon.

Rigdon gave Wall all of his money except fifty dollars, with orders to buy flour, beans, coffee, bacon, salt, and whatever else Luke would need for his cooking. He told Wall to buy axes, pots and pans, matches, and blankets for the men who lacked bedding—along with what other gear might be necessary. Rigdon planned to go to town himself, for reasons of his own—but he wanted to be alone, so as not to involve the other Slash-B men.

He was saddling his grulla horse at the corral when Elena came from her house. The girl was spending all her time at the ranch, nowadays, and though she hadn't said so, Rigdon knew that she had quit the Alhambra for good. She seemed to guess his destination, for she said:

"Jeff, don't. It isn't worth it."

"You worried about Durant?" he asked.

She flushed, bit down on her under lip. "No, I'm not worried about Steve Durant," she said. "But the success of our trail drive depends on you. If there's a showdown between you and Durant, and something happens to you, then all my hopes for the Slash-B will be gone."

"Durant tried to have me killed," Rigdon said. "I should have settled with him long ago."

"If I ask you—"

"Don't," he said, and swung into the saddle.

He gave her no opportunity to use her feminine wiles on him, if that was her intent. He rode out, lifting the big grulla into a lope. It was not so much that Rigdon needed to settle past accounts with Durant as it was a need to insure himself against future trouble with the gambler. He was sure that Durant blamed him for Elena's quitting the Alhambra—and just as sure that the man would try to even matters by striking at him when the herd was on the trail. Rigdon wasn't going to give him the chance.

The Slash-B wagon was just leaving Brazos when Rigdon reached the town. It was heavily loaded. Luke Summers walked beside the oxen, his bullwhip popping. Hank Jessup and George Wall rode a little distance behind the rig. Rigdon merely lifted his hand to them, jogged on into town, and dismounted before the Alhambra. It was mid-afternoon, and, though there was a bit of activity along the street, the saloon was almost deserted.

Rigdon had a drink at the bar, and said, "Steve Durant still around?"

The bartender nodded. "Upstairs," he said.

Rigdon mounted the stairs at the rear of the room, and it took him to

a narrow hall with half a dozen doors along each side—like the hallway of a cowtown hotel. One door stood ajar. Glancing in, Rigdon saw a couple of the Alhambra's percentage girls lounging about. He ignored their quick flirtatious looks, and asked which was Durant's room. It was the last one down the hall, on the right side, he was told. He went back, heard Durant's voice, and shoved open the door.

DURANT was lounging in a chair, his feet propped up on a stool. Bert Venable was seated at a small table, over a game of solitaire. Fear crawled into Durant's eyes, but beyond that the gambler's face didn't change. Bert Venable swore.

Rigdon said, "Bert, get out. I'll have a talk with your partner."

Bert swore again, stood up. "You want me to stay, Steve?"

Durant said mildly, "You go, Bert." The fear in his eyes was replaced by shrewdness, and he half grinned when Bert closed the door behind him. "What's on your mind, Rigdon? Not that trouble of a couple weeks ago?"

"Suppose it is, Durant?"

"I'm not armed, friend. And I don't intend to arm myself."

"You sure play it safe, tinhorn."

"A man who makes his living at cards learns not to bet against odds, Rigdon. I made my play—and lost. I put Jake Graves and Bert onto you, but their killing you wasn't in the cards. Now you've got a good chance of collecting the money you loaned Tom Brennan — along with his widow."

"You're giving up too easy," Rigdon said suspiciously.

"Why not?" said Durant. "The ranch isn't worth enough for me to worry about. As for the girl—" He paused, shrugged, gave Rigdon a mocking grin. "After all, Rigdon, you know and I know that she's nothing but a cheap little floss. A—"

Two strides took Rigdon across the room.

All because of an insult to a girl he himself had thought ill of, he grabbed Steve Durant and pulled him out of his chair. He let loose with one hand, slammed a fist into the gambler's face. Durant reeled back, crashed against the wall. He swore at Rigdon, and pulled a derringer from his coat pocket. The room rocked with the derringer's blast, and Rigdon, hit in the left side, staggered as the impact of the slug spun him halfway around. But Rigdon got his gun out, and fired before Durant could blast with the derringer's second barrel. The gambler fell away from the wall, toppled against the bed, sprawled to the floor between bed and wall.

Somewhere, a woman screamed.

A man, farther away, began to bellow, "Patrol! You, soldiers!"

It was Bert Venable yelling.

The window across the room was open. Rigdon stumbled to it, crammed his big body through. He lowered himself from the sill, at arm's length, then dropped. He hit the ground on his feet, but his knees buckled and threw him. However, he was at the rear of the Alhambra, and safe so far.

He picked himself up, moved toward the alleyway alongside the building. He saw a five-man cavalry patrol gallop past the alley, drawn there by Bert Venable's shouting. Other men ran past, driven by curiosity. Giving the soldiers time to dismount and run inside, but not long enough to find out what had happened, Rigdon headed for the street.

His left arm he held tight against his side, hoping to hide his wound from anyone he passed. Near the mouth of the alleyway, he realized his chances were good. More and more people came hurrying, from every direction. He stepped from the alleyway, joined the growing crowd in front of the saloon. Bert Venable was not in sight. Apparently he had led the soldiers upstairs. Four of the cavalrymen were inside, and the fifth stood holding the patrol's mounts.

Rigdon pushed through to the hitchrack. "What's up, soldier?"

"Don't know. Somebody yelled 'murder.' "

"Murder, eh?" said Rigdon, untying his grulla horse. "That's bad."

He led the horse away from the cavalry mounts, swung to the saddle.

Somebody bawled, "That's him! Get the sneaking son!"

Rigdon kicked spurs to the grulla, gave it a yell. Looking back, he saw Bert Venable, still yelling, leaning from one of the Alhambra's upstairs windows. The soldier holding the horses blasted away with his carbine, but Rigdon's grulla was already hitting a gallop.

TWO miles from town, Rigdon overtook the slow-moving Slash-B wagon and the riders guarding it. Both Hank Jessup and George Wall saw the bloodstain spreading farther and farther across Rigdon's shirt. And they guessed that there had been a showdown with Steve Durant.

Rigdon said, reining in, "The Federals are after me, so I'll have to make a run for it. Hank, you take over as trail boss and get the herd moving. Get started tomorrow morning. If I give the soldiers the slip, I'll meet the outfit somewhere along the trail."

Hank nodded jerkily.

George Wall said, "How bad are you hurt?"

"It's just a flesh wound."

"Still, it needs doctoring," Wall said. "Change horses with me, and I'll lead the soldiers away from you —and you can get to the ranch."

Wall would have it no other way. He was already dismounting.

Mounted on Wall's roan horse, Rigdon rode ahead of the ox-drawn wagon by about fifty feet—as though he had held such an advance position all this while. Hank rode the same distance behind the rig, and George Wall, as the five blue-clad cavalrymen came pounding up, streaked out across the flats on the grulla. The soldiers swung after Wall, giving the Slash-B outfit hardly a look. It was a wild chase, for the soldiers began shooting when they saw their quarry increasing his lead. But Wall was well out of range.

Once they were sure Wall had led the soldiers miles from the road, Hank suggested that he and Rigdon ride on. Luke Summers could bring the wagon on to the ranch alone. The truth was, Hank saw that Rigdon was beginning to droop in the saddle. The old-timer suspected that Rigdon's wound was more than torn flesh. When they reached the ranch and dismounted, Rigdon's knees gave way and threw him to the ground. Hank had to call Elena from the house to help get the unconscious man into the bunkhouse.

Time stood still for Jeff Rigdon. He lost all track of it, and did not care. He was not so much in pain as afire with fever, and when he was not burning up, he was shaking with chills. He was plunged into blackness that only occasionally faded to a murky grayness. Sometimes he had glimpses of faces through the gray haze, and he heard, as from afar off, voices speaking words his mind couldn't grasp. During those intervals of semi-consciousness, he tried to climb back out of the blurred nightmare—but always he fell back, deeper into the queer black nothingness. His will was weakened, and betrayed him.

It was the fifth day, though Rigdon did not know that until later, when the fever burned itself out and the haze cleared from his mind. He found himself lying upon a pallet, under blankets, a bowed roof of canvas above. Wherever he was, the quarters were cramped. Boxes and sacks and gear crowded the small cleared space given over to him. Stranger still, the floor beneath him had motion. Rigdon understood, then. *It's the Slash-B wagon,* he told himself. *We're on the trail.*

He was startled, and wondered, *How long have I been laid up?*

He tried to rise, but all he could do was lever himself up on his elbows and then drop back. He was that weak. His rangy muscle-corded body had become an empty shell. He lay back, gasping, listening to the creaking of the wagon wheels and Luke Summers' voice as he yelped at the oxen. Farther away sounded the bawling of the trail herd and an occasional shout of a rider. Rigdon relaxed. He was half alive, at least. And the Slash-B cattle were on their way to market. The promise made so long ago to a dying man was being fulfilled.

CHAPTER IV

SUNLIGHT suddenly poured into the wagon. The canvas tarp over the front opening had been lifted. Somebody climbed back from the wagon seat. Rigdon said, his voice hollow, "Hank, that you?"

"No, it's I—Elena."

The girl knelt beside Rigdon. There were tears in her eyes, relief glowing upon her face. But she had undergone another transformation. Her dark hair was tucked away under a man's broad-brimmed hat. She wore a flannel shirt, jeans, boots. Her smooth white face was weathered. Rigdon stared.

"You—what are you doing here?"

"Looking after you, Jeff."

"It's crazy!" he gasped. "A woman on a trail drive!"

Elena smiled. "What about the pioneer women who traveled all the way overland?" she said. Then, fiercely: "It was my chance to break away, Jeff—from Bert and the past. I planned to come, all along. Your being hurt and sick had nothing to do with it." Her voice softened. "But I'm so glad you're recovering, Hank and I were so worried."

Rigdon's brain was reeling. He couldn't believe that she was here.

He said, "George Wall?"

Elena's pleasure faded. "He hasn't joined us," she said gravely. "And it's five days now."

George Wall's continued absence gave Rigdon another sort of nightmare, one that stayed with him during his waking hours. It was a picture of the gaunt-faced rider falling under cavalry guns—and being thrown into a shallow grave in some lonely place. He didn't want George to have made such a sacrifice. He blamed himself. Rigdon couldn't rid himself of a sense of guilt, knowing that he shouldn't have permitted George to act as bait for those soldiers.

As his strength returned, within the next few days, Rigdon kept watching the back trail. But there were no signs of a rider trailing the Slash-B outfit across the vast emptiness of frontier Texas.

The third day after ridding himself of the fever, Rigdon rode up front on the wagon seat. The fifth day, he had Hank saddle a horse for him. But he wasn't yet fit to help handle the herd. He rode alongside the chuck wagon, holding his mount down to its lumbering gait. The saddle punished him. He had to will himself to take the punishment.

A good part of that day, Elena rode with him. She was mounted on a pinto pony, and she rode well. Rigdon had difficulty recalling her as she had been that night in the Alhambra when he first saw her. It was hard to believe she ever had been other than this lithe, sun-darkened girl in mannish clothes who ate with rough men about a campfire and slept at night with no more shelter than blankets.

For some time now, Rigdon had realized that she had something on her mind. That she wanted to talk about that something. Now, as they rode stirrup to stirrup, she said:

"Jeff, there's something I want you to understand."

"I've no right to expect explanations from you, Elena."

"Maybe not," she said. "But some-

how I want you to know that—well, that I thought I was in love with Tom. He made me think I was. I let him believe I was alone in the world, because—because I wanted to deny my past. I didn't want Tom to know about Bert and Steve. Tom kept sending me money, and I let him—because I did believe he was rich. I shared it with Bert.

"And that's where I was doing wrong. Bert and I were orphaned in our teens, and Bert became friendly with Steve. Why? Because Bert is weak, and wanted an easy living. And Steve wanted a partner in his tinhorn schemes that never made him rich, as he hoped." She lowered her gaze, and color burned in her cheeks. "Maybe, too, Steve wanted a hold on Bert because—because of me."

RIGDON said nothing. A frown gathered on his sick man's face.

Elena looked up, and cried out, "I never let anything be between Steve and me! You've got to believe that!"

Rigdon wondered, *Do I believe it?*

The same instant he felt ashamed of himself. He had hit Steve Durant when the gambler talked against Elena—so didn't he believe in her?

He said, "I believe it, Elena."

Her relief was plain. "When Tom died, it seemed the end of everything for me," she went on, more calmly. "I let Bert and Steve talk me into coming to Texas. They hoped the ranch would be all Tom had made me believe it to be. When it wasn't, we were stranded here. And I was glad. The ranch seemed like a real home to me, poor though it was. I became afraid I'd not be able to keep it, so I took that job at the Alhambra. Then you came along, and gave me hope."

"You'll never lose it now," Rigdon said.

"No," Elena whispered. "And I'm grateful to you."

That night a rider loomed out of the darkness, hailing the trail camp. Rigdon lay awake in his blankets; it was as though expecting the hail. He pulled on his boots, went to meet George Wall. They shook hands. Never in his life had Jeff Rigdon been so glad to see anyone. George Wall, looking more gaunt than ever, slid off a done-in brown horse.

"Been on your trail for two days and nights of steady riding, changing my horses wherever I could make a trade," he said.

He explained that he had led the soldiers a long way east, keeping just out of gun range. They had quit the chase at nightfall, but the next day a bigger patrol was out hunting him. He had played hide-and-seek with the Federal troops, letting them catch sight of him occasionally. They had charged after him every time.

"That grulla horse of yours was to them what a red flag is to a bull," Wall said, grinning.

The patrol had kept after him for three days, and he kept leading them east—giving Rigdon plenty of chance to head the other way. Finally he had holed up with a rancher he knew, in the Morada hills. He'd left the grulla there, for safekeeping. He had ridden back to the Brennan ranch on a paint horse, and nobody had bothered him.

"But they'd fired the ranch, Jeff," he said. "Burned it out."

"The soldiers?" Rigdon asked.

"No. It was Steve Durant and a couple toughs," Wall told him. "I heard it from Matt Stabley, who has a place near by. Stabley happened by and saw it. Bert Venable was along. He tried to get Durant to hold off, but, according to Stabley, Durant was crazy mad."

Rigdon swore. "I thought I'd killed that tinhorn," he said.

"You just winged him," Wall said. "Stabley told me Durant looked sound, except that his left arm was in a sling. It sure surprises me that Durant hasn't followed the herd—to get back the girl. Her leaving is what really got him. Stabley heard him tell Bert that she wouldn't get far."

Wall went to the cook fire, where Luke kept a coffeepot hot for the hands riding night herd. Rigdon turned uneasily toward where Elena lay in her blankets. She was awake and had listened, all right. Rigdon crossed to her.

"I figured I freed you of Durant," he said. "I'm sorry, Elena."

"And I'm scared, Jeff," she said, shivering.

THE trail the Slash-B followed was twice as long as one would have been through the hostile lands of the Comanches and Kiowas. But the freedom from Indian attack was worth the additional weeks of travel. Jeff Rigdon as guide for the outfit was following the trace of the Southern Overland Mail, Butterfield's stage route, which had been abandoned at the outbreak of the war between the States.

The herd plodded by the haunted chimneys of Fort Phantom Hill, turned south, and drifted its slow way through Buffalo Gap. The Texas frontier lay behind; this was wilderness country.

It was country through which cattle had never before been driven. Past Fort Chadbourne, the outfit swung south and west to cross the North Concho—crossed the divide to the middle Concho, where the cattle and horses were watered for the badlands ahead. West for many miles was Centralia Draw, desert land reaching to the bitter Pecos. Rigdon led the way, day after day, over the stage trail—over the Castle Mountains by way of Castle Gap, and twelve miles beyond was Horsehead Crossing.

But many of those days were sheer torture.

Six days of crossing desert waste to the Pecos with the cattle bawling out their misery, too thirsty to bed down at night, could be as much of a strain as fighting off Indian raids. The white, bitter dust rose in tortuous clouds, and the sun was merciless. Bleary-eyed riders had cracked lips, parched throats. The land was a hell of dry heat and alkali. The steers grew drawn and gaunt, their tongues lolling far from their mouths, and when death approached, as it did for many, their eyes sunk into their sockets.

Some thirst-maddened animals charged at the riders who drove them endlessly on. And finally, at the Pecos, the herd stampeded. Some drowned in the river. Others reached alkali ponds short of the river proper, drank the poisonous water, and died in their tracks. There was quicksand too, and Rigdon and his trail-weary riders fought to save steers caught in the bog.

Nearly two hundred head of dead Slash-B cattle marked the desert trek and Pecos crossing. It was a dear price. But Jeff Rigdon saw that cattle had not been the full toll exacted by those six weeks of trail driving. As he looked at each of the crew, from old Hank Jessup to Luke Summers, the cook, he saw that the ordeal had sapped and aged them. He knew that he too was marked. He felt it, deep inside. He wondered then if he had done right, bringing men and animals over such a trail. He doubted the wisdom of it.

He looked at Elena, and the sight of her thinned-down face, the blue shadowings beneath her red-rimmed eyes, made him wince. Beauty in a woman was a fragile thing. Certainly, the trail had robbed Elena of hers. *Or had it?* Rigdon wondered. Deep in her eyes was a warm glow, upon her thirst-parched lips a brave smile. She seemed to read Rigdon's troubled thoughts, for she said softly:

"It's all right, Jeff. It's not as bad as it seems."

Somehow, he realized that it was so.

He'd given hopeless men the hardest kind of work, but in work they at least found hope. And Elena was freed of her past. While he had kept his promise to a dead friend. The trail up the Pecos would be hard,

treacherous in stretches, but it would have an end.

Rigdon said, "Well, let's shove on."

There was an uneasiness in him. He'd come by it when George Wall brought the news that Steve Durant still lived.

CHAPTER V

JUST beyond Pope's Crossing was the New Mexico line. Having forded the river, the Slash-B outfit trailed north along the west side of the treacherous Pecos. It crossed the Delaware and the Black, then met the first soldiers since Fort Chadbourne. The patrol was out of Fort Sumner, commanded by a young lieutenant.

"I advise you to cross to the east side," the officer said, after greetings were exchanged and questions answered. He gestured toward the mountains looming to the west. "They're the Guadalupes, where the Mescalero Apaches rendezvous."

So another crossing was made, but now the trail herd passed small settlements—Comanche Springs and Bosque Grande and Mexican villages. The cavalry patrol must have spread word of the herd's coming, for a visitor arrived at the camp set up one day's drive from Bosque Redondo—or Fort Sumner. He was a bewhiskered man with shrewd eyes, and he rode around the herd with a speculative gaze.

Rigdon told Hank Jessup and Elena, "A cattle dealer, sure."

The man was that. He introduced himself as Curt Bateman, and said, "I won't beat about the bush. I've got a contract to supply beef to Fort Sumner, for the Navajo and Mescalero Indians. I'm having trouble meeting the demand, and the Indians are causing trouble because they're hungry."

"We're heading for the Colorado mines," Rigdon said.

"I'll save you a long drive."

"More money at the mines, and that means higher prices for us."

Bateman said without blinking, "Eight cents a pound, on the hoof."

Rigdon did the blinking, Hank Jessup choked on his tobacco cud. Elena had no way of knowing that seldom, if ever, had Texans received so much for their cattle, and she asked, "Is that a fair price, Jeff?"

Rigdon gave her a grin. "It's fair, all right," he said. "I think we should make a deal. We'd probably lose some of the herd before we hit Colorado, anyway, and have to take a loss."

The herd was driven into a fenced meadow at Bosque Redondo, and Curt Bateman made payment in gold coin. . . .

It was the day after Bateman had met the outfit. The Slash-B hands made their night camp outside the settlement, and after chuck Elena, with old Hank's help, paid off the riders. For most of them, it was the first money earned since war's end. It was too good to keep, and there was a Mexican cantina in the settlement. Those riders, with a great thirst to quench, headed for the cantina. Hank Jessup followed them, but he was experienced enough a drinker to draw only a small part of his foreman's wages.

There remained then only Jeff Rigdon, and Elena said, "Now I want to pay off Tom's debt to you, Jeff—plus wages."

Rigdon took Tom Brennan's IOU's from his pocket and deliberately dropped them into the campfire. "It's paid," he said. "You owe me only regular trail boss wages."

"Why, Jeff?" the girl said, gazing at him with widened eyes.

"I made a promise to Tom," he said. "I told him that I'd see that you were all right. I'd never have told you that Tom borrowed that money except that things looked different to me when I found you in that Brazos honkytonk. I see things the way they are now. So I'm keeping my promise. You keep that money, Elena. It's your stake for the future."

Elena shook her head. "Jeff, people don't do things like that," she told him. "Not even rich people. And you —don't you need a stake for the future, too?"

"Not if the Slash-B drives more cattle to market, and keeps me on as trail boss."

"The Slash-B will, Jeff. It will!"

"Then I've no need to worry about the future."

He met her eyes, smiled into them, letting her know that he considered her his future. Elena gave him a wavering smile. Despite her mannish clothes and sun- and wind-roughened face, she was all woman again and, to Jeff Rigdon's eyes, incredibly lovely. This moment of understanding between them was a wonderful one, but a sound of riders shattered it.

Rigdon frowned as he listened, and said, "That can't be the boys coming back, already." And he drew Elena well back from the glow of the fire. He drew his Henry rifle from his pile of saddle gear on the ground. The shadows about the chuck wagon helped conceal them.

Six riders jogged up, reining in on the far side of the fire.

Elena gripped Rigdon's arm. "There's Bert!" she whispered.

"And Durant," Rigdon muttered.

STEVE DURANT'S eyes were sharp. He found Rigdon and the girl there by the wagon, and a twisted smile curled his thin lips. The gambler wasn't his dapper self. His shallow face was dark with a whiskery growth, and trail dust filmed his now untidy clothes. Rigdon could see an ugly glint in his eyes. There was a wild rage in Durant. And not even his gambler's nerveless will could hide it.

"It's been a long trail, Rigdon," he said flatly. "Lucky for me I didn't wait longer in Colorado. I'd heard that a buyer in New Mexico was offering a high price for cattle, so it occurred to me that you might sell the herd here. You wonder how I got here with my friends?"

Rigdon didn't say anything. He stepped away from the wagon, so that Elena wouldn't be in the line of fire that was sure to come. Her face was blanched with her fear.

Durant went on mockingly, "Bert and I traveled to Missouri and then came west across Kansas by stage. We got horses at Pueblo, Colorado, and picked up our four friends who like to see justice done—and so rode south to meet you. Last night we met the cattle buyer, and he told us where the outfit was camping."

"Quit the fine talk," Rigdon snapped. "I can see that those four ride for money, not justice. Get on with it, Durant. The odds are with you. But this Henry rifle will give me a chance—to get you!"

There was a flurry of quick movement. Elena had run out into the open, to face Durant and his men.

"All right, Steve," she said chokingly. "You win, as always. But we'll bargain. You want me and you want money. I'm game, and there's more money here in camp than you ever saw at one time. But Rigdon rides out."

Rigdon knew it wouldn't work, even if he'd let it be a bargain. He could see that Steve Durant might want the girl and the money, but he wanted revenge more. Durant had lost Elena to two men within a period of little more than three years—lost her though actually he'd never possessed her—and it was more than the man's pride could tolerate. Revenge was more than a desire, it was a need.

Durant said, "Bert, get your sister out of here."

Bert Venable looked as trail-worn as Durant. He was leaning forward in the saddle, peering at Elena through the flickering firelight with a dark intentness. He looked older, less boyish, since Rigdon had seen him at Brazos Town.

"Sis," he said, "come out of there."

Elena shook her head. "It's got to be my way, Bert," she told him. "I asked little enough out of life. I can't have that, so now I've got to see Rigdon ride out of here—safe. Let me have that much, Bert!"

Bert squirmed. "Steve, it's little enough," he muttered.

Durant cursed him. He gestured with his gun, to one of the four toughs, and ordered, "You, Ed. Get the girl out of there!"

THE man kneed his horse forward, leaned from the saddle to grab at Elena. She shrank away, and then Bert rode in. He yelled, "Leave her alone, Ed!" He was between Elena and Durant and his four hardcases. So Rigdon swung the Henry rifle to his shoulder.

Ed fired the first shot, shouting a warning at the same instant. His shot went wild, and Rigdon's blasting Henry tore him from the saddle. Rigdon leapt back to the chuck wagon, for its uncertain shelter, as Durant and the other three hardcases opened up. Slugs ripped and tore through the wagon's sheeting and sideboards. Rigdon saw Bert Venable catch Elena up and ride out of the camp with her. He saw Durant swing away, not in flight but to circle the wagon. The three hardcases came riding in, their guns blazing—men intent upon earning blood money.

The Henry blasted again, and its ounce slug downed a horse and rider. Rigdon fired again, and missed. The two riders closed in, meaning to ride him down. Then one screamed, flung up his arms, lost his seat, and fell sprawling. He'd been shot in the back, and Rigdon saw Bert Venable —alone now—shooting from beyond the fire. The remaining hardcase jerked his mount away, narrowly missing Rigdon, and tried a getaway. Both Rigdon and Bert fired after him, and missed.

Then Bert yelled, "Behind you, Rigdon!"

Rigdon whirled, saw Durant drop from his horse and take cover behind a rock. Durant fired once, then again, and the third time let his Colt hammer fall upon an already fired chamber. The gambler let out a madman's yell as he rose and flung the empty weapon at Rigdon. He leapt toward his spooked horse, and it shied away from him. Rigdon held his fire, ran forward.

Durant got hold of the horse's trailing reins, but it reared up and struck at him with its forelegs. He reeled back, another crazy howl escaping from deep inside him. He lost the horse then, and turned his face with all its hatred, rage, and terror toward Rigdon. Suddenly he wilted.

"All right, damn you! You've got me!"

"Durant, I ought to shoot you down like a dog!" Rigdon said savagely. "Get back to the fire, so I can keep watch on you!"

He should have guessed that the man hadn't played his last card. Durant obeyed too meekly. Halfway to the fire, he pretended to stumble. He straightened, whirled, and he had pulled a derringer from inside his coat. It was the same sort of play as had taken place the day in the Alhambra. But this time Rigdon fired a second shot after his first downed the man. He would have fired a third, but saw it wasn't necessary. This time Durant was dead. . . .

The Slash-B crew came riding back, torn away from the cantina by the racketing gunfire. Soldiers from the fort came, too. But the officer who demanded an explanation was willing to accept the evidence as it was most easily read: that a band of outlaws had attempted to steal the Slash-B cattle money. He had to accept that, being a gentleman as well as an officer, for it was Elena who gave him the explanation.

When the soldiers were gone, taking the dead men with them, the Slash-B hands returned to their

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Bound by His Badge

By Ray Gaulden

Although Sheriff Dawson had plenty of sand in his craw, he didn't savvy how he could tackle the tough trigger job one of his kinfolk had cut out for him.

JED DAWSON sat on the porch of Neal Pendell's feed store and watched José Gomez leave his adobe down at the far end of Rimrock's single street and come shuffling uptown through the hock-deep dust. As always, Jed Dawson thought of the rifle that belonged to the little Mexican, and how hard he had been trying to get José to part with it.

The swift mutter of hoofs caused Dawson to turn his head in the other direction, and he forgot all about José Gomez as he watched his son-in-law, Chase Latimore, ride into town on his big, blaze-faced stallion.

Chase was a handsome cuss and it wasn't hard for Jed to see why Nancy had fallen for him. He was a smooth talker and he had a way about him. But he wouldn't work, and he spent too much time around a poker table. Jed had gotten him a couple of jobs, but Chase had quit them before the week was up.

Sitting there on a bale of hay, the afternoon sun shining on the sheriff's badge pinned to his dark blue coat, Jed Dawson watched Chase ride up to the Blue Bonnet Saloon and dismount. The young man stood on the plank walk for a moment, letting his gaze run the length of the street. His eyes found his father-in-law and he stared defiantly. Then he put his shoulders back and swaggered into the saloon.

Dawson's face was solemn and he wondered how much longer it could go on this way. Chase had always been a wild one, but Jed had hoped he would settle down after the wedding. He hadn't though, and there was that stage holdup a month ago. Jed hadn't said anything about the pocket knife he found at the scene of the robbery. It didn't prove anything for certain, and the sheriff hoped he was wrong thinking what he did.

FOOTSTEPS close by snapped Dawson from his brooding and he turned to look at José Gomez. The little Mexican was smiling. "*Buenos dias,* Señor Jed," he said cheerfully. "You are looking very good today."

