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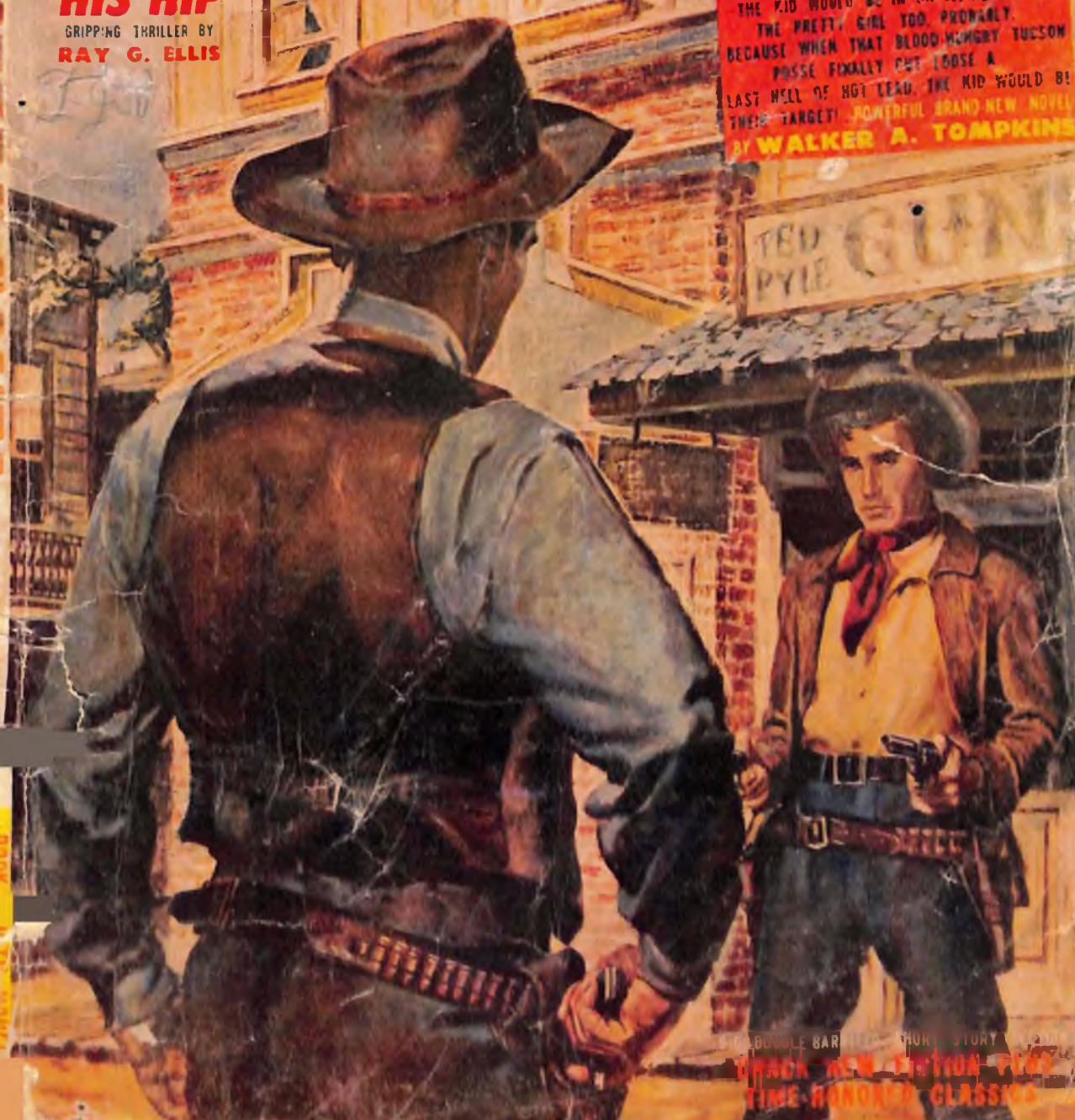
## NO GUN ON HIS HIP

GRIPPING THRILLER BY  
RAY G. ELLIS

## THE KILL

THE KID WOULD BE IN ON IT. ALL RIGHT.  
THE PRETTY GIRL TOO, PROBABLY.  
BECAUSE WHEN THAT BLOOD-HUNGRY TUCSON  
POSSE FINALLY GOT LOOSE A  
LAST HELL OF HOT LEAD, THE KID WOULD BE  
THEIR TARGET! POWERFUL BRAND-NEW NOVEL  
BY WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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# WESTERN

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★ ★ POWERFUL BRAND-NEW NOVEL ★ ★

## THE KILL

by Walter A. Tompkins

The kid would be in on the shoot-out, all right. The pretty girl too, probably. Because when that blood-hungry Tucson posse finally cut loose a last terrible hell of hot lead, the kid would be their target!

★ ★ 6 THRILL-PACKED SHORT STORIES ★ ★

**BAD YEAR**..... M. C. Ashburn 21  
No rangehog was going to push Tad Coleman around. He'd get his revenge by running off with Logan's pretty daughter.

**THE BLOODY HARPER**..... Neel M. Leams 29  
Killing easily and indiscriminately, the hell-born Harper boys enjoyed mysterious immunity from law.

**—NO GUN ON HIS HIP**..... Ray G. Ellis 34  
In their one year of marriage, Kurt Milford had told Jeannette just two lies—that he'd recently bought the ranch, and that his first wife had died of a fever.

**EXTRA RIDER**..... John Lowden 42  
He was with the 2-BAR exactly eleven days. In that time Mary Griffith was knocked flat on his back exactly seven times.

**SECRET OF THE ANEMISH HILLS**..... Norman A. Daniels 48  
If Bandido wasn't her brother, Joe Lambert reasoned, then why was Kathie the only rider the notorious outlaw never held up?

**STACKED DECK**..... C. V. Touch 54  
Jackson didn't want a deputy hid out. This backshooter he chose to handle himself.

★ ★ 5 TIME-HONORED CLASSICS ★ ★

**BRASADA CALLOWS PARTY**..... Tom W. Blackburn 58  
They'd hang a man in the morning, and mabbeso, the stranger reckoned, it would be the hellion they had in the jail, or mabbeso it would be his own neck that dragged the jump rope.

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**TINHORN TROUBLE**..... Glenn H. Wichman 66  
All Luce-Hutson had known or cared about was a green-top table, a deck of cards, and a stack of chips. It was the girl Lane wanted as his wife, who taught him how to use a gun.

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**BUSHWHACKER BEHIND A TIN-BADGE**..... Red Patterson 72  
Marshal Rufe Tudge was proud of his badge and his gun and his draw, and he didn't reckon a backshooting son of Satan could handle his job of taming the toughest, bloodiest town this side of Dodge.

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**KID WHO STARTED THE COURTHOUSE WAR**..... W. D. Overholser 81  
Let the rangehog smell gunsmoke, sally Ringo citizens clamored, but Slim Hardy figured to settle for more than fast-draw persuasion.

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**THE BOSS OF BOOTHILL**..... D. S. Newton 98  
They said the phantom killer's good luck piece was a silver token, but Johnny Eden suspected it was Mr. Colt .45.

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# THE KILL

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER

1

*Last Chance*

**T**OM CLEVENGER sat with his back to the eroded granite wall of the pocket, jaws working on the hunk of jerky Lobo DeSpane had shared with him. Funny thing, how a man would try to ease the ache in his belly even though he would be dead inside of another hour anyway, past caring about hunger.

Darkness was coming on, here at timberline on the west flank of the Cascabel Range. The posse would be creeping down on this rincon when

**HE DIDN'T WANT TO BULLET-BLAST LAWMEN. BUT HE DIDN'T CRAVE A BELLYFUL OF LAW-LEAD EITHER. . . . POWERFUL BRAND-NEW NOVEL**



He was knocked off the saddle before he could pull the trigger.

full night came. Clevenger could hear Purdum's men talking up there, behind boulders and brush clumps where they had maintained this siege all day and the night before that.

Off to Clevenger's left, around a bend of the defile where he and Lobo DeSpane were crouched at bay, he heard the horses pawing the rubble, needing water and feed. No chance to make a break for it; not with the posse ringing this fissure with waiting Winchesters and six-guns.

It beat the devil, Clevenger was thinking, how a man could be honest all his life and wind up this way, branded for a hangrope even if the posse didn't cut him down with lead when they opened fire on DeSpane.

He hadn't actually witnessed the hold-up of the Tucson stage over on the Wagon Pass road above Bonanza Bar, two days ago. Clevenger had been in camp, saddling up for DeSpane and Pablo Marteen, the half-breed, on what he thought was going to be the start of a wild mustang hunt in the Arizona foothills flanking the border.

He had heard the roar of shots on the other side of the ridge, shots which had knocked a veteran stage driver off a Concord coach. Later, when DeSpane and Marteen had showed up with a prisoner, roped and gagged, he had accepted DeSpane's story at face value. This hombre was a road agent who had just lifted a \$100,000 Ajo Copper Syndicate payroll off the Tucson stage, DeSpane had said. They had the leather pouch to prove it, an *alforja* heavy with the weight of gold specie intended for the miners at nearby Bonanza Bar diggings.

"Thing we got to do is get this hombre over to the sheriff in Ajo."

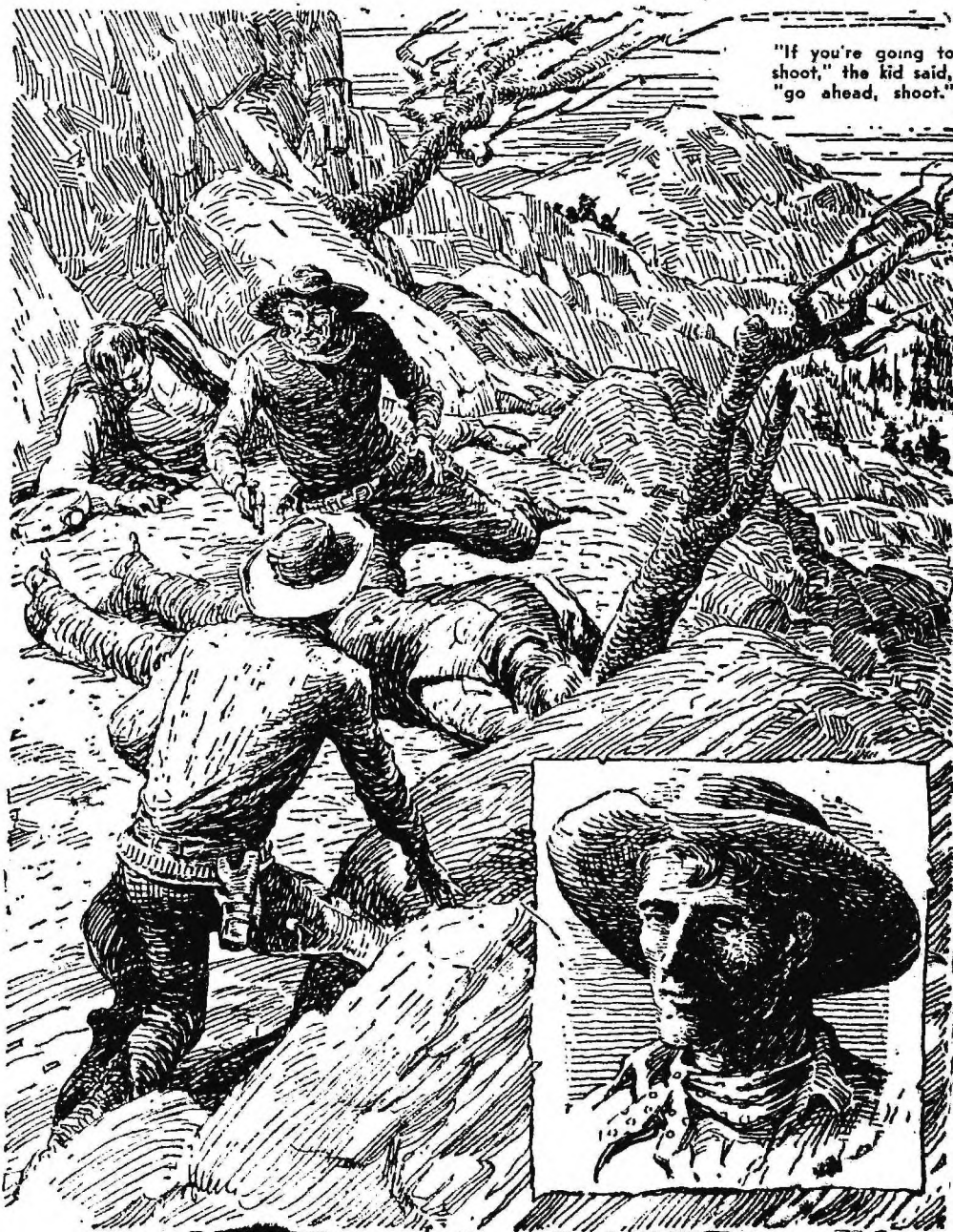
**The kid would be in on the shoot-out, all right. The pretty girl too, probably. Because when that blood-hungry Tucson posse finally cut loose a last terrible hell of hot lead, the kid would be their target!**

DeSpane had said. "That's on our way to the Cascabels where we'll be huntin' fuzztails anyhow. We caught him makin' his getaway, red-handed with the loot."

And so they had lined out across the desert with their prisoner, and even when Lobo DeSpane spotted the

dust of a body of horsemen trailing them, and identified them as members of this road agent's gang bent on rescuing their leader, Tom Clevenger had seen no reason to doubt the word of the mustanger who had given him a job.

Threading a canyon out in mid-



desert yesterday afternoon, Clevenger had stood by while DeSpane hid the payroll pouch in a quicksand *sumidero*. The pursuing riders were gaining on them then and it seemed the thing to do, to prevent the loot falling into their hands.

It wasn't until they were nearing the Cascabel foothills that their prisoner managed to work off his gag and Clevenger learned the staggering truth. DeSpane's prisoner was a Pinkerton detective, assigned to guard the payroll to its destination. DeSpane and Marteen had held up that stage... and the riders closing in on them were a miners' posse headed by Sheriff Ben Purdum of Bonanza Bar.

IT HAD BEEN around sundown yesterday when Lobo DeSpane conceded that any attempt to reach the summit and the sanctuary of Chihuahua soil would be too risky. That was when DeSpane had led the way to this rincon.

"Purdum's boys can't track us above timberline," DeSpane had said. "They'll figger we went on over the top. We can hole up an' rest our nags an' when they've passed us we can cut back to that quicksand bog and pick up our swag..."

The ruse would have worked, too, if their hostage hadn't had the guts to sacrifice his own life to give away their hideout when the posse riders were within earshot of the rincon last night...

Munching the dried meat, Clevenger kept his eyes on old DeSpane, hunkered down in the rubble on the far side of the pocket. Clevenger was young, twenty-three, he wore the brush-scarred batwing chaps, spurred cowboots and flat-crowned stetson of the drifting Texas cowhand he had been, up to the day he had had the bad luck to sign on with DeSpane as a wild-horse hunter.

DeSpane was a gray and grizzled old range wolf, crowding sixty and tough as whang. Staring at DeSpane now, Clevenger knew the old renegade intended to fight it out tonight, to die rather than be captured alive.

The two of them were alone in this gathering dusk tonight, where there

had been four this time yesterday. The posse waiting up there in the rocks didn't know that, of course...

Clevenger's raw-lidded eyes shifted from DeSpane to the sprawled corpse of the *mestizo*, Pablo Marteen. He had been lying in that grotesque position since sunrise this morning, drilled through the head by a Winchester bullet which had ricocheted off the granite wall, smashing through the canteen the 'breed had just lifted to his lips. Whoever had angled that rifle bullet into the rincon had been shooting blind.

Clevenger's gaze shifted a dozen feet to the right, to where another dead man was huddled at the foot of a dead juniper snag. Handcuffed arms encircling the dead tree where DeSpane had imprisoned him upon their arrival in this hideout yesterday.

That was the hot-lead hostage DeSpane had kidnapped on the Tucson road, to guarantee their flight to Mexican soil. The Pinkerton detective whose name was still a mystery to them.

Purdum's posse had been riding out to meet the incoming stage yesterday, which accounted for the rapidity with which they had gotten on DeSpane's trail. The sheriff's riders were only a mile behind when DeSpane had given the order to hole up in this rincon at timberline; and by then Tom Clevenger had had no choice but to string along with the others.

Clevenger had crouched in breath-held suspense while the Bonanza Bar manhunters bracketed this defile, assuming their quarry had made it over the divide. All that time the Pinkerton man had been chewing at his gag, unnoticed. The sheriff's men were passing them by, unaware that this rincon even existed, bent only in topping the Cascabel divide before nightfall, when the handcuffed prisoner manacled to the juniper snag had given his warning shout.

Momentary panic had caused Pablo Marteen to trigger a point-blank bullet into their hostage's skull, cutting off that shout for help. In so doing the 'breed had further advertised their hideout and had nullified the advan-

tage they had held as long as their hostage was still alive.

The Pinkerton man had died twenty-four hours ago, but the posse's answering gunfire still seemed to resound in young Tom Clevenger's ears.

There hadn't been time for Lobo DeSpane and Pablo Marteen and Tom Clevenger to reach their horses around the bend of the defile and attempt a run for it, down-grade into the timber. The spread-out posse had closed around them too fast for that, springing the jaws of their man trap.

**I**T WAS SHERIFF Ben Purdum's ultimatum, ringing loud in the twilight hush of this mountainside, that had finally tipped off Tom Clevenger how things stood:

"We got you hog-tied, DeSpane, and I reckon you know it. We got grub and water for a long siege and we can always send back to the Bar for supplies. How is it going to be?"

And Lobo DeSpane had bawled his defiance, even as his eyes were fixed on the blood gouting from his hostage's bullet-pierced forehead:

"Try to smoke us out, Sheriff, and your payroll guard will be the first one to cash in his chips. Pull out and give me and my pards the rest of the night to make it to the border, and you'll find this Pinkerton dick waitin' here healthy and frisky. I'm checkin' the bet to you."

And so the stalemate had stood throughout the endless hours of a following night and the hated torture of this day now ending. There had been plenty of time for Tom Clevenger to size up his own predicament. His fate was as hopeless as DeSpane's.

That was why, during the long hours of siege, Clevenger had refused to fire a shot in his own defense, letting DeSpane expend his and Marteen's ammunition in the desperate game of keeping Purdum's deputies pinned under cover while daylight held. What puzzled Clevenger was why DeSpane had not gunned him down in a fit of anger, long before this.

Now, with the ribbon of sky overhead turning crimson from the sun's setting, Tom Clevenger made up his mind what he had to do, even if it

meant inviting a point-blank bullet from the outlaw's gun.

Before he could frame words to voice his decision to DeSpane, Sheriff Ben Purdum's fatigue-hoarsened voice lifted from somewhere out of sight up the mountain wall, for the first time in several hours:

"Come dark, Lobo, we're closing in for the kill. This is your last chance. You giving yourself up or not?"

DeSpane hefted the big Colt .45 in his fist, the gun he had yanked out of Clevenger's holster hours before: "You ain't forgettin' that payroll messenger I'm keepin' hostage, are you, Ben?"

Purdum yelled back, "We think you've already killed him, Lobo. Else why haven't we heard him sound off that he's O. K.?"

DeSpane grinned bleakly. "Think I'm bluffin', eh? Well here's my final word, Sheriff. You crowd me, that Pinkerton man's blood is on yore soul as much as mine. Call yore dogs off—or go to hell! We're waitin' an' ready."

## CHAPTER

## 2

Last Cartridge

**A** HEAVY silence closed in. DeSpane, taut with strain, turned to face Clevenger. "You were fixin' to say somethin', kid?"

Clevenger swallowed. "We've got to scramble out of here like the sheriff says, Lobo, while there's light enough for them to see we're empty-handed."

DeSpane's black eyes glittered contemptuously. "Give up now—after leavin' a dead man on the hurricane deck of that stage yesterday? They'd hang the two of us quicker than the devil could fry a hoss-thief, kid. Ain't you figgered out you'd hang as quick as I would for that killin'?"

Clevenger ran splayed fingers through his sweat-sopped hair. His throat was raw and aching with thirst. Their only water had been in Pablo's bullet-ruined canteen. The rock walls of this pocket still radiated the day's pent-up heat like the grate of a stove.

"You're down to your last cartridge, Lobo, I know that," Clevenger re-

mind the old renegade. "You can't hope to shoot your way out of this."

DeSpane shook his head. "I been on the wanted list in this Territory too many years to think I'd have a chance if I gave myself up, kid. No. I'm makin' my last stand here."

"How about me, Lobo?"

The outlaw grunted. "We share an' share alike, reckon. If we'd made it across the border—if we'd gotten back to fish that pouch out of that *sumidero*—Pablo an' me would have divvied up your fair share of that Syndicate dinero, kid. By the same token, you'll swaller the same medicine as I will tonight."

Clevenger shook his head. "No," he said doggedly. "I'm giving myself up. I can prove I wasn't an owlcote before I signed up with you in Bonanza Bar last week—thinkin' I was headin' into the badlands on a wild-hoss hunt."

DeSpane's predatory mouth harshened under his badger-gray mustache. He had found Tom Clevenger broke and hungry in a mining-camp flop-house and had recognized in the young cowpoke a desperation that made him easy prey to DeSpane's scheme. The way the stage hold-up operated, DeSpane had to have an accomplice to hold their getaway horses in a ravine above the Wagon Pass road. Depending on how Clevenger shaped up afterward, DeSpane had figured, the kid might make a future partner for him and Pablo Marteen.

Seeing Clevenger brace himself to stand up, DeSpane brought his six-gun around to cover the kid.

"No," DeSpane snapped. "You know whereabouts we stashed that payroll pouch crossin' the desert yesterday. You'd like the chance to buy your way out of a hangman's noose by turnin' that swag over to Purdum, wouldn't you?"

Clevenger eased back into a sitting position, his eyes fixed on the black bore of his own gun, aimed square at the third button on his faded hickory shirt.

"You wouldn't gun me down, Lobo," the kid said softly. "You know the jig is up. You're saving that last bullet for yourself... when the posse moves in tonight."

Lobo DeSpane licked his parched lips. "Another thing," he pointed out. "The loose talk you overheard from Marteen, laughin' about maybe Monte Webster bein' on that posse. You think I'd let you double-cross my best amigo, kid?"

Clevenger let that soak in. Monte Webster cut a wide swath in Bonanza Bar. He was the Ajo Copper Syndicate's mine super, a citizen above reproach in the camp. Until the half-breed had talked out of turn during the night, Clevenger hadn't guessed that Monte Webster had been the guiding hand back of the stage robbery. But it had to be that way. How else would a renegade like Lobo DeSpane have known that the Wells-Fargo coach from Tucson was carrying the Syndicate's quarterly payroll—with a Pinkerton detective riding as guard? Someone on the inside had to tip off DeSpane about that secret shipment. That someone had been Monte Webster—the mine super to whom Clevenger had applied for a mucker's job upon his arrival in Bonanza Bar ten days ago.

"Look, Lobo," Clevenger panted hoarsely. "You know the sheriff ain't bluffing about finishing this thing off as soon as it gets dark enough for him to close in. We haven't got a chance."

DeSpane spat into the dirt. "Right enough, kid. But you're in this thing as deep as I am. All day long you haven't burned a cap to help me out. Why the devil should I have to listen to you whine now?"

"I'm not whining," Clevenger rasped out. "I never yet killed a man. I didn't aim to start on a star-toter doing his duty."

**D**ESPANE did not appear to be listening. His eyes were darting nervously along the darkening skyline above the rincon, feeling the frustration of a doomed animal caught in a trap of his own making.

Nothing moved up there in the range of the outlaw's vision; no target tempted him to empty his last gun. Why should Purdum and his deputies take any chances? They had this situation sewed up forty ways from the jack.



Without glancing Clevenger's way, DeSpane said softly, "Relax, kid. Don't do anything rash. You ain't goin' noplase."

"I'm pullin' out," Clevenger repeated doggedly. "You aren't stoppin' me, Lobo."

He stood up then, a rangy six-footer in bullhide chaps and spike-heeled cowboots. Shadows pooled thickly in this rincon would shield him from a pot-shot. Once he had sung out his intentions of surrendering, Clevenger believed he could trust the Bonanza Bar sheriff to keep his word and capture him alive.

"You're stayin'—one way or the other, kid." DeSpane's rasping whisper was a point-blank ultimatum. "I know I'm finished. But I won't see Monte Webster betrayed, after all the favors he's done for me. And I won't give Purdum the satisfaction of ridin' back to the Bar with that payroll pouch, makin' a big hero of himself—"

DeSpane was standing up now, a head shorter than Clevenger, a frog-built man with a barrel chest and saddle-warped legs, a rangy old wolf who had carried his own law in his holsters for forty-odd years and was ready to face his last-ditch stand.

Tom Clevenger hitched his empty gun belt, glancing up to where the first blackness was beginning to form in the Arizona sky.

"You got one load left in my gun, Lobo," the kid said despairingly. "If you're going to use it, go ahead. I'm pullin' my wagons."

DeSpane reached out to snatch Clevenger's arm. "Wait," he said frantically. "We can crawl down to the horses and make a run for it. We might get through."

A bleak grin plucked the corners of Clevenger's mouth.

"With half a dozen guns coverin' the mouth of that gully? Pablo wanted to try that last night—with the hostage ridin' with us. You overruled the idea then. It wouldn't work any better now."

DeSpane said, "It's better than waitin' here to be smoked down like rats in a rain barrel. Two targets would split up their fire. We got a chance, kid—"

Clevenger's right hand swung

around and locked like a trap on the old renegade's gun barrel. His first desperate wrench failed to jerk the weapon from DeSpane's fist and in the next instant they were both down on the rubble, rolling over and over in a deadlocked grapple.

What DeSpane lacked in youth and energy he made up in sheer animal ferocity. Agony lanced through Tom Clevenger as he felt DeSpane's knee crash into his groin; he concentrated on maintaining his grip on the six-gun barrel, trying to force the Colt up and away from his own body.

He heard the revolver explode with a crash of sound that momentarily deafened him. Gunpowder grains stung his face; the gunmetal between his locked fingers turned hot.

And then, with gunsmoke smothering his nostrils, he felt Lobo DeSpane's convulsing strength go slack, felt the outlaw wilt under him, the fingers loosening on the six-gun.

Clevenger stood up, backed off, stumbled over Pablo Marteen's board-stiff torso and fell heavily against the granite ledge behind him. Somewhere overhead a Winchester let go with a splintering crash of sound; a bullet carromed off the rincon wall and sprayed DeSpane's sprawled shape with rock dust.

DeSpane did not move. Blood was guttering from a powder-blackened bullet hole under his jaw. The up-ranging slug had pierced his brain and ripped out the back of his skull, killing him instantaneously.

Nausea stabbed at Tom Clevenger, tinged with a passionate thanksgiving that DeSpane's death was not on his conscience. He was alone now. Alone in this pocket with three dead men. All he had to do was shout out that he was ready to surrender, and submit to arrest.

Clevenger opened his mouth to yell, but no sound would come. In the back of his mind, Lobo DeSpane's taunting words came back to mock him: "You're in this thing as deep as I am... you'd hang as quick as I would, kid."

There was no getting around that logic. To the waiting manhunters ringing this trap, Tom Clevenger was a member of a stage-robbing gang who had kidnapped a Pinkerton detective

after they had murdered a Wells-Fargo driver.

In all Arizona there was no man to vouch for Clevenger's good character; he was Texas-born and had been working his way across country, seeking a job, when he had jumped at the chance to hunt fuzztails with Lobo DeSpane.

Surrender to the law—and what would happen? Tom Clevenger could almost feel the rope tightening about his throat now...

CHAPTER

### 3

#### The Gamble

**P**ARADOXICALLY, it was a stranger in Ben Purdum's posse who pointed the way out for Tom Clevenger. The husky voice rang out startlingly clear in the dusk, somewhere overhead:

"DeSpane, this is Monte Webster talking. That hostage of yours was drawing my pay. The sheriff's agreed to a compromise. This is the last chance you'll get and you're lucky Purdum is willing to dicker. You listening down there?"

Clevenger's pulses drummed savagely. Monte Webster... the arch-villain of this drama, siding Purdum as a deputy. Webster was making this play to extricate an accomplice at the last minute. Webster could not know that old Lobo DeSpane was dead...

Getting no answer, Webster went on: "Here's the deal, Lobo. We got no proof you ain't already murdered that Pinkerton man. Send him out to us. Soon as we know he's safe, you've got the sheriff's word of honor to hit the trail... minus my payroll. Come moonrise the posse starts tracking you. Fair enough?"

In that moment the plan bloomed ready-made in Clevenger's mind. A gamble to save his own hide...

Stepping over Martsen's corpse, Clevenger replaced the empty six-gun in DeSpane's hand. Then he crawled over to where the Pinkerton detective sat crouched in death at the base of the juniper snag. Swollen wrists manacled with his own handcuffs, the bandanna gag that should have kept him silent still dangling under his jaw...

"It's no use, Webster," came Purdum's voice. "Goes without saying Zimmerman's already dead. This saves me the shame of makin' a bargain with lobo for the first time behind the star—"

Pulling back the lapels of the detective's coat, Clevenger explored the man's vest pockets, hunting for the key to the fetters he knew the lawman must have on his person. He came up with a leather wallet which contained a Pinkerton badge and identity credentials.

Working with feverish haste in what remained of daylight down in this rincón, Clevenger located the tiny flat handcuff key in the detective's watch pocket, tucked behind a silver hunting-case watch. Up above the rim, the gathering darkness was alive with furtive sounds as the posemen closed in for showdown.

It was grisly business, unlocking the fetters and prying them free of the dead man's swollen flesh, clammy and sodden. That done, Clevenger began a ghoulish search of the detective's other pockets. He must overlook nothing that would identify this corpse as the man whose identity he was going to assume here.

Posing as DeSpane's hot-lead hostage... it was a slim chance, a thousand-to-one-shot. But it might pay off. The detective was from Tucson, probably a stranger in Bonanza Bar. It was unlikely that Sheriff Purdum would recognize the imposture. Monte Webster might—but Monte Webster, assuming Clevenger was in on the deal, would have his own reasons for keeping his mouth shut.

**C**RAWLING back to his original station under the beetling rock wall, Clevenger hunkered down to open the dead man's wallet. It was essential that he at least know the name of the man he was to impersonate. The Pinkerton identity card gave him that information:

<p>Operative 39196698 James N. Zimmerman Pinkerton Agency Tucson Arizona Terr</p>
---

The reverse side of the card car-

ried Zimmerman's description, but fortunately no photograph. Six foot two, 175 pounds, age 25, blue eyes, brown hair.

Close enough. In height and weight, Clevenger could pass for Zimmerman, especially in dim light. The blue eyes posed a risk he could avoid: Clevenger's eyes were deep amber. The age was close enough—Clevenger was twenty-three.

An odor of fresh tobacco smoke wafted to his nostrils, from a Bonanza Bar deputy hidden somewhere at the lower end of the rincon, beyond the picketed horses. The sheriff's attack, whatever form it would take, could not be minutes away now...

Clevenger snapped open the case of Zimmerman's watch, which had run down at high noon. The case bore the detective's engraved monogram. Pasted on the inside of the lid was a photograph of a girl, a lovely blonde who was Zimmerman's widow or sweetheart, most likely. She had inscribed it *To Jimmy with love—Janice.*

He thrust the watch into the pocket of his levis. He was about to stuff the wallet into a pocket of his chaps when he thought of something. A Pinkerton man, hired to guard a payroll shipment from Tucson to Bonanza Bar, would hardly be wearing chaps.

Unbuckling both his gun belt and the chaps, Clevenger crawled back to the dead detective and strapped both items on the corpse. As an afterthought he picked up one of Pablo's discarded Colt .45s and put it in the holster.

One detail about the dead man's appearance gave Clevenger a bad moment: the deep, tell-tale creases left by the handcuffs on Zimmerman's wrists. Those livid bruises, if spotted by Purdum or some sharp-eyed deputy, could ruin this whole hoax.

Clevenger shrugged off his anxiety. This whole thing was a wild, fantastic gamble to begin with. He had set the stage; there was nothing to do now but wait...

In gathering darkness, Clevenger crawled back to the edge of the rincon and snapped Zimmerman's handcuffs around his own wrists. He remem-

bered that Zimmerman had apparently been unable to make himself heard during the siege, which called for a gag. Clevenger's bandanna neckpiece, pulled tight between his teeth and knotted at the neck-nape, took care of that detail.

A spur rowel chimed on the rock ledge directly above the spot where Lobo DeSpane's corpse made a formless smudge in the darkness. Behind and above him, Clevenger could hear a possemen's hoarse, excited breathing.

Then Ben Purdum's raspy voice broke the heavy stillness again: "We're done with palaverin', Lobo. We figger that Pinkerton hombre is dead or you'd have taken up Webster's proposition. We're coming in, Lobo. This is your last chance to give up."

Tom Clevenger stretched himself full length on the ground, belatedly getting another idea which he executed at once—pulling up his knees and working his handcuffed wrists over his boots, so that his manacled arms came behind his back.

"All right, Clancy," the sheriff said heavily. "Let's go."

An instant later Clevenger heard a match scratch, saw a glimmer of light overhead, followed by a shattering red glow and a crackling of flames. Then a blazing comet streaked down over the rimrock and a torch fabricated of dry grass landed on the floor of the rincon, filling the pocket with dancing red light.

**F**OR A LONG interval silence held. Then Monte Webster's voice called excitedly from the opposite side of the rincon:

"No wonder they didn't dicker, Ben! They're cleaned out. I count three dead ones down there—DeSpane, the greaser Pablo, another one by that juniper snag yonder—"

Excited voices ringed the rocky cavity as deputies edged closer to the rim, belly-down, guns ready for the anticipated shoot-out.

"How about the Pinkerton man, Monte?" yelled the sheriff. "You spotted him?"

Boots slogged up the floor of the rincon from the direction of the pick-

eted horses, twenty-five yards down grade. Clevenger heard a deputy voice his close-hand discovery: "I've spotted the fourth one, Ben. Dunno if he's the hostage or not. Don't seem to be alive, anyhow."

Pebbles cascaded down on Tom Clevenger's prostrate body as the sheriff and his manhunt crew lowered themselves over both rims of the pocket, hung by their hands briefly, then dropped the remaining five-six feet to the ground.

Clevenger made no movement, playing to the hilt the role of a man who had held this inert position for twenty-four hours. Through half-closed lids he saw possemen crouching alongside DeSpane's body, recognizing him, reading their own story into what they saw.

A perspiring, cherubic-faced man whose voice identified him as Ben Purdum commented laconically, "Shot himself, by Judas! That last shot we heard was old Lobo cheatin' justice."

Men were peering at Pablo Marteen now, at the chap-clad corpse sprawled under the juniper snag. Then a phalanx of booted legs formed an arena rim around Clevenger. A big man in a town coat and buckskin-foxed pants, a man whose neatly trimmed mustache and cropped spade beard set him apart from the jack-leg muckers who made up most of the posse, hooked a hand under Clevenger's handcuff link and rolled him over on his face. The man spoke and by his voice Clevenger tabbed him for DeSpane's confederate, the traitor Monte Webster:

"This one must be the Pinkerton dick, Sheriff. Shackled and gagged—"

Crowded faces peered at Clevenger in the ebbing light of the bunchgrass torch. Clevenger chose that moment to open his eyes and make a gurgling, inarticulate moan under his gag.

"Ben!" an onlooker bawled. "This one's alive!"

Monte Webster's fatigue-lined face was directly over Tom's head now, the eyes holding a strange and puzzled expression as the sybdicat boss tugged the bandanna gag free of Clevenger's mouth. Clevenger thought, *He's wise to me. He knows I ain't Zimmerman...*

Helping hands were lifting Clevenger to a seated position.

"You all right, feller?" Sheriff Ben Purdum asked anxiously, squatting down before the handcuffed man. "You're Jim Zimmerman?"

Clevenger nodded. If he hadn't been recognized yet, it meant Zimmerman was a stranger in Bonanza Bar.

"Yeah. Didn't think...I'd make it, Sheriff. Specially when DeSpane shot himself just now. He'd have plugged me too...if he he'd had a spare ca'tridge."

The bundle of burning grass smoldered and went dark, giving Clevenger a sense of release from tension. Here in the tricky starlight flintering into the rincon, the possemen couldn't get a good look at him.

"Like—to get shut of these wrist irons," Clevenger panted weakly. "You'll find key...left-hand shirt pocket..."

Ben Purdum said, "Sure, son, sure...sorry I didn't think of it sooner..."

AS SOON AS the sheriff had the handcuffs unlocked, a deputy thrust a canteen into Clevenger's hands. He left off massaging his wrists to swig deeply of the tepid water. His overweaning thirst was something he didn't have to fake...

"Easy on the water, son," Monte Webster said, gently extricating the canteen from the puncher's grasp. "You've been through hell. Can't risk bloating your belly."

Clevenger came shakily to his feet, feigning exhaustion. A deputy was leading the horses around the bend of the defile and busy hands were already starting the gruesome chore of hoisting the dead men over saddles for the return journey to Bonanza Bar.

"Feel like talkin', after this ordeal, son?" Purdum asked anxiously. "Like to know what happened here. We didn't know our blind shootin' had killed anybody, else we wouldn't of done it for fear of hittin' you."

Clevenger removed the Pinkerton badge from his pocket and pinned it on his shirt. "Ricochets got the half-breed and the Kid yonder by the

juniper—don't know his name," Clevenger explained. "You've already guessed what happened to the ring-leader there."

Monte Webster laid a hand on Clevenger's shoulder. He said, "I'm the super at Ajo Syndicate, son. Montgomery Webster. Your sister's my bookkeeper—which is why I asked your boss in Tucson to let you make this trip. Janice said she hadn't seen you in two years and it seemed like a good excuse—"

Clevenger said carefully, "Janice won't be very proud of me, letting myself get kidnapped."

Webster grinned. "That passenger on the coach told us all about the fight you put up before they had you boxed in from two angles, Jim. Same feller recognized those road agents as DeSpane and Marteen, so we knew all along who we were following. Knew they'd taken you along as a hostage—"

"By the way," Sheriff Purdum cut in, "where's that payroll pouch, Zimmerman? We ain't located it yet."

Clevenger's eyes were on Webster's as he said, "DeSpane cached it in a quicksand *sumidero* out in the desert when he saw you were gaining on us, Sheriff. I'll lead you to it."

A gibbous moon was showing its silver rim over the Cascabels now and its glow illumined Monte Webster's bearded face. At this moment Webster was alone with Zimmerman, the sheriff superintending the job of lashing the three dead men aboard horseback. Webster moved in now, close enough for Clevenger to feel the warmth of his breath on his cheek.

"You're not Jim Zimmerman," Webster whispered. "Janice has shown me her brother's picture. What kind of a game are you up to? One word from me and you're finished—"

Clevenger returned the level stare of the mining boss. "Say that word and you don't get your hands on that payroll swag, Monte. DeSpane talked considerable—"

Webster glanced around furtively, then spoke from the corner of his mouth: "We'll hash this out later. Pretend you can't find your way back to Lobo's cache, savvy?"

Clevenger nodded conspiratorially. He could not expose Webster's outlawry without implicating himself, just yet. By the same token, Webster could not brand this hostage as the secret of DeSpane's gold cache was locked up in his head.

Webster moved away and Sheriff Purdum took his place at Clevenger's side. The possemen were starting to file out of the rincon now, leading the outlaws' horses. They had their own mounts staked out somewhere in the timber down-slope, Clevenger surmised.

"Where did you say DeSpane dropped off that payroll money, Jim?" the Bonanza Bar sheriff asked.

"Down on the desert somewhere—in a quicksand bog. There's ten feet of lass-ropes tied to the handle of the pouch, Sheriff—so it won't sink beyond recovery. The rope's anchored to a picket pin buried in the sand. If you were tracking us you probably rode right over it without noticing."

Webster came up to halt by Purdum's elbow. He appeared completely at ease, sure of himself, sure of Clevenger now.

Webster drawled, "I just hope you can locate the right *sumidero*, Jim. Those badlands are peppered with quicksand holes. And last night's wind has wiped out our tracks, headed from the Bar to these mountains."

