

# WESTERN<sup>W</sup>

STREET  
AND  
SMITH'S

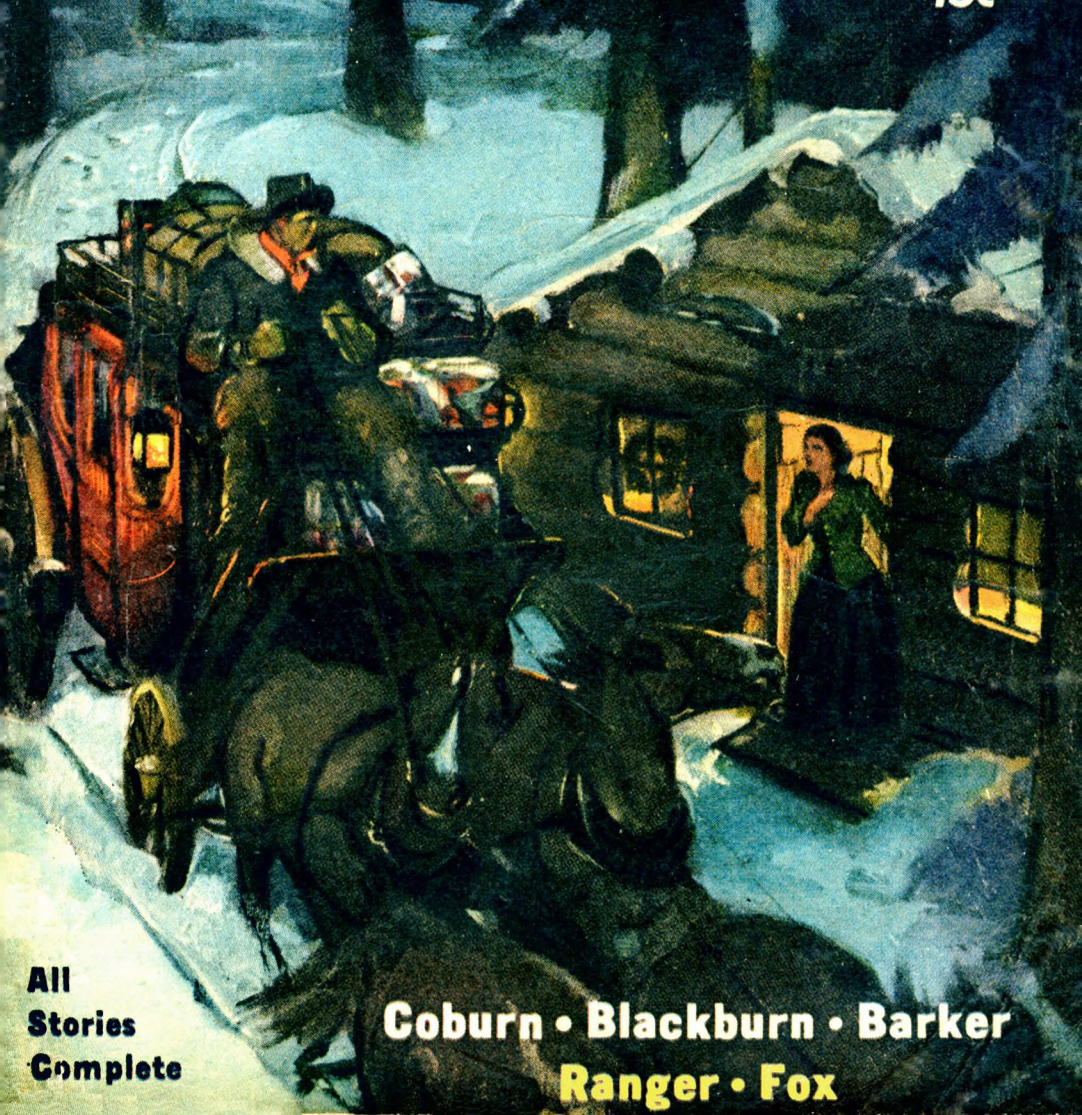
## STORY

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**WESTERN STORY**

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Editor  
**JOHN BURR**

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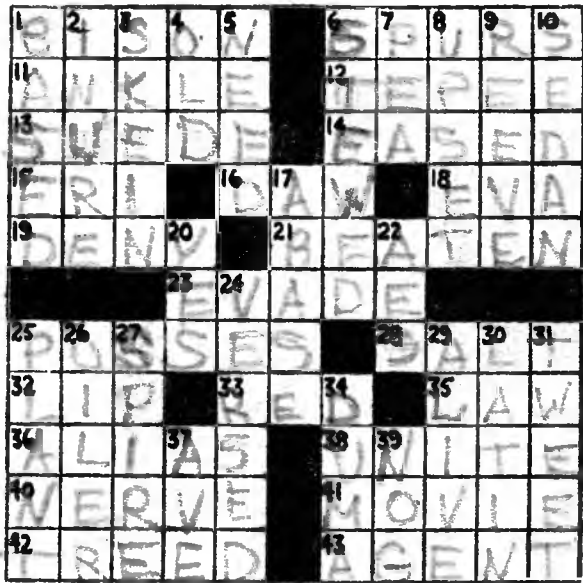
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COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

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# CROSSWORD PUZZLE



## ACROSS

1. American buffalo
6. Pointed goads used by horsemen
11. Joint between the foot and the leg
12. Indian's dwelling place
13. Dull-napped leather
14. Relieved
15. Assam silkworm
16. Crowlike bird
18. Girl's name
19. Contradict
21. Whipped
23. Give the slip
25. Sheriff's forces
28. Lick used by cattle
32. Backtalk

33. Crimson
35. Statute
36. Pseudonym
38. Weld
40. Courage
41. Cinema
42. Cornered amid the branches
43. One acting for another

## DOWN

1. Founded on
2. Accustom to
3. Quantity of thread
4. Well along in years
5. Require
6. Boiled
7. Pod vegetable

8. Capsize
9. Female ruff
10. Closed car
17. Lower oneself
20. Aye
22. Roman money of bronze
24. Skilled, practiced
25. Factory
26. Lubricator
27. Sharp, tapering tip
29. Vivid
30. Spanish-American
31. Bird's cheep
34. Former Russian Council
37. Hail!
39. Egg drink

*(The solution to this puzzle may be found on page 125)*

*Could a bronc-shy buckaroo, with a jinx of his own to fight,  
tame the sinister combine that menaced Pappy Biederman's*

# HOME RANCH FOR HELLIONS



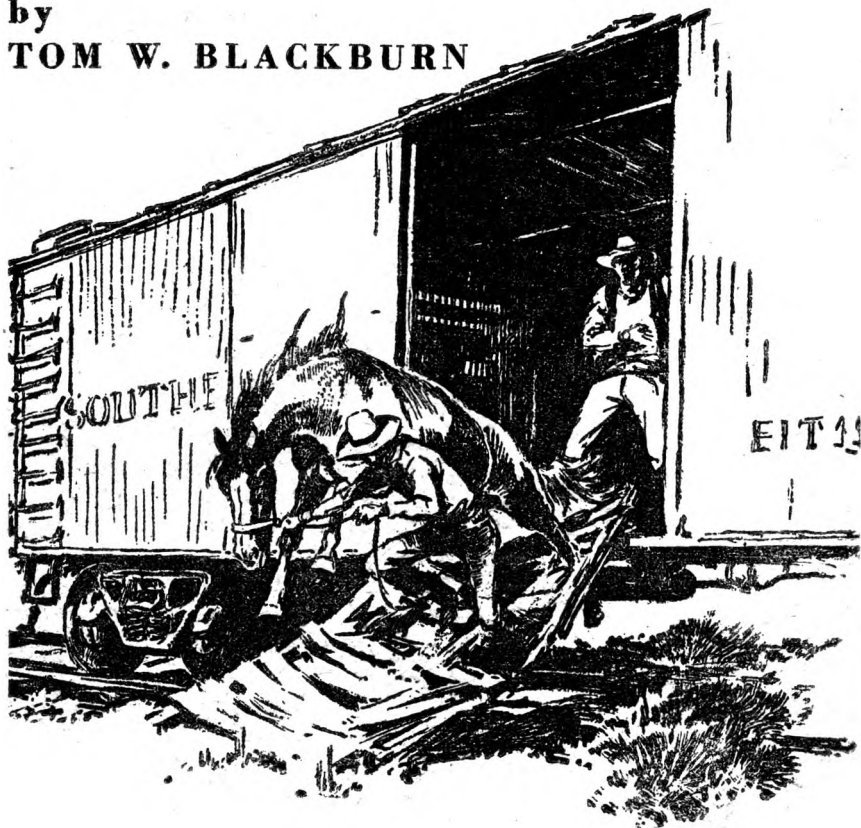
I

IT WAS AS UNUSUAL a kind of wagon as a man had ever built. The running gear of an outsized hayrick, carrying atop it a tolerable replica of an undersized railroad box car, complete to sliding doors and a little light coming in through the roof at either end from the raised lids of fake ice hatches there. A crazy wagon and effective, but no fun to ride in — not when the doors were closed and it

carried a sixteen-hand package of jet black dynamite as freight.

The wagon lurched sharply, jolted, and angled off on a new course. Jack Shaw steadied himself with a hand against the side wall, favoring his game leg, and spoke soothingly to the hooded, trembling horse beside him. The animal blew explosively, shifted to one side with wicked speed, and rammed a smooth, heavy shoulder against the wall where Shaw had been standing only an instant before.

by  
TOM W. BLACKBURN



Shaw swore softly and spoke again to the animal. Three or four times a year Pappy Biederman was able to buy a good black horse, but an animal like this didn't turn up once in a blue moon. This Hades horse was among the best of his kind, spirited, stubborn, and deliberately ornery as hell. Shaw began to wish the wagon would stop rolling.

Almost as an echo of the thought, a hail sounded outside the box. Old Jonesy, sitting on the roof and driv-

ing, set his double-span team back in their collars and kicked the brake to the bottom of its ratchet. The wagon might as well have run into a stone wall. Within, Shaw lost his balance and went down on one knee. The black horse blew again, but shifted its weight so cannily that it did not even brush hide against the side walls. Hades learned necessary lessons fast. He was going to be a big money maker—maybe the best bronc in the famous Biederman bucking string.

Jonesy slid one of the side doors open and light streamed into the dim interior. Favoring his leg still, Shaw dropped to the ground.

Pappy Biederman and a big, slicked-up gent with the effrontery of a pink flower of some kind in the button hole of his shoulder-squaring coat, were standing in the grass of the training meadow. Shaw realized he was sweating heavily and that his hands were unsteady. He knew why and the realization made him angry. But there was only so much he could do about it. Pappy Biederman called him over.

"Jack, meet up with King Coleman, a gent with a bright idea that'll take years off my head. King, you've heard of Jack Shaw, Sweepstakes Winner at the National Western last winter and runner up at the Fort Worth Stock show till—"

Pappy broke off with a quick, embarrassed glance at Shaw.

"Anyways," he said with an awkward, abrupt change of subject, "Jack's the best trainer of bucking horses I've ever had on Plattebench Ranch. Look at this wagon he dreamed up to take all the shipping spooks out of a bucker afore we ever load him on a car for shipment."

Coleman stepped close and glanced into the interior of the car.

"Looks like a wild man's dream to me," he said shortly. "A leg breaker. I wouldn't put a horse of mine in it."

"Maybe that's part of the reason why you or nobody else'll ever have a string of show stock that'll compare to mine, then," Pappy said with satisfaction. "Shucks, the biggest prob-

lem with a string of buckers is to teach 'em how to stand up under all the shipping and handling they've got to take in a season. The National Western at Denver in mid-winter, then Fort Worth in March; Cheyenne Frontier days, El Paso, Phoenix, Pendleton, Salinas, sometimes Calgary; maybe a crack at the Garden or a show in London or Paris for a wind-up.

"A horse don't take to that kind of travel natural, and a bucker in particular. I've seen wicked humpers that couldn't be broke out with a saddle turn mild as kittens after two-three days in a box car, jolting and grunting and clattering along the rails from one show to another. This wagon takes that out of them before they ever leave Plattebench. Jack rides the wagon with a horse till the bucker catches onto how to handle itself and gets used to the kind of ride that's coming. When it does, the animal's ready to ship and r'arin' for competition. That's why you'll make easy money, peddling Plattebench stock to the shows, King."

Coleman swung his attention to Shaw. His glance was speculative and faintly mocking.

"When a man muffs one thing, he's got to turn his hand to something else, eh, Shaw?" he said. "That wagon must be rough. Looks like you've worked up a sweat. Things that tough inside when it's rolling?"

Shaw saw the quick look of protest in Pappy's eyes and he knew that the owner of the Plattebench Ranch had already told Coleman his story — or that Coleman had heard it elsewhere. A story not particularly unusual in

the rodeo circuit, except for one thing. The story of how contender Jack Shaw had missed a dive for a three-thousand-pound steer in the bulldogging event at Fort Worth the season past and had been run over by the beef-and-bone steam roller he had been trying to snag; how a man who takes a quick hurt that way often gets his nerve fuzzed up; and how Jack Shaw's guts turned to water every time he got too close to an animal now—beef or horseflesh.

Shaw wondered curiously if Coleman knew the rest of it. The fact, for instance, that Pappy Biederman was telling only half the truth when he intimated Jack Shaw was an especially hired trainer. He wondered if Coleman knew or guessed that he was actually one of the broken-down hands off the circuit, like Old Jonesy, whom Pappy had taken in out of the largeness of his heart. One of the derelicts whom Pappy blandly insisted more than earned the monthly checks which were solemnly handed out to them when the ranch payroll was made up.

Shaw thought Coleman likely knew it all and the man's veiled mockery stung. He eyed the booking agent coolly.

"Climb in with that black devil and take a circuit around the meadow, friend. I'll guarantee a sweat for you, too!"

Coleman shook his head.

"The devil with that. There's easier ways of making a living," he said. He turned to Pappy.

"They want a top buckner and three or four fillers for a private show on the Hillmont Ranch that Oklahoma

millionaire has down below Cimarron. That's our first order, Biederman. Have the stock on the siding there Friday?"

When Pappy nodded Coleman turned and strode off across the meadow with no further acknowledgment of Shaw. Jack watched the man's retreating back with narrowed eyes. Directly he was conscious of Pappy's close scrutiny.

"Don't like Coleman, eh, son?" Pappy queried. "I'm sorry about that. He's a good man in his line."

"Yeah?" Shaw said. "What line? What business has he got on Plattebench?"

"Plenty of business," Pappy said slowly. "All my life my interest has been in show stock—the kind of clean, hard-working buckners that guarantee a good ride and a fair deal for the man up on 'em. I've always wanted to stick close and work the new head in my string. But instead I had to be drifting from show to show, drumming up business to keep the ranch here going. Now I'm out of that, finally. Coleman and a partner are taking over booking the Biederman string. They'll do the traveling while I stick home and turn my hand to what I want. A perfect setup."

Shaw frowned. "Maybe. I'm not so sure. Your string's been only half the reason you've gotten almost all the business on the circuit all these years, Pappy. You're the other half. How could there be any competition for Plattebench stock when there's only one Pappy Biederman? Always ready to fill in as a judge; every now and then fattening up a lean purse



at a small show so the boys'd have more steam in their rides; working for organization of the Association and a clean set of rules. The circuit'll miss that, Pappy. The boys'll be glad to see your string still humping out of the chutes, but they'll want to see you, too. And they won't like Coleman . . ."

Pappy shook his head. "Look, Jack, you're letting this whole thing throw you," he said kindly. "You're letting it rile you up against everybody in the business excepting maybe me. I've got to hand it to you for the way you're working on the thing that gives you the sweats. I know what it's costing you to work Hades and ride this rolling box with him, but I know it's doing you good. A bone'll knit up in six months, but a man doesn't get over a bad spill that quick. He don't ever get over it unless he works at getting over it till he sweats like hell. But you got to work just as hard at getting over your grouch."

"I'm just toting one score, Pappy," Shaw said quietly. "And I'll keep on toting it till I've had a chance to square it!"

Biederman nodded.

"That's your business, son. Maybe you're right. I figure you've told the story straight about the boy that was runner up for high points with you at Fort Worth deliberately spooking that steer as you quit your saddle to dog it. And I suppose any man with salt would pack a grudge over that. But the judges didn't see it and the news hoys didn't see it, so it don't show on the record. That's nobody's fault. Luck ran that way. You got

to quit lettin' it bog you down. Now, look, Hades seems to be coming along good. Can he stand shipment down to Cimarron Thursday?"

Shaw nodded. "I'd like to see him make a small show, now. He's ready for it. But I've changed my mind, Pappy, about staying off the circuit myself. When this Hades horse goes out, I want to go with him."

Biederman glanced up curiously.

"All right," he agreed. "But why? You don't trust the handlers I usually send along with a shipment with this particular black devil?"

"The handlers are all right," Shaw said quietly. "It's just that I still don't like your booking agent and this Hillmont Ranch show is one I've got to see!"

## II

The railroad kicked a car off onto the Plattebench siding Wednesday night. Shaw went down to the rails after supper to watch the shipping crew ready it for the animals. Preparations were typical of Plattebench operations. Shaw's respect for Pappy Biederman was not wholly based on personal gratitude. It had much to do with the old man's whole theory of raising stock.

Like most men who had ridden the circuit of the stock shows and rodeos, Shaw had a bitter feeling toward the type of operator who capitalized on the showing of stock at the expense of the animals themselves. He could remember a time when showmen tried to make bucking horses. A husky, quick-footed animal with a touch of devil in its eye and a little show of stubborn spirit would be rough-

handled, goaded, frayed in a dozen wicked ways to make it mean. Sometimes the process worked. When it did, the animal was turned out a killer, deadly unless constantly watched, and a hard-enough ride to suit the demands of most shows.

Pappy Biederman, however, had discovered that the best buckers were born, not made. A real bucker was an incorrigible equine personality—a sort of Peck's bad boy in horseflesh. An animal born with a determination to be no man's servant.

Pappy had started searching the country for such natural buckers. Bringing them back to Plattebench, he began working them up into really fine show contenders. Natural tricks inherent in the horse were encouraged and polished. Effort was made to teach the animal new ones. Twists and sunfishing and a long leap out of the chute, in particular—a long, powerful leap which ended in a bone-jolting, head-down, stiff-legged landing which had become a sort of Biederman trade-mark.

When the tricks were polished, a Biederman horse went into the course of handling and shipping training which had become Shaw's specialty since he'd started working at Plattebench. Although the result of this training was to protect the men who would eventually handle the buckers in railroad cars, show corrals and the chutes, the purpose of it all, as far as Pappy Biederman was concerned, ~~was~~ to teach the animals how to protect themselves from the injuries so common in shipping.

And the proof of the sound business judgment behind the old ranch-

er's care of his stock lay in the fact that some Biederman buckers had been so well tended that they'd earned Pappy fees for their hire for twenty years before being finally retired to pasture at Plattebench.

Satisfied that the car was properly prepared for Hades and the three other buckers Pappy had decided to send to the Hillmont show, Shaw went back up to the bunkhouse. Old Jonesy quit a checker game to cross over to him.

"The boss says I'm riding south with you in the morning, Jack," the little old veteran circuit man said. "Going to seem funny without the old man going along to close up his own deal and collect his own cash."

Circuit gossip had it that Old Jonesy had ringbone and a gear loose in his balding skull from making one too many hard rides. However, Jack had found that the little man had not lost his skill with horses or his love of them. And he had sensed a shrewdness in Jonesy which was in no way as dulled as the rider's eccentricity indicated. He nodded.

"That's what I figured, too, Jonesy," he agreed. "That's why I'm going along with Hades to see his first ride."

Jonesy nodded solemnly.

"There's some kinds of men as ought to have to do with horses and some kinds as ought not. Coleman's one of the ought-nots, way I figure. Thought you'd like to know I seen it that way, too."

Shaw grinned crookedly. Since his talk with Pappy, he had been feeling a little guilty. He knew better than

anyone else exactly how jumpy he was. It was pretty bad. And he'd begun to think Pappy's criticism had been well taken. He'd begun to feel maybe he was spooking at King Coleman when there wasn't a damned thing to spook at. Jonesy's backing made him feel better.

"Pappy says he wants to see you up at the house before you turn in, Jack," Jonesy went on. "Got some first-class whiskey up there if he'll break it out. Might work on him for a nibble."

Nodding thanks, Shaw stepped back outside and crossed the Plattebench yard to the solid little shanty which had been Pappy Biederman's house for thirty years. Pappy had gotten around to building fine corrals and the best barns in the State, but somehow his house had seemed always good enough, so long as there were operational buildings which could use improvement on the ranch.

Pappy was sitting in the front room, back of a lowered lamp. Jonesy had been shrewd in his guess. A bottle of whiskey of a kind seldom seen on the bars of even the best saloons in show towns was in front of the old stockman, along with two glasses. Pappy poured a couple of drinks and kicked out a chair.

"Dead certain, are you, Jack, that you want to ride down to this Hillmont show? It'll be pretty ordinary. A scary thing the owner down there's putting on to give a house full of guests a thrill. Won't be anything compared to regular money competition."

Shaw nodded. Pappy sipped at his whiskey, his eyes thoughtful.

"Sure it won't make it rough for you? Don't forget, you haven't been around a show since you took that spill. You've lugged through a good fight, but you're not over that, yet. Get bushed down there and it might set you back a long ways."

"Shucks, I don't aim to ride," Jack said flatly.

Pappy shrugged. "Then I reckon you and me have got to have a little talk, son," he said quietly. "Personally, I'm mighty pleased you're going and I'll tell you why. Something's been happening on the circuit recently. I didn't sign on King Coleman out of an open heart or just because I like the slant of his face. He's a brisk boy and he can get around a hell of a lot more than I could. And there's some getting around got to be done if I'm going to stay in business."

Shaw looked curiously at his boss over his whiskey glass. Pappy folded his weathered hands in front of him.

"Facts is these, briefly," he said. "Everything I've got is tied up in this ranch and my stock. You know how it is—I feed pretty generous and won't work an animal too hard. So them that are working have got to turn in plenty of cash or I'm in a hole. Well, the past two or three seasons, shows have been backing down on the regular orders with me—shows that are maybe a little close on budget and the like. They've been backing down and signing buckers from some other source. Enough of 'em have done it to hurt, particularly the ~~last~~ year. And the hurt's bad."

"How bad?" Jack asked bluntly.

"Bad enough so I've got to have a

top season this year or I'm through." was Pappy's toneless answer.

"Who's your competition?" asked Jack. "When you know the kind of man you're bucking, you can usually turn up a way to get around him."

"It's not that easy," Biederman said heavily. "Shows that have canceled out on me won't talk. And whatever outfit's furnishing the cheap stock is building its string up the old outlaw way—rough handling and the like. The boys riding the backyard chutes have told me that much. So they're staying under cover to keep the Association out of their hair. Plenty clever. I finally found out what they're doing business under, and it turns out to be a corporation—Arena Horses, Incorporated. So that stops me."

"What's this Hillmont show got to do with it? Where does Coleman come in, then?"

"Coleman's a salesman. A smooth one. Biederman horses have never had to be sold, before. I figure they do, now—if I'm going to stay in business. So King's after bookings for me. That's one gamble. The other is you, boy. Think about this Hillmont show. Sure, it's little, but a bunch of kids putting on an exhibition in a meadow would use more horses than the four we're sending. They've got to have more horses. But where are they going to get them? That's what I want you to find out. Maybe you can uncover this Arena Horses thing. I'll go broke, all right, if that's in the cards, Jack. But be damned if I'll see the shows—particularly the cheap ones that we had trouble with before—going back to using galled-up, mistreated stock that

has been prodded and beat into turning bloody-eyed buckers! If you find something, use the telegraph. I want this run down, Jack!"

Shaw nodded and stood up.

"I'll let you know if I turn anything up," he said. "But I ought to tell you the main reason I'm riding to Hillmont with Hades. Frank Heron, the son who volunteered to ride safety so he could spook that steer at Fort Worth, hangs out around Cimararon. This is the slack season. The owner at Hillmont will be paying fancy money for boys who can make a fair show. There's a chance Heron may be there. A chance worth going for. I'll do what I can, Pappy, about this Arena Horses thing if there's outside stock in. But this is one time that my business comes ahead of yours."

Biederman walked with Shaw to the door.

"No use talking to a stubborn man or roweling a stubborn horse," he said heavily. "Just the same, I'm telling you to go easy. You're jumpy still and a tight might make you fold like a bent card. Don't risk it, boy."

Shaw went down the steps. When he got no answer, Biederman shrugged.

"Well, then, good luck!" he murmured.

### III

The freight string into which the bright blue Biederman car had been spliced made Trinidad after dark Thursday night and coupled on an extra engine there. Even with this booster, however, crossing Raton Pass was slow work. The first ten hours out of Plattebench siding went

well enough. The three other animals in the shipment were veteran buckers and they rode out the uneasy footing of the rolling car as unconcernedly as if they were standing in their own stalls in the feed barn on the home ranch. Hades horse, more nervous, nevertheless proved that Shaw's careful training and his familiarity with the box-car wagon on the home ranch meadow had been worth while. He remained relatively quiet.

Old Jonesy, hunkered against a side wall, reached deep into the rich store of his recollections of the first days on the circuit and days before, when no honest rider would fork a horse in any show. Jonesy was a good talker and he worked hard at it. Shaw was grateful. The quietness of the animals and Jonesy's efforts made it easier for him. The smell of a big animal, sweaty and frightened and lethal, did not sweep him in recollection. He was able to avoid the thought that a sudden lurch of the car in which he rode—a hump in the roadbed—an unfamiliar noise—any of these might turn the horses in the car into maddened, lashing, plunging demons, fighting to escape something they did not understand.

He was able to avoid picturing the scene inside the car if this should happen. He was able to keep his nerves from re-creating the taste of the dust of the rodeo ground at Fort Worth, the sudden silence of the crowd in the distant stands, and the blinding agony which had come when the big steer hit him.

But Jonesy was an old man and he tired of talking, eventually. And the animals grew more restless. When

Jonesy stretched out on one of the bunks at the back of the car, Jack stayed close to the lantern in its center. He told himself that he wanted to keep an eye on the animals while his partner slept. But he knew it was the light he wanted. He couldn't face hours in a bunk and the thousand ways of reliving his fall which his subconscious mind could produce when it was night and the smell of stock was in the air.

The down-grade run of the pass into Raton was unusually rough. Hades, more than the three other animals, began to show marked nervousness. Shaw forced himself to go over to the big black and talk to him, but it was an effort which made him sweat.

The Biederman car was cut out of the big freight string at Raton and hooked onto a clanking groaner for the run out the Hillmont spur. Yard noise and the jolting of switching set Hades to blowing explosively and his whole big body to trembling with uneasiness. Shaw's shirt was wet. He felt cold. A muscle in his face was pulling spasmodically—all too familiar sign that his control was slipping. His mouth was dry.

To kill time, Shaw tried to refill the tank of the lantern with oil and spilled a quantity because of the unsteadiness of his hands. This was enough. He roused Jonesy, although common sense told him the old rider had at least a couple more hours of sleep coming.

Jonesy swung his legs over the side of the bunk and sleepily dragged a tin watch from his pocket. He squinted

at its face, then lifted it to his ear. When he heard it ticking, he hit the floor with a veteran's heat at being turned out before his relief's trick was up. However, before he could round up satisfactory sulphur for his anger, he glimpsed Shaw's face in the lantern light. His jaws clamped shut and he hastily dragged on his boots. Crossing to where Shaw was hunkered, he dropped a hand to his shoulder.

"Plain talk's best, I reckon, Jack," he said. "I've always held so. Not that I wouldn't rather hit a show with you than anybody, but I told the boss that it was a fool thing for you to make this trip. A fool thing for you even to be working buckers on the home meadows, yet. You've been doing good, plenty good. But you're a long ways from being ready to even look at a show!"

"I'm knit. My leg's sound enough, now," Shaw said stubbornly.

"The hell with your leg!" Jonesy snorted. "That ain't it and you know it! You've got the creepin' Willies and you're tryin' to get over 'em the hard way instead of lettin' 'em die off slow and natural. It ain't right. Maybe you'll cure 'em this way. But you run an almighty chance of curling up every nerve in your carcass, permanent! Look, when we hit Hillmont, you stick with the car here and take it easy. Look at the scenery. Stay away from the corrals and the arena. I'll borrow me a couple of Hillmont hands and I'll handle the stock."

Shaw let his gratitude show on his face, but he shook his head.

"The stock isn't all, this trip, Jonesy," he explained.

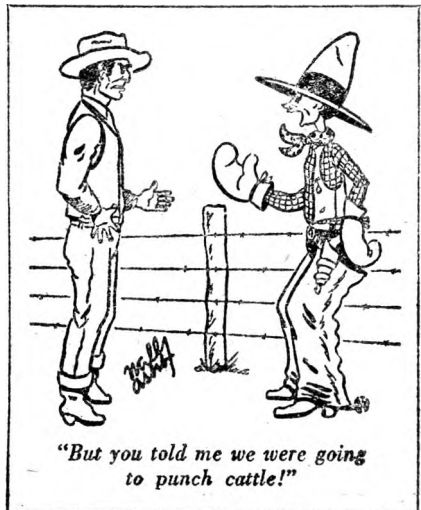
Jonesy dropped down beside him. a sudden look of comprehension on his face.

"You figure you might cut sign of Frank Herron?" he asked quietly.

Shaw nodded. The old rider was silent a long moment.

"A hell of a partner I am!" he muttered finally. "You're a sick man and I know what ails you. I should be turning up arguments, fast and convincing, to steer you shy of trouble. But I can't do her, son. I've been pushed around a time or two, myself. Enough to know that common sense or nothing else is going to keep a gent from going after what he figures is owed him from a crooked deck deal. Let's leave her this way: If Herron isn't here, you stick with this car and stay clean away from this show. If he is about, then we'll go after him together!"

Shaw shrugged. Jonesy was an old man. He had the heart and the spirit, but he'd be little good in a tight.



"But you told me we were going to punch cattle!"

And Herron, down here in his own country and at a private show outside the jurisdiction of the Association, would be a mean hombre with whom to tangle. But if he would be no help, Jonesy would likely be little hindrance, either.

For a moment Shaw debated confiding Biederman's troubles to the old rider, but there seemed little use in doing so. A threat to Plattebench and Biederman's standing in the circuit would really fire Jonesy up. And after all, Pappy had only wanted a pair of eyes and ears quietly at work here at Hillmont. Shaw figured his own would do well enough.

Jonesy returned to his bunk and opened his warbag. Shaw paid him little attention until he came back up under the lantern. Then he saw that the old man had strapped on a gun hanging from a belt so ancient and worn that its leather had turned a greasy, pliant black. He had never seen Jonesy wearing an iron, although that, in itself, was not surprising. Plattebench was no dude outfit and Biederman employees had no illusions of grandeur or heroics, to which a belted gun about their middles might add. Mostly there was a ludicrousness in the bland ease with which Jonesy wore his belt.

Shaw frowned. "Don't be a fool!" he exploded. "That might be a way of asking for trouble we don't want!"

Jonesy nodded.

"It might be," he agreed. "It might also be a way of obliging some other gent if he came asking for trouble. If this Herron gent is around and he was ringy enough to bust you up at Fort Worth because you were

ahead of him on points, he might be ringy here in his own stomping grounds. Seems smart to have something between us to pull his stinger, if necessary. Here, now — pull this down a mite and turn in. You're spread pretty thin and there might be a couple of rough days ahead."

Reaching into a hip pocket, Jonesy produced a pint bottle. The whiskey was pleasantly warm in Shaw's stomach. The warmth extended to his bunk when he kicked off his boots and stretched out. His tenseness eased a little. He heard Jonesy talking to Hades at the other end of the car. And while he listened he drifted off into a heavy, welcome sleep.

Shaw roused to bright sunlight flooding in through the open door of the Biederman car. With an effort he oriented himself. He realized the car was motionless and that it must have already been shunted onto the Hillmont siding. Dragging on his boots, he headed for the door. Jonesy swung up through it from the outside.

"Man, you sure can sleep when you get at it!" he grinned. "We're here. King Coleman's out there. Fancy britches or no, Jack, he's a Johnny-on-the-job. Got an unloading trestle already rigged for us and quite an audience waiting to see the Biederman string come in. He's smart, too. Wants us to unload Hades first—for the effect."

This was good salesmanship, good showmanship and Shaw recognized it. But his distrust of King Coleman was as instinctive as it had been instantaneous. He could not control it. He shook his head with sharp decision.

"The devil with that!" he growled. "Old Blue's in the near stall. Take him off first."

Jonesy looked surprised, but he shrugged and moved toward the hammer-headed old blue buckler. Shaw saw that the old rider still wore his black-belted gun. Damned foolishness. Jonesy came back toward the door, leading the blue horse. He stopped beside Shaw.

"Something else, boy," he murmured. "I don't know this Herron, but I've seen his pictures in the *Association News*. He's out there—along with the big boss of this layout and a bunch of others. Mind you go easy till we can get a wet finger up into the wind."

Without waiting for an answer, Jonesy moved through the door with Old Blue trailing. Shaw did not see exactly how it happened. He heard the shriek of spikes pulling out of timber. He heard the splintering of light stringers failing under sudden strain. He heard Old Blue's explosive snort and the thunder of the buckler's hoofs as the animal tried to keep its footing. Then men were shouting, and the horse and Jonesy were down in a welter of scantlings and planking on the ground, dumped there by the collapse of the unloading trestle King Coleman had provided.

Shaw teetered in the doorway of the car. Old Blue was down on his side, threshing in the mess of broken timbers and drawn nails. Jonesy had rolled barely clear of the horse, but he was stunned and a huge spike, projecting from a plank, had torn a great gash across his cheek. Beyond the wreckage, startled, were a dozen men.

Shaw was aware that one of them was shouting at him.

"Get that man out of there! Get that horse up before he hamstring himself! What's the matter with you, you blasted water-belly?"

Shaw recognized the voice. He recognized the face. He saw Frank Herron lunge forward, carelessly oblivious of Old Blue's pistoning legs. He saw Herron coolly twist Blue's head, force the horse back onto its feet, then jerk Jonesy up like a grain sack and drag him entirely clear.

Shaw felt the eyes of the others outside the car on him. But there was nothing he could do about any of it. His muscles had knotted up tightly. His reflexes had frozen. And his whole effort was to keep his eyes away from the wreckage of the trestle and his stomach from churning itself wrong-side out with nausea.

Coleman leaped up into the car, followed by a graying, spare man who wore a much too new saddle outfit with little grace. Dully, Shaw realized this man was Dudley Hilton, owner of the fabulous Hillmont. A man who could afford to stage a complete arena show for the amusement of his personal guests on a ranch as big as a county and designed wholly as a plaything.

"What a hell of an accident!" Coleman breathed. "A fine start for the Biederman string. Lucky you weren't on the trestle, too, Shaw!"

From the ground outside. Frank Herron spoke angrily.

"Take over in there, King. That washout won't be able to do anything. He's blown high. like he did at Fort



Worth. I'm getting this old man up to the house and a doc. The horse might as well go back into the car. He's got a bad sprain — if he's not hurt worse—"

Herron lifted Jonesy to his feet and turned away. Coleman looked closely at Shaw, then called up a couple of Hillmont hands from the bunch outside. Shaw stood woodenly watching them rig another and more secure trestle. The churning within him subsided. One thought steadied itself in his mind. The collapsed trestle had been prearranged. Shaw was certain of it. Hades was the best buckler—potentially, at least—that Pappy Biederman had ever owned. And Coleman had wanted Hades unloaded first. The trestle had been deliberately rigged for the big black.

Dudley Hilton was standing apart from Shaw.

"What a nasty accident!" he muttered, virtually repeating Coleman's exclamation.

Shaw broke the fetters which had held him silent.

"Accident — hell!" he said with quiet explosiveness.

#### IV

King Coleman's head came up sharply. Hilton looked astonished. The two Hillmont hands who were preparing to unload Hades and the two other Biederman buckers paused and looked around cautiously, their attention drawn by the anger in Shaw's tones. Coleman crossed the car with an easy, swinging stride, his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"You trying to say something, Shaw?" he asked angrily.