Jed made a sour face, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. "I look like hell and you know it. You must be after some money."

José put a pained expression on

his brown face. "You are my friend, Señor Jed. Do you think that I always come looking only for dinero?"

Jed nodded. "Nearly always. And right now, I can tell by that look in your eyes what you've got on your mind."

José spread his hands. "You know me too well."

The little Mexican helped around the livery stable now and then, but most of the time he spent sitting in the shade. He had a great love for tequila and as long as he had the price of a bottle of the fiery stuff, he was happy. But most of the time he was broke and there were not many in this town of Rimrock who would lend him money.

But Jed Dawson had a heart as big as the bale of hay he was sitting on and he didn't often turn the little Mexican down. Except for a rifle that his father had left him, José had sold everything of value that he owned. Jed had been trying to get the gun for his collection, but José claimed it was a keepsake and that he could not part with it.

José said, "If you could lend me the price of one little bottle of tequila, I will work and pay you back. I—I will even clean your office tomorrow."

The lawman took off his hat and ran stubby fingers through his wiry gray hair. He pursed his lips and finally said, "Tell you what I will do—buy that rifle from you."

José sighed wearily. "Must we go through that again? I would gladly give you the rifle, but it is a keepsake."

"I know—I know," the sheriff growled. "Well, you can't blame me for trying. And here's your money."

The little Mexican's face lit up. "*Gracias*, Señor Jed." And with the money in his hand, José started quickly toward the Blue Bonnet Saloon.

"Don't forget, you're going to clean the office tomorrow," the sheriff called after him. But if he heard, José did not turn around, and watching him, Jed couldn't keep from smiling. He liked that little lazy, tequila-loving Mexican.

The sheriff arose, glancing at his big gold watch. He stepped off the porch and walked toward the café. He passed the saloon and for a moment he stopped, staring thoughtfully. Chase was still inside and Jed considered going in and having a little talk with him. But that son-in-law of his was a hard one to do anything with. He was pretty hot-headed.

Jed went on to the café, nodding to folks he knew, walking down this street where he had walked so many times before. He stood outside the café and tried to decide whether he should have a bite to eat. He didn't feel very hungry and he remembered that he had always had a good appetite when Nancy was home and doing the cooking.

And then he swore softly and thought: Feeling sorry for myself.

THE clatter of hoofs drew his attention and he recognized Ed Wade, riding down the street toward him. The young man waved and rode close.

"Hello, Jed. You've got a visitor down at the house. Reckon you know who it is."

Jed Dawson's eyes brightened and he looked up at Ed Wade, grinning faintly. "Thanks, Ed. I'll go right down. How's things out at the ranch?"

"Just fine, Jed. Got the house painted and started to work on the new barn."

Jed glanced toward the little white house on the edge of town where he kept bachelor quarters now that Nancy was gone. Then he turned to Ed again and said:

"Been thinking I'd get out to see the place, Ed, but I don't stray far from town any more. Things are pretty peaceful these days. Makes a man kind of lazy."

Wade rolled a smoke. "You ought to be entitled to a little rest. Up until

the last year, you didn't have time to sit around."

"Well, it's different now, Ed," Jed sighed. "The badmen are thinning out —getting fewer all the time."

Jed saw that Wade's eyes had found Chase Latimore's big stallion at the rack in front of the saloon. The young rancher's face tightened and Jed had a pretty good idea what was in his mind. Ed Wade had gone steady with Nancy before Chase stepped into the picture, and Jed had hoped Ed was the man his daughter would marry. The boy was well liked on this range and he was a hard worker. But it hadn't turned out the way most folks figured it would.

Jed coughed and Wade straightened in the saddle, picking up the reins quickly. He kept his eyes turned away from the lawman. "I better be getting on, Jed."

"Well, so long, Ed. I'll see you around."

The sheriff stood for a moment, his face gloomy as he watched the young rancher ride on down the street. When Wade had stopped at the post office, Jed turned and walked in the other direction. He approached the house that twenty years ago he had built for his young bride. Nancy was born here, and then pneumonia took her mother.

It was a well-built house and there was a picket fence that he had been intending to paint, but, somehow, he had never got around to it. And now that he was alone, he reckoned it didn't make much difference. About the only thing that mattered any more was the big rocking chair on the front porch, where he could sit of an evening and look at the mountains.

"Hell," he muttered. "I'm getting old."

He wasn't really—just forty-five, but he had worn a badge for eighteen years, and that, he knew, had made more than one man old before his time.

As he went through the gate and up the rock-lined walk, Jed remembered how he used to come home and hear Nancy singing, and how she would run to meet him and throw her arms around him. It was different now; she was not singing and the old shine was gone from her brown eyes.

He said, "It's good to see you, honey."

NANCY gave him a smile, a little tired, he thought, a little forced. "It's good to see you, too, Dad," she said. Then she glanced around the room. "I've been trying to decide where to start cleaning. Don't you ever pick anything up?"

He smiled crookedly. "Don't do nothing but sleep in here. All my entertaining is done on the porch."

She shook her head. "You men."

Jed studied her, his face serious. "You've got something on your mind, Nancy."

She stared at the floor. "It's Chase, Dad. I'm worried."

He put his hands on her shoulders and said quietly, "Do you want to come home, Nancy?"

She looked up at him quickly, shaking her head. "No. I can't do that, Dad. He needs me, and I love him in spite of the way he's been acting lately."

"You're one in a million, honey," Jed said, touched by her loyalty.

She bit her lip. "Dad, I've been trying to get him to leave here. I haven't told him why, but it's because I'm afraid something might happen—something that would cause you to have to go after him. And Chase is so quick-tempered. Oh, Dad, even if he did something really bad, I couldn't stand the thought of you having to—to—"

Her lips trembled and she buried her head on Jed's shoulder. He felt worse than he had felt in a long time, but he tried to keep it from showing on his face. He patted her arm.

"Now you quit worrying your pretty head. Nothing's going to happen." But he was just talking—saying words that he didn't believe.

Nancy cleaned the house and they

visited for a while, and before Jed realized it the sun was disappearing and shadows were gathering in the yard. Nancy moved toward the door.

"It's later than I thought, Dad. I'll have to get home and fix Chase's supper."

Jed stood on the porch and watched her go, watched her walk swiftly toward the little house where she and Chase lived up the canyon. When she was out of sight, he started back uptown and he remembered that he had not eaten since early that morning. He decided he had better do something about that.

He passed Hanson's blacksmith shop and the big smith called to him. A rancher from back in the hills had bought a new piebald and Hanson wanted to show Jed what he thought was a fine piece of horseflesh. The blacksmith had just finished shoeing the animal.

Jed was standing beside the forge when he heard the swift pound of hoofs out on the street. He felt himself stiffen a little and a nameless dread began to crawl along his spine. He went quickly to the doorway, just in time to see a rider flash by. Jed recognized Chase Latimore, flattened along his mount, spurring hard.

And then the sheriff heard a man yell, "Stop him, somebody! He just killed George Holms!"

A numbing coldness shot through Jed Dawson, and for a moment all he could do was stand there with a sick look on his face, his mind whirling. Then he got his gun out, but his hand was shaking so that he couldn't aim. Back up the street a gun roared and from the corner of his eye, Jed saw Neal Pendell standing on the porch of his feed store, a smoking weapon in his hand.

Chase's mount was hit and it didn't go much farther. The horse stumbled and went down, but Chase lit running. Bent low, he raced down the canyon toward the house where he and Nancy lived.

OTT BENDER, a driver for Wells Fargo, came running up to the blacksmith shop, his face white. "He cleaned out the express office, Jed," the man said breathlessly. "And then he hit old George with the butt of his gun—split his head wide open. It was awful, Jed. It was—"

Jed moved into the street, aware that the townsfolk were crowding around him. He heard Neal Pendell say, "He can't get far afoot. Let's get him."

Jed looked around him, at the faces of men who were his friends. Most of them had wives and kids to think about, and there wasn't a real gunfighter among them. Besides, it wasn't their job to go after Chase.

"This is my job," Jed said grimly. "I'll handle it—alone."

Neal Pendell came up close to him. "Hell, Jed. Chase is your son-in-law. Why don't you let us take care of him?"

Jed shook his head. "George Holms was a good man. He's dead now, and I'm the sheriff."

He moved down the street, down the canyon, walking on stiff legs, his face gray and hard—like a piece of granite. He wondered what had got into Chase, what had made him think he could get away with robbing the express office. But a man like Chase usually thought he knew all the answers. And now it had happened—the thing he had been dreading, the thing Nancy had been afraid of.

And it could end only one way, he thought. He would have to kill Chase, for he knew that his son-in-law would never be taken alive. The man, Jed thought, deserved to die, but it would break Nancy's heart to have her father end that misspent life.

Jed passed José Gomez's adobe and he saw the little Mexican sitting in the doorway, a bottle of tequila beside him. The sheriff thought: Nothing to worry about except where he's going to get the next bottle.

José peered at him, but Jed kept his eyes straight ahead, knowing that

somewhere in this steep-walled canyon Chase Latimore would be waiting with a gun in his hand, ready to kill.

Then the town was behind him and Jed came in sight of the little two-room house that Chase had rented from a man in town. It was here that he had brought Nancy and she had fixed the place up real nice. It wasn't much, but Nancy didn't complain.

Jed drew close and he saw Nancy in the doorway, standing there with her hand to her throat, and he knew that Chase had been here, that Nancy knew. He wanted to tell her that she would have to try to understand—that his being here was just something that couldn't be helped. But looking at her, at the horrified expression on her face, he knew that she would never understand.

Then Chase came around the side of the house and Jed's hand touched the butt of his gun, a deep sickness inside him. Chase was bad and he would never change; he had been building to something like this for a long time. But still, Jed Dawson could not bring himself to draw his gun. He had shot plenty of bad ones in the past and their ghosts did not bother him now. But this time it was different.

His hand remained at his side as though it had been fastened there and he wondered if he could ever move it again. He kept looking at his daughter, but he was aware of Chase's twisted features. And then he saw Chase's gun coming up and his mind was screaming at him, telling him that in a minute he would be dead.

Jed braced himself, waiting for Chase's bullet to smash into him, but it didn't come. Chase jerked suddenly, for above, on the rim of the canyon, a rifle had made a thin sharp sound.

Chase Latimore twisted around and sank to his knees, then onto his face. Nancy uttered a little cry and Jed whipped his eyes to the canyon rim, but whoever had fired the shot was gone now.

Nancy ran to Chase's side and Jed went forward slowly, his legs weak, his insides trembling. He looked down at his son-in-law and did not need to be told that the man was dead. There was sorrow in Jed, but there was relief too. He pulled Nancy gently to her feet and held her close to him.

"Dad," she whispered. "Dad, I'm glad it wasn't you."

"Yes, honey," he said. "I'm glad it wasn't me." And Jed was thinking: It will take her a little while to get over it, but she will, and the next time she will find the right man. . . .

The town was quiet and a soft breeze was blowing down the canyon when the sheriff came to José Gomez's adobe. The little Mexican was sitting in the doorway and Jed squatted down beside him.

Jed said, "José, I'm glad you didn't sell me the rifle, and I'll never ask you again."

José Gomez pushed his high-peaked sombrero back and his brown face was impassive. "Why this sudden change, Señor Jed?"

The sheriff stared at him steadily. "It's no use playing dumb, José. I found your empty tequila bottle up there on the rim."

The little Mexican sighed and spread his hands. "I could not see two good people hurt, Señor Jed."

The sheriff arose, a tightness in his throat. "I could use a drink, José—a big one."

"Me, too, Señor Jed."

"The saloon is still open," the sheriff said.

They walked down the dark street together.

Cowpoke's Firebrand Legacy

By Cliff Walters

Dan Prentice had not only fallen heir to a few heifers, but he'd also been willed a three-way gun grudge.

THE hundred-mile ride had ended. Dan Prentice had traveled over gray badlands, through spring-flooded creeks, across miles of melting snow atop the Campfire Mountains, and finally down into the little valley beyond.

Now, having reached a picturesque destination to which he had rather not come, the young puncher spur-jingled his way into the only dwelling in Chain Springs Valley. Eventually he reached the open door of a log-walled room in which lay an emaciated, iron-gray man.

For a moment the eyes of the two

men met. Then Waldo Blount weakly offered a thin hand and said:

"Thanks for heedin' the message in my letter, Dan Prentice—for comin' to see me and getting here before it's too late. I'm glad to see you took after your mother who was my sister, lad. You've got her brown eyes, the same square chin. And the same brown hair —with just a little riffle to it."

Dan still hesitated in the doorway, his steady, neither friendly nor hostile gaze riveted on this uncle whom he had hoped to meet up with someday; but under different circumstances. Dan had hoped that the once-husky Waldo Blount would be able to swing fists when and if they ever met. But now the uncle who had ignored the code of decency and justice to further his own ends lay weak and pleading in the shadow of death.

"You won't—shake hands?" Blount asked despondently. "You won't forget the past and—"

"I can't forget it," Dan said, moving into the room. "But Mother, being the wonderful woman she was, might want me to forgive it. So . . ." He took a hand from which all strength had ebbed.

Hoofbeats sounded in the ranch yard. Then heavy boots came clumping into the sepulchral ranch house. Dan Prentice turned and saw a stocky, red-faced man framed in the doorway. The man said gruffly:

"Well, Waldo. Who's the handsome young company?"

Blount answered, "Shale Cavanard, meet my nephew—Dan Prentice."

SHALE CAVANARD froze. His heavy-browed eyes, as brittle-hard as the shale rock Dan had seen exposed in veins along the edge of badland gulches, fastened belligerently on the younger man.

Waldo Blount said, "When it comes to the showdown, I guess blood's thicker'n water, Shale. When you're layin' flat on your back, tryin' to look into the shadows ahead and see where your next camp'll be—well, you can't help lookin' back, too, over the trails you've traveled. Years ago Dan's mother and me inherited a livery barn from our father. I run the place.

"I gypped my sister outa her share of things. Maybe 'cause I didn't like the man she was goin' to marry. And maybe 'cause dollars always seemed bigger to me than wagon wheels. But now I'm squarin' the debt as best I can at this late date. I've willed the Chain Valley place to Dan here, hopin' he'd come to see me—which he has."

Surprised, almost as tense as Shale Cavanard was, Dan said, "Hold on, Waldo Blount. It's too late now to square—"

"Nephew!" Shale Cavanard snarled at the dying man. "So he's the great bronco twister I read to you about in the county paper — the great Dan Prentice that rode an outlaw bucker no other man had ever been able to set, and won first money at the biggest contest in the state. He's your nephew, Mr. Blount? And you didn't even mention it at the time. You sneaked a letter off to him when you found out where he was, and got the doc to mail it in Bisonville!"

"That's right," Blount said weakly. "I didn't want you r'arin' up, like you are now, Shale, if Dan wasn't goin' to show up here."

"Why wouldn't he show up, at the last minute, and grab this fine little cow outfit that I've helped you build?" Cavanard retorted fiercely. "I thought you'd be grateful enough, Blount, to do the right thing by me!"

Loudly, angrily, Cavanard railed on. He accused Blount of being a conscience-stricken coward who, haunted by his evils of the past, was now trying to save his soul from perdition by double-crossing a loyal friend.

Dan, angered by this abusive tirade heaped upon a helpless man, interrupted Cavanard by saying bluntly, "Just what does Blount owe you?"

"Nothin', really," his uncle replied. "I've paid Cavanard regular wages for workin' here. Wages he blowed on a big spree in Bisonville at the end

of every month. And I've kept his lyin', no-good sidekick, Joe Tamplyn, on the payroll for the last six months. Not that one man couldn't look after this little place, and the cattle that're always standin' knee-deep in grass."

"Would you've turned this spread over to Cavanard if I hadn't showed up?" Dan demanded.

"Yeah, I guess," was his uncle's reply. "But only because there was nobody else to—"

"There's somebody else now!" Cavanard raged, thick lips quivering. "But it was me that protected your range from three different homesteaders that had their eye on the lower spring and the ground surrounding it."

"You was protectin' what you thought was goin' to be *your* outfit, Shale," spoke the weak voice of the man on the bed. "What's happened to that last would-be homesteader, that ganglin' greenhorn — Sam Garfield? You loaned him a gray horse to swim the Bison River on when word come that his son, herdin' sheep, had been bit by a rattlesnake. But Garfield hasn't fetched the horse home yet. And—" Blount's failing eyes shifted to the watch pocket in Cavanard's overalls—"I see you're packin' a new gold watch."

"Garfield let me keep his watch for him. He was afraid he'd get it wet, swimmin' the river," Cavanard said. The sturdy two-hundred pounder abruptly changed his manner. In a conciliatory tone he added, "It ain't too late yet for you to do the right thing, Waldo. Why don't you make me and Dan Prentice pards—by leavin' this outfit to us both?"

"I don't owe you anything," was the answer. "I owed Dan's mother a lot. I'm givin' it to her son. And to him only."

Cavanard clenched and unclenched big hands, apparently wishing he had Waldo Blount's throat between them. Then he turned and strode out of the house.

IF DAN PRENTICE had suddenly turned from cowboy into cattleman, he experienced no elation. This generous gesture of a dying, conscience-goaded uncle had come too late to help the early widowed mother of a lad whose youth had been darkened by adversity . . .

"This gray that Cavanard loaned a would-be homesteader," Dan said to his uncle. "Was he a high-headed horse?"

"A half-locoed digger that'd toss his head so high he'd bash in the nose of any man ridin' him—if his head wasn't tied down," Blount said. "Why? Did you meet that long-geared Sam Garfield ridin' him?"

"You seem to be in great pain," Dan said. "Don't you want a doctor?"

"Yeah," was the answer. "I told Cavanard to go to Bisonville and get the doc this morning—or send Joe Tamplyn for him. Maybe you'd go, Dan. Take the bay team and buckboard. And get Doc McGown back here as fast as you can."

Dan was harnessing the bay team when Shale Cavanard came to the barn door and said, "You can run back in the house and play nursemaid, Lucky Prince Charmin'. I'll drive to town after the doc. I want to get a quart of nerve tonic, anyhow."

"I'll go," Dan replied evenly. "I'll find the doc, instead of a saloon, when I get to town. And maybe I'll get back quicker than you would."

"The new boss givin' orders already!" sneered the big man. "Well, you haven't took over here quite yet."

Hard words flew, and then fists. The big fists of Shale Cavanard tried to bring Dan down in quick, vicious onslaught. But Dan, because he was cool and agile, managed to weather that sudden storm — and rock Cavanard with a savage blow to the mouth.

Cavanard blinked and tore into the fray again. This time he ran into a blow to the stomach, followed by another lip-splitting jolt to his already damaged mouth. A quick, hard-thrown right exploded against his

right eye, and still another right sent him crashing back against the wall of the barn. He collapsed and sank to the ground.

A stubby, sloping-shouldered man came loping up on a pinto horse which bore the WB brand. The rider's pale blue eyes stared in amazement at big Shale Cavanard on the ground, then he looked at Dan and blurted:

"Did you lick Shale, Mister? Alone?"

"Are you his sidekick, Joe Tamplyn?" Dan asked.

"Yeah, I—I been out ridin' bog and—"

"I'm Waldo Blount's nephew," Dan interrupted. "I'm goin' to town after the doc. You keep an eye on Blount while I'm gone."

"Sure, if you say so," said the stubby man. "Huh! You're the first man I've ever seen come out ahead, with fists, on Cavanard. But don't forget he can sling lead better'n he can fists. I wouldn't want to be in your boots, later, if Shale—"

"And I wouldn't want to be in his boots," Dan retorted, "if something's happened to a would-be homesteader he loaned a high-headed gray horse to."

"What about the gray?" Tamplyn was tense in his saddle. "Are you accusin' Shale of—" He broke off.

"Of what?" Dan prompted.

"If I was you, I wouldn't go meddlin' too much on new range."

"I'm not askin' you for advice," Dan answered. "I'm just askin' you to take good care of a sick man while I go to town."

THE high-lifed bays were good travelers. It was an hour and a half later when Dan drove into the little range town of Bisonville which stood on a broad flat cut through by the silted, spring-flooded Bison River. That he might inquire where Doctor McGown lived, Dan halted his rig near a group of hilarious men who were watching a redheaded youth firing a six-shooter at a tin can target. The lanky fellow was doing the worst job of shooting that Dan had ever witnessed.

"You only missed that can by six-seven feet that time, Flinch!" whooped a bystander. "Try 'er again. And this time, when you're pullin' the trigger, don't flinch like a horned toad that's seen a stud's hoof comin' down on him."

"And keep your eyes open when you shoot, Flinch!" called a stooped, sallow man with a handle bar mustache and an enormous nose. "If you're ever goin' to learn to shoot that hogleg you just paid twenty dollars for!"

"The daggoned old weapon jumps up when I shoot," drawled the redhead. "I can't hold 'er down no more'n I can haul off and boot a beller out of a dead bull. I try holdin' 'er steady, but she wobbles around on me like an old hen chasin' a grasshopper."

As Dan smiled, the stooped bystander said, "I'm afraid you're just gunshy, Flinch."

"I'll learn to shoot 'er, Mr. Fordyce!" declared the redhead. "I told folks back in Nebrasky I was goin' to learn to ride and rope and shoot when I got to Wyomin'. And daggoned if I won't—or bust a hind axle tryin'!"

Fordyce noticed the buckboard standing near by. He came over to Dan and said, "See you're drivin' Waldo Blount's rig, stranger. How is he today?"

Dan introduced himself and then explained that his uncle was very low; that he had come to town for the doctor. He said he'd like to talk to a deputy sheriff, if there was such an officer in the little range town.

"I serve as deputy quite often," said the other man. "My name's Ira Fordyce, Prentice. What's up?"

Dan explained that a certain homesteader named Sam Garfield, a man who had evidently planned to take up land adjoining the Blount place in Chain Springs Valley, was missing. Shale Cavanard had loaned the would-be nester a gray horse on which to swim Bison River. Cavanard, it

seemed, had Garfield's gold watch. Word had come to Gerfield that his son, herding sheep north of the river, had been bitten by a rattler.

"He was not!" Fordyce answered. "That redheaded clown there—that they've nicknamed Flinch—is Garfield's son. I'll call him over . . . Hey, Flinch! Come here!"

Fordyce introduced the youth to Dan who said, "Seen your dad lately, Flinch?"

"Nope," replied the youth. "He's up in Chain Valley, layin' out a homestead, if he's found a surveyor by this time."

"He's missin'," Dan said gently. "I hate to tell you this, feller, but your dad tried to swim Bison River on a high-headed gray horse. I saw that horse this mornin'. He was layin' on a gravel bar along the river bank—dead. And there was a tie-down on him, a strap runnin' from the noseband of the bridle down to the cinch. A horse can't swim with his head tied down, as Fordyce here'll tell you. I'm just wonderin'—"

"You think that Shale Cavanard got rid of another homesteader for his boss?" Fordyce asked in a low, tense tone.

"Maybe Cavanard'll tell you, Mr. Fordyce," said Dan.

Fordyce clenched his hands and said nothing. Dan said to Flinch Garfield, "Are you still herdin' sheep?"

"Nope," said the youth, a bit numbly. "They sold the sheep I was herdin' and trailed 'em off the range. I come to town, bein' afoot, so's I could cross the river bridge here and head up to where Pa was—or where I thought he was!"

"You can ride out to Chain Spring Valley with the doc and me," Dan answered. "What about you, Fordyce?"

"I'll saddle up my horse and ride part way with you. Don't say anything to anybody here in town until I can maybe slip some handcuffs on Cavanard—wrist hobbles he's been achin' for a long time!"

"Flinch and me won't say anything to cause a commotion," Dan promised. "Want to come with me, Flinch?"

"Sure," was the grim reply.

WITH old Doc McGown a passenger in the buckboard seat and Flinch Garfield sitting with his long legs dangling over the rear end of the rig, Dan was nearing Chain Springs Valley.

"Maybe you'd better ride on ahead, Fordyce!" called Dan to the horseback er who rode beside the rig. "Maybe, from something I said to Joe Tamplyn, Cavanard's sidekick, it might look like I was suspicious about the gray horse and the missin' homesteader. I didn't mention findin' the dead horse on a gravel bar."

"I'll go ahead, get there 'fore Cavanard can fly the coop!" Fordyce answered, and put spurs to his big sorrel horse.

"That puts Fordyce in an awkward position, Prentice," remarked Doc McGown, watching the departing horseman.

"How come?" Dan asked quickly.

"Well," replied the medico, "it happens that Fordyce is married to Cavanard's sister, a large, non-too-gentle woman. Sometimes blood's thicker than water, you know."

"So I found out this morning," said Dan. With a trace of bitterness, he added, "And sometimes brothers-in-law have little use for each other." He was thinking of his father and Waldo Blount.

"I've had no reason to doubt Fordyce's integrity," McGown said. "Well, we shall see what happens. If Cavanard's guilty of a crime — of sending a greenhorn homesteader to his death on a gray horse—"

"The sooner we see, the better!" Dan said as he urged the bay team ahead.

When the rig came into view of Chain Spring Valley, the three passengers saw a horse race in progress. Shale Cavanard, mounted on a big black horse, was spurring hard toward the Campfire Mountains. And Ira Fordyce, a quarter of a mile be-

hind, was riding his sorrel hard upon the trail of the fleeing man.

"Cavanard must've been all saddled and ready to ride!" Dan groaned. "Darn! If my battle with Cavanard hadn't got me so mad this morning—if I hadn't mentioned that gray horse business to Joe Tamplyn . . ."

"Fordyce's sorrel is fast and long-winded," said Doc McGown. "Let's wait for the result of that horse race before you bemoan your impulsiveness, young man." The old doctor's manner was reassuring.

Waldo Blount was alone when Dan and Doc McGown entered the ranch house. Blount, near death from an incurable disease, gasped, "Glad you're back, Dan. I knew *you'd* get the doc for me. Joe Tamplyn stayed awhile, then pulled out—I don't know where. Shale come in for a minute, accused me of double-crossin' him. He said he'd drill me if I wasn't already so near dead. He said he should've drilled you this mornin', Dan. He said he would yet, if you sicked the law on him. What did he mean?"

"Don't talk, Waldo," said Doc McGown. "I'll give you something to make you rest." Doc looked at Dan and slowly shook his gray head.

TWO days later there were two new graves in the cemetery at Bisonville, one occupied by Waldo Blount and the other by Sam Garfield, the drowned landseeker whose remains had been discovered by a cowpuncher. Those graves were not side by side. Twenty-year-old Flinch Garfield had bitterly declared he didn't want his father lying beside the "coyote" who, with his hireling, Shale Cavanard, had kept homesteaders away.

Dan had offered no defense of the uncle who had died without a friend. All Dan could do was to offer heartfelt sympathy to Flinch Garfield. He felt uncomfortable under the stares of men who said with their suspicious eyes: "One of the Blount tribe! Waldo Blount's nephew!"

After the funeral, Dan approached Flinch Garfield, who was talking to Doc McGown, and invited the youth to come home with him.

"I'd starve to death 'fore I'd eat grub bought with Blount's money!" replied the youth fiercely.

"Hold on, Flinch," Doc McGown said gently. "It's Dan's grub now—bought with money Blount stole from Dan's mother. And remember it was Dan here that sicked the law, or the nearest thing we have to it, on Shale Cavanard."

"Yeah, and everybody knows why!" Flinch answered. "Prentice grabbed off a spread that Cavanard thought he was goin' to hook his buzzard talons into. That made Cavanard crave Prentice's scalp. Cavanard's a gunslinger, and Prentice is scared of him. That's why he don't want him runnin' loose!"

Angrily the youth turned, left the cemetery, and walked toward town.

Silent for a moment, Dan said to McGown, "I'm worried about Ira Fordyce, the self-appointed deputy sheriff. Do you suppose he could've run into one of Cavanard's bullets up there somewhere." He waved toward the rugged, canyon-veined slope of the Campfire Mountains.

"Nope," replied the doctor. "There comes Ira right now. He's riding a mighty tired-looking sorrel horse."

Haggard, worn, Fordyce rode up to the two men.

"Well?" McGown asked tensely. He stared, as did Dan, at a bullet hole in the crown of the rider's black hat.

"I caught up with Cavanard at dusk last night," Fordyce said wearily, glumly. "He was trailin' along a big crevice on Iron Mountain. I yelled at him. He pulled his six-shooter and answered me with lead. But it was long range for a six-gun, even if he did put a bullet through my hat. I jumped off my horse and shot at him with my carbine. I hit his black horse.