"I can locate it," Clevenger said carefully. "Don't let that worry you, Mr. Webster."

Ben Purdum, unaware of the cross-currents flowing between the mining boss and this young rider he took to be a Pinkerton detective, said wearily, "Well, let's be hittin' the trail, boys. Mister Zimmerman, your sister's sure going to celebrate when we get back to the Bar. When the stage pulled in yesterday she didn't have any hopes of seeing you alive again."

Clevenger started following the old sheriff out of the rincon, Webster at his heels. Knowing Purdum expected some comment, he said, "Janice won't be any gladder to see me than I will to see her, Sheriff."

Inwardly the thought was racing through his mind: *Somewhere between here and Bonanza Bar I've got*

to hightail it. Which will put Webster in a spot. But he knows as well as I do that I can't meet that girl face to face.

## CHAPTER

## 4

## On the Dodge

THE POSSE, homeward bound with weariness ground bone-deep in them, emerged from the belted jackpine and juniper forest at the foot of the Cascabel in a long single file, Ben Purdum in the lead.

Clevenger and Monte Webster brought up the rear, and of the sixteen-man party they alone were not dozing in saddle. Ahead of them they saw a campfire gleaming like an earth-caught star at the edge of the distance-running salt-and-sand flats. The meaning of that light puzzled Clevenger until Webster explained it in a voice which barely carried above the thud of hoofs and the creak of leather:

"Rest of the posse, camped down there. The old ones who came along for the ride and couldn't make the climb. Purdum will probably make camp there until daylight tomorrow."

Clevenger reined up alongside the mine super's stirrups. Directly ahead of them were the horses packing the three dead ones; the nearest posseman was thirty feet away, out of earshot.

"I can't risk meeting Zimmerman's sister in town," Clevenger said. "What's the deal going to be?"

Webster said, "You'll get your chance when we make camp. These men are dead beat for sleep. You can cut your horse out of the remuda and be long gone before daylight... Where do you fit into this thing, kid?"

Clevenger had a ready answer for that. "Name's Tom Clevenger. I signed up with DeSpane to go horse hunting..."

"And that was DeSpane's idea at the time, son. Then I got word the home office was sending that payroll down... what happened to the Pinkerton dick?"

"It was him who hollered out and let you fellers know we were holed up in that pocket. Pablo Marteen

drilled him. Happened right after Purdum heard Zimmerman yell."

Webster's mouth bent in a cynical grin. "No matter now, but that 'breed played the fool, knocking over Lobo's hostage... Look, Clevenger. After you make your getaway, how do I know you won't lift that pouch out of the quicksand and skin out for the border with the whole caboodle?"

"You don't, Webster."

Here at the bottom of the Cascabel footspurs, thick dust from the riders up ahead flowed back on the drag-end riders in a stifling cloud. Through it Webster's voice came in a taut monotone: "A word from me and you'd be hangrope bait, Clevenger. I am not a man to double-cross."

Clevenger shrugged. "You can't bluff me, Webster. Ben Purdum would be interested in knowing how DeSpane got wise to that payroll shipment."

The syndicate boss laughed softly. "Your word against mine, son? Think it over. Lobo DeSpane has a killer rep that stretches back thirty years. You worked for him. Don't get the idea your Pinkerton badge will help you out. A telegram to agency headquarters in Tucson and you'll be stripped of your disguise."

THEY WERE bearing down on the posse camp now, the horses beginning to break into a trot as Purdum led his manhunters across the level sand flats.

"We'll do it this way," Webster said. "Come daylight, Purdum's boys will want to head for home fast. Locating the right *sumidero* among all those bog holes will take some hunting—the sheriff will admit that. I'm responsible for that payroll. You know where it is."

"What are you driving at?"

"Just this. Tomorrow, we let the posse head on home. You and I will drop out and start hunting for that *sumidero*. We make the split out in the middle of the desert. I'll show up empty-handed... I'll tell the sheriff you and I got separated. You won't be seen in these parts again. By that time Janice will have identified Zimmerman's carcass anyhow. Purdum will just figure I'm lucky you didn't ambush me."

There was no time to talk over the deal further. The possemen in the lead had reached the campfire now and Clevenger saw half a dozen men, mostly bearded oldsters, running over to Purdum's horse, questioning the old sheriff on the outcome of the manhunt.

And then, above the clamor, Clevenger heard a woman's voice lifted in a scream of anguish. He was in the act of dismounting but he lifted himself abruptly back into saddle.

A girl was standing alongside the horse which carried the unshrouded corpse of Jim Zimmerman. The girl whose picture was pasted under the lid of the Pinkerton man's watch now reposing in Clevenger's pocket. "Jim...oh, they killed Jim..."

Janice Zimmerman's agonized voice brought a stunned hush to the possemen who were out of saddle now. Ben Purdum was staring at the girl, at the dead man she had identified as her brother. Janice had ridden out to this camp sometime during the day, probably had been forcibly restrained from climbing into the Cascabel uplands to join Purdum's siege force...

There was only one thing to do. Wheeling his horse, almost knocking over Monte Webster's big shape as he did so, Tom Clevenger drove in the rowels and lined out at a reaching gallop toward the canyon-gashed mountain wall the posse had just left.

Behind him, a sudden clamor of gunshots broke the desert night; Clevenger heard the lethal whisper of bullets bracketing him as he reined in a frantic zig-zag, knowing he was a plain target against the moon-silvered desert floor.

Then the leaden blizzard began to fall short as he drew out of range, and he knew he had a few precious moments of advantage before the dumfounded sheriff could reorganize his pursuit.

His brief-lived masquerade as a Pinkerton detective was at an end; by taking flight he had played into Webster's hands by branding himself as an owlhooter of Lobo DeSpane's stripe. Yet in his grim moment of indecision, flight had seemed the only

answer. His word against Monte Webster's...the only witnesses who could prove the mining super's rôle in the stage robbery were dead and he, Clevenger, stood revealed as a man who had attempted to impersonate a lawman...

Hipping around in saddle, Clevenger saw Purdum's riders fanned out in a wide line, pounding across the desert after him. The firing had diminished to sporadic gun-flashes now—the dim moonlight made long-range shooting useless.

He wondered if Monte Webster was in the chase, or whether the syndicate boss had remained behind with Janice Zimmerman in her black moment of grief and bereavement.

He put the horse, a Texas-born shad-belly dun which had brought him west into Arizona, up the first foothill rise and moments later was lost in the blackness of the timber. Here a carpet of conifer needles centuries thick muffled his pony's hoofs. Trailing him would be next to impossible until daylight.

**A**N HOUR later, Clevenger gained the timberline, not far from the very rincon where the posse had forced DeSpane to seek cover. The summit was another thousand feet above; by midnight Clevenger knew he could be there, and he knew also that the Cascabel divide roughly marked the Mexican border. South of it, he would be out of Purdum's jurisdiction.

But he had no intention of seeking the sanctuary of Chihuahua. Out there on the lower desert, a fortune in DeSpane's loot was waiting, a couple-three feet under the crust of a quicksand bog. In all the world, he was the only living being who knew the secret that *sumidero* held.

A hundred thousand in gold specie, three months' wages for the army of copper miners who worked the big glory hole at Bonanza Bar. For a man of Tom Clevenger's orphan beginnings, whose childhood had been an endless succession of cow camps and railroad towns, that much money in one lump was enough to stagger the imagination.

Hunger ached in Clevenger's belly now, but it was not an unfamiliar

sensation. Looking back on it, it seemed like he had been hungry most of his life. Folks massacred by Comanches when he was a button, left to shift for himself, picking up what meager schooling he could across the span of years...

Giving the stallion a breather, ears keening the lower timber and the sweep of desert beyond it, Tom Clevenger tried to think this thing through. With a hundred thousand he could buy the well-watered valley ranch he had worked for up in the Tonto Basin last spring, buy it and stock it with blooded shorthorns. He could have himself a silver-mounted saddle if he wanted, and a blooded Arab to ride. He could find some woman to love, and build her a mansion fit for a king. Why, there wasn't any limit to what a man could do with a hundred thousand in gold that could never be traced...

He tugged Jim Zimmerman's turnip watch from his levis pocket and snapped open the lid. Close onto midnight. Four hours of night left, at least, before Purdum's riders could hope to start tracking him. He could be across the summit and safe on Chihuahua soil in half that time.

In the act of closing the watch, Janice Zimmerman's portrait arrested his attention. A pair of blue eyes that looked straight out of that photograph to search his own soul. Gleaming wheat-blond hair, recalling to Clevenger the way Janice's golden head had caught the campfire light down there on the rim of the desert tonight. The memory of her anguished cry returned to haunt Tom Clevenger now, her wail of grief at recognizing her dead brother tied across a saddle...

That picture seemed to mesmerize Tom Clevenger. There had been no time for romance during his growing-up years. Keeping body and soul together didn't leave a man much time for chasing the women. The only girls he had ever associated with were the brassy jezebels around cowtown honkytonks.

Janice's brother had sacrificed his life in the line of duty, trying to make sure that payroll shipment reached the hard-working men in Bonanza Bar who had earned it with

their sweat and toil. It had taken a rare brand of courage to make Jim Zimmerman shout a warning to Purdum's riders...

Clevenger snapped the watch lid shut. He had his own neck to think about, sure. But he owed something to the dead Pinkerton man whose credentials he carried at this moment. Jim Zimmerman, knowing death would be the penalty for giving away his captors' hiding place last night, must have wrestled with his own conscience just as Clevenger was doing now.

Clevenger's eyes lifted to pick out the remote glimmer of lights, fifty miles to the northwest, marking the settlement at Bonanza Bar. He knew now that that mining camp must be his destination, not Mexico. Ben Purdum's manhunters would never guess that their escaped fugitive would circle back to invade the lion's den that way...

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CHAPTER

**5**

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*Deadman's Disguise*

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**T**OM CLEVINGER emerged from the tarpaper-roofed Chinese restaurant on the outskirts of Bonanza Bar just as the sun was touching the purple ridges of the Growler Mountains on the western skyline.

Under his belt was the first square meal he had in almost a week. It had taken two days to swing wide to the east, crossing the desert while Ben Purdum's riders scoured the Casabel uplands for his sign. A sheepherder had shared his bacon and beans with Clevenger yesterday; without that hospitality the young Texan doubted if he could have made it back to Bonanza Bar with strength enough to stick in the saddle.

The Chinese restaurant keeper had taken Zimmerman's silver watch as security against full payment for the meal Clevenger had just wolfed down. Before hocking the timepiece Clevenger had taken the precaution of removing Janice's photograph from inside the lid. There was too much chance the Chinaman might recognize it as the likeness of a girl who lived here in Bonanza Bar and would remember that Janice was the



sister of the Pinkerton detective from Tucson whose funeral had taken place here in town only two days ago.

Clevenger had looked over a copy of this morning's *Bonanza Weekly Gazette* he had found on the restaurant counter, and had been brought up to date on developments. The mining camp editor had given a big headline to the hold-up of this week's Tucson stage, and Ben Purdum's capture of Lobo DeSpane, dead, up in the Cascabels.

One of the robbers was still at large, the *Gazette* told its readers. A stranger named Tom Clevenger, who had outwitted Purdum's posse by posing briefly as DeSpane's hostage, Jim Zimmerman. It was Purdum's belief that Clevenger had escaped into Mexico. So far as was known, DeSpane's payroll loot was still hidden somewhere out on the desert.

The newspaper account had devoted considerable space to the Pinkerton detective's sister Janice, identifying her as a bookkeeper employed in Montgomery Webster's syndicate office. It gave her residence as a boarding house at the corner of Tucson Road and B Avenue.

Purdum's posse was back from its fruitless chase now, had beaten Clevenger to Bonanza Bar by a full day. The *Gazette* printed the information that the sheriff had posted a shoot-on-sight order for Tom Clevenger, and Monte Webster, speaking in behalf of the Ajo Copper Syndicate, had indicated that anyone recovering the stolen payroll would be suitably rewarded...

Leaving the restaurant Tom Clevenger headed west along a side street flanking Tucson Road, the camp's main stem. Here in the blue dusk, he had little fear of being spotted by any erstwhile posse rider he might meet; his face was darkened by a week's growth of stubble, and he had the added assurance that no one except Monte Webster had had a really good look at him, up there on the Cascabel timberline.

He carried no gun; his own holster belt had remained on Jim Zimmerman's corpse. If trouble broke, he was powerless to defend himself.

A block from the restaurant, Clevenger found the signpost he was hunting for, a board identifying a north-south street as "B Avenue". Turning south, he spotted the two-story frame building at the corner of B and Tucson Road which had a sign painted on its false front, MRS. GRADY'S BOARDING HOUSE. According to the newspaper story, that was where Janice Zimmerman lived.

**D**ARKNESS was rapidly enveloping the copper town. Heading toward the lighted windows of Mrs. Grady's, Clevenger found himself abreast of a squat structure with iron-barred windows, its walls built of mortared rock. Ben Purdum's jailhouse...

Climbing the steps of the rooming house porch, Clevenger saw men lining the benches there, puffing their after-supper cigars and enjoying the cool of the evening. Through the hooked-back doors he had a glimpse of a big lobby. Out back somewhere came a babble of women's voices and a clatter of dishes.

Keeping out of the bar of lamp-light spilling through the doorway, Clevenger addressed one of the porch loafers: "Miss Zimmerman anywhere around, amigo?"

An anonymous voice answered him: "Janice? She lives upstairs, third room on the right past the stair landin'. What would you be wantin' with her, cowboy?"

Clevenger said, "Old friend of her brother's. Understand Jim got killed in a stage hold-up this week."

After a pause the man said, "That's right. Janice is plumb busted up about it. Go right in, son. She'll be glad to see any friend of Jim's, I reckon."

Clevenger stepped into the rooming house lobby, relieved to find it deserted now that he was exposed to the full glare of a ceiling lamp. A staircase rose into shadows at the far end of the lobby; he crossed to it and made his way to the upper story.

He counted three doorways opening on the upper hallway and paused in front of it, seeing a glow of light under the door. He was conscious of a violent racing of his pulses as he

knocked on the panels and heard a woman's voice call out, "Who is it?"

Clevenger cleared his throat and took the plunge: "Friend of your brother's, ma'am. You're Jim Zimmerman's sister?"

The door opened and Janice stood there, her golden hair framed in a halo of lamplight. Her eyes held an aftermath of suffering as she sized up this gaunt-faced, dusty-garbed range rider standing stetson in hand at her threshold.

"You—knew Jim is dead?"

Clevenger bent his head. "That's why I'm here, ma'am. I—I got to talk with you. I—was with Jim when he died up there on the Cascabels, Janice."

The girl sucked in a breath, the color fading from her cheeks. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she stepped back and let him enter the room.

"You were with Ben Purdum's posse? Who are you?"

Clevenger's hand shook as he reached in his pocket and drew out a leather wallet. He opened it to reveal the bright nicked badge of a Pinkerton operative. From a compartment of the wallet he drew out a circular photograph and a Pinkerton identity card.

"I'm Tom Clevenger, Janice," the cowpuncher whispered. "Reckon that name means something to you. These are the things I took out of your brother's pocket after he was killed—"

For an instant Clevenger thought Janice Zimmerman was going to faint. Then, tearing her eyes off her brother's law badge, she seemed to recover herself.

Backing away from her visitor, the girl came to a dresser alongside the wall. She jerked open the top drawer and the next instant a Bisley .38 was in her hand, the muzzle aimed at Clevenger's chest.

"You're the outlaw who pretended he was my brother—"

"I can explain that, Janice. Else why would I have risked my neck to come back to Bonanza Bar?"

Janice's thumb eared the Colt hammer to full cock.

"Stand where you are," she whis-

pered. "The sheriff's eating supper downstairs. I'm taking you to him—"

Clevenger shook his head. "Ben Purdum's the man I want to see all right, Janice," he said quietly, "but up here, in your room, in private."

"You—you want me to bring the sheriff up here? Knowing he's issued a shoot-on-sight order for you?"

Clevenger licked his lips. "I got a lot to say," he whispered. "I want you and the sheriff to hear it. Without tippin' off the camp that I'm back in town. I—I want you to know who was responsible for your brother gettin' bushwhacked, Janice."

A skeptical grin twisted the girl's lips. "I can have Ben Purdum up here inside of two minutes," she said. "But would you be here when we got back?"

Clevenger shrugged. He glanced toward the wardrobe closet door at the far side of the room.

"You can lock me up in that closet," he said. "I ain't armed. I couldn't bust loose before you got back with the law, could I?"

Janice's thumb eased the gun hammer back onto the firing pin.

"Get in there," she whispered, gesturing toward the closet door. "The least I can do is listen to whatever you have to tell me and Ben."

CHAPTER

6

Quicksand Cache

A FURTIVE knock roused Monte Webster from slumber, inside the mining superintendent's sturdy rock house located on a hill overlooking Bonanza Bar and the syndicate's open pit copper mine.

Webster had not slept well since returning to camp in company with Ben Purdum's manhunters two days ago. He sat bolt upright in bed now, pawing under his pillow for the Colt .45 he kept there, thinking he had dreamed he had heard someone at his door.

Through the open window at his bedside Webster had a view of the outer desert, a night sky ablaze with stars. Somewhere across town a clock chimed: it was two o'clock in the morning.

The knock was repeated. Someone

was out on the porch which fronted Webster's quarters.

"Who is it?" Webster demanded, whipping back the blankets and coming to his feet, every nerve taut with suspense.

"Tom Clevenger, I got to see you, Webster."

Webster's heart slugged his ribs. There was no mistaking that voice; and yet it was impossible that Lobo DeSpane's partner could have returned to Bonanza Bar.

Padding across the floor in his bare feet, Webster stationed himself beside the bolted door and demanded harshly, "Who did you say you were?"

"Tom Clevenger. Open up, Webster. I ain't packing a gun."

"You're alone?"

"Hell, yes!"

Gun palmed in readiness for treachery, Webster unbolted the door and stepped back as he recognized Clevenger's tall shape standing on the porch, silhouetted against the night stars. Clevenger's hands were away from his body, fingers spread to show that he was not packing a gun.

"Reckon you know why I'm here, Webster," Clevenger said bluntly. "Half of that payroll swag is yours. I thought you'd want to be with me when I hauled it out of that quicksand bog."

Webster's spade-bearded jaw sagged open in amazement. "You came back to cut me in on that loot—when you could have made off with the whole business? You're lyin', Clevenger."

Clevenger shrugged. "'*Sta bueno*, I'm lyin'. In that case I'll be hittin' the trail."

Webster stepped out onto the porch, the night breeze ruffling the old-fashioned flannel nightgown he wore.

"But why run the risk of coming back here, kid?"

Clevenger said simply, "I gave my word to DeSpane I'd cut you in on your share, if I got out of that jackpot of Purdum's. DeSpane gave me a break when I needed one, Webster. I don't welsh on my promises—even to a dead man."

Webster waggled his head in dis-

belief. "How far," he asked, "is it to that cache?"

"Fifteen miles as the buzzard flies. Figgered if we left now we could reach that *sumidero* by daylight. Then I'll take my cut and vamoose for the border."

Webster tipped his gun muzzle toward the floor.

"Where's your horse, kid?"

"Out front."

"Anybody see you ride in?"

Clevenger grinned. "Don't waste time askin' foolish questions, boss. If you're coming with me, shuck into your duds. I don't want daylight to ketch me this close to Ben Purdum's wickiup."

WEBSTER ducked back into the house, leaving Clevenger to roll himself a smoke, standing alone on the front porch. Five minutes later Webster emerged, wearing a brush-popper jumper and toting a Winchester.

"I'll saddle up out back," he said. "You're a strange cuss, Tom. A man to ride the river with. I'd kissed my share of that dinero adios the night you got away from the posse. Figgered you'd lit out for Mexico and would come back to that *sumidero* on your own sweet time."

Rounding the house on their way to Webster's private stable, Clevenger said simply, "I made a promise to DeSpane. Aimed to keep it. Half of a hundred thousand pesos looks pretty big to me, Webster."

Ten minutes later they were riding south away from the mining camp. No one was abroad at his hour of the morning to question the furtive departure of two horsemen, heading into the outer desert. The roundabout country lay open and deserted under the stars.

For the better part of an hour they rode steadily in a beeline toward the distant Cascabels, neither rider talking much. Then, at a point some five miles outside of Bonanza Bar, Clevenger reined up to scout for land-marks.

He pointed out a pinnacle of rock some ten miles to the southeast. "Needle Butte," Webster named the landmark. "We passed that, trailing you boys."

Clevenger said, "The quicksand

bog we're looking for is in a barranca far side of that Butte. We'll make it by daylight, I reckon."

A blazing dawn was in their eyes as they reached the rocky pinnacle of Needle Butte. Circling it, Clevenger led the way into the mouth of a rock-ribbed canyon which Webster distinctly remembered as being on the route of DeSpane's getaway.

A half mile inside the canyon, Tom Clevenger dismounted and walked over to a crust of dry sand marking a quicksand *sumidero*. He picked up a chunk of rock and dropped it on the crust. Within a matter of seconds the rock had vanished from sight and the sucking sands closed over to leave a trace of dimpled crust which smoothed out even as the mining superintendent stared at it.

"This is the *sumidero* DeSpane chose," Clevenger said. "We memorized it from that talus yonder, and the cactus. There's a hundred other quicksand patches in the bottom of this canyon, all looking alike."

Webster remained in saddle as he saw Clevenger get down on his knees alongside the *sumidero*, his rope-caloused hands combing the dry sand there.

**A**FTER a moment's search, Clevenger found what he was after—a picket pin, driven deep in the sand and covered over with rubble. Attached to the hardwood stake was a knotted length of rawhide lariat.

Webster's face took on a high flush of excitement as he saw Clevenger step over to his horse and unbuckle a lass'-rope from the pommel. Tying this to the length of rawhide which led into the quicksand bog, Clevenger dallied the other end of his rope to the saddle horn and then started backing his cowpony away.

The rope went taut, lifting the rawhide strands away from the crust-ed *sumidero* at an angle. As Clevenger urged his horse back, keeping the rope taut, the rawhide length began to pull out of the sucking quagmire.

Then something glistened on the surface of the black sands, and with a final sucking *ker-chug* the buried object came to the surface

and Clevenger was dragging it out on the floor of the canyon.

Moist quicksand dripped away from the shapeless object. It was a tooled-leather saddle pouch, heavy with gold specie. Ajo Copper Syndicate's stolen payroll money, intact to the last penny...

"Well," Tom Clevenger broke the silence, "there—"

He turned to see Monte Webster sitting in a hipshot posture astride his coalblack gelding, the mine boss' Winchester resting on the pommel, hammer back at full cock, the rifle bore trained full on Clevenger's chest.

"A man who keeps a promise to a sidewinder like Lobo DeSpane was born short on brains, kid," Monte Webster said. "I figure that *sumidero* will make you a cozy grave—"

Webster was lifting the .30-30 for his point-blank shot when the six-gun blasted from the rimrock overhead. Clevenger saw the Bonanza Bar ramrod lurch in saddle to the shock of a bullet drilling his left temple. Before the echoes of the Colt's blast had faded in his ears, Monte Webster's gelding was bucking and the dead rider was catapulted through space to land with sodden impact alongside the *sumidero*.

Clevenger's tension left him as he turned his head to stare up at the canyon rim where Sheriff Ben Purdum, smoke seeping from his Colt muzzle, was getting to his feet on the ledge's brink. At his side was Janice Zimmerman, dressed in the man's shirt and stetson and levis she had donned last night to accompany Purdum on their fast ride to Needle Butte.

Meeting the girl's tear-bright glance now, Clevenger said, "It had to be this way, Janice. Otherwise I couldn't of proved Webster was back of that payroll robbery. I didn't figger Webster would throw a gun on me an' force Purdum to shoot."

He walked over to where Purdum and the girl were beginning their descent of the short, steep canyon wall. Midway down the slope Purdum let go his grasp of Janice's hand and she half-fell, half-jumped into the young Texan's outstretched arms.

(continued on page 33)

# BAD YEAR

by H. G.  
ASHBURN

**I**T WAS HOT, blistering hot, and Tad Coleman tried to appear nonchalant as he leaned against the white picket fence in front of the small, high-spired church. Fine, powdery alkali hung in the breathless atmosphere like a blanket of fog, softening the appearance of the burnt-brown hills which surrounded the sun-baked valley.

From the open window of the church Tad could hear the sonorous tones of Preacher Tompson. "Revenge not yourselves, my dearly beloved; but give place unto wrath—"

Tad dragged the old man to safety.



No rangehog was going to push Tad Coleman around. He'd get his revenge by running off with Logan's pretty daughter...

Nine weeks since they had that bitter quarrel, and those long weeks seemed like an eternity. During them

Tad wiped away the perspiration that trickled down his forehead and flicked the dust from his new silk shirt. He had used more than usual care in grooming himself this Sunday morning. Nine weeks had passed since he had laid eyes on Jennifer Logan.

he had learned one thing—life meant nothing without her.

"For it is written," floated the deep voice of Tompson: "Revenge is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. But if thy enemy be hungry, give him to eat, if he thirst, give him to drink, for

doing this, thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head."

Tad Coleman wrinkled his brow. "Fine words but they don't pay off," he muttered under his breath. "Pa always talked like that when he was alive. I tried to be square with Josh Logan, and what's it got me. But if I thought it would bring me one step closer to Miss Jenny, I'd buy your beef, Preacher."

His romance with Jennifer Logan seemed to move from one crisis to another. It had started when Tad decided to ranch for himself. Josh Logan had been grooming him to fill the shoes of his late father, who had ramrodded Logan's big Circle L.

But Tad was ambitious. He wanted to do things for himself and it irritated Logan to have him leave. When he homesteaded a section of the range Logan had used for years, the old man became openly hostile. He forbade his daughter to have anything to do with Tad Coleman, and did everything possible to hamper the young man.

"Must be the Lord is sidin' with old Josh Logan," said Tad aloud. "He can bust all the rules and get rich doin' it."

Two years ago Josh Logan had discovered a profitable vein of silver on his land and gone into the mining business. His sudden great wealth widened the gap between Tad and Jennifer. Yet each obstacle seemed only to strengthen the attraction she had for him.

Tad looked up and saw the rotund form of Chichihua Joe come waddling down the cottonwood-shaded path. The good-natured Mexican was smiling, his teeth flashing white in contrast to his swarthy complexion. The bright green sash around his huge girth shook like jelly as he walked.

"Buenos dias, Senior," greeted Chichihua Joe. "It is hot, no?"

"It is hot, yes," smiled Tad. "You goin' to open up? I could use a glass of cold beer."

"The law says I cannot open until noon, Senior Tad. But if you like, I take you in the back door."

"Reckon I'll wait till the shindig is over inside." Tad jerked his head toward the church.

"Ah, the Seniorita Logan?" Chichi-

hua Joe smiled with his lips but a shadow passed over his dark expressive eyes.

"I ain't seen her for a few weeks," replied Tad. "Been away."

"Si, I know," said the Mexican. "Your cattle, how do they stand the drought?"

"Sold most of 'em," answered the young man.

"Sold them? At this time of the year?"

"It was better than watchin' them die."

"It is a bad year for the ranchers," bemoaned Chichihua Joe. "Almost no rain last winter, and this summer—nothing. It is bad, very bad."

"We've had droughts before and lived through them," said Tad. "I would have come out all right if Logan hadn't stopped me from sellin' some of my beef in town."

From the open window the mellow notes of the organ drifted to their ears, and were augmented by the voices of the congregation.

"I must go," said the Mexican. "It is almost noon and some of these men will be very thirsty after they listen to this preacher. It is so every Sunday."

**TAD SMILED.** He watched the Mexican waddle to his saloon which sat on the corner facing the main thoroughfare. It would be cool in the thick-walled adobe, he thought, but at that moment the church doors opened and the people started to pour out. He nodded greetings to his passing friends, but his anxious gray eyes watched for Jennifer. Would she still be angry? Had she felt a little of the loneliness that had made him so miserable?

At last she appeared at the door and Tad's heart began to hammer in his broad chest. She seemed even prettier than the last time he had seen her. She was wearing a new dress, blue taffeta, that rustled as she walked. But it was the sparkling blue depths of her eyes that held his attention. That and her radiant smile. The long ride in from his ranch in the blistering sun was worth this moment.

It was not until she reached the gate

in the picket fence that Tad noticed the angry glare on the face of her father. It struck him that as Jennifer increased in sweetness, Josh Logan made equal strides in the opposite direction. Then he noticed the suave, handsome stranger who moved in beside the girl. The fashionable cut of his soft gray clothes, his resonant, broad Boston accent and proud stride, brought a frown to Tad's brow. But Jennifer's bright smile erased the man from his mind, and sent a rush of blood to his smooth lean face.

"Howdy, Miss Jenny," said Tad, removing his broad, cream-colored Stetson. "You're lookin' right pert this mornin'."

Jennifer stiffened. She stopped and turned to face Tad. "You owe me an apology, Tad Coleman."

"I didn't aim to hurt your feelings no-how."

The girl softened. For a moment a liquid warmth shone in her eyes.

Joshua Logan halted after he had taken a few steps beyond them, then turned around. "Come, come, Jennifer. Do you have to talk to that ruff-raff?"

Tad felt a rising anger color his countenance as he tried to ignore the insult. The stranger lifted his eyebrows and an amused smile curled his lips.

"He didn't mean it, Tad," apologized Jennifer quickly.

"Meet me at the line camp this afternoon," said Tad, his voice tense with emotion. "I must talk to you."

"I'll try," she answered, and rushed forward to join her father and the stranger.

"Quaint fellow," chuckled the man. "Where did he get those garish clothes?" He put a possessive arm around the girl as they continued down the shaded pathway.

A storm of rage drained the color from Tad's face. It was bad enough to take Josh Logan's insult, but to be laughed at by the dandified stranger was more than he could bear. And the way the fellow put his arm around Jennifer—as if he owned her. Tad was through with being pushed around by the mine owner. His hand dropped to the butt of his Colt. If only Jennifer was some other place at this moment...

He looked down at his new clothes. They had seemed quite the thing when he had purchased them at the railroad town a week ago. His trousers were a light tan covert, that fitted tight against his long lean legs; the shirt, a dark blue China silk with pearl buttons, stretched snugly across his broad shoulders. He fingered the crimson scarf at his neck. "Thinks my new duds are funny," muttered Tad. "Like to see him ride a hoss in what he's wearin'."

**TAD WATCHED** the trio turn the corner around Chichihua Joe's saloon, and a bitterness settled in his chest—a deep cold despondency that seemed to coat his insides with ice.

"And I'm supposed to take this?" he asked himself. "Let Logan belittle me? Let that dude laugh at me? From now on I'll take care of my business and let the Lord take care of His. That's the way Logan works and he gets everything he wants."

Tad was taking long angry strides toward Chichihua Joe's. With each step his belligerence increased.

"Logan could have used my beef," he growled. "Those blame miners have to eat. I could have made six or eight thousand if I'd sold at the prices he has to pay."

After his quarrel with Jennifer, Tad had become desperate. He watched his stock melt away and decided to drive them over the hot dry sand to the railroad. Nearly half his herd had perished on the way. There was no market for his emaciated beef and he had been glad to realize something on them. The huge loss he had taken rankled his mind. The eight hundred dollars in his pocket seemed pitifully small, and pangs of self-pity knifed through him. He shouldered his way through the swinging doors of Chichihua Joe's.

"You have seen him, yes?" asked the Mexican. "I should have told you, Senor."

"Who is that fancy poodle?" demanded Tad.

"His name is Springwell," replied Chichihua Joe. "He's the engineer that has come to install all the new machinery at the mine. But I think he is most busy trying to install himself with Senorita Jennifer."

"Can't those miners of Logan's dig the silver fast enough?"

"It is because the surface veins are—how they say—petered out."

"Don't tell me that dude gets his hands dirty diggin' ore?"

"Oh no, *Senor*. He tells them how to put the machine together."

"Hell, I remember a few years back when Logan would have no truck with a pilgrim like that."

"Si—he was a different man in those days," agreed the Mexican. "He come into my cantina and I call him Josh then. But now it is different. One must call him *Mister* Logan these days. He tells everybody what to do." Chichihua Joe shook his head. "On Sunday I must not open my cantina till noon. Every night I must close him at twelve so these miners can work hard the next day."

"Suppose he wants that fancy-pants to marry his daughter?"

"It seems he would like that, *Senor*," said the Mexican quietly. "But *Senorita* Jennifer—*quien sabe?*"

Tad whirled around and his gray eyes bored into the Mexican.

Chichihua Joe shrugged his round massive shoulders.

It could be, thought Tad, that Logan found it easier to control the town than his daughter. She had a mind of her own. Yet, he was a tricky fighter and would try every means to bend her to his will. She was intensely loyal to her father, and she loved him. That had been driven home during their last meeting. Tad had lost his temper and told her what he thought of Josh Logan. It ended in the quarrel, the most violent they had ever had.

"Guess I'd better mosey along," said Tad, paying for his beer. He yanked his sombrero down upon his forehead and there was grim determination stamped upon the straight firm line of his mouth.

At the livery he mounted his sorrel stallion and set his course toward the steep hills to the west.

**A**S HE RODE, the intense noonday heat was like a smothering hand pressed against his nostrils. He squinted through the blinding sunlight to the hills above. It would be cooler up there.

He walked the stallion past the ragged row of miners' shanties huddled on the hillside. They were crowded together like a bunch of rats, ready to scurry into their holes. That's what Logan was turning the cowtown into, a rat's nest. Damn him...

Up the torturous trail he climbed, past the purple, sunbaked mesquite and stunted juniper. One thought kept pounding in his mind. He wanted to hurt Josh Logan. Hurt Logan as he himself had been hurt. Logan had driven a wedge between him and Jennifer and Tad was determined to make him pay for it. Tad ground his teeth, and the muscles of his jaw grew taut.

On he pushed into the jumble of boulders that reared up, raw and jagged against the sky. His spread lay on the other side of this hump. There was an easier route around the elevation, that thrust itself out upon the valley floor, but it would take hours longer. Time seemed important now because in the back of his mind a plan had formed. A daring plan that made anything easy seem distasteful.

The trail wound across a dangerous, boulder-strewn slide that ran down the steep slope into the valley. At the edge of the dry wash, he could see the corrugated steel mine buildings, shining in the sunlight. Beside them reared the super-structure over the mine shaft, and the huge slag pile spread out like a gigantic sleeping animal, slate gray against the pink sand of the wash.

As Tad Coleman picked his way along the trail he noticed deep fissures in the dry, hard-packed earth, cracked by the intense heat and long drought. Further on he crossed the narrow, steep-walled canyon that carried cool mountain waters down into his valley. Now there was scarcely a trickle of moisture to dampen the rounded boulders in the bottom. After an hour's ride he drew up to his one-room cabin and set about filling his saddle bags.

That chore finished, Tad went to the spring and scooped out enough water to fill a bucket which he set before the stallion. There was scarcely two inches of water in the sandy bottom. Devil of a country, he



thought. Even his spring was drying up.

Then he rode out upon his range, following the steep, vermilion cliffs that bordered the eastern limits of the valley. He remembered how proud he'd been of this land when he took out his homestead. It brought a bitter, cynical twist to his lips.

HE TURNED into a side canyon that sloped up to the wrinkled ridge that divided his range from Logan's Circle L spread. Just over the ridge was the line camp, hidden in a clump of scraggy, piñon pines. His thoughts turned to the girl, and their last rendezvous at the shack. That was when he had given vent to the angry outburst against her father.

"You don't realize the heavy responsibilities my father has, Tad," she had argued.

"Why won't he let me sell my beef to the company store?" he demanded.

"I don't know."

"He's actin' like a little tin god," retorted Tad. "Who does he think he is?"

"He has people to think of, not cows."

"Cows are better than the people he's brought in," answered Tad hotly. "You know yourself things were a lot better around here before he opened that blamed silver mine."

"Tad—you're impossible."

"Yeah? You're gettin' as unreasonable as your old man."

"Well," she exhaled huffily. "If that's the way you feel about us—" She turned and mounted her horse. "I hope I never see you again, Tad Coleman," she blurted and spurred her horse homeward.

At that moment he had made up his mind to forget her. He'd find a buyer for his beef and make a new start in some distant place. But during the lonely nights on the long slow drive to the railroad, her eyes shone in every star, the moon mirrored her face, even the night air carried her fragrance. When he looked into the leaping flames of his campfire, she laughed back at him.

The harder he tried to forget her, the more she filled his thoughts. No matter what plans he made, Jennifer was always a part of them. He had to have her, and deep inside he be-

lieved she wanted him. It had to be that way. It simply had to be.

He had been patient, tried every respectable way to win her, but it was no go. Now he had to use drastic means and he grinned mirthlessly as he contemplated his plan. He would take Jennifer, force her, if necessary, and move westward. They'd find a range some place and make a fresh start together. This would deliver a jolt to Josh Logan. By the time the old man could find them it would be too late...

Over his thoughts Tad heard a deep rumble of distant thunder. He dropped into the wooded shallow where the line camp stood and, loosening the cinch of his saddle, turned the sorrel into the pole coral. He found a shady spot under a scrubby pine and hunkered down to wait for Jennifer.

FROM WHERE he sat he could see the slender ribbon of trail snake downward to Dry Creek. The town lay sleeping, like a tired dog, in the brassy afternoon sun. He watched a buckboard turn off the main street and bump over the road to the silver mine. Two men descended and were swallowed up in the gaping hole of the shaft. No sign of Jennifer.

A cool breeze stirred the boughs of the pine and Tad looked southward to see the horizon rimmed with dark blue clouds. A vivid flame forked earthward and again there was the distant roll of thunder.

"Fine time for rain," he muttered. "It's too blame late to do any good now. The Lord runs His rain like He does His revenge. By the time it gets here, the damage is done."

His eyes sought the long trail winding through the scorched brown stubble and centered on the haze of dust kicked up by the buckboard. It hung there like a motionless phantom, softening the outlines of the buildings along the street. Tad took out his makings and slowly formed a cigarette. He watched the blue smoke drift upward into the branches of the pines.

"Wonder if she likes that dude?" he asked himself. "Maybe she goes for his fancy talk. Could be she likes the soft life she's been livin' and doesn't

want any part of bein' a rancher's wife.

"Maybe she doesn't intend to come up here at all."

He ground out his smoke.

The rain came first in big drops, spattering upon the dry, thirsty earth around him. Then the sky darkened and steaming, silver sheets swept down the dried slopes. He ran to the sorrel and striped his gear from its back. After he stowed it in the abandoned shack he stood in the doorway and rolled another cigarette. A vivid streak of lightning sizzled and cracked and the hills shook with the roar of thunder.

"Hell," he mumbled. "She'll never ride up in this storm."

Tad Coleman knew he had been licked. Not only by Josh Logan, but by the elements themselves. It seemed that every force around him conspired to drive him down, and a savage urge to fight back welled up inside him.

"Is this Your revenge?" he shouted bitterly at the ragged raging clouds. "I've taken Josh Logan's guff all these years and look what it's got me. I lost my stock and now I lost my girl... Why don't You tell Your preachers to speak the truth." He shook his clenched fists and cried out: "But I'll get squared with Josh Logan. I will, so help me, I will—"

Angrily he tore his poncho loose from his bed roll and climbed into it. Unmindful of the drenching torrent, he saddled his stallion and drove it down the slippery, muddy trail. He turned off into the wash and came up behind a small shack that shrieked a warning in red paint across its corrugated steel sides. **DANGER—HIGH EXPLOSIVE.**

He glanced around but his eyes could not pierce more than a few yards in the driving torrent. He picked up a sharp rock and loosened the hasp with its heavy padlock, then wrenched it free. Inside he took six sticks of dynamite and bound them together. To this he attached a cap and a length of fuse.

"There—this ought to put a crimp in that new machinery," he muttered. "Like to see the dude put it together after this little firecracker goes off."

He tucked the dynamite under his poncho and went to the door. The mine, with its derrick-like super-

structure, was but a blur before him.

**S**UDDENLY there was an earth-shaking roar that caused him to stop in his tracks. He rushed outside as the rumbling sound grew in intensity. He squeezed the hard knot under his arm to make sure the dynamite had not already exploded. It was still there. Then he looked back at the towering peaks above.

