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# STORY 10 CENTS

JUNE 8, '40

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South to

*Sonora*

BY W. RYERSON JOHNSON

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STREET & SMITH'S

# WESTERN STORY

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CONTENTS FOR JUNE 8, 1940

VOL. CLXXXIII NO. 1

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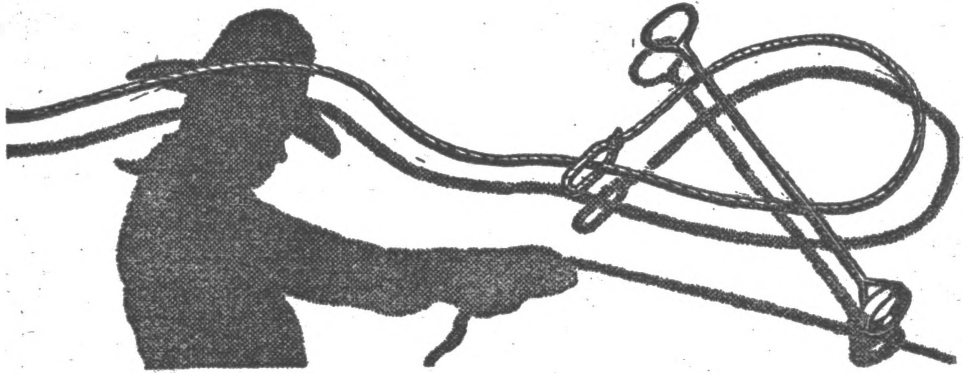
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# The Roundup

WHAT goes into the making of a story like W. Ryerson Johnson's serial, *SOUTH TO SONORA*, which begins on page 9 of this issue, appears to be plenty, according to Johnson's own account, which we give you herewith. But when the results are as gratifying as they are in this yarn, we're sure the effort involved has been well worth while, and we're mighty proud to offer our readers what we consider definitely one of the "scoops of the year." As to what went on behind the scene of *SOUTH TO SONORA*, Johnson has this to say:

"It's funny about a story. Somebody asks you how long it took to write it. You say a week—a month—six months. But that doesn't tell near the whole story. It might be six years—or a lifetime. *SOUTH TO SONORA* has been 'in process,' I reckon, ever since I started reading stories as a kid about Texas Rangers and Canadian Mounted Police.

"The more I tramped around the West and listened to the old-timers talk, the more I became convinced

that the hombres punching typewriter keys instead of cattle were overlooking the best bet of all—Uncle Sam's own trouble gunners, those lone rangers working out of the United States marshal's office.

"You who read *Western Story Magazine* know that before State lines were drawn in the West, law enforcement was pretty much a hit-and-miss proposition. Almost any hardcase with his brains in his trigger finger could upset the tranquility of range or town. And when hardcases ganged up together to gun-boss a territory, who was there to stop them?

"Sometimes a town tamer working for fame or money took on the job. But more often than not a man drifted in from the United States marshal's office. Underpaid, unsung, he stayed around for a while. Maybe there was shooting and maybe not. But when he left to straighten out things in another corner of the growing West, honest men were sitting in saddle at the place where he had been.

"Almost without realizing it, I began to file away in my mind true stories of the exploits of these frontier lawmen. Then last summer two things happened. In a cantina in Mexico a man, on a bet, heaved a hatchet across the room and buried

the blade in a narrow strip of wood that separated two bar mirrors. That hatchet tosser began to give me ideas.

"Later, on a *pasear* in the desert rough country on our own side of the border I ran across an old-timer sitting in the sun in front of his 'dobe.' He hadn't been in town in twenty years, he said, except to trade a little gold dust whenever he needed tobacco, beans, or bacon.

"I stayed the night with him. Inside the dobe I blinked my eyes when I saw, chucked in one corner, a locoed-looking contraption, multiple-barreled and scaly with rust.

"Looks like a Gatling gun!" I said.

"Ought to," he said. "It ain't nothin' else."

"A Gatling, as you know, is the granddaddy of the modern machine gun. A clumsy, heavy thing with a revolving battery, it clattered out several hundred shots a minute and was a fearful weapon in its day. In fact, Richard Gatling, who invented it, put it on the world armament market shortly after our Civil War because he believed it would make war so horrible that nations would quit fighting!

"Well, anyhow, here was this Gatling.

"The old man had a reminiscent look in his eyes. 'I keep it for sentimental reasons,' he said. 'It was one of six hundred.'

"Six hundred Gatlings?" I cracked at him. "Where's the other five hundred and ninety-nine?"

"They went south to Sonora. There was gun runnin' over the border in them days, son."

"Don't tell me," I scoffed. "The U. S. army itself couldn't run Gatlings through this devil's washboard. They're too heavy for a man to pack. There's no railroad, no wagon

trails, even. No rivers to float 'em down on. How could five hundred and ninety-nine Gatlings go south to Sonora through here?"

"They didn't," the old man said.

"Huh?" I exploded. "I thought you just said they did?"

"Well, they did and they didn't."

"It's makin' less sense fast!"

"What I mean is, they got through here all right, but a couple men from the United States marshal's office stopped 'em at the border."

"Two men stopped five hundred and ninety-nine Gatlings?" (Right there is where Roy Lanterman and Red Haw came to life.)

"There's more goes on back here than's ever told," the old man said. Then he told me some of it!

"I added some more to that and wrote SOUTH TO SONORA for Western Story!"

In next week's issue—

Walt Coburn's name on a story is a sure-fire guarantee of a salty, thrill-packed tale, but in our opinion his newest full-length novel just about tops a long list of impressive yarns. It's the story of Sheriff Jim West and his gallant struggle to win back the rep he thought he had lost. Look for Sheriff Jim in RANGE OF NO-RETURN—we're sure you're going to number him among your personal friends.

Watch out also for a string of fine stories by Kenneth Gilbert, George Michener, Wayne D. Overholser, Homer King Gordon, W. Ryerson Johnson, and many others. And don't forget there's always a full list of departments and features.

*No one ever noticed Bill, — until.....*



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For a moment no one answered. Then suddenly Bill rose and strode to the piano. "Do you mind if I fill in?" he said. Everyone burst out laughing. But Bill pretended not to hear.

As he struck the first few chords, everyone leaned forward spellbound. For Bill was playing as Dave Gordon had never played, playing with the fire and soul of an inspired musician. In a moment Bill was the center of an admiring throng. In answer to their eager

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# south to *Sonora*

Part One

BY W. RYERSON JOHNSON

## CHAPTER I

### THE HATCHET MAN

THE Lucky Horseshoe in El Paso was the kind of saloon where a man might expect to meet anyone, even a United States deputy marshal as famous as Lanterman—or say, maybe,

Harliduke Haw. On this particular windy winter night a man might have met the both of them—only he wouldn't have known it.

The boots on the bar rail were the serviceable hand-sewn kind familiar to the border. And the two range-garbed men hefting beer schooners at the far end of the bar—the tall, spare one with sun-squint wrinkles

at the corners of his blue eyes, and the cocky little redhead with the easy grin—looked like any pair of cowpokes in from the range with three months' wages in their jeans and a thirsty determination to spend the money all in one place.

"Peaceful in here, ain't it?" Red Haw remarked, squinting around from under his sombrero.

"Uncommon peaceful," Roy Lanterman agreed. "Does that annoy you much?"

"Not much. Little monotonous, is all."

Roy snorted. "After duckin' bullets for a month on the Pecos, we clean everything up and relax for just one day—and you call it monotonous."

Red Haw shrugged his wiry shoulders. "A fella can't help havin' his impressions."

"Make an impression on the rest of that beer," his companion suggested.

Red Haw downed his beer and juggled a copper token in his hand. "It's all we got left. Good for one more drink. And there's two of us."

With few silver coins circulating on the border in denominations less than a dollar, the Lucky Horseshoe made small change in beer tokens. Red and Roy had been doing their best to drink up their accumulated tokens before they cleared town on the stagecoach for Albuquerque.

Red tossed the token on the bar. "Take a look, government sleuth—a picture of a horseshoe and a mug of beer, side by side." He turned the token over. "On this side just some printin' about what a superior place the Lucky Horseshoe is. You flip it and I'll call it. We'll see who buys the extra beer."

Roy Lanterman nodded, flipped the token, caught it, slapped it on the wet mahogany. His long brown

fingers covered it. "Name what's up, hardcase."

"I say the horseshoe and the beer."

Roy moved his hand away. His sombrero and Red's touched as they both bent close to see which side was up. They never did find out for sure.

**S**TRIKING through the drone of voices in the big smoky room, a voice called in hoarse warning, "Look out!"

There was the faintest of swishing sounds, menacing, imminent.

Neither Roy nor Red had time to look up before the thrown object, glinting in the lamplight, sliced in between their narrowly separated heads and chopped with a thud into the bar.

Close death, like a blanketing aura, held every man in the room paralyzed. Then Red Haw's throat started working.

"I'm a ring-tailed wampus!" he muttered.

He was looking where they were all looking, at the bar in front of him—at a hatchet, its blade buried a full inch and a half in the solid wood, its short handle sticking up so close that it almost poked his nose.

From across the room there was a scurry. Then the green-shuttered doors fanned violently as a man ducked out and ran. The sound of his footsteps wafted back in hollow thumps from the board sidewalk. They were drowned by closer, louder sounds as Red and Roy boiled into action.

They didn't get anywhere near the door. Bludgeoning through the rising muddle of voices, the sounds of boots scuffling and chairs being pushed back, the voice of the bartender got through to them.

"It's all right!" he bellowed. "Come on back. Sit tight, everybody. I got men to take care of this. It was just some temperance crank that hankered to break my new bar mirror." The bartender was a fat man, but somehow he had launched himself on top of his bar. He whirled his arms; he pleaded and threatened. "Take it easy, gents," he howled. "Anyone breaks up any more furniture and I'll heave this hatchet back at him! You hear me—I'll heave the hatchet!"

He got them quieted. As he climbed down from his high perch, men crowded in against the bar, eying Roy and Red, whose heads had so nearly substituted for a chopping block. Eying the hatchet, too.

The bartender, muttering, grasped the handle in his wet, puffy hand and jerked the hatchet blade from the wood. "Real mahogany," he moaned. "Now look at it!"

But it wasn't the gouged bar top which held the attention of Roy and Red. It was the short-bladed hatchet.

Roy took the thing in his hand, hefting it with interest. The sun-wrinkles at the corners of his eyes seemed to be pulling his lids down, squeezing the warm blue from his eyes. "Balanced for throwing," he remarked.

"What's that on the handle?" Red wanted to know.

Roy looked. The others craned their necks. The figure of a lizard had been carved into the wood.

"Nice carvin'," Roy said. "What's the idea?"

The bartender threw up his chunky arms. "What's the idea of any of it?" he demanded aggrievedly. "Temperance crank, that's all. Been pesterin' me all season. But I had a couple men spotted outside tonight, just waitin' for somethin'

like this. They'll get that hatchet man—"

"What's he look like?" Roy threw out. "Anybody see him?"

"Tall, thin fella with kind of a white face," a man in the crowd asserted.

"No, he wasn't," another contradicted. "He was short and he was a Mex."

"Wearin' a poncho? Long mustache? Scar on his left cheek? A front tooth missin'?" Red fired the questions.

"Yeah . . . yeah," the man said uncertainly. "How'd you know?"

Red Haw grinned and swapped an understanding look with Roy. He hadn't known. But he knew now that nobody else knew, either. The men in here had reacted in a way typical of crowds in a moment of high excitement. They had looked right at something without seeing it.

The shuttered doors swung inward and a man pushed through dragging a limp figure. The dragged man's boots scraped through the sawdust in a trail as crooked as that of a sidewinder's.

The bartender's fat jowls quivered, and he stammered, "Them . . . them's the two I had spotted outside! Is . . . is he dead?"

The man who had just come in scowled. "No," he said.

"What . . . what's the matter with him?"

"He took a hard right to the jaw, is all."

"Who did it? Speak up, speak up. Same man that went rammin' out through the doors?"

"Yeah."

"Who was he?"

"Dunno," the man shrugged.

"What'd he look like?"

"Couldn't tell much. He fell all over us gettin' away."

"*He* fell all over you! You're gettin' paid for fallin' on him!"

The man glowered at him. "I never liked this job, anyhow, see? I quit!" He turned on his heel and walked out of the place. His companion, who had been stirring, pulled himself groggily up from the sawdust and made his own stumbling way outside.

Roy looked at Red. "Hatchet sounds like Mexico. Fist clip sounds like United States. Pay your penny and take your choice."

"Speakin' of pennies, look!" Red reached out to the bar, scooping up the two halves of a beer token. "That hatchet chopped our gamblin' money plumb in two!"

**T**ENSION clamped down again in the big room. Only this time, instead of crowding in, the men pushed back from the bar. There was something not quite natural in their movement. One and all, their gaze was fastened on the copper token which had been split almost exactly in half by the thrown hatchet. It was as though they sensed a strange emission of evil from the red metal.

Whatever it was, Red Haw didn't share their uneasy feeling. "Plain accident," he grinned, "and I still got beer on my mind." He held out his two closed hands to Roy. "Hatchet split the token so the beer mug's on one part and the horse-shoe's on the other. Call either one of 'em and I'll buy the beer."

"I'll buy the beer," the bartender cut in. He pressed both hammy hands on the mahogany and leaned forward. "Step on back to the bar, boys. If I can't sell it, I'll give it away. No temperance crank can ruin my business. Drinks are on the house—"

A new voice cut in on the bartender. It was the leather-lunged

bellow of the stage caller, who stuck his head between the batwings just long enough to announce, "Hate to ruin your business, Kegs, but it's the last call! Albuquerque stage leaves out in five minutes! Last call!"

The stage depot was only a short way down the street. Roy and Red waited a couple of minutes, then started sprinting, leaning into the wind which rolled down from the upper Rio Grandé valley with portentous bluster. The wind whirled dust through the empty street. It skittered a piece of paper, ghostlike, into the sickly glow that permeated the night from another saloon window.

"They sure pull in the sidewalks early in this town," Red Haw grunted.

"What sidewalks?" Roy jerked. He pitched forward, half falling over a loose board.

Maybe it was the half fall that saved his life. At any rate, the knife which drove over his head from the pitch-blackness between two buildings was a good fifteen inches too high. Red Haw was bringing up the rear. By the pale-yellow light from the saloon window he saw the knife slither into the dust of the street. He let out a yelp. Like a terrier going in after a rat, he dived in between the two buildings, head low, yanking a long-barreled six from a shoulder holster as he moved.

**R**OY regained his footing and tore in after him. Both instinctively worked on the principle that a minute of attack is worth an hour of defense. In this case their move was so entirely unexpected that they both rammed into solid flesh and bone in the darkness before they could trigger lead.

After that it was too late to shoot without risk of drilling each other.



They struck out, each of them, with their long-barreled service guns—and felt the satisfying resistance of flesh-padded bone. Curses which had their origin below the brimstone border rasped on their ears. Knife steel rasped also—through the bulky shoulder of Roy Lanternman's coat and down the sleeve. And through Red Haw's sombrero with force enough that it took his hat away.

Roy and Red crowded the fight, slamming right and left with gun barrels, protecting their faces with one closely upheld arm, and doubling low enough to keep any chance knife slashes from opening their bellies.

"*Por mil diablos!*" one of the unseen attackers gasped.

And very soon after that Roy and Red found themselves half jerking their arms from sockets as they whacked at empty air. Retreating footsteps, scuffling back between the buildings, told the story.

"After 'em," Red Haw barked. "Where the hell are you, Roy, so I don't shoot you?"

"Wait," Roy's word of low caution sounded. "If we blaze away here we'll collect a crowd. There'll be just enough investigatin' by local law badges to make us miss our stagecoach. I don't hanker to lay over in this man's town another day, do you?"

"I'm a ring-tail whiffletree if I do!" Red assured him. "Not for a coupla Mex footpads. Maybe the show we put on'll teach 'em not to spread such a fast loop for the wallets of the next couple of greenhorns they see in town. Let's get out of here. You all right?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Except for where you pole-axed me once, you long drink of muddy water, when the fightin' got close. And I lost my skypiece on the end

of one of their knives." Backing away, Red Haw stepped on something yielding. He felt down in the darkness. "Wouldn't that jar you? Here it is." He straightened up. "Somethin' in it besides the knife hole. Somethin' with a funny shape—light as cardboard."

Back on the street in the yellow ooze of light from the saloon window, Red satisfied his curiosity about the object he had found in his hat.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he snorted in disgust. "Nothin' but a flattened-out, shriveled-up, sun-dried lizard! Might have kicked it in there myself, I reckon." He tossed it into the wind.

"If we're gonna catch that stage—" Roy said patiently.

"Wait a minute. I saw where that knife went that come slicin' over your head. I'll get it. We'll add it to our hatcheted beer chip as a souvenir of peaceful hours spent in El Paso."

**R**ED scurried out in the street and began scuffling up the dust. The wind was whirling it in blinding clouds, but the faint leaden glimmer of knife steel blinked through to him. He bent, picked up the knife, and hurried back to Roy, impatiently waiting on the sidewalk.

In the close light of the saloon window, Red held up the knife. "Here she is."

Roy glanced at it with scant interest. "You're worse'n a crow for collectin' bright truck. Come on, we'll miss the stage— Hey, wait a minute. Leave me see."

Red's words came in a tight-lipped burst. "Same thought just come to me, pardner." He passed over the knife.

Together they examined it as Roy held it by the blade. The knife was

not unusual except in one respect: a lizard had been carved in the bone handle.

The wind from the high ranges howled through the town with increasing fury, beating gritty dirt against street-front windows, creaking an overhead swinging sign.

Red and Roy squinted at each other in sober speculation.

"Now I wonder," Roy let out slowly, speaking for both of them. "First the hatchet with a lizard on the handle. Now a lizard-handled knife. And you found a dead lizard in your hat, didn't you say? Where is it?"

Red shrugged. "Wind's got it."

"What do you think?"

"Your guess is good as mine."

For another instant, there in the windy street, they met each other's eyes, and the questions that rattled around in their brains were the same. Was there some mysterious design to this lizard business? Had the ax been thrown by a more sinister person than a temperance crank, and for a more deadly motive than to break a bar mirror? Was the fat saloonkeeper on the level? Had this knife attack been motivated by something more significant than robbery? Had the tiny dead lizard arrived in Red Haw's hat by accident, or had it been put there? And if it had been put there, why?

"There's no one around this country with a killin' grudge against us," Red Haw reviewed. "We cleaned up our business on the Pecos. Beef contracts for the army posts are now operatin' as intended, and all thiev-in' cowmen that might have it in for us are bein' close-herded by the government. I reckon we've just been experiencin' life as she's lived in El Paso; and this lizard stuff is plumb coincidence."

"I reckon," Roy agreed. "Let's get goin'."

The six-horse Concord coach was drawn up and ready to roll when Roy and Red reached the station. Both the shotgun guard and the driver had mounted the high box seat.

"Hold it," the station master called as he sighted Roy and Red looming out of the darkness at the end of the platform. "Looks like a coupla late drinkers from Kegs' place."

"Sure will be glad to shake this town," Red grunted, jogging close.

Roy grinned. "This is the place you called monotonous, ain't it?"

"Sure," Red flared. "Three lizards in an hour—wouldn't you call that monotonous?"

The station master was buttonholing Roy. "You Ezra Wire?"

It was the name Roy Lanterman used in connection with official communications of a confidential nature. He nodded.

The station master pulled an envelope from an inside pocket and waved it importantly. "Then I got one of them new-fangled tellygraphs for you. Come over the wire to Albuquerque, and the inbound stage delivered it here with instructions to hold and ask everybody if they was Ezra Wire. You're sure you're him?"

"I'm him," Roy assured him. He took the envelope, looked at both sides and tapped it. "Must be important—"

"Sometimes," Red clipped, "you can tell by openin' 'em."

Roy opened this one. It was from the office of the attorney general at Washington, D. C., and it read:

ALL PREVIOUS INSTRUCTIONS  
CANCELED. DESPERATE URGENCY.  
STAY WHERE YOU ARE UNTIL FUR-

# THEIR NOTICE AND CHECK ON MEXICAN GUERRILLA LEADER KNOWN AS EL LAGARTO.

Roy looked at Red. His voice was low and tense as he said, "Three in an hour was your mistake, pardner. There's four!"

Roy passed over the telegram. Red scanned it, and the two of them swapped taut, wondering looks. The English translation of El Lagarto, they knew, was—the Lizard.

## CHAPTER II

### STAGECOACH TRAP

**H**IS name was Haw and his hair was red, so they called him Red Haw. But that wasn't until he ran away from home and went West. Maybe it was his given name that he ran away from. He was probably the only boy in the world named Harliduke—Harliduke Haw.

In Illinois the hawthorns in September grow red fruit, stunted and puckery, and bright as cherries in the sun. Along every muddy stream that meanders to the Mississippi, the "red haw," tough and thorny, fights its way through the tangle of water-side undergrowth and survives with the fittest.

The hawthorn had a lot in common with Harliduke. But nobody seemed to notice it—not until he went West. There he neglected to mention the Harliduke part of his moniker. So, because his name was Haw and his hair was red, they called the tangy, scrappy, half-pint stick of dynamite Red Haw.

He went West to fight Indians, but finding the unhappy Indians already being herded on reservations, he remained to grow up and wear a peace officer's badge and throw his lead in the interests of Texas justice. Then he spread out, went with the government.

Texas was wide, but the West was wider, a waking giant, meat market and treasure chest of the world, with the tide of empire rolling over tawny prairies, engulfing deserts and moun-



tains. Red Haw was proud to do his part of the empire building.

Others built with ropes and picks and plows. Red Haw—and Roy Lanterman—built with six-guns, easing the West of its growing pains. For, vast as it was, this raw, new land, it wasn't vast enough. Trappers chased out Indians; cowmen, sheepmen, and miners chased out trappers. Then the railroads brought in farmers and they made trouble for everybody in a land already glutted with trouble.

Water—there wasn't enough of it to grow grass, and grow grain, and feed flumes all at the same time. Men never try the conference table until greed has had its play. So six-guns flared and long rifles boomed—and Red Haw, paired with Roy Lanterman, cruised the dim trails up and down, trouble-gunning for Uncle Sam everywhere west of the ninety-eighth meridian.

**R**OY LANTERMAN'S case was a little different. He was a Texan. It was said of him that he was born in saddle, and that he could shoot a

gun as soon as he was old enough to point a finger. He grew up on the open range, with the sting of branding-fire smoke in his nostrils.

He was a cowman by choice and a lawman by accident. The change had come about one time when he went as far east as Kansas City with a train load of beef. He used his brains and his bullets to discourage a crew of train wreckers who were interested in keeping the beef off the market. His exploit brought him to the attention of government men, and the upshot of it was that he left Kansas City wearing a United States deputy marshal's badge, paired off with an explosive little fire-eater called Red Haw.

They cottoned to each other at once, became fast friends. And the two of them, the tall, handsome, soft-spoken, deadly gunning Roy and the grinning, undersized, equally fast-gunning Red, became something in the nature of an heroic fable in the service.

"Leave it to Roy and Red," came to be the order of the day for the toughest jobs that developed west of the ninety-eighth.

Assigned by the attorney general's office at Washington to one judicial district after another, they ranged from border to border, from the scalped mountains and cactus-studded deserts of the South to the timber-girt high country of the North, bringing law to a lawless land. Roy always said he was going to quit sometime and go back to ranching. But he never did. The far, exciting places kept calling, and he and Red kept answering the call.

Now at the station in El Paso, the stage driver was holding his six fresh horses in, splintering the night with his curses; and the station master jiggled first on one foot and then the other, peering at Roy and Red.

"You ridin' or not? Can't hold this stage all night."

Roy and Red were scanning the telegram again. They had intended to take the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad at Albuquerque and go on to Washington. The call to Washington had been in itself irregular. The usual procedure was to report to the United States marshal's office in whatever judicial district they were at the moment assigned.

"When they pull us in all the way to Washington," Red had declared, "there's somethin' big in the wind."

But now their instructions were to stay in El Paso and check on a Mexican guerrilla leader known as the Lizard. And the Lizard, from the evidence at hand, had first been checking on them!

Their identity had been closely guarded, yet El Lagarto had apparently known they were Federal men, and that they were to be put on his trail. He had known this even before they themselves had been aware of it! It was glaringly evident now that the hatchet and knife play of the evening were not unrelated, casual events.

"*Desperate urgency*," Red muttered, reading the telegram. "They're tellin' us! With hatchets and knives this baby comes at us before we even know we're mad. El Lagarto—the Lizard. Nice, up-standin' name for a fightin' man, ain't it? Who the devil is he? Never heard of him, did you?"

"I'm tryin' to think," Roy said thoughtfully. "Runs in my mind the rurales were chasin' a dozen bare-foot rag-tags through Sonora a year or so ago who were headed by a third-rate, breast-beating cutthroat who called himself the Lizard."

"A third-rater can come up fast if he gets a little money backin'," Red muttered again.



The station master pushed in close. "For the last time, are you ridin' or ain't you?"

Roy looked at Red, and understanding passed between the two. They'd worked together for so long that talk wasn't always necessary.

"We're ridin'," Roy said.

Inside, with the stage rolling along, jouncing and swaying on its leather thoroughbraces, Roy started to explain guardedly, "Since they've had our numbers so complete all evenin', I figured it was a good play to let 'em see us leave town—"

"Sure, I get you," Red cut in. "Whoever's watchin' can report back to this here, now, Grand Exalted Lizard that Roy and Red have plumb cleared town. Outside the town limits we can get out and go back, start our investigatin' without three strikes on us to begin with."

**W**ITH apparent casualness, they looked over their fellow passengers. Three Mexicans, two women and a man, with their innumerable baskets and parcels; peons, obviously, journeying to their corn-patch farm in the upper Rio Grande valley. Two drunk and garrulous cowboys who started songs they never finished, interrupting them every few minutes to announce that they rode for the Rafter B, "the best ol' cow outfit between the mountains."

That was all. Nobody who looked dangerous—or even interesting. Roy and Red settled down to wait.

"No use stretchin' this out," Red grumbled. "The less walkin' we have goin' back, the better I'll like it. Look at the way that wind's blowin' sand around. This is the cussedest blame country, anyhow! Anyone that would live in the West ought to have his head examined."

"You're here."

"Not by preference, I ain't."

Roy grinned. He had heard Red sound off like this ten thousand times.

"Quit squawkin'," he said. "You got the smell of sage and piñon deeper in your lungs than I have—and I was born to it."

"Huh," Red scoffed. "You don't anyhow hear me hollerin' I'm gonna work just one more job, then quit and settle down on a ranch—"

"You might not holler so much about it, but times when we've topped a grama-grass swell I've seen the cow hunger in your eyes."

"Beefsteak hunger, that's what it was. The only way I'm interested in cows is sliced thick, well-done, with lots of gravy."

"All right, you could raise your own beefsteaks, then."

"I could, but I wouldn't. Not unless I had the ranch give to me, stocked complete—with a dark-haired gal, red-lipped to match my hair, and eyes no farther from the ground than mine, thrown in for good measure." The coach window had steamed. With the heel of his hand Red rubbed a clear space, pressed his face close to the glass and looked out. "Lights are all behind us. Ain't it about time we put up a holler to the driver that we forgot and left our baby at home or somethin', and we want out so we can walk back?"

The way it happened, they didn't have to ask the driver to stop. Somebody else asked for them. Only *ask* wasn't the word. *Demand* was more like it.

From close ahead on the trail, gunfire split the night. The stagecoach lurched violently as the horses shied. The three Mexican passengers came out of their doze and scrambled for their falling parcels. The two Rafter B rannies quit singing with ludicrous suddenness.

From outside, cries of "*Alto! Alto!*" jammed with the echoing gunfire, and with the profane haranguing of the stage driver.

The stage jerked to a stop. There was a sharp jangle of glass as windows on both sides of the coach were smashed from the outside with carbines. With the short-barreled rifles poking in from right and left, there was nothing for the passengers to do but sit tight.

THE door was yanked open. The man who stood just outside with the wind bending his hat brim of native straw, was tall for a Mexican, lean and wolfish. His unmasked face, looming above his poncho, was nearly buried in hair. He had bushy eyebrows, a fierce mustache, and a short spade beard. The wind flickered the fire in the stagecoach lamp. In the uncertain light the man's face was positively satanic. And yet, for an instant, a softening sadness seemed to touch his eyes.

A trick of the flickering light, Roy decided, because after that a bleakness set in the bandit's eyes—such a bleakness as made even Roy and Red uneasy. Here, it was plain for all to see, was a hard man, an utterly ruthless man.

He spoke in slurring English, no expression lighting his bearded face. Directly to Roy he spoke. "Outside, you and the redhead rooster."

Roy and Red hesitated. The way this was shaping, it was something more than an ordinary holdup.

As though to dispel any doubts about it, the bandit jerked his serviceable carbine and said, "The United States p'lice will oblige quickly, no? So the other passengers are not frightened and may safely continue their way."

Under the threatening gun, Roy and Red got up and climbed from

the stage. None of the other passengers were ordered out. They weren't even robbed. At an order from the man up ahead, the stage driver took his lines in hand, cracked his whip, and started swearing at the horses. The stage started with a lurch, gathered speed. A man up ahead fired a gun in the air. The coach careened as the driver whipped his horses to a gallop.

The dust swirled back and blanked out the stage. In the cold drip of desert stars, the rocky hills, tinsel with the glint of the deadly *cholla* cactus, spread dimly on every side. The loneliness that closed in was like a physical force, brooding, menacing.

From out of the ballooning dust the two who had held the driver and guard under their guns, clumped obscurely into view. They came close and joined the two who were already nudging Red and Roy with their carbines. They were mere dark bulking shapes in their ponchos, and wide-brimmed hats of coarsely woven straw, but the wind which beat down from the high valley dimming the stars and filling the air with gritty dust, spoke of death.

The next moment the bandits themselves were speaking of it. A guttural exchange of border Spanish passed between them. Then the tall one with the bleak eyes and the beard, who had first ordered Red and Roy from the stage, said:

"Our chief have instruct me to tell you that you have grossly underestimate the threat of El Lagarto. It was not that he wanted you out of El Paso, merely. No. He wanted you out of the world!" He paused. "It is our pleasure to remove you. Stan' still w'ile first we take your guns."

Roy and Red were watching, desperately attuned to take advantage

of the least slackening in vigilance of their captors. But with the carbines close boring, there was no slightest opportunity. Two of the bandits pressed close, patting them down, finding and removing their guns from shoulder holsters.

And all that Red and Roy could do about it was to stand and grit their teeth. But at the instant the guns had passed from their possession, there was, undeniably, a relaxing of tension among the bandits. They were so sure now. Roy and Red had seen it happen this way before, and they were watching for it now.

Red gave the signal. Standing close to Roy, he pressed even closer, and Roy pressed back. They had worked together so long, these two. They didn't need to talk.

**I**T was the mountain-peaked hat that gave Red his chance. As the man stepped back with the six-gun, Red dropped both his upraised hands to clutch on the wide, curling brim. He yanked forward. The hat was jammed down tight on the man's head and secured against the wind with a raffia chin loop. At the same time Red pulled in on the straw brim, he was kicking out with his booted toe against the other's unprotected shin.

The man yelped in surprise and pain, and Red, having him off balance, let go in a manner that threw him against the knees of another of the bandits who was ramming close, poking for an opening with the carbine.

Roy Lanterman, at Red's side, was matching his partner's play, almost action for action.

No doubt about it, the boys got off to a whirlwind start. The tragic thing about it was they couldn't

hold their lead. If either of them could have grabbed a gun— But they couldn't manage that. That had been their plan: scramble things in the darkness so that in the confusion the bandits would have to hold their fire for fear of shooting each other; then, holding close together, Roy and Red could blast their way out with a recovered gun.

Their plan misfired because a savage gust of wind cut gritty dirt in Roy's eyes at the worst possible time. He had his man down. He had let go of the straw hat. He was reaching for a gun. Then—dust in his eyes. He overreached.

It was the last chance he got before a carbine barrel clubbed his head. He fell heavily against Red Haw, and the next instant they were both fighting for their lives. On their backs, and one of them temporarily blinded, they hadn't much chance with the wolf pack that closed in at their throats.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE DEVIL IS A MAN

**M**AYBE they could have fought their way clear. But a gambling man would have demanded heavy odds on it. Battered with the carbine barrels, heeled and pummeled, Roy and Red rolled, struck back in blind despairing frenzy. Then one of the bandits got the muzzle of his carbine in against Roy's chest, and started groping for the trigger. Roy's eyes were still full of grit; he couldn't see.

Red Haw could see. But there wasn't anything he could do about it. His head was reeling from a blow against solid rock. On his knees he lurched out, came far short of reaching the carbine that was set to blast Roy off the earth. For the

first time in his dangerously lived life he felt the bitterness of complete defeat. Always before there had been some hope, however slight. But now—

A gun barrel rammed viciously in against Red himself. Hard, to the pit of his stomach. But Red was so far gone from the rock blow that he didn't feel it much.

Things started jumping in front of his eyes. He must be pretty far gone, he thought, for vision to go back on him this way. Then a second thought struck him: if he could do any thinking about it at all he must be still all right! He must be actually seeing some of these things. The man who had been going to blast Roy must have actually fallen down across Roy! And Roy must

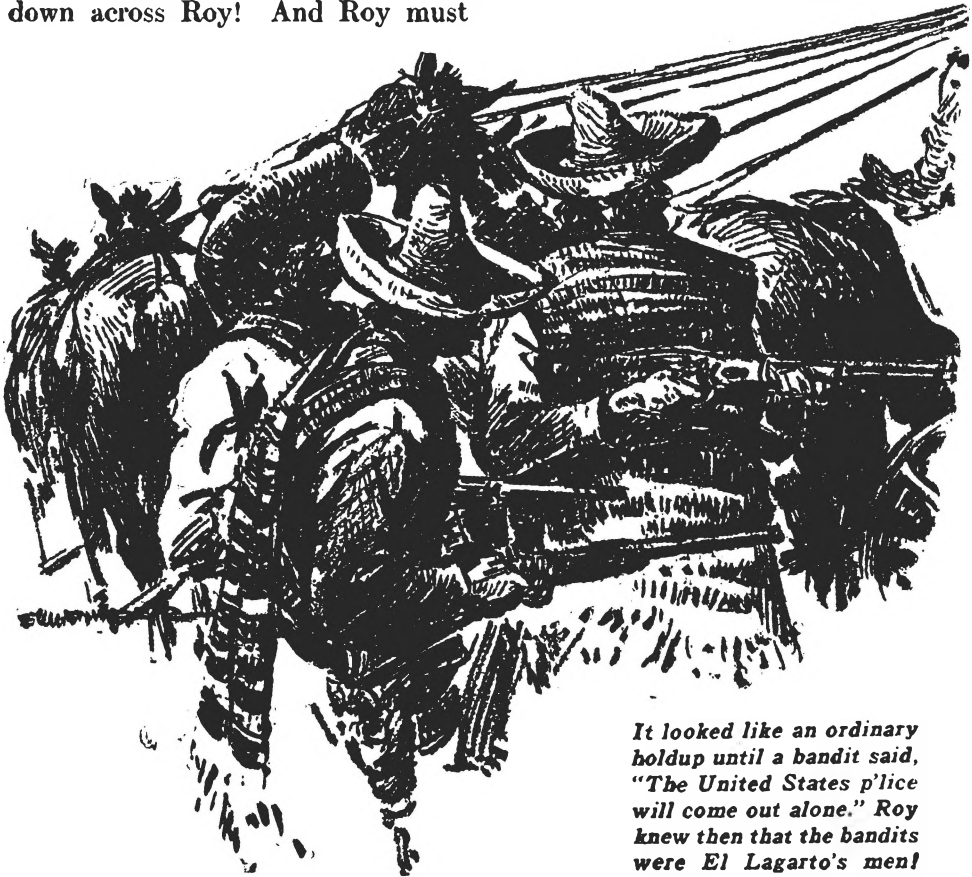
actually be pushing his body aside, the way it looked.

And the man who had socked the gun muzzle to Red's stomach, he was slumping to the ground also. And the other two were running away!

The next thing Red knew he and Roy were trying to help each other up. They stood there swaying, clearly the lords of the battlefield. Amazing and unexplainable as it was, two of the bandits lay in still crumpled attitudes on the ground, and the other two were in full flight.

"I'm a ring-tailed prairie dog!" Red muttered.

"Looks like," Roy said, breathing hard, "we got a pard around here some place, but I'm damned if I know where."



*It looked like an ordinary holdup until a bandit said, "The United States p'lice will come out alone." Roy knew then that the bandits were El Lagarto's men!*



With their strength returning, they padded the ground until they located their six-guns. By that time the two who were running away had disappeared around a bend of the trail in the direction of El Paso. Roy and Red looked wonderingly about them. There was no close cover where a hidden man could have staged an attack.

"I didn't hear any shot," Roy said.

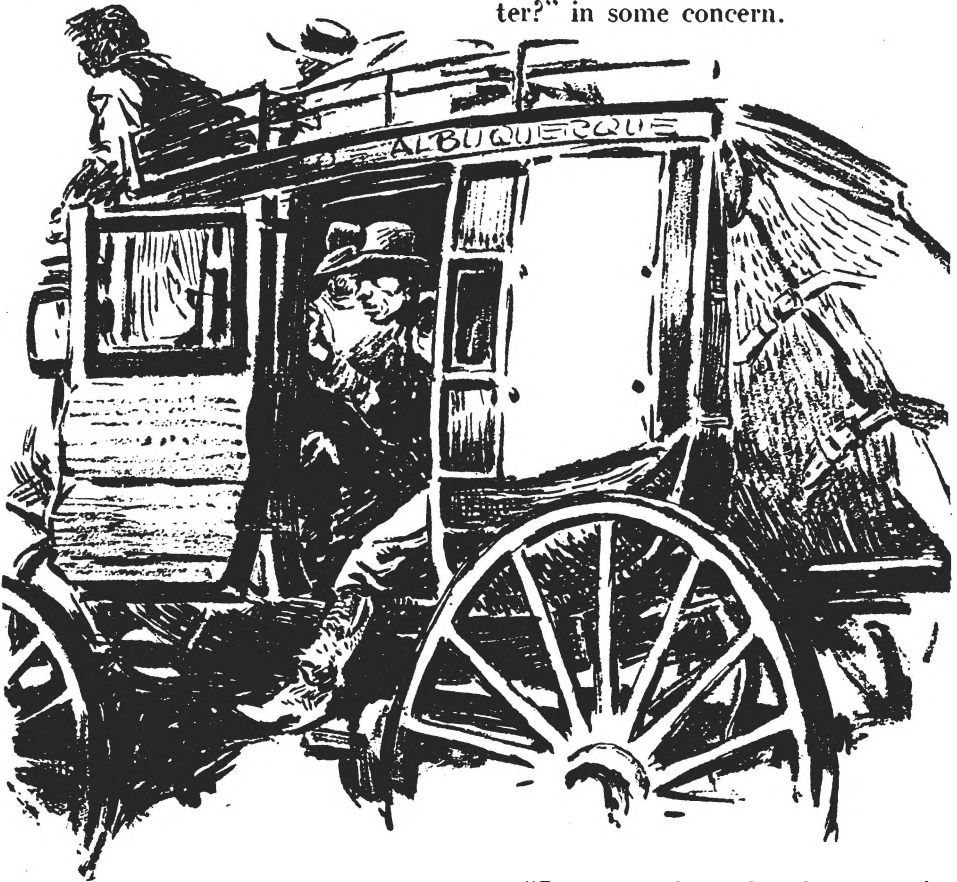
"And I didn't see anyone," Red said.