Jack nodded. "Right out plain!" he agreed. "That trestle was rigged to go down and you knew it was rigged. Only thing is, it spilled the wrong horse to suit you!"

"Anything else?" Cole queried with deceptive quiet.

Jack nodded again. "One thing. Get out of this car and stay out of it! Keep away from our string while we're here!"

"We're working for the same boss, Shaw," Coleman said thinly. "I've the same right here you have—maybe a better one, since I'm no pensioner that's been unhinged by an arena fall. So I guess it's whichever one of us can make his orders stick."

Jack saw Coleman's big hands clench. He knew what was coming. Old reflexes reacted. He swung up and across in a hard drive. His knuckles chopped against the heavy line of Coleman's jaw with a hard, satisfying jolt. Coleman went up on his heels and spilled out the door.

Shaw turned on the owner of Hillmont. "You'll see Biederman horses make your show, Mr. Hilton," he said raggedly, "but you can wait till they come out of the chutes to look them over. Get out of here and take your men with you. And if anything else happens to my partner or to any more Plattebench stock while we're on your ranch, I'll hold you to answer. Don't forget it!"

Looking puzzled and a little angry, Dudley Hilton signaled his two hands and dropped down from the car. Coleman was back on his feet, dusting himself. He looked up darkly.

"You shouldn't have made this personal, Shaw," he said quietly. Then he turned and moved off with Hilton.

Two or three idlers remained curiously about the siding after Coleman and Dudley Hilton left. Shaw waited impatiently for a while, hoping they would drift on also, or that Jonesy would return from the big ranch-house. However, Old Blue was still standing outside in the shade of the car, obviously hurt, and Shaw finally swung down outside, knowing that he'd have to risk making a fool of himself in front of this idling audience in an attempt at least to get Blue loaded again and attended to.

Fortunately, Blue seemed grateful for attention and was docile. And enough of the flare of anger which had come up in Shaw at King Coleman remained to keep his frayed nerve in check. The Hilton hands had rigged a satisfactory trestle before they left. Shaw got Blue back up into the car and checked him over. His injuries did not appear to be as serious as Jack had feared. A sprained foreleg seemed to cover them. Jack located the extent of the sprain as best he could and wrapped it carefully for lack of better treatment.

He waited again after this, but when Jonesy had not returned by noon, he became increasingly alarmed over the old rider. Backing Hades from his stall, he led the buckner to the door. The old sweat returned and the hammering in his chest, but Hades handled as beautifully as he usually did in the home meadow and minced down the trestle to the ground. Re-

turning for the two other animals, Shaw brought them out, also.

All three were in need of water. And Biederman horses were accustomed to sound feeding, whether they were working or not. Jack knew he couldn't keep them here at the siding and that Hillmont undoubtedly had quarters for them somewhere around the arena. Leading all three animals, he started afoot toward the main buildings of the ranch.

When Dudley Hilton set out to build his house on Hillmont, he had outdone the splendor of half a dozen other millionaires who'd come into the high country to build dude estates. The building looked like a hotel and it was nearly as busy. A dozen or more expensive cars were drawn up in the shade of the huge trees overhanging the entrance drive and front lawns. Others were in a service yard to the rear.

Among the outbuildings, around the barns and down by a large corral Shaw judged was used to catch up and saddle gentled riding stock kept for the use of guests, a number of remarkable characters was strolling. Men and women dressed in ugly new denim and much uglier fancy buckskin. Pink, peeling noses and impossibly impractical versions of full-crowned, broad-brimmed range hats. Belts and cuff guards of leather so new and stiff it creaked with every movement. Eyes big and wide with curiosity and faces set in an attempt to appear familiar with everything about them.

One middling, rounded woman he had seen size him up before she approached him, came up to Shaw with

an offer to help him by leading Hades. He refused her courteously, but he wished he could be where he could see her face at the show tomorrow when that twisting black son of hell plunged out of the bucking chutes with a rider up.

A Mexican pointed out the quarters reserved for the guest show stock. It was a low, tiled stable obviously generally used to house a string of polo ponies. Jack led his animals through the door and found four stalls at the lower end with cards tacked to their stanchions indicating they were reserved for Biederman-Plattebench stock. He stalled his animals, saw that they were watered and called to a hostler for feed. While he waited for the fellow, he drifted up a ways. Several private horses were along the line — trick ropers, racers and the like, brought in by contestants. At the opposite end of the stables, he came to ten stalls, each with a card on a stanchion bearing the legend: "Arena Horses, Incorporated."

Shaw studied the animals in these stalls. Vicious brutes, every one of them, and man-made. The evidence was ample. A little underfed — not enough to impair their strength, but the right amount to raise hell with their dispositions. Rough coats, scars and abrasions that no amount of careless shipping or corral accidents could account for fully; lowered ears; the marks of deliberately improperly fitted saddles; spur marks along the ribs that insured a lot of fight for any rider who dropped heels alongside of these old hurts. A typical string from the old outlaw days on the circuit. Evidence over which the Association

would break a man, now, if they caught it in the making.

A tall, heavy-boned rider ducked in from outside, saw Shaw by the Arena stalls, and came down swiftly on him.

"Want something, bud?" he growled.

Shaw shook his head.

"Want it or not, you're going to get it if you don't get back wherever you belong and stay away from this string!" the man snapped.

Shaw looked stonily at the fellow.

"Put it that way and there is something I want," he said. "Who owns this string?"

"I do," the rider said sullenly.

Shaw glanced at his unkempt gear and grinned contemptuously.

"The devil you do!" he answered quietly. "You probably don't even own your own boots!"

He turned, intending to walk away, but another man had come through the door and blocked his path. Shaw recognized Frank Herron.

"Still aiming to make trouble, Shaw?" Herron said. "This time you picked the right boy. If I was to say the word, McGruder, there, would take you apart a sight worse than that Fort Worth steer!"

"The word?" Shaw countered. "Then you're bossing this string. I should have known it!"

"We'll stick with what McGruder claims. Don't guess, Shaw. My name isn't on any of these tags!"

Jack shrugged.

"Where's Jones?" he asked.

Herron's brows went up.

"You haven't heard? Why, shucks, man, that little buzzard was busted up

worse than it looked! There's a doc here that's a friend of mine. I took Jones to him. He's got your partner in bed up to the big house. Says he may do all right if he's left alone and not excited."

Shaw got the pattern, then.

"So I don't see him. I handle our string myself. And the string takes a hell of a beating as a result. The word goes out over the circuit that Biederman's stock's on the down grade—that there isn't a good ride in a carload of it."

"Is there?" asked Herron thinly.

"You're damned right!" Shaw retorted. "Wait till tomorrow and you'll see!"

Herron grinned.

"Till tomorrow, eh? I can hardly stand waiting!" He laughed, turned on his heel, and walked off.

## V

Shaw stayed in his end of the polo stables all afternoon, unwilling to leave his horses unguarded and at the same time tormented with concern over Jonesy. Half a dozen times Hillmont guests came into the stables. McGruder, tending the Arena Horses string, obliged them. Adopting an exaggerated drawl as phoney as the costume of his audience, he attempted some clumsy windies and several times, with a vast show of bravado, he tormented one or another of his horses until the mistreated animal burst into a frenzy of snorting and kicking in its stall.

The general effect was one of entertainment and it left an impression

with the dudes that they had been visiting the stalls of the most ferocious and unconquerable bucking horses in the country. Shaw recognized the showmanship involved in at least courtesy, but when some of the guests drifted his way, attracted by Hades' good lines and fine head and the splendid coats of the other animals, his temper was too frayed to stage an act and he turned them away with blunt irritability. He hoped some of the guests would report his discourtesy to their host, but apparently none did so, for Dudley Hilton did not come near the stables.

At dark a Mexican hostler came in for feeding. Shaw got him aside, passed a bill, and asked him to locate what information he could on Jonesy. After waiting for the better part of an hour, Shaw had begun to feel the bill had been wasted, when the hostler returned. Jonesy was not at the big house. He was in a little guest house at the far edge of the ranch yard. Shaw listened carefully to instructions on how to reach it. Jonesy was apparently under guard of a couple of riders who were supposedly occupying the guest house with him. And the old rider did not seem gravely hurt. At least, he was making plenty of noise.

The Mexican seemed to sense that something was not as it should be, and after looking over the Biederman horses, he seemed to feel the Biederman stock tender was a man to string with. He spoke quietly to Shaw.

"It makes for trouble, eh, señor?" he queried. "Without the partner, you are alone. Alone, you cannot leave. No eating. No sleeping. I

am Manuel. My work is done. Perhaps I help, eh?"

This could be tempting bait, hired by Herron—or whoever was behind Arena Horses. Shaw knew it. But he also knew Spanish-Americans and their friendliness and dependability.

"Know anything about this show?" he asked. "Did your boss rig up the lists himself or did he hire it booked up for him?"

Manuel grinned. He pointed to his ears.

"Big ones, see?" he said. "All the time I hear things, so I know. Señor Hilton knows nothing of ranching, but he wants a show. He hires Señor Coleman to make one—riders, horses, events—everything. But one thing the boss wants. Biederman horses are the best. He must have Biederman horses. Señor Coleman says this is not so. He will prove it. He will have some Biederman horses. He will have other horses, too. Then Señor Hilton can see for himself. On one condition—that Señor Hilton will write a letter of recommendation for the best string. The boss agrees. Rich men are fools. How can there be a better horse than this black one?"

Shaw seized the Mexican's arm eagerly.

"You're sure of this?"

Manuel nodded complacently. Shaw knew he had it all, then. Maybe Herron was connected with Arena Horses. He probably was. But so was King Coleman—and the man on whom Pappy Biederman was depending to sell Plattebench stock back into top place in the circuit was cutting Pappy's throat from ear to ear.

"Don't let anybody near these horses," Shaw grunted. "I'm going across for some chow."

"Remember, señor," Manuel reminded, "the little guest house with the green roof. The partner is there . . ."

Shaw quit the stables and started up across the yard toward the large mess hall, planning to cut around a corner of this building and angle off toward the row of small guest cottages. However, King Coleman drifted out from a wagon shed and fell in beside him. The man's eyes were sullen and friendless, belying his words.

"Don't blame you for blowing your top at the siding this morning, Shaw," he said. "That was a tough break. I should have known enough to keep out of your way. How's our string, now?"

"Good—no thanks to you," Jack said curtly. "Run along, Coleman. I'm particular who's wearing the nosebag next to mine."

Coleman smiled.

"Funny—I had a notion you might be hunting for a way to get in to Jonesy," he said. "Just wanted to be sure, you know. Doc says he mustn't be disturbed."

Compulsion was in Coleman's voice. Shaw pulled up. He was aware, then, that a couple of hard-bitten circuit hangers-on had fallen in behind Coleman and himself. He shrugged.

"All right, Coleman," he grunted. "I'm blocked. Chow was a dodge, anyway. I'll head back to the stables."

Coleman shook his head.

"You've been prying too much—adding too many things together, Shaw. It's been a hard day for you

and you haven't eaten. You're going in and wrap yourself around a meal. A big one. One that'll take a long time to eat!"

The two men behind him had come up close. The lot of them were in the open. Shadows were down heavily in the yard, but Shaw thought Coleman would not want to crowd too far—that he would not risk too much of a scene. Shrugging, as though acceding to Coleman's demands, Shaw turned partially. As he did so, he cocked his right hand, and when the booking agent was in reach, he let drive. Coleman saw the blow coming and stepped back, so that it missed. But at the same time, the man stumbled. Giving over attempting to hit Coleman, Shaw let his forward drive carry him against the man, shattering his already unsteady balance. Coleman went down, skidding hard.

Shaw wheeled and ran recklessly back toward the polo stables. One of the two who had been behind him shouted. The shout came again, then the hard, echoing report of a pocket gun. Shaw heard lead whine past him. Then the second man and Coleman both howled cautioningly and the gun did not fire again. Feet pounded behind Shaw and he ran desperately.

When he dived through the door of the stable, the first thing Shaw saw in the light of the lantern hanging above the Biederman string of stalls was Frank Herron. McGruder was with him. Both were by the open gate of Hades' stall, bent a little and peering within. Herron held something low in his hand which reflected the light. The man pursuing Shaw shouted

again, outside the stable. An obvious warning.

Herron and McGruder wheeled, and Shaw piled into McGruder, ramming the big man up against the side wall of the building. While McGruder hung there, startled and possibly a little stunned, Shaw drove his forearm across in a hard chop which crashed into the man's face, flattening features and rapping his head brutally against the wall. McGruder dropped.

Herron had lunged forward, but he came in one-handed, forgetting that he still clutched something in his right fist. This error of the subconscious cost him heavily. Shaw hit him cleanly between the eyes and again under the ear before he dropped the gleaming metal in his fingers. He went down, rolled, and came up groggily, his right hand now pawing at his hip. Shaw was ready for the small gun when it came out. He caught Herron's right arm, doubled it and bent it up sharply behind the man. A joint quit its socket with a soft snap and Herron sobbed explosively. Shaw had the gun then, ramming it tightly into Herron's belly.

He backed the man until he could see into Hades' stall. The horse was dancing nervously, blowing and rolling its eyes. On the straw bed of the stall Manuel lay limply huddled, his slight figure all too close to the uneasy, shifting hoofs. Herron was coming out of his daze. Shaw prodded him with his foot and when the man bent forward, he slapped the little gun across the side of his head. Herron reeled away and Shaw made a quick dive into the stall.

Hades danced wider at this new intrusion and Shaw spoke swiftly to the animal, swiftly and authoritatively. Bending, he hooked Manuel's body up, dragged him out, and kicked the gate shut. A goose egg in the thin hair crowning the hostler's head accounted for his limpness. Fortunately Hades had not been spooked quite far enough to forget the careful training on the Plattebench meadows. The hoofs had stayed clear of Manuel.

Dropping the hostler, Shaw waded back into Herron. The man flung up his good arm and cried protest.

"Louder!" Shaw said grimly. "Damn you, you're going to talk! Now start!"

Herron shook his head. Shaw hit him again with the little pocket gun and Herron went back against the wall. Shaw wondered what had happened to Coleman and the two who had been with him in the yard. But he held his attention on Herron. The man flattened against the wall. When Shaw started for him again, his lips flat and parted thinly over his teeth, Herron's eyes turned wild.

"All right!" he choked. "What do you want?"

"Fort Worth," Shaw said mercifully.

"Sure . . . sure . . ." Herron's tongue touched his lips. "Sure, I played you for a fool. An idiot that'd let a competitor ride safety for him . . . and that steer damned near got you, too. Took you out of running at the show. But if I'd known you'd pull this some time, I'd have made it permanent while I was about it!"

Shaw used the hard heel of his left

hand this time, driven angling into the man's face.

"Go on. Spill it all. How about these horses?"

"Coleman's idea," Herron muttered. "I was to train 'em, he was to sell 'em—when he'd gotten Pappy Biederman out of the way—"

Shaw heard a familiar snort from the direction of the door. He turned a little and saw an oddly assorted group there. Dudley Hilton was foremost, breathless and eyes wide with puzzlement. Behind him were bunched King Coleman and the two riders who had been in the yard with him. A little to one side, recklessly balancing the belt gun he had strapped on that morning in the Biederman car, was old Jonesy.

"Jonesy!" Shaw breathed. "How in thunder—"

"Think those sidewinders could keep me cooped up?" the little oldest snapped. "Sure I was snaffled by that doc friend of Herron's and a couple of his pals. But thunderation, when I hear bellerin' and powder burning, I ain't so old but I'm fast enough to bust free!"

More people came up in the doorway. Jonesy snapped orders to a couple of Hillmont boys to take over guarding Coleman and his two men. Shaw pushed Herron toward them. More Hillmont hands came up, looking curiously at their boss who nodded approval of Jonesy's orders. The prisoners were dragged out and Hilton looked at Shaw with a baffled expression.

"I don't get it," he said. "They were roughing you. But why?"

"You heard what Herron said about that show at Fort Worth and how he kept me from downing him on points?"

"But this isn't Fort Worth, now," the owner of Hillmont protested in a baffled tone.

Shaw kicked at a bright metal object on the floor, an object Herron had dropped when the fight began. Hilton stared at it.

"A syringe!" he gasped. "And he was trying to get into your black horse's stall! So that's why Coleman was so sure his buckers would look best tomorrow!"

Shaw nodded grimly. Hilton dragged a hand across his face. A worried expression pulled his brows down.

"But what about my show?" he said. "What about my guests? I've promised them something. A chance to watch the Fort Worth Sweepstakes winner attempt to ride the toughest buckers in the country. Naturally, I can't let Herron ride, now . . ."

"You don't know your own luck, Hilton!" Jonesy cut in. "There's better men than Frank Herron. Always have been. See that black horse? This is his first competition. Chances are he'll turn out the best bucker that ever lived. And see this long gent in front of you? If there's a man alive who can ride that Hades horse, Jack Shaw's his name!"

Hilton smiled relief. Shaw let Jonesy's words percolate. He let his mind run ahead until tomorrow. He let the way the chutes would look and

the crowd would sound run through his senses. He let the smell of a nervous, edgy, incorrigible bucker, blindfolded below him, enter his nostrils. And he waited for the inevitable sweep of nausea, the loosening of his joints, the terrible, boiling aversion that always followed these sensations. But they did not come. The taste of the dust of the Fort Worth arena was no longer in his mouth. He smiled also. Hilton glanced toward the stalls where the Arena Horses string was stabled.

"I'll send telegrams tomorrow that'll have that outfit barred from competition anywhere," he declared. "And we'll have us a show here at Hillmont, eh?"

Shaw nodded. "Biederman's Plattebench string always tries to deliver," he said. "We'll do the best we can. I think you'll be satisfied. But if you ever want another show, I'll tell you a sure way to get the best. Stay clear of independent operators like Coleman, and get hold of the Association. We've got a fine circuit and we want to keep it that way. The Association will help you rig a clean show with the finest riding and the best stock in the country. The kind of a thing that'll draw more than just dudes, Mr. Hilton."

Hilton was grinning widely.

"A capital idea. The Hillmont Annual! It sounds good, doesn't it? And I owe you something. How about the Hillmont Annual Roundup for the Jack Shaw Sweepstakes Trophy, featuring Biederman horses and the world's finest riders?"





# FISHY BUSINESS

by S. OMAR BARKER

*El Coyote didn't expect to catch any fish when he baited his hook—but he thought he might pull in a couple of polecats!*

DISPLACE a twig on a familiar trail, and you may be sure that the sharp yellow eyes of the next passing coyote will notice it—probably with wary suspicion. The slim, coffee-hued vaquero, Mariano Luján, was not called El Señor Coyote for nothing. It was as much his alert, wary nature to notice things as it was that of his wild four-footed namesake.

Now, fording Rito Zarco, Mariano noted a slight bluish murkiness in the usually clear water. There had been no recent rain, and the Rito Zarco's bed was too rocky to muddy easily.

Furthermore, this bluish tint could only come from some disturbance in a certain big trout pool some distance upstream where the creek bed was dammed by a traverse dike of limey slate. It was not a suitable place for even a wild animal to ford the Rito because of the abrupt cliffs on one side. Yet something, not many hours ago, had evidently roiled the water there.

Mariano was in a hurry, or his coyotelike curiosity would have prompted him to investigate.

"Maybe some ol' bear been tryin'

to ketch the beeg trout," he shrugged, speeding his sweaty dun horse on down the trail with a light touch of silver-inlaid spurs.

El Señor Coyote had been away in the high country for several days, but the reason he was in a hurry was not merely that he was anxious to get home. From the point of a steep ridge back up the trail he had spied a ragged black shirt, flying at the top of a gaunt red fir tree beside the ancient adobe house of almost equally ancient Don Lorenzo Labadie over across the Santo Niño Valley. To Mariano that black flag was the signal of a damsel in distress—a pretty, doe-eyed damsel named Carmela Labadie, who happened also to be one of his many third or fourth cousins.

Don Lorenzo Labadie lived in poverty, but he was reputed to be a wealthy miser, with a fortune in coins hidden somewhere about the place. He was a violent-tempered old gent, said by some of his neighbors to be *poco loco*, maybe because of his constant suspicion and fear that somebody might steal his hidden treasure, the existence of which he stubbornly denied. He trusted nobody, least of all Mariano Luján, who was a *primo* of his pretty orphan granddaughter, but no kin of his.

Maybe that was because the sharp-nosed vaquero sometimes gipped Don Lorenzo about his miserliness, pretending he knew where the old man's treasure was hidden, and jokingly threatened to steal it sometime if Labadie didn't watch out.

Yet it was Mariano who had persuaded Carmela Labadie to come and

keep house for her cantankerous grandfather after her parents died.

"Thees ways you got a home, *prima*," he had advised her, "at least until you fall for love weeth some *guapo* an' want to make marry. Then maybe when the ol' woolf die, you gonna inhairit hees moneys. Besides, it ees a shame that an ol' man got to living alone like a burro, not even somebody to wash heem clothes."

Carmela had agreed, a little reluctantly. A few days later she had come to Primo Mariano's cabin with a troubled look in her dark-brown eyes.

"Grandpapa got such bad tamper," she sighed. "It make me afraids. Already he's thratten to wheep me if I'm gonna let my boys-friend Mike Ortega come for veesit. Grandpapa say Mike joost pokin' the nose to see if he could eesteal some money!"

"So you tell Mike not to come some more, eh?" inquired Mariano, a twinkle in his sharp black eyes.

"No, *primo*." Carmela blushed. "That Mike, he ees joost a wild cow-boys, but I like heem too much."

"More better than those handsome depooty shereef, Pedro Polanco?"

Carmela made a disdainful sound with her lips. She knew Mariano's contemptuous opinion of Pedro Polanco's fat-middled uncle, Sheriff Eufracio Gallegos.

"But *caramba, primo!*" she said earnestly. "Spozzin' sometime grandpapa make troubles weeth Mike . . . what I'm gonna do?"

"Then you send for El Coyote," he grinned. "Those beeg tree by the gate—can you climb heem?"

"I bet you I can," said the girl. "You theenk Carmela Labadie ees a seessy?"

So they had agreed that whenever she needed help, she should fly some kind of a flag from the broken-off top of the old fir tree, and El Coyote would come, as he put it, "hellzafire for fast!"

Now, for the first time, Carmela's signal had been flown, and Mariano hurried down the mountain trail as fast as his fagged horse could carry him. He intended not even to pause at his own establishment, but when his sharp eye caught sight of a strange something scantily concealed in the branches of a juniper beside his main gate, he reined over quickly to investigate. Standing in his stirrups, he pulled down out of the juniper branches an old carved wooden *santo*, or saint's image, about half a yard high.

"By wheeskers of the burro!" he exclaimed. "Thees look like San Antonio from the house of Don Lorenzo! What he doin' here?"

He examined it as he rode on across the vega-green valley. Unlike many such wooden images, this one was hollow, with a small door in the back. But the hollow inside was empty.

When Mariano loped his tired horse into the yard of Don Lorenzo Labadie's crumbling *hacienda*, he noted that the hard adobe earth was scarred by many horse tracks, but there was nobody in sight. That situation, however, changed very quickly when he started to dismount, the wooden *santo* still in hand. As

if by pre-arranged signal, at least half a dozen *hombres* with six-guns pointed at him came barging from around both corners of the adobe house. Foremost among them as they surrounded Mariano was the duck-waddling, bulge-belted Sheriff Gallegos, his black mustache bristling with triumph.

"Hanzop, son of a papa goat!" he ordered. "Thees time we ketch you weeth the goodies!"

On the way up, one of El Coyote's hands paused long enough for a brief nose-thumbing in the fat sheriff's direction. The other held aloft the *santo*. Somewhere off in a nearby vega a burro brayed raucously.

"Leesten, shereef!" grinned Mariano. "Your mamma callin' you!"

"Look out I don't bost you the nose!" growled the sheriff, his dumpling cheeks reddening with anger. Then with pompous dignity he controlled himself. "Well, Meester Coyote, for why you don't asked what for I am arrest you?"

"You don't got to told me those." shrugged Mariano. "You arrest me because you are dumb like a burro!"

The strutting young deputy, Pedro Polanco, emerged from the house marching ahead of him a lean-built, brown vaquero with bleeding lips and tied hands.

Behind them limped the stooped figure of Don Lorenzo Labadie, his wispy gray hair tousled, his big bulgy eyes bloodshot with excitement and anger.

Hysterically he seized the *santo* out of Mariano's grasp. When he found the hollow image of St. Anthony empty he threw it violently to the

ground. "*Mi dinero!*" he moaned. "You have stolen my money! I cannot live without my money!"

"You been livin' for a long time weethout spendin' none of it, *viejito*," said Mariano dryly. "When did you ever bought Carmela a new dress? What's more from thees, if you have losed your money, for why you t'row heem on the ground, the good San Antonio? Don't you knew he ees the saint thass help somebody find what he losing?"

Before Don Lorenzo could reply, the young deputy, Pedro Polanco shoved him roughly aside. Almost as strutting and heel-thumping as the sheriff himself, he shook a hairy fist under El Coyote's hawkish nose.

"Too much talkin'!" he snarled. "Where ees Carmela?"

"Ask me some questions, I told you some lies," shrugged Mariano. "Maybe she hide some place for 'fraids you try to make love weeth her."

"Shoddop!" Polanco yanked Mariano's six-gun from its holster with one hand and struck him across the face with the other.

Young Mike Ortega swore under his breath and tried to lunge free, but the sheriff's *hombrotos* held him fast. Mariano's bleeding lips still wore a tantalizing grin despite the anger in his eyes.

"Take easy, Mike," he advised. "It don't did the woolf in a trap no good to make fights."

Miguel Ortega matched the grin with a wry one of his own.

"The ol' man must've had his dinero hid in them *santos*," he said

with a drawl that was half Spanish fluidity and half dry Texas twang. "I come onto one settin' on a rock pile by the road—empty o' course—an' figured maybe I better bring it back. When I got here, these law buzzards nabbed me. They're claimin' that me havin' the *santo* is gonna prove I stole the money out of him—an' it looks like they caught you in the same kind of a loop. How we gonna bust out of it is more'n I can figger."

"You don't got to bost notheeng, my fr'an," said Sheriff Gallegos blandly. "The Señorita Carmela Labadie like you very moch, eh?"

"That ain't none of your damn business, Pot-gut!"

"But maybe she ees, *hijo*," purred the sheriff. "I am hees oncle of Pedro Polanco, Chiff Depooty of the High Shereef. He also like to make marriage weeth Carmela."

"What of it? Carmela wouldn't marry your shepherder *sobrin*o if he was the last goat in the corral!"

"You theenk, eh?" One of Don Eufrazio's little piggy eyes winked significantly. "Spozzin' the High Shereef make a propoosition that if she weel make marriage weeth Pedro, then we don't put Mike Ortega to the penitentiary for a thief, maybeso the *señorita* change hees mind! How you like those, my fr'an?"

The young *vaquero's* reply to that was wordless. Pursing his lean lips he leaned forward and spat as near to Don Eufrazio's fancy boots as he could reach.

"*Chivo malvado!*" roared the fat High Shereef, waving his pudgy



arms. "Breeng the horses, *hijos!* Now we take them both to the jail!"

"But Honorable Shereef—my money!" whimpered old Don Lorenzo, wringing his wrinkled hands. "Mother of all the saints, where is my money?"

"Shoddop, *viejo!*" Roughly Sheriff Gallegos shoved the old man aside. "Is not the beezness of the High Shereef to find money. Is my beezness to put thieves to jail!"

"Wait joost one minoot, Honorable High Shereef," put in Mariano Luján with all the apparent humbleness of a whipped dog. "If Mike Ortega will stood up in the courthouse an' testify that it wass El Coyote wheech do all the estealing of Don Lorenzo's *santos* and *dinero*, then maybe you got the beeg heart to let heem loose, eh?"

"Eh? What monkey the beezness are those, *chivo?*" snorted Don Eufracio, then suddenly changed his tune, his eyes craftily triumphant. "By the wheeskers of a burro!" he muttered. "You thenk he weel did thees?"

Mike Ortega had overheard the talk. "Not by a damn sight!" he informed the sheriff dryly. "I ain't in the habit of double-crossin' my *amigos*—even to keep out o' jail! But I'll tell you one thing, sheriff: if you stick me with this frame-up, when I git out I'm shore as hell gonna use up some gunpowder on a bunch of

crooked law buzzards—even if I hang for it!"

"Take easy, Mike," advised Mariano again. "No use thombin' nose to the devil when he got you by the tail."

The young vaquero looked sure enough worried. "I sure wonder what become of Carmela? If I knowed she wass safe, I wouldn't give a damn what—"

The rude prod of Deputy Pedro Polanco's six-gun in his ribs and the paunchy High Shereef's bellowed orders interrupted him: "*Vamos, compadres!* Breengin' the horses! Put the preezners on saddles an' tied heem good! Fineesh too much talkin'! She's time to went!"

As several of the sheriff's hombres came leading a bunch of saddled horses around the corner of the house, a girl's voice, quavery with anxiety and pleading, spoke from somewhere overhead: "Wait, shereef! "For the love of the saints, please . . . I will marry Pedro! I will do anything you ask . . . joost so you please don't take Mike Ortega to jail!"

"Carmela, *por diós!*" exclaimed Polanco staring up into the branches of the big old fir. "What for you hide up in the tree like the she-kitten of wildcat?"

"None of your damn business, bullet-head," said Mike Ortega, but Polanco paid him no attention. The deputy strutted to the base of the tree.

"Come down, *querida mía!*" he ordered. "I, Pedro Polanco, command you!"

"I . . . I can't! I got afraids!" Less than halfway up the tree Car-

mela sat on a big branch hugging the tree trunk, her slender, over-all-clad legs dangling, and for a moment the head of every man on the ground below her—except one—was cocked back, looking up at her.

In that moment Mariano Luján, swift and silent as a mountain coyote, moved unobserved to the side of the sheriff's big gray horse and eased himself up into the saddle. The pound of the horse's hoofs as El Coyote spurred him out of sight around the corner of the adobe was the first the High Shereef and his *bravos* knew of El Coyote's escape. Mariano could hear shouts and curses, and the spat of bullets into the adobe corner behind him. He grinned as he heard Don Eufracio's bull-like bellow warning his deputies not to risk shooting his favorite horse.

Most of Don Lorenzo Labadie's fences were down and offered little obstacle as Mariano spurred the big gray at break-neck speed away toward the timbered hills. Once, in sheer audacity, he paused in plain sight of his pursuers, taunting them with the wild, shrill yelping howl of the coyote.

Several of the sheriff's *hombrotos* pursued him for an hour before they gave it up. Then from a ridge top deep in the timber El Coyote watched them stringing back across the valley. Presently he saw the whole cavalcade move out on the road to Tejón City. Counting the riders, El Coyote knew that they were taking Mike Ortega, Don Lorenzo Labadie and Carmela Labadie with them. With hands tied behind him, Mike had evidently been unable to make an escape.

If he chose to hide out in the mountains, Mariano knew that Sheriff Gallegos could never muster enough deputies to catch him—and dodging them would be fine sport.

"But by wheeskens of the burro!" he told himself soberly. "What benefits ronnin' away eef Mike got to stay in jail, or Carmela is compel to make marry weeth that peeg Polanco? What's more of the same, *somebody* by the name of a eskunk has estale the money of Don Lorenzo. It make joost the job for El Coyote to found out from wheech hole comes the rat!"

El Señor Coyote had no intention of stepping into another trap by returning to his own *ranchito*. There were plenty of *primos* in the Santo Niño country from whom he could borrow horses and saddles. On his way to one of these he made it a point to take a look at the Blue Hole trout pool on Zarco Creek. But whatever creature, two-legged or otherwise might have been there, it had left no distinguishable tracks.

It was the behavior of a fifteen-inch, granddaddy trout that made his home in this clear pool that aroused El Coyote's particular interest. Always before when Mariano had ridden by the pool, this big fellow had glided swiftly out of sight into a shallow back water behind a certain rock under the lip of a bluish boulder overhanging the west bank. Now he scurried toward the same hide-out, then veered away and darted frantically hither and yon all around the rocky pool, seeking some place to hide.

"Whassamatta, Beeg Stoff?" que-

ried Mariano thoughtfully. "You act like crazy!"

It was in the pitch dark between midnight and dawn when El Señor Coyote quietly turned the big gray loose in Sheriff Gallegos' corral and slipped away undetected. A few minutes later he skulked like a shadow to the back door of a little cottage on the outskirts of Tejón City and gave an incredibly soft and quiet imitation of the howl of a coyote. In a moment the door opened. The dry, friendly voice of old Jack Huber, respected citizen and former sheriff of Tejón County, spoke in the darkness.

"So the Coyote's got his tail in a crack again, huh?" he said. "Come in."

With shades drawn, they talked with no other light than the red glow of Mariano's cigarette and the old man's pipe fire, which faintly illuminated his gray mustache.

"Yeah. I been nosin' around a little," said Huber. "They got Mike in jail, but they ain't filed no charges agin' him in Judge Tibot's court yet, an' it's my understandin' they don't aim to—if Carmela will marry Pedro Polanco."

"That Carmela," said Mariano. "She ees a flower of the garden. She cannot make marry weeth a steenk of the hog pen!"

"She'll do it, though, if she figgers it'll save Mike Ortega from the penitentiary. Meanwhiles ol' Don Lorenzo keeps bawlin' around for his money, an' ol' Sheriff Pot-gut claims he's goin' to land El Señor Coyote in the pen this time for sure. Did you bring back the old fool's horse?"

Mariano's nod was visible in the glow of his *cigarillo*.

"I figgered you would. Ol' Lorenzo claims they was three more *santos* with money in 'em besides the two they found on you an' Mike. An' him lettin' that purty little grand-daughter of his slave away for him in barefoot poverty! The damned ol' miser deserved to lose his dinero, but if you an' Mike made away with it with some idea of turnin' it over to the gal, I'd advise you to back up an'—"

"If El Coyote esteal," Mariano's chuckle interrupted him, "you theenk he gonna git ketch so easy?"

"Then who you reckon did steal it?"

"Only St. Anthony know that," shrugged El Coyote. "Me myself I theenk I go feeshin'. How you like to make invitation to Jodge Tibot to went on feeshin' trip weeth us a few days, Meest' Hube?"

"Huh?" grunted Ex-Sheriff Huber suspiciously. "What you drivin' at?"

"Well. I joost theenkin'—spozzin' the jodge gone feeshin', how they gonna put some charges against Mike weethout no court? Spozzin' also the county clerk gone feeshin'. how they gonna bought the license for Pedro Polanco to make marry weeth Carmela?"

"An' meantime poor Mike lays in jail?"

"Sure. Jail don't hurt notheongs. Sometimes I was there myself!"

"But what's the use? We can't keep the jodge out fishin' forever, an' when he gits back—"

"Aha!" said Mariano softly. "When he git back, maybe the good

San Antonio weel have find the thief!"

"Well, O. K. I'll see Judge Tibot first thing in the mornin', an'—"

"More better we go now, before daysbreak. You got the infloonce to breeng the jodge all right, eh—weeth-out too much pooshin'?"

"I'll fetch the judge all right, but that county clerk is one of the Gallegos outfit. How you gonna—"

"Those, my fran'," grinned Mariano, starting for the door, "ees joost the jobs for El Coyote! We meet you one mile outside from town, eh?"

After two days of lying hidden behind the log of a fallen spruce on a cliff bench some twenty feet above the blue trout pool on Zarco Creek, the captive county clerk was sullenly rebellious, Judge Tibot's whiskers had a disgusted angle to their bristle, and even old Jack Huber who knew Mariano's cunning well enough not to mistrust it, was getting impatient.

"Hell's bells, Mari," he complained in a whispered growl. "If you'd only explain to us what in blazes we're supposed to be watchin' for, maybe—"

"Excoose me, please," broke in El Coyote. "Thass because San Antonio tell me if sometheeng happen, you make more convincing witness if you feeger heem out of myself instead of me tolding you!"