Through the driving torrent, the blurred, ragged shapes changed form. A flash of lightning showed him the whole face of the mountain was crumbling, tumbling down the steep slope. Then another sound struck his ear, the rush of angry waters and the crunching impact of heavy, bouncing boulders. It increased in fury, and he understood what was taking place. The slide had blocked the canyon sending the full force of flood waters down the wash. As he stared at the spreading destruction he noticed the mine shaft was directly in its path. The slag pile offered but little protection.

Tad stepped back into the shack and detached the cap from the dynamite. It was trifling compared to the force that now surged toward the mine. A momentary feeling of guilt flashed across his mind and was quickly forgotten.

The first crest of flood water came leaping down the wash and tore at the pile of slag. Backwash surged frothily around the super structure of the mine. Over the boom of thunder a second crest approached, carrying crashing boulders along with its tremendous power. Rain was pouring down in solid sheets and Tad could see the dim outline of a man rush from the mine. He splashed through the churning waters and gained the protection of the dwindling slag pile. Reaching the bank he leaped into the buckboard. The frightened animal reared and dashed madly toward town.

Tad thought he heard a feeble cry from the mine. He remembered seeing two men enter a few hours past. Only one had escaped. Mounting his sorrel he rode toward the bank.

There was a creaking, splintering crash as the tall super structure was torn from its moorings. It seemed to

be wrenched apart by some mighty agonized scream.

In the foaming spray, he noticed a bobbing head. The man was riding a heavy timber. Tad loosened his rope and rode as close to the brink as he dared.

The timber churned as it was caught in a back current and Tad made his throw. He slipped a dally over the horn of his saddle and slowly pulled the half-drowned man to the bank.

When he saw the horror-stricken face, he was tempted to shove him back into the raging torrent. It was Josh Logan. Tad Coleman's big moment had arrived. Revenge was his for the taking, and it was a dirty, slimy thing. A feeling of revulsion possessed him. He wanted to retch, to rid himself of something foul and filthy. He looked down at the old man.

Gone was his proud, domineering air. He was just a weak, helpless, old man, begging for aid. Tad dragged him through the mud to safety. Logan lay there, clawing the wet earth with his bony hands, gasping for breath. There was a scared, pleading look in his glazed eyes. The awkward angle of one of his legs told Tad it had been broken.

He reached down and hoisted Logan, none too gently, over the back of his sorrel. Tad moved like an automaton. Nothing seemed to make any difference now. The spark that had fired his recent actions had burned out, leaving an emptiness in his chest. The old man's agonized moans irritated him as he led the animal toward town.

"Fine thing," grumbled Tad. "Helping a man that's brought me nothin' but grief." He'd dumped Logan at his daughter's feet, then forget the whole blame mess. Even the destruction of the accursed mine failed to bring him satisfaction. The whole thing left a sour taste in his mouth. Wearily he plodded through the wet, sticky muck.

JENNIFER saw them approach, and ran out into the storm to meet them. "Dad!" she cried. "What happened to him, Tad?"

He looked at her as if she were a memory of a shattered dream, and

said nothing. Almost without thought, Coleman hoisted the old man to his shoulder and carried him inside. The girl ran beside him, stirring his thoughts into an awareness of his surroundings.

It gave him a certain satisfaction to hear his wet boots slosh over the expensive carpets. Jennifer opened a door and he dumped the mud-splattered mine owner upon the immaculate silk coverlet of his canopied bed. Sobbing, Jennifer dropped to her knees beside her father.

"Better call the doc," growled Tad. "He's busted a leg."

A grim smile started to curl the corners of his lips. There was a note of revenge in this after all. He had brought in some good clean mud and splashed it all over their vaunted finery.

Jennifer arose and turned a tear-stained face to him. "Please, Tad, get Dr. Pyle," she pleaded. "I can't leave him now."

Tad's spirits clouded with his expression. The conflict inside him sparked and started to burn. He wanted to shout that Josh Logan was getting just what he deserved. In fact, he should have left him in the raging torrent to drown. These thoughts battered against the words of Preacher Tompson, and behind those words welled up the training his father had given him. The two forces clashed head on and left him powerless. Unable to think, he reacted to her command like a freshly broken bronc obeys the pressure of the bit. He turned and left the room.

When Tad returned with the medico, Jennifer had removed her father's wet clothing and had bathed the mud and debris from his person. Josh Logan was lying on clean white sheets, alternately moaning and cursing. Dr. Pyle administered an anesthetic and called upon Tad to assist him in setting the broken leg. He responded mechanically, but after a moment his interest was aroused by the efficiency and skill of the gray-haired medic.

When they finished, Jennifer had hot coffee waiting for them. Tad explained briefly how he had found the old man.

"Thank you, Tad," said Jennifer. "I'm terribly ashamed of the way Dad treated you today."

"Good thing you were there," said the doctor. "He owes his life to you." He gulped his coffee. "I have another patient waiting—must be on my way."

"Yeah—me too," said Tad.

"You're staying right here, Tad Coleman," commanded Jennifer. "Get out of those wet clothes. I've got some dry things laid out for you."

The medico smiled knowingly. "I left some medicine in the bedroom. Give it to Josh when he wakes up."

As Dr. Pyle closed the door, Jennifer moved close and looked up at Tad.

**T**HE DEEP bitterness in the young man's heart seemed to dissolve. He knew he was being weak, a traitor to himself, but his arms reached out, as if pulled by a magnet stronger than he could resist. He drew her close.

At that moment the front door burst open and Springwell rushed in.

"You poor child!" gushed the engineer. "I came as quickly as I could. Your father—how can I tell you?"

Tad dropped his arms and Jennifer turned to face Springwell.

"Your father—the mine—everything is lost." The engineer gestured helplessly. "But my dear, don't feel that you're alone. My heart, my fortune, everything I have, I lay at your feet."

"Jennifer!" The sharp shrill voice of Josh Logan blasted from the bedroom.

"Impossible!" shouted the engineer. His wide, amazed eyes followed the girl to the bedroom. He took a few quick steps to see for himself.

"You!" shouted Logan. "Leave me at the bottom of the shaft, will you? Run off with the lift and make me climb out!" The old man screamed: "Get out of my house, you cowardly coyote—get the devil out of here!"

"I beg your pardon," muttered Springwell huffily. "I resent your tone, Mr. Logan!" But the engineer beat a hasty retreat to the door.

"Get me some whiskey, Jennifer," demanded the old man. "I want to see Tad Coleman. Where is he?"

"I'm getting him into some dry

things," said Jennifer. "Now Dad—he saved your life—please be careful—"

"Careful, be hanged," cried Josh Logan. "I've got something to say to him."

A surge of anger shook Tad's battered mind into action. "Go ahead and say it," he shouted, coming to the door of the bedroom. "I've got a few things to say to you, too."

"Tad, please—Dad—" pleaded the girl.

"I always hollered out loud when I thought I was right," bellowed Josh Logan. "So I'll do the same when I'm wrong. I was wrong treatin' you like I did, Tad—wrong in keepin' you two apart—fact is, everything I did the last two years looks wrong to me now."

"Huh," grunted Tad, not believing his ears.

"Now that that blamed hole is gone, I'm kinda glad," continued Logan. "Those lower veins weren't too rich anyhow." A smile lit the old man's face. "I can go back to raisin' beef. That's where I belong. Had no business burrin' into the ground like a prairie dog in the first place."

"Yeah, I guess so," stammered Tad. He was too flabbergasted to comprehend all that the old man was saying.

"Where's that whiskey, Jennifer? I need a drink—so does Tad. Risked his neck fishin' me out of that flood."

Jennifer left the room. Tad stood for a moment, dazed, uncomfortable, and utterly confused. He backed out of the room, and saw Jennifer coming up the hall with a decanter of whiskey. She rushed into his hungry arms.

A feeling of confidence surged through Tad's mind and body, and seemed to build a foundation beneath him, a solid footing that he could walk on with inward peace and security. The Lord's justice might be slow in coming, but what a mighty sweep it made when it arrived. The preacher had it right after all...

"Where's that whiskey?" shouted Josh Logan, but to Tad, with Jennifer's lips pressing against his and the blood pounding in his ears, the voice sounded strangely feeble. ●END

# THE BLOODY HARPES

by NOEL M. LOOMIS

**T**WO OF the most fiendish killers in American History were the Harpes—Micajah (Big Harpe) and Wiley (Little Harpe). They flourished in Kentucky in the late 1700's, which then was known as the Western Country.

They were born in North Carolina, and it is said their father was a Tory. Most Tories went West hurriedly after the Revolutionary War, but the elder Harpe stayed in Carolina, and this was supposed to have put a blight on the lives of the Harpe boys.

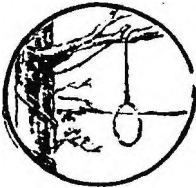
They went to the brand new town of Knoxville in Kentucky and settled there as farmers. With them were two women, Susan Roberts and Betsey Roberts (probably sisters), who were supposed to be their wives.

The Harpes were constantly armed

household, but evidently she accepted the presence of the Roberts girls.

The Harpes started going to Knoxville to trade pork and mutton—their supply of which seemed inexhaustible. When, in addition they began to spend a lot of their time drinking and gambling, suspicion arose. Also, houses and stables began to burn for no apparent reason. This was the outstanding characteristic of the Harpes—whatever they did apparently was not often done for gain but because they wanted to do it.

They stole some horses and were captured, but got away. Then they were traced to Hughes' Rowdy Groggery. A few days later a man named Johnson, who had been in the Groggery that night, was found in the Holston River. His body had been



**Killing easily and indiscriminately, the hell-born Harpe boys enjoyed mysterious immunity from law. . .**



with knives and tomahawks, awake or asleep. They and their women too wore leather hunting shirts and moccasins and roamed the forests of east Tennessee like savages. In a country and a time where a coonskin cap was the badge of a white man—for Indians were still very much present—the toughened Harpes never wore any kind of headgear except in the coldest weather.

At Knoxville, a riproaring, wide-open frontier town, they fitted in. They went out a few miles and built a log cabin and planted a few acres of ground, and generally made such a good impression (they evidently didn't have much competition) that within a few weeks Little Harpe courted and married a slender, lovely blonde preacher's daughter named Sally Rice. It is not recorded what Sally thought of the peculiar Harpe

ripped open and filled with stones.

Hughes now said the Harpes had done the killing—but the Harpes were gone. A party of "regulators" went to the Groggery, pulled it down with ropes, and flogged Hughes brutally with a cowhide soaked in brine. Twenty licks of that weapon on the bare back were enough to knock a man senseless, and the loss of blood could very well kill him. It is said that Hughes took fifty.

**SUCH WAS** the way of justice in those days. For killing a man, the punishment was hanging. Then you could forget it, for the man hanged would bother you no more. But for lesser crimes, such as, perhaps, contributing to the delinquency of murderers, or stealing hogs (horse-theft generally drew hanging), the rugged and short-tempered frontiersmen, in-

stead of removing the culprit, administered punishment.

Whipping, as they did it, was brutal—some have said sadistic. But these were largely unlettered men, not skilled in philosophy or criminology. They figured if a man didn't need hanging, he sure needed punishment, and they gave it to him.

The rather standard whipping by law (which Hughes' was not) was done by the sheriff. The prisoner was put in stocks and the tops of his ears nailed to the boards. Then he was given thirty or forty lashes with a cowhide whip—and each one was a blow that removed skin and flesh. If the whip wielder got chicken-hearted, he would be replaced immediately, for the frontiersmen wanted their whippings to be thorough.

When the whipping was finished, the sheriff with a sharp knife cut off the tips of the man's ears to free him.

Strangely enough, there seems to be no record of deaths caused by whipping. It would be an interesting study. It would also be interesting to know the percentage of reform induced by this punishment. Probably the answer would not be encouraging.

Such punishments, it may be noted, were coincidental with a great wave of revival frenzy that swept the Western Country in that period.

The five Harpes now traveled West on the Wilderness Road of Daniel Boone. They killed a peddler named Peyton and took his horse, then two Marylanders, whom they first shot; later Big Harpe, noting that one man was not dead, "split open his head with a tomahawk."

At an inn they ran into Stephen Langford, a young man of good family from Virginia. Langford was eating breakfast when the Harpes came up. They were dirty and obviously poverty-stricken; their ferocious glances seemed to be looks of hunger. When breakfast was ready, the landlord announced it, but the Harpes did not gather at the table, saying they had no money. Whereupon Langford offered to pay for their food, and did so, displaying considerable silver. Then they all set out on the road together, for outlaws

were so frequently encountered that it was urged that no person travel alone. They killed Langford.

The body was discovered some days later, and identified. At this time the citizens did not know about the previous killings. A posse was organized to find the Harpes. It trailed them from place to place until it discovered them sitting on a log and captured them without protest.

The five were put in jail. They were taken to Danville for district court. On Jan. 20, 1799, the jailer bought "two horse-locks to chain the men's feet to the ground," and on February 13 "one lock for the front door." On February 20, "two pounds of nails." The prisoners were constantly guarded by two men.

But on March 16 the two male Harpes left their family behind. On March 19 the jailer paid 12 shillings for "mending the wall where the prisoners escaped."

In the meantime, the women had been busy with projects of their own. On February 7 Betsey had borne a son, at an expense to the district for midwife, hyson tea, ginger, sugar, etc. of 1 pound, 8 shillings, 10 pence.

On March 6 Susan produced a daughter at a total expense to the district of 1 pound, 1 shilling, 4 pence.

On April 8 Sally produced a daughter at a total expense of 6 shillings, 9 pence.

**T**HE TRIALS were held a week later and the women discharged. It was commonly believed that the women would have been happy to be delivered from the murderous Harpes, and they themselves said they wanted to go back to Knoxville and start life anew. Clothes were donated to them and a purse was made up. They were given an old mare, and set off toward Knoxville.

Thirty miles away they changed routes to follow the Green River—and the Harpes. They traded the old mare for a canoe and got out of sight. Curiously enough, some people had been suspicious of them from the first and had tried to follow them, but now the trail was lost.

Meanwhile, the Harpes were kill-

ing again. They murdered a 13-year-old boy, cut up his body, and threw it into a sinkhole. Their loot was a sack of flour.

Men hunted them, and ran when they were confronted by them. The Harpes were big, heavy-shouldered, with low foreheads and tight, curling hair, both had scowly faces, that should not have deterred the frontiersmen—but it did.

The Harpes had an incredible sense of melodrama. One of their best acts was to refrain from killing a victim, then to shout together, "We are the Harpes!" and disappear.

There seems to have been no great purpose behind this except what moved them on the spur of the moment. They did not seem to plan ahead.

Their only attempt at cleverness was to dress as Methodist preachers, when they carried tomahawks and usually went hatless. They would stop at a cabin and eat, and on being invited to give a blessing, would deliver a sonorous and convincing prayer. Nobody, it seems, suspected them until after they were gone.

James Garrard, governor of Kentucky, on April 22 proclaimed a reward of \$300 each for their apprehension. He said Micajah was six feet high, 30 or 32 years old, with "an ill-looking, downcast countenance, and his hair comes very much down his forehead.... Wiley Harpe is meager in his face looks older though really younger, and has likewise a downcast countenance."

The Harpes killed at least two more—one of them a man named Stump, who went to present them with a wild turkey and a string of fish. He also took his fiddle to play for his new neighbors but they were unmoved. It wasn't necessary for them to kill him, and they had nothing to gain, but they did it anyway.

Killing indiscriminately, easily, dispassionately, and seemingly with complete immunity from justice, the Harpes moved through western Kentucky until they reached Cave-in-Rock, a notorious headquarters for criminals.

**T**HEY MET their women and children here but were not allowed to

stay here long. The other outlaws' main business at the cave was capturing houseboats coming down the Ohio. The Harpes took one of their captives, stripped him, put him on a blindfolded horse, and ran the horse over a hundred-foot cliff. There wasn't much left of either horse or rider after they landed on the rocks below.

This was too much, it seems, for when the ruthless outlaws of Cave-in-Rock, and the Harpes left, and by the middle of July were killing near Knoxville again. They killed three or four, and then one day met two brothers named Brassel, asked the news, heard about the killings, and invited the Brassels to join them in hunting the Harpes.

As soon as the brothers agreed, Big Harpe accused them of being the Harpes and began to tie them up. One brother fled; the other was killed. A small posse went after the Harpes and met them coming back. The two parties passed each other on the trail in complete silence.

The Harpes headed toward Tennessee. They killed a man, and then, stopping at the cabin of one John Graves, were invited to spend the night. They killed Graves and his son with Graves' own axe.

Now they met a Negro boy and dashed his brains out against a tree, but took nothing. A small girl was next.

Then they departed from custom and made a mass attack on an encampment made up of two brothers, their wives, several children, and some black servants. They were assisted by two renegade Cherokee Indians, and killed the entire party except for one man.

Now the Harpes headed north near the salt works.

They killed another man, and ate supper with a second—named Tompkins whom for some reason they did not harm. Big Harpe gave him a teacupful of powder that ironically was later to be used to kill Big Harpe.

They stopped at the home of Moses Stegall, who had sometimes been accused of acting as a spy for the Harpes. Stegall was gone, but they stayed with his wife and small son

and a Major Love, also a traveler. They killed Love up in the loft because he snored, killed Mrs. Stegall and the baby, and burned the house.

They met two men with packs of salt, "arrested" them for the Stegall crime, and then killed both of them. They were really looking for Squire McBee, a justice of the peace who had been active in pursuing them. This was perhaps the only motivated effort they ever made—a crime of revenge—and it was not successful.

McBee and six other men, including the one who had received the cupful of gunpowder, took out after the Harpes leaving all their families fortified up at McBee's place. The following morning they ran onto the Harpes, who separated and went in opposite directions.

**P**RESENTLY the Harpe women were located in a shallow cave, but the Harpes were not with them. They saw Big Harpe on a ridge. Tompkins had given his gun, with Harpe's powder, to a man named Leiper, who caught up with Harpe and shot him through the spine, breaking it.

Harpe still tried to shoot, but his rifle misfired. He fought with a tomahawk for a while, but finally surrendered. But he stabbed his horse in the flanks and got away. They caught up with him a while later, almost unable to move for loss of blood. They pulled him down from the horse.

They gave him a drink of water out of one of his own shoes, and then Stegall shot him and decapitated him. Another story says that Stegall began the cutting while Harpe was still alive. Nevertheless, they put his head into a sack along with some roasting ears.

One account says that one of the Harpe women was forced to carry the head by the hair. At any rate, it was put in the fork of a tree near Robertson's Lick. The road became known as Harpe's Head Road, and the skull was there for many years. (There are many different accounts as to the exact *modus* of fastening the head to the tree, or pole.)

The posse took the three women to Henderson and left them for trial.

The five were ordered sent to Russellville to district court—at a total cost of \$281.78 up to their delivery in Russellville. The women pled not guilty and were so found.

Six years later, incidentally, the man Stegall ran off with a young girl, and her brothers found the two and shot Stegall. Leiper, who had fired the shot that broke Big Harpe's spine, lived to hear himself accused of being an accomplice of Harpe, and of killing him to keep this from being known. He died a year after Stegall, an outcast.

As usual concerning such persons, the physical descriptions vary considerably. Some say the Harpes had red hair. There is reason for doubting that they were brothers, and likewise reason for doubting that the Roberts women were sisters. It is worth observing that this period of terror and murder lasted only about a year.

It may be that Little Harpe did have red hair, for it is referred to more than once.

Susan was described by her last jailer as "rather tall, rawboned, dark hair and eyes, and rather ugly," about 25 years old. Betsey was "rather handsome, light hair, blue eyes." Sally was "really pretty and delicate, about 20 years old."

What happened to the women? Betsey married and lived in Tennessee. Her son enlisted in the Army. . . . Susan did not marry; her daughter, Lovey, grew into an attractive woman, but had a very bad temper. Both she and her mother were driven from the neighborhood for their bad characters. In her later years Susan tried to defend Big Harpe, maintaining that Little Harpe was the incorrigible one of the pair. . . . Sally married again and moved to Illinois, and was later seen there by her last jailer. She had a daughter, a "fine looking young lady" by her new husband.

There is still one of the group not accounted for—Little Harpe.

He was not heard from for two and a half years. Where he was during that period, no one knows. How he managed to remain out of the public notice for so long is also hard to understand. He had friends among the renegade Indians, and he might have been with them. It would seem that



if he had gone west or southwest into Texas, he would have reverted to his old habits and have come to light.

**I**N APRIL, 1802, Little Harpe apparently was a member of Samuel Mason's gang. A proclamation had been issued by W. C. C. Claiborne, governor of the Territory of Mississippi, linking Harpe with Mason, and Mason is said to have read this and laughed. Harpe was known to him as John Setton or John Taylor. Whether Harpe's real identity was known to him is impossible to say on the evidence at hand.

Mason and Harpe were arrested by the Spanish at Little Prairie (near New Madrid, Mo.) and after a prolonged examination were ordered sent to New Orleans for further trial on suspicion of robbery and theft—one of the items of evidence being the presence of seven thousand piasters in U. S. banknotes, "many of them counterfeit."

They were found not guilty of any crimes on Spanish soil but were ordered sent to Natchez. This was a turn they had not counted on. They escaped from the boat on March 26, and Mason established headquarters in the Natchez area. As yet there was not even wagon road from Natchez north to Nashville. The Natchez Trace was a narrow path, beset with outlaws, Indians, wolves, bears, and alligators—not to mention mosquitoes. The Territory of Mississippi had only recently had its status settled as a part of the United States, and the swamps and cane brakes in the Natchez area were a great hunting ground for outlaws.

There was considerable traffic downriver in flatboats, in which flour, whisky, iron goods, pork, corn, and furs were taken to New Orleans. The

boatmen, waking up in The Swamp of New Orleans after a protracted binge, had no recourse but to go back home up the Natchez Trace. Here they camped out and made their way north as best they could, often on foot. But there were also farmers and shippers who had large sums of money, and these spiced the broth for the outlaws. It was a wild country, with mail once every ten days. New Orleans was in a foreign country. It was hard to trace a man who disappeared.

In July a man named May appeared in Natchez, claiming to have been held up by Mason. In October he returned, with Little Harpe. Harpe was arrested, but released on the promise that he would guide May to Mason.

Probably May was a member of Mason's gang and undoubtedly wanted the reward, which now totaled possibly \$2,000 (the reports vary, and no copy of the original circular seems to be preserved).

May and Wiley Harpe went across the Mississippi in a canoe. They found Sam Mason and cut off his head and rolled it in blue clay so it would keep. Then they went back to Natchez and claimed the reward.

The head was identified, but so was Little Harpe. He couldn't talk his way out of it.

Public sentiment was against them. Both May and Little Harpe were tried and both sentenced. They walked to the gallows field, were forced to climb ladders. The nooses were secured around their necks and the ladders were taken away.

After they were dead, both heads were cut off. Little Harpe's head was mounted on a pole north of the town.

It was an old family tradition.

●END

#### THE KILL

"You'll get quite a stake out of this, in reward money, son," Ben Purdum grinned. "I'm hoping you'll sink yore roots somewhere around Bonanza Bar. As the man to take over my job when I fix to retire next fall."

Holding Janice close, Tom Clevenger knew it was time he was releasing her, but somehow he couldn't give up the tender clinging softness

(Cont'd from pg. 20)

of her. He had never held a woman in his arms like this and it suddenly occurred to him that he wanted to keep Janice near him the rest of his days.

"Thanks, Sheriff," Tom Clevenger whispered, his stubbled jaw brushing the girl's head. "Reckon I've had my fill of roamin' the country, at that. Think I'll take you up on your proposition, Ben."

●END

# — NO GUN ON HIS HIP

by RAY G. ELLIS

**T**HE ROAD was a loosely thrown riata that followed the contours of the ridge. Over it the wagon moved slowly, swaying and grumbling at the effort of carrying the personal belongings piled high in the rear. Behind the wagon and tied to it were two saddle horses that Kurt

**In their one year of marriage, Kurt Milford had told Jeannette just two lies—that he'd recently bought the ranch, and that his first wife had died of a fever...**



He pulled the man off the saddle.

Milford had laughingly referred to as his remuda.

Kurt rolled with the gyrations of the wagon and from a distance he would have looked like he was asleep. But his brown eyes, mere slits now against the sunlight, jumped over the valley below, seeming to stop upon no one thing but missing not a detail of the life, or lack of life, below.

On the seat next to him was Jeannette, Kurt's wife of a year. She fought the wagon's every lurch, clutching the edge of the board seat and wondering what ever had possessed her to wear the white dress for this, their homecoming. The dress was brown with dust from a day-and-a-half ride from Santa Fe.

"How much farther," she gasped between lurches.

Kurt drew his eyes from the valley and glanced at his wife. He smiled and said, "Not much farther. Look, you can see it now."

Across the valley and below them he pointed a work-hardened hand toward a group of trees and a small white house resting in the shade.

"It's beautiful, Kurt," she said softly, taking his arm. "It will make a fine home."

He nodded and almost said, "It did make a fine

home."

The trail switched back upon itself like a half-opened pocket knife and Kurt braked the wagon to the floor of the valley. Familiar to him and straight the road was now and he stepped up the pace of the black horse that pulled the wagon. They passed a road that curved off to the right, down the valley, and Kurt caught himself as he was about to mention that it led to the town of Dos Pasos at the end of the valley.

Things hadn't changed much in the two years he'd been away, Kurt noted as they followed the road toward the house he'd pointed out from the ridge. It was cool in the shade of the trees when they pulled into the yard. Kurt helped his wife down from the wagon and she sank to the tall grass, sighing.

"It's just beautiful, Kurt," she said. "How did you ever find it?"

Kurt busied himself about the wagon to hide the guilt that lay in his eyes when he lied to her.

"Just lucky," he said, trying to make it light. "It's more than I expected, buying the place sight unseen."

They moved the supplies and their clothing into the house, then Kurt saddled his bay horse, telling Jeanette that he had business in town. She laughed and told him she'd have the house cleaned up and livable by the time he got back.

Her clean laughter remained to haunt him as he rode down the valley to Dos Pasos. He hated this deception but if she knew nothing of the past she was less likely to get involved in that past.

The valley opened funnel-wise, the ridges flattening out into low rolling hills. Dos Pasos straddled the Santa Rosa River whose ribbon of greenery Milford had followed into town.

**T**HE ROAD led through a scattering of adobe huts, then hoofbeats sounded hollowly as Kurt crossed the wooden bridge and rode into town. He surveyed the row of low wooden buildings until he found what he was looking for. Old Pancho was in his usual place, hunkered against the front of the bank building asleep with

a huge sombrero covering the top part of his thin body.

Kurt smiled as he looked at the familiar figure of the Mexican and reined in before the sheriff's office. It was good to be back, even with the memories.

Sheriff Dolan looked up from the pipe he had been lighting when Kurt stepped through the door. His shaggy eyebrows lifted slightly then dropped again and he said, "Figgered you'd be back."

Kurt looked into the old gray eyes that were still eagle-sharp and felt warm with the renewing of an old friendship.

"Is that all you got to say to a man who's been gone better'n two years?" Kurt asked hooking a chair over from the wall with his foot.

Dolan shrugged and blew smoke toward the cracked ceiling, saying, "You waited long enough. Thought somethin' happened to you."

"Somethin' did," Kurt said, pulling out the makin's. "I got me a new wife."

The front legs of the sheriff's chair thumped the floor as he leaned forward, surprise parting his mouth.

"And you come back to your old place—?" Dolan began, his voice rising.

The match flared noisily as Kurt lit his cigarette. His smile broadened as he studied the seamed features of Dolan's face. He said, "You don't think I'd ask her to live on forty a month, do you?"

Dolan leaned back again, shaking his head. Worry lines creased his forehead and it was a minute before he spoke. When he did the words held no mirth.

"Sim Glass won't like it," he said. "Or maybe he will. He's been tryin' to find out where you went ever since you left. Where did you go, anyway?"

"Santa Fe."

Dolan chuckled now at the joke. "You been right under his nose all this time and he didn't know it."

"A snake can't see much beyond his nose," Kurt said shortly.

Dolan sighed at the bitterness in Kurt's voice. He said wearily, "I reckon I'll have to get to work again. It's been right peaceful here since you

left—not that I ain't glad to see you back, though.”

Kurt shook his head. “There won't be trouble this time, old friend. It takes two sides to make a war and I don't aim to fight.”

Dolan noticed for the first time Kurt's gun-shy hips. His gnarled fist hit the desk with a thump and he said, “Good lord, man, have you forgotten about Hope and Jimmy?” He waved his hand in exasperation when Kurt started to speak. “You know that Glass would shoot his own grandmother if he thought he'd get another acre of land that way. That jasper worships every blade of grass he owns.”

“I haven't forgot Hope and Jimmy,” Kurt said quietly. “But that's over and done with. It didn't have to happen and I don't aim to drag Jeannette into a range war. She doesn't know about it.”

“You blamed ostrich,” Dolan shouted. “You think by hidin' your head you'll get rid of the danger?”

Kurt rose from the chair. “I ain't hidin' from anything. I've had two years to think about it and that's the way it's goin' to be. You were the one that always told me I was too hot-headed. Now you want me to grab a gun and start shootin'.”

Dolan waved his hand in disgust but the sparkle in his eyes gave him away. He said gruffly, “Gwan about your business. I got to go out back and get some target practice. I'm thinkin' I'll be needin' it the first time you and Glass meet face to face.”

**K**URT WENT to the door and opened it. He shot back over his shoulder, “I don't want you followin' me around like a lost pup, either. You can let that cannon of yours rust away like you been doin' for two years. You won't need it.”

Kurt shut the door behind him as he stepped onto the board walk in front of the office. Dolan's reply was stopped behind the door and Kurt shook his head as he thought about the old man. Dolan had been sheriff so long, as long as Kurt could remember and longer, that his life was tied in some manner or other to every life in Santa Rosa Valley—which was as good a reason as any for his re-elec-

tion every two years. Sim Glass had backed several different men over the years but the sheriff's office was still not one that he could call his own.

The Dos Pasos Mercantile was three doors down the street and Kurt hurried toward it to make his purchases and get back to Jeannette and the ranch. He was stuffing the two denim shirts into the saddle bag when he heard footsteps echoing on the board walk. He looked up from buckling the saddle bag and into the heavy face of Sim Glass. Another man was with Glass that Kurt had never seen before but he knew the type from experience.

Glass had put on weight, Kurt noted, and loomed large beside the slim-hipped, rat-faced man that sided him. He sauntered to the rail, a thin smile touching his lips but not his eyes.

“Hello, Glass,” Kurt said easily.

“The rabbit's come out of his hole, huh?” Glass said, then laughed drily. “You never met this one, did you, Jack.” He spoke to his companion but never took his eyes from Kurt.

Glass went on, his words brittle, biting. “Kurt here ran off from a fight he got into before it was finished. He left his wife to do the fightin' only she couldn't handle it, naturally. What do you think about that, Jack?”

Kurt studied the man called Jack while the words were searing into him like they were engraved on a white hot branding iron. He took a deep breath and held it for a minute before letting it out slowly.

“Oh, I forgot,” Glass said. “You never met Jack Korse, did you? He's my all-around handy man.”

Kurt swung into the saddle, noticing the long-fingered hands that were too close to the carved gun butt, the opaque eyes that knew but one thing—kill or be killed. He swung his gaze back to Sim Glass, staring down at the man. He said quietly, “See you around, Glass,” and headed for the bridge over the river.

For two days Kurt hazed cattle from the mesquite and scrub oak and brought them into the valley. They were KM cows that he had left behind two years before. As the small herd grew, Kurt's spirits rose. He had expected to lose most of his cattle but now he found that his losses

weren't near what he'd expected and there was even a goodly percentage of yearlings mixed in with the older cows. When he finally got the cows into a bawling, restless herd he counted heads and found that there were over one hundred. Not a large herd but good enough to build on.

He was riding down a gentle slope chasing a yearling before him when he came upon the two white crosses. Stark and lonely they were on the bare slope and the short mount of dirt next to the longer one told him whose graves they were. He stopped and dismounted.

Already the shallowly engraved words on the crosses were almost obscured by the cracks in the weathered wood. He stood staring at the crosses, hat in hand, feeling like a different Kurt Milford than the one who had lived with and loved Hope and their five-year-old boy, Jimmy.

Maybe Sim Glass was right, he had run out on them but it wasn't until they had already been killed in the hail of bullets that Glass had sent into the house. When Kurt had turned from the window with an empty gun and found them lying on the floor, dead, he'd quit. It hadn't mattered then where he went, for inside he was empty from the terrible loss. He was a wagon that had lost a wheel and was left to run without direction...

People don't fight unless given something to fight against, Kurt had decided now. He'd give Glass nothing to fight against so that the man would eventually have to give up trying to take the KM spread.

He mounted and started to move the grazing calf down the slope. It seemed in the distant past that he'd drifted into Santa Fe, getting a job now here, now there, drinking too much—until he'd met Jeannette when he had gone into the mercantile to buy clothes. She'd filled the void in him.

Kurt had known soon after he met Jeannette that he'd bring her back here, for the ranch belonged to her as much as it did to him once they were married. He'd told her just two lies in their one year of marriage—that his first wife and child had died of fever and that he'd bought this ranch from a man in Santa Fe....

**T**HREE DAYS after Kurt herded the cattle into the flat pasture of the valley they were gone. Not a cow was left but the trail was as clear as if the thief had left an arrow pointing the way.

Kurt followed the sign, knowing where it would lead him. At the bank of the Santa Rosa the mud was torn and trampled until it was a bog where the cattle had been driven across. He crossed the low water and rode to the fence that separated KM from Glass' Anchor spread.

Even before he had dismounted he saw the shiny angular cut in the wire where someone had used wire cutters. One post lay flat, broken off at the ground and trampled by the driven cattle. He threw down the wire he had been examining and went to his mount. Suddenly the Colt .45 at his hip was a lead weight and Kurt stood for a long moment staring across the broad expanse of Anchor grass and his hands went to the buckle of the gunbelt. When he'd put the gun and holster with the belt wrapped around it beside a fencepost he mounted and continued to follow the trail of the cattle.

The sign was still plain, leading over a small rise and then down into a shallow draw. The trail turned to what would have been downstream if there had been any water in the draw and Kurt followed it in no particular hurry. He'd worn the gun that morning for protection against rattlesnakes, he reflected. Now he wondered just what kind of snakes he'd meet up with.

The draw he'd been following faded into flat grassland. In the distance the Anchor ranch house was a white shimmering rectangle. Kurt glanced at it and then shifted his gaze to the cattle bunched together ahead of him. He guessed they were his and rode toward them.

Glass had obviously made no attempt to scatter the cattle and before Kurt had the bawling critters headed for the draw and KM grass he knew the reason. A dust cloud rose in front of the ranch house like a wind devil but with two riders at the foot of it.

Kurt watched the riders for a moment, then turned his back on them and continued to herd the cows to-

ward his own land, chasing a stray back into the small herd now and then until they had decided upon a leader and then there were no more strays.

The leader of the herd was well into the draw before the two riders caught up with Kurt. Sim Glass and the man called Jack Korse reined in beside Kurt, their mounts breathing hard from the hot ride.

Glass studied the line of cattle for a moment, then said, "Them critters all yours?"

Kurt pulled to a stop and studied the two men. He watched Korse's eyes sweep to his waist, searching for the gun that wasn't there. A flicker of disappointment showed in the gunman's eyes when he didn't find what he was looking for, then was gone, replaced by the habitual hard, flat stare. But it was enough to tell Kurt the reason for the obvious trail the cattle had left.

Kurt said, "You ought to know, Glass."

The rancher stiffened from his slouch in the saddle. "What's that supposed to mean?" he snarled.

Kurt shrugged and suppressed a grim smile at the poor acting.

"My fence was cut and my whole herd driven onto your land. Now who would do a thing like that?" Kurt answered.

He watched the fire kindle in Glass' eyes as the words sank in. The Anchor owner's face was red when he ground out words from between clenched teeth.

"Nobody's ever called me a thief and lived, Milford."

Kurt said, the smile still on his face, "I didn't call you a thief, Glass. I told you what happened and you drew your own conclusions."

"Next time we meet, Milford." Glass said, "you better be packin' your iron."

Kurt flicked a glance at Korse and saw the sweat of restraint on his forehead. The man's fingers stretched taut toward the butt of his gun and Kurt knew the gunman couldn't hold himself much longer.

"Give up, Glass," Kurt clipped out. "You ain't gettin' my spread. I ain't fightin' you for it. I don't have to."

His horse moved forward under the

prod of the spur. He turned his head and spoke over his shoulder, reminding Sim Glass of the past. "You killed Hope and the boy and it did you no good."

**T**HE HERD was still moving forward slowly when Kurt caught up to it. Sweat had made a rivulet between his shoulder blades. He hadn't really expected to be back-shot, although he knew Glass wasn't above that, but it still hadn't been a pleasant thing to ride away from the two men.

At the fence Kurt retrieved his gun and belt, then twisted the broken wires together into a temporary splice until he would have a chance to make more permanent repairs. When that was done the sun was straight overhead and Kurt rode in to the ranch house for the noon meal.

He stopped at the pump to wash before he entered the house. From the open window of the kitchen came the sound of Jeannette's humming a tune to herself as she fixed the meal. The gay lilt in her voice eased the tension from him and he was glad that he hadn't dragged her into the trouble with Glass. It seemed almost right now that he'd lied to her.

He dried his hands on his neckerchief and went in the back door.

"Well, don't just stand there," Jeannette said lightly as Kurt stopped inside the door to watch her swift, sure movement about the kitchen.

To Kurt at this moment she seemed entirely feminine with the gingham apron about her and the light rustling sound she made when she moved. But her appearance belied her inner strength. It didn't seem quite possible that this was the same girl that had been accosted by a drunk on her way home from the store in Santa Fe and had knocked him down with a quick swing of her handbag. The man had run away, she'd told him later.

He went to the table that stood near the other end of the large kitchen. While they ate he told her of the "strayed cattle," as he put it, and of how he'd brought them back and repaired the fence. She took it lightly, chiding him for not taking better care of the fences and Kurt let it go at that.

For almost a week it was nothing but work, eat and sleep. He welcomed the work and his trouble with Sim Glass faded into the back of his mind. Jeannette had straightened the house up and so found time on her hands one afternoon. Kurt suggested a ride and saddled a horse for her.

"Don't ride too far," Kurt said when she was mounted and ready to leave. "This spread ain't the biggest in the country and our neighbors might take offense at you ridin' on their land."

She looked down at him, her eyes dancing. She said, "I just want to see what kind of a bargain you got when you bought this place."

"Ah, get goin'," he retorted. "And don't get lost on the back million acres."

She made a face and rode off at a canter. He watched until she disappeared over a rise, then began to busy himself with repairs to the barn. The door was sagging on its hinges, having blown back and forth in his absence until it was ready to fall off. He took it off the hinges and let it drop to the ground. The split boards he replaced and nailed the rest up tight. Hanging the heavy door without help was a chore and it took most of the afternoon before he had it just the way he wanted.

**WHEN THE SUN** kissed the hills to the west and Jeannette had not returned, Kurt began to worry. She was no tenderfoot but even an experienced hand could have an accident. When he got around to imagining her lying unconscious somewhere out on the range, his worry forced him into action.

He had saddled and was ready to ride out when he saw her top the rise over which she had ridden earlier. She came toward the house on foot. He spurred the horse forward. Even before he reached her side he saw the long red gash on one cheek and the torn out knee in the levis she'd worn for riding.

He swung off the horse before it stopped and caught her as she sagged into his arms. She hadn't fainted but made no protest when he swept her up into his arms and carried her down the hill to the house.

The cheek wound was not as deep as he had at first thought, Kurt found when he bathed it. He'd made her comfortable on the couch and he had a surge of pride when she sat up, smiling faintly.

"Why didn't you tell me there was a war going on?" she said.

He jerked around from the pan of water where he had been wetting a rag to put on her forehead. His gray eyes held a hard glint that Jeannette had never been permitted to see before.

"I thought you were thrown," he said. "What happened?"

"I was riding up where that flat-topped country begins," Jeannette told him.

Kurt nodded shortly and said, "Mesa Grande."

"I thought I heard something that sounded like a shot but I wasn't sure. Anyway, I decided to ride out of there just in case it had been a shot. The next thing I knew the horse went out from under me and I fell into some rocks. When I saw the horse was dead from a gunshot wound, I stayed put. I guess whoever it was got scared or got what they wanted because when I finally moved there was no more shooting."

