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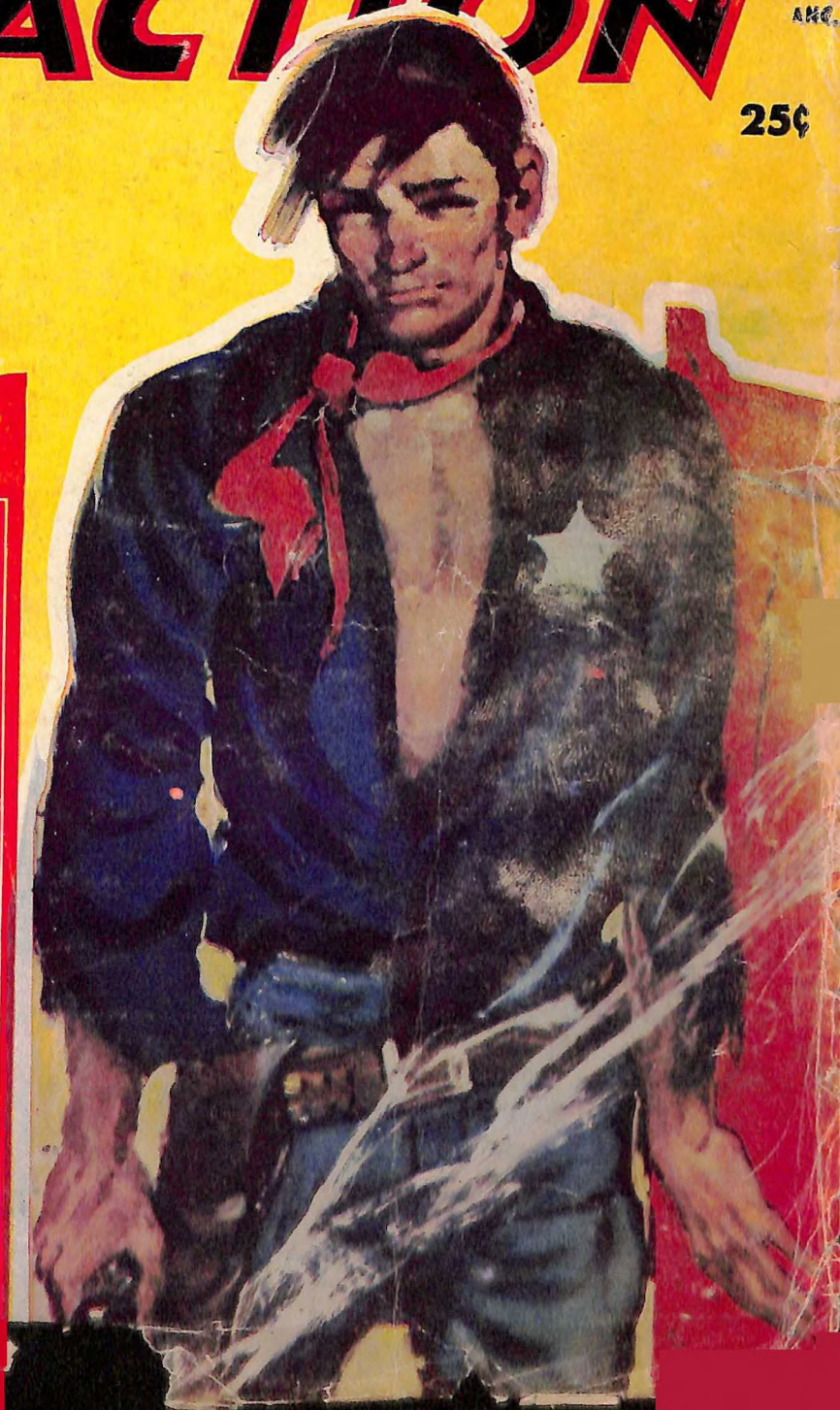

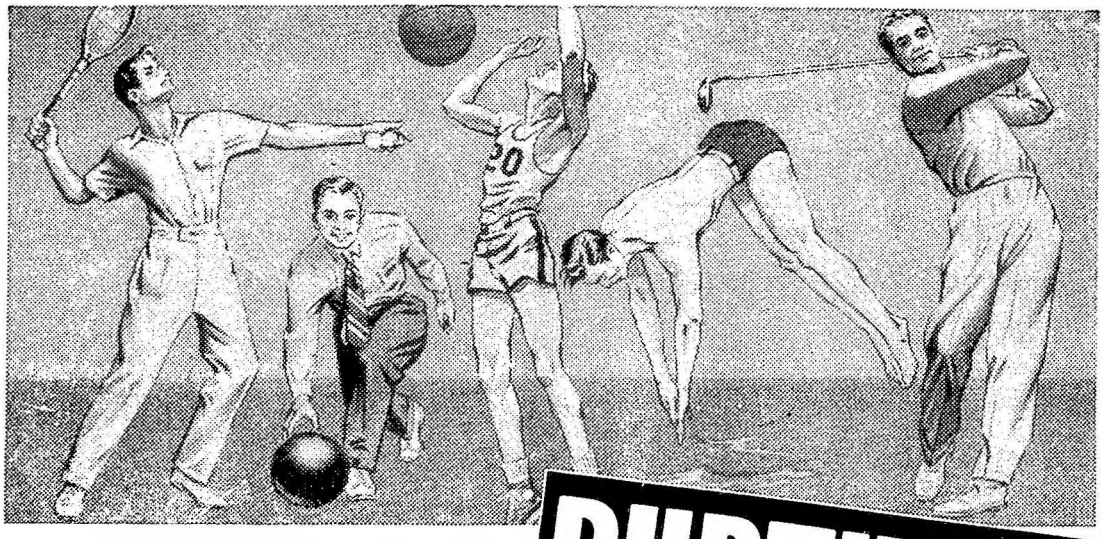

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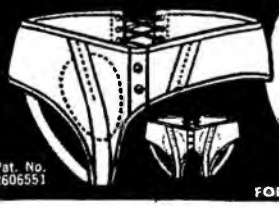

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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 17 April, 1954 Number 6

Our Feature Novel

GOLDEN EMPIRE

by Gene Rodgers 10

Murder stalks a committee of conspirators when the first government mint is planned for California, and only Lew Barton can finish a cunning killer's plans for empire.

Short Stories and Features

Next Issue on Sale April 1st

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor*

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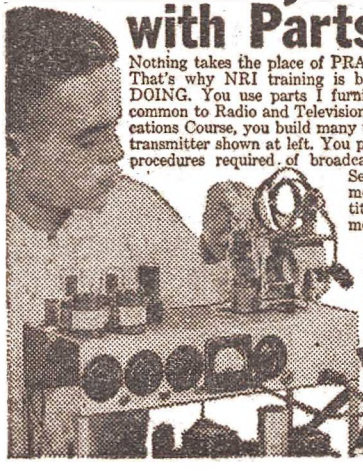

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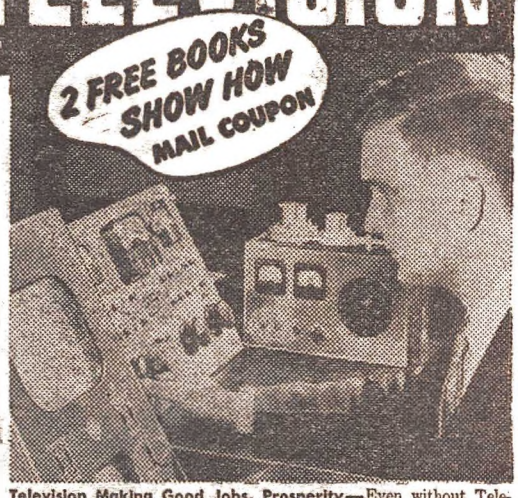

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THE TRADING POST

Department of Special Features

PALE-FACED KILLERS

by White Eagle

THE INDIAN account of broken promises, torn and trampled treaties, and the indiscriminate slaughter of helpless Indian women and children, is a well-known fact to those of us who, for many years, lived amongst them. They did not want to fight the white man; they asked only to be left alone, to live in peace on lands not yet stolen by the "Great White Father's" pale-faced warriors. As *Tatan Kabdoka Oiyotanka*—or *Yo-tankohan Tatan Kabdoka* (Sitting Bull) would say, "You have made many treaties, and you have broken as many; we cannot now believe in your papers of many promises, which are but falsehoods. We ask only that you leave us alone on what you have not yet stolen of our lands. Let us live in peace in those of our villages you have not yet destroyed. We do not wish to fight; it takes away our

[*Turn To Page* 8]

You Can Master the Power of Your "Sixth Sense"

These Uncanny Experiences PROVE YOU Have a "Sixth Sense"!

Buried deep among the atoms of your inner mind there is a mysterious sixth sense which is capable of producing seeming miracles.

How often have you had the feeling someone was staring at you—then turned around and found that someone WAS staring at you? You hadn't seen that person. How did you know?

How many times have you been talking or thinking about a person—then suddenly he or she appears? You had no reason to expect him (or her). But your inner mind knew!

Do you ever have the premonition that something is going to happen—then, bingo! —that very thing DOES happen?

Have you ever started to say something at exactly the same instant that someone else started to utter the SAME words?

Have you ever had a dream—and then seen your dream become a reality, just as your inner mind had pictured it?

We've all had uncanny experiences like these. You can't possibly explain them unless you admit that you DO have a sixth sense but this mysterious power is developed to a higher degree in some people than in others.

Our human mind is the most marvelous mechanism ever created. Like atomic energy, its little-known powers, when properly directed, can work millions of modern-day miracles. All we have to do is to learn how to release, direct and use those mysterious forces which we all have within us.

Some years ago the noted "father of modern psychology," Will James of Harvard, made the astonishing statement that most people use only 10 o/o of their mental powers! The other 90 o/o lies idle. Now, at last, science is making it easy for us to USE the vast reserve of brain power!

A few people seem to know instinctively the secret of harnessing this power. Others must learn. But once you learn the secret, NOTHING is beyond your power—NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE!

This doesn't mean we can all be Einsteins, Edisons or Fords. It does mean that we can have the happiness, peace of mind and feeling of security—plus the success in our chosen life's work—which we have every right to want and expect!

We can cast off the fears and doubts and troubles which plague us by day and keep us tossing in bed at night. We can enjoy better health, too. It is now a proven fact that many minor and major ailments are caused directly by our minds. Every year thousands die needlessly from ulcers caused by nothing more than worry and nervous tension!

Man Is Just Now Beginning to Learn the True Power of the Human Mind!

For almost a hundred years, scientists have known about and talked about atomic energy. It is only recently that something has been done about it. In fact, very few of our "modern" inventions are actually brand new. Leonardo DaVinci designed tanks and flying machines back in the 16th Century. The Chinese invented rockets more than 150 years ago. Bats have been equipped with "radar" for over a million years. Jelly-fish have been jet-propelled since the dawn of time. And the head-hunting savages on the Malay peninsula have been using the principle of the Diesel engine (to make fire) for 200 years!

Likewise, the most amazing and mysterious powers of the inner mind were known to ancient sages, wise men, alchemists and philosophers. Their knowledge of these miraculous forces never died. It has been passed down through the centuries by a chosen few of each decade. Now these secrets are being brought to light for the first time. Now you and I can benefit by the precious knowledge of the inner mind—and learn how to put those forces to work!

As You Think—So You ARE!

That phrase comes from the Bible. It is just as true today as it was 2,000 years ago! But NOW we have the means to think along the right lines! Now we know how much better we can make our lives by simply releasing and putting to work the tremendous forces which have been lying dormant in our minds!

You've noticed that some lucky people seem to coast along through life. They get all the good breaks—while others, who have just as much ability, talent and education plod along in ruts, bat their brains out in humdrum jobs, yet never get anywhere!

Do you know the one simple secret that makes certain people so successful—the lack of which holds all the others back? It's that hidden power which we all have and can now all learn how to use!

Of course you'd like to have a better home. A happier, fuller life. More understanding, respect and affection from your family, friends and associates. Greater success in your life work. More genuine security and peace of mind in this troubled world!

You can have all these things in abundance—soon! Nothing is impossible—nothing is beyond your reach—when you know how to use The Secret of The Power Within You.

You must learn to release, use and apply your hidden powers! You will be astonished at how quickly good things begin to happen—how rapidly you begin to make real progress toward the fulfillment of your dreams and ambitions. Yes, and you will be amazed at the way all of your doubts, fears, troubles and worries begin to fade away. You'll be delighted with the new peace of mind which begins to settle over you like a protective cloak! You will begin to really LIVE!

You'll find you can turn this wonderful power on like a faucet. It flows continuously, almost 100 o/o automatically. You quickly learn to use and apply it sub-consciously—just as your heart beats and you breathe without even thinking about it. Yes, here is power and strength as abundant as the air itself—once you know how to "tap" it!

Ben Sweetland, known to millions throughout the United States as Radio's Consulting Psychologist and who has contributed many works in the field of applied psychology—quite accidentally discovered the direct contact between the two minds of man—and how one can—at will—call upon his great mental powers.

The personal pronoun "I" refers to the mental self, Sweetland has taught for years. When this word is added to another, it becomes an instruction to self. "The only difference between the go-getter and the ne'er-do-well," this psychologist published in 1935, is that one thinks in terms of "I Can" and the other—"I Can't!" He taught his followers to hold to the thought "I Can" and in a large number of cases, they proved they could—they did things. But, there were cases where this apparently magic formula did not measure up to expectations.

One great truth was definitely established. The words "I CAN!" provided the direct path from the conscious mind to the subconscious mind; the use of them invoked the power to swing the door to the open sesame.

Mary Jones was a lonely spinster—not beautiful—and resigned to a life of single boredom. "I Can" helped the sunshine of happiness to smile on her. A large circle of friends—and a devoted husband came into being almost as though a magic wand had been used.

Jenny Smith had a good singing voice but lacked the courage to use it in public. "I Can!" gave her direct contact with her source of power and she has since appeared on concert stages throughout the Unites States.

Joe Winters was a machinist earning just enough to get by. Within days after gaining his "I Can" consciousness he started to expand. Today he operates a business employing 30 machinists.

How You Can PROVE — at NO RISK — That This Secret Will Work Wonders For YOU

The coupon below entitles you to receive a copy of Ben Sweetland's revealing new book, "I CAN"—to read and USE for a month, entirely ON APPROVAL. With it you will also receive, absolutely FREE, Ben Sweetland's Magic Mirror—an ingenious device for self-analysis. The Magic Mirror will be yours to keep, whether you keep the book or not.

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strength, so that we cannot hunt for the food needed for our women and children." So spoke Sitting Bull.

Wacinhnuni Sungakan (Crazy Horse) spoke with bitter and blazing words of passion, of how the pale-faced warriors under orders from the "Great White Father" had stolen his beloved Black Hills—where his father, and his father's father lay buried. He spoke of the surprise-attack made on his village in February 1876, when he and his people were living in peace on land allotted them by treaty. He spoke of how he had been awakened by the thunder of cavalry-horses charging through his village, and the crack of gunfire and bullets whining through the tepees killing many of his people. Of the men, only he, and some two hundred of the braves had escaped into the timber growing along the Cheyenne River. There he had watched the soldiers burn his village, and destroy all food stuff—leaving those of the women and children who had not been killed, standing in the snow and forty-below-zero weather.

This attack had been made by Colonel Reynolds, under command of General Crook, stationed at Fort Fetterman located on the banks of the Platte River in Wyoming. But General Crook and Colonel Reynolds were to pay dearly for this shocking, and wholesale assassination of a people who had been living peaceably on their own lands, as per agreement with the "Great White Father".

Wacinhnuni Sungakan with some two hundred of his *Ozuye We' Tawatas* (men of war), who had escaped with some of their ponies, followed Colonel Reynolds. During a raging blizzard, they recaptured their ponies; then they had slashed at Reynolds and his troops all through the day, killing and wounding many troopers. Reynolds, in his mad flight had been forced to leave his wounded to die in the snow, or by the knife of the enraged Sioux. Wacinhnuni Sungakan continued the fight against those who had destroyed his village, and many of his people. And so, a few days later, he ran off a herd of cattle right under the nose of General Crook and his third cavalry. Now he had food for the women and children who had not perished in the bitter cold.

But Wacinhnuni Sungakan was not yet through; he would later, when again the grass grew green, make the pale-faced warriors pay for their treacherous attack, and the destruction of his village. He was the greatest of all Sioux Chiefs, as well as the greatest leader of Sioux Cavalry. And that he was great, was something General Crook and others were soon to learn.

During the month of June of that same year, General Crook was coming up the Rosebud with a thousand mounted, and foot, troops, all armed with modern weapons. Crook was to meet General Custer, Terry, and other high-ranking officers, and join forces in a joint effort to destroy Sitting Bull and his warriors—who were supposed to be camped along the Rosebud (or the Little Big Horn) River.

But what these generals didn't know, was that all their movements were being carefully watched by the Indians, who had no fear of the pale-faced warriors; their only fears were for the safety of their women and little ones.

Wacinhnuni Sungakan had a score to settle with General Crook and Colonel Reynolds, for destroying his village during the past winter. And so, when he met Crook, with only half the force that the general had at his command, he sent Crook and his thousand pale-faced warriors staggering back in full retreat, giving them no chance to reorganize. Wacinhnuni Sungakan and his *Ozuye We' Tawatas* kept cutting and slashing at the troops, until what was left of them got back to Cantonment. And only then, did Wacinhnuni Sungakan give up attacking. He, Crazy Horse, had paid Crook and Reynolds many times over for their unwarranted sneak-attack on his village the winter before.

[*Turn To Page* 122]

Each little fuse led to a small mound of powder, in which a bullet was embedded. After the safe blew, the bullets would explode at irregular intervals, giving the impression of a considerable number of men inside the bank.

California needed a mint, where the miners' gold-dust could be turned into coins, and a committee had been set up to start the process. A committee whose members plotted wholesale robbery, and terror, to build themselves a golden empire. Then, murder began to stalk the schemers . . .

GOLDEN EMPIRE

Feature Novel of Boothill Greed

by Gene Rodgers

THE STAGECOACH rumbled over the twisting road, kicking dust-swirls high into the still, heavy air as it rolled down the mountain into the desolate valley below. Jed Carson, old, grey-haired and squinty-eyed from too many hours under the merciless sun, tooled the strings as if he were born to the high-box. Beside him, a battered hat pulled down over his eyes, Al Geners held his shotgun in gnarled, tired hands.

"Carryin' nothin' worth robbin' this trip," Jed mumbled through whiskered

jaws. " 'Feard of a holdup last trip, an' the trip afore thet one, too; but they ain't nothin' but three passengers an' a bag of mail today."

"Makes a man lazy, thet's what it does," Al observed. "Sittin' up hyar with nothin' on his mind but the danged heat, a feller sort of relaxes." Th.. he frowned, "Don't like it none."

"Ain't nobody gonna feel a bullet this trip," Jed grinned, his two gold teeth glinting in the hard sunlight. "Never heard you complain afore thet they wasn't no excitement."

Al sat up, pushed his dusty hat back on his bald head, and said, "Kinda miss it, I guess; a race-horse'd feel the same way, I reckon, when he ain't got what to do 'cept take life easy."

The conversation ceased abruptly since the heat and dust made speaking difficult. Jed grinned as he thought of the safety of this particular trip. They had taken on three passengers at Fowler's Gap; a thin, emaciated-looking woman who struck the stage-driver as being either an old maid or a long-time widow; a nondescript cowpuncher who probably had to ride the hard seat since his horse had either given out on him, or had passed hands over a poker table; and a seedy individual whom Jed felt best rid of. Not that there was anything sneaky about him—it was just that his eyes seemed to be constantly roving, never content to remain fastened on any place or thing too long. The man cast sideward glances, gimlet-eyes searching all the time.

Soon, the rhythmic breathing under Al's hat, and the steady rise and fall of his skinny chest, belied the fact that his was the job of guarding the stage. Jed took the gun from Al's relaxed grip before it could fall from limp fingers to the dusty roadway, and laid it carefully underneath the seat. Content that all was peaceful, Jed shouted to the team of horses and levelled them off for the flat, barren trail across the valley. Nostrils dilated from the heat, the animals flecked foam from their mouths and settled into ground-eating strides.

THE SUDDEN lurch, a piercing whinny from the lead horse coupled with the startled shying of the other horses, told Jed that the black had stepped into a hole. Whinnying frightfully, the animal showed pain-filled eyes. Jed clambered down from his seat, examined the twisted leg that seemed half-swallowed in the ground, and looked up at Al. "Busted clean through," he said with a wave of his hands.

"Best get him unhitched," Al said flatly. "Looks like we'll have to make it to Denver with three horses."

The passengers craned for a look, saw the trouble, and were in the process of climbing down from the coach when a calm voice that seemed to come from behind a boulder next to the trail said, "That's right, folks; everybody out."

"What—who is it?" Jed demanded.

"Raise your hands and step back!" the voice commanded. Instantly obeying, Jed and Al held their hands above their heads and stepped into the shade-side of the stagecoach. Moments later, the passengers were beside them, arms upraised. "Turn around, back to me—all of you!"

Jed turned slowly, his brain trying to function, but refusing. A .45 barked close by, and Jed saw the stranger he disliked suddenly fold like a sack of grain and crumple to the ground. The man's right hand clutched a small, pearl-handled revolver and his left hand

clawed at a hole in his shirt-front. Blood was oozing through his tightly-clenched fingers; the man shuddered, then stiffened.

"Anybody else with ideas," the gunman said, "gets the same. Now, all of you, lean against the coach with your hands—keep your feet far back." Dark hair glinted in the sun as the swarthy man nervously tugged his Stetson. He rummaged the passengers' pockets for wallets and jewelry; seemingly satisfied, he deposited his loot in a canvas bag, then stripped the body of its valuables.

As he moved toward the woman, she hysterically cried out, "I'll scream if you lay a hand on me! Don't touch me!"

"All the same to me," the edgy voice assured. From the corner of his eye, Jed saw the flashing glint of the sun on the man's gun as it arced down on the woman's head. Lying sprawled on the ground, she could not know when the man brandishing the gun took her rings, necklace and earrings. The road-agent turned to Jed. "Where's the mail, driver?"

"Under the seat," Jed whispered nervously. "Just got one sack this trip."

"Get that horse unhitched," the voice commanded. Jed and Al turned to the stricken animal, and soon had him near the side of the road, eyes wild and nostrils fanned in pain. With a stony face, the swarthy gunman raised his .44 to the horse's head, and pulled the trigger.

Mounting the box, the holdup man grabbed the reins, shouted a sharp command to the three remaining horses, and lurched off diagonally across the sandy waste, leaving a startled passenger staring at the fast-disappearing coach.

Al and Jed considered the situation, and agreed that they had best see to the unconscious woman.

"She's dead, too," Al said, rising on unsteady feet. "That crack on the head finished 'er."

Jed fumbled for his tobacco, bit off a hunk, and chewed reflectively for some minutes before he said, "Wonder what the stage had on it thet was worth all this?"

"You can talk all you want," the cowpoke said, "but these two are dead; what're you gonna do about it?"

"We'll bury 'em," Al said soberly, "thet's what."

"This ain't gettin' us to Denver any quicker," the cowpoke snapped.

"I ain't gonna carry you," Jed flared. "Gotta give 'em both a decent burial—than we'll jest have to set hyar an' wait fer the next stage through. You'll get to Denver, don't worry."

"Don't care what you do," came the short reply, "long's I get there."

"We ain't got no spades and—" Al began.

"We'll jes' pull 'em off the road an' pile rocks on 'em," Jed said, casting his eyes overhead. "Them buzzards look hungry to me."

The cowpoke nodded. "Yeah, we better get 'em covered up quick!"

"Wonder what anybody'd want with a empty stagecoach," Al said as they dragged the bodies off the road. "Nothin' but a sack of mail—an' not much of thet, neither."

The buzzards circled lower overhead, seemingly worried that their prey might be too well-covered by boulders and earth for them to get at.

"Don't know," Jed said, "but folks'll be apt to do a passel of strange things wit' less sense 'n thet."

The burial-mound finished to their satisfaction, the two men joined the cowpoke beside a scrub tree that afforded little shelter from the pounding sun and began the wait. It would be a long wait, and none of the three men looked forward to the heat that would be their sole company—along with the ever-circling buzzards—till night.

THE STAGECOACH, already high in the mountain range that towered above the desolate valley, creaked to a jerky halt in front of a weather-

beaten, dilapidated shack that had long been deserted. The door, suspended on worn, rusty hinges, screeched protestingly as it was opened from inside.

The driver stepped down from the box, mopping his wet brow with a red kerchief, looked up.

A man, dressed in well-cut, obviously expensive clothes, stood framed in the doorway. "Everything go all right?"

"Just like you figured," the heavy-set man said. "I shot one of 'em and even brought the mail-sack—just like you said."

"Good," the other answered. He stepped from the shadows into the sunlight, blond hair glinting in the glare. His face betrayed youth—possibly thirty, but more probably twenty-five. Even, white teeth were set in a firm, sturdy jaw that was free of whiskers. Manicured hands with a large-stoned ring on his small finger showed an obvious unfamiliarity with the country surrounding him.

"Boss," the other spoke up, "how much time is left?"

"Two hours," the man answered shortly. His deep-set eyes and intense, probing look made the perspiring gunman back away. The look cut, and he twirled a cigaret, fired it up, and stood off to one side. The younger man made a minute inspection of the stagecoach, seemed well pleased, then said, "Get those clothes off, Hank, and put on the outfit that's inside. You have to be at the bridge by nine, and we can't afford any slip-up this time."

"Sure, boss, sure," Hank replied, crushing the cigaret out with his boot heel and moving toward the shack. Minutes later, he reappeared, dark hair pushed under a grey Stetson, old, nondescript clothing loosely-fitting and well-worn. "How's this?"

"Not good enough," the youthful man answered; "roll around in the dirt for a few minutes; that should do it."

"But, boss—"

"You heard me," came the angry reply. "I'm not going to let this get messed up. Too much has gone into it. Roll, damn it, roll!"

Hank thrashed about on the ground, then arose some minutes later and stood still. The blond man looked him over, nodding every so often, then seemed to smile. "You look all right now."

"Got anything to drink inside?" Hank asked.

"If you touch one drop," the other answered evenly, "I'll bash your head in. I want you to be sober tonight!"

"Sure, boss," came the meek reply.

"For the last time, let me hear your instructions once again. I can't afford to have the whole thing blow up because of stupidity, and—"

"Don't worry, boss," Hank cut in.

"All right," he said. "Begin."

Five minutes later, Hank finished speaking. The youthful leader nodded, "All right, Hank, you've got it perfect. I'll be in the coach at the depot—just to see that it goes off right."

"Don't worry, boss."

"Better get going," the blond man said.

"Sure, boss, sure," Hank said, stepping back onto the seat of the coach; he grabbed the traces and started the slow, dangerous descent to the valley below. Unaccustomed to working without the fourth horse, the three other hoses skidded down the slope, finally straightening as they reached the bottom. With a sharp cry and crack of the whip, Hank sent the stagecoach ahead. The depot lay two hours in the distance; he had to get there before it was too late. The big stage rumbled on.

At the edge of the mountain wall, the boss stood beside his mount, surveying the scene beneath him. Far off to the right, buzzards swept low.

An odd, peaceful look on his tanned face, the young man stepped back from the rim, mounted his horse and rode slowly down the mountain, turning in the same direction that the stage had taken some minutes before. He raked his horse's flank viciously, and rode hard for town.

2

LEW BARTON walked through the crowd at the *Last Chance Saloon,* his eyes searching the men at the card-tables for a sign of recognition. He stopped at the bar, planted a booted foot on the rail, and said to the bartender, "Whiskey."

Idly rolling the amber liquid in the bottom of his glass, the tall, well-built man of perhaps thirty years shot carefully-guarded looks about him. Satisfied that he was unknown to the men in the saloon, he tossed down the rest of the drink, the whiskey burning a path down his throat. He paid for it, then moved slowly past the card-tables to the rear.

A shabby curtain parted to reveal half a dozen doors entering onto the hallway. Barton chose the first door on the left, knocked sharply twice, waited a few moments, then rapped twice more.

A guttural voice from within said, "Yeah?"

"Barton," Lew said.

The grate of a key in the lock preceded the opening of the door. A stocky, middle-aged man with a heavy paunch, coarse, flaccid features and small, rat-like eyes stood in the doorway. "Come in."

The room itself, obviously used by other people, for other pastimes, had a brass bed in one corner, a washstand and cracked pitcher in the other. A kerosene-lamp hung from a chain in the center of the single-windowed room directly over a heavy wooden table. The paunchy man had resumed his chair and he nodded to the other two men who sat on either side of him.

"We're all here," he said. "Sit down, Barton."

The tall man took the empty chair opposite the speaker and waited.

The fat man said, "Lew Barton, this is Ed Pauley."

Barton looked at the nattily-dressed man at his right, saw the diamond stickpin that gleamed in the poor light, took in his soft, well-fed features, and nodded, "How do you do?"

That was the banker.

The man on Barton's left was introduced as Chuck Weber. A man of gigantic physical proportions, he looked every bit as capable in his chosen line of endeavor as Barton had been told. Weber was bland, six feet six inches in bare feet, and his huge hands were rough and ham-like, probably able to break a man's arm with a single blow.

That was the stevedore.

The fat man across from him, Lew knew, was Al Dennis, whose letter had brought Barton across the continent. Now face-to-face with the "brain" of the scheme, Barton sat back in his chair, drew a thin cigar from his pocket, and looked about the room. The banker, Pauley, smiled an oily, professional grin, his features relaxed—almost as if he were hearing a loan-applicant discourse on his financial dependability. Pauley reached for the bottle of wine at his elbow, poured a glassful, and savored the aroma before he drained the glass.

The stevedore, Weber, was obviously unaware of the undercurrents at play among the other three men. He rubbed whiskered jaws, his face flat and heavy, betraying no emotion.

Dennis, the originator and main cog of the scheme, sat with poker-faced solemnity, a handkerchief daubing away the perspiration from his collar, neck and arms. As Barton finished his inspection of the group, he reflected on the purpose of this meeting in a back-room of a Denver saloon.

It had all started when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill. The resulting influx of miners, tramps and general undesirables to the gold-fields was turning quiet, peaceful communities into camps of armed, desperate men. It was a challenge to the already-es-

tablished businesses in California, and it was further felt by those who controlled the destinies of the young country that unscrupulous men could easily turn the bonanza to their advantage and personal gain.

Reports were coming in every day that mine-claims had been jumped, the owners knifed, shot, beaten—some completely disappeared—and all of their possessions stolen. The boiling-point was reached when Joe Oliver, one of the first settlers, had been found tortured to death, a reported cache of gold-dust looted, and no possible trace of his assailant remaining.

The government took the position that something had to be done—and done quickly.

AL DENNIS said, "Since you left the East, Barton, there have been dozens of men added to the list of the missing." The guttural, uneducated tone had disappeared, now replaced by well-mannered, soft-spoken tones. "Washington doesn't feel that a U. S. Mint is called for yet; however, the situation demands immediate action. A group of men in the East has made arrangements whereby the people out here can have the privilege of minted coins. If each man could have his dust stamped into coins, and the valuation fixed on its face, I'm fairly confident that these mass-murders, robberies, and general wildness would cease.

"A man is forced to carry great quantities of dust on his person, since that is the only way he can be certain that it is safe. If he could have the bulky weight made into more easy-to-carry coins, he would be able to buy what he needs for months at a time—and do it with a few coins.

"Pauley, here, has at his disposal approximately $50,000 of gold-dust. He is willing to let us use that as a start. Weber has agreed to strike the coins off on a hand-press, and we are looking to you," Dennis waved his hand at Lew, "to enlist the local support. You are known by the miners, trusted by them and accepted as one of them. Just one more thing," Dennis said: "did you bring anything from Washington?"

"No, nothing," Lew said evenly. "Where is the press?"

"The fewer who know of its whereabouts, the better for all parties concerned," Dennis said. "Weber knows, of course; I know—but no one else does. I'd prefer to leave things that way."

"All right," Barton said. "I'll be at the bank in the morning. In a few days, I should have things moving along smoothly. Who is making the dies?"

"Another question best unanswered," Dennis said. "Weber will handle his end—you take care of yours."

"All right," Lew said. Then, leaning forward on his seat, he peered into Dennis' eyes. "Just one more question; are you going to charge the miners for the minting?"

"Well," Dennis said, stroking his face in contemplation, "I suppose we'll have to, just to meet expenses. We'll probably fix our price at two or three cents on the dollar. Don't forget, we have invested our time and money to underwrite this enterprise. We'd like to get some of it back, naturally, with possibly a small dividend for ourselves. Of course, we expect to cut you in—"

"No thanks," Barton said. "I'm being paid for my work; I don't expect any extra."

"Oh," Dennis smiled at Pauley, "a man of scruples."

"What does that mean?" Lew Barton asked.

"Nothing," Dennis smiled. "Just a little joke."

"I see," Lew said. Then, he was gone.

Dennis, Weber and Pauley sat for some moments in silence after Barton had departed, then the banker smiled broadly.

"What are you smilin' at?" Weber demanded.

"How completely our government friend was taken in. I told you that this plan had merit; are you both

willing to agree with me now?" Dennis asked triumphantly.

"Yeah, come to think on it," Weber agreed.

"Just imagine," Pauley said. "We have sole rights to stamp all the gold on the coast. We turn out a few hundred good gold coins, according to plan, then start mixing brass, copper, or tin with the gold. If we can introduce twenty-five percent fake into the regular mixture, we should clean up in a year or two."

"And you mustn't forget our 'charge' to the miners," Dennis said. "Instead of two or three cents on the dollar, we can charge fifteen or twenty—and get it, too, since we have a charter for this area. When we get to the coast, we'll be able to start right away. As soon as we take delivery of the press and the dies—"

"Still," Pauley said sourly, "it is a risky business—very risky. My gangs have been making quite a bit from robbing the miners; I'm satisfied with half of their take in return for protection. You're not forgetting that this steady source of income will be taken from me, are you?"

"We stand to clear a dozen times what you are making," Dennis said. "All that it involves is a slightly higher degree of risk. But the profits—"

"Perhaps," Pauley agreed, reluctantly. "But I'd still feel better without all this extra worry and trouble."

"Look," Weber spoke up. "If we *do* get in any trouble, we can say that Barton brought the dust in; is it our fault if he gives it to us mixed with other stuff? Let him get the blame!"

"Bravo!" Dennis beamed. "I detect a true genius beneath all that muscle and brawn. We have a perfect alibi—and a perfect scapegoat!"

"When do we start for the coast?" Pauley asked.

"There is a lot to be done here first," Dennis said. "But we should be starting within the week. Meanwhile, you had better finish things here—we may have to leave at a moment's notice."

"Dennis," Pauley said as they left the room, "when are the dies from New York being delivered?"

"The stagecoach from Kansas City is bringing them in tonight. I am going to pick them up in an hour," Dennis said. "I'll take them right over to Weber, then arrange to get your dust to him first thing in the morning. If you can have it there early, we can start right away."

"Awright," Weber said flatly. "Deliver 'em as soon as you can. I wanna get this started quick!"

"We should have things moving very nicely by tomorrow afternoon," Dennis said. "See you tomorrow."

All agreed, they went their separate ways.

WEBER WALKED out of the *Last Chance Saloon,* past the buildings of the main street, the saloons, barn-like stables and restaurants, and was five minutes walk out on the outskirts of town when he heard the approach of horse's hooves.

"That you, Weber?" a voice came from the darkness.

"Yeah," Weber said, an edginess to his voice. "Who is it?"

"Frank Johnson," the rider said. He dismounted, stepped from behind a screen of brush, and faced Weber. His youthful, blond face still showed serene calm. "Is everything set?"

"Yeah," Weber said. "Stage'll be in soon. Did you get the buggy?"

"This afternoon," Johnson replied, a smile crossing his face as he thought back to the mound of rocks beside the road in the canyon. "The stolen coach is at the lower end of the ravine." He waved to a slope in the ground behind him. "When the Kansas City stage comes, we'll stop it, rob it, and roll it over the cliffs far out of town. My boys are dressed as passengers, and Hank is up on the box. When we deliver the stage at the depot, there will be a box for Dennis aboard, but the only trouble is going to be that the New York engravers made a mistake—they shipped a box of inks and blank dies to Dennis. That will delay him sufficiently, I'll wager."

"I dunno," Weber said, a frown of concentration on his flat face. "This had better pay off better'n Dennis' scheme—else I'm gonna be awful sore."

"Stop worrying," Johnson smiled wanly. "How could anything go wrong?"

"The man from Washington—Barton, his name is," Weber said, "is gonna bring trouble. I kin smell it, I can. Dennis give him an offer of a cut, but he turned it down cold; I don't like it none."

"Barton!" Johnson exclaimed. "Tall, heavily-built?"

"Yeah," Weber nodded. "That's him."

"Lew Barton," Johnson said; "I never thought that I'd see him again. Well," he suddenly halted his swift-flowing train of thoughts, "no matter. Lew Barton will be dead long before he can cause me any trouble."

"Look, Johnson," Weber suddenly stiffened, "I ain't gonna get mixed up in no killin'. If yuh wanna put the blame on Barton, that's awright by me. But I ain't gonna stand around an' let anybody kill him; I don't figger on stretching no rope."

"Take it easy," Johnson soothed. "It won't come to that, I can assure you."

"Yeah, but you said—"

"Never mind what I said," Johnson cut in. "Barton will probably report to Washington that everything is going according to plan and that there is no trouble anticipated. Then, he'll go back where he came from."

"What's between you'n him?" Weber suddenly asked.

"Nothing," Johnson said, "nothing at all." But a mask of hatred covered his eyes, and the youthful, handsome face turned into a livid thing.

JOHNSON remembered only too well, those years in Philadelphia. Born in a poorer section of the city, he had grown up with Lew Barton. The years had been good to Barton, Johnson reflected, but a petty thievery at his bank had resulted in his, Johnson's, dismissal and subsequent blackballing at every other bank in the city. It wasn't until he had gotten wind of this scheme that Frank Johnson felt he would finally get even with his boyhood nemesis. And there was the girl, Esther...

"Lissen," Weber cut into Johnson's reverie, "how long'll it take for Dennis and Pauley to find out that there wasn't no mistake in the shipment?"

"Two weeks, perhaps," Johnson said. "But that will be enough time for you to stamp all of Pauley's dust. That'll make us both $25,000 richer—and we can skip the country with enough money to live on for the rest of our lives."

"I still don't like it none," Weber said. "Besides—"

"No time to talk now," Johnson cut him off. "I've got to make sure that we switch coaches without any mistakes; I'll be at your place later tonight."

Chuck Weber walked slowly back toward town, his child's mind seething with thoughts of how he was going to spend his half of the loot. As instructed, Weber went to the back of the saloon, up the dingy flight of stairs to his room, he was in the process of get-

ting ready for bed when he heard the faraway rumble of the stagecoach as it rolled toward the depot from the far end of town.

3

BARTON sat at the counter in Ma Willis' restaurant and smiled at the girl who brought him his steak, the huge potato doused in butter and a half dozen slices of bread. It was late, and the restaurant was nearly deserted. A couple sat at a table in the corner, more intent on each other than the slabs of blueberry pie in front of them.

"Work pretty late?" Lew asked.

The girl stepped around the counter, a cup of coffee in her hand, and sat on the stool beside him. She was hardly more than twenty, big saucer-sized brown eyes staring out of a round, full face. Her brown hair was braided, and it hung to the small of her back, the ends secured with two strips of bright colored ribbon. She sipped the coffee slowly, looked at the tall, husky man beside her, and smiled.

"Close for the night at ten," she said. "The stage from Kansas City should be in soon, and we usually stay open until any passengers aboard get fed."

Lew ate, unaware of his plate. To his surprise, he had finished the steak and the potato, and was soaking up the gravy with the last piece of bread when he said, "You certainly know how to cook, Miss, ah—"

"Shirley Collins," the girl answered. "And thank you very much."

Lew introduced himself, then said, "It's a pity to waste such a night behind the counter, Shirley. I suppose that there is a long line waiting ahead of me—but I'd be honored if you'd let me walk you home."

The girl blushed, then lowered her head. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity to the man seated next to her, she said, "Thank you, Lew. I'll be ready by ten."

Barton got up, paid his check, and went outside. He walked slowly, his mind on the girl in the restaurant. But much as he tried to concentrate on her, he kept thinking about the odd trio he had met in the *Last Chance Saloon* that afternoon.

In his pocket, Lew felt the assuring brittleness of a United States Marshal's badge. Its six prongs stabbed at his chest, but it was a good feeling. As he walked, Lew remembered the instructions he had received from his superiors before he left. "Don't take any chances, Barton," they had told him. "We want you out there merely as an observer. Pressure-groups have gotten together to arrange for this trial minting. We don't say that it is a good idea—or a bad one, either—but we will reserve judgment until we have your report. Al Dennis, a man of vast experience in that part of the country, wrote us, telling us about the problem. We have agreed to confine the minting in that area only to his group. We needn't tell you what would happen if the dies should fall into the wrong hands."

Then, suddenly, Lew thought of Esther, back there in Philadelphia. She had wanted all the things that go with money, and neither he nor Frank Johnson had been able to meet her requirements. True, Johnson had always felt that Lew had cut him out with Esther, but the matter of the fact was that she wanted neither.

A dull rumble filled Lew's conscious mind, and he suddenly awakened to reality. Across the street, the stagecoach from Kansas City was pulling in at the depot. Curiosity, mixed with a feeling of apprehension, turned Lew's feet in that direction.

Someone shouted to the driver, "Whar's t'other horse at?"

The driver told of an accident with

a gopher-hole. But another voice insisted, "Whar's Jed an' Al? This hyar is their reg'lar stage."

"Don't know about that," the driver said. "At the last minute, they told me that my stage was in the shop with a busted axle, and they gimme this for my run today. Don't be so full of fool questions. Just lemme off this box—my, er—uh, anyhow, I ache!"

With a roar of laughter, the crowd stepped back, seemingly satisfied with the explanation. The door of the coach opened, and Frank Johnson, as well as three other men, stepped down.

"Spread out and get lost," Johnson whispered to the other erstwhile passengers, then nodded with a grin as they soon had disappeared from the depot.