Mariano's arrangement had been for him to keep the captive county clerk on watch with him while Huber and Justice of the Peace Tibot took their turn eating and sleeping at the little camp hidden back a few hundred yards in the woods, and vice versa. Fear of El Coyote kept the

clerk from trying to get away. Huber's hold on Judge Tibot was never explained, but the two had been cowboys together in their youth.

Now an hour before dawn on the third day, Mariano had suggested that they all stand watch until sunup.

"I got my honch from the good San Antonio that sometheeng gonna happened," he said—without explaining that he had also done some scouting for information among his helpful *primos* during the night.

Dawn came and the sun rose salmon-hued over the spruces. Trout rose to strike at gnats flitting over the Blue Pool in whose clear depths they could make out the shadowy form of the big trout lazing around. Higher rose the sun, but still nothing happened.

"Jack," whispered Judge Tibot grimly, "you an' me been pardners for years, but I'll be damned if this ain't the craziest—"

"Ssh! Shut the talk!" Mariano's whisper warned him. "Leesten! Step-foots comin'!"

"You're crazy!" growled the whis-kery judge under his breath. "I don't hear . . ."

He broke off abruptly as two dark, stockily built young men, stepping cautiously in their sock feet, emerged from behind a blue spruce and approached the pool.

"Los Polancos!" breathed the county clerk, but Mariano's hand, laid threateningly on the butt of his gun, silenced him.

Looking warily around, Pedro Polanco advanced toward the pool, but his brother held him back.

"We are fools to come so soon,"



he protested in Spanish. "Suppose that damn Coyote has followed us?"

"El Coyote is too busy hiding out himself," retorted Pedro, removing his pants. "Besides, how else can I buy Carmela a fine diamond ring so that she can no longer refuse to marry me?"

Rolling up his drawers, he waded into the pool. From behind the blue rock where the big trout had once been accustomed to hide, Pedro Polanco fished out three dripping wooden *santos* and a small canvas sack which he handed in turn to his brother Pablo on the bank.

"I hope not so many pennies in thees ones," Pedro grumbled. "Anyhow we will take the money out, then you got to put the *santos* in the cabin of that *chivo* Mariano Luján, so that when our Uncle Shereef comes to search, he—"

"Will find two eskons, wheech are his nephews, are preezners of the judge heemself!" broke in Mariano dryly from up on the ledge. "High the hands, *hombrotos!*"

Like thieving raccoons caught in a corn patch, both the Polancos grunted and started to run. Two bullets, spitting judiciously into the trunk of a spruce only inches from their heads, brought them back quickly—both with their hands up—and one with his drawers down.

Already Judge Tibot was on his feet, whiskers a-bristle, waving his gun.

"You, Pedro Polanco," he announced sternly, "what yuh mean ap-

pearin' in my court with your pants down? I fine yuh ten fer contempt! An' on the testimony of four witnesses, includin' myownself, that you knowed where the loot was hid, I hereby find you guilty an' bind you over to the district court to be duly convicted of same, prima facie, de facto, de jure, an' if I hear a word out o' either one of you, I'll shoot your damn heads off! Court's adjourned, an' damned if yonder don't come the sheriff!"

Unknown to the brothers Polanco, Sheriff Gallegos had been out doing some scouting of his own. It was the sound of Mariano's shots that brought him bulging up the creek. The indignant quiver of his silver-belted paunch when he was made to understand the situation, was something to see.

"*Pendejos!*" he cursed the Polancos. "You breeng me beeg shame! When you gonna stoled sometheeng, for why you got to hide it in feesh pool where pass the trail of El Coyote?"

Getting no answer to his questions, the angry High Shereef turned to shake his fist in Mariano's placid, smiling face.

"As for you, Señor Son-of-a-Burro, by wheeskens of the papa cow, *nex*' time I put *you* to the jail for *sure* for the *rest* of my life!"

For answer to that, El Señor Coyote merely smiled, raised his lean chin and howled, softly, mockingly, the *yip-yap-yur-ur-r-ring* howl of a care-free ridge-top coyote mocking a valley full of barking dogs.

# RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING



The popular contention that "riders come from the North, ropers from the South" is, generally speaking true. Northern riders, having heavier winters to contend with, wear heavier clothing, wool chaps, etc. and ride bigger horses. The bigger horses are harder buckers. Then too northern cattle are often wintered in feed pastures with the branding largely done in corrals. The southern cowboy favors lighter horses. Cattle are more likely to be ranged out year around and branded on the range at roundup time. He therefore has, as a rule, more opportunity to develop into a skilled roper than the northern cowboy.



Texas longhorns, rare as the vanished buffalo, are staging a comeback under Government supervision. Nor are they being preserved merely as museum pieces. Cattlemen have long been aware of inherent characteristics in the original longhorns that made them admirably adapted to western range conditions. Notably their ability to thrive on rough land where other cattle would starve, and to travel miles further to water than the imported domestic beef breeds. Now Government scientists after checking a picked herd of the old-timers declare that under modern practice, longhorns will fatten and dress out in favorable comparison to Herefords and Shorthorns. The rejuvenated longhorns may therefore soon return to the range.



Too often overlooked is the prominent part churches have played in the history and development of the West. Wherever white settlements were started, and pioneer families braved the hardships of the wilds to establish homes in the new country, frontier sky pilots soon followed. Sometimes, as intrepid missionaries, they preceded the settlers into hostile Indian country. Montana's first church, founded as St. Mary's mission in 1841 by Father P. J. De Smet, is still used regularly for worship at Stevensville in the Bitter Root valley.

Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

# DOG TEAM SANTA

by SETH RANGER

## I

FEW PEOPLE won arguments with Inspector Angus MacLean, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, because he always considered all available facts before taking a stand on a proposition. His wife, Peggy, was inclined to ignore logic when something was close to her heart. She was Irish and sentimental, and when she put her hands on her hips and pointed her elbows slightly forward, it was a definite indication she was about to go into battle with her heaviest guns.

Now, as Inspector MacLean separated the mass of Christmas mail into two piles, Peggy put her hands on her hips. The mail addressed to Beaver Post was for local distribution. MacLean's headquarters, Beaver Post, was the trade center for a vast area of tundra country. The mail addressed to Cultus Creek had to go north by dog team. It was this pile of mail that aroused Peggy MacLean's ire. As



*Unless Mounty Jim Keenan solved the mystery of that lost gold, his Christmas pascar would bring no holiday cheer to seething Cultus Creek*



it increased, her elbows moved steadily forward. Finally she exploded into speech.

"Angus MacLean! Surely you aren't thinking of mushing that mail to Cultus Creek! You know it can't be done, the way the weather has been."

"No," MacLean answered quietly, "I'm not fool enough to think I can mush that mail to Cultus Creek."

Peggy's eyes narrowed. "Surely you aren't thinking of ordering young Constable Keenan to mush Christmas mail to Cultus Creek? Surely you aren't planning to order a new, untried man to do the impossible?"

"Nobody's told Jim Keenan that it is impossible," Inspector MacLean reminded as he continued to sort the mail. "And when a young fellow, full of the ambition to make good, doesn't know what he is sent to do

is impossible, why sometimes he does—the impossible.”

“Angus MacLean!” Peggy blazed, “I could murder you at times, and this is one of them.”

“That wouldn’t be advisable,” her husband pointed out mildly. “Jim Keenan would have to arrest you; the Crown would have to try and convict you of murder, then hang you. That would put the Force to a lot of trouble, and the Crown to needless expense. Let’s see now, I’m getting quite a sled load. Maybe I shouldn’t add this package. Still, it looks as though it might be a doll for some little girl.” He added it to the pile. “Hm, this is heavy. I shouldn’t include it, but when I rattled it, it sounded like a toy train. That’d make a little boy mighty happy. Naturally I can’t leave out the hard candy, either.”

“It’s bad enough to detail an untried man to do the impossible,” Peggy went on furiously, “without adding a lot of extra weight.”

“I’ll put on an extra dog,” Inspector MacLean told her.

“Angus! I want to show you something.” The inspector joined his wife at the window. “Isn’t that sweet?” she asked, pointing to a young couple. Jim Keenan, very handsome in his scarlet and gold uniform was sauntering over Beaver Post’s short street with a very pretty girl. The constable was five feet nine with broad, powerful shoulders, a flat stomach and straight, powerful legs.

“As handsome a lad as I’ve seen in many a year,” MacLean declared. “And the finest legs in the north country.” His idea of fine legs were

those that could stand heavy packing or hard mushing, day after day. “With that coal-black hair and those Irish eyes Jim could quicken the heart of most any girl. It’s little wonder Lois Tremper has been after him for seven weeks now.”

“And Lois will land him, too,” Peggy predicted, “unless you send him off on some wild goose chase between now and Christmas.” She sighed. “There’s nothing like marriage to steady a man.”

“You mean there’s nothing like marriage to anchor a man,” her husband corrected.

Peggy thought of a couple of sizzling answers to that, but wisely resorted to diplomacy. “You know, Angus, speaking selfishly, Jim Keenan is the answer to our prayers. Here we’ve been waiting for years for the right man to come along so that we could spend an occasional winter in a warmer climate. Now if you’ll just let well enough alone, Angus, Lois and Jim will marry, establish a home here at Beaver Post and give you a little freedom.”

“In the eyes of the natives, Peggy,” Inspector MacLean reminded her, “Jim’s an untried man. The whites feel almost the same way. Has he courage? Has he endurance? The endurance that will enable him to run down the strongest outlaw and bring him to the barracks? Has he the resourcefulness to match wits with a clever outlaw? And has he wisdom and justice to continue to preserve the Force’s reputation for fair dealing, so that when a policeman shows up in some remote place there’s relief and

happiness, instead of dread? A fine man on the surface, Peggy, but—untested.”

“But we know that Jim Keenan will measure up,” Peggy argued. “Now if he’ll only marry Lois Tremper and establish a home—”

“We don’t *know* that he’ll measure up to the Force’s high standard,” Inspector MacLean answered firmly. “But we are confident that he will. In any event, there’s only one trial in native eyes and that’s trial by ordeal, as the ancients termed it.”

“Angus, sending Jim Keenan to Cultus Creek alone would come close to being murder, at this time of the year,” said Peggy. “You’re one of the best men in the Force and, as well you know, I’ve never questioned your judgment, nor even thought of interfering, but—it’s different this time.”

“Yes,” MacLean thought, “it *is* different this time.” He said: “Peggy, I’ll still have to use my own judgment. Jim Keenan doesn’t know it, but he’s heading for Cultus Creek this morning. I’ve a couple of good reasons. Here’s one of ’em. A breed brought this message last night.”

Peggy read:

Dear Inspector:

One of the eleven partners working the placer ground on Cultus Creek has stolen and cached the season’s cleanup. The guilty man left no clue. As a result, man suspects man. Soon man will be accusing man. Then there will be fighting, possibly killing. This is a dreary spot at best and we are getting on each others’ nerves. There is no policeman in this region. Is there no way the guilty man can be detected before theft leads to killing, perhaps in self-defense? Things of this nature

shouldn’t happen at any time, particularly Christmas.

As teacher for the Cultus Creek area—there are seven children—I am neutral, and thus the logical person to send out this note. French Joe has agreed to try to get through, though he knows the chances are against success.

Sincerely,  
Ellen Reagan.

“I guess that *is* reason enough for sending someone to Cultus Creek,” Peggy agreed reluctantly. “But you mentioned a second reason?”

She turned and glanced at Jim Keenan and Lois Tremper, otherwise she would have seen her husband’s hand reach toward a note which had been opened and read many times. His fingers almost touched the note, then resolutely came out of his pocket.

“The second reason,” he said, “I guess isn’t much of a reason.” It was the first time he had tried to deceive her, and for that reason the attempt was successful. Neither Peggy, nor anyone else, expected deceit from Angus MacLean.

“Are you sure that this Ellen Reagan is reliable?” Peggy asked. “After all, she’s a city girl. She came from Vancouver or Victoria, didn’t she?”

“One of the British Columbia places,” Angus answered. “I checked on her carefully. She seemed a sensible sort. Pretty, too, but not as pretty as Lois Tremper, of course.”

“Few girls are,” said Peggy. “Well, not many people fool you, and if you decided Ellen Reagan isn’t likely to get excited over a trivial thing, then affairs at Cultus Creek must be in a sad way. I declare, I think there must be a curse on the region.”

Cultus Creek's record was bad. First, the name—Cultus—means no good, or bad, in the Chinook jargon. Early-day prospectors had given the stream its name after the Indians had killed several of them. Then the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, as it was known at the time, put in several tough years convincing the natives that murder and robbery did not pay. The natives remained grim and suspicious. A policeman had to measure up to the standards set by the pioneer members of the Force.

Constable MacLean had won their respect long before he became sergeant and later inspector. And now the descendants of the early-day renegades were weighing this new member of the Force, Constable Jim Keenan. Jim didn't realize it, but Inspector MacLean knew the signs too well. The natives' faces might be impassive, or they might even smile when Jim met them, but their eyes told the story. The new constable was a big, strong man, but was he the man that MacLean had been when he first came into the region?

Thus far, Jim's duties had been routine. He hadn't ventured beyond Beaver Post, but moccasin telegraph had carried word of his arrival to the remotest villages.

Now as Peggy finished rereading Ellen Reagan's note, she said: "Can't you delay sending Jim a day or two? Even twenty-four hours might be enough for him and Lois to become engaged. Lois has him coming her way, even though he is dying hard."

Inspector MacLean studied the pair intently through the window. There

was no doubt of it. Lois with her sparkling eyes, inviting lips and warm cheeks was an intriguing person. Hourly Jim Keenan was growing more fascinated.

"The sooner Jim hits the trail, the better," the inspector said. "It might be a good idea if he made a Hudson's Bay start."

Peggy MacLean understood the term. Jim would pull out immediately and make camp a few miles from Beaver Post. This had the advantage of giving man and dogs a short day at the beginning of the trek. Angus opened the window.

"Jim," he called, "how soon can you make a long patrol?"

"Why . . . tomorrow morning, I suppose," Jim answered, leaving Lois.

"Not soon enough," Inspector MacLean told him. "You're leaving in two hours."

"Angus MacLean!" Peggy began to sizzle again. "At least give them the evening together. He might pop the question. One would think you were against that match."

MacLean started to make an answer, then thought better of it. While the window was still open, he saw Pete La Farge. La Farge was three-quarters native. He had been given an education in the first, second and third grades, and could speak good English, but he preferred native ways.

"Come here, Pete!" MacLean yelled, and motioned with his hand.

## II

A few minutes later Jim Keenan and Pete La Farge were in the inspector's office. MacLean gave Jim Ellen

Reagan's letter to read and the young man's face grew serious.

"How'll I get there, by compass?" Jim asked. "There're no marked trails, just tundra and snow blowing over it. But I'm ready."

"Magnetic deposits throw a compass off," explained MacLean. "You have to go by stars, which aren't visible a lot of the time, or by landmarks like low hills, peculiar-shaped ridges and the like. I'm going to ask Pete to guide you."

"And if anything should happen to Pete?"

"You're on your own, then," MacLean answered. "You'll never have a tougher patrol than this one. Besides being a policeman on patrol, you'll also be a dog-sled Santa Claus. I want you to mush in the Cultus Creek mail."

A surge of anger gripped Jim. It looked to him as if the inspector planned to overload him with duties in the hope that he would fail. But his face betrayed none of his inner feelings.

"Jim, I can't teach you my experience in a matter of days, or even months," MacLean continued. "It's likely that in a weak moment someone did steal the clean-up. Again, an outsider might have done it with the expectation of setting the eleven partners at one another's throats."

"What would be the purpose in that?"

"He might want to create dissension and cause a split that would make all hands quit in disgust or result in a murder with everyone brought here for trial," MacLean

answered. "His reward would be a chance at the creek himself. Again, there are people who resist the advance of civilization. A native may be afraid his meat supply will be exhausted; a trapper may feel that competitors will cut down his fur supply."

"Then the people, generally, are against the Cultus Creek settlement?" Jim asked. "I should think they'd welcome it. The eleven partners claim ranching is their chief aim: that the placer proposition is like money in a bank which they draw on as needed. As soon as their ranches begin paying off in produce, the trappers and prospectors can buy locally raised grub at a low figure. This stuff that comes in by pack train or pole boat runs into money."

"You're right, Jim," the old MOUNTY said, "and most people like the Cultus Creek setup, but if there are three or four men who don't like it, or even one, it can cause a lot of trouble."

"Is there anything else that I should know?"

"Plenty," Inspector MacLean answered. "You must adapt yourself to the situation as it develops. I can't prepare you against sudden changes, but never forget this: Though you may be alone, the Force, with all of its traditions, is always behind you. A lot of good men died to create those traditions, to make your job easier. You'll lean on them at times, but if you can also contribute to them, then you are a MOUNTY in any man's language." He shook hands and said: "Good luck!"



Then he stepped to the door and called Lois Tremper. "Jim's going on a patrol, Lois. You'd better tell him good-by while you have a chance."

Her face suddenly filled with dismay, the girl hurried over to the barracks. As MacLean walked past the door leading to his living quarters, his wife snatched him into the room and closed the door.

"Jim MacLean, you're an idiot!" she stormed. "Why didn't you let Jim go over to Lois' cabin for their farewells? At least he deserves a chance to pop the question. It would serve you right if Cupid dropped his arrows, picked up a sharp knife, and slit your throat."

Angus MacLean smiled. He kissed his wife, who didn't know whether she liked the kiss or not. And there was deep wisdom in the inspector's eyes.

While Jim Keenan packed the sled, Inspector MacLean fussed around like an old hen with chickens. Slim Calkins, the owner of the trading post, brought over several hurriedly ordered items.

"Going with him, Angus?" he asked. The inspector shook his head, and Slim Calkins' eyebrows lifted in amazement. He thought: "Angus is crazy or he wouldn't send a green man on that patrol. His conscience hurts him, too. He knows he shouldn't do it. He knows he ought to make this patrol and not Jim Keenan. Angus is in for some sleepless nights." His gaze shifted to Lois Tremper's face. The

girl was worried. "Just when it looked like we'd have a wedding around Christmas time," Slim thought, "this has to happen."

Slim Calkins had been in the country as long as Angus MacLean and he knew the people as well because most of them came to his post for their supplies. He bought their gold and their furs and his dealings were always fair. He thought: "Angus is sending Pete La Farge along, too. Hm. Sometimes I've wondered about Pete's stick-to-it-iveness if things got tough. He'd stick to Angus, because Angus is a tested man, and that would be the safest thing for anyone to do if he was thinking of his own hide. But will he stick to Jim Keenan?" He shrugged his shoulders, but he couldn't shake off his worry. "Oh, shucks! There's something about this that I don't understand."

"I guess I'm ready," Jim said finally. He waved his hand in a short, curt gesture of farewell. "S'long."

Inspector MacLean drew a deep breath. He knew that everyone present was questioning his actions. Lois Tremper doubled up a small, mittied fist and pressed it hard against her lips, but she didn't cry. Peggy MacLean's eyes moved from the sled to a point far to the north where a bleak gray sky came down to the frozen tundra.

"Jim is such a fine lad, and the elements are so merciless," Peggy was thinking. "The times I've seen Angus go forth on such patrols; the hours I've waited . . . and prayed."

## III

Pete La Farge swung in ahead of the team, the natural spot for the man who would break trail. But there would be no trail breaking the first few miles.

Jim Keenan didn't look back, because that was bad luck.

They made the first camp about five miles from town. Pete La Farge seemed capable enough. He gathered fuel from dead, stunted willows and built a fire while Jim unharnessed the dogs and staked them far enough apart to prevent fighting. The heavy load was untouched as they carried camp equipment, small tent and sleeping bags on top.

As they ate, Jim tried to draw La Farge into conversation, but the guide merely grunted his comments, and whenever a definite reply was necessary, his answers were brief.

Before Jim turned in, he spent a half hour studying the stars. Inspector MacLean had drawn a map, noted the position of the stars with relation to the sketch, and fixed the position of landmarks also.

Three days passed without incident. Jim formed the habit of making early starts, when the beginning of the short day was a long way off and the stars were clear and bright.

He checked with the compass frequently, but not with any intention of using it as a guide. He wanted to see how much it was off with relation to fixed stars.

The vastness of the tundra coun-

try was sobering. The horizon was now a complete, unbroken circle. Lacking immediate landmarks, it seemed as if they made no progress. The dogs pulled steadily, while the sled creaked and groaned over the uneven ground. The fifth day out the faintest suggestion of a breeze came from the east. Pete La Farge watched the blowing flakes with interest. About an hour before camping time he said: "Suppose I go ahead and get fire going? Pretty hard day."

He pointed to a slight ridge ahead. "Good camp place over behind. Miner who spent winter with Eskimos built igloo there three, four years ago. Storm come up, dogs and us sleep in igloo."

"Go ahead," Jim told him.

La Farge increased his normal pace slightly the first mile, then he moved at top speed. His eyes roved the surrounding area, studying the points where the breeze was strongest and where footprints were likely to be quickly drifted over. He turned slightly to the east and broke into a run. For a half mile, he kept up his swift stride, then settled down to a walk.

The ridge that La Farge had pointed out to Jim Keenan was now lost in a mixture of gloom and drifting snow unless a musher was close. La Farge was satisfied with his work. His running and changing of course had put him far enough ahead so that by the time the slow-moving sled reached the point of his increased speed, sufficient time would have elapsed for the tracks to be drifted over with newly fallen snow.

"Pretty soon," he mused, "this new Yellow-legs will wonder where he is. He'll make a cold camp tonight."

He followed a faint depression in the tundra to a point where a frozen lake lay. It was long, narrow and less than ten acres in area. On the southerly end was a shelter constructed of sod and willow wood. As La Farge approached, a lone figure emerged. He was bearded, quiet, but a trace of a smile showed his white teeth—seemingly the only clean thing about him. His parka was soiled and stained with caribou blood, the soot and ashes of many campfires, and the oil incident to catching, cleaning and smoking fish.

"Hello, La Farge," he said. "Where's Keenan?"

"Back there." Pete jerked his head southward. "I think my trail should drift over. Maybe it won't. He might come here. We wait and see." They went into the sod shelter where tea strong enough to whip a caribou bull was bubbling on a small fire.

"What do you think Keenan do if he figger you lost, Pete?"

La Farge had thought this through and was ready with an answer. "He'll feel sorry for me. He'll think I'm lost with no grub, no sleeping bag. He'll build fire on ridge to show me way to camp. He wait three, four days, maybe lookin' for me, then he'll try to find Cultus Creek. Days go by. Weeks go by. He'll either miss Cultus Creek and keep on goin', or he'll use up strength back trackin' and goin' 'round in circles. Dogs get tired.

Grub runs out, after awhile he die. What do you think, Bull?"

Bull Stosser nodded. "We make good deal," he declared. "I send word to you from Cultus Creek telling you everybody plenty mad because gold cleanup was swiped."

"Yes," La Farge agreed, "you worked fast. The native who give me your note came to Beaver Post and left without anybody knowing it. He beat the breed the schoolteacher sent with note to MacLean. MacLean pick me to go with Keenan because I'm damn good man on trail."

"I pick you, too, because I know you damn good man on trail," Bull Stosser said. "Now things come our way. No Yellow-legs at Cultus Creek, plenty trouble. Soon killings. We lay low and pretty soon I get back trapping grounds; and you get Cultus Creek placer ground." He rubbed his thick, powerful hands together with enthusiasm. "Plenty good deal."

"Did you cache the stolen gold where nobody can find it?" La Farge asked.

"Who tell you I steal gold?" Bull Stosser demanded sharply.

"Nobody," La Farge replied. "But you never overlook a bet." He finished his tea.

The two had worked successfully together on several minor deals which had involved frightening trappers and miners out of remote regions, then "locating" newcomers on the deserted ground for a price. In each case La Farge had played the role of respected citizen while Stosser did the dirty work. La

Farge, on good terms with lawmen and trading post operators, had always managed to pick up sufficient information to warn Stosser of what was transpiring when the wronged parties protested to the Mounted Police that an unknown man had driven them out of the country with long-range rifle fire. In one instance he had been a posse member trailing Stosser and had managed to divert the pursuit.

When Stosser saw the Cultus Creek people squaring off for a free-for-all brawl he was confident that this was his and La Farge's chance to cash in on the improvements the settlers had made in the area. He had sent a trusted native to La Farge, who informed him of developments. Stosser had quickly concluded that Inspector MacLean would mark time, hoping that the Cultus Creek people's common sense would eventually prevail, or that he would send the untried Jim Keenan with a guide. He knew, too, that MacLean would logically select La Farge as guide because of his physical ruggedness and knowledge of the country.

Through the native, Stosser had suggested that La Farge remain with Keenan until weather conditions were ripe for him to be "lost," thus leaving the MOUNTY to his fate. He had cached food at several points to insure La Farge an adequate supply, then he had taken up his own station at the shack on the small lake. The igloo, several miles distant, would have been much more comfortable, but there was also the danger of some-

one, outbound from Cultus Creek, coming upon them. Stosser had suggested the shack as a likely meeting spot because it made up in safety what it lacked in comfort.

Here, unseen, La Farge could hole up until the time was ripe for him to "find" himself and return to Beaver Post. Stosser could also remain here until conditions developing at Cultus Creek required additional action on his part.

There would be no complete relaxation because there was always the remote chance that an inbound man from Cultus Creek would miss the igloo and stumble onto the shack. It was no trick at all for a musher to make the trek from Cultus Creek to Beaver Post. He merely headed south until he struck a river flowing, generally, east and west. It wasn't much of a stream, but it was a faultless guide. A musher couldn't miss it, even if he meandered extra miles over the tundra. When he found it, it was merely a matter of going over the ice to the trading post. The real problem was the trek from Beaver Post to Cultus Creek.

Now as the two men talked, they reviewed everything that had happened, and discussed what might happen. Each felt he had safeguarded his movements so that future investigation would leave him in the clear.

A period of silence settled on them, and finally Stosser blurted: "You think I swipe that gold so Cultus Creek men suspicious of each other and start fighting. And you think I should split with you, eh? Well, I didn't have nothin' to do with swipin'

that cleanup. If you say I did, I bust you one."

"Before you start bustin' me," La Farge warned, "think a coupla times. Nobody said you swiped that gold."

"Yeah, no say it, but what you think? Tell me that! What you think?" Slosser regarded La Farge evenly.

"Me?" La Farge pointed to himself. "I no think." He changed the subject by climbing the low ground surrounding the lake. He looked south and west for indications of a campfire. The stars were out, the snow was blowing over the ground but not high enough nor dense enough to conceal a campfire's glow.

"What you think of this Jim Keenan?" Slosser inquired when La Farge returned. "Smart? Got nerve?"

"Nobody knows," answered La Farge. "MacLean can't get good enough men. What's good enough other places ain't good enough here."

"This sled load of Christmas mail," Slosser said slowly, reluctantly, as if feeling out the other, "when Keenan's dead and the wolves kill his dogs, they chew up mail pouches and scatter everything. Mebbe somethin' we can use? Mebbe we hang around, watch, and open packages before wolves?"

"No!" snapped La Farge. "We buy everything from Slim. He remembers what he sell us. We have somethin' he no sell us, MacLean start askin' questions."

"You smart," Slosser said. "You smarter'n I figger."

They smoked a couple of hours, saying little, then La Farge again

climbed the ridge. He saw a campfire a mile distant. It was long past Jim Keenan's time to turn in, he knew.

"Settin' over there feedin' a fire to guide me, the damned fool," La Farge mused.

#### IV

Constable Jim Keenan fed the last of the fuel to the fire, aroused his resentful dogs and harnessed them to the sled as he prepared to continue northward. His face was filled with concern, because he had just made his first important decision. Then he grew grim and determined.

Moose, his lead dog, named because he was the biggest dog in the litter, snarled at the swingers immediately behind him to indicate his authority. Then as Jim cracked the whip, the team leaped against the harness in a single movement that broke the sled clear.

Less than a half hour later, the heavy load began moving faster than the dogs could run. Jim stepped on the brake, heard the teeth bite into the snow and felt the momentum checking. Moose stopped in front of a mound almost drifted over with snow.

"This must be the igloo that Pete La Farge was telling me about," Jim mused. "It's been a long day for you pups, but a longer one for me because you had a rest while I was hunting for La Farge's trail, and lighting a signal fire. I can go for a little sleep."

He cleared the snow away from the entrance. The doorway was made of larger logs than could be produced from any tree he had thus far seen. The miner who had built the igloo

must have freighted the timbers from some stand of trees in the region. There were several such stands, Jim had been told, growing because some freak of the air currents kept them warmer than the surrounding areas.

The entrance was covered with a heavy walrus hide. It was rotting with age, but it was so thick that no holes were worn into it. The air within was cold and stale. Some thoughtful person had left a stack of willow roots near a Yukon stove. A rusty pipe carried the smoke through a sod roof that was supported by logs, but was now frozen solid.

A frame on the ground, four by seven feet in area, was filled with tundra grass and moss to a depth of several inches. "It's no feather mattress," Jim mused, "but better than anything I've seen so far."

He unharnessed the dogs, spread his bag on the moss, and crawled into it. The dogs stretched out around him, with Moose occupying part of the bed.

Jim tried to relax, but for a half hour he lay in his bag, twisting and turning, as he thought of Pete La Farge. He awakened, left his bag, looked out and saw that it was blowing hard. Shaking his head, he returned to his bag.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when he finally awakened. It was still blowing, but there were moments when the stars were visible. Harnessing the team, Jim headed north. It began snowing hard at seven o'clock that night. He lashed his compass on the load where he could check with it occasionally and pushed on. He was trying something

new. Frequent checks against the fixed stars had given him a rough idea of its variation. Now, with that in mind, he was hoping to follow a general course northward.

It was man-killing work. Sometimes Jim left the team and broke trail, then he went back to the sled and helped the dogs drag the load through. He disregarded the days, mushing when conditions seemed favorable, sleeping when the going was most difficult. Several nights he moved slowly under the stars.

One clear night Jim saw a faint glow on the horizon. He swung toward it, then checked with the fixed stars once more. The glow lingered almost an hour, then it died slowly. Jim mushed two hours before camping, then fed the dogs and turned in. It was daylight when he awakened—a day that was little more than twilight.

The sun far to the south spread a ruby glow over the stark landscape. Jim Keenan shaved, and he knew from the feel of the razor that his thick black beard covered a gaunt face. He had left a lot of weight along the way. Perhaps he was making a wild guess, but he felt sure the creek lay beyond the next low ridge. He put on his scarlet and gold uniform and pulled his parka over it.

The load moved ponderously as the dogs dug in. They were lean and gaunt, too. Each animal had lost weight so slowly, so steadily that Jim had hardly noticed it.

Gaining the crest of the ridge at last, Jim looked below. A mile distant he saw a meandering stream.

stunted timber along each bank, and square, cleared areas that marked each man's ranch. Each clearing was well away from the others. The eleven men had left room to grow.

Smoke lifted reluctantly in the cold air, then hung at the hundred foot elevation. There were three log buildings, probably the trading post, the school and a storeroom. Jim shed his parka and for a moment stood against the skyline, a symbol of the Force in a dreary country.

"I've been telling myself the mushing was the hardest part, and with it behind me the rest would be easy," he told himself in surprise. "But this is where a policeman really begins—at the scene of the crime. I've just arrived on the job. And I'm getting off on the wrong foot. I've put on the wrong uniform. The kids, at least, are expecting Santa Claus and not a policeman out to make an arrest."

He dug deep into the load and brought forth a package that Peggy MacLean had handed him as he was ready to leave Beaver Post. It was a cold business, but he took off the scarlet and gold of the Force and stowed it in a bag. He donned his rough trail clothes once more, then pulled a red Santa Claus suit over them. A set of whiskers and a cap completed the outfit. Then he cracked the whip and yelled: "Mush!" But he was thinking: "On, Comet! On, Cupid! Now, Dancer! Now, Prancer!"

"Manhunting and Christmas somehow just don't go together," Jim thought. "I wish there were ways of clearing up this mess without putting on a lawman's uniform and throwing the fear of the Force into the guilty

man. Chances are, he isn't a criminal at heart; criminals don't try to develop ranches in this kind of a country. They wait until hard-working people, such as these, finish the job, then try and cut in on the profits."

The sled moved steadily on a slightly down grade, but, try as he would, Jim couldn't imagine his dog team as Santa's reindeer. A native boy saw him first, and his yell brought out everyone in the native shacks grouped along the creek bank. Then others came out of the white settlers' cabins, stared briefly and raced inside to arouse the remainder of the family.

Within a few minutes Jim could see them moving toward the schoolhouse—black dots on a white world. Those living at a distance began running, as if afraid that the dog team might vanish without warning. Jim saw men pick up the smaller children and hurry along with their amazed offspring in their arms. Some of the older, stronger boys met him and ran beside the sled.

"Got something for me?" one asked.

"I guess there's something for everyone," Jim answered.

"We sure didn't expect anything like this," the lad said excitedly. "The old folks said Santa wouldn't be fool enough to mush to Cultus Creek because he'd get lost in the kind of weather we've been having."

"I guess Old Santa knows what he's doin'," another youngster declared. "I guess he couldn't get lost in the North Pole country." The faith in the boy's eyes was a sobering thing.

"Miss Reagan said she bet you'd come," the older boy said. "She's

the teacher. 'That's her comin' out of the little cabin back of the school-house. She lives there.'

The girl looked interesting from the distance as she stood therein mukluks and parka, her lovely features framed by the wolverine fur facing of her parka hood. And as distance diminished and Jim could note details, he was progressively impressed. He stopped in front of her cabin.

"I'm Constable Jim Keenan," he said.

The girl smiled. "No, you're not," she answered in a low voice. "You're Santa Claus. Please don't forget again."

"According to Senior Santa Claus Angus MacLean, I'm to turn all mail over to you," Jim told her, "as you have been made postmistress for Cultus Creek. The first-class mail is in a leather pouch, the Christmas packages are in bundles."

"I'll take the first-class mail whenever you can unload it," Ellen answered. "These poor people are starved for word from the folks back home."

As he removed the lashings on the load, Jim noticed each family group huddled together, as if for mutual protection. There was no mingling of families. Here and there he noticed men whose faces were cut and eyes blackened. Occasionally he saw hate flash as the eyes of the men met, but mostly they avoided one another's gaze. The women were cold and aloof toward each other.

Natives were everywhere, ignoring the various factions. Jim saw amazement in their eyes. They knew, as

did the whites, that the Force, in Jim Keenan, had brought the mail to a remote settlement. The older, tougher natives had believed but one man in the north country was capable of finding his way to Cultus Creek in the vile weather—and that man was Angus MacLean.

Jim sensed that they were asking each other in their dialect: "Is this man a second Angus?" Slowly he saw their expression change from amazement to respect. But it was respect for his feat in finding their village, in possessing courage enough to gamble his life by pushing north, when safety lay in retreat as his dogs weakened and the grub supply grew low. No man would have blamed him if he had abandoned his load of mail and played it safe. This, Jim sensed, was only a minor hurdle. Would he clear up the gold theft mystery?

As Jim carried the pouch into the girl's cabin, she turned to the ranchers. "If you will please line up," she told them, "I'll distribute the first-class mail as soon as possible." Then she followed Jim into the cabin and closed the door.

"Do they know you sent for a policeman?" Jim asked.

"No," she answered. "Your arrival has made a profound impression all around. I'm glad you put on the Santa Claus suit. It was thoughtful of you. Do you suppose you can submerge the policeman's role until after Christmas? It seems a shame for Santa to suddenly yank off his whiskers and serve a warrant. On the other hand, it might make for a happier Christmas if the real thief was



exposed. I've lost a lot of sleep over it, Constable Keenan. Truly, all of them are such good people."

"Have you considered the possibility of a native taking the cleanup?" asked Jim.

"The Force in the person of Angus MacLean made honest men of them years ago," Ellen answered. "Temptation may be great, constable, but a healthy respect for scarlet-and-gold justice is greater."

"Have you any idea who did it?"

She shook her head. "No, I haven't. Nor has anyone else."

"Who is the leader among the eleven families? Usually some fellow takes command either by selection, or because the others instinctively follow him."

"Jack Judson has done the separating when men came to blows," Ellen told him.

"And who pulled Judson off when he began throwing punches?"

"One of the others," she answered. "It's been terrible."