Kurt stared across the room, twisting the rag in his hands until water dripped from it onto the rug. "I should have told you," he said finally. "I should have known that I couldn't keep you out of it."

She watched him with eyes that held pity and love. "You don't have to tell me anything, Kurt," she said softly. "But I think I know what it is."

He turned back to her, guessing what she would say before she spoke the words.

"Before the shooting started I found two graves, Kurt," she said, wishing now as she watched his stricken eyes that she had not found them. "It was where your wife and boy were buried. I wondered why you lied to me about the ranch until I was shot at. They didn't die of the fever, did they, Kurt?"

He shook his head. "Sim Glass killed them like he tried to kill you."

Then he told her everything, glad that he had to live the lie no longer. It wasn't easy to tell how he'd quit

the night. Hope and Jimmy were killed, nor any of the rest of it, either. But her eyes told him she understood and it was like a blow when it came to him suddenly that he had almost lost her too because he hadn't told her the truth.

"I'm sorry," were the only words she spoke when he finished but the way she said it told him everything.

**THEY TALKED** of Sim Glass and of his desire for more range that bordered on the insane. He told her how Anchor was fenced in on three sides by men bigger than Glass. Kurt's own KM land was the only way out until Glass had built himself up to a size where he could take on the men that hemmed him in.

"Won't he ever give up?" Jeannette said.

Kurt shook his head and guessed, "I thought he would, now I'm not so sure. He's more determined than I thought. Maybe old sheriff Dolan was right—I am a fool for not carryin' a gun."

"Avoiding a fight by not carrying your gun is the right thing against a normal man," she said, "but Sim Glass doesn't seem to be very normal."

Suddenly they realized how hungry they were and Kurt rustled dinner in the kitchen over Jeannette's protest that she was able.

It hadn't been dark long when he put her to bed, again under protest. He saw with satisfaction that she was asleep even before he blew the lamp out.

Restlessness was on him like a thousand prodding needles. Finally he blew out the lamp and went into the yard.

A million stars pricked the black roof of the sky, casting faint light and shadow through the trees. He moved to the gate and through it, closing it quietly behind him. In the black shadow of a tree he leaned against the fence, waiting.

The desire for a cigarette came and went three times before he heard the sound of approaching horses. He stiffened, feeling for his gun.

The habit of not carrying his gun that he'd forced himself into since he'd come back to the ranch had betrayed him. Before, the gun had been such a part of him that he wasn't con-

scious of wearing it most of the time; now, the opposite was true and he felt a moment of anxiety as his hand brushed his bare hip.

The riders came into the dark yard and Kurt saw with relief that there were but two. They stopped near the gate.

"You sure the girl ain't here?" Kurt recognized the flat voice of Korse.

Glass spoke then. "I told you I took care of her. She won't be around for a long time."

Kurt rubbed his sweating palms on his pants. So it was Glass himself that had shot at Jeannette, and he hadn't told Korse about it. Korse was a killer but evidently Glass knew he'd ride out of Anchor in a minute if he learned what Glass had done.

He saw Korse shift in the saddle and face the house. The man's hard voice came to him. "What if he ain't here?"

"He's here," Glass said. He raised his voice and called Kurt's name.

Kurt moved from the shadows, saying, "You don't need to shout, Glass."

The two riders jerked around and stared into the darkness with heads shoved forward. Kurt moved toward them, feeling the sweat in the palms of his hands again. This time he made no attempt to wipe them on his levis. Any motion toward his hips would be taken as a draw—in the darkness he knew they couldn't see yet that he wore no guns.

He stopped two steps from Glass' horse. "What do you want, Glass?" he asked flatly and placed himself so that Glass was between himself and Korse.

"I told you no man calls me a cattle thief and gets away with it," Glass snarled.

Kurt watched the thick fingers that were splayed out over the butt of the gun. He wondered if he could grab that hand before the gun cleared the holster. It was a long chance and he decided to wait.

"I didn't call you a cattle thief," Kurt told him, "but I am callin' you yellow. For trying to ambush Jeannette this afternoon. You didn't tell Korse about that, did you?"

Glass shifted uneasily then his words were loud as he made his bluff. "I've taken all I'll take off you, Mil-



ford!"

Kurt tensed, ready to spring, then Jeannette's voice sounded from the porch. She called his name and Glass dove for his gun. It came up and squeezed off a shot at the white-clothed figure on the porch. The bullet plowed into the shingles of the roof when Kurt leaped and knocked the gun upward.

Glass twisted about savagely and brought the weapon down again. Kurt knocked his foot from the stirrup and pulled him from the saddle. The big man landed heavily on his shoulder but kept the gun in his hand. He brought it to bear and Kurt's high-heeled boot lashed out. The gun went spinning into the darkness. Glass went after it on his hands and knees but he was too slow. Kurt scooped it out of the dirt and leveled it on the panting rancher.

The Anchor owner's breath came in short gasps as, on his knees, he looked down the barrel of his own gun. Death lurked in that small hole, ready to claim him with a tongue of fire.

"I ought to kill you," Kurt said.

Glass found his voice finally and said weakly, "There's no need for that, Milford. We—"

"There's a rifle in the boat," Kurt said, the words clipping out. "Go get it."

Glass stared a moment longer, then got to his feet, and went for the rifle. Before he faced about Kurt heard the click as Glass drew the hammer back. Glass whirled suddenly and flame spurted from the barrel of the rifle. But the shot went toward the stars when the heavy lead slug from Kurt's sixgun slammed into his chest. Glass hit the ground and lay still.

Movement to his right reminded Kurt that Korse was still mounted, watching the play. He swung the .45 around and leveled it at the gunman. Then Kurt realized that Korse had stayed out of the fight, evidently choosing not to side a man who would backshoot a woman.

The gunman sat unmoving for a moment and then he reined his horse around. The darkness swallowed him before he reached the road.

Jeannette was at the gate when Kurt turned. He looked at her for a moment and then down at the gun before he flung it from him. It landed with a thud in the dust and he walked toward the shadow of white that was his wife. ● END

## "SLEEPY" GRASS

A GREAT deal has been written about the famous loco weed of the Southwest, but in New Mexico the first white settlers had an experience with a grass that was astounding. This grass grew fairly abundantly and the settlers thought they had found fine grazing land. Imagine their surprise when it was noted that every time a horse ate the grass, he would fall asleep, stay unconscious for several hours, and often not be ridable for a week or more.

The white men learned from the Indians that this was "sleepy" grass. For years no attempt was made to investigate this curious grass, but early in the present century a trip was made to the region where it grew abundantly, by a party sponsored by the U. S.

by W. K. PUTNEY



Biological Survey. Scientists wanted to find out if the stories told about it were true, and if so, they wished to make a study of it and find out what made it "sleepy".

(Cont'd on page 55)

**What strange effect did this curious grass have on the range stock? Science will some day find the answer to this mysterious weed.**

# EXTRA RIDER by JOHN LUMSDEN

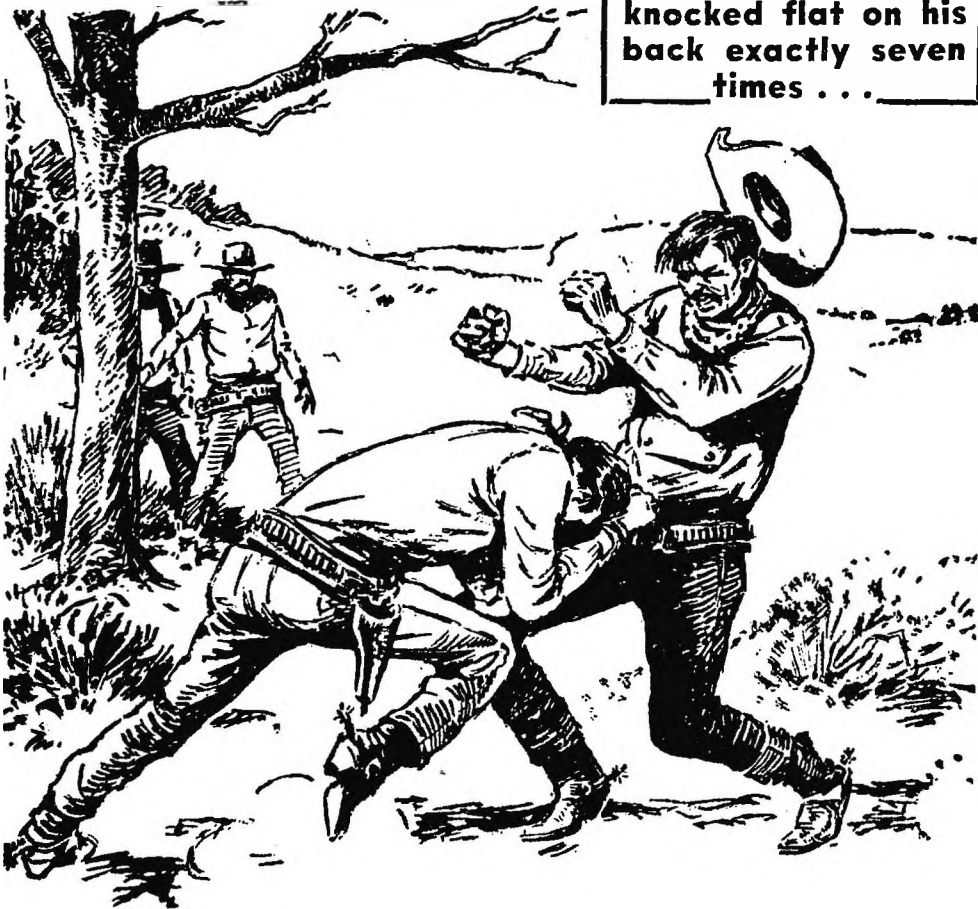
**M**AYBE someday they'll figure out what makes a kid like Marv Griffith tick. Back when he rode into Benton, though, men looked at things straight and simple. You were a "good man" or you weren't a "good man"—and the "good" meant nothing fancy like "noble", but rather simply "a man".

I don't know whether or not it was

Bill Boyle chopped another pole-axer down on the Kid's head that had him crawling.

fully. But one part of it I'll bet we were all unanimous on, crazy as it was: I'll bet we all drew a big, deep breath of relief at the end; I'll bet we were all, deep down inside us, blamed glad it turned out as it did....

**He was with the 2-BAR exactly eleven days. In that time Marv Griffith was knocked flat on his back exactly seven times . . .**



ever decided, in and around Benton, as to Marv Griffith's status in this regard. I guess, finally, we each of us had our own personal opinion, which we did or did not reveal truth-

He showed his hand not five minutes after he rode in, that first morning. I noticed him right away because the boss had sent me into town to do just that: look over

everybody who tied up along the street, even the ones who tied up first off at the saloon rack, to see if I couldn't hire a few hands for fall roundup. We wanted to take no less than a thousand head to market, and as ramrod of the outfit I wanted seven-eight men for such a drive; the 2-BAR regularly kept on only four. And as we were already in the second week of the gather, the extra riders needed to be hired pronto.

Marv Griffith didn't tie up at the saloon. He tied up at the livery. *That's one I'd like to hire*, I thought; because a man who thought first of his horse was apt to be a responsible one. Then, a minute later, I wasn't so sure.

Frank Toomey had just picked up his horse, and Frank was a middle-aged, solid-built, moderately successful rancher who didn't think too fast or act even that fast; and he had been standing with his mount square in the entrance to the place just watching the holster vigorously scrubbing a little mare with a grain sack.

And Marv Griffith hadn't stood there thirty seconds before he said without anything a mile from a smile, "You coming or going, mister?"

It didn't register on Frank at first; that was the way he was; it took an idea a long time to find its way into his brain. Then Frank turned around with that loose, always half-open mouth of his, and knowing what I know about the kid now, I reckon it was that doltish look on the burly rancher's face that did the trick.

"Come on, come on," the kid said, sort of out one side of his mouth, and he suddenly shoved both Frank and Frank's horse out of the way. Just leaned to it like he'd put a shoulder to a mired-down Conestoga. And him no more than half Toomey's girth and heft, if anything an inch shorter.

It was a warm day but Marv Griffith had on a leather jacket, and some kind of thick-materialled trousers stuffed into high-heeled boots that looked too big for him, and a dusty flop of a one-time stetson; and his extra-wide gunbelt was strapped around the outside of the leather

jacket, with the big .45 practically on his belly, presumably for a right-hand draw. His horse, a good enough looking roan, had that messy appearance too, with the ancient rig and blanket rolls and saddlebags lashed to it or hanging from it all the way around, even jammed against the pommel.

"That rub-down a rush job?" Marv addressed the liveryman. "Because this animal of mine needs feeding."

Frank Toomey was no more belligerent than he was swift, finding it more profitable to avoid trouble, but few men could have taken what the kid had dished out here.

"Well now," was what he finally said, but he was madder than the words indicated, and I remembered once when Frank Toomey hadn't seemed angry at all he'd suddenly pole-axed an antagonist with a deliberately thrown right fist.

I settled the thing, probably in the nick of time. I had some misgivings already about the kid's actions and looks, but I was never going to hire any hands being fussy, and right now was a good time for me to step up anyway.

"Hey, there, fella!" I yelled across the street and went over at once.

The kid hadn't looked around, but Frank Toomey plainly welcomed the interruption, so I pushed right on.

"Lookin' for work, fella?" I said when I was standing right over the kid.

"What's the pay?" Marv Griffith said, still without looking at me. His sharp, steel-gray eyes were on the holster, a man in his seventies or eighties who only now looked up. "How about putting a feedbag on my horse, oldtimer?"

The liveryman stood bent-backed and panting gently and looking wattery-eyed at the kid.

"What do you say, pop?" Marv Griffith shouted. "What is everybody around here, dead on their feet or something?"

"Fifty and found," I said.

"Not interested," the kid said.

The liveryman croaked, "You want some grain for the horse?"

"You got the idea, pop," Marv said. He turned to me with a little sarcas-

tic smile, said, "How dim-witted can you get?"

I said, "Maybe when you're his age you won't be so razor-sharp either." That's the way you can see Marv Griffith made you feel, like you could talk to him right off like you'd known him all your life. "Okay, sixty."

"What's the job?"

"Riding. Roundup."

"I'll take it. Hey, pop, you feedin' this animal or ain't you." The kid suddenly turned those cold grey eyes on Frank Toomey, who'd been simply standing there looking at Marv. "Why don't you get lost, friend. You make me nervous standin' there gawkin' at me with your mouth hangin' open like that."

**T**HE WAY Frank Toomey raised his big fist in wild-eyed fury, as I quickly dragged the kid away from there, was to become for me a kind of symbol of everybody's eventual reaction to Marv Griffith. I guess Rose Dixon, the boss' daughter, was the only human being at the 2-BAR that didn't feel sheer, cold hate for the kid; I swear even some of the horses glared at him, though he was fairly decent to animals—not kindly or gentle with them, he simply treated them straight instead of like scum.

Rose seemed to be amused by him, even interested in him, not romantically I don't mean, but out of a kind of sympathetic curiosity. As though she thought some good might be found, if you looked hard enough, in even a rat.

Whenever she saw him working around the place, and once when we were out brush-popping and she'd ridden along, she'd go over and stand watching him, smiling a little, not speaking until he glanced up (I was always expecting him to tell her to "get lost" too, but in the beginning at least she seemed to be the one mortal he'd tolerate, and I'm certain it wasn't because she was female because I'm certain he wouldn't have weighed a little matter like that).

One other wasn't bothered by him either, even, in fact, sided with him on a couple of occasions—another young fellow I picked up in town when I was in hiring. Clance Daley.

You couldn't, though, imagine anybody bothering Clance. He was probably the most self-sufficient cowboy I ever hope to run across. Rode like the wind, roped like a wizard, managed a gun like he'd been born with a sixshooter in his hand, was afraid of nothing.

And as if this weren't enough, he was a handsome devil besides. Average tall, tight dark hair, one of those high-cheek-boned leather-lean faces, with a wide flat mouth. So Rose Dixon noticed him especially too, of course: she'd probably never seen a man like him, having been born in a trail camp and never been east of Abilene since.

And Clance noticed her, maybe only due to she was the boss' daughter for all I know, because Rose wasn't what you'd call a beauty. I don't mean she wasn't pretty, because she was, but more from the vitality of a strong lithe body and fine healthy skin and hair and bright wide deep-blue eyes, than from perfect features or a Venus-type figure. What I mean is, Clance could have had any girl, so you naturally took his interest in Rose with a grain of salt.

**B**UT TO GET back to Marv Griffith: the first 2-BAR man to actually slam him one was Billy Boyle. I hired Marv on Monday of the week before we put our herd on the trail; we set out on a Friday, so he was with the 2-BAR exactly eleven days. In that time Marv was knocked flat on his back in his leather jacket exactly seven times.

Bill Boyle was the first because Bill is that humorless kind that can't stand for a minute a queer one like Marv. Bill was wincing irritably at first sight of the kid. And the first salty remark the kid made to Bill, Bill let him have it. Marv got up and put his head down like a bull charging and he charged at Bill, and Bill chopped another pole-axer down at the kid's head that left him crawling around in the dust in front of the bunkhouse practically senseless.

Later, after all of the boys had ridden out, he got up and dusted himself off. Rose Dixon had come out of the house and when I saw her walk over to him, I came out then too.

I said to him, "You all right, fella?"

"Oh sure," he said. "Outside of I can't see straight and one ear is deaf." He was banging the palm of one hand against one side of his head.

Rose Dixon stopped a few feet away, a frown of concern on her face, but she didn't say anything.

"Okay, get your horse," I said.

The next time was the following morning, at breakfast again. At the table he said to Les Peters, "You want all them fried potatoes, Jack, or are some of the rest of us supposed to get to eat some of them?"—the dish of spuds had stopped in front of Les.

Another of the boys ribbed, "You know, I think Griffiths sleeps in that leather jacket." It was already a subject of amusement among the crew how the kid kept that crummy wind-breaker on practically all the time; he didn't usually wear it indoors of course, but sometimes he did, and he always wore it to breakfast.

"The name is Griffith," Marv said. "There ain't any 's' on the end of it."

Les Peters' cheeks and mouth had an ominous puffiness.

"Look, Griffiths," Les said, plainly controlling himself with difficulty, "somebody's going to get sore at them funny remarks of yours one of these days—"

"You still ain't passed the fried potatoes," Marv said.

"Okay, pass him the spuds, Les," Clance Daley said, "and forget it."

"Pass him the spuds, Les," I confirmed from the head of the table.

Les had started to reach for the plate when the kid added his inevitable two cents: "Come on, come on, get the lead out." This did it. Les almost upset the plank-and-nail-keg table storming to his feet. He had a fistful of the lapels of the kid's leather jacket before Marv could get up and he'd smashed his free fist twice at Marv's head before Clance Daley and I could grab his arms and pull him away.

"What the devil's the matter with you anyway, Griffith?" I threw at him. "Haven't you got an ounce of sense in your blamed head?"

The kid was dabbing at his bloody

mouth with the big blue bandana that was always hanging half out of a pocket of the leather jacket.

"Why didn't he pass the fried potatoes then," was Marv Griffith's unemotional reply. . . .

I GUESS when the kid got it the third time, though he suffered kind of a bad cut on the side of his head from crashing against a corner of the bar at the Red Dog, we all nodded righteous satisfaction. "Served the damn fool right," was the comment of one of the boys, and it was exactly how we all felt. Only Clance Daley didn't go along entirely with this sentiment. "What's the matter with him, anyway?" Clance said.

And I by Judas would have fired the kid right off the 2-BAR then and there if Rose Dixon hadn't stopped me; she took an active hand in the outfit while her daddy was in St. Louis looking for an Eastern cattle buyer.

"I feel sorry for the poor kid somehow," Rose said. "Give him another chance. He does his work all right, doesn't he?"

"He does his work all right," I agreed grimly.

Marv Griffith did that charging-bull act the next two times, and pulled that rusty sixshooter finally too (and would doubtless have had his head shot off if Clance Daley hadn't taken a hand in the nick of time), evidently having decided to defend himself on these occasions—he seemed to think he ought to fight back once in a while, though he remained equally unemotional either way, and stood to fare equally badly whichever he did.

What was eating the damn fool? Lord only knows. Like I said, maybe someday somebody'll figure it out. To us, he was just plain off his nut. But at the same time, just when you were sure you wanted nothing so much as to see the son killed, you felt a sudden stab of pity. Yeah, actually. Pity. Rose Dixon, of course, a lot more than any of us. She had the bigness to reveal it, too, which none of us did.

Except Clance Daley, though I don't know whether it was exactly pity with him. When Clance shot the

gun out of that big muleskinner's hand, when the fellow was going to let Marv Griffith have it after Marv had asked him one night in town, "What do you want, Jack, the whole boardwalk?"—I think Clance was simply acting instinctively, or more, was simply itching to unlimber that dazzling draw of his and welcomed the chance.

And why pity? Again, the Lord only knew. I know what it was like: it was like the pity you feel for a dog that enraged people shoot because it's been biting everybody. You feel deep down in you that the poor devil can't help that he wants to bite everybody. . . .

And with Marv Griffith it was more than this—because, like I said in the beginning, I swear that at the end everyone of us felt relief, even maybe a lift, at the way that crazy fool just couldn't be put down. Like the lift you get from witnessing any example of the unquenchable rebel spirit of a human being, regardless of who or what the human being is. . . .

**T**HE EVENING of that last day the kid was with the 2-BAR, the day before we set out for railhead with our herd, Rose Dixon had evidently decided to take Marv Griffith under her personal wing, knowing that I was sure to boot him as soon as the cattle were delivered. She strode over to him in that direct way she had, and she said, "Marv, I'm going to need somebody to help me bring up Lilly. Would you be interested in the job, after roundup's done?"

He was squatted down like a button at a sandpile, trying to splice a busted cinch leather or something—Marv was always busy repairing some item or another of that mess of stuff he'd brought with him draped from his saddle. He gave a couple of test pulls at the strap before he looked up, and then it was to squint at Rose.

"Who's 'Lilly'? You don't mean that damned sickly colt I see you leadin' around all the time?"

This was out in back of the bunkshack, which happened to be where Clance Daley always went for a smoke after evening chow; he'd stand out there leaning on the corral fence and gaze out toward the pur-

ple mountains, and a couple of times. Rose Dixon had "happened" to come out of the house and he had smiled over at her in a way that you could see he was probably debating what to do about her.

The boss' daughter, you figured he was probably thinking, a nice girl but not much of a looker. But you knew that Clance Daley would never marry a girl just for her money, he was too square a boy for one thing, for another, Clance didn't need to make any such compromises, because like I said, I swear there wasn't a gal I don't care how wealthy or beautiful, whose head he couldn't have turned.

So Clance heard Marv's remark; everybody did, for that matter, because the kid's voice had a carry, as though it wanted to be sure every time to reach somebody it would irritate; Clance showed it by how he paused just that fraction of an instant in the act of putting his quirley back in his mouth.

"Yes," Rose said quietly. You could see she was kind of taken aback. Marv had never talked this tough to her before, and up until this moment I think she'd figured something like that all the kid needed was a little kindness, you know, the way a woman would figure.

"Look, lady," Marv went on, "I ain't a horse nurse, you know. That's a hell of a funny proposition to make to a cowboy anyway, it seems like to me." Then, with a humorless little laugh, he really laid it on, as though it had suddenly occurred to him that Rose Dixon might have gotten the false impression that he made special exceptions, in his outspokenness, of certain favored people. "And where do you get that 'Marv' stuff—what are we, old pals or something just because I worked around here a few days?"

Clance Daley was on the kid like a bolt out of hell.

"You'll apologize for that," Clance said in a terrible low voice. "Get up and apologize to Miss Dixon."

Marv Griffith squinted up at Clance Daley now. He lay the strap aside and hung his hands limp and casual between his squatted knees. There were patches criss-crossing a

good part of his head—you wondered how-come he'd arrived in town without any bandages showing on him; there'd evidently been a sufficient interval for all his wounds from his last job to have healed meantime—and his crummy stetson was tilted at a foolish Spanish-like angle off one of the bloodiest spots. And he had on his leather jacket as usual.

"For what?" Marv Griffith said carefully.

"I'm telling you, fella, you'd better do what I say. I'm not kidding."

"What'll you do if I don't apologize, beat me up?"

"Never mind, Daley—" Rose Dixon said.

"This is the last time I'm going to say it, fella," Clance said to the kid, ignoring Rose.

Marv Griffith just looked up at Clance Daley without moving, a little mocking grin in one corner of his mouth. You couldn't believe the guy, you just couldn't.

**WHEN** CLANCE suddenly reached out, his lips thinning in cold fury, the kid tried to scramble up and back. Clance got a grip on the leather jacket, not a full hold though, and he slammed his free fist wildly at Marv's mouth. It caught the kid tough enough even so, and, completely off-balance, he crashed back into Rose Dixon, his out-flung left arm batting her a good one across the face.

Clance Daley dropped the fight cold, seeing this. Rose had put the back of her hand up to her eyes, which streamed tears, and Clance went quickly to her and put his two big hands on her shoulders.

"Golly, I'm sorry—" he began, his eyes all tender on her.

"I'm all right," she whispered.

Then Clance put an arm around her and led her toward the house, and a couple of the boys exchanged looks, and a couple others went to take up with the kid where Clance had left off.

"You double-damned fool," one of them gritted at him.

Marv was trying to scramble to his feet again, but somebody gave him a hard shove that dumped him right

back on the ground. He yanked out his rusty sixshooter and aimed it at them, but that went spinning before he had it half lined, because Clance Daley had returned in that moment and he'd booted it out of the kid's hand.

I didn't keep count but Clance must have knocked the kid down at least fifty times. I mean it. Marv would lay there maybe a minute or so and then he'd push himself up and do that bull-charge at Clance. And Clance would stand there, feet set apart, lips thinned in so tight you could see the muscles in them quivering, and throw another pole-axer at the kid's head.

If Clance had stuck at it, I think the kid would still be getting up. But Clance finally husked, "Oh for Judas sake," and went into the bunkhouse pulling off his sweat-soaked shirt.

You could hardly stand to look at Marv Griffith's face. I said hoarsely to the men, "Okay, the show's over," and to the kid I said, "You better come inside and get your pay after you wash up."

The last time I saw the kid he was standing, weaving in the middle of the yard, dabbing at his bloody face with that blamed big blue bandana. I'd tossed his money on his bunk and sat in on a game of stud.

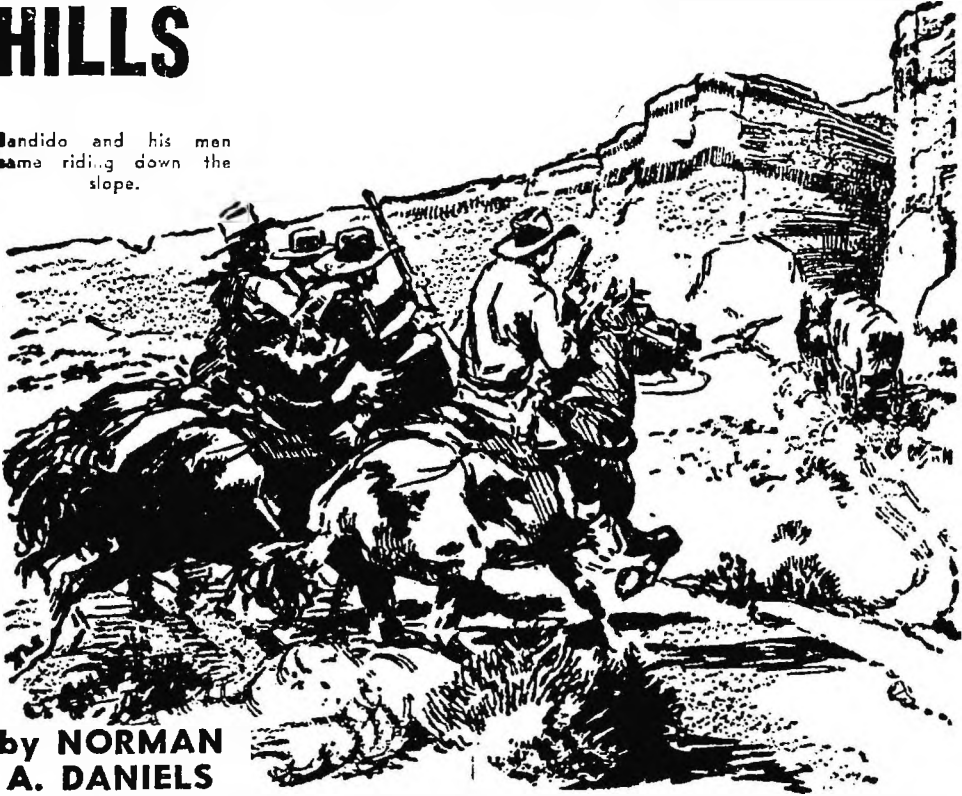
No it wasn't. The last time I saw him was about a half hour later. He was in the corral trying to get a leg up over his roan. We didn't any of us watch him ride out....

**I** GUESS around Benton they'll never stop talking about Marv Griffith. And, like I said, it was funny but I know that all of us (to turn a phrase) admired his guts as much as we hated his guts—because when we rehash the thing I notice that we talk about more and more is not what a stinker the kid was but how tough he was.

But the way I try to remember the affair is: I swear it was what made up Clance Daley's mind to start seriously courting Rose Dixon—I mean putting his arm around her that last day like that, and comforting her and all.... ●END

# SECRET OF THE AMBUSH HILLS

Bandido and his men  
came riding down the  
slope.



by NORMAN  
A. DANIELS

**If Bandido wasn't her brother, Joe Lambert reasoned, then why was Kathie the only rider the notorious outlaw never held up?**

**I**T HAPPENED exactly where Joe Lambert thought it might.

The Bandido gang always were careful about where they pulled their holdups and this was one of the best spots. Joe had reached the cut-canyon-area—rough country of rocks and crevices and plum thickets. An army of men could hide here and suddenly appear as if out of nowhere.

There were seven of them, with their leader masked and remaining on his black horse all the time. They closed in fast, fired a dozen warning shots and Joe Lambert's string of mule teams ground to a halt. His skinnners jumped off the wagons and raised their hands high. This was Bandido—an outlaw whose men had a habit of shooting, sometimes just for the pure hell of it.

Bandido rode slowly, casually, up

to where Joe stood. The renegade had a sixgun carelessly held in his hand, but he put this away when he saw that Joe wasn't armed.

Bandido said, "*Buenos días*, Señor Lambert. I am sorry I must steal your goods."

Joe said, "You can stop the Mex palaver, *amigo*. I know you ain't no Mexican."

"What else do you know?" Bandido asked with lazy interest. Lazy—and dangerous.

Joe shook his head. "This is the third time you hit me. Three times in six months. You'll strip my wagons and I'm finished. I'm bankrupt. I don't just freight I buy this stuff, get it here and sell it. Every dollar I own is in them wagons."

"Too bad," Bandido sympathized. "This time I also take your mules."



If Joe had been wearing a gun, he would have gone for it. He'd have been killed without question, but even death wouldn't be so hard if he could take this insultingly polite bandit with him.

Bandido's men were working fast, selecting what was best, always the most expensive stuff Joe carried. They ordered his skimmers to unhitch the mules and they were driven off, bunched and held ready until the raid was over. Joe watched it all with a sinking heart because he was out of business now with no chance to get back in.

Somebody hooted in the distance. Bandido drew erect, listened and then relaxed again. Joe could hear the shouts of the oncoming mule skimmers. Another freighter was running into trouble.

Suddenly Bandido raised himself again. "Clear the road, you men. Clear away! We got a freighter coming on through."

The first wagon hove into sight. The outlaws stepped aside and let it go. Half a dozen others followed. At the rear rode the girl who owned this freighting business. Joe had never spoken to her, but he knew who she was and while he'd often admired her, she seemed more beautiful than ever right now.

She was just about perfectly formed, she had long brown hair with soft waves, worn attractively. He knew she had smoke grey eyes and full lips. He knew she had a voice like music and features which had often made him pray she'd turn his way so he could see her better. In town they'd passed several times, but she had given no indication that she even knew he existed.

At this moment she barely gave him a glance. Bandido waved to her and bowed, but she gave him no heed either. Her men, yelling at the mules, were close to panic, but not that girl. She looked as calm as if she passed a holdup every day.

**A**FTER THE mule train had clattered off, Bandido shouted orders and his men went back to work looting Joe Lambert's wagons. Finally, they were all pulled in one tight circle and set on fire. That was sheer

vandalism. There was no need for it. In fact the whole thing was senseless, for a man without wagons can't be held up again.

Bandido rode over to where Joe stood. He pulled up his horse too hard and the animal's forelegs went flying upwards, feet kicking out so that Joe had to duck quickly or be brained.

Bandido laughed—it had been done with the purpose of frightening Joe and, possibly, for the amusement of the outlaw and his men. Bandido said nothing for a moment and when he did speak, his voice was harsh.

"You're an angry man, Joe Lambert. You're just ringy enough right now to pick up my trail and follow me into the hills. Don't do it! I got nothing against you, but if you follow me, I'll kill you. *Adios!*"

He turned his horse and yelled to his men. Those with the mules promptly got them going. Bandido's light wagons rolled off and all that was left were burning wagons and several skimmers who were going to get sore feet.

Joe said, "You're all on your own, boys. I'm wiped out—can't even pay your wages now. But I will, and you can take my word for that. Find other jobs. Maybe Miss Keenan will hire you and that'll be real fine because none of her wagons ever get touched. So long, boys—and I'll look you up when I'm heeled again."

Nobody was sore. They shook hands with him, murmured how sorry they were and shuffled off. Joe watched them move toward the horizon. Not one had walked more than a hundred steps at a time in months.

He picked up what gear he'd been able to salvage, took a final look at the smoking ruins of his carefully planned future and started hiking toward town himself.

He hadn't gotten far when he saw Kathie Keenan riding his way, with a pony in tow. He stopped and waited until she reined up and dismounted. She saw that his eyes were not friendly and she knew why.

"Joe Lambert," she said, "I'm sorry this happened. Bandido took you so

often he should have let you go through this time."

"I notice he let you through," Joe said. "I notice he always has."

She said, "I don't know why, Joe. I swear I don't."

He wanted to touch her, to murmur softly, to take her in his arms and when his imagination reached its wildest peak, to kiss her. Instead, he growled.

"Well, I'll tell you why Bandido never stops you. It's because he happens to be your brother."

"Joe," she gasped. "Joe, you have no proof of that."

"Maybe not," he said, "but it sure looks mighty funny with you coming on through while I'm being stuck up. With you never touched once while every other freighter's been hit near as often as me."

If only she weren't so danged pretty, he thought. If her eyes were not so clear and if there wasn't an unholy desire within him to take her in his arms. He liked the way her cheeks flushed in anger too.

She said, "Joe Lambert, if you have any evidence, go to the sheriff with it."

"Your brother Pete rode the owl-hoot plenty. He showed up here and right away these stickups started. What else can a man assume?"

She relented a bit. "I'm sorry, Joe. You're upset and I can't blame you. Look—maybe if I ask Mr. Camlin to stake you, you can get going again."

**H**IS SHOOK his head stubbornly. "Cleve Camlin hires nobody but you to freight for him and he's got the biggest general store in these parts. You fill his contracts real well so why should he be interested in staking me? Besides, Cleve knows when I get enough money, I'm starting a general store too, and right close to his."

Kathie Keenan said, "Very well, Joe. They told me you were stubborn. Handle it the way you like. I'm riding back and this spare horse is for you."

"Keep your danged horse," he shouted.

She reddened this time, swung into

the saddle and rode off, leading the spare pony. Joe watched her for a moment, thought of the long hike to town and shuddered.

"Kathie," he called out. She came to a quick stop and he ran toward her. "I'm mighty sorry I dusted you off like that. Bandido has got me part loco, I guess. I'd like to ride back with you."

She was still cool, but she gave him the pony and they rode side by side on the way back. Kathie was thinking that he didn't seem as shy as she thought he might be. She'd passed him so often in town and never even gotten a nod. All the while she had wanted to know him, for Joe was no trail-dirty cowhand. He was tall, lean as any mule skinner is. He always wore a clean shirt, his boots were polished, he never needed a slave. He was handsome too—in the craggy sort of way Kathie liked. Sometimes Joe reminded her of her wild brother, Pete. Perhaps that was one reason why she liked him—for even though Pete wasn't any good, Kathie would have done anything possible for him.

Joe said, "You're real quiet, Miss Kathie. Like I said, I'm sorry I offended you."

She gave him a smile that made him gulp. "That's all right, Joe. I was thinking about my brother. Do you honestly believe he is this masked bandit?"

"Looks that way," Joe said warily. He was on dangerous ground and he didn't want to lose her friendship again. "I got no evidence—just that you ain't molested while everybody else is just about wrecked."

"I know it looks strange," she said. "I can't account for it either. But Bandido isn't my brother. Masked or not, I'd know if he was Pete."

"Reckon you would," he agreed. "Been doing some thinking of my own. I need a job real bad. Maybe you could use a good skinner."

She hired him with more eagerness than she wanted to show and he was to report for work in three days. "If you'll call around tonight," she went on, "I'll give you more details. You—might come for supper. I'm a pretty good cook when I got somebody to experiment on."

"I'll be there," he said. "Thank you for making it a good day even though I been robbed white by Bandido."

If Joe looked forward to that supper date, his enthusiasm was no less than Kathie's. When he strode up the whitewashed path of river bottom rocks, Kathie rushed to the front door. The aroma of frying steak and biscuits went rushing out to greet him and he never even noticed for in a moment he was holding both her hands and they didn't let go until after he was inside.

**H**E ATE with the ravenous appetite of a man who rarely gets a home-cooked meal. He helped with the dishes and when they were finished, Kathie somehow couldn't unknot the apron she wore. That called for his help and before they knew it, his lips brushed hers, came back and fastened harder. His arms tightened too and he held her for a long, long time.

"You big galoot," she said firmly, "why didn't you do this a long time ago?"

He grinned. "Well now, I kind of figured you were Mack Camlin's girl. Seeing you did all the freighting for his father and you and him..."

"Mack Camlin," she scoffed. "Why, he's just a store clerk. And I heard that you and Lou Ann..."

He stopped her talk with a kiss. Apparently it satisfied her, for she didn't mention names any more. They sat on the front porch steps for an hour or so, mostly dreaming, as two people freshly in love can dream. Kathie was surprised when he made his excuses soon after nine o'clock, but she didn't protest. He seemed somber when he left too—and that worried her.

There'd been a serious look in his eyes. He hadn't even kissed her when he left. Kathie decided he'd probably gone to get drunk. She hardly blamed him. Going bankrupt and finding himself in love, all during the same day, was an experience he perhaps couldn't cope with. She threw a cape over her shoulders, tied on a bonnet and walked swiftly down the wooden sidewalk toward the lighted area.

The way the man ducked down the alley between Camlin's store and

Mrs. Miller's millinery store was a clear indication that he was up to something. Kathie had seen his face too, as he turned. She'd never seen Joe Lambert look so deadly serious. Because she knew he was desperate, she decided to follow him and she was in time to see him crawling through one of the rear windows to Camlin's general store. Kathie could hardly believe her eyes. Joe Lambert a common thief? It seemed impossible, but a man who enters a darkened store through a window he has forced, isn't on any shopping expedition.

She hurried around to the front of the store, just in time to see Mack Camlin sauntering toward the place, and as he drew near the door, he took the key out of his pocket. Kathie literally ran into him.

"Why, Miss Kathie," he took off his flat, dark brown hat. "What are you doing here?"

"Just taking the air," she said. "I'd like your company, Mack, if you wish."

"I been trying to get up enough gumption to call on you for months, Kathie. Reckon I shouldn't have been so doggone bashful."

She gave one hurried, half frightened glance into the dark store and promptly led Mack away from it. They walked for an hour, sixty minutes of anxiety and boredom for Kathie. She had difficulty getting rid of Camlin and he was going to be a pest from now on, but she considered it well worth while.

That is, she did until she found Joe Lambert on the front porch of her house when she returned and left Mack at the gate. On one of the porch chairs were piled half a dozen tin cans and there was fire and anger in Joe's face.