AN OLD, BENT man with a full, snow-white beard and a cane to support his ailing leg, stepped up and wheezed, "Ain't they no more passengers?"

"None that I know of," Hank said as he brushed supposed trail-dust from his filthy outfit. "Why?"

"Got a letter last month," the old-timer said. "My nephew, Dan'l, he was a-comin' on this stage to visit wit' us. Bess an' me, we ain't got too many years left; an' we wanna see the boy afore he gits some fool notion in his head to get hisself hitched up to some woman."

"Tell me," Hank thought quickly, "was he a skinny feller?"

"Prob'ly; ain't seed 'im since he wuz a boy," the old man said.

"Must be your nephew," Hank said. "Got on at Kansas City, then thought better of it, and we let him off about fifteen miles out of Cedarville. Told him he was crazy to get off in the middle of nowhere, but he went, anyhow."

"Sounds like ol' skinflint's boy alright," the oldster said. "Father never was much of anythin', and it looks like he ain't gonna be much diff'rent. Same mold—both of 'em."

Frank Johnson smiled as he thought of the condition that the old man's nephew—as well as Jed and Al—would be in, if they were ever found.

Al Dennis had elbowed his way through the crowd, and he was standing by as the baggage and freight was unloaded. Johnson had taken the precaution of putting the mail and other freight on the stolen coach, and things seemed in order as men came forward to claim their property.

"Is there anything for Alan Dennis?" he asked.

"Just a minute," Hank growled. "Saw something here for you when we loaded up."

Dennis took a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end, and sucked it into full life before the phony driver found the heavy box. The portly Dennis flipped Hank a silver dollar, called two men over and offered them a dollar apiece to carry the wooden box to Weber's place.

His fears proven unfounded, Lew Barton edged away from the depot and headed after Dennis. "Wait a minute!" he shouted at the back of the man who was fussing around his two sweating helpers.

"Good evening, Mr. Barton," Dennis smiled.

"Is this the, ah, er—"

"Yes," Dennis quickly cut in. "Let's not discuss it here, shall we?" Dennis' eyebrows shot up warily.

"As you wish," Lew said, falling into step with the older man and following his footsteps up the street until they both stood in front of a locked office.

"Just put it inside the door," Dennis told the men. That accomplished, the big man gave each of the two men their due, added an extra dollar for their trouble, and sent them away.

"Now, then," Dennis said, "let us see what New York has sent us."

Both men pried the heavy wooden lid from the box, then gaped in astonishment as the shipment showed to be

a set of blank dies, two huge containers of printers ink, and several reams of white writing paper.

"Is this some sort of joke?" Lew asked.

"I—well, there must be some blunder!" Dennis shouted in anger. "Some idiot must have sent the wrong package to us, and sent our order elsewhere. Wait until I tell New York about this!"

"Look here," Barton said. "There is an order-slip inside." He reached in, pulled the pink slip out, then said, "This order is consigned to the Peters Printing Company in Boston. It will be faster if we just send word to them that we have their order, and ask them to send ours to us directly."

"Good idea," Dennis said. "I—"

"Never mind," Lew cut in. "I'll write them myself tonight. Since this shipment of ours is best kept secret, I won't telegraph them—a letter should reach them fast enough."

"This will throw our plans off," Dennis admitted after he had cooled down. "But it will merely be a matter of a week or two—the delay will not seriously hamper us. We intended to leave for California immediately; however, we can put the extra time to good advantage—it will afford you a better opportunity to round up the miners. That way, we will have them ready when we arrive."

"Good idea," Lew admitted. He glanced at the clock that stood in the corner, saw that it was nearly ten o'clock, and said, "I have an appointment in a few minutes. I shall write the letter immediately and send it out tonight."

"Good, good," Dennis said.

Lew hurried away.

SHIRLEY COLLINS was just locking the front door of the restaurant when Lew Barton crossed to meet her. She had thrown a light wrap over her dress and she had combed her braids out to let her hair fall freely to her waist. A ribbon held it from falling onto her face, and Lew admitted to himself that she certainly was a beautiful creature in the moonlight.

Lew took her arm, helped her across the wheel-rutted street, and they gained the plank walk on the other side already deep in conversation.

"I live at the boarding house," Shirley said, pointing in the general direction with her finger.

"I thought that you might like to take a ride out into the country with me," Lew said, almost as if an afterthought. "I have a buggy..."

"Sounds wonderful," Shirley said.

The buggy rolled into the starlit night; Shirley's head rested on Lew's shoulder, and he smelled the perfume she wore. Somehow, it reminded him of Esther—back in Philadelphia. "What's the matter?" Shirley asked, sensing his sudden tenseness.

"That perfume," Lew said. "What kind is it?"

"I don't know." Shirley's eyes danced playfully. "Sam Fuller at the store told me that it was imported, but that the label had fallen off. I don't know what it is, but I like it; don't you?" She leaned closer to him so that he might smell the scent.

"Yes," Lew said. "Yes, suddenly I do." He looked down at her and her face was close to his; he felt that there was one girl in the world whom he could trust again.

Realizing the invitation she had offered, Shirley drew herself back. "You must not think too much of a girl who would throw herself at a man on their first date," she said quietly.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said. "I was thinking that—well, never mind." His voice turned cold, his eyes far away.

"Tell me," she said. It was not a command, and it wasn't an invitation, either—but more as if a person one had known all his life had shown an interest in one's thoughts.

Lew pulled the buggy to a halt near

the swirling river. The Missouri shone black and swift in the night light, and Shirley drew instinctively closer to Lew as they stood by the side of the churning, rushing water.

His touch was light on her shoulder, but she turned instinctively to him. Her eyes shone like brilliant gems, and she closed her eyes, reached her face up to his. Lew tried to hold back, but he suddenly swept her into his arms and she responded willingly. A torrent of words poured out on the majestic river, but it did not listen. Lew smelled the perfume on Shirley's white neck, and he thought of the girl here in his arms, not Esther in Philadelphia.

It was nearly midnight when the buggy came slowly around to stop in front of the boarding house. Lingering moments were shared in front of the white fence, and then she was gone. Lew turned the reins in his hands and slowly rode back to the hotel.

The awakened stable boy yawned, walked out into the yard, and stretched. Lew Barton climbed out of the rig, walking like a man who has discovered the secret of life itself. Without much thought to where or why he was going, Lew ambled toward the Harold Hotel. The night was clear, and the stars still shone.

His thoughts tumbled over one another; Shirley, Esther and the mistaken shipment. He reached into his pocket and drew forth the pink shipping slip. His eyes probed in the feeble light, then he drew a match from his shirt and lighted it.

IN THE FLICKERING light, he read the paper. A thought wormed its way into his brain, and he considered it thoroughly. He was so intent on it, that he had hardly noticed the man behind him.

Why would they make up a shipping order and not put down the contents of that order? Lew asked himself. *And how could they fill an order without knowing what it was to contain?*

His thoughts were interrupted by the man's voice behind him. "You Lew Barton?"

"Uh, oh, yes," he replied with a start.

"Come with me," the man said.

"Who are you and where are we going?" Lew snapped suspiciously.

"I'm Sheriff Nathan Friedley," the man said, showing his badge. "There is a message in my office for you; it's marked *Confidential.*"

In the sheriff's office, Barton opened the letter, turned it to the kerosene lamp, and read:

Watch yourself, Lew. Word has gotten to us that there are others interested in the dies beside Dennis. We cannot trace these rumors, or even tell if they are anything more than rumor—but you are best advised of the situation.

The note was unsigned, but the handwriting showed it to be from the men who had sent him here in the first place. Lew held the note into the lamp, and held it until it almost burned his fingers. Then, after crumbling the ashes to dust, he left the sheriff's office.

On his way to the hotel, Barton was too concerned with this new development to hear the faint sound of an upper story window being slowly opened, or the click as the hammer of a rifle was stealthily pulled back.

The gun roared, and Lew felt a white hot flash of pain in his back. It seemed to furrow across his ribs, and the pain made him reel. He reached for the spot, and his hand came away bloody. The second shot sent him reeling toward the onrushing street, and he closed his eyes peacefully as the pain vanished.

He was unconscious to the fact that men had rushed into the street to find the cause of the gun-reports, or that his unknown assailant had pulled his rifle in and slowly lowered the window.

4

SACRAMENTO lay wrapped in fog. The saloons roared with life, liquor flowed, and men died. In his office upstairs, Oscar Marlowe surveyed the *Silver Dollar Saloon,* alive and riotous beneath him. Marlowe stood a shade above five feet, his sharply-chiselled features alert and aware of his surroundings, a thin cigar stuck between heavy, protuding lips.

"Boss," a flunkey said from behind him, "there's someone here to see you."

"Who?" Marlowe's eyes swept the floor, finally centering upon a man who stood off in a corner by himself.

"Says his name is Ackerson," the other answered. "Said that he heard you were interested in dies."

"Send him to my office," Marlowe snapped. He turned, glared again at the man below, then swept into his office, slamming the door behind him. In the privacy of his well-appointed and elegantly-designed office, Marlowe went to the decanter of his desk, poured a generous portion of red wine into his glass, and drank deeply. With a hearty belch, he lowered the glass, reached for a fresh cigar, and seated himself majestically behind his oaken desk.

There was a sharp rap on the door, and a man entered at Marlowe's bidding. "I am Phil Ackerson," he said.

Marlowe surveyed the man from behind a thick screen of smoke. Greying at the temples, a thin moustache neatly clipped, and a rugged, healthy look about him, the saloon-owner thought.

"Sit down, Mr. Ackerson," Marlowe said, waving to a chair that stood opposite his desk. When the other had taken his seat, Marlowe said, "Now, sir, what can I do for you?"

Ackerson set his briefcase on the thick rug, dry-washed his hands for added effect, then said, "I am aware that certain elements hereabouts are making arrangements for the coining of money."

"Where did—" Marlowe began.

"Let me finish," Ackerson cut the shorter man off with a wave of his hand. "First, Mr. Marlowe, I hope that you are not making the mistake of underestimating me. I did not come here to waste your time—or mine, either. I have reliable information, and I also have an idea that could turn out very profitably for both of us. If you are willing to listen, I shall be glad to present my ideas."

"Just who are you?" Marlowe asked.

"Phil Ackerson, Assistant to the Assayer in Sacramento," the man said with a gleam in his grey eyes.

"Ah-hah," Marlowe smiled, the import of the man's occupation already having made its weight felt.

"Now, if you'd rather I didn't—"

"Please continue," Marlowe said; "may I offer you a glass of some of our very best wine?"

"That's better," Ackerson said. "I do believe that a bit of refreshment would be fitting." After tasting the wine, he continued, "There is positive information that the government has given an exclusive contract to a group of men, headed by one Alan Dennis, to mint specimen coins for the use of the miners. It is further believed that should this token minting turn out successfully, California will come more and more under the influence and charge of the men in Washington.

"Now, I needn't tell you that men, uh—such as myself—do not particularly look forward to intervention by the government. I just learned today that Dennis' group has made arrangements with my office to have gold weighed and evaluated by us, so that it can be made into coins. Since this falls into my line, I think that this positon of trust can be turned to—shall we say—our mutual advantage."

MARLOWE smiled, tapping his stubby fingers on his desk-top. "But, where do I come in?"

"I am an assayer. This limits the places that I can safely be seen in, as well as my active participation in obtaining other metals for mixing; for contact work; and also for the myriad details that such a scheme involves. You have the organization, I am told, to handle the other loose ends," Ackerson explained.

"True," Marlowe said. "But there remains the question of how you intend to make the switch, as well as the financial aspects of this situation."

"Well," Ackerson said, stroking his face with his left hand, "the Head Assayer, Charles T. Flowers, is going to retire shortly; the job will fall to me. As to the other question you mentioned, I think that we can make a suitable deal at a later date which—"

"Cash and carry is my motto," Marlowe said.

"Well, in that event, do you think that a 60-40 split is fair?" Ackerson asked.

"You get the sixty, I assume," Marlowe said dully.

"Yes," came the flat answer.

"M-m-m," Marlowe glowered. "I propose a 50-50 split. That way, there will be no, ah—trouble—between us."

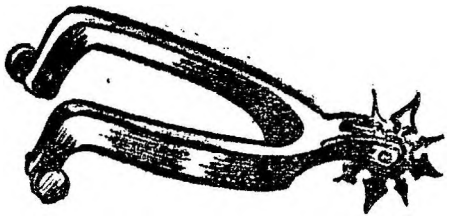
"Sixty-forty—or nothing," Ackerson bristled.

"Very well," Marlowe said. "When can we start?"

"The dies are on their way now, and we should deliver our first assayed gold within a week."

"Very good," Marlowe said, rising cordially from his chair and extending his hand. As they shook hands, Marlowe said, "I shall expect to hear from you soon."

Ackerson smiled, descended the wide staircase, and walked out through the ever-swinging batwings. Marlowe stared after him for some minutes, the plan and its many ramifications spinning golden webs in the short man's brain.



It was less than a day later when heavy footsteps were heard on the balcony and Marlowe rose to greet Ackerson. They chatted for some time of inconsquential things. Wine-glasses had been refilled a third time when Ackerson said, "We got word from Denver."

Marlowe's eyebrows arched.

"The first batch of dust will be delivered to our office on Thursday; we are to have it ready by Friday morning. Obviously, that means that we can expect the dies from Denver sometime Thursday. Now, the first batch must be good. The second—well, I think that we can start then," Ackerson said.

"What will you need?" Marlowe said, leaning back in his chair and touching his extended fingers together.

"I'll need a quantity of copper, and I want you to send your man around to the office so that I can give him the dust that was removed," Ackerson said.

"I am at your disposal, er—Phil," Marlowe said.

"Good," came the smiling reply.

"Who is doing the actual striking of the coins?" Marlowe asked, almost too nonchalantly.

"I don't know," Ackerson lied. "But it will be done right here in Sacramento; that I am positive."

Ackerson cut short any further questions by getting to his feet. He extended his hand, gripped that of the other man, and let himself out quietly.

FIFTEEN minutes away, he stepped past the rumbling wagons at the railroad depot and walked into the telegraph office. Seated behind the rattling key, an old, white-haired man looked

up and broke into a toothless smile. "Howdy, Mr. Ackerson," he greeted.

"Hello, there, Jake," Ackerson replied. "Any mesages for me?"

"Yep, they's one hyar from Denver."

"Let me have it!" Ackerson snapped, tearing the yellow sheet from the telegrapher's trembling hands. "Damn!" he swore softly. "Of all the times for an order to go astray, this is really it!"

"What's thet?" the oldster piped up.

"Oh, nothing, Jake; just a bit of bad news."

"Too bad."

"Yes, indeed," Ackerson said, turning on his heel and walking out of the depot across to his office.

Once inside, he re-read the note and planned. If the dies had been delayed, that meant that the whole scheme would likewise be held up. Marlowe, a man of quick decisions, would take the news as a sign that Ackerson now wanted to back out of their agreement. It was known that Marlowe had a number of men in his employ who would kill if their boss so ordered; Ackerson's face turned pasty-white, and his hands nervously crept up to his neck.

There had to be some way of delaying Marlowe without saying it in so many words. Perhaps, Ackerson could plead that the Head Assayer wanted to do the job himself. Then, when the dies were delivered, he could tell Marlowe that they finally had insisted on his superior's retirement.

Yet, despite all the thoughts that raced through his mind, Ackerson knew that delaying would only serve to infuriate the little saloon-owner all the more.

The more he thought about it, the more Ackerson wished he had never broached the subject to Marlowe. On this sour note, Ackerson removed his jacket and started in on his day's work.

5

CHUCK WEBER was a huge man, and his size and strength were accentuated as he stood by the forge, sweat glistening on his naked chest. The steady swooshing of air onto the coals turned them from a dull red to an angry ashen-gray.

Despite the fact that he was standing in the open air, far above the sprawling city of Denver, Weber's face was pale from the exertion. Beside and slightly behind him, Frank Johnson stood calmly. His collar was open, and he looked neat and cool as he watched Weber heap more coals onto the forge.

A bag of gold-dust stood near Johnson, and he ran his fingers enviously through the coarse mixture. At a call from Weber, the blond man carried it to the forge, and helped pour half of its contents into a thick, steel-jacketed container. Slowly, the golden ore melted, finally turning into a fluid, and it was this molten stream that Weber poured into a mold.

As both men relaxed while the bar hardened, Weber wiped his wet forehead with a hoary arm and said, "This'll be finished soon. We ain't got the right stuff to do the job like it oughta be, but we'll have it all done proper by mornin'."

"You're sure that no one followed you here?" Johnson asked again. "Did you check your backtrail?"

"Stop worryin'," Weber said shortly. "I tell you that I wasn't followed; you're worse'n a mother hen."

"Where's Dennis now?" Weber asked.

"Seen him today?" Johnson asked.

"No, but he must be pretty sore that them dies didn't show up," Weber grinned. "Figgered he'd be rippin' Denver apart to find 'em."

"I told you that it was arranged to show that the dies had been sent to the wrong place," Johnson glowered. "He's probably cooling his heels over at the hotel; after all, he has to wait for an answer from Boston, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," Weber said, "I suppose so."

"Is anything worrying you?" Johnson asked.

"Barton, that's who," Weber blurted. "He's up to trouble fer us, that's what he is. And besides, maybe—"

"Don't worry about Lew Barton," Johnson said, a smile creasing his young face.

"Whatcha mean?" Weber demanded.

"Didn't you hear?" Johnson said. Then, on seeing the negative reaction in the hulking man's eyes, he added, "Barton met with an accident—of sorts—last night. It seems that someone took a few shots at him from an upper story window. They tell me that he is in pretty bad shape; no one knows if he'll live. Such a shame, too," the blond youth's face lighted up, "that such a nice fellow has to die."

"Who done it?" Weber suddenly sat up.

"Don't look at me like that!" Johnson snapped. "I didn't say that I did it."

"Well—didja?"

"Come now," Johnson soothed. "What would I have to gain by shooting down Lew Barton? There would be no sense to it."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Weber said, his face showing that the huge man had no idea of what he was talking about. A frown of deep concentration knitted his brow, but the obvious exertion the thoughts caused in his mind made Weber agree reluctantly that Johnson had no reason to kill Barton.

Then, thinking of the stagecoach hijacking, Weber suddenly asked, "Johnson, didja kill anybody on the stage?"

"What's bothering you?" the smiling youth asked. His mind conjured up a picture of red-beaked buzzards swooping down and glutting themselves upon their feast.

"I wanna know."

"We only wanted to take the stage and make it look like a robbery. There was no sense in killing any of the innocent people on board," came the calm denial.

"You sure?" Weber asked.

"Yes, I'm sure," Johnson snapped.

THE SMELL of sweat that emanated from Weber's pores was offensive to the younger man, and he leaned away from the big man's presence. Too stupid even to take offense at such lack of taste and good manners, Johnson thought, as the ox-like Weber kept up a stream of steady questions. Johnson, on the other hand, was busy making plans, even though he occasionally nodded in agreement to what Weber was saying and every so often saying, "Yes," to some point that the huge man stressed over and over again.

Johnson examined the possibility of not losing sight of a good thing. After all, if he were to discard the dies after they had run the $50,000 of dust off, he might possibly be losing a proverbial goldmine. If there were a way to retain his advantage, and use it in such a manner as to profit himself, it certainly seemed worth the risk. There were a number of possibilities; he could make his own deal with the miners in Sacramento; he might even make a deal with Dennis so that he could return the dies—with a suitable explanation—and stand to gain a reward for his "honesty". The more he mulled these many ideas over in his mind, the sooner he arrived at an inescapable conclusion. The hulking Weber stood in his way . . .

He was still deeply engrossed in his thoughts when Weber announced with a start, "Someone's comin'!"

Quickly springing to his feet, Johnson ran to the edge of the cliff and peered down. His eyes, unaccustomed to looking across miles and miles of burning, scorched dust and sand, were unable to distinguish who the rider was that came slowly across the barren waste. It was nearly five minutes be-

fore Weber said, "Looks like your man."

"Hank?" Johnson asked.

"Yeah, that's the one."

Half an hour later, Johnson waved an angry greeting to Hank, who dismounted and stalked over to the forge.

"Trying to deal me out?" the dusty rider asked.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Johnson asked. "And haven't I told you never to come here unless I wanted you?"

"Yeah, he's right," Weber echoed.

"You'll want to hear what I've got to say," Hank said, thumbing his hat back on his forehead.

"All right; out with it!" Johnson snapped.

"That guy, Barton," Hank started.

"Well?" Weber's voice asked sharply.

"Boss, he isn't dead! You didn't kill him! He took a bullet in his chest, and one across the ribs, but he ain't dead!"

"What!" Weber exploded.

"It's just his idea of a joke, isn't it, Hank?" Johnson's eyes flicked a warning to his lieutenant. Instantly recognizing the message, Hank smiled, "Yeah, boss; I was only kidding."

"You sure he ain't dead—an' you didn't shoot him?" Weber asked, fire in his eyes.

"You heard Hank, Weber," Johnson said. "He was only fooling." Then, turning to his man, Johnson asked, "How badly is he hurt?"

"The doc gives him half-and-half a chance to live," Hank said. "He's hurt pretty bad, but Barton's young. And there's this girl, Shirley from the restaurant; she's been seeing to it that he gets the treatment he needs."

"Shirley?" Johnson said oddly. "You mean to say that Barton has a girl?"

"Something like that," came the flat, unemotional answer.

Fire danced in Johnson's eyes, and he thought of Esther, back in Philadelphia. Here was the perfect weapon; the girl could inadvertently be used to his advantage.

Weber said, "What's that crazy look for?"

"Forget it," Johnson said; "let's see how the gold is doing."

THE THREE men moved toward the mold. Satisfied that it was cool enough, Weber lifted the heavy tray and deposited it in a barrel of water. Hissing steam arose, and Weber pulled it out gently. Time and time again, the heavy mold was doused in the water. After three changes of water, Weber agreed that they would be able to strike their coins that night. For long hours under the gruelling sun, Weber pounded the soft bar of gold into thinner, more even-shaped size. Finally, just as the sun sank over the distant mountain peaks, the last bar was ready for the dies.

Hank had ridden back to town some hours before, and his last words with Johnson escaped Weber's ears. Strapping the bars onto the three mules which stood under a tree some yards away, Weber mounted his horse and started toward the town.

The sky was inky-black before Weber, Johnson and the three laden mules approached the roaring, noisy camp that was Denver. The saloons were full; painted women busily plied their trade at the bars, and it was with great resolve that the youthful blond passed the invitation of the wide-open houses.

The two men moved quickly to Weber's small shop, and they quietly unloaded the mules.

"Get right to work!" Johnson snapped to his companion; "I want it finished by morning!"

"Where're you going?" Weber asked.

"To see a sick friend," Johnson said coldly. Then, his hat pulled low against recognition, the blond man walked silently out of the shop, toward the rooming house. He used back streets all the way, and he cautiously poked his head over the sill of the open window at the rear of the house some fifteen minutes later.

A man, swathed in bandages, lay in bed, and a girl sat in a straight-backed chair beside him. Grimacing at his bad timing, Johnson slid his pistol quietly into his holster and crept stealthily away.

A moan came from the bed, and Lew Barton slowly opened his eyes. He was in a room that was strange. Curtains hung at the window and lace-embroidered sheets were cool beneath him. Lew waited for the fog to lift from his brain, then started to sit up.

"You lie right down," Shirley Collins' sharp command came to him.

"What—where am I?" Lew asked.

"You're in the boarding house—in my bed," Shirley said. "I was getting ready for bed when I heard shots." She lowered her head, but savagely on her lower lip, then continued, "I—I had a premonition that it was—that someone was hurt, and I rushed out to find you lying in the street. I had them bring you here."

"Oh," Lew groaned, his brain beginning to function. "You mean that this is your room?"

"Yes."

"I can't stay here; what will people think?" he said. "How does it look," Lew waved his hand to express his meaning. Then, he sat bolt upright, and a wave of nausea and pain flooded him. Quickly, he lay back down. "I—"

"Never you mind," Shirley interrupted. "You'll stay right here. You're badly wounded; the doctor doesn't want you to move around until you are rid of your fever." You were almost killed!"

"But—where will you sleep?" Lew asked desperately.

"Silly; the same place that I slept the last two nights—right next door," Shirley's eye twinkled.

"*Two nights!*"

"That's right—two nights," Shirley said.

"What about Dennis and Pauley?" he blurted.

"A man who called himself Al Dennis came to see you yesterday. He left a note for you and told me to tell you to get well quickly," Shirley said, reaching into her pocket for the crumpled letter.

"Shirley, I think I can trust you," Lew said, and he saw a silent smile cross her face briefly. Then, after telling her the reason for his presence in Denver, he said, "Open the letter and read it to me. I can't see too well—things look sort of hazy."

"I—you," Shirley stammered, "you really trust me that much?" Her face was a crimson red.

"Yes," he said soberly. "That much."

WITH A reassuring smile, Shirley opened the envelope, looked at the ghostly-white man in the bed, then began to read. "*'We are making arrangements to leave for Sacramento as soon as you are sufficiently recovered to travel. I have written to Boston to secure the shipment, and have instructed them to forward it directly to us out there. Pauley advises that you try to get well fast—there is a lot of money and time tied up in this. Dennis.'*"

"Yes, he is right," Lew said.

"Then—you'll be leaving?" Shirley asked.

"I'm afraid so," Lew said. "But I'll be back in a few months. I promise; things cannot wait for me."

Shirley smiled bravely, rose silently and leaned low over the bed. She kissed Lew full on the mouth, and he

lifted weak hands to toy with her loose flowing hair.

"I love you, Shirley," Lew said.

Tears staining her face, she hurried out of the room without answering.

Then, suddenly, she thought of the man who had come into the restaurant, full of questions about Lew Barton. Someone had called him Hank, and she was curious as to the sudden interest in a man like that in Lew.

It seemed that all he had wanted was information, and he hurried away without even finishing his food.

This struck Shirley as being odd. She had never been involved with anyone before, and her sudden concern for Lew made her that much more worried than ordinarily she would have been. She puzzled about the strange man as she prepared for bed. She stood next to the open window, combing her long, brown hair, when she thought she heard a noise in the back.

She looked through the window, saw no one, and was about to close the shutters when the moon gleamed on shiny metal. With a cry, Shirley fled for Barton's room. She flung open the door, and saw a figure move out of the window and over to the bed.

Startled by her sudden appearance, the intruder leaped for the window frame, diving headlong through it and rolling with a grunt as he hit the ground.

Lew's .45 lay on the dresser, and inexperienced hands reached for it, aimed it at the fleeing shadow-like figure, and squeezed the trigger.

Shirley heard a curse, a guttural stream of invectives, and the even footsteps sounded now as if one leg was being dragged.

VOICES were raised, lights appeared and Lew sat up in his bed. "What happened?" he asked.

"Thank God you're safe!" Shirley said.

"But—"

"Someone was in this room," she said. "I saw the moon shine on something he was carrying; it looked like a knife to me. I burst in here, saw the man run for the window and dive out. I grabbed your gun, fired at him. I think I hit him, too."

"Did you recognize him?"

"No, it was too dark. I couldn't even tell if it was a man or not, but I think I hit him," Shirley said.

Voices from the hallway penetrated the thin walls. The door burst open and two nightgowned-men appeared. "What was it?" they asked.

After a quick explanation, Shirley said, "I'm going to stay in this room all night; if that man should come again, I'll be ready for him."

"No, I can't let you," Lew said.

"What do you mean?" Shirley asked.

"Well," Lew blushed, "it isn't exactly the decent thing to have a man in bed and—"

"Don't be foolish!" Shirley snapped. Then, turning to the small crowd that had gathered, she said in a sturdy voice, "Lew and I are going to be married. And if anyone doesn't think that he's worth sitting up all night with, then I certainly feel sorry for you!"

"Hooray!" they shouted.

"That's the spirit, girlie!" one man said.

"Hear thet, Marthey? If thet young feller has any sense, he'll throw her right outta hyar!" another voice said.

"Shut up, Henry! Keep your spirits up, girl; that's the best way I know of to get a man!" Henry's wife said.

On that note of gaiety, they all left the room. Shirley went over to the side of the bed, and peered down at Lew. He smiled wanly up at her.

"You're worth fighting for, darling," she said.

"Don't you believe it," Lew said, and all of a sudden, she was in his arms.

"Lew, please," Shirley said, pushing herself away.

"Gal, I aim to marry up wif you yet, yessir!" Barton grinned, reaching for her hand.

"Get some rest, Lew," Shirley said.

"If that man comes back, he's going to wish he had left well enough alone."

"Your gun?" Lew asked, pointing to the still smoking .45 in her hand.

"Yours," Shirley said.

"Thief!" Lew said with a grin.

"Quiet, before I knock you out," Shirley smiled back, and she kissed him gently on the forehead.

"Goodnight, darling," Lew said.

"Goodnight," came the soft reply.

Then, the pistol held in her small hand, Shirley crossed to the open window, placed a chair before it, and sat down. The thought was better than the execution; a few moments later, the only sound that greeted the hooting owl was the rhythmic breathing of two sleeping people.

6

ALL DENNIS, Ed Pauley and Chuck Weber sat in the back room of the *Last Chance Saloon*. The new day dawned hot, and the flies swarming in the window caused the three men to continually slap the pesky creatures. An occasional hornet droned by, and the three men made sure to stay away as far away as possible from the angrily buzzing insect.

"I reiterate," Dennis said, "that too many people have shown an interest in the dies. First, they are sent to Boston in error. Second, the government man, Barton, is shot down—almost killed, too. Third, a crazy man is going around shooting at people in the night."

"What do you suggest?" Pauley asked, nervously.

"I suggest that we get to Sacramento. If you think it wise, we can even stage a holdup at the bank and clear it out," Dennis said. "We can blame that on our prowling friend—whoever he is."

"Bank—rob it!" Pauley spoke up. "See here, gentlemen, a thing can go just so far—then it gets out of hand. But when it comes down to robbing my own bank—"

"You're insured, aren't you?" Dennis asked.

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing," Dennis cut in. "If we can clean out your bank, we will all be that much richer when we finally get to Sacramento. Then, should anything go wrong, we will have something to fall back on."

"Good idea," Weber piped up.

"And Barton?" Pauley asked.

"What about him?" Weber asked.

"Well—how does he fit in?"

"That's just it," Dennis said triumphantly. "With Barton in bed badly shot up, we can just rob the bank, go to Sacramento and wait for him to join us there. With so important an enterprise waiting out on the coast, he won't be able to dawdle here and dig into the robbery."

"How much have you got?" Weber asked.

"Well, roughly speaking," Pauley made mental additions, "I'd say between one and two hundred thousand. We're due to receive a shipment of silver from Philadelphia; that should raise the figure by another hundred thousand."

"Whew!" Weber whistled through his teeth. "That's a lot of money!"

"Indeed," Dennis scowled at Weber.

"Are we agreed, then, that we shall clean out the bank tomorrow night—after having made an 'official' departure in the afternoon?" Dennis asked.

"Suits me," Weber said.

"Very well," Pauley said reluctantly.

They filed out of the room, and Weber went across to the restaurant for breakfast. He sat on a stool, ordered a plate of ham and eggs, and was just about to eat when a woman came in.

"Shirley!" she cried. "I heard all about it. How exciting!"

"Let me tell you, Clara," Shirley said, "that whoever it was didn't show up again."

"Just imagine," Clara beamed. "A slip of a girl like you shooting a man in the leg and keeping guard over Lew —uh, Mr. Barton—all blessed night!"

"Come to think of it," Shirley smiled, "it was quite a trick!"

Weber got up, walked over to the girl, then asked, "Did something happen to Barton?"

"Who are you?" Shirley asked.

"I'm Weber. What happened?"

"Oh, hello, Mr. Weber," Shirley said. "Someone sneaked into Lew's room last night and was about to do something to him when I came in, took a shot at him, and sent him running."

"What's this about hittin' him in the leg?" Weber asked.

"Well," Shirley said excitedly, "I'm positive that I heard a groan, then the man limped away."

Weber went back to his food. His child's mind kept asking if it was Johnson who had broken in. He'd soon find out, too, for he was to deliver the coins that he had struck the night before in an hour or two.

WEBER GOT up, paid for his meal, and left. Shirley and Clara were still eagerly discussing the events of the previous night. Weber went to his room, found his .45 and worn holster, and strapped it on. He checked the load, spun the chamber to make sure that it was properly oiled and adjusted, then clomped down the stairs and over to his office.

In the back, Weber had neatly piled the shiny new coins in six canvas bags. He hefted two apiece onto his mules, led them out of the small stable in the rear, and started the long ride to Johnson's camp.

The sun was beginning to beat down in steady anger when he topped the final rise that led to the barren canyon. Weber's eyes focused on a lump far ahead of him. He rode closer to it, dismounted, and kicked away the accumulated sand.

To his shock, Weber saw the dried-out body of old Jed Carson. Sightless eyes stared out of hollow sockets and Weber winced as he saw that the buzzards had beat him to it. Quickly scooping sand over the horrible remains, Weber straightened.

Hadn't Jed Carson been the driver of the stagecoach that Johnson had stolen? Hadn't Johnson sworn that he hadn't harmed any of the passengers or drivers? Hadn't Johnson lied about it all—and probably even the shooting of Lew Barton?

Anger filled Chuck Weber as he remounted his horse, raked spurs into its shanks, and set off at a wearying pace across the valley. It seemed hours before he hove into view of the old cabin.

"Halooo!" Weber called.

"Who is it?" Johnson's voice asked.

"It's me, Weber," came the answer.

A pistol rang out, and Weber clutched at his left arm. He angrily threw himself to the ground, and scrambled in behind a cluster of bushes. "What's goin' on?" he demanded.

"I'm going on, Weber, but you're going to be buzzard bait!" Johnson called back triumphantly. "You've served your purpose—now you're going to die; do you think that I would really split all this gold with you?"

Two more shots rang out, kicking spurts of dust into the air. Weber looked through the brush, saw an arm in his sights, and squeezed off a shot. A yowl of pain escaped Johnson's throat and the arm was quickly pulled back.

The buzzards began to circle high overhead. They had come at the beckoning of death. "I give up, Weber!" Johnson shouted. "You broke my arm and I'm bleeding like a pig!"

Weber stood up, and advanced toward the house. With a look of stupid shock, Weber stared into the muzzle of a barking .45. A purplish hole materialized on Weber's forehead, and an involuntary movement of his arm sent his dying shot into the ground at his feet.

Weber fell backward as if poleaxed, his flat, coarse-looking face grinding into the sand and pebbles on the ground. Johnson stepped out of the

doorway, stood over Weber, and pumped the remainder of his pistol-load into the cadaver.

The buzzards bore in, five circling birds that pecked away at Weber's remains. Without looking back, or bothering with the bullet-scrape on his arm, Johnson walked over to the skitterish mules, untied their six bags of burden, and lugged them into the shack. He sat at the sole table on the only chair and spread the contents of one bag before him. Brand-new gold pieces glittered and sparkled even in the poor light of the shack.

He sat for some moments, playing like a child with the shiny coins, until sense returned to him. He returned the coins to their bag, lifted a board from the warped floor, and deposited the six bags in a space between the earth and the floor.

He walked out into the sunlight again, his eyes fascinated as he watched the buzzards at their meal. Twirling a cigaret into shape, he ignited it and smoked it halfway down before he tossed it aside, tore his gaze from the buzzards, and mounted his horse.

Frank Johnson was whistling a gay tune to himself as he headed his horse down the tricky slope. Much had been accomplished. Much more remained; Lew Barton was still alive, and Johnson carried on his sore right leg a bullet crease, from the gun held by Lew's woman, Shirley. His eyes blazed as he envisaged her shapely form, long flowing hair and well-developed figure.

Lew Barton had taken one woman away from him, but Johnson would see to it that Shirley was his—or, at least, that Lew would never have her.

IT WAS NEARLY noon of the next day before Johnson rode into town, somewhat stiffly. He had spent the night high in the mountains, treating his wounds. He noticed with interest that Al Dennis and Ed Pauley were standing by the stage-depot. Dennis was speaking to Shirley, "We can't wait for Barton, Miss, but we'll expect him along as soon as he can make it."

"I'll tell him," Shirley said; "I hope everything turns out all right."

Dennis nodded, waved to Pauley, and both men boarded the empty coach.

As they rattled along, Dennis asked, "What happened to Weber?"

"He wasn't in his room, and we can't wait for him. What does it matter? He'll be there when we get back," Pauley said.

Thirty minutes out of town, Dennis shouted to the driver, "Hey! We're getting off here!"

"What fer?" the man asked.

"Never mind!" Pauley shouted. "Just let us off!"

With an oath, the driver pulled his lathered team to a grinding halt and watched as both men stepped out, handed him a dollar apiece, and walked off. "Durned crazy, that's whut they is!" he said to himself. "Ain't gonna worry none 'bout 'em, though." With a crack of his whip, the stagecoach driver sent the four horses on their way again.

It was nearly seven o'clock when Pauley and Dennis, now dressed in range clothing, went up the stairs to Weber's room. They knocked, waited a moment, then went in.

"It's the same as it was this afternoon!" Dennis said.

"Will this change our plans?" Pauley asked, nervously.

"No; Weber knows where to find us."

"We may as well wait here until nine o'clock," Pauley said. "No sense in showing ourselves unnecessarily."

The hours ticked by on leaden feet, and both men squirmed uncomfortably. Finally, after what seemed years, the clock tolled nine times. "Let's go," Dennis said, pulling his hat down low over his face.

Silently, they departed.

The streets were deserted, save for the entrances to the saloons, and both men hurried past the patches of light escaping through the batwings. A

drunken cowpoke meandered over to them and insisted that he be allowed to buy them both a drink.

"No, thanks," Dennis said.

"What're yuh doin'," the drunk asked, "insultin' me?"

"Just not thirsty," Pauley said, and he felt the cold claminess that clung to his arms and back.

"I wanna—" He got no further. Dennis had slipped around behind the man and had creased his skull with his .45; the drunken cowpoke slipped noiselessly to the ground.

"Come on," Dennis whispered. Both men moved slowly past the last patch of light, and soon were in the comforting darkness of the upper street.

A couple walked by and both men shrank into a doorway. Too intent on each other to notice anything else, the couple walked by without seeing them.

The glass window of the bank gleamed in the street lamps, and they quicky hurried to the back door. Pauley's key opened it silently, and they stepped inside. "Follow me," Pauley said, leading the other man around the maze of cages and chairs toward the rear safe.

The banker kneeled before the safe, spun the dials, and soon the iron door swung open.

BARS OF gold, stacks of paper money and coin and the shipment from Philadelphia were soon stowed in suitcases that Pauley had left there that morning.

"I want this to look real," Pauley said, setting a large charge of powder in front of the safe and igniting the extra-long fuse. "This should give us at least twenty minutes before it goes off."

"Just to add to the general confusion," Dennis said, working with other fuses, "I'm going to sprinkle powder all over the floor. I'll leave a few dozen bullets too, so that the powder will set off the bullets at intervals; that should convince people that there's a mob in here!"

That accomplished, the two men toted their heavy loads outside. It took them fifteen minutes to put the contents of the suitcases into a big trunk, lock it, and make sure that proper labels were attached.

"When they come by tomorrow to pick up my luggage," Pauley said, "they'll ship this along to me, too."

They were at the livery-stable door when the first explosion rocked the town. Men streamed from every direction, and the stable was momentarily empty. Quickly securing mounts, Dennis and Pauley headed slowly out of town. Gunfire indicated that shots were being exchanged by the townsfolk with the supposed robbers in the bank.

Smiles broadened on their faces as they heard the wild shouts fade behind them. Dennis led out at a ground-eating clip, and Pauley rode along behind him. "Imagine the shocked-looking people who finally break into the bank," Dennis said.

"I can imagine," Pauley said; "they're probably positive that a full-sized army is inside."

"You know," Dennis remembered, "I wish I knew where Weber was."

"You have something there," Pauley said. "He's probably sleeping off a drunk in jail; when he wakes up, he'll know where to find us."

"Indeed," Dennis said, and both men rode hard into the night.

7

IT WAS NEARLY a week later before Ed Pauley and Al Dennis descended from the stagecoach in Sacramento. It was late in the afternoon, and the banker decided that a visit to the assayer's office should come first.

Tracing weary steps to the small, out-of-the-way office, Pauley entered

and his gaze swept the room. Half a dozen men stood idly by, nervously twiddling their thumbs, twirling cigarets into shape, and crushing them out before they had been half-smoked. Occasionally a man would come from another room, call one of the men over, and speak to him. Sometimes with a happy grin, more often with downcast, angry eyes, they departed.

"I'm Pauley," he said to one of the underlings; "I want to talk to Mr. Charles Flowers."

Phil Ackerson, busily engaged with a miner on the far side of the room, glanced covetedly about. He listened to the man say, "I'm sorry, Mr. Pauley, but Mr. Flowers is not here any longer; he retired just this morning."

"Well, then, let me speak to the man next in charge," Pauley said with authority. He nodded emphatically to Dennis, who stood at his side.

"May I help you?" Ackerson said with a smile, as he crossed the room. "I am Phil Ackerson, Assistant to Mr. Flowers. We don't know when—or even if—there will be anyone to replace him, and I have assumed his duties until—"

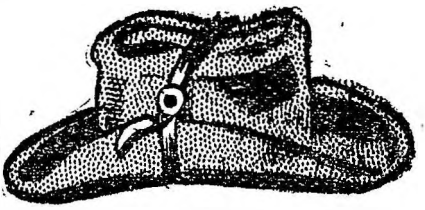
"Very well, Mr. Ackerson," Pauley cut in impatiently. "You are obviously the man for me to see."

"Won't you come inside?" Ackerson invited, an anticipatory gleam in his eyes.

In the cramped private office, Pauley and Dennis took seats and faced Ackerson across a cheap, wooden table that served as a desk.

"Mr. Ackerson," Pauley said, "I shall come right to the point." He briefly described the arrangement he had had with Flowers; in conclusion, he said, "So, I assume that you find this arrangement meriting a continuance on your part."

"Yes, yes," Ackerson said, "by all means. We are usually happy to do this sort of thing on a small scale. However, when it involves so large an amount of work, our staff, naturally—" he waved his hand emphatically.



"We understand that, too," Dennis said. "I am certain that we can arrive at a figure satisfactory to both parties. What do you say to, uh—well, how is 3½%?"