As she talked, she ran hurriedly through the stacks of letters, separating them into eleven piles. She stepped to the door and called the names of the various ranchers and as each man passed, she handed him his letters.

"Read your mail," Jim told the ranchers. "That's the most important thing in your mind right now. This afternoon I'd like to meet all men and women in the schoolhouse. It's important. Will three o'clock suit you?"

With dry humor Jack Judson drawled: "Three o'clock suits us. I haven't heard my wife say anything

about her bridge club meeting, or going shopping in town."

"And you aren't going to play golf or go to the ball game, Jack," his wife added. She smiled at Jim. "Three o'clock is all right with us, Santa."

The others also murmured approval, then headed for home, glancing through their mail as they walked.

"Where had I better hole up?" Jim asked the girl.

"Sleep in the schoolhouse," she answered, "and when you aren't invited to someone's home for meals, I'll cook for you."

"I hope I don't get any invitations," Jim said. "In fact, if I do, I'll turn 'em down. I don't like the idea of sitting at a man's table, eating his food and unconsciously watching him for signs of guilt."

"Then you can eat with me," Ellen told him.

## V

At three o'clock Jim Keenan faced the eleven couples, a tired smile on his face. He wasn't supposed to know there had been a gold theft, and for that reason he made no reference to it.

"I know," he began, "the popular idea of a MOUNTY is a fellow in scarlet and gold—scarlet is almost the red you find Santa Claus wearing—who goes forth and gets his man. I might say, in passing, we would rather prevent a crime than make an arrest. Perhaps because the MOUNTY knows how it feels to spend weeks and even months on lonely patrols, he understands what mail means. Particularly around Christmas time. That's why we try to get mail to people who live

far beyond the areas covered by the post offices."

A man named Guy Rand got slowly to his feet. "Do you mean to say Inspector MacLean sent you on a patrol just to deliver us some mail?" he asked.

"Inspector MacLean, in his constable and sergeant days, usually showed up in out-of-the-way spots before Christmas," Jim answered. "He made a lot of talk about checking on evildoers but, just between us, he's as sentimental as he is tough, and delivering the mail was the real purpose. And so—here I am."

Rand sat down, and Jim continued: "You people have been strained to the limit by your hardships. Your nerves are on edge. You're suffering from cabin fever. I can detect the signs. Yet you've months to go before the break-up."

"That's right," Judson drawled.

"You've had your first-class mail,"

Jim continued, "and you're entitled to the packages *now*. But Christmas Eve is three days off. Why not make it a Christmas party, with Santa Claus delivering the packages from a pack? There's something about Christmas . . ." He paused, then concluded: "Well, how about it?"

Judson got to his feet. "I'm in favor of it, constable," he said. "The least we can do, after all *you've* done, is to agree. But aside from that, I'm for it. I'm as curious as a kid, right now, about what's in the packages addressed to us. But—shucks, part of the holiday fun was wondering what was in packages that were marked 'Don't Open Until Christmas!'"

"I'm for it, too," Guy Rand declared. And the others quickly agreed.

"There's one difficulty," Jim said. "Won't the kids wonder why Santa Claus is loafing around Cultus Creek just before Christmas? Of course I could hide this costume and get into my uniform, but—"

"You can tell your children that Santa Claus is dog tired from getting ready for Christmas," Ellen Reagan said to the gathering, "and that he's resting up, here."

"Which will sure be the truth," declared Jim.

He thought he knew the right place to rest up, too — in Ellen Reagan's cabin, eating her cooking. The mid-day meal that she had served him was something to remember after days of roughing it. He liked Ellen's quiet voice, her common-sense way of looking at situations and her strength of character. She made him think of Peggy MacLean.

He slept twelve hours out of twenty-four at the schoolhouse, and then would fall asleep in a chair after a good meal, sometimes even when Ellen was talking to him.

"I sure am making myself at home," he said once, by way of apology. "I go to sleep while you're talking to me."

"You lost a lot of weight on the trail," Ellen answered. "And don't think you're heading home right after Christmas, either. We won't allow it. You're in no shape for a hard trip."

Jim grinned. He would have liked to remain with her forever. She wasn't as turbulent as Lois Tremper, and there was less excitement about her. But Jim was beginning to real-

ize a man didn't want excitement as a steady diet.

Quietly, after dark, the presents had been transferred to the schoolhouse. As quietly, a self-elected committee of women had cut red and green paper and hung it up to brighten the drab schoolhouse. Guy Rand cut a small tree and brought it in. Draped with chains of bright paper, it looked gay and festive. A truce had evidently been declared by the women, for they worked together well enough. Except for Rand, the men remained away, Jim noticed, and this reduced the chances of another outburst.

Christmas Eve the schoolhouse was jammed. When Ellen gave the pre-arranged signal at a window, Jim left her cabin, and walked quickly to the back door of the schoolhouse. He stepped into the vestibule and picked up a pack. For a moment its weight was staggering.

"I must be getting weak," he muttered. He opened the inner door and shouted: "Merry Christmas! Well, boys and girls, I'll have to hurry this business. I've been resting up here a few days, and now I'm heading south to visit all the other children who have been good."

He lowered the pack with a thud, opened it, and began calling out names. One by one, the children came, some shy, some scared and others grinning wisely. Jim reached the bottom of the pack at last, then stared unbelievably. It was well his face was masked. A Santa Claus is supposed to smile, or chuckle merrily, not grin all over like a coyote.

"Well! Well!" he said. "It looks as if we've something else in the pack—something for the grownups. But let's wait until we've distributed the grownups' presents stacked in the vestibule." With the help of two older boys, the stack was quickly distributed, then in tense silence Jim lifted three moosehide pokes from the pack. "There are no names on these pokes," he said, "but my guess is they're filled with gold, and that they belong to all eleven of the Cultus Creek families."

The room was so still Jim could have cut the silence with a knife. Then a sigh of relief swept through the gathering. Ellen Reagan turned her head quickly, swallowing a little catch in her throat.

It was Jack Judson who broke the silence. "After the presents are all looked over, and the kids sent home to bed, I'd like the grownups to come back a few minutes. And Santa Claus too, if he can spare the time."

"I can spare the time," Jim said. Then for the benefit of the children, he added: "Sometime tonight, a Mountry named Jim Keenan will arrive. He's taking charge of my dog team. I'm using reindeer, you know, on my long trips. They're faster. Constable Keenan will be around here about a week, then he'll head for Beaver Post, his headquarters. He'll be glad to take out any mail you want to write."

The children were home and the grownups had returned to the schoolhouse. Again Jack Judson got to his feet.

"One of us was weak," he said slowly, "and took the cleanup. It

might have been me, or it might have been any one of you. Only one person knows who did the job—the guilty party. Possibly Constable Keenan knows, but can't prove his case for lack of evidence."

Behind his Santa Claus mask Constable Keenan remained silent.

"My guess is," Judson continued, "that the red in Santa Claus' costume reminded the guilty man of the scarlet in the uniform of the Force. Anyway, he felt the strength of the Force or his prodding conscience and responded. I'm willing to leave it at that, wipe the slate clean, and start anew. We've all had our weak moments in this struggle to make a place for ourselves in a raw land. Maybe we didn't take gold. Instead we let down a little at times and didn't pack our share. We'll have our temptations in the future, but we'll weather them. Out of one member's weakness we've all found strength. This is Christmas Eve, Mike Denny has his accordion, so how about a carol?"

Mike struck a few notes, then began "Silent Night." Without hesitation they all joined in as one. Jim took off his mask and sang with the others, dropping his arm across Ellen's shoulder.

It was early Christmas morning before the singing ended and the happy gathering broke up.

## VI

At six o'clock on the morning of New Year's Day, Constable Jim Keenan's dog team waited with noses pointed south. Farewells had been said but Jim wanted one last moment

with Ellen. "You'll be coming out after the breakup, and we'll soon be making plans for our future," he told her. "So let's start the New Year right." He kissed her and cracked the whip above the dogs' backs. They hit the harness and broke the lightly loaded sled clear.

Even the dogs sensed that they were homeward bound, because there was little lagging on the long days. It was night when Jim hit the stream seven miles east of Beaver Post. He camped and mushed into the post shortly before noon.

He saw the quick interest in white and breed alike as they recognized him. It was apparent they were thinking: "The Moun'ty's made the toughest patrol in these parts, and he's back." The word would spread in every direction by moccasin telegraph. It was like dropping a rock in a pool—the waves reach every part of the bank.

Jim turned the dog team over to a native who helped about the barracks and headed for MacLean's quarters. The inspector looked his years and suddenly Jim thought: "He knew he might be sending me to my death on the Cultus Creek patrol, and it's taken a lot out of him." He said formally: "I wish to report the patrol completed, the Christmas mail delivered, and the missing gold voluntarily restored to the partnership. There was no desire on anyone's part to learn the guilty man's identity."

"But, of course, you decided who was guilty?"

"Yes, sir," Jim replied. "One man—the one with the guilty conscience—asked me if my only purpose in com-

ing to Cultus Creek was to bring the mail. I saw the relief in his face when I answered that the Force always tried to get mail to remote places. Shall I name him?"

"No," answered MacLean.

"Has Pete La Farge showed up yet? He deserted me."

"No. Why do you think he deserted you?"

"I lost his tracks," Jim explained. "I thought it my fault until I brushed the snow aside in two spots where a man would likely pass. Instead of taking the logical route, La Farge had sidestepped and taken the one a quarter mile distant. Then I knew he was doing me dirt."

"That confirms a growing suspicion of mine," said the inspector. "You can surmise a lot by thinking when you are mushing or merely sitting in the barracks. When La Farge and Bull Stosser are in the same region, though they are never seen together, things happen. My hunch is, they're mixed up in this business, but we can't prove it. Watch them in the future, and in time you'll have a chance to square up for what they might have done to you in this instance. But what did you do when convinced that La Farge had deserted you?"

"Played his game—built a fire as if I were trying to guide him to me," Jim answered. "I reasoned that the old igloo must be near, and when the fire died, I let Moose lead the way. He took me to the igloo."

"He'd been there before," commented MacLean. "And after that?"

"I'd check the compass with the stars to make allowances for deviation, then used it whenever it was

snowing. In time I saw Ellen Reagan's signal fire. She hadn't told the Cultus Creek people she'd sent for the police, so she explained the fire by suggesting the police might be bringing Christmas mail." Jim hesitated a moment, then went on: "Ellen's a smart girl and I'm glad I didn't get engaged to Lois Tremper before I left. It would have complicated things. Ellen and I hit it off . . . well, like Mrs. MacLean and you do."

"That's why I didn't give you a chance to pop the question," Inspector MacLean told him with a smile. "Lois isn't the type to stay permanently in this country. She'd have nagged you to death wanting to move out. I sized up Ellen as one who would stick." His smile broadened into a grin. "Mrs. MacLean gave me fits. Thought you should marry Lois and settle down. I couldn't tell her you might like Ellen better. She'd have argued."

Silence settled between them, as if each realized there was more to be said, but neither knew how to approach it.

"Inspector, have you been sick?" Jim asked finally. "You've lost weight and look shaken."

"You thought I was sending you on a patrol that might end in your death," MacLean said slowly. "Did you hate me at times?"

"Almost."

"I thought you might," MacLean told him. "I lost much sleep over you, lad, though I felt sure you'd solve, in your own way, problems as they appeared. There's still La Farge, but you'll deal with him when he

shows up. That'll be in your hands. I hope, Jim, that your hardest decision won't come late in your career as mine did. Sending you on that patrol, instead of tackling it myself, was the toughest thing I ever did. Here's the reason." He reached into his pocket and brought out a note that had obviously been read many times.

Jim opened it and read:

Dear Angus:

You've won many an argument and fight, but this is one you can't win. Attempt no more tough patrols. I examined you thoroughly, as you know. A check with other doctors confirms my own diagnosis. If you behave yourself, you can continue service with the Force. But if you attempt a tough patrol they'll be hunting for your bones.

Don't do it, regardless of the emergency. Dead, you're dead a long time. Alive, you can impart your knowledge to new men and perhaps save their lives.

As soon as you develop a man to relieve you, head south for a long rest. Then I promise you you'll be a better man than you are at present. This is the truth, set down in black and white.

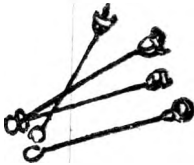
My best wishes to Peggy and yourself.

Sincerely,

Fred.

"Fred's my doctor," Inspector MacLean explained. "Well, I've found the man to take my place, and I'm feeling better already. Will you join Peggy and me in a belated Christmas celebration, lad? I couldn't even think of it while you were on patrol."

THE END



**BRANDS OF HATE** were rapidly venting the cowmen's marks of the OYO and the Hentrack, as hatred flared against that stubborn nester making a lone stand in the Bridlebit country. It was then that sheep-herder Hamish MacDonald, kilt a-flyin' and bagpipes a-skirlin', put in his pibroch's worth and tried to prove to those cattle barons that what they say about woolie nurses just isn't so . . .

**BRIDLEBIT BOOMERANG**, in which Bennett Foster's lovable range Samaritan returns to *Western Story*, will be featured in our January issue, as well as a top gathering of prime stories and features by Walt Coburn, Peter Dawson, M. Howard Lane, James Shaffer and many others—plus your personal service departments.

# THE TENDERFOOT

by WALT COBURN



## I

THE TENDERFOOT'S name was Stoddard. Stewart Stoddard, Princeton. He had been sent West to Montana to die. . . .

"You've burned the candle at both ends, old man. Right now, you're living on borrowed time," his friend, Dr. Wayne Frampton, had told him. "This is unethical as hell, Stew. I'm a little drunk or I'd keep my mouth shut. But there's Ethel; it's not fair to her. You understand. . . ."

"I understand, Doc. Who was the duffer that said 'Go West, young man'? Nathan Hale?"

"Greeley," corrected the doctor.

"Ah, yes. Good old Horace. Tell Ethel. You're clever at juggling words. Well, keep your stethoscope oiled, Doc." And Stew Stoddard, Princeton, had tilted his head and sung a little off key, with a twisted grin. "*Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie-eee!*"

Stew Stoddard had guts. He had spent a year in England riding steeplechase races as a gentleman jockey, to bring the sport back to Virginia. But before he got the steeplechase course mapped out on



*Before Stew Stoddard gave the O'Hays back their Seven Up outfit, he wanted to show two double-crossing sidewinders that a greenhorn could kill his own snakes*



his own land in Virginia, they began lopping off chunks of the estate for unpaid taxes.

Stew had blamed it on the Damnyankees. He rode hard, held his liquor like a gentleman, crossed the Mason-Dixon Line only because his grandfather had willed it that Stewart Stoddard III get his higher education at old Princeton. And when the broken ribs Stew had picked up in a bad steeplechase fall had left him with a cough that could not be checked by good bourbon, he had let an old Princeton classmate who had become an M.D. check him over. And for perhaps the first time in his wild young life Stew Stoddard had taken the word of a Damnyankee. Dr. Wayne Frampton was one of the New Jersey Framptons.

Stew Stoddard was not yet thirty, but gray sprinkled the wiry black hair around his temples and his lean-jawed face was etched with tiny hard lines around the corners of his dark-gray eyes and straight-lipped mouth. There was a bitter, mocking twist to his grin. Tall, well-made, slim-boned, lean-muscled, he looked hard and fit until a coughing spell shook him and left his tanned skin drained to a grayish pallor.

He was not quite sober when he got off the stagecoach at the end of the seventy-five-mile ride over a rutted Montana road. He had been driving the six-horse team most of the way after he had drunk the stage driver into a stupor. He threw out the mail sacks, tossed the reins down to the barn man, climbed down over the front wheel and headed for the

nearest saloon where he had bought drinks for the house.

In less than twenty-four hours' time Black Coulee, Montana, had accepted Stewart Stoddard, Tenderfoot. He had money and he let it be known that he had come here to stay. If there was a small ranch for sale, a place that had a trout stream and where the hunting was good, he had the cash to lay on the barrelhead.

"There," Hix Liston told Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner, "is our tenderfoot. Sell him the Seven Up."

The Seven Up Ranch was down on the Missouri River. The big Missouri is no trout stream. But if it was fish a tenderfoot wanted, catfish are mighty good eating. As for hunting, you could kill anything from a jack rabbit to a grizzly or mountain lion in the badlands that were the Seven Up range. And beyond the badlands stretched the prairie country where you could run coyotes and wolves with a hound pack. Besides that, there were cattle in the 7 UP iron and a small remuda of good cow horses. Hix Liston even threw in a pack of wolfhounds to clinch the deal.

Stewart Stoddard wrote out a check for fifty thousand dollars and, taking a few months' supply of grub and a barrel of bourbon whiskey, moved down to the ranch on the Missouri River. He liked the log buildings with the weeds grown rank on the sod roofs, the pole corrals, the muddy smell of the river, the wild roses in bloom. There were a few good horses in the little remuda. The big shaggy wolfhounds took to him at once as they had never taken to Hix Liston.

Liston, tall, lean, sandy-haired, lantern-jawed, pale-eyed, tallied over the cattle in the 7 UP iron and Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner was on hand to give it a legal touch. There were a lot of cattle. More than Stew Stoddard had bargained for. More cattle than he had any use for. He said he was not a cattleman. He'd take the cattle, as long as they were there on his land, but he refused flatly to hire any cowhands. He wanted to be alone there on the ranch, for a while, anyhow, he told Hix Liston.

Dave Wagner, big, getting paunchy from easy town living, warned Hix into silence with a meaning look. Dave had hard opaque black eyes, reddish-black hair and a heavy red mustache that hid a cruel thin-lipped mouth. His face had a red beefy look. His head sat low on a bull neck that lumped down into powerful muscle-bound shoulders. He had the build of a wrestler. His voice was a harsh sound that grated against the ears of a listener. Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner was tough. He was the law there at Black Coulee, Montana.

Stewart Stoddard's mail caught up with him about a week after he had settled down at his Seven Up Ranch on the Missouri River. Hix Liston, whose place was a few miles down the river, fetched it in an old flour sack. There were a lot of newspapers, magazines and letters that had been forwarded from Virginia.

Hix left the mail and rode on, a little off-tempered because the tenderfoot hadn't asked him to stay and get drunk. The tenderfoot had, in his lazy slurred voice, thanked Hix for the mail and waved him on care-

lessly. Without putting it into so many words, he had let Hix know that he was not entertaining company, that he wanted to enjoy the solitude he had bought for fifty thousand dollars cash.

"The high-toned greenhorn!" Hix muttered to himself as he rode on down the river.

There was a note from Ethel Fairbanks — a bitter-sweet sort of note. And a handsomely engraved announcement of her marriage to Dr. Wayne Frampton . . .

Stewart Stoddard III had nerve. Enough to take almost anything in his headlong spurring stride. But this was a gut shot. An eye-opener and a gut shot. Because this was the first inkling he'd had that Doc Frampton, good old Framp, had ever looked sideways at Ethel, or that Ethel had ever seen Framp as anything but Stew's old college chum.

"The Damnyankee! The damned Damnyankee!"

Stew had cut down his quart a day to no more than three or four drinks. He'd been too happily engrossed in lazy catfishing and combing the cockleburrs from the shaggy wolf-hounds and riding out his horses. But tonight Stew Stoddard got drunk.

He fed the hounds and sat down in the log cabin with a jug of whiskey. The lamp was turned low and the picture of Edith in its opened leather case faced him. Slumped down in a big old homemade rawhide chair, Stew drank raw whiskey from a tin cup. His gray eyes under heavy black brows were shadowed with a deep, black, murky brooding.

He was living on borrowed time, marked by death. Marked for death by his best friend who had stolen from Stew Stoddard the most precious thing he owned—the love of a golden-haired girl with black-lashed violet eyes.

Poisoned deep by a bitterness that ate into his heart like slow acid, Stew Stoddard had lost his last shred of the zest for living. There was no self-pity. He never felt sorry for himself. There was only a bleak, black futility.

He had bought a Colt .45 six-shooter. He had it in his hand when a small voice behind him jerked him out of his chair.

"I bet," said the small voice, "I know what you're fixin' to do with that gun, mister."

## II

Stew Stoddard got to his long legs a little unsteadily. Blinking the ugly nightmarish brooding from his blood-shot eyes, he stared at the boy who stood in the open doorway of the log cabin.

Red-headed, freckled, snub-nosed, the boy was about fourteen or fifteen, but small for his age. An old Stetson hat tilted at an angle on his head. Silver-mounted spurs were strapped on his feet. A man's filled cartridge belt with a holstered six-shooter was wrapped twice around his slim middle and buckled to the last hole.

"You're aimin'," the boy answered his own implied question, "to go gunnin' for Hix Liston an' Dave Wagner. On account of they counted them Seven Up cattle twice-three times around the hill fer a tally. . . . You

know how much that danged Hix Liston got this outfit for? Five hundred dollars. It was a sheriff's sale and Dave Wagner auctioned it off to Liston and that danged Hix was the only man there to make a bid. Five hundred dollars! That taken the Seven Up, lock, stock and barrel. And them two dirty, crooked sons o' snakes turned around and hung it on you fer fifty thousand. Because you're a tenderfoot sucker—"

The big wolfhounds were mauling the boy by now. Tails wagging, whining, they were on top of him, licking at his freckled face and pawing off his old hat and chewing gently at his faded blue cotton shirt.

"I bet," said the boy, "that's why you was lookin' over your shootin' irons. . . . Gosh sakes, mister, don't you know no better'n to sit there in the lamplight with the door open and window blinds up? You'd make a shore easy pot shot for that bush-whackin' Hix Liston. But of course the hounds wouldn't let Hix git in gun range without chargin' out after 'im."

"They let you get close." Stew put down the gun. The color was coming back into his face.

"Heck, yes. They're my dogs, that's what. . . . I guess you don't know who I am."

"I'm sorry to say"—Stew Stoddard was smiling faintly—"I haven't the honor."

"I'm the O'Hay kid. I guess you heard about Johnny O'Hay, the outlaw?"

"I'm sorry," said Stew gravely, "to have to admit my ignorance. And you're Johnny O'Hay, the outlaw?"

"Me? Heck, no." The boy's eyes, reddish-brown, looked at Stew with sudden suspicion. "You tryin' to make fun of me, mister?"

"I should say not. Put it down to tenderfoot stupidity. I've read somewhere that the notorious New Mexico outlaw, Billy the Kid, killed his first man when he was twelve years old. I wouldn't be that bad-mannered, to poke fun at a friend in need. Speaking of bad manners, I forgot to ask you in."

"I gotta put up my horse first. I left him hid back in the brush. I kind o' slipped up on the cabin. I was thinkin' about killin' you . . ."

"Oh." Stew wiped away the ghost of a smile with his hand. "What made you change your mind . . . about shootin' me?"

"Her." The boy pointed at the picture of Ethel Fairbanks in its tooled leather case. "I stood outside for a while in the dark. Gosh, she's shore beautiful, ain't she? Like the picture on a Christmas calendar."

"Yes." Stew Stoddard's voice had a dry sound. "You're not Johnny O'Hay, then?"

"I'm his kid brother. Johnny's robbin' trains somewheres down the Outlaw Trail. They outlawed him—Dave Wagner an' Hix Liston—when they sent paw to the pen. Johnny will come back some night and when he does, that big tough badge polisher and that cattle-rustlin' Hix Liston better hunt their coyote holes and pull the holes in after 'em. Me'n Johnny will shore hang their hides on the fence. . . . I'm packin' my paw's gun."



Stew nodded. "I'm glad you changed your mind about killin' me with it."

"On account of her."

"On account of her." Stew tried to veer the conversation away from "her." "What do I call you?"

"Butch," came the prompt reply. "Like after Butch Cassidy. He's the boss outlaw of the Wild Bunch. . . . Johnny's thrown in with the Wild Bunch."

"We might put up your horse, Butch. Supper would taste good now. I forgot to eat mine."

"You better hear what I got to say first. Before you ask a man to put up his horse."

"Perhaps," Stew agreed gravely, "you'd better get it off your chest."

"This is our ranch. The Seven Up is the O'Hay outfit. Dave Wagner an' Hix Liston sent paw to the pen and run Johnny out o' the country and they stole the Seven Up outfit. I was too young to put up a scrap and Johnny said I better stay behind to look after Karen—"

"Karen?"

"My sister. You seen her at Black Coulee. She's the red-headed schoolmarm you tipped your hat to when you got off the stage. She's the post mistress. You handed her the mail sacks. She's the notary public, too. She stamped the bill of sale when you bought the Seven Up. Remember?"

"Vaguely. She has freckles across her nose. Dark eyes. The most beautiful auburn hair I ever saw. I wondered at the time why she looked at me and stepped back as though I had some contagious disease."

A faint grin twisted Stew Stoddard's mouth. One of his characteristic headlong impulses had struck him. He found paper and pen and ink. Bending over the table, he wrote rapidly, signed what he had written and fanned the ink dry. Folding the document, he put it into an envelope which he sealed shut. He wrote the name "Karen O'Hay" across it and handed it to the boy with a faint smile.

"That's a bill of sale," said Stewart Stoddard III, "to the Seven Up ranch, lock, stock and barrel. You can ride back to Black Coulee after breakfast in the morning and give it to your sister."

"I ain't goin' back to Black Coulee."

"I see."

"No, you don't," said the boy. "Not till I tell you why. I changed my mind about shootin' you. You can't handle this ranch alone. I'll work for whatever wages you figger I'm worth. I'll make a hand. . . . I had you sized up wrong. So did Karen. . . . When Johnny shows up, we'll work out some kind of a deal. But don't go givin' Karen O'Hay no bill of sale to the Seven Up. Whew! She'd claw your eyes out, mister. She's prideful."

"Just the same, Butch, you put this in your pocket, in case anything happens to me. Meanwhile, let's make it a working partnership. I thought I heard you say something about the

Seven Up cattle being counted twice or three times around the hill. I'm a greenhorn tenderfoot at the cattle business. I could sure use a pardner that savvies the tricks of the trade. I'll put the coffeepot on while you unsaddle your horse. But before you go, would you mind shaking hands on the deal, Butch?"

The boy wiped his hand along his faded overalls and held it out across the shaggy hound pack. The man and boy shook hands gravely. The hounds followed Butch outside.

Stew Stoddard poured himself a stiff drink. His eyes, cleared now of their black brooding, looked at the leather-framed picture of Ethel Fairbanks. He lifted the tin cupful of whiskey, smiled faintly, and his twisted lips moved. His voice was a barely audible whisper.

"Felicitations!"

Downing the raw whiskey, he threw the empty tin cup out the open doorway. Then he folded the picture in its leather case and put it back in the big old saddle leather trunk and strapped its locked lid down.

He had supper started when Butch came in with an armful of stove wood, the hound pack at his heels.

It was a hearty supper and the man and boy ate hungrily. It was not until they had washed and dried the dishes that the boy, his eyes heavy-lidded, pulled off his clothes and crawled into the spare bunk.

Stew Stoddard corked the jug and put it away. For quite a while he stood there, looking down at the boy's tousled red head and freckled face.

Sleep softened the boy's mouth, so that he looked younger, helpless.

Stew's eyes lost their hardness; the bitter twist was erased from his mouth. Blowing out the lamp light he went outside. He walked down to the river's edge and sat down on the sandy bank with his pipe. The moon and stars were reflected on the wide river. The whispering of the muddy current against the shore seemed to talk to him. Slowly, gradually, the aching lump was melting inside the man's heart. A silent, inarticulate prayer went from him to his Maker . . .

Dawn was breaking when Stew knocked the cold ashes from his pipe and stood up, stretching his cramped limbs. Stripping, he went into the river. He swam across, angling against the swift current, and when he had reached the far bank he trotted back up the long sand bar. The blood pumping through his veins, he swam back across with long, easy, powerful, hard-muscled strokes. He was blowing hard when he reached the bank. Standing on spread legs, he stretched his arms to pull the crisp, early-morning air into his lungs. And then a sudden realization came over him and he caught his breath, staring out across the wide water with its strong current. A warm glow spread over his whole lean-muscled body. He had swum across the river and back and had not coughed once. There was no ache or pain or tightness or shortage of breath. There was nothing wrong with his lungs.

"That Damnyankee!" he yelled. "That lyin' damned Damnyankee!"

It was his laugh, strong-lunged, gay, reckless, carefree, echoing across the river, that brought the boy from the cabin.

"Come an' git it!" Butch cupped his hands to shout his early breakfast call. "Come an' git it or I'll feed it to the houn's!"

The barn chores had been done. Breakfast was cooked and on the table. The boy's tousled red head was damp, his face scrubbed until the freckles shone.

"You're a swell swimmer, mister," he said admiringly. "Even Johnny can't bust 'er wide open like that. And he's the best along the river. I kin swim 'er. But I land about a mile fu'ther down. Karen cuts 'er like a knife cuttin' soft butter, though. . . . Karen's all right when her nose ain't in the air—"

"Karen is all right," grinned Stew Stoddard, "even with her nose in the air. . . . What do you use for catfish bait?"

"Raw liver. They'll bite tonight . . . Say, what you got that big buckskin Yellowhammer tied up for?"

"I've been riding him. Why?"

"You mean you rode Yellowhammer?"

"Why not?"

"Didn't he throw you?"

"Half a dozen times—until I got the knack of how he pitched. Then he got tired tryin'. He's all right now."

"Well, I'll be danged! Nobody ever rode him. He's an outlaw. Johnny got throwed so many times he condemned the Yellowhammer. Say, you're all right, mister."

"You better call me Stew."

The boy was looking at him covertly. After a while he broke a silence that was beginning to get a little uncomfortable.

"You look . . . well, you don't look like the same feller, somehow, Stew. You looked kind o' scarey last night. Desperate, kind o'. Today you ain't like that. . . . Say, you ain't weakenin' on me, are you? I mean, about Hix Liston an' Dave Wagner?"

"We'll take care of Hix Liston and Dave Wagner, Butch. But right now, this morning, we'll forget about that pair of blacklegs. It's good to be alive. Listen to that meadowlark!"

They rode the horse pasture together. The boy's eyes were shining. He knew this ranch as a town kid knows his back yard and he loved it.

They went for a swim and lay stripped on the warm sand in the sun. Stew was tanned all over from lying in the warm sun. He was the first man along the river who had ever taken time to loaf. River ranchers had to work hard to make a living. It bothered the boy at first, just lazing around.

"You never had much time to play, did you, Butch?"

"No, sir. Paw worked us hard from the time we was big enough to make a hand. Even Karen, when she wasn't off at school. Maw died when I was a yearlin' an' Karen kept house for us, vacations. But paw said she had to git an education. I hate school but Karen makes me study harder'n any o' the kids . . ." He squirmed a little uneasily on the sand.

"School's out for the term, Butch?"

"Well, no . . . I . . . well, I was goin' to lie about it. But a feller

can't lie to a man that treats him like you bin treatin' me. I had a story made up how I'd run off from reform school. But that's a lie. I'm playin' hookey. This is Tuesday. Karen can't come after me till Friday night or Saturday, when school's out for the week an' there's only two weeks more to go till summer vacation. Mebbyso by the time Karen gits here after me, you'll take my part."

"I'll take your part right now, Butch."

"That's another lie. I mean, nobody calls me Butch. I made that up, to act tough. My mother named me Irving. Ain't that a heck of a dangned name for a man?"

"We'll stick to Butch. Stewart's another burdensome name to hang on a kid, even when you're named for a great grandfather who was hung for a pirate. Shortening it to Stew takes the curse off. . . . Let's hope, Butch, that isn't your sister Karen ridin' down the ridge on the road from town . . ."

"That's Dave Wagner. Sits a horse like a sack of wet bran. . . . We better get some clothes on, and our guns."

### III

They were dressed when Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner rode up. His opaque black eyes glinting, he grinned flatly at Stewart Stoddard.

"The O'Hay kid," he said in his harsh voice, "has run off again. As if a peace officer of the law ain't got his hands full without ridin' his horse down huntin' kids playin' hookey from school. . . . I promised you a

hidin' the next time I had to come here after you, button. And by the hell, I'm goin' to give it to you. I'll quirt the runaway hide off your backside — and claim a big hug and kiss in the dark from that red-headed, high-chinned sister of yours fer the trouble she's put me to."

Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner was half drunk. He had a rawhide quirt hanging by a loop from his thick wrist as he swung from his saddle.

Young Butch stood his ground but his freckles stood out like warts. The big wolfhounds growled, hackles lifted.

Dave Wagner swung the rawhide quirt by its wrist loop and Stew Stoddard moved with long, lithe speed. He grabbed the swinging quirt and yanked. His other fist whipped in a hard, looping swing that had all his six-foot, hundred-and-eighty pounds behind it. The blow caught the burly Dave on the blunt point of his bulldog jaw, snapping his head sideways on his bull neck and staggering him back a step.

But it was like trying to knock down a bull with your fist. The big, muscle-bound deputy shook his head a little, spat between grinning teeth. His eyes were wicked.

"Why, you damned drunk green-horn tenderfoot pilgrim!"

Stew Stoddard had the quirt in his hand, gripped by its twin tails. Its braided rawhide butt was shot-loaded like a blackjack. It made a good weapon. The tenderfoot took a shorter grip on the quirt and swung it with a looping overhand motion. Dave Wagner ducked the blow, side-stepped. But whiskey had made him

slow and clumsy-footed. Stew drove his left deep into the big hard paunch. Just above where Dave's belly sagged over the tight waistband of his pants. The deputy grunted as though he'd been kicked by a mule, doubling over, face purpling as he gasped for wind. And Stew slapped off the big deputy's black Stetson and brought the loaded butt of the rawhide quirt down across Dave Wagner's close-cropped head.

It made a dull, spitting sound. The big deputy's thick legs buckled. His bloodshot beady black eyes rolled back in their sockets. He pitched forward and landed with a dull, heavy thud, laying there like a dead man.

"Whew!" Young Butch O'Hay stood wide-eyed with wonder and a great hero-worshipping admiration. Then he made a headlong dive at the big deputy's holstered six-shooter.

Grabbing it, he leaped back.

"Watch 'im, dogs!" the boy shrilled.

Dave Wagner was a hard man to whip. That blow would have cracked a skull less thick. But the burly deputy was moving sluggishly, clawing blindly at his gun holster as he rolled over.

Stew hooked his fingers through the wrist loop of the braided rawhide quirt. The quirt made a hissing sound as it swung through the air. Its twin tails slashed across the big deputy's rump and back.

"Rise and shine"—Stew's grin was flat-lipped—"you muscle-bound ape. Solid bone, that skull of yours, or you'd be hard to wake an hour from now. Get up, Dave. Party's over. It's time you went home."

Dave Wagner got to his hands and knees, shaking his head like a bull.





Then the rawhide quirt slashed down across the seat of his pants. The burly deputy snarled with pain. Lunging to his feet, he charged, head lowered, big-muscled arms spread to grab the tenderfoot in a wrestler's grip.

Stew sidestepped nimbly. The quirt swished through the air. Over and under in a hissing loop. The plaited rawhide whipped Dave Wagner across both eyes. The pain was blinding. The big deputy lurched drunkenly, both hands lifted to protect his face and cover his pain-blinded eyes. He was cursing in a sobbing, snarling growl.

"You damn tenderfoot! I'll kill you fer this."

The rawhide quirt ripped and slashed across the big man's back and

shoulders where his shirt stretched skin tight. Dave Wagner was staggering around like some big blinded wounded animal. The rawhide quirt slashed and ripped viciously. The big deputy blinked the pain from his eyes and charged. Long-legged Stew had no trouble dancing out of the way. The quirt slashed the deputy's beefy face, leaving bone-white welts on the mottled red hide, drawing blood. And Stew Stoddard kept it up.

It was a brutal beating. Stew had no stomach for it but he kept it up because this was the only kind of treatment a man like Dave Wagner could understand with his brutish mind. The big deputy was tougher than most men. Tough and dull-brained and able to stand a lot of punishment. Stew was white-faced and dripping with sweat by the time Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner stumbled and went sprawling in the dirt, sobbing and begging the tenderfoot not to quirt him any more, that he'd had enough.

Stew Stoddard threw the quirt aside. He was breathing hard, like a spent runner. Filling a pail of water, he threw it down onto Dave Wagner's head and face.