"Let's have a look."

In the darkness they ran their hands over the nearest man. His body was limp. His heart was still.

"Dead, all right," Red said in a hushed voice. "Damnedest thing. They had us both hung on the ends of their carbines. We just as good as give up the ghost. Then two of 'em cashes in, and the other pair turns and runs like the old Harry was after 'em. What do you make of it?"

Red's voice cut off so abruptly that Roy asked, "What's the matter?" in some concern.



"Plumb spooky, ain't it? What you reckon scared them two?"

"What killed these two?" Roy retorted.

"Just passed my hand across the back of this fella's head. My hand come away sticky with blood."

"Hit his head when he fell, I reckon."

THERE was a taut harshness to Red's voice as he said, "Nothin' that he fell on could make his head like it is. There's a gash in it big as a canyon!"

"Somebody hit him with something? How could they? No place around here to throw from cover. And we didn't see anybody run in to attack."

"I'm not explainin' it. Only tellin' you what I felt."

Far in the distance, borne on the cruising wind, sounded a coyote's ululating howl. Then from closer in came another sound, blood quickening—a shrill moan.

"Look!" Red pointed.

In the faint light dripped by the frosty stars, the other "dead" man was stirring. Red and Roy moved quickly to his side.

"My head aches," the man complained feverishly in Spanish.

Roy felt of his head and drew his hand away. It was wet. "No wonder, poor devil," he muttered to Red. "The same as the other. He can't live long."

The dying bandit asked for a cigarette. They lit one for him and put it in his mouth and made him as comfortable as they could. He drew the smoke in gratefully, and between puffs talked readily, answering their questions in a fast-weakening voice.

Why had he attacked them? It was the orders of his chief. And who was his chief? Who but El Lagarto, of course!

"Where is this El Lagarto?" Red asked.

"Where but El Paso, señor. Under your very nose."

"I do not believe you," Red said flatly. "If he is in El Paso, why should you admit it?"

"And why should I not? You cannot hurt him. No one can hurt him. I tell you the truth, on his

side are some of the most rich men of your own country. Soon now he will have more guns, more men than the federal government of Mexico. He will be the chief of all Mexico."

The man's eyes glowed, and he puffed fast on the cigarette. "Yes, and he may be much more than that. A dying man may have far vision, is it not so? I say he will be much more than that."

"Who are these rich men of my own country?"

"It is a stupid question, señor. A dying man tells only what he pleases, is it not so?"

"It is so, *compañero*," Roy told him. "Perhaps this you can tell: It was you who attacked us with a knife in El Paso tonight when we ran for the stagecoach?"

"Si, señor."

"And the sign of El Lagarto, the sun-dried lizard, you left in a hat?"

"Si, señor."

"And at the Lucky Horseshoe Saloon you threw the hatchet—"

"No, señor!" There was surprising force in the denial.

"One of your friends of this evening, perhaps?"

"None of my friends, no! This hatchet man—" A spasm crossed the man's face. He shuddered, then for a moment the cigarette hung limply between his lips. "He is a devil!" The words came faintly.

"Tonight," Roy pressed, "who is it that has killed you? How? Why?"

"This hatchet man." The words came more faintly still. "This hatchet man, señor, I must tell you . . . is a devil—" He shuddered again, and this time the cigarette made a trailing spark as it fell from his lips to the ground. His body stiffened, then sagged. His head lolled.

"He's dead," Roy said grimly.

**F**OOT-SLOGGING back through the windy night to El Paso, Roy and Red struck a balance of what they knew and could guess. This business of a "third-rate guerrilla" was spreading way out of bounds. The words of the dying man concerning El Lagarto's United States backing, the fury of the attacks tonight, the last-minute urgency of the telegram from Washington, all confirmed it.

In going through the clothes of their mysteriously killed attackers, Roy and Red had found nothing of importance, except, in a pouch on one of them, a quantity of the sundried lizards. If, as the words of the dying man had seemed to suggest, the "hatchet man" was responsible for the night's killings, then that sinister individual had become a greater mystery than ever.

"Can't make it out," Red puzzled. "The fella's plumb indiscriminate. Tries to kill us by heavin' a hatchet in the saloon, and now saves our lives by hatchetin' everybody in sight but us!"

"And nothin' to show where he came from or where he went."

"And no sign of the hatchet."

"No sign of anything! Spooky as a graveyard. The dead gave up no clues. And as for the livin'—the two that hightailed it away—this is all." Roy dangled a raffia chin loop which he had picked up at the scene of the fight.

"Slim pickin's," Red growled, "to identify a man by a chin strap that's been torn out of his hat. The way he was runnin', he's probably lost his hat by now."

The way it turned out, Red made a bad guess about the hat. They found the hat. Just inside the El Paso town limits. It was easy to locate because there was a small excitedly jabbering crowd of people

around it, and one man held a lantern.

The hat was still being worn, tight on the head, the way a man would pull it to keep it on in the wind after his chin strap was broken. It wasn't in good condition. The straw was torn, as though by a sharp, descending instrument, perhaps a hatchet. And both the hat and the dead man who wore it were soaked in blood.

"What happened here?" Roy questioned the group sharply.

"Don't know," an onlooker answered. "Most all of us heard a scream. We come runnin' out of our houses an' found—this."

"Nothin' gained by waitin' till the local law badges get here," Red said under his breath. Roy nodded. Walking swiftly away through the dark street, Red continued grimly, "Hatchet man's still on the job. Only one more out of the four to account for."

"In a way, it's lucky for us," Roy said. "I mean, the fourth man, in case he's not found in the same shape as these others, will be the easiest for us to identify—"

"Yeah," Red picked it up. "He's the one who opened the door of the stagecoach and ordered us out. The English-speakin' hombre. Tall as you and lean like a wolf. Eyes like gimlet holes, and a beard square-cut, like the blade of a hatchet!"

"Same idea just hit me!"

They stopped, searching each other's faces in the darkness, nerves strumming.

"It's crazy," Red clipped. "Don't make no more sense'n bull's milk. Why should that bearded wolf turn on his pards and hatchet 'em all three down? But if he didn't, who did?"

"Yeah," Roy said tensely, "when those two were runnin' away, it

makes more sense that one was chasin' the other, than anything else I can think of."

"And that," Red let out slowly, "ain't enough sense to brag about, is it?"

"It's a start. Let's get goin'."

"Lucky Horseshoe?"

"Yeah. We'll check on that fat bartender and his temperance cranks."

IT was late by the time they reached the saloon, but the place was doing a rush business, with men lining the bar three deep. It didn't take a detective to find out why. The big bar mirror was broken. Its shattering had collected idle men from every open spot on the street.

"Feller jus' come in and asked fer whiskey," a hanger-on volunteered to Roy and Red. "An' when Kegs set it out fer him he hollers so's everybody can hear him, 'This is what I think of Demon Rum!' And he slams the bottle at the mirror afore anyone can stop him. Man, did she smash!"

"Who you talkin' about?" Red queried.

"I dunno. Some temperance nut. Got him a tent out at the edge of town. Been preachin' rum and hell-fire all week. This makes three mirrors he's broke."

Roy and Red held a two-man powwow.

"Looks like our case, as far as the bartender is concerned, is smashed as bad as his mirror," Roy said in a low voice.

"Yeah," Red agreed. "He wasn't foolin', was he, when he told us the temperance crowd was on his tail?" He shoved a hand in under his hat brim and scratched industriously at a place where, years ago, a bullet had traced a furrow across his scalp. It was a characteristic gesture of

Red's. The healing scar had left a faintly restless nerve end there. Red claimed the scratching cured the itch, and also helped him to think. "This ain't too surprisin'," he said. "I watched that bartender when he was goin' on about the hatchet, and I got the idea then that he was on the level. No, I don't reckon he knows any more about the hatchet business than we do. We're snubbed right back on our hocks, ain't we, with our only lead petered out?"

Roy nodded. "Calls for procedure Double X Special in the Haw-Lanterman system, wouldn't you say, pardner?"

Red grinned. "Like that time in Cheyenne, huh?"

"Yeah. Lizard tried to put his mark on us once in here tonight. Well let him try it again."

"All right." Red reached out his hand. "Cough up your souvenir."

"How you mean?"

"Your half the beer token that got chopped in two."

"What for?"

"To see who we use for bait."

Roy fished the half token from his pocket. He had kept the half with the beer mug on it, and Red had kept the part that showed the horseshoe. Roy handed his piece over now.

Red shook up the two halves and shoved out his fists. "All right, feller, name the fist that holds your own."

Roy named it.

"Shucks," Red said, showing his opened palms, "they always told me a horseshoe was lucky."

"Better luck next time, pardner. But this time you're the bait."

"All right, you long drink of green tequila. But you come along quicker'n you did that time in Cheyenne, see?"

"It's in the bag," Roy assured.

"Now let's circulate and see if we can pick out our victim."

**M**OVING about the big, smoky room, talking loudly, laughing, slapping men on the back, they continued the mild celebration they had started earlier in the evening, only doing it in a grand manner now. At the end of an hour, in one manner or another, they had brought themselves to the attention of every man in the place. They had bought drinks for all who would drink them, and they had, to all appearances, absorbed an ungodly amount of liquor themselves. At the last they were filling in, tenor and base, on a whiskey quartet.

Roy was the first to break away.

"Feelin' li'le sleepy," he said. He turned, scuffed away from the bar, knocked over two chairs in his staggering progress, and flopped down in another chair. His head lolled disjunctedly on his neck.

Red Haw, with drunken elaborateness, excused himself from the quartet and reeled across the room to Roy. He tugged at him clumsily. "Cummon an' sing some more. We got to have a tenor." Under his breath he added, "The two over there at the front table cuttin' aces. What do you think?"

"Uncommon likely," Roy murmured. Aloud he said, "Lemme alone. I'm sleepy."

Red stepped back and stood weaving. "Gotta have a tenor." He looked around. It was late now, and the crowd had thinned. "Don't see any tenors," he said sadly. "I'll go get one."

He leaned toward the door and let his feet catch up with him. Without a backward look he plowed sawdust all the way to the batwings, butted through and kept on going.

The two cutting aces at the table up front immediately lost interest in their pastime. They pushed their cards to the middle of the table, leaning close. They weren't the same build; their features weren't similar. One was young, the other middle-aged. At a glance they had nothing in common except their brown derbies and patent-leather shoes. But at a second glance it was apparent they had the same hard furtiveness of manner, the same tight lips, the same dull callousness of eye.

"There's been too many slips to-night," the older one whispered. "We'll both of us take him and make sure. Then come back for the other one. With the load he's got on, he'll still be waitin' for us."

The younger man jerked his head in a nod. They squashed out cigarettes, pushed back from the table, got up and walked out the door.

Roy waited for a few moments, sizing up the saloon night owls through half-lidded eyes. No one else made a move to leave, and no one was watching him. He got up unsteadily and tracked a weaving path to the front of the room. There he clung to the batwings, steadying himself and looking down the length of the street through the crack he held open between the doors.

Dimly, in the gusty darkness ahead, he could see Red Haw's shambling figure. Behind Red, swiftly closing the distance, he could see the two who had followed his partner.

Roy waited another moment, timing his move, then he himself stepped out in the street. He didn't stagger now, and he moved more swiftly than any of them, holding to the store-front shadows, and feeling for his shoulder-holstered six.

## CHAPTER IV

## HIGH DEATH

**L**EADING the sinister night parade, Red Haw reeled sharply around a corner into a narrow side street. It was a prearranged move. Roy was watching, and the instant the street-mouth blackness swallowed up his partner, he himself froze out of sight against a shadowed store front.

He kept watching, every sense alert, while the murder-minded pair ahead quickened their prow to the corner. Just short of the turn they stopped, looked quickly and furtively back, as Roy had expected them to do. Then, as he had further anticipated, one of them remained lounging at the alley head while the other plunged in to make the kill.

Roy went into action at the same moment. Acting the part of a store proprietor leaving his place of business, he rattled the door, as though



trying his lock, then stepped briskly out onto the sidewalk and moved along in dim view of the man guarding the alley mouth. He began to whistle as he drew closer, swinging his long arms in a careless gesture.

There wasn't enough light that anybody taking care of El Lagarto's extermination list could have identified him as the drunken man from

the Lucky Horseshoe. In the gusty dark he appeared to be merely a local merchant closing late and hurrying home. The killer at the corner allowed him to approach.

Roy came close. He passed by so near he could have reached out and touched the man. A single step beyond him he wheeled, turned back. His hand, under cover of his body, had unholstered his six-gun in one stabbing motion. His wheeling turn brought him almost against his quarry, with his gun muzzle jabbing to the stomach.

"Don't move!" he gritted.

The jabbing gun barrel was enough of a warning. The lightning move had taken all the starch out of the man. He simply stared, pop-eyed, unmoving and making no sound.

From the black maw of the alley, though, there was sound—a sodden thump, then a noisy scuffling which came closer and closer. While Roy waited tensely, Red Haw loomed into the near darkness, dragging his man along under one arm.

"Everything under control?" Roy questioned.

Red dumped his burden on the sidewalk. "Sure, you long drink of lemonade. I just let him come up to me in the dark, and conked him with my gun barrel. Too easy. Candy from a baby. Well, what you savin' yours for? Want I should conk him, too?"

"No, you bloodthirsty little chipmunk. Just skim the iron off him."

**W**ITH the murder team relieved of their weapons, Roy and Red looked at each other and grinned.

"We'll get our teeth into somethin' now," Red predicted. "One way or another, we'll get a lot of questions answered."

"We'll take 'em in back of the

buildin' here, work on 'em separate and see how their stories check."

"Windin' up Haw-Lanterman procedure Double X Special. Let's go."

In the cluttered lot back of the building where there was little risk of interruption, they went to work on their prisoners. Lanterman had the younger of the two.

"Play along with me, kid," he said quietly, "and I'll do what I can for you. But try actin' up or lyin' to me"—his voice hardened—"and I'll find out anyhow in the end and you'll spend the rest of your life in a striped suit breakin' rocks. Now, then, who's payin' you?"

"I ain't talkin'," the man said sullenly.

"All right, I'll answer that one for you. El Lagarto hired you to kill me, didn't he? How much was he payin' you?"

"You know so much," the other sneered, "answer that one, too."

"Maybe I could top his price," Roy suggested.

The man laughed in harsh derision. "He pays me more in a week than you get out of the government in a year."

"So he pays you?" Roy taunted. "I thought you weren't talkin'."

"So he pays me," the young gunman snarled defiantly. "So what?"

Roy leaned close. "So what if I go to him and tell him you aren't earnin' your money? How'd you like to be a target for the hatchet man?"

He was throwing a wide loop on that one. But it flung home. There was enough light that he could see the young hardcase flinch. Under his Eastern derby, his face was a pasty blob in the darkness. The line of his pinched-in waistcoat was faintly visible. His patent-leather shoes glistened slightly. All in all,

there wasn't a more ineffectual-looking organism in the rock-and-cactus country.

But Roy Lanterman had been through the mill too much to jump to conclusions. If El Lagarto had imported him, then the alley rat must have been a good killer in his own home town.

After his start at mention of the hatchet man, the gunman pulled himself together. "You couldn't find 'em," he slashed. "Either one of 'em. And I ain't talkin'."

Lanterman knew most of the ways to make men talk. He tried a few of the more humane ones. Later, the way this case built up, he looked back and marveled at his indulgence. But he couldn't foresee now the trail of torture death and sheer unalloyed horror which he and Red Haw must take in tracking down the Lizard. It was doubtful if even those in Washington—and the attorney general's office had some shuddering angles on it—could have predicted anything near the terrifying shape of things to come.

Lanterman didn't get much out of his prisoner. Not then.

"I ain't talkin'," was the sullen answer to everything.

But once he was goaded into making threats. "You tin badges are ridin' for a fall. You're all ridin' for a fall. El Lagarto, you can't stop him. He's got backin'; that baby. When he's through he'll have Mexico and the United States both in his pocket, and no lousy tin badge of a Federal man, or anyone else, can do anything about it."

Plain mad-dog raving, was Lanterman's natural reaction. But he couldn't rid himself of an uneasy remembrance. The tough little Mexican bandit, dying in the road from the hatchet man's attack, had pre-

dicted substantially the same thing! What was there about this obscure guerrilla leader to command such respect from his men? Money backing, maybe.

"A dying man may have far vision, is it not so?" the bandit in the road had said. "No one can hurt El Lagarto. On his side are some of the most rich men of your own country. Much blood will flow. El Lagarto will be chief of all Mexico, and more—much more."

And now Roy Lanterman was hearing it again from this imported alley-rat gunman. He didn't hear much else. Securing the gunman with a length of stout cord which he carried concealed about his waist as permanent equipment, he stepped a little away and engaged Red in low-voiced talk.

**R**ED listened and shrugged. "This one won't talk, either," he said.

"I was just thinkin'," Roy let out slowly. "Remember that time in Billings on the Yellowstone?"

"There was a tight-lipped pair!"

"But they talked."

"Yeah, mister! And so will these." Red slanted under his sombrero at the roof of the store building. "Two stories—high enough."

"But they'll talk too loud," Roy objected. "We still don't want the local law badges clutterin' up the case. Reckon we better take a little sashay out of town."

"Before we go," Red said, "excuse me. I want to rob a store."

"Make it sudden," Roy told him.

"Second building there sells grub and dry goods," Red announced. "I got the putty already pried loose from the window glass. Be right back."

He didn't miss. Within four min-

utes he was back—with a bottle of ketchup.

"I left the money where I took the bottle from," he said. Then, in answer to the sullenly curious stares of their prisoners, he explained, "Never was much for roughin' it. When I hit the trail I like to take along some of the refinements of civilization. Bein' from the city, you boys will understand my effete cravin'."

"What's he talkin' about?" one of the gunmen muttered to the other. "Dunno."

But a little later they knew. Out from town, the four of them, with a huge fire going at the base of a cliff, the city hardcases showed increasing uneasiness. The fire slashed the darkness with eerie light. The wind still moaned and whined, pushing the smoke in their faces. Above the desert stars were frosty points in the sky.

"You'd feel more at home in a dark alley somewhere, wouldn't you?" Red Haw snapped. He stepped close to the older of the pair. "What's your name?"

"Torpedo," the man said sullenly.

"Yeah? You know what happens to a torpedo when it hits? It smashes all to hell. Keep rememberin' that. Now, where's El Lagarto?"

"I ain't talkin'."

Red's hand lanced out against the gunman's glowering face. The *thup* snapped back in echo from the shadowy cliff wall. But it wasn't actually a punishing blow. Frightening, merely, delivered with the flat of his hand. But it looked punishing to the other gunner as Torpedo's head jerked back and the brown derby fell off and rolled to the edge of the fire.

Red picked up the hat and



jammed it on his prisoner's head. "Where's El Lagarto?"

The man only glared.

"I reckon," Roy said quietly, "we better take 'em up closer to the stars."

Red nodded, punched his prisoner with his gun. "Get goin'."

So they climbed the cliff, the four of them. On top, Roy and Red herded their prisoners to the very edge, overlooking the fire. The wind blew stronger here, making it hard to hold a footing on the rough limestone.

"A man could easy fall off," Red said harshly. "Now do either of you ring-tailed wharf rats know anything?"

"You're wastin' your time," Torpedo said, and the younger gunman nodded in confirmation. But his face was pasty again with fear.

"It's the last time we're askin'." Answer fast, Torpedo—or take a dive below with nothin' but your derby for a net."

"Don't try to fool me," Torpedo sneered. "I know your kind. You wouldn't kill a man like that in cold blood. I ain't talkin'."

Red looked at Roy. "He's askin' for it, ain't he, pardner?"

Roy nodded, said grimly, "I'll take this young one back where he can't see. I believe in bein' as humane as possible."

"Yeah. Him bein' so young and impressionable. Be a shame to have him look in on somethin' that would burn like a nightmare in his memory. Thing like this could easy blight a young alley rat's whole life. Take him back where he can't see."

**ROY** herded his prisoner a little way back behind a head-high upthrust of rock. In the star-pierced darkness he crouched with him there and waited. Red's hoarse, excited

voice was flung back to them on the wind.

"So you ain't talkin', you derby-topped drink of canal water," Red's voice sounded. "Well, maybe when he sees what happens to you the other one will. I'm gonna knock you off here so hard you'll splash blood all over the floor of the canyon. Here I come—"

"You ain't foolin' me. You wouldn't push a man off. It . . . it ain't human. You wouldn't—"

His voice broke off. There was the briefest sound of scuffling, then a shriek of pure horror—a cry more shuddering than the death wail of a wolf. The shriek tapered off swiftly, as if a rush of air had pinched off sound in the throat. A muffled thud wafted back. Then the brittle *slap-slap* of a few loose rocks falling down the side of the cliff. Then silence.

In the deathly hush, Roy moved close to his captive. "How about it? Talkin' now?"

The man was sweating. But he bared his teeth in animal defiance. "It's a trick! He didn't push him off. You ain't foolin' me."

"That's what your sidekick said. "And you heard what happened to him."

"It's a trick!" the other screamed.

"They grow 'em skeptical where you came from. All right, I'll give you about two minutes to make up your mind. Then I'll *show* you what happened."

Roy waited. His man didn't talk. Roy leaned close and cut the cords which bound the wrists. "You'll need both hands to hold on with when you see what I'm gonna show you. Come on."

He took his prisoner back to the cliff top again, gun nudging him close to the edge. Together they

looked over. The man who had come south to kill for the Lizard uttered a low moan. A trembling seized him. For an instant he teetered there, almost losing his balance. Then he slumped to the ground, clawing at the gravelly dirt with his bare fingers in a frenzied attempt to anchor himself against any force which could push him over.

What he had seen below in the bright glare of the fire was a still, crumpled figure, legs and arms unnaturally outflung on the sharp rock. The fire made soft glints from the patent-leather shoes. The derby hat, smashed almost beyond recognition, had rolled a few feet beyond the crumpled body to the very edge of the fire. The pinched-in waistcoat was half torn from the body. It had flopped up over the head. But the side of the face was showing.

A dark blotch covered half the face, and more of the dark blotches showed on the rocks. It looked as though Red Haw's gruesome prediction had come true, that the man who called himself Torpedo had splashed his life's blood all over the floor of the canyon.

The gunman on the cliff top was moaning in unadulterated terror now. He clawed at Roy's boots. "Don't push me off! I don't want to die. I'll talk. Anything. I don't like this country. I dunno why I came. Don't push me off—"

"Where's El Lagarto?" Roy cut in.

"El Lagarto? I know. I can tell you. Don't push—"

"Talk fast, then."

"He's in El Paso. Old abandoned warehouse of the Isthmus Trading Co. Near the river—"

"I know the place. Who's with him?"

"A gang of his *lagartijos*—Little Lizards, he calls 'em. His boys from the other side the border."

"What's he doin' there?"

"Meetin' his American backer."

Roy's eyes shone with a quartz-like glint. "His backer, huh? Who's he?"

"I don't know."

"It's a long way down below," Roy warned.

The gunman groveled, whining, "I'm tellin' you straight, mister. I dunno. Nobody don't know. We only know he's meetin' him, that's all. You got to believe me, mister—"

Roy shrugged. "All right, you don't know. Reckon the start you've given me is enough. I can find out the rest myself." He moved a step nearer the cliff edge and looked down. "All right, Red," he called, "wipe off that ketchup and get on up here."

AT the surprising words the gunman stopped, groveling long enough to look over, too. An amazed gasp broke from his lips as he saw the crumpled figure near the fire jerk around and pull to his feet. His hair was revealed now, and it was red. Slamming around down there, Red Haw kicked off the patent-leather shoes and tore off the last tag ends of the ripped coat.

"You didn't kill anybody!" the gunman accused Roy. "You tricked me."

"Uncommon likely," Roy admitted.

"I lied to you!" the gunman said viciously. "Everything I said was lies."

"I don't think so," Roy declared. "But I'll find out for sure when I visit the Isthmus warehouse."

Red Haw made the steep climb

from the bottom of the cliff and came close, puffing, and still wiping at the ketchup which had looked so much like blood in the firelight. "How'd you do?" he grunted.

"Fine. Even better'n that time in Billings. How'd it go with you?"

"Smooth as silk. I clipped my man and drug him around in back of the rock there. But I like to ruined my feet with his fancy patent leathers, and I got some ketchup down my neck. Should've waited till I got to the bottom to put those shoes on. How'd I look down there?"

"You made a beautiful corpse, pardner. Where you say you stowed the Torpedo?"

"I'll show you. Kind of a half-way cave around here."

"Room for another one in it?"

"Sure."

"We'll spot 'em both in there, then. Pile a few more boulders in front for good measure. We got an appointment at a warehouse, Red."

The whine came back into the gunman's voice. "Hey, you ain't gonna leave us holed up out here, are you?"

"Take it easy. We'll be back."

"Not if El Lagarto or the hatchet man or any of the Little Lizards see you first, you won't."

"Then that'll be just too bad for all of us, won't it?" Roy said gently.

**I**T was nearing daylight by the time Roy and Red reached the warehouse of the Isthmus Trading Co. on the outskirts of El Paso.

"I've chalked up more walkin' miles tonight," Red complained, "than in all the rest of my life.

Next time I get back in saddle I'm gonna tie myself in."

From a rising swell near the river they studied the lay-out. The warehouse, long abandoned, loomed through the night, a ramshackle wooden structure that sprawled like a circus tent. A sagging wharf ran out into the Rio Grande, with the water sucking quietly at its snaggle-toothed pilings. The place was silent—and dark.

"Looks like a bum steer," Red observed.

"What's that under the wharf?" Roy murmured.

"Rock, I reckon."

They crept in closer. It wasn't a rock. It was a boat. And no old wreck. It was a sturdy, broad-beamed craft, made fast with new rope.

Something else, too. From this point they could see a knife edge of light shining between two boards of the warehouse.

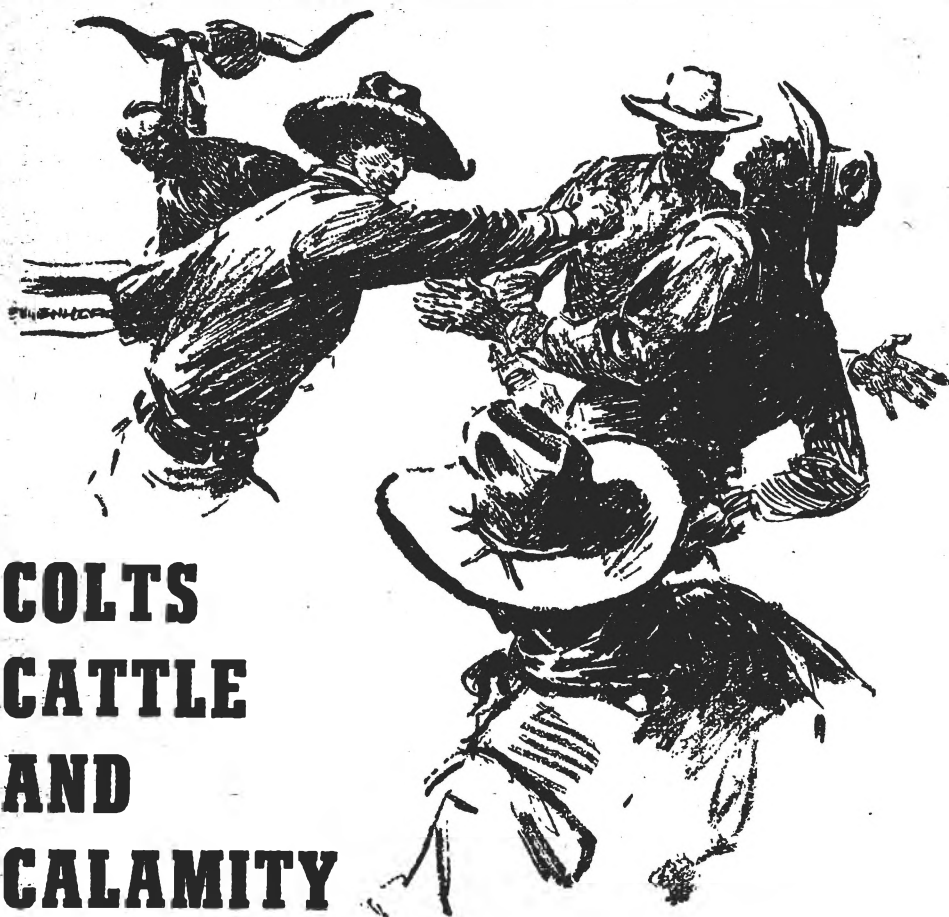
"So far so good," Roy said. "Let's take a look around in back."

"I sugges' a look aroun' in heaven, señors—or in hell!"

The stabbing words struck from somewhere close in the jet shadow pools under the wharf. Roy and Red were standing ankle-deep in the river. In the doom-freighted silence that followed they could hear the water lapping gently at the leather of their boots. Each of them knew what peril it was they faced. The uncompromising tone of that voice, the sardonic, slurring accent, was one they had recognized instantly.

It was the voice of one who had killed at least three men tonight—with a hatchet.

*Facing death at the hands of the ruthless hatchet man, what will Roy and Red's next move be? Are they on the trail of the Lizard? What desperate plan is the guerrilla leader hatching? Another action-packed installment of this gripping serial appears in next week's issue.*



# COLTS CATTLE AND CALAMITY

BY JOHN A. SAXON

THE man who forked the tired paint horse on the Rock Lake trail was tall and lean. He rode like one born to the saddle, yet his clothes were not those of the range. No guns swung at his waist and his flat, broad-brimmed Stetson seemed a compromise between the ten-gallon hats of the working cattlemen and the more conservative headgear of the towns further east. His eyes were blue and hard, and his thin lips compressed into a tight line. When his horse stumbled and nearly fell, he brought the animal out of it by a superb bit of horsemanship.

Randy Girard was no stranger to this part of the cattle country. He had been born and raised in the little town of Rock Lake toward which he was headed.

There was a crumpled piece of yellow paper in his left hand. He read it for the tenth time before he tore it up and threw it away. In the rounded handwriting of the railroad agent at Fanning, twenty miles away, he read again words that he had already committed to memory:

**MUST HAVE FIVE HUNDRED  
HEAD PACKERS BY FIRST OR SHUT**

DOWN TRY HENDERSON ROCK  
LAKE LAST CHANCE  
FREEMAN PACKING CO.

A simply worded business message from a meat-packing concern for which he was buyer and part owner, but to Randy Girard it was a back-trail order into hell. He knew Rock Lake and he knew the big Rafter H spread owned by Vic Henderson. Ten years ago he'd ridden for that very outfit.

Ten years. He'd been a gangling kid then, filled with the lore of the old West—of guns and badmen and flashing six-shooters. Then his greatest ambition had been to follow in the steps of the great lawman who had made pioneer history. His dad, Matt Girard, had been sheriff of this very county, a man who had sided Wyatt Earp in those hectic days when the railroad was pushing its steel ribbons westward; when "south of the tracks" in Wichita and Dodge meant more than a mere direction, meant a lawman's life was in his own hands—taut fingers that must be able to start a gun smoking just a split second faster than some other man who lived by the speed of his draw.

At sixteen Randy Girard had been able to hold a gun in either hand and hit a dollar at ten paces. But that was a long time ago. He hadn't felt the buck of a six-gun against his wrist for ten years. His father had put a stop to that with characteristic directness.

"Yo're grandpap died with a gun in his fist fightin' Billy the Kid," the grizzled old sheriff had said one day when he caught young Randy practicing a border shift back of the jail. "I'll prob'ly go out the same way, facin' some rannicky killer; my draw ain't as fast as it was oncet. But yo're the last of the Girards an'

you ain't cashin' yore chips thataway. This family has done its share to bring the law to this country. There'll be no more Girards behind a star. You put them guns away or, by Jehoshaphat, I'll skin yuh alive! Practice all yuh want to with a rope, learn all yuh can about cattle, but you leave gun fightin' to somebody else."

That was all—but it was enough. Randy knew his father and he knew the old man meant what he said.

Two years later, Randy Girard was a top hand on the Rafter H. "Little Willie No-gun" they had dubbed him, because he had obeyed his father's order and hadn't figured it was necessary to explain to others why his hips were bare of guns. He had been able to outride and out-fist fight any one of the fifteen men Henderson had riding for him. They let him alone after he'd proved it.

AS his horse jogged along, sending clouds of alkali dust spreading a fan-shaped cloud behind him, Randy watched the old familiar landmarks unfold.

Ten years—and he still remembered Vic Henderson's biting words that day. "I'll have no blasted son of a crook workin' on my spread, Girard," the boss of the Rafter H had said. "Draw yore time an' git."

Son of a crook! Randy hadn't stopped to question Henderson. Hot, unreasoning fury had flamed in his brain and his hard fist had swung out and-bashed against Henderson's lean jaw.

"You can't talk that way about my father," he had choked. "He's the sheriff of this county an' he never did a crooked thing in his life."

He could see Henderson now as he clambered to his feet, a thin, worm-

like trickle of blood in the corner of his mouth. "You crazy young helion," Henderson had growled. "If you wasn't a button, I'd break yore neck for that. Matt Girard *was* sheriff—"

Randy's mind grasped at the past tense. "Was?"

"He's layin' on a board in back of Tanner's Furniture Store till they can get a coffin. He was shot last night—robbin' the bank!" Henderson paused, his expression thoughtful. "Mebby you had a hand in it; you wasn't here—"

Randy hadn't been. He'd been alone, on the range. There was no way of proving that alibi even had the hinted charge been pressed against him.

He'd ridden into town after that. The evidence against old Matt was pretty conclusive. A man had been with him, a man who had escaped through the back door of the bank under the hail of bullets. But Matt had been with that man—and Matt had been kneeling beside the open safe when the bullets of half a dozen men out of the Silver Star caught him—before they knew who he was.

Low-lying sun tinged the distant rimrock with ruddy mist as flat rays burned through the whipping dust devils atop the mesa.

Ten years, Randy Girard thought bitterly—and now he had to try and buy cattle from Vic Henderson or see the little packing concern he had built up go to ruin. Unless they got packer cattle to fill their only existing contract, the Freeman Co. would go out of business. His mouth twisted wryly at the thought. They were practically out of business now. No money—no credit.

Everywhere he'd gone to buy cattle, he had been met with shrugging shoulders. "Freeman ain't paid for

the last shipment yet." It was in vain that he tried to explain that they couldn't pay until the contract had been completed and they themselves had been paid.

Henderson was his last chance, Henderson could give them credit, but what chance was there that he would help the son of a man who was believed to have robbed his own bank.

The little town of Rock Lake nestled before Randy's eyes, the lights of the stores twinkling in the dusk. He rode down the single street, tied his horse at the hitch rail and walked into the Silver Star Saloon. There were about a dozen men there, men he recognized easily even after the lapse of years. Bull Bradshaw, Henderson's foreman, a squat-shouldered, almost neckless man with a cruel mouth; Rick Fletcher, Bradshaw's *segundo*, thin as a rail and as poisonous as a rattler; Tom Henderson, old Vic's son, a peaked-faced bully with whom Randy had fought many times as a kid.

It was Tom who recognized Randy first. He put down the glass of whiskey that was halfway to his mouth, staring. "Well, for Pete's sake! Look who's here. Little Willie No-gun!"

**B**UT Randy Girard didn't hear the taunts that followed Tom's words, the laughs of derision. He was staring at something over the bar that sent scorching hatred through his consciousness, that made him silently curse Rock Lake and the men in it with an intensity that was a soul-consuming fire. Over the bar, on a peg, and dusty with the years, the leather of the belt and holsters dried and shriveled, was a pair of six-guns. There was a placard above them, a ten-year insult

that brought a choke into the throat of Randy Girard. It read:

THESE GUNS ONCE BELONGED TO  
MATT GIRARD, THE ONLY CROOKED  
SHERIFF IN THE HISTORY OF THIS  
TOWN

Red haze almost blinded Randy. He approached the bar without a word, ordered a beer.

Young Tom Henderson laughed. "Ridin' grub line, Randy?" he asked with pseudo-friendliness. "You used to be a good hand. Mebby *somebody'll* take you on."

Randy downed his beer, tried to keep his eyes off those old Colts above the bar. "I'm not riding grub line, Henderson," he said, fighting to control the catch in his voice. "I'm buying cattle. I want to see your father."

"That's rich," Tom sneered. "Dad's over in the Mercantile. I imagine he'll be right glad to see you. What'll you be usin' for money to buy stock? Some of the bank's money that—"

Before Tom Henderson had finished the words that were upon his lips, he was sprawling on the floor, the hot-eyed, avenging son of old Matt Girard standing over him.

"Why, you no-good son of a thief!" Tom Henderson shouted, scrambling to his feet and reaching for his gun, "I'll—"

Cooler heads tried to intervene, but they were too slow. Randy had no gun, but that meant nothing to the angry scion of the Rafter H. He leveled his Colt and triggered it. Death flamed full in the face of Randy Girard, flicking powder burned his cheek. He dived for Henderson, knocking the gun upward. The slug went high, over his shoulder.

The split of a second intervened after the roar of the gun racked the smoke-stained rafters; then it was

followed by the crash of splintering glass. The bullet intended for Randy's body had struck within three inches of the holstered guns hanging above the bar. They had dropped into the up-ended glasses below the smudgy mirror, shattering a dozen of them. There was a hole the size of a man's thumb in the middle of the placard that had hung over the guns of Matt Girard.

Randy moved in quickly, wrested Tom's gun from his fingers. He broke the gate open, shoved the slugs out one by one and handed the empty six-shooter to Bull Bradshaw.

"You'd better keep this for him until he cools off," he said flatly. "He's plumb careless with a gun."

The bartender was looking ruefully at the smashed glasses. "I'll pay for them," Randy said calmly, flipping a gold piece on the bar. "And I'll take those guns. They belonged to my father. I want them!"

"Shore, shore," the barman said hastily. "Glad to get rid of 'em." He wrapped the guns in a piece of old newspaper, shoved them toward Randy.

"You'd better get 'em in workin' order, Girard," young Tom Henderson said viciously. "If yo're in Rock Lake come mornin', you'll have need of 'em."