"I shall accept 5%, gentlemen," Ackerson bargained, "and not a penny less."

"You leave us no alternative," Pauley said. "Then, we expect to have the first order placed within a few weeks. A slight error in shipment has delayed the dies that we ordered from New York, but we should receive them shortly."

After another five minutes' talk of generalities, the two men left. Ackerson watched them go, already forming in his mind what he meant to tell Marlowe the next night. He could see, in his mind's eye, the reaction the short man would have; a big grin, a glint in his eyes and an approving nod of his head. Ackerson smiled to himself.

Out on the street, Pauley went toward the telegraph office as soon as he had left Dennis. He asked the operator if there had been any messages for him, and the old man said that there weren't. Minutes later, he was in his hotel room, shoes kicked off and a robe around him.

He sat on the edge of his bed and began to think. Would it be advisable to wait for the dies, or should they commission a man here in town to make new ones? The itch of possible money passing through tied hands angered Pauley. Here he was sitting on a thing of tremendous potential. For every day that they delayed, another day of rich profits had passed. Swearing bitterly to himself, he strode to the window and looked out.

IT SEEMED odd that Dennis should be down there in the street, talking

to a woman of obvious charm. They were walking up the street, arms entwined, and Pauley craned his neck to peer after them. Who was she? What connection did she have with Dennis? But most of all, Pauley wondered if the sudden appearance on the scene of a woman would in any way detract from his own share of the profits. It could be an old friend, Pauley rationalized, and he laughed uneasily at the thought; perhaps she bore news that would turn his profit into loss. This situation could never be tolerated. The more he puzzled, the angrier he got. He made a mental note to ask Dennis who she was.

He was still peeved, an hour later, when he descended to the hotel dining room to find it deserted. He sat in a corner, ate his meal quickly, and was just rising to leave, when he saw Dennis enter with the woman on his arm.

"Over here!" Pauley said, half-rising from his chair.

"Hello, there," Dennis greeted. "May I present Miss Vincent?"

Pauley sipped coffee while the two other diners finished their meals. Then, after both men had seen her to her room, Pauley turned angrily, then said, "Dennis, who is that?"

"She brought important news!" Dennis said in a hushed voice. "Come to my room; we have a lot to talk over."

Minutes later, each man had selected a comfortable chair in Dennis' suite, and Pauley was biting the end off a fat cigar when Dennis said, "The government is entertaining the idea of establishing a regular branch Mint in San Francisco!"

"She—"

"She works for me," Dennis said. "Through her, I find that a bill is in committee in Congress. We have to make this area look so roaring and uncivilized that they will pigeon-hole the motion. First, I want you to get your gangs together; tell them that there is to be a sudden, widespread rein of terror. The Head Assayer has retired; that leaves only a rather stupid assistant to succeed him. I want him killed; I want it to be done in such a way that the Congress will suspend further talks indefinitely."

"What about us?" Pauley asked. "And where is Weber with my $50,000 in gold-dust?"

"We can't worry about him," Dennis said; "I'm waiting for those dies. The man we have making them, a C. C. Wrightson, says that his dies cannot be forged. He seems to feel that, if we give honest weight, we will get the people behind us—and a branch Mint will follow in its steps. That is why we must start turning out poor, watered gold as soon as we can."

"You know," Pauley said, fingering his cigar thoughtfully, "it suddenly struck me that you, Weber, and I are standing in the way of a mighty good thing. If it weren't for us, the miners here would soon have stability and confidence in their work. It almost makes me feel like a snake, messing their hopes up so badly that they will be afraid to step out of their tents, or leave their diggings, for fear of being robbed."

DENNIS' eyes arched in surprise, but he said nothing.

"We made close to $200,000 apiece from that bank robbery—enough to keep us the rest of our lives. It almost seems a shame," Pauley said, "to have to be so greedy."

"Listen," Dennis said. "I started as a boy in New York. I used to steal fruit from pushcarts, snatch ladies' purses, and many a time I slept in a cold doorway. I didn't ask for this lucky break, but, by George, I'm going to turn it to my advantage. Only someone who smelled as I did, slept in doorways, and stole from the old and the blind can feel as I do when I think of empire.

"Why do I think of empire?" he continued. "I want to make Al Dennis so rich and so powerful that he never need fear poverty again. No, sir; I may feel a bit sorry for the poor people who aren't getting what they paid

for—but my first and last concern is for myself!"

"Yes, I suppose so," Pauley said. "But just imagine—"

"I'll imagine nothing!" Dennis said. "All I want is money, and I don't care how I get it. If I were a woman, I probably would work any man for money; since I am a man, I must connive and plot to get it."

Now it was Pauley's turn to remain silent.

"If those dies aren't delivered by tomorrow evening, I am going to wire Boston. We can't wait too long," Dennis said. "I can't afford to lose this kind of money. If worse comes to worse, I shall have a local man make up dies. Why is there such a fuss and bother? Dies or solid bricks of the stuff; I'll take it any way I can get it!"

Pauley and Dennis talked for several more hours, discussing the killing of Ackerson, the shooting of Barton and the disappearance of Weber.

Then, nearly at midnight, Pauley arose to go to his own room. As he turned to open the door, he heard Dennis say, "Remember, I insist that Ackerson is removed; how, or by whom, is of little interest to me. We must stop Congress from making any move that would rob us of a ready fortune!"

8

LEW BARTON had been walking about for three days when the doctor came for his final visit. His body was still wrapped in gauze, but he had been able to get in and out of bed without too much difficulty.

"Funny thing about you young fellers," the wizened old man said. "Bullet shoulda killed you; 'stead, you're up and around and almos' fully recovered." The doctor shook his head, a puzzled, good-natured smile on his face.

Shirley had found a room on an upper floor for Barton, and since he was now in a position whereby he could not be attacked from the street, she had relaxed her vigil over him.

The doctor unwound the bandages, replaced them with smaller, more-compact strips of tape, and was looking over his handiwork when the door opened and Shirley entered. She kissed Lew hungrily, then looked at the tape.

"He'll live, I suppose," she said with a broad grin.

"'Fraid so, Miss," the doctor winked back.

"Too bad—isn't it?" Lew said.

"You'll have to take it easy fer a spell," the doctor said. "No runnin' around, no hosses; jes' plain relaxin'll do the trick."

"I'll see you downstairs," Shirley said, and the door closed softly after them.

Lew stood in the center of the room for some time, gently trying out muscles that had grown stiff and sore from his enforced inactivity.

When Shirley reentered the room, he sat down on the edge of the bed and let her help him on with his pajama shirt. Since the exertion of flexing his arm, side, and back muscles had weakened him, Lew lay on top of the bed, his head resting on the pillow.

"Lew," Shirley said, a puzzled expression on her face.

"What is it?"

"There has been the strangest man hanging around the restaurant this last week," Shirley said. "He keeps staring at me—and I feel rather foolish about it, too. It's almost as if this man were watching me die, the expression is so strange. Every time I look back at him, he lowers his eyes. Brrr! It's awful."

"Hmm," Lew said, rubbing his jaw. "Doesn't he speak to you at all?"

"No, that's the funny part," she answered. "Except for asking me for his dinner, a glass of water or another cup of coffee, he hasn't said one word."

"When does he come in?"

"Never at one particular time," Shirley said. "He may not be in for a whole day—then he's in for all three meals and many times beside that the next day."

They talked about the strange man for some time, then the whole incident was forgotten in the rush of conversation on other, more intimate things.

But there was still a certain foreboding when Shirley reported for work the next morning. She was serving coffee to a man at the counter, when the door swung open and the man came in.

He took a stool at the far end of the long counter and ordered coffee and a bun. He stared continually at her. Youthful, blond, and yet somehow, old at the same time.

"W-why do you stare at me?" Shirley was surprised that she had the boldness to ask.

"Uh—oh, I didn't know that I was," he replied. "Excuse me."

"Yes, of course," Shirley said with no warmth in her tone.

"Will you be working here tonight?" he asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Willis is going over to see her nephew and I'll be here all alone," Shirley said.

"I see," the youthful man said. Then he paid his check and left.

IT WASN'T until eight o'clock that Shirley thought of him. It suddenly came to her conscious mind when she saw Ma Willis walk over to her.

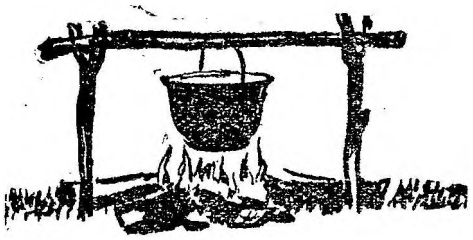
"Lands," Ma Willis chirped, "I never in my life!"

"Why are you so excited, Ma?"

"My nephew, Arthur," the older woman said. "They told me that he was at Death's door; but now he's all well and better and I'm not to even go over there tonight. He went off with his father for a ride in their new buggy."

"That's really wonderful for you," Shirley said.

"Enough of that hogwash," Ma Willis said. "What with your young man sick, you'll want to see him. Go on and git, girl, afore I change my mind. I'll tend the store alone; never is heavy on a night like this." Then, as Shirley began to protest, "Hush up! Go on; off with you!"



Shirley quickly removed her apron, tidied up her hair and then rushed off. Minutes later, she was with Lew.

A rainstorm suddenly sprang up from nowhere and lashed unmercifully at the sleepy town. Lew held Shirley closer to him as they sat and stared out of the open window.

They had been sitting there for five minutes when Shirley stiffened, then asked, "Lew, what was that?"

"I didn't hear anything, darling."

"It sounded like a gunshot."

"Probably just thunder, that's all," Lew soothed her. Then, as if dreading the moment when he would have to say it, he said, "Shirley, I'm going to be leaving for Sacramento in the morning. I'm well enough to travel, and I can't afford to delay this much longer. If I am not there to see that things are going properly, the government will not be able to make up its mind as it should. They tell me that, even now, opponents of the idea of erecting a Mint on the west coast are trying to bring the matter before Congress, before all the facts are in. It may hurt me to move a little, but quite a bit depends on my getting started as soon as possible."

"Yes, I sort of knew that you'd be going as soon as the doctor took off the gauze," Shirley said, her eyes moist with tears. "Oh, Lew, why must it be you?"

"Darling, I—"

"Of all the men who must be picked, why did they pick you to go to Sacra-

mento? I want you, need you—it will be unbearable here until you come back!" Shirley sobbed, tears flowing freely now that the pent-up emotion had been released.

"I know," he said, brushing her long, silken hair back on her head. "But how do you think it is for me—leaving you behind like this?"

They talked for some time, finally agreeing that, as they full well knew all along, Lew would go and Shirley would stay until he could come for her.

She left then, but he kissed her hard and passionately before she slipped quietly way. He sat staring into the pelting rain for nearly an hour after she had left. Then, sleep claimed him.

WHEN HE awoke, the sun streamed through his window. It was morning, and the beauty of the day was a poignant reminder to him that he had to leave his woman.

Slowly, methodically, he dressed. He bathed, shaved and was adjusting his belt when a knock came on the door. "Come in."

"It's time for breakfast!" Shirley announced. She smiled, and not even the bat of an eyelash betrayed her sorrow that he would be gone by noon.

Together, they descended the stairs, went out through the front door, and were slowly walking toward the restaurant.

"I want to see what kind of a cook you are," Lew grinned, "*before* we're married!"

"I only poisoned three customers last week," Shirley smiled back.

The restaurant was already open, and Shirley said, "It's nice of Mrs. Willis to come down and open up for me this morning; she knows that—"

Lew opened the door, shouting a cheery, "Good morning!" to stop Shirley from saying what both knew to be the sad truth. She bit her lip, thinking that their last morning together for some time should be a happy, remembered occasion.

"Good morning, Ma," Shirley said. "Here, darling, you sit down and I'll get you something to eat. What do you like; flapjacks, eggs, cereal? You know, you never did tell me what you like for breakfast."

"I like to start off with a big kiss!" he said, rising from the stool and reaching for her as she went around behind the counter.

"Silly!" she said after she had kissed him.

"Yes, but—" he suddenly stopped in mid-sentence. He gasped, quickly pulled Shirley toward him, and shoved her outside.

"Wh-what's the matter?" she asked.

"What does Ma Willis look like?" Lew asked flatly.

"Middle-aged, probably about fifty, gray-haired, rather plump, wears a—" Shirley began.

"Darling," Lew said, "brace yourself; Ma Willis is dead! She's lying behind the counter inside."

With a sharp cry, Shirley said, "That shot last night; it was probably the one that killed her!"

The sheriff was quickly summoned. As soon as he hurried over, a curious knot of people surrounded the tiny restaurant. Inside, the sheriff bent to examine the body. "Right through the back of her head," the lawman said. "She never saw who did it. Poor Ma never had a chance."

It wasn't until later that Shirley recalled the man she had told Lew about; they hurried to the sheriff and she explained the odd circumstances surrounding the man's last visit to the shop.

"Sounds reasonable," the sheriff said. "But, what would he want to kill you for?"

"I don't know," Shirley said. "I think that it might have something to do with my wounding the man who broke into Lew's room." Then, after pausing to puzzle her thoughts into order, she added, "I foiled him when he broke in—even wounded him when he was escaping. Maybe he was so angry

at me for doing that, well—he used this way to get even."

"What does this feller look like?" the sheriff asked. The girl gave a short, but accurate description. To her surprise, the sheriff's eyes seemed to light up.

"Do you know where he is?" Lew asked.

"Well," the sheriff said, "I *do* know where he ain't."

"What do you mean?" Lew asked anxiously.

"Well, I saw this hyar feller get on the train this mornin'! Bound for Sacramento, I hear." The sheriff scratched his ears with grimy hands.

"When?"

"Started my tour at midnight," the sheriff said without turning from the body. "Musta got on the five o'clock train. That's the only one that comes by here before noon."

AND THAT very minute, many miles away, Frank Johnson and his helper, Hank, were on the Sacramento Express. Johnson sat in one of the double seats, drawn close to the window, and Hank snored loudly beside him.

In his hands, the blond youth fondled a white apron; the one that he had snatched from the peg behind the counter of Ma Willis' restaurant.

With soft, gentle strokes, he seemed to caress the piece of cloth, and his eyes were wild, hate-filled and sullen. The conductor came by to collect the tickets, and Johnson slid the apron into the open fold of his jacket.

Reaching into his pocket, Johnson felt the cool brittleness of newly-struck gold coins. A key came next to his grasp, and he smiled as he thought of the heavy strongbox that he had personally seen put aboard the mail-car.

Finally, he found his ticket. He gave it to the conductor, then watched as the man tried to awaken Hank. He gave a sly smile as the sleeping man tossed, then slowly opened his eyes.

"Your ticket?" the conductor said.

"Uh, oh—yes," Hank said, reaching into his pocket. There was a strange bagginess to his shirt, and he reached suddenly for the holster at his side. It was empty; his pockets were empty. Even his ticket was nowhere to be found. Hank got angrier and angrier as he searched his pockets, the band of his hat and the insides of his shirt.

"It's gone!" Hank said with amazement.

"What's gone?" Johnson asked.

"My ticket; my money—everything!"

"I don't know anything about it, conductor," Johnson lied. "And don't start accusing me of having stolen this man's wallet. If I had, would I still be sitting here next to him? Any fool would change seats before the theft was discovered."

"Come now," the impatient conductor said. "I have five more cars to go."

"I *had* a ticket!" Hank spluttered.

"Don't care if you *had* one," came the train-man's reply. "What I want to know is if you *have* a ticket. Come on, now, let me see your ticket, and let's stop monkey-doodlin'."

The angrier Hank got, the more impatient the conductor became. Finally, after more fruitless minutes of re-examining his pockets, Hank turned to Johnson and said, "Boss, tell this guy that it's okay; that you'll pay for the ticket."

Johnson looked Hank squarely in the eye, then calmly said, "Believe me, I've never seen this man before today."

Hank tried to say something, but failed. He spluttered finally, "Boss, you're kiddin'!"

The conductor had turned to accept a ticket from a man directly across the aisle, and in that moment, Johnson whispered, "Hank, play along; let him put you off at the next stop. Don't ask any questions—do as I say."

"Well now, young feller," the conductor said, "are you going to give me your ticket or must I throw you off at the next stop?"

Hank glanced at Johnson, felt a warning nudge of the blond man's elbow in his ribs, then said, "Guess I can't show you one at that."

Fifteen minutes later, the train chugged into a small, out-of-the-way station, aptly called, What Fer, Nevada.

With as little ceremony as possible, the conductor escorted Hank to the platform. After yelling that there would be a thirty-minute wait while dinner was served in the Nevada House, the conductor re-mounted the steps of the train and went inside.

Before Hank could ask for an explanation, Johnson grabbed his arm and steered him into a dark alley. A dull thud was heard, then the labored breathing of a man carrying a heavy weight. Johnson looped a rope from a nearby laundry-rack around Hank's hands; a gag was quickly inserted into his mouth, and he was dumped into a shallow gulley behind the deserted alley.

Minutes later, Johnson re-appeared, his face showing signs of fatigue, but his smile showing that there would be no need to split all that gold that rested safely in the mail-car.

A shrug of his shoulders, and Johnson quickly made for the Nevada House.

9

THE *Silver Dollar Saloon* was at its roaring climax when Phil Ackerson came in on Saturday night. Oscar Marlowe, the usual cigar clamped between his teeth, stood on the balcony surveying the tables, the girls and the bar.

Directly beneath where he stood, Marlowe watched intently as a bearded miner ran a few bags of dust into a sizeable sum. An almost imperceptible nod from the owner, and a new croupier was sent to the roulette wheel.

Despite that, and even though the ball was changed at every roll, the miner continued to win. Marlowe watched as Phil Ackerson wandered over to the table. Like everyone else within earshot, the entire playing crowd was backing the lucky man's choice.

"Red, twenty-four!" the croupier intoned. A roar of delight went up as happy people raked in more winnings. A hush, the roll of the ball; click, click—then the croupier chanted, "Red, twenty-four!"

Throwing caution to the winds, the men crowded around the table recklessly played the same number again. Marlowe's foot reached for an invisible button in the corner of the balcony. He trod heavily upon it, standing there while the ball rolled, clicked into a slot, and finally stopped.

"Five, black!" the croupier said with relief. A sea of groans arose, and two men were sent to help collect the chips won by the house on that single spin.

Sighting the short owner on the balcony, Ackerson pushed through the crowd and climbed the staircase. He nodded at Marlowe, received the same greeting, and preceeded the *Silver Dollar's* boss into his private office.

"They'll never learn—will they?" Marlowe said listlessly, adding almost contempt to the last words.

"What do you mean?" Ackerson said.

"The whole deal was rigged," Marlowe sneered. "We have been having a run; all of a sudden, people began to turn lucky tonight. It only takes a little play like that to recoup—and be far ahead for the rest of the night."

"But, I thought—"

"So does everyone else," Marlowe sneered. "We tell them that we have honest cards, honest tables, and honest women here. We let some rumpot win a big hatful of cash, beat him up in the alley when he leaves, and no

one is the wiser. Why, we even water the drinks!"

"And the gold," Ackerson wryly added.

"What news do you bring?" Marlowe asked.

"Dennis and Pauley arrived today," Ackerson said. "They came to see me; we made a deal."

"Good," Marlowe snapped. "How soon will you need the material and men you asked for?"

A knock on the door interrupted further talk, and a flunkey informed Marlowe that one of the dealers had been caught red-handed, corner-nicking a deck of cards.

"What?" the fat man exploded. "I'll be right down." Then, to Ackerson, "Come along and see how we handle 'crooked' dealers."

Both men descended the staircase, the fat owner quickly leading the distinguished-looking Ackerson to the offender. "What's your name?" Marlowe barked at the dealer.

"Joe H-Hansen," the frightened man said. The green eyeshade that covered the man's upper face and forehead wobbled.

"You carry a gun?" Marlowe asked offhandedly.

"Y-yes, right here," Hansen said, reaching into his vest and handing the pudgy owner a small, pearl-handled pistol.

Marlowe took it, broke it, examined the load, then shut it tight. He toyed with the gun several moments, then said in a loud enough tone for everyone in the room to hear, "This is how we take care of sharps!"

With that, he held the gun in front of him, its barrel aimed at the man's stomach. A look of fright mingled with anticipation fled across Hansen's face, then the gun barked. A small, blueish hole appeared just below the middle button on his vest, then a groan escaped the man's lips. His face turned a livid red, then a pasty-white, and Hansen clutched his stomach; he keeled over, hit his head against the table-leg. At a nod from Marlowe the bouncer dragged the unconscious man out. "He'll last until morning, at least," grunted Marlowe, turning away. He started back to his office. "Better get a drink," he said to Ackerson. "Come up to the office when you feel better."

SHAKEN by this experience, Ackerson walked unsteadily to the bar, brushed past a man who stood there, then ordered a double whiskey.

"Who're you pushin'?" a voice growled behind him.

Ackerson turned to face a giant of a man, roughly-clothed and obviously drunk. "I beg your pardon."

The drunk, his face flat and his voice like tempered steel, turned to his companion, held out his drink to him with the words, "Watch this fer me—and don't drink none." Then, he swung back to Ackerson.

"L-listen, mister," the cowed assayer pleaded, "I didn't mean any offense."

"Yeah," the big man growled. "Well, that's too damned bad, cause I ain't aimin' to let a panty-waist fop like you insult the likes of Vinnie Cassidy!"

Big Cassidy drew his gun, broke open the cylinder, and removed one of its six bullets. He closed the gun, spun the cylinder with his huge thumb, then said, "There is one empty chamber an' five full ones. If the first shot don't go off, then you're gonna live a while; if it goes of, there ain't gonna be no time to worry."

For the length of half a minute, Cassidy spun the cylinder. Then, satisfied that the empty was so well mixed with the others that no one had any idea where it would turn up, Cassidy cocked the gun, levelled it, and said, "Right between the eyes, mister; there ain't gonna be no second chance!"

Breaths stuck in the viewers' throats as the forefinger curled around the gun. It seemed an eternity until the finger turned white from the pressure. Then, almost as a relief to all, the gun roared. A neat hole squarely between

his grey eyes, the dapper Phil Ackerson died.

"Drinks're on me!" Cassidy shouted, and the mob broke for the bar. Turning to his companion, Cassidy whispered, "If Dennis don't like this, he'll have to go some to find a better way."

Marlowe had re-appeared at the sound of the gun, and he watched with ill-concealed dismay as the late Ackerson was carried from his saloon. He cursed himself for not laying down to his men that Ackerson was to be protected. Replacing a dealer was an easy process; but trying to hook up with a man like Ackerson again would not be easy. Marlowe truly felt that the goose to lay the golden eggs had died too soon.

Next morning, however, Marlowe presented himself to the Assay office and asked to see the man in charge.

"I'm sorry, sir," the man told him, "but no one has been appointed to replace Mr. Ackerson yet."

"How do you chose your replacements?" Marlowe asked.

"That depends," came the answer. "We'll probably hear from Washington within a few days, though."

Angrily, Marlowe stomped out. No sooner had he left, than Al Dennis came in. He asked the same questions, received the very same answers, and left just as puzzled as had Oscar Marlowe.

AS MARLOWE walked back to the *Silver Dollar,* he asked himself how he could make a deal with a new man—especially when no one seemed to know who it was going to be. Dennis, too was berating himself on the same subject.

And, not far from the Assayer's office, Frank Johnson stepped down from the train, a package held securely under one arm. He went to the mail-car, watched as the box he had put aboard at Denver was unloaded, and together with his prize, went to the hotel to check in.

He was still smiling at the thought of having done so neat a job in killing Lew Barton's woman. He envisioned the look on the government man's face when he discovered her with a bullet in the back of her head. He may have missed in getting Barton out of the way, Johnson reflected, but he certainly made sure of Shirley Collins.

And Hank, too, brought a smile to Johnson's face. Stranded all alone out in the desert, he would have to wait at least until the next train. By then, Johnson figured, he could have the gold, as well as any proceeds from selling the dies back to Dennis. He would be rich, and this, too, was not an unpleasant thought. And by the time they had finished chasing their imaginations about in Denver, he would be safely aboard a boat at San Francisco, headed around the Cape for England.

And even dumb Weber, the trusting fool. The blond man broke into peals of laughter as he remembered how the giant had walked right into his well-baited trap. And now, Johnson had a feeling of desire for Esther, back in Philadelphia...

Lew Barton was a fool, Johnson mused. How anyone could work for the government, for practically nothing, too, when a man could live like a king...

Everything was working so well, that Johnson decided to step into a saloon and drink, gamble and love with his money. Casting worries away for the evening, he pushed through the batwings of the *Silver Dollar Saloon.*

10

IN THEIR hotel room, Al Dennis and Ed Pauley discussed the demise of Phil Ackerson. Dinner, in its most expensive and sumptuous best, had been served, and brandy glasses were filled as the two men sat facing each other.

"I have some influence in this terri-

tory," Dennis said. "I think that I've waited long enough."

"What do you mean?" Pauley's face turned a shade whiter.

"I have often asked myself why I was not made Governor of California. I would appoint myself Head Assayer, too, and I would make so much money that none could oppose me. Who knows—maybe even President of the United States!"

"It's suddenly crystal-clear to me," Pauley said. "It isn't gold that you want; it's the power you can get from using it. For a while, I thought that the fever of gold—something which strikes all of us—had taken a slightly stronger hold on you. But it isn't the gold at all; I see that now."

"I'm glad that you finally have gotten a correct set of morals," Dennis said. "This country never will be strong, if it doesn't have strong people. Initiative! Courage! Bah, I say. Money and power are what will do it. All that hogwash about the common good; it sounds nice, but it isn't for me. I want power, prestige. I want children yet to be born to repeat my name long after I am dead. I want—"

"Power?" Pauley said. "You want to be the almighty, and no one has that right. Even Napoleon—"

"He was on the road to it." Dennis' eyes gleamed ruby-red. He swirled the brandy around in the glass, savored its aroma, then drank deeply.

Ed Pauley rose to his feet. He looked down at Dennis' wild eyes with the passion of power deep-seated within him. Without being conscious of it, Pauley's fingers clasped around the fat neck. Eyes that shone with greed only moments before, now bugged with pain; sharp, clawing nails dug into his arms, legs and face. But there was more on Pauley's face; it was almost as if he were an avenger.

He dug his hands tighter, fingers closing around Dennis' windpipe. The fat man had dropped his brandy-glass, the lifeless cigar now forgotten. With strength born of desperation, Dennis drove his knee into Pauley's groin, felling the other man and releasing the stranglehold about his neck.

Desperately, Dennis was on his adversary, a hastily-snatched, silver paper-cutter in his hand. Blood signalled Dennis' victory.

Panting, he stood on wobbly feet, the flush of victory on his face and coursing through his body. Then, fatigue gripped him, and he stumbled to the couch. No one would be there tonight, and it would be a simple matter to arrange a mock holdup to explain his partner's death the next day.

IT WAS nearly eleven o'clock the following morning when Frank Johnson rapped quietly on the door of Room 104, waited until he was bade to enter, then opened the panelled door.

All evidences of the struggle had been removed, and Al Dennis now sat at a desk, busily writing in a ledger, when he looked up, saw the stranger, then said, "Yes?"

"I understand that you are looking for something."

Johnson's cold eyes stared; they roved about the room. He had seen wealth before, but the quiet dignity of the man at the desk, the richly-furnished hotel room, and Dennis' obvious familiarity with such things sent a wave of resentment through Johnson. His eyes seemed to lift each ornament from its resting place, caress it as if it were his own, then lay it in its place carefully so as not to spoil the richness of it.

"Something? What are you talking about?" Dennis asked, his eyes betraying no emotion other than anger at the interruption. He looked at the man in front of him, saw breeding that fell far below his own, and wrinkled his nose disdainfully.

"Dies," Johnson said without expression.

"Dies! How do you—"

"Let's not waste time," Johnson cut in. "I have the dies—but I am willing to bargain."

Dennis appraised the youthful man

before him again, and now noted fox-like eyes that probably never passed up an opportunity. Beneath the calm exterior, here was a man of turbulent passions—one who could be easily offended, and who would strike back like a snake when cornered. He looked up, stared some moments at the man, then said, "You have them?"

Johnson nodded.

"Let me see them."

"Here's a coin that was struck from them," Johnson said, reaching into his pocket and flipping the sparkling piece onto the desk.

"Where did you get them?" Dennis parried.

"I did not come here to answer foolish questions," Johnson snapped, obviously enjoying his role of having the upper hand. "If you are willing to make an offer, then let's get down to it! If you prefer to haggle, then perhaps I can find others who—"

"May I examine the dies?" Dennis asked. "It is not impossible to make a few coins by hand."

Johnson reached into his pocket, pulled out nearly a dozen of the shiny coins, and threw them on the desk, too. "These are not cheap imitations," he said.

"Perhaps," Dennis agreed, picking up each coin and examining it under the light. Then, satisfied that they were genuine, and had indeed been struck from the self-same dies that he believed were en route to him from Boston, he said, "You're not lying."

Dennis studied the man for several minutes, trying to uncover some clue that would aim him in dealing with the man. The stranger possessed some vanity; perhaps, by playing upon it, Dennis might be able to gain a bargaining advantage.

"Have a seat," Dennis smiled graciously. "May I offer you a glass of wine; brandy, perhaps?"

"I—uh, brandy!" Johnson snapped, easing slowly, cat-like, into a nearby chair.

THEY TALKED for nearly an hour. Johnson parried Dennis' verbal attacks deftly, turning the conversation time and again to the purpose of his visit. Sensing that the direct method was not bearing up too well, Dennis switched suddenly to the more subtle line of attack.

"You see," Dennis was saying, toying with the cigar in his fat hand, "the fact of the matter is that the government has gone to great expense to see that California is given an equal opportunity to share in the richness and protection of the union.

"They have given me a charter, making it illegal for anyone else to coin gold here, but allowing me to offer—for a small fee and at more of a loss than profit—the miners the priviledge of minted coins."

Black jets of smoke belched from the depot a short distance from the hotel. Another train-load of miners, tramps, and gunmen were arriving. "Do you see those people?" Dennis asked, waving at the mob from his window. "They all want opportunity; some want it for personal reasons; others want to give their families a new start—but they all are entitled to protection from their government."

"Where does this all fit in?" Johnson asked. "That may be all as you say, but I am for myself, and I never forget it."

"To insure this end, the charter specifically states that *only* I am entitled to do this minting," Dennis went on. "So, even if the dies should fall into—shall we say—undesirable hands, it would be of no help to them."

"But, should you order another set of dies, then the first set suddenly becomes—" Johnson began.

"Young man," Dennis snapped, all pretense of kindliness gone, "what is your offer?"

"I'll listen to yours, first."

"Five thousand dollars is tops," Dennis said.

"Then, sir," Johnson said, "I suggest you order a duplicate set; I shall accept no less than one hundred thousand dollars." He mentioned the sum of money as if he were quibbling over the price of a steak in a restaurant.

"What!"

"Others will listen, and—"

"Wait a minute," Dennis said, grabbing Johnson's arm as he rose from his seat and turned toward the door. "It seems to me that we—"

They argued for another hour. Then, after snipping at the price until Johnson's patience wore thin, Dennis agreed. "Eighty-three thousand is a fair price."

"I want cash—now," Johnson said.

"Impossible," Dennis protested. "Be reasonable."

"I am reasonable," Johnson said. "You have twenty-four hours to raise the cash, or I will accept another offer I have been listening to" Then, Johnson strode from the room, triumph written in a broad hand across his sharply-chiseled features.

AS THE DOOR closed behind Johnson, a sense of defeat came over Dennis. That man had the dies—no doubt about it. No matter how excellent a craftsman any forger was, it would be impossible to turn out such uniformly-equal coins. And should he order a new set of dies, Dennis knew it would mean a delay of several weeks—possibly months. Since the whole success of his scheme depended upon short, quick utilization of their charter before the branch Mint was opened, this new turn of events might well wreck any chance for a quick, sure profit.

There remained but two alternatives. The first, and most distasteful, was to buy back the dies. The second would be to steal them back.

Al Dennis sat for many hours puzzling this turn of events, one that seemingly was going to rob him of all his profit. It was still a toss-up to the paunchy man as he downed a glass of rye, then prepared for bed.

As he lay stretched on the soft, comforting four-poster, he tried to arrive at a clear decision. Should he buy—and at that almost ridiculous price for $83,000? Or, perhaps, it might be worth the risk to steal the dies back. But, where were they? Who had them? How could he obtain them?

Al Dennis' hand caressed the glistening gold coins that had been left behind by the departed Frank Johnson. Gold had bought a lot of things; secrets, souls—even entire armies. Why couldn't gold buy the name of the man who held the dies? Indeed, Dennis thought, as he clinked the hard, shiny coins between his hands, why couldn't gold buy all this?

11

LEW BARTON stepped down from the train and walked slowly through the depot. It had been nearly two years since he had last seen Sacramento. What had been a quiet, sleepy town now rocked with the impact of a thousand booted feet on its planked sidewalks, its muddy, slimy streets and its roaring saloons.

Men died with blazing guns; others were quietly sent to boothill with a knife between their shoulder-blades. It was a wide-open town, but as with other boom-towns, the wildness would pass in time.

Lew wandered aimlessly through the

town, searching out signs of people and things he had known. He noticed that the old saloon, *Jack & Pete's,* was still open, although it already appeared to be feeling the pinch of other saloons in the neighborhood.

He went through the squeaky batwings, and he saw Pete, the aged bartender. "Long time no see, Pete," he said.

"Lew. Lew Barton! Why, you old son of a gun!" Pete roared. "I ain't seed you in nigh onto a coon's age."

"How are things?" Lew asked offhandedly.

"Not good," Pete answered levelly. "If you're plannin' to stake a claim, give it up afore you start. Roaming gangs rob and kill the decent goldpanners 'round hyar."

Lew stood back, astonishment bold on his face. "Do you think that these gangs are organized? I mean—have you any idea that anyone may be behind it all?"

"There's a rumor that Ed Pauley, the banker, is behind them," Pete said in an icy voice.

"I can't believe it," Lew said. "Why—"

"Ask anybody." Pete said. "They'll all tell you, son, thet these gangs operate too slick; and lately, Pauley's been actin' as ornery an' lowdown as they make 'em."

"I will," Lew said firmly.

"Say, how's yer folks?" Pete asked, but his words fell on deaf ears, as Barton turned and strode quickly from the saloon.

It took less than an hour to find that Pete had been telling the truth. Saloons, restaurants—even the hotels; all of the people had the same thing to say. Pauley had been living high on the hog, and his bank had not been that successful. Immediately, Lew made for the hotel where Al Dennis and Ed Pauley had rooms.

At the desk, Lew learned of Pauley's disappearance the night before. "He hasn't shown up," the pasty-faced clerk said. "Mr. Dennis, in Room 104, reported that Mr. Pauley hadn't returned last evening; he still hasn't."

"When did you see Pauley last?" Barton asked.

"The last time I saw him," the clerk made a show of trying to rack his memory, "let me see."

Lew reached into his pocket, showed the man his U. S. Marshal's badge, then asked, "When?"

"I remember—all of a sudden," the startled clerk said. "He came in with Mr. Dennis around five o'clock. I went off duty at six, and didn't see him after that."

"Keep this under your hat," Lew said, and the frightened clerk quickly agreed.

As Lew mounted the stairs, he began to put together the crazy thought-pattern that raced through his mind. Ed Pauley had disappeared and it seemed that Al Dennis knew more about it than he might be willing to admit. And...did either the banker or Dennis have anything to do with the shooting of Ma Willis in Denver? All these thoughts crowded into his brain as Barton turned the corridor. A door was opening, and Lew slid back into a partially-open doorway.

"It's—it's Frank Johnson!" Lew muttered dazedly. "What in thunder is *he* doing here?"

Barton waited until the blond man's footsteps faded away, then he went up to the door from which the man had just departed. It was Room 104. But wasn't that Al Dennis' room?

LEW NEEDED more time to think, and he knew he wouldn't be able to find out what he had to know by confronting Dennis. This would require tact, and it had to be done surreptitiously, so as to divert suspicion away from himself.

With a minimum of noise, Lew went back down the stairs. His booted feet slid noiselessly across the deep, plush carpeting, and he spotted a restaurant across the street. He headed for it.

As Barton opened the door, a giant

of a man arose from behind the counter and thundered, "Lew! How iss you?"

"Hans, it certainly is good seeing you again," Lew broke into a broad grin. Memories flooded upon each other as the two men faced each other. Lew had first seen Hans Kaufmann at work in an eastern coal field. Huge muscles strained a six-hundred pound solid chunk of coal off of a man's crushed chest; had it not been for the strength of the easy-going Hans, the man would have died.

"Married yet, Lew?" Hans asked disarmingly. "Hans have fine daughter—"

"Hans, where can we talk?" Lew asked, and the seriousness of his question stunned the hulking man.

"Vas iss?" he countered.

"I want to talk to you alone," Lew said urgently.

In a back room, Hans looked searchingly at his friend. "If is trouble, Hans will help."

"All I want is information," Lew said. "You know Ed Pauley, don't you?"

Hans' face turned livid. At a sign from Lew, he merely nodded his head, "Ja."

"Have you seen him with a blond, youngish-looking man named Frank Johnson?"

"Ja," Hans admitted. "Chonson every day sits outside, but he disappear five, six weeks ago. Now, iss back. Today, is sitting, like always, then goes to hotel across street. Wait long, then Chonson come out. Hans see him, but he not come back to restaurant. Smile all over, like iss swallowed goose und golden egg."

"That was about ten minutes ago, right?" Lew asked.

"Ja."

"Have you seen anyone else with either Johnson or Pauley?" Lew asked, edging closer to the big man.

"Ja. Hans see with man from Assay Office, named Ackerson. But Ackerson dead, and Chonson not around

Assay office again," Hans said, stroking his blond whiskers.

"Did you hear about Pauley disappearing last night?" Barton asked.

"How iss possible?" Hans said. "Pauley with fat man from hotel when come back last night."

"Thanks, Hans," Lew said. "You've been a real help."

"You eat Hans' food?"

"Not now," Lew said, "but I'll be back later."

Hans watched the man leave, then smiled. "Iss good for Lew to married. Too hot-headed. Woman fix, ja."

LEW STOOD outside for some time, digesting the facts as he had them. Ackerson was dead. Pauley might be dead. What would a government assayer and a man like Johnson be doing together? What was Johnson doing in Al Dennis' room? The more he thought, the less he could make out of it. Ma Willis was dead, too—but why?

Thinking that Hans Kaufmann might have been mistaken, Lew went to see Mort Fiedler, the baker. Mort was shovelling a huge loaf from his oven when he spotted Barton. They talked for nearly fifteen minutes, but the answers he got to his questions were almost identical. Sandy McHerny, the hostler; Adam Hovner, the owner of the mercantile; even the bootblack at the hotel. They all were of the same opinion. Ed Pauley, whether alive or dead, had probably bled

Sacramento white. Most of the citizens agreed that it was the banker who had control of the thugs who roved the mine claims to torture, beat and kill the rightful owners, stealing whatever gold-dust they had. There was talk, too, of a Vigilante committee being formed to look into the matter.

Lew set to forming a plan He had to smoke Dennis and Johnson out into the open. A direct accusation would be valueless, but if he were able to force either of the men to make some move, then he would have them dead to rights.

As Lew thought, his brain kept recalling Shirley, waiting for him in Denver. Suddenly, he remembered that she had complained of a man who started coming to the restaurant. Could he possibly have been Johnson? If so, what was he doing in Denver?

The first thing to be done was to contact Washington, advising them of the situation. Perhaps the men who had sent him here could offer some advice. Possibly, they knew of a way to trap the pair. Lew had a hundred things to do, but he stopped at the telegraph office and sent a message. In the code that he had been taught, he told Washington of the recent developments.

Then, he went off to the hotel to see Al Dennis.

It was mid-afternoon when he knocked on the door of Room 104, waited until Dennis opened it, and stepped inside.

"Oh, hello, Barton," Dennis said. "Glad to see that you are up and about so soon."

"When you're young," Lew said, "you have an extra advantage; you heal more quickly."

"Drink?" Dennis offered.

"No, thanks. Say, where's Weber and Pauley?"

"Weber's simply disappeared; he didn't even come here with us. Probably just ran off with Pauley's fifty-thousand in gold-dust. But he's a simple fellow at heart; he'll show up, sooner or later."

"And Pauley?"

"I don't know," Dennis lied. Then, he elaborated on the story he had made up about the banker's disappearance. As Lew sat and listened to it, he had to admit that Dennis was a cunning foe. He didn't think of mixing with the paunchy man, but he relished the idea of having a showdown with Johnson.

Finally finished, Dennis sat back. Lew said, "You haven't heard a thing from him?"

"Not a word. He said something about Chicago—I didn't quite catch it, but he left and hasn't come back," Dennis said, rolling the long cigar between his fat fingers.

"Have you notified the authorities?" Lew asked.

"They're too busy with all sorts of killers, drunks, and loose women to bother tracking down a missing man. I didn't think he would be gone this long. Perhaps, we can wait until tomorrow. Then, if Ed still hasn't shown up, we can drop by and report it. However, I've known Ed a long time, and he sometimes goes off like this for a few days, then suddenly pops up when you least expect it."

"Let's hope so," Lew said.

"Yes, indeed," Dennis agreed.

12

FRANK JOHNSON stepped up to the bar, plunked down his coin and ordered, "Whiskey."

He was in a good mood, and rightfully so. He could already feel the eighty-three thousand dollars in his pockets. Life would be a gay round of parties, women, liquor and more women. He smiled inwardly and ordered another drink.

Fifteen minutes later, he had wandered over to an empty table and sat down. His bottle before him, Frank sat alone. At the next table, a girl sat on a bearded miner's lap, fighting off his uncouth advances as she tried to lift his wallet.

Frank smiled at the girl, told her with a sly wink that she was doing well. In another moment, the wallet came out of his pocket and into her dress-bosom. Then, tired of the miner's filth, she wandered over to Frank's table.

"Mind?" she asked, and before Johnson could answer, she slid into the seat. "Whiskey."

"Frank Johnson," he said. "Who are you?"

"Sue Ryan," she came back. "Wanna go up to—"

"Hold on," Johnson said. "Let me do the rushing. I'm used to doing things my own way—and in my own good time."

"Preacher?" she asked.