Young Butch had watched the quirting of Dave Wagner with a boy's cruel satisfaction, now and then lifting a shrill voice. "Give it to 'im, Stew! Lay it on! Give 'im his medicine!"

The big shaggy wolfhounds had circled restlessly, hackles lifted, white fangs bared, held in check by the boy's occasional command to stay back out of the fight.

Now the hound pack was alert, the big wolfhound pack leader growling deep as he started towards a red willow thicket about a hundred yards away.

"There's somebody over behind that brush, Stew." The boy pointed. "Sic 'em, dogs! Git 'im!"

Brush crashed as a man on horseback spurred away from behind the brush and off down the trail that led to the Liston place down the river.

It was Hix Liston. And he was getting away as fast as he could make his horse travel.

"Call your dogs off, Butch," Stew said. "He might shoot 'em."

The boy whistled shrilly and the hounds came back a little reluctantly. Stew Stoddard jerked Dave Wagner up onto his feet and told him to get back on his horse and pull out.

"I'll git you fer this tenderfoot," Wagner growled.

"Unless somebody gets you first," said Stew. "That was your tough blackleg chum Hix the hounds just ran off. I'm beginning to take some of your wild and woolly West with the proverbial grain of salt."

Dave Wagner was muttering something about his gun. Stew took the deputy sheriff's six-shooter from young Butch. Hooking a long forefinger through the trigger guard, the tenderfoot began spinning the gun. There was an empty tomato can about fifty feet away and Stew Stoddard was spinning the six-shooter rapidly. Then the spinning gun began to explode and each time the gun hammer was thumbed back it was triggered down on a cartridge and every bullet hit the tin can. It was rapid shoot-

ing, trick shooting. The tin can bounced and rolled and dust kicked up. There were six ragged holes torn in the tin can when the tenderfoot handed the empty, smoking six-shooter, butt first, to Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner.

"Don't load it," said Stew Stoddard, "until you've ridden off my land. I don't make a practice of showin' off, but I wanted you to realize you won't be gunnin' for a harmless thing when you come back to 'git your tenderfoot'. Good day, Wagner."

Dave Wagner shoved the empty six-shooter into its holster and climbed slowly, stiffly, into his saddle. He rode away, slumped over his saddlehorn, sodden and whipped. When he got out the far gate, he turned down the river, taking the wagon trail to Hix Liston's place.

Young Butch had retrieved the bullet-mangled can. His eyes were shining.

"Johnny," he said, his voice filled with awe, "like to shot a toe off tryin' to learn how to spin a gun. Gosh! Where'd you learn it, Stew?"

"We have guns"—Stew smiled faintly—"in Virginia. Guns and horses."

The boy took a long thick leather wallet and a leather-covered tally book from inside his shirt and handed them to Stew.

"Dave Wagner"—he grinned widely—"kind o' dropped 'em out o' his pocket when he was gittin' quirted."

Stew Stoddard was not a man who made a habit of going through anyone's personal papers. But something

prompted him to look inside the wallet.

There was no money inside the big wallet. Only some letters and official-looking papers. Stew whistled soundlessly as he scanned them. Then he spent a few minutes looking through the tally book.

He put the letters and papers back in the wallet and put it and the tally book into his pocket.

There was a strange dark look in his eyes and his grin was flat, mirthless.

"I hate to lose you, Butch. And I don't want you to figure I'm lettin' you down in any way. But I'm writin' a letter to the sheriff and I'm sendin' you to the county seat at Chinook with it. It's mighty important that you get it to the sheriff as quick as possible. Don't let anybody know you're packin' it. Don't give it to anybody but the sheriff. It might be a good idea if you rode wide around Black Coulee. We don't want your sister to collar you and put you back in school. Saddle your pick of the Seven Up horses and ride him like you owned him. . . . Now get your horse while I'm writin' this letter to the law."

"You got somethin' on Dave Wagner?" Young Butch dropped his voice to a conspirator's whisper.

"We've got enough on that black-leg scoundrel"—Stew used the same whisper—"to send him to the pen—to take your father's place there."

"Whew!"

"That," Stew Stoddard smiled at the boy, "seems to cover it nicely."

#### IV

It was lonesome here at the ranch now, with young Butch O'Hay gone. Stew missed the boy. The sun climbed noon high, then began its slow downward descent in the cloudless Montana sky. Stew kept a steady watch on the trail and wagon road that led from the Hix Liston place down the river.

But he figured that Dave Wagner and Hix Liston would wait until they had the cover of darkness before they came back to claim the big deputy's missing wallet and tally book. Anyhow Wagner wouldn't be in any sort of fighting trim for at least a few more hours.

But big Dave Wagner wouldn't wait too long. He couldn't afford to delay it. It meant his big tough quilt-weltd hide. Nobody but a stupid ox-brained thing like Dave would have carried such incriminating papers around. Enough documentary evidence there to put the deputy sheriff and his partner-in-crime, Hix Liston, in prison for years. Dave would go hog-wild with fear and worry and fury when he discovered his loss.

Dave Wagner and Hix Liston would be playing for keeps when they showed up here at the Seven UP Ranch. They would come here to kill Tenderfoot Stew Stoddard. They were capable of murder. And they would have to kill the tenderfoot to keep him from sending them to prison.

So Stew Stoddard had a double purpose in sending Butch away. They wouldn't stop at murder. But the boy was well along his way to Chinook now, forking the fastest stoutest

ridge runner in the 7 UP remuda. No Pony Express rider ever took his job more seriously. His father's filled cartridge belt was wrapped twice around his slim kid belly and the big old long-barreled six-shooter slapped his flank. Hat pulled at a slant on his curly red head; a man's grim set to his jaw. His red-brown eyes shone with excitement and his freckles stood out like black lumps.

"Nothin' kin stop me, Stew. I'll change horses along the way." Butch patted the butt of the old six-shooter and spat between set teeth.

"Carry the mail, Butch!"

A tight lump rose in Stew Stoddard's throat as he watched the boy ride out of sight high up on the ridge on the road to town.

Last night that freckled red-headed boy had saved the life of Stewart Stoddard III. Today the sun shone and the meadowlark sang. There was the good earthy smell of the muddy river and the sweet odor of wild roses in bloom and Stew was alive to enjoy them, with a keen zest for living that pulsed through his veins and tingled his every nerve.

For the first time in his life, Stew Stoddard destroyed good whiskey. He smashed the jug that was partly filled, then rolled the barrel of bourbon down to the river's edge and smashed its hardwood ribs with an ax. When it was drained empty, he rolled the smashed barrel into the river and watched it float downstream with the swift current.

Stew had his cartridge belt and six-shooter buckled on when he did his barn chores at sundown. The hounds

were outside. The big half-grown hound pups prowled the brush on a pup hunt for adventure but the big pack leader and older hounds were outside on guard. Stew was forking old hay for bedding in Yellowhammer's stall when he heard the hounds bark. In a few minutes the barking stopped and Stew stepped to the barn door, his gun in his hand.

Then he slid the gun back into its holster. It was Karen O'Hay on a stout, sweat-marked roan cow horse. She wore a shabby leather divided skirt and boots and a gray flannel shirt and a man's Stetson hat pulled down on her dark-red curly head. Her eyes, thick-lashed and shadowed by almost heavy black brows, were smoky-brown. Her red mouth was flattened in a hard straight line.

Stew Stoddard was glad now he'd shaved and put on clean clothes. He pulled off his hat and bowed stiffly. He had a notion that if he smiled or voiced anything like a welcome he would get a tongue lashing. It was there, glinting in the girl's dark eyes.

"Where," asked Karen O'Hay, "is my kid brother?"

"Butch?"

"Irving!"

"Butch. My pardner in the cattle business. Top hand and ramrod. Butch O'Hay. . . . He's gone."

"I didn't come here to be insulted by your tenderfoot whiskey talk. I came here to get my brother and take him home where he belongs. What have you done with him?"

Her anger showed in the red spots that stained her cheeks. The rest of her tanned skin had gone a dead white till the freckles showed.

"Like Butch's," Stew spoke aloud.

"What?"

"The freckles. I like 'em. . . . You'll have to excuse that slip of the tongue. But it's not whiskey talking. I had my last drink about midnight last night when young Butch O'Hay appeared like some freckled guardian angel. There are other things besides liquor that can intoxicate a man. . . . If you will honor me by dismounting, I'll put up your horse and after supper I'll mount you on a fresh horse and escort you at least a part of the way back to Black Coulee. Butch isn't here. He's making a Pony Express ride on a very important errand. He should be nearly halfway to Chinook by now. I can explain it in more lucid detail if you'll relax. Light and rest your saddle, as we say out West—"

"Quit," said Karen O'Hay, "trying so desperately to be funny. You're not."

"Then," Stew Stoddard spoke quietly in his slurred voice, "we'll dispense with the levity. Bring it down to cold turkey. You've got to get away from here before dark. I'm expecting evil company. They'll not be in any humor to treat you as a lady. I refer to Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner and a character named Hix Liston. . . . While we're on the subject, why did you send an ugly-tempered brute like Dave Wagner to fetch back your kid brother?"

"That's a lie! I sent nobody after my brother. I got panicky when I found he'd run away, so I dismissed school and saddled my horse and came here hoping to find him. I was afraid to tell anyone he was gone. It

isn't the first time Irving has run away. He always comes here. He was gone two days and nights while Dave Wagner and Hix Liston were tallying over the Seven Up cattle to you. Irving—"

"Butch!" Stew cut in quickly.

"All right. Butch, then. . . . He's been playing range detective. He's as wise as an old hand in some ways. He's found out a few things. They'd kill that boy if they suspected—"

"You'd better step down, Karen," said Stew quietly. "Butch is safe. It's you that I'm worried about now. I didn't really think you'd send a man of Dave Wagner's caliber to get your kid brother. In any case, he didn't get the boy. Between us, Butch and I managed to discourage the only law at Black Coulee, and Butch is carrying the mail to the sheriff at Chinook. I'm expecting a call from Deputy Sheriff Dave Wagner and I don't want you underfoot when he shows up. We're wasting some valuable time, Miss O'Hay."

The girl looked down from her saddle and straight into the dark-gray eyes of Stew Stoddard. She smiled faintly, her lower lip caught between white teeth. He suspected it was a trait left over from her childhood and he hoped she would never break herself of it.

"I like it better," she told him, "when you say Karen. I'm sorry . . ."

"Stew." He reached up, swung her from her saddle and put her down.

"I'm sorry, Stew."

He held onto her hands for a long moment. They felt cold, trembling.

and he held onto them until they steadied.

"Between us, Karen," he said quietly, "we'll work this out for the benefit and peace and happiness of the O'Hays. Butch . . . Karen . . . Outlaw Johnny . . . your father whose days in prison are now shortly numbered. You can gamble on it. More power to Range Detective Butch O'Hay. By the way, is your brother Johnny really holding up trains?"

"I hope not." Karen's little laugh sounded shaky. "Whatever gave you the idea that Johnny O'Hay had turned outlaw?"

"I must have heard it from Dave Wagner."

Karen's eyes crinkled and bright little sparks of laughter showed in their depths.

"I think," she said, "I understand. Butch. You'd cover up for him, wouldn't you, Stew?"

"You bet I would, lady."

Stew unsaddled her roan gelding and turned it into the horse pasture. They went on to the cabin together. He liked the way Karen hugged the big shaggy hounds. And then the younger dogs came trotting back and Karen whistled, like young Butch had whistled. The big, nearly grown pups heard her whistle and they charged her from all sides. It was not until they had nearly knocked her off her feet and she was tussling with them, the color in her cheeks and her eyes sparkling with laughter, that Karen and Stew got a good whiff of the skunk odor. Too late now to do anything about it. Mauling the pups had gotten the skunk odor on her clothes.

But Karen O'Hay thought it was a

good joke. Laughter crinkled her dark eyes almost shut. With her flushed face and tousled curly hair, slim and healthy and wholesome, Karen O'Hay was something to look at, to quicken any man's pulse.

Stew Stoddard suddenly remembered a day at the Hunt Club when the foxhounds had run afoul of a skunk. They were Stew's hounds. He'd taken it as a huge joke until the disgraced hounds had come near where he and Ethel Fairbanks were standing dismounted near their horses, and the girl had lashed out with sudden anger with her riding crop.

"Filthy, stinking pothounds!" Anger had sharpened her soft voice. There was cruel, vixenish fury in the way she whipped the foxhounds away from her.

Stew had jerked the riding crop away from her and thrown it as far as he could. And then Ethel Fairbanks, cold, blond, beautiful, well-bred, her manners polished off at an expensive finishing school, had turned her fury on him. Stew didn't know that a girl like Ethel Fairbanks could use the language of the gutter until he heard it.

Stew had taken it white-lipped. And when Ethel had worn out her anger, he had given her a wry smile.

"Get Doc Frampton," he had told her, "to prescribe a strong mouth-



wash. I find the scent nature gave the skunk a clean and wholesome odor by comparison."

Stew had taken his hounds to the kennel, carrying one that limped in his arms.

That night Doc Frampton had escorted Ethel Fairbanks to the Hunt Club ball. . . . Stew Stoddard, master of the hounds, had saddled a horse and ridden off alone, with a quart bottle of bourbon whiskey.

It was not long after that episode that Doc Frampton had given Stew Stoddard the ugly verdict. . . .

It all came back to Stew now as he stood there in the sunset and watched Karen O'Hay laughing, wrinkling her short nose. He shrugged off the ugly memory and grinned. And then he was laughing with the girl.

"You get used to it after a while," Karen explained, "and unless it's really bad, you don't burn your clothes. It wears off in time. But if you have hounds, you're bound to put up with fleas and skunk smells and you keep a pair of tweezers handy to pull out porcupine quills. The pups do smell sort of rank, but they haven't seen me in a long time. They wouldn't understand it if I scolded 'em away from me. . . . As long as you don't seem to mind too much, Stew. . . ."

"On the contrary," grinned Stew Stoddard, "until today I never realized how much I actually enjoyed the odor of a skunk."

He opened the cabin door and bowed her inside. "A boar's den, and you'll have to put up with its untidy mess—like the skunk smell on

the pups. Make yourself at home. It is your home, Karen. . . .

"I'll wrangle the horse pasture while it's still daylight. . . ."

The hounds set up a furious barking. Stew motioned the girl back inside and shut the door on her. His six-shooter was in his hand when Hix Liston rode up out of the willows and wild rose brush.

"Call off your dawgs, tenderfoot!" Hix Liston's big crooked tobacco-stained teeth were bared in a wolfish grin. He was a little drunk and his pale eyes were bloodshot, crafty.

Stew called the hounds back. He let the lanky Hix ride up.

"What do you want, Liston?"

"Call it a neighbor's visit. I'm feelin' neighborly as all hell, this evenin'." Liston's voice had a nasal twang.

"What's on your mind?"

"Ain't you axin' a neighbor to light and have a dram of that good likker you got in the barrel?"

"Stay on your horse, Liston. Say what you've got to say, then hit the trail."

Hix Liston hooked a lanky leg across the saddlehorn and spat a stream of tobacco juice at the ground.

"Me'n you might make a smart dicker, tenderfoot."

"Me'n you," Stew picked up Liston's words, "are through with what you call dickerin'—in case you've got some more cattle to count twice around the hill."

"That," grinned the lantern-jawed Liston, "was just funnin'. What you might call a kind o' initiation fer a tenderfoot greenhorn pilgrim."

"Quit beating around the bush, Liston. What's in your craw?"

"Don't git high an' mighty, tenderfoot. I know why you don't want me to hang around. You got the schoolmarm hid out in your cabin; I seen her roan horse just turned loose in the pasture. . . . Keep your hand off your gun, pilgrim. You don't dast use it because I got all the bulge. It's Hix Liston that's holdin' aces. The hell I ain't!" His nasal laugh grated against Stew's ears.

"You're drunk, Liston. Get off my ranch."

"Tuck in your shirt tail, bub. I ain't a-bluffin'." Hix reached a grimy, black-nailed hand into the pocket of his grease and dirt-glazed canvas overalls and pulled out a crumpled soiled envelope. It had been torn open. He tossed it at Stew. It fell in the tobacco juice on the ground.

The color drained from Stew Stoddard's face. Without stooping to pick up the empty envelope, he recognized his own handwriting on it. It was the envelope that had contained the letter he had written and given to young Butch O'Hay to deliver to the sheriff at Chinook.

"I picked up the button," leered Hix Liston, "at the head of the breaks. Me'n Dave Wagner has the kid on ice. Does that kick the wind out o' your tenderfoot belly?"

## V

Hix Liston wasn't lying. This was no whizzer he was trying to run.

Stew Stoddard stood with his back to the door, eying Liston narrowly.

He knew that Karen stood just inside listening.

"What's your deal, Liston?"

"Dave lost his wallet an' tally book here. He's sweatin' blood. He sent me to git 'em back. That gives me the deal. Sometimes me'n Dave don't git along too good. He's got bullyin' ornery ways, drunk er sober. He'll hide behind that law badge an' kill a man. He swears he's goin' to kill hisself a damned tenderfoot. No tellin' when he'll take a notion to polish up that law badge an' squat in behind it an' kill Hix Liston. How much would it be worth to you, Stoddard, to find Dave Wagner's bloated carcass floating in the river tomorrow?"

"Not a dollar, Liston. Not even a Confederate dollar. You talk like a damned carpetbagger and a scalawag."

Hix Liston's long face darkened. His pale eyes glittered with hatred and cunning. His crafty grin was ugly now.

"Hold your damned Rebel tongue. By grab, you're fergettin' we got the O'Hay kid. Dave Wagner's ridin' close herd on the button. That sneak-in' little whelp knows too much fer his own good. I ain't only holdin' aces, you sheep-brained tenderfoot; I got a barlow knife whetted and ready to rip you apart. . . . Call me Mister Liston!"

"Mister Carpetbagger Liston!"

Stew took a step forward. He'd jerk that long-gear'd Hix Liston off his horse and beat some decent manners into his hide. . . .

The cabin door opened behind Stew, and Karen's voice stopped him.



"Wait, Stew." Her voice was level-toned. She stood beside him.

"Name your game, Hix." Karen spoke quietly. Her freckles showed like specks of soot on a pale skin.

"Hand over Dave's wallet and tally book." Hix Liston's nasal voice matched his pale crafty eyes. "We'll turn your kid brother loose."

"What," asked Karen O'Hay, "is in the wallet and tally book, Stew?"

"Enough to send Dave Wagner and Hix Liston to the pen for the rest of their natural lives. Enough to open those same prison gates for your father Pat O'Hay — and to clear your brother Johnny of the cattle-rustling and horse-thief indictment out against him."

Stew Stoddard's left arm was around Karen O'Hay's slim shoulders. In his right hand was a six-shooter that was pointed at Hix Liston's long lean belly.

"Go back inside the cabin, Karen." Stew's slurred drawl had a deadly sound. "I don't want you to watch this."

He gripped her shoulder and turned her around and, without taking his eyes from the man on horseback, he spoke to the girl.

"I got Butch into it and I'll get him out of it. I'm goin' to kill this carpetbagger. Then I'll make my own deal with Dave Wagner."

He gave her a backward shove. Karen was breathing quickly as she stepped back into the log cabin and shut the door.

Sweat beaded Hix Liston's long, lantern-jawed face. His pale eyes

shifted furtively like the eyes of some trapped animal.

Stew Stoddard thumbed back the hammer of his gun. His slurred voice was barely audible as he stepped away from the door.

"You and your blackleg pardner," said Stew, "would never in the world keep any bargain you made. Perhaps you've already killed the boy. So it's your life for his, Liston. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And then I'll kill Dave Wagner where I find him. Fill your hand with a gun, man. Play your aces!"

Hix Liston clawed the air with both dirty hands. The fear of death crawled inside him like a cold slimy snake and it showed in his pale blood-shot eyes. Eyes that lost their glint of cunning now.

"Don't, mister! Hellamighty, don't murder me! I'm afeered!"

"The boy's dead, then."

"No! The button's alive an' kickin'. He's hogtied at my cabin. He was cussin' me'n Dave a-plenty when I rode off. I don't know how much o' that cussin' Dave is goin' to take. He was braidin' hisself a quirt out o' rawhide when I pulled out. Lemme go, mister. So he'p me, I swear I'll lend you a hand a-killin' that ornery Dave!"

"I'll probably regret this." Stew lowered his gun hammer and shoved the six-shooter into its holster.

"You'll ride back to your place, Liston. But I'll go along. If anything has happened to that boy, I'll kill you like I'd kill a copperhead, and I'll hang Dave Wagner to a tree limb."

The cabin door was opening slow.

ly. Karen O'Hay came out. She had Stew's .30-30 saddle carbine in the crook of her left arm and her dark eyes were cold and merciless.

"I overheard a part of it, Stew. I'm going along."

Stew Stoddard shook his head. "You'd be underfoot, Karen. Stay here. Keep the dogs inside the cabin with you and bar the door. Butch and I may be a little late for supper or a little early for breakfast but we'll show up. If we're not here by daybreak, ride back to Black Coulee. Gather a posse that'll hang Dave Wagner and Hix Liston. But I'll gamble on your havin' to feed me'n my pardner Butch for breakfast. . . . Turn your horse around, Carpetbagger. I want a look at your galluses where they cross."

"You wouldn't shoot a man in the back," whined Liston, "with her a-lookin' on!"

"Turn around, I said."

Hix Liston reined his horse around and Stew stepped inside the cabin.

"This is hardly the time, Karen," he spoke softly, his voice unsteady, "to worry you with it. But I want you to know I love you. I'll get down on my knees when I come back, to ask you to marry me."

Karen O'Hay looked up at him, smiling a little, her eyes dark.

"I wouldn't want you on your knees, Stew. Ever. Come back to me." She held out both hands.

Stew Stoddard shoved the door shut with his boot heel and took her into his arms.

Hix Liston was still sitting his horse, his long back towards the

cabin door when Stew opened it and stepped outside.

"Ride on to the barn," Stew told him, "while I saddle my horse. Keep your gun. When you feel a lucky hunch, fill your gun hand. The cravin' to kill me a Copperhead is strong within me. . . ."

But for a man with the craving to kill, Stew Stoddard was acting very queerly. His eyes were bright and a smile played around the corners of his mouth as he herded Hix Liston along the trail down the river. Life had never seemed so filled with hopes and dreams as it was this evening when a round white moon pushed up over the badlands skyline as twilight slowly darkened into starlight.

Now and then he shook his head. How in the world he had ever imagined himself in love with Ethel Fairbanks seemed a puzzle. His heart sang. He was too filled with happiness to have room for bitterness. Doc Wayne Frampton had done him the greatest favor on earth.

"I'm on my way, Butch." It was a whispered prayer. "Please, God!"

## VI

The Liston place was rundown. Even in the moonlight it had a slovenly, unkempt appearance. The fence needed mending. The barn and cattle shed were badly in need of repair. Even the cabin where Liston lived was sadly neglected. The mud daubing and chinking between the logs had fallen out in places so that now the lamplight inside showed between the logs. The door sagged on its hinges.

Hix Liston rode ahead, his hands

in front of him and clear of his saddle gun or six-shooter. Fear stiffened his long back.

Stew Stoddard rode behind on the big buckskin Yellowhammer. His gun in his hand, he halted Liston at the brushy edge of the clearing.

"Ride about halfway across the clearing, Copperhead. Then pull up. Call Dave Wagner outside. Tell him any kind of a lie you figure he'll swallow. Get him out in the open. I'll take it from there on. Make any mistake about it, and I'll kill you. . . . Ride along, Carpetbagger."

"You won't kill me?"

"I'm promisin' you not a thing in the way of life or death. Get out there."

Off behind the brush a horse nickered. Yellowhammer nickered in answer.

The light inside the cabin went out suddenly. Rusty hinges creaked as the sagging door was cautiously pulled open. From the dark doorway sounded the rasping voice of Dave Wagner.

"That you, Hix?"

Stew's gun hammer click-clicked to full cock. His voice was a bleak whisper.

"Ride out there, Copperhead!"

Hix Liston rode out of the brush. "It's me, Dave. . . ." He seemed to cringe in his saddle.

It was fear. A new fear. Something was wrong. Hix Liston and

Dave Wagner had signals they used. Words that had a different meaning from their customary usage. Hix and Dave never called one another by their real names in a tight of any kind. But Dave had called his partner "Hix" and that meant something had gone wrong here. And Hix was telling the big deputy the same thing when he called him "Dave."

Off behind the brush the horse nickered again. And from the dark shadow of the brush, Yellowhammer nickered back a reply.

Then big Dave Wagner lurched from the black doorway as though he'd been shoved from behind. And as he staggered out from the black shadow of the cabin a six-shooter was thrown out on the moonlit ground. It landed a few feet in front of Dave Wagner.

"Pick up your gun, Dave!" That shrill, excited voice could belong to nobody on earth but young Butch O'Hay.

"Don't rabbit, Hix!" called another voice from the log cabin. It had a reckless, almost gay lift to it. "Don't coyote, you long-gear'd sidewinder!"

Stew was confused for a moment. Hix Liston had reined his horse to a halt. Big Dave Wagner was half crouched over his six-shooter on the ground as though he was afraid to pick it up. His rasping voice snarled a belated warning to his partner.

"Johnny O'Hay showed up!"

Stew Stoddard rode out of the brush, his gun in his hand. His slurred voice sounded across the moonlit clearing.

"Stew!" shrilled the boy's voice. "Hold your fire, Johnny! Gosh, that's



Stew! I told you about 'im. Holy mackerel!"

A slim cowpuncher stepped out of the cabin doorway and into the moonlight. He was bareheaded and even in the moonlight at that distance Stew knew that Johnny O'Hay was red-headed. Probably freckled, too. Tall, slim, easy-moving, his six-shooter held almost carelessly in his hand, Johnny O'Hay looked young and he was young. But there was a hard, brittle sound to his voice.

"Ride away from this, mister. No need of your bloodyin' your clean tenderfoot hands in this dirty mess. I got nothin' to lose. Git away from here. Pronto. . . ."

Moving with incredible speed for a big man, big Dave Wagner dropped down over his gun, grabbed it and fired. No time to aim. But it was either uncanny marksmanship or a lucky snap shot. The heavy .45 slug struck Johnny O'Hay in the right shoulder and spun him sideways. The six-shooter slid from the slim cowpuncher's hand and he threw himself flat and clawed wildly with his left hand for his gun.

Tenderfoot Stewart Stoddard III went into action. His first shot hit Dave Wagner's big bulk and he heard the burly deputy scream hoarsely as he turned his second shot on Hix Liston.

Liston was a moving target now. His long body was flattened along the neck of his running horse. His gun was spitting jets of fire as he raced at an angle for the safety of the brush.

Inside the dark cabin a .45 six-

shooter roared. The bullet kicked dirt in Dave Wagner's face.

Johnny O'Hay had his gun in his left hand. He was shooting at Dave Wagner and Dave was returning the gunfire. Inside the dark cabin young Butch crouched with the long-barreled six-shooter gripped in both hands and he was shooting as fast as he could thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger.

Young Butch O'Hay's shots were wild. The bullets whined and snarled around Dave Wagner's big bulk. Now and then one would kick the dirt in the big deputy's face.

Stew had to leave it like that. Hix Liston had spurred his horse into the brush and was headed at a run for the river. It was less than a hundred yards away and Liston had a head start. Brush flanked the trail on both sides and screened him as he made his desperate bid for escape.

Stew was a short distance behind when he heard the heavy splash. Then the big Yellowhammer carried him out of the brush and to the edge of the high bank above the river. And Stew could not have pulled up if he had wanted to because the shooting had spooked the big line-backed buckskin and the Yellowhammer cold-jawed on him. Stampeded. No man could have pulled up that big spooked gelding. Nor did Stew Stoddard try. The bank dropped over ten feet to the black water below. Stew kicked both feet from the stirrups and grabbed the saddlehorn with his left hand. His gun was gripped in his right hand.

Out now in mid-air, the big buckskin was somersaulting. Stew was

thrown clear. He doubled his knees to keep his wind from being knocked out in a belly flop, struck the water with a headlong impact that slammed his head against his legs. Then he went under. He hadn't enough air pulled into his lungs and for what seemed long minutes he was underwater, his lungs bursting, and he let go his six-shooter and used both arms and hands to climb up out of the black water.

He was dazed, panicked, smothered, and when his head broke the surface of the water, he pawed like a drowning man, gasping for breath, sucking the air into his aching lungs, while the sodden weight of his water-filled boots pulled his legs down and the heavy undercurrent along the high black bank dragged at him. And for a minute or two Stew Stoddard had to fight with all his strength to keep from drowning. A whirlpool pulled him under and he had barely time to pull the air into his lungs and hold it. For a second he bobbed up like a cork. He had hooked a spur shank in under the other boot and pulled it off. Then he doubled up and yanked off the other boot and both were off when he came up below the whirlpool.

Black . . . the water was black as liquid agate. The current threw him against the bank. He found a big gnarled tree root growing out of the bank and hung onto it, getting his wind. Somewhere out in the channel a swimming horse was blowing. . . .

Then a shapeless thing came downstream. It was a horse. Hix Liston's horse. It had quit swimming and was floating downstream on its side. Per-

haps it had been cinched too tight or had water in its ears, or had just sulked. Whatever makes a horse quit swimming.

Hix Liston was a river man. He had swum stolen horses across on many a night. There wasn't a trick in the swift treacherous river that he hadn't mastered. He had hold of the saddlehorn and had reached with his free hand to loosen the saddle cinch.

" . . . wind-bellied, quittin' fool horse!" he was cursing in his nasal whine.

"I wouldn't cuss a horse that saved my life, Copperhead."

Liston was almost within arm's reach of where Stew clung to the big tree root. A few feet upstream. In a moment the current would swing the floating horse and man against the high cutbank.

Hix Liston let loose the latigo and jerked his six-shooter from its armpit holster. He fired point-blank, so close that the gun flash blinded Stew's eyes and the burning powder stung his wet face. The bullet grazed his head and buried itself in the high clay bank.

Stew had both feet braced against the bank, legs doubled. They levered like springs and he lunged out with both arms to grab Liston around the neck. His legs wrapped around Liston's. He grabbed Liston's neck in the crook of one arm and tightened it in a stranglehold and held on.

Hix Liston had a death grip on his saddlehorn. He clubbed wildly at the tenderfoot's head and shoulders with the barrel of his six-shooter. Each time he clubbed down with the long gun barrel, he thumbed back the ham-

mer and pulled the trigger in a frantic, desperate attempt to blow the top of the tenderfoot's skull off.

The combined weight of the two men swung from the saddlehorn now. Some trick twist of the current helped. The horse rolled over on its back, dragged down by the weight, and, terrified by the dragging burden on the horn of the saddle and the roaring explosion of the gun, the sullied animal was now fighting the water.

Hix Liston's neck and head still locked in a stranglehold, Stew swam desperately with his free arm. There was the taste of blood in his mouth and it was clogging his nostrils and throat. A blow from the gun barrel had almost smashed Stew's nose. Then there was new danger. The swimming horse was pawing the two men. Shod hoofs slammed down on them. Stew pulled air into his lungs and sank, keeping his hold on Liston's neck. It seemed as though he would never again come to the surface. The black water pulled him and Liston down and down. And then he had his head above surface and his feet touched bottom. The current had swung him ashore on a sand bar below the high clay bank.

Stew Stoddard still had Hix Liston gripped in his stranglehold. But Liston was dead, the deep imprint of a shod hoof marked there like a brand on his face and forehead.

Stew Stoddard's stranglehold slipped loose. He crawled away from the dead man, rolled over and began to vomit water and blood. He thought he heard the shrill, panicky voice of young Butch somewhere, shouting his name over and over.

## VII

It was young Butch who found Stew and the dead Hix Liston. Stew heard the boy calling his name. He blinked open his eyes and saw the white face of young Butch, tears trickling down through the mass of freckles.

"The only danged friend I had . . . treated me like a man . . ." And then the sobbing voice lifted in a wild, shrill wail.

"Karen! I found 'im! Hey, Karen! Johnny! Dang it, git here!"

"Take 'er . . . easy . . . pardner . . ." Stew's voice was no more than a waterlogged croaking whisper. "I don't die that easy, Butch."

"Karen! Sis! Johnny! He's come alive! Stew! Goshamighty!"

Stew rolled over and sat up. He forced an excuse for a grin.

"Wagner?"

"Shot full of holes. Me'n Johnny got that big son. . . . Yellowhammer and Hix Liston's horse come ashore on the sandbar. I seen 'em wadin' out o' the river. And that's how I found you. . . . You shot anywheres, Stew?"

"Not that I know of."

Karen got there first. And young Butch stared, slack-jawed, a little jealous, when his sister dropped down on her knees and took Stew's head in her arms and kissed him, and Stew's arms went around her.

"Well, I'll be danged!" Then young Butch O'Hay grinned his approval and called the hounds. "Come along, dogs. Give 'em room!"

Karen had trailed Stew and Hix Liston. "I took the risk of being

cussed out for getting underfoot," she explained. "After all, it was the O'Hay ruckus and I'm an O'Hay, too."

She had patched up Johnny's bullet-ripped shoulder. It was only a flesh wound, no bones broken.

Johnny eyed Stew for a long moment. He was freckled and snub-nosed, younger than Karen. About nineteen. He grinned and nodded.

"That kid brother of mine claims you're the greatest man on earth. Until you showed up, I was it. . . . I'm proud to admit the kid's one hundred percent right."

Stew reddened under the flattery. He looked at them. Butch, Karen, Johnny. Freckled, red-headed, alike.

Johnny grinned uneasily under Stew's frank scrutiny. He said he'd been holed up in the badlands for a long time. Only Karen knew where his hideout was. He hadn't dared let his kid brother in on the secret.

"The kid would have thrown in with me. Nothin' could have stopped him. That's why I had to lie to the button. Tell him I was goin' down the Outlaw Trail to join the Wild Bunch . . ."

"Call him Butch," said Stew.

"Butch it is," Johnny agreed.

Back at the Seven Up Ranch they ran into a dozen heavily armed men—the sheriff from Chinook with a hand-picked posse. He had come to pick up Hix Liston and Dutch Wagner. The law had been watching that pair, giving them enough rope to hang themselves.

Stew had told Karen, just before he took Liston and headed down the

river for his showdown with Dave Wagner, to look in the big leather trunk where she'd find the big deputy's wallet and tally book. Stew called Karen now and she handed him the wallet and the book with the cattle tallies.

"There's a signed agreement in the wallet," Stew told the sheriff, "that tells the tale. Dave Wagner drew it up and had Hix Liston sign it. It tells how Hix and Dave framed a cattle-stealin' charge against Pat O'Hay and his son Johnny. Hix Liston did the actual cattle rustling, and when he had the evidence planted at the Seven Up Ranch, he gave Wagner the signal. Dave polished his law badge and rode up. Dave Wagner and Hix Liston had enough faked proof to send Pat O'Hay to the pen. Johnny O'Hay got away from them. Hix Liston's guilt is there in black and white, along with his further guilt in the deal they made with me when they counted the Seven Up cattle three times for the payoff tally. The actual tally and the tally around the hill twice more is there in Dave Wagner's tally book."

The sheriff from Chinook said that evidence wouldn't be needed now against Dave Wagner and Hix Liston because that pair had gone where they'd be taken care of. But this did open the prison gates for Pat O'Hay, and it cleared Johnny O'Hay.

Johnny hadn't gone down the Outlaw Trail. He'd holed up in the badlands. Johnny had left his horse in the brush and walked in on Dave Wagner when the big deputy was about to give young Butch a rawhide whipping. Johnny had taken Dave's

gun, then handed the new quirt to his kid brother. Butch had just started his quirting when they sighted Hix Liston riding up.

The sheriff led his posse down the river to take charge of the dead.

A week later a big, slow-spoken man with grayish-brown flecked eyes, gray hair and a drooping gray mustache got off the stagecoach at Black Coulee. His three red-headed freckled "young 'uns" nearly smothered him.

"This is my father, Stew," said Karen. "Pat O'Hay. From Ireland and Kentucky." Her eyes crinkled as she added: "Stewart Stoddard from Virginia, father."