"I don't carry guns, Henderson." Girard's words were icy. "I've never needed them—up to now."

HE stuck the package under his arm and walked across the street to the Rock Lake Mercantile where he had been told he'd find Vic Henderson.

Henderson was just coming out of the store when Randy climbed onto the old boardwalk. The man hadn't changed much, Randy thought. A little older, a little grayer, but the

same arrogant mouth, the same flinty eyes.

For a moment the old cattleman didn't recognize Randy, then his eyes went bleak. "Randy Girard! What the devil are *you* doin' in *my* town?" Randy didn't miss the inflection. That was Vic Henderson—always had been. He was still the hard-fisted, hard-dealing boss of everything that pertained to Rock Lake and the country for miles around. Then Henderson's eyes shifted from Girard to the men shoving out of the Silver Star. "There was shootin' over there." His voice was peremptory. "What did—"

Randy Girard's thin lips formed the ghost of a smile. Henderson probably knew young Tom was in the Silver Star, knew his son's penchant for getting into fights. This wasn't Vic Henderson, the tough, bargaining cattleman; this was Vic Henderson, a worried father.

"Yeah!" Randy supplied. "It was Tom, getting careless with a gun again." He pointed at his cheek, burned by the flash of gunpowder.

"He shot at *you*?" Henderson's voice was incredulous, as his eyes flicked toward Girard's bare thighs.

"He let his temper get the best of him," Randy added. "Mebby he had reason to. I knocked him down. It's not important why."

The Rafter H men boiled out of the saloon, forked their horses and rode off, Tom Henderson leading, without a glance in the direction of his father.

"Crazy young fool!" Henderson growled, now reassured that his son was all right. Then his eyes bored into Girard's. "What you doin' in town? You know how things stand around here. You know what people think. I'd figure this would be the last place in the cow country

you'd want to show up."

"It's not what I want personally, Henderson," Randy said, and there was a tinge of bitterness in his words. "I know what people around here think about my father and"—his gaze was full on Henderson as he said it—"why they think so. No matter what they believe about Matt Girard, there never was anything to connect me with what happened."

"You weren't on the ranch that night," Henderson said pointedly. "There were two men in the bank when your father was killed. He even had papers and stuff out of the safe in his hands when he was picked up. There was twenty thousand dollars in that safe—and your father knew it. I had told him so myself. That money didn't walk away. The man with him took it."

"That was ten years ago," Randy countered. "If I'd gotten that money do you think I'd have struggled along as I have trying to get a start in the meat-packing business? I'd have had money to start with, to keep going on—"

"Meat-packing business," Henderson echoed. "So you're the man who's been trying to buy packers? You're the Freeman outfit, that little one-horse concern that owes half the ranchers in the southern part of the State."

Randy was fighting hard for self-control. After all, there was a lot more at stake than his personal feelings. He outlined briefly the contract his company had, the fact that they hadn't been able to borrow funds because of the prevailing tightness of money; the fact that they could pay everybody, once the contract was completed. He knew his plea was falling on deaf ears.

"Sorry, Girard," the boss of the Rafter H said. "I'm in the cattle



business to make money. I've got plenty of stock, yes. As a matter of fact I'd like to get rid of some of it. I'd be willing to sell 'em to you—even though you're the only man who ever knocked me down and got away with it. But money talks, and you ain't got it. You'd better look somewheres else, an' you'd better look sudden. Folks around here have got a long memory. You'd best be out of town before some of them recollect that Matt Girard—"

The smoldering fire in Randy's eyes stopped Vic Henderson from finishing what he had started to say. He went to the hitch rail, jerked loose the reins of his horse, forked the animal and headed toward the Rafter H.

**W**ITH a beaten feeling and a raging resentment of the injustice of a community that could harbor a grudge for ten long years, Randy put his horse in the barn, went into the hotel, got a room and tossed his saddlebags under the bed. He unrolled the newspaper containing the old six-guns that had been his father's, stared at them a long time. The leather of the cartridge belts was cracked and dry. The guns were rust-bitten and gummed with the hardened oil of years.

Almost mechanically, Randy looked around until he found some soap and with the palm of his hand began rubbing it into the leather to soften it. How many times he had seen his father do that very thing. Someday, he thought, he'd clean up those old guns, keep them always. They were the only thing he owned that had belonged to his father. Finally he wrapped the six-shooters up in the newspaper, stuck them in the bottom drawer of the old-fashioned commode in the corner and went to bed.

The next day and the next, Randy Girard rode through the hills to ranch after ranch, trying to buy the cattle that meant the life of the Freeman Packing Co., trying to convince unfriendly ranchers that they'd get their money, and everywhere meeting with the same half-insolent refusals. Vic Henderson had spoken truly when he had said the memories of those who lived in Rock Lake Valley were long.

On the third day he returned to the little two-story hotel, saddle-weary and discouraged. It was no use, he thought, the Freeman Packing Co. was finished. He took his key from the cold-eyed clerk, mounted the stairs to his room, lighted the lamp. Then he saw an envelope that had been put under his door during his absence. It was unaddressed, and there was only a single sheet of paper in it. It bore a penciled message, scrawled in blocked letters:

ROCK LAKE AIN'T WANTIN' YOU.  
GET OUT OR ELSE.

Something akin to the fighting spirit of his frontiersman father torched in Girard's mind. He knew what such a message would have meant to his father, to Wyatt Earp, to Bat Masterson. It would have spelled one thing—fight! Yet the habit of years was strong. He reminded himself that the day of the six-gun was coming to a close. After all, there were laws and courts and—

The glass of the old-fashioned, six-paned window of his room crashed and splintered as a bullet smashed through it and ripped the plaster from the unpapered wall. In the distance Randy could hear the faint *zi-i-ing* of a Winchester. That bullet, he knew, was a warning, an underscoring of the last two words contained in the message—or else!

All right, he thought grimly, they were asking for it. He had intended leaving in the morning, but if this was the way they wanted it, he'd be hanged if he'd be run out of town, as he had been ten years ago. If it was one man against the town, that's the way it would be. He took a bottle of newly purchased gun oil out of his pocket, tore a towel into strips, started cleaning one of the old Colts. The fighting spirit of the Girards flamed within his breast. With the end of a pencil he pushed out the slugs that had been shoved into the belt by his father years ago. They were green with age, useless. Randy threw them away. Tomorrow he'd buy some cartridges. Finished with one gun, he tested its mechanism. He'd fix the other gun some other time. Then, tired and disheartened, he went to bed.

**E**ARLY the next morning Randy bought a box of fresh shells, loaded the gun he had cleaned. The storekeeper, who had been a friend of his father's, looked at him questioningly.

"It's none of my put in, Girard," he said, "but I wouldn't go lookin' for trouble if I was you. There's a lot of talk around town—"

"I know it, Johnson," Randy cut in. "Too much talk. I'll leave Rock Lake when I get good and ready, not before. They're not going to run me out—with talk or anything else. I didn't come here looking for trouble. I came here to try and buy a few cattle, but if this town has any idea I'm going to be forced out of it before I'm ready to leave, they've got to change that idea. The Girards never were much to be shoved around."

Johnson wagged his gray head. "Know just how you feel, Randy," he said—and Randy felt warmed by

the first friendly word he had received since his return to the town where he had been born. "Seems like I can almost hear yore old man talkin' now. Me, I ain't ever been so satisfied about what Matt was doin' in the bank that night. But I don't run this town, an' I don't frame opinions for other people. I sell my goods an' keep my mouth shut. But somehow, younker, I feel if old Matt was alive, he'd say you was makin' a mistake."

Perhaps, Randy thought, as he walked toward the barn back of the hotel to see that his horse had been taken care of, Johnson was right. He wondered what his father would say if he were alive to see guns hanging on his son's hips after all these years.

Guns! He hadn't felt their oily smoothness in his hands for a long time. Randy looked around almost furtively. He might have forgotten how to use them after this lapse of time. Making sure that he was unobserved, he whipped both six-shooters from the holsters, felt their even balance. With a dexterity that he believed long ago forgotten he executed a perfect border shift, passing the guns from one hand to the other in a smooth, perfectly timed transference. Again and again he switched them until suddenly he heard the sound of some one approaching. Quickly, he jammed the guns into their holsters, his eyes leveled in the direction of the man who was coming around the corner of the barn.

It was Lem Calder, the man who had been elected sheriff after Matt Girard's death. The six-pointed star on Calder's faded shirt had once been Matt's.

"Heard you'd heeled yoreself, Girard," the sheriff said flatly. "We don't want no trouble in Rock Lake

an' I'm warnin' you. You'd better get out of town while yo're all in one piece. The Rafter H men are over in the Silver Star. They've been there all night an' they've been drinkin'. Young Tom Henderson's on the prod. He says you knocked his father down ten years ago, an' you knocked him down tother night. Says nobody does that an' gets away with it. The Hendersons run this country, Girard. You'd best hit the grit an' make it fast."

Randy's lips flattened in a thin smile. "Is that an official order, sheriff?"

"You know damn well it ain't," the lawman answered. "I wouldn't have no legal right to give such an order, but the Hendersons—"

"I know," Randy cut in, "the Hendersons are the big-spurred gents in this man's country. Tom Henderson gets away with about anything he wants to because he's old man Henderson's son. I don't blame you; Vic is a power in this county. He always was; he probably always will be. But I've taken the last insult I'm taking because of my father. I'm staying here until I'm ready to leave and that won't be until I've faced down the men who have had so much to say about my dad—and heard nothing but silence. Is that plain enough?"

"I only figured you'd ought to know—" The officer's voice trailed up to a lame hesitation and stopped. The pause engendered a suspicion in the mind of Randy Girard.

"Go back and tell Vic Henderson I've been warned," he said tightly. By the sudden twitch of the sheriff's mouth, Randy knew his guess has been right.

"He's only tryin' to avoid trouble," the lawman said uneasily.

"Then he's warning the wrong

man," Randy retorted. "Go take that message to Bull Bradshaw and Tom Henderson and the rest of them. Tell them I'm coming over to the Silver Star right after breakfast. Tell them I've heard the last slur on my father's name that I'm listening to. I want no part of this mangy town, but for the next twenty-four hours I'm staying here—and I'm listening."

**W**ORD that Randy Girard was heeled, and headed for the Silver Star, swept over the town of Rock Lake like a grass fire before a high wind. The sheriff had talked, and half the men of the town were in the saloon by the time Randy finished his breakfast. He smiled a little grimly as he walked out of the front door of the hotel and saw a man who had been standing outside the Silver Star scuttle inside to give warning. The buzzards were gathering for the kill. Men, hungry for the lust of gunplay, as long as they had no part in it, were hot upon the scent of trouble.

Randy walked to the corner, crossed over and came up the other side of the street. He might have been a casual puncher in off the range. He stopped and looked into the window of Ed Burham's jewelry store with its cheap ornaments and nickel-plated alarm clocks. The door was closed and locked. Burham, too, would be one of those men in the Silver Star; little Ed Burham who had probably never had a gun in his hand in his life.

There was an ominous hush as Randy pushed open the wing doors of the saloon and strode in. There were men at the bar, men who finished their drinks hastily or tossed away half-smoked cigarettes and had immediate business among the tables on the opposite side of the

room, out of the line of possible gunfire.

Four men remained at the bar by the time Randy reached the far end. Tom Henderson, blear-eyed and sullen, Bull Bradshaw in whose ratlike glance Randy read cold sobriety and the dangerous glint of a coiled rattler. He knew Bradshaw's job, to ride herd on Vic Henderson's spawn. Green River Farrell, squat, toadlike, his seemingly lidless eyes blinking ominously; Rick Fletcher, a known killer from the old Cherokee Strip country. A fine set-up—and a deadly one, Randy knew.

"Mornin', gents," he offered, as calmly as though he had just walked into a place peopled by old friends. "I'll have a beer, Mike," he told the barman, whose hand trembled as he placed the foaming glass on the battered counter. Randy's icy glance surveyed the crowd. "I don't find the old town changed much after ten years. Folks seem to be about the same. Maybe some of you don't know me. My name's Randy Girard. My father used to be sheriff of this town. You've probably heard of him." His voice had become suddenly cold. "Mike, you remember my dad?"

The barkeeper's face muscles worked nervously. "Yeah! Sure I remember him." His eyes flicked to the face of Tom Henderson. "Yeah! I do remember him," he repeated, and forced to his lips what was meant to be a smile.

Randy put his back against the bar. "And the rest of you gents, surely some of you recall my father? He made quite a name for himself before he died. Any of you gents like to talk about him?" There was the steady staccato of dripping ice-water in his voice. Nobody answered.

"No? Now that's too bad. I un-

derstood folks had a lot to say about him—after he was dead." Randy moved away from the bar about a foot and looked straight at Tom Henderson. "You, Tom," and his voice seemed almost friendly. "Could you say anything about my father?" There was the challenge of steel flicking steel in the words.

**TOM HENDERSON** moved away from the bar, shook off Bradshaw's restraining hand. "Yeah!" he snarled. "I can, the old crook! He took—"

His hand pounded for his gun in a lightning draw, but it was matched for speed by the flashing stab of Randy as his hand swooped for the iron in his right-hand holster. Then in that split second of time that his fingers closed over the butt of the gun and his hand moved upward, Randy experienced a sinking sensation. His fingers had touched roughness and grime. He remembered too late that the sheriff had interrupted that border shift back of the hotel! The gun upon which his grip closed was rusty, sticky. *He had put the uncleaned gun in the right-hand holster instead of the left!*

Too late now! Randy triggered the old Colt. Nothing happened. His other hand moved toward the gun on the left side and he flung himself sideways as hot flame from Henderson's gun seared against his side.

A man burst through the front doors, his boots pounding hollowly on the wooden floor—Vic Henderson. "Stop it, you young fools!" he yelled. Even as he shouted, Randy threw the useless right-hand gun at Tom Henderson's face. The other ducked and the rusty Colt slithered along the floor, crashed against the pot-bellied iron stove in the front of the saloon. Out of the corner of his eye,

Randy saw Vic Henderson reach for the gun.

Two against one now—but there was no time for planning. Already Tom Henderson was setting himself for another shot, an exultant leer upon his face. No chance for a shift now, it was that left-hand gun or—

The Colt in Randy Girard's fist roared belching fire. He wasn't conscious of aiming; he knew only that the two guns roared as one, splitting asunder the banked tobacco smoke that was flattened against the stained rafters above his head and that Tom Henderson had missed!

The scion of the Rafter H weaved uncertainly on his feet, went to his knees and rolled upon his side. Bradshaw reached for a gun but froze as the six-shooter in Randy's left hand arched in his direction. Then Randy saw Vic Henderson moving in toward him. Perhaps it was a trick of his eyes, but he thought the gun he had thrown was in two pieces—broken apart where the barrel joined the chamber.

"Stop it!" Vic Henderson said hoarsely. "Girard, if you've killed my boy—"

Blood was running down inside Randy's shirt. He felt dizzy, but not too dizzy. The gun in his left hand swung until it covered Vic Henderson.

"He's not killed, Henderson. I didn't aim to do that. You'll find the slug in his shoulder."

Vic Henderson was staring at something in his hand. He looked up as Randy said coldly: "How about you, Vic? Surely you've got something to say about old Matt Girard—and you're going to say it, blast you!—that Matt Girard was an honest man—"

"Matt Girard was an honest man," Vic Henderson repeated slowly, and added: "Anybody who

says otherwise answers to me—from now on."

"That's nice—Henderson," Randy Girard said huskily, hardly believing what he heard. "That's . . . real . . . nice. I've wanted to hear that . . . for a long time."

Then he fell forward into the grit and sawdust on the floor of the Silver Star.

THE next thing Randy Girard was conscious of was the smell of antiseptic, of hearing somebody say: "Take it easy, Randy. You've been out nearly twenty-four hours. A nasty slug hole, son, but in three or four days—" And the voice was friendly, Randy thought, very friendly.

"Doc Dillon? You still fixing up the folks of this town?"

"Uh-huh! You just behave yoreself, young feller, and you'll be all right—"

Outside the window of the hotel room, Randy Girard could hear the clacking of hoofs, the bawling of steers, the yells of punchers. Cattle! He started to sit up. That's what he had to get. Cattle!

"That a herd, doc?"

Doc Dillon looked out the window. "Yep!" he answered disinterestedly. "Looks like a bunch of Rafter H stuff, headed south to the railroad. They're always shipping." He busied himself with his instrument case, added: "I'll be back in a couple of hours. Just you quit squirming around and you'll come out all right."

"How's Tom?"

"That young wild cat? I took the slug out of him yesterday and sent him to the ranch. He'll be around in a week. By the way, Vic Henderson left something for you. A busted gun and a note." Then he closed the door and went out.

Alone, Randy opened the package the medico had left. It was the gun that he had hurled at Tom Henderson. There was a sealed envelope, too. In it there were three sheets of paper. One was a bill of sale for five hundred head of cattle, made out to the Freeman Packing Co. and marked "Paid in full." It was signed by Vic Henderson. The other was a piece of paper that was yellowed with age. Randy read the few lines of writing on it and his throat tightened. He laid it aside to read the third communication, scribbled on a page torn from a Rafter H tally book. It read:

RANDY:

Ten years is a long time to wait. Maybe the cattle I'm shipping today will help. You can have more if you want them—and pay when you can. When I picked up the broken gun I found this stuck in the barrel, probably the last thing old Matt did before he passed out. It may explain a lot of things to you. You can make it public if you feel that you should. I hope you'll not find it necessary, for there are other ways things can be rectified. VIC HENDERSON.

Then Randy Girard picked up the

yellowed sheet of paper, read it again.

VIC:

That wild-eyed kid of yores is in a mess. He's been losin' money gamblin'. If I can find out what he's up to, I'll try an' stop it.

MATT GIRARD.

Slowly, though the effort cost him pain, Randy Girard tore the yellow, oil-stained slip, into tiny pieces. He knew now who that second figure in the bank had been. His father had known, too, but he'd been willing to die as he had, without wrecking the life of his friend's only son. Dying, his last act had been to slip the folded note into the barrel of his gun, so that it wouldn't be found in his pocket.

Through the window Randy could look out into the sunshine. Up on the trail, where it topped the rise out of town, he could see a boiling cloud of dust—cattle—his cattle. Somehow he felt that if old Matt knew, he would feel that those ten years of calumny had not been in vain.

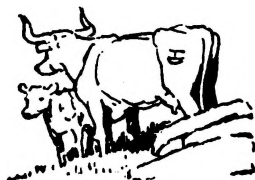
THE END.



# RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

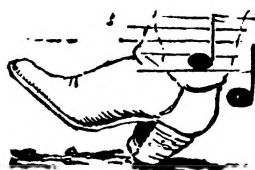
The stock answer to the tenderfoot who asks which side to brand cattle on is "the outside." It's a good, rollicking cowboy comeback, but the fact is, to be rustler proof the iron must burn deep



enough to leave a scar *inside* the cowhide as well as outside. Many a range-land jury has ordered a neck-tie party for brand changing on this inside evidence on a piece of cowhide. Because no matter how neat a job the hot-iron artist may do on the hairy side, the scars of his burn will not exactly match the inside scars if the original brand has been properly burned.

Probably the most unusual boots ever made were worn by Flash Jack Buchanan, a Queensland, Australia, drover.

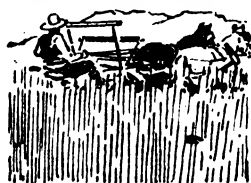
The high heels were built on spring-compressed forms, while reeds taken from an accordion were fitted inside. Metal-rimmed holes acted as stops for the springs. Then, covered with leather,



they were fitted on the boots. And when Flash Jack strode down the street in those boots, he needed no spoon-shanked spurs to make music for him. Each boot heel, under compression of the springs, sounded two clear, soft musical notes.

Quite proud of his unique job, the old German cobbler who made them only regretted that "dose cooboy's" didn't wear six-inch heels. "With six-inch heels," he averred, "a feller could play 'God Save the King.'"

As did the legends of gold in the West, so tales of fortunes made in wheat brought thousands of immigrants westward. News filtered through the East



that three hundred and sixty acres of land, often costing less than a dollar an acre, would produce in a single season a crop worth from five thousand to thirty thousand dollars. Thus came another horde to crowd out the cattleman and the cattle.

Never let it be said that John Conner, Indian guide, needed spectacles. He was hired along with several other Indians to accompany an exploring expedition through Texas. In passing down a dry stream bed, they came upon an Indian trail, and John Conner displayed the rare powers of his kind.

Riding along with his eyes bent upon the sand, Conner soon pulled up and said,



"Wichita trail, mebbe so, eight animal, two horse, one pony, three mule, horse shod all round, pony, too. Shoes on pony heap old. One mule shod all around, others shod before. Trail five days old."

With nothing but blown-over marks in the sand to guide him, John Conner made an estimate of the situation which was later proved quite correct.

Two months later it was reported that the horses and mules had been stolen from the area of Fort Belknap. A detachment of soldiers, sent out after the narauders, caught them, thus testifying to John Conner's trail-reading genius.

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Mr. Young will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

# HEP—THE GIRL GUIDE

BY GLENN H. WICHMAN



It was on Tuesday that the boss sent me and Hep Gallegher into Valley Center with six steers he had sold to a butcher. We started early and got there in the middle of the afternoon and delivered the steers O. K. The boss had said we could linger in town until Wednesday, but if we didn't come back then he'd fire the both of us. This letting us loaf around was a mistake on the old man's part, because the way it turned out we never did get back to his ranch, either Wednesday or any other day. In fact, we didn't even see the old gent again.

It was Gallegher's fault. Every time he's exposed to a townful of folks something usually happens to him. In most towns there's generally somebody looking for a sucker, and Hep was as likely as not to be elected. Anybody who was in need

of a fall guy could spot him coming a mile off. It was pretty remarkable the way they always found him. It must have been something about the way he looked but I never could tell what it was because he was put together about like any other saddle tramp.

"Listen, you big stiff," I warned him, after we'd turned the steers into the butcher's corral, "I don't want you to take up with any strangers here in town. We'll do our celebratin' together and leave other folks alone for a change."

"All right," Hep agreed. "I'll be a lone wolf."

"I've followed you around now," I told him, "for ten years hopin' that some day you'd learn somethin'. I ain't give up hope yet, but I'm mighty pessimistic."

"Quit worryin'," Hep said. "Come



on. We're due for a snort."

So we took our horses up to the livery barn and bedded 'em down for the night, and then engaged ourselves a room in the Palace Hotel while we still had something to engage it with. After that we ambled out into the short main street to see the sights. We were heading up the plank walk for the Silver Spur Bar when all of a sudden we were confronted by three large females who'd just come out of the general store together.

Any sort of ladies were scarce around Valley Center, so the sight of three of them all at once was something to look at. And these three were something in particular, because they were all of about the same size and shape and all dressed exactly alike. Each had on a split riding skirt and a blue blouse and a yellow bandanna and the same kind of Stetson. And all of them wore little peashooter guns of about .32 caliber.

"My gosh!" Hep exclaimed. "Look what's descendin' upon us!"

"Not on us," I told him. "We ain't ladies' men. Or at least you ain't. Just pass by as though you hadn't noticed 'em. And try not to look any sillier than you have to. Don't let 'em think we ain't ever seen any women before. Have a little pride—"

I had to shut up then, because they were right down upon us.

**T**HEN a very peculiar thing happened. Those three strange women stopped in front of us and blocked the plank walk and all three smiled at us.

The one in the middle said: "How do you do, boys! Are you gainfully employed?"

"Not at the minute, ma'am," Hep replied, after he'd swallowed hard. "We're just horsin' around."

Which was, of course, true; but it

was a misleading thing to say because we had good jobs out on the beefsteak farm. They naturally took it that we were out of work.

"Are you a good trail cook?" one of the gals asked Hep.

"Am I?" Gallagher exclaimed. "Why, ma'am, there never was a better one! You should taste my flannel cakes and hot biscuits and crisp bacon and java!"

"Now listen, Hep," I said to him, "why give these ladies such a line of hot air as that? Why don't you be honest an' tell 'em about the prospector who lost his spectacles and thought some of your biscuits were his quartz samples?"

For some reason this made the women laugh, although there certainly wasn't anything funny about it. It was just the truth.

"Are you good at packing horses?" another of the gals wanted to know.

"I'm famous for it," Gallagher admitted modestly. "I can throw diamond hitches faster than Billy the Kid could throw bullets."

There was some slight truth in this, because he did know how to pack a horse.

"Do you get lost easily?" was the next question.

I thought it was time I took a hand, because I could see something bad was going to happen to us.

"He's always lost," I told the ladies. "He hasn't found himself in the past six or seven years. He can't even remember where he's been."

"Them's fightin' words—" Hep cut in.

But the woman in the middle was speaking again. "The idea is this," she said. "The three of us want to go up in the Trilby Mountains. We want two men to go along to do the chores and attend to the horses and to see that we get back safely. The

Trilby Mountains are wild and mostly uninhabited and we would feel better if we had two good cowhands with us."

This was bad news. In the first place, we already had jobs. Secondly, the Trilby Mountains were mighty dangerous. Plenty of men had gone into those mountains and had never even been heard of again. It was no place for three women, no matter who went with 'em.

So I jerked my thumb at Gallagher and said: "Ma'am, this guy would get lost getting there. And if he got there he'd never find his way back. He went lookin' for Canada once and ended up in Chihuahua."

Almost immediately I knew I'd made a mistake by exaggerating, because they didn't believe a word I'd said.

"I don't think it's very becoming of you," one of the women scolded me, "to be so uncomplimentary about your friend. I'm sure you are both very competent outdoor men and could look after yourselves anywhere."

"I could," Gallagher said. "I don't know about George here because he's something of an idiot. But I could go up to the Trilby Mountains and back with my eyes shut."

"We're not going," I said. "We don't want anything to do with mountains."

The gals ignored me, and the one in the middle explained:

"If we decide to hire you, we'll pay each of you five dollars a day. We plan to be gone thirty days."

This was both astonishing and unreasonable.

"Anybody," I said, "who'd pay us more than forty dollars a month an' found would get cheated."

"Five bucks a day!" Hep gasped. "Jiminy Christmas!"

But it seemed that we weren't hired yet.

"Pardon us," the gal on the right said, "but would you mind removing your hats so that we can get a better idea of the shape and size of your heads?"

Which settled it, I thought. They were crazy. Just as crazy as Gallagher. Now I was sure I wasn't going to any mountains.

But Gallagher was chump enough to take his hat off, so I took mine off, too. The three gals, looking very wise, studied our heads carefully. They looked at us and looked at each other and nodded their heads.

**Q**UITE all right, girls," one said. "Above the average in intelligence. I believe they may do."

This was pretty mystifying, even to Hep. "I'll admit I need a hair cut," he said dubiously. "There's no argument about that."

But the girls didn't appear to be interested in hair cuts.

"We," one of them explained, "are students of anthropology."

This left me and Gallagher as cold as a couple of cucumbers.

"Anthropology," the lady continued, "is, roughly, the science of man in relation to physical character, distribution, the origin and classification of races, environmental and social relations, and culture."

"Of course," Hep said, as though he knew all about it.

"Then," I asked, "what do you want to go up in a mountain for, since you already know all about it?"

"To make a study," the lady on the end said, "of the primitive people who dwell there."

"Nobody ever dwells in the Trilby Mountains," I told her, "except dead guys. It's no place for man or beasts, but it's fine for buzzards."

"Ah," the gal exclaimed. "That's all the better. Quite often human remains are of great value in the study of anthropology. Will you boys hire out to us for five dollars a day if we decide we want you?"

"Sure," Hep said enthusiastically. "We're tickled to death. My partner'll agree to it, too, after the idea's soaked through his head. It takes a long time for him to understand anything."

"Have you any references?" the women wanted to know.

"Bartenders are the only people who know us," I said desperately. "We're just a couple of soaks. Confirmed drunkards. And all the wardens of the penitentiaries west of the Mississippi know us. We're criminals."

Again it appeared I'd exaggerated too much, because what I said only seemed to annoy them.

"Kindly give references other than bartenders," the lady insisted.

So Hep told her that we knew the storekeeper and the liveryman and some other people and that we had a speaking acquaintance with the parson because the sheriff had once made us sweep out the church after we'd hollered too loud at a revival service.

Then they got our names and introduced themselves. It seemed that they were all sisters. Standing from left to right they were Abigail Winkler, Amethyst Winkler and Annabell Winkler. They were all unmarried and came from some place back East, which is where they ought to have stayed.

"Mr. Gallegher and Mr. Armstrong," Abigail Winkler said, "please meet us at the end of one hour in the parlor of the Palace Hotel and we will inform you whether we are hiring you."

"That's swell!" Gallegher ex-

claimed. "We'll be seeing you."

With that the three anthropologists took themselves along and me and Hep went into the Silver Spur Bar.

"I'm going to see," I told Hep, "if I can get delirium tremens before the hour's up."

"If you have more than two snorts," Gallegher warned, "I'm going to shoot you. This is the chance of a lifetime. Imagine making five bucks a day for doing practically nothing."

"Taking three dizzy females up into the Trilby Mountains," I reminded him, "is a lot more than nothing. It'll probably be the death of both us and the women and the horses. We'll either get lost or be attacked by outlaws or be scalped by Indians or have something else happen to us."

"Don't always be so pessimistic," Hep said. "Have a little courage once in a while. Look at me. I'm not afraid of anything."

"That's because you haven't got any sense," I reminded him. "If they hire us, I'll go. But only because I have a kind heart and want to see if I can get you back in one piece."

"All right, kind heart," Gallegher said. "Two snifters, and no more."

So we dawdled an hour over a couple of schooners of beer and then went down to the parlor of the Palace Hotel. The three gals were waiting.

**J**UST one more question," Abigail Winkler said. "Are you men inclined to be afraid of things?"

"What things?" I demanded to know.

"Oh, just such things," Abigail explained, "as one would meet in the mountains."

"A gent," I said, "is likely to meet anything in a mountain, except

things like steamships and such. Especially in the Trilby Mountains."

"I'm not afraid of anything except ghosts," Gallegher declared. "And I don't believe in ghosts."

The three gals went into a huddle, doing a lot of talking and nodding to one another.

"Boys, we have talked to the citizens here about you," Abigail announced. "The general opinion is that though you are a little light-headed, you are in general trustworthy and suitable for the work that we have to do. So we're hiring you."

She unsnapped her pocketbook and took out a roll of yellow-back bills that would have choked a burro. She handed the money to Hep.

"Gallegher, here is one thousand dollars. Buy each of us a good riding horse, with saddles and bridles. And buy enough donkeys to carry food and supplies for thirty days. Get sufficient camping equipment and a tent for the three of us women to sleep in, and any other things you think we'll need. If the thousand dollars isn't enough, we'll give you some more. But don't spend money needlessly or foolishly."

Even Hep was amazed at the sight of all that money. "I wouldn't think of it," he said.

"Be ready to leave by noon tomorrow," Abigail directed.

When me and Gallegher had backed out of the parlor, I said: "How about the poor old guy we work for out on the cow farm?" I asked.

"Think nothing of it," Hep assured me. "And, anyway, he isn't poor. Besides, I've got a lot to think about now besides him."

He had, at that, with all the horses and burros and other things to buy. Before dusk Valley Center was experiencing a business boom.

Folks stood around with their mouths open and watched us. They made me nervous. The opinion was practically unanimous that either us or the ladies or all five of us were out of our heads or coming down with some illness. By dark we had enough stuff cached in the livery barn to have outfitted a young army. Somebody started the rumor that the Winkler girls were lady bandits who were fleeing to the Trilby Mountains for safety, but this was manifestly ridiculous, Hep said, because they were anthropologists. Which led to the rumor that they were kin-folks of Jesse James and were out looking for the old villain's bones.

At eight o'clock the stage came in from Hackberry, which was a tank stop on the railroad east of Valley Center. The stage drew up in front of the livery barn where me and Hep were packing canned goods in some oil-can cases. Three guys got out of the stage.

We knew two of them. They were no-good citizens who spent more time in jail than out. One went by the name of Shorty Moore and the other by the moniker of Joaquin Walker. The third man was a city fellow with a very bald head and a sad face. All three men seemed to be traveling together.

"Hello, Hep," Joaquin Walker said to Gallegher. "What's the matter? Are you going in the freighting business?"

"Something like that," I said quickly. "Don't let it give you a headache."

"All right," Walker said. "If that's the way you feel about it."

Hep and I watched him and Moore and the city man go up the walk and disappear into the Silver Spur Bar.

"You might have given 'em a civil answer," Hep said to me. "It always pays to be polite."

"Nothing would pay with those guys," I said, "except to stay away from 'em."

"Moonshine," Gallegher replied. "Don't be so jumpy. Have a good time, like I am."

After a while we laid off work, had something to eat and ended up in the Silver Spur. The bald-headed guy was sitting all by himself over in one corner at a table. He was nursing a bottle and doing pretty well by it, although he looked as sad and disconsolate as a Salton Sea pelican. The bug juice didn't seem to be putting any life and friskiness in him at all.

"Listen," I advised Hep, "the less we have to say about the Winkler girls and where we're going, the better off we'll be. At least we won't be any worse off."

"Always seeing ghosts," Hep said. "Why don't you unbend and relax?"

So I unbent partially and relaxed some while we hoisted a few to our future success and such other items as we could think of.

Presently Shorty Moore and Joaquin Walker came in. They had a couple drinks at the bar and then went over to where the bald-headed man sat.

"The gent without any hair foliage," I told Gallegher, "is due for a rough trip."

"Where's he goin'?" Gallagher wanted to know.

"Wherever it is," I said, "Shorty and Joaquin'll come out on the long end. They're gettin' 'emself some loose coin."

"We ain't everybody's guardian," Hep replied. "I'm goin' to bed so's I'll be fit as a fiddle in the morning."

Seeing that this was one of the few sensible things he had ever thought of in his life, I agreed with him and we went to bed.

The three lady anthropologists

were up and around early next day. They tried out their horses and, sure enough, they were able to ride without falling off, which was a surprise to everybody. They cantered up and down the street and like to wore themselves out.

I asked the liveryman what had happened to Joaquin Walker and Shorty Moore.

"That's a funny thing," he said. "Along after midnight they woke the stage driver up and had him lug 'em all back to Hackberry. The tall guy with the polished dome paid for the trip."

"That was nice of him," I said, and felt about halfway relieved. "They didn't say where they was goin' after they got to Hackberry?"

"Nope," the liveryman replied. "They didn't."

**B**Y ten o'clock the great foray into the Trilby Mountains was ready to start. I felt kind of embarrassed, because half the town of Valley Center was gathered around the livery barn to see us off. Eventually we got all the burros tied together. It looked like a prospector's convention was moving out.

Up the street we went, the three gals riding abreast out in front. And me and Hep behind worrying the mountain canaries. It must have been quite a sight.

"I feel worse than a sheepherder," I complained. "Imagine what folks must be thinking of us. Two grown men being nursemaids for a parcel of anthropologists."

"It isn't everybody," said Hep, "who can travel around with anthropologists. Practically nobody here even knows what they are."

We couldn't go very fast, because no burro ever went very fast, but finally we got out of town and headed for the Trilby Mountains.

They were away off in the distance and between us and them were some of the worst badlands that there were anywhere about. There was water and grass in isolated spots, and that was about all.

By noontime we weren't over three miles from Valley Center.

"It's time to halt," Miss Abigail Winkler said, "and have some lunch."

"Lunch!" I exclaimed. "Why, we haven't even started yet."

"Please bear in mind," Amethyst told me, "that we've got thirty days to get there and back in. And we're accustomed to having regular meals."

"Of course," Hep said. "George, build a fire."

So I built a fire and some curious folks even rode all the way out from Valley Center to watch Hep fry bacon and to see what the trouble was. By the middle of the afternoon we were going again and by dark we were camped beside a waterhole some few miles farther on.

Except for unsaddling the horses and unpacking the burros and staking out the livestock and pitching the tent and rustling up the firewood and fixing the gals' bedding rolls and answering questions and building the fire and unpacking the cookin' utensils and getting supper, we had practically nothing to do.

"I can see already," I said to Gallegher, "that we won't get fat from sitting around. Mister, you've got yourself into something. Why in heck I ever came along, I don't know!"

Miss Annabell overheard this last remark and gave me a lecture.

"Never," she warned me, "let me hear you say anything as vulgar as that again."

Then Gallegher got a lecture, too, when the biscuits got so hot that they took fire and burned up.

After the meal, such as it was, the three women took to investigating the outside of Gallegher's head, although it'd have been much more sensible if they had tried to find out what there was inside it. They made him stand up with his hat off while they took some measurements with a tape line.

They were interested in how far his chin was from his ears, and how far his nose was from the back of his head. And how thick through the dome he was and whether or not any of his teeth were missing.

"Roughly," I asked Abigail, "what seems to be the trouble with him?"

"Hereditry," Abigail answered. "That seems to be one of the most distressing weaknesses of mankind."

"You mean," I inquired, "that one of his kinfolks was a jackass?"

"Now, look here!" Hep began, and reached for a frying pan.

But the three lady anthropologists laughed him out of it.

"Calm down, Mr. Gallegher," Miss Amethyst urged. "It's too early yet for us to be sure what you are related to. But if we ever find out we will certainly let you and George know. The only thing we are sure of is that you're not related to a cook."

This wounded Hep's feelings but there wasn't anything done about it, because right at that minute the three gals called it a day and retired to the tent, leaving us with all the work to do. And it was a lot of work, washing the dishes and gathering some more wood for the morning and doing other chores.

When we finally rolled up in our own blankets the coyotes started cryin'. One of them made a noise exactly like an infant with the colic which liked to scared the wits out of the Winkler girls. They made us get

up and chase the coyotes, although, of course, we couldn't get within a mile of one, and we knew it. So by the time the coyotes quieted down and we got to sleep it was time to get up.

**T**HE next day we got a little nearer the Trilby Mountains, and the next day a little nearer, and so on. And all the time me and Gallegher were getting more worn out and frayed around the edges.

"It wouldn't be so bad for a fella to get married," I told him, "because if he had any kind of luck at all his children would be little when they were born. And if he had the luck of a sheepherder they'd come along one at a time so's he could get used to their ways piecemeal. But look at us! It's as though we got married and had three daughters all bigger and older than we are and all at the same time. Now, if there's any justice in that, I'll eat your hat!"

But Hep wasn't even listening, because he'd gone to sleep in the saddle. Between cookin' and ridin' all day and chasin' coyotes half the night he was in the way of going into a collapse.

Gradually we became better acquainted with the Winkler girls. The one named Amethyst seemed to be the pet of the family, and Annabell and Abigail were always worrying about her. Amethyst was slightly better looking than the others, which wasn't saying much.

They carried on some very unenlightening conversations as they were either ridin' or sittin' around the campfire.

"Are you feeling all right, Amethyst?" Annabell would ask.