"Had me a little idea tonight," he began.

"I know what your idea was, Joe. You broke into Camlin's store."

He gaped slightly. "You know that?"

"I saw you—and two minutes after you were inside, Mack Camlin came along and he was going in. That would have been fine. Mack would have had you arrested as a thief."

"Reckon he wouldn't," Joe said.

"What were doing out with him anyhow?"

"None of your dratted business," she exploded. "Joe Lambert, you're a fool..."

"Take a look at them tins of peaches." He thrust one of the cans at her. "Go ahead and look. Last month them peaches were hijacked off my wagons by Bandido. I know—because I marked some of the cans. They turned up in Camlin's store. Now tell me Bandido ain't your brother and he and Camlin ain't in in cahoots."

**S**HE PUT her hands on her hips and stuck her face closer to his. "Now you're accusing me of being in cahoots with them too. That's the only reason you made love to me. You wanted me to talk—to say my brother is Bandido. Get out of here, Joe Lambert, and don't come back."

"I'm going." He yanked down the brim of his stetson. "I'm heading into the hills and I'm not coming back until I bring Bandido with me. Maybe he'll be sitting in the saddle or maybe lashed to it. I don't care much which, but he's coming back with me or I ain't coming back at all."

"Joe—you're crazy," she cried in horror.

"Maybe so, but a man can only stand so much. Figured Camlin knew more about these holdups than he allowed. Figured too that Camlin knew I was fixing to start me a store of my own and he didn't want the competition. That's why Bandido hit me so often and even burned my wagons and stole my mules today. Camlin told him to."

She said, "Joe...listen to me..."

"I listened long enough and no good-looking gal is softening me up. I'm too mad and I got to work off my anger by finding Bandido. Then, maybe, a man can freight his supplies without danger of losing them all."

He walked swiftly away and Kathie just stood there—because there was no way of stopping him now. She went into the house and sat down without removing bonnet or cape. Joe wouldn't lie. If he said he found stolen goods in Camlin's store, that was exactly what he had found.

He was right too, in guessing that Camlin dreaded competition. Then she gasped in horror—because her brother and Camlin had been good friends right up until the time Pete rode off and never came back. Pete liked the owlhoot trail. He loved danger and excitement—easy money too—and he had a peculiar contempt for the law. Pete could be that masked outlaw—the chances were even good that he was.

Now Joe Lambert was hunting him and Joe would shoot to kill. So would Pete—if Bandido was Pete. No matter which man won, she was going to be hurt. She didn't sleep much that night and around dawn she suddenly knew what she had to do. She prepared a bedroll, a grub sack and took the rifle Pete had left. When the dawn had changed from grey streaks to a brilliant red, she was heading toward the hill country too. The ambush hills, folks called them, because so many men had died there.

Open country began raising, benchlike, toward the hills. Kathie left the wagon road and headed east. Before long she crossed the canyon road the freighters used, not far from the spot where Joe had been held up.

She began planning as Joe might—as if she herself were on the trail of Bandido. To scour the hills for the man wasn't only highly dangerous, but rather stupid. A man couldn't live long enough to explore every canyon. Therefore, the hunter must wait until the man he wanted showed himself and Bandido was likely to appear along this road where more freighters could be stuck up.

Kathie dismounted, led her horse up the rocky slope and found a high rock behind which the horse could be hidden and from where she could keep the road under observation. She was playing a hunch, but it was the only way she could think of to find Bandido before Joe Lambert reached him and someone got hurt.

**A**ROUND noon she ate cold meat sandwiches and almost gave up the whole scheme as a bad bit of planning. She saw the dust first and she knew it meant a freighter outfit

—and a fairly big one. Texas Mike Marlin was due about now and his freight was usually well worth stealing. The freighter pulled into the canyon shortly and then, for the first time, Kathie became aware that she hadn't been alone.

Bandido and his men came riding down the slopes, two of them very close to where Kathie was hidden. They stormed the wagons, looted them efficiently and sent the drivers by shank's mare to town by the simple trick of taking the wagon bolts away with them. However, none of the wagons or unwanted freight was burned nor were the mules stolen.

Kathie watched Bandido carefully. There was something about him she thought was familiar. At times, he did act and have the general size and shape of her brother. More and more she thought Joe might be right.

Bandido headed back up the slope alone, leaving his men to take care of the loot. Kathie suddenly stepped out from behind the rock and called loudly. The outlaw brought his jet black mare up sharply, whipped out a gun with an amazing speed and started fast toward Kathie. He didn't holster the gun until he'd explored behind the rock and made certain she was alone. Then he got out of the saddle and walked toward her, leading his horse.

She said, "Pete, you crazy fool..."

Bandido took off his hat and his hair was thin and a rusty color. Kathie gasped and stepped back. He swept off the mask made out of a neckerchief. She had never seen the man before. He was sallow-faced, mean-eyed and the smile playing around his thin mouth wasn't one of mirth.

"I'm right sorry you had to see me," he said. "Means you have to ride with us."

"I thought you were my brother," she tried to explain. "Pete Keenan."

"Reckon maybe you did. Pete—he's dead."

"Dead?" she gasped. "Are you sure...?"

"Seeing I watched him die, I sure am. He rode with me—one of my men. Got himself a bellyful of metal back in Tawnyport when we stuck up the bank."

She lowered her head, covered her eyes. He grabbed her arm and gave her a hard yank. "Get on your horse—we're riding, pronto. Got me a feeling there's more to your being here than looking for your brother. I'd hate to kill a good-looking gal like you, but I will if you try to get away."

She couldn't have protested if she wanted to. At the moment, it didn't seem to matter. Pete was dead—crazy, lovable Pete. He'd died a bandit from law bullets. It had been almost foreordained that he'd end that way, but still the shock had rendered her incapable of thinking.

They reached the stronghold of this outlaw an hour later. It was in a rocky, broken up area at the bottom of a deep, dangerous walled canyon. There, the outlaw had two flimsy cabins, a corral and a big shed in which he probably stored his loot.

The sight of the hideout made her realize what kind of a position she was in. Nobody would ever find her here. They'd looked for Bandido's den for months without success and they'd hardly find it now. Bandido himself wasn't the dapper, suave type his mask and his low bows made him seem to be. She suddenly wondered why he had never molested her wagons before. Certainly a man like him wouldn't care whether or not she was the sister of one of his men who was now dead.

The renegade said, "I'm locking you in my cabin until I decide what to do with you. I'll give orders you're to be shot if you step outside. I can't take no chances—there are too many ropes waiting for my neck."

She didn't answer him, but entered the cabin and found it dirty, hardly more than a hovel. They'd never let her go. She felt like crying and it was a novel sensation. She hadn't felt that way since she was a small girl. She should have trusted Joe much more, confided in him, asked his help. Instead, she'd sent him packing because she'd been so certain Bandido was her brother.

She had memorized landmarks on her way here. If she did escape, she could bring a posse. Bandido came in soon afterwards, but he hardly looked

ber way and he merely put on a pair of old boots before he went out to wait for the loot to be brought.

**J**UST BEFORE dark his own wagons arrived and were promptly unloaded. Then she heard his men whooping it up and she guessed that part of the loot consisted of whiskey. Texas Mike usually carried the supply for one saloon. She began wondering how she could get out of here and there was danger in waiting.

Somebody gave a hoot signal in the distance and the noise stopped abruptly. Men, half drunk or not, moved to assigned posts and covered the entrance to the canyon. The man who rode in did so with his arms raised high. As he passed by one bonfire, Kathie saw that it was Mack Camlin, whose father owned the general store. After awhile Mack came into the cabin and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I wish this didn't happen," he said. "There's nothing I can do, Kathie. The man who opposes Bandido gets killed."

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Well—I ain't exactly proud of it, but I make all the deals with Bandido. My Pa stakes him and gets the stolen stuff in payment. That's why you never were bothered. Pa figured everybody thought your brother Pete was Bandido and if your wagons weren't touched, they'd be doggone sure. Which means nobody would even think that Pa gave the orders you weren't to be stuck up—because you carried all of Pa's freight. If folks ever realized that, they might suspect him, but not with your brother on the loose."

"What's going to happen to me, Mack?"

"I don't know. I...wish...I..."

He turned abruptly and walked out. He went straight to where his horse was tied, mounted and rode away. The festivities were quickly resumed and Kathie realized that Bandido meant she would never leave this canyon and he had told Mack Camlin so.

She was frightened, but fear didn't deaden her brain. She went to the back of the cabin and hunted for a

way out. Two feet behind the cabin was sheer rock wall. The front door faced a clearing through which she wouldn't get a dozen feet before they'd cut her down. And they'd hardly wait long. Half drunk, none of them would care much about mounting guard to prevent her escape when she was meant to be killed anyway.

Half an hour went by while her apprehension grew and grew. The men were getting louder and drunker and Bandido wasn't holding back. Then that same hooted signal sent them into position. The fire had almost died out by now so the approaching rider couldn't be easily distinguished until he was quite close and then his flat, round hat, the way he held his arms up, indicated it was Mack Camlin back.

"I forgot something," he yelled. "Bandido...I got a sackful of gold..."

The outlaw stumbled toward him. "Gold...now there is something a man can..." His voice dwindled away. Kathie saw him raise his arms very slowly while the rider swung off his horse and held a sixgun on him. It was Joe Lambert, and Kathie cried out as she started running toward Joe.

One of Bandido's men drew a gun and levelled it at her. Joe shot him and snapped the gun back to cover Bandido so quickly that the outlaw never had a chance to go for his own. Kathie saw the man close by her crumple and fall. She bent, wrested the gun from his limp hand and moved to Joe's side.

He said, "Bandido—we're riding. Kathie and me on my horse—you'll be walking. Maybe your men can shoot me in the back, they got a mind to, but I'm betting no bullet can kill me so fast I can't shoot you down. And if I don't, Kathie will."

"So—there is nothing I can do but obey," the outlaw said. "What happens when we're out of this canyon?"

"I'll let you go," Joe said. "That's a promise, but I'm warning you, I'll be back with a posse."

Bandido said, "It is your play, Lambert. I am not in the mood for dying at this moment." He turned

and shouted to his men, telling them of the deal.

He started walking. Kathie swung onto Joe's horse and he climbed on behind her. He was a perfect target, but so was Bandido and the men knew it. Near the end of the canyon the outlaw signalled he wanted to stop. He turned and yelled orders for his men to load up the wagons with the choicest of the stolen supplies and get going fast.

IT WAS SLOW, with Bandido on foot, but they got out of the canyon finally and Joe called a halt. "All right," he said. "You kept your part of the bargain, now I'm keeping mine. Start using that shank's mare you made me use so many times."

"I wish now," the outlaw said, "that I had never stopped you. *Adios*—and I am also happy the girl was not harmed. *Adios* again...and someday we shall meet once more, eh, Lambert."

"I doubt it," Lambert said, "but I'll be ready."

Bandido stumbled off into the darkness and Joe touched spurs to his horse. He rode at a moderate speed because of the double load, until he felt they were well out of danger. Then he stopped and helped Kathie off. Without a word he took her in his arms and kissed her soundly.

"Been aching to do that even if you are a halfwit."

"Joe—I did think Bandido was Pete. But Pete is dead. I never saw that outlaw before."

"He's a mighty dangerous hombre, Kathie. I didn't get there any too soon."

"But how did you find that canyon? I watched Bandido pull a hold-up and I just rode up to him. Yes, I was foolish, Joe, but I was afraid you'd be gunning for him and he might kill you—or you'd kill him. I couldn't have stood it either way."

"I guessed that," he said. "I also guessed Mack Camlin contracted Bandido for his pa and sure enough Mack started out tonight. I trailed him. When he rode out of the canyon, I just busted his head some, borrowed his coat and hat and rode back..."

She said, "Joe...it was my fault, all of it. I want you to have my freighting business."

There was some shooting and a lot of shouts well off to the west. Joe put his arm around Kathie. "I won't need it," he said softly. "I forgot to tell Bandido that a posse was following sign. I left, and he and his men and wagons must have run head-on into them. Most of the loot they're carrying is mine—so I'll be back in business. Thnaks anyway for your offer."

"I still want you to have it," she said.

"But, I told you, I've got my stuff back..."

"Joe Lambert, I won't marry a man who thinks his wife should go on skinning mules."

He laughed out loud and held her close. ●END

### "SLEEPY" GRASS

(Cont'd from pg. 41)

They let their horses graze for a half hour. At the end of that time, the animals were picketed in another spot where grass was good. Every horse went to sleep without bothering to lie down. Some assumed very grotesque positions, standing with legs braced and heads hanging low. In every case the mouth was open and the tongue protruding.

All slept or were sleepy for three days. After that, they gradually recovered, but during their recovery it was noted that every horse sweat



profusely as if it had been exposed to the hot sun. None of them would eat  
(Cont'd on pg. 89)

# STACKED DECK

by C. V. TENCH

**"I** I'LL BE comin' back for that money!"

Mordant called it over his shoulder as on the back of a cruelly spurred horse he raced around a hill beyond range of further bullets.

Jackson got up slowly from where he had knelt for the last shot at Mordant, and lowered the hand holding the now empty gun. Perhaps his misty, blurred vision was why he had missed with all six hastily-fired shots, but when a man suddenly stumbles across the body of his partner of more than twenty years standing, his eyes are apt to become tear-blinded.

Now he walked back to the ranch house and ordered the one hired helper, Sam Holmes, to fetch the sheriff.

"You—you ain't followin'?" Holmes was an old man and the suddenness of the shooting had him shaking.

"He's got too good a start and too good a horse," Jackson replied. "And Sam, tell the sheriff first—before you head for a saloon and start drinking and babbling."

"Why, I—" began Holmes indignantly.

And when Sheriff Dave Axton arrived Jackson told his story, trying hard to keep his voice steady.

"We've only the small ranch, Dave, as you know, but we've made a good living and there's cash in the safe from recent sales. Somehow Mordant must've heard about the money."

"Holmes talking again in his cups?" the sheriff suggested.

"Could be." Jackson shook his head. "Anyway, I was out in the barn when I heard a shot. I came running. When I came in the door I could see Mordant, his back to me, working at the safe, but he couldn't get it open.

"He spun around and saw me, but of course I had him covered then. He

stood up with his hands high and his back to the window. I walked into the room toward him, and, as I did, he just flung himself backwards through the window. Then I saw Jake on the floor behind the door.

"I shot through the window but seeing Jake had me shaky. I ran outside and tried again, but he had quite some start by then, and I missed him twice. I stopped and got down on one knee, but I was so worked up I pressed trigger before I was ready. Then he was gone."

**Jackson didn't want a deputy hid out. This backshooter he chose to handle himself...**

"Yeh," Axton nodded. "I can understand how finding Jake spoiled your shooting."

"But not only that, Dave," Jackson resumed, "Mordant yelled he'd be back for the money."

"Said he'd be back?"

"Hey. He's bad clear through." Jackson's mouth hardened. "So, Dave, anything I've got you can have if you drag him to a noose. Think you can get him?"

"I'll sure do my blame-dest," Axton promised.

"But Mordant's a real sneak killer; he'll likely hide out for a spell now and there's plenty around who'll help him to lie doggo. We don't know exactly who his toadies are."

"That's right," Jackson nodded, his eyes bitter. "But Mordant's a real sneak I'll—I'll tend to Jake."

**D**AYS CAME and went with no word of Mordant. Jackson's face became more grim and gaunt. Came the morning when the sheriff rode up and swung out of saddle.

"What news, Dave?" Jackson asked.

"One of my boys heard Mordant was around," Axton replied, "so I'd like to station a deputy here."

"No," Jackson refused. "I can handle this end."





"Listen," Sheriff Axton argued. "I've learned that Mordant's desperate for money. He knows there's some here. Sam Holmes ain't no good in a fight, and Mordant's a lot younger than you. And he's a good shot and quick. He's liable to be here after that money any time."

"I wasn't much good in a fight either, and I appreciate your offer, Dave," he said grimly, "but if Mordant does come back here I want to get him myself."

"Of course you do," the lawman agreed, "but here's how I figure it: Mordant couldn't get that safe open before, so he's liable to come some night and make you open it at gun point—then he'll shoot you. I want you to have an even break by letting me hide a deputy here."

"No."

"Okay." Axton climbed back into the saddle. "But don't relax your guard any."

Two days, three, but there came no further word of Mordant. Each evening since the shooting Jackson had trudged up to the plain wooden cross at the top of a small hill. He was there now.

"No luck yet, Jake," he said quietly to the small mound. "But I'm not resting till I've squared accounts. Mordant said he'd come back for the money and—"

Later he sat at his desk going over his books. He turned abruptly to Holmes, dozing in a deep chair.

"Sam," he said, "Jake's passing so suddenly was a shock, eh?"

"Huh?" Holmes jerked suddenly erect. "Yeh. Sure, sure."

"I might pass out just as sudden," Jackson went on.

"Huh? Why you ain't sick, are you?"

"Yeh. Not myself at all. The hurt's here." Jackson touched his left breast.

"Well—" Holmes' eyes grew hopeful. "You've got some whisky locked up in a cupboard. Mebbe a coupla shots—"

"No." Jackson shook his head. "But, Sam, in case anything happens to me, what's here is yours. The money Mordant tried to get is still in the safe, and I've written down the combination in this book I keep in this drawer."

"I don't want your money." Holmes was indignant. "Far's I'm concerned you can leave the safe wide open."

"Well, don't forget where the combination is," Jackson replied.

For two days Jackson spoke often of his ill health and stayed close to the house. On the third day he stretched out on the couch in the living-room, much to Holmes' consternation.

"Now," suggested Holmes, eyeing Jackson's burning eyes and gaunt cheeks, "you'll mebbe try a coupla stiff jolts, huh?"

"Fetch it," Jackson agreed.

After two drinks, Jackson said: "I think, Sam, you'd better ride to town and fetch a doctor."

"That's sense," Holmes agreed. "Think you'll be all right while I'm away?"

"Yeh. Have another drink and get going."

It was close upon midnight before Jackson's straining ears caught the soft, shambling footsteps of a horse walking. They stopped and again all was quiet.

There came no further sounds, but very slowly the door opened a crack. There was a pause. It advanced again. Through the aperture began to form the blurred image of a face, that suddenly flung through, as the door was hurled to one side. Two shots thundered, at the same time the gunman flung himself to one side, his eyes upon the couch into which his bullets had smashed.

"Why, he ain't—"

"No, Mordant!"

Mordant whirled toward the corner from where Jackson's voice had come, shooting. Two shots replied, flame slashing orange through the powder smoke.

Jackson took one long look, then turned to the window, stared at the plain wooden cross that stood revealed by moonlight.

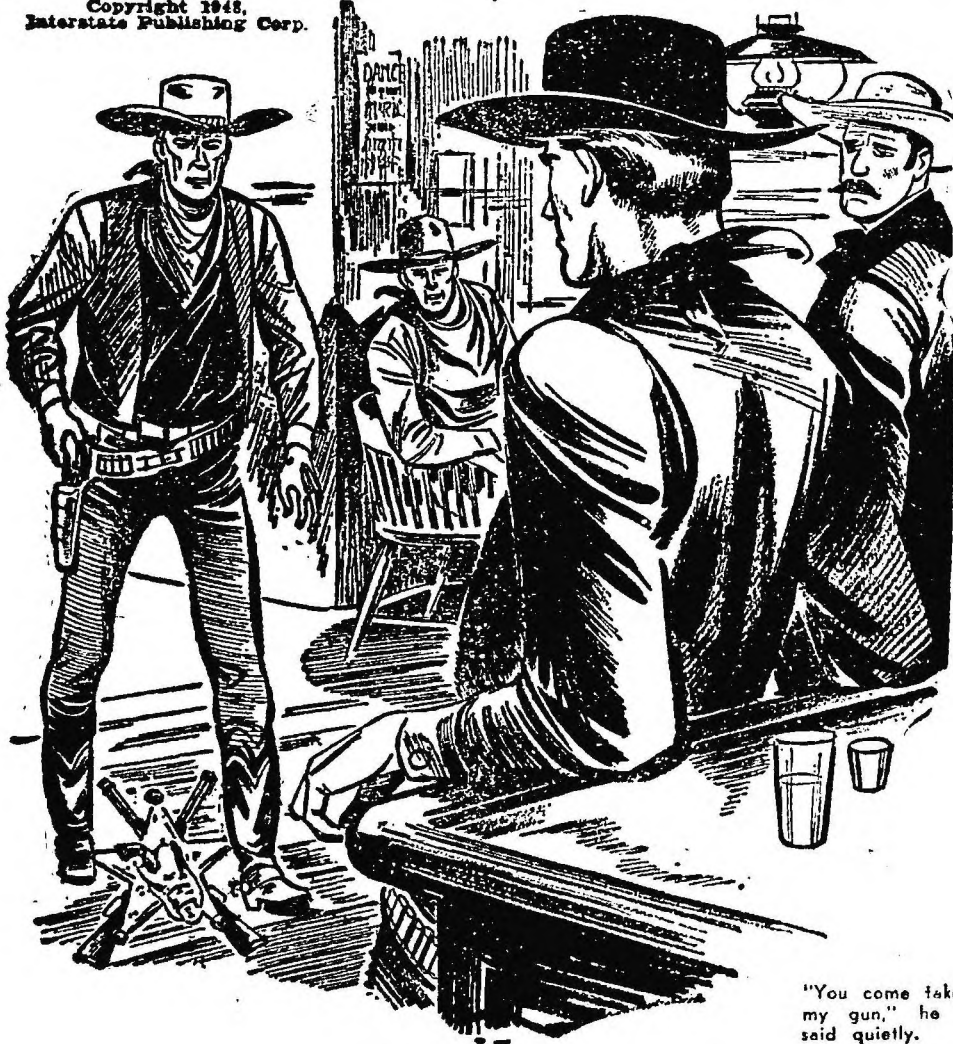
"Played sick, Jake," he said aloud, "and sent Sam to town. Knew he'd drink some more and tell everyone I was flat on my back, and probably reveal where the combination to the safe was too. A trick to draw a rat out of his hole. It worked. Mordant figured the deck was stacked in his favor and came back. So, Jake, I reckon that squares matters." ●END

# BRASADA GALLOWS PARTY

by TOM W. BLACKBURN

TIME ★ HONORED  
WESTERN  
CLASSIC

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"You come take  
my gun," he  
said quietly.

**They'd hang a man in the morning, and mebbeso, the stranger reckoned, it would be the hellion they had in the jail, or mebbeso it would be his own neck that dragged the jump-rope....**

**H**E CAME out of the brush at late dusk, with long shadows running ahead of him, and slacked off in the saddle for a look across Atascosa Creek at the scraggly collection of buildings on the east bank. Jordano. He had been long gone from this town. Five years, crowding six. Expectancy had been in him. Now it had no flavor. Once Jordano had been the center of his world. Since

then, he had seen what the world was really like. Memories persisted, maybe even old fears, but neither had urgency.

From this little rise he could see the town square. There was a flurry of activity in it. In one corner, fronting the courthouse, was a structure of new lumber. He recognized the skeletal frame. There had been a similar one in the same place, eight years ago. Some raiders had crossed the border burning and killing. A couple of them had been caught. And they had been hanged.

An ancient buckboard came along the road from town. Old Man Tarrill, still driving rat-eared mules which seemed to have acquired his disposition. Only a drifter changed—not Jordano.

"Hidy," the old man said, hauling up. He knuckled his watery eyes and peered hard. "*Quien es? Who is it?*"

"A buscadero fresh out of the brasada. Looks like a necktie party ahead. For anybody I know?"

"Likely," Old Man Tarrill agreed sourly. "If you're out of the brush with your bed on your saddle, you'll know him. Newt Furrey's been practicing all day with a bag of wet sand, taking the sag out of his rope. Going to hang a young hellion in the morning. A sullen, damned ornery kid I always said would die with his heels in the air. Come back after five-six years to gun down his uncle so's he could hurry up his claim to the biggest cow spread in the brush. Name's Earl Follard—"

The rider grunted, stiffening as though he had been hit. The old man swore at his mules and drove on. The rider heeled his horse.

A man could ride far, see the world and leave a lot behind him. But there was one thing he couldn't entirely shake off. That was his name. *He* was Earl Follard.

There had been a plan in Follard's mind, a foreknowledge of how he would ride into Jordano. A visit to Julio Montoya's barber shop first, for a trim and a shave. Then a long spell of soaking in the big stone tub back of Julio's place. Afterwards, a stop at Cohen's Mercantile, to let the kindly old storekeeper who had been one

of his few friends fit him with new clothes from the skin out. Then a drink at the Longhorn and another at the Star, and supper at the Commercial House. He'd talk a little, listen a lot. He'd find out why Lucia Follard had sent for him.

Not that Follard was too puzzled by Lucia's relayed message. He was certain enough that he hadn't cut over to Kansas City to pick up her letter at Ted Olewine's office. The uncle they shared in common, Dobbs Follard, had died. Earl Follard was needed for legal division of the Cross Hatch between the only two heirs, Lucia and himself.

Even with this certainty, he had not come back for a piece of the Cross Hatch. He wanted no part of its brush and sand hills and scrawny cattle. He didn't need the land, or the money it would bring. Something else had pulled him down the long trail from Montana, when he had sworn he would never come back. A desire to see the town again, and to let the town see him. A deliberate test of old emotions he had been unable to forget. And curiosity concerning Lucia Follard...

**T**HE NEWS that Dobbs Follard was dead stirred no feeling in him. Earl Follard's bitterest hatred had been for his uncle. The bitterness was dead with the root of the hatred. Only curiosity remained. Who had killed Dobbs Follard? And how did Newt Furrey fit into this? Newt had been a Cross Hatch rider, in those other days—a big man, and mean. He had known Earl Follard. So the rope he was testing was for someone else. And Furrey knew it.

Follard spurred his horse across the creek at a shallow ford. The main street was unusually crowded for a week-day evening. Jordano was the center of a hundred mile trading circle, and it looked as though everyone had come to town for the hanging. For his hanging. Follard grinned. This was what was meant in bunkhouse talk about falling into a bobwire tangle with your breeches off.

He kept away from the main street, taking a back lane. Beyond the last of the town's houses, where the brush

and prickly pear flats began, he pulled up at a small shack. Dismounting, Follard touched the grip of the single gun smugged low on his right thigh, and eased up toward the back door. No light inside, but he rapped against the door and then stepped prudently to one side. Newt Furrey could set an elaborate scheme to lure him back to Jordano. If so, the big man might have remembered Juana Delfino. Her house could be watched.

A faint glow built up against the kitchen window. The door eased open a crack.

"*Quien es?*" A woman's strained whisper.

"*Amigo!*" Follard said. Then, in swift Spanish. "Juana? This is Earl, *vieja*. Open up, please. I need to talk with you—"

"*Amor de Dios!*" Juana, a squat, shapeless Mexican woman, who had been mother to both Lucia and himself on the ranch, went back a step, hastily crossing herself. Follard stepped swiftly inside and took the lamp from her. He smiled at the old woman, a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Juana, it's all right. I'm no ghost."

"We heard you were dead," the *vieja* whispered. "To see you again is good. But to see you now— Go! At once! Ride far and fast. There is great danger for you in Jordano tonight—"

"For someone," he conceded. "Newt Furrey's hanging won't quite come off if he doesn't have a neck for his noose—"

Juana grimaced and spat. "Furrey! The black dog of hell!"

"Probably the sentiments of whoever is locked up in the jail with my name," Follard said drily. "Tell me, now—where's Lucia?"

"Here."

PLEASURE rippled through Follard. He had planned to ride on to the Cross Hatch tonight. Something he didn't relish. He needed time here in town. Things added up in rough fashion. Someone bearing his name was scheduled to be hanged tomorrow. Newt Furrey was too well acquainted with Earl Follard to hang a stranger bearing that name. Furrey,

then, wanted Earl Follard legally dead. To hang the real Earl Follard instead of a ringer would certainly fill Furrey's hand in a very satisfactory manner. If Lucia's message had been faked, certainly the Cross Hatch would be watched.

"I want to see Lucia, *vieja*," he said.

"*Pero si!*" Juana agreed. "The poor little one has been tearing her heart out to save that man they say is you. She sleeps now. Come."

The woman led the way to the front of the house. There, on ancient horse-hair sofa, Lucia Follard dozed uneasily. Earl studied her. This distant cousin had become a woman in his long absence.

Juana hastily pulled down window curtains. Lucia Follard opened her eyes and sat up suddenly, sweeping aside the shawl with which the old woman had covered her. She stared at Follard.

"So you didn't die, after all," she said quietly. "That letter, two years ago, was a lie."

"Yes," Earl said. "Deliberately. I wanted to cut loose from the past. I had a letter written to Uncle Dobbs that I was dead. You must have guessed the truth. Lucia, or you wouldn't have written to Olewine now."

"The letter was to Olewine, not you, Earl. I knew Mr. Olewine was a lawyer. I was writing for legal advice. You had once said he was your friend—that I should contact him if I ever wanted to reach you or needed help. Something terrible is happening. Judge Smollett is the only lawyer here and he's drunk on Newt Furrey's whiskey all of the time. I was driven to clutching straws to help Bart—"

It had been a mistake, then, not to go by way of Kansas City and see the man who had befriended him when he first left Texas. Olewine's telegram to Follard in Montana had merely said Lucia Follard needed him at Jordano. He should have talked to Olewine first instead of coming directly into the *brasada*. He had instead come southward hard and fast, on the spur of the moment and without sure knowledge of what he faced,

just as his younger self of six years ago would have done. That impetuosity had caused him trouble before. It could now. It had to be checked.

"I don't know what has happened," Follard said. "Supposing you tell me what this is, very carefully—"

"It's Newt Furrey," Lucia told him. "He has been quite attentive to me, Earl. Uncle Dobbs fired him from the Cross Hatch because of that. He got a job as Sheriff Eastland's chief deputy, and he continued to pester me. Then the sheriff was shot, out in the brush one night, and Furrey took over until a special election could be held. Now he's fixed solidly and he's going to hang Bart—"

"Who's Bart?"

"Bart Macomber," Lucia said wearily. "A stranger to this country, Earl, with no living kin. I met him while visiting on the Brazos, last year. I—was attracted to him. Very much attracted, Earl. Bart came down here to see me. You know Uncle Dobbs. He'd hound any man who came to see me, from sheer meanness. I met Bart once, secretly, and we stumbled into Furrey. He said nothing, then. The man is a devil! Two days later, Uncle Dobbs was killed. Furrey arrested Bart after a hard tangle and he was charged with the murder—in your name."

"**W**AIT A minute!" Follard said frowning. "It doesn't hold together. Furrey couldn't pull a noose around a stranger's neck when half this country knows me! Why doesn't this Bart Macomber speak up—"

"Could you speak up," Lucia interrupted grimly, "if you had a broken jaw and a face so badly battered nobody could recognize you? How many people are going to question the identity of a prisoner the acting sheriff had to beat into submission before he could be taken? What chance does a sick and battered stranger have in the hands of a jury of squatters out of the pecan groves on the upper creek—two-legged coyotes who would commit murder themselves for a loaf of sourdough and a haunch of salt pork? A man tried for his life and sentenced to hang in two hours of one morning with the gallows going up before the verdict was in!"

Follard nodded slowly. He saw clearly how it had been done. All Jordano knew the bitterness between himself and his uncle. Many would remember a Saturday morning in the town square when Dobbs Follard had unmercifully thrashed his nephew with a quirt because Earl had for years been doing a man's work at the Cross Hatch without pay, and at last had served notice he was through. There were many in Jordano who knew revenge and so would believe Earl Follard had come back for the eye and the tooth his uncle owed him. They would believe he had murdered his uncle. And those who might have doubts wouldn't dare stand up to Furrey with them. He had been a good man with a gun—a very good man.

"What does Newt Furrey get from this?" Follard asked.

"Me," Lucia said simply. "He accepted as fact that letter stating you were dead. Since there isn't anyone else, the Cross Hatch is all mine, with Uncle Dobbs gone. He wants it, Earl—quickly. And the quickest way is to have you legally dead in Jordano and then take me. Bart Macomber was in the way because he wanted me, too. Furrey is killing two birds with one stone. He knows that no woman in the brasada—including me—can stand too long against him when all of her props have been cut away."

Earl nodded slowly. The Cross Hatch represented a big stake for Newt Furrey—worth any risk, any gamble. A forty-and-found brush popper, he had managed to parlay a deputy's badge into something better—probably with a bushwhack bullet in the sheriff's back. That had given him opportunity to make his cast for the bigger prize, possibly also paying off some grudge debt to Dobbs Follard. He had moved very surely. The man had a confidence Follard did not remember in him. And a confidence so hastily grown mighty destroy a man.

Follard reached for the girl's hand. It rested lightly in his, small and warm, but it trembled. He was aware of subtle fragrance from her hair, of high color in her cheeks, of the rounded maturity of her body.

"You're afraid," he said. "Don't be, Lucia. A man isn't dead until the trap

springs. It's a long time until morning."

Juana made a small, moaning sound. Lucia sprang up, gripping Follard's arm tightly.

"No, Earl! You can't do anything. I know. I've tried. If I'd known things would move as fast as they have I wouldn't even have written that letter to Mr. Olewine. This is all going Furrey's way. You can't stop him—and if you try, he'll kill you. That won't help Bart—or me. I—I don't want you mixed in it, Earl."

"A lot can happen before morning," he said. "A man shouldn't be as sure as Furrey is—not on a deal as raw as this one."

Luica's face paled a little. Her lips flattened. Her grip on his arm tightened.

"Your coming back makes a difference—your being alive. You must see that, Earl. It's all that counts, now. Furrey will come after me when that trap is sprung in the morning. I had resigned myself to that, because I couldn't see any other way out. But now I can. Get into the brush now, Earl! I'll send Juana to the ranch for the few things I'll need. And I'll be on the San Antonio stage at day-break—"

**S**HE LET it go at that, her voice trailing off, but a tempting picture had been painted for him. He had once wanted Lucia nearly as much as he wanted freedom. To slide into the brush and meet her at San Antonio— That, bluntly enough, was what she proposed. Lucia, too, had developed in the years between them. Cow country realism had grown strong in her. She was bitterly tired of fighting for Bart Macomber and she was grimly afraid of Furrey. Follard's retreat would be retreat for her, also.

There was only one flaw. She did not see the change in him, perhaps because it was not physical. Under the gun, literally, on the high grass Earl Follard had learned to fill a man's shoes.

The younger Earl Follard she had once known would have taken this offer. It was for this reason she had made it. She believed that if she did

not, he would go smoking once again tonight into something he could not handle and that he would make his final fiddle-footed blunder in a list which had already been long when he left Jordano. Some ember of an old affection prompted her feeling. Follard was grateful for it. Somehow it made his return worth while. He pressed her hand gently.

"You're forgetting the young fellow waiting in town tonight for Furrey's noose," he said. He turned to Juana. "Stay with her, *vieja*—"

He drifted back to the center of town, hat down. In the crowd along Front Street he wasn't noticed. Another rider in from the brush to see the hanging.

It wasn't necessary to look up; he could move along this street blindfolded. As he rode, Follard became aware of a curious feeling. Something compounded of all the unpleasant things he had experienced in this town. He fought it down, but it stayed with him, cold and tightly coiled.

What made a man, anyway? Little things, he thought, tags of reputation—a moment of hard steadiness in a gun fight, standing up to the rocky fists of another man, and beating him down; success built from a certain measure of good luck and a lot of hard work.

But that was Montana. This was Texas. That patterns were different.

He turned in at Julio Montoya's barber shop, hesitating a moment before putting his hand to the door-knob. Only a moment. Then he went in.

Montoya was alone. The barber's eyes bugged at sight of him.

"Santa Maria—Follard! You've broken out! Here, through the back door, man—I'll pick a horse off the rail and bring it around to you—"

"Out?" Follard said, brows raised. "I haven't been in, Julio. Just rode down from Santone." He sat in the ornate plush chair, scaling his hat aside. "Haircut and shave. Save the sweet smelling stuff until after my bath—"

Montoya hastily pulled the shades on his two windows.

"If only no one saw you come in here— Especially Furrey!"

"*Basta, amigo,*" Earl said, "get busy!"

HE LOOKED and felt better, an hour later, when he paid Julio. He left the barber shop and paced slowly across the street, head up, now. While relaxed in the chair, and later in the tub, it had come to him how this thing should be handled. He was aware of Julio's hasty action in closing the shop, behind him, and of the barber scuttling away up the opposite walk. Julio Montoya was the town's greatest gossip; he'd get the word started through town that Earl Follard, sentenced to hang in the morning, was walking the streets of Jordano. Follard wanted this. He wanted Newt Furrey to begin sweating.

He walked slowly across the wide porch in front of Cohen's Mercantile, and on inside, stilling the pleasant hum of evening business within the store. Earl deliberately took the center aisle so that all present might see him, and beckoned to the proprietor.

"Sol, I want the best suit in my size on your rack. Low calf boots and a white shirt. A new stetson out of the box you used to reserve for Uncle Dobbs—"

The gnomish little storekeeper trotted at his heels, kindly eyes frightened.

"Earl, you're crazy! Crazy, boy! You know my place down on the Neuces? Make for it, son. I've some tough Tejanos down there who don't care a damn for Newt Furrey and his tin badge."

"—and a place to shuck these things I'm wearing, which you can burn." Follard reached into a money belt under his shirt and removed a sizable wad of green notes. "What's this talk about Furrey, Sol? He seems to have run this town up a tree."

Sol Cohen licked his lips.

"You've broke jail, Earl."

"Or I was never in it," Follard said. "You think about that—and, while you're thinking, how about some service?"

He did not try to hurry Cohen. A lot of trade had quit the store after his entrance. Jordano was winding it-

self. Furrey would be beginning to feel the pressure. Follard made his selections carefully, keeping his mind on the new clothing so that he would not himself be snarled in the coils of the spring he was winding. He hung his gun so the skirt of his new coat wouldn't foul its grip. He adjusted his new Stetson.

"Remember when you gave me one of these, Sol? The first I had ever owned. I was a mighty ragged, sullen kid, those days— That hat meant something. I've never forgotten it."

Young Earl Follard had turned before this same mirror, carefully creasing the brim of that other hat. And young Earl Follard looked out at him now, a tenseness building in his belly in spite of his effort to curb it. How much could a man change, when the cards were all up? He had thought the years had made a difference. But standing here again, he wasn't so sure. Maybe this town had marked him too deeply with its memories. Maybe he could not do what he believed he could.

"Boy," Sol Cohen said softly, "Newt is fast and he's deadly with a gun. He's proved it. You've set him on his heels. Get out of town before he catches his breath."

"Have a drink with me, Sol," Follard said. "Over at the Longhorn. An easy, slow drink. I'll give you a toast: 'A short, hot road to hell for Newton Furrey!'"

Cohen shook his head.

"A favor to me, then, Sol," Follard said gently. "You're beginning to understand this, now. I want others to understand. You know Earl Follard didn't kill his uncle. You know Earl Follard wasn't arrested for murder. You know he wasn't tried and convicted. And you know he isn't going to hang. You've seen me, you've seen my face isn't bruised or scarred and that shoots enough holes in the story Furrey's been telling to pretty well indicate the rest of it. You know an innocent man has come almighty close to hanging under a name not even his own. Circulate up the street a little, talking with folks. And when you pass Furrey's office, tell him. I'll be waiting in the Longhorn—"

THE LITTLE mercantile man nodded unwilling assent. Follard left the store, angling unhurriedly across the street toward the Longhorn Saloon. He was aware of the emptiness of the walks, of curious faces and wary eyes in windows and doorways. The tension of the town was building. Tension must be putting its stress against Newt Furrey, too. Follard could feel the pressure within himself, also. He held it in check with a strong effort of will. It was this he had learned on the high grass—a refusal to be hurried into anything.

With street ruts underfoot, Follard had a sudden feeling all this was inevitable. Lucia's letter to Ted Olewine and Olewine's non-informative telegram to him. His trip south, without stopping in Kansas City to get his facts straight. The years away, memories of Jordano heavy in his thoughts. Since the moment he had left, everything had worked out to bring him back. Back to correct the one flaw in the fabric he had woven of his life.

Now, night in a little Texas town, with lightning bugs dancing over the square, death waiting speculatively somewhere back in the shadows, and Earl Follard filling out the pattern of inevitability by going through the batwing doors of the Longhorn Saloon....