"The black squealed, made a long jump, then r'ared up and fell into that crevice—takin' Shale with him."

Fordyce shuddered a little. "It's narrow and dark down there. Maybe Shale and his horse are layin' a hundred feet below the surface of the mountain down there. And maybe a thousand. Nobody'll ever know."

"Good heavens!" McGown ejaculated in an awed tone. "I know the crevice you mention. I hunted elk along there two years ago. Well, that settles that!"

"Not for me," Fordyce answered. "Whatever Shale Cavanard was, he was also my wife's brother. And she's always stood up for him. There was war in our house when I jailed Shale a year ago, for gettin' drunk and nearly beatin' a cowpuncher to death. Now—well, I ain't goin' to tell her that me and Shale tangled—and that he's dead. I'm not goin' to tell anybody else, either. And I'm askin' you two gents to swear that *you* won't!" His tone was pleading.

"I won't," Dan agreed.

"Nor I," said Doc McGown. "But don't you think, Fordyce, that young Flinch Garfield ought to know?"

"Don't tell him," Dan said. "Not yet, anyhow. I've got an idea."

WHEN Dan drove his buckboard into Chain Springs Valley that evening, Flinch Garfield was with him. Not that the youth wanted to go. Yet, when Dan offered to trade him a saddle horse for half a month's work, Flinch compromised with his prejudice against Chain Springs Valley. He wanted a horse more than he wanted anything just now, he said. And, once he possessed one, he would set out on the trail of Shale Cavanard. He already had a gun—if he could learn to shoot it.

Those fifteen days proved not to be an ordeal for a naturally happy young man who was getting his fill of good food; who rode the range with Dan; and who, mounted on Dan's fine buckskin horse, was allowed to rope a dozen young calves that needed branding.

"You're catchin' on fast, Flinch," said Dan, as the youth snared the last calf with the lariat he had been shown how to wield.

"I sure crave learnin' to throw out a loop as fast and straight as you can," Flinch answered, grinning. "Yeah, and set a buckin' horse like you set that roan bronc yesterday. Golly! He swapped ends so fast I couldn't tell which end his tail was hangin' on."

"There's a dozen broncs down in the pasture that need breakin'," Dan said. "You want to help me tackle 'em?"

"Sure!" Flinch said eagerly. "Not that you need help, though. You're the best daggoned rider and roper in the whole world, I reckon!"

"Hold on," said Dan with a modest smile. "There's a couple of 'em you haven't seen yet, pard."

"It's funny, though," Flinch went on, "that you can't handle a six-gun no better'n you do. Shucks! When you tried shootin' my old roarin' iron at that willer tree last evenin', you never touched a feather."

"But you hit it every shot," Dan said. "Keep on practicin', Flinch. I'll furnish the ammunition."

"I hate to burn up so much money on shells."

"It was part of our bargain, when you come out here, that I'd furnish you with all the shells you wanted, wasn't it?" Dan countered.

"I sure would like to learn to shoot straight—and fast," replied the redhead, and glanced off toward the hill over which Shale Cavanard had once spurred in hasty exit.

The next day Flinch rode a little pinto bronc that Dan had topped off first. The pinto was no bucker. He merely crowhopped, yet he almost spilled Flinch who, riding Blount's old saddle and looking as grotesque as a bobbing scarecrow, put on the most comical ride Dan had ever witnessed.

An hour later, against Dan's advice, Flinch mounted a brown bronc and was thrown on the second jump. When Flinch insisted on trying a sec-

ond time, he lasted four jumps before he was thrown hard.

"Let me take a whirl at him, Flinch," Dan said.

"I started it. Let me finish it," said the redhead grimly.

This time Flinch lasted seven jumps. He picked himself up and said, "I'm gainin' on him, Dan. Let me try him just once more. Please!"

The last time Flinch, pulling leather and hooking his spurs in the cinch, rode the brown bronc. And Dan, with a sigh of relief, said:

"Good for you, cowboy! You've got the nerve. All you need is some practice, and maybe a better saddle."

The next day Dan, having business at the lawyer's office, drove to Bisonville. When he returned that evening he brought a fine new saddle, bridle, blanket, and spurs.

"Tomorrow you'll be on your way, pard," he said to Flinch. "But I want you to have a good ridin' outfit, as well as that bay horse you've picked out."

Flinch couldn't meet a pair of friendly brown eyes. He looked away across the hills, his own vision a bit misty and said, "I—I wouldn't mind stayin' here a few days longer, Dan. I'd like to be able to shoot a little faster and straighter 'fore I take up Cavanard's trail."

"The longer you stay, the better I'll like it," Dan said.

"Lately I've been figgerin'," Flinch went on. "Shale Cavanard wants your scalp, Dan. Maybe, someday, he'll try to get it. And, as poor a hand as you are with a gun, he might get it, too, if—well—if there wasn't nobody else around to help you out. Daggone it! It's too bad we sent Ira Fordyce out to trail his brother-in-law. I don't believe Fordyce would've arrested Cavanard, even if he could've!"

"That's one way to figure things," Dan answered. "I brought you some more ammunition, Flinch. You go practice with your six-gun while I get supper."

SPRING warmed into summer. Then it was September, with the haze of autumn veiling the Campfire Mountains. Still Flinch Garfield remained with Dan. One day the latter, buying supplies in Bisonville, met old Doc McGown who said:

"Hello, Santa Claus."

"Santa Claus?" Dan echoed.

"Sure," McGown said. "Aren't you still playing that role for the benefit of Flinch Garfield?"

"He helps me with—"

"A top-notch young cowman like you doesn't need help to run that little spread at Chain Springs," Doc interrupted. "You could handle twice that many cattle, on such fine range as that, and have time to spare. Still, it's fine of you to have helped Flinch over the bumpiest spot in his young life—and make a cowhand out of him. No wonder he thinks you're about it."

"He won't be twenty-one till next week," Dan answered. "But that lad's been all man all his life, Doc. I hope he never leaves."

Chuckling, the doctor said, "I was talking to Flinch the other day. From something he said about Shale Cavanard—well, I wonder if he figures he's your private bodyguard, Dan?"

"He's thought that for a long time," Dan grinned sheepishly.

"Has he learned to shoot yet?"

"He says he ain't the best shot in the world yet," Dan answered. "But I haven't watched him practice the last few weeks. He goes quite a ways off from the house. And I'm glad. There for a while I smelled so darned much gunpowder, my tongue tasted like it had come out of a buckle on a cartridge belt. Well, I got to go and see Ira Fordyce. He's to bring a cattle buyer out to the valley tomorrow."

Dan's cattle were hog-fat. It didn't take a very big bunch of steers to bring twelve hundred dollars. Awed by the sight of more money than he had ever seen before in his life, Flinch watched Dan carefully recount and pocket a roll of currency at the

supper table that evening. In the morning, Dan said, he would go to town and put the money in the bank. With a smile, he added that Flinch could go along as his bodyguard.

"If I was a cowman and had to tote fortunes 'twixt my ranch and town, I'd learn to shoot!" Flinch declared. "Anyhow, straight enough to hit a willer tree. Why don't you drag your uncle's old six-shooter from under your bunk and—"

"You'll be a cowman 'fore you know it," Dan said.

"Huh?"

"You'll be twenty-one next week, Flinch. Old enough to take up the nice chunk of land down the valley, the land your dad wanted and didn't get —thanks to a coyote named Cavanard, and maybe his disappeared sidekick, Joe Tamplyn. Yeah, and maybe Waldo Blount. Someday we're goin' to be full-fledged pards, Flinch. We can range a lot more cattle than we've got."

Flinch tried to say something, but he choked up. Then, as if he didn't want Dan to see the sudden mist in his honest blue eyes, he moved toward the door and looked out into the September dusk.

"Think it over—pard," Dan said gently. "But forget about ever havin' to go on a manhunt in order to square a revenge debt for your father. There's something I should've told you, but I didn't because—"

Dan broke off. He had heard a snarl coming from out there in the dusk beyond the door. With jarring echoes, a gun cracked and a bullet ripped through the upper muscle of Flinch's left arm and tore off a splinter of doorjamb.

But Flinch Garfield didn't flinch. With a lightninglike movement he had snagged down at the old gun he always carried now. Dan, leaping to his feet, saw Flinch's old gun streak up from its holster and roar a prong of orange-colored flame into the dusk.

"There, Mr. Cavanard!" Flinch said coldly—and pulled the trigger again.

That name stunned Dan into immobility for an instant. But only an instant. Through the window at his back came a whistling bullet. The leaden slug ripped through the sleeve of his flannel shirt without touching his arm.

"Get down, Dan!" Flinch ordered coolly, and dived out into the night.

DAN made a dive for the bunk where he slept. A moment later, while guns roared outdoors, Dan rushed to the front door of the house. He got there in time to see a man, partially screened by a willow tree, aiming a carbine at Flinch. Young Garfield, standing by the corner of the house, was pouring lead into the man whose glass-shattering bullet had nearly caught Dan.

The six-shooter in Dan's hand came up as he leaped out onto the front porch. The man with the lifted carbine tried to shift his gun toward a new target—Dan. But Waldo Blount's old six-shooter cracked, and the man with the carbine sagged hard against the willow tree. Desperately he tried once more to bring his carbine up. But Dan, jaw grim and hand steady, was pulling the trigger of an old six-shooter again. That second shot plowed into and brought down the dusk-blurred figure by the tree.

Flinch Garfield, reloading his gun, came bounding around the corner of the house and bellowed, "Good gosh! How many of them lead-slingin' coyotes run in one pack? I fixed two of 'em—Shale Cavanard and another feller. And you, Dan—you—" Flinch blinked unbelievingly as he quickly estimated the rather long distance between Dan and the victim of the latter's unerring gun.

Dan was moving cautiously toward the man lying beside the willow tree. Ira Fordyce, sallow face ghastly pale now, groaned, "Yeah, it's me, Prentice. The gent they was crazy enough —to let—pack a deputy's star—a few times. I lied to you and Doc McGown

—about havin' killed Cavanard. I shot that bullet hole in my own hat and—"

"I see," Dan answered flatly. "You wanted me to be caught plumb off guard when the time come to reap a loot harvest. A harvest you thought you saw ripen today when an old cattle buyer paid me twelve hundred cash. If it hadn't been for Flinch here, a lad that's learned to draw a gun faster'n your badman brother-in-law, Cavanard, ever dared to . . ."

"Flinch Garfield," Fordyce groaned. "That gun-shy clown—accountin' for both Cavanard and Joe Tamplyn! I never thought—"

"Neither did I," Dan said. "But if Flinch hadn't been between me and your scalp-cravin' brother-in-law when Cavanard started sneakin' up to the door tonight—" Dan said no more. He had seen Fordyce twitch, and knew that his words were falling on deaf ears.

A full moon was rising over the rugged heights of the Campfire Mountains when Dan, with Flinch beside him on the wagon seat, drove a bay team down the road leading to Bisonville. The wagon contained a cargo that would make the citizens of that little range town gasp. And one citizen in particular—Doc McGown — who had shared with Ira Fordyce and Dan the secret of Shale Cavanard's "death."

"There's our new homestead, Dan," said Flinch, pointing.

"That's her, pard," said the driver warmly.

"Daggone it!" Flinch blurted. "I can't figger yet why you didn't tell me Cavanard was 'dead.' "

"If I had, you wouldn't have needed a horse to chase him on," Dan explained. "And you wouldn't 've thought I needed a bodyguard — which, it turned out, I did." The hint of a smile lighted his face. "And here I thought that, as a leadslinger, you was plumb hopeless, Flinch. Thought all your practicin' was a waste of ammunition."

"Oh, if you want to do somethin' bad enough, and try hard enough, and keep at it long enough, you'll do 'er," Flinch answered. "But don't think I'm proud-crowin', Dan. I'm mighty proud, though, that I fished this gold watch of Pa's outa Cavanard's pocket. I guess this watch is the best thing Pa ever had."

"No," Dan gently disagreed. "Sam Garfield had a son that was made of even better stuff than gold."

"Aw, shucks!" Flinch answered, mightily pleased but embarrassed. "I hope you ain't just foolin' me again, pard. Like you was when you shot at that willer tree and missed. I know now you didn't need a bodyguard half as much as you pertended!"

Buckaroo Kangaroo

By Joe Archibald

Butterball and Gabby, those itinerant imitations of cowpokes, were out of dinero after they fogged into Limbo Flat. And, as a last resort, the two job-hating hombres brought in a certain pouch which they opined would line their pockets with gold.

BUTTERBALL EPPS, cowpuncher at large, stopped his tired bronc in front of a big tree at a three-corners and studied a collection of direction signs. He slowly read the names of the towns to Gabby Snead who seemed interested in something going on just off the narrow road.

"Taken-in Creek, Dog-Hobble Gulch, Seldom-Seen Holler, Woolly Ridge, Bugaboo Bend, an' Big Soak," the fat rider reeled off. "Take your pick, Gabby."

"As we are lookin' at the moment for a stop-off to stock up on a certain bev'rage, I would say Big Soak," the skinny fiddle-foot opined. "I was just watchin' a bird gittin' its chuck, Butterball, an' it sure had to tug at that worm. Was thinkin' what an awful world this'd be if you an' me had to work like that t' git a pork chop outa the ground."

"If you ever do me dirt, Gabby," Butterball Epps said, "the worst I could do to you was wish you'd have to do a day's work. Come on, as my tongue is all swole up like a poisoned toad."

With eight hundred dollars in bona fide coin of the realm distributed on

various parts of their anatomies, Butterball and Gabby topped the next ridge, dropped down toward and then over a dry wash, negotiated another hogback, and nearly slid into the town of Big Soak. It was made up of three stores, a saloon, four private wickiups, a church, and a watering trough. The indolent pair sauntered into the town's main attraction, the Halfway Saloon, and ordered their favorite snorts.

"Halfway to where?" Gabby Snead asked, after emptying his glass of rotgut.

"Y' miss this irrigation ditch, strangers," the little barkeep sniffed. "You're halfway to hell, sabe? Lucky y' stopped now instead of after sundown. Local option goes into effect then. Big Soak will be no more. Sky pilot here has a way with him, gents. Ever hear of gittin' saved an' ruined at the same time?"

"We'll each take two bottles," Butterball said.

Leaving the Halfway, they were confronted by a doleful-looking hombre wearing a stovepipe hat and a frock coat that left two trails in the dust behind him. "Begone!" the Big Soak sin buster intoned. "I see you are polluted with the vile likker."

"An' luker, too," Gabby replied. "Ain't we a couple of skunks? *Adios*, my frien'."

"The devil be with you!"

"If he is, he'll buy his own drinks," Butterball countered as they rode out of Big Soak.

"Maybe we are really sinners, Gabby," the fat cowpoke gulped when they were two miles out. "We don't work a lick an' don't say no prayers. We chew vile weed an' drink red-eye. We'll get punished, I know it."

"We'll die quicker if we use cologne an' go into a bar an' order lemon soda, Butterball," Gabby orated. "I crave to sleep in a bed tonight without havin' no centipedes crawlin' in with me. I hope we'll come to a settlement 'fore sundown.

THE sun was getting alarmingly low in the direction in which it likes to set when Butterball Epps suddenly yanked his bronc off its front legs and emitted a strangled cry. He pointed at something, then left the saddle pronto and rummaged into his saddlebags.

"I don't see nothin', Butterball," Gabby snorted, and craned his neck.

Crash! Crash!

"You gone plumb loco?" the thin rider yelled. "Both bottles of wh— Butterball, look!"

"I've seen it. Got the head of a antelope an' the tail of a dinnersaw," the corpulent cowpoke groaned. "Is it still there, or is it a figurement of our imagin—"

"We got 'em," Gabby groaned. "Delirious tremens." He looked again.

The strange-looking beastie regarded the horsemen quizzically, and its big pointed ears pricked up. It sat on its haunches, and its two front legs seemed too short for any useful purpose whatsoever.

"It ain't a antelope, Butterball."

"Let's pull ourselves together, huh?" the little fat man choked out. "Let's ride like all aitch, an' if it don't foller us—"

Gabby Snead shook his head stubbornly. "I aim to make sure, Butterball. I wouldn't dare to ever take another drink if that ain't really there. Foller me."

"You can go to—"

Butterball Epps, however, had a curious streak in him stronger than his timidity. He drew his six-gun and stepped along behind Gabby Snead. Gabby stopped quick.

"Somebody's roped the freak, Butterball. It is tied to the hackberry tree. Seems like I remember lookin' in a book once an' saw a pitcher—"

An avalanche of gravel rolled down a bank, and in the midst of it was a little hombre in a derby hat, a baggy store coat, rusty black pants, and a pair of beat-up boots. He wore also a yellow vest. He had a long predatory

nose, a handle-bar mustache, and very little chin.

"An archyologist," Butterball sniffed. "He's caught a baby wampozzoli or somethin'."

"Greetin's, gents," the stranger called out heartily. "Glad somebody came along. Hope one of you has got long fingernails."

"Huh?"

"My name is Cadmus Tozer. Need some help."

"If it's brandin' that antique yearlin', you can jump in the creek," Gabby Snead growled.

"Nothin' to be scairt of, gents. This is just a kangaroo named Phoebe," Tozer divulged. "Native of Australia, yep."

Butterball Epps spun half around, staggered toward a tree and hung on. "Wha-a? I got a letter from a sister three months ago. She said she married one."

"There's men in Australia, too," Tozer said. "Look, I got to git the cactus thorns outa Phoebe, but I always chawed my nails somethin' awful. We skirted the edge of the desert awhile ago, an' she got startled by a rattler an' backed right into a cactus."

"What good is that thing, huh?" Butterball asked. "You can't ride it an' nobody would eat it."

"Bought it off a circus," Tozer explained. "I take it around to places an' let people look at it for four bits. You git another rope an' make its tail fast an' we kin git them thorns out."

GABBY SNEAD took his rope off the saddle horn, then advanced warily. The kangaroo tugged at the rope that was already made fast under its little front legs. Gabby threw a wide loop and drew it tight around the animal's haunches and so rendered its big hind legs useless. He tied the rope to a tree, and Phoebe glared at him.

"Git that can of peaches in my warbags, Butterball," the skinny man said. "Pry 'em open. They'll make Phoebe feel better while I pull out them thorns."

Butterball obeyed. He handed the canned fruit to Tozer who relayed it to the kangaroo. Phoebe grabbed the luscious fodder and gulped it greedily. Gabby Snead thought the animal was purring, but Tozer shook his head.

"See if she'll let you git them thorns, huh?"

Gabby Snead went around in back of Phoebe. The big tail cracked like a whip and the skinny cowpoke howled and landed in a clump of soapweed fifteen feet away.

"Come on, Butterball," he yelped. "Let him have that gol-blasted critter all to himself. It's half alligator."

"You try it," Tozer said to Butterball. "It knows you got the peaches."

Butterball Epps would risk a horrible death trying to do something Gabby Snead was unable to do. He approached Phoebe's back porch cautiously, reached out suddenly, and plucked a thorn loose. The kangaroo became very co-operative, and Gabby Snead shook his head.

"After all you are a relative of his —hers," the skinny man sniffed.

Cadmus Tozer was obliged indeed when Butterball Epps had finished his humane task. "The Lord bless you, li'l friend," he said. "Mayhaps we'll meet ag'in. Le's git the ropes off."

"You wait until I git in the saddle, by cripes!" Gabby roared.

Phoebe kicked up no ruckus when her bonds were removed, but hopped down to the creek and dipped her tail into the cool water. Butterball Epps went to his bronc and climbed aboard. "Huh, afraid of a kangaroo!" he said to Gabby Snead. "I bet that cuss got mad at you 'cause you got a face like hers. Which way will we go?"

"Not towards Australia," Gabby growled. "I crave to meet up with grizzlies, bobcats, or rattlesnakes, an' other things I know belong in these diggin's."

Five hours later, droopy in their saddles, Butterball Epps and Gabby Snead rode into a fair-sized town spread out on a slope that fell away from a line of timber. Most of the

light in the settlement was confined to the Shoo Bird Saloon & Hotel, and most of the citizens seemed to be there.

"Quiet here, ain't it?" Butterball asked. "Nice place to hive up fer the night."

They turned their broncs loose at the livery stable and crossed the street. A tall hombre, packing a Colt and a mean look, met them halfway. "No saddle bums wanted here. Figger you better vamoose!"

"Don't say?" Gabby Snead sniffed. "We could buy out this gopher hole, Mister. Who do you think you are, huh?"

The hombre's face underwent a change. "I am Nemo Spragg, sheriff an' mayor. So you are well-heeled, hah?"

"We happen to be men of means," Gabby went on. "Come on, Butterball, an' we'll show 'em the color of our dinero."

A FEW moments later, at the bequest of the Law, the itinerant pair displayed their opulence. Spragg drew his Colt and grinned. "Take charge of the money, Obie. Pronto!"

Butterball Epps made a threatening gesture and immediately felt the meat ends of three hoglegs pressing into his bulging meridian.

"Easy, fatty. Ain't robbin' you. This is just a ekonomikal percedure. Tell 'em, Nemo."

"Got a depression here, gents. Bank was robbed last week by Squint Yurp an' his owlhoots. Took us fer three thousand," Spragg drawled. "To stop inflationin' we have confiscated all the wealth in Limbo Flat. Parcel it out when it's sorely needed an' not until then. Everybody on rations. When the town is solvent once more, we repay accordin' to what was anted. That plain?"

"It is robbery!" Butterball howled. "We ain't citizens here."

"Where do you belong, huh?"

"Well, we—that is—well, nowheres—only—"

"You are now citizens of Limbo Flat," Nemo Spragg snapped. "Give 'em each two dollars, Obie, to start with. There is one more thing y' better know. Nobody loafs here. Our merchants can't afford to hire help. We all pitch in. Tomorrer mornin' at five you two rannies'll help cook breakfast in the hotel kitchen. Welcome to Limbo Flat."

"I hope a cyclone hits this blasted town 'fore mornin'," Gabby Snead groaned. "You can rob us, an' that ain't so bad, but forcin' us to work is somethin' else ag'in!"

Spragg's right-hand office holder, Obie Zorn, appropriated the Colts of the newcomers and tossed them to the bar. The custodian of Limbo Flat's whisky supply swept them out of sight, and Butterball and Gabby felt naked as well as hungry.

"Where do we spend the two dollars fer grub you give us out of our own pockets?" Butterball sneered.

"Report to the chuck commissioner, 'Eely Bunce. Menu tonight is cold bacon sandwich with no butter—an' coffee. Fer two bits. Only one san'wich per capita."

"Hey!" Butterball gulped out. "I won't never read the Good Book never ag'in, Gabby. I give succor to a creature in distress, an' now I am a sucker. Le's eat 'fore they think up a new rule."

"How long 'fore you git solvents?" Gabby asked.

"Hard tellin', friend. Two years—maybe five—"

Gabby staggered into the little hotel dining room, Butterball Epps waddling disconsolately behind him.

"Who is responsible fer this, Gabby?" the fat cowpoke choked out. "The Republicans or the Democrats?"

"I aim to find out," the skinny man yelped.

The bread was cut as thin as the seat of Gabby's pants, and there were only two chunks of cold bacon between the slices. The coffee had no more flavor than boiled corn stalks and contained no sugar.

"I won't live a week," Butterball repined. "It's better I ride out somewheres an' go to work."

"We better wait awhile 'fore we do somethin' so desperate as that, Butterball," Gabby advised with a shudder. "Maybe bankrupture won't last two long. You could lose eighty pounds an' nobody could feel your bones. An' you went an' give a kangaroo that can of peaches!"

"Five o'clock in the mornin'!" Butterball groaned. "It is only seven when you git up in jail."

EELY BUNCE, a stubby little jasper with batwing ears, a brierpatch beard, and a button nose, appeared. "Drink what's left of the cawfee, you wastrels! Nothin's throwed out in Limbo Flat. An' perduce four bits."

"How many breaths kin we take every day?" Gabby sniffed.

"That ain't the right spirit, gents," Eely said in a hurt voice. "United we stand, divided—"

"Come on, Gabby," Butterball snapped. "Le's draw our share of sleep from the kitty. If I ever git holt of my six-gun!"

They went out and hunted up Nemo Spragg once more. He steered them to Harlow Pinkney, wickiup administrator. Harlow had cross-eyes and legs like ice tongs, and wore leather chaps and an old derby hat. He took the cowpokes to a lean-to out in back of the Chinee laundry and showed them two beds of pine boughs.

"Two bits a night," Pinkney sniffed. "Yep, we all got to tighten our belts. We don't ast help from nobody."

"You just take it, you ol' wreck!" Gabby Snead griped. "Two bits! We can sleep fer nothin' out in the open."

"Up to you, gents, but it is two bits just the same."

A swamper from the Shoo Bird aroused the dead-to-the-world victims at five A. M. He led them to the hotel kitchen and turned them over to a sad-eyed sheffie.

"Help gits worst lookin' every day," the cook complained. "Awright, you two drones, start mixin' up the corn meal. Mush fer breakfast, an' cawfee with two spoonfuls of goat milk."

"I'll just lay down an' die, Gabby," Butterball moaned. "If my stummick had a Colt, it would shoot my insides out."

"They'll make a cannibal outa me," Gabby sighed. "I hope they do 'fore you git too skinny, Butterball."

For three hours the hapless pair plunged into menial toil, and when Limbo Flat had breakfasted, they hied to the saloon for moral support. The barkeep set two little glasses in front of them and poured carefully, mentally measuring every drop.

"There ain't more'n one finger there," Gabby protested. "Pick up that danged bottle ag'in."

"Sorry, gents. Only so much to each resident fer two bits," the barkeep said. "Have to preserve the supply fer visitin' cowpunchers an' drummers an' such. They pay up to six bits fer a full jigger. Only way we'll get solvence."

"Ain't enough red-eye here to wash out a frog's eye," Butterball said miserably, and trickled the beverage down his throat as slowly as possible. Afterward they sauntered out and looked over Limbo Flat. A big sign in the bank window said: CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. Other signs tacked up in conspicuous spots proclaimed: *Don't Throw Nothin' Away! Hoarders Will Be Hung When Caught! Tighten Yore Belts, Friends —It's for Limbo Flat!*

"It couldn't be worst if we was in Scotland," Gabby Snead gulped as he took a seat on a box in front of the hardware store. "Wonder why all them hombres are headin' fer the lodge hall, Butterball."

"We better go an' see," the fat man snapped. "They figurin' on usin' our dinero, we'll have some say about it."

A FEW minutes later they took seats in the back of the hall. There were about a dozen citizens of

the town gathered there. Nemo Spragg took a high back chair labeled, *Brotherly Love*, and gave the table in front of him a clout with a wooden mallet.

"Meetin' will come to order! Gents, we have a mighty serious problem. We're losin' business at the Shoo Bird when he should be gittin' more. It's because of that saloon over in New Antioch run by Bige Gusset. All the cowpokes are doin' their drinkin' there 'cause Bige has a tame bear that chews tobacker. We got to meet the competition somehow. Any of you jaspers know where there's a tame wild beast?"

Butterball eyed Gabby Snead. "Do we?"

"Tozer most likely is all the way to Yuma by now," the skinny man groaned. "If it took a week to find him, he'd have to gather up our bones after sayin' hello."

Butterball got to his feet. "Sheriff, if you will gimme the floor—"

"You'll be toted out on part of it if you an' your skinny pardner don't go out an' go to work, sabe?" Spragg yelped.

"We aim to help Limbo Flat!" Butterball orated. "You give us maybe fifty dollars of our dinero for expenses, we will bring a live kangaroo to this benighted town."

The sheriff conferred with his committee. They wagged their noggins for a while. Nemo Spragg got up. "Epps, we'll give you ten dollars an just twenty-four hours. You don't perduce, your ante diverts to the town treasury. Is it a deal?"

Gabby and Butterball got into a huddle. They knew that the building housing the saloon was to get a coat of whitewash and it meant hard labor.

"Look, we'd be better off goin' to work at some spread. Three years here an' we wouldn't git no pay. Le's take it!" Butterball sighed. "I'm starvin', Gabby."

Gabby got up. "It is a deal, gents!"

Ten minutes later they left Limbo Flat, ten dollars between them, both concerned none at all with the possible whereabouts of Cadmus Tozer and Phoebe.

"Gabby," Butterball sniffed, "that was about the crookedest legal holdup I ever did see. Where'll we pilgrim to?"

"A cow outfit," Gabby replied, his words sourer than his mien. "Look fer the first direction sign."