"Oh, yes," Amethyst would answer. "Fine!"

Then Abigail would put in her oar. "We must think only of new

horizons. Are you sure you feel all right, Amethyst?"

"Of course," Amethyst would again insist, looking off into space. "I feel swell."

It seemed very silly to me to be asking her how she felt because she looked as strong as a horse.

Then Annabell would sometimes say: "Think of it! The three of us, ever onward and upward. Ever onward and upward. It's sublime!"

Sometimes I didn't know whether the gals were nuttier than Gallegher, or vice versa. Or mebbe it was me. Anyway, by the time we actually got into the Trilby Mountains me and Hep were wore out to a ravel. Now the Trilby's aren't very high, but there's a lot of 'em. They stretch thirty miles one way and twenty the other and are cut up kind of like a waffle iron. A greenhorn might wander around in those little canyons until he wore his legs down to stumps and never get anywhere at all. The ground is very deceiving. You follow down what you think is a dried-up watercourse, and end up on top of a small hill. Or at least it seems that way. Many a tenderfoot prospector has come out of them as loony as a doodlebug.

When we actually got into the mountains I paused and made a speech. "Ladies," I said, "Amethyst isn't very well, even if she says she feels good. Don't you think we'd better go back to Valley Center and rest our bones for a chance? None of us has lost anything in these mountains and we couldn't find it if we had. So, since Amethyst isn't feeling very well—"

Nobody paid any attention to me. Gallegher had started to take a nap the instant his horse had stopped moving. And the mere mention of Amethyst had made Annabell and Abigail concerned about her.

"Aren't you feeling all right, Amethyst?" Abigail and Annabell asked together.

"I'm all right," Amethyst answered, as she looked up at the blue sky.

"Poor, poor Amethyst," Abigail moaned. "Poor, dear Amethyst."

So there wasn't anything for me to do except throw rocks at the burros and get things started off again. After a while and when the opportunity offered I rode up beside Amethyst.

"Ma'am," I said, "what seems to be the matter with you?"

For no reason at all this made the lady anthropologist blush. "George," she said, "you would never understand. Kindly never mention it again. My dear sisters and I are riding into the future together, so don't be inquisitive."

So naturally I gave up trying to talk to her. But that evening Amethyst sat down on a boulder and had a good cry while her two sisters hovered around her like a couple of hens.

"Now," I thought, "we'll head back for Valley Center." But it was a false alarm. All that happened was that we kept on going.

A couple more days and we were so tangled up in our directions that we found ourselves back where we had camped the day before.

"Gallegher," Miss Abigail complained, "you're becoming confused."

"Think nothing of it," Hep assured her. "Tomorrow morning when the sun comes up I'll know which way is east."

Twice a day we knew our directions, but as we did our traveling in between those periods, it didn't help much. And we couldn't have traveled in a straight line anyway, owing to the canyons and washes that wandered all over the landscape.

**A** COUPLE of days later we made the startling discovery that we were being followed. A long ways back on the top of a ridge I saw a gent on a horse.

"Perhaps it's an Indian," Annabell gasped.

"No Indian," I assured her, "would be numbskull enough to be wandering around in a place like this."

"Could it be a renegade?" Abigail asked.

"Two of them, probably," I told her. "The fellow we saw had a partner who ducked back quick."

"Let us be brave," Amethyst suggested. "We don't even know where we are ourselves so I don't see how anybody could find us."

This wasn't exactly logical, because with the burros and horses we left a trail that a blind man could follow.

"Listen, deep thinker," I said to Gallegher, "have you got any suggestions to offer?"

"We'd better be going," Hep replied, which helped a lot.

The three anthropologists tried to cheer themselves with the thought that the United States was a law-abiding country and that the Constitution frowned upon murder. And besides they had two brave cowhands along to protect 'em. Of the three women Amethyst was the only one not frightened out of a year's growth.

"Are you feeling all right?" Annabell asked Amethyst.

"Yes," Amethyst answered, which was, of course, enlightening.

"What in the name of Jehoshaphat," I asked Annabell, "are you expecting her to come down with?"

"Kindly remember, George," she told me coldly, "that it's none of your business."

Nothing happened the rest of that day, or the next. Except that



we didn't know where we were going. But on the next day after that plenty happened. We were camped in a narrow gully where we'd discovered a hatful of water in a hole. It had rained a couple of days before. Gallagher and I were getting the cooking gear together when Annabell set up a squeal and pointed down the wash. There, just rounding a bend, were three men on foot! One of the men pulled a gun and took a shot up the gully. The slug passed a long way above us.

Abigail screamed. "Hep and George!" she hollered. "Protect us!"

Amethyst yelled, too, and grabbed up a stew pan.

Just as me and Hep were getting out our artillery to do battle with the renegades a very singular thing occurred. Amethyst came up beside me and hit me on the head with the stew pan! And darned if she didn't swing around then and hit Hep on his noggin, too, with the same stew pan! It was a heavy stew pan and she swung it like she would a sledge hammer. Hep folded up like an empty gunny sack. He was sound asleep before he hit the ground. I didn't fare much better. I sat down and couldn't get up. I couldn't move either arms or legs. I could see and hear and that was about all.

"Miss Amethyst is a traitor," I thought. And, as I thought it, Amethyst went to work on her two sisters! They'd pulled their pea-shooting .32's and were beginning to bang away with them when she yanked them out of their hands and threw them away.

**I**N the meantime, the three men were running up the gully. They looked like six men to me, but that was only an illusion, owing to the stew pan. When they got nearer I finally recognized 'em. They were

Shorty Moore and Joaquin Walker and the tall, bald-headed guy we'd seen nursing the bottle in the Silver Spur in Valley Center. Right then they looked a great deal the worse for wear.

Amethyst tore herself away from her sisters' grasp and ran down the gully to meet them.

"Professor! Professor!" she hollered.

"Amethyst!" the bald-headed guy yelled back at her, and held out his arms.

A second more and they had gone into an affectionate clinch. If my head hadn't hurt so, it'd have been touching.

Abigail and Annabell didn't seem to like these goings on at all. They were as sore as a couple of timber wolves and about as fierce.

"You men brought him here!" they yelled at Joaquin and Shorty, meaning the bald-headed guy. "We are going to kill you!"

It seemed that Shorty and Walker weren't such bad guys as I had thought them. Of course, they could have put some holes in the lady anthropologists but, instead of that, they turned and ran. But they were not any match at footwork for Annabell and Abigail. In a moment they'd been caught and were being given a good whacking. Then each of the women grabbed herself one of the men by the neck and marched him up to where the rest of us were.

By now Hep's brain was beginning to unscramble itself. "Who won?" he asked, sitting up.

"The battle's over," I told him. "We've been vanquished. All that remains is for us to starve to death while we're trying to find our way home."

Amethyst and the bald gent were still hugging each other. Seeing this, Annabell and Abigail turned loose of

Shorty and Joaquin and each began to cry in a blubbery sort of way.

"Come! Come!" the bald man exclaimed. "Please! It can't be as bad as that. All I'm going to do is marry your dear sister. Isn't that right, Amethyst?"

"Oh, gracious me," Amethyst said happily. "Of course. Dear, dear professor. I'm so glad you found me—"

These kind of doings went on for some time and finally things got partially straightened around. Amethyst explained matters to me and Hep while her sisters went behind a rock and pouted and sulked. The bald-headed man's name was Professor Alphonso McGillicuddy. Miss Amethyst had been in love with him for some time, but her sisters didn't want her to get married and break up the family circle. They'd persuaded her to come out West and forget him, but McGillicuddy had threatened to follow. So they thought they'd go some place where he couldn't find 'em. The professor had hired Joaquin and Shorty to help him. In Valley Center they had learned what was up and backtrailed to Hackberry and got horses, and then had trailed us.

"Do either of you," I asked Shorty and Joaquin, "by any chance know the way back to Valley Center?"

Neither of them did. And we couldn't backtrail very far either because it had rained.

"But the professor knows the way back," Shorty explained. "All the way out here he's pretended that he was a steamship on the ocean and done what he calls navigating."

"Dear Alphonso," Amethyst sighed. "He'll save our lives." She glanced up at the sky. "I think, sweetheart, that the sun's about to cross the meridian."

"So it is," Professor McGillicuddy

said, and ran down the gully to his horse. He came back with some kind of a gadget that he pointed at the sun. "This," he said, "is a sextant. With it I determine how far north we are from the equator. And I have a watch set with Greenwich time, which tells us how far we are west of London. It's all very simple if you understand it and my compilations will be correct within a mile."

But the professor didn't want to go back to Valley Center. He said that according to his map it would be shorter to keep on west. So, after no end of traveling we hit a railroad eighty or a hundred miles from Valley Center. And just in time, too, because that morning we ate our last flannel cake.

Annabell and Abigail had sulked most of the way, but by the time we got there they had forgiven Amethyst and Alphonso. It turned out, also, that none of them were anthropologists. They'd just been pulling our legs.

As we helped them on the train, after they'd paid us off, I said to Amethyst: "Are you feeling all right, ma'am?"

This made her feel so good that she insisted on kissing all four of us and like to go left behind as a result.

Me and Hep and Shorty Moore and Joaquin stood by the track and watched the train disappear.

"I told you everything would turn out O. K.," Hep said.

"A lot you had to do with it," I told him. "If it hadn't been for Professor Alphonso McGillicuddy, we'd all be bleached bones in the Trilby Mountains."

"Well," Hep replied, "I'd have made good bleached bones, anyway."

Which was just like him. He could always think of something.



# THE MEDICO OF MESA ROCK

BY C. K. SHAW

## CHAPTER I

### A DOCTOR MAKES HIS CHOICE

DR. VERD HOLLIS had often looked upon death. It brought with it a physical sensation almost as tangible as the touch of icy water. He

did not need the throat rattle to warn him of its approach. Tonight, as he stood in the front bedroom of the Stebbin home in Mesa Rock, he knew the gap of time that had opened for young Milton Stebbin on the day of his birth was about to be

closed. That was what death meant—the closing of a man's book of years.

Young Stebbin's deputy star lay on the commode, one of its prongs stained. His shirt was a sodden ball on the floor, pungent with the smell of fresh blood. The tragedy of this moment was cut into the young doctor's face, for he and Milt Stebbin were friends.

Verd turned to Sheriff Bert Stebbin, Milt's father, and their eyes held together. The gray-haired lawman understood the mute message. He spoke in a grief-parched voice.

"Ain't there something you can do to rouse him? Something so's he can say a few words before he—goes?"

Verd Hollis shook his head. "I've done everything."

He stepped to the door leading to the sitting room. Milton's sister Flora came to meet him. Flora and Verd were engaged. They had planned to marry soon. Knowing Verd as she did, she, too, read his message immediately and asked no question. He held her close a second, then led her toward the bedroom.

It was still a wonder to Verd Hollis that such beauty as Flora's should flower on the desert of New Mexico. It was as unexpected as the brilliant blossom put out by the prickly pear. Her lips were close-pressed now, but their smile could be rich and warm. Her brown hair curled and her eyes were larkspur blue. Such blue eyes and curly hair can make a face doll-like, but Flora's features were too genuinely cast for that. Her eyes were too sincere, too concerned with life.

A few minutes later Milt Stebbin died, the secret of his last fight locked behind still lips. A terrible moment of reality gripped the little room. It was as though life were

the artificial thing, and only death was genuine. Sheriff Bert Stebbin looked down on his son's face as though to implant the features forever in his mind. His fingers curled about the butt of his gun. Even in this moment he realized he had work to do.

Dr. Hollis led Flora away and closed the bedroom door. It did not seem right that Milt was gone. It seemed more of a mistake that he should die in a gun battle with the noted Whistler Enis, with only the friends of Enis around to report the clash and to claim that Milt had started the fight. There was the word of the rancher, Gifford Matson, for whom Enis worked, but Matson must have missed something of the affair. It was not like Milt Stebbin to bully a man into gunplay.

For some time Sheriff Bert had been on the trail of dope runners working between Mesa Rock and old Mexico. Milt might have struck a clue that had drawn him into the death battle. Rumor said Whistler Enis was also dying. If there had been a clue uncovered it was costing two men their lives.

**T**HE one-streeted town of Mesa Rock quieted when it heard of the death of Deputy Milt Stebbin. Even a few moments of silence was expressive of its respect and regret, for its existence was hectic with gun flame, nervous laughter, hair-trigger curses and the beat of hoofs pounding for the border, twenty miles south.

A short time ago old Sheriff Bert had announced that he was turning the town over to his son and was hanging up the gun that had curled forth smoke in a twenty-year record. Mesa Rock would have accepted Milt Stebbin as sheriff, but now he was dead. That meant Sheriff Bert

would have to tighten his belt a notch and go on. With the dope runners plying their nefarious trade, Mesa Rock expected it of him.

Sheriff Bert sat heavily in a chair and looked at Verd Hollis. He did not understand the young medico very well. At times he had found him strangely puzzling. "Highfalutin'" was the way he had it filed away in his mind. A lot of fancy learning and not enough horse sense. But Flora loved Verd Hollis, and her father was glad she was happy. He hadn't had much time for his daughter. Milt he had understood. The boy had always ridden stirrup to stirrup with him, planned with him, fought with him.

"Verd," the lawman said almost dispassionately, "Giff Matson and his whole crew lied about that fight. Milt didn't cuss Enis out like they say." He lifted a finger and pointed it at Hollis. "There was something vital behind that fight. Enis was out to kill Milt, and Milt fought to save himself."

"If Giff Matson were not giving his word, I'd feel the same way," Verd said. "But Matson, a wealthy rancher—"

"Why did Matson import Whistler Enis?" the sheriff cut in. "Why does he pay wages to a fancy gunman? There're plenty of New Mexico punchers capable of keeping Mex rustlers off his ranch."

"Are you sure Whistler Enis is a fancy gunman?" Verd asked.

A frosty shadow darkened Sheriff Bert's eyes. "It's burned into his hide same as a brand is burned into a cow." He leaned forward in his chair. "Verd, I ain't never asked you a lot of questions because I know you have fancy ideas—all about a doctor keepin' his mouth shut when he comes back from a call. I ain't never asked you about the

trip you made to the Giff Matson ranch because I knew if you'd wanted to talk you would have. I'm askin' you now. Did Giff Matson call you clean out there just to doctor his chink cook?"

Stillness was born in the depth of Verd's gray eyes. His face had become like a patch of December sky at daybreak. He hesitated.

"Don't be afraid to talk," Sheriff Bert said, never lifting his gaze. "If you're thinkin' somebody might give you what Milt got—"

"I am not afraid to talk," Verd Hollis interrupted flatly. "When a doctor answers a call, his visit is generally unplanned for. He walks into a home torn by stress and he doesn't go about spreading a picture of that stark hour."

"Is Matson's chink cook havin' a stomachache one of these times of stress you're mentionin'?" Sheriff Bert probed, an edge of sarcasm in his voice.

"The Chinese cook was not ill," Verd answered quietly. "I was called on another matter."

"And you said the cook so's to blind me and Milt?"

"I let Giff Matson's word stand. After all, it was his business, not mine. I give you my word, Sheriff Bert, there was nothing sinister in the call."

"Better let me be the judge of that, Verd. You're still a newcomer to the desert. It has strange ways."

"I think I am capable of judging."

Flora Stebbin lifted her cheek from where it pressed against Verd's arm. "Verd, tell father. He's had twenty years of dealing with Mesa Rock and the border and the desert." Her glance moved to the closed door leading to the front bedroom. "He needs every clue now."

"Flora, the first thing a doctor's wife learns is to keep his professional

secrets." Verd drew her close to him as she started to pull away. "But I'll tell your father of that call. Both Matson and the patient asked me to forget the visit. I had expected to do so." He faced Sheriff Stebbin. "I removed a bullet from the chest of a youth, a mere boy. If Matson had been harboring a criminal, I would have told you and Milt. This lad had crossed the border in a gay party and had been drawn into a fight. He was visiting Matson and didn't want his father to get wind of the affair."

"A boy?"—Sheriff Bert's lids flickered. "Did you call on him a second time?"

"I rode by, but he had left the ranch."

"And you swallowed a story like that, did you, Hollis?"

Verd stiffened. "Matson is a substantial rancher in these parts. His word should stand."

"I don't take his word. I don't take the word of any man that hires gunmen with no good reason in sight. A boy, huh?" The sheriff rose and paced the floor. "That might have been the thread that would lead us to a den of snakes. Hollis, you've done a good job of keepin' your mouth shut!"

**V**ERD HOLLIS choked back a hot reply. He knew that Sheriff Bert, torn with grief, was not himself. Milt had been his great light, and now that light had been dashed out.

"A doctor's sworn and solemn duty is to care for the sick," he tried to reason with the angry lawman. "And to keep secrets. I am living up to that code as well as I can."

Sheriff Bert paced through the small house, from sitting room to kitchen. Flora Stebbin's blue eyes were unnaturally bright. She let

Verd take her hand in his, but there was no response to his pressure. She seemed to be listening to the measured fall of her father's boots. She started when they came abruptly to a halt, and held her breath as they came clumping forward again.

The lawman strode in from the kitchen. "Giff Matson's comin' up my path!" he said tightly. "Giff Matson comin' to my home!"

He jerked open the door. A solidly built range-dressed man stood on the small porch. Brows and hair were black, and so were the man's arrogant, searching eyes. Giff Matson stepped into the room without an invitation. The man owned eighty sections of land and ran thousands of head of cattle; something in the set of his shoulders asked men to keep in mind these facts. He looked at Sheriff Bert with muscles cording his square jaw.

"I'm sorry about Milt," he said brusquely. "Doubly sorry it happened at my place and at the hands of one of my men."

"Now that you have made your speech, get out!" Sheriff Bert ordered.

Matson clashed glances with him, then turned to Verd Hollis.

"I need your services," he said. "A man is dying."

Verd felt icy fingers squeeze at his heart. "Is the man," he asked, "Whistler Enis?"

Matson settled squarely on his blocky legs. "A doctor takes an oath to minister to the dying, doesn't he, Dr. Hollis?"

"Giff Matson," Sheriff Bert ordered, "get out of my house!"

Matson continued to face Verd Hollis. "Dr. Hollis, will your conscience let you refuse this call?" he asked quietly. "If you break your solemn oath you had better erase that lettering from your window that

reads 'Doctor,' and put in its stead '*Judge, Jury and High Court.*' You haven't the right to say that Whistler Enis must die!"

The flat statement out, his broad face set to lines of stone. Verd thought of the Sphinx. So much could lie behind a stone face. Sheriff Bert started forward as though to force Matson from the room, but Verd stayed him.

"I will go with Matson," the medico said.

Sheriff Bert stiffened. He looked to Verd for confirmation of the words, as though hardly able to believe that he had heard aright.

"I would be a murderer to refuse this visit," Verd said. "I must go."

Gifford Matson stepped back to the little front porch, his body peculiarly agile for so heavy a man. "I shall expect you immediately," he said to Verd, and walked down the path to the street. His steps were light, yet they whispered back to the quiet room.

Verd felt the eyes of Sheriff Bert scorching his face, he felt the throb of Flora's blue ones. It was to Flora that he tried to make his explanation.

"I cannot refuse to go to a dying man."

"He is a murderer. The law can't touch him, but a higher court is meting out his punishment," the girl replied in a half whisper. "Don't obstruct that justice, Verd."

He shook his head. "I can't set myself up as a court, Flora."

Her eyes widened. "You mean—maybe Milt did bring on his own death?"

**H**E caught her hands as though to hold her from withdrawing from him. As he looked into her eyes he realized he might hold her body near him, but her spirit could

not be kept by human fingers. It hurt him to see the pain that had come to her face.

"No," he replied. "No, I don't believe Milt was at fault."

"Yet you go to his murderer," she said.

A terrible chasm was cutting its way between them. Flora must understand. He had to make her see. But he stood silent, not knowing what to say.

"You can ride out of town on another call," Sheriff Bert said. "Granny Higgins is always needin' you."

Verd turned to him. "If my actions must be cloaked in a lie, then they are wrong!" The words came louder than he intended. There seemed to be antagonism in their ring. He had not meant to speak that way.

Sheriff Bert stiffened under the harshness of the doctor's tone. "I don't have no mind to keep you if you want to go to Whistler Enis," he said.

"Flora," Verd cried, "can't you see I must go? He is not Whistler Enis to me; he is just a dying man."

Her glance did not lower. "He is Whistler Enis to me," she replied. "The gunman who destroyed my brother. He will destroy others if he lives." Her glance flew to the grim face of her father, and Verd understood. She feared for him if Enis lived. "You," she whispered, "you do not want to burden your conscience with a thought that might rob you of sleep. You would rather make this call than bring down the wrath of Giff Matson." Her blue eyes were stormy pools. "You're passing the issue to my father!"

She thought he was a coward, Verd realized. The thought was

swift and deep. She had called him a coward because he would not leave a man to die. She thought he wanted his own peaceful nights, his serene conscience while an old man fought the battles of Mesa Rock. She couldn't understand his side of it. Anger began to warm him. She did not want to see. Verd's lips locked in bitter silence. He moved into a stream of light from the open door. It followed along his jaw line, squaring it. His brows were still above the coldness of his face. It was as though Flora's words had emptied his soul, left nothing for his face to reflect.

"Flora didn't mean it that way," Sheriff Bert said huskily. "She . . . she's close to the breakin' point."

Verd looked at the girl's white face. There was no recanting in the larkspur eyes. "I meant it," she said, her voice low and steady. Dr. Hollis turned and walked out of the little house.

## CHAPTER II

### DEATH-BED CONFESSION

**T**WO months after the death of Milt Stebbin, Whistler Enis paid his first visit to Mesa Rock since he had been able to be moved to the Matson ranch. He rode beside Giff Matson, and the old swing was in his shoulders, the old arrogance in his manner. Menace again rested in his tied-down holster. The pallor of weeks indoors had not yet been entirely tanned from his cheeks, but otherwise he bore no signs of weakness. His body was lean, but it had been lean before.

Gifford Matson stopped Dr. Hollis on the street. He slapped his shoulder with hearty familiarity and nodded proudly toward Enis. The gunman gave Verd his brief greeting.

"Whistler is as good as new," the

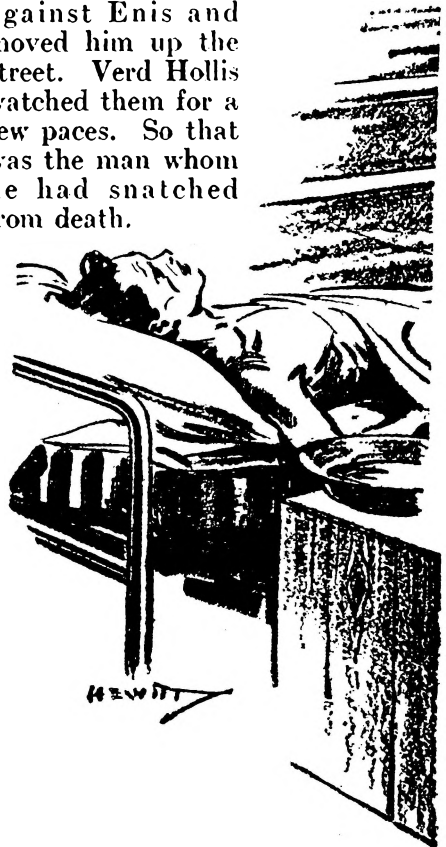
rancher said. "He's drawing his gun speedy as ever."

Verd Hollis looked from one to the other. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Enis turned toward him with a swift bend of the waist. "There's a lotta lip in them words, doc," he said meaningly. "Some day I might ask you to explain them."

"Suppose I explain them now, Enis," Dr. Hollis answered. "Suppose I told you I'm sorry I pulled you through. Milton Stebbin was a friend of mine."

Gifford Matson's hearty laugh cut through a tense moment. "Don't get no notion of blotting Dr. Hollis out, Whistler. He's a handy man. You'd be looking at six feet of dirt instead of sunshine if it weren't for him." He brushed against Enis and moved him up the street. Verd Hollis watched them for a few paces. So that was the man whom he had snatched from death.





His thoughts fell into a worn groove. Whistler Enis was a killer. Even when he lay at death's door his sinister look had not diminished. The hardness of the mouth had not softened, the eyes had glittered dangerously even in delirium. Enis hated most of Mesa Rock for what it was saying about the death of

Deputy Milt Stebbin. Above all, he hated Sheriff Bert. A showdown was bound to come.

"I've passed the buck to Sheriff Bert," Dr. Hollis told himself. That was the thought that was each day wearing itself a deeper groove. It



*"There'll be no third degree on a dying man!" Doc Hollis snapped. Deputy Dillon didn't answer, but his hand kept moving toward his gun.*

was like water falling in steady, relentless drops against his brain. He had passed the buck.

He had lost Flora the night he left her to go to the bedside of Whistler Enis. He had not been able to keep himself from hoping that the gunman might die, and because he hoped it he worked more desperately to save him. All the time Gifford Matson had hovered near, watching and not quite trusting this young doctor he had summoned.

Now Whistler Enis was again a menace to Mesa Rock, and folks were remembering that it was Dr. Verd Hollis who had put him back on his feet. The town had welcomed Verd Hollis when he had first come among them. People had allowed him to doctor them, although they had lifted eyebrows at some of his newfangled ways. Old Doc Valley, who was hoping to retire from service, said castor oil had always served him well, but that new things were forever coming out. He cautioned the desert folk to have patience with the young medico.

Now Doc Valley was again hitching up his gray team and rattling out of town on calls. The old man agreed with Mesa Rock that the young medico had played a cruel joke on the town by saving the life of Whistler Enis after the gunman had killed their promising young deputy. Doc Valley said Mesa Rock would have been blasted off the map twenty years ago if he'd run around saving the life of all the badmen.

**V**ERD HOLLIS went for his horse to answer a call. He still had some patients. He had given up crossing the street to meet Flora Stebbin. She always spoke politely to him, asked about the sick, but the part of her that he had once known was frozen away from him.

Her blue eyes never gave him any of their warmth. Flora could not erase from her memory that he had saved Whistler Enis from the death he deserved, and that Enis would perhaps take her father as he had taken her brother.

Because Verd Hollis no longer talked with Flora did not mean he loved her less. Suppressing his love had not made him cease to want her. A prisoner did not forget the sunshine because he was shut away in a dungeon. He had no thought of leaving Mesa Rock, for his life seemed to have taken root in the desert. The mesa lands were a solace to him. Chameleonlike, they could be gay or somber. He rode over flat miles, and directly ahead a mountain lifted. It was like that, mountains and desert. When the desert had stretched into enough miles, the mountains would lift up and thrust it back. The cactus would creep up the barren sides to prove the desert was not entirely defeated.

Verd Hollis went out of his way in returning from his sick call to ride by the graveyard, a quiet spot just outside the town. He did not dismount, or go within the wooden fence. He just pulled to a walk to absorb some of its quietness. The headstones were weathered slabs of wood, their black paint contrasting with the gleam of sand. There was one with fresh paint that held Verd Hollis' eyes.

"I thought I was doing right, Milt," he said softly. "But passing the buck to an old man can't be right. I guess you're about the only one of us that's seeing clearly."

He rode on into town. He saw Sheriff Bert standing by his saddled horse and to Verd it looked as if the lawman was waiting for him. His clothes were creased as though he

had worn them all day and all the night before. His face was like the desert, grim and unreadable. He motioned Verd over.

"I been waiting for you to get back," he said abruptly. "I got a prisoner that's dyin' from a bullet wound, and I want you to rouse him so's he'll talk. It's the son of Wolf Wallace."

Wolf Wallace! Nothing tangible was known of this gunman, yet where play was swiftest and boldest his name was always mentioned with awe.

"I got the kid as he was finishin' on the small end of a gun battle in Rocky Canyon," Sheriff Bert said. "Somebody hightailed it off in the hills as I got there. Try and get the kid to talk, doctor. I'm leavin' to look into some trouble on Salt Crick; might not be back till mornin'. Call Deputy Sam Dillon when you get the kid ready to talk."

Staring at Sheriff Bert's tired face, Verd Hollis wanted to suggest that the old lawman send his deputy to Salt Creek and he take a night of rest, but such advice would be considered presumptuous, so he only said quietly, "I'll go over to the jail now."

Sheriff Bert mounted. "Don't forget to call Sam Dillon," he repeated.

Verd felt the words bite into his spine. Didn't Sheriff Bert trust him? Could he be listening to any of the vague rumors that were linking his name too often with that of Gifford Matson?

"I'll call Deputy Dillon," he promised.

Sam Dillon was the deputy Sheriff Bert was breaking in to fill the place of his son. Dillon was young, swift with a gun and seemingly unafraid, but he didn't have that intangible quality of character that stamps a man as law timber. Sam Dillon was

wearing the deputy star, but he was not filling the boots of Milt Stebbin.

VERD walked into the jail, already thickening to evening shadows. This sick call weighed on him heavily. Doc Valley must be out of town or Sheriff Bert would have called him. Perhaps, though, this boy was so badly wounded it was going to take more skill than the old doctor possessed to keep him from dying with sealed lips. Verd lighted the lamp and carried it toward the cell. There was a coolness in the late fall air that would bite to the bone of a sick man.

"Get an extra blanket," he said to Sam Dillon as the deputy unlocked the cell door.

Dillon turned queer, searching eyes on him. "Blanket? That kid is tougher than rawhide," he said callously. "He won't need no old-woman wrappin's."

Verd continued on into the cell. The light showed him a slight, almost frail body stretched on the cot, a body drained of everything vital. The face was ghastly, the lips bloodless. Verd set the lamp down very carefully, excited in spite of himself. He knew this boy! It was the youth he had been called to attend at Gifford Matson's ranch. The son of Wolf Wallace, Sheriff Bert had said. So that was the youth Matson had claimed was wounded in a night of fun in a border cantina. Verd hoped he was keeping his face impassive, for he knew Dillon was watching him.

"Bring me that blanket," he repeated.

Dillon went for the covering. Returning, he tossed the blanket on the floor, his mouth curling with malicious satisfaction when Verd had to stoop to pick it up. The deputy sat down on a box and rolled a smoke.

He was expected to keep his eyes on Mesa Rock while Sheriff Bert was out of town, but he showed no signs of leaving the jail.

"That's the son of the orneriest he-wolf out o' hell," he remarked.

Verd made no reply. He was removing the temporary bandages that Sheriff Bert had applied. The boy was dying, and Verd could not keep pity from welling up. What chance had this unfortunate youth ever had? Not more than six months before his young body had been torn with lead, and now here he was again. And this time it was the end.

Sam Dillon rolled one smoke after another, tossing the burning remains on the cell floor. The weak lungs of the wounded boy labored with the foul air.

"He don't look like much of a heller now, does he, doc?" the deputy asked with a low laugh. "Think you can do as good a job on him as you did on Whistler Enis?"

"The boy will die," Dr. Hollis said evenly. He met the eyes of Sam Dillon and ignored their taunting light. "I'll give him something to hold him for a couple of hours' sleep. He should waken with strength enough to talk."

"If he wakes," Sam Dillon shot back.

He rose and held the cell door open for the doctor to leave. "I'll call you if I need you any more," he said.

"I'll stay at the jail," Verd answered. "I don't leave a dying patient."

"Sheriff Bert never said nothin' about me leavin' you here," Dillon said angrily. "I got to make a round of the town. I'll come back and set with the kid. I reckon I don't need you here, Hollis."

"I'm the judge of how badly a patient needs me," Verd said evenly.

Dillon's eyes were shrewd. "Figurin' on maybe savin' his life?" he snapped. "You patched up Whistler Enis, and now me and the sheriff have to risk our hides in a gun fight with him. All of Mesa Rock knows it's only a question of time till Enis will have to be handled. I'll tend to this kid. He's a tough customer. I aim to make him talk when he comes to, and I don't want you around slingin' advice."

Verd Hollis rose from his chair and faced Dillon. "I am not leaving this cell. There'll be no third degrees on a dying man."

Dillon frowned. It was plain he hadn't looked for such resistance. "Get out or I'll put you out," he warned, and his hand traveled threateningly to his holster.

"I wouldn't advise you to try and force me out," Verd Hollis said.

Sam Dillon, it was obvious, was holding on to his temper. Guns were not a thing you turned loose on a doctor attending a patient. "You ain't got none too good a rep as it is in Mesa Rock," he reminded. "Stickin' up for the son of Wolf Wallace won't bolster it up much."

"I'm staying in this cell, Dillon," Verd said flatly.

Sam Dillon's lips curled in a derisive smile. "It's your own funeral," he said. "Folks around here have about had a bellyful of you as it is. I reckon this will finish things." He passed out of the cell and locked the door.

A man had just entered the front of the building and was calling stridently for Dillon. He was one of the punchers from the Gifford Matson ranch. "Matson says if you got any news of his cattle that has been rustled, to come over to the restau-

rant and see him," he said arrogantly.

Dillon swung on him. "Giff Matson ain't the only man in this State that's lost a few cows," he said importantly. "Maybe this office has some word of them and maybe it ain't. I'll be over to see Matson when I'm ready."

He walked back to the cell and looked in. "The kid will sleep an hour, huh, maybe two, you say? I'll be back." His boots clattered on the boards as he left the building.

VERD listened to him go. Sam Dillon was not much of a man to fill the empty boots of Milt Stebbin. Small wonder the gray was settling deeper into the face of Sheriff Bert. Then a groan swung Verd back to the cell cot. The boy was looking at him with widened eyes. The shot of morphine Verd had given him to soothe him and ease the pain had had the opposite reaction. It had fanned the weak heart to life. The boy might go out any second.

Verd pressed the hot forehead with his palm. The thin face, dissipated though it was, did not look vicious to him. He saw recognition flicker in the bright eyes.

"I'm finished," the boy whispered. "You can't pull me through this time."

Dr. Hollis sat down. "Death is nothing to fear," he said.

"I ain't afraid. Only—"

"Only what?" Verd was wondering if he should call into the street for someone to fetch Sam Dillon.

"Nothin'," the boy whispered.

"Would you rather talk to Deputy Dillon?" Verd asked.

The lad's lips twitched. "Dillon ain't wantin' me to talk! He's afraid of me. He knows I've seen him ridin' up the back way to Giff Matson's."

Verd Hollis bent close to the boy's whispering lips. "Then talk to me."

The youth was keen as a trapped animal. His strength was gone, his life was slipping away, but his brain was still tapping out warnings. "You're Matson's doctor. You patched up Whistler Enis."



Verd was startled at the hate in the boy's voice. "I'm not Matson's doctor," he said. "I saved Enis, but I'd rather he had died. He killed my best friend."

The boy's bony hands clutched the doctor's wrist. "You mean that, doc?"

"I mean it."

"Will you take a message to my dad?" All the lad's dying strength was behind the request.

"Tell me more. I'll try to play fair with you."

"I got to trust you," the boy gasped. "Whistler Enis give me this shot in the back. He aimed to finish me, but I caught his move and jumped for a boulder. He'd 'a' got me, but the sheriff come down the draw and Enis had to run. We was the go-betweens in the dope ring." He said the last jerkily. "We'd been to the Rio for ten thousand dollars' worth of the stuff. Enis packed the money to pay for it. He didn't pay." The boy's eyes were filled with brooding horror. "Whistler killed the fellow so's he could keep

the ten thousand. Then he was goin' to kill me so's I wouldn't squeal. Besides, he was gettin' scared of me. Of my dad."

He tried to lift himself up, but Verd gently held him back. "My dad, Wolf Wallace, wouldn't dirty his hands with dope runnin'!" Pride burned in the weak tones. "Enis was goin' to kill me 'fore I told my dad about the dope business 'cause he knew Wolf would kill him when he found out. Doc, promise me you'll tell my dad it was Enis that got me . . . in the back. Tell him that . . . I'm sorry I got into that dope runnin' . . . that I tried to get out and Enis threatened to kill me."

Dr. Hollis wiped damp beads of perspiration away from the brow. "Where would I find your dad? There are only rumors of what Wolf Wallace looks like."

"Ride to the Green Eye. A mile north of Hell it is. Ask about for the Wolf." The boy's fingers picked weakly at a silver buckle on the belt that encircled his gaunt middle. "Say you got a silver buckle you want to deliver to the Wolf. He'll do the rest." The dying youth's eyes were glassy now, his breath coming in thin threads. "He always said if I wanted him, to send the buckle along so's he'd know the message was from me."

The Green Eye. Verd Hollis had heard of a roadhouse close to the wildest spot along the border. There were two or three miles in there that was acknowledged to be as close to hell as anything on this earth could be. North of Hell or south of Hell was the way a point in that section was located. The medico took the buckle from the belt and slid it into his pocket.

"The Green Eye," he repeated. "One mile north of Hell. Would that be south of Pallor Mountain?"

"Yes." The boy whispered the word eagerly. "Do you promise, doc? Don't leave Whistler for the sheriff to get. Sheriff Stebbin is too old and slow. Enis would whack him down like he did Milt Stebbin. Dad is the only gunman Whistler Enis fears." Again pride flickered in his eyes.

"How did Enis come to kill Milt Stebbin?" Verd Hollis asked.

But the boy was mumbling half deliriously now. Death was very close. The false strength was dying from his face. "Promise," he whispered.

Verd Hollis realized the lad had forced himself to tell these things, made his slender strength stretch over the task, but now he had finished. He was holding to life for one thing—a promise.

"I'll tell your dad," Dr. Hollis said gently. "Do you hear me?"

The boy's smile flickered. He had heard. Then his strained body relaxed. A moment later he was gone.

Steps sounded out front and a shadow fell across the cell floor. Verd Hollis did not look up from his work of smoothing the frail body and closing the glazed eyes. A key grated in the lock and Deputy Sam Dillon entered.

"Dead, huh?" At first there was satisfaction in his voice, then suspicion flamed. "So the kid was dyin' when I left! You tricked me into leavin' you alone with him so's the law couldn't ask him no questions. I told Sheriff Stebbin it was dangerous callin' you!"

### CHAPTER III

#### FLIGHT INTO THE DESERT

DILLON advanced so swiftly across the cell floor that Hollis had no chance to rise from his position beside the cot. He drew his bag

near and reached inside. Without knowing exactly why, he let his fingers close about the gun he always kept there.

"The dose I gave to quiet him kicked back," he explained. "There are rare cases when a thing like that does happen. The body is stimulated instead of soothed. In this case it made the patient wild."

"What did he say?"

"He thought he was talking to his father. Kept trying to tell him something."

"Hollis, you're lyin'? That kid talked and you're holdin' out on the law!" Dillon's fingers sank to his holster. A threatening light shone in his eyes.

Verd Hollis rose, and as he did so he drew his hand from his bag. It held a gun. He thumbed the hammer back, and its click was loud in the stillness. He knew very well that he was no match for Sam Dillon in a gun bout, but when a weapon is pointed, at full cock, toward a man's heart, it has a disquieting effect. Dillon's eyes burned with anger at the way he had been trapped.