"No, why?"

"Nobody else ever turned me down," she said.

"Hah!" he laughed. "I'm not here to sample the flesh; I want to drink, and gamble!"

"Care who you spend it with?" she asked.

"Susie, it may as well be you," Frank said, reaching for the girl. She did not resist, and he pulled her close.

Upstairs, Oscar Marlowe maintained vigil on the balcony. He saw what Johnson was doing to one of his girls. "Joey, get that mauler up here. Looks like he's got money."

Joey, the strapping bouncer, soon returned with Johnson; money-hunger had subsided, and Johnson felt the want of a woman. He did not relish the idea of gambling, now, but he went with Joey and Sue up to where Marlowe waited.

"I have a game going up here," Marlowe grinned. "Thought that a man like yourself would like to play a man's game—with man's rules."

"Yeah," Johnson said. "Susie, come with me."

They went into the inner room, the one just off of Marlowe's office. A table, four chairs and a few bottles of liquor on a stand were already there. Sue draped herself over a chair in the corner, and Johnson kept looking at her, longingly.

The hours passed. It did not take too long for Johnson to see that he was in way over his head. He anticipated sharping, but was sure he could spot it, and he'd seen nothing. The girl, attentive to him when he had started, began to ridicule him; he knew that she would leave if he lost much more. In a final desperation-hand, Johnson said, "I'm throwing everything I have into this pot. Match me!"

"Go on, Marlowe," Sue taunted.

"Call," Marlowe said evenly. "What have you got?"

Joey said, "Three kings."

Marlowe said, "Three queens."

Uxbrin, the other man, said, "Two pair, jacks high."

All eyes centered on Johnson. "Three jacks."

Johnson knew that he had been taken, but it burned within him to lose so badly in front of a woman. He took out the gold coins that he had in his trouser pocket, lay them on the table, then said, "I'll play on these."

MARLOWE stared at the gold coins, then at their owner. A sudden thought shadowed his mind, and he suddenly found himself thinking of Ackerson. Could this possibly be the new assayer? The more the saloon owner figured, the surer he was that Frank Johnson was the man that Washington had sent to replace Ackerson. True, he felt that it was fast work, but the government moved in strange ways. Perhaps Ackerson had been due to be recalled, and this blond youth was already on his way weeks ago.

"Are they true value?" Marlowe in-

quired, a deadpan expression on his fat face.

"These are Dennis-die coins," Johnson bristled; "there is no doubt about their gold content!" He leaned back with a smug, almost triumphant leer on his features.

Dennis! He had said Dennis! Now, if not completely so before, Marlowe was positive that the Head Assayer for the district sat across from him.

"Oh, you say that they are Dennis-dies?" Marlowe asked in an off-hand manner. "Who made the dies?"

"What difference does that make?" Johnson asked.

"They could be fake," Marlowe said.

"Take his money, Marlowe," Sue Ryan snapped. "I want to get back downstairs."

"Relax, Susie," Marlowe shut her up. "You'll go back down there when I get good and ready."

After some questions and answers, Marlowe accepted the coins. Now, he would start to play for *real* money, not a few thousand dollars, as before.

"Get brandy," Marlowe said to Sue. "Bring the bottle and four, no—five glasses."

Obediently, she moved to his command.

"Yeah, Marlowe," Sue said disgustedly. She envisioned a night of boredom, and the more time she spent watching the game, the less time she would have to pick the pockets of the customers down near the tables, the bar and the dance floor.

"Oh, Susie," Marlowe arrested her departure from the room. "I put a new bartender on tonight. Give him this note; that'll get us some good brandy," Marlowe said, scribbling a few lines on a piece of paper and pressing it into her hand.

It was fully fifteen minutes before Susie returned, and she brought with her a tray, glasses and a full bottle. "Charlie had to go to the storeroom to get the right brand. He says that you're getting exactly what you ordered."

Marlowe beamed broadly. If Johnson knew that the note to the bartender had been an order to send half a dozen men to search the blond man's room at the hotel! Well, Marlowe thought, a man only gets what he deserves.

Uxbrin was dealing. Crisp, new cards slid noiselessly across the table. Marlowe picked up two kings, a deuce, another king and a four.

The emotionless expression remained on his face as Marlowe bought two cards. He did not even bother to look at them, for he knew that Uxbrin would deal as he was told.

"Three hundred," Marlowe said.

"Too rich for my blood," Uxbrin said, throwing his hand away in mock disgust.

"See that—and raise it another three hundred," Johnson made the grand gesture.

"I call," Marlowe rasped, and watched with pig-eyes as Johnson lay a pair of jacks next to three eights.

"What have you got?" Johnson asked with an edgy voice.

"Four kings," Marlowe said.

With feline grace and amazing speed, Johnson had a small gun in the palm of his hand. He motioned Marlowe away from the table, and soon had him lined up against the wall, Uxbrin and Sue Ryan beside him.

"What—what's the meaning of this?" Marlowe asked, pig-eyes dilated in fear.

THERE WAS a cold smile on Johnson's face.

"You didn't even look at your cards after you discarded the two; yet without even seeing the two that you bought, you said that you had four kings. Just for my own information, I'm going to look at your hand." Johnson went over to the table, stood where

he could watch the three in the corner, and scooped up Marlowe's hand.

"I—I—" Marlowe stuttered.

"I'll hold them up—you tell me what they are!" Johnson snapped. He held the first one up.

"K-king," Susie Ryan said.

"And this?"

"King," Uxbrin said weakly.

"This?"

"Four," Marlowe said nervously.

"This?"

"King."

"This?" Johnson asked, and there was a quaver in his voice as he waited, then turned the last card face up. "Out loud, Marlowe! Read it off!"

"I can explain—" Marlowe hedged.

"What is it?" Johnson shouted, and wild eyes lit up with anger. "Read it off!"

"But—" Marlowe cringed. "You see, I—"

"Read it!" Johnson was in a mood to kill. Muscles bulged red from his neck, and the finger around the trigger tightened slightly. "Read it, damn you!"

"King," Marlowe said dully, his head bowed.

"Empty your pockets—all of you!" Johnson waved his gun at them. Uxbrin threw down a wallet, a few bags of dust and two or three coins. Marlowe pulled out a dozen silver dollars, most of the gold he had won from Johnson previously, and a wad of bills rolled into a tight bundle.

Johnson eyed Susie, but she said nothing, nor did she move.

"The creep's wallet!" he said, pointing at her.

"Go to hell!" Susie snapped, eyes defiant and back arched to add to her mood.

Johnson walked over, slapped her across the open mouth with the back of his fist, then reached into the low-cut blouse to secure the wallet. A look of astonishment, then curiosity, then downright anger crossed her face. She was about to reach out to slap him when Johnson grabbed the top of the blouse in his left hand, then pulled with all his strength, tearing the upper garment. She stood by the wall.

"Take a good look," she sneered defiantly.

Johnson's eyes lingered, but he caught a movement on his left. Uxbrin, taking advantage of the diversion, moved swiftly for his holstered .44. With the same cat-like speed, Johnson swung his sights from Sue to Uxbrin, whose gun was not yet free of leather.

It wasn't a roar—it sounded more like a twig snapping, but a purplish hole appeared between Uxbrin's eyes; the muscle-response to his last wish cleared Uxbrin's gun from its holster, and sent a .44 slug into the carpet. Uxbrin dropped like a felled tree, arms still at his side. Susan Ryan put her knuckles to her mouth, bit down hard, her breasts rising and falling rapidly at the sight of the dead man.

Marlowe was ashen-faced, his fat little body standing rigidly on unbending knees. His mouth dropped open, stayed in that position and his tongue fell from his mouth as if unattached.

"I'm taking all the money," Johnson said, "and I'm going to back out of here." His eyes swept from Marlowe to Susan. He edged toward her, and she cringed. White teeth showed as he laughed heartily. He reached out with his free hand, grabbed the skirt at her waist, and pulled with murderous savagery. The rent of the cloth startled Marlowe, and he saw that the girl at his side wore little more than knee-high stockings and a pair of shoes.

Susan tried to cover herself, but Johnson was enjoying his sport. He moved toward Marlowe, clubbed him viciously with the gun, and quickly scooped up all the money that had been thrown on the floor in front of him. He grabbed a handful of Susan's long, auburn hair, dragged her to the door and flung it open. Holding her in front of him, Johnson descended the staircase.

Movement, sound—even the tinkle of glasses stopped as all eyes were on the girl. Before the eyes of the

crowd, Johnson walked to the door. With a laugh that bordered on hysterical, he threw her sprawling back into the silent room, then eased through the batwings, quickly moving to the side of the door as he came out into the dark.

No one followed, seemingly content to watch as the girl squirmed under their stares. Several moments waiting failed to show any sign of anyone following him, and Johnson struck out for his hotel. He had a hatful of money to count, and he would feel better in the privacy and safety of his own room.

MINUTES later, he rounded the corner from the staircase and moved toward his room. He inserted the key in the lock, turned it, then pushed the door inward.

Someone had made a hasty search. His clothes were strewn about the room. The small bureau in the far corner had been torn apart, papers and other paraphanalia scattered on the floor and the bed.

Too smart to look for the dies immediately, Johnson made certain that there was no one in his room. He dashed cautiously to the window, peered down into the dusky street, and saw three figures slip quietly from shadow to shadow. He was even more interested as he saw the batwings of the *Silver Dollar Saloon* flap open, and the shadows disappeared inside. It was impossible to get a good look at the men, but it was obvious that they had been in Marlowe's employ. Johnson recalled the note that Marlowe had sent downstairs with Susie, and he added other bits of sudden recollection. He had out-duped Marlowe, but he now had cut off one outlet for the dies.

However important the dies were, Johnson smiled as he saw the girl in his mind's eye. His close-set eyes, now had a sparkle in them.

Then he thought of the girl, Shirley, whom he was positive that he had shot before leaving Denver. He had killed Barton's woman, and the thought mellowed him.

Certain that he was unnoticed, Johnson went to the edge of the carpet, pulled it away from the wall near the closet, and heaved a sigh of relief as he saw the dies safely in their place. Quietly, he replaced the carpet, smoothed it out neatly, and stood up.

He would have to see Dennis in the morning, but he had to arrange a transfer of the dies that would not jeopardize his safety. That would not be too difficult, but he was certain that it would not be such a simple matter to get the eighty-three thousand dollars that Dennis had agreed to pay him.

JOHNSON undressed; then, after putting on his night clothes, he lit up a cigaret and sat in a chair near the open window.

He still thirsted for more direct revenge than killing Shirley Collins. It was imperative, to his mind, that Lew Barton go down before his smoking guns. It would not sit too well if he were to allow the government man to live. His scheme was to obliterate Barton. He wanted to hear him beg, plead for mercy, before he administered the coup de grace.

The manner in which he killed Barton had been developed during years of thought upon the subject. It would have to be a long, painful process, or the victory would be shallow for lack of it.

Johnson flipped the cigaret out of the window, and he watched as it splattered out in the muddy street below. Barton would die that way, too, he mused; it could be the only satisfactory way.

Yet, in the dark recesses of his mind, Johnson knew that Barton would not be a coward; he would indeed be a worthy foe to such a man as himself. Esther; what did she matter? Barton's death at his hands would make up for her.

It was late, and Johnson had given Dennis only twenty-four hours to raise

the necessary cash. There was a restlessness about him as he waited for sleep to claim him. Perhaps, after all, there was no point in having it out with Barton. Foolish, he chided himself.... Yet, too much water had gone under the bridge for either man to back out. It would be as he had anticipated.

Despite the feverishness with which he planned his revenge, Johnson fell into a heavy sleep. Tomorrow, that would be soon enough. He had waited long for this moment; it would come on the morrow.

13

SHIRLEY COLLINS paced nervously in back of the counter at the restaurant. She had been agitated all night, ever since the cowboy had ridden in to speak with the sheriff.

"Buzzards was eatin' on somethin'," the cowboy had said. "Or, somebody."

"We'll send a posse out to find out just what it is," the sheriff answered.

And the posse had gone out, and they were due to return any hour. What could have died on the desolate waste? Shirley felt that it had something to do with Lew.

Even now, she reflected, he might be facing death—and for a few dollars, too. How could a man take such a job? She was contemplating this, and other things, when the door burst open and the sheriff strode in.

"Mornin', Shirley," he said.

"Did—"

"Yes," the sheriff soothed, "and nothing to get alarmed at. A man named Chuck Weber, that's who it was. The buzzards had near to picked him clean, and only a few bones are left. There was some sort of friction between him and somebody else, likely, and the other party did him in proper."

"Weber!" Shirley cried out. "Lew was working with a man named Weber. Oh, if he's hurt, I'll—"

"Come on, Shirley," the sheriff said. "Don't sob all over the place. Ma Willis wouldn't like it—and her dead only a short time."

"Have you found who killed her?" she asked.

"Well," the sheriff began to alibi, "not yet. But we've got a couple of clues we're working on and—"

"Oh," Shirley said dully. "You haven't."

"Now, now," the sheriff stood up, put his arm around her in a fatherly way, and gave her courage.

"I must warn Lew," she said. "If he is hurt, I'll never forgive myself."

Quickly composing herself, Shirley forced a smile. Then, she thought of the death of Chuck Weber, and fear for her man caused her to turn toward the depot.

The telegrapher was there, and he took her message. Then, after she had paid for it, the old, bent man looked at her and said, "Don't worry; he'll be back."

As she started back to the restaurant, she tried to figure the results of the queer happenings that had popped up lately. The bank had been robbed, all the money stolen, and no one was even suspected. It had been planned and executed so perfectly that there was not even a trace of the guilty party.

No doors had been forced, the safe had been cleaned out and the clever ruse of scattering bullets on the floor and setting them off with powder had kept the defenders away from the inside of the bank for too long.

And the recently-discovered body of Chuck Weber—what did that mean? Shirley tried to reason it out, but failed as she found that her mind was clogged with fear for Lew.

The blond man who had been annoying her, too, had vanished. Perhaps she should have let Lew know

that, too. But he probably had more important things to do than worry about a stranger's advances.

Still filled with misgivings, Shirley went back to the restaurant. So much buzzed through her brain that she chose to dismiss it all, rather than worry uselessly over it.

She worked hard that day; but the morbid thoughts clung to her as does a new-born babe to its mother. With sleep came some sort of relief, but the new day dawned with the forebodings of doom on her.

"Telegram for you!" someone shouted to her as she dressed next morning.

She sprinted out into the hall, rushed down the steps, and grabbed the message from the startled landlady's hand.

"It's from Lew!" she said excitedly. She opened it with trembling fingers, then read the message over and over again.

Shirley Collins
Denver, Colo.
Can hardly wait to see you again. Miss you terribly. Better get the wedding dress; I should be back in a few weeks. Love.

Lew

WHEN LEW BARTON read Shirley's message a surge of anticipation coursed through him. Chuck Weber was dead—that much was certain. True, Dennis had said that he did not know where the hulking, imbecilic man had disappeared to. The message from Shirley had said that they had found the buzzard-stripped body out of town. He figured that it would not be Dennis' way to kill Weber so uncouthly. Could it have been Johnson? Lew mused at great length on it; he remembered the vicious streak that Johnson had displayed, even as a boy in Philadelphia. He thought of the time that Esther had finally turned him down. He had another girl, too. Carol, her name was. Johnson had whipped her, and it seemed odd at the time. Could it have been that this was his way of taking out his anger at Esther?

Odd, this man named Johnson; odder still his connection with Dennis. Lew had to make his move quickly. He had instructions from Washington; the message had told him that the committee hearing the petition for a branch Mint in California would sit in three weeks. The success of his venture here would determine the outcome of that hearing. His thoughts, opinions and information would be weighed thoroughly. His word alone could swing the voting. Congress would vote the way the committee suggested. It always worked that way, and there was nothing to suppose differently now.

Washington had expected the trial minting to be well under way. It would surprise them to know that not one coin had been struck yet.

The dies, through an unfortunate mistake, had been sent to Boston. They should be on their way now; but every hour's delay made his task all the more hopeless.

A good report was necessary, he felt, and it behooved him to act immediately. With that in mind, he strode toward the hotel for a talk with Dennis. The man must be made to realize the importance of their task. Lew hadn't even thought how to broach the subject tactfully to the flabby man, when he found himself standing in the hallway in front of room 104.

AS LEW BARTON stood in the hall, he thought he had heard voices coming from behind the closed door. He surreptitiously glanced the length of the hall, saw no one approaching, and pressed his ear to the panel.

Instantly, he recognized the voice of Al Dennis, raised in anguish. The other man, Lew knew, was Johnson.

"But I couldn't raise that kind of money in twenty-four hours!" Dennis said. "I was able to get $25,000—and that was by mere good fortune; I will be able to deliver the rest later."

"Did you order my room searched?" Johnson snapped.

"No," Dennis said. "Is something missing?"

"Fortunately," Johnson said, "there was nothing missing; only a few dollars that I had on the top of the dresser and a few pieces of jewelry."

"Where are the dies?" Dennis demanded.

"I'll give them to you when I have received payment in full."

Lew was thunderstruck. Johnson had the dies! But how did he get them?

And, with the information of Weber's demise, Lew was positive that there was much more to learn before he confronted them with his evidence. Quietly, he retraced his steps, then clomped up to the door. He waited a second, then knocked.

"Come in," Dennis snapped.

"Good morning, Dennis," Lew said, his eyes directly on the fat man. He made no move to look to his right, where he knew that Johnson was seated.

"Oh, er—Barton," Dennis faltered. "I, er—good to see you."

"I have some disquieting news," Lew said. Then, as if just looking about the room, his glance fell on Johnson's leering face. "You!" he said, in mock surprise.

"What are you doing here?" Johnson asked, quietly, though his eyes burned into Lew's.

Lew had them upset, off-stride, and he wanted to keep it that way. If he could get rid of Johnson by some ruse, he would have the man nervously anxious about what was going on behind his back.

"I have news for you," Lew turned back to Dennis, "and it is the kind that must be told in privacy."

"All right," Johnson said. "I'll see you later, Dennis; you, too, Barton."

Lew smiled as the blond man made his exit. He waited until the footsteps had clumped down the stairs, and the man could be seen angling across the street.

"Well, what is it?" Dennis asked.

"Chuck Weber is dead; buzzard-bait. He was found yesterday on the outskirts of Denver," he said, watching the fat man's expression.

"What!" Dennis bolted from his chair. "I swear that I didn't do it! But, who—why would anyone want him dead?"

"I thought that you might know." Lew said. When that failed to unseat the flabby, cigar-chewing man, Lew brought in his ace. "When do you take delivery of the dies from Johnson?"

"Wh—how did you know?" Dennis cut his voice to razor-sharpness. "I—"

"I listened outside," Lew said, waving at the closed door. "I further believe that you had something to do with the 'disappearance', if you care to use that term, of Ed Pauley."

DENNIS saw his golden empire crumbling fast. He dragged hungrily on his cigar, sipped from his wine glass, and then said, "I suppose that you'll win now."

It was said simply, with no trace of emotion, but its intent and importance

filled Lew with hope. "When do you take delivery?" he asked flatly.

"I was to have eighty-three thousand ready by today. Johnson was going to deliver the dies to me. Barton," Dennis' voice raised in false-anticipation, "you seem to me to be a man of practicality. You don't strike me as a man who'd sit still while others—"

"I'm not listening," Lew said, "to any of that! I was sent here to do a job, and I'll do it to the best of my ability or turn it over to someone who can. You don't seem to realize, Dennis, that there are more things at stake here than just minting coins.

"This country is vast, and the wealth of the West combined with the resources of the East, could make this country a world power. This country is growing, and I want to see it grow all the way; it's got a good set of rules, and I'd rather live by them than by any others. I, for one, won't sit by while a few greedy men try to turn a country's growing pains into their pockets. I'd as soon kill you, Dennis, if it came to that."

Then, disgustedly tossing his hands in dejection and bitterness, Lew said, "I have a feeling that I'll have to have it out with Johnson, too."

Dennis uttered a strange laugh. "What do you get out of all this?"

"Possibly nothing more than the satisfaction of knowing that my children will grow up in a free country. I'm not trying to wave a flag, Dennis," Lew said. "But it seems to me that you should be willing to go some for a country that has given you such opportunity. Ah, I'm wasting my time!"

"You know, of course, that your death would benefit me," Dennis said suddenly. A small-caliber pistol appeared in his hand, its muzzle pointed at Barton's stomach.

"Would you resort to that?" Lew mocked.

"For such wealth as this," Dennis' eyes turned savage, "I'd kill anyone; I'm no longer a rich man, and this is my last chance to really clean up. I can go to England, France—anywhere, and live like a king. If one man's death can accomplish that, then I have no compunction but to kill."

"I wish I were as cold-blooded as you," Lew said, his eyes searching the other man's face for some sign of undertanding. "But I get sick when I kill a man. I've killed before—in the line of duty. And after it is all over, I retch; no man has the *right* to kill, Dennis—even me."

All the while he was talking, his hand felt the table behind him, and the letter-opener came to his grasp. He toyed with it as he talked, his eyes never leaving Dennis. It was a heavy, silver opener, and it balanced easily in Lew's hand.

"But yet, if by killing a man, a lot of heartache and misery for a young country is averted, then there might be some justification," Lew said, bringing his arm around with a lightning-like movement, as he knocked the gun aside.

Before Dennis could register surprise, the steel opener was embedded. Involuntarily, he groped for the wound, and the gun clattered from his hands against the table near him.

The opener made an ugly, welling hole in Dennis' fat, flaccid chest. He seemed to stare at it in fascination, his hands no longer clawing at it. Blood seeped onto his vest, trousers, and finally onto the carpet. His eyes bugged in horror, his face a mask of grotesque contortions. With a final effort, he rose from his chair, put both hands on the opener, and wrenched it from his body. He seemed to stand motionless briefly, then he slowly buckled to the floor, the letter-opener still grasped in his white hands. A long, low gasp snaked from between his half-open lips. Lew looked at the man at his feet, anger and rage disappearing. He felt a touch of pity.

LEW MADE a swift search of the room. He tore open the closet, and gasped as he saw a steamer-trunk its lid open. Bills, silver and gold, all with

the Bank of Denver wrappers on it, lay shiny and bright. It seemed as if there was enough money there to buy a thousand dies. Yet, Dennis had said that he was a poor man.

Lew shrugged his shoulders helplessly; he could not fathom the man he had just watched die.

There were probably few to mourn Dennis, Lew thought, and if it were not for Shirley, there would be few to miss Lew Barton, should he die.

It flashed on his tired brain that Johnson was still at large. He had the dies, and without them, his presence here—even the Congress itself—would be powerless in California.

Lew bent low, closed the staring eyes, and threw a blanket from the bed over the body. He looked down at the body, watched the still form under the rich red covering, for some time, and then rose.

Fifteen minutes later, he had the trunk safely stowed away in his room. He went across to the telegraph office, wired Denver of his find, and then went to the sheriff's office.

"Sheriff," he said, showing his badge, "I have a cache of loot taken from the Bank of Denver. I am going to place it on the train tonight. I'd like to have a guard put over it until the train leaves."

"Sure," came the reply. "Who stole it?"

"A man named Alan Dennis," Lew said soberly.

"Not Dennis!" the sheriff said in surprise. "Why, Mr. Dennis is—"

"Was," Lew corrected. "You'll find him in his hotel room." Then, to save further embarrassment, he said, "It was self-defense." He related the circumstances briefly, then added, "And, if it is at all possible, make no mention of the theft, will you?"

"Why?" the sheriff inquired.

"There may be someone in his family," Lew said evenly. "That he is dead is enough; there is no reason to make the living pay for the crimes of the dead."

"Amen," the sheriff said slowly.

"When did it happen?" a deputy asked.

"About fifteen minutes ago. If you'll send a few men along with me, Sheriff, I'll show them the loot and help them bring it here," Lew said.

"Pete, Charlie, Jake," the sheriff snapped, "go along with this feller and tote back what he says."

"Thanks," Lew said, stepping from the jail into the street. The three deputies strode along behind him, but he soon had them hefting the heavy trunk.

Lew Barton's course of action was now crystal clear. The long-awaited showdown with Frank Johnson—a thing spawned in Philadelphia years ago—had grown to its maturity in the wild streets of Sacramento.

One would die—perhaps both—but thus it had to be.

14

AS SOON as he left Dennis' hotel room, Johnson angled across the street. He still had the better part of $50,000 in gold, and he knew that he had to strike quickly. As soon as he saw Lew Barton leave the hotel, he would go back, take whatever Dennis had to offer for the dies, and beat a hasty retreat.

In the privacy of his soul, he knew that a showdown with Barton would not be necessary. Not that he was a coward, Johnson felt, but with all that money in his possession, why risk it by tangling in a meaningless fight? This country owed him a living, and he would spend his life laughing at it from abroad.

He sat on the porch under the upper porch of the building directly across the street from the hotel. He was unobserved and unnoticed as he

pulled his hat low over his eyes and feigned sleep.

Johnson waited nearly twenty minutes, then watched with beady eyes as Barton made for the sheriff's office, returned with three deputies and emerged from the hotel shortly thereafter with a steamer trunk.

After an interval during which Barton was in the sheriff's office. Johnson made for the hotel, raced up the stairs to Dennis' room, then gaped at the covered body of the man who lay on the floor.

"Damn it!" he murmured. Then, retracing his steps, he made for his room, quickly threw his necessary possessions into a small valise, and left the place.

With no loss of time, he turned toward the livery-stable. And old, wheezing man sat on an empty barrel in the doorway.

"Help ye?" he asked in a cracking voice.

"I want a horse—the best you have," Johnson said with a trace of anxiety on his face.

"Well, sir," came the reply, "they's Blue Angel; then they's Sirnam. Now, I'd say..."

"Let's not quibble, man," Johnson said, throwing a glance over his shoulder. "Bring one of them out, and let me be on my way."

The oldtimer heaved himself onto spindly legs, trotted into the stable, and emerged fifteen minutes later with a sleek, black animal saddled. "Give yuh Sirnam; he's strong—"

"How much?" Johnson snapped.

He quickly paid the amount asked, then leaped onto the frightened animal and spurred down the street, rounding a bend at full speed and headed out of town.

"Whyn't he let me tell him thet Sirnam ain't up to snuff today? Dang fool, he'll prob'ly find out soon 'nough, I reckon."

It was less than an hour later when Lew Barton approached the same old man, asked for a fast horse, and listened with interest as the livery man said, "Blond feller hyar askin' same sort of fool questions as you—maybe twenty minutes ago."

"Which way did he go?" Lew asked.

The old man told him, then brought a brown, sturdy animal out. Without stopping to thank him, Lew swung aboard and was soon roaring out after Johnson.

The sun was high in the heavens as Johnson spurred his mount toward the mountains. For endless miles, the lathered horse labored under the oppressive heat. Lew Barton, wise to the ways of horseflesh, kept at a slower, more even gait.

For a while, the distance between the two men grew, until mid-afternoon. Johnson had stopped to gulp stale water from his canteen and roll a cigaret. His horse stood blowing, huge ribs sucking in the air. Too soon, Johnson was again roaring out over the land. A hill loomed ahead, and Johnson spurred up, every so often stopping to check his backtrail.

It wasn't until he had made the hill and was descending the other side that his horse gave out.

BY TWILIGHT, Barton had found the dead horse. His mount shied away, but Lew dismounted and examined the trail. The horse had been dead for a few hours, he figured, and it was worth the risk of riding on by early night.

Johnson had reached the foot of a mountain by then, and had already struck out on foot across another barren stretch of deserted, rocky country. In the waning light, Lew saw tracks as he slowly made the bottom of the mountain.

A light rain had begun to fall, but the imprints had not filled with water yet. Lew knew that Johnson was close by; he had a sudden inspiration, and moved to effect it quickly.

It was perhaps five minutes later that Johnson saw a riderless horse approach through the gathering rain.

Without thinking how it had come there, but merely blessing his good fortune, Johnson rushed out, leaped aboard the tired, thoroughly-frightened horse, and spurred off.

The horse, responding to the command, automatically stepped out, but the hobbles Lew had applied arrested his tread, throwing him heavily to the ground. Johnson was pinned beneath the struggling horse, and crawled out to see the muzzle of a .44 in Lew Barton's hand.

"You!" Johnson said. "I—"

"Only a fool would have fallen for that kind of trick," Lew said. "Turn around!"

Johnson did as he was told, and felt Lew's hand gently lift his holstered gun.

Lew looped a rope around the man's neck, pulled it taut, then led the man to a scrawny tree that stood close by. He soon had the blond man tied securely to it.

"You going to leave me here," Johnson said, not questioningly, but more a statement of fact.

"No." Lew said. "I wouldn't do that to a snake."

"I didn't figure that you would," Johnson sneered.

The rain soon stopped, and Lew built a fire. After much smoking, the fire blazed. Lew watched Johnson all through the night; at daybreak, he untied the stiff-jointed man, and helped him onto the refreshed horse.

They rode back toward Sacramento. Johnson slumped in his ropes, feigning sleep. When Lew reached into his pocket to find his makings, Johnson suddenly threw himself backward, knocking Lew off the saddle. Johnson spurred the animal, and the horse leaped forward.

"Stop!" Lew shouted as he rolled to his feet, his gun in his hand. "Stop—or I'll shoot!"

A derisive laugh was his only answer, and Lew knew that the time had come. He aimed carefully, squeezed the trigger, and sent a bullet across the rider's shoulder. Johnson, trying to duck low, fell from the horse, and the animal trotted some distance away before he stopped to graze on the rough grass that grew all about him.

Somehow, Johnson had wriggled from his ropes, a gleaming knife held in his hands.

Lew holstered his gun, drew a razor-sharp knife from its scabbard, and wrapped his gunbelt about his free hand.

Both men advanced cautiously, until they now stood inches from each other. "I'd rather it be this way," Lew murmured.

"If I were you," Johnson rasped through clenched teeth, "I would have shot to kill."

With that, he lunged toward Barton, his blade passing inches from the darker man's chest. Lew lunged, then drew back as Johnson moved away. He feinted, then thrust at Johnson's stomach, but the blond man gracefully slid away.

Sweat stained both men's shirts as they circled warily.

High overhead, buzzards began their familiar circling. Johnson glanced hurriedly up, saw his flying friends momentarily, then smiled. He was not alone; his ilk were with him to the bitter end.

Johnson slipped a thrust at his arm, then slashed down on Barton's unprotected sleeve. His blade sank into soft flesh, and blood spurted from Lew's right arm.

WATCHING in fascination at the steady flow of blood, Johnson forgot the man opposite him. Lew feinted twice, caught Johnson wriggling from his second feint, and sank his knife deep into the man's stomach.

With a gasp of horror, Johnson dropped his knife, doubled up in agony, his teeth bringing blood from his white lips. Muscles tensed to the breaking point, Johnson clawed at the knife. He touched it, felt the red-hot pain sear through him, and fell to the

ground, his body caving in like sand when water flows over it. He dropped forward, falling on the knife, pushing it further into his stomach. He tried to scream, but the cry stuck in his throat. Lew watched in pity as the youthful man's eyes welled, then streamed from the pain.

After a few minutes of waiting, Lew thought Johnson must be reliving his worthless life in agony. He glanced down at him; Johnson looked up, eyes begging to be put out of his misery.

Unable to stand it any longer, Lew pulled out his gun, then sent a .44 crashing into the other's brain. Johnson stopped squirming, beads of sweat rolling down his face.

The buzzards dove toward the earth, but cautiously, avoiding the living man in their way. Lew turned his gun upwards, shot at the lead vulture, and watched as it fell to earth in death.

Lew ripped Johnson's shirt away, tore strips of it and bandaged his own arm. He dragged himself over to his horse, mounted him, and rode on, his course set toward Sacramento.

He did not watch the hungry birds descend.

Barton's head swam with sickness, pain and memory. It was mid-morning when he reached the foot of the mountain, then set out across the flat wasteland. He stopped at noon, aware that he would not be able to ride into town.

Lew took his rope, tied it around his own ankles, and draped his body across the saddle. He put one arm through the stirrup, then tied it to the other end of the rope with his free hand. He managed to fashion a slip-knot and slid his other hand into it, stretching it until both hands were securely fastened.

He lay there for some time, the horse slowly jogging across the deserted country. He knew that the saddle horse would wend its way home unaided and unguided.

The sky was a soft blue, and the sun beat down on the weak rider. Lew thought about Shirley then, and it was a comforting reverie. He remembered the wound in his arm, but he knew that it could not be tended to until he made town. Then, he fell into a deep stupor...

15

THE ROOM was packed. A long, mahogany table stretched across the far end of it, and benches opposite were long-since filled. Eight men filed into the room, and a hushed silence fell over the spectators. The eight took seats behind the table; a gavel rapped importantly; and the audience leaned forward expectantly.

A grey-haired man with long sideburns and a thick, white moustache stood up. He drank a glass of water, replaced the tumbler next to the silver pitcher, then said, "Gentlemen, we are sitting today to hear petition from the State of California for a branch Mint. We have already listened to the learned speaker from the California Assembly; and Mr. Howard Munson, delegate from Ohio, has spoken movingly on behalf of the petition."

A rumble of assent spread through the crowded room, and they looked at the tall, dark-haired man who sat in front of the wooden gate, opposite the speaker and the seven other members of the committee.

"Now," he went on, "we will listen to United States Marshal Lew Barton. Mr. Barton was sent by this committee to investigate the needs of the community for such a branch Mint. Mr. Barton," he waved at a chair that stood next to the large table.

Lew stood up, glanced at the stony-faced men who sat in front of him, then said, "I have just returned from Sacramento. In my opinion, a branch

Mint is a necessity to the preservation of life and property."

A roar of words flew through the audience. After the room had been quieted down, Lew explained the reason for his opinion.

"Gold is being dug from the ground and panned from the streams in ever-increasing quantity. The men who get this gold are forced to carry it around with them in little bags. As the amount of gold increases, so does the amount of killing, robbery and beatings proportionately increase.

"If the men in the fields are not given the right of turning their gold dust into coins, there will be even more unnecessary bloodshed. A set of dies, prepared in New York, was sent to Denver to be used experimentally. These dies were of such importance that five people we know of—and probably others—were killed. The dies, fortunately, are now in the proper hands, and they are being used to strike coins from the gold that is brought in.

"When the idea was first made public, there was a line around the Assay office of nearly one hundred and fifty people. Some waited for two or three days to get their dust minted; that alone is evidence enough of the need.

"I could go on, telling you about murders, robberies and more such unpleasantries, for hours. But suffice it to say that the erection of a branch Mint is imperative. I might even hazard to say that California will be a big, bawdy camp of unrest and defiance of law and order until such time that a Mint is erected. This will not, of itself, stop crime, but it will introduce order.

"The future of California is beyond our knowledge. But we must take a firm step in the attainment of that eventual future. We must aid those people that live there—and we must build a Mint to supply them with currency.

"I have had my say" Lew said, "and I leave it to the gentlemen of this committee to do what is right."

With a spontaneous shout, the audience rose to their feet and applauded. Lew resumed his seat, and he thought how nice it would be to live in California.

The gavel knocked again and again for order, but it was five minutes before a semblance of dignity had been restored to the cheering mob.

"Gentlemen," the grey-haired speaker said, "I think that we have heard enough. Shall we retire to render a verdict?"

ALL AGREED, they arose and went into the small, outer room that was used for the digestion of such information as this and for arriving at a just decision.

"What is your opinion?" one of the men asked the speaker.

"Mr. Barton, although rather impassioned, did state a truism. Until we do erect a Mint, and give California a chance, there will be unnecessary bloodshed. The cost will not be too high, and we would be receiving goods in excess of the cost. I vote, Aye!"

The committee filed back into the room fifteen minutes later, and a hush of anticipation fell over the rapt audience.

"The committee wishes to express its thanks to United States Marshal Lew Barton for his devotion to duty," the speaker said, "and we will ask the President to bestow a fitting reward on him.

"However, a more urgent thought comes to mind. Mr. Barton has told us of the facts as they stand. The government wishes to do the proper thing, and it has been agreed upon that we shall ask the Congress at the next meeting to appropriate funds for the erection of a United States Mint in California."

"Hooray!" a man rose and shouted from the rear.

Howard Munson from Ohio, and G. Rollins Young, from the California Assembly, rushed over to Lew. Young said, "It was a wonderful thing that

you did for California. May I shake your hand, sir?"

Lew shook hands warmly, then smiled. The long, wearing tension was over. His life was no longer wanted by men of greed and lust. He now was his own boss, free to choose for himself where and when he went.

Next day, Lew Barton was called to see President Millard Fillmore. He stood uncomfortably as the speeches were made, and a medal was pinned to his jacket.

IT WASN'T until three weeks had passed that Lew stepped off the train in Denver. He carried a box under his arm, and he walked with the stride of a happy, eager man.

Shirley Collins was in the midst of the busy lunch hour, but she dropped everything and rushed to throw her arms around Lew's neck, kissing him longingly and passionately.

"Hey, Shirley!" one of the diners piped up, "how's about a cup of coffee and a slab of that apple pie?"

Shirley Collins turned to face the man, who wore a broad grin on his stubbled face. "Abe, you'd better get it yourself. If you're waiting for me to get it—you'll have an awfully long wait!"

"How long?" Abe asked.

"About—" Shirley began.

"A lifetime!" Lew cut in, then kissed the protest away from her red lips.

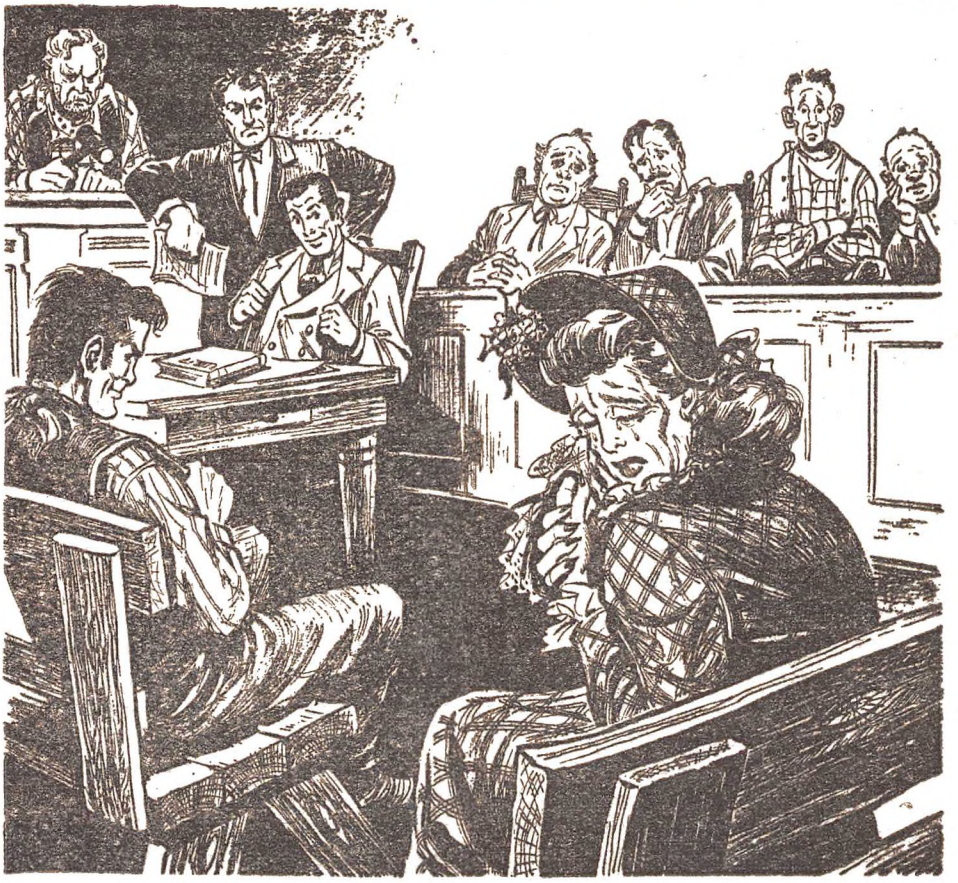
"That's the way, Shirley!" another man spoke up. "God bless you both."

Arm in arm, Lew and Shirley walked down the street. There they stopped, opened a rusty gate, and stepped inside. Lew smiled at Shirley, kissed her again, and said, "Come on, darling, the preacher is waiting."

Slowly, they walked up the worn steps together.

★

★ JUDGE STEELE STORY ★



It was obvious that the woman seated in the front row of Flat Creek's crowded courtroom could be the determining factor in this case. Guilty or not, the prisoner would be acquitted if she continued to play upon the jurors' sentiments. Judge Steele, however, was immune . . .

THE WALKING JURY

by Lon Williams

JUDGE WARDLOW STEELE, arms folded across his rugged chest, scowled at a mongrel crowd with customary displeasure. Flat Creek's jammed courtroom had settled to expectant silence, when a strange new sound intruded upon its stillness. It was a feminine sob, one that tightened to a hurt and tender moan. This touch of aching heart posed a problem not before encountered in Steele's brief, but stormy, judicial experience. A middle-aged woman, once no doubt exceptionally beautiful, though now considerably faded by countless washings of adversity and time, occupied a

front-row puncheon and bravely dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

Those eyes met Judge Steele's, assailed their savagery with an unspoken plea in behalf of a cause easily surmised, though not yet disclosed. Judge Steele shifted uncomfortably and glared at a young, hard-faced monkey who sat on a puncheon reserved for criminals about to be tried for their lives. His jaws tightened then; deliberately, almost resentfully, he rejected that quality of mercy which reputedly fell like gentle rain. He hardened his heart instead.

"Sheriff, call court."

Sheriff Jerd Buckalew, raw-boned, tall and poker-faced, stood up and pounded an inverted barrel with his forty-five. "Court's now in session; anybody with different ideas had better save 'em up."

Judge Steele, shaken in spite of himself by those tender eyes that constantly sought his own, gave his straw-colored mustache a couple of slow pulls. His glance at Clerk James Skiffington was nevertheless cold and determined. "Skiffy, call fust case."

Skiffington rose, stood for a moment, thin and pale, a paper quivering in his long fingers. He steadied himself and read, "People versus Jefferson, alias Forty-rod Furlong. Charge: first count, conspiracy to commit first-degree murder; second count, first-degree murder."

Judge Steele glared at Forty-rod Furlong. A dark, callously-indifferent, smooth-shaved bozo of about twenty-five glared back at him.