"You wouldn't be. By damn, ye are, though! The spittin' image of Captain Jed Stoddard. Side by side and hell-bent and outridin' each other as we charged the Damnyankees head-on at Shiloh. . . . Jeb Stoddard died in my arms, sir. With a smile on his lips. He said we'd never be licked. I doubt he would have ever surrendered."

Stew Stoddard's heart was pounding. "You must be Captain Red Pat O'Hay, then. In his letters my father said he'd be bringing you home when you'd driven Grant's army back across the Mason-Dixon Line."

Later that evening they were sitting together and Stew took Karen's hand.

"So now," he said, "I've met all the O'Hays. Is there any reason for postponing the wedding?"

Karen smiled and she shook her thick curly mop of red hair. She

hung onto his hand, a blush flooding her cheeks.

"I did a mean, underhanded, despicable thing," she told him. "At the ranch. Before I followed you and Hix Liston that evening. You had told me to look in your old leather trunk, that I'd find Dave Wagner's wallet and tally book there. You wanted me to deliver them to the sheriff in case something happened to you. You gave me the key to your trunk.

"There was a leather case with the picture of the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. I don't know why I did it. It wasn't just jealousy. But I knew that somehow, somewhere, you'd been horribly hurt. It showed in your eyes, the twisted bitter smile you had when you got off the stage at Black Coulee. . . .

"Across the picture was written 'To Stew. With all my love. Ethel.' I burned it. I burned that girl's picture, Stew. . . ."

Stew nodded. His arms were around her now. "I know. Butch's Christmas calendar picture girl . . . something I once mistook for love. She and a Damnyankee who called himself my best friend sent me West to die. Butch walked in on it—the only real cowardly night of my life. I'm glad you burned the picture. I should hate 'em both. But somehow I can't."





"And the wedding announcement burned with it," said Karen. "Some time a long ways from now, Stew, you can tell me about it. Not now. Not on this, our wedding night."

Butch, his face scrubbed, his red hair plastered down, came into the hotel sitting room where they were. His eyes were shining. He was dressed in his best school suit.

"I got 'im, Stew. Dad and Johnny are ridin' herd on 'im." His voice was a conspirator's whisper.

"Got whom?" asked Karen.

Butch cut her a quick look, then grinned at Stew.

"She might as well know now, Stew, as fu'ther up the crick. She can't back out now. You tell her."

He edged away toward the door.

"Got whom?" Karen asked again.

"The sky pilot," explained Stew. "The parson. We're usin' your mother's wedding ring. Your father wanted you to have it. Butch has it in his pocket, I hope—unless he turns out to be the proverbial best man who's misplaced the ring."

"I got it," said Butch a little grimly, his hand in his pocket.

They were coming up the stairs now, Red Pat O'Hay, his son Johnny and the parson.

"Turn your back, Butch," said Stew, "while I kiss Karen O'Hay for the last time. Next time she'll be Mrs. Stewart Stoddard III. Mrs. Stew Stoddard, for short. . . ."

"And forever," finished Karen.

#### THE END

### WHY THE HOOK ON A LASH CINCH?

THE question was recently asked: "Why the hook on a lash cinch when all the other cinches have rings in both ends?"

The answer is: "Because it is impossible to throw a diamond hitch correctly without a hook in one end of the cinch." In throwing the diamond hitch, the hook end of the cinch attached to the lash rope is passed over the pack from the near (or left) side of the animal and twisted once, forming a loop in the lash rope which is hooked into the cinch. Now turn another loop and push it from the rear under the rope that encircles the animal and pull the part nearest to the packer out to form a second loop. This loop should be pulled through sufficiently so that it will not be lost when the first loop is enlarged to go around the right (off) side of the pack. When this loop is in position, the one you have enlarged can be placed around the pack. Now tighten the cinch, letting your helper on the opposite side of the animal take up the slack.

When all the loops have been tightened, the loose end will hang down at the rear of the pack. From here one has an immense purchase and can, by pulling on the loose end, tighten every part of the hitch. If the loops have been neatly placed, the diamond will show squarely, but slightly to the left of the center of the pack.

*George Cory Franklin*



## HOME FOLKS

BY S. OMAR BARKER

The old-time Western cowboy, I've been told by them that know,  
Was often some young willful lad that had wild oats to sow.  
He'd maybe run away from home in answer to the lure  
That bold adventure holds for boys of high blood temperature.

He'd prob'ly heard a heap of tales about life on the range  
That made his life at home seem dull. He hankered for a change,  
An' nothin' could have stopped him nor have put his mind at rest  
Except to be a cowboy punchin' cattle 'way out West.  
Of course, he learned that punchin' cows wrings out a heap of sweat,  
An' roundups is one college where there ain't no teacher's pet.  
But if he had the innards that it takes to make a hand  
He learned to love his saddle an' he learned to love the land  
Where all the world lay open wide as far as you could see,  
Where horseback men was forkéd an' the life they led was free.  
Sometimes he cut up purty wild an' daubed a cow town red;  
Sometimes he heard the lobos howl around his lonesome bed;  
An' sometimes in the starlight when he first would come awake,  
"The lonesomes" sure would git him, an' his carefree heart would ache  
With thoughts about the home he'd left, about his Pa an' Ma,  
An' wonder if they missed him much 'way back in Arkinsaw.  
That's how it was at Christmas, for no matter where he'd be,  
He'd think about the popcorn on the old home Christmas tree,  
An' how Ma used to tease him 'bout the presents she had hid,  
An' all the other Christmas stuff that happens to a kid.

Well, now he was a cowboy on a Christmas gallyhoot,  
With a rawhide throat for whiskey an' a six-gun meant to shoot;  
A man full growed an' able, like a wolf with hairy ears,  
A tough man on a bronco an' a plumb good hand with steers.  
But still it made no diff'rence, was he tough or was he tame—  
He got "the Christmas lonesomes" for his homefolks just the same.  
An' what made Christmas precious to this old-time buckaroo  
Was knowin' that the folks back home was thinkin' of him, too!



# The Hunter's Favorite Gun

by JIM WEST

PERHAPS in Shangri-La the perfect gun exists—the dream rifle of so many hunters— one gun that can be used with equal success on vermin, varmints and venison. It has not been found on these shores. And there are no better gunsmiths or ammunition makers in the world than those in America.

No artist uses a single brush to paint a picture. No mechanic packs a lone wrench in his tool kit. Nor can a man equip himself with a rifle that will be tops for cottontails and big game alike.

On the other hand, hunters, even gun sharks, may have their favorite firearm. Psychology being the potent stuff it is, it is generally the rifle which has most consistently brought home the bacon, or performed best the kind of shooting required of it.

Though on paper it may not be the best gun for the purpose, if it works that is what counts. Factors entirely extraneous to a rifle's ballistics often play a large part in the popularity of any particular gun.

Take the .30-30 in the famous Winchester Model 94. Lever-actioned, it is easy to handle, quick to sight. Generations of hunters from Maine to

California insist it is the logical choice for a deer gun. They use it, swear by it and have brought down their share of game with it.

Without detracting from the .30-30's merits within its range, or condoning those who cite figures to show the gun is a big game bust—figures don't put meat on the table; guns do—the fact is that this favorite firearm has years of tradition behind it. It is literally all but smothered in an aura of its early glory.

This Winchester, like the same caliber Marlin or Savage, being flat and light, makes an excellent saddle gun. It rides comfortably in a saddle scabbard, more comfortably than a heavier, bolt-action job. This can mean a lot to the range-riding Westerner who spends much of his time in the saddle and frequently carries a saddle gun for plinking coyotes or other range varmints.

By the same token, the Western hombre's hunting trips into the mountains were apt to be pack-horse affairs. Automatically he took his .30-30 along. He was used to it. He'd had lots of practice with it. He managed to get his share of deer with it, and sometimes even brought down a bear.

Thus the .30-30 established a reputation as a deer gun. It was and is a favorite rifle. Before the war .30-30 cartridges could be bought at any outpost general store as easily as a slice of chawin' tobacco.

For the experienced hunter, the man who knows how to estimate distance and doesn't blaze away at every rack he sees, or thinks he sees, drifting through the woods, the .30-30 does get deer. It is a better deer gun than it is a varmint gun because it has a fairly high trajectory.

But facts are facts, and so are ballistics. The .30-30 lacks the zip and energy to drop a deer at ranges much over a hundred yards. Even at a hundred yards it takes a bullet placed in a vital spot to kill a deer with a .30-30.

Statistically, the .30-06 is a better deer gun. It carries a better all-around big game load. Vitally placed, it will kill a deer instantly. The .30-06 is surer death on coyotes, lobo wolves and the like, too. For such shooting, the .30-06 using a 110 grain bullet with a velocity of 3,500 foot-seconds is considered by many just about right.

Hunting deer in open country and taking longer shots with the .30-06, a 150 grain bullet gives excellent results. But these light, fast bullets have a habit of going to pieces when they strike any small twig, or branch. For this reason deer hunters favoring the .30-06 can get better results using a heavier bullet in brush country, scrub timber or other territory where such obstructions are apt to cross the line of flight. A 180 grain bullet is

a slower charge. But it is not so readily deflected or broken up and may mean the difference between a miss and a clean hit.

Savage, Remington, Winchester—in fact nearly all gun makers—put out, before the war, excellent guns in various models chambered for .30-06 cartridges. These guns, using a 220 grain big game bullet, may be successfully used on heavier animals such as elk, moose, grizzlies and even the tough Kodiak bear.

However, the .30-06 is a gun with plenty of recoil. That is all right for the man accustomed to the gun, or one who does plenty of round-the-calendar game and varmint hunting. On the other hand a heavy recoil can be disastrous to the accuracy of a fellow whose annual hunting consists of a late fall trek into the woods after venison once a year.

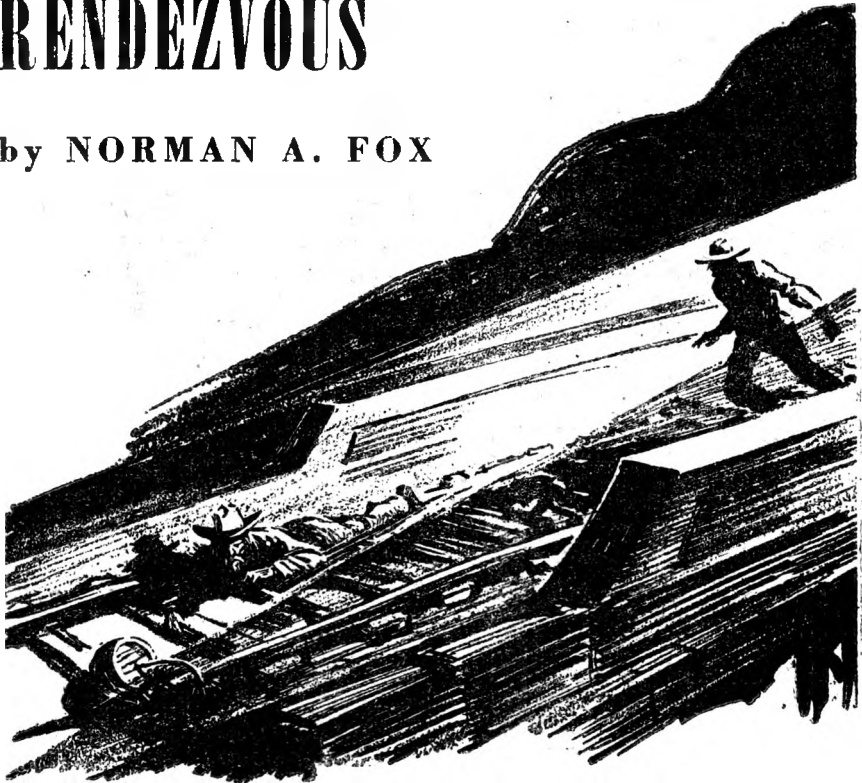
To the latter person the smaller kick of the lighter .30-30 is more easily handled. It doesn't interfere with his aim. He gets better personal results with it. Figures to the contrary, for him the .30-30 is a better deer gun. And he sticks to it.

Statistically, the .30-30 is not the one-gun answer. It has been damned for wounding animals instead of killing them, and declared a misfit on several other scores. But it is still a mighty popular rifle.

In proper hands, a .30-30 using a 170 grain bullet can be, within its capabilities, a doggone good hunting gun. Ask the man who gets his meat with one. Chances are he's like us—wouldn't swap it for a whole flock of fancier shooting rifles.

# DOC COMANCHE'S RAILHEAD RENDEZVOUS

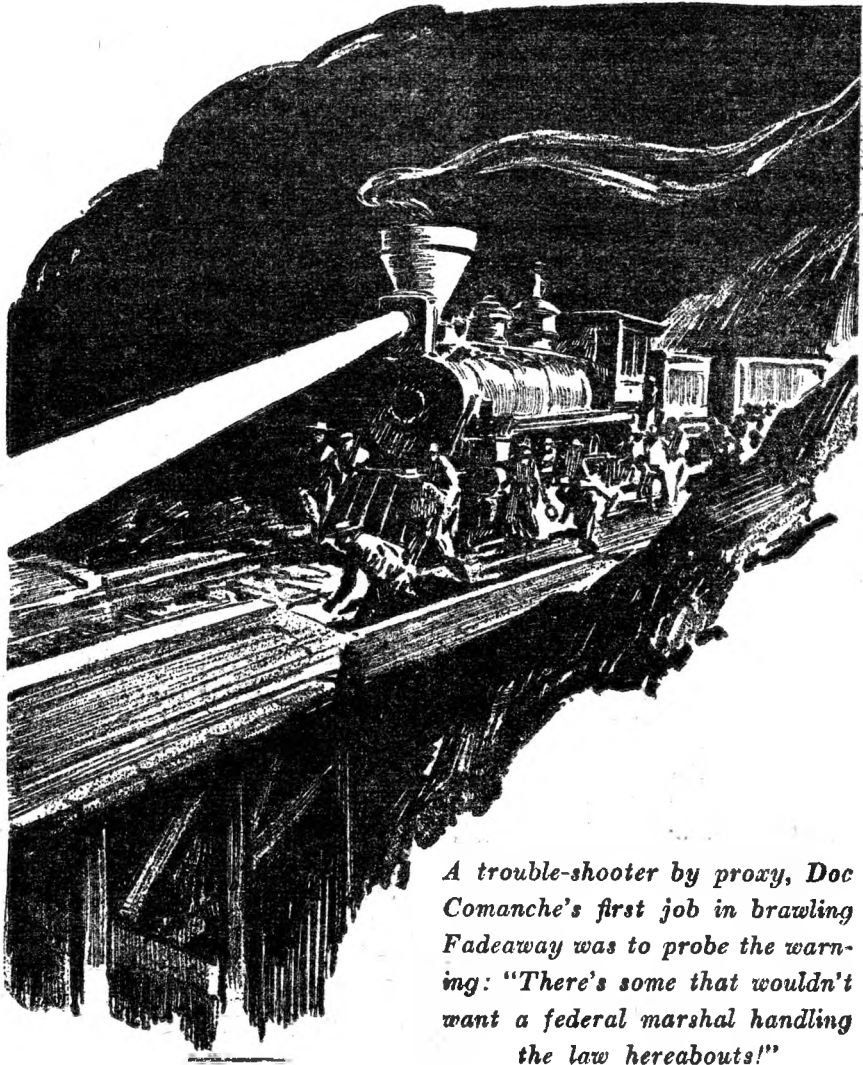
by NORMAN A. FOX



## I

THE letter, short and cryptic, had been waiting in the littered post office of a nondescript town when the erratic trail of that veteran pitchman, Doc Comanche, and his

slow-witted assistant, big Oscar Lund, brought them there. It wasn't much of a letter. Its single scrawled line said: "Am biting off a mouthful in Fadeaway and may need help with the chewing," and



*A trouble-shooter by proxy, Doc Comanche's first job in brawling Fadeaway was to probe the warning: "There's some that wouldn't want a federal marshal handling the law hereabouts!"*

to this was affixed the tangled signature of Federal Marshal Steven McCracken, known to some as So-sad McCracken.

Reading the message, Doc Comanche had sighed. His plans had

included no jaunt to Wyoming's distant grasslands, but a man may be two-fifths charlatan and two-fifths fraud and still have room in him for loyalty to a friend. And thus another man's need fetched

Comanche's sway-backed Conestoga southward.

That tattered wagon, mobile advertisement for Comanche's New & Improved Indian Medicine, neared its destination on a blazing summer's day, and, threading a broken country, the pitchman got his first clue as to what might concern a federal marshal in this section.

Chaos spread before them as they topped a rise. Below, twin rails shimmered in the sunlight, and over the yellow welt of a naked grade the dust billowed as mules and skinners toiled. There were wagons hauling ties and timbers to be piled along the raw right-of-way. There was a work engine, puffing and snorting as far as it dared, and ahead of it Irish track layers shouldered rails and placed them. Sledges clanged, and gandy dancers plied shovels, and the rails jumped forward in jerky strides. Chaos, yes, but it blended into a pattern of efficiency as a railroad inched toward the horizon.

"Look, sir," said Comanche. "There you see civilization on the march, but in its wake there will be lawlessness and turbulence and a need for such men as our sour-faced friend, McCracken. I'd heard that Wyoming-Pacific was building west, but I had no idea, sir, that Fadeaway was already the terminal point. A new era has come to the range, Oscar. Perhaps in another few years, fellows like you and I will be pushed out of the picture."

Big Oscar, his bovine face furrowed with interest, hunched his broad shoulders. "Nobody's push-

ing us, huh, Doc?" he said. "Not unless they're hankerin' for a black eye, huh?"

Comanche smiled. "I'm afraid that even your big fists, Oscar, can not impede progress. But come, sir. We've still got traveling to do."

Their trail took them down into the basin and onto a road that was clogged with supplies coming up from construction headquarters, and many times Comanche had to aim his crowbait team out upon the prairie. Also he had to detour around a deep coulee, spanned only by a railroad trestle, and night was nearly upon them when they came at last to Fadeaway. And here again Comanche found the chaos that was spawned by progress.

Fadeaway, remembered from the yesterdays, had been a sleepy little cow town, and Comanche, in his twenty years of roaming the West, had visited it a time or two. Tents and rickety shacks had blossomed upon the prairie, tripling the size of the town, and hammers and saws made a ceaseless, discordant symphony as new structures went up. Engines chuffed at sidings, and the main street seethed with movement, freight wagons toiling hub to hub, and men milling everywhere.

With some difficulty, Comanche found a livery stable, and, after the team had been cared for, he and big Oscar searched out a restaurant. Elbowing among workmen in from the end-of-track, Comanche made a colorful figure in his fringed, buckskin suit, his creamy sombrero tilted at an angle defying gravity.

his long, silvery hair curling to his shoulders. Seated in a restaurant, he stroked his skimpy goatee reflectively, winced at the boom-town prices chalked on the wall, and came to a decision.

"We, sir, must find McCracken," he told Oscar. "But in this case it would appear wiser to let the mountain come to Mahomet."

"Are we lookin' for a mountain, too, Doc?"

"A figure of speech, Oscar. We, sir, shall set up our stand and make a pitch. That way McCracken will have no trouble finding us. A more efficient method, Oscar, than combing this overcrowded town for the marshal. And a more lucrative one as well. After all, sir, there is no reason why this little mission should distract us from bestowing the blessing of New & Improved Indian Medicine upon a town which seems to have money to burn."

"I reckon you know best, huh, Doc," Oscar declared.

And so it was decided, and, upon the street again, Comanche scanned its potentialities with a professional eye. There was no shortage of saloons, but one obviously commanded the bulk of the business, a canvas and frame structure which had been designed to move with the railroad. Its sign proclaimed it to be the Canvas Castle—Deuce Hurley, Prop.—and, seeing the number of men who crowded its entrance, Comanche ordered Oscar to fetch the stand and set it up across the way.

With the oil torches burning, Doc plucked music from his banjo, eying each passerby the while, searching

always for a little man, sad and sourish of face. But in two respects he was disappointed. There was no sign of So-sad McCracken, and no interest in the free entertainment Doc was providing.

After about twenty minutes of this, Comanche turned to his assistant. "Oscar," he said, "will you see what enticement yonder saloon is offering that so completely offsets our little show."

Oscar took off and returned in due time, walking a little unsteadily. "Free whiskey, Doc," he said. "Free whiskey for railroad workers. The Canvas Castle aims to run all the other saloons out of business. No wonder nobody's interested in buying medicine, huh, Doc."

Comanche frowned. Free whiskey in Fadeaway! There was something as out of place here as a sunbonnet on a sidewinder—something so wrong that the pitchman instantly sensed the sinister. No man in his right mind gave away his wares, and certainly not in a town where double prices were the order of the day. Moreover, this was a challenge to honest competition that awoke animosity in Doc, and he put his banjo aside and raised his voice in an impromptu spiel.

"Get yo' free whiskey across the street," he barked. "But get your balm for the morning after *here*. You, sir"—he caught the eye of a passing Irishman in the high boots, tucked-in pantaloons and flannel shirt of a railroad worker—"do you wish to awake with palsied hands,



bloodshot eyes, and butterflies stampeding in your belly? Of course not, sir! Do you wish to greet the rosy dawn, calling upon your own good St. Patrick to pull the snakes off you? Then buy a bottle of Doc Comanche's medicine, guaranteed to offset the ravages of the demon alcohol. Then, sir, you may have your whiskey and drink it, too. Free whiskey, gentlemen? There is nothing free in Mother Nature's scheme of things. She exacts her toll, but in her benevolence she has provided a balm for all the ailments that beset man and beast—New & Improved Indian Medicine. Here you are, sir. Thank you!”

He was beginning to draw a crowd. The Irish have ever loved an orator, and Doc was warming to his theme. Drawing upon an agile imagination, he vividly exaggerated the horrors of drink's aftermath, hinting broadly that free whiskey was apt to be more devastating by virtue of being free. He mentioned softening of the brain, hardening of the arteries and the possibility of falling hair and swelling ankles.

“Faith and I'll be drinking no more free whiskey tonight,” one brawny track layer said. “'Tis bad cess, that stuff, and I'll be draggin' me friend, Mike Moriarty, out of yonder saloon. Come on, you terriers! Is it the shakes you want when the sun comes up?”

Comanche had gotten his second wind and a fresh measure of confidence from the results of his spiel. He graphically described the fate of a friend who had turned to stone after an extended bout with John

Barleycorn, and mentioned another whose legs and arms had fallen off, one by one. That these men might have been saved from such calamity by proper medication was, of course, pointed out. Even big Oscar began gaping with rounded eyes as Doc's voice filled the night, and now men were deserting the Canvas Castle in droves, drawn by friends who had gone to their rescue. Doc's medicine—a curious compound of pink pills and creek water—was being swapped for dollars, when two men shouldered through the crowd, and the sudden silence attending their coming gave Comanche warning that trouble was in the wind.

“'Tis Deuce Hurley himself, and his bouncer, Ferd Drago,” an Irishman near Comanche whispered. “Ye'd better be moving your stand, Doctor.”

## II

There was unspoken challenge in the mien of the two who were approaching. Hurley was a lean, handsome man, waxlike of face, and clad in black broadcloth and white silk, while Ferd Drago was a thick-shouldered giant, as big and solid as Oscar Lund and looking as though he were no brighter than Doc's assistant. Hurley surveyed Comanche from head to foot, shifted a thin, wine-soaked cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, and said flatly: “Get this outfit off the street, peddler. And move it quick!”

Anger put a stiffness in Doc, and his wish was for the pearl-handled .45's that were stowed in his wagon.

"This, sir, is a free country . . ." he protested, but that was as far as he got.

"I've heard enough of your talk," Hurley cut in. "Ferd, bust his outfit up. That will show him we mean business!"

"Sure, boss," said Drago and reached for one of the row of bottles Oscar had placed upon the stand. Lifting the medicine, he smashed the bottle against a corner of the stand and reached for another. That was when the avalanche hit him.

With a deep-throated roar, Oscar descended from the stand, and he came with his fists swinging, the blow lifting Ferd Drago from his feet and sending him backward into the crowd. Drago went down, but the consciousness was still in him, and murder blazed in his eyes. A

heavy .45 was thonged to his thigh, but as he reached for the gun a heavy foot was planted on his wrist.

"No yez don't!" an Irishman protested. "'Twill be a fair fight, fist against fist. Give 'em room, bhoys."

A blast of sound lifted to the hooded sky, the roaring approval of the Irish, and space was cleared. In its center Oscar Lund stood, waiting for Drago to arise. Then the Canvas Castle's bouncer was up and the two came together with a crash. Doc Comanche watched anxiously, hoping that Oscar's rage wouldn't rob him of caution. But there was no real need for concern. This was Oscar's meat and drink. In matters requiring intellect, he might be woefully wanting, but he was built to be

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a human battering ram. He smashed Drago back into the arms of the Irish, smashed him again and again, bringing the blood from the man's nose and mouth.

There was power in Drago, plenty of it, but there was a righteous wrath in Oscar Lund. His big arms wind-milling, he clumsily wore down the bouncer and soon it ceased to be a fight and became a shambles. Doc, his eyes on Oscar, breathed easier, until the pitchman happened to glance at Deuce Hurley. The saloon owner, standing to the front of the crowd, had watched his champion go down to defeat, the sight goading him to desperation. Hurley's hand was dipping under the long Prince Albert coat he wore, and a derringer materialized in his fist.

Comanche left the stand in a dive, his arms outspread, and, striking Hurley, he nearly knocked the breath from himself. The two went down in a tangle of arms and legs, but Comanche came first to his feet, and when he did, the derringer was in his hand and went arcing away. He got a hand wrapped in Hurley's collar, and he was hauling the fellow to a stand when an exceedingly fat man, range-garbed and wearing a sheriff's star upon his vest, came panting through the crowd.

"What's going on here?" the lawman demanded. "Break it up, now!"

Ferd Drago was down upon the ground, the fight gone out of him, and Oscar Lund was hovering over the bouncer with fists cocked. Deuce Hurley shook off Comanche's grip.

"It's a good thing you showed up, sheriff," Hurley said. "I want these medicine show men jailed for creating a public nuisance and disturbing the peace. Can't you see that they've nearly murdered my man?"

Anger gave the Irish strident voice, but the sheriff waved his thick arms and silenced them. "Run along now, all of you!" he ordered. "There'll be nobody jailed unless there's a reason for it." He looked at Comanche. "You and your man better come along with me. It will be best all around."

Comanche shrugged. A word from him would have gotten the active backing of the Irish; he'd won popularity with them by his oratory, and Oscar's display of fisticuffs had increased that popularity. But Doc sensed the fear of a riot that was in the sheriff, and there was nothing to be gained by starting a battle in Fadeaway's street. Deuce Hurley doubtless had other men to throw into a fray, and New & Improved Indian Medicine wouldn't mend broken heads. So, with a bow to the sheriff, Doc said: "I put myself at your disposal, sir. Come along, Oscar. I'm sure that justice will be done."

And when the three of them were a few paces down the street, the lawman said: "Thanks, stranger, for not making a fuss when you could have. Between you and me, I've got no love for that saloonman, but he packs some weight around here. My taking you along will satisfy him, but I'll only book you instead of jailing you. Confound it, I could use a heap o' help in this town!"

"Help, sir?" Comanche inquired politely.

"With the railroad building through here, lawing has got to be too big a job for us county officials," explained the sheriff. "But the railroad has asked for a federal marshal to be sent to help handle things. Steven McCracken—him they call So-sad—has been assigned to the job. Likely you've heard of him."

McCracken! In the excitement of the last hour or so, Doc had almost forgotten McCracken and his railroad rendezvous with the marshal. "You expecting him soon, sir?" Comanche asked, trying to keep his voice casual.

"Expecting him soon?" The sheriff sighed wearily. "He's so long overdue now that there ain't much question as to what's happened to him. The railroad made a mistake in letting it be known that he was coming. There's some that wouldn't want a federal marshal handling the law hereabouts. My guess is that So-sad McCracken was drygulched along the trail and dumped into a coulee."

### III

The three were crossing the street, angling over to the jail building, and big Oscar, who'd maintained a stolid silence so far, now took on a look of fierce anger.

"Doc!" he cried. "If anybody lined their sights on—" But the vengeance he obviously meant to announce for whoever had waylaid McCracken went unsaid.

Comanche, stunned by the news

that McCracken was likely dead, recovered his wits quickly enough to realize that his own connection with McCracken was better kept secret. The sheriff, leading the way, was a pace or two ahead of the pair as Doc, thrusting out a buckskin-clad leg, tripped his big assistant and sent Oscar spilling into the dust. Freight wagons jammed the way, and the sheriff had skipped between two of these, showing a remarkable nimbleness for a man of his bulk.

"Sorry, sir!" Doc exclaimed, helping Oscar to his feet and brushing the giant's clothing. A freighter, sawing hard at his reins to keep from running over the pair, loosed a blast of profanity that would have blistered paint, and under that barrage Doc hissed a quick warning to Oscar. "We've never heard of McCracken, savvy?"

For if Doc Comanche had sensed something sinister when he'd found a saloon dispensing free whiskey in Fadeaway, that same instinct had started clamoring loudly the moment he'd discovered that So-sad McCracken was long overdue. There was a puzzle here, and the pieces in Comanche's possession were pitifully few.

McCracken had written, intimating he had a job to do in Fadeaway and requesting Doc's help. A plague on such a veiled request! Was there any law that said a short man had to write short letters? And now McCracken was missing. A fine howdy-you-do! Comanche was here, not knowing what was wanted of him, and the man who'd needed his help was probably dead. But one

thing was cameo-clear. McCracken's enemies, whoever they were, must not learn that Doc Comanche was a sort of unofficial deputy of the marshal's.

That was why the pitchman had cautioned Oscar to sudden silence, and, having done so, Doc breathed easier as the two of them rejoined the sheriff on the farther walk. Grief and rage might have swayed Comanche with the news that McCracken had obviously met with disaster, but neither of these would have made for clear judgment. His face expressionless, Doc followed the sheriff into his office.

A lamp was turned up and a journal of sorts dug from amidst the litter atop the lawman's desk, and a pen scratched as the sheriff booked the pair, asking them only their names.

The pen was still scratching when a man framed himself in the doorway—a tall, stiff-backed man, leathery of face and wearing black broadcloth as a gentleman wears it. But despite the garb, Comanche's instant estimation was that this man had once carried a cavalryman's saber.

"Evening, Colonel Wicksham," the sheriff greeted the newcomer, with obvious respect. "Something I can do for you?"

This, then, was Colonel Sam Wicksham, and anyone who'd heard of Wyoming-Pacific had heard of him, for he was its construction chief, an ex-soldier turned railroad builder to fight the plains and the mountains with the same courage he'd displayed in battles of another sort. Even big

Oscar was impressed, but Wicksham gave the pitchman and his assistant no more than a passing glance. Planting the heels of his hands on the edge of the desk, the railroad man said: "How about it, sheriff? Any news on that missing marshal of ours?"

The lawman shook his head. "No more than the last time you stopped in. McCracken was seen in a Montana town, and he was heading south when he rode out. Somewhere between there and Fadeaway, the ground just opened up and swallowed him. I can't comb the prairie and law this town at the same time."

Wicksham frowned. "You've done your best, I suppose. I could use a troop of cavalry, but I'd have settled for McCracken. Agitation in my construction crews! Supplies gone astray! Payrolls stolen! It's an open secret that Central Western wanted an option from the government to put this road through. And it's common knowledge that they'll get their chance if we fail to make Chimney Butte by the first of the month. I tell you, Central Western Railroad has got a man in this town who's behind every bit of deviltry that's plagued me in Wyoming!"

"You still suspectin' Hurley?"

Wicksham nodded. "Now he's giving away free whiskey in that Canvas Castle of his," he went on. "Do you know what that means? How can I keep my terriers at end-of-steel when free drinks can be had in town? And how can I hope to get any work out of those who do

show up after getting a skinful the night before?"

The sheriff shrugged helplessly. "I've spoken to Hurley," he said. "He claims there's a price war on among the saloons. Says he's decided to run the rest out of business by giving away booze. There's no law against that."

"A blind to cover his real purpose! It's just one more attempt to ruin me. Hurley knows it will be touch and go for us to reach Chimney Butte. Every hour lost by my workers can count against me. No, you can't make arrests without real proof; I realize that. I was hoping McCracken would get me proof. One scrap of real evidence that Hurley is taking Central Western's pay and I'll bring my terriers in and tear down the Canvas Castle over his head. And the terriers would do it, too, if I could make them believe Hurley's the man who's constantly harassed us."

"I've had my eyes peeled," the sheriff told him. "If I can help you, Colonel, I'm shore as shootin' on your side."

Wicksham smiled wearily. "Thanks, sheriff," he said. "Find McCracken and you'll do a real favor for me. I could ask the government for another marshal, I suppose, but I knew McCracken once, and I'd rather it was he. Besides, the race will be run and over before I could get another man. Good night, sir."

Turning upon his heel with military precision, Colonel Wicksham marched out of the building, and instantly Doc Comanche was dart-

ing after him. Overtaking Wicksham just beyond the doorway, Doc plucked at his sleeve.

"Just a minute, sir," he said. "I couldn't help overhearing what was just said."

"I was aware of your presence," Wicksham admitted. "The troubles of Wyoming-Pacific are too self-evident to be secret, so I saw no reason to speak to the sheriff privately. What is it you wish?"

Comanche lowered his voice. "This, sir, is private information, but I have recognized you as an ally in a common cause. It happens that I am Marshal McCracken's right-hand man, the person he turns to whenever his problems become more than ordinarily complicated. I am here in that capacity of unofficial deputy. I presume, then, that I can rely upon your assistance if I come to grips with our mutual enemy?"

Colonel Wicksham's eyes widened, and now he carefully appraised Comanche from the pitchman's beaded moccasins to the creamy sombrero atop the shoulder-length hair, but if it was Wicksham's thought that Doc looked like anything in the world but a lawman, the railroad builder kept it to himself. Taking a careful step away from Comanche, Wicksham said soothingly: "You'll feel better after a good night's rest, old-timer."

"I, sir," said Doc with dignity, "am neither drunk nor addle-pated, as you obviously suspect. This letter, bearing McCracken's signature and written in a hand which is doubtless familiar to you, will con-

vince you that my claim is not founded on delusion."

He was fumbling in a pocket of his fringed, buckskin jacket as he spoke, feeling for the letter he'd fetched from Montana, and Colonel Wicksham stood waiting. But Doc's fingers went from one pocket to another in vain until the truth burst upon the pitchman. "It's gone, sir!" he ejaculated. "I've lost the letter!"

"Too bad," Wicksham said with a smile that was a mixture of tolerance and obvious pity. "Good night, sir."

And with that Colonel Wicksham was gone into the crowd, and Doc Comanche was still standing before the jail building, fumbling through his pockets, when Oscar Lund emerged and joined him.

"That's a worried look you got on your face, huh, Doc?" big Oscar said.

But Comanche made no reply. A matter of this sort might be a little too complicated for Oscar's comprehension, and explanations could wait until another time. Obviously Colonel Sam Wicksham considered Comanche to be a man who'd overexposed himself to the Wyoming sun, and obviously there would be no cooperation from the colonel. But at least Comanche was wiser for having been present at Wicksham's talk with the sheriff. Now Doc knew why So-sad McCracken had been summoned to this town. McCracken was to have pitted himself against the enemies of Wyoming-Pacific. But what had happened to McCracken? And what part had the marshal wanted Doc to take in the fight?

Speculation along fruitless lines only gave a man a headache, but at least Comanche saw his work cut out for him, though how to go about it was another matter. He had to replace McCracken, with or without Colonel Wicksham's help; he had to do the job McCracken was supposed to have done. And now he was possessed of the knowledge that Deuce Hurley was the spider whose web was snarling up the railroad's construction.

Turning all this over in his mind, Doc elbowed along the teeming street to his stand, and he found it ringed by the Irish workers who'd appointed themselves as guardians. They greeted the pitchman and his assistant with something that might have passed for a cheer if whiskey hadn't rasped their throats, and they surrounded Oscar, pumping his hand and reliving his fight with Ferd Drago.