"Come up with the drop, did you?" he snapped. "You win this pot, Hollis, but this play cooks your goose. So far you've worked for Giff Matson and hid it under your profession, but pullin' a gun on the law is another story. Better tell what that kid said."

"Stand out of my way, Dillon."

Sam Dillon sullenly obeyed, for the medico was holding the gun as steady as a surgical knife. "You'll fix up a big lie about what the kid said," he growled, "but it won't buy you nothin'. Not even the sheriff will believe you."

Verd backed out of the cell. "You already know what the boy told me," he said grimly. "You're sweat-

ing blood, Dillon, and you're going to sweat some more."

Sam Dillon made no attempt to follow. The gun trained on his heart kept him nailed to his tracks. His face twisted at the doctor's last words, but he still did not move. Verd Hollis backed from the building into the night.

Once out on the street he hurried toward his home. He had been thinking rapidly, planning. Whistler Enis was a go-between in the dope running. That meant Gifford Matson was probably the big man. From what the boy had said, Matson also had Sam Dillon working for him. They would make a desperate effort to kill any information the son of Wolf Wallace had given out.

It was thirty miles to Salt Creek where Sheriff Bert had gone on a call, Verd knew. The lawman would not return before morning. Somehow the doctor was relieved by that thought. If Sheriff Bert had been in town he would have felt obliged to give him this information he had gained. Yet he did not want to tell Sheriff Bert of the guilt of Whistler Enis. He was going to save that for Wolf Wallace. Wallace was a gunman with a more formidable reputation even than the famous Whistler. Let Wallace take care of the man that had murdered his son. Then Sheriff Bert could close in on the rest of the ring. Verd Hollis was glad it had worked out this way, with Sheriff Bert out of town. It would save the old man from breasting certain death.

**V**ERD entered his home and pulled down the blinds before he struck a light. After turning the keys in both the front and back doors, he hurriedly got himself some supper. It was a long ride to the Green Eye, and he had not eaten

since early morning. He was rather glad to be away at night. Nights were the time when the house was so broodingly still. It was as if the four rooms realized that Flora Stebbin was never coming to lend them her cheer. They had settled to their fate of being just walls, shutting away the sands of the desert and offering bleak protection from the weather.

The medico did not build a fire, but ate what cold things were in the house. He blew out the kitchen lamp and walked to the window, lifting the blind. He did not expect to see anything and inwardly he was amused at his caution. But his caution probably saved his life. He saw a form dodge into the mesquite thicket that came from the back road to his house.

Anger boiled up in Verd Hollis. The stable where he kept his two saddlers was out this way. That skulking form was probably waiting for him to walk down the path. That boy whose eyes he had just closed had been murdered, Milt Stebbin had been ruthlessly killed. What was one more?

He noticed that the feathery branches of the mesquite were whipping in a stiff breeze and the stars were beginning to wink out. Mesa Rock was in for a fall sand storm. He would have seen it coming on if he had not been so busy. A sand storm would mean the town would be deserted tonight. Even the toughest of the desert folk would stay in their homes.

Rapid calculation added up to a single answer. He must get out of the house. It would have been better if he had gone from the jail to the saloon and eaten at the restaurant. He remembered now that Whistler Enis and Gifford Matson were in town. Matson had sent to

the jail for Dillon. Probably the rancher was worried and had wanted to know if the son of Wolf Wallace was going to be able to talk before he died. He had shrewdly covered his summons to Sam Dillon under an inquiry about stolen cattle.

With Enis and Dillon both after his life, staying in Mesa Rock was dangerous, Verd Hollis knew. He could sneak up to the saloon and get protection, but that would mean leaving the job of handling Enis up to Sheriff Bert. He had passed the buck once; he was not doing it again. He and Wolf Wallace would handle things.

He made ready to steal away from the house before the two gunmen could rush him. He thought in terms of two, although he had seen but one skulking form. It was certain, though, that Sam Dillon would be backed by Whistler Enis. The cellar, he decided, would be the best way out. Few houses in Mesa Rock had cellars, and the watchers would probably not be thinking of such an exit. He was lifting the heavy door that led down from the kitchen when a horse pounded up to his back porch.

**F**OR a second Verd had a burst of hope. A patient! And the arrival of a man in this country meant another gun and one held grimly ready to do its work. Then the voice of a boy showed him his hopes had been futile.

"Doc! Doc Hollis! Wake up! It's Wicky Burk. Ma's turrible sick!"

Verd Hollis let the cellar door down softly, called through the wall. "Just a second, Wicky."

Mrs. Burk was expecting a baby. She lived fifteen miles south, out on the desert at the foot of Ribbon Mountains. A month before, her



husband had been killed by a wild horse he was breaking. She had carried on as best she could; there was nothing else to do. Her sixteen-year-old boy had taken over the running of the ranch, and even Wicky, who was only nine, did almost a man's work. Dr. Hollis had promised Mrs. Burk he would come when she sent for him, although he had known there would be no money to pay him.

His problem now was to get rid of the boy, and in such a manner that Enis and Dillon would know he had received no message. "Put your horse in the livery stable, Wicky," he called. "Sleep in the hay there. I'll go out to your mother."

He could hear the lad shuffling his feet. "Can't I put him in your barn, doc, like I did last spring?"

"My barn is crowded tonight. I'll take care of the bill. Run along, Wicky, so I can get my bag packed." Wicky went to his horse and Hollis heard him ride away.

His bag needed little packing. In the dark he found the few extra things he needed. He knew that somehow he must get to Mrs. Burk, and before morning he must get to the Green Eye and find Wolf Wallace. Those two things he was determined to do. Again he softly lifted the cellar door. He felt his way down the dark steps. His gun was in his pocket. He had a rifle in the barn in a scabbard on his saddle.

He had dug the last of the cellar himself, and he had had trouble at the end with the sand rolling in. He had noticed a week ago that it had caved in badly, but he hadn't boarded up the spot. His interest in the cellar was gone. Living alone in a house he had had built for Flora, he had no concern about things. He

found the spot that he had neglected to side up, and he could feel a rush of wind through the opening. He got his shovel and worked silently, listening with strained attention for steps above his head. Enis and Dillon might try rushing the house any moment.

It wasn't much effort to get the hole large enough for his body to slide through. He pushed his bag up and followed it. The sky was blacked out, the wind was beginning to whip up with a vengeance. The dead vine at his kitchen window was flapping and crackling. He began to crawl, keeping his body flat to the sand. He was relieved that there were no windows at the corner of his house that he was now leaving. The men lying in wait for him would naturally be watching doors and windows.

It took him a long time to reach the small barn. He lay a moment outside the closed door, then came to his feet and lifted the wooden latch. Someone might be hiding in the black interior, but waiting wouldn't lessen the risk. The wind was rattling too many loose boards for small sounds to carry. He set his bag down and closed the door, returning the gun he had drawn to his pocket.

His horse, Bally, was nosing his hay, but he lifted his head and heaved a sigh that was close to a groan as Dr. Hollis fitted the saddle to his back. He took the bit without protest. The front was the only way out, so Dr. Hollis led the big bay forth. He was depending on the wind to cover his departure. Once he was gone, Enis and Dillon could not be certain that he was still not about town, waiting for the sheriff to return.

A window shot up in the house as he was turning his stirrup to mount.

Not a stealthy sound, but violent, as though made by someone who had searched a place and found it empty.

"The barn!" came a whisper whose very thinness made it carry. "He couldn't have made it out front!"

Dr. Hollis swung to the saddle and jabbed Bally with the spurs. No use now in trying to cover his movements. A bullet planked into the barn wall on the heels of a barking gun. That must be Whistler Enis, for Dillon would be slower. It seemed only a second until a horse had sprung to life behind him. Enis must have brought the animal with him. Verd swung Bally in a half circle. He would make them think he was trying to break back to Mesa Rock.

**I**T seemed to work. That horse behind him was angling across to shut him away from the next alley. Verd pulled Bally to a trot, then a walk. His chance of escaping the two men lay in making them think he was trying to return to Mesa Rock.

He was soon lost in the blackness. He kept to a slow pace until there was no sound behind him, or blinking lights. Miles spread away to merge into vast sweeps. He rode in the center of it all, a puny dot, night about him like a snug wall. Enis and Dillon, he was confident, would waste time beating the outskirts of Mesa Rock, certain that their victim would try to reach the protection of the lights. They would not realize an urge that could send a man to answer a call when the going endangered his own life.

Bally had strong legs, a wide chest and plenty of desert savvy. He would safely weave his way through prickly-pear patches and coyote holes. Dr. Hollis left the wagon

road and angled across to cut off miles. This storm was not simply a blizzard of sand; lightning was playing through the thick clouds, out-



lining mountains that would keep a man to his course.

Tonight the desert's mood was a vicious one. Its winds were a dirge, its soul was draped in funereal black. Verd Hollis listened to the direful voices it lifted and felt close to the grim monster. It could grind a human life to pulp by the single closing of its jaws, but he did not feel afraid.



*Verd Hollis' business was to save lives, but he was dealing in death when he waded into that chaos of flame and smoke.*

A light burned in the Burk home when he arrived. Bally was sweaty and tired. Verd led him into the lean-to beside the house and closed the door behind him. There was another door leading from the kitchen to the lean-to. A lanky boy with frightened eyes stood there.

"This ain't the barn, doc," he said.

"It'll do, though. Hurry!"

Hollis piled some chunks of wood against the outer door. "It'll do," he said. "Get your rifle, Ben. Stand at the kitchen window and watch the desert when the lightning flashes."

The boy's worried face sharpened. He unhooked the leather straps that held a rifle to the kitchen wall and shoved in a shell. "Ma's pretty bad," he said, walking toward the window.

"I'll take care of your ma if you watch that desert."

The youthful face, aged the last few months by worry, settled to grimness. "I'll watch it, doc, and I'm a prime shot." The last was not boastful. Ben Burk did not ask a single question, but he knew his vigil was not for four-legged beasts.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WOLF

**M**OLLY BURK'S baby was not long in coming. The young doctor's mind centered on his work in the little lamp-lit room. The desert and what menace it might hold was washed from his mind. Molly Burk was his point of concentration. He brought the baby out and laid it on the kitchen table.

"You have a little sister," he said to Ben.

The boy swung about. With all his worry for his mother, he had kept his glance nailed to the black miles reaching away from that window. A gust of relief wheezed from his chest. He listened. His mother was quiet now. Tears swam in his eyes.

"I reckon you've done a good job, doc," he whispered.

"I reckon you haven't done such a bad job yourself, Ben," Verd told him.

The boy's slim shoulders straightened. "I watched her every second," he said. "Nobody has come close, leastwhile not while the lightnin' was playin'—and she's been gettin' mighty frequent."

Verd was closing his bag. "I'll leave my bag here," he said. "Sorry I can't stay with you longer, Ben, but I have—another call." He returned to the bedroom to have another look at his patient and to explain that he had to leave.

He took her work-hardened hand. "You'll be fine now, Molly."

She smiled wanly. "Yes. Thanks, Dr. Hollis. I . . . I've only got my thanks to give you, but—"

"Having friends like you and Ben is enough, Molly. I'll start Wicky home tomorrow. Better get to thinking of a name for your daughter."

Ben was at the door of the bedroom motioning for him to come. Verd smiled at Molly Burk and followed the boy. They went into the lean-to to talk.

"I caught sight of two horsemen," Ben whispered. "Too far away fer a shot."

Hollis was turning Bally about to lead him from the lean-to.

"I'll see to it those fellows hear me leave," he told Ben. "I'll drag them away on my heels so they won't bother you."

The boy rubbed one foot against the leg of his pants. "Calculatin' to outrun 'em, doc?"

"Yes. Their horses have covered as many miles as Bally, and he's had a rest. Ben, if I ride south from here, will I strike a road leading to the Green Eye?"

The boy's mouth flew open. "Heck, no! There ain't nothin' but trails, and dim ones, leadin' to that place. Doc, the Green Eye ain't safe, even fer a medico!"

"Where do I strike the trail?"

The lad's nostrils quivered. "South till you come to Mourner's Peak, then you lean over toward Pallor Mountain. The Green Eye is south of there—a mile north of Hell. Keep bearin' right from Pallor, just a mite, and the lightnin' oughta pick her up."

"I'll find it. If those riders should drop in on you, let them know I was headed for the Green Eye. Answer all their questions."

The boy swallowed. "If you want to hole up here, doc, I'll take one window and you can take the other."

Verd swung to the saddle. "No man could offer more than that, Ben, but I'll ride on."

**H**E headed Bally south at a gallop. The desert was hard-surfaced along the mountains, and the ring of hoofs carried. The wind was picking up dust now, hurling it in handfuls, and the lightning was more vivid. Dr. Hollis heard hoofs spring to a run behind him and knew that Enis and Dillon had taken his trail. They would not bother with the Burk home until they were sure he was silenced.

He kept on south, watching for Mourner's Peak. Once the men behind him were close enough to zip a bullet by his ear. He straightened the big bald-faced bay to a swifter run. Bullets were dismal things when they buzzed in your ears.

He caught the outline of Mourner's Peak and angled across to a line with Pallor Mountain. From there he rode due south. The men behind him must have sensed his destination, for they put on a burst of speed. Verd leaned down along old Bally's sweaty neck. The bay opened up another notch. The country was becoming rough. Enis and Dillon lost him in the dips, and

slowed to be sure he was not doubling back.

In a sweep of rock-ribbed desert, Verd saw the squatty buildings of the Green Eye. They scattered about, as if their builder had realized the foolishness of conserving space. A streak of lightning opened the heavens and grabbed them from the night, spreading them to the eye like sleepy lizards. Then the sky closed and thunder crashed. Echoes rolled back to the mountains. Verd galloped closer and waited for another flash to show him the door. He rode into the shelter of a low, long building and dismounted. Dust wrapped his body in a prickly blanket as he shoved open the door and pushed inside. He almost stumbled, so hard had he pressed against the resisting door.

A dozen or so men were in the big room he entered, and a howl went up for him to get to devil inside and shut the door. Then the howl was swallowed in silence. The Green Eye had spotted him for a stranger.

Verd straightened and walked to the bar. "A straight whiskey," he said. Then: "A bad night."

Perhaps not a man there knew him for Dr. Verd Hollis, but they all recognized him as not belonging at the Green Eye. A crash of thunder drowned Verd's remark about the weather, and the bartender let that go as a reply. He slid the whiskey across the bar. There were other glasses along the boards, but none was lifted as Verd gulped his drink down.

Verd's eyes began a slow canvass of the room. He searched face after face for one that bore some resemblance to the thin features of Dan Wallace, the son of the Wolf. He was half finished his inspection when he realized that antagonism was

crystallizing. He glanced at the bartender. The fellow was leaning on his elbows, regarding him from drooping lids.

"You seem to be looking for someone," he said.

"Yes," Verd replied. "I am looking for—someone."

The bartender's laugh was harsh, repellent. It advised the young medico that any man who came to the Green Eye on such a mission was treading on dangerous ground.

"I am looking for Wolf Wallace," Hollis said.

At that, even the marble face of the bartender was nicked with surprise. It was quickly wiped away. "The Wolf? What makes you think you'll find him here?"

"I was told he'd be at the Green Eye." Verd took up his inspection of faces again. He had heard that the Wolf traveled alone, that he didn't gang up with other gunmen; that he wasn't even regarded as friendly by border traffic. If he were not here tonight, anyone asking for him might find the going rough. It might have been dangerous, asking openly for him, but Verd had to do things rapidly. It would only be minutes until Enis and Dillon arrived. These men who looked at him with such open hostility might all be Enis men. He had taken those chances.

"Who told you that?" The bartender's voice was urgent.

Hollis finished his survey of the room. He had not seen a set of features that reminded him of young Wallace. There was a small man in a distant corner whose face was blurred by the shadow of his hat, and there were two men playing cards whose faces were only lifted briefly. He braced himself to answer the bartender. He might as well

stake everything on the fall of a single card.

"His son told me," he said distinctly.

Evidently, speaking of the Wolf's son was not usual. Somebody laughed, a jeering burst of sound.

"Friendly with the kid, are you?" the bartender asked.

"I'm Dr. Verd Hollis. I was with the boy when he died."

**T**HE bartender leaned another inch across the bar. "We had word from Mesa Rock that the sheriff blowed the kid apart, then slapped him in jail to bleed to death."

Hollis looked up and down the room. "Is Wolf Wallace here?"

A man cursed. "Your gag is an old one. Lots of fellers would like to know what the Wolf looks like. Better find the tracks you come in on, Hollis."

This new voice came from the curling lips of a squat, long-armed man who stepped out in front of Dr. Hollis. "The kid blabbed in his delirium of his dad and the Green Eye, so the sheriff sent you out to try and round up the Wolf. Ain't that right?"

Hollis met the man's eyes. There was a malevolence there greater even than that resting in the eyes of the bartender. And he was playing to an audience. Could he be the Wolf?

The wind was howling, rasping tense nerves. Seconds were slipping away. Hollis stepped close to the bar. He reached into his pocket and brought out the silver buckle Dan Wallace had given him, slithering it down the gleaming surface. He watched the room with a prayer. If this failed, he was lost. The brightly polished buckle caught the light. It lay on the bar, an unknown chal-

lenge. The squat, long-armed man blinked. It was clear he did not understand this move. He waited for an inkling.

The small man in the distant corner stood up and approached the bar. Dr. Hollis had never seen a man glide before. He had heard the term, and had connected it with the smooth cat walk of Whistler Enis. But this man was crossing the room with an effortless grace that made his feet soundless on the dirt floor. He was a scrawny, unimpressive man, but flexible as rubber. Two guns pressed his hips in deadly snugness. He reached out swiftly for the buckle, as though he distrusted having a hand so far separated from a gun.

"I am Wolf Wallace," he said to Dr. Hollis. "Come with me." He led the way to a door opening off from the main room.

## CHAPTER V

### THE WOLF'S GUN CLEAN-UP

**WOLF WALLACE** was turning the silver buckle slowly in his fingers as though the feel of it could still the sorrow in his eyes. He turned it until the polished surface



caught the feeble lamplight. It lay an instant in his smooth palm, more alive than his face. Then he closed his fingers and shut its brilliance away.

"Have you told me everything?" he asked.

"All that Dan told me," Dr. Hollis answered. "Now I want to tell

you the thing he did not mention. The boy was using dope. Maybe you know a hophead, and maybe you only think you do. I've tended a ward full of them. Dan's young body was fighting a battle that has mowed down the strongest. He hadn't lost his love for his dad. To his last breath he spoke of you. He was proud to think you would not stoop to dope running. You thought you had him safely working on a ranch, but Whistler Enis hunted him out and gave him drugs, made a slave out of him. That's the way he handled him—by numbing his brain and will power."

Dr. Hollis leaned closer. "Wallace, I want you to understand that the boy that died in jail did not let you down. He was destroyed by a drug!"

Wolf Wallace's thin face hung behind the shadow of his hat, his mouth was a cruel line. His fingers tightened on the buckle until his knuckles threatened to split the skin. "I understand," he said.

The storm lulled for a second, apparently only to lift two galloping horses from the desert and drop them with a clatter before the Green Eye. The door was kicked open, and a voice bellowed in on the gale.

"Had any visitors on this hell's night?"

Wolf Wallace moved to the door leading to the main room and opened it a crack. He stowed the buckle away, and his two hands sank gunward. Whistler Enis and Sam Dillon were at the bar. Verd Hollis drew his weapon from his pocket.

Wolf Wallace looked at him. "Stay out o' this," he warned. "Enis has friends in yonder." He nodded toward the only window in the room. "Crawl out that and hit for Mesa Rock."

"I'll stay," Hollis whispered. "If I don't get buck ague I may score a hit or two."

Whistler Enis had sensed the air of tension in the room. He swung about with his back to the bar, palm resting against the wooden handle of his gun. "Somebody talk!" he ordered.

Wolf Wallace moved through the side door and was into the room before either Enis or Sam Dillon saw him. "I'll do the talkin'," he said in a voice like cold steel. "Enis, you killed Dan. I wish you had nine lives, so's I could take every one of them." The echoes wavered like ghosts caught in the howling night.

Whistler Enis did not speak, but his thin face blazoned forth his character. A killer. The thirst for blood lay cold and hard in his eyes. He did not speak, for so small a digression might cost him his life. He waited only for an inkling of Wolf Wallace's next move.

Wallace toyed a second. He looked Enis square in the eyes and sweat burst on the tall man's brow. Then the Wolf opened the gates. His two guns answered the pressure of his palms upon them. They were part of his body. His brain thought for them, and they responded to its flash. One second he had been standing, squeezing the sweat from the body of Whistler Enis with his mocking eyes, the next he was triggering with the speed of heat lightning.

**W**HISTLER ENIS fired one shot, then he was toppling forward. His cry died low in his throat, as though life departed so swiftly that it cut into two pieces that last breath.

Sam Dillon had drawn as the fight broke, and so had the squat man with the long arms. The Wolf was

twisting and weaving, carrying the battle with a swiftness that dazed the room. He gave no man that had emptied his holster time to breathe. Few men were constituted for a brand of gun argument like the Wolf was displaying.

Verd Hollis had waded into the chaos of flame and smoke. He shot wildly the first time, for death shrieks and curses were hammering at his nerves. Then he saw Enis fall and Sam Dillon and the squat man closing in. He shot again and spun Dillon about as Wolf Wallace planted a fatal bullet into the squat man. Then Wallace had twisted his scrawny body about and finished Sam Dillon.

But the Wolf was tottering. One gun was gone, the other sinking. He began to fold to the floor. Verd Hollis felt the rush of wind from the opening of the outer door. The broad face of Gifford Matson came from the night. His gun was sliding from its holster, his black eyes were on the slim back of Wolf Wallace. The Wolf came slowly around, sensing danger. Matson laughed at him, for the ace gunman's body was still sinking to the floor.

Verd Hollis had his gun pressed close to his body for steadiness. He had to get Matson before the rancher killed Wallace. Never before had he tried to kill a man. He was surprised that he felt no compunction. He pressed the trigger with utter coolness. Gifford Matson's triumph turned to shocked surprise. He clutched for his heart and fell backward. The wall supported him for a second, then he slid to the floor.

Verd Hollis looked over the room. He pinned his glance to the glassy eyes of the bartender. "Do you want what Matson got?" he asked.

The bartender laid his hands palms



up on the table. "You win," he said hoarsely.

The fight was over. Verd walked through the welter of blood toward Wolf Wallace. The gunman had his back braced against a fallen chair, but his arm was too weak to hold up his gun.

"That was a ringer you pitched at the last, doc," he whispered. His head sank down on his chest and he started to slide from his bracing.

"Bring that small first-aid kit from my saddle pocket," Dr. Hollis shot at the bartender and knelt beside Wallace.

**W**HISTLER ENIS, Gifford Matson and the squat man were dead, but Sam Dillon still lived. When Verd Hollis finished with the Wolf, he gave attention to the deputy. Dillon, a broken man now that the men who employed him were dead, told them the recent purchase of dope had not yet been delivered. They found it in secret pockets on Matson's saddle. Gifford Matson was the power behind the ring, Enis and Dillon worked for him.

Strength was coming back to Wolf Wallace. He asked someone to search Whistler Enis. Oddly enough, the bodies had not been touched except to stack them in a corner. There was ten thousand dollars on Enis, the money Matson had given him for the purchase of the dope—the money Enis had acquired by murder. Wallace said he would take the roll.

It was delivered to him without hesitation. "A nice haul," the bartender said.

"It ain't money I'd spend if I was starvin'," the Wolf whispered. "I'm givin' it to Doc Hollis fer to build a hospital with in Mesa Rock. I want Dan's name carved into one

of the cornerstones." He looked at Verd. "There ain't no way to give this ten thousand back to the man that owns it—he's dead. The money is mine, and I'm givin' it to you fer to build a hospital. Is that defeat-in' justice?"

Verd Hollis smiled. "It seems to me that it's assisting justice, Wallace. I accept the gift in the name of Mesa Rock."

The wind was still blowing when morning came and the dust was driving in brown sheets, but the lightning had passed. The three bodies were loaded on horses so that Verd might take them to Mesa Rock. Sam Dillon was tied to a saddle for the trip. Wallace called the medico to his bed for a last word.

"Bury Dan in that graveyard south of town, close to the mesquite trees," he ordered. "Put up a board with his name and age—seventeen. Don't forget the board, 'cause I'll be lookin' for it."

"I'll do that, Wallace," Dr. Hollis promised. "But Dan's monument is going to be a building of native stone, and I'll see that the folks of Mesa Rock understand about him."

Physical pain was in the Wolf's sunken eyes, but the inner heart pain had lessened. "I'm glad Dan was prideful of me to the last," he said. "I'm on the wrong side of the law, but there's lots of things I won't do."

"That's why Dan was proud of you," Hollis said.

**M**EN stood on corners in Mesa Rock and shook their heads. It was funny how a man so bent on saving a life that he'd patch up a no-good Whistler Enis, would then go after Enis and two more like him and bring them into town with no more fuss than if he had a bundle of sticks on his saddle. It beat all. "Patchin' him up so's he could

risk his neck in a gun battle with him at the Green Eye! That was chokin' on a gnat and swallerin' a haystack," according to Loot Hammer.

"Jest his principles," Aggy Tompkins said sagely. "If it'd been me, I'd 'a' let him die peaceful thet time Milt Stebbin had shot him up, but there's them that craves excitement. Too bad he's wastin' his time doctorin'. He'd make a good sheriff."

"Mesa Rock needs a doctor, too, though," Loot said. "Special with this new hospital they're gonna build. Ain't that spreadin' the dog?"

Sheriff Stebbin sat in his buckskin-thonged chair in his front room. His eyes gleamed proudly when they turned to Verd Hollis. He had listened twice to the story of the fight at the Green Eye.

"I'm glad you squeaked through without any bullets in you," he said gruffly.

"I was too small a fry for them to waste bullets on," Dr. Hollis grinned. "Their business was stoppin' Wolf Wallace."

"And just as Matson was ready to slip in a sweetener you got him. No wonder Mesa Rock wants you to run for sheriff, Verd. Too bad we can't persuade you. Well, while things is in this lull, I'm turnin' in

my badge. Twenty years is enough." He rose. "Guess I'll go uptown and spread the word."

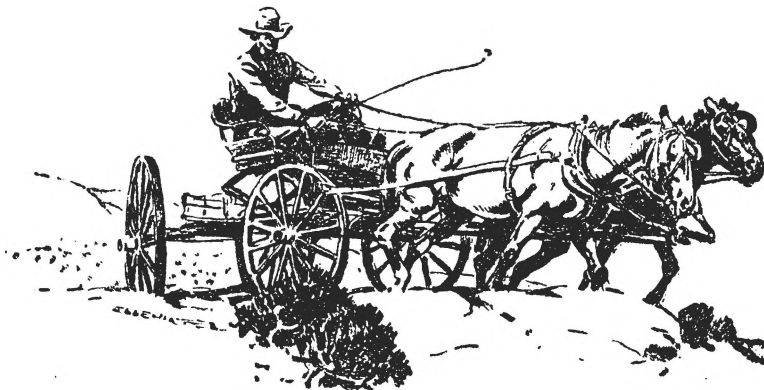
Verd watched him go. Sam Dillon had told them about Milt's death. The young deputy had overheard Whistler Enis and Matson quarreling, had learned what was going on. They had thrown in together to get him. Milt had been faster than they figured, and almost took Enis with him. Would have, die-hards said, but for the work of Dr. Hollis. Verd smiled at that last thought. He could smile now. Mesa Rock understood. Or if it didn't completely understand, at least it didn't hold hard feelings.

Flora Stebbin was at Verd's side. He took her in his arms, and it seemed that life was brighter than it had ever been. Even the old desert was quiet and responsive to the mood of lovers. The wind was still and the air was light and refreshing.

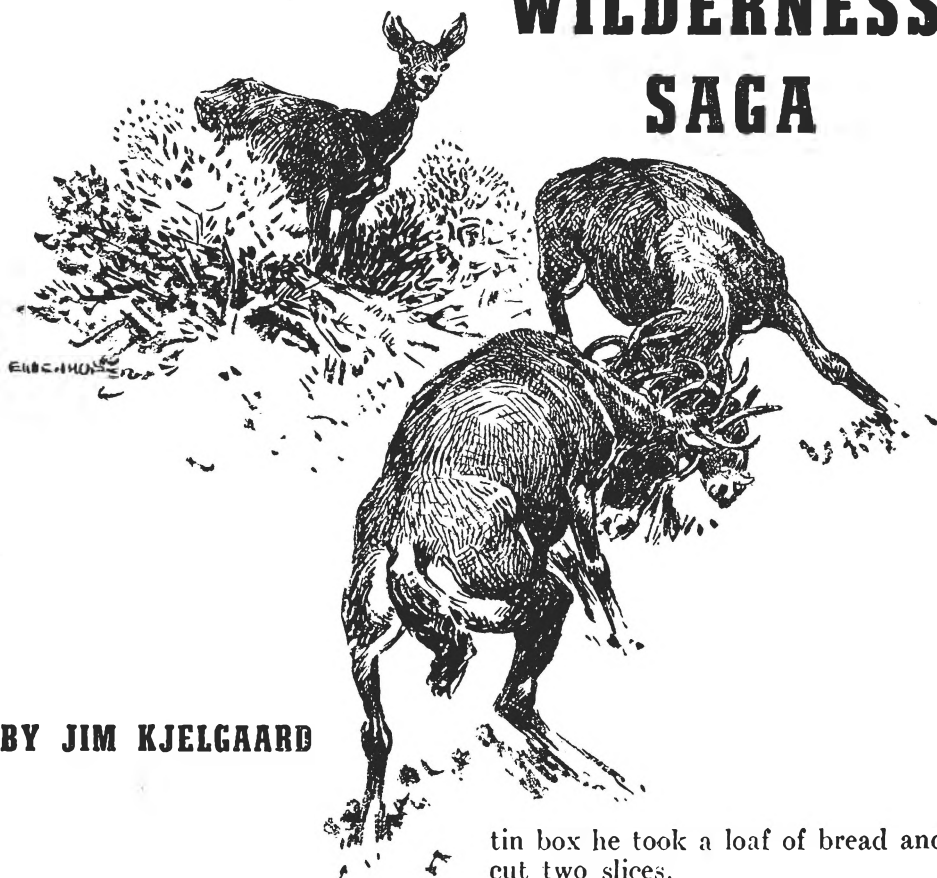
Tears overflowed from Flora's eyes and lay jewellike on her cheeks. "I'll always understand from now on, Verd," she promised again. "I'll never fail you again."

He pressed her closer. There were a few moments of silence, rich as mute music from the desert. Then they began to talk of the new hospital and its needs.

THE END.



# WILDERNESS SAGA



**BY JIM KJELGAARD**

JOE BEAM arose early. The oak tree outside his window rattled a dry branch against the house. The heavy coating of frost on the autumn-withered grasses threw flame back defiantly at the sun peeping over Scandalous Mountain.

Joe descended the stairs and went into the kitchen. When he'd built a fire in the stove, he measured out the two cups of coffee he wanted and set the pot over the fire. From the woodshed behind the house he brought a chunk of pork into the kitchen and with a cleaver he cut off the three pork chops he wanted to eat for breakfast. The cleaver he left lying on the table. From a

tin box he took a loaf of bread and cut two slices.

The pork chops fried, Joe Beam poured a cup of coffee and sat down to eat. He was half finished when Matt Cross came down the stairs into the kitchen.

Without seeming to, Joe Beam watched him, murder in his eyes. Matt had been his partner since long before the two had bought this little farm, but it had taken Joe twenty-one years to find out exactly what kind of a double-crossing, knife-in-the-back yellow-belly Matt was.

For the past year Joe had been sparking Lena Danvers, twenty-year-old daughter of Joe's and Matt's nearest neighbor. Six months ago, Matt had declared himself in.

At first Joe had been amused by the competition provided by Matt and the big-toothed, pimply-faced Mallon kid from over Banton way whose chief assets were a rattletrap car and an amazing talent for spitting between his teeth. The Mallon kid took Lena dancing once in awhile, and that was all right with Joe. Lena was young, had a right to dance, and Joe had never been able to see himself on a dance floor. Lena had given some time to Matt "because, Joe, I simply can't be rude to him."

Joe had bought Lena everything she had asked for. He'd have won her, too, if Matt had played fair. Joe decided now that Matt Cross always had had a glib, oily, lying tongue. He had strung Joe along and last night had said that he had given Lena a diamond and they were going to be married Tuesday.

It wouldn't even be so bad if Lena hadn't promised to marry Joe first. Matt had taken her right out from under his nose, stolen her like the low-down pack rat he was. Still boiling inwardly, Joe kept his eyes on his partner. Just let him start something—anything.

Matt did. His face sullen and set, he went to the stove and picked up the coffeepot. He shook it, and started to the sink with it. Joe's voice was low, heavy with the rage he felt.

"That's mine," he growled.

As though he did not know that, Joe was in the room, Matt Cross continued to the sink, tipped the coffeepot upside down, and spilled the coffee into the sink.

"Why, you—"

Joe's voice was the growl of an outraged St. Bernard. Pushing the table back with his hands, he leaped from the chair. Matt Cross, his back against the sink and his

right leg bent slightly, stood to meet him. Joe swung. Matt staggered three paces sideways and came back fighting. Matt lifted one from the floor and Joe saw lights and rainbows.

He shook his head, backed like a bull that has been struck a glancing blow by the butcher's maul, and muttered angrily in his throat. Then he leaped at Matt.

They met in the middle of the floor. Matt Cross caught Joe's right arm in his left. With his right arm he parried the blow Joe aimed at his jaw. For a moment they stood, red eye to red eye, nostrils distended and jaws tight. Each felt the hot breath of the other in his face. Neither could gain an inch.

With a sudden forward plunge and a backward jerk, Joe Beam freed his right arm from Matt's grasp. He brought it back, snapped it forward, and Matt Cross went spinning across the floor. Joe Beam shook his head to clear it. He saw Matt crash into the table, tumble to the floor with it. And he saw him come up with the cleaver in his hand.

The cleaver came whirling across the room. Joe threw himself down a split second before the cleaver struck the wall and hung there quivering.

Joe got up again, the fiery rage he had known given way to a clear and soul-chilling anger. Matt crouched against the wall, his hands behind his back, his jaw slack, and his face a little white. Joe did not see that. But suddenly he knew that he must not do murder here this morning. Anger urged him back into the fight. Reason told him to exercise judgment.

"I'm going out," he said, his voice deadly calm. "I'll be back tonight. If you're here, I'll kill you."

WITH a .30-30 in his hand and the familiar feel of frosty leaves under his feet, Joe felt better both physically and mentally. Always the hunter, he had in times of stress always sought the solitude of the hills to work out his most pressing problems. And always before he had walked or hunted until he was able to find a reasonable solution to anything he had to face.

But there was no answer to this, no alternative save the one already offered Matt. The acid hate that had been consuming Joe since last night still burned. Never again, Joe felt as he left the house, would he be able to stand a sight of Matt. And he knew that, if Matt was there when he returned, he would make good his promise and kill him.

They had been partners ever since Matt had been twenty-two years old and Joe twenty-five, and both had been teamsters hauling wood off Scandalous Mountain. They had had their ups and downs since then, had fought each other some and fought for each other oftener, but never before had there been anything like this. A fresh sea of anger washed through Joe. Lena Danvers had promised to marry him. Matt had stolen her right out from under his nose. Then in a fair fight Matt had tried to kill him with a cleaver.

By the time he reached the top of Scandalous Mountain, Joe felt better about the whole thing. There was something about the woods, especially the hunting woods in fall, that was very comforting to a man. He could lose all the rest of the world, and he need not feel hopeless as long as there were woods to walk in. He was still grimly determined never to have another thing to do with Matt—if Matt took his advice and got out while the getting was good. Meanwhile he had

a day and night as well put it to good use by getting a buck.

Joe swerved around the rim of Scandalous Mountain to a wide and almost treeless gully where a couple of nice bucks had been hanging out. The gully was not more than a hundred and fifty yards across at its widest, just nice shooting range.

Carefully he started up one side of the gully looking across at the other. After a bit he saw a deer feeding with its head down. Joe whistled. The deer raised its head and went on placidly chewing grass. Joe snorted, and continued up the gully. The deer was a buck, but a runty little thing with one crooked horn.

At the head of the gully Joe stopped and sat down behind a stump. There was a bubbling spring in the gully below him, and the two big bucks drank there. About three in the afternoon they'd be down from the thickets where they spent the day. Joe stretched out behind the stump, letting the fall sun warm his body. Animals now, they made sense. All summer the two big bucks had hung around the gully, just resting, and eating, and growing their new horns. They wouldn't double-cross one another the way his sneaking partner had two-timed him. By and by, worn out with tossing wakefully all the night before, Joe slept.

The sun was much lower when he woke up and, being a hunter, Joe sat up carefully. Directly across from him stood a mighty buck. It was a twelve-point with polished antlers and swelling neck, one of the two big bucks that had spent the summer in the gully. He was a splendid animal, sleek, healthy, and in the prime of condition.

Joe slid the rifle barrel across the

stump and drew a bead on the buck. He couldn't miss. But he hesitated and took the gun down again. Staring intently, the buck was looking toward the brush on the rim of the gully.

Joe followed its gaze, for the buck couldn't get away. Even if it started to run he could kill it before it could get back into the brush. The brush on the rim of the gully moved a little and a second later the other buck, a ten-point with horns fully as big as those of the twelve-point, stepped into view. There was hardly five pounds difference between the two bucks and both were in the pink of condition.

Then a small doe walked out of the brush to stand beside the ten-point. The twelve-point stretched his muzzle, a soft call sounding from his throat. With dainty, mincing steps the little doe trotted down the gully's side to sniff noses with the twelve-point. The ten-point brushed the ground with his horns and bawled angrily. The twelve-point walked a few steps toward him and stood with front feet braced. Tail over her back, the little doe ran a few nervous steps and turned to watch. And the ten-point came leaping down the hill.

With a clashing and rattling of horns the two bucks came together. At first they fenced lightly, leaping in and out, probing for an opening where they might do damage without receiving any. Then, as they got warmed up, the fight was on in earnest.

The twelve-point backed twenty paces, and came crashing ahead to meet the ten-point's ready antlers. For an hour they pushed and shoved with neither gaining nor giving much ground. They were evenly matched. Tongues out, they heaved and strained.

Leaping high, the ten-point strove to batter down his enemy with raking front hoofs. But the twelve-point reared on his hind legs to meet the attack. They went into another shoving match that lasted a half hour more. Then the twelve-point withdrew for another charge.

Like a bullet he shot himself across at the ten-point, who met him with lowered head. They came together, and the two points on the ends of the ten-point's antlers folded over the first crotch of the twelve-point's. They strained backward, and flung themselves hysterically about trying to break the deadlocked horns. But the harder they strained, the tighter became the lock. Finally on their knees with tongues hanging from the sides of their mouths, they faced each other. Neither could get up again.