They rode for seven hours, stopped over in a town called No End Slide, and ate five dollars' worth of meat, potatoes, and pie. Their spirits soared as high as one would expect of two hombres who had been relieved of more than seven hundred dollars, and they set forth toward a cattle spread known as the K-9.

"We are goin' to the dogs awright," Butterball groaned, and negotiated a bend in the road. Suddenly he hauled in on the reins and stood up in the stirrups. Gabby Snead's mouth flew open, and his bronc snorted and capered about for a moment or two on its hind feet.

Coming right at the pair of disconsolate waddies was Cadmus Tozer astride a burro. At the end of a chain that strung away from the burro was the kangaroo named Phoebe.

"Greetin's! We meet ag'in!" Tozer said, and lifted his hand palm outward like an Indian.

"The Lord be praised," Butterball soughed out. "I, a low-down skunk of a sinner, ast forgiveness—oh, Lord!"

They dismounted quickly. "Cadmus, we got a preposition to make to you!" Gabby yelped. "Can that thing do any tricks?"

"It kin box, gents," Cadmus said. "Got any canned peaches?"

"Look, that critter'll git all it wants if you'll just foller us to Limbo Flat," Gabby howled with glee. "The chance of a lifetime is there, ol' friend."

"Lead on, gents," Tozer nasaled.

SIX hours before the deadline, Gabby Snead, Butterball Epps, Cadmus Tozer, and Phoebe came into Limbo Flat. The populace stared in

stark amazement. A horse at the tie-rack snapped its moorings and headed for the hills. Two dogs and a cat climbed the roof of the Shoo Bird Saloon, and women screamed and yelled for their offspring to gather about. Nemo Spragg grabbed at a lamppost in front of the saloon.

"It is one!" the mayor and lawman gulped. "A kangaroo!"

Butterball got down from his bronc. "Sheriff, git some signs painted. Nail 'em up between here an' New Antioch. Nail 'em to the four winds. Print on 'em, 'Come One an' All to Shoo Bird Saloon, Limbo Flat! See the Trained Kangaroo. Admission Two Bits Besides Your Drinks!' "

Cadmus Tozer led Phoebe into the saloon and made her fast. Gabby Snead and Butterball followed him to the bar and demanded a full measure of the brew of iniquity.

"An' somebody go out an' see the chuck commissioner an' git a can of peaches!" the fat waddy yelped, and planked a dollar bill down on the bar. "Won't be long 'fore the depression is over!"

"How'd you know where to git one so quick?" Spragg yelped. "There can't be more'n one of them beasts this side of the Mississ—"

"I just said to myself," Gabby replied, "where would I go if I was a kangaroo, an' I went there an' there he—she was, hah!"

The printed signs blossomed out during the next twenty-four hours. They covered a radius of ten miles, and then the influx of the curious began. The Shoo Bird was choked with customers, and the barkeep had to summon help. Butterball hopped behind the bar and donned an apron. Dinero flowed into the coffers of the impoverished town.

"Step right up, gents!" Tozer wheezed. "Any of you salty buckos want to put on the gloves with Phoebe? Step up an' see the only genui-ine kangaroo not in a zoo fer only two bits, the fourth part of a dol-l-lar! Thank you—thank you—awright, my friend, you want to indulge in the manly art with the marsupial, huh?"

"I thought it was a kangaroo!" Butterball snapped.

"Zoological name, my fat friend!" Tozer twanged, and held out the boxing gloves to a cowpoke from the K-9. "No hittin' in the clinches, my good friend. Phoebe fights fair with the Markish of Queensburrer rules. Awright, give 'em room!"

The puncher was a hammered-down hombre with shoulders like a grizzily and a flattened nose. "Go outside an' pick up this drinkin' man's nightmare, Tozer, after I clip it!" he grinned, and shuffled in.

Phoebe pawed with the gloves affixed to her short front legs, and hopped around a bit. The K-9 rannyhan jabbed with his left. *Kerwhack!* He landed on his angel bones, turned a somersault, and rolled out onto the planked walk. Phoebe hit the nearest spectator with a right, and Cadmus Tozer quickly hauled in on her chain.

"Step right up, gents! Win a bottle of Ol' Ramrod by stayin' three rounds with the greatest boxin' kang—"

The K-9 puncher staggered in, his eyes still at cross purposes. "I was—pickin' a stone out my b-bronc's foot. an' it up an' kicked me. Hear them canaries, friends? An' orioles an'—I sure love the spring. Uh—it was a foul, y' ol' fraud!" he yelled at Cadmus Tozer. "I wa'n't watchin' its feet. Gimme them gloves once more—er—never mind. Ha-a-a!"

THE Shoo Bird whooped it up until an hour after midnight, and when it was finally locked up, Nemo Spragg and his security council took Butterball, Gabby, and Cadmus Tozer over to the hotel and broke out a steak with plenty of onions.

"Yep, boys, we ought to be outa the red inside of a year now," Spragg enthused.

Butterball and Gabby suddenly lost their appetite. "We aim to be out sooner'n that, by Godfrey!" Gabby howled. "We'll take Cadmus an' the

kangaroo an' pilgrim first thing in the mornin'!"

"What kind of a headstone does an hombre put up fer a kangaroo, Obie?" the lawman inquired.

"We kin stuff it, sheriff!" Eely Bunce said. "Draw some trade that way. What was you sayin', Snead?"

"Nothin'," Butterball answered. "He didn't say a word."

"I'm plumb content," Tozer said. He chuckled and cut off another hunk of sirloin.

"Come on, Butterball," Gabby choked out. "Le's go sleep in the crick bed tonight an' git pneumonia."

Three days passed. The legal tender still poured into Limbo Flat. Butterball and Gabby were in the Shoo Bird one night huddled at a table and watching the gold mine they had presented to Nemo Spragg and his partners.

"We would of been rich, Butterball," the skinny cowpoke wailed. "That kangaroo—er—look!"

Butterball did. The hubbub quickly died. Three mean-looking jaspers, one nearly seven feet tall, and packing Colts, stood just inside the batwings. "Everybody, put their hands up! It is Squint Yurp talkin' an' not Lily Langtree. Hah, got word you gents put all your dinero in one pot, all that was left when we robbed your bank. Come after it, yep. Reach!"

There was just one man in the town who would have possibly gone for his forty-five if he'd been able. But Nemo Spragg had the boxing gloves on and had been sparring with Phoebe when the owlhoots appeared.

"Cripes, we'll never leave with a red cent now," Butterball gulped. "No guns—no—of all the ding-donged cussed luck I ever did see!"

"Spragg, go git the dinero. Got two gents outside will excort you!" Squint Yurp bellowed, then shot a hogleg out of the barkeep's hand. "Come out from behind there, or I'll give you a third eye, you polecat!"

Nemo Spragg staggered outside. "Awright," Yurp said to his henchmen. "Watch these hombres here! So that's a kangaroo, huh? Heard about the critter in New Antioch this morning'. Lemme git a good look at it. Got boxin' gloves on, huh? Wonder could it beat a six-gun to the punch?" Squint Yurp bent forward and blew the poisonous smoke of a quirley right into Phoebe's face. Then he swung his right fist.

Kerwhop! Wham! Phoebe hooked Squint with a right, then slapped him out of his marbles with a terrific wallop of her left hind foot. The owlhooter landed right at the feet of his cronies, out as cold as an Eskimo's front stoop. Phoebe hopped toward Cadmus and huddled against him, and Gabby Snead tried for the gun that had hopped out of Squint's hand. A bullet scattered splinters near his avid fingers, an outlaw roared:

"Everybody stay put, or we'll start a massacre!" He stepped forward and kicked Squint's gun toward the door.

"What a mess!" Butterball griped. "If I could git a hand on a six-gun!"

"That animal won't live long when Squint comes to!" a badman said. "Is he stirrin' yet, Largo?"

"Talkin' to hisself a little, Ears," the other owlhooter said. "Well, they ought to be back with the dinero any minute. Squint's goin' to be awful mean when he gits up."

"They're going to kill Phoebe!" Cadmus wailed. "Don't let 'em, friends. My means of livelihood—an' my dearest pardner."

SQUINT YURP got to his feet, teetered like a half-cut giant spruce for a moment, then shook the cotton batting out of his evil noggin. Things came back to him, including his Colt. He waved Tozer out of the way. "Step aside y' li'l banty, or I'll send you to kangaroo heaven with the cuss. By cripes—"

Phoebe seemed to sense disaster. Cadmus Tozer shoved her away from him, and Squint fired. Phoebe made a great broad jump that landed her smack against Butterball Epps where

she believed she would be safe. The fat cowpoke felt her shake and heard her whimper.

"Prod that cuss out into the open, fatty!" Squint yowled. "You'll have kangaroo cutlets in the mornin', gents!"

Butterball groped for Phoebe's chain. Most of it had become deposited in her pouch. The fat waddy reached in and his fingers curled over something that felt very familiar. He glanced over at Tozer and remembered that the banty had worn a six-gun shoved down inside the front of the waistband of his baggy pants when Squint Yurp had taken over.

"You got just three more seconds, y' ball of suet!" the outlaw leader yelled. "One—two—"

Butterball hesitated for only half a second. He saw that there was one hanging lamp burning in the Shoo Bird. The night was misty outside, and no stars shone in the sky. He drew the six-gun just as Squint Yurp began rolling the number three off his tongue.

Bang! The light went out, and Butterball roared as he rolled over the floor, "The guns are behind the bar, gents!" With Cadmus Tozer gasping for breath under him, Butterball shot toward the door. An owlhooter yelped with pain. Six-guns set up a terrific racket. Phoebe ran amok, her hind feet flailing at anything human that got in her way. Big strong hombres managed to wriggle under tables where they offered up prayers.

"Go get 'em, Phoebe!" Tozer yelped, then got hit by a big fist and rolled over the floor to get tromped on by Squint Yurp who was trying for the back door. Something met him head-on and slapped all the breath out of him.

Gabby Snead, now behind the bar, yelled, "Here's the artillery, boys!" and tossed a dozen Colts out onto the floor.

The frame building shook. Men crawled out onto the planked walk half dressed and half conscious. Butterball Epps shook fog out of his eyes and looked at the hombre who'd come out with him. It was the owlhooter named Ears. He jumped on the jasper and nearly pounded his head through the boards, then got to his feet and staggered back into the saloon. Something flew past him.

"Hello, Butterball!" it said.

Usually peaceful and timid citizens were now surrounding the quivering saloon, armed with shotguns, clubs, rolling pins, and other weighty bits of bric-a-brac. Gunsmoke boiled out of the Shoo Bird. Cadmus Tozer reeled out, an outsized cuspidor covering his head, one boot gone, and one pant leg missing. He held a six-gun limp in his right hand, and Butterball grabbed it and threw a shot at a badman trying to leave town.

"Good shot!" Nemo Spragg complimented as he stumbled toward him. "He had all Limbo Flat's dinero! Go pick it up."

Spragg walked into the Shoo Bird and met Phoebe trying to get out. Both of her hind legs splatted against Spragg's breastbone, and he landed on the seat of his pants near the watering trough. Phoebe kept traveling, and Butterball Epps, retrieving a sack of legal tender out of the dust, saw her take the creek in one jump and head for the timber.

Things suddenly became very quiet in the Shoo Bird. Butterball helped Spragg up, and together they crossed the street and entered the saloon.

"Somebody git a lantern!" the fat cowpoke yelled at the posse of armed citizens. "Git the sawbones an' the undertaker!"

WHEN light was thrown on the subject, Butterball stared at the shambles of men and furniture. Eely Bunce evinced the first sign of life. He came out from under a heap of plaster, broken tables, and inert humans and said he knew Judgment Day had been overdue. There was a gap in Eely's front teeth, and he had one leg

caught and tangled in his suspenders.

Squint Yurp was propped up against the wall, his boots pointed toward the ceiling, and his sweat-rag crammed into his mouth. The badman, Largo, was draped over the bar, and bits of broken glass still glistened in his black locks.

Gabby Snead came weaving in. He did a half-spin, a few waltz steps, and then lay down on the floor, heaving a deep sigh. "Yep—only survivor. Some earthquake, by Godfrey!" he muttered.

Other hombres began showing signs of life, and Epitaph Smoot, the mortician, got more discouraged by the minute.

Butterball Epps suddenly yelled, "Step up, gents. Drinks are on the house!"

Seven survivors of the ruckus revived miraculously and flocked to the bar like as many sleepwalkers. The barkeep brushed the defunct owlhooter off the counter and began to pour from memory.

Cadmus Tozer groped his way into the battered saloon. "Gone! Phoebe's lit out, gents! I am ruint!"

A deputy who had escaped the holocaust came tearing in, waving sheets of paper around his head. "Sheriff, this ding-danged town is out of the red! There's fifteen hundred dollars reward out fer Squint Yurp! Five hundred each on Ears McGlone an' Largo Jacks! An' most likely they got most of our bank money on 'em or cached near by."

Butterball lifted Gabby Snead to his feet. "Hear that, you skinny wampus? Here, take this Colt. We're gettin' what we anted up to this accurst lobo lodge, *muy pronto!*"

"Never had no anty nor no uncles," Gabby mumbled, his marbles still somewhat scattered. "Don't need a poncho—ain't rainin'. Where am I?"

Nemo Spragg, after three stiff snorts, finally grasped the situation. "Twenty-five hundred, huh? This calls fer a drink, by cripes! Seems years since I had one. I—er—huh?" He peered into the muzzle of Butterball's six-gun.

"You can thank me an' my partner, you ol' highway robber!" the corpulent one said in a voice as mean as Yurp's. "An' if we don't get our deposit back inside of ten seconds, you will get measured fer a pine overcoat alongside some owlhooters. That plain?"

"Why, I was goin' to give it to you right away, Epps," Spragg gulped. "Bring that sack here, Obie."

"By rights the reward should go to a kangaroo," Butterball said, while Gabby Snead cleared his brain at the bar. "But it would only spend it all on canned peaches, huh?"

Cadmus Tozer dug at his weepy orbs with a big thumb knuckle. "Phoebe'll die out there all alone, yep. She'll mebbe git caught in the roundup an' end up a pot roast. I wisht I was dead."

Nemo Spragg counted out an even thousand dollars for Butterball and Gabby. "That's interest on your dinero, ol' friends. Sort of a dividend paid out of Limbo Flat stock."

"So you owned a herd of cattle, too?" Gabby Snead sniffed. "Why, you low-down skinflints!"

"Don't mind him," Butterball started to explain. "When he was six, his ma dropped him on his head an' —what's that?"

"Sounds like somebody was in the grocery store!" Spragg yelped, and drew his gun. "Come on, gents!"

Breaking down the door of the emporium two doors away from the Shoo Bird, Nemo Spragg plunged in. "Hands up, y' sneakin' vandal as I—o-o-oof!"

The sheriff came out as if caught in the teeth of a cyclone and landed on his back three feet off the sidewalk. Out of the store hopped Phoebe, trying to get the top off a big can of peaches.

"Partner!" Tozer yipped, and sprinted toward the kangaroo. He

threw his arms around it and cooed in its ear.

Butterball beamed at Gabby. "Touchin', ain't it?"

"Let's git the broncs, Butterball. We been touched enough fer a spell!"

They rode out of Limbo Flat with the cheers of the solvent populace ringing in their ears. Two miles out they paused to get their bearings.

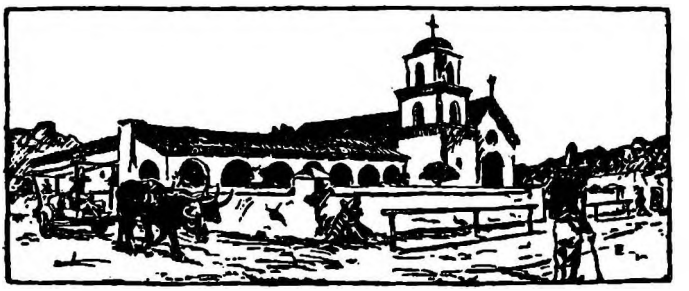
"Looks like a good trail over that way," Butterball said, and pointed. "Over by that depression near that line of willows."

"Depression?" Gabby gulped out. "Then let's head towards the highest mountains. Ain't you got enough?"

They camped that night many miles from Limbo Flat. Pouring a can of beans into a frying pan, Butterball suddenly shook his head. "We've seen about everythin' now, Gabby. Hangin's, floods, cyclones, pearly-gray spats—an' the only animal in the world that was born with a gun holster."

"Most likely then they call their offsprings colts, huh?" Gabby queried, and dumped half a pound of coffee into the blackened pot.

Butterball snickered and opened a can of corned beef and dumped it on top of the beans. Happy days were here again.



Red Runs the Pecos

By Joseph Chadwick

(Continued from page 23)

drinking. Left alone with Elena, Rigdon said, "Where's Bert?"

"Gone, Jeff."

"He took a hand in it, Elena—against Durant."

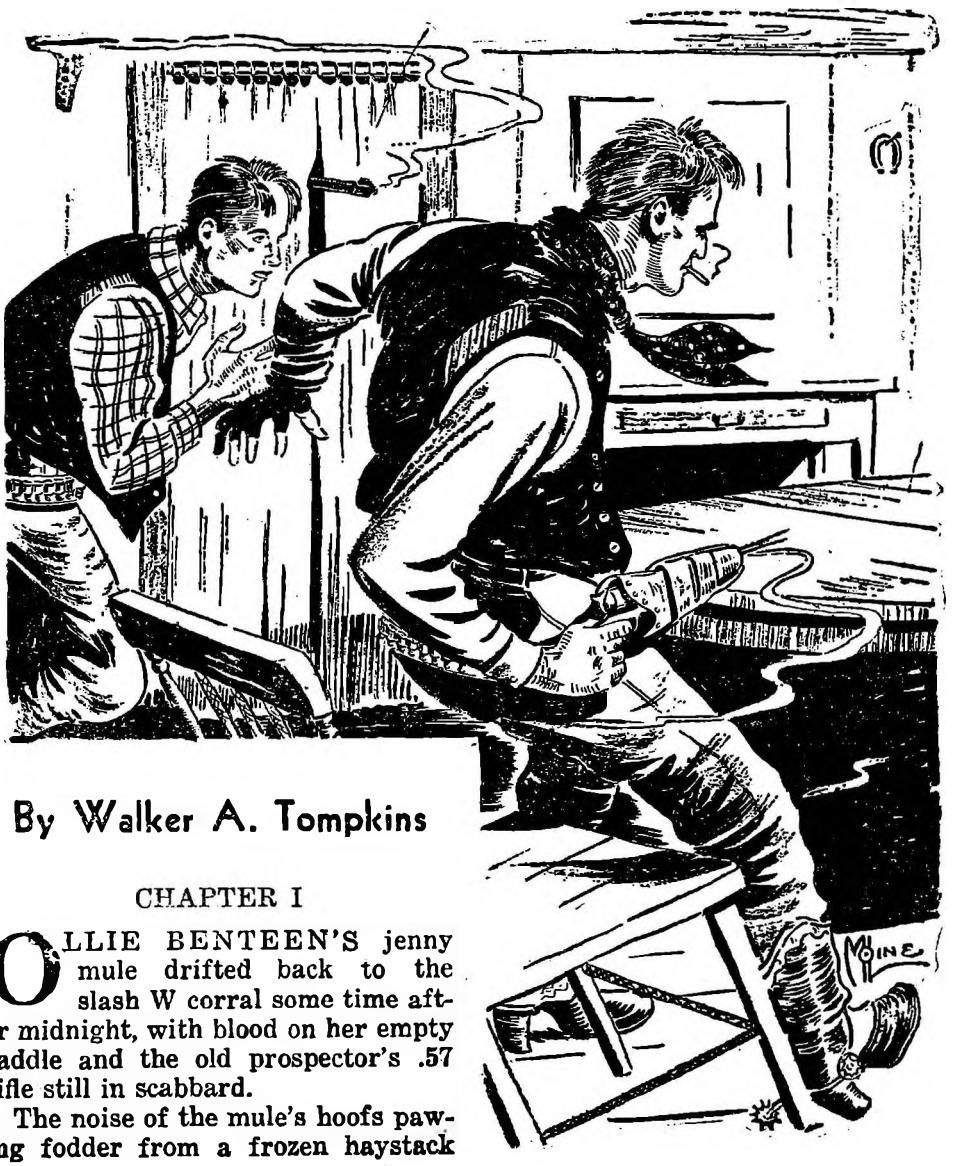
"Yes," she said soberly. "He told me that he just realized that I had a right to live my own life—without him and Steve Durant."

She was pleased about Bert, evidently hoping that Bert had also realized that he should live his own life without being influenced by any other Steve Durant. But they forgot Bert Venable almost at once, for Jeff Rigdon said:

"You're really free, now, Elena." Then he added, "It might be that there's somebody at Fort Sumner who could perform a marriage." Showing that Elena wasn't free, after all. But her answering smile told Jeff Rigdon that she didn't really mind.

Hell Lies Grassroot Deep

Hatred lay festering like an open wound in the hills of Claybank. And when the brothers Westring tried to keep the hate from flaring up in a .45 fracas, it dynamited in a powdersmoke volcano.



By Walker A. Tompkins

CHAPTER I

OLLIE BENTEEN'S jenny mule drifted back to the slash W corral some time after midnight, with blood on her empty saddle and the old prospector's .57 rifle still in scabbard.

The noise of the mule's hoofs pawing fodder from a frozen haystack

Gripping Novelette

reached Claude Westring and his brother Jepp when they were eating breakfast by lantern light in the log ranch house, and brought the two punchers out to investigate in the pre-dawn darkness.

"The old galoot must of got drunk and fell off on his way back from Claybank," young Jepp concluded, his breath steaming out in the rays of his brother's lantern. "Must have."

Claude knew Jepp didn't believe what he said. There was a clotted stain on the cantle rim, and a similar smear on the frost-rimmed stock of the Texas-Enfield rifle. Claude rubbed the thumb of his mitten across the saddle stain. The wool revealed it as crimson. Blood. . . .

Claude's lean face, muffled in the

fleece collar of his buffalo jumper and the pulled-down-brim of his Stetson, took on a pallor under the cherry glow produced by the winter air. He handed the lantern to young Jepp, muscles pulling at the corners of his taut mouth as he framed his words carefully, not wanting to give truth its expression.

"Tend to the chores and check on how our feeders are making out over in Gypsum Coulee," Claude said briefly. "I'll follow the mule's sign and fetch the old codger back to sober up."

Young Jepp was thawing out the corral pump with a kettle of hot watter when Claude led his sorrel gelding out of the sod-walled barn and mounted. He had strapped a shell belt and a holstered .44 on the outside of his buffalo coat. The red glow shafting across the Montana hills to eastward revealed deep ruts of concern in the rider's bronzed face, in the thoughtful cast of his eyes.

"Claude." Jepp's voice carried a tragic quiver. "You—you figger some bushwhacker jumped Ollie for the gold he was totin'?"

The elder Westring's slitted gaze was picking up the jenny mule's trail across the glistening crust of snow which carpeted the frozen slopes below the Slash W corrals.

"Possible, kid. But Ollie didn't have a pinch in his poke when he left for town yesterday mornin'. He was taking a gunnysack lode of ore from his test hole, aiming to get an assay run on the sample. Most likely worthless rock."

Clouds of steam from the teakettle obscured the tears on Jepp's lashes as he took another glance at Benteen's mule. The ore sack was missing from the ancient McClellan. That meant Ollie had been homeward bound from Claybank.

"Pick up some screw-worm dope for the pinto if you go as far as town," Jepp called after his brother.

THE red globe of the December sun was poised on the staggered crest of the Flintrock foothills as Claude Westring gigged his sorrel down the valley road which skirted Squaw Creek. Yesterday's skift of snow made tracking Benteen's mule a simple matter.

Ollie Benteen was a crotchety old prospector who had come up from the Pike's Peak country last summer to try his luck in the gold fields around Virginia City. Later he had crossed over to the Flintrocks and put in the fall prospecting Squaw Creek's dry bed, having leased the mineral rights on the five sections of foothill land which the two Westring brothers had bought from Dall Sprecker's Circle S ranch two years back.

Anger needled Claude as he slanted down the west rim of the creek. The gulch should have been sheeted with ice from bank to bank at this season. Instead it was bone dry, save for the fresh snow which softened the harsh outlines of the creekbed boulders.

Squaw Creek drained off the Flintrock Range, and its minor tributaries had made the Slash W a fertile paradise for a cowman. When the Westring brothers had come up from Texas hunting for land to settle on, range grass had been chest-high in the valley of Squaw creek. They had jumped at the chance to buy the land from Dall Sprecker.

Two months after the deal was closed, Sprecker dynamited a whole cliff across Squaw Creek, a mile north of the Slash W line. The spring freshets had been dammed up by Sprecker's avalanche, spilling over to cut a new channel across Circle S graze, the stream separated from Westring land by the intervening shoulder of Axblade Ridge.

There was nothing the Texans could do about it. They had watched their fertile range dry up under the punishing summer sun. They had been forced to the expense of drill-

ing a well to water what stock they had brought north for a starter. Dall Sprecker's dam had transformed the lush Slash W graze into a parched waste, a worthless strip of foothill country fast reverting to sagebrush and bitterroot weed.

Time was when the Flintrocks had been cow country, and Claybank a rip-roaring trail town down in the Beaverhead Flats, a cowtown situated below the ford where big Montana outfits hazed their annual beef drives across the Beaverhead, market-bound.

But the gold rush had changed all that. Prospectors swarmed like ants over the Flintrock canyons, staking out claims, paying local ranchmen exorbitant prices for their beef. Claybank was a hell-roaring mining camp now, its saddle shops replaced by assay offices, its mercantile stores stocking hobnailed boots for the mucker trade instead of stilt-heeled Coffeyvilles for cowhands.

Most of the mining was centered in the South Range, where the Flintrocks made a horseshoe curve around three sides of Beaverhead Flats. Prospectors had found no color in the northern foothills where Dall Sprecker and the Westring Brothers had their spreads.

WHEN old Ollie Benteen had braced the Westring brothers for the mineral rights to Squaw Creek valley, the two punchers had tried to talk the old-timer out of it. Bearded muckers had already quested the full length of Squaw Creek with their Long Tom sluice boxes, their iron pans and cleated cradles. It was sterile ground; the gold deposits lay in the placers of the South Range, ten miles across the intervening Flats.

But old Ollie had spent the fall months digging a test drift into the face of Axblade Ridge, a mile north of the Slash W cabin. Now, after the season's first snowfall, the old man had taken his samples into Claybank to be assayed, to see if his miner's savvy, his instinct for locating gold-bearing rock had justified his long weeks of toil.

Benteen's home-bent mule had beelined over the ridges, scorning the Slash W wagon road and the webwork of game trails. By the time the sun was two hours high, Claude Westring had followed sign down to the timber-mottled floor of Beaverhead Flats, with the tarpaper roofs of Claybank town taking shape against the background of the South Range.

In a clearing a mile north of Claybank, Claude found what he had secretly expected, what he had grimly steeled himself to endure. Ollie Benteen had taken a short cut through the timber on his way to Squaw Creek. Here, in a snow-whitened meadow surrounded by lofty lodgepole pines and naked aspen thickets, Westring drew rein before a hoof-trampled spot on the snow.

A puddle of frozen blood made a crimson patch against the white, where Ollie Benteen had fallen from saddle. Off to the right went the tracks the yellow mule had made, bolting in wild stampede. Another set of tracks made a wide-angled V from the trees, where a rider had crossed the snow, picked up the fallen prospector and then headed toward town. The glistening virgin snow was packed with a man's boot prints, too large for Benteen to have made.

"Whoever had bushwhacked Ollie wouldn't have carried his body away, don't seem like—"

Westring muttered the words aloud, staring around at the snow-wigged pines, wondering which bole had concealed an ambusher last night.

The rancher tugged off his bulky fur coat to give his arms more freedom, rolled it in a tight bundle and lashed it behind the cantle of his Brazos kack. He buckled his gun harness over Angora chaps, snugging the .44 against his flank.

Daylight revealed Claude Westring as a towering, lathy-built man nearing thirty, legs warped from a lifetime in saddle, hands thick-calloused by lass'-rope and heavy range work.

Sunlight sparkled on the windrows of drifted snow, dazzling the silent reaches beyond the timber as Westring emerged into the open and followed the horse trail toward Claybank, losing the sign when he hit the outskirts of town where wheeled traffic had churned the main street into a muddy quagmire.