"Murder, eh?" growled Steele. "Tired of livin', I suppose? Well, by thunder, you'll find this court mighty accommodatin' in that respect. You got a lawyer?"

A lean, black-haired hungry-looking human in black suit, white vest and four-in-hand necktie got up, poised and confident. "I am his lawyer, Your Honor, French Demeree."

To Judge Steele, appearance of this Demeree from Tennessee was like being confronted by a dose of nasty medicine. "Demeree, you seem confident enough. Has Flat Creek run out of hangropes?"

"Your Honor, I am in hopes there is at least a temporary shortage."

Steele's blood-pressure inched up, as it always did in prospect of battle with this clever, axe-faced Demeree. "Don't let your hopes get out of bounds." Steele swung left. "Whar's our man?"

A stocky redhead rose at an adjacent table, a placid, benign expression on his ruddy face. "Wade Claybrook, Your Honor. Prosecuting attorney."

Steele surveyed his man with a hope hardly sustained by experience. "I trust, Claybrook, you are no less confident than your adversary?"

Claybrook was not one for levity, whether it came disguised as humor or as sarcasm. "I am confident, Your Honor, that justice will prevail."

Steele grunted, shifted and glowered at Forty-rod Furlong. "All right, what's your plea?"

Demeree responded in Furlong's behalf. "Your Honor, I move to strike so much of this indictment as charges conspiracy to commit murder."

"Object," said Claybrook boldly. "Defendant is charged with having committed first-degree murder. An element of that crime is deliberateness; premeditation could no better be shown than by proof of a conspiracy."

"But," said Demeree, "it takes two to make a conspiracy."

Claybrook fired back, "There were two, Your Honor."

"This indictment," said Demeree, "mentions no co-conspirator."

"I mean to use him as a witness, Your Honor."

"But Mr. Claybrook can't prove a conspiracy without proving a co-conspirator."

"See hyar, consarn you lawyers, quiet down. Motion granted; we don't have to prove no conspiracy to prove murder. Now, Demeree, what's your plea?"

"Not guilty, Your Honor."

A POUT APPEARED on Claybrook's lips. He sat down and slumped low. Demeree sat down and assumed a passive demeanor, that being his equivalent of satisfaction.

Steele nodded at Sheriff Buckalew. "Panel a jury, Bucky."

Buckalew jerked his head at Clerk Skiffington. "Call names, Skiffy."

Neither side challenged those called, and presently a jury of twelve gold-diggers had been sworn. A moment after they had seated themselves, a muffled feminine moan rose plaintively, "Oh, my son! My poor, poor son!"

Judge Steele glanced at his jurors. Already, he perceived, their stony hearts had turned to butter. Consarn these sentimental gold-diggers! To please a pretty woman, they'd turn a barrel of rattlesnakes loose.

"Witnesses come and be sworn," he called, anger in his voice.

Seven men came forward, all gold-diggers except one. That one had a shifty eye, an unkempt sandy head and a lean, downcast face; he also wore handcuffs, which necessitated a two-handed oath.

When all were herded to a back room, Judge Steele gave his mustache a hard jerk. "Call fust witness."

Claybrook got up. "Call Utah Mullet."

A deputy sheriff brought Mullet in and seated him as a witness. Mullet's big, round head was as bald as a gourd. He had a long nose, and his large ears stuck straight out; but he was of friendly, smiling disposition, and honesty glowed within him like a lighted candle.

"Your name?" said Claybrook.

"My name air Utah Mullet."

"Your name is Utah Mullet," Claybrook repeated. "Now, Mr. Mullet, where do you live?"

"I live in Patch-britches Gulch, yes, sir."

"You live in Patch-britches Gulch," Claybrook repeated. "Are you acquainted with defendant Jefferson Furlong?"

"I am acquainted with Forty-rod Furlong, yes, sir."

"You are acquainted with Forty-rod Furlong. Now, Mr. Mullet—"

Demeree arose, his face serious. "May it please Your Honor, I don't think Mr. Claybrook should repeat after witness Mullet everything that Mullet says. It sounds like some sort of fraternal initiation. Besides, it has a tendency to make two witnesses out of one, namely, Mullet plus Claybrook. Defendant objects."

Before Judge Steele could respond, Claybrook cut in. "If Your Honor please, Mr. Demeree is right. I had not noticed that I was being repetitious, and I stand corrected."

There arose again a sobbing, feminine moan. "My son—my son."

Steele snapped indignantly, "Proceed, Claybrook."

"Now, Mr. Mullet," said Claybrook, "where were you last Saturday night between nine o'clock and midnight?"

"I were at Cooksy Blair's saloon."

"What were you doing there?"

"I were having a nip of whiskey."

"Did you see there a man named Buck Saddler?"

"You mean him that was robbed and killed?"

"I do."

"Yes."

"What was he doing?"

"He were having a good time."

Demeree popped up. "If Your Honor please, witness may not draw conclusions. It is a matter of opinion as to whether old Saddler was having a good time, or a bad time."

Steele tugged at his mustache. "Demeree, I sort of figured you meant to act decent for once; I see I was mistaken."

Demeree eased down.

CLAYBROOK proceeded. "Mr. Mullet, relate in detail what Buck Saddler did in Cooksy Blair's saloon."

"Well, sir, he war-whooped a right smart."

"Go ahead."

"He staggered and stumbled around, bumpin' tables and chairs."

"Yes?"

"He had a bottle in his left hand and a leather pouch of gold money in his right hand."

"Go right on."

"And he bangs down his leather pouch of gold on a table so hard he nearly busts it, yes, sir."

"Proceed."

"And when he whams down that gold, he whoops and says, says he—"

"Object," said Demeree, rising. "He can't tell what somebody said."

"Your Honor," said Claybrook, "what this witness is asked to testify to is not to prove a fact, not to prove that what Buck Saddler said was true, but merely to prove that he made a particular statement."

"No, Your Honor," Demeree insisted, "he can't do that. If a witness swears that so-and-so said that so-and-so rode a black horse, somebody is going to believe that so-and-so *did* ride a black horse—not merely that so-and-so *said* that so-and-so rode a black horse. I object."

"Now, Your Honor," said Claybrook with patient forbearance, "what is sought here is not proof of an ultimate fact, but merely proof that Saddler made such and such a statement. Hearsay evidence is inadmissible only when it is offered—"

Judge Steele banged with his gavel. "Be-consarned if a couple of lawyers can't kill more time than a cat-fight; Mullet, what did Saddler say when he banged down his bag of gold?"

Mullet swung round toward Judge Steele. "Well, Jedge, Saddler says, says he, 'I've got fifty double-eagles in this here pouch. And what is more', says he—"

"Now, Your Honor," said Claybrook, "it was that statement about his having fifty double-eagles which I wanted brought out by this witness, nothing more."

"By thunder, Claybrook," growled Steele, "we're going to bring out more'n that, if Mullet knows any more."

Demeree was up. "If Your Honor please, I'd like to cross-examine this witness."

"Demeree," retorted Steele, "this witness ain't ready to be cross-examined." He turned to Mullet. "Utah, what else do you know about this murder?"

"Well, now, Jedge, I knows them three coyotes was there and heard every word Saddler said at Cooksy Blair's."

"What three coyotes?"

Mullet jerked a thumb toward Forty-rod Furlong. "Him there, for one."

Judge Steele's female spectator sobbed, "Oh, no, no; it is not true."

Steele pulled angrily at his mustache. "Lady, are you a witness in this case?"

She looked up through startled tears. "No. No, Judge, but please—"

"I don't please, ma'am; you will have to keep quiet, or a deputy sheriff will escort you out," Steele growled.

She dabbed her eyes. "I'm sorry, Judge; I shall try to be brave."

OUTWARDLY silent, Judge Steele inwardly stewed. Be-consarned if he knew what to do. Here was a murderer who ought to be hung, but unless events took an unexpected turn, Furlong was going to be acquitted. He could read that in every juror's eye.

"Claybrook, got any more questions?"

Claybrook was pouting. "No more questions."

Steele scowled at Demeree. "I suppose you will cross-examine, or bust?"

Demeree nodded calmly. "It is defendant's right and privilege, if Your Honor please." He came round and confronted Utah Mullet. "You say you were at Cooksy Blair's, having a nip of whiskey?"

"I were, yes, sir."

"How much is a nip?"

"About a pint."

"How much of that pint had you already swallowed, when old Saddler

went whooping around, making his brags?"

"About all of it."

"How much was left?"

"A drap or two, maybe."

"How much whiskey does it take to make you drunk?"

"A pint."

"Is it not true, Mullet, that when old Saddler was kicking chairs around and being a general nuisance, you were already dog-drunk and didn't know anything about what was going on?"

"I were beginning to feel a little tipsy, yes, sir."

"What do you mean by tipsy?"

This was too much. Judge Steele's fractious temper rebelled. "Now, look hyar, Demeree, you're diggin' outside your claim; git over thar and set down."

Demeree obeyed reluctantly. Mullet was excused.

Claybrook nodded at a deputy. "Call Windell Grocer."

Grocer was brought in and seated. He was short, booted, and in need of a haircut. His dark, middle-aged face was pitted with smallpox scars.

"Your name?" asked Claybrook.

"Windell Grocer."

"Sometimes called Potatoes Grocer?"

"Sometimes."

"Gold-digger?"

"Yes."

"Know defendant?"

"Yes."

"Where were you last Saturday night between nine o'clock and midnight?"

"In Cooksy Blair's saloon."

"Did you see defendant there?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him in conversation with anybody?"

Demeree got up. "Now, Your Honor, he is getting ready to ask what somebody said, and he knows before he does that he can't do it. I object to this line of questioning."

"Your Honor, I intend to prove by this witness that Forty-rod Furlong and two others, namely, one Shug Sartin and one Sharm Litus, otherwise known as Litus Hitchus, agreed to act in concert—"

"Object," Demeree shouted. "Mr. Claybrook should remember that his conspiracy count has been stricken."

"Nothing has been said about a conspiracy," Claybrook fired back.

"If there is any better definition of conspiracy than an agreement to act in concert, I don't know what it is," returned Demeree.

"I disclaim responsibility for Mr. Demeree's lack of knowledge," said Claybrook. "What is intended here is proof of premeditation and a killing with malice aforethought."

"Yes," Demeree insisted hotly, "he may prove premeditation, if he can; but an agreement to act in concert is a horse of another color. I object to his attempt to prove conspiracy."

"Both of you lawyers set down," Steele ordered angrily. "If thar's any excuse for lawyers, I don't know what it is." When Demeree and Claybrook had eased down, he turned to Grocer. "Potatoes, what do you know about this murder?"

"I know it was planned in Cooksy Blair's saloon, Judge."

DEMEREE started to get up, but changed his mind.

"Proceed," snapped Steele.

"Well, Judge, I was settin' at a table, with them schemers off to my left."

"Now, Your Honor," Demeree said contritely, "there's no difference between schemers and conspirators. He can't—"

"Sheriff," Steele said coldly, "if Axe-face Demeree interrupts again before he has permission, throw him out. We've got a murderer hyar to be tried and hung, and thar's been enough nonsense." He returned his attention to witness Grocer. "All right, Potatoes, tell what you know."

"As I was saying, Judge, I was set-

tin' at a table, with them schemers off to my left. That one called Litus Hitchus says to Shug Sartin, he says—"

Demeree half-rose, but quickly got down again.

"This Litus Hitchus says," resumed witness Grocer, "he says to Shug Sartin, 'Shug,' says he, 'how would you like to have them fifty double-eagles?' And Sartin says, 'Just what I was askin' myself.' And this here Forty-rod, him there with Demeree, he says, 'I got a scheme, fellers. Want to hear it?' And they both say, 'Shoot.' 'Well,' says Forty-rod—"

A feminine sigh shuddered softly. Eyes turned away from witness Grocer, and those within range beheld a dazed and placid face, filled with sweet sadness.

Judge Steele's nostrils distended themselves. "Proceed, Potatoes."

Windell Grocer took up his story. "Like I says, Judge, this Forty-rod Furlong had a plan. And this is what he says. 'You fellers,' he says, 'sneak out and hide in Goochy Alley. Meantime I'll get next to Saddler and whisper a sweet tune in his ear. Maybe, first thing you know, we'll be dividin' fifty double-eagles between us three.' Pretty soon after that, Shug Sartin and Litus Hitchus sneaked out. It wasn't long after that till Forty-rod was whispering something in Saddler's ear, like he said. Saddler's eyes popped wide, and a smile turned his lips up, and out they went; Forty-rod Furlong and Buck Saddler. That's all I know, Judge."

"You're excused," clipped Steele. "Next witness."

Claybrook responded sulkily, "Call Combs Delay."

Delay was a short gold-digger with brown whiskers and a restless right eyebrow. His heavy hair had a crooked left-side part.

"Your name?" said Claybrook.

Judge Steele leaned forward. "Hold on thar, Claybrook. Ask him what he knows about this murder."

Claybrook nodded at Delay.

"Tell you how it was," said Delay. "Last Saturday night, when I'd had a dram or two and was going home, right at a street lamp I sees this here Furlong and Saddler turn aside and go down Goochy Alley. I reckon a good many gold-diggers knows what's down that way. It's where Goldielocks Hanno keeps a house of cuties and a man with money can meet a lady. Well, it's no affair of mine, so I ambles along, turns right at next corner; and when I'm a hundred yards or so down my street I hears what sounds like a grunting, slugging fight over in Goochy, with Saddler calling for help. Saddler is no particular friend of mine. Still, I figures somebody is doing him dirt, so I heads in to lend a hand. But when I gets there, nobody is around except two dead men. Somebody comes out of Hanno's with a lamp, and there's Saddler with his head busted, and Sharm Litus with a knife in his side."

"Next witness!" snapped Judge Steele.

DELAY STEPPED down, and Claybrook got up.

"Your Honor," said Claybrook cautiously, "people's counsel has an objection. Orderly justice—which, I believe you will agree, was our original aim in setting up a court of law—requires that witnesses be examined and cross-examined by counsel. In such a court, its judge is expected to maintain a status of strict neutrality. It is not that I am accusing Your Honor of unfairness; yet, as people's counsel, I find it my duty to say that in orderly procedure—"

"Claybrook," Steele interrupted with a contemptuous snarl, "you've said enough, by thunder. You lawyers would make every case a bone for a couple of yowling dogs to fight over. Call your next witness."

Demeree eased up halfway. "Your Honor, may I say a word?"

"All right, Demeree."

"By way of showing how right Mr. Claybrook is, I wish to call attention

to this witness Combs Delay, variously known as Wattles Delay, Don't Delay, and Why Delay. It is common knowledge that he never stops his liquor with a dram or two, but always gets whooping drunk; that when he's intoxicated, he not only sees double, but as often sees treble; and that, drunk or sober, there's no bigger liar in Flat Creek than he is. Defendant feels deeply aggrieved at not being permitted to cross-examine witnesses, which, as Mr. Claybrook has so learnedly and honorably conceded, is a part of fair and orderly justice."

Judge Steele settled back in his chair, outwardly calm but inwardly raging. "Claybrook, call your next witness."

"Call Shug Sartin," said Claybrook, a hint of elation in voice and attitude.

Sartin, wearing handcuffs, was brought in and seated. He was slim, freckled, and about twenty-one years old.

"Your name?" asked Claybrook.

"Wilbur Sartin."

"Sometimes called Shug Sartin?"

"Yes."

"Acquainted with defendant?"

"Yes."

A sound of gentle weeping spread its disturbing influence to witness, jurors and spectators. Men heard an agonized whisper, "Oh, my son. They are going to betray my poor, innocent son."

Judge Steele contained his wrath. There had crept upon him a beguiling resolution to become a mere spectator himself and leave everything to Claybrook and Demeree. He kept silent.

DEMEREE arose cautiously. "Your Honor, may I say a word?"

"Go right ahead, Demeree."

"Defendant objects to this witness, Your Honor."

"On what ground?"

"On ground of infamy. He is a convicted felon who has served time in a Missouri prison for horse-stealing. An infamous person is disqualified by his infamy to testify in court."

Claybrook was up, facing Judge Steele. "If Your Honor please, what Mr. Demeree says would be sound law, if true."

Demeree's long face stiffened. "Are you insinuating, Mr. Claybrook?"

"I," said Claybrook, "am charging defense counsel with fabricating out of whole cloth."

"Your Honor," said Demeree, "if you will question witness Sartin, I am confident his testimony will make Claybrook out as an unconscionable liar." Demeree paused, then looked intently at Steele. "Would Your Honor like to question witness Sartin?"

"If I wanted to question him, I would not require your permission," Steele replied frigidly. "This court is committed to fair and orderly justice, hence my position is that of impartial and passive neutrality."

"Then I suggest that Claybrook qualify his witness," said Demeree.

Claybrook hesitated, confused and embarrassed. He stared through his eyebrows at Sartin. "Have you ever been convicted of horse-stealing?"

Sartin colored, replied shiftily, "Yes."

"Then step down," said Claybrook.

"Hold on thar," ordered Steele, unable longer to restrain his fury. "You lawyers set down." He waited until they were seated, then glared at Sartin. "Tell what you know about this murder."

Sartin, dry-mouthed, began huskily, "Well, it didn't start out to be a murder. We—that is, me and Litus and Furlong, was going to entice old Saddler into Goochy Alley and rob him. We got him down that way, when Furlong told him a lady wanted to see him in Hanno's place. First thing I knowed, Sharm Litus whams him with a slug sock and knocks him down. That sort of addles Saddler, but he gets up and puts a knife between Sharm's ribs. About then, Furlong lays a bone-crusher across Saddler's head with a wagon coupling-pin. When I saw it was turning into a murder, I lit out,

and what happened afterwards I don't know."

There was a shuddering feminine sigh again, but when jurors and Steele and others looked, they saw not a face drawn with agony, but one of beauty that had resigned itself to an embrace of saintly martyrdom.

Demeree was up, waiting.

"All right, Demeree?"

"I'd like to cross-examine."

"Your privilege, Demeree."

Demeree did not venture to come around. He said quietly, "Mr. Sartin, in return for betrayal of your former friend and companion, did Mr. Claybrook promise that he would not have you indicted?"

After a shifty hesitation, Sartin nodded. "Yes."

Claybrook rose indignantly. "Now, Your Honor, I did not make any such promise."

"I suggest," said Demeree, "that if Mr. Claybrook is determined to be a witness, he have himself sworn by Mr. Skiffington."

"Counsel's word in court is admissible as a matter of honor," Claybrook retorted angrily. "I did not promise this witness he would not be indicted; I merely promised that if he were indicted and prosecuted to conviction, there would be a recommendation of leniency."

"In other words," said Demeree, "Mr. Claybrook supplied this witness with a motive for lying; it looks more and more like a frameup."

Claybrook flushed. "If Mr. Demeree is determined to be a witness—"

"Call next witness," said Steele sharply. "Be-consarned if this ain't as sorry a trial as I ever saw."

Following examination of two other witnesses, Claybrook looked at his watch. "It is twelve o'clock, Your Honor."

Steele nodded at Sheriff Buckalew. "Recess court till after dinner."

Bucky pounded with his forty-five. "Court's in recess till one-thirty."

AT ONE-THIRTY he pounded again. "Court's now in session."

Judge Steele sat for a while, his savage eyes roving in search of a familiar figure. At last those eyes spotted what they sought. Steele beckoned with his thumb, and a broad-shouldered six-footer with black, close-cut mustache, dark, fierce eyes and twin sixguns strode leisurely forward and eased up beside Steele.

"What's wrong, Wardlow?"

"Bill Hacker, this case will soon be ready for a verdict, and unless something is done pronto, thar's going to be an acquittal. Do you see that lady down thar?"

Hacker nodded. "What about her?"

"Bill, our jury won't convict her boy; that sorrowing, saintly look of hers has already melted them jurors down, and I'm beginning to feel like a brute myself."

Hacker sank his voice to a whisper, and Steele's nostrils began to expand and his face to flush with heat.

When Hacker had concluded, Steele faced his beautiful, saintly auditor. "Lady, kindly stand up."

Her mouth opened in surprise. Indignation spread over her once lovely face. "Why, Judge! And before all these—these ruffians!"

Every grizzled face within hearing produced a smile. There were silent chuckles.

"Lady," said Steele, "if you are suffering a disability, a couple of nice deputies will gladly assist you."

Buckalew nodded, and a couple of deputies moved to either side of her.

She stood up without assistance. "This is an outrage."

"Lady," said Steele, "you have been making it appear that you are that varmint's mother. You are not his mother, are you?"

She looked for an avenue of escape. None appeared. "No," she said angrily.

"You used to travel with a show, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And your show-girl name is Jobina Lynn."

She nodded.

"And somebody hired you to come here and pretend to be that Furlong skunk's mother. Right?"

She looked frightened, but nodded.

Bill Hacker tugged at Steele's sleeve. "Don't ask who hired her, Wardlow; if it turned out to be Demeree, we might have to hang him."

"Lady," said Steele, "unless you'd like to stick around and see how a monkey looks when he's hung, you may now be excused."

She turned and swished down a narrow aisle that closed behind her as she passed. Before leaving entirely, she faced about and gave Judge Steele an angry glare. Her expression toward her recently-captive jurors was a contemptuous leer.

"Next witness, Claybrook," said Steele.

TWO MORE witnesses were called, one an undertaker who testified that Saddler's death was caused by a skull-crushing blow.

Demeree cross-examined, but did so half-heartedly. After a verdict of guilty, however, he rose with a show of outraged sensibilities.

"Your Honor, a matter of utmost gravity has come to my attention. While out to lunch, that jury went on a sight-seeing expedition, and they were not accompanied either by me or by defendant. Their verdict is void; therefore, and I move that it be so declared and that defendant be discharged."

Judge Steele's blood pressure shot up. "Demeree, what in tarnation are you talking about?"

"I am saying they took a walk," replied Demeree.

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, had they confined their perambulations to a mere stroll. But they went to Goochy Alley, took a look around and asked questions of every Dick, Tom and Harry who happened to stroll along with them."

"Who had this jury in charge?" Steele demanded.

A huge deputy, almost seven feet tall and weighing around two hundred fifty pounds, stepped out. "I had 'em in charge, Judge."

"Dan Trewhitt, what did they do?"

"Like Mr. Demeree said, Judge, they took a walk. One of them said he'd like to see where that murder took place, and I said, 'Shore, I can take you right to it'. And what they saw was plenty, I can tell you that. Ground tore up where they fought, and where they died it looked like somebody might've poured out a couple of buckets of ox blood. They talked to some of them cuties at Goldielocks Hanno's, too—asked 'em questions about what they saw and heard. One of 'em said she was lookin' out of an upstairs window and saw Forty-rod wham old Saddler with something heavy and hard. Hit him from behind, she said, which dropped him like a shot steer. They also measured how far it was to that corner street light and asked this person and that how far its light would shine. They figured it would shine as far down as Hanno's, so a witness upstairs could see who was who and what was what, down below. But I shore didn't know there was anything wrong with a jury takin' a little stroll. I'm sorry, Judge. I could crawl under a log, if there was one handy."

"Now, Your Honor," Demeree continued, "in view of what Trewhitt has reported, defendant is entitled to be discharged. Any other course would be a travesty upon justice."

Steele started to get up. Hacker pulled his sleeve. "Claybrook wants to say something, Wardlow."

Claybrook rose with dignity and in magnanimous spirit. "Your Honor, this is a most unfortunate turn of events. Of course, Mr. Demeree is right. I can't say that defendant should be discharged, but he certainly should have a new trial, and I so move."

Judge Steele eased up. "Claybrook,

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They's some people here in Paydirt what never did take too kindly to Gus Halbert, what with them high prices and him sleepin' half the day. But who'd figgered that eastern professor, William Worthington Tolliver, to fix Gus' wagon?

COMPETITION IS DEATH

by Richard Brister

IN THESE gold camps you see some types. This Tolliver, for instance, come into Paydust riding a swayback dun mare, stiff and uncomfortable as he knowed how to be in the saddle. No boots under his California pants. Duffle scraping skin off his calves every time the mare shifted her weight underneath him.

First off, he signs up for a bunk—five dollars the night, mind you—in Ed Rafferty's hotel shack. Writes it down *William Worthington Tolliver* in a real pretty hand, like he'd been born hanging onto a pencil. "How're they doing up at the diggings?" says he, in kind of a super-civilized accent.

"They's plenty dust up there yet," says Ed, "for the fella that ain't afraid to dig for it."

Ed's doin' some gentle digging himself, verbal, and as he looks over Tolliver's hollow chest, skinny arms, and horn-rim glasses, it is plain he don't count on William Worthington Tolliver to pan out so good on the business end of a pick handle.

"You got a claim staked out, pilgrim?"

"I have. Friend of mine lost heart for gold digging and signed his claim over to me. Right by the river."

"You're lucky."

"Where do I go for my tools?" says Tolliver, blinking some through them horn-rim glasses. "I'll need a shovel, a pick, and some—"

"Acrost the street, Tolliver. Gus Halbert's the man to see for minin' supplies in these diggings."

William Worthington Tolliver steps gingerly over the mud puddle that does Paydust for a main street and steps inside Gus Halbert's army issue tent, where Gus is taking a siesta for himself on an army cot. Gus is a big fellow with some extra poundage around his middle and his shoulders. He eats good and sleeps even better. Like Ed Rafferty says, Gus is the man to see for miners' supplies in this camp, but you do well to see him in the morn-

ings, around ten, when he feels chipper.

"Hello there," says Tolliver.

Gus twitches some on the cot, annoyed, but he don't make no move to untilt the Stetson hat from off of his chin and forehead.

"I understand," says Tolliver, "you're the man to see about mining supplies."

Gus stiffens some, but that's all.

Tolliver looks at the shovels and picks and sifting pans laid out helter skelter on the tent floor. "I'll be wanting a shovel and a pick and one of those pans, to start with. And—"

"Son," growls Gus from under his Stetson, "if you was anything but a damn sissified eastern dude, you'd understand when a man's layin' down with his hat over his eyes, he ain't open for business. You come back in an hour or two, and just mayhap I'll be able to do something for you."

THIS TOLLIVER'S pale blue eyes commence to cloud up some, under them glasses. "It's quite apparent you don't want my business," says he. "You needn't trouble yourself on my

account. I'll take my business elsewhere."

If there is one thing Gus Halbert will not stand for, it is back-sass from a tenderfoot stranger. Gus has a real mean streak in him, for such a sleepy son. Them big hickory-handled hawg-legs he wears ain't just for showoff, neither. Gus'll shoot a man down quick as say "Howdy," when somethin' riles him.

Gus opens his slitty black eyes and tips up the brim of the Stetson a mite, squinting at this Tolliver. "Well, now ain't you a prime dude!" he says, smooth smiling and dangerous as a new-woke-up rattler. "Where you git them fancy duds, for tarnation?"

"In Boston. Cambridge, to be exact."

"Cambridge," says Gus, "happens to be in England. My old man was borned and raised not twelve miles from it."

"The Cambridge I'm talking about," says Tolliver, kind of stiff, "is near Boston. Harvard University is there."

"University, hey? That where you learnt the fancy accent?"

"I happen to be a college professor," says Tolliver. "I had the fancy accent, as you call it, long before I joined the faculty at Harvard, however."

"If you're a professor," says Gus, "how come you ain't professin'?"

"I'm on sabbatical leave. Now, if you're quite through prying into my personal affairs, Mr. Halbert, I'd like some tools."

"I don't like the way you talk, son," says Gus, working his mouth some. "I got half a mind to put a hole in your hocks and learn you some western manners." He sits up on the cot, swings his gunbelt up in proper position, and drags one of them hickory-handled lead spitters out of its sheath. He grins, slow and sleepy, and trains it on Tolliver's beltline. "Now let's pick up the confab where we left off. I figure you'll sing purty from here on."

This William Worthington Tolliver stands there, blinking down at that six-gun, fascinated, as if it is some new kind of insect he never lays his eyes on before now. "If this is your idea of a joke, Mr. Halbert—"

"Just you sass me some more, and you'll learn how much I'm joking."

"You have a strange way of inviting trade."

"I don't have to invite it," Gus says.

"As a student of economic theory," says William Worthington Tolliver, "I beg to differ. The law of supply and demand—"

"Ain't no laws in this gold camp, to speak of," grins Gus. His mouth is still mighty thin and hard, under his Ulysses S. beard, but them slitty black eyes have gone curious. "I always figured laws was made to be broke, anyways. What's this here law you spoke of?"

"The basic law of economics," says Tolliver, kind of starchy and classroomy. "Demand for a certain type of merchandise creates supply, and the interplay of these two factors, in free trade, tends to keep prices down at a reasonable level."

Gus grins some behind that rat's-nest beard. "Brushin' them cobwebby big words off of what you're tryin' to say," says he, "I'd say you got a lot to learn about economics, as you call 'em... Now spit it out. What'll you have? I've lost enough shuteye standin' here arguin' with you."

Gus puts his gun up.

Tolliver points at a pick and shovel and a pan for washin' out gold dust, and Gus sets them up on the table he uses for his store counter.

"What else?"

"That's all for now," says William Worthington Tolliver, reaching down in his pepper and salt town coat for his wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

"Why, lemme see," says Gus. "Forty for the pick. Same for the shovel. Twelve for the pan. That'll come to just ninety-two dollars."

William Worthington Tolliver is in the act of drawing a ten-dollar bill out of his billfold when he hears Gus

name the price. The New England pilgrim stiffens up as if he just got hit in the chest by a rifle bullet. He pushes that ten-dollar bill back out of sight.

"Man," says he, "are you crazy?"

"Son," says Gus, "I'm gettin' right impatient with you. What's your trouble?"

"You can't get away with it," says Tolliver. "You can't charge any such outlandish prices as that. It's against all rules of—"

"You mean the law of supply and demand?" grins Gus.

"I mean the law of supply and demand," admits Tolliver, grim-faced and full of Yankee stubbornness. "Why, in Boston, I could pick up these three items for less than ten dollars. I—"

"Son, I got news for you."

"Yes?"

"This ain't Boston. Also I got some more information that may interest you."

"Have you?" says Tolliver, stiff-mouthed.

"You can't take gold out of the ground without tools. Even a college professor oughtta be able to figure that out for himself. It just so happens I'm the only man in Paydust that's sellin' tools. That'll be ninety-five dollars."

Tolliver blinks at him through them horn-rim glasses. "Ninety-five? A minute ago—"

"I said ninety-two. A minute of my time is worth three extra dollars. Happens I was asleep, when you come in here... Ninety-five dollars."

"No," says Tolliver.

Gus stares at him, mouth hanging slack behind that U. S. Grant beard. "How's that?"

"In a free economic system," quotes Tolliver, "the customer is under no obligation to buy if either the merchandise or the price doesn't suit him."

He turns on his skinny legs and walks out, leaving sleepy-eyed Gus too startled to think up an answer. "Now ain't that one damfool of a sissified eastern dude!" grumbles Gus. "If he looked half like a real man, I'd of gunned him in his tracks. Well, he'll come crawlin' back, when he finds they ain't a tool to be bought anywheres else. And I'll learn him a lesson about economics. I'll charge him double."

WILLIAM TOLLIVER goes back acrost the street to Ed Rafferty's hotel shack. Ed lifts an eyebrow at him. "Thought you was in the market for tools."

"I am," says Tolliver, kind of grim.

"You don't appear to of bought none," says Ed.

"My New England ancestors," says Tolliver, "would have turned in their graves if I had paid the gouge price Halbert is asking." His brow wrinkles some; he looks real thoughtful.

"What're you fixing to do?" says Ed.

"Some thinking," says Tolliver. He looks at Ed with kind of a twinkle in back of them glasses. "Ever hear of the law of supply and demand?"

"I sure have," says the hotel man. "Wouldn't of put up this hotel shack if I hadn't figured there'd be a demand for lodgin's. What about it?"

"Not much," says Tolliver. "Our friend Halbert seems to think that law can be broken. And perhaps it can, but never for very long. I think he needs a lesson."

"Son," says Ed, "they's somethin' right likeable about you, once a man gets used to your eastern ways. Don't you go for to teach Gus Halbert any lessons. It ain't like to be healthy."

"I was referring to a lesson in economics."

"Gus ain't going to pan out so good as a student. He leans more toward bully than business."

"Where does he get his merchandise?" asks Tolliver, casual.

"Why, from over in Kenyon," says Ed. "Mule wagons it in over the Copeland Ridge. Forty mile of mighty mean country. 'Course, he don't make the trip often. Gus don't figure to overstock hisself."

"I've noticed that," says Tolliver. "Commodities in short supply invariably undergo a price advance."

"Hey?"

"Hardware wholesaler in Kenyon, is there?"

"That's right. Gaston, Smith, Leeders & Company." Ed grins. "You fixing to ride that old swayback mare clean to Kenyon, just to beat Gus out of his profit, young feller? Gus ain't going to like that."

Tolliver is looking at a beat-up old prairie schooner, sturdy enough but commencing to rust her wheel bands where she sets in the hotel shack's back yard. "Your wagon, Mr. Rafferty?"

"Sure is," Ed grins. "Rode her here clear from Independence, Missouri. Paid five hundred for her. She ain't much to look at now, but there's some good miles left in her."

"For sale?" says Tolliver.

Ed looks up, puzzled. "I'd take a hundred. Cash, that is."

Tolliver reaches in his coat for his wallet, then hesitates. "Any idea where I can hire enough horses to drag that wagon."

"You mean with a load of miner's supplies, from up in Kenyon?" says Ed, beginning to get the idea.

Tolliver nods yes.

"Down to the livery yard," says Ed. "Jess Wingle can rig you up, I reckon."

Tolliver takes ten ten-dollar bills out of his wallet and hands them over. Ed grins, kind of toothy. "Son, you just bought a wagon."

"I'll take a bill of sale for that," suggests the college professor.

"Why, sure, sure," says Ed, kind of proud. "You ain't suggestin' I'd go for to bilk you?"

"Of course not," says the pilgrim. "But a business transaction is not legal without some sort of receipt handed from seller to buyer."

"You're just chockful of them fancy ideas, ain't you?" says Ed, scribbling out a bill of sale for the wagon. "Son, I want to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"You ain't going to make it. You're a green hand in these parts. You can't buck an old hand like Gus Halbert and get away with it. He's hard, Gus is. Don't let them sleepy eyes of his fool you. He'd gutshoot you quick as spit at you. Was I you, I'd just forget about hauling tools in from Kenyon. Gus has a good thing, and he don't like competition."

"Competition is the life of trade."

"Competition'll be the death of one four-eyed Boston pilgrim, if he don't smarten up some."

Tolliver blinks through them glasses. "Are you afraid of Gus, Mr. Rafferty?"

"Me? 'Course not. Why should I be?"

"Then I'm not, either."

"Going through with it, are you?"

"I have a sweetheart back in Boston. Her father happens to be very wealthy. He won't permit her to marry a poor man. If I strike it rich out here, I will have removed that objection. I have only one year leave of absence from the college. Naturally, I'm in a hurry. And something tells me I'm on the right track. The miners grub for the gold, but eventually it winds up in the business men's pockets. I may give Gus Halbert some real competition."

"Son, you're a fool," says Ed Rafferty, with a strained expression. "Since you won't listen to sense, just remember one thing. I never knowed what you wanted the wagon for, when I sold 'er to you."

"Thought you weren't afraid of Gus Halbert," grins Tolliver, and strolls down toward Jess Wingle's livery yard at the south end of the street.

HE ARRANGES for a four-horse team to be hitched to the wagon in Ed Rafferty's yard, and for Wingle's man to drive the rig out of town, where he, Tolliver, will take over. Payment on a rental basis, horses and harness at the rate of thirty dollars per diem.

"What's all the secrecy for?" the livery man says.

"A secret once confided," says Tolliver. "is no more a secret."

"Well, I was just askin'," grumbles Wingle. "They're good horses."

"They'll be good horses when you get them back," says the pilgrim.

"They better be, young feller."

Tolliver is still making arrangements with Wingle when Ed Rafferty steps across the street, farther up town, and pays Gus Halbert a visit in his army tent. Gus has just finished his nap and feels grumpy.

"Whatta you want?"

Gus has a mean way of turning them slitty eyes on a man, and Ed kind of winces under the big fellow's stare. "No need to bark at a man, Gus, when he comes to do you a favor."

"Favor?" says Gus. "Since when're you doin' Gus Halbert favors?"

"Since now, Gus I—uh—I don't like to turn on a man when he ain't done no harm to me, but—well, about that pilgrim—"

"You mean that damfool college professor?" says Gus. "What become of him?"

"I'm tryin' to tell you, Gus. He just bought my old wagon. I'd never of sold it to him, if I'd knowed what he wanted it for."

"What did he want it for?"

"Why, he figures to truck in some miners' supplies from Kenyon, Gus. He—"

"What! Why, that lily-livered, skin-and bones little whelp! I'll break his arms off him. I'll cut him in half with six bullets." His face commences to cloud up. "So you sold him your wagon, hey? I don't appreciate that, Ed. I take that real unkindly."

"Gus, I'm tryin' to tell you, I never knew what he wanted it for, or I'd never of sold to him. I'm too smart to cross horns with you, Gus. I know you ain't a man to—Gus, put that gun up, in the name of—"

"Always figured there was rat in your system somewheres," growls Gus. "I ain't took in by your lies, Ed. You sold that wagon for a profit. Go for your gun, Ed."

"Gus, listen. . .listen to me!"

"Grab for it, Ed. Ain't no law in Paydust, but I'd still prefer to plug you in self defense. It'll look better."

"Gus!"

"Grab for it, Ed, if you're going to."

Ed stands there, his face falling to pieces, too scared to move. Gus sneers through his U. S. Grant whiskers and pulls trigger. It is only six feet between them. Ed does a flop on the tent boards. Gus puts his gun up and quick rolls Ed down onto the street, where he won't stain the wood. A crowd's coming now, and Gus looks at them, defiant.

"He come in my tent and made a ruckus. I give him his chance and beat him to it, that's all. Anybody comes lookin' for trouble with Gus Halbert in this town, they can always find it. . . Tote him out of here. It ain't good for business."

Speaking of things that ain't good for business reminds Gus that William Worthington Tolliver means to tote a load of miners' supplies in from Kenyon, which if he succeeds, will be strictly tragic from Gus' standpoint. "The gall of that skinny whelp!" he rumbles. "I got a mind to go blow his brains out before he gets a good start." But then a long grin splits his face. "'Course, if I was to keep clear of the dang button-head pilgrim till he'd got a load of stuff pretty near back here, I could knock him off, commandeer the stuff and make a nice profit out of it, besides savin' myself a trip to Kenyon."

He commences to chuckle and slap at his big thighs. "By golly, I'll do it. Chances are, he'll try to come sneakin' in, I'll be waitin' at the trailside. He'll get a real bushwhack welcome, that four-eyed sissified pilgrim!"

GUS IS A sleepy son, but he can generally keep his slitty eyes open when he's bent on a killing. He lays in wait for the pilgrim all one

night, and half of another, before he finally hears the rumble and clatter and clopclop of that prairie wagon coming down trail towards where he lies hidden. It's damp and cold out under them stars, with no moonlight to speak of. Gus feels kind of sour towards the world, and especial towards William Worthington Tolliver.

"Come along, sonny," he growls, squinting to make out the shadowy figure of the pilgrim perched on the driver's seat. "That's it. Easy now. I'm about to learn you a final lesson in economics."

He pulls his six shooter out and rests the barrel on top of a rock, squinting along it to get the silhouette of the pilgrim square in his line. The wagon rumbles up even with the clump of mesquite Gus is using for cover. He grins, squeezing the trigger, real gentle.

Wham! It sounds like artillery opening up in the night. That figure crumples over on the seat and Gus hears the pilgrim let out a gurgly groan. Them four horses are all set to stampede, but Gus is thinking about that cargo in back of the wagon. He steps out fast and grabs a holt of the leader by the chin strap.

"Whoa," he soothes. "Whoa up, boys. Wouldn't wanta see you roll all that expensive hardware down the side of the hill now. Jest take it easy."

"That sounds like a pretty good plan for you to act on," says a voice with a sissified eastern accent. It is William Worthington Tolliver, speaking from inside that prairie schooner. He has a big buffalo gun trained on Gus, who squints around at him, then freezes in front of them horses.

"Thought you was knocked out of the picture, pilgrim."

"That was my friend here," says Tolliver, and nods down at a dummy he'd rigged up and set on the driver's seat, purposeful, to fool Gus. "On the farm where I grew up, back in Massachusetts, Halbert, we got pretty handy with horses—and with the building of scarecrows. I also used to shoot squirrels for sport. You make a much more sizeable target. Don't move."

"But—I plugged you, dammit. I heard you gurgle."

"Are you sure the one proves the other? You're not too smart, are you, Halbert?"

Gus just stands there, mindful of that buffalo gun trained on him.

"I knew you'd be here waiting for me," says Tolliver. "I knew Ed Rafferty was scared of you, and that he'd sell me out, rather than risk his hide when you learned he'd sold me this wagon to compete against you in business. I also knew you wouldn't strike till I was nearly back into Paydust."

"You know purty much," sneers Gus. "Just how'd you figger that out?"

"You're lazy, Gus. You were too lazy to wait on me, the first time I ever saw you. I knew you'd like the idea of having me deliver a load of supplies this far for you. So I was ready—"

GUS LETS out a cussword, swings around sharp and tries to snap out a quick shot at Tolliver. For a skinny, four-eyed little college professor, Tolliver can think and act mighty quick, in a crisis. "G'yap!" he yells at the horses. The leader jolts forward, pushing Gus off his balance. His shot goes wild.

Tolliver yanks trigger on that big buffalo gun. The wagon is moving and his slug goes high. It rips a neat furrow acrost the top of Gus' head, parting his hair just as slick as a whistle. Gus quits trying to haul that six of his up for a second shot. He goes backward, flat on his shoulders, screaming bloody murder as them horses commence to churn forward.

Tolliver tries to hold 'em in, but you know how horses is, when they've had

their fill of excitement and racket, and mean to run their nerves down to normal. They run right over Gus, one of them big wheels takes him in the stummick, and as of right then Gus Halbert is out of the miners' supplies business.