Joe Beam grunted, took good aim, and pressed the trigger. When the bullet crashed through their locked antlers the two big bucks lay a moment more, then got up and together trotted back into the brush. But the sound of the gun awakened more than echoes. Joe saw motion two hundred yards down the gully and he looked that way. The runty buck with the crooked horn he had seen earlier in the day was leaping up the side of the gully.

The little doe ran with him.

**I**T was nearly dark when Joe got home. He entered the vacant house and built a fire in the kitchen stove. He scrubbed a half dozen big potatoes and put them in the oven to bake, then he went into the woodshed to bring out a piece of prime beef. Carefully he sliced off two big steaks, one a trifle thicker than the other. Old Matt liked his steak thick and medium rare. When the potatoes were nearly baked, Joe

put the steaks in the oven to broil. He made a pot of coffee—six cups. Matt liked plenty of coffee with his supper.

Joe set the table carefully. He had always thought that a nice-looking table went a long way toward making a nice meal. The steaks, done to a turn, were taken from the oven and placed on a hot platter with plenty of melted butter running over them. Joe put the potatoes on a plate and poured two cups of coffee, then he went to the door.

"Oh, Matt!" he yelled.

From the barn Matt Cross answered, "Yes?"

"Supper's ready. Better get it while it's hot."

More than a little sheepish, and still silent, Matt came in from the barn. He scrubbed his hands at the kitchen sink and took his place, his eyes cast down at the table. His face was ashamed and troubled when he looked up at Joe.

"Joe," he said awkwardly, "I just

dunno what could have come over me. When I threw that cleaver I just saw red. I—"

"What cleaver?" Joe Beam asked. He turned and looked at the wall. It was freshly painted and a gaudy calendar hung over the scar the cleaver had made. "I don't know nothin' about no cleaver."

"Well," Matt said uncomfortably, "you said you wanted me to leave. But I thought I'd hang around long enough to tell you—"

"Don't tell me," Joe cut in. "She run off with that pimply-faced Mallon kid. An' I don't remember askin' you to leave."

A slow grin spread over Matt's face. "Old horny toad," he said affectionately. "How did you guess?"

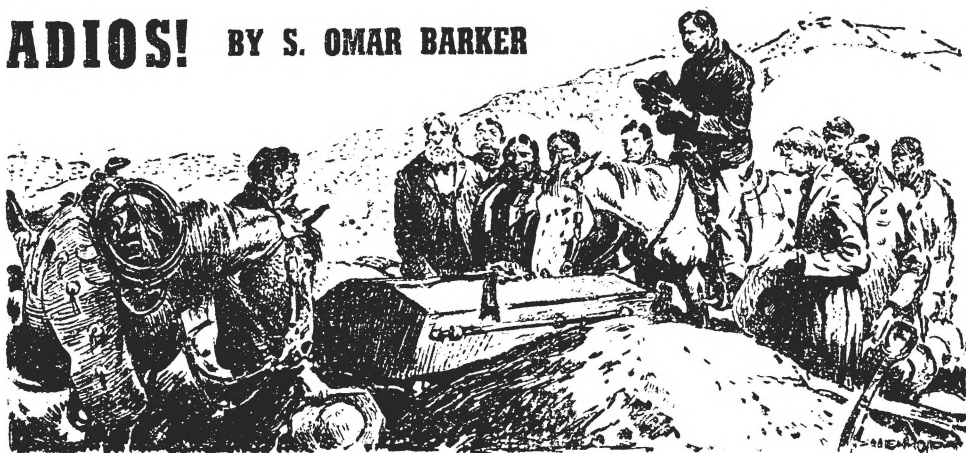
"I didn't guess," Joe said, his mouth full of steak. "I saw it happen. Now eat your supper before it gets cold and tonight I'll beat you at cribbage."

Matt Cross said, "Like heck you will."

THE END



# ADIOS! BY S. OMAR BARKER



In a valley high up in the mountains,  
With the wind like a knife on their cheeks,  
They carried ol' Mac to his resting  
When winter lay white on the peaks.

Behind come his fav'rite old pony,  
Led slow by an old Spanish friend.  
The saddle an' chaps, they was empty—  
Ol' Mac's trail had come to its end.

There wasn't no fancy procession,  
Just cowboys an' Indians an' such,  
Plain men of the saddle an' mountains,  
An' nobody said very much.

Ol' Dough-belly Price done the preachin',  
Astride of his cream-yaller hoss.  
All he said was a few words an' simple  
About Mac, the old wagon boss:

"We've not come slicked up for a show-off,  
An' we've not brought no preacher to pray.  
My words won't be fancy ones, neither,  
For Mac wouldn't want it that way.

"We all of us knew Mac McMullen—  
I couldn't say more if I'd try.  
He was one of our own, but he's left us.  
We've gathered to tell him good-by.

"The range that he rode was a wide one,  
His friendships was many an' deep.  
So now that his saddle is empty,  
God rest him at ease in his sleep!"

'Twas thus near old Taos in the mountains,  
With white winter peaks looming close,  
They carried a man to his resting,  
An' quietly said, "Adios!"

*Author's note: This is the true account of a funeral, simple, dignified and touching, held at Taos, N. M., in January, 1939. Mac McMullen was hunter, trapper, mountaineer as well as old-time cowboy. Dough-belly Price is a ranchman at Eaglecrest, formerly a star bulldogger and bronc rider of the rodeos as well as working cowhand.*



# RANGE HOG'S RANSOM



BY  
**WILFRED  
McCORMICK**

It was the sort of morning that Hap Doak liked best. Not the weather, though Carrizo Canyon was sunny and warm with the feel of spring. What made him feel good was the chance the morning had provided to indulge in his favorite pastime: Putting a firecracker under the tail of burly, mean-tempered Bronc Willdew, range boss of the arrogant Two Squares outfit. Bronc wasn't likely to find it out until afternoon, but when he did he'd come unshucked with a fury that would be the envy of a sore-eyed bull in a red barn!

So Hap Doak was even happier than usual. A gay whistle poured from his lean, freckled young face as he jumped over the corral fence, grabbing up a pitchfork to throw his little roan pony a block of hay.

A clatter of gravel, sounding above

the rush of nearby Carrizo stream, brought him around swiftly. A broomstick could have lopped off both of his bulging eyes at what he saw.

Two men had ridden into the yard. And already they separated him from the house—where his revolver still hung on a nail above the kitchen table. That was Hap's first thought as he recognized Bronc Willdew. The burly-shouldered foreman wore his flat-brimmed black hat low, as usual, on his square, boxlike head. His right arm, bulging his jacket sleeve like a young tree trunk, dangled just behind his hip. The man with him was Sheriff Logan Cartwright, a

gangling six-footer, and one of the most feared lawmen between Montana and the Brazos.

Hap wasn't ready to see Bronc Willdew. And that went double for the sheriff! So he watched them come with the uneasiness a hound pup might show at getting caught in a chicken coop.

What he had done that morning hadn't been a crime, exactly. Just another of his "back-handed" slaps at the powerful, bulldozing outfit that had sought for three years to bluff him away from his little spread on the Carrizo.

That morning, shortly before day-break, a loose herd of sheep had straggled down the canyon from Shep Tucker's place above. On his way out to shut the gate, an idea had suddenly caught on with Hap.

Grinning from one ear to the other, the young cowpoke had promptly bunched the sheep and driven them a mile farther down to the Two Squares. He had turned the whole herd, some seven or eight hundred head, into Bronc Willdew's choicest pasture. They'd be discovered within a few hours, he figured, and the chief harm would be that done to Bronc's temper.

"Howdy, sheriff!" called Hap, as the pair drew rein just outside the corral.

The officer nodded. Then, "I ain't alone," he reminded, indicating his burly companion.

"No," grinned Hap. "A man's never alone, when he can ride alongside a nag like that!" Still pointedly ignoring Willdew, he leaned his arms up over the fence to stand gazing admiringly at the restless dun which the Two Squares foreman rode.

There was an awkward hush for several seconds.

"You two mossyhorns ought to bury the hatchet," Sheriff Cart-

wright growled presently.

"Suits me!" snapped Bronc Willdew, glaring down at Hap, "I'd sure like to bury a hatchet—right between his eyes!"

Hap grinned wryly. "I ain't wearin' any sign that says, 'Keep off!'" he remarked. "Any time you feel lucky—"

**T**HE sheriff whacked a riding quirt noisily down against the corral boards. "Cut it out!" he roared. "You two hombres can save your bad manners till sometime when there ain't company around! Hap," he continued, more calmly, "we dropped past here on a little business."

So it had come! They were going to ask him about those sheep. Hap Doak kept the grin on his face, but inwardly he grew tense. "Fire away!" he nodded to the sheriff. "I'll try to answer straight. But, remember, a man's allowed three lies a day!"

"Not if I catch him in the first one," Cartwright said grimly. He leaned forward, his stern blue eyes boring straight into Hap. "Have you been up to Shep Tucker's place lately?" he asked.

Hap shook his head. "Not in a month," he replied truthfully.

"Have any of your stock been in Shep's pasture?" the sheriff continued.

"Why, no," said Hap, wondering. "Is something wrong?"

"Plenty!" Cartwright tilted back his hat, drawing a brown flannel sleeve across his leathery forehead. "Shep Tucker's range is infected with the foot an' mouth disease," he explained soberly. "The thing spreads fast, an' there's only one way to stamp it out. We're on our way up, now, to kill off his stock an' burn his grass."

"The foot an' mouth!" Hap mut-

tered dully. A new worry was prodding him. He had driven Shep Tucker's herd on down to the Two Squares pasture! That was nearly four hours ago. By now they would be scattered all over the place and miles of fine grass land would be ruined!

After all he had taken from Bronc Willdew and the Two Squares, Hap Doak wouldn't have been human if he didn't derive some satisfaction from seeing them suffer some grief.

But this wasn't his way of fighting them. This was too much like sticking a man in the back. For the first time in his happy-go-lucky twenty-five years, Hap Doak had to battle to keep a grin on his face.

With an effort he hoisted sobering gray eyes to the sheriff. "Did you gents ride up the main canyon trail?" he asked, wondering why they hadn't noticed the scattered herd, or at least the chopped tracks in the road.

"No," the sheriff answered. "We came over the ridge. We'd hurried across to Bluewater Gap, you see, in order to meet the stage Judge Strachan was riding on. He gave us an order to destroy the Tucker property, so we took the shortest trail back into this canyon. But we've got to be goin'!" he added hastily, glancing at Bronc Willdew.

Bronc gouged his pony cruelly, then whirled the excited dun around so that he could throw a warped grin back toward Hap.

"Too damned bad you ain't one of Tucker's sheep!" he declared. "I'd like to put you out of your misery!"

"Come on, Bronc!" the sheriff interposed hastily. "You can save them bad manners for some other time."

"It ain't bad manners," sneered Bronc, "for a white man to speak sharp to a no-account nester!"

With one vaulting leap, Hap

cleared the fence. He started for Bronc's horse, intending to grab the bridle reins and haul the fellow down from the saddle. But Bronc wheeled the spirited dun barely in time, set spurs to its sides, and lunged out of reach. At a signal from the sheriff, they galloped off, Bronc's harsh laugh trailing back to Hap.

"I'll settle with you some day—for keeps!" he called, above the sounds of clattering gravel. "You'd better drift, nester!"

**F**OR a moment, Hap was savagely glad that he had turned the Tucker sheep into his unloved neighbor's pasture. It would serve that high-and-mighty rooster right! After all, the Two Squares had it coming to them. He remembered the fall they had burned his feed stack. And the morning he had gone out to find that one of his windmills had been chopped down during the night. And the dozens of times when scrub bulls had been secretly driven into the pasture with his thoroughbred Herefords.

Of late, Hap had been retaliating with numerous little tricks of his own. But never would he have knowingly infected their grass with the "foot and mouth," the most dreaded disease of the rangeland. Now he had them, as the saying goes, "stretched over a barrel with a paddle in both hands!" Their range, like Shep Tucker's, would have to be burned, and any exposed stock killed and buried. And it would serve them right!

But Hap's savage mood was short-lived. This wasn't any way to fight. Not even a cur like Bronc Willdew. After all, Bronc walked on his hind legs. That made him a man. As such, Hap Doak would fight him. But in the meantime, Hap's inborn sense of fair play warned that he'd have

to correct the terrible wrong that he had done the Two Squares by ruining their pasture.

What could he do? He didn't have any money. Only the week before, he had used all his small savings to pay off the final mortgage on his place. Everything was in the clear now, and with the coming of warm weather he had expected to use his ranch as security for the purchase of two hundred cows with calves.

He could, of course, loan the Two Squares his range until their own had grown out again. The thought stabbed him clear to the quick. And yet, it was the only way he could atone for the damage he had done. Yes, he resolved dully, he would do that. Get a job himself somewhere for the year, returning next spring to take over his ranch again. They would graze it to the limit, he realized, maybe even get a herd of sheep for that season, but he'd have to grit his teeth and swallow the medicine. After all, he'd gotten into this jam himself. It was up to him, alone, to pay the penalty.

Hap Doak was far different from his usual grinning self as he walked slowly toward his little three-room ranchhouse. He'd been mighty proud of that house—built slowly and painstakingly with his own hands. It would never look the same again after the Two Squares occupied it. Bronc Willdew would use it for a line camp, and after the first week or so it would look like a pigpen, with unscrubbed floors and dirty dishes left to collect grease. Two years before, the owners of the Two Squares outfit had tried to force Hap to lease them his house and land. Hap could have used the money then, five hundred dollars in cash, but the thought of Bronc Willdew camping in his little home had soured him on the whole idea.

Come to think of it, that lease was still in his trunk! It was all made out in detail, awaiting only his signature. He'd laughed away the proposition when it was made. Now, he decided sadly, the simplest way to handle the situation was to sign over those same papers and leave them in the mailbox for Bronc to pick up as he returned from Shep Tucker's. That way he wouldn't have to face Bronc.

It took Hap nearly an hour to get his personal stuff sorted, and the pony ready. He got out the lease and signed it, crossing out the stipulated five hundred dollars the Two Squares was to have paid him, and writing in its place a phrase he had heard the lawyers use, "valuable considerations already in hand paid." That would make it an even swap. Bronc's outfit would get unrestricted use of his place for a year, in return from his unintentional destruction of their pasture.

**H**AP left the signed lease with a brief note in his mailbox, setting up a placard in the middle of the road that would direct Bronc to it. This done, he tied his slicker roll and few belongings behind his saddle, swung astride, and jogged off down the canyon. He tried not to look back—and didn't, until he had reached the canyon bend. Then one quick look brought a lump to his throat. It nearly changed his mind for him, but he fought down the impulse.

He was careful not to ride in the same dusty trail the sheep had taken, lest his pony be exposed to the highly contagious disease. But when he reached the gate where he had turned the sheep into the Two Squares pasture, he reined to a halt. As he had expected, the sheep were scattered over the canyon bottom as far as he

could see, but some eight or ten were fairly close to the road. He studied these curiously. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with them. Not yet, anyhow.

He rode farther down, still failing to note any sign of the dread disease. Usually, an animal's mouth would be sore and slobbery with ulcers, contracted from licking their itching hoofs; and invariably they'd be making a dull, clicking noise with their tongues against their palates.

Hap couldn't understand, unless these particular sheep had not yet taken the malady. They certainly belonged to Shep Tucker. The brands were plain and, besides, nobody else in the canyon owned sheep.

Maybe the sheriff was mistaken? Maybe he was going up to the Tucker place on hearsay. Come to think of it, he *hadn't* mentioned examining the herd himself!

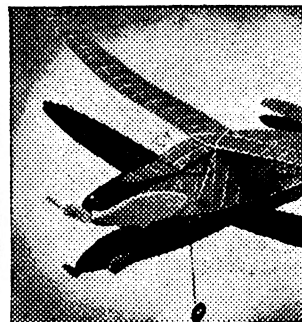
Hap sprang down from the saddle. He tied the pony to a scrub cedar, walked rapidly over to the pasture, and climbed inside. He covered a lot of ground in the next forty-five minutes, but failed to find a single case of disease among the sheep. The animals were all eating peacefully, and there was not the slightest sign of an ailment in any that he saw. There had been a mistake, all right! Hap was willing to gamble that the Two Squares pasture wasn't hurt.

He ran back to his pony at top speed. Breathless, both from the run and from new hope, he vaulted into the saddle without even touching a stirrup. He wheeled the pony on its hind legs, dug in his heels, and tore back up the canyon at a high lope. If he could only beat Bronc Willdev to that mailbox now, and tear up the lease.

But he couldn't. Half a mile below the house, he met Sheriff Cartwright. The lawman was alone.

"You act like your shirt tail was

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afire!" Cartwright said curiously. "What's the hurry?"

"Did you find Tucker's sheep?" demanded Hap.

"Yes. An' a nasty job over with," the sheriff replied. "I allus hate to—"

"But I just saw them, down in Bronc Willdew's pasture!" protested Hap.

The sheriff smiled wearily, shaking his head. "That wasn't the main herd," he explained. "Those were just some that Shep had been grazin' on his east pasture. It was his west pasture that was contaminated. Bein' short of cash, he sold those seven hundred head to Bronc Willdew. He turned them loose this mornin', knowin' they'd wander straight down to Bronc's place."

Hap nearly fell out of the saddle. So that was it! Instead of putting the firecracker under Bronc Willdew's tail, as he had thought at the time, he had actually done the Two Square foreman a favor. A favor—at the cost of his ranch!

"Where's Bronc now?" he asked the sheriff.

"He stopped off at your house," the officer replied. "Said he had a note from you, apologizin' for all past troubles, an' givin' him a lease on the ranch for this comin' year."

A thought suddenly occurred to Hap. "Did you read that lease yourself?" he asked.

"No. Bronc just told me what it was. Is somethin' wrong?"

"Maybe not." Hap pulled his sombrero down tight, getting ready to ride on. "I'll see you later," he said tersely.

"Wait a minute, youngster!" Cartwright reached out and caught Hap's bridle reins. "I know there's been bad blood between you an' the Two Squares," he said, his boring blue eyes seeming to look clear through Hap. "If there's somethin' really

wrong, I demand to know what it is."

Hap flashed the sheriff his old-time grin. "Nothin' that we can't settle ourselves," he said. "See you later!"

**H**E gave the pony its head, dashing on up the canyon in a swirl of dust and gravel. Smoke curled upward from the chimney of his house, and the front door was open. Hap entered without knocking.

The kitchen was already showing signs of Bronc Willdew's occupancy. In building the fire, Bronc had spilled ashes on the floor, then tracked through them several times. He had sliced off a generous hunk of steak from the hind quarter Hap had left in the spare room, and the greasy, bloody remnants still smeared the table.

"Bronc!" Hap called sharply. When there was no reply he went into the living room. An angry exclamation broke from his lips when he noticed Bronc's sweaty saddle and blanket dumped in the center of the floor. Then he saw something else—something that flared him to quivering rage. His mother's picture had been tossed in a corner, face up, the glass broken. Too stunned for the moment to move, Hap stood gazing down in horror.

A boot heel crunched the ashes on the kitchen floor behind him. Hap whirled, staring into the sneering face of Bronc Willdew, who had evidently just come in from the corral.

"This place is under my say-so now," the foreman rasped. "What're you doin' back here?"

"Two things," said Hap. "For one, I'm goin' to get that lease an' tear it up before anybody sees it!"

"An' the other?"

"The other," Hap said slowly, looking the big man straight in the

eye, "is to whip the daylight's plumb out of you!"

Bronc's huge right hand was already caressing the butt of his six-shooter. Now his fingers closed about it.

"When do you aim to start?" he asked mockingly.

He slipped the gun from its holster, brandishing it in front of him, the snout leveled in the general direction of Hap's midriff. Hap saw that he had let rash anger trap him. The slightest move toward his own gun, now, would bring instant crashing death. Bronc was rated a good shot. And at this close range, he couldn't miss.

"I've always wanted this ranch of yours," Bronc was gloating. "Now that you got scared an' decided to give me a lease on paper, I'll never give it back. The Two Squares can go to the devil! I'm keepin' the place for myself."

Hap managed a weak grin. "It sort o' looks like you hold the cards!" he admitted. His roving, desperate glance took note of the saddle and blanket on the floor between them. Not much to fight a man with, but if the chance came—"Don't forget," he went on casually, "that a lease ain't a deed. As long as I'm alive—"

"I've figured on that, too!" Bronc cut in triumphantly. "So I aim to fill your damned belly full of lead! With a signed lease to show 'em, any jury in the world would turn me loose for a killin' in my own house. Put up your hands!" He motioned with the gun. "I ain't takin' any chances."

**H**AP started both hands slowly upward. As he did so, he shifted his weight onto his left leg. "If you—" he drawled with seeming laziness.

His right foot threshed out, kicking the saddle blanket viciously forward and up. The move was fast. Caught completely by surprise, Bronc Willdew went back on his heels, fighting to throw the blanket from his face. Meanwhile, Hap's gun hand had swooped down. His six-shooter cleared leather, just as Willdew hurled the blanket aside. Two crashing, jarring explosions rocked the house. Hap felt the lead of Bronc's shot scorch past his cheek, but had the satisfaction of seeing that his own bullet had sent his opponent's gun spinning across the room. Bronc was threshing around, wringing his numbed hand and fogging the air with curses.

Grimly, Hap holstered his gun. Just as grimly, he stepped suddenly forward. He slapped Bronc across the mouth, and as the foreman whirled to charge him, he crossed with a right. The blow carried steam and it landed full on Bronc's nose. Bronc snarled a curse, swinging a looping fist that would have downed a bull, had it found its mark squarely. But Hap's partial side-step saved his face, the blow catching him on the shoulder instead. It spun him halfway around. Before he could get straight, Bronc hit him again.

Hap tumbled backward the length of the room, then lost his balance and stumbled to his knees against the wall. Bronc lunged at him with the savagery of a killer grizzly, both massive fists poised for the final smash. But his anger made him overconfident. His blind rush carried him to the wall, all right, but in the meantime the nimble Hap had squirmed aside and leaped to his feet. Then, as Bronc turned around, Hap stepped into him—first with a left, then with every ounce of long-pent-up fury behind a right that measured Bronc full length on his

back. The big fellow groaned, but made no effort to get up.

Hap dropped beside Bronc. His fingers tore into the foreman's grimy jacket front. "Where's that lease?" he demanded.

"*Let him alone!*" The words, cracking like pistol blasts, had come from the kitchen.

Hap glanced around. Sheriff Logan Cartwright stood crunched in the doorway, a revolver in his hand.

"Get away from him!" the sheriff commanded. "I was right when I smelled trouble, an' decided to ride back here."

Hap straightened to his feet.

"Are you hurt much?" the sheriff asked Bronc Willdew.

Bronc sat up. "No," he growled, rubbing his bruised chin. "But I de-hand that you arrest this nester for tresspassin' an' attempted murder!"

"What have you to say to this?" the sheriff asked Hap.

The young rancher explained rapidly about his mistake that morning with the sheep, and how he had tried to right a wrong by signing over his place for a year. But now that he had learned the pasture wasn't harmed, he intended to regain his ranch.

"That don't make any difference!" Bronc Willdew argued hotly. "I've got a paper that any court on earth will recognize. The place is mine, in black an' white!"

"Let me see your paper," the sheriff said.

Bronc handed it over.

Sheriff Cartwright studied the document for a moment, then glanced at Hap, shaking his head. "It looks to me like Bronc has got the law on his side," he said soberly.

"You're plumb right I have!" Bronc snarled. "An' what's more, I demand that you arrest him!"

The sheriff hesitated briefly. Then he nodded. "I sure hate to do it, Hap," he said, "but I reckon Bronc is right there, too. The courts will allow that you entered another man's house an' committed a felony. I'll have to take you to jail. Of course, the judge may—"

"Wait!" Hap's eyes began to shine like twin balls of fire. He pointed to the paper which the sheriff still held. "Look at the date on that!" he directed excitedly.

The sheriff followed his motion, then shook his head. "It's dated last year," he admitted, "but that's minor. I don't reckon the court would throw it out on them grounds."

"That ain't what I mean! Read the contract itself!" Hap urged. "It says that the Two Squares is to have unrestricted use of my place from January 1st, *last* year, to January 1st, *this* year. Well, this is March! That lease ain't worth the match to burn it up!"

For only an instant longer did Sheriff Cartwright hesitate. Then his lined old face broke into a grin of relief.

"Good work, Hap!" he said. "Willdew, you better saddle up and get moving." As the Two Squares foreman strode sullenly out of the room, Cartwright turned back to Hap.

"The next time Willdew, or any of his rotten outfit, makes a move against you we'll have every resource of the law on hand to help you out. But from the looks of things," he added, chuckling, "you can take pretty good care of yourself without any help!"





# Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

BACK hundreds of years ago when the old muzzle-loading gun was just beginning to enjoy life as a satisfactory weapon, someone figured out that if you put some form of sighting equipment both front and rear on the barrel of a gun you could point it a little bit better.

Naturally, the first sights on a gun were very crude and merely consisted of a couple of marks lined up between the front and rear of the barrel of the gun. They didn't need to be very accurate in those days since the guns themselves were not capable of doing much along those lines.

Then came the so-called open sight, which, you may be surprised to learn, has been in use for over three hundred years.

During the latter part of the past century, the first practical idea of a sight came into view with the so-called peep variety. A peep sight is nothing more nor less than a small hole in the rear sight. You look through it and line up the front sight with the target.

During the last twenty years I've been told by readers that they can't use a peep sight since it takes them

too long to line up the front and rear sights.

This is a mistake on their part. One doesn't line up a peep sight with the front sight. You look through it and forget the rear sight. The eye automatically lines this up. You can readily test this by forming the thumb and forefinger of one hand into a circle. Hold this up about one foot from the eye and look through it at some object twenty feet distant. Look at the object and not at the peep your hand is forming. Then refocus the eyes without moving your peep and you will find that you have automatically looked through the center of it. The eye centers this very naturally and you don't have to move around to do it. The same thing applies to a peep sight.

The chap who thinks a peep is slow spends too much time trying to center the front sight in the peep disk. Instead he should forget the rear sight and spent his time lining up the front sight with the target.

Once he learns this, the peep is the fastest form of sight yet devised with the exception of telescopes.

I'd like to quote from a letter received from H. O. P. of Rural Valley, Pennsylvania:

"I have hunted for many years and never used anything but the open sights and have been rather fortunate in the amount of game shot," he writes. "This past year I removed the open sight on my favorite rifle and used a peep exclusively due to the fact that my eyes have become so weak I have been obliged to hunt with bifocal glasses and found that at close range I could not see the notch in the rear sight plainly enough to get the front sight down into it properly for carefully aimed shots. With a peep sight I could see through it and have a very clear sight.

"A year or two ago you could not have persuaded me to use any form of peep sight. I'd like to point out that I have had one on my gun for the past seven years, but never used it. It was of the folding variety and I always kept it out of the way and did my big game hunting with the open sights as I was always more sure of my shot with them—or at least it seemed to me that I could get my game lined up quicker.

"Circumstances alter cases and I know this to be a fact in my case and am writing this letter and hope that it may explain the differences

in people's opinions concerning different kinds of sights. It took failing eyesight to show me the advantage of a peep sight and now I am 100% for them."

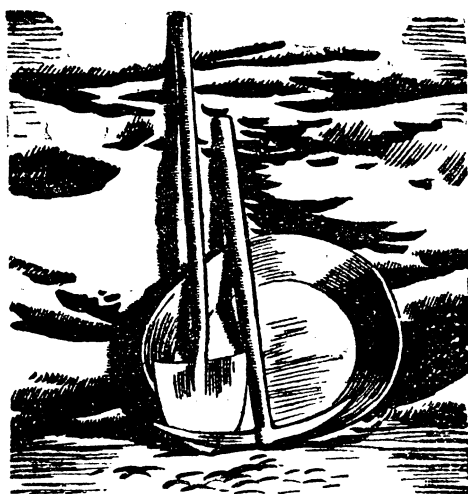
There may be a bit of a lesson in this. Peep sights cost a bit more money than the open sights. That is 99.9 percent of the reason why factories equip standard rifles with open sights. They don't want to spend the additional amount of money.

It is rather difficult to convince the old-time shooter that he can improve his shooting ability with a peep sight but once he does get the idea you can't return him to the old style.

Concerning the accuracy of shooting with peep sights, I'd like to point out that no matches for many long years have been won by anyone shooting the old-fashioned open sight. Peep sights usually take the cream of the prizes. As a matter of fact, they have taken every one of the prizes except those reserved for telescope sights for the past twenty years. Think that over in your spare time!

Any form of peep sight should be as close to the eye as is possible. The closer it is to the eye, the quicker the sight can be handled. The vision is greatly improved and one can use a peep sight at least a half hour earlier and later in the day while hunting than one can using the so-called open or sporting sights.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



# Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

ONE of the questions most frequently asked concerns the identification of gold in its natural state. Obviously the first thing those who are contemplating their initial placer prospecting trip want to know is how to tell gold when they find it.

Fortunately gold is easy to identify. That, and the fact that placer-gold can be won at a minimum of expense with readily constructed homemade apparatus such as sluice boxes, rockers, Long Toms, dry washers, and so forth, combine to make the fascinating quest for yellow metal any man's game. All he needs is the courage to tackle it, plus the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the true lover of the outdoors, and the ability to recognize the real pay stuff when he finds it.

Usually even a novice prospector should have no trouble in determining placer-gold from its physical characteristics. Its color, for in-

stance. Absolutely pure gold is a rich, brass yellow.

However, because the placer-gold found in stream gravels, creek beds and so on is virtually never simon-pure, the metal the prospector looks for in his gold pan may vary from a deep-yellow to pale-yellow in hue. The differing amounts of silver with which the gold is alloyed produces these color variations. The more silver, the paler the yellow color. In fact, a high percentage of silver may make the metal almost silver-white, but with a noticeable, distinguishing yellow tint. Small amounts of copper may also be alloyed with native placer-gold. In such cases the gold takes on a deeper yellow than average.

The metallic yellow appearance of nuggets or colors is the first, eye-striking identification of gold. Its next most prominent characteristic is probably its high specific gravity, that is, its heaviness for the size of the particle. It is this characteristic that causes the gold to lag behind lighter materials in the gold pan and make its presence in the gravel easily establishable. It is this same property that enables the small-scale prospector to wash large quantities of gold-bearing gravel so effectively in a sluice box or rocker. The water carries the lighter sand away, and leaves the heavier gold.

Even a small nugget is a definitely "heavy" piece of mineral. How much heavier, size for size, gold is than other metals and minerals may be better realized from the following actual comparisons. Gold is two and a half times as heavy as an equal volume of metallic iron. It is almost twice as heavy as lead, nearly seven times as heavy as quartz, and more than eight times as heavy as dry sand. A cubic foot of gold would roughly weigh a thousand

pounds or half a ton. All of which helps explain how tiny particles of the metal can be caught by riffles in a sluice box.

Gold is yellow and it is heavy. What else? Well, gold is soft. A small nugget or tiny particle can be cut with a knife blade just like a sliver of lead. A needle point can be stuck into gold, and will leave a small pin prick. Moreover gold is malleable. Hammer it on an anvil or pound it on a rock. It will not crumble to a powder as most minerals will. It merely flattens, without cracking or breaking. Gold leaf can be made out of pure gold because of this peculiar, distinguishing property of the metal.

The combination of those four determining physical characteristics ought to solve the average gold identification problem for any placer prospector. There are other yellow minerals, yes. Fool's gold, for instance, is a bright, shining yellow, but it is hard and brittle. A knife or needle point will merely scratch it. Pound some of the stuff and instead of flattening out as gold does, it simply crumbles to a dull, lifeless gray powder that no one would even think of mistaking for gold.

Then there is yellow mica. Often under water, or when intermixed in sand with the sun shining on it, it will flash bright yellow and cause the unwary to think they have suddenly stumbled on a real bonanza placer-gold deposit. But yellow mica, even the smallest particles, only shines when turned at certain

angles to the light. Pick it up, twist it toward and away from the light. It will be dull at one moment, a brilliant flashing yellow the next. Gold is not like that. Gold is yellow no matter how you turn it toward the light.

Another, perhaps even easier way to dispose of the yellow mica versus real gold question is to try crumbling it, or picking it apart with the fingernails. Mica will flake off. It can be rubbed and crushed in the fingers. Real gold won't act like that. Or try panning some of the stuff. Real gold will hang back behind the black sands, and show up as a feather of colors at the end of the operation. Mica is so light, it is one of the first things that floats over the rim of the pan with the worthless sand.

In other words, as we stated at the outset, placer-gold is not hard to identify or distinguished from the common yellow minerals, fool's gold and yellow mica, with which it sometimes is confused. The tests already given will do the trick. And not a chemical test, nor a single bit of fancy apparatus is needed—just average powers of observation, and a little knowledge of the fundamental physical properties of gold.

To H. L. P., Camden, New Jersey: It is due to the occurrence of gold-bearing rocks in almost all or at least in the majority of the mountain ranges in the Southwest, that Arizona offers such a likely field for placer-gold deposits.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



# The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

The slogan "Join the navy and see the world!" is not in the least exaggerated, judging by the letters we receive from members of Uncle Sam's navy. You'll agree with us, too, after you finish reading the one printed below. There isn't a port in the Orient Sailor Ardis Davis hasn't touched on, and all those intriguing places that are just names to most of us are right on his calling list. Writing to him should be a mighty entertaining pastime, as well as an education in itself, so how about getting at it? Here's what he has to say:

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sailer eleven thousand miles from home who is indebted to Western Story Magazine for helping him to while away the lonely days. My hobby is traveling to far-off lands, and so far I've been very glad of the opportunity to see how people work and live in the alluring Orient. In the past year I've visited such interesting seaports as Singapore, Rangoon, Saigon, Hongkong, Amoy, Shanghai, Tsingtau, Chingwangtao, Chefoo, Canton, Peking, Manila and Zamboanga. I would be very happy to tell any pals who are interested about these foreign ports. I also have a large collection of snapshots taken during my travels that I would gladly exchange with you. I'll be eagerly awaiting your letters.

Ardis Duane Davis, P. S. S. *Marblehead*, (R Div.) c/o Postmaster, San Francisco, California

## *Hunker down, you cow folks, and swap tales—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two stockmen from the Upper Murray and we would like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls living in your West. Our favorite sports are horseback riding and hunting and we can tell some very interesting stories of the Upper Murray and surrounding mountains. We will also exchange snapshots of which we have a good collection. I am twenty-one years old, and Jack is eighteen. —Arthur Warner and Jack Keenan, Ournie Station, Upper Murray, Via Albury, New South Wales, Australia

## *Betty wants her mailman overworked—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and would like to hear from and write to boys and girls living all over the world. My hobby is writing letters and I enjoy sports, especially baseball and tennis. I also like to read and dance. I promise to answer all letters and will be glad to exchange scenic post cards and snapshots, so come on, you letters writers, and swamp the mailman. Betty Bohatka, 678 East 222nd Street, Euclid, Ohio

## *Harry wants postmarks—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

How many readers of the ol' Hollow Tree collect postmarks, and how many would like to exchange a few? I'd be greatly pleased to hear from all who are interested, but please cut the postmarks out in two-inch by four-inch pieces, or larger, as I think they are much easier to handle in that size. My friends say that I can ride this old typewriter to a frazzle and turn out really interesting letters, so I'll be tickled plumb pink to send a sample of them to anyone who will write me. Harry J. Morse, P. O. Box 1487, Hondo, California

## *Learn about the "South American Way"—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would be very pleased if a girl or boy between fifteen and eighteen years old living in any part of the world would write to me. I live on an estancia in the province of Santa Fe, and my favorite sports are riding, swimming, tennis, and shooting, and I also enjoy dancing. I am interested in collecting photos and autographs. Helen Miles, Estancia "La Perena," El Trebol, P. O. C. A., Argentine Republic, South America

## *John is a budding cartoonist—*

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young man twenty-three years old and I would like to have some Pen Pals from all parts of the United States. My ambition is to become a cartoon animator and I am studying that now. I will send cartoons and pictures to

anyone who writes me and I sure have some supply. My hobby is motion-picture photography and taking snapshots, and I will exchange anything my Pen Pals find interesting. So come on and drop me a line and I will fill your mailboxes full of interesting chatter and cartoons.—John R. Garmis, 167 Morningside Avenue, New York, N. Y.