Jack Spender, the Longhorn proprietor, had been primed. Spender knew of his presence on the street. Older and balder, a man Follard remembered with dislike. A part of this disturbing picture which had not changed except in the meaningless detail of passing time.

"Not in here, Follard!" Spender said sharply. "Get the hell out of here."

"You mind your trade, Jack," Follard told him. "Set out a bottle of your best rye, then duck under the counter if you run to as much water in the gut as you used to."

"I said get out!"

"And I said mind your trade. Rye whiskey, Jack—"

Their eyes met. Follard remembered he had been afraid of Spender once, as he had been afraid of many

men in Jordano. He had been afraid of being alone against them all. He had not known that aloneness could be a man's strength. Spender stared a long moment before his truculent defiance broke. He cracked a seal and set a bottle before Follard, then scuttled for the foot of his bar. Follard turned his back on the bottle without touching it and set his eyes on the street door.

Sound stopped in the Longhorn. Breathing stopped. There were faces along the wall, far out of the line of danger. But in effect the saloon was empty except for a man with his back to the bar, waiting for another man to come in from the street. And with him, death was also waiting.

Newt Furrey hit the batwing doors with his chest and came in aggressively, stopping two yards in from the entrance, his head a little forward and his shoulders hunched and the lamplight bright on his badge.

"There's three things I don't know about this, Follard," he said quickly, roughly. "How you gave me the slip so I got the wrong man the night I thought I picked you up in the brasa-da. Who the hell the brushpopper I've had locked up across the street with a broken face might be. And why in hell you're so damned obliging as to walk in here tonight. But there's one thing I do know. You killed Dobbs Follard and you're going to hang high at ten in the morning. Unsnap that belt—carefully—"

Very smart. The conscientious officer of the law, pursuing his duty through a startling turn of events, but remaining righteous and efficient.

FOR A MOMENT Follard felt a sick rush of fear. The old fear of failure in anything he tried which had obsessed him in this town. The one shadow in his memory which he had been unable to erase. Then he saw the flicker in Furrey's eyes and he realized the tension to which his presence and his unhurried movement in Jordano had wound the man.

"You come take my gun, Newt," he said quietly. "Dobbs Follard wasn't wearing one the night you killed him. Neither was the kid you beat half to death in the brush and brought into



town with his face a pulp and my name hung on him. Sheriff Eastland had need for a gun and carried one, so you must have got him in the back. You started this and now you'll ride it—to hell or success. Come get my gun, Newt. But you be careful. I'm waiting for you."

Follard saw the man weigh these charges and their effect among the townsmen along the wall. He saw the man remember a kid from the brush, surly with a temper prodded by a hard-handed old man and too unsure to have judgment. He saw Furrey's hand begin an almost wholly confident downward stab toward the butt of his gun and knew now, irrevocably, would come the test of his fear.

Furrey was a dangerous man with a gun. That was a remembered thing, and time had increased his skill. Furrey's weapon came into his hand with a snapping violence like that of a striking snake. It tilted and fired, using to the fullest extent the advantage Furrey had in making the first movement.

Follard's mind recorded the slap of Furrey's fingers against the butt of his gun, the flash of the weapon, the sound, the impact of the bullet against the outer muscle of his upper arm. And salted away among these, the concussion and recoil of his own gun. He did not realize that it had been his shot which was away first until Furrey took a step toward the bar, sagged and fell heavily, his head striking the foot rail. Then recognition came that at this distance Furrey would have nailed him center instead of in the arm if his own bullet had not driven the man off balance at the moment he pulled trigger.

FOLLARD dropped his gun into leather. He poured himself a drink with his good hand from the

bottle Spender had set out for him. Shock was receding and his arm was beginning to hurt, but a good feeling was building in him. Newt Furrey had been the strongest challenge Jordano could offer. The shadow of the town and the last memory were gone from him. They might as well have hung Earl Follard here. The kid from the Cross Hatch they had once known was as dead as any noose of rawhide could ever make him.

Lucia and the unsteady buscadero with the bandaged face found him later in the Commercial House, where a doctor was working on his arm.

"About the Cross Hatch," Follard said quickly. "Take it, you two. Find what Sol will lend on my half of the spread. Send it to Ted Olewine for me. Then the place will all be yours."

"But that isn't fair!" the girl protested. "You'll have to go back to line riding—"

"No," Follard said. "A man doesn't stand still in Montana, Lucia. He goes up or down. I have three thousand acres of the best grass on the Musselshell and stock fatter than the Texas brasada will ever see."

He stood up. The doctor was finished with him, and he was finished with Jordano. A moment of hesitation as he looked at Lucia, remembering what she had offered him, and he fumbled for words to tell the girl that it wasn't her—only that she was a part of Jordano and he was done for a last time with this place and its memories.

Then there was a sudden smile on her lips. Follard saw she understood. She put her hand on Macomber's arm, and her head came up. She was satisfied, even happy. It was in her eyes.

"Goodbye. For always, this time, Earl?"

"For always," he agreed, returning her smile. "Goodbye, Lucia." ●END

#### AMERICAN COWBOY 300 YEARS OLD THIS YEAR

The 300th anniversary of the American cowboy is celebrated this year. The cowboy usually is regarded as a symbol of the golden West of the past century.

The first organized cattle drive in the United States took place along the Old Bay Path between Springfield and Boston, Mass.

That first cattle drive was started in the year 1655, under the direction of John Pyncheon, son of the first American meat packer.



# TINHORN

by GLENN H.



# TROUBLE

WICHMAN

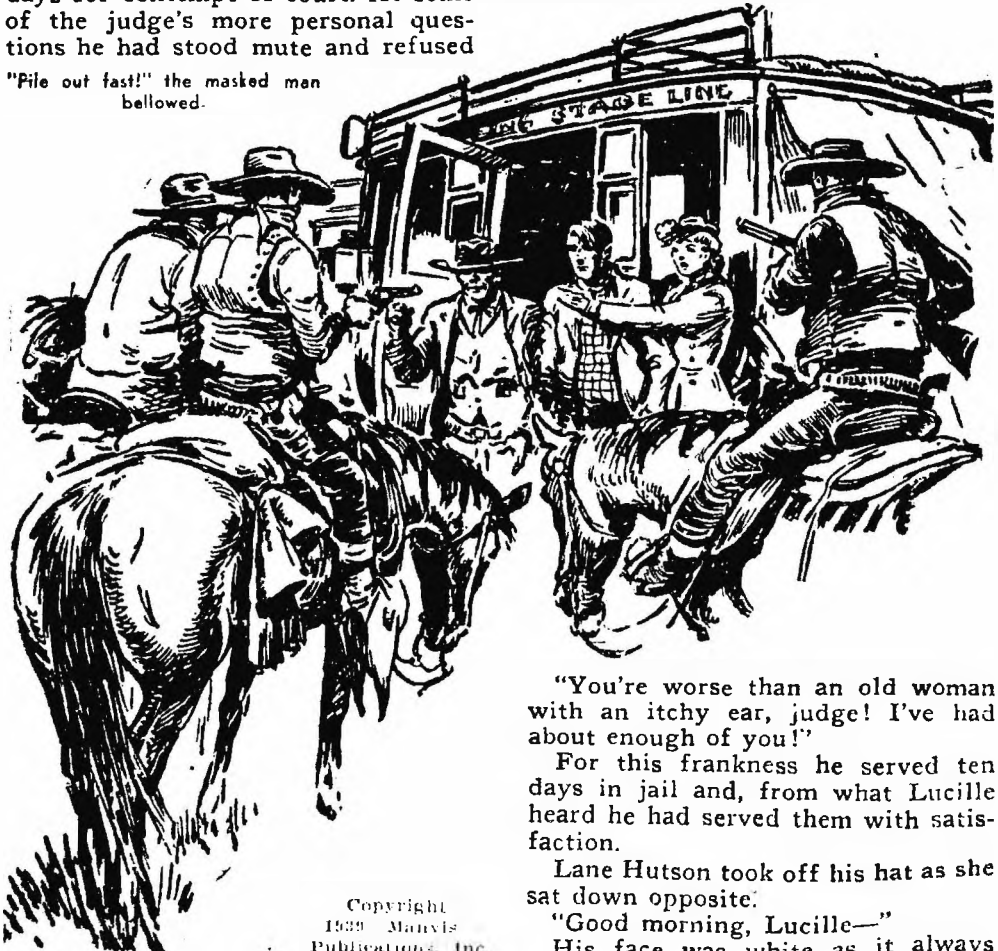
TIME ★ HONORED  
WESTERN  
CLASSIC

LUCILLE HUTSON tried not to show the shock she felt when the stage coach driver helped her up the step and she saw Lane Hutson sitting there in the front seat facing her. At the last quarterly sitting of the circuit court she and Lane had come to the parting and this was the first time she had seen him since that day. Immediately following the trial he had served ten days for contempt of court. At some of the judge's more personal questions he had stood mute and refused

"File out fast!" the masked man bellowed.

All Lane Hutson had known or cared about was a green-top table, a deck of cards, and a stack of chips. It was the girl Lane wanted as his wife who taught him how to use a gun...

to answer. Finally, prodded into cold fury, he had blurted out:



"You're worse than an old woman with an itchy ear, judge! I've had about enough of you!"

For this frankness he served ten days in jail and, from what Lucille heard he had served them with satisfaction.

Lane Hutson took off his hat as she sat down opposite.

"Good morning, Lucille—"

His face was white as it always

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was, a gambler's face. The separation appeared to have made no change in him that she could detect. He was dressed neatly in somber clothes. His eyes were bright; there was the barest suggestion of a smile on his straight lips.

Lucille Hutson nodded. "Good morning, Lane."

"If you'd rather," Hutson continued, "I'll go down on the stage tomorrow. I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I didn't know you were going today."

Lucille felt warmth come into her cheeks. "It makes no difference, Lane. This is a public—"

Two men climbed in, one on either side. Luke Thrasher moved the faster and he sat down beside her. Rex Hanover scowled and sat down beside Lane Hutson. Both men spoke to her and she nodded in reply. She looked across at Lane and saw amusement in his eyes. The situation was obvious, to both of them. Hanover and Thrasher were riding this stage because she was riding it. They were making love to her.

It was still nine months before she could remarry, before some man could again share with her the Bar 2 X, which, when the price of beef was good, yielded as much as forty thousand a year. It wasn't doing that well now, but there was still plenty. Since the trial a number of men had contrived to continually put themselves in her way, each apparently with the idea that he might be Lane Hutson's successor.

Rex Hanover and Luke Thrasher were among the better of her suitors. Both were men of substance. Hanover had a mercantile and freighting business. Thrasher dealt in cattle. They were of Lane Hutson's age but better looking than he and infinitely more substantial and a million times more respectable.

The only thing Lane knew or really seemed to care for was a green top table, a deck of cards and a stack of chips. He was good at it and made a living for himself. When Lucille had married him it was agreed between them in a nebulous sort of way that he would move out to the ranch and learn the cattle business. He had moved out, but not for long.

"Sorry," he said. "It's the case of an old dog. There's a good house for rent in town. We'll move."

LUCILLE hadn't gone with him. A gambler's wife. That hadn't been her idea. Gamblers were put up with, like people put up with taxes and the Devil, but they belonged very definitely on the outer fringe. Most people had looked askance at her marriage. The day came when she winced at their gaze. They had been right and she wrong. So she parted from Lane Hutson.

Lucille, looking mostly at the floor, knew that Luke Thrasher and Rex Hanover were enormously annoyed at Lane Hutson's presence in the stage coach. But they surely had enough wit to know that no reconciliation had taken place or she and Lane would have been sitting together, not opposite. Loafers on the walk were taking an interest in the situation. She heard a guarded comment or two and a snickering laugh and she wished that the stage would start. Crimson, she knew, was now flooding her cheeks. Perhaps it was not too late for her to agree with Lane's suggestion that he take the stage next day. But that would be awkward now unless he should renew the offer.

"Going to Willow Junction, Lucille?" Luke Thrasher asked inanely, for that was the only place the stage could possibly go when headed east.

"Yes," she answered.

Rex Hanover laughed. "I'm going down to buy a wagon. Funny, but I got the idea about five minutes ago."

"I suppose, Rex," Thrasher put in, "that you were so surprised you could have been knocked over with a feather when you saw Lucille sitting here?"

"I was no more surprised than you were," Hanover murmured.

It annoyed Lucille that both the storekeeper and the cattle buyer ignored Lane Hutson so completely. They hadn't even spoken to him. There was such a thing as ordinary politeness so she said, "Lane, they tell me that Dutch is enlarging his barroom."

Lane Hutson's mouth broke into an amused grin. "Thanks, Lucille. That's what I'm going down to the Junction

for. To make arrangements for the lumber. Now, folks, just forget that I'm 'around and go ahead and enjoy yourselves."

"I can't imagine," Thrasher said, "that your being here makes any difference. It doesn't to me."

Rex Hanover nodded. "You've set in at least one game, Hutson, where you couldn't win."

Lucille cringed as she saw Lane's face harden. He was never much of a hand to take things off of people. But all he did now was shrug his thin shoulders.

Old man Bryan, the driver, thrust his head in the door. "Everything O.K., folks?"

They nodded.

"We'll get going."

A moment and the stage lumbered out of town. Conversation was now nearly impossible. Lucille did not mind this. As they jostled about Rex Hanover and Luke Thrasher looked at her almost constantly. Lane Hutson never looked at her at all, he looked out the window.

They passed over the flat of the plateau and dropped down into Mule Canyon. An hour or more and the coach stopped. To water the horses, Lucille thought. But the heavy vehicle had barely stopped moving when a man with a bandanna covering most of his face thrust his head in the door. In each hand he held a gun.

"Pile out!" the man said. "Quick! don't make any bad moves!"

"My God—!" Rex Hanover breathed, and his hands went up over his head.

Lucille wanted to scream, but reason and fright prevented.

"Let's deal the lady out of this, partner," Lane Hutson suggested quietly to the bandit. "I'm sure she's carrying little of value."

"It's the lady that we want the most," the man replied. "Come on! Move!"

Lucille, trembling violently, was the first one out. The three men followed. Bryan, the driver, was already on the ground with a gun muzzle in his stomach. There were two bandits. The victims were lined up quickly beside the road and one man covered them. The second man started the driverless stage to moving. He re-

leased the brake and kicked the off wheel horse. The stage rumbled on, disappeared around a bend.

"Good Lord!" old man Bryan yelled. "Those horses'll be killed! There's a bad grade ahead!"

"I know what I'm doin'," the bandit said. "Shut up!"

LUCILLE, from the corner of her eye, looked at Lane. She knew that he invariably carried a gun in a shoulder holster. Apparently the bandits knew it too for one of them stepped up to Lane and relieved him of the gun.

"You were very smart, Hutson," the man said, "for not trying a draw."

So they knew him. Then the man relieved Lane of a roll of bills. Luke Thrasher and Rex Hanover were frisked quickly and with dispatch.

My turn now, Lucille thought. But the men ignored her. She heard the crash of the stage coach down the canyon and the horrifying scream of a horse.

"That's the end of my six nags," Bryan said. "I hope you guys roast in hell."

"You'd better keep quiet, Bryan," Lane Hutson suggested. "These men won't stand for much."

Of the four male victims Lane was the only one who appeared even partially at ease. Thrasher and Hanover had the appearance of being on the verge of hysteria. Both had been carrying guns, as was the custom of the country, but not in open holsters. Neither had had any more opportunity to draw than had Lane Hutson. The bandits had the situation in hand. They had taken all the tricks without firing a shot.

They understand this business, Lucille thought.

"Come on," the taller bandit ordered. "You folks just follow me."

He lead the way in among the boulders, his partner bringing up the rear. A hundred yards off the road they came upon seven saddled horses, tethered to willow saplings. Lucille startled at some of the brands. They were familiar brands, neighbors of hers. Then she remembered talk of stolen horses she'd heard in town that morning.

"We're riding, folks," the bandit

said, and with that he took off his bandanna mask.

"I thought it was you," Lane Hutson murmured. "Sylvester Brandon. We met once, up in Colorado."

The woman gasped at the man's name. For a long time it had been a name to conjure with and fear. There was no sheriff west of the Mississippi who did not want him. She looked at him now as stark terror gripped her. Sylvester Brandon was tall and straight and in his middle forties. His face was hard, like flint, his eyes black, and there was an old knife wound on his left cheek that ended in the corner of his mouth. There was no crime in the catalogue with which he had not been charged. The only good thing that anyone had ever said about him was that he was soft spoken.

Sylvester Brandon waved a hand at his partner. "This is my man Friday. Oddly enough his name's Friday. Lorenzo Friday."

Lorenzo Friday took the bandanna from his broad face and made a sardonic and slightly idiotic bow. "Greetings, folks."

"We're riding," Brandon repeated. He turned to Lucille. "Ma'am, I've got something for you." From under a bush he took a package and unwrapped it. A pair of new overalls. "Slip these on, ma'am, over your dress. You'll ride more comfortably."

"Very decent of you, Sylvester," Lane Hutson put in. "I want to thank you for your courtesy."

Brandon laughed. "I would not want Lucille Hutson to make a spectacle of herself before you men. Mount up now. Follow Friday. I'll bring up the rear. The first one of you who tries a break, gets it in the back."

Lucille stepped behind a boulder and pulled on the overalls. Then Sylvester Brandon helped her to mount. White-faced, they started off, with Lorenzo Friday out ahead. They made their way out of Mule Canyon and then through the sharp hills to the south.

**P**RESENTLY Lucille contrived to ride beside Lane Hutson. Of all those men she wondered why it was him she turned to. She spoke without

turning her head. "Where they taking us, Lane?"

The gambler shrugged. "It's got me puzzled. Why they'd be taking us anywhere."

"Brandon covers his trail," Lucille added. "That's what folks say. Are we to die, Lane?"

"I'd hate for you to die," Lane answered. "You've hardly started living."

Two hours and Sylvester Brandon called a halt. He stood beside his horse and, though he looked at the girl, he spoke to all of them.

"This is a very special day in my life," he began. "Out of consideration for Lucille I don't want there to be any bloodshed. That's why I've taken you with me instead of leaving you back there in the road. Blood is something that you, Lucille, will have to get used to gradually. If you don't get accustomed to it gradually it'll spoil your beauty. Your beauty's something I'm going to value and enjoy."

Lucille heard Lane Hutson groan. As for herself she was scarcely breathing. The outlaw's words could only mean that he was taking her with him, that henceforth she would be his woman in his hideout camps. Swiftly her gaze passed from one to the other of the men. Both Luke Thrasher and Rex Hanover were looking away. Both appeared relieved that nobody was going to die. They sighed deeply. Color was draining back into their faces. She looked at the driver. Old man Bryan's cheeks were livid with anger. He swore beneath his breath.

"You're a devil, Brandon!" old Bryan spat.

"Shall I shoot him, Sylvester?" Lorenzo Friday asked.

Brandon shook his head. "Nope. It'd be a messy sight. Mister," he said to Bryan, "believe it or not, you're free now to ride away. Yes, sir. You're free. Hightail it for town an' tell 'em there what Sylvester Brandon's done. Tell 'em Sylvester Brandon's hiding in the Cordova badlands and that they can try and find him if they want to. Shove off, you old goat—"

Lucille felt old man Bryan's eyes boring into her, questioningly. She

nodded. So without a word Bryan turned his horse, rode down the little draw in which they rested, and out of sight. They heard the pounding of his horse's iron shod hoofs, rapidly receding.

"Pick it up, the rest of you," Brandon directed. "We'll ride some more. We've gotta make the badlands before sundown."

Once more Lucille rode beside Lane Hutson. She saw that his face was white and pinched, his eyes hard.

"Where will he take me?" she asked.

"There'll be no rescue from town," he answered. "Not if we really get into the badlands. And with the border so near. I suppose he's figurin' on Mexico."

Two or three miles and Brandon again called a halt. He laughed raucously. "Folks in town'll think that Sylvester Brandon's gone crazy. You birds drifting back in there one at a time. Which one of you wants to go now? Who wants to ride away? Any one of you three men."

There was silence for a long minute.

"I'll ride for help," Rex Hanover said finally, and his voice sounded as hollow as though it had come from a cistern. He looked neither to the right nor left but with head down rode over a rise and out of sight.

"A yellow dog," said Sylvester Brandon, "with his tail between his legs and his belly dragging. Come on."

**T**WO MILES more and again he halted. The afternoon was growing old, the sun almost down behind the high mountains to the west.

"Well, Hutson," Brandon began, "it's either you or the storekeeper. One or the other of you can go now. Who'll it be?"

"Not me," Lane answered.

Luke Thrasher neither spoke nor looked at any of them. He just wheeled his horse around and sank the spurs.

"Brandon," Hutson said, "it's easy enough for me to figure out your play. We understand each other." He half turned and looked away from Lucille. "I think I can be of use to you, Sylvester. You see I was once

married to this lady. I understand her, like I do you."

"By thunder," Brandon grumbled, "mebbe you can help at that. I've got two things in mind. The woman and some twenty thousand in gold that's buried on her ranch."

"Gold!" Lane gasped. "I don't understand. I've never heard of it."

Sylvester Brandon chuckled boastfully. "I get around, mister. I know things. Couple months ago I ran onto the doctor that was with Lucille's father when he died. Just before the old man died he told Lucille where the gold was buried. She was never to dig it up except in some great emergency. Well, that emergency's come now. The doc didn't hear enough to know where it's buried. They sent him from the room. But Lucille knows. And she's going to tell. When we've got it we'll slip over into Mexico and enjoy ourselves."

Lucille Hutson saw the hills spinning crazily about her. Then she gritted her teeth and the hills no longer moved.

"Doctor Osgood," she said weakly. "What's happened to him? He was a good man."

Brandon made a movement of finality with his hands. "Osgood was bargaining with me for his life. He was offering various things he knew. He was a sick man and he told about the gold. But unfortunately for him he didn't know where it was buried, so I shot him. Then I planned this present lay out, and here we are." He was smiling broadly, well pleased with himself.

"Gold," Lane Hutson repeated.

"By thunder, Lane!" Sylvester exclaimed excitedly. "I got an idea. I'll let you handle Lucille. I'll let you get the information out of her. It'd be better for you to do it, than for me. I want her to like me."

Lorenzo Friday put in a word. "I don't think much of takin' Hutson to the hideout. That's a damn valuable spot."

"You shut up, Friday!" Brandon half shouted. "That's for me to worry over! I'll attend to it."

Lucille shuddered. Sylvester Brandon's meaning was all too clear to her.

They rode on, straight for the bad-

lands that lay to the south. Only the four of them now, the two outlaws, the gambler and Lucille. When the opportunity offered the girl dropped back beside Lane Hutson.

"You should have gone, Lane," she whispered hoarsely. "With the others. You'll never come out of this alive. You know it."

Lane Hutson smiled wanly and shook his head. "Quien sabe, Lucille."

Lucille Hutson's vision blurred as she looked at him.

"Nothing can save us," she said thickly. "Nothing. I'll be dead or worse within a month. You should have gone, Lane, while you had the chance. Maybe there's still a chance."

He shook his head and bent from the saddle. "Don't tell 'em where the gold is—"

"Enough of that!" Brandon yelled from over the girl's shoulder. "Quit that whisperin'!" Then he hit Lane Hutson across the face with the flat of his hand. And just as quickly he apologized. "Sorry, Hutson. I'm a jealous man. We're friends and you're going to help me with Lucille."

"Sure," Lane answered. "I'll overlook the sock on the mouth. Are you giving me a share of this gold? I ought to get a cut."

"I might. I might give you one-tenth—"

Lorenzo Friday interrupted with a laugh.

**TWILIGHT** came as they entered the badlands. It was a perfect labyrinth of crooked defiles, running thither and yon, at every imaginable point of the compass. Little gorges, big gorges and some so narrow that a horse could not go through them. Mostly they rode on bare rock and occasionally through pools of water. Less than a mile of this and Hutson said:

"The lady's had nothing to eat since morning. That's no way into a woman's heart, Sylvester. There'd be no danger this early in building a fire. There might be later."

"Nothing doing!" the outlaw snapped. Then he looked at Lucille and just as suddenly changed his mind. "All right. I was going to suggest it."

Lorenzo Friday did not like this.

"We'd better wait till we get to the hideout."

"Nope," Brandon ruled. "We'll eat here."

Just as darkness came they stopped beside a pool. Mesquite grew along the edges of the water in the shallow ground. From this scraggly growth Lane Hutson built a fire.

"I'll make the coffee," he volunteered. "If there's anybody knows more about making coffee than I do, I've never heard of him."

Lucille sat on a protruding rock and watched. Friday had taken a skillet and a slab of bacon from his saddle bag. Brandon had some hard bread in his hand which would be soaked in bacon grease. Hutson sat on his haunches before the fire, watching the coffee pot. Light from the fire danced eerily along the rock walls of the gorge. Illuminated the men's faces.

"You haven't put in the coffee yet," Sylvester said.

Premonition told Lucille that Lane Hutson would draw cards now most any moment. He would make the supreme gamble of his life.

"With this new method," Lane explained evenly, "you put the coffee in just before the water boils. In that way you extract the best aroma from the coffee bean. Not the bitter but the—"

"Horse collar!" Lorenzo Friday interrupted. "There's no sense in that."

Lucille felt around her and found two rocks, each half as large as her fist. She picked these up, tried to still the pounding of her heart, tried to breathe—

"The water's just about right," Hutson murmured. He reached out and, protecting his hand with a handkerchief, grasped the handle. He opened up the pot. Bent over. "Yep. It's just right Sylvester, hand me the coffee."

Even before Brandon could turn he got the entire contents of the coffee pot in his face! Lucille was on her feet. A gun blasted. Silhouetted in the light from the fire she saw darting figures. Brandon, blinded by the boiling water, was emptying his Colts. Lane Hutson was plunging at him. Then, even before Lucille could throw her rocks, something sharp hit her. She was falling—

(continued on page 80)

# BUSHWHACKER

## BEHIND A

## TIN - BADGE

by **ROD PATTERSON**

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Publishing Co., Inc.

of his Walker Pistol and earned the rep for being as proddy as a red-eyed mossy-horn out of the hills. Folks said Rufe smelled a ruckus a week before it broke, and when it did, could shuck iron faster than hell could scorch a feather. Rufe was proud of his badge and his gun and his draw. But....

TIME ★ HONORED  
**WESTERN  
CLASSIC**

**F**OR FORTY years Rufus Roscoe Tudge had been marshal of Mormon Springs.

The toughest, bloodiest town in the Washoe basin, it had been only a two-bit burg when old Rufe started, but when the first great trail herds belled up from the Panhandle to the Wichita Mountains, the fame of the town and its fighting marshal rode out on the dust and the din as far away as Dodge City and old Cheyenne. Through hell and high water Rufe rodded the law in that bibulous Babylon of the West. In his first five years, he carved five nicks in the butt

**Marshal Rufe Tudge was proud of his badge and his gun and his draw, and he didn't reckon a back-shooting son of Satan could handle his job of taming the toughest, bloodiest town this side of Dodge...**

Rufe had the neatest little house in Washoe Township; and the neatest wife. She had silver hair and cobalt blue eyes, like the two Dresden china dolls on the fireplace in the living room. Folks couldn't help but envy a man



He fired his gun point-blank at the nearest shape.



with a settin' room that had no bunks in it and a wife who could cook like Annie could. And Rufe felt mighty proud.

And Annie was proud of her fighting marshal husband, too. She wanted Rufe to have a better home than those tin horns and gun-toting cowmen who battled and wore calouses on their elbows leaning on the bars in town. But there was one thing Annie regretted: that Rufe couldn't spend more time in his home. Maybe he could, too, if only he'd get some sense and turn his badge in to Mayor Bowerhan. But she had to be careful about mentioning that; Rufe was apt to get his bristles up if you reminded him that he was seventy-two.

Now, on the way to the bedroom to call Rufe for breakfast, Annie thought again of Ben Bowerhan and had the same strange feeling of foreboding she'd had the day previous when Chuck Jones, Rufe's moon-faced deputy, had stopped at the house, three miles from town. Chuck's usually placid face had been drawn and worried-looking.

"Land sakes, Chuck," Annie said, "you look like you'd jest come from a witch's barbecue!"

"Nothin' like that, Annie," Chuck said. But I shore got a load o' trouble on my mind."

"Mebbe if you was to talk about it, t'would help some."

Chuck twirled his hat nervously a moment before blurting: "I wish yuh'd git Rufe to quit, Annie."

"Glory be, Chuck, I been a-tryin' to do that for three years! Rufe's as ornery as a muley-bull."

"Damn it, don't know it!" Chuck got up from where he was sitting and walked over to the stove and back. Then he said, "Ben Bowerhan's got an hombra name o' Bat Serango hangin' 'round the courthouse. I jest learned he's a gunman from up Dodge way."

"Well," Annie said, "if the mayor's so sot on takin' up with a gun-toter, guess it's his funeral, ain't it?"

"By grab, it ain't as simple as all that!" Chuck brought out tightly. "Yest'dy I happened to overhear them two swappin' tongue-oil in the mayor's office. Only roped a little of it, but t'was enough. I heered Bowerhan

mention Rufe an' the Miners' an' Herders' Bank in the same danged breath. An' I remembered right off that the Rollin' R brand from Sweetwater jest rolled into the Flats with five thousand head."

"What in the world are you drivin' at, Chuck?"

Chuck spoke in a whisper: "The Rollin' R sold ev'ry damn head o' beef in that trail herd to Tom Milo day 'fore yest'dy, an' deposited eighty thousand iron men in Belcher's bank. An' Bowerhan knows Rufe sticks closer to that bank nights than a houn' dawg to a hot stove!"

"But—"

"I got a hunch Bowerhan an' that Bat Serango are gonna try to git shet o' Rufe Tudge somehow," Chuck went on, "so they kin bust inter that bank 'tween now an' Friday. I allus figured Bowerhan fer a stinker!"

Now as she stood at the bedroom door, thinking of how deadly serious Chuck had been, Annie felt again that helpless, sinking sensation. For she knew with irrevocable finality the uselessness of telling Rufe anything; he was too loyal, too innocent of wrong-doing to even suspect anyone else of it. Drunkenness, rowdyism, yes. And even murder in some men. But not dishonesty in the mayor of the town he loved.

**S**HE PAUSED, hating to wake Rufe; he needed his sleep after being out so late nights recently. Finally she went in. She had to shake him hard before he yawned and knuckled his eyes and asked what time it was.

"Time all old dogs was dead," said Annie tenderly.

"Ain't you the slick one," Rufe said, throwing his long legs out of bed. He looked comical in his dinky nightshirt. Rufe was a big, raw-boned man with a seamed red face and gray eyes that were just beginning to get a little watery. Despite the hectic nature of his calling, there was a certain damn-it-take-your-time look around his long-lipped mouth. Now he said, "What we got fer breakfast, Annie?"

"Guess."

"A big durn' steak an' rais' biscuits an' sop," grinned Rufe, reaching out to the bedside chair for his hat. He

always started dressing with his head-piece—a hangover of his Texas range-riding days. He put it on carefully now before adding, "An' no danged whittle-whangin' 'bout it, neither."

"You'll git pan cakes an' lick, ol' shaky shanks," she informed him tartly, "an' like it!"

"My, my," he mocked her gently, "ain't you got the pepper on yore tongue! Now git, so I kin put on my pants!"

When they finished the simple meal, Annie said, "When you goin' turn in your star and enjoy life fer a change?"

"Now don't start that again," Rufe warned her. He got up from the table and strapped on his gun belt, clipping his steel-linked handcuffs to a brass ring on it. "I ain't *never* gonna quit; I tol' yuh that afore. Bowerhan can't git nobuddy who kin handle them Texas trail boys when they come skally-hootin' inta town. An' besides, the mayor needs an honest, straight-shootin' marshal, with the bank bulgin' with beef money like it is this time o' year."

"Bowerhan!" Annie snorted. "Don't mention Ben Bowerhan an' honesty all in the same breath to me, Rufe Tudge! I've heered a-plenty about that man's shady dealin's."

"Oh, Ben's all right, I guess." Rufe pinned his old ball-pointed marshal's badge in a fresh place on his cowhide vest. "People shouldn't oughta run a man down on plain heresay. Besides, Ben's only been mayor a month. Give 'im time to show what he's made of, I say."

Annie studied her husband a moment, then heaved a sigh. "I do wish you'd listen to your wife onct in a while." She sighed again. "Reckon when you git to be an ol' man, Bowerhan'll have to start packin' a gun an' do his own marshalin'. You bein' the only able-bodied man in Mormon Springs."

"When that happens, old gal, you ain't gonna be round to see it. My paw lived to drive an eight-mule baggage wagon when he was ninety-six. An' then he—"

"An' then," she supplied Annie caustically, "he fell off a bar stool and busted his brisket. Tellin' that

windy over and over is goin' to tucker you out, if nothin' else does."

"Now, now," Rufe said. "Yuh got my lunch ready?"

"Yes." Annie sighed. "You'll find it on the pump shelf. And be sure your boots is clean afore you walk onto my clean kitchen floor."

A half hour later, Rufe rode into Mormon Springs. Humming happily to himself, he lit down from his bay in front of the courthouse, tied the horse, and went briskly up the steps to his office in the east wing of the building.

He was glad to find Chuck Jones there ahead of him. Good man, Chuck. But Bat Serango was in the office too. He was sitting in the sun, with his shin-boots propped up on the front window ledge, hat slapped back on his sleek black head. Serango, Rufe knew, was a friend of the mayor's, but that didn't make you like him any better. Serango had a shifty way of looking right over your head when he was talking to you.

"'Morning, boys," Rufe said, sitting down at his roll-topped desk in the corner. "Anything new, Chuck?" He turned quickly when his deputy's reply came tautly across the room: "Mayor wants to see yuh right away, Rufe."

"What's he wanta see me about?" Rufe's gray eyes bored at his deputy. Chuck kept his gaze averted. Rufe saw his round face was almost gray underneath its tan. "Says fer yuh to come right over. That's all I know."

Rufe stood up. He shot a glance at Serango over by the window. Serango was picking his teeth with careful concentration and staring out on the street. There was no expression in his pale eyes.

Rufe went across the hall to the mayor's office. A short, stocky man with crisp black eyes, Ben Bowerhan was sitting at his desk with his big flat boot-soles sticking out from under it. "'Morning, Tudge," he said pleasantly.

Rufe felt a little quiver of relief go through him. He said, "Chuck told me yuh wanted to see me."

"Yeah." The mayor looked down at some papers he was riffling, then up again. "I was wonderin' if you'd be

good enough to show Serango the ropes."

Rufe scratched his jaw. "Mind chewin' that a little finer, Ben?"

"Didn't Jones tell you?"

"No, sir."

"Why the hell didn't he?" Bowerhan acted irritated. "I told him to."

"Give 'er to me straight, Ben, if I done something wrong."

**B**OWERHAN cleared his throat. "Well, Tudge, it's this way. Runnin' a town the size of Mormon Springs is a business proposition and the records show you're gettin' too old for the work. You're seventy-two, Tudge, and much as I hate to do it, I got to ask you to step aside for a younger man."

Rufe swayed a little; his hands balled suddenly into fists at his sides. "Yuh mean—yuh mean I'm—fired?"

At the utter incredulity in Rufe's voice, Bowerhan allowed a pained expression to cross his heavy features. "Now, Tudge," he said patiently, "you got to look at this reasonable. We all got to get old some day. And in your case—well, it oughta be pretty gratifyin' to know you done your job good all these years and that you're checkin' out with a whole hide."

Rufe gulped. "But what've I done that's—"

"Hell, it ain't that!" Bowerhan snapped. Then, holding his voice down low: "I savvy this is kind of a shock to you, Tudge. And takin' that into consideration, I'm gonna stretch a point of law and give you a bonus of two months' salary."

Rufe's shoulders were sagging; there was a stunned glassiness in his eyes. "Yuh fire Chuck Jones too?" he asked thickly. "An' him with a wife an' three kids?"

Bowerhan made an impatient gesture. "He'll get a bonus too."

Rufe stared. Then he said:

"Who yuh gonna appoint in my place?"

"Damn it, Tudge, didn't you hear what I said about—"

"I wanta know who's gonna wear my star."

"You know goddam well I already swore in Bat Serango!" barked Bowerhan. "A man with some get-up-and-go! Not a blasted moss-back!"

A spasm of fury shook Rufe; his face seemed suddenly to crack into deep furrows, like cleft chisel marks in a granite mask. "Yuh mean to sit there an' tell me you're gonna make that—that Serango marshal o' this town when the bank is loaded plumb to the winders with—"

"Look, Tudge." Bowerhan's tone went flat, deadly. "I don't aim to sit here all day augerin' with you. If you don't want to stick around for a couple days, till Bat gets the hang of things—all right."

"It ain't square," Rufe moaned, "to cut me down like this in the prime o' life."

Bowerhan's mouth had the curl of a whip lash. "Seventy-two," he said.

Rufe dragged in a deep shaken breath. He drew a hand falteringly over his eyes as if he was trying to clear his sight. Then, slowly, he began to fumble at the tarnished marshal's badge on his vest. "It—it ain't square—" he whispered. He tried to get the star unpinned, failed. Bowerhan eyed him coldly. "You can keep it," he said brusquely.

Rufe let his hand fall limp. When at last he spoke, there was a reedy quaver in his voice. "Listen, Ben, I come of a race o' long-livin' men. I—I still got fifteen years o' good active life. An'—I ain't sure about my age nohow—like's not I'm only about sixty."

The mayor was looking out of the window. "Wonderful weather we been havin', Tudge." He pushed abruptly to his feet and turned to a filing case in back of him.

Rufe faced toward the door. Slowly. He made it all right, but he bumped hard against the door frame going out. Chuck Jones wasn't in the office when he finally got hold of himself and went in.

But Bat Serango was. And Serango was sitting at his desk already. Rufe's desk. The one he'd used for so long, it had two polished hollows on it where his elbows had rubbed.

Rufe dropped his handcuffs on the desk.

He said, "The mayor asked me would I show yuh things an'—an' kind of introduce yuh 'round town."

Serango tipped back in his chair. He anchored his pale gaze on a spot

just over Rufe's gray head. "Okay with me, Grampaw," he said. "Ready any time you are"

Rufe saw the brand-new marshal's star on Serango's gaudy vest and went all tight inside. Forty years rodding the law in the toughest, bloodiest town this side of Dodge. Forty years taming down a town where there hadn't been enough peace and safety to wad the barrel of a smooth-bore gun. And he, Rufe Tudge, had made that devil's den a fit place for women and kids to live in. But now, he was through. Now he had to take a lot of rotten lip from a blasted cold-deck pilgrim from the brush. Why, damn it to hell, he had a good mind to tell this flat-bellied, squint-eyed gent he could gun-whup or hand-whup him seven days out of a week! Seventy-two or no seventy-two! But he didn't. Instead, he said, "We'll go over to see Ed Belcher at the bank, fust thing. That'll be the spot to watch close. Leastways till the beef money that's there now goes out Friday with Wells Fargo."

"Hope you don't think I *tried* to git yore lousy job, Grampaw."

More than anything else in the world, Rufe wanted, right then, to smash that smirk clean down Serango's throat. But he didn't even answer. He turned away, disgusted. Sick. He took Serango across the square to the Miners' and Herders' Bank, stiffly introduced him to the president and cashier. Ed Belcher, a whiskery, cheerful little man, came out from behind his wicket and shook hands.

**R**UFE EXPLAINED: "Serango's gonna take care o' things fer a while, Ed. I—I jest wanted yuh to know he's got full authority." Realizing suddenly that he was stammering it out, Rufe flushed clear up to the brim of his hat. Then, feeling the banker's astonished stare, he added hastily, "Hell, I'll be a-rollin' my tail 'round town jest the same, only I—well—I ain't quite as spry as I usta be."

Ed Belcher laughed a little uncomfortably, then said, "Jupiter! This here town would fall plumb apart if anything happened to you, Rufe!"

Bat Serango hooked his thumbs

into the arm-holes of his brocade vest and swaggered around the bank, squinting at this and that and asking questions. Damn fool questions. Rufe thought. Like: "Yuh keep that back door barred up night and day. Belcher?" and "Jest how much dinero yuh got on hand right now?"