I suppose you could say as of that moment William Worthington Tolliver is in the business. He drives that rig into Paydust, toting what's left of Gus for supercargo, and he gets a right friendly welcome. Folks is looking greedy-eyed at them beautiful new picks and shovels and what-all, and when Tolliver announces he's sellin' 'em for ten dollars at what he calls "an entrepreneur's fair profit," he's as popular as if he give the town a barrel of whisky.

Well, sir, you never see a town grow like this one, from then on. Seems like Gus had held her back, gougin' newcomers and driving them out before they got settled to try their luck at the diggings. Now she got up a real head of steam and Tolliver, he growed right with her.

Eight months passed, and he'd made himself a tolerable rich man, just sellin' mining supplies at a fair profit. That girl of his from back east come out—pretty as a picture, she was, at the church—and they got married.

Tolliver's president of town council, these days. "What Gus Halbert never realized," he was sayin' last night at meetin', "is that you can turn more profit with large turnover on a small margin than with small turnover at a large margin."

"You college professors," says Jess Wingle, "is always theorizin'."

But the rest of the council hollered at Jess to set down. Where'd this town be today, they wanted to know, without Tolliver's economic theorizing?

Jess, he couldn't give them no answer to that one.

★

The Walking Jury

(continued from page 71)

do you mean to stand thar and say this murderin' skunk should be tried again, just because these jurors got curious and wanted to see some blood?"

"Yes, Your Honor. They not only saw blood; they questioned unsworn witnesses, in great prejudice of defendant's rights."

Demeree was still up. "Your Honor, defendant should be discharged. Mr. Claybrook has moved for a new trial, but a second trial at his instance would be double jeopardy. No recourse is left, but to discharge defendant. Rightfully, he is now a free man and should be so declared."

"Hold it, Wardlow," chided Hacker, "you're a fine judge; just what we need in Flat Creek. Suppose you ask Demeree *when* he learned about that jury-excursion. If he knew about it prior to verdict, and played shut-mouth, he must be deemed to have waived his objection."

Judge Steele saw a gleam of light. He faced Demeree with rising exultation. "Demeree, just when did you learn about this jury picnic to Goochy Alley?"

"At lunch-time, Your Honor."

"Why didn't you say something about it as soon as court took up again?"

"I did not then consider it advisable to do so, Your Honor. A verdict of 'not guilty' seemed to me clearly indicated, and I did not wish to alienate any juror's feelings. Accordingly—"

"Accordingly, you gambled, and your luck turned sour. By taking a chance, you tossed away what might have been a valid objection; too bad, Demeree." Steele furrowed his brow at Sheriff Buckalew. "Forty-rod is your meat, Bucky; swing him."

A roaring exit set in, and after a few minutes Steele and Bill Hacker were alone. Hacker filled his pipe with tobacco crumbs and fired up.

"Let's go, Wardlow."

Steele remained seated. "Bill, what are we going to do about this man Demeree? Be-consarned if I don't think he ought to be hung."

Hacker firmed his burning tobacco and took a long draw. "No, Wardlow. Lawyers don't ordinarily get hung. Possibly from excellent reason; a man never knows when one might come in handy."

Steele slid down. "I reckon you're right, Bill. But they sure ain't handy around this place."

★

Juno Crowder was a law unto himself in Lobo Junction. But now that he was about to match gunsmoke with young Steve Kincaid, Barney felt that all his years of debt could now be wiped off the books.

DERELICT'S REDEMPTION

by Frank Smith

MEN HAD been drifting quietly into *Honest John's Saloon* here in Lobo Junction all morning, and now, at a few minutes past eleven, the long bar was filled.

Barney Fannon, moving mechanically about his swamper's chores, saw the sober faces and dread-filled eyes of these men and heard the tenseness in their voices. He was aware of these things and his fear was a clinched fist in his stomach. His watery pale eyes jerked to the clock behind the bar and his lax, beard-stained jaw trembled.

At noon—less than an hour from now—Fannon's son would die amid the thunder of Colts out there in the hot, yellow dust of Main Street, another victim of Juno Crowder's greased lightning gun draw.

The white face of the clock blurred before Fannon's eyes and he slumped down on a chair, a gaunt, graying

man, thin-shouldered and frail under a threadbare black suit. He sat there, motionless, listening to the men's voices, and his helplessness was like a gnawing sickness.

At the bar a grizzled old bull-whacker slapped a wide hand on the unvarnished wood and declared, "I ain't sayin' young Steve Kincaid ain't got sand, but I am sayin' he won't show up for no gun fight with Juno Crowder. Why, hell, Crowder's the fastest hand with a gun that ever hit these parts. Steve'd be plumb loco to match draws with a gent like that."

A loose-boned, rangy puncher standing next to the bull-whacker said, "Kincaid'll show, all right. He's worked mighty hard, buildin' up that little spread of his, and I don't reckon he aims to let Crowder scare him off it."

"If he don't," the bull-whacker said, "he'll be the only little rancher Crowder ain't chased. And Crowder wants Steve's place mighty bad, seein' as how Steve's got the best water in the country." He tugged at a scraggly beard thoughtfully. "I don't reckon Crowder minded Steve's lickin' him in that fist fight last night—long as it gives him an excuse to draw his six-guns."

The rangy puncher refilled his squat glass from the bottle before him and stared at the amber liquid a moment. "I hate to see it happen to Steve, him about to get hitched and all, but there ain't nothin' much a fella can do about it, I reckon." He glanced along the bar toward a burly-shouldered, sandy-haired man with a star pinned to his leather vest. "And nothin' much the law can do, either, eh, Marshal?"

The marshal shrugged. "Not a damn thing. Killin' a man in cold blood is one thing; a fair-square gun fight is another. Crowder don't hanker after no hang rope; he always waits for the other gent to go for his iron first, and still burns him down without rushin' hisself."

The marshal turned his head to one side and spat into the box of sawdust at his feet. "You notice Crowder didn't make no move for his cutter last night when he had fist trouble with Steve. He picked that fight and took his beatin', knowin' it would give him an excuse to invite a gunsmoke showdown."

The puncher poured himself another drink. He said, tightly, "Some day Crowder'll make the mistake of cuttin' down an unarmed gent. When that happens, the town'll sort of take the law into its own hands and Crowder'll do a dead man's rigadoon from that cottonwood on younder side of town."

The marshal's eyes narrowed. "And I ain't the one to interfere, law badge or no law badge..."

BARNEY FANNON'S legs felt limp as rope as he pushed up from the chair and walked slowly toward the batwings. He stepped from the cool dimness of the saloon into the blinding glare of Lobo Junction's sun-baked Main Street and turned down the boardwalk toward the livery stable and the cubby-hole there he called home. The street was empty, but Fannon knew that behind the drawn blinds and closed doors, the people of Lobo Junction were silently waiting for the hour of noon and the death that it would bring.

And even as Fannon hurried his steps toward the livery stable, a rider galloped into town on a froth-flecked gelding, pulled up in front of *Honest John's Saloon* and shouted, "Kincaid's on his way! I seen a dust devil on the road from his place. He's comin' after all!"

Fannon turned in at the livery stable, passed the liveryman without greeting, and went to the little room at the back where he knew the liveryman always hung his gun belt. The liveryman paid no attention. Fannon took the gun belt from its peg behind the door and removed his frayed black coat. He strapped the belt over his shoulder, nestling the holster and its bone-handled .44 under his armpit. Then he slipped his coat back over

his thin shoulders and buttoned it tightly.

It had taken but a moment, and now Fannon left the livery and turned toward the Pride Hotel at the foot of Main Street, where he had heard Juno Crowder had taken a room. And as he walked, his mind raced back through the years, back to that black day in his memory—the day he had deserted his wife and his infant son, Stephen.

Fannon had tried desperately, those first three years of his marriage, to curb his wildness, to settle down to the hum-drum existence of a family man; but he had failed. He drank too much. He gambled too much. He had endured the fetters of married life as he walked, his mind raced back for his old freedom had grown stronger within him with each passing day. Then had come the gold strike in California and the rolling wave of men crossing the country with gold lust in their eyes and adventure in their hearts. Barney Fannon had gone with them.

He had left the gold fields as poor as he entered them. He began to drift then, working at odd jobs for beans and whiskey, always on the move. Somehow the slow, empty years had dragged by. But his restless, roving spirit had never left him, even after twenty-years of drinking rot-gut liquor in a hundred trail towns had made of him a hollow, broken wreck of a man, good only for sleeping in stables and swamping saloons.

Then, six months ago, Fannon had come to Lobo Junction in an empty cattle car and found a job in *Honest John's Saloon*. A few nights later, while he stood at the end of the bar, mooching drinks in return for his windies about the gold rush, a young rancher with smoke-gray eyes and unruly hair had come through the swinging doors. Fannon had taken one look at the man's face across the smoke-filled saloon and suddenly his fingers had become nerveless and his glass had splintered on the bar. It was as if time had turned backward twenty years and he were seeing himself in a mirror when he was a young man. Then he heard the dark-haired man referred to as Steve and the truth came to him and he knew he looked on his own son.

Fannon had asked enough innocent questions at the bar that night to get the young rancher's story. Steve's mother had moved to Lobo Junction about fifteen years ago. She had died when he was hardly more than a button. He had worked at anything and everything until he had saved enough to buy a few cows and a little spread to the north of town. He was engaged to marry the pretty girl who ran the town's millinery shop. He had the good-will and respect of all the town—except Juno Crowder, a range-hog who had swallowed up, one by one, most of the smaller ranches adjoining his sprawling Circle 7.

Fannon had talked often with Steve after that night, and the damned up emotions of twenty years had broken loose in an overpowering surge of affection for him. But he had kept his secret. Steve's mother had told him his father's name had been Kincaid, that he had died when Steve was three. Fannon had promised himself that Steve would never know that the whiskey-rotted old swamper emptying spittoons in a saloon was his own father.

NOW, AS FANNON entered the lobby of the Pride Hotel, his thoughts jerked back to the present and he said gruffly to the sour-faced woman behind the desk, "What room's Juno Crowder got?"

The woman looked sharply at Fannon and her thin nostrils flared contemptuously. "He's in 201," she said at last. "But I don't know if I should let you go up—"

"Don't worry about it none," Fannon said dryly and climbed the narrow stairs.

He found 201 and rapped softly. A cool, toneless voice said, "Come in."

Fannon twisted the brass knob and stepped inside.

Juno Crowder stood with his back to the window, a tall, wedge-shaped man with hair the color of new straw and careful hazel eyes with cold lights in them. An expression of annoyance crossed his square face as he recognized Fannon. Slowly his hands came away from the butts of twin pearl-handled Colts in low-slung holsters. He said, quietly, "What the hell do you want?"

Fallon let his eyes rove lazily over the long length of the other man's body; the fancy white silk shirt, the carefully cut dark trousers, the glistening ninety-dollar boots. "Crowder," he said softly, "you're aimin' to kill a man in less'n an hour from now. You'll have witnesses to call it self-defense, but it won't be nothin' but murder. I'm here to tell you to plumb forgit it."

For a long moment Crowder stared at Fannon incredulously, then the pupils of his hazel eyes seemed to grow darker and a muscle jerked at one corner of his mouth. From the loading pens on the far side of town a cow bawled. A short-lived breeze lifted the curtains behind Crowder, whispered against the window shade.

Then Crowder's shoulders dropped and he let his breath out slowly. "That snake-head whiskey has finally eat out your brain, you damn nursemaid to a bunch of spittoons! I oughta pistol-whip you for stickin' that red nose of yours where it don't belong." He took a short step forward. "Now, git!"

Fannon spread his feet on the carpet and his watery eyes locked with Crowder's. He unbuttoned the shabby black coat and pulled it back far enough for Crowder to see the bone-handled .44 under his armpit. "Look at it, Crowder. Take a damn good look and remember I'm goin' to kill you—if'n you don't call off your gunfight with Steve Kincaid. You need killin', Crowder, and I got nothin' to lose."

Juno Crowder closed the distance between them with a single long stride. His hard hand arced up and across and back again and Fannon felt the hot, salty taste of blood from his cut mouth. Still he stood there, smiling at the yellow haired man before him. He spat a stream of blood from one side of his mouth. "Remember, Crowder. I'm goin' to kill you."

Crowder's face twisted with rage. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "Git, damn you!" He slammed the heel of his hand into Fannon's shoulder, spun him around toward the door. Without hurry Fannon pulled the door open, spat again, and stepped into the hall. Crowder was cursing him as he pulled the door shut behind him, but the loud pounding of blood in Fannon's temples drowned out the words.

MINUTES later, Fannon walked slowly up the deserted boardwalk, past the millinery shop and the barber shop, to the spot he had chosen. It was the narrow space between two gambling halls, hidden from both ends of the street. There were no buildings directly across the street; no one could see him here.

He leaned his shoulder against the chipped paint of one of the gambling halls and built himself a smoke. There was no fear, no regret. He was thinking of this thing he was about to do almost as if someone else were doing it and he were only a witness. He was remembering the long years that had built up to this moment, and the price his wife and son had paid for his selfishness, his worthlessness. His son...

From the far end of town Fallon heard a sudden clatter of hoofs, then silence, and he knew that Steve Kincaid had arrived. Seconds later he heard the screen door of the Pride Hotel slam. In a moment Juno Crowder would start his slow walk down the middle of the rutted, dusty street toward Kincaid, for the duel that could have but one ending.

Fannon strained his ears. He heard the soft sound of boots, muffled by dust. He took a final drag on his smoke and tossed it away. Juno Crowder

came abreast of him, and crouching there, Fannon slid his hand inside his coat and called, softly, "Crowder!"

Crowder's cold eyes glittered in the sunlight as they jerked around. And then he saw Fannon's hand inside the coat and he sprang to one side. Twin blossoms of fire belched from his big Colts.

Fannon felt the sledge hammer force of the bullets, the slugs tearing into his stomach. But somehow he staggered toward Crowder, pushing his blue-veined hands against the chipped wall for support. He weaved the width of the plank walk to the street. Then the dust beneath his faltering feet swayed and tilted and floated slowly up to him.

He lay there on his side, the nausea and the pain a burning hell inside him. As if from far away, he heard doors jerking open and the sound of many boots pounding along the boardwalk.

"He was pullin' a gun on me, I tell you!" Crowder was shouting. "He came up to my hotel room and—"

The burly-shouldered marshal looked up from the little knot of men around Fannon. "You lie, you damned murderin' son! Barney Fannon ain't packin' no iron!"

Someone yelled for a rope then and the outraged, angry cries of the men pitched back and forth across the narrow street in a mounting roar. A loose-boned, lanky puncher ran from the general store, a length of white rope in his hand, fastening a noose in one end of it as he came. "I've been waitin' for this day," he muttered. Helpless in the strong hands of the irate mob, Juno Crowder saw the lynch rope. His square face contorted with fear and he screamed. There seemed to be no strength in his big body, as stumbling and whimpering, the mob dragged him away.

Lying there in the hot dust, Fannon looked up through a red mist into the anxious gray eyes of Steve Kincaid. He thought about the liveryman's .44 he had borrowed, and how he had gone back to the livery stable and replaced it—before he walked out on Main Street to pay his debt to Steve—to his son. No one would ever know about his tricking Crowder into shooting an unarmed man.

Fannon thought about these things, and just before the darkness closed in about him, he thought of Juno Crowder swinging from a cottonwood limb. Somehow the pain inside his wasted body was not quite so bad.

It sure was suspicious the way this stranger arrived at the Tower ranch, but Fran Tower took to him at once. So ... he had to be tolerated for awhile, at least. But when the sheriff arrived ...

THE PLUCKING KID

by J. J. Mathews

A STRANGER, riding a flea-bitten gray, arrived at the Tower Ranch Sunday afternoon. For reasons of his own, he had recently annexed the horse in great haste.

The tired gray, when fresh, could make the posts of a barbed-wire fence go past so fast that they looked like pickets. Without slackening its speed, its rider could bunch six shots, at a considerable distance in any necessary direction, into a space no larger than a hat. He could also throw a rope; but it was the skill with which he played the mandolin that decided things that Sunday afternoon.

He could make a mandolin talk. His own he had left behind, having had no thought of music on his hurried departure from Rondero, two days previous. The instrument that had been lying in the rawhide-bottom chair on the veranda of the Towers hacienda gave forth a pleasing sound as he thrummed it with his thumb, carelessly, by way of investigation.

"The senor plays the mandolin?" said Fran Tower.

She occupied her throne at the end of the veranda, where Wes Bell, foreman of the ranch, sat in humble vassalage. Other privileged subjects gazed from tilted chairs along the whitewashed wall.

"I used to tinkle some," said the stranger, running his hand over the stripped back of the instrument. "I have been known to extract sounds from the insect."

Then he played, and Fran listened with the rest. That was the beginning.

No one on the ranch knew where the stranger came from nor his name, but because he could play a mandolin "in a way to charm birds," as the Towers outfit put it, they called him the Plucking Kid. It took too long to say that, so they shortened it to Plucky.

After the musicale, Fran whispered something to her father. Later he told Bell, the foreman, to add Plucky to the payroll.

"Fran," he remarked, "is dead tired of the brand of music we've been subsisting on, and this hombre I'm discussing can sure produce the other kind. Don't let him get his hands burned with a rope."

"We could get along without another man," said Wes, "but I'm for whatever Fran says, just the same as

you are. There ain't no use trying to disguise the fact that the Kid is a trained canary on the music proposition. I've heard mandolins tuned up, but I never heard one really played before. What was that one he gave us toward the wind-up—the one with the Spanish words? I didn't get it all."

"I forget the name. It's an old Spanish love song I haven't heard for twenty years. I used to sing it to Fran's mother before we were married."

"Look here!" said the foreman. "Do you suppose that maverick meant anything?"

"Never in a thousand years. Didn't even look at her. He was only playing for a job—a place to stop a while. It looks bad for him, the way he showed

up here. That gray has been used hard. I wouldn't wonder if he borrowed it; but he can't do any harm around here if you watch the stock. Some day he'll disappear, but keep him while you can—Fran's orders. It's the music, that's all."

The old ranger slapped his foreman on the back. "She's yours," said he. "All you've got to do is to round her up. That ought to be easy, from the way things look," and humming the old Spanish air that Plucky had played that evening, he turned in.

After smoking many cigarettes, pondering long upon the power of music as against the ordinary human voice, and coming to no definite conclusion, Bell also turned in for the night.

Early the next morning he found the Kid in the corral.

"How's the orchestra this A. M.?" he said.

"So-so," replied the Kid. "Does it get a job? It can throw a rope some."

"It stays at forty per, until I change my mind."

"What you might call a kind of removable fixture! Well, that exactly suits me. Maybe I won't want to hang around more than a month. I ain't used to working long in one locality. I'm called elsewhere quick, sometimes."

"Yeh, I guess so. That gray must have come a long ways fast—he's sore and lame this morning. Looks like a fine horse, though!"

Bell's eyes scanned the other's impassive countenance.

"Fair," said the Kid, looking at Bell from the corner of his eye. "He was picked for speed."

The direct question being barred, according to the code applying in such conversations, Bell learned no more about the gray. About himself Plucky proffered little information.

BEFORE the week was over he had become familiar with the routine of his work. Every evening he sauntered over to the wide veranda, picked up the waiting mandolin, and played—played to Fran. The rest were there, but he played to one only.

The Kid had eyes that saw. Never had he played to so beautiful a woman, and he had played to many. From beneath the shadow of his sombrero, thrown by the oil-lamp hanging overhead, he looked at her oval cheeks, olive against her jet-black hair; at her lips, red as the rose she wore; and at her marvelously dark, soft eyes, set in long, thick lashes. They were eyes that spoke as they gazed steadily into the shadow underneath the hat-brim. He played to them. He sang. He improvised. Many melodies he blended into one, harmonious and soft and full of tenderness.

One evening Fran tossed a red rose to the player—a red rose that she had worn. Bell, always at her side, picked another from the bush along the trellis and put it in her hair. This one, also, reckless of all consequences, Fran threw to the mandolin player.

The rivals met in the morning. The Kid wore two roses in the band of his sombrero. As he rounded a corner of the corral, Bell, who was waiting, reached toward his holster; but the Kid was quicker. Bell grinned sheepishly as he looked into the muzzle of the forty-five.

"Ain't you a little previous?" he said.

"Generally am," said the Kid. "I have to be, to keep alive."

"Guess you're nervous this morning," Bell muttered. "Just step to one side. You're in direct line with that speckled rooster I'm about to slaughter for the old man."

The Kid walked over behind him.

"Just a little habit I've got into," he remarked.

"That's all right," said Bell, as his gun flashed. "Accidents will happen. Looks like I only grazed his wattles." The Kid shot as the speckled rooster disappeared behind a water trough.

"When an obstacle gets in my way, I generally shoot clean through it," he

said, as the headless rooster flopped and fluttered behind the trough, which was perforated just above the water-line.

As the two men stood eyeing each other, Fran appeared, larger-eyed than usual, and a trifle pale.

"Who shot?" she asked.

"Chicken dinner," said Bell laconically. "Sorry to disturb you." Turning to the Kid, he added: "I guess you better ride out on the range today. Go and count that far bunch of calves down by the wash."

FROM THAT time on, Bell with some pretext or another, kept him always on the range. This was what the Kid had wanted. His time was as good as his own. Mounted on the gray he cantered leisurely about, examining the trails, and following them out until he had a picture of the country in his eye.

He knew that in leaving to the north, time could be gained by skirting a fringe of greasewood and bearing toward the east, thus avoiding a rather deep arroyo, and striking the north road two miles up. Directly to the east, far out on the mesa, the dry creek-bed would furnish shelter for as many miles as any one might need in a pinch. He discovered that the shortest cut to the main road leading south passed through a scattering growth of cactus and mesquite to the southwest, beginning at a point where three dwarfed oaks leaned together like three thieves whispering.

Westward, some miles from the ranch-house, loomed the mountains. Running approximately north and south, they sent out spurs like the legs of a gigantic centipede. Between were gulches, canyons, and ravines.

Toward the wildest and densest of these canyons the Kid one day turned the good gray's nose. The entrance was guarded by a regiment of Spanish bayonets and tall, spearlike ocotillas, which could be seen for miles across the mesa. Under and around these, and up the canyon, spread a growth of greasewood, mesquite, and cactus.

An expert at the game of hide and seek, the Kid knew well the necessity of reconnoitering the place as a possible hiding-spot for one on bad terms with the laws of Nevada. Arriving at the mouth of the canyon, he slowed his horse down to a walk and gazed along the rocky walls of the wide defile.

As the gray wound its way leisurely in among the brush, and over the sandy wash, which the sun had long since dried to powder, its rider's eye fell upon the hoofprints of a horse. Fetlock-deep, it had passed diagonally across the wash, leaving no trace on either side, but its general course had evidently led up the canyon.

The Kid pulled up the gray, threw one leg over the pommel of his saddle, and for a long time sat in deep reflection. In the game that he was playing, with his mind alert and open to suspicion, the trail of a lone horseman in that secluded spot was to be reckoned with as carefully as if it were a coiled snake at his feet. Possibly, from some vantage-point far up the canyon, his movements on the mesa had been watched.

It was a rule with him always to see the other man first, or, if he could not see him first, to locate him in advance, and to prepare for all contingencies that a knowledge of the other man's identity and purposes might foreshadow.

While he sat pondering the situation, the cool draw, fanning his face as it swept gently past him toward the range, brought with it, from a distance up the canyon, the peculiarly shrill neigh of a horse. The Kid's trained ears caught the familiar sound distinctly enough to cause him to finger his forty-five, and to exclaim, with a strange mingling of contempt and animosity:

"Dead right! I knew it—it's the little bay, or I'm deafer than a snake! And he ain't up there alone, or I'm loco in the head. It's just like I figured

it, but I won't bother with him yet; he'll keep another day."

Patting his horse's neck, he leaned forward and whispered confidentially:

"The little lady sure has roped me, and I've got to have a private talk with her before I take the big chance that winds up this game!"

Turning the gray, he rode out toward the range.

HALF AN hour later, while meditating under a thick mesquite, a mile to the north of the canyon, the Kid, whose eyes had been roving the mesa from long force of habit, noticed a horseman coming from the south. He led the gray to cover, picked his way along the edge of the mesquite, and finally stretched himself at full length on a brushy hummock, where he had a good view, but was well concealed. His forty-five lay at his side.

When he reached the canyon, the horseman paused and gazed long in its direction. Then he touched spur to his horse, and, casting backward glances, galloped toward the Kid.

As he approached, the Kid picked up his forty-five and shifted his position slightly. When he recognized the rider as the sheriff of Rondero County, decked in the habiliments of war, he partially arose. Then he settled down again; the sheriff had turned his roan toward the ranchhouse.

The Kid had never had an opportunity of seeing Fran alone. Now she would come to him; he knew it as he knew that the sun would set. His one weakness—the love of a practical joke—had got the better of him, and this service that the gray old sheriff was about to perform for him—unwittingly—pleased him much.

In spite of the intense anxiety which he knew the situation would cause Fran, the fact that the ruse would bring her to him was excuse enough, to his mind, for adopting it. For the first time, he would see her alone; and there was much that he desired to tell her. So he smiled and waited as he watched the roan move toward the little group of dull brown buildings that shimmered in the heat, far out on the range.

Arrived at the ranch-house, the sheriff made inquiry:

"Have you seen a flea-bit gray in this locality, with a star and a circle brand and with a stake-rope burn up around his left hock?"

"It'll be in tonight," said old man Towers, "and with the party that you want. I thought you'd be around. Wanted bad?"

The sheriff held up three fingers and tapped his gun.

"Besides the killings, he's wanted all along the line for a lot of borrowed stock. Everything pointed this way. About a month ago he killed Ab Wallis behind the bar and walked out with four hundred dollars. It was late, and he got away on the first horse that he came to. It happened to be this gray. Last week's reports come in that the gray was seen headed in this direction. All the way up, I've been hearing about personal property that has been removed without permission. He shoots whenever anybody gets in front of him. He's bad medicine!"

"I thought so," said Bell, who was seated near on the veranda steps. "He looked bad to me—and I've seen him make a gun-play that would get most men before the draw."

"We don't go to town for a month, sometimes," said Tower, "but I suspected something wasn't right the way he showed up here. He'll be in this evening. Better put your horse up; you've got three hours to wait. That'll be the easiest. You can get him in the bunkhouse."

Whereupon the sheriff, weary from a two days' trip, was shown to the best room, where he peeled off his boots and lay cogitating on his chances at the next election.

MEANTIME, the Kid, sitting beside a yucca, hummed an air, the words of which were sentimental.

Mounting the gray, the Kid gazed out toward the somber mesa.

"She will be here soon," he mused.

As he watched and waited anxiously, he heard the thud of a horse's hoofs, and saw Fran riding like the wind across the range.

"Al canyon—apuraos! He is here—the man they said would come for you one day. I saw him. He waits. Ah, mi adorado! There is one place where you will be safe."

Riding beside her, the Kid felt reckless of all danger. His clear eye kindled as her rounded arm swept toward the grove of Spanish bayonets that sheltered the entrance to the canyon.

"Listen!" she said, when they had reached the tangled, brushy growth that spread upward. "Listen well—far in the canyon stands a little casa, forsaken, very old—it crumbles. There you must hide—go!"

"Plenty of time," he said. "I'm going to see that you get home O. K. It ain't polite to leave a lady all alone in a place like this. You asked me if I were afraid—it would look some that way if I left you now."

She caught his horse's bridle.

"You could not be afraid. It is I who fear—for you!"

"Well, there ain't no need of that," he said. "Don't you worry any."

As they rode out upon the mesa toward the ranch-house, with Fran still remonstrating and urging the Kid to seek safety in the canyon, a dark figure stepped stealthily from behind a yucca, mounted the horse it led, and, like a moving shadow, wound through the thinning brush and cacti.

"Mi adorado, you are brave!" she whispered. "I care not what they say. All are against you. I alone might save you—and you will not go!"

"Little girl," he said, "they don't make 'em any gamer than you are, nor any finer, anywhere. I never said so just this way before, but I want to tell you, right now, that I'd go against that Bell person and that sheriff and the whole of Nevada, blindfolded and hobbled—just for a chance to win you!"

For a moment he looked down into her face, pressed against his shoulder and modeled to an amazing beauty in the moonlight. Then he threw his arms about her. "You don't need to worry," he said. "Wait till I explain—why, there's no more danger of Bell or the sheriff getting the drop on me than—"

"Up with 'em quick!" called a voice.

In the shadow of the ranch-house, Wes Bell stood levelling a forty-five.

"Congrats," said the Kid, as he stood with his hands raised above his head. "First time anyone ever got the drop on me. . . . Well, hurry up and get the sheriff out here before a tree grows up alongside of me. I'd hate to see you tempted; you might get real harmful!"

Bell, stung with the ridicule, stepped forward just as the sheriff strode out of the door, with one boot off. For a moment, there was silence. Then, turning to the lawman, Bell said, "There's your horsethief, sheriff. Take him off my hands before I put a hole through him."

"Horsethief?" said the sheriff incredulously. "Horsethief? Where?"

Glancing in the direction indicated, the sheriff's eyes focused on the Kid, standing with his hands held high. As he gazed, he brought his gun down with a slam against the railing over which he leaned, and burst into a roar of laughter. "Horsethief!" he shouted. "Why, that ain't no horsethief. That's Art Moss, the best deputy I ever had!" He sniffed, and added, "Even if he does like to take a few days off after finishing a job, instead of turning in a report pronto."

Bell muttered, "Damn!" then holstered his gun ruefully as he looked at Fran. "So that gray he rode in on was acquired from the killer, huh?"

Art Moss nodded. "Like I said before, Wes, you're the first hombre who ever got the drop on me." He lowered his arms, and they encircled Fran Tower, naturally and easily.

Bell shrugged, then stepped forward with his hands extended. "You win," he said grudgingly, then managed a wry smile. "Shake—if you aren't too busy!"

The mob wanted a hanging. Nate knew that it would take only the smallest spark to ignite the flame that he read in their eyes. Yet, he had a feeling that Coulty hadn't killed Baxter. But he might not get the time to prove it.

READY FOR HANGING

by William F. Schwartz

ED COULTY surrendered after the first shot and Sheriff Nate Harper wasn't surprised. Anybody, Nate thought to himself, who was coward enough to drill a man in the back, couldn't have much fight—when somebody else had the drop on him.

But Coulty, Nate noted warily, had elevated only one hand after he had sent the warning shot whistling over his head. Coulty's right hand—his gun hand—was upraised, but his left hung limply at his side.

Nate stepped from behind the boulder where he had been hidden, waiting for Coulty to come along. He had seen Coulty struggling up the trail on foot and had lurked behind the rock at his approach.

"Reach with the other hand, too," Nate ordered. He held his .45 ready, aimed at the youth's back, just in case Coulty contemplated trickery.

"Can't," Coulty told him, without looking around. "My arm's hurt. My horse threw me back there on the trail. My arm's hurt—broke, maybe."

Nate's eyes probed the slightly-built figure of the twenty year old cowpuncher who stood before him. Coulty certainly did look the worse for wear; his range clothes were torn and dusty; his hat was missing and his sandy-colored hair was wet with sweat; his left knee was visible through a rip in his levis. Coulty was cowed and beaten. But Nate forced out the pity for the youngster that threatened to well up within him. He could never pity law breakers, especially killers.

Nate moved closer, yanked Coulty's six-shooter from its holster and put his own gun back in leather.

"Let's have a look at that arm," Nate said. "Turn around—slow."

Coulty obeyed meekly, and Nate saw the worry that was in the cowpoke's lean, handsome face. Coulty's lips were compressed in pain and there was an animal look of fear in his eyes.

Nate probed at the arm while Coulty gritted his teeth to hold back the agony.

"It's broke all right," Nate said.

Coulty sat on a rock while Nate improvised a splint with a limb from a jack pine and his own bandana. Then he ordered Coulty to use his own kerchief as a sling.

"That'll do," Nate said, when the job was finished, "until we get back to Sulphur Springs."

"Thanks," Coulty said, gratitude visible in his pale blue eyes.

"Don't thank me," Nate told him, curtly. "I'm only doin' my job. And my job is to get you back to Sulphur Springs—alive."

Coulty's lips trembled. "So I can hang?"

Nate shrugged his broad shoulders. He avoided the other's eyes. "You'll get a fair trial. But if you're found guilty, I guess you'll hang."

A sound that was almost a sob wrenched itself from Coulty's lips. "But I'm not guilty! I didn't kill Baxter!"

Nate shrugged his shoulders again. "Expect me to believe that? Ben Baxter was found in his merchantile—shot through the back. Only yesterday, I hear, you threatened to kill him. And you was seen comin' out of the store, right before they found Baxter's body. If you ain't guilty, then how come you was runnin'?"

Coulty choked back a sob. "I don't know! I don't know! I guess I was crazy! I saw Ben there on the floor, all covered with blood. I knew everybody would think it was me. So I wanted to get away—as far as I could, before they could blame it on me. That's why I ran. I didn't think of nuthin' else. I just wanted to get away. I know now I was crazy."

Nate eyed him, thoughtfully. "I'll get my horse," he said. "It kin carry double. But don't try to run—or I'll gun you down!"

COULTY stood impassive, his face ashen, while Nate walked behind the boulder where he had concealed his sorrel gelding.

Then, when the sheriff returned with the mount, Coulty started to plead again, "Look at my gun, Sheriff! It ain't been fired. Baxter was shot this mornin'. My .45 ain't been fired for weeks."

Nate examined Coulty's six-shooter, carefully. "But you could have used another gun," Nate said. "Or you could've cleaned it, put a fresh shell in."

"But I didn't! I tell you! I didn't! Look! Which way was I headed when you caught me? Back toward Sulphur Springs. I wasn't runnin' no more. I was comin' back."

Nate looked at him, warily. "I saw that, Coulty. But I figured you was lost."

"But I wasn't. All the time I was ridin', I was thinkin'. I was thinkin' that I was doin' the wrong thing. Then when that jack-rabbit spooked my horse and it threw me, I saw it was all up. I knew then for sure, I was makin' a mistake by tryin' to run. So I started back, on foot, for Sulphur Springs.

I figured somebody'd be after me. I knew you'd find me."

"Good thing," Nate commented, "that it was me that found you—first. There's a posse out after you, too, by now. If them fellers hadda caught you before me—well—maybe you'd be swingin' from a tree already. This way, at least, you'll get a fair trial. I'll see to that."

"But I didn't kill him!" Coulty insisted again. "I love Sarie. You think I'd kill her father? Sure there was bad blood between us. I admit that. Ben didn't like me. He didn't like the idea of me courtin' his daughter. And you know why, Sheriff?" he added, bitterly. "Because I have no money—and the merchantile was to be Sarie's someday. But I didn't kill him."

Nate gritted his teeth. He was getting tired of this. But, somehow, Coulty sounded sincere. "And what about that threat yesterday?" Nate probed. "How do you explain that?"

"Ben ordered me to stay away from Sarie again. Yesterday he—he cussed me out, told me he'd take a whip to me if I looked at Sarie again. That's why I lost my head. That's why I said I'd drill him if he talked that way to me again. But I didn't mean it. I just lost my temper. But I'd never kill Sarie's father—much as I hated him. And why would I want to cause Sarie sorrow. I love her. And—and she loved me. And I spoiled it all—by runnin'! Sheriff, yuh gotta help me!"

NATE SUPPRESSED blasphemy. Coulty was getting on his nerves. What did Coulty think he was—a Dan Cupid or somethin', that was supposed to patch up love affairs? He was a Sheriff! A law man. His job was to track down law-breakers, see that they were punished. And he had cornered a killer.

Or had he? Like many another man, Nate prided himself on his ability—real or imagined—to be able to detect when somebody was lying. And Coulty, strangely, seemed to be telling the truth.

But Nate shrugged his shoulders. The cards were all stacked against Coulty. On circumstantial evidence, Coulty looked as guilty as hell.

But was he? Nate's conscience jibed at him. What if Coulty, like he insisted, wasn't guilty? His job as law man wasn't only to track down the guilty. He had to protect the innocent, too.

Besides, Nate had known Ben Baxter—very well. He knew him as a hard-headed, tight-fisted merchant with plenty of enemies. Ben was far from a popular man in Sulphur Springs. Behind his back, people called him "Greedy Ben." Ben Baxter gave no credit. His terms were strictly "cash on the counter or no merchandise." Many a cattleman had come to Baxter and asked for credit when times were rough, especially during the great drought the year before, and Ben had refused them all—no matter how good customers they were. Yes, Ben Baxter had been well-disliked. But, Nate thought, as he fought back the doubt that was festering in his mind about Coulty's guilt, that gave no man an excuse to murder him. And Coulty looked like the guilty party!

"Get on the bronc," Nate told Coulty. "We're wastin' time here."

Nate Harper and Ed Coulty headed for Sulphur Springs on a back trail with the sorrel gelding carrying a double load. Nate wanted to avoid the posse, wanted to get Coulty tucked safely away in jail.

But the posse still caught up with them. Nate saw the dust plumes from far off. At first, he almost raked the sorrel's flanks with his rowels. Then he decided against it. The sorrel was carrying a heavy burden. He didn't want to kill him.

There were ten men in the posse. Nate's own deputy, red-haired, youthful Jeff Clarke, was among the riders.

"Nice work, Nate. I knew you'd get him." Clarke grinned.

But the others, Nate saw, weren't

grinning. They were tight-lipped. Their eyes were cold.

Fletcher Dolan spoke next. He was a cattleman who owned the Flying W spread; a short, muscular man in an expensive-looking broadcloth suit who rode in a costly saddle. Dolan had a sneer on his swarthy face.

"Yeh," Dolan echoed, "nice work. But how come he's still breathin'? You shouldn't have left him live this long. But don't worry! We'll find a tree That pine over there looks just right." He nodded at Josh Bilker, his ramrod. "We'll use your rope, Josh."

Josh Bilker studied his employer for an instant. Josh was a tall lean man in his early forties. He reached for his rope. Sardonic amusement was in his pale gray eyes.

But Nate held up his hand. "Forget the rope," he told them. "I'm takin' in Coulty alive. There'll be no hangin'—until there's a trial."

Hate and anger leaped into Dolan's face. He scowled, darkly. "But why wait?" Dolan blistered. "Why waste time? Coulty's guilty as hell." He nodded to the other members of the posse. "Come on! Let's take him. The Sheriff's only one man!"

"But he's my boss!" a voice cut in. It was Clarke, and the deputy already had his twin .45s out. And they were aimed at Dolan.

Nate felt an inward glow at his deputy's loyalty in a time of crisis. But he knew inside, that he, himself, should master the situation, not let Clarke's six-shooters settle it.

"Put away your guns, Jeff," Nate told his deputy. Then to Dolan, "I'm the Law here. I was duly elected Sheriff. And till my term's up or till I resign or get impeached, I'm gonna act like one. Any more talk like that—or any more threats—and you're settlin' with me—personal. I said this man's gonna get a trial. And he's gonna get one. From here on in, you can ride with me to Sulphur Springs—if you want to. Otherwise, get outta my way! We're wastin' time talkin' here."

Nate watched Dolan as he spoke. The cattleman's lips were curling in a sneer and hate was in his eyes. For a second or two, Nate thought Dolan was going for his gun. But he didn't.

There were cooler heads in the posse, and they prevailed.

Lem Masters, a tall, skinny man in his sixties with a drooping white mustache, moved his bald-faced roan between Dolan and the sheriff. Masters was the owner of the X Bar X ranch, the largest in the county.

"Nate's right," Masters said. "I've been here a long time. I remember when there was no Law. I don't want it to be that way again. We'll give this —this killer a trial. Then we'll hang him, peaceful-like. Come on, Nate. Let's get back to town."

NATE HAD more hostile citizens to face when the posse arrived at Sulphur Springs. A crowd had collected in the streets. And the crowd was in an ugly, excitable mood—ripe for a hanging. Ben Baxter's killing was the first outright murder in Sulphur Springs for nearly ten years, and the citizens were eager for swift justice.

But Nate ignored them. With Ed Coulty still on the sorrel with him, Nate moved his mount through the sea of angry faces and brandished fists and headed straight for the adobe jail house. The crowd followed in his wake. There were sullen mutterings and threatening shouts.

Nate helped Ed Coulty off the sorrel in front of the jail. Clarke and Masters stood by, their bodies forming a barrier to the seething mob as Nate hurried his prisoner inside.

"I didn't do it!" Nate heard Coulty breathe. "Don't let them get me!"

Nate locked him in the cell. Then came out to face the mob. "Go home!" Nate told the gathering. "All of you. If this man's guilty, he'll get what he deserves—and he'll hang. But it's gonna be legal. They'll be a judge and a jury. They'll be no mob action here —as long as I'm sheriff."

"But maybe you won't be sheriff long!" This was from Dolan. He looked to the angry citizens around him for support. "The election's comin', ain't it, folks? And we'll know how to vote, won't we?"

Jeff watched the men in the crowd nod in sullen agreement with Dolan. Right now, Jeff mused bitterly, his chances for reelection weren't worth the proverbial plugged nickel. And he wanted to be sheriff again—for as many terms as he could. Because the Law was the work he knew, loved. But he hesitated for only a second. He had to show who was boss!

Nate reached his hand out, grabbed Dolan's shoulder, spun him around.

Crack!

His fist smashed into Dolan's chin, sending him backward into the mob, who caught him as he fell.

"I'm sick of your bellowin', Dolan!" Nate shouted. "Damn sick and tired of it! Now! Get out! Before I lock you up, too!" Then he wheeled on the mob. "Clear off! Every mother's son of you. I'm still the sheriff. Remember that! Pick out who you want next time you vote. But till then, I'm still the sheriff!"

And, once again, Masters spoke up, came to Nate's aid. "Do what the sheriff says," Masters ordered. He looked and saw some of his own punchers in the gathering. "You, Stephens," he yelled to his foreman, "get every X Bar X man out of here. Break up the crowd!"

Finally, the crowd was gone. Nate turned to Clarke, his deputy. "I'm a mite hungry, Jeff," he said. "I'm goin' down to the Chinaman's for some grub. You stand guard here. If there's any trouble, send for me—pronto!"

Clarke grinned, patted his twin .45s. "Don't worry, Nate," he assured the sheriff. "There ain't gonna be no more trouble!"

NATE HARPER was hungry. This was his first meal today, but he found the steak and potatoes tasteless. Damn Coulty and his belly-aching about not being guilty. Coulty was as guilty as hell. And he had spoiled—for good—his chances for reelection by protecting him. Nate was in an angry mood when he paid for his meal and then sauntered down the planked walk.