Claybank's false-fronted shacks followed the curve of the Beaverhead River. Where the stockpens of an earlier day had been located, a reduction mill reared its fuming stacks now. Long trains of tandem-hitched ore wagons, fresh from the South Range diggings, were drawn up at the syndicate yards, awaiting their turn at the discharge hoppers.

While his ears throbbed to the racket of the big ore-crushing stamps, Claude Westring kept to the middle of the main street, not quite sure where he wanted to start making inquiries.

TO HIS left was the little soddy where Doctor Grobinder, the camp medico, had his office. Beyond it was Joe-Ed Dixon's furniture store with undertaking parlors in the rear. Benteen might logically be at either of those places.

Westring spurred on in the direction of the squat brick building where Marshal Tol McBride had his jail. Passing the Lucky Nugget Saloon, Westring saw a string of cowponies standing in the frozen mud at the hitchrail, and he recognized the Circle S brand on their rumps.

Sprecker's in town, Claude thought moodily, and felt the bitter tide of anger swelling his veins, as was usual whenever he cut the cattle baron's sign. Between Dall Sprecker and the Texas brothers he had swindled, hatred lay festering close under the surface, promising to break open in shoot-out one fine day.

A voice hailed Westring as he flanked the Lucky Nugget and came abreast of the Claybank stage depot and post office. Hipping around in saddle, Claude saw Dall Sprecker emerging from the post office with a bag of Circle S mail. The rancher paused on the porch, his black Stetson brim nudging the blunt icicles which depended from the eaves, glinting like danger blades.

"I got a deal I'd like to talk over with you, young feller!" Sprecker called out, mouthing a black cheroot. "Pull over and cool your saddle."

Sprecker's foreman, Kile Drillden, joined the Circle S boss on the post-office steps as Westring rode on past, making no move to rein in.

"I talked business with you once, Dall!" snapped the Texan. "Once burnt, twice shy."

Drillden's booming laugh followed Westring on down the street to the jail hitchrack. Claude saw the Circle S pair go into the Lucky Nugget as he dismounted.

Marshal Tol McBride appeared in the jail door as Westring stepped up on the splintered plank sidewalk, stamping thick Montana gumbo off his spurred boots.

"Checking up on why Benteen didn't get home last night?" McBride asked, interpreting the purpose of the rider's errand. "Saves me a trip out to break the bad news, son."

The marshal waddled out across the plank walk, an elephantine man in a plucked beaver mackinaw and moosehide gauntlets. Twin jets of vapor forked from the lawman's nose as he gestured toward Joe-Ed Dixon's furniture store.

"Benteen's lyin' on a slab over yonder with a bullet hole where his suspenders cross, Claude. Some jasper bushwhacked the old timer up in the piny brakes last night."

Claude Westring's lips compressed. His throat muscles hurt. The news came as no surprise, but it left an empty ache in the pit of his stomach.

During the months Ollie Benteen had bunked with them at the Slash W, the Westring brothers had come to love the grizzled old Pike's Peaker like a father.

"Who found him, marshal?" Claude's voice was a sharp rasp in the gelid morning quiet.

The lawman turned his head to spit tobacco into the gutter.

"I did. Heard a shot over in the pines as I was ridin' in from Virginia City around midnight. Saw Benteen's mule high-tailing out of the timber by moonlight, and went in to investigate. Ollie's carcass wa: still warm. The shot I heard got him."

Westring's eyes held a question and the marshal went ahead to answer it.

"He was gulched with a Winchester from back in the trees, Claude. I got there too quick, I reckon—scared the bushwhacker off before he had a chance to rob the body. I went back out there this mornin' an' cut the drygulcher's sign. It doubled back to town. Any one of a hundred cutthroats could have done it, son."

Westring hitched his gelding and regarded McBride bleakly.

"Thanks, marshal. But I aim to tally Benteen's killer if it takes me the rest of my life."

CHAPTER II

WESTRING found Ollie Benteen's mortal remains lying under a greasy blanket on a slab in Dixon's back room. The undertaker had piled Benteen's familiar red shirt, patched levis, and warped boots on a near-by chair and had dressed the old man in cheap burial clothing provided by the county. Dixon was a deputy coroner working out of the Virginia City office.

"Benteen didn't have much in his pockets, Claude," Joe-Ed Dixon commented. "His stuff is on the table yonder. I reckon it'll be yours, soon as I've an official inquest. Benteen left no kin, far as I know."

Westring pulled his gaze off the dead man's serene, bearded face, and walked over to a table where Benteen's meager possessions had been carefully itemized in the deputy coroner's record book. A floppy Keevil hat with a snakeskin band. An old Spiller & Burr revolver, relic of his war years as a Confederate captain by brevet. A hunk of uncured Missouri tobacco, a rusty barlow knife, a buckskin poke, its flatness proving it was empty of coins or gold dust. Certainly a poor loot, if robbery had been the motive for the old man's murder.

Dixon was out in his storage room, loading a coffin onto a hand dolly. Westring took advantage of the undertaker's absence to reach for the prospector's hat. He remembered how old Benteen made a habit of poking matches and cigarette papers and other miscellany under the rattlesnake band which girdled the Keevil.

Westring's probing fingers were rewarded by the discovery of a folded sheet of pink paper, bearing the printed label of the *Sam Bunce Assay Office, Claybank, Montana Territory.* It was a receipt for $2.50, the fee for assaying the fifty-pound sample of ore Benteen had brought down from his Squaw Creek drift, and it bore yesterday's date.

Westring thrust the assayer's receipt in his jumper pocket and was standing by the slab, looking down on his old friend's corpse, when Dixon trucked a cheap pine casket into the room.

"Inquest is set for ten o'clock," the undertaker said briskly. "O' course, the verdict will be a routine formality. Death by murder at the hands of a party or parties unknown. There's a hundred renegades in Claybank who'd cut a man's throat for a wooden nickel. No chance of ever trackin' down his killer."

Claude nodded bitterly. Killings were so commonplace around Claybank these days that the authorities brushed them off as inevitable. Ollie

Benteen's murder had already gone into the limbo of a vital statistic on Dixon's records.

"I'd admire to have you set on the jury, Claude, seein' as how you was about the only friend the deceased had."

"Glad to, Joe-Ed."

Claude left the undertaker's establishment, paused a moment on the icy sidewalk, running splayed fingers through his shock of crisp roan hair.

This wasn't an ordinary bush-whacking, he told himself. *Somebody figgered they'd be better off with Ollie out of the way.*

HE PERCHED the cleft-crown Texas sombrero at an angle across his forehead and moved in the direction of a shack which had formerly housed a blacksmith shop, back in the cattle days. Its forge had been converted into an assayer's coke furnace and a new sign painted across the board-and-batt false front proclaimed it as the Sam Bunce Assay Office.

He found Bunce inside, crushing an ore sample in a big iron mortar, his workbench littered with crucibles and flux bins, cupels and sample bags, molds and tongs and dog-eared books on geological subjects.

"Mornin'," Bunce grunted, laying aside his pestle and scanning his visitor's shaggy goathair chaps, sunflower-rowel spurs, brushpopper jumper, and other rangeland accouterments. "Another cowhand bit by the gold bug, eh?"

Westring shook his head in negation, sizing up Sam Bunce. The assayer was a burly giant with a massive torso and oak-trunk legs, brindle whiskers, and smallpox-scarred cheeks. Westring knew Bunce only by sight; he believed he was a stranger to Bunce.

A nameless animosity coursed between the two men. They were poles apart, representing divergent breeds of men locked in a death struggle for the control of this corner of Montana. Mining pitted against stockraising, and never the twain should meet.

"You tested some minerals for a man named Ollie Benteen yesterday." Westring's statement was a flat fact, not a question.

The assayer tugged his lower lip, appraising his visitor with some subtle wariness which Westring was quick to detect.

"Did I now? Assay reports are nobody's business except to the man who—"

"I'm Benteen's partner. I want to know what that assay showed."

Bunce hesitated a moment, then reached in a drawer under his workbench and consulted a battered ledger. He scanned his recent entries, then shook his head.

"I ain't had a customer named Benteen, stranger. Assayers are a dime a dozen in Claybank. You've come to the wrong place."

Westring reached in his pocket and held Benteen's crumpled receipt out for Bunce to see.

"This paper carries your signature and my partner's name on it, Bunce. That jog your memory?"

Sam Bunce flushed, then rubbed his big palms up and down his corduroy pant-leg, in a gesture reminiscent of a barroom thug anticipating a brawl.

"I rec-lect Benteen's name," the assayer grunted. "He's the old codger who got himself gulched out in the timber last night, ain't he? You got my sympathy, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Westring. Claude Westring. I own the land Benteen was prospecting. I want to know if he hit pay dirt or whether that test hole of Ollie's was worthless."

Sam Bunce shook his head, exposing tobacco-stained teeth in a slow, widening smile.

"I told you I didn't run an assay for Benteen. That receipt is either a forgery or—"

His voice trailed off as he sensed the unreasoning anger which flamed up in the cowhand. Westring read

the lie in Bunce's manner, knew the assayer was withholding information which might prove to be the vital link in determining the motive for Benteen's murder last night.

Moving up as Bunce started to turn back to his mortar, Claude's left hand seized the assayer by his buckskin shirt, fisted the leather garment taut against the bigger man's chest, and then jerked Bunce violently around to face him.

"I want that report!" Westring snarled, cocking his right fist. "Quit stalling. Tell me—"

Bunce brought up a knee toward the cowman's midsection, but Westring swiveled his hip around to block the foul, at the same time driving a rock-hard fist into the assayer's chest.

WINDED by the hammer blow to his heart, Bunce fell back. Westring released his grip on the buckskin shirt and followed up with a looping haymaker which smashed Bunce in the mouth with a meaty, chopping impact which rocked the assayer's head back on his bull-thick neck.

Blood welled from Bunce's pulped lips as he reached for a hickory-handled muller on his bench, a sledge-like tool which could smash a man's skull like a melon rind.

Westring lashed out with a boot toe, paralyzing Bunce's elbow before he could haul the muller off the table. As the assayer reeled back, a dull rumble issuing from his vast chest like an injured steer in a slaughter chute, Claude Westring pulled himself out of his murderous fury and lifted his Colt .44 from holster.

"Now talk, damn you!" panted the cattleman, thumbing the knurled gun-hammer to full cock. "Who paid you to leave Benteen's assay off your books? He struck it rich out in Squaw Creek—is that what you're trying to hide?"

Beads of sweat coasted down Sam Bunce's pock-pitted cheeks as he appraised the shoot-sign in Westring's eyes. He made futile pushing motions at the leveled gun.

"It's—ag'in the law to give out assay findings, Westring," wheezed the big man. "If an assayer spilled everything he knew, there'd be an epidemic of claim jumpin' wherever miners scratch the earth. Be sensible, man!"

Westring hefted the blue-barreled .44 menacingly, keeping a tight curb on his temper.

"Maybe you'll be sensible—with a slug in your belly. You're running a sandy on me somewhere, Bunce. I aim to find out why."

Bunce licked his bloody lips, leaned back against the brick combing of his assay furnace, his eyes glued to the black bore of the six-shooter leveled at his paunch.

"Stand hitched, Westring. Drop your gun."

The voice came from behind the Slash W rider, timed with a draft of cold air from the opening door at his back. Westring stiffened as he felt a gun jab his spine. He let his own .44 drop to the earthen floor.

Turning slowly, he found himself staring into the slitted yellow eyes of Dall Sprecker. The Circle S boss held a Walker pistol, a gun without a trigger. Westring's life lay at the mercy of Sprecker's thumb on the cocked hammer.

This was a trap, and Westring knew it. He saw Sam Bunce lunge to scoop up his fallen gun. Dall Sprecker waved the assayer back as Bunce lifted the weapon for a clubbing blow at the cowboy's skull.

"I'll handle this, Bunce!" clipped the Circle S boss, cuffing back his black Stetson. "What's the trouble here, Claude? What has Bunce done to rate all this howdy-do?"

Westring pulled a deep breath into his lungs. Sprecker's timely intervention was no accident. He had seen Westring enter Bunce's assay office, had left the Lucky Nugget to investigate. It was not a case of a cowman coming to another cow-

man's assistance, in a town that was overrun with jackleg muckers and their ilk. Westring saw raw hate lurking in the yellow depths of Sprecker's gaze.

"This rannyhan was trying to force me into divulging confidential information, Dall!" Bunce panted heavily. "Claims I ran an' assay for a partner of his who got killed last night. He's a damn liar. I never done any work for Oliver Benteen. If I had of, I wouldn't be unethical enough to spill what I know."

IN SPITE of the pressure of the moment, Claude Westring's thought processes were alert and were running with clocklike precision. Bunce addressed the Circle S man by his first name, betraying a common ground of intimacy with the foothill rancher. How come Dall Sprecker was on such good terms with an assay man?

"How about it, Claude?" Sprecker demanded, suddenly thrusting his gun back into holster. "You're straying off your range, ain't you? Tol McBride could clap you in the hoosegow for throwing down on a law-abiding citizen thisaway."

Westring choked back the hot rush of profanity which trembled on his tongue's tip. Something lay back of this business here in Sam Bunce's place. Some force stronger than hate or pity had checked Dall Sprecker's gunhammer just now. The Circle S man was trying to draw him out, find out what he knew about Benteen's relationship with the assayer. That knowledge took on a sinister significance in Westring's mind.

"I guess you're right, Sprecker," Claude said wearily. "I'll drag my picket pin out of here."

Westring saw a look flash between the assayer and Dall Sprecker. Without a word, Bunce reversed the Colt in his fist and handed it back to Westring, butt foremost.

Sprecker followed Westring outdoors, reached to touch the cowboy's sleeve as Claude started back toward the undertaker's.

"Your quarrel with Bunce is no affair of mine, son," Dall Sprecker said affably. "I'm glad I chanced to be going past in time to keep you from doing anything rash. Us cowmen have got to stick together."

Westring halted, taking the measure of Sprecker's level stare, wondering what had brought the cattle baron down to Claybank, wondered if he had been in town last night when Ollie Benteen rode out to his doom.

"You said you wanted to see me about a deal," Westring said suddenly. "What's on your mind, Dall?"

Sprecker took a cheroot from his vest pocket, offered it to Westring, saw it declined.

"We can talk better over a bottle at the Lucky Nugget," Sprecker suggested carefully. "I—"

"I'm due at Benteen's inquest in half an hour. Whatever you got to say, spill it here and now."

Sprecker flushed, glanced up and down the street, then moved closer to Westring.

"It's like this," the rancher said in a confidential undertone. "The government's refused to renew my lease on Buffalo Meadows, aiming to open it for homesteading. I got to move my beef out next spring, and that means I'm caught short of grass. Claude, I'm prepared to take back those five sections of Slash W graze I sold you at twice what you and Jepp paid me. Plus what stock you've got on your books as of now, at last fall's top market quotation. I'll take my chances on a die-off this winter."

Westring thought over Sprecker's proposition for a long moment, searching for the motive which prompted the offer. He had heard about the government closing Buffalo Meadows. Sprecker's dilemma sounded legitimate enough on the surface.

"Are you forgetting how you diverted Squaw Crick to the east side

of Axblade Ridge, Dall?" he asked accusingly. "Slash W range is worthless without water, and you know it."

Sprecker grinned sheepishly.

"I could wait another year and buy Slash W for taxes, after you and Jepp go bust," he countered shrewdly. "Let's put it this way: I ran a sandy on you Texicans, and I want to make it good. I can swing Squaw Crick back onto your side of the ridge and use that range for the stock I have to move off Buffalo Meadows."

Westring reached under the lapel of his jumper and brought out Durham and thin husks. He was silent during the time it took him to fill and shape the quirly, his brow furrowed as if he were giving serious consideration to Sprecker's proposition. And he was—but not along the lines the rangehog imagined.

Sprecker had spoken truth. Another season, especially if Montana saw a wholesale die-off in January and February, would wipe out the Slash W. Sprecker, being the wealthiest cattleman in the Flintrocks territory, could easily enough regain title to the Slash W when bankruptcy drove the Westring brothers to the wall.

Such a generous offer might never come again. Westring knew he was a fool not to jump at the chance. But he could not keep his thoughts from swinging back to Benteen's murder, to Sam Bunce's mysterious perfidy, to Sprecker's quick intervention in the assay office showdown.

"Sprecker," the Texan said slowly, firing his cigarette and eyeing the range baron across cupped fingers, "Slash W ain't for sale, now or ever."

CHAPTER III

CLAUDE WESTRING gave tacit assent to the verdict which the jury returned regarding Ollie Benteen's murder: death at the hands of unknown persons. Probable motive, robbery.

Dixon laid the old man to rest that afternoon. Except for a handful of muckers who had known Benteen down in Denver City and Cripple Creek, the old prospector's last rites went virtually unnoticed by Claybank's citizens, who were apathetic to the almost daily spectacle of the deputy coroner's hearse heading for the boot hill cemetery by the Beaverhead.

Sundown was less than two hours off this brief winter afternoon when Westring rode out of town, heading back toward the home ranch. Beyond the snow-drifted hogback north of Claybank, the Texan veered off to the stand of timber where Ollie Benteen had met his doom.

Reaching the spot where the prospector's lifeblood still lay scarlet on the snow, Westring tried to read sign in the hoof-churned drifts, tried to reenact what took place.

At the moment of his death, Benteen's jenny mule had probably been heading northwest. The .44-40 slug had struck the old man in the back, at an angle running toward his left lung. That meant that his ambusher had been stationed somewhere along the southeast rim of the clearing, if Joe-Ed Dixon's testimony at the inquest had been accurate.

Stepping back in saddle, Westring spurred his gelding to the southwest. Icicle-festooned undergrowth whipped at his buffalo coat as he entered the indigo shadows of the lodgepole timber.

He found a set of hoofprints a few yards inside the conifers. Two sets. One belonged to Marshal Tol McBride, who had scouted the area for sign at daylight this morning. The other was unquestionably the spoor of Benteen's slayer.

Slanting sunset light penetrated under the snow-hung aspen thickets, and glinted off a metallic object which had escaped the marshal's search that morning. Swinging out of stirrups, Westring pawed through the frozen twigs and retrieved the

object. It was a rimfire .44-40 shell case, the odor of burned powder still clinging to it.

The feel of the cold metal cartridge put a grisly sensation down the Texan's spine as he recalled that Joe-Ed Dixon had probed a slug of .44 caliber from Benteen's corpse. This, then, was the shell which the killer had ejected from his Winchester.

Scouting the area inside the undergrowth, Westring made another discovery. Behind a snow-mantled gabbro boulder at the fringe of the clearing, he located the clear impressions of spike-heeled boots in the hard crust of snow. And a brushed-off spot on top of the boulder, where the ambusher had rested the barrel of his .44-40, its muzzle commanding the entire scope of the clearing beyond.

"Cowboots," Westring whispered. "Only a bronc-stomper would be wearin' Justins. No miner plugged Ollie with the idea of lifting his dust. No barfly trailed him out from some honky."

Westring was on his hands and knees, crawling back to where he had ground-hitched his sorrel when the shot came.

A blow from an invisible fist smashed Westring high on the right shoulder, spun him violently around. His arm went numb before his ears registered the flat whipcrack of a gunshot somewhere off in the trees, its echoes breaching the dusk quiet.

BELLIED down on the frozen earth, Westring arched his back and reached under his body with his left hand, tugging his Colt from leather.

His attacker was moving off through the timber, boots crunching on hard-packed snow, brushing ice off low-growing limbs. The red glare of sunset was blinding Westring, putting him at a disadvantage. He started flexing the fingers of his right hand, trying to restore life to them.

Then he caught sight of a crouched form skulking Indian-fashion from tree to tree, silhouetted against the blinding sunset glare. Ruby light glinted off a Winchester barrel, put a scarlet halo around the ambusher's woolen mackinaw.

Westring recognized that garment. Sprecker's foreman, Kile Drillden, wore a black-and-red mackinaw.

Drillden was not stalking closer to investigate his kill. He was moving off in the direction of town, to whereever he had left his horse after trailing Westring into the timber.

Bracing his left arm across a fallen log, Westring notched his gunsights on the ambusher and squeezed off a shot.

When the smoke cleared, he saw his target had vanished. A scuttling sound off in the underbrush reached his ears, told him his shot had missed, that he had scared off his quarry. If he had had the use of his right hand, Drillden would have been cold meat by now.

Westring settled down to wait, wondering if the Circle S ramrod had holed up, waiting for him to show his head over the log, or whether he was circling around for another shot before the light failed.

An eternity later, Claude's ears caught a rataplan of hoofs far off beyond the timber in the direction of Claybank. That might be a passing rider. More likely it was Kile Drillden, unnerved by the failure of his bushwhack errand, high-tailing back to town to report what had happened to Dall Sprecker.

The numbness left Westring's shoulder as darkness settled in and the temperature plummeted below freezing. A drowsiness was creeping over the cowpuncher, and he knew its danger. He felt the sticky warmth of blood inside his sleeve. Stabbing pain came to bullet-torn muscles as movement was restored to his arm.

It was deathly quiet in the pines,

broken only by the occasional clatter of a pine cone dropping to earth. But Westring knew it would be suicidal to venture out of the brush and mount his gelding, as long as the burned-out glow of sunset lingered. He couldn't take the chance and gamble that Kile Drillden had actually left the timber.

The agony of his shouder wound finally drove Westring out of hiding, back to his sorrel. He swung wide to the east and emerged on the snow-covered floor of Beaverhead Flats a mile from the point where he had entered the timber.

Reaching the outskirts of Claybank, he found the reduction mills had closed down. Their racket was replaced by the cacophony of music from the hurdy-gurdy houses, the roar of noise from the deadfalls and honkies along River Street, the rumble of big-wheeled ore wagons pulling in from the South Range diggings.

Luck was with him. He found Doc Grobinder cooking supper in his little soddy next door to Dixon's establishment. Grobinder, long since inured to having furtive-eyed men call on him with gunshot wounds to treat, asked no questions of the taciturn cowpuncher. He set out his instruments on a boiled towel, gently removed Westring's bullet-punctured buffalo coat and bloodsoaked hickory shirt, and swabbed the bloody musculature on the point of Westring's right shoulder.

"Slug went clean through," Grobinder gave his laconic diagnosis. "Missed your collarbone by a hair. Barrin' infection, you won't know you got creased a week from now."

WESTRING gave the medico a gold octagonal and stepped out into the stream of foot traffic coursing up and down the plank walks. The pain had eased off in his shoulder, but the bulk of the compress which bandaged his flesh made it difficult to use his right arm.

He was aware of the danger that walked the night here in Claybank. Drillen had had plenty of time to acquaint Sprecker with the failure of his bushwhack mission. Death might come from any alley mouth or shadowy doorway, if the Circle S boss had alerted his gun-hung crew to be on the watchout for the Texan.

Westring crossed the street to the marshal's office. Again luck was with him; Tol McBride was in the jailhouse cleaning a shotgun in preparation for his routine round of the camp's gambling halls and barrooms.

Westring felt considerably perked up in spirit when he came away from a half-hour conference with Tol McBride. In the event of his death by any cause tonight, the marshal would know what to do.

The string of Circle S cowponies still stood at the rack in front of the Lucky Nugget when Claude Westring pushed his way through the batwings into the smoke-fowled barroom which the Circle S bunch made their headquarters when visiting Claybank.

The pine bar was jammed with muddy-booted muckers and Circle S riders. In an annex off to the left, miners were dancing a polka to the music of a tinpanny piano and a fiddle, enjoying the company of the Lucky Nugget's bevy of percentage girls.

A bombazine-skirted jezebel caught Westring's eye as the Texan paused with the half-doors fanning his back. He passed up the brazen invitation in her smile, turning his attention to the gambling tables at the far end of the barroom.

He located Kile Drillden, his back to the door, engrossed in a stud poker game in a far corner. Then he spotted Dall Sprecker at the roulette layout. The presence of assayer Sam Bunce at Sprecker's elbow brought its meaning to Westring.

Elbowing through the bearded, gun-hung throng, Westring caught Sprecker's eye above the heads of the crowd pressed about the baize-covered roulette table. He jerked his

head toward a secluded corner beyond the chuck-a-luck cage, caught Sprecker's brief nod in response.

Westring wondered if he had surprised a look of astonishment in the Circle S boss's first unguarded glance. If Sprecker knew of his foreman's murder mission tonight, his inscrutable face gave no hint of guilty knowledge.

Westring was building a smoke over in the corner by an empty faro table when Sprecker joined him, brows arched quizzically.

"Think over my proposition, Claude?"

Westring eased his bandaged shoulder against the pine-board wall, studied his cigarette tip for a moment and then nodded.

"Yeah. But I'll have to consult my brother before I can give you a definite yes, Dall. Providing your offer is still open."

Sprecker chewed his soggy cheroot for a moment. Across the room, Kile Drillden was eyeing them covertly, pretending to be concentrating on his poker hand.

"The offer still stands," Sprecker said. "Maybe I'm a fool, but I'm short of graze. I'll have my lawyer draw up a quit-claim deed for your signatures and I'll make a draft on the Stockman's Bank of Missoula for ten thousand, six hundred. Okay?"

Westring grinned enigmatically.

"Bring the deed and the dinero over to the Slash W tomorrow afternoon," he said. "If Jepp agrees, it's a deal."

Sprecker thrust out a hand to seal the bargain. Westring, ignoring the overture, turned on his heel and headed off through the crowd.

CHAPTER IV

SMOKE spiraled from the blacksmith shop chimney at the Westring ranch next morning. An assayer from Claybank, one Mike Rhodes by name, had converted the Slash W forge into a makeshift assay furnace. He had come out to Squaw Creek Valley at dawn, at the instigation of Marshal Tol McBride.

He was busy making a test of a hundred-pound sample of ore which Claude Westring had brought over from Ollie Benteen's prospect hole midway up the slope of Axblade Ridge.

The Westring brothers returned to the ranch at noon, in a democrat wagon. They had spent the morning scattering baled hay over in the north coulee, to prevent starvation from decimating the gaunted herd of Slash W shorthorns wintering there in the shelter of the gypsum rimrocks.

The two punchers unhitched, broke the skim of ice from the windmill tanks, and headed for their cabin. Stomping snow and mud off their boots, they went inside.

Mike Rhodes was busy at the kitchen table, scribbling figures on the flyleaf of a cattleman's journal. Before him was a set of balances enclosed in a glass case. On one of the scale pans was a tiny bead of lemon-yellow gold.

Bottles of nitric acid, *aqua regia,* and other assaying equipment were aligned at Rhode's elbow.

"What's the verdict?" Claude Westring asked, unbuttoning his buffalo coat and spreading it over the back of a split-pole chair in front of the crackling fireplace.

Rhodes finished his figuring, pulled his spectacles down to the end of his nose, and turned in the rawhide chair to survey the two Texans.

"Benteen had a bonanza, men. If I don't miss my guess, Axblade Ridge is filthy with the yellow stuff, grassroot deep. Benteen was right. The other prospectors who curried Squaw Creek were wrong. Because there was no float ore in the creek bed, they overlooked the placers further up the slope."

Claude and Jepp eyed each other, pulses hammering on their temples. The prospect of mineral wealth on otherwise worthless land inflamed

them with its possibilities. Cowmen born and bred, they interpreted any wealth they might glean from mining in the terms of what that gold would buy: land and horses, barns and corrals and blooded beef.

"My assay shows Benteen tapped an ore body that should net nine hundred ounces of gold to the ton," Rhodes went on. "I can't make any further predictions until the snows thaw off your outcrops, but I got a hunch Benteen's placer will make you boys rich enough to buy and sell a dozen men like Dalton Sprecker."

Rhodes packed up his assaying gear and headed back to town in his buckboard a half hour later.

Standing in the door of their log shack, Claude and Jepp saw three horsemen top the crest of Axblade Ridge and slant down the snow fields in their direction, shortly after Rhodes' wagon disappeared down the valley road toward Claybank.

"Ridin' over grassroot gold," Claude grunted. "I wonder how much Sprecker paid Sam Bunce to tip him off that Ollie had struck it rich."

Claude took a pair of field glasses from the mantleshelf and focused them on the oncoming riders.

"Sprecker's taking no chances," he grunted, handing the glasses to his brother. "Drillden and Sam Bunce are with him."

THE oncoming riders vanished under the snow-piled rim of the dry creek bed, to reappear a few minutes later on the near bank. They reined up at the rack outside the moss-chinked ranch cabin and walked up the path to where Claude Westring stood in the doorway.