### ***Middle-aged members—here's a friend—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm wondering if there are any folks who would correspond with me. I'm a middle-aged widow staggering all around that old fifty-mile post, but surely there must be folks who are just as lonely as I am and who want good, honest, sincere Pen Pals just as I do. A friend of mine told me that she has received one hundred and nine letters in response to her plea and that they were from nice folks in need of friends just as she was. So, please, will you ask folks from everywhere to write to me? I'll promise faithfully to answer each and every letter and I would like to exchange snapshots of odd and interesting places and scenes. I will send them lovely views of our old historical city, Lookout Mountain and of the battle grounds at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. I will be grateful if both ladies and gentlemen between forty-five and sixty write to me.—Nellie E. Bowen, 1411 Kelly Street, Chattanooga, Tennessee

### ***From Canada comes this plea—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a nineteen-year-old girl and would appreciate receiving letters from anywhere in the world. My favorite sports are skating, swimming and baseball. My hobbies are collecting stamps, post cards and writing letters. I'll tell you all about the most interesting parts of Vancouver, which are many. You'll not disappoint me, will you?—Marjorie Stuckey, 76 East 53rd Avenue, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

### ***Johnnie asks for Pals from everywhere—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been interested in the Hollow Tree for a long time and hope to get quite a lot of Pen Pals from all parts of the globe. I'm interested in almost everything pertaining to the outdoors and life in the open spaces. In fact, I almost became a ranger once. Here's hoping I'll be rewarded with many letters. I have lots of time in which to write and I'll answer all letters promptly.—Johnnie Brinkley, 1107 Branson Street, Fayetteville, North Carolina

### ***Dell is a W. S. booster—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

For several years I have read and enjoyed Western Story Magazine, and as the years pass, the stories improve. The Hollow Tree is an excellent idea and a very good way for your readers to get together. May I come in? I am twenty-eight years old and can tell some interesting things about life in an army post.—Dell Andrews, 41 Retta Avenue, Hamilton, Ohio

### ***Help make Ronald feel at home—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young man twenty-four years old, came East recently from California and find it quite lonely here. I would appreciate hearing from

male correspondents who are interested in art, music, literature and the great outdoors. I sincerely promise to answer all letters.—Ronald Pemberton, 3015 West 84th Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### ***Flo is a music lover—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is a plea for Pen Pals between thirty-five and forty years old. I am a lover of music and am most interested in the West. I will exchange snapshots with the first five who write. Here's hoping I get some answers.—Flo Morris, Box 17, Sulphur, Louisiana

### ***This CCC knows his West—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a twenty-one-year-old member of the CCC stationed in one of the most beautiful spots in the West, Zion National Park in Utah. I have also worked a good deal on large cattle and sheep ranches in Utah and can tell many things of life here in the West. My hobby is music, but I am interested in other people's hobbies, too. Here's hoping I hear from everyone everywhere as I have lots of spare time to write.—Delbert Pedersen, CCC Camp, Co. 962, Springdale, Utah

### ***Charles sounds interesting—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

What do you say to me joining the Hollow Tree? I am a young man of twenty-five who loves to write letters. My life is kind of lonesome, so I would appreciate any letters I receive. I guarantee to answer all who write me, and if snapshots are included I shall answer sooner and send mine. I am interested in basketball, reading and writing. My hobby is studying character and helping people with their problems. I am a singer by profession and am working hard to become a good short-story writer. I would like to hear from Pen Pals everywhere between sixteen to thirty. Write, pals. I'll be watching the mailbox.—Charles H. Wright, Box 86, Dayville, Killingly, Connecticut

### ***A lonesome soldier sends this plea—***

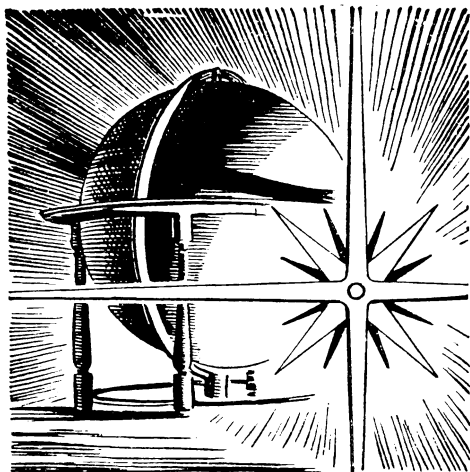
Dear Miss Rivers:

Just a few lines from a lonesome soldier wishing for a few Pen Pals. I am twenty-two years old and my hobby is photography. I am also interested in figure skating, swimming, hunting and horseback riding. I would like to hear from boys and girls between seventeen and thirty and I'm sure I can write interesting letters. I've been in the army almost a year and have lots to tell about it.—Ernest Collinsbee, Battery A, 7th Field Artillery, 1st Division, A. P. O. No. 1, Fort Benning, Georgia

### ***And here's another Aussie interested in our West—***

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and am looking for some cowboy and cowgirl Pen Pals between sixteen and nineteen years old. I am interested in horseback riding, swimming, reading and sketching. I also like animals, cowboy songs and cowboy movies. I would like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls living in America. I will exchange snapshots and promise to answer all letters.—Leila Munt, Box 70, Temut, New South Wales, Australia



## Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

LIKE many other vacationists, H. M., of Dayton, Ohio, is planning to do his traveling in the West. "I am making a beeline for Yellowstone National Park," he writes, "and I would appreciate your telling me something about conditions there. What I particularly want to know is something about the organization of the park. About accommodations for campers, et cetera. Are you allowed to bring your own camp gear or do you have to rent cabins?"

To answer your last question first, you are allowed to bring your own camp gear and to use it if you like. On the other hand, if you are traveling light, you will find plenty of cabins which you can rent by the day or week or season, and you will

find any number of restaurants and cafeterias where you can buy food if you prefer not to cook your own.

You can do just about what you like in Yellowstone, so long as you bear in mind that there are others who want to enjoy the park, too. Such regulations as there are were made to assure everybody the utmost pleasure.

The park belongs to the people of the United States. It was set aside as a park in 1872 to be held forever for that purpose, and every citizen therefore has a right to use it for as long as he wishes. Every person is privileged to camp in its woods or patronize its hotels and cabins, to fish in it without purchasing a license, to climb its mountains and to explore its canyons and study its wild life.

There are uniformed attendants, of course, but they have to cover the entire three thousand miles of the park, and so they expect the tourists, who, after all, are the owners of the park, to do their part to help keep it in good condition. Naturally you will keep your camp sites clean and not leave rubbish after you. All visitors are also expected to cooperate in guarding against fire, the greatest danger to the park. One bad fire, started carelessly by a discarded cigarette stub could ruin the beauty of the park for a hundred years.

In planning a visit to Yellowstone, or to any other park in the National Parks system, the tourist should determine to see the sights in a leisurely manner. Do not rush by the many wonderful spectacles; take your time.

Maps and illustrated literature about Yellowstone or any other of the National Parks may be had free by writing either to Department of Interior, National Park Service, or to the particular park in which you are interested.

In Yellowstone there are two outstanding sights which the visitor should make sure to see. One is the phenomenon of the geysers, the series of hot springs with their attendant terraces, and the paint pots.

The other is the wonderful canyon of the Yellowstone. See the Grand Canyon which inspired Moran to make his celebrated painting that hangs now in the Capitol at Washington.

Even if your time is short, you should make sure to see the canyon from at least two famous vistas. One is Inspiration Point, on the left of the north rim, and the other is from Artist Point, reached by crossing Chittenden Bridge just above the Upper Falls. Five miles of driving will take you to within reach of both.

If you want to walk scenic trails, leave your car at Canyon Hotel and take the rim trails to Artist and Inspiration Points. One is two miles and the other only a mile long. Also climb down the Uncle Tom's Trail to the bottom of the canyon.

The main trip through the park is by way of the Grand Loop Road. This main road circles the interior of the park, and is entered from any of the four directions of the compass. It is one hundred and forty-five miles long, and gives the visitor access to the greatest scenic features, such as the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, the Geysers, the Hot Spring Terraces, Yellowstone Lake, Mount Washburn, and Dunraven

Pass. Unless you cover this entire road you will miss a lot that is worth seeing.

There is a total of well over three hundred miles of road in the park. There are five roads leading into the Grand Loop from the five main gateways, the Gardiner entrance on the north, West Yellowstone on the west, Cody on the east, Cooke Entrance on the northeast and the Snake River entrance on the south. Also there is the road from the Gallatin entrance to West Yellowstone and a road into the southwest corner of the park to the famous Cave Falls. Besides these, there are about thirty miles of the south approach road which run through the Teton National Forest from Moran to the park boundary.

You will have no trouble at all in finding out what to see once you get to the park. There is a central Information Bureau and Park Museum at Mammoth Hot Springs, while branches of both are situated at Old Faithful, Norris, Madison Junction and Fishing Bridge. There are also uniformed rangers stationed throughout the park.

Members of the naturalist staff conduct parties at Mammoth, Norris, Madison Junction, Old Faithful, Thumb, Yellowstone Lake, Fishing Bridge, Canyon Falls, and Tower Falls. Many lectures also are given in the evenings, and this service is rendered by the National Park Service free to visitors.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.





## Missing Department

**FOSTER, MRS. LARRY**—She formerly lived in Plankinton, South Dakota. Anyone knowing her whereabouts or the whereabouts of her mother, Mrs. Smith, please get in touch with me. —Mrs. Harold McDonald, 119½ E. 15th Street, Wichita, Kansas.

**BANKS, SCOTTY**—He once lived in Caddo, Texas, and before that in Bisbee, Arizona. He is a wrestler. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with me. Frank Stewart, 69 Brookley Road, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

**CRITCHFIELD, HERSCHEL**. He was last heard from in August, 1939, at which time he was in Burley, Idaho. He is about five feet five inches tall, and has light hair, brown eyes and is very solidly built. If anyone knows his whereabouts please notify me.—Lee Critchfield, CCC Company 4703, Council Grove, Kansas.

**WILSON, DAVE or DAN**—He is my brother, and his sisters, Viola, Bertha and Mabel, and his daughter, Mae Abigail, want him to come home. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please write his sister, Viola Lyon, Rt. No. 1, Box 124, Lompoc, California.

**PITTS, JACK**—He is an inventor and at one time lived in Caddo, Texas. I am very anxious to get in touch with him. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please notify me. —Frank Stewart, 69 Brookley Road, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

**LAMONTAGNE, THERESA**—"I saw your ad in the Missing Department in Western Story and wrote to the address you gave, but my letters were returned to me. If you see this, please write to me." Or if anyone knows her whereabouts tell her to get in touch with her sister-in-law. —Mrs. Joseph McLaughlin, 113 Barons Avenue, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

**YOKE, DAN**. He is my son and when last heard from in 1923 he was in Bakersfield, California. He is five feet six inches tall and has dark blue eyes and dark hair. He is sixty years old, a true son of the West and would be likely living on a ranch. Any information would be appreciated. —Flora Yoke, Burlington, Colorado.

**NOTICE**—I would like to learn the whereabouts of my sister and her three children. Her maiden name was Nora Reed. She married Will Bryant and had three children, Ella, Pearl, and a boy nicknamed "Dubb." Later on, she married Will Wofford. When last heard from, about thirty years ago, she was in Waco, Texas. I would also like to locate my father, Will Reed, or his brother, Bart, or any of his children. They were last heard of about forty years ago at which time they were at Bastrop, Texas. If anyone has any information concerning any of them, please notify me.—Gordon James Reed, Rule, Texas.

● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" postoffice address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

**WARNING.**—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



# Barb Wire or Boothill!

Part Five

BY BENNETT FOSTER

## *The Story So Far:*

Serious trouble looms for the Curampaw when the big ranchers begin to fence in their land. In a year of scanty rainfall and poor grass, such a move is resented by the smaller owners who have been accustomed to letting their cattle run on the open range. When Sheriff Lee Pryor's bullet-riddled body is found near a fence started by one of the ranchers, Dave Cloud is appointed to replace the dead lawman. He is distrusted by both factions, however, and realizes that while the smaller owners are plotting among themselves, the big ranchers have started to hire hard-case gunmen to protect their fences.

While Dave is doing his utmost to keep peace, two men are secretly fomenting trouble for their own ends. Yancy Yarbrow, a man who has served time for rustling, is doing his best to persuade the small owners

to take a stand against the big ranchers in the expectation that the coming trouble will give him an opportunity to make a big cattle raid. Meanwhile, Ray Vincent, one of the big ranchers, is also plotting trouble. With the help of a dishonest surveyor, he has had a fence constructed between his land and Phil Killane's which cheats the latter of a big slice of land. Since Dave Cloud has discovered the swindle and has told Killane about it, Vincent is plotting to kill both of them.

## CHAPTER XIV

### RUSTLERS' RENDEZVOUS

IN the sheriff's office in Marksham Dave Cloud was listening to a complaint. Barry Trevis' foreman sat on the corner of the desk, his legs

swinging. Across from him, Trevis himself occupied a chair.

"There's anyhow a hundred head gone," the foreman said.

Dave, sitting between them, looked past the foreman and nodded meaningly to Pug.

"How come you haven't missed cattle before this?" Pug asked, turning his eyes to Trevis. "You boys have got your country fenced, haven't you? Don't you ride yore pasture?"

"We haven't got the north fence finished," Trevis growled, answering the question. "We've started, but that's all a break country an' I didn't see any use—"

"It was more important to fence the flats an' keep yore neighbors out," Dave interrupted grimly. "I *sabe* that, Barry. You've been keepin' your crew down on the south end, throwin' out strays an' watchin' the fence. Well, now you've got a hundred head missin' that you know of, an' no tellin' how many more."

"What was the idea of Pug askin' if we'd missed any cattle?" Trevis growled. "What do you know, Cloud?"

"I don't *know* anything for sure," Dave drawled, "but I had a hunch, Barry. I had the hunch that somebody that was pretty smart would take advantage of this trouble over the fences to make somethin' for himself. It looks like I was right."

"I can't figure how they took 'em out," Trevis growled. "That's a tough country to go through. You got to go up right over the rimrock an' it's a hard drive."

"But it can be made," Dave said. "Well, Pug an' me will go up there and look it over. We haven't had any rustling for a long time in this country. Not since Nancy Yarbrogot caught. The little men used to kind of look after your fellows when

you all ran yore cattle together on the flats." Dave could not resist that barbed jibe.

Trevis flushed. "We had to fence to protect ourselves an' you know it!" he snapped.

Dave nodded. "An' now the fences don't protect you," he remarked. "Are you goin' to lease any of this land you got under fence, Barry?"

Trevis studied Dave's desk top. "No," he answered, lifting his head abruptly, "I ain't. I might have done it later on, but now since my fence has been cut they can go to hell."

"I was afraid of that," Dave murmured. "The fence is cut because you won't lease an' you won't lease because the fence is cut. Well, Pug an' me will go out there." He heaved himself wearily from his chair. "We'll ride out with you today. We ought to get in around ten o'clock if we start now. Then we'll spend the night at yore place, Barry, an' look over that upper country tomorrow. How's that?"

Trevis nodded. "There's been nothin' but grief in this whole country since the wire came in," he said viciously. "I wish I'd never seen a piece of barbed wire."

"So do I," Dave agreed. "Let's go."

Riding north out of town, Pug jogging along beside him, Dave did not look back. Even had he done so he would not have seen Vic McClellan come pounding in. The buildings of the little town obscured McClellan's entrance.

All about the four men, riding steadily northward, the Curanpaw lay bright and clean, washed by the rain. The thirsty earth had swallowed the moisture, gulping it down. In a week, with the coercion and cooperation of the sun, that moisture

would go back to the skies, but by then the grass would be green and growing with the new life blood. It was good to be moving, good to be riding along the road, muddy in places, water standing in the ruts, the prairie soft all about. Dave and Pug felt it so and even Trevis and his foreman, worried as they were, could not but respond to the day.

"That rain day before yesterday has kind of set things up," Trevis commented. "We get a little more moisture an' we'll make grass."

Dave nodded gravely. "We'll get some more," he prophesied.

"I ain't even branded yet," said Trevis. "Nothin' but some big calves that we picked up. If we get some more of this I'll have a roundup."

"An' put *all* yore cattle under fence?" Dave asked meaningly. "I notice you got some running on the open range yet."

"All under fence," said Trevis, coloring. "Look here, Dave—"

"Yeah?"

"If it had rained or if we'd had some snow last winter I don't believe I'd of fenced."

Dave did not answer that. Trevis was working in the right direction, he thought. Let him keep going without encouragement.

"But these blasted grass thieves —" Trevis let the words trail away. Still Dave said nothing. Turning in the saddle, he looked back toward Marksham.

**I**N Marksham Vic McClellan had gone to the courthouse. There, in the sheriff's office he found no one but Amador Saiz. Amador was polite and equable, but of no help. Dave Cloud, he said, had gone with Señor Trevis. Señor Wells? He also had gone.

Vic McClellan rubbed his ear. "I

should have come in yesterday," he accused himself. "I should have. I wasted the day ridin' down to see if them fellows really had gone on."

"*Que dice?*" questioned Amador.

"When will Dave get back?" McClellan demanded, ignoring the Mexican's question.

Amador shrugged. "*Quién sabe?*"

Again McClellan rubbed his ear and frowned in his perplexity. It would not do to let this information spread. He knew definitely that it was Ray Vincent's men who had shot at Dave Cloud and Jessie Killane. But to tell Phil Killane would be to precipitate open war between the Anchor and the V Bar. No. McClellan could not do that. There was only one man who could be told what he knew: Dave Cloud.

"You tell Dave that I've got to see him," Vic ordered Amador. "Tell him as soon as he gets back. Tell him it's important. Do you get it, Amador?"

"*Yo comprendo,*" Amador assured him. "I tell heem."

McClellan pulled his hat down tighter on his head and went out. When he mounted his horse in front of the courthouse, the butt of his rifle swung against his saddle. Like all the Curampaw, Vic McClellan was going armed.

**I**T was dark when Dave Cloud and his companions rode in to Barry Trevis' TMT headquarters. They dismounted at the corrals and Lake unsaddled for Trevis while the rancher hurried to the house to tell the cook to get some supper on the table. Trevis was a widower with no children and he kept a bachelor establishment at the TMT.

By mutual consent conversation at the TMT headquarters was brief that night. Morning was coming

mightily early and within half an hour after supper everyone turned in.

In the morning, before sunup and while the first hint of day was in the east, the wrangler went out for the horses while Trevis and his guests sat down to breakfast. Dave, Pug, Trevis and his foreman were saddling not half an hour after they had dressed and while the east grew first pink and then golden, they rode away still headed north. They went across fifteen miles of the TMT in less than two hours and before seven o'clock were mounting the sheer escarpment of the Curapaw rim which stretched in a long line to south and east.

Here the going was rough. Brush, oak, cedar, piñon beset them. Rock had tumbled down to bar their passage. By the time they topped out on a mesa it was nine o'clock.

Now they rode, swinging east, bordering the mesa rim, seeking sign of cattle. The rain had erased what sign there might have been. It was a patience-trying business, but they stayed with it. Wherever cattle could have climbed the rim, there the four went, and in those places found exactly nothing. Returning to the point of their first ascent, Dave made suggestions.

"We're not findin' a thing," he said, "an' we won't. This is the way the cattle come; it must be. But we'll find no sign of 'em. Barry, you boys drop down Hobey Canyon an' go in that way. Pug an' me will go on west an' drop down Vinegar. We'll go past the old Sena place. We've combed the east pretty thoroughly. Maybe we'll find somethin' over west."

Trevis nodded. "We're late," he said. "I should have watched my country closer, but I was tied up with the damned fence an' all. All

right, Dave. We'll meet you at the ranch."

They separated then, Trevis and his foreman dropping into the steep descent of Hobey Canyon, Dave and Pug riding along the rim through the malpais toward the west. A magpie flew up from below the rim. A lanky rabbit ran from his bed. Overhead a buzzard sailed and two crows went by, calling as raucously as geese in their fall flight.

"Here's Vinegar Creek," Pug said. "Let's get a drink."

The two riders dismounted. The horses drank from the creek and grazed. Flat on their bellies, Dave and Pug refreshed themselves and then, seated, smoked a cigarette in silence.

"Let's get going," Dave said, rising.

"All right," Pug agreed.

They rode on, descending now, following slowly down the trail that bordered the little stream, splashing through the stream at times. Vinegar Creek, like all the country, had been refreshed by the rains. The stream rose in low hills that rested on the mighty mesa's top. There, fed by springs and little bogs, it began to thread its way across the mesa, now disappearing, now coming out into the open. At the rim of the canyon the rivulet had cut a steep-sided box and it was along the edge of this box that the descending trail began. Below the box the canyon widened and Dave and Pug rode through this greater thoroughfare.

They came to the remnants of a fence and passed it. Here Eufracio Sena used to run his sheep. A tiny green vega spread before them and at the farther end of the vega there was a dilapidated stone house.

"The old Sena place," Pug remarked, and Dave nodded.

AS the two men approached the house a horse nickered. He stood, saddled, close beside the rock wall of what had been a corral. As the two officers looked their amazement at each other, Carl Sobran stepped from the door of the house and, shielding his eyes against the sun, peered at them.

Dave and Pug, dismounting beside the house, greeted Sobran. They could feel the constraint in his words as he answered them, making them welcome. Sobran spoke jerkily. He had, he said, come up this way to look over the Sena property with a view to selling it. He had a possible buyer. This was logical enough, for Sobran dealt in real estate. But he had spoken with suspicious quickness without being asked a question. Dave squatted by the wall of the house and conversed casually with Sobran. Pug, leaning against his horse's shoulder, fashioned a cigarette.

When Pug's match flamed against the tip of his smoke, Sobran moved out to his horse. "I'll ride on in with you fellows," he announced.

"Let's rest a while," Dave answered. "Pug an' me have been at it all day."

"We won't get to town until after dark, the way it is," Sobran objected.

"You can come on back to the TMT an' stay overnight," Dave said. "That's where Pug an' me are goin'."

Pug, the cigarette looking particularly small in his round and cheerful face, moved toward the door of the house. "This place has stood up mighty well," he observed, almost at the door. "It— Say, there's been somebody stayin' here."

As Pug spoke, Carl Sobran tried to mount his horse. He reached for reins and horn and had a toe in the

left stirrup. But Sobran was not fast enough. Dave Cloud, coming up from his place beside the wall, leaped for the man. Sobran's horse, frightened, whirled away and the cattle dealer almost fell. Before he could recover, before he could draw his gun out from under his arm, Dave had him, and Pug, running from the door of the house, completed the capture by snatching away Sobran's weapon.

"What's all the hurry, Carl?" Dave demanded. "What's the rush?"

Sobran did not answer. His horse, the momentary fright passed, had stopped and was staring back. Dave gave Sobran a gentle shake.

"You was goin' to meet somebody here," he stated. "It wouldn't be polite to run off an' leave them, Carl. We'll all wait an' meet 'em."

Pug's eyes were wide and round. "Dave, you don't think—"

"I think Carl here has got company comin'," Dave answered. "Who were you waitin' for, Carl?"

"None of yore business," Sobran said sulkily.

"I been told—" Pug began and then stopped.

"Yeah," Dave nodded, "you been told that Carl was the market that Yancy Yarbrow sold his stolen cattle through. Were you waitin' for Yancy, Carl?"

"No. I wasn't waitin' for Yancy!" Carl Sobran tried to twist away, but Dave held him fast. "Let me tell you, Cloud, you'll get into trouble over this. You'll—"

"Shut up!" Dave said curtly. "Who did you expect, Carl?"

"I wasn't waitin' for anybody. Let me go, Cloud. By damn, you'll be sorry about this! You'll—"

Dave swung Sobran away and the man's threat stopped in a little yelp of pain. Dave's amber eyes were

narrow slits and his mouth was thin and firm.

"We'll just wait an' welcome yore friends," he said. "This is the way they took the cattle out, Pug. Up Vinegar Creek. The men that handled 'em have been stoppin' in the house here. You take our horses an' tie 'em in the timber. Put Carl's horse back of the house where it was. We'll go inside an' wait for Carl's friends."

Pug nodded and moved to obey the command. "And you an' me'll go inside an' sit down," Dave Cloud informed Sobran. "Maybe after you've waited a while you'll feel more like talkin'."

Sobran struggled as Dave pushed him toward the house. He fought like a cat, clawing and biting. Dave jerked Sobran's hand up until it was between his shoulder blades, caught the other flailing arm and shoved Sobran through the door.

When Pug came in, carrying his own and Dave's rifles, Carl Sobran was seated sullenly on a bench against the farther wall and Dave Cloud lounged beside the door, watching his captive.

"Carl says he ain't goin' to talk," Dave drawled.

"I guess there's nothin' for us to do but wait."

**T**HEY waited. Dave plied Sobran with questions and for an answer received only curses. With philosophical calm Pug smoked and watched them both, and once made comment. "He's cursed you in Mexican an' English, Dave, but I don't sabe that other lingo."

"It's bad, from the sound of it," Dave grinned. "Take a look outside, Pug. When were you expectin' yore friends, Carl?"

"To hell with you," Sobran snarled, and cursed softly and luridly.

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Pug came back from the door. "Somebody's ridin' down the creek," he reported. "I just saw the tops of their hats. How about it, Dave?"

"We'll welcome 'em," Dave answered. "Carl, you let out a yelp an' I'll jar you loose." He slid his gun out into his hand and walked over to stand beside Sobran. "Take the side of the door, Pug," he directed, "an' get the drop when they come in."

Grimming, Pug took his station, his Colt in his hand. Horses came up outside. There was the squeak of leather as men dismounted, and then a voice said: "That's Sobran's saddle. Guess he's inside. Hey, Carl!"

Dave made a little warning gesture with the gun in his hand. Sobran closed his mouth and a shadow fell across the door as one of the men outside moved toward it.

"Hey, Carl! You asleep? Wake up, you—"

Over in the timber where Pug had tied their mounts, a horse nickered, high and carrying. At the door a slim man paused, peering into the room. Pug's gun came up, but as his mouth opened to speak a command, Carl Sobran yelled:

"Look out, Ben! It's—"

Dave's Colt, chopping down in a short stroke, stopped the rest of that warning. In the doorway the tall man snapped a gun from his hip and shots thundered in the single rock room of Sena's old house.

Pug, caught momentarily off guard by the action and by Sobran's yell, was a little slow. The man in the door was a speed artist. Three shots ripped out of the single-action Colt before Pug pulled his trigger. Then, caught almost at the gun's muzzle, hammered back by the blast from it, the man at the door went down.

Outside, a horse's hoofs ground on hard rock and earth and then thundered away. The room was filled with powder smoke and Pug, disregarding the man in the doorway, whirled to call: "Dave are you hit?"

There was no answer for a moment and then Dave Cloud said very slowly, "I guess this was the time, Pug."

Pug hurried across the room. The smoke swirled ceilingward, thinning. Dave was down, leaning against the bench, his hand pressed to his side. On the bench sat Carl Sobran, tilted toward the window which was to his right. The window ledge had caught his coat and supported him. Sobran's eyes and mouth were wide open with the vacant, gaping look of death. A shot from the door had caught him, high in the head, and blood oozed from the blue hole made by the passage of the bullet.

Pug wasted no time on Carl Sobran. He bent down over Dave Cloud. Pug was almost beside himself with anxiety and remorse. "I was slow. I didn't think he'd shoot. How bad is it, Dave? Whereabouts is it?"

"In the side," Dave said weakly. "I—" His head rolled and his hand relaxed. Dave Cloud had fainted.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE AGITATOR

**Y**ANCY YARBRO did a good deal of riding the day after the rain. He rode north to Joe Chase's little cabin set in the bend of a canyon and there he talked with the young owner. Yancy had a willing listener. To Joe Chase, all the world was wrong. By stepping from his door he could see thin cattle that wore his brand, cattle that had been shoved out of Barry Trevis'



pasture and pushed down below the fence.

Joe had fed them what scanty hay he had. That was gone, and now the cows hung dejectedly around the place, hopelessly looking for a little more feed. And weighing on Joe more than anything else, was the belief that he had killed a man. He believed that Grace Arnold was in love with Wade Samis; he believed that his little stake was lost, that the hundred head of cows he had worked so hard to acquire were starving. Joe Chase was desperate. Nothing mattered much to him, and Yancy Yarbrow found himself talking to a dark-eyed fanatic.

"Sure I'll go with you," Joe Chase agreed. "Why not? What have I got to lose? I'll meet you Friday night at the old U Slash headquarters."

Yancy nodded. "See some of the boys," he suggested. "Tell 'em what we're goin' to do."

"Yeah, I'll see them," Chase promised listlessly.

"An' bring along yore fence pliers," Yancy reminded, thrusting toes into a stirrup. "An' a gun."

He went on from Chase's, visiting most of the other small owners. Yancy took a big swing that day after the rain, but he was back in Marksham by dusk and stayed in his house.

The next day Yarbrow rode south, dropping in on Vic McClellan, on Morris Sales, on Wayne Thompson. That night he spent with Dan Sawyer down below the V Bar, talking to Dan and to Alberto Montoya and a couple of other men.

Out from the places Yancy had visited, the running fire of discontent spread like a blaze in dry grass. It ran a circle in the Curampaw. Hard-eyed men met and talked at windmills, on trail back in the bro-

ken country, on the corners of Marksham's streets. The word was: "Friday night at the old U Slash headquarters. We'll show the skunks. Did you hear about Trevis throwing all of Chase's cattle out of his pasture? Trevis is still runnin' his stuff on the open range too, tryin' to hog all the grass!" Or: "Killane's the head of it. He's been carryin' things with a high hand a long time. We'll show him." That was Wednesday.

On Thursday night at Sawyer's, the word caught up with Yancy Yarbrow. Yancy sat in Sawyer's kitchen and there were three others there. Boone Littrell, one of Duchin's two riders, pushed open the kitchen door and came in, his eyes wide and his voice hoarse with excitement.

"Henry sent me down," Littrell announced without preliminaries. "He said to tell you that they're all ready in the north end an' they'll be there; an' he said to tell you that we don't have to worry about Cloud. Cloud's out of it."

"Out of it?" Sawyer questioned. "How do you mean?"

"He's laid up in the hotel in Marksham," Littrell answered. "Him an' Wells went up on Trevis' place after some fellers that had been stealin' TMT cattle. They run into 'em at the old Sena place. Carl Sobran was there with 'em. Cloud was shot an' hurt. They brought him in from the TMT in a wagon. Wells killed one of the rustlers an' Sobran was killed, too. I guess there must have been a hell of a fight. But Cloud's out of it. He's bad hurt."

QUESTIONS besieged Littrell, flung at him from three men. Yancy Yarbrow sat silent beside the table, his cigarette forgotten between his lips and his face showing pasty white in the lamp light.

"Who was the man that was

killed?" he asked presently.

"Nobody knows," Littrell answered. "Wells says that when he came in the door of the Sena place, Sobran yelled an' he went to shoot-in'. That's all they know. The other one got away."

The talk went on and Yarbrow sat with his dead cigarette between his lips. After a time, their curiosity satisfied, Sawyer and his riders ceased their questions and all talked at once, each airing his opinions and conjectures.

"I'd better get in to town, Dan," Yarbrow said, drawing Sawyer aside. "I want to see about this business an'—"

Dan Sawyer was a little man and hard as a pine knot. His eyes were very level as he stared at Yancy Yarbrow. "There's no need of yore goin' to town," he said, and his voice was as hard as his face. "We know all we need to know from town. Cloud is out of it. We'll make arrangements to get Wells out of the way. Glen is goin' to send for him to come out an' see about some stock that was stolen. Wells won't bother us."

"But I've got some business in town I've got to 'tend to," Yancy insisted.

"You started this, Yancy," Sawyer said harshly. "It looks to me like you was tryin' to pull out. Yo're not goin' to do it. We don't trust you, Yancy, an' yo're goin' to stick right here with me an' ride along with the rest of us."

"Why, of course, Dan," Yarbrow agreed with alacrity. "I never had no other idea than that."

"Don't get any other idea!" Sawyer warned.

All over the Curampaw the grass fire of excitement ran its course, to the small ranchmen on the north and south and west and east. It

touched not them alone. Wade Samis rode into the Anchor yard and, dismounting, tied his horse to the corral fence.

"Where's Mr. Killane?" he asked Remedy Harper who came from the bunkhouse. "I want to see him."

"He's home," Remedy answered. "Just go on in through the kitchen."

Samis turned and walked toward the kitchen door. He found Killane in his office off the living room. Jessie was in the living room and Killane was seated at his desk surveying a letter that had come out from town. He looked up when he heard Jessie greet Wade Samis. Then Samis was at the office door.

"Come in," Killane invited.

Samis came in and closed the door behind him. "I came out to tell you that your fence is to be cut," he said hoarsely. "All the little ranchmen in the country have gotten together. They're goin' to meet Friday night at the old U Slash headquarters on Vinegar Creek and then ride up here and cut your fence and Vincent's."

"How do you know?" Killane asked levelly.

"Why, they . . . they told me," Wade Samis answered. "I run a few cattle. They came to me and told me to be there."

"You said that you'd go?" There was contempt in Killane's voice.

"Of course," Samis said defensively. "I couldn't do anything else."

"Why'd you come out here then?"

Samis appeared to be puzzled. "Why, Jessie an' me—" he began.

"I'd keep Jessie out of it," Killane warned. "Jessie's got nothin' to do with this. She's got no use for you an' neither have I. I hate a turncoat, Samis. I'll use yore warnin', but you'd better get out. Don't come around here again, either. I

don't want you on the place an' neither does Jessie."

Samis, eyes angry, reached back a hand toward the doorknob. "You can't treat me like this," he flared. "I come out here—"

"You played traitor!" Killane said contemptuously. "Now get out. If Duchin or Yarbrow or the others knew you'd been here, they'd kill you an' I wouldn't blame them. Get out now an' don't set yore foot on the Anchor again!"

Samis jerked open the door and stamped out. As he crossed the living room, Jessie spoke to him, but he did not answer her. He left the office door open and, getting up from her work, Jessie came to look in on her father.

"What's the matter with Wade, dad?" she asked curiously.

"He's a traitor an' I told him so," Killane answered. "Jessie, you go get Remedy an' send him in here. Tell him to bring Yoder an' Bub Price if they're around." Wonderingly, Jessie left to obey her father's order.

It was not long before Remedy Harper and the other two men filed into the house and through the office door. That door was closed again and there was the harsh sound of Killane's voice. Then the riders came out, walking hurriedly. They left the house and went to the corral. Horses were saddled and in a few minutes men pounded away from the Anchor, two north, one toward the west.

**I**T was Bub Price who carried the word to the V Bar. He spoke briefly to Ray Vincent, outlining the plan Killane had devised. "I go from here to town," he concluded. "I'm supposed to take the word in to Dave Cloud."

Vincent's narrow face twisted into

an unpleasant grin. "It'll do you no good to try to see Cloud," he said. "Cloud's in the hotel. He's been shot an' they think he's goin' to die."

"How was that?" Price demanded.

He jumped some rustlers," Vincent answered, and told the story.

"I'll go back to the ranch then an' tell Killane," Bub Price decided.

When Price had left, Vincent went out to the corral. There, lounging in the shade, was the Kid. The other V Bar riders were out about their work, but the Kid did not go with them.

"I want to talk to you," Vincent told the hard-faced young gunman. "Come on into the house."

The Kid followed his boss. When they were in the office, seated, Vincent produced his bottle and poured them both a drink. Replacing his glass on the desk top, he looked at the Kid with a smile that was thin and cruel.

"It's comin' up," he said. "It's goin' to work out, Kid, an' I didn't have to do a thing about it."

"How do you mean?" the Kid drawled.

"I mean that Yarbrow an' Duchin an' the other little fellers have got together an' are goin' to cut fence Friday night," Vincent answered. "Killane got word of it an' he sent Price over to tell me. We're all goin' to meet at the Anchor Friday afternoon an' get ready for 'em. Killane sent word to Trilling an' Trevis an' me. We're goin' to take our men an' be there."

"An' so?" the Kid asked.

"An' so there'll be a fight an' Killane will be killed," Vincent snapped. "You'll be beside him an' you'll earn yore money."

"Five hundred?" the Kid drawled.

"The whole damned pot!" Vincent reached again for the bottle.

"Cloud's in the hotel in town an' they don't know whether he's goin' to die or not. It don't make any difference about him anyhow. Killane's the man I've got to get rid of an' get rid of now. I've had a letter from the surveyor I hired. They're investigatin' him, he says, an' Killane has sent for another man to come out here an' survey that fence line. Killane's the man that's dangerous."

The Kid nodded and replenished his glass. "I was kind of hopin' I'd have a chance at Cloud," he said regretfully. "On account of Tex. But a thousand is a thousand. All right, Vincent."

"An' when it's done you'll pull yore freight," Vincent stated. "There'll be no comebacks on this job. You won't stick around an' be askin' me for more money."

"I've never done that yet," the Kid drawled. "I get paid once an' that's all. Well," he raised his glass, "here's how, Vincent!"

Back at the Anchor Bub Price was reporting to Phil Killane. "So Cloud is out of it," he said, concluding that report. "That's what Vincent told me. I thought I better come on back here an' tell you."

Phil Killane shook his head. "I'm sorry about Dave," he said. "Don't say anythin' to Jessie about it, Bub. I'll tell her. She likes Dave Cloud an' so do I." He paused a moment, musing. "Vincent said he'd come?" he asked presently.

"He'll be here an' bring his men," Price answered.

"All right, Bub," Killane said, "that's all I need you for right now. We'll take care of this ourselves."

Bub Price went on. Killane sat down at his desk again. He was there when, late that night, Remedy Harper and Yoder returned. Yoder reported that Barry Trevis and his

men would be there early in the morning. Harper announced that Trilling and his crew would be in by dinner time.

"You'd better tell the cook," Phil Killane told Harper. "Tell him about how many will be here, an' then get a night's sleep. You'll need it."

The men went out and Killane sat musing. Then, rising stiffly from his chair, he blew out the lamp on his desk and went to the door. As he entered the living room he saw Quincy Adams Beauchamp standing there.

"Mr. Killane—" Beauchamp began.

"Not now, Beauchamp," Killane said kindly. "Some other time. I've got something to think about now. I'm busy. You go on to the bunkhouse an' come an' see me sometime after tomorrow."

Quincy Adams Beauchamp looked a little disappointed but he went out quietly. Killane blew out the lamp and crossed to his bedroom door.

**A**WAY to the west in Vic McClellan's little house, another light went out. Springs creaked as McClellan climbed into bed and then there was quiet, broken only by the man's restless turning. Mary McClellan reached out and put a hand on her husband's hard shoulder.

"You mustn't fret so, Vic," she comforted. "After all, you're not going with them."

"Dave Cloud was square with me," Vic McClellan murmured in the dark. "I ought to tell him. But I can't go back on Sawyer. He talked to me in confidence. I can't squeal on him."

The hand moved from McClellan's shoulder to his head, and stroked it with a soothing gesture. "You've got to do what's right, Vic," Mary McClellan said. "And that's to stay

out of it. You've got to think about Jack and me."

McClellan groaned and turned again.

In Marksham Wade Samis took another drink across Sid Crocker's bar. "Killane's a damned old fool," he said to Crocker. "He thinks he's a lile tin god on wheels. Somebody'll show him. Some day—"

Sid Crocker glanced wearily around his empty barroom. "You go on home, Wade," he said. "You've had enough to drink, an', anyhow, I'm goin' to close up."

"Li'le tin god," Wade Samis muttered, weaving his way toward the door. "There's other girls besides Jessie Killane. I'll show 'em. I'll show 'em both."

"Go on home, Wade," Crocker commanded. "Get down to the hotel an' sleep it off." He blew out a bracket lamp.

In the Commercial Hotel in Marksham, Pug Wells stood beside a door. Through the narrow crack of the door a dim light showed and Mrs. Lee Pryor spoke softly.

"He's all right, Pug. He's sleeping just like a baby. The bullet didn't touch his lung and he's going to be fine."

"He looks so da . . . so blame white," Pug growled. "If I'd just been a little quicker—"

"Now you mustn't blame yourself," Mrs. Pryor said kindly. "What's got to be, will be. Dave's going to get well."

"I got to go out to Glen Whitcomb's tomorrow," Pug growled. "They sent for me to go out there. I've got a notion to send Abran or Anastacio."

"Dave would want you to look after things," Mrs. Pryor said. "Do you know what he said today, Pug? That he felt all right because you were looking after things. Now you

go on to bed, Pug. I'll look after Dave."

"Well, good night, Mrs. Pryor," Pug said heavily. "If you want anything you call me."

"I will. Good night, Pug."

## CHAPTER XVI

"SHERIFF, HAVE A DRINK."

**W**HEN Jessie Killane came from her room Friday morning she found the Anchor in a bustle of preparation. His father had gone out and the cook told her that he had orders to prepare for a lot of men. Jessie left the kitchen and went on about her work, cleaning and dusting the living room, making beds, doing the hundred and one chores of the housekeeper. It was not until noon when Phil Killane came in for a hasty lunch, that Jessie had a chance to speak a word to her father.

At the table Killane was distracted, short-spoken, and evidently immersed in his own business. He did, however, emerge from his distraction for a long enough period to tell Jessie about Dave Cloud. Jessie had not much to say when she learned of Dave's wound. Her brown eyes were soft and introspective and she toyed with her food. But when Killane had finished his meal, Jessie spoke again.