He passed a few citizens. But they seemed to be avoiding him. He was accustomed to a pleasant, "Evenin', Sheriff," from everybody. But, now, nobody talked to him. And he ignored them with a smouldering hate in his heart. After this business with Coulty was finished, he promised himself, he was going to resign. He wouldn't wait to have them vote him out of office. He'd quit!

But could he? Deep down inside, he knew that being sheriff was the only job for him. Being a sheriff was his life. He'd never be happy doing anything else.

"Any trouble?" Nate asked Clarke when he arrived back at the jail.

Clarke grinned. "None at all, Nate. But our prisoner had a visitor."

"Who?"

"You won't believe it—Sarie Baxter!"

Nate shrugged his shoulders. "I believe it."

"Coulty kept tellin' her he didn't kill her Dad," Clarke said. "And, don't think I'm loco, but she looked like she believed him."

"And what do you think, Jeff?" Nate asked his deputy. "You think Coulty's guilty?"

Clarke grinned. "As guilty as hell, Nate."

Nate eyed his deputy, studied him carefully. The wide grin was still on Clarke's lips. There was a grin, too, in his eyes. Nate wondered if Jeff thought he was a fool for protecting Ed Coulty from the mob.

"But we gotta be sure, Jeff," Nate said. "We gotta be sure." Then another thought struck him. "You wait some more here, Jeff. I'm goin' down and have a talk with that girl."

●

Nate Harper found Sarie Baxter upstairs in the apartment over the merchantile. Sarie, a girl still in her teens with hair the color of ripe wheat and eyes like a Montana sky, was weeping softly when she answered his knock on her door.

"Oh, Sheriff!" Sarie began. "This is terrible. But Ed didn't do it. He didn't kill Daddy. I know he didn't."

Nate probed her pale face, her tear-reddened eyes. "You seem sure of that, don't you, Sarie? But who did it then—if it wasn't Ed? If you know, you must tell me. Then I can get whoever did it. That's the only way Ed can go free."

Sarie choked back a sob. "I don't know, Sheriff. If I knew, I'd tell you. I wasn't home when—when it happened. But I know it wasn't Ed. He's not that kind. I know he's not guilty. Believe me! I'm sure he's not!"

Nate sighed. "I wish I was sure," he said.

But all the while, his mind was working. He was remembering that Ben Baxter had many enemies. Maybe—maybe—

"Don't fret, Sarie!" Nate told her, suddenly. "I'll find out—for sure!"

●

Nate Harper shoved at the batwings and stalked into the saloon. Immediately, all conversation stopped and he felt hostile eyes heavy on him. He walked up to the bar, ordered a shot of whiskey.

Aprons Hobbs, the bartender, eyed him quizzically as he poured the drink.

"When's the hangin', Sheriff?" Hobbs asked, his voice tinged with sarcasm. "When does *the Law* string up Coulty—all legal-like?"

Nate let Hobbs wait while he downed the whiskey. Then he said, quietly, "The boy ain't hangin', Aprons."

"What!"

"No," Nate repeated, while the customers in the barroom crowded around to hear his words, "the boy ain't hangin'. You see, he didn't do it. But he knows who did. Now here's the right story," he added, fabricating the tale as he went along. "Coulty found the body. He was the first one in the mercantile after the killin' and he saw the killer leave. The reason he ran away was because he thought the killer would try to get him, too. That's why I locked him up. I want him kept safe until I can get proof—proof that will hang the right killer." Then he wheeled, pushed his way through the crowd, left the saloon without another word. He heard them jabber excitedly behind him. He knew the story he had invented would spread through the town like wildfire.

NATE HARPER crouched in some bushes behind the adobe jail house and waited. He was playing a hunch—and wondering if he was a fool.

Even in his own mind, he wasn't convinced that Coulty was innocent. He had only the boy's word—maybe the word of a killer—and Sarie's faith in him.

And he had staked much in this. Principally, his own reputation. If his hunch proved wrong, there was only one course to pursue; admit he had invented that yarn about Coulty's seeing the killer—and resign.

Then, for sure, Coulty would be thrown to the wolves. Maybe—now—there would be a trial. But it was certain to be swift. And there could only be one verdict: guilty. The town was hungry for a hanging. Coulty didn't stand a chance to go free.

Nate was glad the night was dark, the moon hidden by clouds. From the bushes, he could see the lights in the saloons down the street. But there were no sounds of merriment issuing from the barrooms. The atmosphere tonight in Sulphur Springs was heavy with silence. It was like the lull before a storm. The place was a powder keg, ready to blow up any minute. Only the

hanging of Baxter's killer could bring untroubled peace once more to the community.

Nate waited long. But he was a patient man. Then, suddenly, without warning, he heard the soft crunch of footsteps in the sandy gravel behind the jail. A shadowy figure was moving up quietly toward the window of the cell in the jail house.

His hunch was right! Nate felt like a man who had just been pulled out of quicksand.

Silently, Nate moved away from his hiding place. He stalked his prey as noiselessly as a Comanche. But he hurried forward—ready to strike. His six-gun was in his hand.

But even then, he was too late. The roar of a .45 shattered the silence of the night. The flash—in all that darkness—was blinding. But Nate knew the gun was fired through the cell window.

There was no time to wait. Nate fired at the shadow at the cell window. A man gasped in surprise and pain. And Nate knew his slug had ripped home into its target.

"Drop your gun!" Nate barked as he rushed forward.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" a voice begged. "I'm hit! Wounded bad!"

Nate recognized the voice. But he lit a match anyway.

"Okay, Bilker," he told the writhing figure on the ground. "Stand up, if you're able. I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Ben Baxter."

Bilker winced in pain, cursed. "But I didn't do it! I didn't kill Baxter!"

"Then why," Nate blistered, "are you here, tryin' to kill Coulty? Answer me, Bilker! And answer me fast! The crowd will be here soon. They want a victim. And they'll get one—*you!*"

"But I'm wounded!" Bilker pleaded. "Dyin'!"

Nate had no mercy for him. "You'll live long enough to hang, Bilker. You better talk."

Bilker moaned in pain. Then cursed again. "All right! I'll talk! It was Dolan. He put me up to this. He told me to get Coulty, plug him through the jail window, so he couldn't give evidence."

"Then Dolan killed Baxter?"

"Yeh, Sheriff. Yeh. Dolan killed Baxter. Dolan ain't had much cash lately. He asked Baxter for credit. Baxter refused. So Dolan got sore and plugged Baxter. That's the truth, Sheriff. Honest it is! Dolan knew about the argument Coulty had with Baxter. So he figured they'd blame the killin' on Coulty. But then—tonight—when he heard how you said Coulty told you who the killer was, he told me to drill Coulty—so he wouldn't talk no more."

Nate grinned inside. That story he had told in the saloon had worked, had served its purpose. He felt justified, now, in telling the falsehood.

And, once more, in the main street of Sulphur Springs, there was a mob. Nate heard the cries, the pounding of feet as the crowd rushed from the saloons, headed for the jail house to investigate those two shots.

And Bilker heard them, too.

"Lock me up, Sheriff!" Bilker pleaded. "Don't let them get me! They'll hang me—for killin' Coulty. Don't let them get me! I'll talk! I'll talk! I'll tell a judge and jury it was Dolan that killed Baxter."

Nate grinned again. "Don't worry, Bilker. You won't hang—not for killin' Coulty. He wasn't in that bed in the cell. Them's only blankets and pillows on that bed. Don't worry. I'll lock you up. I'll get a doctor to fix you up, make sure you live. You'll give evidence at the trial—Dolan's trial!" Then he paused, made certain his .45 hung loosely in its holster at his hip. "But my first job is to get Dolan."

Nate stepped out into the street, toward the fast-gathering crowd. He was hoping Dolan was in that mob. And he was hoping Dolan would fight.

★

WHO BIT LADY ELOISE?

by John T. Lynch

There is on record — somewhere — the case of a clipper ship, in full sail, having been sunk by a pair of false teeth. If you don't believe it, read on!

WHEN Blewberry Briggs finally finished tattooing a trim clipper-ship, in full sail, on the vast expanse of Lady Eloise Murphy's back, he felt that he had created his masterpiece.

As one of the few genuine artists in San Francisco during the hectic gold-rush days, in the early '50s, Blewberry steadfastly refused to get the gold-bug. Let others go to the diggin's and maybe—or maybe not—strike it rich. Blewberry Briggs was content to pursue his art, in his little "studio" near the water front, free and aloof from vulgar riches.

Even so, Briggs found himself making plenty of money. One of the first things a lucky prospector would do, on returning to 'Frisco, was to hit for Blewberry's place to have a bit of ornate artwork created upon his person. After all, when a man struck it rich, he could well afford to have a pair of entwined hearts, with appropriate inscription, tattooed upon his hairy chest, or have an anchor, a rose, or a dancing-girl permanently produced on his arm.

After a long day with his needles and dyestuffs, it was the artist's custom to wander over to the *Green Nugget Saloon* and indulge in some inartistic gambling. It was not that he enjoyed losing small sums of gold-dust, night after night. What lured Blewberry to the faro table at the *Green Nugget* was the beefy female who dealt the game, Lady Eloise Murphy.

The Lady Eloise, who had been banished from such civilized spots as Kansas City, Chicago and St. Louis for crooked card-dealing—and other anti-social practices, including murder—weighed two-hundred pounds.

She was fairly pretty, in an obese and cowlike sort of way, but her husky chatter, salty language, and eternal cigar-smoking quickly canceled out any romantic notions that players at her table might have.

In general, Lady Eloise was more repulsive to Blewberry Briggs than to most other males in the vicinity; she pained his esthetic soul. Yet, every night, Briggs was lured to the *Green Nugget* by the woman. Blewberry always played a few times, invariably lost, then wandered around the table and took up an unobstrusive stand. There, feeling he had paid the price of admission, the tattoo artist would stand and stare, entranced, at Lady Eloise's huge, smooth bare back.

Very often, while gazing at this vast expanse of white flesh, Blewberry would thank his lucky star that the woman was given to wearing low-backed gowns. It would be a shame, he felt, to cover up such a lovely sight. This way, he could stand there for hours, and dream up various splendid works of art that could be tattooed onto such a noble stretch of sheer skin.

In his creative mind, Blewberry could plainly see, on the Lady's back, a grand, bloody fight between Indians and United States Cavalry. Why, hell —he could fit a whole tribe of Indians on there, as well as a full company of soldiers, completely-equipped, including horses.

Another time, Blewberry would dream of a Sandwich Island scene, in which hula girls would be dancing on a moonlit beach, while in the distant background, a range of volcanic mountains spewed red fire and purple smoke from many peaks.

It was after losing two ounces of gold-dust, one night, that Blewberry outdid himself in creative thinking. While staring, transfixed, he watched the shoulder muscles ripple a bit, as the lady dealer reached for the cards. The movement reminded him of the grace and lilt of the sails on a clipper-ship. A clipper-ship! That was it! Only once in a lifetime does such inspiration come to one man!

UP TO THIS time, Blewberry had feared the lady as much as did everyone else in San Francisco. But, with a great art project on his mind, Blewberry forced himself to wait until the nightly play was over, then approached the awesome woman.

Hat in hand, somewhat shakily, Blewberry said, "Lady Eloise, I am an artist."

"The hell you say," answered the lady.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm a tattoo artist; and I would like very much to adorn that beautiful back of yours with a masterpiece," he explained.

"You mean, a tattoo pitcher on my back?"

Blewberry backed away a few paces, not knowing what reaction to expect. He was vastly relieved to see the lady smile.

"Now, that's right complimentin' of you, friend," she said. "I never met a real, live artist before. Set down; I'll order us a drink. Go ahead, tell me what you got in mind."

As Blewberry described, in colorful detail, the beauties of a clipper-ship, in full sail on a bright blue ocean, with foaming, billowing clouds overhead, and great birds flying in the heavens, Lady Eloise sighed in frank admiration at the man's artistic genius.

Appreciative as she was of the arts and sciences, Lady Eloise still had the penurious soul of a gambler. "How much this here ship on my back goin' to cost me?" she asked.

Blewberry shuddered visibly at the mention of mere money, when a masterpiece was involved. "I would not taint such a project with remuneration," answered Briggs. "This will be purely Art for Art's sake. Just think! We will, together, bring a work of art into the saloons and gambling-houses. Instead of killing themselves standing at the bar, drinking vile whiskey, men will flock around your table not only to gamble, but to observe the color, the action, the beauty of a glorious seascape!"

Every afternoon for the next three weeks, Lady Eloise sat patiently and bravely in Blewberry's studio—a rough-board shack with a patched canvas roof. And every night, her am-

ple back swathed in wide bandages, the lady was at her faro table Then, on Blewberry's advice, she retired to the ranch of a friend for a month, while her back healed from the millions of tiny needle punctures.

Chalkeye Stanyer, owner of the *Green Nugget,* was sorry to lose his best faro-dealer for such a length of time, but became wildly enthusiastic when he learned the reason for the absence. Chalkeye, a good showman, made the most of the situation. He advertised widely, by home-made posters and word-of-mouth, that a great work of art would be unveiled in the *Green Nugget* on the evening of May 10th. Everyone was invited to this cultural event, and the first rounds of drinks would be on the house.

The *Green Nugget* was crowded to the swinging doors on the night of the gala unveiling. A hush settled over the mob as Lady Eloise, wrapped in a flowing robe, made her entrance and strode to a small platform, specially erected for the purpose. A large lamp hung low over the lady's head as she stood on the little stage. All other lamps in the saloon were turned out. The professor at the tinny piano played a sailor's chanty, softly. Slowly, with a fine sense of drama, the Lady Eloise removed the robe and let it fall to her feet. She wore a plain black evening gown, neck-high in front, but practically backless.

She turned suddenly and, under the glare of the single lamp, the great clipper-ship, sails proudly unfurled, smote the audience a mighty wallop of mixed emotion. A great cheer went up, followed by prolonged whistles and applause, interspersed with numerous gun-shots fired at the ceiling.

Chalkeye Stanyer jumped to the platform and smilingly held up a hand for silence. "Gents," he said, "nothin' ain't too good for patrons of th' *Green Nugget;* this proves it, don't it?"

Another round of applause, mingled with less genteel expressions of hearty agreement.

"But wait. The best is yet to come. Look!" He pointed to the Lady Eloise. "Watch that pitcher move."

As the Lady Eloise shook her great frame, the picture came to life. The doves in the bright blue sky fluttered their wings; the pink and white clouds swelled and puffed; the white-topped waves in the water undulated menacingly, while the sails of the clipper spread and swelled until it looked like the sleek vessel might sail right off its owner's back. What a spectacle! The crowd howled in glee. No masterpiece of art had ever received such an ovation. Culture and civilization had arrived in San Francisco, ever to remain.

Blewberry Briggs, for once, knew artistic triumph. He had planted the seed of art-appreciation in a rowdy community.

However, this tradition of true art appreciation in San Francisco had to be fed by other, if lesser, works of art, as time went on. Lady Eloise, despite her undoubted value as a cultural project, was given a "ticket of leave" from 'Frisco shortly after the unveiling. Caught in the act of dealing the Mayor a few sour cards, she was hastily banished from the growing city.

THE LADY ELOISE next appeared in Downie Flat, a hell-roaring mining-camp up near the headwaters of Yuba's north fork. Then she made a stand in Galena Hill. Camptonville was next to be treated to the great vision of the clipper-ship on the faro-dealer's huge back.

The lady and the ship were a great success, wherever they went; money and appreciation were hers for the taking. Even so, she could not resist working in a crooked play, every now and then. With her it was a habit. Keeny Simpson, an honest miner, resented losing money on a rigged play, and told the lady so one night, in *Grady's Saloon.*

"You accusin' me of cheatin', Mister?" asked Lady Eloise.

"I sure as hell am, ma'am," answered Keeny, in a gentlemanly manner;

"you're th' crookedest witch I ever see!"

"Don't you call me a witch, you little scrub," screamed Eloise. She shot out one powerful arm and grabbed Keeny by the throat. The crowd, standing behind the lady's chair, were delighted. Never before had the clipper demonstrated such manueverability; it almost flew from the water.

Keeny Simpson, in self protection, brought up his left fist and hit the lady on the jaw. She fell backward, holding fast to Keeny. Both rolled on the floor on a short catch-as-catch-can interval, during which Keeny sank his teeth deep into the lady's back. With a howl of pain, she jumped from the floor as quickly as her two-hundred pounds would permit.

Keeny was up in a flash, and made for the back door. Usually, this door stood wide open. Tonight, it was locked shut. In his haste, by the time Keeny found out this physical fact, it was too late. He banged into the door, then caromed off the side wall and went down in a limp heap.

When Keeny awakened, the next morning, he learned he was under arrest.

"What's th' charge?" asked Keeny, reasonably.

"Bitin' a lady," said the deputy.

"It was in self-defense," said Keeny.

"Trial comes up this afternoon," said the lawman, shrugging his shoulders. "Wan' that bandage on yer head changed? It's kind of bloody."

"Never mind that," said Keeny. "Go get Lawyer Peabody, sober him up, an' tell him I want to see him."

That afternoon, before an overflow crowd in the makeshift courtroom, Jerome Peabody, suddenly sobered, was present to defend his client. Keeny smiled happily when he saw him.

"This here court will come to order!" yelled the bailiff.

Card Evans, chosen judge for the event, took his place and rapped for quiet. "This here is th' case of Lady Eloise Murphy who accuses one Keeny Simpson of—er—mayhemp. That is, to wit, said Keeny did bite this here lady."

Judge Evans turned to the plaintiff. "Where did this here—er—mayhemp take place? On what part of your body, that is?"

Lady Eloise came forward and took off her robe. Dressed in her favorite low-backed evening gown, the clipper-tattoo was at once startingly visible to all. The lady pointed to the set of obvious teethmarks on her back.

Judge Evans studied the picture for a time, then said, "Looks like Keeny bit this lady in the stern, below decks."

After a short wrangle by all hands, it was agreed by Judge, jury and attorneys for both sides that the teethmarks were definitely in the stern of the clipper-ship, and slightly below decks.

After the lady, herself, had testified, she was followed by many reluctant witnesses. They were Keeny's friends, but were sworn to tell the truth; they admitted they saw Keeny bite the lady in the stern, below decks.

Finally, Lawyer Peabody called his client to the stand. "I will now prove, your honor, that Keeny Simpson is an innocent man. Them teethmarks show upper and lowers. Now, Keeny, open yore big mouth."

Keeny opened his mouth wide and turned his head slowly for one and all to observe. He didn't have a tooth in his head.

"Case dismissed!" shouted the Judge, over the hubbub that arose.

Later, in Lawyer Peabody's office, he handed Keeny back his false teeth and collected his just fee.

The Lady Eloise, feeling the law had handed her a raw deal, went from bad to worse. A few years later, while helping two men cronies hold up a bank in Stockton, she was shot to death. The Stockton coroner, in his official report, stated that two bullets had entered the lady's body in the back—right through the prow of a tattooed clipper-ship.

★

Only one man in town could possibly help Sheriff Chad Oliver — young Johnny Parsons, now in jail for rustling. And everyone said that Johnny was a killer in the making, a thoroughly bad kid, just waiting for a chance to prove it.

The Sheriff Stakes His Life

by Ford Clark

SHERIFF OLIVER sat on a stool in Ma Ashbey's eating-place, having a piece of her deep-pan, open-faced apple pie, feeling grateful for being out of the hot afternoon sun. He felt a hot blast of air at his back and knew someone had quietly opened the front door. He looked up slightly, glancing in the mirror that faced the counter. Bear Wilson came through the door, walked past him without a word, and went to the end of the counter where he sat down, his ever-present shotgun cradled in the crock of his left arm. He looked steadily at the sheriff, his almost-colorless grey eyes holding no expression. Duke's other gunman came in; a slight nervous man with twin guns, who looked quickly about and then perched halfway down the counter on the other side of the sheriff. Then Duke came slowly through the doorway and sat down beside Chad Oliver. He nodded pleasantly to Ma behind the counter, but she took one look at the smiling, handsome gunman and scurried out back.

The Duke grinned at the sheriff. "Looks like she must have knowed I want to talk to you private, Sheriff."

Oliver turned toward the dark-haired man, as if to be able to talk easier, the motion freeing his gun-arm from the overhang on the counter. "That's right interesting, Duke, 'cause I've been wanting to talk to you."

The Duke smiled. "Well, now, seems like we're goin' to get along real well. Let's start things off by me askin' you a favor, Sheriff. There's a local kid you got in jail on some no-account charge of rustling a few cows. Now I'd consider it as a personal favor if you'd let him out." The Duke turned his head and looked at his men. "Ain't that right, boys?"

The nervous gunslinger to the right of the sheriff smiled mirthlessly, showing a row of crooked, yellow teeth. Bear Wilson, on the other side of the sheriff, just sat there, the twin muzzles of his shotgun pointing at the boards underneath the sheriff's stool.

Oliver picked his words with care. "I know the kid you mean, Duke; his name is Johnny Parsons, and he's a little wild. But not mean yet, Duke. You leave him be and he may straighten around."

Duke smiled. "Sheriff, when that kid was a youngster, I gave him his first lesson with an old Navy colt. Now I understand he's growed up old enough to shave once a week, and

draws a fast gun. That's enough for me. I only been back in town a week, Sheriff, and I don't want no trouble." The Duke smiled with everything but his eyes. "I want that kid out of jail, Sheriff."

Oliver heard the nervous gunslinger to his right get to his feet. The sheriff sat there; no trouble, the Duke had said. They'd been there a week and there hadn't been any trouble. Oliver thought of the Wells Fargo stage held up last Tuesday and the coach-guard killed by one of the three holdup men. He thought of the mutilated body of the young Mexican girl they had found that Friday down by the stream that cut in back of town. The sheriff remembered the way the girl's mother had screamed when they brought home her daughter. Oliver thought of these things and stubbornly said what he'd been going to say when the Duke first walked in, said it knowing what a foolish things he was doing.

"Duke, I'm giving you till sundown tomorrow to get out of Plainsville."

The nervous gunslinger, already on his feet, mouthed a curse and moved his slight, pale hands toward leather.

The sheriff's words cut through the building tension like a .44 slug cutting through air. "Duke, you got me outgunned, but I can beat anyone here to the first shot; I'll give you one guess who I'll take with me."

Oliver knew that the Duke was measuring the short distance between them; the Duke knew he was as good as dead if the sheriff could get away just one snap shot.

And the Duke was laughing. "We'll see you tomorrow, Sheriff, out in the open." He backed out through the open doorway. "Go ahead, Sheriff; try and get someone to help you out, that's what you got on your mind. Well I know these little one-horse towns; they'll say it's none of their business, and you'll have to go it alone."

The Duke was laughing as his two watchdogs filed slowly out. The yellow-toothed bandy was grinning at the sheriff like a coyote that saw a piece of meat; the Bear went by the sheriff without a glance, as if he considered Oliver a man already dead.

The lawman watched the three guntoughs ride out of town. He stood there in the hot sun, knowing that what the Duke said was true; he couldn't expect any help from the townspeople. But it wasn't their fault; they were storekeepers, not gunhands. Chad Oliver set his jaw stubbornly. All right, he was the law here, and he'd let Johnny Parsons out of jail. But maybe not quite the way the Duke was counting on...

THE SHERIFF unlocked the door to Johnny's cell and handed the kid his short-barrelled .45. The kid jacked the sixgun open, loaded five of its cylinders and set the hammer down softly on the empty chamber. The kid's grin was a little crooked as he leathered the gun. "One thing I want to get straight, Sheriff. I've rightly agreed to help you out in this rukus your going to have with the Duke tomorrow in exchange for you dropping that rustling matter. But making me a deputy..." the kid's grin grew broader, "I sure don't understand that."

Chad Oliver threw the kid a dep-

uty's badge. "We're going to do this up legally, Johnny. I figure yours is the only gun in Plainsville that's fast enough to help; and if I got to make you a deputy to keep the law here, why I'll do it."

The kid's eyes turned bitter cold. "The folk around here aren't going to take kindly to your making my sort a deputy."

Oliver stuck out his jaw. "You let me worry about that."

Chad turned to open the door, his back prickling between the shoulder-blades where the kid could pump a bullet if he had a mind to.

The kid's voice stopped him. "Just one question, Sheriff."

"What's that Johnny?"

"How come you figure you can trust me?"

Oliver slowly shook his head. "Some things a man can't rightly put into words. This is a second chance for you, Johnny, if you can only see it. And if there ain't enough good in people like you to make good when they got the chance, why it sure seems like my job just wouldn't be worth the trouble."

The kid's eyes were still bitter-cold. "Well, you're sure as hell the first one that's ever believed any good of me."

There didn't seem to be an answer to that, so the sheriff merely turned and headed out the doorway. He got two steps out onto the boardwalk and a scream rent the air.

"Sheriff, look out! Young Parsons has broke jail; he's right behind you!"

Oliver saw Mrs. Tawillager peering out from behind a cracker barrel in front of the feed store next door. The sheriff looked at her solemnly. "You can come out from there, ma'am; I let young Johnny out."

Mrs. Tawillager came out from behind the cracker barrel with an indignant twitch of her petticoats. "Chad Oliver, what do you mean letting this murderer out of jail?"

The usual stern-faced sheriff had a hard time keeping a grin off his face. "He ain't no murderer, Mrs. Tawillager; he just stole some of your husband's cows. And, ma'am, I got those cows back 'fore Johnny even had time to run any fat off 'em. Anyway, I figure on having a little trouble and the kid's going to lend a hand."

Mrs. Tawillager's mouth dropped open. Her eyes blazed with anger. "Wait till my husband hears about this!"

Oliver walked over to the hitching rail and unlooped the reins of his big sorrel. He looked at Mrs. Tawillager and his voice had a cool depth to it. "I got enough on my mind without having trouble with your husband and the rest of the town's menfolk. I haven't asked for help; all I want is to be able to do my job without being bothered. But if your man has a mind to try throwing a hackamore over the kid, we'll be at my place."

The sheriff waved Johnny grimly up on saddle and then led the way out of town, conscious of Mrs. Tawillager already making her way across the dusty street, in search of her hot-tempered husband.

SIX HOURS after the sheriff and the kid rode out of town, Al Tawillager made his play. Oliver had gone to bed early, deliberately closing

his mind to the events of the day and falling asleep almost instantly. He woke up with a gun-barrel pressed against his throat. "Don't move Sheriff, and you won't be hurt; we just came for the kid."

Chad Oliver squinted up into the soft moonlit room and saw Al Tawillager bending over him with a gun. He could hear sounds of other men moving around the room, one letting out a muttered curse as he tripped over a chair.

"Dang it," he said, "someone find a light."

Chad stole a quick glance at the bedpost by his head, and saw that they had taken his gun-belt. Someone fumbled at the lamp on the table next to the bed. The sheriff took a deep breath and kicked out, catching the underside of the table and driving it back into the man bending over the lamp. The man let out a surprised yelp, and went over with the table on top of him.

Al Tawillager instinctively pulled his gun over in the direction of the sound; the sheriff reached behind his head, grabbed his pillow, and swung it at Tawillager's gunhand. The six-gun jarred off with a loud bellow, the sheriff going over the end of the bed in a long dive toward the Sharps rifle he knew was on pegs in the far wall. Then he had the rifle, and was falling behind his battered chest of drawers in one motion. The sound of him jacking a shell into the chamber of the Sharps quieted the room like it was a tomb.

Finally a voice came hesitantly from the far side. "Sheriff? This is Al Tawillager. I swear I didn't aim to fire just now. We don't want no gunplay, Chad. Just tell us where the boy is, so we can lock him up; that's all we want."

Oliver thumbed back the hammer of the Sharps and there was a great amount of scurrying on the other side of the room.

Tawillager's voice came out of the darkness with a squeak in it. "Did you hear me, Sheriff?"

The sheriff grinned a little in the darkness. "Sure, I heard you, Al. I figured you might try this, so I had Johnny sleep in my line-camp. Lucky you came here and not there; the kid's not as old as I am, and don't sleep as sound. He probably would have greeted you with a .45 in each hand."

There was a calm voice from the head of the bed that Chad recognized as George Granger, the livery man. "Chad, if you don't mind, I'd like to holster this gun and walk out of here. This has been a dang fool stunt, and right now I can't figure out why I came."

Tawillager's voice came angrily from the other side of the room. "You came out here for the same reason we all did. Just because the sheriff's dumb enough to get himself killed in a gunfight with the Duke doesn't mean he has the right to turn loose another potential killer like that Johnny Parsons."

The Sheriff's drawl had an under current of anger in it. "Al, despite all their orneriness, I've always believed that most folks were all right deep down. But the way you've acted over this business about the Duke, has made me feel plumb crazy. I need the kid's gun, sure; but I also did it cause I figure that kid deserves a second chance."

Tawillager's voice came sympathetically out of the darkness. "That's real noble thinking, Sheriff. But I'm warning you: when the time comes, the kid will gun you down without a thought. You can't change nineteen years of livin' in one day."

Oliver stayed grimly silent. Something flew by his head, out the open door and lit in the dust outside. It was a gun. As if by agreement, the other three men followed Tawillager's lead and tossed out their Colts.

They filed out and mounted up, Tawillager being the only one to meet the sheriff's gaze. "You going to take us in on account of this, Chad?"

Oliver motioned with the Sharps. "Get out of here 'fore I change my mind."

Tawillager opened his mouth as if to say something and then closed it; he wheeled his roan out of the yard, and led the other riders toward town.

As the sheriff started in the house, he thought he saw a deeper patch of blackness in the shadows that bordered the sides of the bunkhouse. A part of the shadows moved, as if a rider and horse might be standing there watching what had happened. Then Oliver took a closer look, and the black patch was gone. He went into the house figuring the western moon was playing tricks on his eyesight...

GEORGE BRANGER came out the next morning to tell Chad that Duke and his men had just ridden into town. An hour later Chad Oliver and Johnny Parsons were walking their horses up Plainsville's only main street.

The kid grinned. "No one's outdoors today, Sheriff. I wonder why."

Oliver motioned silently toward the three figures lounging in front of the hotel some two hundred yards down the street. The kid tersely pulled his Colt and then let it drop gently back into leather. "Well, let's get on with it."

The sheriff nodded and started up the street, the old, familiar pattern started to set in his mind. He watched the three men fan out in front of him. It was as if they were moving in slow motion, the scene sharp and clear in Oliver's mind.

Chad figured on going for the Bear first. Duke was probably the best shot of the three, and the nervous gunslinger probably the fastest and the most likely to draw first; but the Bear had that shotgun. If he ever got it unlimbered and in action, the battle would be over before it started. Oliver watched the men's shoulders; twenty years of experience as a peace-officer had taught him that there was the first motion you could see when they drew. But he expected a little parlay first—a little talk in which the Kid would make up his mind which way to throw his lead.

The sheriff knew that whichever way the kid decided, there was a good chance of stopping a slug. But he was as tense over what the kid's decision was going to be as he was about the Duke's gunslingers. This was the moment he expected to find out if he'd been a dang fool about people, a dang fool about the way he'd tried to do his job.

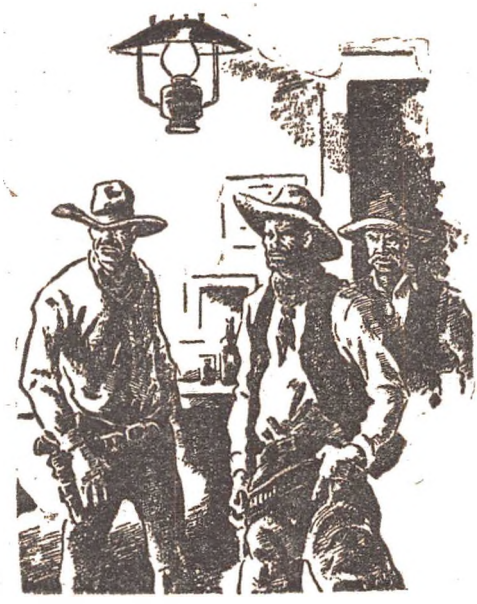
The nervous gunslinger went for his gun. A well of frustration hit Oliver as he and the kid went for their Colts. The kid hadn't made up his own mind; it had been made up for him. It was fight now on the sheriff's side or get gunned down. The nervous bandy got off a wild, snap shot, trying to draw fire while Duke and the Bear went for the surer shot.

Oliver took a shot at Bear, missed; then, as the big man brought his buckshot-loaded shotgun to bear, the sheriff nailed him with the second pull of the trigger. The Bear stood twenty feet away, his huge shoulders hunched over, his expressionless grey eyes looking directly at Oliver. The big man held the heavy shotgun away from his body in one hand, as if it were a toy. He had the gun centered on the sheriff's middle, knowing he was hit bad, trying to take his time for one, good shot. He tried to pull the trigger but only succeeded in dropping to one knee. Then his other leg buckled so that he was kneeling in the dust of the street, still looking at the sheriff. He was still trying to pull the twin triggers of the shotgun as he fell on his face and lay still.

A moment later, Sheriff Oliver was down in the dirt with him, a bullet from Duke's .45 deep in the muscles of his right shoulder. He couldn't keep his own gun up, finally having to brace it with his other hand. The front sight of the sixgun momentarily wavered across the figure of the nervous

bandy, already hurt by one of the kid's slugs. The sheriff got off his last shot of the fight; the heavy slug caught the gunslinger just below the neck.

Things started getting a little fuzzy after that, the sheriff being only dimly aware of crawling the few yards that separated him from one of the street's horse troughs. He flopped there, reaching from behind the protection of the heavy wood to cup some water and throw it on his face. When his eyes cleared, he stared through the pain of his shoulder at the figures in the street. The Duke's boys were down and not moving; the wind off the street blowing the edges of their clothing back and forth.



OLIVER saw Duke up the street. He was still on his feet, apparently unhurt; half crouching behind the protection of a wagon. Johnny was directly across the street from the sheriff, not more than thirty feet away.

The Duke's voice came drifting down the silent street. "Hey you, behind the building over there; you're the Parsons kid, ain't you?"

Oliver watched the kid glance over in his direction and nervously shift the gun in his hand. The Duke evidently took the kid's silence as an answer, because his voice got more confident.

"Hey kid, your kinda fighting on the wrong side, ain't you? This is the old Duke, remember?"

The sheriff caught the uncertainty in the kid's voice. "Look, Duke; your man opened fire first."

The Duke laughed. "Well, now, seems we were a little hasty. Maybe a little talk, and it would have been four against one instead of three against two."

Chad Oliver sat in the shade of the water trough, trying to get his handkerchief out of his hip pocket so he could press it against his wound, listening to the Duke talk, trying not to lose consciousness. The sheriff watched the kid grow more and more nervous with indecision and knew there wasn't a thing he could do. He tried to shift his weight away from his injured side and only succeeded in getting his head part way out into the hot sun. The heat made him sick and he pulled back into the shade. But the bleeding itself had stopped, and Oliver knew that with a little luck he'd be all right. He missed the tail end of the talk going on between the kid and Duke, and then suddenly wished he hadn't.

Johnny was dashing across the street and falling behind the protection of the trough. Chad watched numbly as the kid rubbed the back of his neck and face with a sweaty sleeve. "Sheriff, what would you think if I hooked up with the Duke?"

Oliver sat there, knowing that the next sentence would be for his life. He knew the Duke, knew that the dark-haired killer would pump another shell in him as the kid and he rode out of town. The kid wasn't the kind to do things that way, but it would be too late then. But Chad could only shake his head. "I can only say I figured on you doing the right thing. I still feel that way. That's my piece; talk isn't going to change anything."

A FUNNY look came over the kid's face. He jacked open his Colt and emptied the cylinders of their spent shells. He loaded the gun, a grin starting to break through on his face. "You don't have to say anything more, Sheriff. I was there the night Tawillager broke in your place. I heard the shooting and came down for a look-see. I remember how you stuck up for me, and made up my mind that as long as you felt that way, I'd be just dumb enough to string along for the ride."

The grin was clear across Johnny's face. "You stay right here, Sheriff; I'll be right back."

The kid stood up in plain sight of the Duke's gun and started across the street. The Duke didn't have to take a second look to know what the kid's decision had been. The outlaw let the kid get halfway across the street and then braced his gun on the top of the wagon.

Johnny dove sideways, fanning his Colt. He started to the Duke's right, sending the heavy .45 slugs into the wood of the wagon, working across to the Duke's right, sending the heavy .45 slugs into the wood of the wagon, working across to the Duke's left. The bullets tore into the wood where the Duke's chest would be behind the boards, the kid emptying his gun, gambling everything that the .45 could punch through.

The sheriff heard the sound of Johnny's gun-hammer striking a spent shell and gripped the sides of the water trough with a desperate grip as he watched the wagon the Duke was behind. A hand came over the edge of the boards. Another hand, this one holding a gun. The Duke pulled himself up over the edge of the wagon. Oliver's eyes twisted back to the sight of Johnny standing wide-legged in the middle of the street.

The Duke raised his gun-hand and Oliver had to fight the temptation to shut his eyes. Chad tried to crawl toward his own six-gun, knowing he'd never make it. He stopped. The Duke wasn't trying for the kid; he was crawling along the bottom of the wagon, reaching out toward the team's reins. Then he had them in one hand and was trying to get up on the seat. He wavered there a moment, then fell into the dirt of the street. Oliver watched the kid turn and walk back.

"Come on, Sheriff, we'll get you to the doc."

There was a voice at the sheriff's elbow. "Here, let me help."

Chad and Johnny Parsons turned and looked at Tawillager as he bent over the sheriff with a piece of cloth to stem the slight bleeding. Tawillager met their eyes without flinching. "I just took care of the man they had holding their horses. I know it wasn't much, but it's the first step in seeing that this town makes up for the wrongs we've done."

Oliver felt himself drowsily closing his eyes, forcing them open just in time to see Al Tawillager and Johnny

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It had been brought home to Ed Slocum with the force of a pile-driver. Hitting one's flesh and blood was akin to murder. But Uncle Dode played on this one weakness, and it seemed certain to come between Ed and Elly Mae. And the only one who could right the situation was Truthful Annie.

NEVER HIT YOUR KINFOLKS

by Will O. Grove

ED SLOCUM was an impressionable boy. At a church picnic, when he was barely into his teens, he bloodied his cousin Ralph's nose in a fist fight over Elly Mae Simpson. Grandpa Jenks shook a long finger at him. "Boy," warned the old man, "never lift your hand against your own flesh and blood kin. It ain't noways natural. Nothin' but trouble can ever come of such doings."

When Ed got home from the picnic, he learned that his Pop had fallen to his death while patching the barn roof. He remembered what the old man had told him. From then on he was mighty careful not to raise his hand against anybody who was a blood relative to him.

Ed was a strapping young man in his twenties when Dode Slocum, his dead daddy's no-account brother, came calling on him at the family farm.

"Ed," announced Dode, after shaking hands with him, "I just done me a seven-year hitch in State's Prison, and I'm plumb tuckered. Years is creepin' up on me, boy, sideways and lengthways together. I need a rest. I figure to visit with you and your mom, here on the farm, till I can get me some strength back."

Ed stuck a wheatstraw in his teeth and inspected his Uncle Dode with a frown. Dode was a tall, hunch-shouldered man with a slinky walk. His face was pocked, and had a vicious cast to it. Dode never spoke without smiling. But his smile stayed on the surface; there wasn't any depth to it.

Ed looked him over and felt his emotions pull him two ways as he faced the problem.

"Uncle Dode," he said, "you're my own flesh and blood. If it was only me, there'd be no question about it. But I got Ma to think of. You and her never hit it off together worth shucks. I ain't sure you two could get along under the same roof."

Dode's black eyes thinned down a trifle, but he kept that smiling mask on his pock-marked face. "Ed," he said, "you leave Annie to me. I know your mother never set much store by me. But I ain't the same Dode Slocum that went off to State's Prison seven years ago. I'm changed, Ed. And all for the better. I'll have your ma eating out of my hand, once she sees the change in me."

At that moment a door slammed, back at the house, and a strident female voice struck at Dode like a whiplash. "Just you turn around and get on out of here, Dode Slocum. Scat, now. This is no roosting place for broken-down convicts."

Ed and his uncle looked at the woman without surprise, for this was old Annie Slocum, Truthful Annie Slocum, Ed's widowed mother, whose scathing, uncompromising tongue was famous throughout the valley. Annie Slocum always said exactly what she thought, without any trimmings, and those who had nothing to hide found the old woman's forthrightly honest tongue highly amusing. Others were not so fond of Ed's mother.

Dode Slocum, for instance.

"Now, Annie," he placated, smiling toothily at her, "you ain't changed a bit. Seven years, and still you're calling a spade a spade, like always. I ask you, is that a proper welcome-home for your dead husband's own flesh-and-blood brother? Charley'd turn in his grave, was he to—"

"Charley'd back me up all the way," Truthful Annie Slocum cut in bluntly. "Charley knew a no-good man when he saw one." The woman leaned forward a little, eyeing Dode with bleak distaste. "My nose tells me you've been drinking. Haven't changed a bit yourself, have you?"

"Shush," Dode grinned foxily. "You ain't goin' to begrudge a man a drink to celebrate his hard-earned freedom, now, are you, Annie?"

"Earned!" scoffed Annie. "As I understand it, Dode Slocum, you held a gun on the others while they sweated with pick and shovel. A Judas, ready to shoot down your own kind in cold blood, to save your thieving hands from a few blisters. Don't try to twist the truth around me, Dode Slocum. Others may fall for that glib tongue, but I know you for what you are. Scat, now. Get along with you."

DODE SLOCUM'S black eyes gleamed with fierce hatred of the painfully forthright old woman. But still that smile stayed on the pocked features. And Dode's voice was whining.

"Now, you ain't that hard, really. You ain't serious, Annie." He sent a pleading glance in young Ed's direction. "Speak to her, boy. She don't know what she's doing. It ain't natural for folks to turn out their own flesh-and-blood this here way. Ain't decent."

"You're no blood of mine, Dode Slo-

cum," said Truthful Annie. "I married your brother, but there's none of the Slocum blood in my veins. And looking at you, I'm happy to say it."