Bunce and the foreman grunted acknowledgments to the Texan's greeting as they went inside, but Sprecker was in high good humor. The faces of the three men glowed with the cold, and frost rimmed their stubbled jaws as they backed up to the fireplace, the heat drawing steam off their mackinaws.

"Here's a quit-claim deed, transferring title on your five sections of Slash W graze," Dall Sprecker said, fishing a folded document from inside his beaver coat. He tossed it on the table where Mike Rhodes had been working. "I've got a check for twelve thousand in my wallet. It's yours when you and Jepp put your signatures on that instrument."

Claude Westering shook his head.

"Sorry, Sprecker," he said softly. "You've had your trouble for nothing. Jepp's talked me into hanging onto the Slash W."

Sprecker's face twisted into a scowl. Without speaking, the Circle S boss tugged off his beaver coat, tossed it over a chair, and hitched the gunbelt which sagged under the weight of two triggerless Walker model Colts.

"Kile, go out and water our broncs," Sprecker grunted an order to his foreman. Then, shuttling his gaze back to the Westring brothers, he bit out: "How's that again, Claude? Ain't I offered you enough?"

Kile Drillden moved away from the fireplace, heading for the door to carry out Sprecker's orders. Reaching it, he swung about, hand dropping to the staghorn-butted Colt at his thigh.

Sam Bunce waddled over to the pealed-pole partition which separated the kitchen from the bedroom and leaned against it, big hands hooked in the shell belt which girdled his paunch. The assayer stood there, waiting, his face tense.

Tension was building up in the room, putting an electric charge in the air. If the Westring brothers sensed that they had been maneuvered into a trap, caught between Kile Drillden and Sam Bunce, they gave no sign of dismay.

"We had an assayer come up from town this morning to test the ore Ollie Benteen dug out of Axblade Ridge, Dall," Claude said conversationally. "He'd hit pay dirt. We aim to lease our mineral rights to the syn-

dicate, letting them do the smelting and paying up a fifty per cent royalty."

Sam Bunce broke the silence which followed.

"Sprecker knows that. I told him day before yesterday that Benteen's strike will make that low-grade stuff on the South Range look like chicken feed."

Claude Westring swung his smoldering gaze toward Bunce.

"Is that why you bushwhacked Ollie the other night? To keep him from telling us about his good luck, Bunce?"

Bunce jerked a fat thumb toward Dall Sprecker, standing in front of the fire place, basking in its warmth. All sham was dropped from the rancher's face now, and avarice was in his leering grin and narrowed eyes.

"I tallied Benteen with my .44-40, Claude. Kile tailed you out of town last night at my orders. He bungled. We won't bungle now. Savvy what I'm driving at, you Texicans?"

The two Westrings exchanged glances. It was out in the open now, the whole rotten deal, just as Claude had appraised it after his trip to Claybank yesterday.

AS IF SPRECKER had given them some secret signal, Bunce and Kile Drillden lifted guns from holsters, leveled them at Claude and Jepp, left Sprecker to do the talking.

"You're caught in a crossfire, boys." Dall Sprecker's voice held a subtle note of amusement. "All you have to do to keep from being gutshot is to sign that deed."

Claude Westring's gaze slanted over to the paper which lay on the table.

"And if we do sign, what guarantee have we got that you won't kill us anyway?"

Sprecker shrugged. From a pocket of his levis he took out an indelible pencil, tossed it on the table.

"We'll give you till sundown to roll your soogans and saddle up. As long as you stay out of Montana, you'll stay healthy. It's that simple."

Claude Westring laughed harshly.

"No dice, Sprecker. We won't sign."

Sprecker's hands lowered, taut fingers about the bone butts of his Colts.

"One second, Dall," Claude Westring went on. "Before you make it look too scary, take a look at the curtain in the bedroom door yonder. Maybe you'll change your mind about this set-up."

Sprecker froze, guns half drawn. His yellow eyes darted to the left, toward the burlap curtain which closed off the doorway to the left of the fireplace.

Thrust through the parted curtains was the black bore of a Winchester, trained at Sprecker's head.

With a choked oath, Kile Drillden swung his guns toward the curtain. Instantly the unseen rifleman behind them swung the .30-30 around and flame blasted from its bore. The Circle S foreman held his feet for a ghastly interval, dead with a steel-jacketed bullet in his brain.

Jepp Westring flung himself to the puncheon floor as Sam Bunce jerked the trigger of his Root side-hammer .36. The slug whipped through space which the younger Westring had occupied an instant before.

Jepp's gun barked. The impact of his bullet drove Bunce back against the log wall, blood welling from a blue hole punched through one pock-marked cheek.

Claude had picked his own target. There was no time to draw his gun. He twisted his holster upward on its belt rivet, aiming at Dall Sprecker.

The Circle S boss's guns exploded first, but his lead went wild in that frenzied moment of unforeseen showdown, bracketing Claude Westring's crouched body.

Claude, triggering through the toe of his holster, saw his slug rip into

Sprecker's granite jaw, saw the Circle S rancher pitch face forward through his own clouding gunsmoke.

Ollie Benteen had been avenged.

Jepp was slapping his brother's back then. It was all over.

Sam Bunce lay toppled against the partition wall, looking like a grotesquely fat toad, ribbons of blood leading from his nostrils. Kile Drilden was sprawled against the slab door, guns unfired, eyes bugging and sightless. It seemed incredible that three men had died in the space of as many seconds.

"Okay, Tol. You can come out now," Claude spoke wearily.

The swaying curtains of the bedroom doorway were parted by the elephantine figure of the Claybank marshal, emerging from the hideout he had occupied since before daylight that morning.

A grin touched the lawman's mouth as he grounded the butt of his carbine.

"I promised you Benteen's killer for your trouble in riding out here last night, marshal," Claude Westring said, tossing Dall Sprecker's unsigned deed into the fireplace. "The way it's worked out, I reckon you'll have to borrow our buckboard to haul these three jaspers down to Dixon's morgue."

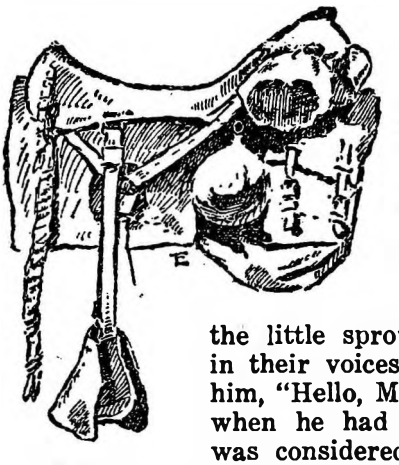
Tol McBride fingered the law badge on his mackinaw lapel, grinning as a pleasant thought struck him.

"I got a hunch," he predicted musingly, "that the Circle S will change its brand to Slash W before next fall's beef gather. I reckon you Texicans will be slapping your brand on Montana beef long after this here gold rush has been forgotten."

Heroes Belong to Younkers

By Robert S. Fenton

Even though the saddle maker of Prado couldn't see, his sixth sense told him how he could measure up to a youngster's ideal of powdersmoke prowess.



WHIT HASSLER, saddle maker of the town of Prado, had been expecting the question the sheriff's six-year-old son had put to him. Little Jim came into the shop a lot and at odd times to watch him work. For a long time Whit had hoped the boy would keep that question far back on his tongue. But it was out now. "Mr. Hassler, why do you carry a six-gun? How could you shoot anythin' if you're blind?"

Hassler wanted to yell at the kid and tell him that folks in a certain part of this country, over by the Little Missouri, still talked about his magic with a gun. That was when he had worn a lawman's badge. Even though a man can brag and have others brag for him, a small boy has to be shown.

He said listlessly, "I don't rightfully know, Jimmy." His hand came in contact with the gun and he wondered if he was a fool to carry it. "Habit is a powerful influence, Jimmy, an' I wouldn't feel fully dressed without it." He wondered if Jimmy's pa, Sheriff Hack Braun, or one or two other men had told the boy about his shooting practice a mile outside of Prado. For three years he had practiced shooting at sounds, and the results, according to the eyewitnesses, were amazing.

Whit Hassler had never been too impressed by the praises of grown men. It was the hero worship in the eyes of the little sprouts, the deep respect in their voices when they'd said to him, "Hello, Mr. Hassler." That was when he had all his faculties and was considered the greatest sheriff ever to wear the star, in a certain community far from Prado.

Now he was just a blind saddle maker, and he was glad he couldn't see Jimmy's eyes. The quality of his voice had been enough. He said, "You better run along home, son. Dark already."

"Pa said I could wait up for him," Jimmy said.

"Where'd he go?" Hassler laid a piece of leather on the skiving block.

"Went to Malvern City to look at a man in jail there," the boy said. He was quiet for a moment. "Why do you have the lantern hangin' up by the door, Mr. Hassler, if you can't—"

"There's folks that can, Jimmy," the saddle maker said in a tight voice.

The light from that lantern made the lines in his middle-aged face seem deeper than they were, and gave the impression that there was some brightness in his eyes. Yeah,

little hombres like Jimmy had to be shown, he thought. He leaned against the skiving block and put down his knife when the sounds of trouble came from down the street.

AT FIRST it was just a break in the town's steady hum of sound, and then it was a definite disruption knifed through with gunfire. Men yelled, and horses at the tie-racks set up a nervous racket. The planked walks drummed out the sound of men running.

"Jimmy, don't go near the door," Hassler said, and moved toward it himself as if his eyes were as good as they ever were. He stood out on the walk for a good five minutes until the hue and cry faded out a little. Steps came close and the saddle maker recognized certain voices. "What is it, Cal?" he asked.

"Man held up Ordway's bank, Whit. Seth was in there after hours makin' a loan to Faraday of the Rocking T. Ordway's hurt bad an' Hack's deputy is dead. The spook didn't get out of town, Whit. They figure they got him cornered in Selby's lumber yard."

"Who is it, Cal?"

"Ordway is sure it's Al Sassone. Would happen when Hack was out of town."

Hassler said, "Good." He thought of Jimmy, and Hack's other child. He remembered eyes that were the color of the clear daytime sky and curls the hue of clover honey. "No need to wait for him, Cal." He called back into the shop, "Jimmy, you stay here until I git back."

Another voice said, "Whit, what you figure on doin'?"

"Aim to find out for myself once an' for all, Ben," Hassler said, and felt the cool clamminess under his arms and in the hollows under his knees. A man has nothing if not his pride. Here was his chance with the odds even. He'd asked for it many times on his bended knees and now it had been given him.

Jimmy asked breathlessly, "You goin' after the badman, Mr. Hassler?

"I am, Jimmy. Bring me my hat. It's on the saddle horse."

"Gee," the boy said. "Gee, Mr. Hassler."

Whit Hassler walked down the street with two men flanking him and pleading with him to get the crazy idea out of his head.

"Don't try and stop me, Cal," Hassler said. "You'll be mighty sorry. What kind of a night is it?"

"Clouded over, Whit."

"Black as night then in the lumber yard. I'm used to a blind trail. Sassone ain't. Sure, we could wait for Hack an' the young fool'd go in there an' git himself killed. He has a family, Cal. I have nothin' to lose, but a heap to find out." His knees shook a little and there was some unease in him, but a thousand men and horses would not hold him back now. "There's a door in the fence facin' the alleyway next to the hotel, Cal. Don't guess Sassone knows about it. Get away from me as I've walked the dark of this town alone for three years. I know it better than any one.

WHIT HASSLER came to the lumber yard fence and moved along it until his fingers came in contact with a big leather hinge. He pushed the door open and stepped inside. His nerves sang as he stood and listened for a few moments. He began walking, his left hand groping in front of him.

He came to a pile of lumber and moved along it, and now his sixth sense began to function. He sensed the presence there. He began to hear little sounds that men with eyes could not hear. He moved catlike between two piles of lumber and when he felt his boots sink into sawdust, he knew exactly where he was.

The movement off to the right was stealthy, only a faint brushing sound, but to Hassler's acute senses it was like a man crashing through dry brush. He licked very dry lips.

"That you, Sassone?" he called out, and quickly fired.

A painful grunt of surprise came at him out of the dark, and now anyone could have heard a man's bulk shouldering along the board fence. Hassler had already shifted his position when Sassone's gun roared.

"Dark, ain't it, Sassone?" the saddle maker mocked. "Darker for you, though." He pitched to his left and answered a desperate shot that missed, and his bullet tore a wracking cough out of the badman's throat.

Hassler heard Sassone fall heavily, then waited patiently. The silence pressed hard against his chest and his breathing was like the bite of Selby's saw through a spruce log. Then he heard men coming in.

"Over here, boys," Hassler called out, and his voice had the old ring to it. He felt as tall as the high board fence.

A familiar voice said, "He's dead. Whit Hassler, you old smoke-eater!"

The warmth of a lantern was against his leg. Men slapped him on the back and marveled at what he'd done. But he hardly heard the praise. As he walked through the dark and out of the lumber yard, he knew he was no longer just the blind saddle maker of Prado. No one would ever ask him why he wore a gun again. Hassler quickened his step and soon caught the smell of leather and beeswax. He turned into his shop.

"Jimmy?"

"I'm here," the boy said. "You get the outlaw, Mr. Hassler?"

"Sure did, Jimmy. Now you better run along home."

Voices, high-pitched, came in off the street. "He got him! Whit Hassler got Sassone!"

"Gee," Jimmy said. "Gee, Mr. Hassler. Will you teach me to shoot some day?"

He felt little fingers on his arm. All that mattered had been in the sound of the boy's voice. They kept calling for him out there, but they could wait. Heroes belonged to kids.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946

of Western Aces, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass.
for October 1, 1947.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Western Aces, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537 Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, A. A. Wyn, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.; Managing Editor None; Business Manager, A. A. Wyn, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Periodical House, Inc., 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.; Rose Wyn, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.; Warren A. Angel, Rockville Center, New York; C. A. Publishing Co., Mt. Morris, Ill.; (E. Campbell, Mt. Morris, Ill.); (E. L. Angel, Rockville Center, New York).

3. That the known bondholders mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs, next above giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting is given also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

A. A. Wyn
(Signature of publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1947.

ROSE BLUMENTHAL, Notary Public
New York Co. Clk's No. 435, Reg. No. 9B-B-7
Commission expires March 30, 1949.

Rangeland Iron Man

By Nat McKelvey

Some interesting highlights in the life of a fighting frontiersman

ACROSS a blanket, two men sat cross-legged, grimly facing each other on a fateful night in 1878. On the outcome of their conference hung the issue of war or peace, and talk cascaded like a flash flood.

In the high fastness of Mexico's Sierra Madre mountains, a chill air rustled over the field of council. Men in blankets pulled them closer. They were adherents of one of the cross-legged men, Geronimo, chief of Arizona Apaches, hard-riding, severe, unrelenting in his hate for the white man. Opposite the slash-mouthed old chief sat Al Sieber, representing the United States Army.

Geronimo, who has been called "the biggest chief, the best talker, and the biggest liar in the world," arose gracefully to his feet, speaking all the while.

"I will return to the reservation," he declared in the Apache tongue. "I will make no more war. I will do these things if—" He paused for dramatic effect, his coal-black eyes swept the band of braves and soldiers.

"If what?" Sieber grunted.

"If you give me two Mexicans to make mescal for me to drink. If you give me arms and ammunition, calico for my women, shoes for my children, money for my—"

Sieber, rising to his full six feet, the light from the campfire turning his sandy hair and gray eyes to copper, held up a hand, commanding silence.

"Geronimo, you have talked for an hour. You have asked for everything except for these Mexican mountains to be moved to Arizona for you and your tribe to live in. I'll give you until sunrise to decide if you don't want these mountains too. If your former conduct entitles you to what you have asked for, then you should have these hills also."

Quickly, Sieber turned his back on the chief, walking away. Fully clothed as he always was in blue flannel shirt, heavy pants, and top boots, Sieber lay on his bedroll, staring at the stars, thinking. If Geronimo refused to return to the reservation, it would mean more months, maybe years, of bloody battles between Apaches and whites. Yet, Geronimo asked too much.

As Sieber pondered, he became aware of a young man, looking down at him. Tom Horn, who was later hanged for a murder he did not commit, started to speak. Sieber waved off the words of his youthful Apache interpreter.

"Go away, boy," he commanded. "I'm thinking up all the mean things I can say to that old wolf tonight when we meet again."

Whatever Sieber thought of to say, it proved ineffective. Although sixty-two Indians returned to the reservation, Geronimo refused to go, preferring the owlhoot life of a renegade.

NOT until five years later, in 1833, did Sieber finally induce Geronimo to return to the Apache reservation. On that occasion, General George Crook, Sieber's commander, personally confronted the chiefs, Geronimo, Nana, Ju, Loco, and a thousand warriors. After Crook's speech, Geronimo sought Sieber's advice and decided to return to Arizona. It was characteristic of Al Sieber's integrity that even his enemies valued his counsel.

As scout and Chief of Scouts, Al Sieber served his country with distinction for nearly twenty years. Apaches who knew him and worked with him had nothing but praise for him. "Sibber," they called him. To them "Sibber" was a good man, fair and square. He was brave, not afraid of anybody.

Born in Germany, February 29, 1844, Sieber was a leap-year baby, youngest of eight children. Prior to 1848, his father died, and the family, because of their part in the German revolution of 1848-49, were forced to flee to America. They first settled in Pennsylvania, but shortly before the Civil War moved to Minnesota.

Eighteen years old, Sieber joined the Union Army in March, 1862. At the battle of Gettysburg, he received a double wound that put him in sick bay for five months. By the time war ended, Sieber was twenty-two, a hardened veteran, ripe for adventure in the far West.

In 1866, Al landed in Virginia City, Nevada, where he earned a few dollars grading roads. While on this job, he was held up by an armed robber who took the only money Al had, a fifty-cent piece. Next Al appeared as a silver prospector at White Pine, Nevada. Finding nothing, he pushed into California to look for gold. His luck there was no better, so he joined a band of men driving horses to Arizona where he arrived in 1868.

After knocking about as a rancher for three years, learning the country and its redskinned natives, Al accepted a job as army scout under General George Stoneman. Sieber was the right man for the work. So keen was his understanding of Indian psychology, that he could enlist as trustworthy scouts the very bravest Apaches he had fought and vanquished.

One historian, Dr. Frank C. Lockwood, calls Sieber "a hardened human instrument." Certain it is that Al could hike sixty miles per day, exist on meager rations, sleep anywhere, and fight for hours without apparent exhaustion. During his lusty career, he was twenty-nine times wounded by bullets and arrows.

Once, during a skirmish with Apaches, Sieber rescued a four-year-old Indian boy. Scooping the tot from the thick of battle, Sieber placed the lad behind himself on the snow-white horse he was riding. For a while, the frightened boy hung to the scout's shirt, apparently completely in terror. But suddenly, the scout felt a sharp stab in the side, then another, and another. A warm trickle flowed in his shirt.

Sieber swiveled around in the saddle. Making a quick grab, he seized the young boy's wrist. From the tiny fist he plucked his own bowie knife, red with his own blood. The lad had, true to Indian training, attempted to eliminate an enemy.

Unlike many frontiersmen, Al Sieber fought for justice for the Indians as, in a later time, Col. T. E. Lawrence fought for justice for the Arabs. As with Lawrence, Sieber was betrayed by higher authority. In the main, Sieber's operations were

against renegade Indian bands, against men who would have been criminals regardless of race.

Sieber was no harder than the times demanded, and he certainly was not cruel. If he had to execute a prisoner, he spared that prisoner the anxiety of knowing his fate and the exact moment of meeting it.

DURING Sieber's command as chief of scouts, occurred the incident that outlawed one of Arizona's legendary characters, the Apache Kid. Sieber had reared this Indian, teaching him to read and write English.

In 1887, at San Carlos, the Apache Kid was serving as Sieber's first sergeant of scouts, a position that he filled with dignity and efficiency. Peaceable and self-restrained, the Kid seemed to have no worry. Then he attended a dance at which his father, Toga-de-Chuz, was host. Tizwin, the Indian drink more potent than Kickapoo joy juice or triple distilled panther sweat, flowed like buttermilk. During the orgies Toga,-de-Chuz was found murdered, a knife through his heart.

Evidence showed that an old enemy, one Rip who, forty years earlier had lost a sweetheart to Toga-de-Chuz, had committed the crime. According to Apache tradition, the Kid, being the eldest son of the murdered man, was duty bound to avenge his father's death.

Sieber, out of respect for the Apache code, detailed the Kid and two others, to arrest Rip and bring him in. This the Kid tried to do. Rip resisted arrest, and the Kid shot and killed him. Instead of reporting to Sieber, the Kid fled, got drunk, and for some days was a deserter from the scouts.

At length, responding to Sieber's urgent invitation, the Kid, heavily armed, returned to camp. With him were four other Apaches, all armed.

"Lay down your guns, men," Sieber commanded, speaking fluent Apache. "We must talk together as friends."

The men complied, indicating good faith. They were about to comply also with an order to report to the guardhouse, when someone in the crowd of curious onlookers fired a shot. Instantly, all hell broke loose. Sieber dashed to his tent, grabbed his rifle, and was levering a shell into it when a bullet struck his left ankle, shattering it and giving him a wound that never after healed.

In the melee, the Kid and some of his friends hit for the owlhoot trail. In their wake they left a string of murders that eventually led to their capture and sentencing to prison at Yuma. While en route to that institution, they killed their guards, a sheriff, and his deputy. Immediately, the territorial legislature posted a $5,000 reward for capture of the Kid, dead or alive.

Ordered by his superiors, Sieber relentlessly pursued the Kid and his men. Though he killed several of the Kid's lieutenants and friends, he could never capture the Apache Kid. This was so, perhaps, because Sieber felt that in some small measure, at least, the Kid had been betrayed while trying to surrender after the shooting of old Rip. What became of the Apache Kid is, to this day, unknown.

Sieber's loyalty to his friends was legendary. Tom Horn he raised and trained and took with him on his two historic meetings with Geronimo. When Tom was falsely accused, even convicted, of murdering one Willie Nickell in Wyoming, Sieber came to his defense with public statements.

Of Tom he said, "Knowing him as I do, and taking all into consideration, I cannot and will not ever believe that Tom Horn was the man the papers tried to make the world believe he was. These words and sentiments cannot be put too strong, for I can never believe that the jolly, jovial, honorable, and whole-souled Tom Horn that I knew was a low-down miserable murderer."

In spite of Sieber's plea, they railroaded Horn to the gallows.

IN 1885, Sieber ceased to hold the position of Chief of Scouts, but continued in government service as superintendent of pack trains, as guide and interpreter. The incident that caused Sieber's forced retirement from army service is typical of his honesty.

At the time, Captain John L. Bullis was agent at San Carlos. Ambitious, domineering, he set out to surround his territory with a network of new roads. For labor he used Indian prisoners who received no pay.

Whenever the captain ran short of laborers, he would arrest a batch of Apaches on trumped-up charges, sentencing them without a trial. He kept his road gangs filled, but Indian morale and Indian belief in the white man fell to a low level.

Al Sieber could not stomach this double-dealing. He could not force himself to arrest Indians whom he knew were innocent. Finally he confronted Bullis. In blunt, sulphurous language he read off the swaggering captain. Almost at once, Sieber was relieved of his duties and warned off the reservation.

Sieber was the classic woodsman. With his favorite weapon, a Henry rifle, he was a dead shot. Once he killed a running Apache renegade with a bullet through the head at five hundred yards.

Whenever the troops needed meat, they sent Sieber to get it. In the White Mountains, he hunted wild turkey—not in the modern manner with a shot-gun—but with a rifle. He killed birds as large as forty pounds. At other times, he would bring in as many as seventy-five deer in a day.

The scout was something of a prospector, too. By stalking out the first claim in the Verde Valley, near Jerome, Sieber became the pioneer in a copper development that now includes the famous United Verde Mine. Today Sieber's mine, the Copper Queen, is immortalized at Bisbee, Arizona, by the renowned Copper Queen Hotel.

As a camp cook, Sieber was both skilled and ingenious. From the most modern ingredients he could concoct tasty dishes. A great lover of vinegar, on one occasion he exhausted his supply. Nothing daunted, he made some from wild grapes.

Sieber's vices were those of the frontier, gambling and drinking. He never married.

Al Sieber died as he lived—by violence. Yet he died trying to protect some of the very Indians against whom he had fought in earlier days. As chief of a road building crew at the side of Roosevelt Dam, Sieber commanded a group of Apaches. Toiling and grunting, they strove to dislodge a giant boulder that lay in the route. Suddenly, Sieber saw the boulder teeter and stir, threatening to tumble over his gang.

"Look out!" he shouted in Apache. Jumping forward, he scattered the Indians, saving their lives. But the boulder rolled over him, erasing forever from the frontier a man who had, in large measure, helped to mold it.

In a resolution of tribute to this pioneer, the territorial legislature said, in part: "He held to the day of his death the respect of every Indian who had ever fought with him or against him, and the respect and regard of every man or woman to whom he was known."

General Thomas Cruse placed Sieber in the category of immortal pioneers. "Sieber," General Cruse declared, "deserves to rank with the greatest of our fighting frontiersmen, Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill, and others whose stories are so well known."

"Sibber," his Indian friends said, "was fair and square, brave. Not afraid of anybody!"

.45 Freight for Oro Gulch

By Michael Trent

The odds were two to one that Johnny Meager couldn't get his pack string through the ice-laden trail. For Johnny had more than blizzards and avalanches to buck when bullets hailed from a back-trail trigger-man.

THE trail north to Oro Gulch was a treacherous one, even in the best of weather. In the dead of winter, when blizzards raged through the high Sierras, it was choked by drifts and hammered by snowslides. There had been travelers who made foolhardy attempts to break through to the isolated camps only to pay with their lives. Knowing that, young Johnny Meager swallowed hard when Saul Benson, owner of

the Mercantile Supply House, offered him a bonus rate for packing some special freight through from Ransom City.

Johnny hedged, "I'll have to think it over."

Saul Benson was an angular-faced trader from New England, as shrewd as men came. He reminded Johnny that for two months, ever since Johnny set himself up as a packer, he had been pestering Mercantile for freight to handle. "You make this trip for me," he added slyly, "and I'll throw plenty of business your way."

Despite the roaring fire in the big potbellied stove, it was cold in the stock-cluttered store. Yet Johnny began to sweat, from sudden strain. This was his big chance to get established as a packer; if he got through the mountain passes and delivered the merchandise to Oro Gulch, his reputation would be made. But if he didn't get through . . . Well, there would be no getting back either. A pack string caught in a snowslide or blizzard on Oro Gulch trail couldn't save itself by turning back. Going or coming, the mountain route was equally dangerous.

"It's a pretty risky trip, Mr. Benson."

"A packer has got to take risks," Saul Benson said. And again he added a sly comment: "I'll be taking a risk, too — sending valuable merchandise out over that trail."

"Well—"

Benson jumped Johnny's indecision. "You can start in the morning," he said, settling the matter.

Johnny buttoned up his blanket-lined canvas coat and pulled on his woolen gloves before leaving the store, for the temperature was five below. Outside, the cold hit him like a fist. The wind whipping along Ransom's crooked street grabbed at him. Snow was piled high everywhere, and the sullen gray sky threatened more of it. Johnny headed toward the Miners' Rest. There would be packers in the saloon who would tell him if he would have a chance on the trail.

THEY would be packers for Matt Dublin's big Sierra Express Company, which until now, with Benson's offer to Johnny, had controlled all the freighting to and from Ransom City. Thought of taking some business away from Matt Dublin made Johnny brighten. Big Matt had laughed at him when he bought his mules from a packer whom Sierra Express had put out of business—by cutthroat rate cutting.

Big Matt had said, "You wasted your money, friend." He had been riding Johnny about it ever since, for Johnny's mules stood idle in his ramshackle barn, devouring expensive feed. That was part of the hard luck that dogged Johnny's footsteps.

In more ways than one, Johnny's name fitted him. He was meager of build, so skinny he had a hungry look, and he was always meager of pocketbook. Nothing he had tried since coming to the gold fields three years ago, as a youth of eighteen, worked out. He had panned for gold, without turning up enough color to keep himself eating regularly. He had prospected hundreds of miles of mountain country without success.

He had worked at all sorts of jobs, and gotten fired from some. When he did hold a job for a time and acquired a poke, he would lose it in some foolish venture, like his pack string. No, his mules weren't a foolish investment. He now had a chance to make them earn their keep, and a profit. Turning into the Miners' Rest, Johnny was almost convinced that he could get through to Oro Gulch.