"Dad," she said, "I'd like to go to town. I know you're busy, but I—"

"I can't take you in, Jessie," Killane interrupted. "I can't leave the ranch right now."

"I can drive the buckboard in alone," Jessie suggested.

Killane shook his head. "I don't want you goin' by yourself," he objected. "And I can't spare a man. If there was someone I could send —" He paused and looked fondly

at the girl. "I'd really like to have you in town, Jessie. Who would you stop with there?"

"I could go to Mrs. Pryor's," Jessie answered eagerly. "I— Oh, dad!"

She sprang up from her chair and came around the table to her father. Phil Killane put his arms around her, and looking over her shoulder, his brown eyes tender and a little troubled. "I didn't know you thought so much of him, honey," he said. "I'll get you in to town some way. I wonder—"

"Quincy Adams could go with me," the girl said. "You don't need him. He's no good around cattle and—"

"It isn't exactly cattle that we're goin' to handle," Killane murmured. "Maybe Quincy Adams would be all right. It's just that I want a man along with you right now, daughter. We'll see."

Killane went on out. Jessie returned to the front room. Presently, looking through the window, she saw her father ride away with Remedy and two of the other men, and realized that he had forgotten all about her request.

Jessie was an obedient daughter but she had a will and a temper of her own. In love with Dave Cloud, worried and anxious about him, she made up her mind quickly. Leaving the house she went down to the corrals. There Carlos told her that Quincy Adams Beauchamp was in the bunkhouse. For a moment Jessie debated and then, daring greatly, she ordered Carlos to harness the team to the buckboard. Carlos demurred. Jessie flared up, her temper hot, and in a few minutes Carlos, mumbling, went into the corral to catch the buggy team.

Jessie went to the bunkhouse where she found Quincy Adams

Beauchamp. The old man was sitting on a bunk examining a piece of metal. Jessie spoke briefly and to the point, informing Quincy Adams that he was going to town with her. She was surprised at the alacrity with which he agreed. Seemingly Quincy Adams wanted to go to town as badly as Jessie herself.

Within an hour after lunch, Jessie was driving the bays out of the Anchor yard and Quincy Adams Beauchamp, very erect, rode beside her.

**W**HILE Jessie and her companion rode toward the town from the east, Marksham received another arrival from the west. Joe Chase rode into town and stopped at the courthouse. He went into the building and sought the sheriff's office. There was no one in the office save Amador Saiz, the jailer. Dave Cloud, Amador said, answering Chase's questions, was in bed. He recounted the story of the fight at the Sena place, embroidering it, and Chase listened. Joe Chase expressed his regret over Dave's injury and asked for Pug Wells.

Pug, Amador explained, had gone to Glen Whitcomb's and would not be back until late that night or early in the morning.

"I've got a shotgun here," Joe informed Amador. "I've come in to get it."

Amador shook his head. He knew nothing of any shotgun.

"I can pick it out," Chase announced, and before Amador could object, he had crossed the office to the gun cabinet and selected his weapon. Amador remarked that he thought Joe had better wait until Pug came back before he took the gun. Chase paid no attention to Amador and the jailer did not push the point. He was hired to look after the jail, to take messages and

to look after the office when the sheriff and his deputy were gone, and not to take shotguns away from tall young men who had reckless eyes.

Joe Chase walked out with the shotgun. He put the weapon in the old rifle scabbard on his saddle and, mounting again, rode down toward town. Stopping at Pop Olafson's he tied his horse and went in. Grace Arnold was behind the counter talking to Pop. Noon was past and there were no patrons in the café.

"Can I talk to you a minute, Grace?" Joe Chase asked.

The girl accompanied him out to the sidewalk. There beside the hitch rail, with Joe's roan lounging in the dusty street, they talked.

"I just wanted to see you a minute," Chase said, his hungry eyes on the girl. "I'm goin' right out of town, but I wanted to see you. I might not get to see you again soon."

"Why, Joe, you aren't going away, are you?" Grace looked anxiously up at the man.

"Maybe," Chase said. "Maybe I won't be coming back from this trip. Anyhow, Grace, I wanted to say that I wish that things had been different. I wish— Well, anyhow you know how I feel about you. If there's been a chance for me I wouldn't be goin' now. I— Good-by, Grace. I guess I can't tell you, after all."

Leaving the puzzled girl, Joe Chase ducked under the hitch rail. Grace watched him untie the roan's reins, mount and ride off down the street. She could not understand his brief, incoherent words. They had no particular meaning to her. It was no surprise to her that Joe Chase was in love with her; he had asked her to marry him. But she could not fathom this brief, almost

tragic appearance. She shook her head helplessly and went on back into the restaurant.

"Anything wrong, Grace?" Pop Olafson asked, noticing her troubled look.

"I don't know," Grace answered. "Joe acted so funny, Pop. I don't know what's the matter with him."

"He's all right," Olafson said. "You stay in the restaurant a while, will you, Grace? When Mom comes back tell her I've gone out."

Grace smiled and nodded. Every afternoon when Mom Olafson was not at hand to frown her disapproval, Pop went down to Sid Crocker's. He and Sid were old cronies and they played rummy by the hour at a table in the back room of the Elite.

When Pop reached the saloon he found Crocker behind the bar and Wade Samis in front of it. Wade was nursing a whiskey glass and Sid was scowling. Pop nodded to Wade. Crocker motioned him down the bar and at its end leaned over to talk, low-voiced.

"I can't play this afternoon," Crocker said. "Samis is about half drunk. I can't very well throw him out because he's been buyin' his liquor here, but I'll have to stay on the job until my bartender comes."

Olafson nodded. "I'll be back tomorrow, Sid," he said. "If I can get away from Mom. Maybe we can play then."

**I**N his room at the Commercial House, Dave Cloud was having a bad time. His body was swathed in a bandage and his face was pale, the tan of his skin looking almost as though it had been painted on with a brush. He had lost a great deal of blood; he was weak and his wound pained sorely. More than all these things his restlessness re-

tarded him. Dave knew that trouble—bad trouble—was afoot in the Curampaw and to be tied to his bed, sternly forbidden to move, unable to do much in any case, fretted and irritated him. Mrs. Pryor stayed with him and watched him, and Dr. Freeman came on regular visits.

It was all a bad dream to Dave Cloud. The fight in the old Sena place, Pug's rough bandaging, the trip down to the TMT on horseback with him clinging weakly to the saddlehorn, the rough trip to town, bumping along in the bed of a springless wagon, the hazy delirium of Dr. Freeman's surgery, the sharp pain when the probe had followed the bullet hole into his body; Dave could faintly remember these things.

Dave had been shot Wednesday afternoon. He had reached Marksham early Thursday morning. All day Thursday he had been in bed, weak, lapsing into a semicoma at times. But by night his strong body had taken hold and he had slept. On Friday morning Freeman had been pleased when he visited his patient and had complimented Mrs. Pryor on her nursing. Through Friday Dave alternately dozed and fretted, comforted only by Mrs. Pryor's assurance that Pug was looking after things. Friday evening Mrs. Pryor gave Dave a little chicken broth and he felt stronger. There was a little color in his face when Mrs. Pryor took the soup bowl out of the room, and Dave's eyes were bright because there was some fever in him.

He heard steps in the corridor and watched the door, expecting to see Mrs. Pryor returning. But when the door opened, Jessie Killane came in. Behind her was Quincy Adams Beauchamp. The girl came directly to the bedside and stood looking down at Dave.

"I heard what happened, Dave," she said. "I came to see how you were, and if I could do anything."

"I . . . that's mighty fine of you."

Jessie was appalled at the weakness of Dave's voice. Reaching back, she drew up a chair and seated herself.

"Your being here makes me feel good," Dave said, smiling.

That smile broke Jessie Killane's reserve. Her hand reached out and caught Dave's hand, and, slipping from the chair, she knelt beside the bed so that her bright hair was level with Dave's eyes.

"I . . . I had to come." Jessie's voice was muffled, for her face was hidden against the bedding. "I—Oh, Dave!"

Dave's hand was closed tightly on the girl's own and his eyes were very bright as he looked at the softly waving red hair. "You know I love you, Jessie," he whispered. "I guess it's been all my life. Ever since I was a kid an'—"

His voice trailed away. Strength seemed to well up in him, given him by this girl who knelt beside his bed.

"Jessie," Dave said. "Look up, Jessie."

Timidly the girl lifted her face. What she saw in Dave's eyes was an answer to all her questions, all her uncertainly, all her doubts. For a moment they looked at each other, forgetting all else, and then Jessie Killane moved and kissed Dave.

**THEY** were brought from their reverie by a loud clearing of the throat. Quincy Adams Beauchamp stood in a corner of the room, not looking at the two, but examining an old Gideon Bible that lay upon the table there. He cleared his

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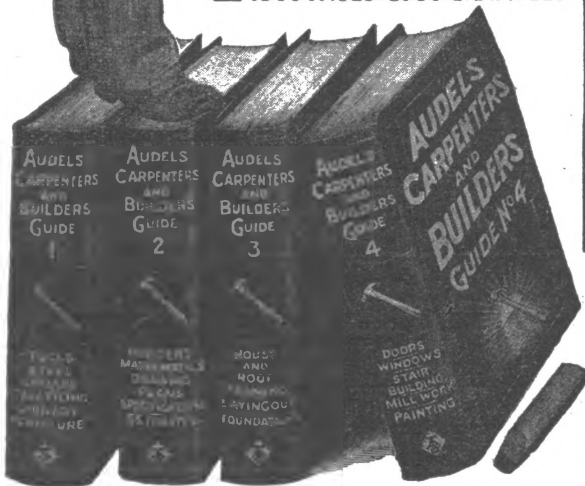
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throat again and, still not turning his head, said. "I believe there's someone coming."

Self-consciously, Jessie sprang to her feet, smoothing her hair with a hasty gesture. The door opened and Mrs. Pryor came in.

"They told me—" Mrs. Pryor began and then, seeing Jessie's face and eyes: "Why, Jessie!"

Jessie crossed to the older woman in one swift movement. Mrs. Pryor's arms went about the girl and Jessie's head was pillowed on an ample shoulder. Mrs. Pryor knew what had happened. Her eyes were very bright as she looked at Dave.

"Sometimes it happens that way," she said softly. "I remember when Lee— There now, honey. Dave will be all right. He has both of us to look after him now. You mustn't cry. You'll upset him."

Jessie lifted her face from Mrs. Pryor's shoulder. "I didn't know—" she half sobbed the words.

"Now, Jessie, you come with me a minute." The older woman, her arm about Jessie's waist, urged her toward the door. Jessie's eyes went to Dave Cloud and through the tears that glistened on long lashes, she smiled.

"I'll be all right, Dave," she said tremulously. "I'll— It was just that I was so worried. I'll wash my face and come right back."

Dave watched the door as the two women went out together. His eyes were bright and his lips moved faintly, as though he were talking. Quincy Adams Beauchamp coming from the corner, spoke professionally, the bombast in his voice hiding his real feeling.

"Very bad for a patient," he said. "Excitement shouldn't be allowed."

"Did you see her?" Dave said, and his voice had almost all its old

strength. "Did you see her?"

"Certainly I saw her." Beauchamp seated himself in the chair beside the bed and, old habit returning, reached out and took Dave's wrist, counting the pulse that throbbed there. "A very fine girl, Jessie Killane."

"She's the best in the world," Dave said. "I didn't know— I guess I've always been in love with her an' didn't really know it."

Beauchamp released Dave's wrist and tipped his chair back, putting his hands into the pockets of his overalls. "We none of us know—" he began, and then stopped. Slowly he brought his right hand from ~~it~~ hiding. There was a length of metal in his fingers, metal that was dull from heat, but that was shaped like the blade of a short and powerful shears. Quincy Adams Beauchamp stared at that metal blade and Dave's eyes were also focused on it.

"What's that, Beauchamp?" Dave queried.

"Nothing," Beauchamp answered, starting to put the piece of metal back in his pocket. "I'll tell you when you're better, Dave."

"What is it?" Dave insisted. "What made you look at it like that?"

"Some other time I'll tell you," Beauchamp evaded. "You're sick, Dave. You—"

"You'll tell me now!" There was a drive in Dave Cloud's command that would not be disobeyed.

"It's part of a surgical instrument," Beauchamp said, rising. "I found it in the stove at the Anchor bunkhouse."

Dave had lifted his head as Beauchamp spoke. Now he let it rest again on the pillow. "In the bunkhouse stove?" he said slowly.

"Where Andy Blare's clothing was burned," Beauchamp explained.

"I— Let it go, Dave. We'll talk about this when you're well again."

"We'll talk about it now!" Dave's eyes were very bright. "That was in Andy Blare's pocket when his clothes were burned."

"I think so." Beauchamp nodded his head.

"You said it was part of a surgical instrument. Are you sure?"

Again the gray head nodded. "It is a blade from a rib shears," Beauchamp said. "I know that, Dave."

**D**AVE CLOUD closed his eyes. He was thinking, recalling an office with a littered desk, Pug's voice coming from the surgery saying: "Go easy with that thumb, doc. You ain't drillin' a well." Recalling, too, the bright handles of an instrument he had picked up from the desk, an instrument that resembled a small bolt cutter and that had a broken blade.

"But it couldn't be—" Dave Cloud begun, and stopped. There were brisk steps in the corridor and Dr. Morgan Freeman, his little medical kit swinging, came into the room. For a moment he stood there beside the door, his eyes scanning the bed, the man on it, and the man beside it. Quiney Adams Beauchamp, attempting to return the steel blade to his pocket, dropped it and, bending, picked it up hastily. Dr. Freeman came on into the room.

"Well, Dave," he said briskly, "I see you're to have two nurses from now on. I met Jessie Killane in the corridor. Mrs. Pryor says that you've been fine today, but that you're restless. We must take care of that."

Beauchamp had risen awkwardly to his feet and was standing clear of the bed, over by the table where the Bible lay. Freeman sat down, possessed himself of Dave's wrist and

found the pulse. Watch in hand, he counted it.

"You seem to be doing all right," he said. "The pulse is strong. Are you feeling any pain?"

"Not particularly," Dave said. "I feel all right, doc."

"Do you think you can sleep to-night?" Freeman had risen. He placed his bag on the table beside Dave's bed and opened it. "I think I'd better fix you a little medicine," he continued. "Something that will make you sleep." He removed a bottle from the bag, shook several small tablets into his hand and dropped them into the half glass of water that stood on the table. "Take that—" he began.

"It's no use, doc," Dave Cloud said. "It ain't any use. We know. It was you that killed Lee Pryor at Killane's fence corner. You—"

Freeman's hand flashed down into the open medicine bag. It came up holding a stubby gun, the nickel plating flashing in the lamplight. Freeman moved, swinging around the table so that he could see both Beauchamp and Dave. His chubby, pleasant face was twisted into a snarl and all his bustling dignity was gone.

"You know, do you?" he rasped. "Well, it won't do you any good, Cloud!"

Dave's belted gun hung at the head of his bed where Pug had placed it. There, not three feet from his hand, was the gun's black-rubber butt. Five feet away, across the little table, was the man who had killed Lee Pryor. Dave's amber eyes were thin slits and in his body strength gathered.

"It won't do you any good, doc," Dave's drawling voice was soft and level. "You're under arrest for murder. You'll never get away."

Freeman did not answer that in

words. The little nickel-plated gun in his hand lifted slightly and Dave could see the knuckles begin to grow white as the hand closed. Freeman's eyes were on Dave Cloud as though he were picking the spot where he wanted the bullet to enter. And then, with a yell that was part fear, part sheer rage, Quincy Adams Beauchamp threw the Bible!

In that swift instant Dave reached for the butt of the Colt, snatched out the heavy single-action gun and shot. The roar of the Colt drowned the spiteful crack of Freeman's little gun and Dr. Freeman, slapped back by the impact of the big lead bullet, dropped his weapon and staggered, thrusting his hand out to the wall for support. Dave was propped up on his elbow, the Frontier Colt in his hand, cocked and ready for another shot. Dr. Freeman had miscalculated. He had forgotten Quincy Adams Beauchamp and the fact that Dave Cloud, there on the bed, was a fighting man.

"Get his gun!" Dave threw the order at Beauchamp. "Set him down. I hit him pretty hard."

Beauchamp came across the room, picked up Freeman's weapon and thrust it in his pocket. Supporting himself by the table, Freeman did not wait for Beauchamp's aid. He reached the chair and dropped into it, pressing his hand against his side.

There was a scream in the hall and the sound of running feet. Dave Cloud spoke again. "Fix him up, Beauchamp. He'll live to hang for killin' Lee Pryor."

The bedroom door burst open and Jessie came running through, to fling herself down beside Dave Cloud, to throw her arms protectively across him.

"Dave!" she cried. "Dave, are you hurt?"

Turmoil reigned there in the hall

of the Commercial House. The clerk, Mrs. Pryor, Jessie Killane, Quincy Adams Beauchamp, a number of curious men and women who lived or worked in the hotel, all thronged the corridor and the door to Dave's room. Gus Loren, summoned by the clerk when he heard the first shot, had come charging in. Abran Garcia came running. A good part of Marksham reached the Commercial House within a short time.

**I**N Pop Olafson's restaurant Grace Arnold, finishing the supper business, carried soiled plates and dishes to the kitchen. Returning to the serving room of the restaurant, she stopped short, for Wade Samis had come in and now stood swaying beside the door. He saw the girl and advanced a staggering step. Reaching the counter, he plumped himself down on a stool.

"She's got no use for me," he said thickly. "Don't love her anyhow. I'm in love with you, Grace. Come on with me!"

Grace poised behind the counter, ready to run if run she must. "I won't go with you, Wade," she said angrily. "I hate you. You went with Jessie Killane. You—"

Wade Samis, drunk though he was, caught that word. "Went to Killane's he said. 'I tol' him they were goin' to cut his fence. Yarbrow an' Chase. Tol' him to look out, that they was goin' to cut it. Called me traitor, he did, but he'll be waitin' for 'em just same.'" He closed his lips and swallowed and his head rolled with the lax control of the drunken man. "Thought mebbe Jessie'd like me," he muttered. "Kicked me out, damn him! Never liked Jessie anyhow. Liked Grash and—"

Grace Arnold's hand was at her

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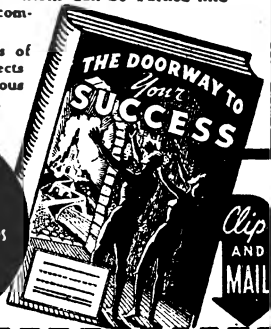
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mouth as though to suppress a scream. Her eyes were wide and fright filled. So that was why Joe had come to see her, why he had been so distraught? He had been going out then, when he stopped by the restaurant, going out to meet the rest of the little men of the Gurampaw, desperate men, bound on a desperate errand and riding into an ambush. She could repress her scream no longer. It arose, shrill and high, and running wildly, she cleared the counter, burst through the door of the restaurant and went on toward the hotel. She had to reach Dave Cloud. She had to! Somehow . . . somehow . . . Joe Chase must be stopped, for Grace Arnold suddenly realized she loved him.

In Dave Cloud's room Morgan Freeman sat upon a chair. The room was filled and Freeman was the center of attraction. In the hall the overflow of the crowded room was tense and quiet. Freeman was bandaged, and his face was pale, but his pomp and importance had returned. It seemed almost as though he were enjoying this, relishing his importance. There was a tinge of scorn in his tone as he spoke to Dave and to the crowd, and on the table beside the bed an empty glass reposed. Morgan Freeman had asked for water and drunk from the glass.

"I met Pryor," Freeman was saying. "He got into the buggy with me. We were going east toward Killane's. Tia Placida had told Pryor I'd killed Sena and he wanted to question me. I had killed Sena! He was dying anyway, but it would have taken time, so I hurried him along with three and a half grains of morphine. I wanted the Sena place and took it for the bill the Sena owed me. The water rights would have made it possible for me to quit practicing and give all my time

to my chemical experiments. You thought my research was just a hobby. Bah! I was on the track of something big, something big, I tell you! It would have made me wealthy and powerful. You think I wanted nothing more than to be a country doctor? I'd have had an international reputation, the profession all over the world would have honored me!

"But Pryor was getting close—he accused me of killing Eufrazio. I didn't intend to have my plans ruined by a nosy fool. My revolver was on the seat beside me and my rifle was under the seat. I took the pistol and reached across and shot him."

Dr. Freeman's voice lulled for a moment and then went on. "I thought of the fence. I knew that there was going to be trouble over the fencing, so I took Pryor to Killane's corner. I propped him up against the post there and shot him twice with my rifle. That was to make it look as though he'd been shot by someone he found cutting the fence. Then I took the rib shears from my surgical case and cut the fence. I broke a blade of the shears and couldn't find it so I got back into my buggy and went on."

He paused and looked around the room triumphantly. "When I talked to Andy Blare before Cloud got in, he hinted about a clue he'd found. It had to be the broken blade. That was the only clue I had left; so I killed Blare with my shotgun through the window of the saloon. When I came in to dress Samis' wound I had an opportunity to change the shells I had used for the shells in Chase's shotgun. You all thought that Chase had killed Blare."

"I didn't," Dave said quietly. "I

saw that Joe's gun barrels were clean. I knew he hadn't shot Blare."

Freeman flashed Dave a glance. "That was why you brought Blare's clothes to the courthouse," he said. "I went up there to get them. I'm sorry I didn't shoot straighter, Cloud."

"And it was you all the time," Dave said slowly. "I thought it was someone else. I thought it all tied up with the fence."

"I fooled you all." Freeman's voice was slowing, the words trailing out. It was almost as though the voice came from a phonograph that was running down. "But I won't hang, Cloud. I put four grains of morphine in the glass for you. I'd have killed you . . . but . . . I've taken it . . . and my heart is bad."

The voice drifted away. Dr. Freeman's head rolled limply, his mouth dropping open. The limpness spread to his pudgy body and only Abran's quick hands kept his body from sliding out of the chair. For a little time the breathless silence in the room was troubled only by the little doctor's stentorian breathing. That stopped and Jessie Killane sobbed once, and Quincy Adams Beauchamp's voice came, softly, but carrying to all parts of the room.

"Four grains of morphine. He meant to kill you, Dave. Instead he's killed himself."

No one spoke. There was a commotion in the corridor, a woman's voice screamed, "Let me through! Let me through!" Then those in the door were thrust aside and Grace Arnold, fighting her way, reached the room, pushed Gus Loren aside and came to Dave Cloud's beside.

"They've gone to cut the fence!" she cried, clutching at Dave's arm. "Joe and all the rest of them."

They're going to cut Killane's fence, and Killane and his men are waiting for them. You've got to stop them, Dave! They'll kill Joe! You've got to stop them!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### TRIGGER MAN

**I**T took a little time to calm Grace. When finally she was coherent she poured out her story to the man on the bed. Sobbing as she spoke, she told of Joe Chase's visit, of his strangeness. When Grace told of Wade Samis and what he had said, Jessie gasped and put her hand against her lips. Dave noted Jessie's consternation, and when Grace had subsided into steady weeping, he turned to Jessie.

"Father wouldn't bring me to town," Jessie said, answering Dave's question. "He said he had to stay at the ranch. The cook was getting ready for a lot of men. He—"

Dave needed no more than that. Pushing himself up in his bed he sat erect, somehow finding strength that he should not have had.

"Get the women out of here," he ordered. "I've got to get up."

"You can't, Dave!" Jessie threw her arms about him, trying to force him down again. "You've been hurt. You can't—"

Dave Cloud thrust the girl away. "It's my job," he said grimly, "and I'll handle it. Get the women out of here, Beauchamp."

Somehow the room was cleared. Despite Jessie's expostulations, despite Mrs. Pryor's objections, they were pushed into the hall. With Beauchamp helping him, Dave slid into his trousers, donned socks and boots, buckled his gun belt about his middle. Gus Loren and Abran

were in the room as Dave dressed, and Morgan Freeman lay against the wall where Abran had placed him. Dressed, Dave stood up upon his shaky legs and gave orders.

"Abran, you go down an' get me a horse. Get Stormy. Gus, you'll have to look after things here. If Pug comes in tell him where I've gone. Beauchamp, you'll have to stay with Jessie. Keep her here. This is men's business. Now help me get out in front."

With never a glance toward the quiet body lying beside the wall, the men left Dave Cloud's room in the Commercial House.

In the hall and in the little lobby Jessie and Mrs. Pryor besieged Dave Cloud. They pleaded with him and tried to hold him back. To their importunities and entreaties he had but one answer: "It's my job." And so, with Quincy Adams Beauchamp supporting him, with Jessie's arm about him, he reached the door. There in front of the hotel stood the Anchor buckboard, the bay horses slumping their weight as they rested.

"You can't ride out there, Dave," Jessie said pleadingly. "You can't. You'll kill yourself. You can't ride a horse."

Dave Cloud saw the buckboard. He was realizing his weakness now, feeling the false strength drain out of him, and yet he felt he had to go.

"Take care of Jessie, doc," he ordered. "Give me a hand, Gus."

Loren must have sensed the thing Dave wanted, as Beauchamp did. The old man released Dave and gently took Jessie by the shoulders, holding her. Loren, his shoulder under Dave's, helped him through the door.



"Help me in the buckboard, Gus," Dave directed.

"I'll go with you," Loren said. "You can't drive out there, Dave."

"There's no use of two of use gettin' killed," Dave Cloud said grimly. "Help me in."

Loren pushed him up, over the wheel, and Dave found the seat and the lines wrapped about the whip socket. He gathered up the lines and Loren freed the tie rope from a bay neck. The buggy team, awake now, backed from the hitch rail and Dave straightened them. He could hear Jessie calling to him from the sidewalk and saw her struggling in Beauchamp's grasp. Then the bays, touched by the whip, were trotting, lengthening their stride, and the buckboard was rattling down the street. Marksham loomed darkly all about, the buildings gaunt as their shadows. The bays stretched out. They were going home.

**A**WAY east of Marksham, under the dark loom of a ridge, men were gathered into a compact mass. They stood or sat upon the ground, their horses behind them, their bridle reins in their hands. There was no smoking, no talking save now and then a hard-toned muttering of words. Frank Trilling, with Killane and Trevis and Vincent, stood a little distance from the main body. Near Vincent a man lounged, spread full length upon the ground, utterly relaxed. This was the Kid.

"Be moonrise in half an hour," Trilling growled. "You'd have thought they'd come before this. Are you sure they're comin' here, Killane?"

"They were to cut my fence an' Vincent's," Killane answered. "They'd start here. An' Bub Price is watchin' the old U Slash headquarters. He'll bring us word."

The voices died away. A bird twittered sleepily. Over in the main

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body of men someone spat, the sound flat and hard. There came the low roll of the hoofs of a running horse and all about in the blackness, men rose up.

"That'll be Bub," Killane said softly.

The drumbeat of hoofs came nearer. A man crowned the ridge, horse and rider silhouetted blackly there for an instant only to disappear. Killane, leading his horse, stalked forward, the other three following him. Where the gate lay, pulled back against the fence, they stopped.

"Bub?" Killane called.

From the darkness Bub Price answered. "They're comin'. I waited till they strung out, headed this way. Then I came on."

"Did they see you?" Killane asked softly as Price dismounted.

"No, nor heard me either." Price was beside Killane now, his horse blowing hard. "I lay close till I heard 'em talk. They're goin' to head for this corner. Then I led out down a draw for half a mile before I got on an' rode. This is the place, Mr. Killane."

"This is the place," Killane said softly. "It'll be moonlight by the time they get here. We'll take the ridge back of the fence an' wait till they start to cut it. We might as well move out, gentlemen."

All about, men moved, leading their horses, shifting toward the long roll of ground that lay just back of the fence. Ray Vincent, close by the Kid, murmured softly: "When the shootin' starts." The Kid grunted.

On the ridge top the movement ceased. Men spread out into a thin line, taking position, tense with excitement, with the feel of what was coming.

"I'll give the word," Phil Killane said. "It's my fence."

**N**OW the moon tipped its upper symmetry above the eastern horizon. It came up rapidly, sliding toward the zenith. Shadows were long and black and the earth was silver. In the moonlight the fence showed, a thin line of posts and wire, inert, harmless, and yet in itself potential death. From beyond the fence came sounds, the faint rattle of a bit chain, a clink of metal, and then the noise of the steady progress of moving horses. The sounds neared slowly and the moon climbed high. Across the little valley a compact body of horsemen showed, riding slowly toward the fence. Along the line of men atop the ridge a flutter of movement ran. There was the sharp clicking sound of a rifle's being cocked, a silent stir of motion. Phil Killane placed his hand beneath him to push himself up, and checked. Distinctly, through the quiet of the night, came the pound of running horses and rattle of wheels.

A team and buckboard plunged into the moonlight, coming along the fence. The team slowed and stopped and Dave Cloud, his night shirt that he had not bothered to change, white in the moonlight, stood up, pushing himself erect. His voice carried to the men on the ridge, to the horsemen who had halted.

"I've come to stop this!" he called. "There'll be no fence cut an' no man killed!"

Killane was on his feet. All along the ridge the men stood up. Across the little valley the riders, the little ranchmen, saw that line of rising men and knew that thing that had almost happened. They had halted their progress when the buckboard appeared and now they hesitated to continue their advance.

"There's law in this country,"

Dave Cloud said, and rocked on his unsteady feet as he spoke. "You men go home."

Between Ray Vincent and Phil Killane a man grunted and then moved, striding down toward the fence. Vincent cursed, low-voiced and took a step toward Killane, and the walking man went on. At the fence he stopped and, standing there beside the wire, he spoke so that the men, held motionless on either side of the valley could hear the words.

"Cloud!"

Dave Cloud turned. He was holding himself erect with an effort. Sheer will power kept him on his feet. Some men are made of iron, nerves and body, but even iron finds a final point of exhaustion.

"Cloud!" said the man at the fence once more. "You killed Tex Osburn. Fill yore hand."

He moved as he spoke, the glitter of the moonlight making that motion plain, and standing in the buckboard Dave Cloud met the challenge. Flame, paled by the moonlight, blossomed and shots dispelled the magic stillness. The buckboard team, frightened, lunged ahead and Dave Cloud pitched down over a turning wheel. But at the fence the Kid sagged and caught at the top wire and leaning against it coughed twice and then was still.

In that stillness Ray Vincent screamed a curse and, turning toward Killane, lifted the gun he held. Then, from beyond Killane, Bub Price, alert and ready, shot twice. Then men were running down the hill toward the fence. On the further slope riders whirled their horses and broke back toward the ridge top. But some men stayed and these, after a brief moment, came down the hill, riding slowly in the moonlight, empty hands raised.

DAVE CLOUD, opening his eyes, saw curtains and a green window shade. Turning his eyes further, for he could not seem to move his head, he discovered that the gentle motion he had noted was caused by a palm-leaf fan. The wielder of the fan was Pug Wells. Automatically Pug waved the fan back and forth, his eyes fixed upon a book in his free hand.

"Pug," Dave said and wondered why his voice sounded so far away.

Book and fan were dropped simultaneously and Pug bent forward eagerly. Seeing that Dave's eyes were open, he grinned, and got up.

"By gravy, it's time!" Pug exclaimed. "Wait till I get doc."

"Pug," Dave said.

Pug paused and stood near the bed. "Doc?" Dave said.

"Doc Beauchamp," Pug explained. "He's been lookin' after you. You been in bed three weeks, Dave."

"Tell me." Dave's lips were colorless, but the words came more strongly and his eyes were insistent.

Pug sat down again. "I'm supposed to call doc soon as you come out of it," he announced, glancing uncertainly over his shoulder. "You ain't supposed to talk, Dave. He'll give—"

"Tell me."

Pug squirmed in the chair, making himself more comfortable. "A feller they called the Kid shot you," he announced. "You got him, but you got pitched out of Killane's buckboard on yore head an' after that you pretty near died. Beauchamp's a good doctor or you would have. You better let me go get him, Dave."

"The fence," Dave murmured.

"All right, then." Resignedly Pug settled himself farther on the chair. "I'll tell you. There ain't no more fence trouble in the Curampaw.

They was all lined out to cut Killane's fence that night, but you got there an' stopped 'em. I guess they kind of figured you had too many guts for 'em, Dave. Anyhow after you an' the Kid had yore shootin', Farmer an' Duchin an' Chase an' some of 'em rode down the hill an' talked to Killane an' Trilling an' Trevis. Vincent had got himself killed—" Pug stopped, heading the question in Dave's eyes.

"Vincent," Pug elaborated, "tried to kill Killane, an' Bub Price shot him. Vincent had stole some land from Killane when they put in their boundary fence. The surveyor he hired confessed to it. Vincent wanted to get Killane out of the way. He knew the old man would be tough about that land."

Pug stopped again and Dave Cloud's lips formed the words, "Go on, Pug."

"Well," Pug said, "Farmer an' Duchin an' them come down an' talked to Killane. They made kind of a truce. They thought you was goin' to die an' everybody wanted to do the right thing. Seems like you stood pretty high with all of them right then. Anyhow there was no more trouble that night. There ain't been any since, neither. Vincent's range was throwed open an' with that an' what open range there was, there's been grass enough for everybody. An' Killane an' the others are goin' to lease some pasture. There's plenty of grass now. We had three rains since you been laid up."

Pug lapsed into silence. Dave's eyes were closed and Pug could not be sure that Dave was listening. The amber eyes opened and Pug grinned.

"It was Vincent rilin' up Killane an' Trevis an' Trilling, an' Yancy Yarbrow workin' on the little fellers.

Yancy's in jail for stealin' cattle. That feller that got away up at Sena's was caught in Colorado. The district attorney opened some letters that come in for Carl Sobran an' from them, an' Carl's books, he got wise that Yancy was in partnership with Sobran, an' when I picked Yancy up he confessed the whole thing. "Yancy's in jail all right." There was serene satisfaction in Pug's voice.

"I got in less than half an hour after you'd left for Killane's," Pug continued. "There wasn't nobody home at Whitecomb's an' I figgered it was a scheme to get me out of the way. I pretty near killed of Champ gettin' back to town. Then I found out about Doc Freeman an' that you'd gone out to Killane's so I follored you. I got in in time for the parley."

"Joe Chase?" Dave murmured.

"Joe knows that he didn't kill Handy Andy. He's all right. Him an' Grace Arnold are goin' to get married. Joe's buyin' Wade Samis' cattle an' Wade's leavin' the country. It was Grace that Wade an' Andy got into the jangle about the night Andy was killed. Andy jumped Wade about the way he'd treated Grace. That's what started the trouble. An' then Freeman shot Andy through the window. Hang it, Dave, I never would have suspected Doc Freeman."

"I didn't," Dave whispered.

"I got to go get Beauchamp." Pug got up from his chair. "He'd raise hell with me if he knew you'd come to life again an' I hadn't called him. You been layin' right there, just breathin', for three weeks an' we all been nursin' you."

**P**UG departed, and Dave closed his eyes and lay very still. Peace was all about him, relaxing his muscles, easing his mind. When he opened his eyes again, Quincy

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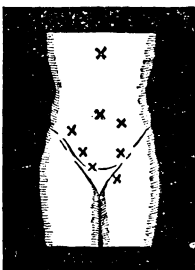
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Adams Beauchamp was sittin' in the chair that Pug had occupied and was taking his pulse. Beauchamp's beard was trimmed and he looked quite professional and not at all like the drunken old profligate of a month before.

"Well," Beauchamp said, "you seem to be doing nicely, Dave."

Dave looked past him. Phil Killane stood just beyond the doctor's shoulder, gray mustache and goatee bristling, eyes very bright.

"It's about time," Phil Killane commented.

Dave moved his lips. He wanted to speak, but no words came. Suddenly Killane smiled. "Everything's all right in the Curampaw," he said. "You taught us a few things, Dave."

Beauchamp got up and disappeared from Dave's vision. Killane moved a trifle closer to the bed. His voice was very gruff. "Before all this happened, I told you I wanted to see you. Remember?" he asked. Then, without waiting for reply: "I wanted to make you a proposition, Dave. I'd watched you and I had in mind a job at the Anchor. That job's still open whenever you finish being sheriff. I hope you'll think about it, Dave. They'd elect you sheriff of this county for the next hundred years, but I'd like to have you run the Anchor for me."

There was no answer to that, none that Dave could make. Killane waited a moment, his smile softening. "Think about it, Dave," he said, and then: "I'll go out now an' send Jessie in."

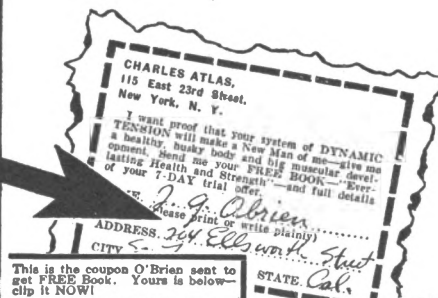
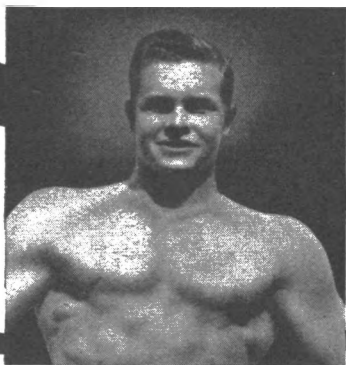
Phil Killane's peg leg thumped on the carpet. The door closed after him, and Dave Cloud lay there, waiting for Jessie and knowing that her coming was the one thing needed to round out the satisfaction and peace he felt in a job well done.

THE END.

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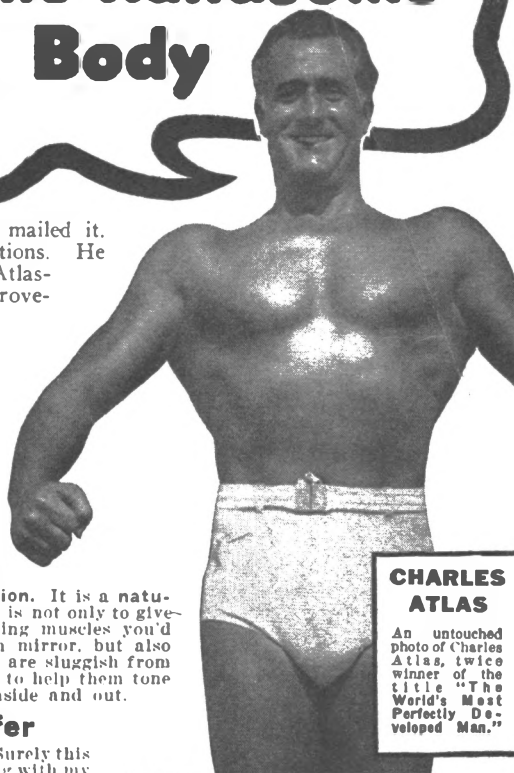
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