One red-headed son of Erin said: "'Tis the work train we're catching to end o' steel in another hour or so. Come along, me bucko, and back us up when we tell yer story to the bhoys out at camp. 'Tis liars they'll call us when we say that Ferd Drago was bested tonight."

Big Oscar looked inquiringly at Comanche who was already dismantling the stand, and the pitchman nodded.

"Run along, sir," Doc said. "You've earned yourself an outing."

Whereupon the Irish attempted another hoarse cheer, and Oscar was swept away by the rolling tide of

them as they headed toward a distant siding to await the departure of the work train. And Doc, watching them depart, sighed a contented sigh. Better that Oscar be elsewhere on a night like this. For Doc Comanche now knew where he would commence his play. The Canvas Castle held all the answers to all the questions, he suspected, and it would take brains, not brawn, to pry its secrets from it.

#### IV

Sin had turned mobile to follow the westering rails. More than one of Fadeaway's viler establishments had been transported from terminal point to terminal point, and these structures, flimsy shells of frame and canvas, were so constructed as to be quickly knocked down and loaded upon flat cars. They had blossomed upon many a weedy lot in many a now-forsaken town; and of them all the Canvas Castle was the largest and most pretentious.

Doc Comanche, carefully circling the building, could hear the muted throb of many voices, the steady jangling of a piano, the incessant cry of the monte dealer: "Watch the ace!" The Castle had a plank floor, and it shook under dancing feet. Doc, studying the building, sensed a certain irony here. Any man could walk into the Canvas Castle—any man but Doc Comanche.

Aye, there had been the touch of destiny in his meeting with Deuce Hurley, but Lady Luck hadn't been especially kind. Doc had made a personal enemy out of Hurley over the insignificant matter of the rela-

tive merits of medicine and whiskey, and thus Doc was now a marked man. Small chance of walking in through the front door and playing the part of a patron, hoping thus to glean a bit of information. But if that advantage were denied him, there was always a back door. He located the one to the Canvas Castle with no trouble.

But here he hesitated. Should he head for his wagon and rummage through it for his guns? But that would take time, and his plan was to rely upon stealth rather than artillery. Easing inside, Doc found himself in a shadowy hallway, made by the mounting of thin partitions within the building, and he threaded this darkness, hardly knowing where he was going or what he was seeking.

Beyond the flimsy wall, the roar of the saloon beat thunderously, and again Doc hesitated, a bewildered ghost in the gloom. Then he saw light trickling from beneath a loosely fitted door far down the hall. Gliding toward this door, the pitchman paused, then pushed the door gently. Swinging inward, it revealed a room tucked into this far corner of the building, a room containing a desk and chairs and a squat iron safe. An overhanging lamp gave light for Doc's quick inventory, and he guessed that the room was Hurley's private office.

Doc drew in a long breath and ventured a step forward. The desk, he saw, was ornate, and the walls were hung with black, billowing drapes from ceiling to floor, thus concealing the drabness of clapboard



and giving an air of somber elegance. But it was the safe that held Comanche's eye. Here was something tangible, the fruit of vague questing, and he found himself wishing anxiously for a look inside that safe.

What was it Colonel Wicksham had said? "One scrap of real evidence that Hurley is taking Central Western's pay and I'll bring my terriers in and tear down the Canvas Castle. . . ." If Hurley had any written instructions from his superiors, where else would they be kept but in yonder safe? And it made equally good horse sense that if such evidence could be turned over to Colonel Wicksham, the railroad builder would feel free to take the law into his hands. The tangling of Deuce Hurley's twine could be as simple as that.

Without a qualm, Comanche bent his knees before the safe and fumbled with its dial. He was So-sad McCracken by proxy, he assured himself, but the cloak of righteousness, thus lightly donned, was not lined with a skill at opening safes. Though the tumblers clicked, the door remained obdurate. The sweat stood out on Doc as the minutes slipped by, and so intent was he upon his futile task that he didn't hear the beat of hoofs along the hall's planking until men were almost to the office door.

But he heard with a split second to spare. Bobbing erect, his eyes frantically quested the room, but there was only one door, and men were beyond it. Darting toward the

wall, Doc slid in behind the billowing drapes, squeezing tightly against the clapboard, and he had just barely hidden himself when two men entered the office.

One was Deuce Hurley, for Comanche instantly recognized the man's voice. Hurley was saying: "I'm worried, Ferd, and I don't mind admitting it. Sure you looked the jail over carefully?"

"The sheriff had stepped out, and if that medicine man and his assistant had been locked in a cell, it would have been like shooting fish in a rain barrel," Drago answered. "But the jail was empty, I tell you. Want me to have the boys comb the town for that pair?"

"I wonder," murmured Hurley. "Likely that medicine man is palavering with Wicksham right now. Who'd have guessed that Doc Goat-Whiskers, or whatever he calls himself, was any more than what he seemed?"

"Mighty lucky I saw that letter fall out of his pocket when he jumped you from his stand," Drago said. "Didn't suppose it meant anything, but what with the sheriff showing up and all, nobody was paying much attention to me, and it was easy to roll over onto the envelope. Your jaw shore dropped when we'd got back into the Castle and I gave it to you to read. But a lot of good it does us to know that the medicine man's a friend of McCracken's. He's got plumb away."

So that was what had become of the lost letter! Comanche had supposed it might have slipped from his pocket days before, but he'd lost

it during the recent fracas. And Ferd Drago had found it. Surely a dark star had frowned upon Comanche since his coming to this boom town, and to make things worse he now found himself fighting an impulse to sneeze. Getting a long forefinger up under his nose, he managed to avert the explosion.

"Well, at least we know that McCracken was counting on the medicine man somehow," Hurley said thoughtfully. "When Wicksham first made his brag that he was having an ace-high lawman come to smoke me out, I figured that made our job mighty simple. All we had to do was lay for McCracken. But now a friend of McCracken's shows up. It looks like it's our move again."

"Want me to go lookin' for that medicine man?"

Hurley was silent a long moment. "No," he decided at last. "Tonight we'll play our hole card and rake in the pot. I've been saving one ace for the right moment to play it, and maybe that moment has come. You recollect the scheme, Ferd? After tonight, Wyoming-Pacific will be a gone gosling. Then we can quit our worrying. With Central Western getting Wicksham's forfeited option, we'll be in the winning saddle."

"The sign is right, at that," Ferd Drago said exultantly. "Any way you look at it, the sign is right!"

That desire to sneeze was overwhelming Comanche again. A ticklish sensation seemed to have started at the tips of his toes and was working upward through him, a twisting, twining corkscrew of feathers that

whirled faster and faster as it arose. The tears came to his eyes with his efforts to stave off the inevitable, but as he grasped his nose tightly between thumb and forefinger, something exploded in his brain. That sneeze was nothing ordinary. It was the grandfather of all sneezes; it was cataclysmic and catastrophic, and the drapes bellied outward with the force of it.

After that came a second of silence, the clamoring, electrified silence that follows the thunderbolt, and then the voice of Deuce Hurley said coldly: "Show yourself with your hands lifted, or I'll put a bullet through you!"

Again Doc Comanche found himself wishing mightily that he'd taken the time to get his pearl-handled guns. A plague upon his own foolhardy impatience! But that was like wishing for wings. He came from the coverage with his arms aloft, for there was no choice—not with Hurley's derringer covering him.

Ferd Drago opened his eyes as



wide as the ravages of big Oscar's fists permitted. "The medicine man!" he ejaculated.

"I, sir," said Doc with proper dignity, "am Doctor Comanche, adopted kinsman of the tribe which bestowed its name upon me. Let me warn you, sirs, that if I am harmed you will do well to sleep with your scalps hidden under your pillows in the future."

Without moving his eyes from Comanche, Hurley said: "Fetch a couple of the boys and a rope, Ferd. We'll stow him away and get on to our work. That showdown's got to be tonight for sure, now. The next thing we know there'll be friends of McCracken's crawling out of the woodwork!"

Ferd Drago obediently bobbed from the room. When he returned, two men were at his heels, and a shave would have improved either of them, but not a great deal. Both had obviously been availing themselves of the free liquor flowing hereabouts; and one bore a rope. Doc's hands were quickly trussed behind him, and he was prodded from the office. Halfway down the hall, Hurley knelt and fumbled at the floor. He lifted the ring of a trapdoor, and a square of darkness was revealed.

"Dump him, boys," Hurley ordered. "We'll attend to both of them when we get back. With Wicksham going around threatening to bring his terriers and wreck the place, I figured a valuable hostage might come in handy. But we'll need no hostages after tonight."

Comanche was shoved through the hole and had the sickening sensa-

tion of dropping through darkness to an unknown landing, but it was only some six feet from the floor to the ground beneath it. This was apparently a cellar of sorts, crudely hewn from the prairie and designed as a storage place beneath the saloon. Doc landed without mishap and the trapdoor was closed above him.

"You, sirs, are unmitigated scoundrels!" he cried, but there wasn't much emphasis behind it.

Out of the darkness a mournful voice said: "What do you figger talk will buy you now, Doc?"

And this was the manner in which Doc Comanche kept his rendezvous with Federal Marshal Steven McCracken.

"McCracken?" Doc cried. "You here, sir? Confound this darkness!"

"Thisaway," said the sorrowful voice. "They got me lashed to a sup-reporting post. Looks like you got on the job, Doc, but you seem to have tangled your twine. Where's big Oscar?"

Comanche told him everything, speaking quickly and sacrificing his usual flamboyant vocabulary to a need for terseness. When the tale was told, McCracken's sigh filled the darkness.

"When I got my orders to report to Fadeaway, I figgered I could use an undercover man," he said. "My job was to find out who was behind the trouble Wyoming-Pacific's been having, and as a marshal I was likely to be a marked man. So I thought of you. Hossback news had you

headed for a dozen different towns at the same time, so I sent letters in care of general delivery to all of them. Me, I never got to Fadeaway. Was jumped ten miles out, which shows that Hurley's bunch was laying for me. And you say they're going to pull their main act tonight. Whatever it is, we can't do much hogtied down here. Hop over this way. Maybe you can get your fingers on my ropes."

Comanche got to his feet and edged forward, but it was hard going. The cellar, littered with boxes and barrels, was as black as a thundercloud's lining, and he had only McCracken's sad voice to guide him. And just when he was tasting the consolation of knowing he was nearing the marshal, the trapdoor creaked open. Instantly Comanche slumped to the debris-littered ground. Lamplight shone down into the cellar, and two men descended—the same bearded pair who had roped Doc but twenty minutes drunker than when Comanche had last seen them. Scarcely glancing at the prisoners, one held the lamp aloft while the other began searching among the barrels and boxes. Soon this second fellow said: "Here it is. Set that lamp aside, Tug. I don't want it near this powder keg."

Hoisting a huge keg into his arms, the fellow came toiling back to a stand beneath the trapdoor. "Climb up above, Tug, and I'll pass the keg up to you," he ordered. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, but it's heavy. And we've got to hurry. The boss aims to be riding in a few minutes."

"Enough here to blast three trestles," Tug guessed as he awkwardly

clambered up through the trapdoor opening. "It'll take a spare hoss to tote this keg."

The man below raised the keg until his partner could get a grip on it. "The end of Wyoming-Pacific is in this little ole keg," he panted. "One big boom and the trick is turned. You gotta hand it to the boss for figgerin' how to get the most out of a single card. Now me, I'd have thought of blasting the trestle, maybe, but I wouldn't have risked timing the explosion to catch the work train halfway across the coulee. But this way there'll be a few carloads of steel and ties dropped into the gulch, a half a hundred terriers knocking at St. Peter's door, and the trestle blasted so that new supplies won't get to end-of-steel for a couple weeks. Chimney Butte is going to be a million miles away once this powder lets go!"

Then the keg vanished from sight, the second man hauled himself upward, and the trapdoor was closed.

"So that's the scheme!" McCracken said hoarsely. "Blow the trestle and the work train at the same time! They'll slow down construction all right—slow it down to the ruination of the railroad's chance!"

But Doc Comanche, horror-stricken, wasn't thinking of a railroad at this moment. For he'd remembered the one thing So-sad had forgotten.

"We've got to stop them!" Doc cried in a strangled voice. "Big Oscar will be on that work train! Don't you understand, sir? When I sent Oscar with the terriers to keep him out of trouble for awhile, I sent the poor fellow straight to his doom!"

## V

There was one ray of hope—literally. The lamp. The two who'd come into the cellar, a little drunk and wrapped in a dream of death and destruction, had forgotten the lamp they'd fetched along. Still burning, it was perched upon the edge of a packing case, and Doc Comanche, inspired, came to his feet again, but not to renew his efforts to reach McCracken. Backing to the lamp, Doc fumbled with his bound hands and wrapped his fingers around the lamp shade. It was hot enough to make him groan as he wrenched the shade away, and then he forced his hands down upon the little open flame.

Here was his hope—to burn the ropes that bound him; but he couldn't see what he was doing, and he burned himself in the effort and ran the danger of setting his shirt tail on fire. So sad McCracken, his sour face showing several weeks' beard, saw Doc's struggle but could only encourage him by a soft and steady cursing. The sweat burst out on Doc, and he gritted his teeth, certain in these frightful moments that it was his fingers that were in the flames, and not the knots between his wrists. Then he lurched involuntarily against the packing case, and the lamp, so precariously perched, went crashing to a heap of debris on the floor, and burning coal oil ran everywhere.

This was as bad a moment as Doc had known in Fadeaway; he had aspired to free himself, not to be burned alive. Straining at the knots, he leaped frantically aside from that spreading sea of flames. And he dis-

covered that he had burned the knots! Not all the way through, but this one last effort turned the trick. His scorched wrists came free, and, oblivious to the pain, he was over to McCracken in a bound and struggling desperately to free the little man. This littered cellar was shortly going to be an inferno, and it seemed forever before he was able to help the marshal to a stand. McCracken had been tied for hours at a time, and so stiff that movement at first was impossible for him, and Comanche practically had to carry the man toward the trapdoor.

They skirted the growing holocaust as well as they could, choking and gasping in the writhing smoke, and when they stood beneath the trapdoor, Comanche wheeled a barrel into position and boosted McCracken upon it. Pushing at the trapdoor, the marshal opened it and hauled himself from sight. Comanche was instantly after him. They were into that dim hall to the rear of the building, and beyond the flimsy wall, the roar of the Canvas Castle had turned into a many-throated bellow of fear. Obviously the smoke was seeping upward through the thin planking of the floor and spreading terror among the Castle's patrons.

This, at least, offered a measure of protection to Comanche and McCracken. Hirelings of Deuce Hurley who might otherwise have inadvertently put in an appearance and thus offered opposition to the escape were now concerned with fleeing the doomed building. When the pitchman and his friend reached the rear door, a dozen men were stampeding

toward it, but they paid the two no heed. Doc and McCracken were caught up in a tide of frantic humanity and swept out into the dark alleyway beyond, and then Comanche, getting a hold on McCracken's wrist, was sprinting toward the livery stable, dragging the numbed marshal beside him.

Into the wagon yard adjacent to the livery stable, Comanche quickly discerned the high, familiar tilts of his sway-backed Conestoga, but it took considerable rummaging before he got his hands on that brace of pearl-handled .45's. Clambering out of the wagon, he found that So-sad had wasted no time, either. The marshal had helped himself to a pair of speedy-looking livery stable horses and slapped gear onto them, and as soon as Doc pressed a gun into McCracken's hand, the two of them swung aloft.

At a distance, the night sky was turning a lurid hue as the flimsy Canvas Castle went up in flames, and Doc said: "No chance of explaining to folks and raising a posse, sir! The whole town will be fighting yonder fire to keep it from spreading and wiping out Fadeaway. Our job is to head off Hurley and his crew before they reach that trestle."

"Lead on, Doc," cried McCracken. "I'm hoping you know the lay of the land."

Doc was already picturing that stretch of country to the west of Fadeaway, and he was thankful now that his Conestoga had rumbled across it this very afternoon. Forcing his mount through the lusty excite-

ment of the street, he headed first to the railroad siding, but a forlorn hope died before it was fully born. Far down the track, the red eye of a caboose's tail light winked in the night; the work train for which big Oscar and the Irish laborers had waited had started for end-of-steel, and the horse wasn't born that could overtake the train. Nor did Comanche make the try. With McCracken thundering along beside him, the pitchman paralleled the rails only a short distance out of Fadeaway and then struck off overland.

"Track curves, sir, to avoid certain natural obstructions," he cried. "We can lop off a few miles by letting ourselves in for some rough riding. I been thinking that Colonel Wicksham's likely on that work train, too."

He wasn't sure whether McCracken heard him, and it didn't much matter. Somewhere ahead was Deuce Hurley and his crew, and doubtless they'd taken the shortest route, too, knowing a more sinister need to reach the trestle ahead of the work train. Accurate timing had to be part of Hurley's scheme, and the man knew the country.

Comanche put himself to the task of riding, cursing the minutes he'd lost in getting out of the Canvas Castle, and the minutes it had taken to arm himself and get onto the trail. Hurling down the slopes of coulees a sane man would have skirted, he risked himself and the horse a hundred times, and the ride became like something a man dreamed about when his food poisoned his sleep. And always McCracken was beside him. The miles were falling behind

them, and at long last Doc reined short on a promontory and gazed down upon a distant gulch and the spidery trestle spanning it. Somewhere, not so far away, a train hooted, and the thin pencil of a head lamp's light touched a bluff. There weren't many minutes to spare.

"We part here, sir," Comanche cried. "I'm depending on you to flag down the train before it reaches the trestle. I, sir, will try to circumvent Hurley and his minions."

There was no time for argument—no time for gauging which job might be the most dangerous and whose was the responsibility for taking the perilous chore. Comanche had assumed command, and So-sad McCracken obediently spurred his horse down the slope, heading off at an angle for the railroad track. Comanche, too, was roaring down the slant, dissolving the distance between himself and the trestle and, as he neared the gulch, the moon peeped furtively from a hooded sky.

In that feeble light Doc saw dim movement far out on the span. Hurley and his crew were there. They had placed the powder keg where it would wreak the greatest havoc. Then they had waited, gauging the speed of the oncoming train and its nearness to the trestle, and now their moment had come. Doc saw the brief, fitful flare of a match and knew that the fuse had been touched.

He came out of his saddle then and scrambled up the embankment to the tracks, and, once between the rails, he realized they were trembling to the

oncoming work train. He prayed that disaster had not lain in the path of So-sad McCracken, that there'd been no unseen gopher hole to trip the marshal's mount, and then he was running out upon the trestle toward that powder keg and the doom that slept within it.

The fuse lit, Hurley's men had hurriedly quit the trestle, vanishing into the darkness on its far side. There'd been Hurley himself, Doc judged, and Ferd Drago, and those two bearded men who'd fetched the powder keg out of the saloon's cellar, and a couple of others besides. They saw him coming, and they recognized him, for a shout went up and guns began spitting from the far end of the trestle. Doc loosed a few bullets of his own, running forward as he fired, and then he went down, pain shooting through his right ankle. At first he thought he'd been hit, but he soon realized that his foot had slipped between two ties and in falling he had wrenched his ankle. With pain shooting through his leg, he began dragging himself toward the keg, about a dozen paces ahead of him.

It was slow going, but at least Hurley's men couldn't distinguish him so easily now that he was flattened against the ties. Such bullets as pelted about him were random shots. But the rails were still trembling, and he heard the work train signaling its approach to the trestle. He judged then that McCracken had failed and wondered which would be the kinder death—to be crushed beneath the oncoming train or to be hurled skyward by the exploding powder a moment before the train reached him. One

prospect was as bitter as the other, but still he crawled onward.

From the sound of that train, in another moment he'd be bathed by its head lamp, and that would provide a third peril, for by such light Hurley's men would do accurate shooting. Then he thought he heard the hiss of steam, the grinding of brake shoes, and he risked a backward look.

The train had come to a stop almost at the rim of the ravine, and men were pouring from it and milling in the head lamp's beam. McCracken had flagged it, after all! A shout went up from both ends of the trestle, and Doc knew that the terriers, swarming from the train, had seen him and the powder keg and grasped the situation. He inched himself forward half the length of his body. That powder keg was almost within his reach, but the fuse was so short that the sight of it tied Comanche's insides in knots and made it hard for him to breathe. Then he heard the voice of big Oscar Lund.

Looking back, Doc saw that group of terriers hesitating at the end of the trestle, and he knew what was in the hearts of them. One impulse whispered that they must charge out upon the trestle and reach that powder keg before it went off, but an older instinct held them back — an instinct that said: "*This is suicide.*" And thus they stood transfixed while the precious seconds ran out.

But not so Oscar Lund. The pitcher's big assistant was fighting his way through the terriers, his bovine face contorted, his voice an incoherent bellow. And then Oscar was upon

the trestle and sprinting forward, and instantly every son of Erin was after him.

"Go back, Oscar! Go back, sir!"

That much Doc remembered yelling, but it was as though his voice belonged to somebody else. And then he was drawing himself erect and falling forward. When he alighted, rolling, the fuse was in his hand.

There was a wild rush of men bearing down upon him, and one stayed to shelter him in a protecting arm, and that one was Oscar Lund. Others were tearing the now harmless powder keg free from its lashings and hurling it far out into the ravine. But most of those men were swarming on past and to the far side of the ravine. For Doc managed to say: "Hurley . . . and crew . . . yonder. Get 'em!" Then he fainted away. . . .

He opened his eyes to find himself bedded in the caboose with a ring of anxious faces around him. One belonged to So-sad McCracken, and another to Oscar, and still another to Colonel Sam Wicksham. "Had a hunch you were on the train, sir," Comanche said weakly. "Hurley?"

Wicksham smiled. "My terriers rounded up the bunch of them. Some are whole enough to go to jail, and my friend, the sheriff, will have them under lock and key shortly. McCracken, here, tells me the Canvas Castle has gone up in flames. It's the ruination of Deuce Hurley, and the ruination of Central Western's hope of stopping me from reaching Chinney Butte on time. In fact, Central Western will likely repudiate Hurley now that he's failed, and then tuck



their tails between their legs and play dead dog."

"I suggest you rake the ashes of the Canvas Castle for Hurley's safe, sir," Doc said. "Likely it contains evidence of Hurley's connection with Central Western, evidence that will enable you to collect damages from those unmitigated scoundrels."

Wicksham nodded. "I'll do that. And thank you. Wyoming-Pacific owes a great deal to you, Doctor, and to your assistant. I never saw anything so magnificent as the big fellow fighting his way through my men to dash out upon that trestle."

A red-faced Irishman who'd stood behind Colonel Wicksham and escaped Comanche's eye till now, grinned sheepishly. "Begorra," he said, "and when we saw an Irishman named Oscar willing to risk his life, it shamed the rest of us."

"You'll get the best of care, Doctor," Colonel Wicksham continued. "There seems to be nothing wrong with you but a wrenched ankle and some burns about your wrists. I shall be eternally grateful to you. And a little curious, always. Why, for instance, did a man who had nothing to win but a harp in the hereafter pit himself against Hurley in a fight that wasn't his?"

Why? Doc Comanche turned the question over in his mind and realized there might be many answers. He could have spoken of his friendship with So-sad McCracken and the cryptic letter that had fetched a sway-backed Conestoga across the miles. He might have said that a railroad stood for progress and that even though its coming might mean the vanishing of the kind of range he knew and loved, still there was a certain glory in having helped, in his own way, to further that onward and inevitable march. But those were the kinds of thoughts a man kept to himself.

And so, smiling, he said: "Hurley, sir, was my enemy from the first. How could I expect to extract dollars for Indian medicine out of a populace that could get free whiskey for the asking. But now the Canvas Castle is gone. Business should be brisk in Fadeaway. Oscar, you hear that? We've eliminated our worst competition, and there's work to be done."

Big Oscar beamed. "Nobody's pushing us, huh, Doc?" he said. "Not unless they're hankerin' for a black eye, huh?"

But Doc Comanche had drifted off to peaceful sleep and a rest well earned. . . .

THE END



*When Speed Kilbourn took to the air for his getaway, Dan Ramsey had to go along for a ride that threatened to end in Boothill*

## BALLOON BUSTER

by WILLIAM J. GLYNN



SPEED KILBOURN snaked forward until there was only a thin screening of the dry slough hay in front of his ugly, dark-stubbed face. A foxtail jabbed him in the flat belly as he squirmed to a stop. Lifting his .45, he cocked it and peered out anxiously at the balloon's bulging sides, hemmed within the circle of four-by-four up-rights.

"Won't be long now," he muttered, and stretched his long, bony frame. A night and morning under the haystack had left him stiff and cramped as well as hungry, and he was frightened, with a hunted animal's fright. Worry deepened the lines below his beak nose.

But it was only about thirty paces to that swaying, tugging balloon.

Thirty paces to freedom—or a swift, gun-blasting hell.

The weathered skin crinkled over Speed's high cheeks, almost hiding his small yellow eyes. He shrugged his flat shoulders and grinned slyly as he dug down into the hay to bring the heavy sack of silver and greenbacks up close where he could grab it quickly when he made his run for the balloon's wicker basket. Next he pulled out the watch he had taken from the banker's body and snapped open the gold hunting case.

Five minutes to noon.

With a harsh grunt, Speed stuffed the watch back into his wrinkled Levis. In five minutes the dozen Sioux Bend townsmen holding the mooring lines would cast off, just as they had yesterday. The huge blue silk balloon would leap upward, toward the cloudless prairie sky, snatching the basket high and away above the crowd of folks swarming within the fenced-off fair grounds.

Speed forced a chuckle and watched the slim young aeronaut in the red tights with a cold calculation.

"Dan Ramsey, the fearless balloonist," the slack-chinned ticket taker called him as the two men paraded for a last time in front of the customers who had paid their four bits to watch the ascension.

"Me and Dan'l are going to be chums," Speed whispered, and tried to still the slight quivering in his hands as he spotted the tall hat of Sioux Bend's sheriff sauntering through the crowd. There were members of the posse there, too, all armed, all watching, searching for the man who had held up the Cattlemen's Bank

and killed old John Beardsley, the banker, yesterday.

Speed patted the canvas money sack. They wouldn't get him. They could surround the town and watch until snow, but they'd never find him. In another few minutes he'd be up there in the air far beyond the law's reach. He gripped his .45 and got to his knees.

The big Irish ground captain opened the door of the little sheet-iron stove under the long, funnel neck of the balloon's intake valve. He stuffed in another wad of twisted slough hay and cocked an eye at the dimple slowly filling out on the *Mary Ann's* great blue head as the smoke and hot air swelled into the sphere.

Once again Speed Kilbourn glanced at the pennant secured to the basket shrouds. It pointed a gay, fluttering finger to the northwest. The wind wasn't strong, but it was probably enough to carry the balloon across the river toward the badlands and safety.

Now Dan Ramsey was tying off the valve, lashing the hooked anchor to the five-foot-square basket. Next the mooring lines would be brought in close to the basket and cast off. Ramsey would climb aboard and the *Mary Ann* would leap into the air.

Speed stood up, keeping a careful eye on the sheriff. He had to time it just right so there would be no hitch. When those hold-down men walked in with their mooring lines, he'd be among them, not hurrying, acting as though he were one of them. But instead of leaping back from the jerk-

ing wicker basket, he'd be legging into it, his gun in the balloonist's belly. As easy as that, and if the lawmen saw him they could run and holler. It would be too late to put the finger on him.

Suddenly the ticket taker was warning everyone back out of the way and Speed was striding forward on his long legs, feeling a cold prickling up his back. He kept his gun down along his thigh and out of sight as best he could, while his left hand guarded the money sack tucked under his belt.

Then he was walking in with the hold-down crew, the only one of the bunch whose eyes were on the basket and the aeronaut instead of the tugging blue bag overhead. Ramsey climbed in and when he turned around, Speed was hunkered down below the four-foot-high rim of the basket, his six-shooter leveled at the balloonist's stomach.

"One word out o' you," Speed warned in a low voice, "and I pull trigger."

The aeronaut froze, stared wide-eyed at the big outlaw crouching in a corner of the basket. Dan Ramsey was a handsome young man, not over twenty-three or four, slim and tall-looking in his close-fitting tights and white silk shirt. His blue eyes narrowed as he studied Speed Kilbourn's dark, heavy-browed face.

"All right, you've had your look," Speed snapped. "Now tell 'em to let go those ropes—pronto!"

"You—you're the man held up the bank," said Ramsey. "Your picture's posted all over town."

"You're getting smart, eagle man," Kilbourn snarled. "But you'll live

longer if you give the word to cast off."

The ground captain was walking toward the basket. "Danny, me boy," he shouted. "sure, there's nothin' wrong, is there?"

Dan stared at Speed's .45 and swallowed hard. He twisted his gaze from the outlaw to big Mike Ryan.

"Wave him back!" Speed warned savagely. "Quick!" He jabbed his gun into Ramsey's middle, an ugly light flaming in his little yellow eyes.

Dan gripped the edge of the basket. He darted a look at Speed's hard, flat mouth. There was no mercy there; no chance. To refuse would be to bring a hot chunk of lead from that jabbing six-gun.

"Let her go, Mike," Dan directed. and set his teeth over the anger and surprise that gripped him.

The ground captain shouted to the men on the ropes and the nervously tugging balloon suddenly shot upward toward the sky, its basket swinging and twisting beneath the big silken bag.

A great sigh came from the crowd watching the ascension. Kids quit their horseplay to stand like so many curious prairie dogs, mouths open, watching the sight in solemn wonder. A team of broncs hitched to a buckboard reared, wild-eyed and snorting.

Speed stood up, towering over the slender balloonist. He was smiling, reckless with this new freedom. Leaning over the basket, he shouted at the sheriff and when the lawman recognized him and started on a run for the take-off spot, he made a face and

laughed jeeringly. Presently he said to Dan:

"You and me are going to get along, bub—if you behave." He made sure Ramsey wasn't armed, then took his money sack from under his shell belt and stowed it in a corner.

"You can't get away with this," Dan said grimly.

"No?" Speed braced himself, reached out with a long arm and slapped the balloonist across the mouth, and when Dan's quick fists pounded against him, raised his .45 and brought the long barrel down against the man's head.

"Try that again, and I'll kill you," the outlaw warned.

Dan lost his footing and went to his knees, groaning. Blood streamed from the cut over his ear and smeared his white shirt.

Speed turned away from the balloonist to stare down at the retreating fair grounds. Ramsey's quick breathing was the only sound, the only reality in this silent rushing into space.

A red-tailed hawk circled the balloon. As Speed watched it, he felt a lessening of the pressure against his feet. He glanced quickly at the flag on the shrouds and saw that it was no longer dipping toward the ground. There was an almost imperceptible drift of the basket as a thermal boiling up from the sun-baked fair grounds caught them. The big outlaw felt a strange tightening in his stomach. The balloon was no longer rising.

It was drifting toward the river, and the shouting and cries from be-

low came to him with new strength. Looking down, Speed saw men running on the ground and recognized the sheriff's big white Stetson. The possemen were racing to their horses at the edge of the field, following the huge black shadow of the balloon as it drifted into the northwest.

Kilbourn's jeering laugh broke off abruptly and the chill dread of capture returned to him. The balloon wasn't over four or five hundred feet up, and it was going no higher. Lifting his gun, the outlaw poured lead down at the posse.

They scattered like prairie chickens, but they didn't stop. They spurred on, chasing the *Mary Ann's* sweeping shadow.

Dan Ramsey struggled erect, held himself tight in his corner of the swaying basket. He wiped the blood from his face.

"You fool!" he said hotly. "Now you've done it. I'll lose my balloon. They'll shoot us—hanging up here!"

Kilbourn put his hard little eyes on Ramsey as he reloaded his .45 with cartridges from his shell belt. "Let 'em shoot," he snarled. "This is the first chance I've had to get back at them damn bounty hunters."

"Yes, but they'll shoot us down," Dan retorted. "You didn't think of that, did you? We're not more than a hundred and fifty yards up. The *Mary Ann* isn't filled to capacity, and with your big skunk carcass in here, we won't go up another inch. This thermal will drop, once we hit the cold down draft over the river."

Speed peered over the side and grunted. They certainly weren't go-

ing up; they might even be settling a bit. He glanced at the bag overhead and for the first time noticed the tiny folds and wrinkles in the lower half of the silk.

"Another half hour over the stove and I'd have made two or even three thousand feet," Dan offered coldly. "But this is going to be short and quick. Look at those lawmen down there. You think those are hoe handles they're pointing at us now?"

Stupidly, Speed looked again at the bag, the shrouds. He put a big hand on the slender cords.

"Holy mackerel, them *are* little strings, ain't they?" he said softly. He lifted a big number twelve boot and stared down at the bottom of the woven basket. It was springy and gave with his movements. "This . . . this is a mighty shifty perch."

Dan's blue eyes narrowed. "Can you fly?" he asked.

"Huh?" Speed jerked around, his face a dirty gray under the grime as a small singing sound broke into the quiet. The flat crack of the possemen's rifles followed.

"Look at the holes in the bag," Dan said.

Horror stamped hard on Kilbourn's ugly features. All his fear was back with him. He was feeling again the haunting loneliness of that night and morning under the balloon's stack of hay fuel. He was seeing the banker's frightened eyes as he shot him—the blood that welled from the man's mouth and wet Speed's hands as he fished through Beardsley's pockets. They'd catch him now. They'd hunt him down like a varmint. This was no freedom. He was a sitting duck.

a target for those keen-eyed lawmen below.

Kilbourn swung on the balloonist. "Dammit, man!" he yelled. "Don't stand there like a sullied ox, staring at me. Do something!"

Dan forced a grin to his tight lips. "That sounds good, coming from you," he said. "Where's the big bad outlaw now?"

The cruel streak that was never far from the surface washed back into Speed's ugly face. "None of that," he roared, and stepped toward Ramsay. "Sure, I'm scared. Who wouldn't be? This is the first time I ever tried to sprout wings. But this is your job, and I'm giving you five minutes to do something to get this bag higher. Savvy?"

Dan shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing I can do."

"Listen. I ain't no dummy," Speed snarled. "How about them sandbags hanging on the basket? You could drop them."

"That won't mend those holes in the silk," said Dan. "The hot air and smoke pushes the top side, and those bullet holes are letting it out, fast. If I'd had hydrogen gas like I get in the big towns we might have a little more chance, but—"

Kilbourn's gaze flashed to the small bullet holes and back to the possemen on the ground. The sheriff had halted on the river bank and was watching the balloon drift out over the water and out of range. But the posse wasn't giving up. One of them was riding hell bent toward the ferryboat moored opposite the town.

Tension built up fast in the out-

law's lanky body. He stared down at the muddy yellow water swirling beneath them. Hurriedly he whipped out his clasp knife and slashed the lines holding the sandbags.

They dropped and the balloon lifted slowly for a moment. Then it settled sluggishly again.

"She'll come down," Dan said with a cold smile.

"Well, don't stand there laughing about it!" Speed yelled. "You're in this, too."

But again the balloonist shrugged his shoulders. "Feel that cool air?" he asked. "We've lost our thermal, for sure. In another few minutes we'll be swimming."

"No!" Kilbourn growled, but there was no conviction in his tone.

"Can you swim?" Dan goaded.

Stark terror showed in the outlaw's yellow eyes. "By damn, we gotta—"

"You'll never make the other side," Dan went on. "You'll never hole up in those badlands over there."

"Shut up," Speed blustered. He cut the rope holding the anchor, which dropped like a stone, throwing a white splash below. But the balloon settled more and more.

"You see?" said Dan. "There isn't a chance. And look at the ferry. The sheriff's men are pushing out into the river." Dan's glance flicked to the money sack. "You could throw that over," he said, "and your six-shooter."

Speed's lips drew back in a tight, flat snarl of rage. "I ain't clippin' my own wings," he said. "The gun and the money — them are all I got between me and that hang-happy posse."

Dan wet a finger, held it over the

edge of the basket. They were going down faster now.

"The river's coming right up in our faces. You oughta know something to do," Kilbourn raged.