A dozen miners forced away from the diggings by the cold were in the saloon, along with a few Sierra Express wagoneers and packers. Johnny sought out an old-timer named Hank Shelly. He bought the whiskery old packer a drink with one of his last few silver coins, then asked about the Oro

Gulch trail. Hank eyed him knowingly.

"Don't try it, kid," he advised. "You'll lose your mules, maybe your life. Saul Benson offered that freight to Sierra Express, but Matt Dublin won't risk an outfit on that trail this time of year."

Johnny nodded gloomily.

Hank went on talking, advising him in friendly fashion to leave Ransom City and find another town where he might find it easier to get a start. "Matt Dublin's got more than a business reason for not letting you set up here," Hank ended up.

Johnny knew what the oldster meant. There was a girl, dark-eyed Mollie Garran. She was pretty as a picture, and she and Johnny were on friendly terms. But Matt Dublin had set out to court her, too, and that was his second reason for not wanting Johnny Meager to prosper as a packer. Mollie was also the reason why Johnny wasn't going to take Hank Shelly's advice and seek a fresh start elsewhere.

The saloon door banged open, and Old Hank nudged Johnny. Big Matt Dublin was coming in. The door slammed shut behind the burly express company owner.

"A cold day, gents," Dublin said boisterously. "As cold as a freeze-up in hell." He guffawed at his own humor. That was Dublin's manner; he was vigorous and noisy. "Cold enough for drinks all around. Line up, boys!"

He was a handsome, ruddy-faced sort who favored and could afford fine big-city clothes. He wore a dapper overcoat with a fur collar. A broad grin showed on his face as he caught sight of Johnny Meager. He came to where Johnny stood at the bar, crowding Hank Shelly aside.

"Just came from the Mercantile," he said. "Benson tells me you're taking some freight out tomorrow, bound for Oro Gulch." His grin twisted, became a sneer. "You poor fool, don't you know that trail's closed with snow?"

Johnny didn't answer.

Everybody was listening, and Dublin, liking an audience, went on. "Sam Maury, the big man at Oro, is marrying a girl out of the Bird Cage honky-tonk up there. Maury owns the Lucky Dollar Mine, which makes him a bonanza king. He's got more money than he knows what to do with, so he's throwing a big party to celebrate his wedding. He sent a half-breed Frenchman, an old fur trapper, down here on snowshoes with an order for a lot of fancy grub and drinks. Benson is anxious to deliver the stuff because he can charge Maury sky-high prices."

DUBLIN paused, for the bartender had lined up the drinks. Men reached. Dublin shoved a glass toward Johnny Meager, then picked up one for himself. They all drank, Johnny choking on the raw whisky. Then the crowd faced Matt Dublin again, expectantly.

"The Mercantile stocks a lot of fancy merchandise for hombres like Sam Maury, who've struck it rich," Dublin told them. "I know, because my wagons freight it in from Sacramento."

"What kind of fancy merchandise?" a burly placer miner asked.

Dublin grinned. "Better stuff than anybody in this camp eats or drinks," he said. "Choice meat, and oysters packed in cans. Eggs—wrapped in paper and packed in oats, so they don't freeze. Special flour, for fancy baking. Butter, too. No rotgut whisky, either. Champagne. Real imported French Champagne!"

Envious exclamations rose from men accustomed to the plainest of fare.

Dublin turned to Johnny Meager. "That's the kind of freight you'll be risking your hide to pack to Oro Gulch," he said. He looked about, lifted his voice. "I've got a thousand dollars in dust that says the kid here can't make it. Anybody want to take the bet?"

Johnny got out of there, in a hurry.

They were betting on his getting over the trail, gambling on his death. Nobody had jumped at Dublin's first offer, so he had cut the odds to two to one that Johnny couldn't get his pack string through to Oro Gulch. Dublin had found takers then, but only because miners and freighters liked a wager and had been baited by the odds. Johnny had a hollow feeling inside himself when he reached the street. He had to make the try now, or be branded a quitter. If he backed down, he would be done for good in Ransom City.

Johnny plodded through the snow to the Garran house, a tidy place with the only peaked and wood-shingled roof in town. Patrick Garran was a carpenter. His workshop was around back, with a neat sign over the door giving his name and trade. Johnny went around back, but he knocked on the kitchen door. He wanted to see Mollie.

She opened the door for him, reached out, drew him into the warm and spicy-smelling kitchen. She wore an apron over her gingham dress. There was a smudge of flour on her pert nose, and her cheeks were bright from her bending over the cookstove. She was baking cookies and fruit cake, for Christmas was only a week off.

Mollie smiled with her eyes as well as with her lips, and her invitation, "Take off your things, Johnny, and sit awhile," was sincere.

Johnny obeyed, seated himself on a chair standing against the wall. Mollie kept busy at the table, deftly cutting out patterned cookies and placing them upon the baking sheet. Johnny watched her in silence, for he was always tongue-tied when with Mollie Garran. He hadn't known many girls. He hadn't Matt Dublin's easy ways with women.

"Something on your mind, Johnny?" Mollie asked, her voice gentle with him. "You look pleased with yourself, but a little worried, too."

"I've got some freight to pack, at last."

"You have!"

"Saul Benson is shipping some merchandise to Oro Gulch," Johnny told her, and saw her pleasure fade. "Matt Dublin turned it down, so Mr. Benson offered it to me."

Mollie didn't say anything, but he could tell that she was upset because her hands became idle. He was glad that she didn't speak, for he didn't want her to tell him not to make the trip. Now that he had started talking, words came easier. He told Mollie how much it meant to him, that it was his chance to get a real start. For if he made good, there would be plenty of business for him, and not alone with Saul Benson.

He wasn't quite able to find the right words to tell Mollie that he was thinking of her future as well as of his own—of a future they might share. But he knew she understood. Mollie also understood, without his mentioning it, that the trip was a risky one.

"It's good to get a start for yourself, Johnny," she said. "I guess I'm the one who urged you to become a packer when you had the chance to buy those mules. You hadn't any luck working a claim or prospecting, and you didn't do well working for other men. But—well, it's a dangerous trail. Are you sure you can get through?"

"If a man couldn't get through, Saul Benson wouldn't risk sending out valuable merchandise."

"Maybe not," Mollie said, unconvinced.

"I'll get through, all right," Johnny told her, and grinned.

His grin was sheer bravado. Mollie recognized it for that, but said no more. She was frowning, though, as she went on with her baking. Johnny guessed that he had made a mistake in telling her beforehand. Now she would worry.

THE sky had a sullen look in the morning when Johnny took five of his mules around to the rear of the Mercantile. He halted them by the

loading platform, swung down from his horse, went inside. Saul Benson was there in the wareroom, fussily checking a list while his clerk stacked the Oro Gulch goods by the door.

The sharp-featured merchant said, "Meager, I'm counting on you getting my goods through. There's nearly a thousand dollars tied up in this order."

Johnny said, "I'll get it through," and began hustling cases and sacks out onto the platform.

He wasn't an expert packer, but, having worked for a freighting firm in Sacramento at one time, he could rig up a sound pack. Working without a second packer, he had to use squaw hitches in the ropes instead of the more common diamond. But there was strength in his skinny frame, and he worked with the will of a man aware of being his own boss.

When the string was ready for the trail, Saul Benson said peevishly, "Mind you now, that merchandise is almost worth its weight in gold."

Johnny knew well the high prices of provisions in the gold camps, and so could believe that. But he thought: *How about my life?* He didn't say anything, however, merely nodded. He mounted his old crowbait sorrel, got the mules moving, and headed for the street. He saw Mollie Garran appear at her door. She had a shawl about her shoulders and held a flour sack half filled with some of her good cooking. She smiled and handed the sack to Johnny when he reined in.

"I was afraid you wouldn't think to take any provisions along for yourself," Mollie told him.

Johnny thanked her, tied the sack to his saddle horn.

Mollie said, "I'll be—thinking of you, the whole time."

Johnny knew that she had almost said that she would be praying for him. She had caught herself up, because she didn't want him to know she was worried. Johnny Meager understood Mollie Garran, all right. He wished that he knew how to say the things that were in his mind—in his heart. Suddenly he grew bold.

"Mollie, if I get through safe, I'll be fixed as a packer," he said. "I'll buy more mules—maybe a wagon and team, even—and hire a couple of men. I'll make out fine, like Matt Dublin." His voice began to fail, fell to a hoarse whisper. "I'm wondering if then you and I—"

He couldn't get it all out.

But Mollie Garran understood Johnny Meager.

"I haven't made up my mind, Johnny," she said gently. "Maybe when you get back, I'll know. At any rate, I'm very fond of you. And—" Mollie was suddenly grave—"and if you're making this trip just for me, I—well, don't, Johnny. Don't risk it for me!"

"It's only partly that, Mollie."

"You want to show up Matt Dublin, then. That's no good, Johnny."

"It's more than that," he told her. "I reckon I've got to prove myself—to myself." He forced a grin, said, "S'long," and kneed his horse. Riding after the plodding pack mules, Johnny felt a warm inner glow. Mollie hadn't given him her promise, but she had let him know that Matt Dublin, for all his easy ways with women, hadn't got far with her!

The glow lost its warmth when Johnny rode past the Miners' Rest. The bartender and several of the men who had placed bets with Matt Dublin yesterday appeared at the door, and one called out, "Don't you let us down, Meager. We've got a lot of dust bet on your getting through to Oro!"

Johnny nodded, but made no reply.

FARTHER on stood the box-sized office of the Sierra Express Company. Matt Dublin was at the door talking to Frenchy LeBrun, the man who had come over the Oro Gulch trail with the order for Saul Benson. LeBrun was actually only a quarter-breed, but the Indian blood showed in his dark skin and blunt features. He wore a beaver-fur cap and a buckskin

coat. He had his snowshoes lashed to the pack on his back. LeBrun gave Johnny a narrow look. Dublin stepped out into the piled-up snow, took the cheroot from his mouth, and grinned.

"You'll never make it, Meager," he called. "Frenchy tells me the north trail is worse this winter than it was last."

"Still, I'll make it," Johnny retorted.

Dublin's mocking laugh followed him.

Three of Sierra's big six-horse-team wagons were leaving the wagon-yard. They rattled emptily and no doubt were bound for Sacramento for freight. The third of the string was tooled by old Hank Shelly, and he slowed up so that Johnny's outfit came alongside. They were well beyond Matt Dublin's hearing, but Hank pitched his voice low.

"Watch yourself on the trail, Johnny?" he warned. "I'm not saying Dublin will try anything crooked, but he's sure up to no good talking to Frenchy LeBrun."

"Matt wouldn't pull anything that raw, Hank."

"Don't be too sure of that," the freighter muttered, and spat tobacco juice in contemptuous gesture for his employer. "LeBrun will do anything for a little money, and Dublin's got so much at stake he can afford to buy a little insurance. You mark my words—and keep your eyes open."

Johnny nodded, said, "Thanks, Hank."

They had come to the edge of Ransom, and the freight rigs took the safe south road. Johnny swung his mules onto the north trail that led deeper into the mountains. Only bleak cliffs and lonely gorges lay ahead. There were no settlements between Ransom City and Oro Gulch. There was only a snowbound rocky fastness.

Johnny feared being caught on the trail by a blizzard, but the clouds scattered in midmorning and let the sun through. The glare of sun on snow was like a fist hammering Johnny's eyes, half blinding him, but he felt easier in his mind. There was a warm wind. A chinook. Johnny pocketed his gloves, unbuttoned his coat, and grinned over the thought that back in Ransom City Matt Dublin would be cursing such weather.

Still, it was slow, hard going. The animals had to buck the drifts, and at times the narrow trail was blocked and the string was held up while Johnny dug it clear with the shovel he packed along. The chinook caused a slight thaw, and the gorge reverberated with the din of falling ice and shifting snow.

Giant icicles fell crashing from the precipices, and miniature snowslides thundered down the cliff walls. There was danger in traveling so close to those towering cliffs, and Johnny flinched at every explosive burst of ice and rumble of slipping snow. He knew that it would be sudden death for an animal or himself to be struck by one of those falling icicles. And he feared that each slide would grow into an avalanche which would engulf the entire outfit. A blizzard would have been worse, but the chinook wasn't wholly a blessing.

Early in the afternoon, the trail zigzagged up a long slope. It took the string two hours to reach its crest, and there Johnny paused to rest his animals before descending the north slope into Gold-Pan Canyon.

The narrow gorge of the Gold-Pan twisted tortuously for half a dozen miles, and it was one of the worst stretches of the trail. Johnny hoped to clear it by nightfall. He didn't want to be caught in such a narrow canyon if the chinook wind let up and bad weather came, which was certainly to happen—soon and suddenly. Johnny knew his luck couldn't continue this well.

He had forgotten Hank Shelly's warning, but he glanced backward after putting his mules on the trail again. He remembered then what Old Hank had said about Matt Dublin hiring Frenchy LeBrun to pull something

to keep the outfit from getting through the mountains. He had reason to remember. Johnny saw a distant figure working its way along the gorge the outfit had just traveled. A man traveling north, and moving swiftly over the drifts. Frenchy LeBrun on his snowshoes!

Johnny muttered a mild oath.

He reached into his saddlebag and brought out a long-barreled Colt six-shooter. He thrust the weapon into his waistband, and wished it were a rifle. He saw that the still far-off figure carried a rifle, and his uneasiness increased. LeBrun had a bad reputation. Johnny himself had never been in a gunfight.

JOHNNY kept looking back, saw LeBrun top the ridge and start his descent into the Gold-Pan. The tracker was gaining, had lessened the outfit's lead to no more than a mile. Johnny tried to hurry the string, using shouts and a lash of his rope across broomtailed rumps. But those pack mules had one plodding gait in this snow, and they brayed complainingly.

One jenny let loose with her rear hoofs, and Johnny swung his horse away none too quickly. He gave up then, knowing he couldn't pull away from LeBrun. A man on snowshoes was faster than mules or horses in the high drifts. LeBrun came on, within rifle shot now.

The Gold-Pan too was dangerous, letting loose ice and snow from the high cliffs. An icy dagger crashed explosively on an outcropping of rock just above the pack string. That succeeded where Johnny had failed; the mules broke into a lurching run. Johnny managed to get his old sorrel into an uncertain lope. And LeBrun, evidently thinking his quarry was escaping, opened fire.

Johnny guessed that LeBrun was using one of those new Henry rifles, for the shots followed each other in quick succession. Johnny heard the whine and shriek of the half-ounce slugs. One of the mules was creased across the rump, and let out a wild squeal. Another bullet ripped and tore through the tarpaulin covering the same animal's pack.

It was clear to Johnny then that LeBrun meant to kill the pack mules, rather than to murder the packer. But that thought infuriated Johnny Meager as much as if the shots were aimed his way. He jerked his horse to a shot, drew his six-shooter, and fired at LeBrun. He was shouting in rage as he squeezed the trigger.

LeBrun was wily. He halted and took cover behind some snow-capped rocks. His next shot was aimed at Johnny. It tore at the slack of the packer's canvas coat. Johnny was firing back, but LeBrun was not only sheltered but beyond accurate Colt range. It was a duel that could end in only one way, and Johnny, despite his blind rage, knew that the odds were against him. But then he heard thunder.

The rumble became a roar, and the roar boomed from cliff to cliff. The din rose to a wild crescendo. Johnny was first to see it—the avalanche of snow rushing down the steep slope. Then LeBrun stumbled from the rocks, staring upward, and Johnny saw what had happened. LeBrun was in the direct path of the snowslide.

LeBrun was slow to run, but now got started.

He threw away his rifle. His snowshoes tripped him. He fell sprawling as the first of the slide—small balls of snow and particles of ice—rained down. He got up and ran some more.

Johnny stared in astonishment. He saw a cloud of powdered snow puff upward, hundreds of feet above the avalanche. He saw the tremendous rush of rolling snow, like water pouring over a broken dam breast. Above the roar, the air popped and cracked as it filled the vacuum created by the sudden shifting of all those tons of snow.

The monstrous rush surged down the cliff, smashed against the few scrub pines at its bottom. It leapt

away from the wall, thudded tremendously in one great slap against the canyon floor. It engulfed the fleeing Frenchy LeBrun. He vanished from Johnny's sight.

The tail of the slide piled up as more and more snow slipped down in the wake of the great mass, and flying ice fragments and wads of snow pelleted Johnny. It surged close, and his horse reared and plunged—and threw him. Johnny fell deep into the loose snow, but when he picked himself up the roaring had let up. The avalanche was over except for a last settling of the cloud that had puffed skyward.

Johnny was awed as well as shaken, convinced that he had witnessed a near-miracle. The thaw-loosened snow had been hanging on the cliff in precarious balance, and the concussion of the gunshots had been enough to tip the balance. LeBrun had outsmarted himself. LeBrun? Johnny heard a muffled wail for help. His attacker was still alive, then; he hadn't been wholly buried.

Johnny thought bitterly: *To hell with him,* and turned away.

IT TOOK him some little while to catch up his spooked horse. He mounted and started after the mules, which were now perhaps a mile up the gorge and, over their fright, traveling again at their customary plodding gait. They were safe enough. Johnny reined in, looked back at the high-piled mass of snow. He heard a panicky shout.

There was conflict in Johnny Meager. His mind conjured up a picture of a fellow human being hurt and unable to help himself. He remembered other occasions when he had jeopardized his own best interests to lend a hand to someone in trouble. He told himself that Frenchy LeBrun deserved no help. *Let him yell for Matt Dublin!* he thought sourly.

But there was a soft streak in Johnny Meager. If LeBrun was lying injured, he was no longer an enemy. Johnny knew that he would be haunted by the man's cry for help, if he went on. He would have no peace of mind. Johnny called himself a fool, and rode back.

LeBrun lay buried up to his neck. He had managed to keep his head and one arm clear, but there was a great mound of snow atop the rest of him. He was helplessly trapped and in agony. He had a broken leg. His china-blue eyes, out of harmony with the Indian cast of his face, had fear in them. It was clear that LeBrun expected Johnny to kill him. But he clung to a straw of hope.

"It was Dublin," LeBrun croaked. "He gave me ten ounces of dust—"

"I ought to leave you here," Johnny said sourly.

He began to dig away the trapping snow.

The sun was almost gone by the time it was done. Johnny set LeBrun's leg, using splints cut from pine branches, and bound them in place with strips cut from the man's buckskin coat. Then he cut two long poles and, with a blanket and rope, made a travois for the sorrel to drag. He got LeBrun onto the travois, then, leading the horse, started out in such Indian fashion. It was the only way LeBrun could be moved. With a broken leg, the man could not mount a horse.

It was slow going, and Johnny begrudged the time he was wasting. Yet it had not held up the pack mules. Accustomed to keeping to the trail until dark, the string had continued on up-canyon. Long after dark, Johnny came upon them stolidly waiting by an ice-fringed creek. Mule-wise, the animals knew by instinct that here would be the camping place. Johnny halted the sorrel. He meant to make camp.

But LeBrun said, "Don't stop here, friend."

Johnny stared at him. LeBrun lay there on the travois in great discomfort, and it only seemed reasonable that he should want to get off the thing and take his ease by a fire. And get some grub inside him. But he was peering at the night sky and sniffing

the wind. It was cold again, with the sun down, but Johnny believed the chinook was still with them.

"Blizzard coming," said LeBrun. "We've got to find shelter."

Johnny would have laughed with scorn, but the man was in dead earnest. LeBrun looked uneasy. Johnny asked where they would find shelter in this wild country. His tone was sarcastic.

"I know where there's a cabin," LeBrun replied. "It's three miles from here, and back from the trail. If we stay here, we're goners—sure."

If LeBrun hadn't been part Indian and of the trapping country, Johnny would have scoffed at his warning. But he feared that the man might know what he was talking about. "All right," he said. "We'll go on."

THEY made it to the cabin with no time to spare. It was a good enough shelter, with a lean-to around back to put up the animals. Johnny had no more than gotten the outfit moved in when a savage wind whipped through the mountains. The temperature dropped, kept on dropping, and the snow came.

They were holed up there for the night—for two days and nights longer. The blizzard was so severe that each time Johnny went out to cut firewood, he had trouble finding his way back through blinding snow. Had he been caught on the trail, he and his animals would have died in the cold white hell. It was a grim joke on Matt Dublin, for the man he had paid to keep the outfit from reaching Oro Gulch had been its salvation.

The third night the blizzard was unabated, but LeBrun probed his strange nature and predicted, "Tomorrow we'll hit the trail again."

He was right, for in the morning the storm had blown itself out. It was terribly cold and the sky still had a bleak look, but the snow let up and the wind died down. Johnny got the outfit onto the trail, with the crippled LeBrun again riding the travois, and all that day they bucked gigantic drifts. They camped that night at Skillet Creek, and Johnny said, "Tomorrow we'll reach Oro, if we're lucky."

"We'll get there, partner," LeBrun assured him.

Frenchy LeBrun had a way of being right in some things. At noon of the following day, the gold camp turned out to gape in surprise at the outfit that had come over the trail in midwinter—through a blizzard. And Sam Maury, the bonanza king, slapped Johnny Meager hard on the back and exclaimed:

"Friend, I'll give you a bonus for this trip!"

Johnny's grin wasn't very enthusiastic. He was already thinking of the return trip. He wanted to let Mollie Garran know that he had gotten through all right. And he wanted to settle matters with Matt Dublin. His horse and mules could be stabled here in Oro Gulch until the weather opened. He would go back over the trail in LeBrun's style of traveling, on snowshoes . . .

It was another night of raw wind and snow flurries, with the cold creeping through every crack and cranny of Ransom City. The Miners' Rest was well patronized; men gathered in the saloon for the warmth of its big potbellied stove and the other sort that came in bottles. The door opened, a chill blast swept through the room. Somebody yelled, "Get that door shut, quick!"

The newcomer was slow in his movements, for he wore snowshoes, but finally he closed out the cold. A man exclaimed, "It's Meager! By all, that crazy packer got back!"

Another man cursed. It was Matt Dublin, who was playing cards at a table with Saul Benson and a couple of miners. Johnny Meager gave the crowd a stiff grin. He was caked with snow. He removed snowshoes, gloves, woolen muffler, his canvas coat, and piled them by the wall.

"I'm back," he said. "I've been to Oro Gulch, and now I'm back."

"He's lying!" Matt Dublin shouted, wild with uncontrollable rage. "What proof have we got that he reached Oro?"

Johnny slowly crossed the room. Somehow, he had a different look. A more confident look. He stood tall. He took a paper from his pocket and laid it before Saul Benson, the merchant.

"There's your receipt," he said. "It's signed by Sam Maury."

Saul Benson beamed on him.

Johnny took another paper out and laid it on the table. "This is a confession signed with Frenchy LeBrun's mark and witnessed by Sam Maury and two other Oro Gulch men," he said. "Frenchy admits trying to kill my mules so I couldn't get through to Oro with my freight. He was paid ten ounces of dust for the job—by Matt Dublin." Johnny gave Dublin a mocking grin. "You should have left it up to the blizzard," he went on. "It wouldn't have crossed you up like LeBrun did."

Benson and some of the others were reading the confession.

Dublin's heavy face was a dull red. He could see his own reputation smashed and Johnny Meager's stock rising. It was more than he could take. Matt swore, jumped up, slamming his chair over backward. His face took on an ugly grimace. He grabbed the table, toppled it over, lunged at Johnny. Saul Benson yelled, "Watch it, Johnny!"

Johnny was braced. He was ready for this, eager. He wasn't any longer the timid, uncertain man Ransom City had known. He met Dublin's rush, and though it carried him backward and slammed him against the bar, he hammered the man's face with jolting blows. He battered Dublin's nose, drew blood and an agonized howl. A wild swing of Dublin's fist caught him alongside the head. He went down, but came up—and leapt in.

There'd never been such a brawl in the Miners' Rest. It was a slugfest; both men giving and taking heavy punishment, and both going down half a dozen times. Johnny saw his enemy through a red-black mist finally. His breathing rasped, and his arms grew leaden. For a moment, picking himself up after a blow to the jaw, he thought in panic: *He'll do me in, yet!* But Dublin was weakening. He went down under a blow between the eyes. He sprawled out flat on his face, lay there groaning, and even when Johnny prodded him with his boot, Matt Dublin didn't get up.

A cheer went up. A dozen rough hands pounded Johnny on the back. He was pulled to the bar for a drink. He could have had a hundred free drinks that night, but after that one he slipped away. There was somebody waiting for him. Johnny Meager had no doubt, as he left the saloon, that Mollie Garron would have any trouble making up her mind now. He would make it up for her.

Because he shot first and asked questions afterward, the killer got an . .

Answer from Boot Hill

By Gunnison Steele

SID BOGART had crept up close to Sam Yeager's cabin there on Whitedeer Creek, a .30-30 Winchester in his hands and cat-savage murder raging blackly in his heart.

The forest marched right up to the cabin, so that branches of the towering pine and fir trees formed a dark, protective canopy above. The wind whispered softly in these trees now, as if trying to warn old Sam Yeager of his peril, and the near-by creek made an alarmed sound in the shadows. For Sam Yeager, folks said, could talk with the wind and water, just as he could talk with the wild creatures that were always coming to his cabin for handouts.

Sam was a fat, laughing little oldster with birdlike eyes. He ran just a few cattle in the surrounding meadows, and in summer worked the creeks for gold. He seldom left the hills, but he was always glad to have company.

"Me get lonesome?" he would say, smiling. "Not with all the friends I've got up here. We understand, and trust each other. Which is more than I can say for some humans I've seen."

Maybe he'd been thinking of Sid Bogart when he said that. Bogart was his nearest neighbor, although their places were several miles apart.

Bogart, a dark, slab-bodied man with wicked little eyes, grimaced in the dark. Sam Yeager's "friends" wouldn't help him now. He couldn't see Sam anywhere, but lamplight glowed inside the cabin.

Crouched at the edge of a cedar thicket, fifty feet from the cabin, Bogart watched narrowly. He had thought it out, and he knew he had to kill Sam Yeager. Two months ago old Sam had caught Bogart butchering one of his calves, and he'd gone to Sheriff Nick Bowers in Skytooth and lodged a charge against him. The trial was due to come up before Judge Oxstern, three days from now.

If Sam Yeager testified to what he knew, Sid Bogart was almost certain to go to Deer Lodge. Worse, in the course of the trial the law was liable to start probing along his, Bogart's, back trail, which might mean a hangrope. . . .

Bogart stiffened suddenly. A shadowy figure had come from the timber and was moving along the cabin wall toward the front door. Quick, wicked triumph slammed at Sid Bogart. Likely, he thought sardonically, Sam Yeager had been out in the forest with his friends. Bogart raised the rifle.

The figure had paused, and Bogart heard the rattle of a bucket. There was a shelf there against the cabin wall, he knew, where old Sam kept a wash basin and water bucket. Apparently Sam Yeager had paused for a drink—his last one. For now Bogart could see the stubby, bulky figure more plainly outlined against the peeled-log wall of the cabin.

He lined the sights carefully on that shadowy figure and squeezed the trigger. The rifle blazed and roared. Bogart heard a low grunt, saw the bulky figure stagger, heard a low thud as the figure fell to the ground. Deliberately, he drove two more shots at the dark, still figure there on the ground.

Bogart straightened, started for-

ward. Then, as a quick wave of panic flooded him, he jumped back into the cedars and went crashing toward the spot where he had left his horse in the deep timber a hundred yards away. Scratched and out of breath, he leaped into saddle and rode furiously away.

TWENTY minutes later he came to the trail that led westward from Skytooth to Hobbs Ferry. Here his trail would be lost among countless other hoofprints. His panic left him now, and he grinned in the dark. Maybe he'd be suspected of the killing, but there'd be no proof. And Sam Yeager would do no testifying in court.

Bogart spent the night at his rundown little ranch, and the next morning headed for Skytooth. He wanted to be there when Sheriff Nick Bowers got news of Sam Yeager's death. Bowers, a shrewd, relentless manhunter, might fume and rage, but he would be up against a blank wall this time.

Bogart entered the Mountain House Saloon and had a couple of drinks. Afterward, he got into a cheap poker game, to kill time. He had seen no sign of Sheriff Bowers. As time passed, doubt jabbed at Sid Bogart. What if he hadn't killed Sam Yeager, but only wounded him?

Silently, he cursed himself for not tarrying long enough to make sure. What if old Sam had stayed alive long enough to write something on the soft earth? But then, Sam Yeager wouldn't know who it was that had shot him in the dark, even if he hadn't died.

That made Bogart feel better. But, as noon passed, those imps of doubt returned to caper in his mind.