Rufe held in as long as he could, then burst out, "Damn it, we ain't supposed to run the bank, Serango! We're jest supposed tuh take care nobuddy busts into it."

"Did yuh say we?" Serango asked with heavy irony. "Look, Grampaw, yuh don't tighten the latigo on that jaw o' yourn, I'll have tuh do it fer yuh!"

Rufe's right hand flicked down, hung fire a moment above the black butt of his gun. But Belcher stepped into the breach. "Shucks," he said calmly, "the bank ain't never lost even a short bit since Rufe's run this town. When the longhorns hit here he keeps watch on the bank from eight till midnight, then Chuck comes on. Say...who you gonna make yore deputy, Serango?"

"Deputy?" Serango sounded incredulous. "Me need a deputy? Hell, Belcher, this ole smoke-wagon's all the deputy I need!"

Ed Belcher eyed him a moment, stiffly. Then he said, "Well, after Friday it'll be normal again. The money'll be outa here then—most of it, anyhow."

Annie was in bed and asleep when Rufe got home that night. He didn't wake her to say goodnight as he usually did. He just crawled between the blankets and lay quiet, thinking. It was almost dawn when he fell into a fitful slumber.

Tuesday morning at breakfast time Annie waked him as usual. But the meal was different. There was chicken and salt pork and homemade peach preserves.

"Wish ev'ry day was like this," Rufe said.

"T'would be," Annie said, "if you'd only get some cow-sense an' quit that star-totin' job o' yourn."

"There yuh go again," he told her sternly. "Women talk too much."

Suspicion hit him suddenly, suspicion that somehow she had learned

about his getting fired. He said, "Was you in town yest'dy?"

"How would I get time to go to town—with all this housework?" She said it so indignantly that he felt easy in his mind again. But when he opened his lunch that afternoon at the courthouse, his feeling of security evaporated. There was so much in his pail that it looked sure as hell like Annie was trying to console him for something. And, ironically, today he didn't feel like eating it. Maybe he was going into a fast decline. Seemed like he'd heard somewhere that some old men did go all to once like that.

All day he tried to duck people on Main Street and kept to the courthouse, dozing and smoking by the gray metal door that lead into the jail's cell-block. But when he went out for coffee at eight o'clock he ran spang into Bert Downey, owner of the Silver Chip Saloon. Bert said, "What in time ails that there mayor of ours, Rufe? If this Bat Serango ain't a cat-eyed killer from awayback, I'll eat yore shirt."

"Reckon he can't help his looks," Rufe said gruffly.

"Mebbe not," Bert replied, "but last night in my place, I seen him get into a jangle with Sam Purvis and dig for his blue lightin'. Thought surer than cripes he was gonna unravel some slugs."

When Rufe arrived at the courthouse Wednesday morning, he found Mayor Bowerhan waiting for him on the steps. "Monte" Clayton, the local blacksmith, and Jeff Caldwell, the night barkeep at the Silver Chip, were lounging in the shade nearby. That's what made it so tough when Bowerhan said, out of a clear sky: "You won't be needin' to ride in after today, Tudge."

Rufe felt his face get red. He swallowed hard and said, "That's all right, Ben. I don't mind none. It's only two whoops an' a holler—"

Bowerhan cut him off: "Listen, after today I don't want your carcass clutterin' up the scenery around here. Is that plain enough?"

Rufe nodded dumbly. Then, as the mayor wheeled and stomped back to his office, he dragged himself wearily up the steps after him. There was

a lump in his throat, a consuming bitterness in his heart for the two men who were at last kicking him flat-footed out of the life he loved. And the irony of it was: he was as helpless against the pair of them as a scrub-calf in a stampede.

SINCE Monday, the breakfasts Annie prepared for him kept getting better and better, and devil take the expense. "What's come over yuh, Annie?" he growled at her at Thursday's breakfast. "Feedin' me up like I was hell bent fer Glory Hallelujah!"

"I jest get sick and tired hearin' you take on so about your meals," Annie said tartly. "But I guess you'd holler and yell anyhow, no matter what kind o' chuck you was gettin'."

"I ain't *kickin'*, Annie. I jest figured t'was—well—kind of queer."

"Land sakes," she came back at him, "you're a-gettin' so old and wuthless, if you're ever a-goin' to eat good cookin' you better do it now!"

It did him good to hear her jump on him like that; it meant he'd fooled her, too. But he was still worried. He knew he couldn't go on like this forever. He realized with a sudden hard pang of alarm that he had no place to go today. The first time in over forty years! The knowledge hit him in the stomach and turned him sick. Bowerhan had meant what he said; no doubt of that. Well, the hell with Bowerhan! Bowerhan couldn't stop him from riding to town. He'd hang around some place. Hang around till midnight which was his regular hour. Then he'd ride home as if nothing was wrong. And then, tomorrow...

In town, he stopped at Clayton's to have the bay shod, which gave him a good excuse to pass a pleasant hour. It didn't work out as he thought it would, though, listening to Monte's belly-aching. Because, for the first time in his life, his own troubles seemed to be the lumped-up sum of all the grief and anguish in the world. So he left the horse at the blacksmith shop and went over in back of the Union Church and sat in the wagon shed and cleaned his .45.

At four that afternoon, he suddenly recalled that he'd forgotten to bring his lunch pail, so he sneaked

across the square to the Hip-High Restaurant and had a cup of coffee. When he saw Ed Belcher coming over from the bank, he pushed up in a panic from the counter and tried to duck out before Ed spotted him. It didn't work.

"Hold on, yuh son-of-a-gun!" The banker hopped across the boardwalk. "Say, what's eatin' yuh, Rufe? Your lip's hangin' down like a blacksmith's apron!"

Rufe screwed up a grin. "Perky as a jay-bird, Ed."

Belcher pulled him aside. "Do me a favor, pard, will yuh?"

"Spit 'er out, Ed."

"Listen." Belcher stopped, looked to see if other ears were near, then went on in a half-whisper: "Stay in town tonight like a good feller and keep an eye on the bank, will yuh? I don't cotton to that new marshal o' Bowerhan's. Not any."

"Hell, Serango's only—"

"I got to think o' my stockholders, Rufe," the little banker broke in irritably.

"And there ain't hardly a family in Washoe Township ain't got a piece o' money in that bank o' mine. And—well, I'll feel a heap easier when the express comes for that eighty thousand beef deposit tomorra morning." He dropped a hand pleadingly on Rufe's arm. "I could mount guard myself, but Cynthia's sick and—"

"You're gettin' yore nerves in a jingle, Ed. You—"

"Look, I run into Bat Serango last night comin' out of the alley in back o' the bank. He was drunker'n a fiddler's clerk.

"Now yuh can't go and trust a man like that, Rufe!"

Rufe suddenly was remembering things—little things: the whispered gossip about Ben Bowerhan; Bert Downey's cynical reference to Bat Serango; Bowerhan's offer of two months pay, his seeming attempt to make him, Rufe, stay out of town. Somehow the pieces fitted together to make a picture. True, a hazy one. But still. . . .

Rufe's seamed face brightened; there was a new look in his eyes. More like the old sure blaze of power and determination. His shoulders

came up, almost imperceptibly. He said, "Keep yore shirt on, Ed. I'll kinda watch out fer things."

ALL HIS life Rufe had believed in self-decision. He had made his own judgments, had lived by them, and had taken the rewards or the penalties they brought him, asking no help from anyone and caring little whether the next jerk of the trigger brought him death, or just another notch on his gun for law and justice.

So, when he stepped out of the shadows of Comanche Street under the light of the quiet stars and saw two men ease stealthily down the steps of the courthouse, he felt the old thrill of danger, knew the old quick surge of pride in his chosen calling.

Unconsciously his left hand came up to the ancient marshal's badge he still wore on his faded cowhide vest. The star was there, all right, in the old familiar place, cold and ball-pointed to his touch. Paused stolidly in the gloom, he watched the two dim figures slouch unhurriedly across the dusty square toward the Miner's and Herder's Bank. One was short and stocky, the other a little taller. Rufe didn't need to see their faces. He knew them: Ben Bowerhan and Bat Serango, sure as hell!

Rufe's shoulders pulled back straight; he felt the hot blood hammer again through his hardened veins. And he felt a swift jolt like that of an electric shock streak through him from hat to boots. A slow fierce joy began to build up in him; it loosened every stiffened muscle of his body, put a springy snap into his legs as he stepped forward.

Bowerhan and Serango had vanished abruptly down the dark alley beside the bank. It was ten o'clock, but there were no loiterers aboard. Rufe stepped quietly off the plank walk, for the boards might clatter under the impact of his high boot heels. Down the street a banjo twanged out its plangent rhythm. A drunken voice yodeled off key, from behind the batwing doors of the Silver Chip.

Rufe kept to the shadows cast by the high false fronts of the buildings and approached the bank, warily

examining each dark alley opening as he walked. His gun was out. Cocked. He'd give 'em time to get their dirty hands on the money. That was all. Just time enough for that.

He reached the alley beside the bank and stopped. Then abruptly he moved up the darkened alley. He walked with a slow, firm tread. Quietly. Past a rain barrel, and a big heap of rubbish, a pile of wood. . . .

He was there. At the banker's rear door. The opening yawned, a black loom of shadow, right in front of him. He reached out, touched shattered wood where the door sagged inward. He moved. Across the sill. Three wooden steps angled downward into the bank's musty interior. Now he could see the steps plainly because there was a light down there—a coal oil lamp, burning yellowly on the floor. Huge, fantastic shadows jiggled and wavered on the white-washed wall—the shadows of Ben Bowerhan and Bat Serango. Rufe saw them suddenly, hunkered down close together near the lamp. He didn't raise his voice at all. He said, "All right, boys," and made the three steps to the level of the floor in a single nimble jump.

Simultaneous with the whack of his boots against the floor a gun flamed up into his face. He fired his own piece point-blank at the nearest shape, fell like a log, feeling the searing impact of lead against his left shoulder. The lamp went out with a crash of glass. Rufe fired again, rolled over on his wounded arm. Boots kicked across the floor toward him. They raked his side as they pounded past. And then Bowerhan and Serango were blocked clearly against the stars in the opening of the rear door.

Rufe fired twice, swiftly. Bowerhan went down in a groaning heap outside in the yard. At that instant Rufe felt nausea wash through him. Everything went blank for what seemed to him the space of a heart beat. And then he was fighting to his knees, choking, as swirling black smoke stung his throat and lungs. The lamp had started a fire across the room. As Rufe wrenched himself upright, flames caught on dried-

out wood-work, sent red tongues of fire spurting upward.

Rufe broke into the rear yard, jumped the mayor's silent form and sprinted out to the street. He came to a slithering halt, gun arcing up, his left arm swinging limply at his side.

Bat Serango was out in the middle of the square, moving away into the gloom with a kind of hitching limp as though he'd been nicked by a slug. He had a war-bag in his left hand.

Rufe called, "Come back here, Bat!"

Serango's hands pushed air in his effort to stop. He dropped the bag to the dust. Then he turned. Slowly. Cautiously. "By God!" he snarled. "So you was the one, Grampaw!"

"Come on back here!" Rufe repeated. He was beginning to feel sick again.

"Yuh better come out an' get me, Grampaw; I'll be right here."

"No," Rufe said. "Drop yore belt, Serango, an' walk this way."

**R**UFE COULD remember scenes such as this, when time thinned down and moments were like lagging pulse beats. He couldn't shoot a man who hadn't even drawn. He had to wait. Rufe held his sixgun down flat against his thigh and called, "Make up yore mind, Serango," and went on waiting.

There were scenes that cut an indelible mark in a man's memory; this was one of them: Bat Serango's lean body crooking over from the effort of his draw, his boots braced wide apart in the dust. And that was how he was when Rufe's bullet smashed home. The echo of the two shots rocketed up and down the street and Bat Serango bowed his head and bent his legs as if to kneel. He pitched face down into the dust.

Other things began to happen, swiftly. Guns were banging out an alarm all over town. A hundred citizens, sober, half-drunk, drunk, were pounding through the streets. A fire in a frontier town could be a dreadful thing if it got away. The Miner's and Herder's Bank was a mass of rolling flames. A fire brigade roared up. Bucket lines were being franti-

cally formed. The iron triangle on porch of the Suttler House was clanging out its wild alarm through the redly lit night.

Rufe stumbled and fell flat a few yards from the burning bank. As he lay there in the dust, gun still clamped in his outstretched hand, Chuck Jones came kicking through the crowd and reached him. An then the deputy had the old marshal's bloody head pillowed in his arms, and he was crying, "Yuh danged ol' war-hoss! What the hell was yuh tryin' tuh do? Git yourself a han'-holt on Saint Pete?"

Rufe struggled vainly to get up. "Blast it," he bawled. "leggo my neck! The money—she's in the bank! I gotta—"

"Shet up, yuh ol' fireball!" Chuck held him down by main force. "The money's okay, I tell yuh! Serango had the hull kaboodle in his bag! An' they jest drug Bowerhan outa the alley; he's dead! Hear me, yuh hell-cutter...?"

But Rufe wasn't listening any more. He had passed out cold as frog's legs in December....

Rufe had his broken arm in a sling and his head done up in yards of lint and bandage when he reached home that night. Chuck rode with him, "tuh make shore yuh don't fall an' bust yore brisket like yore pappy done."

There was a lamp burning low in the kitchen when Rufe went in; and a fire in the fireplace. He limped all through the house but couldn't locate Annie anywhere. "Helluva hour to go a-visitin'!" He sat down wearily on the bed and tried to shape a cigarette

with his good hand. And the next thing he knew Annie was shaking him. "What ails you," she was scolding him. "You gettin' so old yuh can't even take your duds off when you git in bed?"

Rufe squinted through his bandage. He suddenly realized that he was plumb tuckered—and hungry, too. "Ain't so old," he grumbled, "I can still show 'em how tuh rod the law 'round here."

"I heard about the whole thing," Annie said calmly. "I was down to the Farrelses till jest now."

"I suppose," Rufe said with heavy sarcasm, "yuh heered 'bout me bein' made mayor in Bowerhan's place—an' all about how they're goin' tuh hol' a special election nex' week tuh make 'er stick. S'pose yuh heered that too."

Annie was smiling. She tried to hide the happiness in her eyes until she could muster up a frown. "Your arm," she said; "does it hurt yuh much?"

"Hell no!" Rufe smothered a groan as he sat up on the bed. "Golly, Annie, I wish't yuh could'a' seen me to-night! Guess even you would'a' said seventy-two ain't so old!"

"Quit your braggin'," Annie said.

When he went out into the kitchen, Annie was dishing something into his plate. "Hey, what's that?"

"It's good vittles," Annie snapped back at him. "You been gettin' a'together too much rich grub lately—made yuh brasher'n a sunpecked jay. Now you sit down an' eat your pan cakes an' lick. An' then"—there was suddenly an impish twinkle in her eye—"you kin git to bed, ol' shaky shanks!" ●END

#### TINHORN TROUBLE

**H**OW IT all ever happened she was not sure but she was sitting there on the ground beside Lane Hutson. Dried blood was on her forehead, where a bullet had nicked her. Lane's left leg was broken and a shoulder shattered but she knew enough about wounds to know that he would not die. The fire burned fitfully. Near at hand lay Sylvester Brandon and Lorenzo Friday.

"They will find us here," Hutson said weakly. "I had to manage it before we got too far into the badlands. Well, Lucille, I reckon you won't g-

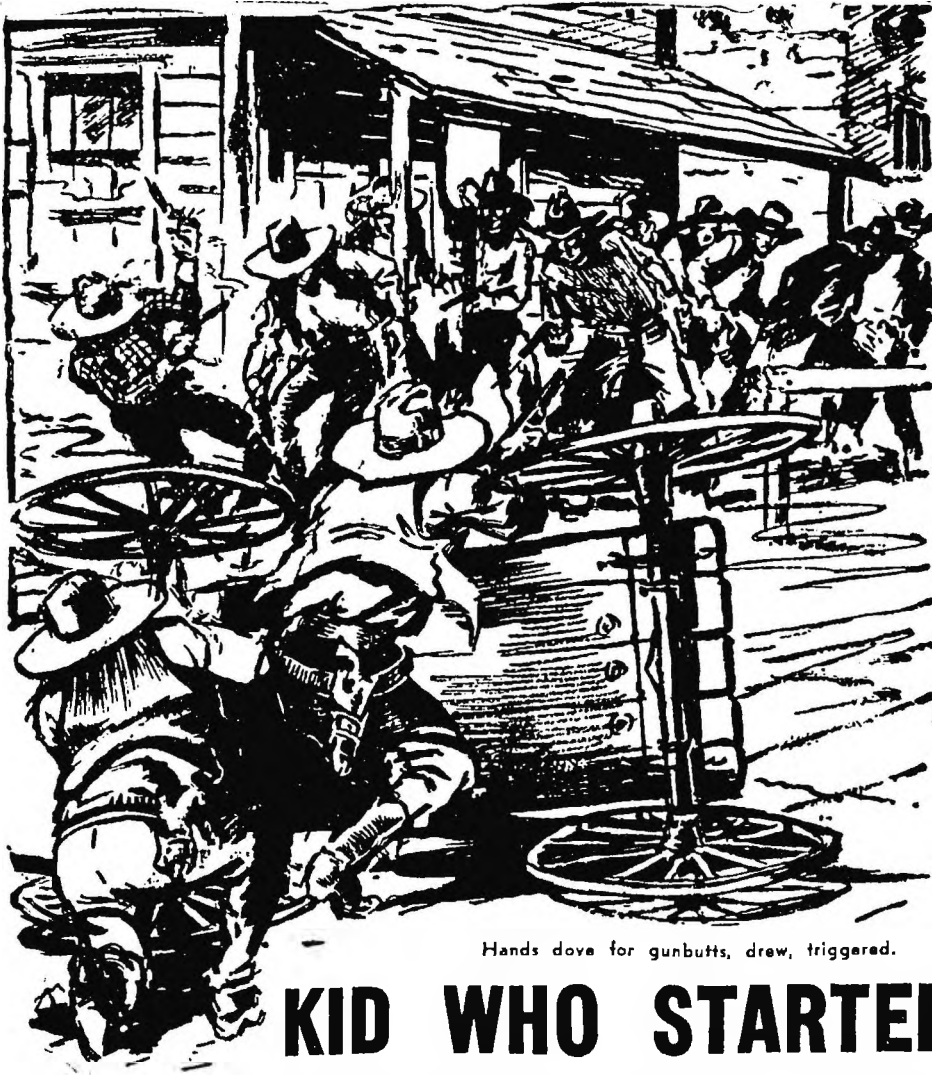
(Cont'd from pg. 71)

across the border with a bandit. That's a great relief to me."

Lucille Hutson could scarcely see for the tears that were in her eyes. She kissed the lips of the man whose head lay there in her lap. "Lane, you once asked me to go to town to live. I want to go. I want to—"

There was no need for further words. They understood each other now as they had never understood in the past. Lane Hutson would be what he had always been, a gambling man, and Lucille Hutson would be his wife. ●END





Hands dove for gunbutts, draw, triggered.

## KID WHO STARTED THE COURTHOUSE WAR

TIME ★ HONORED  
WESTERN  
CLASSIC

**E**VERYBODY that was anybody in Ringo was gathered in a tight little knot that spring morning in Lucky Hoffert's Gold Spur Saloon. Over them hung the electrified atmosphere of men whose passions have been whipped close to the fighting point.

"It's been coming for a year," Judge Wade rumbled, "ever since Wither-  
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Let the rangehog smell  
gunsmoke, salty Ringo  
citizens clamored, but  
Slim Hardy figured to  
settle for more than fast-  
draw persuasion...

by Wayne D. Overholser

spoon started to build the railroad down Murder River. Tula wasn't no more than a post office. Of course Witherspoon figured on bridging the river there, so he buys up the whole damned town site dirt cheap."

"I hear he's put 10,000 into that courthouse," Hoffert, the saloonman said. "She's sure a beaut. All red brick, and he's slapped so much paint around inside and out she just naturally shines."

"If he gets the county to take that courthouse," the Judge boomed, "he'll get his dinero back with fancy interest. I'm damned if I'm going to ride fifty miles just to try a case."

"I don't know why we're getting so heated up," Abe Beck, the thin-nosed district attorney snapped. "Can't see no way Witherspoon and his outfit can make us move county seats unless we're willing."

So far Slim Hardy had taken no part in the talk. He stood a little away from the rest, a tall, lathe-like man, and although he'd been a successful lawyer in Ringo for nearly a year, his deep chest, narrow hips and weather browned face were reminders of the days that he had ridden for Lee Thorn's UF. He still wore cowboy duds, and a gun on his hip as naturally as any waddy. His long fingers worried a whiskey glass on the bar, and his gray eyes shifted from one speaker to another. Now he spoke up.

"I know Abner Witherspoon," he said, "and I reckon you're being unduly optimistic, Abe. Because he's an Easterner, we aren't giving him his due. This thing's been done so many times it's old stuff, and Witherspoon's crooked enough to do it again."

"Do what?" Beck grated. "We got more votes here in Ringo than Witherspoon could get out of Tula if he stuffed the ballot box twice."

"Sure," Hardy nodded, "sure, but he won't monkey around with votes. He'll send some of his gunslicks in here, swipe the records out of the courthouse, and pack 'em back to Tula. Then he'll invite the county officials to come over there and run things from the new courthouse that he's so generously given to the county."

"Hell, I wouldn't go," Beck scowled.

"Witherspoon might find ways of persuading you," Hardy went on. "Maybe a slug in the back for one or two stubborn hombres, and everybody else caves in."

"He can't do that as long as I'm packing a star," Jim Ash, the sheriff, put in.

"I'm not too sure about that, Jim," Hardy grinned, "seems like I've known a few times when you didn't care to buck a game when the cards were stacked."

ASH SUBSIDED with a sullen growl. He had no reason to love Hardy, for the long legged lawyer had broken several cases that Ash had found expedient to let alone.

"Hardy's right," Judge Wade agreed, "Witherspoon's tough, even if he is a dude."

Gus King, owner of the big Cross J, poured himself a drink, gulping it, and whirled to face the others. He was a bald-headed, cadaverous looking gent with a hair trigger temper and a way of shooting first and thinking afterwards.

"There's only one way to do this," he bellowed. "I say to gather up every man who can fork a horse and chase Witherspoon and his hellers out of the country."

"Now you're talking," someone yelled.

"You're damned right," another agreed, "let him smell gunsmoke."

"Wait a minute," Hardy held up his hand. This was the kind of wild talk he had been afraid of. "No use spilling a lot of blood if we can get around it."

"You got any ideas?" Lucky Hoffert spat the words.

"Well, yes," Hardy answered. "I say to send somebody over to Tula and try to talk some sense into Witherspoon. Even if we have to buy that courthouse, it's better than a lot of killings."

"I wouldn't pay him a cent," Judge Wade roared. "and who's gonna ride into Tula? It would be all a Ringo man's life was worth to slope in there alone."

"I'll go," Hardy said softly. "Sure, it's risky, but the sooner Jackson County sees that rows like this can be settled without a shoot-out, the

sooner we'll have a decent place to live."

"That's right," Wade nodded, "but—"

There was the crack of boot heels on the sidewalk, and the swish of the flap doors being shoved in. Every man in the room whirled to face the front of the saloon, and an audible sigh went up, for there, framed against the morning sun, was the burly figure of Abner Witherspoon.

"Talk about the devil," Lee Horn muttered in Hardy's ear.

Witherspoon came in. He was an imposing man, well over six feet and built like the trunk of an ancient oak. He wore a black broadcloth suit and a white shirt. A brand new cream colored Stetson topped his square head. Money and power seemed embodied in this man.

Flanking Witherspoon were two of his gunmen; a cat eyed, yellow skinned gent named Streak Grover, the other a consumptive looking man known as Dead Dan Mapes. Both wore their guns low and tied down in the manner of professional gunslicks. Hardy knew them, both by name and reputation, and nowhere could Abner Witherspoon have found two more efficient, cold-blooded killers.

Dead Dan coughed, a hollow, brittle sound that came like an explosion in the tight silence.

**S**UDDENLY King bellowed, "Why don't we smoke 'em out right now," and dropped his hand toward his gun.

"Hold it, Gus," Hardy caught the gun arm. "Let's hear what he's got to say."

Witherspoon shriveled King with a long, scornful look, then his eyes flashed around the room.

"I'm looking for Judge Wade." His tone had a nasal twang. "Is he here?"

"I sure am," the Judge stepped out.

"I want you to call a meeting of the county court." Witherspoon spoke as if he were giving an order.

"Takes a mighty important piece of business to call a special meeting."

"This is important," the millionaire threw out his chest. "I want the county to accept the new courthouse in

Tula, and officially move the county seat to that growing metropolis."

"Mister," Wade thundered, "we've seen this coming. We've already considered your offer before you made it, and we're turning it down flat. The county seat of Jackson County stays right here in Ringo."

Witherspoon looked as if he'd just heard something that couldn't have been said, then his cheeks turned a dull red.

"Wade," he said harshly, "that courthouse in Tula is the best in the state. Any set of officials but a pack of fools would be glad to accept it."

"Witherspoon," King yelled, "if there's a fool in this crowd, you're standing closer to him than anybody else."

Witherspoon's thin lips tightened into a red line as somebody snickered. Dead Dan Mapes leaned forward and said something in his ear, but Witherspoon shook his head.

"Gentlemen," he said finally, and Hardy saw he was having a hard time riding herd on his temper, "maybe I am a fool. I thought you would be glad to receive a generous gift, but let me tell you this, you can't stop progress, and Tula is the coming town in this part of the state. If this is the way you want it, then we'll have to do something else."

He wheeled and strode out, his gunslicks close behind.

"Well, boys," Hoffert's voice cut the silence, "that calls for a drink. Belly up. It's on the house."

There was a rush to the bar, and a bedlam of voices as everybody talked at once.

"I reckon that saves you a trip to Tula, Slim," Wade said, "and Jim," he turned to Ash, "you better put a guard over the records tonight."

"I'll bunk in the recorder's office myself," the sheriff nodded. "I ain't looking for trouble, though. I kinda think you put old Witherspoon smack where he belongs."

**H**ARDY LAID a hand on Thorn's arm. "Come on over to Hung Low's, Lee, and have some sowbelly and cackleberries."

After they had eaten, Hardy said, "You staying in town, Lee?"

"No, reckon I'll get on home. Something on your mind?"

"No," Hardy hesitated, "only I'd kinda like to have you around tomorrow."

"Sure, Slim," the little man nodded, "what do you figger's gonna happen?"

"I don't know, but if King starts more fight talk, maybe you could hold him off. I sorta expect I'll have to take that trip to Tula yet."

"That'd be plumb foolish, Slim," Thorn shook his head, "plumb foolish. Well, so long."

"So long, Lee." Hardy stood in front of the restaurant watching the UF owner unhitch his bronc and climb aboard. Thorn was his best friend, the one man who'd stuck with him when he'd first hit Ringo and run head on into a mess of trouble. The little man was fast with a gun, but he wasn't like Gus King, given to big talk, then disappear when lead started to hum. Whatever happened, Lee Thorn could be counted on to do his share of the gun smoking.

Hardy had some business up the West Prong, and it was late when he got back. He ate supper at Hung Low's, then dropped into the Gold Spur, played a few hands of poker, and went to bed. He didn't sleep very well, for he had a strange feeling of impending trouble. Witherspoon wouldn't be so easily balked. It wasn't just a matter of profits now. It was a question of prestige.

Just before daybreak it happened. A dull explosion from across the street that brought Hardy out of bed in one jump. He pulled on his clothes and grabbed his gun as he heard the pound of receding hoofs. He ran into the street in time to glimpse the blur of men galloping north. Down the street somebody was shooting, but the light was too thin to hit anything.

Other men poured out of houses and the hotel, and Hardy joined the rush toward the courthouse. Hoffert was already there. He'd lighted a lamp, and was slashing the ropes that bound Jim Ash.

"I couldn't see who it was," Ash mouthed a string of curses, "but it was that damned Streak Grover and Dead Dan Mapes. I know their voices. They

stuck a gun into my belly, tied and gagged me, and blew the safe."

Hoffert picked up the lamp and looked into the yawning mouth of the safe.

"Clean as a button," he yelled, "looks like maybe Tula's gonna be the county seat yet."

"The hell it is," Ash roared. "Come on, you gents. Saddle up and let's ride."

They swarmed out toward the livery barn, a full dozen, mostly townsmen and two or three punchers who'd stayed in the hotel overnight.

"You coming, lawyer?" Ash bel-lowed.

"Reckon not, Jim," Hardy answered.

"You scared to smell some gun-smoke?" Ash sneered.

**H**ARDY SMILED at the taunt. "You won't be smelling gun-smoke, Jim. Dead Dan's too smart for that. Let's just say I don't want the ride." He turned on his heel and crossed the street to his office.

Inside of ten minutes he heard the posse thunder out of town headed north. That it was a wild goose chase Hardy well knew. Dead Dan always figured these things too well. There'd be tracks to follow, only Dead Dan would have made a shift, and the records would be well on their way toward Tula. Hardy filled his cartridge belt, examined his gun, and took his sorrel out of the livery stable. The sun was beginning to show by the time he swung into the saddle and headed south for Abner Witherspoon's town.

Hardy had only a vague idea what he would do when he hit Tula. Maybe he was loco to think he could change Witherspoon's mind by words. The talking might have to be done with lead, and he'd be bucking Dead Dan Mapes and Streak Grover with the odds all against him.

One thing in Hardy's favor was the fact that if Dead Dan had stolen the records, he'd still be trying to throw Ash off his trail, and Hardy would beat him into Tula. That margin of time was small, and Hardy kept his sorrel at a ground eating lope that brought him to Black Pass by mid-morning. Here he left the road and

turned east into the grim canyon that gashed the Songbird Mountains, and rode into Tula with noon still a good half hour away.

Hardy racked his sorrel in front of a barber shop, and glanced up and down the street. It was a new town, the buildings unpainted, but not yet weather stained, the smell of fresh pine lumber strong in the air. Across the dusty street and down a block was the new courthouse, two stories, the red bricks bright in the sun. It was an imposing building that Jackson County might well have been proud of if it had been built in Ringo.

Hardy stepped into the barber shop.

"Where'll I find Mr. Witherspoon?"

"Why, I reckon he's—" the barber stopped, a puzzled frown suddenly furrowing his forehead. "Say, ain't you that Ringo lawyer?"

"Reckon I am," Hardy nodded impatiently.

"Then was I you, I'd hightail out of this town. Ringo men ain't popular here none at all after what you said to Mr. Witherspoon yesterday."

"That wouldn't surprise me none. Now if you'll just tell me where I'll find the big gun, I'll move along."

"He's got an office in the courthouse."

The barber jerked his thumb in the direction of the building.

"Thanks," and as Hardy went out, the barber called after him, "Don't say I didn't warn you, mister."

Hardy paced the block to the courthouse in long strides. The quiet of the town didn't fool him. It was the quiet of dynamite waiting for a spark to set it off.

The hall of the courthouse smelled of fresh paint and new lumber. On the door to the right was lettered, "ABNER WITHERSPOON," and without a knock, Hardy turned the knob and stepped in, closing the door behind him.

**T**HE RAILROAD man was sitting behind a new rolled top desk. He looked up and frowned as Hardy came in, then the frown faded as he recognized his visitor.

"Well, Hardy," he gestured toward

a chair, "did your pals in the old county seat change their minds?"

"I'll stand," Hardy shook his head. "No, Mr. Witherspoon, there's been no mind-changing. This morning some of your men blew our courthouse safe, stole the county records and got away. I'm afraid that's gonna make us more stubborn than ever."

There was a faint smile on Witherspoon's face as he fingered his bow tie.

"My friend, that's just the beginning. I'm rather stubborn myself, and I'm not planning to go East, leaving this building unoccupied."

"Mr. Witherspoon," Hardy said bluntly, "where you come from, men can be told what to do, but not here. If you go ahead, there'll be blood spilled. I'm asking you to call in your gun hands, and stop this thing before it goes any farther."

Slowly Witherspoon took a fat cigar from his pocket and bit off the end. He said, "I'm afraid I can't do that, Hardy. If any blood is spilled, it will be your men that start it, not mine."

"Is that your last word?"

"That's it." Witherspoon's voice brooked no argument. He turned back to the papers on his desk as if the interview were over.

Hardy's gun slipped into his hand. "Then I'll have to play rough. Stand up, and keep your hands in sight."

The big man's face turned a pasty gray. He stared at Hardy as if he couldn't believe this thing he had seen. Never had any man had the temerity to point a gun at Abner Witherspoon.

"You'll regret this, sir," he snarled as he got to his feet. His hands were flat against the desk top as his eyes flashed around the room for some avenue of escape.

"I think not," Hardy smiled mirthlessly. "I won't regret anything that will keep your cussed bullheadedness from spilling a lot of blood. Where's your bronc?"

"None of your damned business," Witherspoon growled.

"Take your choice," Hardy shrugged. "You can follow orders, and live, or I'll let you have it here."

The ominous sound of Hardy's gun

being cocked changed Witherspoon's mind. "In the livery stable," he said.

Hardy nodded. "That's being smart. Now you're leading the way to the stable. You'll mount up and go back with me to Ringo. You'll stay there till your gun hands return the county records to where they belong. Savvy?"

Witherspoon wagged his square head, and said nothing. Some of the fear went out of his face. Hardy noted that, and the quick look of sudden cunning that came and passed.

"You're thinking that when we get out of here some of your outfit will take a hand," Hardy said. "I don't think so. We're going to walk along chummy like. If you make any kind of a sign it'll be your last one. Don't forget that. Now get going."

**W**ITHERSPOON nodded again. He came around his desk and walked out of the room. Hardy eased down the hammer of his gun, and slid the Colt back into leather. He followed Witherspoon until they were in the street, then he stepped up beside him.

Slim Hardy knew too well he was playing a long chance. No one was in sight, but Hardy was certain they were being observed. Still, it wasn't likely that any of the townsmen would take a hand unless Witherspoon gave some signal, and Hardy was gambling that Witherspoon was too yellow to give that signal.

They angled across the street and went down the sidewalk to the livery stable.

"Tell the hostler to saddle your bronc," Hardy ordered. "Tell him you're taking a ride."

Witherspoon made no answer. He walked into the gloom of the stable and called, "Jeb."

The hostler came out of the stall. He was a burly, thick lipped man with little red eyes that jumped from Witherspoon to Hardy and back to Witherspoon.

"Howdy, Mr. Witherspoon," he said, and stared at Hardy as if he knew him and couldn't figure out why he was here.

"Saddle that black gelding," Witherspoon ordered loudly.

The hostler's eyebrows lifted in

surprise. "Why, why sure," he said, and didn't move.

Something was wrong. Hardy couldn't put his fingers on what it was, but he knew this wasn't just right.

"Get a move on," Hardy said curtly. "I'm doing Mr. Witherspoon a favor, but I'm damned if I'm going to stand around here all day waiting for you to make up your mind."

"Sure," the hostler said huskily. "The black gelding, you say?"

Still the man didn't move. There was only one thing then for Hardy to do, and he did it. His gun cleared leather again, and covered the hostler.

"You heard him," Hardy snapped.

"I'm going," the hostler breathed, his little eyes glinting savage hate. "You don't need to pull no hogleg. That ain't gonna get you nothing."

"It'll get you something," Hardy said angrily. "A chunk of lead right in your brisket. You stand around like a—"

Slim Hardy never finished that sentence. Something slammed down on his head, and Hardy pitched forward, face down in the straw.

Witherspoon scooped up Hardy's dropped gun, and grinned at the man who'd sneaked up behind Hardy.

"A pretty piece of work, Cal," he chuckled. "I guess our smart lawyer friend won't be making us any trouble after all."

A grin showed under Cal's walrus mustache. "I heard the ruckus. I knew something was wrong when I heard you tell Jeb to saddle that black gelding seeing as we don't have no black gelding. I picked up this beer bottle and he was so busy watching you and Jeb he didn't hear me. What was he up to?"

"Had an idea about taking me to Ringo so they could get their county records back." Witherspoon glared viciously at Hardy's still form. "Tie him up and toss him into the harness room. Dead Dan can take care of him when he gets back."

**C**AL TWISTED a tip of his mustache and looked down at Hardy. "Them Ringo gents think a heap of this lawyer hombre, Mr. Witherspoon. He'll be right valuable to keep around

here till this thing dies down and they know they're licked."

"Sure, we'll keep him around," Witherspoon grinned evilly. "Tie him up while he's still taking his nap."

Slim Hardy was first conscious of a dozen hammers pounding in his head when he came to, and for a moment he couldn't remember what had happened. The smell of new leather and oil was in his nostrils. There was one window in the room that opened into the alley. Hardy saw the clutter of harness and saddles, and suddenly remembered what had happened. Witherspoon had outsmarted him. Somebody had come up behind and slugged him.

Hardy's hands and feet were tied. He pulled on the string that held his wrists until it hubbed through the skin. Then he quit that because it would be fatal to let his wrists stiffen. He'd need all his speed if he had a gun showdown with Dead Dan Mapes and Streak Grover. If he had a gun, he thought ruefully, but right now his job was to get out of here.

The room was filled with all sorts of odds and ends; bits of leather, saddles, harness, but there wasn't a thing with any sort of a sharp edge he could use to cut the string that bound his wrists. For ten minutes he rolled his body around so that he could study every crook and cranny of the room, and that ten minutes brought exactly nothing.

Despair came to Slim Hardy then. He could guess why he was still alive. Abner Witherspoon was a born horse trader. He'd figure on using Hardy as an ace in the hole if the Ringo men came. They'd come, when they found how futile it was to chase Dead Dan Mapes and Streak Grover. Blood would mix with the dust of Tula's street and men would die. Slim Hardy would have failed. Holding him prisoner here wouldn't prevent the fight. He had to get out. Had to. Had to. He kept telling himself that, a droning refrain in his mind, but with it was the sure, hopeless knowledge that there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

Hardy rolled to the wall that faced the street, and put his eyes to a crack between the boards. The sun was low

now. He must have lain here for hours. Then sudden hope flared within him. Across the street Lee Thorn's white stockinged bay stood racked in front of the Paradise Bar. Nobody ever rode that bay but Thorn. Then the UF owner was in Tula, and he wouldn't be here for any reason except to find Hardy.

Hardy groaned. If there was only some way of letting Thorn know he was here! This very instant Thorn would be quietly making the rounds of the saloons searching for him. Sooner or later he'd go by the livery stable. There was nothing to do but wait.

Minutes dragged out like hours. Then Hardy heard the staccato click of heels on the board walk. He twisted his head, glimpsed Thorn, and realized he didn't dare yell. He threw his legs against the wall, pounded with his toes. Thorn paused, and Hardy called softly, "Come closer, Lee, easy like."

**T**HORN LOOKED up and down the street, then came to the wall and leaned against it. Carelessly he built a smoke as any man might do.

"I'm tied up in the harness room," Hardy said softly. "Don't use a gun. There's two gents in here. Get me out, but don't make a ruckus doing it."

Thorn struck a match, dragged in a lungful of smoke, and then casually moved on to the barn door. Hardy lay with ears straining, heard the drone of voices, but he couldn't make out what was said. Then the door opened, hinges creaking, and Thorn said, "Cut him loose, and be damned quick about it. I ain't in no mood to palaver."

Two men came through the door, the red eyed hostler Witherspoon had called Jeb, and another lanky gent with a walrus mustache. Thorn was standing just outside, his gun lined on the two, and his expression wasn't pretty. The hostler jerked out a knife, and slashed the strings that held Hardy's feet and hands.

"Thanks, Lee," Hardy said, and flexed the muscles of his arms. He'd lost hours lying here, and it might be too late now to do what he planned. "On your bellies," he ordered, and

picked up a rope. Quickly he bound the two, ripped his neckerchief lengthwise, shoved a thick piece of leather into their mouths, and gagged them. "Chew on that awhile," he grinned, and turned to Thorn. "Give me that other gun you're packing, Lee. One'll do you."

"Sure," Thorn held out the .45 and Hardy slipped it into his empty holster. "What happened?"

Hardy told him, and asked, "How come you're here?"