The black eyes gleamed with craft as Dode retorted; "Maybe you ain't my blood kin, Annie. But the boy is." And he turned the full weight of his glance, and of those pregnant words, upon young Ed. "How about that, son?" he said softly. "You figuring to turn your own flesh away from your door, are you?"

The white mark of fear crept into Ed Slocum's brown-burnt cheeks. He stared at the ground, swallowing hard as he saw Dode's meaning.

"Why, now, I don't rightly know," he said numbly. "I ain't quite certain just what I'd ought to do, Uncle Dode."

Dode Slocum's eyes narrowed. "If I was in your shoes, boy," he said softly, "I figure I'd bend over backwards to be nice to my kinfolks. You ain't forgetting how you fought your cousin Ralph, and drawed blood out of him, causing the untimely death of your daddy, now, are you?"

Ed Slocum stood there, white as a sheet. Truthful Annie watched her son's spirit swiftly, silently crumble. She let loose a stream of bitter invective against Dode. "You get off this land, Dode Slocum. Coming around here scaring the poor boy to death with that superstitious prattle. Ain't a particle of sense to a wagon load of such talk. Ed, don't you pay him any mind, hear me?"

"Shucks, Ma," Ed groaned. "He just might be right, though."

"Durn tootin' I'm right," Dode chuckled happily, and grinned triumphantly toward the frustrated old woman. Truthful Annie reached to the ground for a stick and brandished it at him.

Ed caught her arm in one work-hardened hand and yanked the stick away from her with the other.

"Don't, Ma," he muttered. "Don't go for to hit Dode. It scares me somethin' awful. I'm rememberin' poor Pa."

Truthful Annie looked wearily at him. "Your Uncle Dode's tricked you, Ed. He's worked on your one big weakness and made a fool of you. You ain't goin' to play right into his hands, boy? You ain't goin' to let him stay here?"

Ed Slocum looked at Dode's crafty, tense face, pocked and vicious. He looked at his mother, who was staring bitterly at him. He groaned and shrugged his big shoulders. "I reckon I ain't got any real choice," he said slowly. "Dode can stay for a while. I'm not turning my own flesh away from my house."

Dode Slocum grinned wolfishly at him, said, "Boy, I'm right grateful. I knowed you'd do the right thing."

Truthful Annie Slocum looked bitterly at Dode, then swung hard eyes toward her son. "Ed, you're a fool," she announced, with characteristic forthrightness. Then she went stalking into the house.

WHEN TRUTHFUL Annie Slocum made a pronouncement, it was well to listen closely to what she said, for she had a sharp eye for the kernel of truth in any situation. Ed *was* a fool for allowing his uncle Dode Slocum to move in at the farm, as he learned the very next evening, when he went calling on Elly Mae Simpson at the neighboring farm.

He found Elly Mae taking the cool of the evening on the porch of the Simpson's big white farm house, along with her father and mother.

Ordinarily, the old folks would go inside when they saw Ed walking up the long lane, but this night they didn't budge from their rockers. And as he went up the steps, Ed noticed that Harvey Simpson's red face was clouded with brittle emotions.

"Ed," Harvey Simpson said bluntly, "me and Clara've always had a soft spot for you. You pitched in and made a go of the farm when your daddy passed on, while you wasn't no more than a boy in your teens. Me and Clara've noticed you makin' calf eyes

at our Elly Mae all these years, and we been happy to see which way the wind is ablowing."

"Oh, for goodness' sakes, Pa," Elly Mae blushed prettily.

Her father paid the pretty blonde girl no attention.

"You're a good boy," Harvey went on to Ed gravely. "But you got one mighty weakness, and that's this here superstitious nonsense about not striking your kinfolks. I know what lies behind it, of course, and I'm not sayin' I can't understand how you feel about it. But it won't do, son."

Ed shuffled his feet and looked straight at the older man.

"Just what're you driving at, Mr. Simpson?" he asked.

"Dode Slocum," snapped out Harvey Simpson. "He's not a particle of good, and he never will be. I understand you've let him bamboozle you into letting him move in with you over there at the farm."

"Why, I didn't have no real choice," Ed protested. "Dode's funny. There ain't no way to insult him, and like you say, I can't lift my hand against him, account of that old superstition. My Ma give him a tongue-lashing, but Dode, he just laughed at her."

"Get him out of there," said Harvey Simpson.

"Why," Ed said strangely, "there's nothing I'd like better than to see Dode leave. But I can't hardly throw him off my land personal, can I?"

"Have one of your hands throw him off," said Harvey Simpson, "if you're so afraid of bloodying your own hands on your own kin."

"That wouldn't do, neither," Ed said. "Me givin' the order would be the same as me doing the deed itself. I'm scared to move against Dode, Mr. Simpson, and I ain't ashamed to admit it, seeing what happened to my pappy."

"Ed," growled the older man, "I think you better quit calling on Elly Mae, for the time being."

"Why, Daddy!" the girl gasped, turning wide blue eyes toward him.

ED SLOCUM looked at her, so lovely, so sweet, and felt his heart thud sickly within him.

"That don't seem rightly fair," he said to her father, trying to stifle the simmering anger that was growing inside him. "I don't see what you're getting at, Mr. Simpson."

Harvey Simpson shrugged his big shoulders. "Nothing personal in this, Ed. I want you to understand that. I always liked you and I still do. But my first duty is to think of Elly Mae's welfare."

Ed nodded. "That's normal."

"You take Dode Slocum now," went on Harvey Simpson. "I've knowed Dode since the days when we was kids together. Dode never would go to school. He never could keep his thievin' hands off of other folks' property, or stay sober two days in succession, or act anyways decent. You ain't going to get him out of your house without you put the toe of your boot against his britches."

"Why, he says he just wants to get rested up, Mr. Simpson. He's just payin' us a short visit."

"You're young, boy," said Harvey Simpson. "Dode'll hang on like a leech. He'll stay just as long as you let him pull the wool over your eyes, and scare you with that superstitious bunk about not hitting your own flesh and blood. And that's why I say you better give up calling on Elly Mae."

"Why?" Ed gulped sickly.

Harvey Simpson looked at him. "I'm assuming," he said, "your attentions towards the girl are honorable, Ed. That being the case, you and Elly Mae'd be fixing to marry, sooner or later."

"Daddy, for goodness sakes!" Elly Mae protested weakly.

"Fixing to marry," went on her father, "you'd be fixing to take her home to your place. Which'd be taking my daughter to live in the same house with a no-account ex-jailbird."

"Why, shucks," Ed said. "Dode'd move out, if it come to that."

"Would he?" said Harvey Simpson. He was silent a moment. "Ed," he said

slowly, "what do you figure to be a short visit, like you say your Uncle Dode is payin' you over at your place?"

Ed frowned. "Why, I don't rightly know. Two weeks to a month, I reckon."

"All right," grunted Elly Mae's father. "We'll call it a month."

"Yes, sir?"

"A month from tonight," said the older man, "I'm goin' to pay you a visit over at your place, Ed. If Dode's pulled his freight, all well and good. If he's still parasiting onto you, I figure to send my Elly Mae back East to stay with my sister in Philadelphia. And I'll figure to keep her back there till either you or her has given up the idea of getting married."

"Why, hell and damnation," Ed protested, "that ain't rightly fair, Mr. Simpson."

"Boy, I ain't interested in what's fair, at the moment. I'm interested in protecting the happiness of my only daughter. I reckon we done all the talking we need to. Clara, let's go inside."

When the older people were safely out of earshot, Elly Mae flung herself into Ed's arms, sobbing hysterically.

"Oh, Ed, this is hateful. What are we going to do?"

Ed put his big arms around the girl, trying to soothe her. He felt very protective, in this moment. A slow anger burned in him, not at her father, who, after all, was only doing what seemed right, but at Dode, who was at the bottom of Elly Mae's unhappiness.

"I'll tell you what we're goin' to do," Ed said firmly. "We're going to get rid of Dode, pronto. I'm goin' right back home now and tell him to pull his freight off of my land. After all, Mom can't stand the sight of him, even. So just you quit crying, honey."

Elly Mae did. "Oh, Ed, you're so wonderful," she said, staring up proudly at him.

ED *FELT* wonderful, all the way home. He found Dode playing solitaire in the kitchen, and explained the situation to his pock-faced uncle. "So you've just got to leave, Uncle Dode," he finished gravely.

Dode looked at him. "Why," he said, "what's the hurry?"

"I told Elly Mae I'd speak to you tonight. She's been cryin'. Besides which, Mom ain't been none too happy having you here neither. I know that's blunt talk, Uncle Dode, but I can't help it. You got to go, and that's all there is to it."

That constant smile of Dode's was getting brittle around the corners of his thin mouth. "Suppose," he murmured, "I was to disagree with you, boy. What then?"

Ed felt the shock of it in the pit of his stomach. "Why—why, you got to agree," he spluttered. He felt a terrible itch to lay his big hands on Dode, and force the man to be reasonable with him. But Dode was his blood kin. His fear was far stronger than the anger within him. "Don't fun with me, Uncle Dode," he muttered.

"Ain't," Dode said crisply. "Ain't goin' to agree with you, neither. Ain't goin' to budge off this place. Unless," and his black eyes were laughing gently at Ed's stricken eyes now, "unless you was to get rough with your poor old uncle."

Ed stood there, breathing hard, thinking about it. His big fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. Finally, he turned, a broken, down-shouldered figure, and marched dispiritedly from the room.

Elly Mae's stricken eyes showed the depth of her disappointment. "But you shouldn't have let him out talk you," she challenged. "I'm trying to understand, Ed, but didn't you give up mighty easy? I mean, if a man really loves a gi , wouldn't he fight harder than that to keep her from being sent all the way to Philadelphia?"

"If it was anyone else," Ed groaned, "it would be different. He's my own blood, Elly Mae. He—"

"I know. And you're afraid of that silly old jinx." Her pretty mouth curled a little. "Honestly, Ed Slocum, some-

times I simply can't understand a big man like you letting a silly coincidence that happened years ago put such a 'right in you."

"It didn't happen to you," Ed reminded sickly. "It was my father who— There's no use to talk, Elly Mae. I can't lift my hand against him. I just can't, that's all."

The girl looked at him for a long moment. "I guess you think more of that old jinx than you do of me," she said. "Is that it, Ed Slocum?"

"Now, honey—"

"Don't you 'honey' me," said Elly Mae Simpson. "After all, I have some pride, if you don't. What you need is some spurring, Ed Slocum. Maybe you'd better not come calling again until you've got rid of your Uncle Dode."

"Aw—" Ed flubbered.

"Good night," said Elly Mae firmly, and stormed into the house.

●

Ed Slocum put in a wearisome month. He worked himself to exhaustion at his chores, hoping in that way to keep from thinking too much about Elly Mae who steadfastly refused to see him as long as Dode remained with him.

Dode loafed around the house, driving Truthful Annie almost wild with bitter frustration, while Ed worked the fields. Dode kept complaining of his rheumatism, whenever Truthful Annie lit into him with her fiery tongue and named him for a no-good loafer.

Sometimes, on the porch after dinner, Ed sought to reason with Dode.

"Seems like if you were a normal man," Ed told him, "with normal instincts, you'd be most ashamed to stick on here, knowing what Mom thinks of you, and knowing how you're spoiling things between me and Elly Mae."

"That so?" smiled Dode.

Ed was angered. "I figured a man would draw the line at biting the hand that feeds him," he said bluntly.

Dode chuckled nonchalantly in the teeth of the insult. "Boy," he drawled, "when you get to be my age, and when you've seen the rottenness of humankind like I have, in prison, you'll draw the line at makin' that kind of a statement. I ain't no particular good, and I know it. Likewise, I know that the rest of the world ain't much better. You might as well give up tryin' to insult me. It don't bother me any."

"You don't give a hoot about anyone else?" Ed said. "Is that it?"

"That's it," Dode grinned at him. "I had to scratch for mine all my life, boy. When I see a chance to rest on my hunkers and take things easy for a while, like I'm doing here on the farm, I figure to make the most of it. I figure a growed man ought to be realistic."

"I figure you ought to be kicked in the belly," Ed burst out in a flash of hot temper. He was thinking of his mother, who had fallen into the habit of retiring to her bedroom right after dinner, since Dode's arrival. Truthful Annie could simply not stand to be in Dode's presence for an unnecessary moment.

Dode was chuckling softly at him. "That's pretty rough talk, boy," he bantered. "I see you got your fist all knotted up there. Go ahead, hit me one, why don't you?"

Ed grumbled something under his breath, stale-mated, and fell into a brooding silence, as always after one of his hopeless verbal bouts with his uncle. He could not hit Dode, as Dode well realized.

A MONTH will pass, even such a miserable month as this one had been. Ed ticked the days off the calendar with misgivings, for he lived in the memory of Harvey Simpson's stern edict.

One night after supper, Harvey rode a big gray up the lane to Ed's house. Ed left the porch, where he'd been sitting with Dode, and walked out to greet Elly Mae's father.

Harvey Simpson's bitter eyes narrowed on Dode, who lolled comfortably in the best rocking chair, puffing away on a fat cigar.

"Still here, is he?" the older man snorted. "Well, Ed, your month's up. Elly Mae'll be on the train East tomorrow. I'm right sorry, the way things've turned out, son."

Ed just stood there, feeling sick and bitter. Dode came swaggering down off the porch, grinning that constant grin he affected. "Well, howdy, Harvey," he said, and reached one grimy hand up toward the mounted guest.

Harvey Simpson stared silently at it. "I'm not going to shake hands with you, Dode. I'm not that much of a hypocrite. I don't like you, and I don't care if you know it."

"Good for you, Harvey Simpson!" boomed a strident female voice, and Truthful Annie Slocum appeared in the doorway of the farm house. "Hear that, do you, Dode? If you had an ounce of decency in you, you'd clear out now, and give the young people their chance to be happy."

Dode Slocum glowered at Harvey Simpson, who had refused to take his proffered hand. He snarled at old Annie. "I'm gettin' a mite sick of that tongue of yours, woman. I don't need nobody to tell me how to live my life. I'm stayin' on till I've got good and rested." He flung a hard eye at Harvey Simpson. "So you and that precious daughter of yours think you're too good to associate with the likes of me, hey, Harvey?"

"Bridle that tongue, Dode!" thundered Harvey Simpson.

"I don't reckon I'm takin' orders from you," Dode snapped right back at him.

The pair exchanged bitter glances, while Ed watched numbly. He couldn't imagine what had got into Dode, all of a sudden. But then it came to him. Dode was trying to cause a ruckus with Harvey, trying to get him so angry that any further connection between Ed and Elly Mae would be out of the question.

Sure, Ed thought weirdly. *Then there won't be no more reason for me and Mom to try to pry Dode loose from this place. At least, no special reason.*

Ed's mother was staring at Dode in a silent fury. She suddenly sputtered, "I see your game, Dode Slocum. Don't you pay any mind to the no-good, Harvey. He's trying to—"

"Shut up, Annie," Dode snapped.

Truthful Annie reached down for a stone and flung it awkwardly at him. Dode ducked, stepped forward, grunting, and slapped the woman hard on the cheek.

"There," he muttered. "Guess that oughtta learn you."

Ed started toward Dode, his fist clenched hard, ready to throw a vengeful punch at the pock-faced man's curling mouth. Then he remembered the jinx, and stood in his tracks, like a statue.

Harvey Simpson stared at him. "I reckon," he said finally, "it's a good thing I come over here tonight. I never figured to see a man watch another man hit his mother, and stand by doing nothing. You ain't exactly the sort I had in mind for my son-in-law, Ed. Maybe we better just forget the whole business."

Ed stood there sickly, drinking it in. He could feel Dode's crafty pleasure, as the man's black eyes watched him. He could see sharp compassion in his mother's eyes.

TRUTHFUL Annie stepped close, took his elbow, and dragged him off to one side. There was a strange pallor in the woman's yellowish cheeks, and a fierce light glowed in the depths of her bitter eyes.

"Ed," she murmured, "there's something you ought to know. I never figured to shame you by letting you know your old mother was such a terrible sinner. But there's times when a body just has to speak out the truth."

Ed frowned. "You've always spoke out the truth, Mom. Everybody knows it ain't in you to tell a lie or to be deceitful."

"Once it was," said his mother, and

[*Turn To Page* 118]

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her eyes took on a pained, faraway expression. "What would you say, son," she said, "if I was to tell you that you wasn't really the son of your daddy?"

"Huh?" Ed said sharply.

"It's true, Ed," said Truthful Annie. "I always told myself I'd as soon die as tell you. But it's true. No need to name you the man. I sinned, Ed. Your poor dead father never did realize. But I did. It wore down on my conscience something terrible, Ed. That's how come I turned so hard to religion, and set out to drive all the lies and deceit out of my system. It was for penance. Why, Ed, what's the matter? Now, don't take on so."

Ed was chuckling softly. There was a wild glimmer in his normally placid eyes, as he looked at his mother.

"Ed," she said tersely, "are you all right?"

He grinned. "I'm glad you spoke, Mom," he said, and swung to fasten greedy eyes on Dode. "I reckon what you've just told me kind of changes matters between me and Dode. I mean to say," he laughed softly, "if I ain't the son of my pappy, I can't be any flesh and blood kin of Dode's, can I?"

Dode did not hear the soft-spoken words, but Dode saw the beacon light of vengeance lurking deep in Ed's eyes, and cringed away from him.

"Now," he whined, "don't you lay a hand on your own flesh-and-blood uncle, boy. Remember what the jinx done to your pappy. Ed, stay away from me, now. I'm warnin' you, hear me?"

Ed made a grab for him. Dode stuck a frightened hand down along one trouser leg and brought it up quickly, displaying a glinting long knife blade.

"I'm warnin' you, Ed."

Ed's foot came up, kicking Dode's wrist. The knife flew out of Dode's hand and lit in the grass a full twenty feet away. Ed's hand came around, slapping his uncle.

"That's for hitting my Mom," he said, and hit Dode in the stomach.

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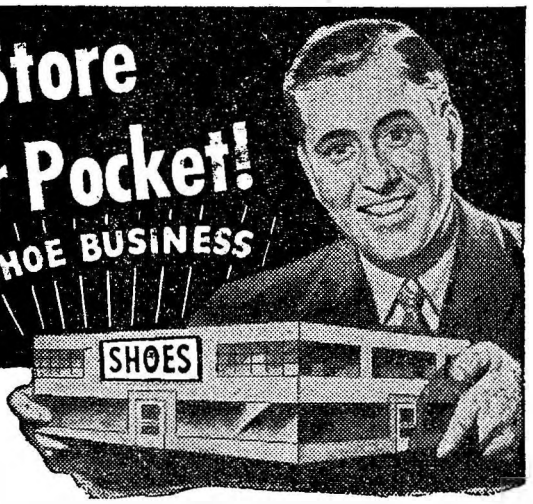

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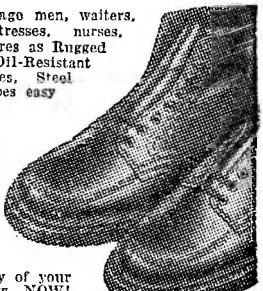

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Town .....State .....

Dode tried to kick him. Ed caught his foot, and dumped him on the seat of his trousers. Dode surged onto his feet again, raging.

The toothsome smile was gone from the vicious, pocked face now, and in its place was a murderous scowl. Dode came charging in, pummeling at Ed with both hands. Ed hit him hard with his left hand, swung with a right, and missed.

Dode closed in, brought his knee up into Ed's stomach. Ed gasped, wraping his arms around the wily Dode, who was scratching, gouging, using every dirty trick he had learned while in prison. Ed twisted Dode's arm around behind him and exerted pressure upon it.

Dode screamed with pain.

Ed steered him down the lane. "Walk," he commanded.

"Now, Ed," Dode started whining.

"Walk," Ed repeated, and brought his knee sharply up toward Dode's trousers. Dode staggered forward, cursing a streak. Ed kneed him again, and again he spurted forward. At the corral fence, Ed gave him one final kick, and said, "Keep goin', if you know what's good for you."

Dode stared at him with obvious fright, and kept going.

Harvey Simpson was slapping his legs, laughing so hard he could just manage to stay mounted, as Ed walked back toward him.

"Ed," he chuckled, "I'm much obliged to you. I wouldn't've missed it. I don't figure Dode'll be comin' back again in a hurry, and I reckon you're enough man for my Elly Mae, at that. What in sin got into you, all of a sudden?"

Ed smiled softly at Truthful Annie. "Nothin' much, Mr. Simpson," he chuckled. That would have to be a secret between him and his mother, he realized.

●

But he changed his mind, the day of the wedding. For it was on the day

NEVER HIT YOUR KINFOLKS

of the wedding that his mother made another confession. "I lied to you, Ed," she smiled doubtfully at him. "I never sinned like I told you I did, and you *are* a real Slocum. I hate a lie like I hate poison, but it was the only way I could think of to turn you loose from that superstition so you'd act up proper with Dode. I—I hope you aren't going to hold it against your old mother."

Ed looked at her fondly. "Shush, Ma, I reckon that *was* all just superstition, when you figure how I give Dode such a working over, and nothing's happened. So I'm cured of my weakness. And of course I ain't angered about it. Me and Elly Mae'll always remember it was the only lie Truthful Annie ever told that brought us back together."

He put one big arm around Elly Mae, another around the thin shoulders of his mother, smiling down at them. They both burst into tears, which proved beyond all doubt they were happy.

★

THE SHERIFF STAKES HIS LIFE

[*continued from page* 109]

Parsons shaking hands. The sheriff growled at the kid. "All right, that's enough of that. Now turn in your badge and get back in jail."

Tawillager began to sputter. "You can't do this Chad; I drop all charges."

Chad Oliver grunted. "Aw, he'll get his badge back; but first he's got to wipe the slate clean by doing his sixty days." The sheriff looked up at the kid, stubbornly, and found the kid grinning at him. And Oliver caught himself grinning back.

★

THE TRADING POST

(*continued from page 8*)

But Wacinhnuni Sungakan would soon crush others of the hated pale-face killers of women and babies. And so, a few days later, Crazy Horse—with much captured booty—joined forces with Sitting Bull, camped along the Little Big Horn River. Here were a total of one thousand eight hundred tepees strung along the banks of the river. Some four thousand warriors, their women and children, were also here—brought along to keep them from being murdered by Custer. They well knew that he would destroy them as quickly as he would the men.

OF THE MANY Chiefs present on the Little Big Horn River, there were *Tatan Kabdoka Oiyotanka* (Sitting Bull), *Wacinhnuni Sungakan* (Crazy Horse), *Pizi Ha' Yusdoka* (Chief Gall), *Non'Pa Hanyetuni* (Two Moons), *Tan'Ka Wicaso Cigala* (Little Big Man), *Pazo* (Chief Hump), and many other prominent chiefs. It was the greatest force of warriors ever assembled, in an attempt to stave off white men's destruction of their ancient hunting-grounds. But it also had one other purpose: that of destroying General Custer, killer of helpless women and children—Custer, who'd never had guts enough to attack a force of Indians as strong in numbers as he.

Custer had never in his life faced Indians in force; his fame was based on massacre of Indians with little or no power to resist. There are yet men living who can remember Custer's cowardly retreat on the *Wahsica Wakpa* (Bad Route River). There he had deserted Major Elliot, who was killed with all his men by the Sioux; Custer ran like a yellow dog.

On July 28, 1867, Custer was placed under arrest by his Department Commander and found guilty of several crimes—any of which would have meant the end of an officer's career to-

[*Turn To Page* 124]

day. He was found guilty of disregarding orders, deserting his command in hostile territory, and also was found guilty of having shot some of his own troopers for nothing more than having stopped for a drink at some stream they were crossing. He was further found guilty of having refused medical aid to his wounded men, and leaving them to die.

On January 3, 1868, an order for his arrest was issued in Leavenworth, Kansas, on a charge of murder, but this arrest was never made; the army saw to that. And so, some time later, this murderer was restored to duty in the army.

Some one in high office once said, "We deplore the destruction, and the assassination of underprivileged peoples by those who hold power in countries other than our own." Did these last four words—"other than our own"—mean that it was all right to destroy and assassinate the weaker peoples here at home? It was certainly done against the American Indians; they did not want war with the white men, but were forced by the army, and white renegades, to fight in self-defense. Even then, they fought only to protect their women and children from marauders who held no respect for womanhood or their little ones. It was Custer's system to kill all—men, women and children alike; as he would say, when you kill the lice you must also kill the nits.

It is, of course, useless to mention all that went on; it would take a lot of space to write the complete story of white men's brutality against these otherwise-kindly people, who asked only to be left alone to live in peace. And I think that even those readers who enjoy stories of violence and bloodshed would be sickened by a factual description of well-authenticated happenings.

So let us go on to the story of how Custer, the killer, was lured to his

[*Turn To Page* 126]

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death with all of his men. The trap was closing on Custer the day he rode away from Major Reno and Benteen, after ordering the men to give chase to a small band of Indians riding along the edge of timber growing near the Little Horn River. This of course, was Indian strategy—part of the trap to force Custer to split his command. It worked, and thirty minutes later Reno and Benteen were fighting for their lives against Wacinhnuni Sungakan and his fierce Oglala warriors. Farther down river, Custer stood on a high-point looking down at a seemingly-sleeping and peaceful village of some thirty teepes. What he did not know was that, the day before, there had been one thousand, eight hundred; but these, and all the children as well as most of the women, had been moved to safety in the hills south of the river. Only a few squaws were seen moving around in the camp across the Little Horn.

After watching the camp for a few minutes, Custer decided that this was to his liking; it would be easy pickings. Here he could destroy more women and helpless little ones; but had he known that throughout the timber along the river there were more than three thousand fierce Sioux and Cheyenne warriors waiting for him to make his attack, then I don't think there is any question but that he would again have run and deserted his troops. But, he didn't know. Waving his forces together, he gave the order to charge. But did he—as many would have you believe—lead his troops? No; as always, he kept to the rear, standing on the highest point above the swale down which his troops went charging. There stood Custer, surrounded by some forty of his officers and men, whom he always kept at his side for his own protection.

But no manner of protection could save him now; he had given his last order.

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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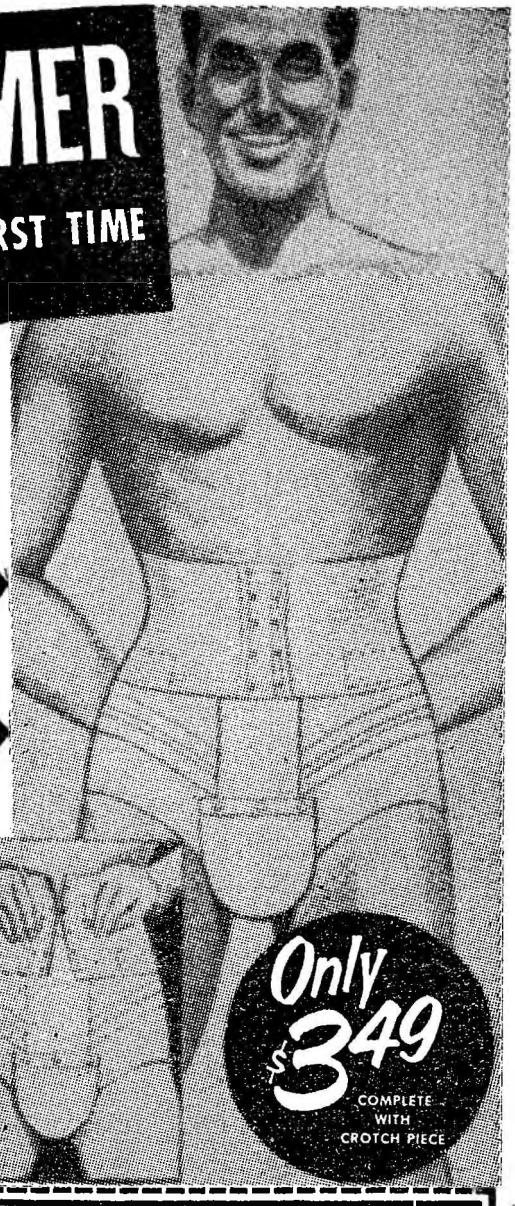

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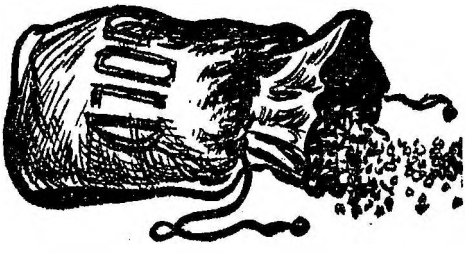
WESTERN ACTION

AS THE TROOPS neared the river timber-line, they were met by a hail of bullets and the fierce war-whoops of painted warriors streaming out from the timber, up the gulches, and over the flat—west of the hill on which stood Custer. He was caught in a trap similar to the ones he so often had set when he had surrounded small, winter-bound, peaceful villages, and ordered his troops to ride in and destroy all human life. The day of reckoning was at hand. In less than fifteen minutes on that fatal day of June 25th, 1876, Custer and his entire command died along the swale, at the top of the hill where he had been standing but a few minutes before, expecting to see his troops achieve more of his idea of glory—murder of women and children. He himself lay dead on the highest point of the battlefield, killed by his own Chief of Scouts.

Milton Brughier, half-breed Oglala Sioux, and brother to John Brughier, had fulfilled his oath to kill Custer. But he himself was killed; not by the Sioux who loved him, nor by the Cheyennes who knew him as a dear friend, but by one of Custer's men who saw him drive his long-bladed hunting-knife into the body of Custer.



What happened on the battlefield after it was over, cannot be told here in full, except that the squaws took a most hideous revenge for their dead sisters and loved ones, whom Custer had slain in the past. Bodies of the dead soldiers were stripped, and cut to ribbons by the enraged women, who were now streaming onto the battlefield from the hills across the river;

and who could blame them? They had suffered much at the hands of Custer and his troops.

Some folks will tell you that no man escaped the field of battle; I know better. There was one officer—a Captain with the Custer command—who got away. Somehow or other, he must have ridden off as the order to charge was made; anyway he got five miles up Custer creek. There he was killed—but not by the Sioux, nor by the Cheyennes. Who killed him? The War Department has stated that this officer's body has never been found. That, of course, a good many of us older men know, and today I may be the only man living who knows where his grave is located—unless some of the older Crow Indians know. But Indians, if one of their own people had killed a trooper, just didn't talk.

Herb Reckord, oldtime scout who came across the battlefield shortly after it was all over, knew; so did a trooper by the name of Ford, who was later stationed at Fort Custer on the Banks of the Big Horn River.

There had been five Crow scouts with Custer. Brughier had sent them away an hour or so before the battle, telling them they had better leave, as everybody would be killed. The five Crow scouts were *Yuhaha* (Curley), *Wasicun In' Yanha I'ye* (White Man Runs Him), *Hin Yuhan Hinsma Hanpi keeka* (Hairy Moccasin), *Tu We Iyopte* (Goes Ahead), and *Mayatanka Ska* (White Swam). Now which one of these Crows killed the officer? I would say Curley did. I knew him well, had many talks with him up till I left that part of the country, back in 1908. I also had many talks with "Old Coyote" as well as with "Bird Above", who betrayed the Sioux before they made their attack on Fort Smith near the mouth of the Big Horn Canyon.

As far as I know, all of these oldtimers have gone over the Big Divide; they can talk no more. It's nearly fifty years since last I rode by that lonely grave on Custer Creek, but should the War Department want to claim what remains of this officer, I can take them to the grave. The metal insignia on what is left of his uniform, should be there to prove his identity.

Now let us do a bit of talking about Curley. We know he was watching the battle from the higher hills to the north; he saw this Captain make his getaway. Did Curley follow and kill him? Curley said, "No, him kill himself." Well, maybe; but I and others always will believe that Curley did do away with him. Curley, had he wanted to before he died, could have told the real story; but he didn't. The secret was buried with him, so who knows?

As to graves, of both troopers and Indians, I can point out many from the Missouri river west to the Continental Divide. Many lay forgotten by man, covered by purple sage or wild rose-brush; and again, others have only grass growing over their grave. Many of the old Sioux burial-grounds are well-known to me; some of these, when found by white men, were often destroyed without respect for the dead. Forty-five years ago, I visited one where the dead warriors were laying side-by-side in a cave, high in the hills. My sincere hope is that they will never be found. Let these warriors, in all their finery, lie in unmolested peace, while their spirits ride the plains in that happier land known to the redman as the Happy Hunting Grounds.

Let the Monument, which stands on the spot where Custer fell, commemorate him as a daring and gallant hero; there are yet many among the living who know better. We know him only as a cowardly killer of men, women, and little children alike; we also know him as one who would—and did—desert his men to save his own hide. The Monument also memorializes Custer and his men as symbols of traditional love of country and devotion to duty. Was it then their duty to commit murder, in order that they could steal that which belonged to the American Indians?

★

Skin Specialist Demonstrates How To Rinse Away Your Blackheads

By CLAIRE HOFFMAN

A leading skin doctor today showed an audience of men, women and skin-troubled teenagers how to clean oily skin and shrink their enlarged pores with a 10-minute home medical treatment he has perfected. Then to the amazement of young and old, he demonstrated how you may rinse away externally caused blackheads, and dry up whiteheads and adolescent pimply skin eruptions!

Before our very eyes the doctor selected a 36-year-old woman with typically oily skin. This woman had blackheads around her nose. Enlarged pores and whiteheads visible to the naked eye. To this woman's face, the doctor applied a cream. Within moments it firmed into a plastic-like mask. Next he sprinkled her face with water, and handed her an ordinary washcloth to rinse the cream from her skin. To her utter astonishment, clinging to the washcloth, were not only grimy black streaks of dirt—but several blackheads and pus formations which has marred her beauty for years.

As we stared at the washcloth in disbelief, the doctor's assistant turned to us and said: "You have just seen what looks like a miracle. Yet, what has just been done for this woman's skin, you can do at home just as easily. But to understand how and why this medical formula acts to help clear your skin troubles, you must first knock out of your head some silly notions most people have about their complexions."

The Truth About Cosmetics

Has it ever occurred to you that you lavish more care on your face than any other part of your body . . . yet isn't that where you find the most offensive looking pimples, blackheads, blemishes and enlarged pores? So what do you do about it?

Nine out of 10 women simply don't or won't understand that if they have oily skin, blackheads, pimples or enlarged pores, they may not only have a cosmetic problem . . . but a medical problem as well.

Now why is this so? Shocking as it seems, if nature gave you either a normal or oily skin, your face is always dirty! Why? Because 24 hours a day your face is always exposed to soot, smoke, factory dirt, car exhaust, coal dust, noxious fumes and other germ-laden dirt that pours into the air. It clings to the natural oils on your skin.

Your pores become choked and clogged. Your natural oils are stopped up and harden into blackheads or pimples. They try to push out, forcing your pores to open wider and wider. Once this condition starts (especially during adolescence, when glandular disturbances make your skin extra oily) the condition usually grows worse and worse as you grow older. And when this happens . . . isn't it obvious that it may become **impossible to correct unless you start to change your complexion care immediately!**

WHAT DOES YOUR FACE REVEAL ABOUT THE COSMETIC CARE YOU USE? To many a woman, there comes a day when she honestly faces her mirror . . . and faces this shocking truth! That all the time and money she has lavished on improper cosmetic care . . . that all the creaming, greasing, smearing and squeezing have not removed her blackheads. That her face is still marred by clogged and ugly pores. That another 100 jars and bottles of inadequate preparations can never help clear up her blemished complexion, can never give her the clear-skin beauty she dreams of. To learn the incredible difference 10 minutes with a doctor's formula can do for your skin . . . read this article! ABOVE, LEFT: a typical example resulting from improper skin care. ABOVE, RIGHT: 10 minutes with a skin specialist's home medical facial described in this article may pave the way to a remarkably clearer skin.

Do This For A Clearer Skin

If you want to rid your face of ugly blackheads, enlarged pores and externally caused skin eruptions, these are the three things you must do:

First, you must soften the hardened filth and oils that may have accumulated in your pore openings, not only for days but for months! Second, you must remove that filth (but don't squeeze it out. Squeezing only forces part of the pus deeper into your skin and spreads the infection!) And third, you must try to tighten your skin with shrinking and antiseptic agents, not only for beauty . . . but to guard you against re-infection! And unless you are prepared to do all three things it's likely you will go on wasting your time and your money the rest of your life looking for "miracle cures!"

What Happens When You Apply This Doctor's 3-Way Formula!

First, to prepare your skin for treatment, we are going to soften and loosen the buried filth cemented into your pores. The scientific pore cleanser which is part one of this famous skin doctor's treatment, is unlike any other cleanser you have ever used in your life, regardless of how much you

can afford to pay. And here is how you can prove it on your skin.

Apply the doctor's scientific pore cleanser. Tissue it off! Now look at the tissue!

When you see the dirt and filth pouring out of that tissue . . . when you see the infectious filth and indescribable wastes that may have been causing your skin eruptions since adolescence . . . then and only then will you begin to understand why you need a drastic change in complexion care.

2) The second part of your doctor's treatment is a medical cream designed to get at those ugly blackheads, whiteheads and externally caused pimples which cause you so much misery.

Apply it to your face with your fingertips as you would any cream. A little thicker around the "danger area" . . . mainly around the nose, under the lips, around your eyes and cheeks.

The first 3 or 4 minutes you will feel a strong stimulation. This is the massaging action of the medical ingredients going to work on your skin. Your face will feel hot and cold. You will like it. Your face will feel refreshed. It is like a massage without irritation, bringing fresh, purifying blood to your face to draw off the poisonous wastes in your skin.

After 3 or 4 minutes this hot and cold action goes away in a wonderful relaxation of all your tense, overworked facial muscles sets in. Your pulse tends to slow down and you are so relaxed you feel a great tendency to fall asleep. In another moment, you will feel your skin getting tighter and tighter. What is happening is this. A wonderful medical absorbing agent doctors call ARGILLA is drying on your skin. It is turning the cream on your face into a firm, plastic-like mask. You get a pleasant drawing feeling, a relaxing feeling, there is a corrective action, there is an astringent action and an antiseptic action. You feel the ARGILLA drawing on the pusheads. Everything it touches it draws into itself, including the hardened oils, the dirt, the waste matter, the fatty acids, whatever filth is buried in the pores, including some of the blackhead materials, perspiration and poisons given off by the skin.

After 10 minutes rinse the mask away. Hot or cold water makes no difference. It dissolves in a second. Your skin feels clean, refreshed, sparkling, smoother! Like velvet! But wait . . . you haven't finished your first treatment yet!

Now Apply Step 3 of Your Treatment . . . The Astringent

This is not merely a perfumed alcohol that tickles your skin for a few seconds. It's medicated. It penetrates into your pore openings. Kills bacteria lurking there. And even more important . . . leaves an invisible germ-destroying film on your skin that kills germs for hours. You cannot feel it . . . you cannot see it . . . but it is there to help guard you against re-infection!

Now Look Into Skin-Analysis Magnifying Mirror You Get With Your Treatment!

Some of your blackheads should be gone with very first treatment! Look for softened pimples and whiteheads that may break or be drawn out in your next treatment or two. Look at the corners of your eyes, the corners of the nose, around your mouth, your cheekbones! See how your enlarged pores have tightened! Your skin will feel alive! And you will be amazed to see minor wrinkles gone . . . and this fresh, buoyant, youthful effect will last for hours.

Is This For "Normal" Skin, Too?

Certainly. Simply because this is a doctor's formula doesn't mean that you have to have a "sick skin" to use it. You may be a woman past 30 who has never had a really serious skin problem, but who finds herself annoyed by occasional blackheads, whiteheads, enlarged pores or periodic skin eruptions. You may be a woman who suspects that your skin is not as beautiful and as fresh-looking as it could be . . . but your cosmetic creams can't give it to you. In that case . . . we think you'll be thrilled by the sheer, smooth, silken beauty that one or two treatments can give you.

On the other hand . . . if you have an adolescent, broken-out skin, if you are a man who is troubled by blemishes or a "sandpaper skin" and you are sensible enough not to be ashamed to use a so-called "woman's treatment" in the privacy of your own home . . . or if you are a woman who has chosen to abuse her complexion with improper and inadequate cosmetic preparations . . . then this is vital.

We promise you dramatic improvement with your first 10 minute home treatment. Your magnifying mirror will show it to you, and we promise you further rapid improvement for the next 14 days. After 14 days, you will discover whether you have to keep using all or part of the treatment every day, once a week, or once a month, depending on how fast your complexion begins to clear.

Look at This Photograph — Then Look in Your Mirror!

THESE ARE THE DANGER AREAS . . . What doctors call the seborrheic areas, which produce excess dirt, oils, fatty acids, ugly blemishes and enlarged pores.

How You May Try This Skin Treatment in Your Own Home Without Risking a Penny!

The name of this 3-way doctor's formula is the Queen Helene Skin Treatment. It is named in honor of the nurse who worked at the doctor's side for 15 years while this formula was being developed. Your Queen Helene 3-way formula, enough for 42 home treatments, includes your scientific cleansing cream, your medicated mask cream and your medicated pore astringent. The cost is $3.98 . . . less than 10c a treatment. Yes, less than 10c for a skin specialist's 3-way skin and beauty treatment.

With your order, you also get a professional skin analysis enlargement mirror, at no extra charge. Follow your daily progress in your mirror

SO THAT YOU can check the impr... in your skin from day to day, fr... ment to treatment . . . you get ... sional skin-analysis enlargement ... is same type of high refractive mirr... by dermatologists.

and after each treatment. If you, Queen Helene treatment does not do for your skin everything we have led you to believe it will do, if you don't see dramatic improvement after just one 10-minute treatment, if you don't see a faster improvement each day for the next 14 days, return the unused portion. We'll thank you for trying it, and refund your full purchase price. But keep the enlargement mirror as our gift for your trouble.

But act today! The longer you wait the worse your skin is bound to get. And like any other condition, the worse it gets, the longer it takes to get well. So right now, while you're determined to help yourself, send coupon today! **Para Labs. Sales Corp., Dept. H-334 141 5th Ave., N. Y. 10**

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Plus My Free Analysis Enlargement Mirror.

I will pay postman low introductory price, plus Federal Tax and postage. If I don't see dramatic improvement in my skin after just one 10-minute treatment—if Queen Helene doesn't do for my skin everything you have led me to believe it will do, I will return unused portion for my money back. But the enlargement mirror is mine to keep anyway.

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