Bogart swore harshly, and flung down his cards, determined to ride out to Yeager's place and make sure.

But just then Sheriff Nick Bowers, a rawboned man with piercing blue eyes and a graying mustache, pushed between the batwings of the Mountain House. The sheriff paused, a hand on each wing of the door, looking about the room. His cold-eyed gaze riveted almost instantly toward Sid Bogart.

Bogart felt as if a bucket of icy water had been dashed over him. He sat very still, suddenly feeling weak, panicky. Those cold blue eyes seemed to pierce through to his brain and see what lay there. The sheriff's gnarled hands, swinging at his sides, were empty—but to Sid Bogart they seemed to hold a coiled rope, with a noose fashioned at one end.

He thought wildly: *He knows, and he's come for me. I'm trapped!*

The sheriff started across the room toward Bogart, and he said, "So, there you are, Sid. Now, about old Sam Yeager—"

Bogart snarled, "You'll get the same thing Sam Yeager got, blast you!" and reared up, grabbing for his gun.

Like a startled old tomcat, Nick Bowers leaped to one side, his hand stabbing downward. His old Peacemaker came out, blasted, and a red streamer of flame lashed across the room. Bogart stiffened, clawing at his chest, and fell slowly forward to the floor. Nick Bowers came forward and stood over him, puzzlement in his eyes.

Bogart wasn't dead, but he was dying and he knew it. There was no repentance in his black eyes as he looked up at the sheriff, only hate and anger.

"One thing," he whispered harshly, "I killed Sam Yeager, all right, and I'm glad of it—but I won't hang!"

"Sam Yeager?" The sheriff's voice seemed to come from a vast distance. "Sam ain't dead. He's over in my office, right now. That's what I come over to see you about, Sid. Sam Yeager rode in to tell me he'd decided to drop them calf-stealin' charges against you, because he's just naturally a friendly cuss.

"But, friendly or not, Sam's sore as a boil right now. He had a pet black bear, named Geronimo, which he'd raised from a cub. Some low-down skunk, Sam claims, killed poor Geronimo while he was gettin' him a drink outside the cabin last night! Now, what was it about you killin' Sam?"

Law Without Order

By Ennen Reaves Hall

No one savvied why that tinhorn badge-toter wanted to control Dias Valley—nor how he managed to eliminate every rancher who stood in his way. But finally young Bob Morgan hit onto the right answer that had brought about left-handed law.

A PEARL-HANDLED six-shooter might not look as businesslike as a plainer weapon, but it can shoot just as straight. All over southern Arizona the pearl-handled gun of dapper Moss Barker was held in high respect, both by law-abiding citizens and those who recognized no law but the law of might.

It spoke often, and always in a voice of authority. It spoke a quickly executed death sentence to law vio-

lators and, it was rumored, talked the same language to any brash enough to cross the Cochise County sheriff in his personal affairs.

Bob Morgan felt the chill fingers of death playing up and down his backbone as he stared at the fancy gun, stuck so carelessly in the lawman's belt. That carelessness didn't fool Bob any. He had seen that gun move with the speed of a striking snake, belching smoke and death. Not five minutes before he had seen it end a man's life. The man still lay on the floor at Bob's feet. He had been his friend and neighbor, Juan Garcia. Now he was just a dead Mexican.

Above his gun Moss Barker's eyes were as brightly hard and cold as the gleaming pearl. "Still think you want to stay, Morgan?" he asked softly. "Or don't you think it'd be smarter to take what I'm offering you and get out of Dias Valley? Tomorrow I might not offer anything, except maybe what Juan got." He touched the body on the floor with the toe of his boot, contemptuously.

Bob licked his lips, his mouth like dry cotton. Still staring at the innocent-looking gun, he muttered, "Juan nor me didn't have anything to do with that stage holdup. We was both home—"

The lawman smiled, his eyes going still colder. "Then Juan shouldn't have resisted arrest. He should have played it smart, like you're going to do. Smart men don't make trouble for themselves by resisting the law."

THAT was what Moss Barker always called himself—the law. And most people thought of him that way. Bob knew a man hadn't a chance, pitting his will against the cold-eyed sheriff's. All Juan Garcia had done was protest his innocence when Barker came looking for him with a warrant on a trumped-up charge of stage robbery. But Barker had killed Juan, and he called it resisting the law. He'd never have to answer for the Mexican's death.

But Bob Morgan knew what was back of it all. Juan had refused to sell his holdings in Dias Valley, just as Bob's father had done. And Dick Morgan, like Juan Garcia, was dead. Dick had stopped a bullet a few weeks back in a saloon fracas in Blackstone City. Barker had said Morgan had stepped in front of a bullet meant for an outlaw he was chasing, but Bob knew better. His father had been deliberately murdered, just as Juan had been, because he wouldn't sell out to Barker and leave Dias Valley. Just as Bob would be if he insisted on staying.

But Bob wasn't staying. He knew when he was licked. No piece of land, he told himself, was worth what his father and Juan had paid for it. Not even Dias Valley.

He nodded, said dully to Barker, "I'm willing to sell, sheriff. But you ain't offering what the land's worth. We've put in lots of work on the valley—"

Barker flung a thin packet of bills on the table. "Any land's worth what you can get for it and no more," he said coldly. "There's my offer, Morgan. Take it now or leave it. But I'm warning you, tomorrow it might be a damn sight less."

It was a thinly veiled threat, and Bob knew it. Tomorrow, the lawman was saying, he would get what Juan had gotten if he was still in Dias Valley. But Bob didn't want to die. The world was too big a place, with too much land in it, to die for one small portion of it.

"I'll take it," he said thinly. "I'll be gone before morning."

"Now you're being smart," Barker said, picking up the dead man off the floor as easily as if he'd been a sack of meal. "I'll take Garcia along to town for an inquest. And if you see Chambers and Slaughter, you might advise them to change their minds, too. I've decided to have all of Dias Valley, and I mean to get it."

But Bob hadn't any notion of trying to see John Chambers or Tom

Slaughter before leaving the valley. It wouldn't do any good, for he'd heard his neighbors talk before. They were just as determined as Dick Morgan and Juan Garcia had been to keep their fertile acres in the narrow valley between the San Pedro River and the Blackstone Mountains. Men do not easily give up the dreams into which they have put their sweat and blood.

It wasn't an easy thing for Bob—leaving. His eyes misted at the thought. He would find it hard to forget Dias Valley and the day his father had brought him there, a long-legged boy in his late teens. The two had stood on the site they had selected for their cabin and Dick Morgan had said, with a catch in his voice that Bob understood:

"This is it, Bob. We'll build a good life here together. Once we get that river to working for us, we'll make this valley bloom."

BUT it had taken sweat and toil and money to put the river to working. It proved too big a job for Dick Morgan and his young son, so they had let three other men have land—Juan, who had died fighting for his, John Chambers, and Tom Slaughter. Shoulder to shoulder the five had worked until a crude irrigation system was turning the arid wasteland into fertile fields. It was then Juan had reverently given the valley the name that had stuck, Dias Valley—God's acres, indeed.

Then Moss Barker decided to make the valley his. Already three of the five men were eliminated. It wouldn't take the wily sheriff long to get rid of the other two, but he could do it without any help from Bob Morgan. Not even to himself would Bob admit that Anita Slaughter had anything to do with his reluctance to see his neighbors before leaving. He had closed his mind completely against Nita.

Busy packing his personal things, Bob didn't hear the horse outside nor realize anyone was near until a shadow fell across the room. He looked up to see Nita Slaughter in the doorway.

Nita's mother had been Spanish, and from her the girl had inherited a cloud of silky dark hair and eyes that looked like black velvet. Her fair skin made the eyes and hair stirringly beautiful in contrast. Bob's heart missed a beat, as it always did at sight of her, as he straightened up and faced her silently.

"Going somewhere, Bob?" Nita's voice, usually as soft as her eyes, had a foreign brittle note in it today.

Bob didn't hedge. "Yes," he said flatly, "I am. I'm selling out to Barker and going away, Nita."

"And without bothering to say good-by." Her red lips curled in scorn, and her eyes were dark fire. "But that isn't surprising. When a man double-crosses his friends, he doesn't usually stop to tell them about it."

"I was afraid you'd feel that way, Nita." It was hard, but he managed not to let his gaze fall under the lash of hers. "And I reckon your dad will, too. But I'm tired of bloodshed, and there's no way to beat Moss Barker once he says he wants a thing. He killed Juan today—"

He stopped as she gasped in horror, her face whitening. After a moment he ventured another try to make her see reasoning.

"I'm certain now he killed Dad on purpose, Nita. And he'll find some flimsy excuse to get me, just as he did Juan, if I stay here. And no piece of land is worth dying for. I'm young and I want to live, Nita. What good would Dias Valley do me after I'm dead?"

"Men don't die for land, Bob." The red lips of the girl weren't quite steady, but her low voice was. "They die for the right to own land like a lot of men did before our time. Like your father and Juan did, but you—"

She choked, and he finished for

her savagely. "But I refuse to. You're right, Nita. I'm not staying here to stop bullets. If Moss Barker wants Dias Valley that bad, he can have it."

"And the lives of your friends with it," she said, all the fire suddenly leaving her so that she spoke dully. "You know Dad and John Chambers will fight him, but they haven't a chance alone. So I guess this proves how little we mean to you. A man is willing to fight for anything—or anybody—that he cares about."

He had no answer for that. After a moment he only repeated stubbornly, "I care about living. If you care about it for your dad, Nita, try talking some sense into him."

FIRE leaped back into her eyes so that they fairly seared Bob. "If being sensible means running away like a coward, then I don't want Dad to show sense. No matter what you think, Bob Morgan, some things are worth even dying for. Good-oy!"

Empty words, Bob told himself, watching the girl ride away as though pursued, her hair a floating dark cloud following her. Empty words, and small comfort to a dead man.

He was still telling himself that the next day as he sat in the Red Ball Saloon in Blackstone City, dallying over a drink much stronger than he was used to. The stage for Douglas left in a couple of hours, and Bob meant to be on it. Below the border or above—it didn't matter so long as he was alive. And there'd be other black-eyed girls to help him forget Nita Slaughter and her harsh words.

Two men came in and ordered drinks. Bob stirred uneasily as he recognized the men as Joe Royster and a half-breed known only as Moon—both deputies of Sheriff Moss Barker.

Over his drink Royster leered at Bob. "Heard you was leaving Dias Valley, Morgan. Ain't figuring on stopping in Blackstone City, are you? I don't reckon that would be smart, do you, Moon?"

Bob knew a threat when he heard it. He got up hurriedly, leaving his drink unfinished. "I'm taking the stage to Douglas," he muttered and went out.

The batwing doors were still swinging behind him when he heard the two men laughing contemptuously. "Hasn't got the guts of a sick rat," he heard Royster say.

"Smart," Moon grunted. "Dead men don't need guts."

Royster laughed uproariously at that. "Reckon you're right, Moon. And this time tomorrow old man Slaughter and that black-eyed she-devil of his'n will be agreeing with you, too."

Bob walked away, Royster's words ringing in his ears. So Moss Barker was plotting real trouble for Nita and her father. Well, hadn't Bob warned her? He'd warned her to talk sense to her dad and she'd answered by calling him a coward and talking big about some things being worth dying for. Likely enough, though, Tom Slaughter would see things different before Moss Barker got through with him.

But in his heart Bob didn't believe that. Tom Slaughter wouldn't accept the measly price Barker had paid Bob for his fertile acres, any more than Dick Morgan and Juan Garcia would accept such an offer. So Tom would die as the other two men had. And Nita? Well, Nita Slaughter wasn't his concern, either. There had been a time when he'd held a dream about her but that dream, like all the others he'd had, had been left in Dias Valley. Sold to Moss Barker for the price of his life.

Suddenly the thought was too much for Bob. When a man looks inside himself and hates what he sees there, he tries shutting the door, fast. Bob went back into the Red Ball and asked for a bottle. After he'd emptied it he got another, then staggered off looking for a room. The stage for Doug-

las came and left, but Bob didn't care. He was interested only in drowning his thoughts.

THE next morning Bob was up early because his head wouldn't stay in bed with him, but kept floating around the room. He went down to a restaurant and was still dawdling over a cup of coffee when John Chambers came in.

Chambers was a grizzled old Texas rancher who'd taken up farming only after an outlaw horse had left him with a busted leg that didn't heal straight. The old-timer couldn't do much riding himself, but he'd taught Bob a lot about horses and guns—and men. Bob knew Chambers would have died for Dick Morgan and his son any day.

The old rancher's face that morning was gray and seamed with new worry lines. His eyes hardened at sight of Bob, and he started to pass by. Then, changing his mind, he sat down at Bob's table.

"I heard you were gone, Bob. Or didn't Moss Barker pay you enough to git outa town on?"

Color stained Bob's face. "Just about," he admitted. "Look, John. I'm sorry I had to be the first to give in. But I couldn't see us winning a fight against Moss Barker."

"Not without fighting we couldn't," Chambers said harshly. "But I'd shore have welcomed trying, except a man can't do much by himself at my time of life. A few years back I'd have seen Barker in hell afore I'd have sold to him fer what he's offering. But now that Tom and Nita and you all give up, and Dick and Juan are dead, I reckon I'm licked, too."

Bob couldn't believe what he had just heard. "Tom and Nita gave up? Are you sure, John?"

Chambers nodded sadly. "Came by their place this morning, and it was locked up hard and fast. A sign on the door said they'd sold out to Barker and left. Just like you," he added bitterly, "without even telling an old friend good-by. And Tom knowin' I was facing a trumped-up murder charge by Moss Barker—"

"Whose murder?" Bob asked as quietly as he could.

"Juan's," Chambers answered, his face twitching. "And nobody knows better'n you that me and the little Mex was friends. But Barker claims Juan told him last week we was having trouble, and yesterday he found Juan in a clump of mesquite close to my shack with a bullet hole plumb through him. Barker got a warrant out fer me—"

"But he promised to drop the charges if you'd sell to him," Bob finished bitterly. "Sell, and leave Dias Valley."

Chambers nodded. "That's right. I told him to go plumb to hell, and he give me till today to think it over. I did figger Tom would stand by me." He blinked his eyes rapidly, and Bob saw the moisture gathering in them. "I reckon a man can't do much alone," he quavered.

Bob was feeling like something that crawls under logs, and he didn't like the feeling. As much to himself as to old Chambers he said heatedly, "We couldn't do anything standing together. Barker's the law and can do anything he wants to."

John Chambers shook his head. "Barker ain't the law, boy. He's just one man, and he can't do only what we let him do. It's our thinkin' about it that's been wrong."

SOMETHING inside Bob told him the old man was right. He had known it when Nita had talked the same way two days before, but he hadn't wanted to admit it. He'd been scared, a yellow belly. And he was still scared. Too scared to tell John Chambers or anybody else that he'd seen Barker shoot Juan Garcia Barker had known he wouldn't talk, that he didn't have the guts, as those two deputies had said.

Suddenly he was remembering

what else they had said—that Tom Slaughter and his black-eyed she-devil daughter would find out that dead men didn't need guts. A black sickness rose inside him as the full implication of the words struck home. He leaned across the table and gripped the arm of the old man.

"John," he said hoarsely, "that sign. Are you sure it was in either Tom's or Nita's handwriting?"

"Wasn't in anybody's writin'," Chambers answered. "It was in printed letterin'."

"Then anybody could have made it," Bob said, breathing fast. "Listen, John. We both knew Tom too well to think he'd give in to Barker like that. Or Nita either. Barker's carried them off somewhere to force them into signing sale papers." Hurriedly he repeated what he had heard the two deputies say and added bitterly, "I knew he'd find some way of making trouble for Tom, of course. But this looks bad, John."

"You're damned tootin' it looks bad, boy. Looks to me like he aims to leave 'em both dead somewheres where they ain't likely to be found an' claim they sold to him and left like you done."

Cold hands were squeezing all the blood out of Bob's heart. Fear for Nita was rising so strong in him he forgot all about his fears for himself. He gripped John Chambers' arm tighter.

"Listen, John. He can't do that to Nita. He's got to be stopped."

The old man's eyes started to glow with new hope. "Sooner or later," he said softly, "a man like Barker allus gits stopped. Where you startin' first, Bob?"

Bob thought that over quickly. "To find Tom and Nita. In all likelihood Barker took them into the Blackstones somewhere. There's not over a half-dozen places where prisoners could be held, and I know all of them, John. Can you stall around with Barker and keep him in town a few hours till I can do some searching?"

Chambers nodded. "I'll do my best, boy. But I already found out those two murdering deppities of his'n, Royster and Moon, is out somewheres. You figger on tackling the two of 'em singlehanded?"

Bob nodded, his face tightening with angry determination. "If I have to. And don't you worry none about that trumped-up murder charge, John. I saw Moss Barker shoot Juan in cold blood, and I'm going to tell it to everybody who'll listen to me."

He got up, dropping a hand affectionately on the old-timer's shoulder. "You won't have to fight Barker alone, John. We'll all stick together."

And likely enough die together, he was thinking as he took the trail to the Blackstones, the craggy wildly rough, sprawling desert mountains paralleling Dias Valley. But the fact didn't seem so important any more. Nothing was important except to find Nita and share her danger. To change that look of scorn and bitter hurt he'd seen in her black eyes two evenings ago.

FEW men knew the Blackstones better than Bob Morgan. He had hunted all over the treeless, rock-piled hills and had once discovered a shallow cave not very far from Dias Valley that showed evidence of being frequently used. When Moss Barker was stumped in his manhunt for some border bandits that had taken refuge in the hills, Bob had told him about the cave, and the men were captured. Now, thinking Bob gone, Barker might feel safe in using it for his own purposes.

Two hours later Bob left his horse in a ravine and worked his cautious way to a position above the cave. Lying flat on his belly on an overhanging ledge of rock, he studied the boulder-strewn area below. After a moment he smiled grimly. Not more than twenty feet below him was the black crown of a man's hat. Someone was on guard, to be certain no one approached the cave. A smart

thing to go around and come up from the other side as Bob had done.

The man sat with his back against a rock, only his shoulders and head exposed. Enough, Bob thought grimly, drawing a bead on that black hat. But, with his finger on the trigger, he hesitated. He didn't like shooting men in the back, not even Moss Barker's men. Besides, a shot would warn the second man, doubtless in the cave, of his presence.

Holstering his gun, Bob picked up a smooth stone about the size of a baseball. He had to raise up to give his arm leverage, but he risked that. That rock had a job to do and do right.

It didn't miss. Striking the man squarely on the back of his head, it toppled him over on his face without a sound.

Bob moved as fast as he dared then. A few moments later he stood at the opening of the cave, hardly more than a narrow slit between huge boulders, straining for some sound from within. There was nothing except a faint glimmer of light and the smell of wood smoke. He drew a deep breath and moved closer. His toe struck a small stone, and the small noise sounded startlingly loud in the stillness.

At once a voice called from inside, not six feet from where Bob stood. "That you, Moss?"

"Yeah," Bob mumbled. "C'mere, Joe."

As Joe Royster pushed through the opening, Bob moved aside, his gun held as a club. He didn't dare shoot, knowing Nita and Tom Slaughter might be inside. As Royster emerged, blinking in the bright light, Bob brought the gun down in a vicious blow that should have split Royster's head open.

But Bob had forgotten to guard against shadow. His clubbed arm was plainly outlined on the rock in front of the deputy, and as Bob's downward arc began, the other man threw himself flat, clawing for his gun.

Bob's blow, with nothing to stop it, threw him off balance. He half fell, throwing out a hand to the rock to catch himself. His gun clattered into the opening, and before he could stoop for it, another exploded almost in his face. He felt the gentle tug of the bullet as it went through his hatbrim.

HALF blinded by powdersmoke, Bob whirled to see Royster getting to his feet, fingering his trigger again. Bob jumped, doubled up jackknife fashion, and another bullet went over his head. Then his head struck Royster in the stomach, slamming him back against the rocks. Before the deputy could straighten up, Bob had brought up his fist in a powerhouse blow that started at his feet. It caught Royster flush on the jaw, snapping his head back against the rocks, His eyes rolled, and he slumped senseless to the ground.

Bob reached for the fallen man's gun, but never got it. An avalanche struck him from behind. Star exploded before his eyes, and as he fell, he dimly heard the echo of a rifle's crack mingling with the scream of a girl. Of Nita, and she sounded very close.

Another gun spoke, this time a six-shooter. Then Nita's voice, no longer soft, but hard and brittle enough to break. "Drop that gun, Moon, or you won't live to breathe another breath!"

The rifle in Moon's hands slid to the ground with a soft thud. Bob rolled over and sat up. Blood was warm on his face and the back of his neck, but he knew the rifle bullet must have just grazed his head as he stooped to get Royster's gun. If he'd been standing, it would have scattered his brains.

Bob's eyes cleared, and he saw Nita holding his own gun trained on the half-breed deputy. Moon's sleeve was bloodstained, showing the girl had shot well.

From one of Nita's wrists dangled a short length of rope, queerly

blackened on the end. Stout ropes still bound her ankles together. She had hobbled to the cave's entrance and picked up Bob's gun just in time to stop Moon's second shot.

Staggering up, Bob retrieved the gun Royster had dropped. Royster was beginning to stir, moaning faintly. Bob prodded him roughly with his foot.

"Get up," he ordered. "And inside, both of you."

The interior of the cave was dimly lighted by the fire Bob had smelled. Bob's flesh crawled as he saw the running iron in the fire. It was plain enough how Moss Barker planned to force the Slaughters to sell.

Plain, too, how Nita had freed her wrists to come to Bob's help. For now he could see big white blisters on her arms and wrists and the burned ends of the rope. He swallowed a lump in his throat as he took the gun from her so that she could free her father.

Tom Slaughter, still bound hand and foot, lay half senseless on the floor of the cave. He had been badly beaten, and Bob understood that. He'd have to be before they could do to Nita what they had done.

When Nita and her father were free, she held the guns while Bob tied up the two men. When he started questioning them, they turned sullenly silent. Going to the fire, Bob picked up the red-hot branding iron.

"Maybe a dose of this will make you talk," he said grimly. "If I'm not mistaken, you were going to use it on Tom and Nita. Now we'll see how you like it."

Absolute terror filled the men's eyes. "It was Barker's orders," Royster said. "He was going to use it, not us."

Bob brought the iron so close that its heat fairly scorched their faces. "Now tell me," he ordered, "why does Barker want Dias Valley so damned bad? Not to grow cotton and alfalfa, I'm damned sure, for Bar-

ker's no farmer." He moved the iron closer. "Why?"

Moon broke down. "It's the railroad," he gasped. "The railroad that's coming to Tucson has to cross the Blackstones. There's a natural pass through the mountains if they can use your valley. Moss plans to sell to them."

A railroad! That explained the lawman's eagerness to get full possession of Dias Valley. With the irrigation system and a railroad, the land would be worth a small fortune. A fortune Moss Barker meant to have at any price.

As Bob looked at Nita's cruelly burned wrists, anger, swift and terrible, took possession of him. "He won't get away with it," he said thickly. "Nita, get my horse and take your dad home. I've got business with Moss Barker when he shows up."

Nita smiled, her dark eyes flashing. "So have I, Bob. I'll wait, too."

IT WAS past noon when Barker came. Old John had done his part well. Bob, watching from the cave's entrance, saw the lawman leave his horse near the foot of the slope and come on afoot. He waved a signal to Moon, still on lookout duty where he had left him, the sun glinting on the barrel of the rifle in his hands.

Bob, watching from his hidden post, smiled. Barker didn't know the chambers of Moon's guns were empty. And he didn't know, as Moon did, that Bob's gun was trained on his back, watching for a wrong signal or a shout that would betray his presence. Bob had thrown so much fear into the breed that he didn't really expect any double cross.

Moon let his boss pass with only a casual word. Barker came up to the cave's entrance and sang out, "Okay, Joe!"

Inside the cave Nita, holding Royster's gun over him, nudged him, and he answered the sheriff in similar fashion. Barker stepped through the

entrance, then stopped short at sight of Nita's gun. Before he could move a hand, Bob was prodding him in the back with another.

"Your game's over, Barker," Bob told him coldly. "Right now we hold all the aces. We'll see if you like the way we play them."

With his hands and feet bound, Barker continued to mouth threats. "I'm the law around here, Morgan. I'll see you hang for this."

Bob picked up the white-hot running iron. With his other hand he took a thin packet of bills from his pocket and threw them at Barker's feet.

"Maybe you'll never see anything again, Barker, unless you take back that blood money and sign this paper saying you give me back my land. And that you killed Juan and Dad because they wouldn't sell to you."

"You're crazy if you think I'll sign that." Barker's eyes flicked nervously from Bob's face to the iron in his hand. "And you wouldn't dare touch me with that—"

In reply Bob slapped the iron on Barker's hand. There was the acrid odor of burning flesh, and the sheriff yelled hoarsely. "I'll hang you sure for that, Bob Morgan!"

"Your hanging days are over," Bob told him. "Unless you sign that paper and get out of the country, you won't live to do anything. I mean this, Barker. And I'm not doing it just for myself. It's for Tom Slaughter and old John, who've got a right to keep their homes if they want to. And the rights of other people who've suffered long enough under your brand of law. Are you signing, or do I burn the skin all off of you?"

Several hours later Bob and Nita watched from the doorway of the Slaughter ranch house as Moss Barker and his deputy, Royster, rode away, empty guns in their holsters. Moon, with his empty rifle, had escaped from the mountain earlier. The sheriff would have some odd

burns on his hands and face to explain if anybody got curious.

Beside Bob, Nita spoke in a worry-filled voice. "He can still make a lot of trouble for you, Bob."

"I doubt that he will," Bob told her. "I think he'll be good and ready to leave these parts. Nobody knows better than he does that the days of one-man law are over. When the railroad comes through, it'll bring us real law and order to take the place of the bandit kind Barker's been handing out."

Nita sighed happily. "You sound so different today, Bob. The other day you sounded like you were afraid of Moss Barker—"

"Maybe I was," Bob admitted, looking down into black eyes that were plenty soft now. "But I found out you were right, Nita, when you said a man would fight for something he cared enough about. He'll fight for his home, I guess, when it comes to a showdown."

Nita's eyes glowed. "Is that all, Bob?"

Bob took her hand, gripping it tightly. "You know it's not even the most important, Nita," he said huskily. "I don't reckon I have to tell you that."

"No," she said, moving so close her cloud of dark hair touched his nostrils. "You don't have to tell me, Bob. But a girl likes to hear it said."

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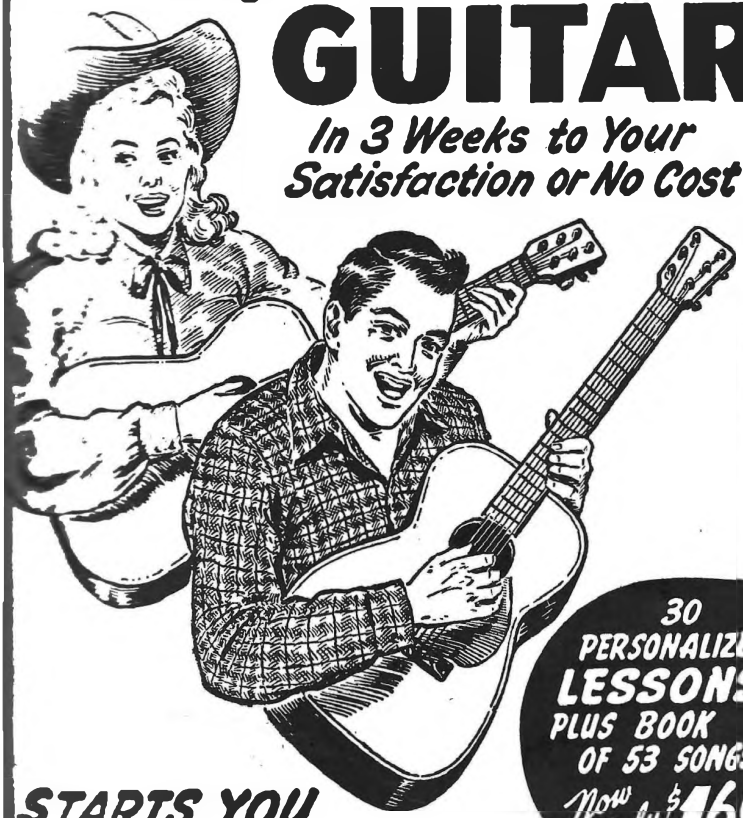

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