Thorn smiled bleakly. "I figured you oughtta know. Ash got back with nothing but a temper like a cougar with a stepped on tail. King was in town, and they've sent for everybody that can ride. They'll be here burning powder most any minute."

"Witherspoon probably has men out watching the road for a big outfit. He's got enough men here to fort up and mow our bunch down if he gets them organized. Our only chance is to get him before he does."

"A long chance," Thorn murmured, "but I've raked in the pot more'n once with a pair of deuces."

They went out into the street, shadowed now by the false fronts of the buildings, slanted across the street, and half way to the other side, stopped. Witherspoon came out of the courthouse, talking loudly to the men behind him.

"We've got Hardy," he boasted. "I reckon the rest won't be—" His words came to a fear-stammering halt, for it was then he saw Slim Hardy and Lee Thorn.

Back of Witherspoon were Dead Dan Mapes and Streak Grover. Back of them were two more men Hardy didn't know. The odds were five to two. It was like betting two jacks against four aces and a deuce. If Hardy judged it right, Witherspoon was the deuce.

A cold grin came to Dead Dan's face. "Don't seem like you had Hardy locked up very tight, boss."

Witherspoon's four men fanned out. They saw, as Hardy and Thorn saw, this was the pay off in hot lead.

**W**ITHERSPOON didn't say anything. Just stood staring at

Hardy, his mouth partly open, stark, abysmal fear on his big face.

"The doc's giving me six months to live, lawyer," Dead Dan said in his flat voice, and coughed. "I'd just as soon cash in from lead poisoning as the other way. If you're looking for trouble, you'll sure as hell get it."

"I'm not looking for any trouble," Hardy answered. "I'm trying to stop it. A bunch of Ringo men are high tailing this way, and there'll be a massacre if we let it go. I'm taking Witherspoon back with me till you gents decide to return them records you stole."

Streak Grover snickered. "You ain't taking nobody, lawyer. The boss stays here and so does the records."

"I'm telling you, Witherspoon," Hardy said. "Come with us."

For one tight moment it was that way, five of them on the courthouse steps, Hardy and Thorn in the street, a stark tableau pregnant with death. Witherspoon hadn't moved since he'd first seen the two Ringo men, his square face still that ghastly gray of a man who knew the ending of his trail lay in the hands of the men facing him. He had no confidence in the four beside him, yet it had to be put to the test.

"All right, boys," he said, and that set it off.

Hands drove for gun butts, drew, and pressed triggers. Hardy knew Dead Dan was the most dangerous, and fast as the killer was, Slim Hardy was faster. He drove a slug into Dead Dan's heart, lined his gun on Streak Grover without another look at the slumping body of Dead Dan Mapes. Grover was firing. Hardy felt the sting of lead opening a gash along his cheek, but he had Grover in his sights then, and pitched another bullet. This time Grover's shot went wild, for Hardy's slug had caught him square above the belt buckle.

There was this moment of gun thunder, bullets ricocheting off the brick wall of the courthouse, and then it was over. Only Witherspoon was standing, his hands in the air, lips quivering in abject fear. Four men lay on the steps beside him, none of them moving.

Hardy shot a glance at Thorn, saw



blood on the UF owner's shirt front.

"You hurt bad, Lee?" he asked.

"In the shoulder," he said through clenched teeth. "I can still hold a gun if anybody else gets a wild idea."

Men had boiled into the street, Witherspoon's men. Trouble wasn't over yet, not unless Witherspoon stopped it. Hardy came toward him.

"You're yellow," Hardy barked, his voice carrying to the men who crowded the sidewalks, "or you'd have pulled your gun. You'll live a long time yet if you don't start anything more to get you in trouble."

Thorn turned to face the men who stood behind him. "Stand pat, gents," he called.

**HARDY** HALF turned away from Witherspoon toward a half dozen others who had burst out of the Paradise Bar. "Anybody want to argue some more?"

It was then Witherspoon started to run, stumbled, and fell face down in the street.

Hardy put a bullet into the dust a foot from his nose.

"On your feet, you yellow-backed coyote," Hardy roared.

Witherspoon got to his knees, swayed a second, looked around at the men, and then stood erect.

Somebody hooted, and Hardy knew the danger was passed. The men of Tula wouldn't fight for a coward. Abner Witherspoon was done.

"When does the next train leave?" Hardy shot the question.

"Half an hour," somebody supplied.

"That's just fine," Hardy nodded. "You're taking it, Witherspoon, and don't ever come back."

Then Hardy heard the pound of hoofs.

The Ringo men were galloping into Tula, Judge Wade in front.

"Into the street," Hardy ordered, and Witherspoon obeyed. There they waited until Wade and the Ringo men drew up, eyes roving from the dead men on the courthouse steps to the dust-covered Witherspoon.

"What happened?" Wade demanded of them.

"Plenty," Hardy smiled mirthlessly, "but I've got a hunch we won't have any trouble getting our records back. It took a little powdersmoke to teach Witherspoon that Ringo still is the county seat, but I reckon he knows it now.

"Take him down to the depot, boys, he's taking the next train out."

"A good idea, Witherspoon," Wade chuckled. "Get going."

Hardy and Thorn watched the long procession move toward the depot, Witherspoon stirring the dust as he dragged his feet before the mounted men, head down, arrogance completely gone.

"I guess our two deuces took the pot all right," Thorn said. "Me, I'm heading for a sawbones."

"I'll be with you in a minute, Lee," Hardy said. "I'm going to get them two galoots we got tied up and make them fork over my gun. I've got a hunch they've chewed on them chunks of leather long enough." ●END

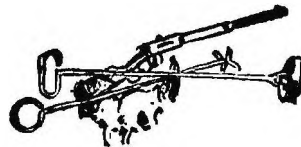
### "SLEEPY" GRASS

or drink while feeling the effects of the grass.

Range horses today will avoid any place where sleepy grass grows, once they have felt its effects. Most cattle, also, will not eat it after a taste. Strangely, in many cases where horses or cattle have been missing, a search has proven that they were victims of sleepy grass and had simply become unconscious, to remain that way for long hours. Then they wandered to some quiet place where they could lie down and finish their naps.

Scientists now believe that the

(Cont'd from pg. 55)



grass contains some kind of chemical that has a sedative effect, and experiments have been made to see if this could be extracted and used for medicinal purposes. Thus far little has been done, mainly because of the cost of extraction and the small amount of chemical that can be extracted. ●END

# THE BOSS OF BOOTHILL

by D. B. NEWTON

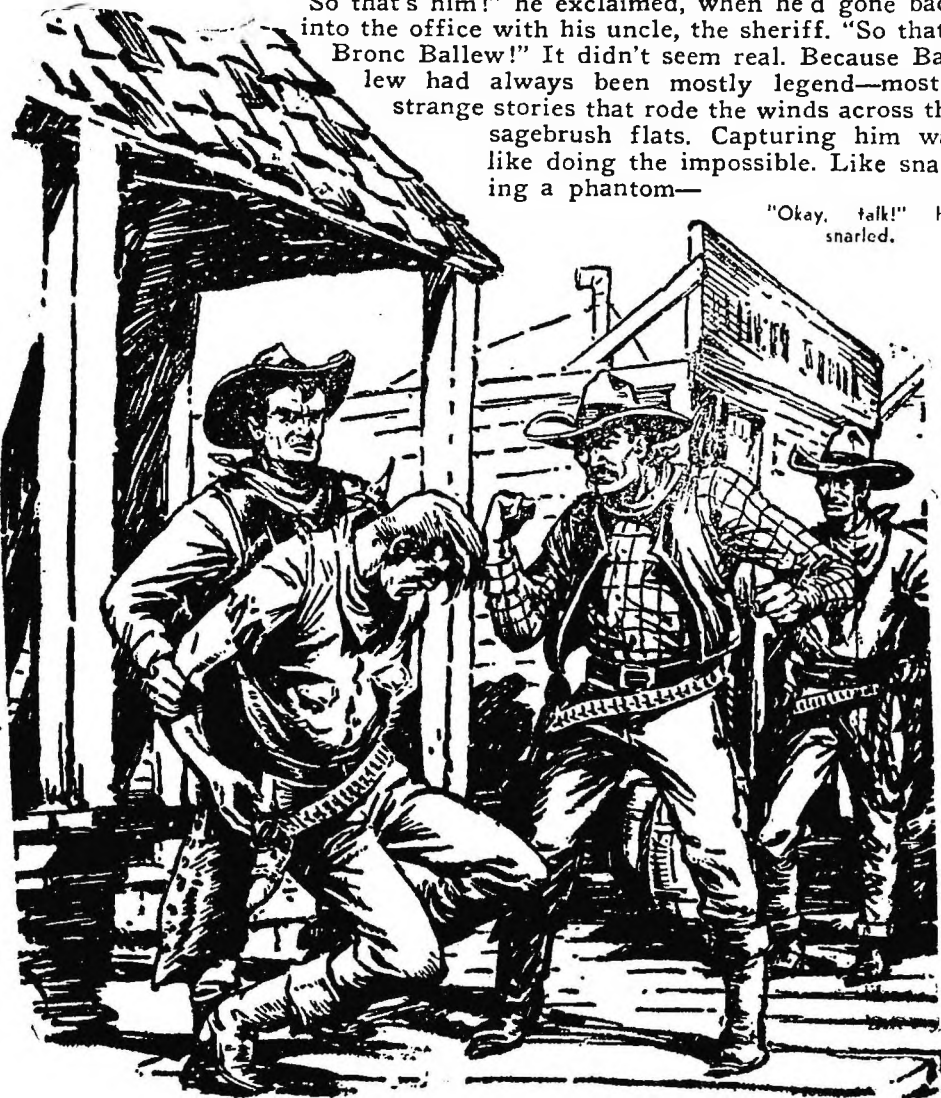
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CLASSIC

**T**HE PRISONER in the jail at Crystal glared out at Johnny Eden with crazy, crafty eyes that were deep-set and venomous with hatred. It was an impersonal hate, taking in all of the human race that those bars didn't hold. It made Johnny shudder a little.

"So that's him!" he exclaimed, when he'd gone back into the office with his uncle, the sheriff. "So that's Bronc Ballew!" It didn't seem real. Because Ballew had always been mostly legend—mostly strange stories that rode the winds across the sagebrush flats. Capturing him was like doing the impossible. Like snaring a phantom—

"Okay, talk!" he snarled.



They said the phantom killer's good luck piece was a silver token, but Johnny Eden suspected it was his Colt .45...

"It's the first time," Sheriff Al Eden exclaimed, proudly, blue eyes alight under crisp white hair. "And the first time the law's ever had a clear case against him. When we took him he had that money he gut-shot a whiskey drummer for, up north a week ago. The bloodstains were on it yet!"

Johnny swiped trail dust from a youthful face. "Sorry I missed the excitement," he said. "I tried to get here in time to help, as soon as I heard he'd invaded your end of the state. But it was a long ride.... How's your friend, Tom Horn, takin' the news?"

"That blowhard!" Sheriff Eden spat. "If it was him had Ballew in his stinkin' cracker box of a jail, there at Juniper, he'd be sendin' telegrams all over the state braggin' about it. I wouldn't lower myself that way! Damned if I don't think I'll just let him wait and read about this in the papers!"

Johnny grinned a little. He'd only said that to watch his uncle get riled, because Al Eden's feud with Horn, the sheriff of the next county, was a thing of long standing that'd kept them both hot trying to beat each other's record. He knew the capture of Ballew was going to be a hard pill for Horn to swallow.

A dusty cabinet stood against one wall of the office. Sheriff Eden stepped and fetched something from it now. He said: "You've heard about this, of course. Thought maybe you'd like to see it."

In awed silence Johnny took it from him—the outlaw's stetson, fawn-colored and so rich and soft it all but crumpled in the fingers. But it wasn't the hat itself that interested him. Quickly Johnny turned it until he could see, pinned to the broad band near the front on the left side, Bronc Ballew's trade mark—his lucky charm.

It was a little handful of brightness, that had been beaten out of Mexican silver by some great but unknown native artist; and it had the shape of a stallion rearing, rearing, pawing at the sky with unshod hoofs while mane and tail streamed freely. Though smaller than a palm's width, the whole thing was so perfectly worked in every detail and line that it seemed real, al-

most visibly alive. Johnny had heard a million tales about the little token. He'd heard, too, that the Mexicans sometimes said that it was *alive*..!

"Golly!" breathed the cowpoke. "Just look at it!"

His uncle said, quietly: "Ballew's more'n half insane when it comes to this silver pony—and yet it was the thing that gave him away! Nobody knew what he looked like—no pictures or nothin'; but as soon as we seen the metal flashin' from his hat band we knew it was him. He always wears it there—has some crazy idea that all his luck and his strength's bound up in it—"

**S**UDDENLY from back in the jail came the prisoner's voice, cursing and bellowing, tight and shaken with fury. Something cold seemed to touch Johnny Eden's spine at the sound of it; even the sheriff looked a little creepy. "Funny!" he muttered. "Ballew seems to know, every single minute, what's happening to the little pony. If anybody even so much as touches it, he gets killin' mad!"

Johnny dropped the hat abruptly, as though it'd burnt his fingers; then he had to laugh a little at his own skittishness. Bronc Ballew couldn't hurt anyone now, however much he might curse and storm, and those evil, red eyes of his glare behind the bars.

"Well," said the cowpoke, "if the show's over I might as well be headin' back to my job. Thought sure I was gonna have some fun this time, but looks like I just missed it—as usual."

"Too bad. But thanks for comin' down, anyway." The sheriff held out his hand. "I better go look after the prisoner," he said. "If I don't see you again before you leave—good trailin'. Try and keep out of mischief."

They shook, and then the older man's lean frame disappeared into the back part of the building, and Johnny started for the outer door and the hitch rack where his roan mare waited. But halfway across the room the youngster halted suddenly and turned, as a wild idea hit him. He stood looking back at the hat on the sheriff's desk. He thought: "Johnny Eden, you are the doggonedest idiot! Now, you

know you shouldn't ought to do that—"

• But good sense couldn't combat the grin that began spreading itself across his sun-whipped, homely face....

At nine next morning, Doug Peyton came running into the sheriff's office at Juniper with the breathless news of what he'd seen across the street. Tom Horn, dozing in a tilt-backed chair, didn't get it at first; but at the second telling he blinked fully awake and let the front legs of the chair down with a slam. He gave Doug one long, clear scrutiny. He said: "I always knew you was crazy!"

"No I ain't!" the deputy insisted. "He's here—right here in Juniper! Come on and take a look—"

The morning sunlight was a hot blast that hit the body as soon as you stepped outdoors. Horn waddled through it and pushed open the batwings of the Golden Girl across the street. Behind the mahogany a white-faced, trembling barkeep was pouring a drink and spilling much of it.

Tom Horn eyed the lean frame of the man whose foot was up on the scuffed brass rail, taking in especially the hang of his gun, and the set of the broad shoulders. Hardly what he'd expected, from all the yarns he'd heard—But then the stranger turned his head, and Horn saw the flash of the silver ornament on his hatband that identified him. It couldn't be anybody else. No one else would have dared the wrath of Bronc Ballew by wearing a thing like that.

Suddenly the sheriff's throat felt dry, and he wished Doug Peyton, behind him, wouldn't crowd him so....

Johnny Eden nodded to the pair and sipped his drink, slowly, while he got a first good look at his uncle's professional rival. He set down the glass, placed a coin on the bar and pushed it across to the bartender, who fumbled in the cash box finding change.

Pocketing the silver, Johnny turned and walked straight across the big room to where the two men stood blocking the doorway. A small dew of sweat had sprung out on Tom Horn's florid features. Johnny stopped in front of him, and for a moment the silence felt thick and heavy.

Johnny said, quietly, "Do you mind, fellows?"

The sheriff hesitated, something like a croak coming out of him; then, with one move, both lawmen stepped out of the way and let the man in Bronc Ballew's hat have the door.

He stood for a few minutes looking up and down the length of the sidewalk. He saw a restaurant and strolled along toward it.

A few people were eating breakfast, and a fork or two clattered as Johnny went in and took his place at an empty table. But nothing else happened. He had to give his order three times before the waiter got it all written down.

Horn and Peyton came in while he was eating, and stood watching from the door. Johnny nodded to them pleasantly, went on cutting up his fried eggs. He noticed he was the only customer in the room that seemed to be eating now.

He finished leisurely, left a tip for the waiter, got another glass of water at the counter, and started for the door. Again he ran up face to face with the lawmen. Johnny smiled at them. "You have crowded doorways in this town, don't you?" he observed.

**A**UTOMATICALLY, sheriff and deputy moved aside and Johnny stepped out into the sunlight.

He loitered there a moment, using a toothpick. Then he remembered he was out of makin's and went over the ruts of Juniper's main street to get them in a little tobacco store there.

The court house was a big, square frame building, with a roofed veranda and several split-bottom cane chairs lined up in the shade. Johnny Eden sauntered over and settled into one of them, comfortably, leaned back with feet on the rail while he started rolling a cigarette from his newly purchased tobacco.

He had it half made when, sure enough, here came Horn and his deputy together up the steps. The sheriff's face was very red except where it looked as though it had been pulled tight around the edges. Suddenly, as he reached the top step, his right hand made a dive and jerked out a heavy six-gun.

It was a very poor draw. Even Johnny could have beaten it, but he didn't try. In a pretty horrible voice, the sheriff said: "Hombre! Put up your hands."

"Just a minute," replied Johnny. He finished twisting the quirley and shoved it between his lips. Then obediently he lifted his hands, limply, shoulder high. He still had his chair tipped back and boots cocked against the rail.

Tom Horn's hold on his six-gun was a life-or-death grip. He spoke to Doug Peyton, out of the side of his mouth: "Quick! Get his shootin' iron!"

The deputy circled wide and jerked it from Johnny's dangling holster. Sheriff Horn relaxed a little, then, and said with slightly more confidence: "Come along with us, mister! You're goin' to jail!"

"All right," agreed Johnny, affably.

There was a block of cells in one corner of the ugly court house building. Johnny walked into one of them and Horn locked the door with hands that still shook so that the keys rattled.

But the instant Johnny Eden was safely behind the bars, the sheriff let loose with a terrific war whoop. He took off his hat and slammed it gleefully against the wall of the corridor. "We got him!" he shouted. "Bronc Ballew—we got him, Doug! All locked up—"

He swung the deputy and headed him for the door. "Get goin'!" he yelled. "Tell everybody! And bring us a quart from Bud's to celebrate. Oh, yeah—send a wire, too. To the governor. And to that cold fish of an Al Eden, over at Crystal! Wait'll we hear what he's got to say about *this*!"

All at once, Johnny Eden felt ashamed of himself. Poor, stupid Tom Horn had swallowed it all so completely and helplessly that it took some of the fun out of it to think how unhappy he was going to be in a minute, when Sheriff Al Eden learned the news—and pricked his balloon for him! Johnny began to wish he'd never come here. But then he thought maybe, even yet, it wasn't too late—

"Just a minute, sheriff!" he cut in,

through the bars. "Don't send those telegrams. The whole thing's a joke. I ain't Bronc Ballew—"

Sheriff Horn turned on him with a snarl of triumph. "Startin' to crawl, already?" he grunted. "Tryin' to whine and lie your way out, now that that the iron door's fair shut on you?"

"But I tell you I'm *not* Ballew!" Johnny insisted, heatedly. "I warn you! Send that wire to Crystal and you'll make yourself the laughing stock of the state!"

"What you waitin' for Doug!" Tom Horn snapped out. "Do what I told you. As for you," he went on to Johnny as the deputy hurried away, "you can save your breath. I know doggone well who you are!"

Johnny gave up, then, and turned away with a shrug. He'd tried. He sat down on the iron cot to wait, while Horn drifted out front to his office. It shouldn't take long. Just long enough for the sheriff to get his wire to Crystal and an answer to come blistering back....

**S**URE ENOUGH! A sudden hurt bellow from the sheriff's office, after awhile, told Johnny it was here. Tom Horn was stamping up and down in there now, roaring like a wounded bull. "They can't do this to me!" the prisoner heard his exclaim. "They can't *do* it!" Listening, Johnny shrugged. He thought: "Too bad, mister—but you laid yourself open—"

The door to the office wrenched open and Tom Horn came thundering down the corridor, a sheet of yellow paper in his hand. He waved it at Johnny, his face mottled with rage. "Of all the filthy, double-crossin'—" he spluttered. And then he read the message—to Johnny's astonished ears:

BALLEW ESCAPED CRYSTAL JAIL LAST NIGHT STOP  
HAVE MURDER CASE TO  
HANG HIM STOP COMING  
AT ONCE WITH POSSE TO  
BRING HIM BACK STOP  
HOLD HIM FOR ME AND  
THANKS

AL EDEN

Ballew—escaped! Johnny hadn't figured on *that*! Suddenly, it occurred

to him what he'd done. When his uncle got here, after tearing across two counties with a posse siding him, and found out who Tom Horn really had in his jail— Well, it looked like the cowpoke's little prank had backfired. Al Eden would turn out to be the goat, not Horn. And Al would make it plenty uncomfortable for his nephew, after leading him on this wild goose chase....

But Tom Horn had his own grievance. "Hold him for me and thanks," he read again, bitterly. "Bringin' a posse, is he? Gonna take my prisoner away from me to put in his own flea-infested jail and hog all the glory!"

"What can you do about it?" Doug Peyton cut in. The deputy had followed him down the hall, unopened whiskey bottle in one hand. "We'll have to turn him over. The telegram says somethin' about murder evidence and there's no case against him in this county. He'll have to stand trial at Crystal."

"Oh, hell!" Sheriff Horn wailed. "Wouldn't you know it? That trial will make news all over the country. Old warthog Eden'll get his pictures in the papers, of course, and there'll be no livin' with him after that. It ain't fair, damn it. It just ain't fair!"

"Well, what're you gonna do?" the deputy repeated.

Tom Horn didn't seem to know. He stood in the dark hall, glaring at his prisoner; and Johnny, who felt unhappy himself at the mess he'd made of things, glared back. But then suddenly the sheriff clapped one broad fist into the palm of his other hand. "That's it!" he declared. "By golly, that's it! We'll beat 'em to it. We won't let 'em put anything over on us."

"How do you mean?" asked Doug Peyton, while Johnny's brows puckered in sudden alarm. "What's on your mind, boss?"

"No time for talkin'," Horn said shortly, turning away. "Come on, Doug. We'll have to work fast—before that crowd gets here from Crystal."

Johnny waited. He didn't know what was going on, but somehow he didn't like the looks of things. Such vague sounds as drifted in through the cell window and through the walls of the ramshackle court house seemed

strangely threatening and ominous. Was there a crowd gathering?

Nearly three-quarters of an hour the suspense lasted. And then, unmistakably, men were swarming into the building, like a trampling herd of steers. But that noise died down, too, to a low-running sort of hum; and presently the far door swung open and Sheriff Horn came into the corridor with his deputy trailing him. Without a word, Peyton unlocked the cell and Horn said, with a flourish of his drawn gun: "All right, hombre. Step out!"

Johnny went with them through the sheriff's office and down the long hall that split the building in two. Then another door was opened and on the threshold Johnny halted at what he saw.

A boisterous mob filled the long benches, sweating and yelling. Up at the head of the room, behind a high scarred desk, a disreputable creature in string tie and black tail coat sat waiting with tobacco-stained books piled before him and a gavel in his hand. At sight of the trio in the doorway, he brought down the gavel with a crash and yelled: "Silence in court! Officer, conduct the prisoner to the bar!"

**T**OM HORN'S gunbarrel bored into Johnny, and with great misgivings the cowpoke stumbled forward into the dusty court room. A sea of faces greeted him, and a swelling roar that battered against his ears. He waded forward, in a daze, until the sheriff's hand on his shoulder pushed him down into a chair at a long table near the judge's bench. Across from him twelve men sat in a rickety jury box. The judge was hammering for order.

As the sheriff took a chair next to Johnny, he pulled out a big watch and looked at it nervously. "Move it right along, Judge," Tom Horn said. "It's gettin' late."

"Right." The magistrate gave his desk a final wallop, and quiet began to filter in. "The People ag'in Bronc Ballew," he announced.

Johnny was on his feet. "I protest, your honor," he said. "This is a miscarriage of justice. I'm not Ballew—"

"Set down and shut up!" the judge ordered. "An take yer hat off in the

presence of the court." He added, "Maybe the hat should be exhibit A for the state."

Amidst a chorus of shouts and boos, Johnny let the sheriff drag him down into his chair. A hand jerked his hat off and slammed it onto the table in front of him, and Johnny sat staring dully at the little silver horse that pawed the air in perpetual, frozen grace. It seemed to mock him. He shrugged. Let 'em go ahead, he decided. His uncle should be here in an hour or so, and then this whole crazy farce would end, abruptly.

"Who't your first witness, Tom?" the judge asked.

The sheriff, who seemed also to be filling the role of prosecutor, stood up again. "Please the court," he muttered. "Bertie Keller, take the stand."

Johnny turned with interest as Bertie came bustling up through the crowd, shoulder-slaps from his cronies helping him on. He was an oldster with a crumpled body and tiny black eyes as bright as a bird's. The witness chair wobbled as he sat down, crossed his legs and looked importantly all around him.

"Mr. Keller," said the sheriff, strutting up and down in front of him, "what business are you in?"

"That's a damn fool question, Tom," the old man retorted. "I'm a hoss trader. Everybody knows that, hereabouts."

The crowd roared with delight. The sheriff frowned. "Just answer the questions," he said. "Did Bronc Ballew here ever steal a hoss from you?"

"Yep. Lots of 'em."

"You know that for a fact?"

"Sure," said Bertie. "He's a hoss thief, ain't he? And mine are the best in the state. Whenever I miss one, I just check it off to Ballew. Never fails."

The sheriff hummed to himself a moment as he prowled about the crowded court. He turned back to the witness. "You seen the roan mare the defendant rode into town this morning?" And when Bertie nodded: "Is that one of your animals?"

"Sure is."

Johnny stormed to his feet. "It's a lie!" he shouted. The judge banged his gavel.

"Set down!" the magistrate ordered. "Unless you want to be fined for temptin' the court... Any more witnesses, sheriff?"

"We ain't got time," Tom Horn said, watch in hand. "State rests."

"Well, the jury will have to vote then. Gents, Bertie here has just proved the defendant is a damn filthy hoss thief. What's your verdict?"

Johnny broke loose from Doug Peyton's hands and strode up to the judge's bench, his face dark with anger. "This is no trial!" he exclaimed. "It's a doggone lynching! What about my side of the case? Where's the attorney that's supposed to be representin' me?"

THE JUDGE scratched a leathery chin. "Well, I dunno," he mumbled, shifty glance searching for Tom Horn. "I'm the only lawyer in town. Reckon I could defend you—"

"No, thanks!" Johnny grunted. "I'll do it myself. But by golly you're gonna listen to me!" He turned on Bertie Keller, who was still on the witness stand. "You! You say I stole from you. Did you ever see me at it?"

"Nope."

"And that roan mare of mine. Tell me: just when did I take it?"

The witness hesitated. "Well, I don't rightly remember. Looks a lot like one I had once, though."

"Looks like it!" Johnny echoed. "For Pete's sake! You ain't got a grain of real evidence against me, and you know it!"

Bertie grinned toothlessly, and winked one bright eye. "Who you kiddin', mister?"

Laughter rocked the court. White of face, Johnny wheeled around, and his eyes were slits as he faced the crowd. "When I rode into town this morning," he gritted, "I had the whole passel of you scared to death. But now you've took my gun you figure there's enough of you against me that I can't hurt any of you. Even a name like Bronc Ballew can't scare you with odds like that on your side. You're a doggone pack of yellow—"

"Quit that!" The judge brought his gavel down sharply. "If there's no further testimony, we'll get on; haven't much time. The verdict—?"

Well, we know what that is, I reckon. Everyone savvies the penalty for hoss stealin' in this court, too. . . . Prisoner, stand up here and take your sentence!"

They wheeled the cowpoke around to face the bench. The judge said: "I sentence you to be hung by the neck till you're plumb out of mischief. . . . Come on, fellows!" He leaped to his feet, waving skinny arms. "Let's get at it!"

The whole room sprang alive with shouts now, as that session of kangaroo court ended. Hands seized Johnny and spun him toward the near door. He saw men's distorted faces, and from somewhere a coil of rope had been produced. They'd had it ready all the time; they were going to beat Crystal County to the draw and hang Ballew themselves, before anyone else could lay hands on him. Before Al Eden could come and make them see—too late—that they had the wrong man. . . .

In despair, Johnny threw a pleading glance over that mass of faces, searching for one that showed any kindness, that would listen to him. And then a pair of mocking, red-rimmed eyes caught his, at the far end of the room by the door. A face seemed to leap toward him across the heads of the mob. Johnny stared, incredulous.

It was Bronc Ballew!

Suddenly Johnny was trying to point him out, to make them see; but the crowd pressed in on him. Fury gripped the prisoner. "That's him, you fools!" he shouted above the noise. "Stop him—"

But now Ballew had turned and ducked swiftly out of the room. A second door, near Johnny Eden, was already open and a way clear for the sheriff to take his prisoner out to the street where the rope would do its work—

Quickly, Johnny whirled on Tom Horn and with a shove sent him twisting and sprawling over an outstretched foot, straight into the ranks of the mob. In that same instant of confusion Johnny leaped and made the door. He grabbed it in passing, slammed it in their faces. Now he was in the dark tunnel of hallway that

split the court house building from front to back, with street exits at either end opening on squares of blasting sunlight.

Bronc Ballew was hurrying down toward one of those exits; and Johnny would have started after him but the yells from inside the court room gave him warning. Just in time he pulled himself back into the narrow recess of a doorway across the hall, just as Sheriff Horn wrenched open the court room door and came rushing out with the mob bawling at his heels.

In the darkness they couldn't see Johnny flattened against the wall. But they saw Bronc Ballew, silhouetted as he ran for the street entrance. They shouted: "There he goes! Get him!" A gun barked. Ballew went faster, the crowd trampling after him.

At the same time Johnny came out of his niche and started in the opposite direction, for the other street exit down the hall. But suddenly men were coming in there, drawn by the yells and the shooting. Quickly, Johnny turned back. There was only one place to go—He got to the court room entrance and ducked inside just as boots came pounding by.

**B**REATHING hard, Johnny waited in the corner behind the door until they were past. The noise had dimmed a little now, as the yelling mob flowed out of the building. Strangely silent was the big, empty court room.

Johnny slipped out of his hiding place and glided over to the windows. Maybe he could escape this way, into the alley, and get to a horse—He looked out, saw the coast clear and only a short drop to the ground. He lifted one foot to put it over the sill.

A sound in the doorway turned him quickly.

It was the click of a revolver hammer coming into full cock. Bronc Ballew stood there, and the mad hatred in his eyes burned like a flame as he looked at Johnny Eden.

"I'm gonna kill you!" he said, flatly. "I know what you been up to—makin' a fool out of me. Nobody ever done that to Bronc Ballew before!"

Johnny tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. Then the outlaw



had caught sight of his hat lying on the table, and quickly stepped and snatched it up. For a moment his face softened with insane affection, as he touched the beloved little metal horse. Then he thrust the hat under his arm.

"Stole him, did yuh!" he snarled. "I could kill you for that, if for nothin' else—it's the reason I trailed you all the way from Crystal. But I figured I'd lost my chance there when you tricked that mob into chasin' me; I didn't know when I snuck back to get my hat that I'd get you, too!"

"Now listen, Bronc!" Johnny tried to say. "Please—" But the outlaw's gun was steady, trigger yielding under the slow pressure of his finger—the finger that had killed a dozen men—

A voice cried: "Look! This fellow's caught him!"

Two of the mob, with more brains than some, had run back into the building looking for the vanished quarry. And now one was rushing out again yelling for the sheriff, while the other waited. Ballew glowered at the intruder. Johnny almost had to smile as he saw the outlaw's disappointment; for Bronc Ballew couldn't shoot him down now.

But Johnny's position wasn't any better than before. Another moment and Tom Horn and the rest came crashing into the room. They took Johnny away from his captor, and tied his arms, and draped the noose over his shoulders. Then, shouting and yelling, they dragged him out of the court room and into the hot blast of the street.

Bronc Ballew trailed along, his warped mind apparently fascinated at thought of another being strung up in his own place. He caught Johnny's eye, gave him an evil, yellow-toothed grin.

Then the crowd stopped in the dust before the big door of a feed barn, and under an out-thrust timber that would take the rope. Eager hands threw it up and over, and caught the end. Sickeningly, Johnny felt the knot pressing against his ear.

"Wait!" he yelled, the sweat starting down his face.

Doug Peyton, rope in hand, snorted: "Wait, hell!"

"Just a minute," Tom Horn cut in. "Give him a chance! Whatever you got to say, mister, make it quick. We ain't got all day."

Yes, that was it! Al Eden and the posse from Crystal! They ought to be getting here at any time, and they could save him. If he could do something to stall, to keep talking—

"I want to confess!" he said. "Lemme go out with a clear conscience!"

A chorus of boos sounded, but Sheriff Horn's face had lighted at the suggestion. "Sure!" he exclaimed, eagerly. "This'll be better yet! A full confession from Ballew, signed and delivered, before we string him up—it'll look great in the papers. You got a pencil, Doug?"

**G**RUMBLING, Doug Peyton felt in his pocket. They had to send someone running to the court house, finally, to fetch one, and a block of paper. The seconds ticked away. When the man came running back, Tom Horn took the writing materials and looked at Johnny with pencil stub poised. "Well?"

Johnny swallowed. He listened hopefully for the sound of hoofbeats, heard none. He cleared his throat again. "That whiskey drummer, up north aways," he began, faintly. "I—I killed him. Plugged him in the stomach."

"Wait a minute!" Horn was writing it down, pencil squeaking.

Johnny began to warm to his task. If he could just keep it up...

"There was a couple of sheep herders, over Las Vegas way," he said. "I killed them too. Shot one in the back and slit the other's throat."

"Go on!" growled the sheriff, writing furiously.

Johnny thought hard. "I held up a stage coach just out of Alamogordo. Killed the guard and the driver. There was a sky pilot on board. I made him take off his shoes and walked him through a cactus patch. After that I shot him."

Nobody but Johnny Eden heard Bronc Ballew's curse of rage, or saw the way his face had darkened at this procedure. The sheriff was still writing. But Johnny's throat was drying up and so was his imagination. He

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found himself straining his ears for the first sound of horses coming.

"Well?" said the sheriff.

"There was a gent down at Socorro who said he'd take me on and give me the first shot. I met him in a dry arroyo and plugged him when his back was turned—"

Johnny's voice clogged suddenly. At the same time, others heard the pounding of hooves. Someone cried: "Who's that comin'?"

Tom Horn jerked up his head, listened. Then he shrugged. "Some of the fellows thought Ballew got away on a hoss, when he broke out of the court house," he said. "That's just them comin' back."

Johnny wilted, then, and the hope ran out of him. And when Horn told him to continue, he couldn't find the courage or the strength to do it. His dry throat ached. He shook his head.

"All right," said Horn, briskly. "Untie his hands, Doug, so he can sign this thing. Then we'll get it over with quick."

The hoofbeats drummed louder. Vaguely, Johnny knew that his arms were free. The pencil was thrust into his hand, and the paper held up; he made some kind of a scrawl, he didn't know what. Tom Horn stepped back. "All right! You ready, boys?"

In a swirling cloud of dust, horse-men came into sight around the corner. Al Eden rode in the lead, crisp white hair wind-ruffled. At sight of him, Tom Horn let out a groan.

"Too late!" he exclaimed. "It's the posse from Crystal!"

Bronc Ballew had recognized Sheriff Eden at the same instant, and at once he turned and started running for it before the latter should set eyes on him. Only Johnny saw him go. The rope had slackened. Quickly he jerked off the noose and lit out before the mob could stop him.

He caught Ballew and whirled him around. Red eyes glinting, the outlaw started for his gun but Johnny halted him with a fist driven against his mouth. Ballew stepped back under the impact. Johnny bored ahead, trying to crowd him and keep that gun in its holster.

Yells, confusion, dust. . . Ballew had to defend himself now. He struck

Johnny a lashing blow that made the cowpoke's head ring. But Johnny kept on, arms working like pumps.

Suddenly Bronc Ballew dropped, motionless. Panting, Johnny stood over him. He saw, trampled in the dust where Ballew had let it fall, the hat and the lucky silver piece, and stooped, picked it up—

**T**HE CROWD closed in. Al Eden had him by the hand shaking it madly. "Good for you, Johnny!" he cried. "It took nerve, tacklin' Bronc Ballew!"

Sheriff Tom Horn and the rest of the Juniper mob stared, uncomprehending. "I—I don't get it!" Tom Horn stammered. "Ain't this—? I thought— Damn it, he just signed this confession!"

Al Eden snatched the paper, and when he'd read it he looked first at Horn and then at Johnny. "He signed it?" he echoed. "My nephew, Johnny? You thought *he* was—?"

Then he got the point, and started to laugh. He laughed until he choked, and the posse from Crystal joined in, and presently even the bewildered mob began to take it up. "Wait'll I print this in the papers!" Sheriff Eden howled, waving the confession. "Tom, you'll never live *this* down!"

Horn swallowed and looked at Doug, and Peyton looked back, and then the pair of them turned away, crestfallen, and crept off to their office with the laughter following them. After a bit Sheriff Eden stopped laughing quite so hard. Still chuckling, he began slowly tearing the paper into strips.

"Wish I coulda printed it," he said. "It sure would of been funny!"

"Ain't you going to?" Johnny asked, surprised.

"Hunh-uh," grunted the sheriff of Crystal. "Reckon that'd be mean. Don't you think so?"

Johnny didn't know. Suddenly the only thing he did know clearly was that he'd been through a hell of an experience, and his legs had gone weak and shaky under him. The main thing he wanted just then was some place where he could sit down.

And a drink. Gosh, yes! A good, long, stiff one. . . ● END



# BUNK!

NOBODY IS JUST "Naturally"

# SKINNY!

Give Me 15 Minutes A Day And I'll Give YOU A NEW BODY

**W**OULD you believe it? I was once a skinny 97-pound weakling. People used to laugh at my spindly build. I was ashamed to strip for sports or for a swim. Girls snickered at me behind my back. Folks said I was just "naturally-born skinny!"

Then I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—"Dynamic Tension." And it turned me into such a complete specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title, "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

**WHAT'S MY SECRET?**

When you look in the mirror and see a healthy, husky, strapping fellow smiling back at you—then you'll be astonished at how fast "Dynamic Tension" GETS RESULTS!

**ARE YOU**  
 Skinny and run down?  
 Always tired?  
 Nervous?  
 Lacking in Confidence?  
 Constipated?  
 Suffering from bad breath?  
 Do you want to gain weight?  
**WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT** is told on this page!

"Dynamic Tension" is the easy, NATURAL method that you can practice in the privacy of your own room—JUST 15 MINUTES EACH DAY—while your scrawny chest and shoulder muscles begin to swell . . . those spindly arms and legs of yours bulge . . . and your whole body starts to feel full of zip, ambition, self-confidence, and new energy!

**"Dynamic Tension" Builds You NATURALLY**

Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give them no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You simply utilize the dormant muscle-power in your own body. In a very short time, you'll watch it grow and multiply into real, solid, rippling, LIVE MUSCLE.

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Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in an international contest.



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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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**FREE BOOK** Mail coupon now. I'll send my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells about my "Dynamic Tension" method. Shows photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Mail coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 249Q, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.



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"Up to our necks in Radio-Television work. Four other NRI men work here. Am happy with my work." — Glen Peterson, Bradford, Ont., Canada.

"Am doing Radio and Television Servicing full time. Now have my own shop I owe my success to N.R.I." — Curtis Stalk, Ft. Madison, Iowa.

"Am with WCOC. NRI course can't be beat. I'm now passing 1st class Radio-Phone license exam." — Jesse W. Parker, Meridian, Mississippi.

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Keep your job while training. I start sending you special booklets the day you enroll, that show you how to fix sets. Multitester built with parts I send helps you make \$10, \$15 a week extra fixing sets while training. Many start their own Radio-Television business with spare time earnings.

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You benefit by my 40 years' experience training men at home. Well illustrated lessons give you basic principles you need. Skillfully developed kits of parts I send (see below) "bring to life" things you learn from lessons.

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