Dan cut his eyes to the cord trailing down from the bag. It was a small cord, the same size as the shrouding, but it extended up and over the swelling belly of the balloon, going clear to the cap on the very top. A good hard pull on it would rip a twelve-inch hole in the silk. It was an emergency release Dan had invented to prevent the balloon from falling into trees or dragging the basket on the ground in a windy landing. He had been placing his hopes on that rip cord—that and his try to break Kilbourn's nerve. If he could just get his hands on that six-shooter . . .

"We could wait a bit, then jump," he suggested.

"But . . . I can't swim," objected Kilbourn. His face was chalky.

"Then you've got about two minutes to say your prayers," Dan told him. "On the other side, against those hills beyond the trees we might find a deflection current and scoot back up." He shook his head. "But we'll never make it across the river."

Dan had been telling the truth along with his bluff. It was slow, but they were going down, without doubt, and it was a worry of his own. If they hit hard, there was a good chance the basket would smash. The bag would push them down into the Missouri's muddy current and then it would be all over, save the dragging for their bodies. If he could just

hold on for a little while, he told himself, until that slow-moving ferryboat closed in.

Speed's quick little eyes were searching the basket. Suddenly he stuffed the money sack and his .45 into his shirt and buttoned it.

"I'm going to get some of the weight out o' the basket, but it won't be nothin' o' mine," he said slyly. "It's *you*, feller."

"Me?" Dan gripped the basket.

"Yeah," Speed said. "With you out, it'll be light enough to mebbe reach the other side. I can drift into them pines, make a stand, or even give that posse the slip."

"Just a second," Dan placated the big outlaw, and it seemed to Kilbourn, suspicious though he was, that there was acquiescence in the balloonist's tone. "I could try one more thing which might save both our lives."

As Kilbourn eyed him grimly, Dan reached for the rip cord and gave it a sudden jerk.

There was a sound of ripping fabric. The balloon lost altitude, fast, dangerously so. But Dan knew it was that or be thrown out, smashed as though he'd jumped onto hard ground.

Kilbourn's eyes grew round. "What you doing?" he demanded.

But Dan had no cause to answer that, for with a great puff of smoke and hot air, the balloon wrinkled and folded upon itself, not completely empty, but without enough lift to hold them up. The wind fanned their faces as they slipped toward the water.

The basket swayed with the rapid descent, seeming to leap toward the

swift-flowing river. A cry of rage and terror was forced from the big outlaw.

"Double up—take a big breath!" Dan shouted.

Then they hit, with a mighty splash, the basket taking most of the shock, but tossing the two men about like pebbles in a Mandan's drumstick. The emptying bag smothered down over them with its silken folds. Dan struck out as fast as he could, to his right, across current to escape the entangling shrouds.

Kilbourn clung to the basket which was broken but still buoyant and upright. He clawed savagely at the folds of the balloon, pulled them clear. But his thrashing about upset the basket, tossing him out into the river.

Dan swam with strong, even strokes to emerge beside the edge of the *Mary Ann's* floating bag. He grabbed the wet silk, held a fold of the balloon cloth up against the wind, shoulder high, and scooped enough air to make himself a float. He lay there, half out of the water, panting, searching for the ferry when Kilbourn broke the surface.

The outlaw turned a terrified face toward Ramsey, pawing the water like a green trail pony on his first crossing. The heavy money sack in his shirt weighed him down, and with a strangled cry he sank.

Dan shoved away from the safety of his float and dived. The muddy water was too thick to see through, but his groping hands struck the outlaw's shaggy head. Taking a handful of the wet hair, he kicked for the



surface. He came up blowing and near exhaustion, towing the gasping Speed behind him.

The balloon had gone on, swirled away in the current. Dan managed to keep his grip on Kilbourn, but it wouldn't be for long, he knew, for the outlaw was thrashing and shouting crazily in panic whenever his mouth broke free of the water. If one of those clawing hands once got a good hold, Dan knew it would be all up for both of them. The drowning man would freeze to him, drag him under, and the Missouri would do the rest.

Then Dan saw the almost submerged wicker basket and struck out to reach it with the last bit of strength in his lean body. He made it, and hooked an arm over the edge, sucking air into his laboring lungs.

He was still there, holding the unconscious outlaw's head above water when the basket drifted down river and bumped into the ferryboat in mid-current.

Dan felt strong hands reach and lift him up to the low deck. He

passed out for a time after that, coming to as the boat scraped the bank on the Sioux Bend landing.

The sheriff was bending over him, his deep-set gray eyes squinting. He pushed back his big white Stetson and laughed softly.

"Fer a high-flyin' balloon buster, you ain't such a bad lawman," he said. "I reckon you better take a job with me as deputy. You done saved that worthless polecat's hide—and the bank's money. There's near ten thousand dollars in that money sack Kilbourn buttoned up in his shirt. Mebbe you could use the thousand-dollar reward on his head?"

Dan sat up. He was groggy and weak but with the exception of a few cuts and bruises, he was unhurt. He grinned at the possemen circling him on the deck. Off to one side he saw the lanky form of the outlaw, handcuffed and tied.

"No, sheriff," Dan said. "You keep the deputy job. I can sure use that thousand, though—to buy a sister to poor old *Mary Ann*."

THE END



Below are 15 scrambled words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 130.



- |            |              |                 |
|------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1. bourica | 6. lewl      | 11. crabbitjak  |
| 2. ako     | 7. cutbek    | 12. larber      |
| 3. nibso   | 8. knalp     | 13. lastlion    |
| 4. calerp  | 9. neverwoli | 14. kerchifence |
| 5. keyo    | 10. hapace   | 15. kenothol    |



## MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

SEARCHING for placer gold in Nevada's widespread mining districts has always been an alluring proposition for the prospector anxious to tackle real desert country. It still is.

Up to the turn of the 20th century, American Canyon and Spring Valley in the Humboldt range produced about \$10,000,000 in placer gold. The Osceola district produced somewhere between \$3,000,000 and \$3,500,000. Barbara and Wright Canyons in the Sierra district were another pair of old-time honeys.

More lately and right into present times, the Manhattan, Round Mountain and Battle Mountain placers have added further millions to Nevada's total placer gold score.

Nevada is big, thinly populated and in many places highly mineralized. There are extensive, hard-to-reach sections in both the northern and southern portions of the State where so far prospecting has been sketchy at best. Such regions are likely to bear further looking into.

But the placer gold prospector hunting desert yellow metal in Nevada — or for that matter elsewhere in the desert Southwest — may have to unlearn some things he previously took for granted. The usual rules of placer prospecting in regions where

mountain streams are constant don't always hold in desert country.

For instance, it is a fairly well-established precept in placer prospecting that the richest pay streaks are virtually always found at or close to bedrock. In semi-arid or desert country this *may* be so. More often than not, however, spotty and sometimes rich pay streaks are found at various levels above bedrock resting on layers of caliche—cemented gravel, sand and desert debris.

Then, too, in Nevada's desert mining country, placer gold concentrations are apt to be extremely irregular. This is because such rainfall as the desert receives is usually of the cloudburst type—short-lived and violent.

The cloudbursts bring a sudden torrent of water, sand and gravel rushing down the mountain canyons to the desert floor. The onrush scours out the more orderly formed concentrations of placer gold that may have accumulated in the gulch, and dumps them beyond the mouth of the wash at some limited spot where the power of the rush has been abruptly checked.

The next cloudburst that hits that particular canyon repeats the process. But the second wave of water is not apt to have precisely the same carrying strength as the first. It may be

weaker from a smaller storm, or stronger from a more violent cloudburst.

In any event its scouring of sand, gravel and gold, instead of being dumped where the former one was, is apt to be released at some other point beyond the canyon mouth. The result is that in place of building up in a single continuous pay streak, desert-country placer gold tends to be pockety, occurring in individual narrow streaks of limited length and depth.

Gold from comparatively recent cloudburst action, geologically speaking, may be found literally at the grass roots where wind action has blown much of the lighter sand away. On the other hand, the gold carried down by ancient violent storms will be buried at various depths beneath the desert surface of the sloping alluvial fans back against the foothills.

These irregular, gold-bearing patches of desert ground have to be located pretty much by hit-or-miss prospecting. You can strain your brain and use your best judgment in attempting to figure out where the cloudburst levels should be in the delta of sand and gravel at a canyon's lower end. Or you can toss your hat in the air and start digging where it lands.

Both methods have had their own quota of failures and successes.

In desert placer prospecting don't neglect checking the canyon itself,

or any boulder-filled wash in gold-mineralized country. Quite often rich pockets of gold are found in clay accumulations under big boulders close to, but not actually on, the bedrock surface. And if the bedrock itself is rough and "crevicy," coarse gold and sometimes nuggets may be found mixed with the sand and gravel in the bedrock crevices.

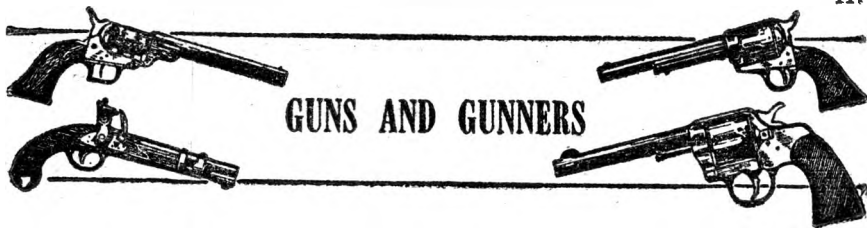
In Nevada actual or potentially important gold placers occur in fourteen of the State's seventeen counties. They are scattered mostly in the northern, central and western sections. Pershing, Elko and Humboldt Counties are dotted with desert and semi-desert placer gold areas.

There are placer areas in the south, too. Carrara, Johnnie and Beatty in Nye County. Tule Canyon, Pigeon Springs and Gold Mountain in Esmeralda County.

You may not get rich placer-prospecting in Nevada. But that's a chance a gold prospector has to take wherever he decides to hunt his own deposit of yellow metal. And there is one thing certain about Nevada. Placer mining is not something embalmed in the pages of its past history. It's alive today, an active part of the State's prominent, colorful mining industry.

Best of luck, ex-GI R.C. of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and all you other readers who have written in regarding placer gold prospecting in Nevada's wide-open, empty desert spaces.

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

WELL, another year will soon be over. For the gun fan, it has been an unusual one. Trophy rifles and pistols have changed hands by the thousands. Many disappointed hunters have been trying to get assorted ammunition for their rifles for hunting. The ammunition makers did their best, but it wasn't good enough to satisfy everyone.

They tell me that before the next season opens, they will catch up with orders, and the new rifles and plenty of ammunition will be available.

But lots of the boys got what they needed this current season. I myself had enough ammunition available to keep some of my guns going part of the time. And what a year it was! For four summers I had been in uniform. In 1946 I was able to get out almost weekly, all summer, for the best chuck hunting I have enjoyed since . . . well, I can't remember.

Down in the vicinity of Baltimore, Maryland, is a chap we will just call Arthur. I have yet to see a more enthusiastic woodchuck hunter—ground hog killer—to some of you. Art has been at it for more than twenty years, and can tell you every day he went out, and where, and how many chucks he got. In fact, he has kept an annual record of every shot

he has made, where, what range, what gun, what ammunition, and the type of kill.

I spent the summer hunting with Art. He knew all of the chuck dens in several counties. We would go out on a Sunday afternoon and be assured of from five to fifteen shots each. When we got home, Art would get out his book and write down all of the data.

In all of our travels, there was only one close shot—and I drew that. I felt a little ashamed of taking that chuck at a range of 100 yards. All other shots were at distances of from 185 up to almost 500 yards. Not all shots were hits.

There is a real thrill in the art of dropping a chuck at long range. You use a high-power high-velocity rifle, taking care to pick a load which will let the bullet break up on turf to prevent ricochets. You use a high-power target telescope sight. You aim carefully, touch off the shot—and if you have figured everything correctly and done a good job of holding, your pal, with his glasses, says: "You got him."

After I got back from overseas, I fell in with a batch of woodchuck hunters in Baltimore. Art was the most methodical, but they were all enthusiasts. Each Tuesday evening

we met at the home of one of the boys, loaded a few cartridges, and did a lot of talking.

What guns do those chuck shooters use? A couple of .30-06 Springfields, custom-made .220 Swift, .257 Roberts, .22 Varminter, .22 H-Lovell, 7 mm. Mauser, .270 Winchester, and three or four types of special custom .25 Magnums. Each thinks that his is the best for the job. But they all score well.

For target telescope sights, most of the boys use 6, 8 and 10 power. A few of them use 2½-power hunting telescopes, but they admit that they lose many of the long shots.

These chuck hunters have a code in a chuck hunter's paradise — first, to leave some chucks for seed next season, and second, to insure clean kills. They do not go barging all over farms and arousing the ire of the farmers. In fact, they all have their hunting grounds and have permission to hunt.

I think that the most fun I ever had was one afternoon when we spotted a chuck at 900 measured yards. Now, no one can shoot chucks at 900 yards; you can't find a cartridge sufficiently accurate to make connections with such a little target. But this chuck seemed to know all about it.

We took turns, I shooting a special 7 mm. and Art his favorite .270 Winchester. That chuck was uncomfortable, but he came back. I guess we fired about 15 shots each at him. We

changed sights, tried hard, and came so close much of the time that we threw dirt on him.

We ran out of ammunition eventually, and the chuck went to his den, unharmed. One shot struck within 4 inches of him, which, at 900 yards, was a lot of very good luck. He provided us with so much sport that we were kind of glad we hadn't hit him.

Next year there will be more ground hogs and more hunting. New rifles will be ready. Plenty of ammunition. That's one type of hunting that is not too expensive, and in many States, the season is long and you can shoot much or little. This is one of the reasons why this type of sport has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years.

But there are two requirements for long-range ground hog shooting: good shooting and good equipment. A chuck makes a small target at 200 yards. You must hold carefully, and a good telescope sight must be accurately set. Sometimes you do not have an entire chuck's body to aim at — only a head peeking out of its den.

Perhaps we should add a third requirement — safety. Never shoot any weapon using a bullet which can ricochet or glance off the surrounding land. Never shoot unless you have a natural safe backstop. Never shoot unless you are certain that nothing can happen to spoil permanently your hunting pleasure. You can't recall a bullet that has been started on its way.

Captain Sharpe is back after more than three years in the Army and your letters concerning firearms will receive his prompt attention. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



## WHERE TO GO

BY JOHN NORTH

**SHORT-LEAF PINE** for long-term security is becoming an increasingly popular adage among farmers and land owners in the mild-winter Southern States. It makes sense. Growing short-leaf pine, also known as loblolly pine, as a farm crop is sound conservation—and good business.

The trees grow rapidly. Given proper attention, pine acres can prove a highly profitable enterprise with reasonable assurance of a steady return over an extended period of time.

The loblolly pine—an excellent pine timber tree—is one of the South's greatest natural resources. Easily propagated, it is adapted to large areas in nearly all the Southern States from southern Delaware and eastern Maryland, down over the coast plain and Piedmont sections of the Carolinas, south through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, and clear west to eastern Texas and southern Arkansas.

Throughout this area farm owners are realizing more and more that on broken land, wet or sandy parts of their land not suitable for regular farm produce, short-leaf pine will make money, and in the long run will bring them in a larger net return than any other crop. Others are taking on

low-cost pine-growing lands as an investment in future security.

Either way, raising loblolly pine as a producing timber crop appears to be a good bet. Because of its profitability this pine has become one of the most important forest trees in the country.

Writing from Green Bay, Wisconsin, Reader T.V. has heard about short-leaf pine. He's interested in its possibilities. So his letter said, adding that he and his family were anxious to get away from long Northern winters and engage in some form of farm industry or timber raising "in a milder climate closer to Florida's winter playground."

On that last score, T.V., considerable short-leaf, or loblolly, pine is grown right in Florida—the northern half. And notably in the hilly section around Tallahassee.

The distinguishing features of the loblolly pine are its rough bark, its very prickly burrs about the size of a duck egg and the fact that it has three leaves, or "straws," in each cluster usually of a bluish green color. The more crooked-trunked slash pine has longer, greener leaves and the timber in it is generally of a relatively poorer grade.

The loblolly is a fast-growing tree, even among pines. In open stands and under good growing conditions, thirty-year-old trees can be expected to average slightly more than 14 inches in diameter and stand about 75 feet high. The same age trees in poor soil and under poor growing conditions would probably run closer to 8 inches in diameter and a little under 50 feet in height.

Loblollies have been known to reach heights of 170 feet and have a 6-foot outside diameter at  $4\frac{1}{2}$  feet above the ground. Such trees are well over a hundred years old.

How much timber will an acre of loblolly pine produce a year? The answer, as with other land crops, depends on several things. Soil condition, age of the trees, number of trees on the ground and so forth all affect the average growth figures. But a well-set acre of loblolly pine should gain for the owner anywhere from 300 to 1,000 board feet of saw timber annually.

There is an additional yield from the thinnings, the first of which is generally cut when the trees are perhaps 12 years old, or reach a diameter of 3 to 6 inches. Another thinning generally follows five years later with a third and final thinning when the trees are between 20 and 30 years old.

And the thinnings often provide a pleasant profit. The first two usually make firewood, pulpwood, poles, etc., while saw logs are obtained from the final thinning. Many well-spaced

stands cut saw logs at from 20 to 25 years of age.

Well-spaced means, where the main objective is to grow fair-sized saw timber, having a final marketable stand of around 200 trees to the acre. This affords the trees an average spacing of about 15 feet apart. And for the mature or final timber crop, hang on, if you can, until the stand is at least 25 to 30 years old—30 to 35 years old is even better. The pines are growing at their fastest rate during this period, adding dollars and cents to the value of the wood and your profit from the crop.

On open land loblolly pine can be started by setting out small seedlings, generally obtainable from State authorities free or at low cost. Or you can grow your own seedlings in garden beds from seed either gathered from trees or purchased through regular commercial channels.

The seedlings grow 6 to 9 inches tall in one season and are then large enough for planting in most cases. To get the best saw timber in your final crop, the young pines should be started in thick, well-stocked stands. Loblolly pine seedlings are generally set out 1,210 to the acre, or spaced about 6 feet apart each way.

Loblollies need considerable crowding during the early years of their growth. Otherwise they have a tendency to bush out, developing long, spreading branches rather than the tall, straight trunks that will eventually make the best saw logs.

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. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

*"He's mighty fast on the draw," they said of Trigger Donner, but was he fast enough to free those little ranchers from that*

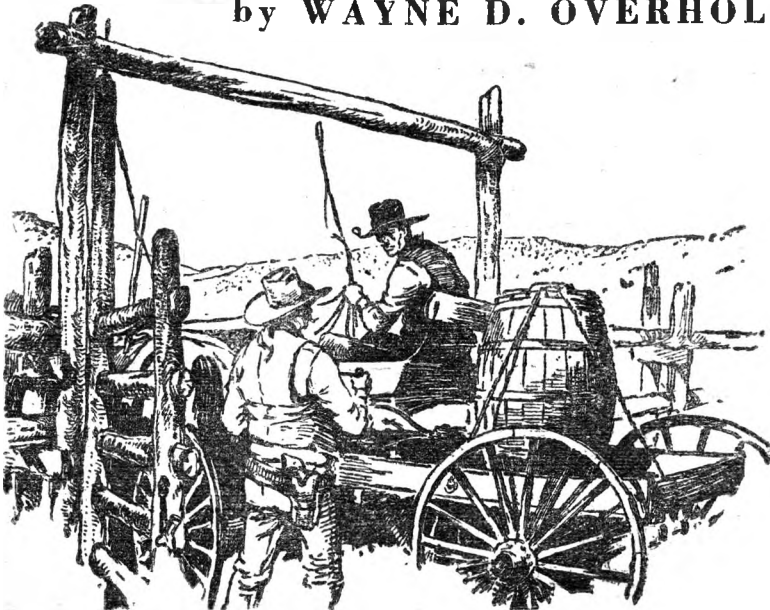
## WATER-BARREL TRAP

SHERIFF ED MAXTON and his posse were watering their horses at Sam Rhodes' place when Pete Donner drove in. There was always a faint uneasiness in Pete when he saw the sheriff, for Maxton was a stubborn man, and there was no telling what kind of notion he might get into his head, especially about the brother of a notorious outlaw. Drawing up just inside the gate, Pete sat there on the wagon seat, hat brim pulled low over his eyes, a faint hope in him that Maxton and his men might ride on without noticing who he was.

Pete waited for some minutes, but the posse seemed to be in no hurry to move on. They stood around the horse trough, smoking and talking, the sheriff casting an occasional glance at Pete as if he couldn't quite place him. Then Sam Rhodes came out of the barn and called: "You won't get no water waiting by the fence, Donner."

There was nothing for Pete to do but drive on into the barnyard and fill his barrel. Ed Maxton watched him, suspicion narrowing his eyes, and when the barrel was full, he

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER





asked bluntly: "Why don't you drill your own well, Donner?"

"It'd cost a thousand dollars," Pete said grimly, "which same I ain't got." He fished into his pocket for a gold coin. "How much, Rhodes?"

The cattleman laughed shortly. He was a big, pot-bellied man, this Sam Rhodes, who believed that the high desert was his by right of occupation, and accordingly hated all homesteaders, but reserved a little extra hatred for Pete Donner.

"You know damned well my prices don't change, Donner," he said.

"I won't go on paying you five dollars for a barrel of water," Pete told him. "It ain't right, and if you wasn't the kind of a gent who nursed a penny till it gave birth to a nickel, you'd know it."

"You don't have to get water here," Rhodes reminded sourly. "Why don't you get it out of the Deschutes? Ain't more'n thirty miles."

Contempt marked Pete's face as he tossed Rhodes the gold coin and climbed back into the wagon seat. He was getting close to the place where he was going to bring a gun and gut-shoot Sam Rhodes.

"You know, Sam, you're going to push some of these boys too far," Maxton said. "You owning the only well in twenty miles of here don't give you the right to pour it on like you're doing."

Rhodes cuffed back his Stetson, fat cheeks glowing a dull red. "I'd like to know why it don't? If they starve out, so much the better. They come in like a plague of locusts, ploughing up the bunch grass, building fence, stealing my range out from under my

nose and raising hell in general. This land ain't good for dry farming, and you know it."

"But they don't," argued Maxton, "and a man gets thirsty. I know how it is."

"Let 'em go settle somewhere else," Rhodes said stubbornly. "I ain't gonna give 'em no water."

The sheriff shrugged, and turned his back to Rhodes. He stood pulling at his handle-bar mustache, keen eyes on Pete as if he wanted to say something, and wasn't quite sure how to say it. Pete felt a queasiness in his stomach. When a man had a brother like Trigger Donner, and all the neighbors knew about it, he never knew what was coming next.

"You heard about Trigger?" the sheriff asked finally.

"No." Pete shifted uneasily. "Ain't heard anything about him since he was here six months ago."

"And I let him slip through my fingers," Maxton cursed bitterly. "I ain't missing him this time, Donner. He held up the Moro bank, and headed south. Me and the boys fixed up a trap for him the other side of Grizzly, but the killing son had help and they shot their way out of it. Got two of my posse, but we wounded Trigger. I've got a hunch we'll find him out here on the desert somewhere."

"What makes you think he came this way?" asked Pete.

"It's just possible," Maxton explained, "that when he gets hungry and if he's shot up some, he'll head for your place."

"I don't reckon he will, sheriff."

Pete said heavily. "Him and me had an understanding the last time he went through."

"That so?" Maxton pulled his pipe out of his pocket and began to fill it. "Now what sort of an understanding would that be?"

"That he'd steer clear of my place. I've got enough trouble just having him for a brother without him getting me tangled up with the law." Pete shot a glance at Sam Rhodes. "Besides, sheriff, I'm beginnin' to think I've got a little killing to do myself."

"Who you aiming to kill?" Rhodes asked, fat face showing his amusement.

"You," Pete said softly. "I've paid too many five dollars for water, and now I'm about broke."

Rhodes bent over in a spasm of laughter, and slapped his leg. Pete spoke to his team, and as he drove out of the barnyard he heard Rhodes shout after him: "You couldn't kill a full-grown gopher, you bald-headed peanut."

"Donner," Maxton called, and strode to the gate.

Pete pulled his team to a stop, and waited for the sheriff to come up.

"Donner, some of your neighbors are throwing in together on a well. Probably won't cost 'em more'n a couple hundred apiece. Why don't you get in on it?"

"Mostly because I've got a brother named Trigger Donner," Pete said quietly. "They don't want me in on anything around here. Take Rhodes there, for instance. He don't try to charge anybody else around here five dollars a barrel for water."

"He don't?" Maxton asked in surprise.

"He sure don't. It's just that he wants me out of here. Reckon he's afraid Trigger will hide out at my place, and mebbe pull some devilment around here. I dunno what else it is. I honestly figgered I could live out here and raise Bud where we could be by ourselves, but he gets into it at school just the same." Long-suppressed anger brought a darkness to Pete's face. "Guess I've had about all I can stand, sheriff. There's always a time a real man has to take the bull by the horns, you know. Mebbe Trigger's got the right idea."

"No, he ain't," Maxton said soberly. "There's a thousand dollars reward out for that killing son. If he shows up at your place, you get word here to Rhodes. We'll take a sashay over around the buttes, but we'll be back here tonight."

"I ain't low enough to turn my own brother in," Pete said crisply, and drove away.

Pete cooked his usual frugal meal when he got home. Despite the certainty that Trigger wouldn't show up here, he found himself going to the front door and looking across the sage flat to the rimrock that made a long line north of him. There was a break in the rimrock not more than half a mile from his tar-paper shack, and if Trigger had come on south of Prineville, he'd probably head for that break.

Pete spent the afternoon grubbing sagebrush, lifting his head every few minutes and glancing toward the rimrock. Then he'd mop his bald spot

with a red bandanna, and get back to his grubbing. An idea had been churning in his mind all afternoon. Maybe he could get Trigger to shoot Sam Rhodes! He tried to put it out of his head because it was a strange notion for him to have, but it had a way of coming back. He wasn't a killer. Sam Rhodes had it about right when he'd called him a bald-headed peanut who couldn't kill a full-grown gopher.

Still and all, Rhodes needed killing if a man ever did, and Trigger had never thought any more of taking a human life than he would a gopher's. Trigger owed Pete plenty, most of all for taking his boy Bud and raising him as if he'd been Pete's own son. The only thing was Trigger never worried much about paying his debts.

It was after five when Bud rode in from school. He was a leggy kid just past ten, and as usual got home with a black eye.

"Sure I've been fighting again," Bud said in answer to Pete's question. "And I did all right, too. Joe Rhodes ain't gonna bother me for a while, I reckon."

There wasn't much Pete could say. If Bud had to fight, he'd better do a good job of it, and he must have if he'd licked Joe Rhodes who was two years older than Bud, and correspondingly bigger. Joe was like his dad, big and tough-talking and overbearing, and Pete, looking down at Bud, felt proud of him, though, chances were, he'd find that Bud's victory would make the next barrel of water cost ten dollars instead of five.

Bud struggled with his arithmetic

for an hour after supper, and went to bed, but Pete stayed up. His back hurt from the grubbing, and he was sleepy, but he didn't want to turn in. He'd told the sheriff that Trigger wouldn't stop at his cabin, but for some reason the feeling had been growing in him that Trigger would. Trigger had never been one to keep a promise, and if he was wounded, it would be like him to head here to hole up for a few days.

Pete sat on his front steps, and smoked, lamplight falling across his thin shoulders. Suddenly he flipped his cigarette stub into the yard, and going inside the shack, took a gun out of the trunk, and slipped it inside his shirt. He had about as much business with a gun as a horse had with five legs, but if Trigger did show up, anything could happen.

It was past midnight when Pete heard the drum of a horse somewhere between him and the rimrock. He rose, drew into the shadows beside the shack, and, pulling gun, waited. He was there when Trigger rode into the light and called wearily: "Where are you, Pete?" Before Pete could answer, the outlaw slid out of his saddle like a half-empty sack of grain.

Pete got his brother into the house and on the couch and locked the front door. He found the bullet hole in Trigger's shoulder and he thought it looked pretty bad. He did what he could for the wound, washed it and doused whiskey over it, and then bandaged it. Trigger would make it if he had a doctor, but a ride in a wagon to Bend or Prineville might be

too much. Pete had about decided to hitch up the team and try it when Trigger opened his eyes and said weakly: "Hell of a way to get here, ain't it, son?"

"Yeah, it is for a fact," Pete answered. "I was just about to harness up my team and haul you to town."

"Don't bother." Trigger pulled himself to a sitting position, and leaned against the wall. "I'm about at the end of my string. Met up with your sheriff, and had to gun it out with him by myself."

Trigger was far from the man who had been here six months before. Skin made a tight fit over his cheek bones, his face seemed to be mostly eyes, and his clothes were dirty and torn.

"I thought you always traveled alone," Pete said, and remembered that the sheriff had said Trigger had help.

"I have lately. How's the kid, Pete?"

"He's fine."

"Still figgers I'm his uncle and you're his dad?"

"Yes."

"Let him keep on thinking that," Trigger said. "How you making out?"

"Not good."

"Why not?"

"I don't have water." Pete could have told him there was cheaper water for settlers who didn't have Trigger Donner for a brother, or that he could have put up some of the cost of the community well and had free water if it hadn't been for Trigger, but he didn't tell him either of

those things. Even Trigger had the right to die in peace.

The wounded outlaw sat there for a time, chin dropped to his chest, eyes closed, and presently asked for a drink. Pete got it for him, and then Trigger said: "Pete, I don't want to die."

"None of us do, I guess."

"I don't mean like that. If I was you, I wouldn't worry none. Never thought about wishing I was you till the last three days. It took me that long to get here after my run-in with the sheriff. I've got too many things on the wrong side of the book, Pete." He drew an empty tobacco sack from his shirt pocket, felt of it and threw it on the floor. "Fix me a smoke, will you, Pete."

Pete rolled the cigarette, slipped it between his brother's lips, and lighted it.

"Why don't you drill a well?" Trigger asked.

"Costs too much. I'm about broke."

"You like it here?"

"No." Pete had held himself back, keeping the flow of things he wanted to say dammed inside of him, but he could hold it no longer. "Why would

SOLUTION TO CROSS WORD PUZZLE

B	I	S	O	N		S	P	U	R	S
A	N	K	L	E		T	E	P	E	E
S	U	E	D	E		E	A	S	E	D
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D	E	N	Y		B	E	A	T	E	N
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P	O	S	S	E	S		S	A	L	T
L	I	P		R	E	D		L	A	W
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N	E	R	V	E		M	O	V	I	E
T	R	E	E	D		A	G	E	N	T

anyone like it out here living in the sagebrush and junipers, and having to pay five dollars a barrel for water?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Trying to get to a place where folks wouldn't hold it against me and Bud for being related to a tough hombre named Trigger Donner, but we didn't get far enough. I've got a hunch when we go to hell the devil will give us an extra hot seat for being hooked up with you."

Trigger's eyes were on Pete, the cigarette dangling from pale lips, the smoke of it shadowing his face. There was a long run of silence then before Pete said: "I'm sorry, Trigger. I shouldn't have said it, but it's got to the place where I can't stand it. Mebbe if we move to Arizona . . ."

"Why don't you do that, Pete? You haven't got anything here to lose. Load up your wagon and light out."

"I ain't gonna run, Trigger," Pete said stubbornly. "I don't want Bud to run. That was what was wrong with you. Always running from what you ought to do and hating yourself and everybody else because of it. Always taking the easy way. When I think of ma and your wife before they died . . ."

"If it hadn't been for you, I guess they'd have starved to death," Trigger said, his tone faintly mocking.

"Don't give me any little white wings," Pete said somberly. "Things came easy to you and they didn't for me. I never had no kids. That's why I took Bud. I wasn't doing you no favor. Now I've gone through all the money ma left me, and I'm done,

mostly because of you. What ain't your fault is Sam Rhodes'!"

"What's Sam Rhodes got to do with it?"

"Charges me five dollars a barrel for water, I told you."

"Yeah, I forgot. The kid sleeps sound, don't he?"

"Why?" Pete asked suspiciously.

"I want to see him. Help me in there."

Pete helped Trigger into the lean-to where the boy slept and for a long minute the outlaw stood there looking down at his son. When he came again into the big room there were no tears on his cheeks, no twitch to his lips, but Pete, looking at him, felt his brother's emotions, felt for the first time since they were boys that Trigger was thinking of somebody else than himself.

"You done a good job with him," Trigger declared. "I'm thanking you for it, and I kind o' wish there was something I could do to pay you back a little bit. Mebbe I could sort of balance off the books when I get before The Judge, and mebbe give you a little bit to brag about to Bud."

This wasn't like Trigger Donner. He'd been here in this cabin several times before, but he'd never been much interested in his son or in Pete's troubles. He'd take what food he needed, maybe sleep through the day, talk big and tough and belittle Pete in every way he could, and then ride off. That was the way it had been since they were kids, and Trigger had robbed and killed a neighbor when he was twenty, a month after he was

married, and pulled out to ride the dark trails ever since.

If there had ever been any good in Trigger, Pete had not seen it; yet now he was wanting to pay back a little and sort of balance the books. No, it wasn't natural, and Pete wasn't sure everything was the way it looked. He twisted a smoke, covertly watching Trigger's gray face and trying without success to gauge the depth of his brother's real feelings.

Trigger brought a roll of bills from his pocket and laid it on the couch. "There's a couple of hundred dollars, Pete. It'll take you to Arizona."

"I'm not running," Pete insisted doggedly, "and I don't want any of your dead man's money anyhow."

Trigger sat up, more alert than he'd been since Pete had brought him into the cabin. "You're sure a hell of a good gent, so damned good you don't want any of my dinero!" he snarled. "Why don't you get smart and move while you can?"

This was more the old Trigger whom Pete was used to, and it was clear he was a long ways from being dead.

"I ain't smart," Pete said. "Never was smart like you were, and you sure are smart, riding in here with a slug in your shoulder and the law on your tail."

"The law won't get me," Trigger jeered. He got to his feet, and stood there spread-legged, a hand on his gun butt. "You're a fool just like you always were, Pete, and you took this line I've been putting out, like a cat licks up cream. All I wanted to do was to get you off this place, so Sam and me could—"

A heavy pounding on the door broke across Trigger's words. He paused, eyes on Pete as if trying to read treachery there, and then motioned toward the door. "It's probably Sam. Let him in."

Pete moved slowly to the door, trying to hook this thing up in his mind and finding that it made no pattern at all. What would Trigger have to do with Sam Rhodes and why would Rhodes be here? He turned his body so that his gun would be away from Trigger. It looked as if he was the one slated for boothill, and if this was Rhodes he might as well die with his gun in his hand.

It was Rhodes, and he came in swiftly, his heavy body slamming into Pete and almost knocking him down. Rhodes shut the door, and leaned against it, puffing hard, fat face showing a fear that was close to panic.

"What in blazes is wrong with you?" Trigger demanded.

"The sheriff ain't far behind me," Rhodes panted. "His posse was staying at my place, but I figgered I'd get out without being seen. He must have been watching me, though."

"Which means he's got an idea what's been going on," Trigger said. "My horse is outside. Pete, put him and Sam's bronc in your barn, and if the sheriff's out there, don't try tipping him off."

"Your kid's in here," Rhodes said brutally. "You might remember that when you're out there."

Pete put his eyes on Trigger. "You wouldn't—"

"I've got my own hide to think of right now," Trigger said sharply.

"Go on. Git. Leave the door open, and if you run into the sheriff, just bring him in, easylike."

Pete went out. He couldn't breathe very well. Something had pumped his stomach up until it was pressing against his heart. He didn't understand it, but he did understand now why Trigger had the reputation that he did. He'd give Pete's life and his boy's to save his own.

The horses were in the barn and Pete was on his way back to the house when the sheriff called softly from the shadows: "You alone, Donner?"

"Yes," Pete said. They were fifty feet from the door, and Trigger and Rhodes would hear anything that was said. "Why?"

Maxton swore softly. "Rhodes pulled out about midnight, and I followed, figgering he was heading here to meet your brother, but damn it, I lost him back there a-piece. I don't know where he went."

"No reason Rhodes would want to meet Trigger," Pete scoffed. "Come on in and have a cup of coffee."

"Might be plenty of reason." Maxton came on until he was within ten feet of the door. "What are you doing tramping around this time of night?"

"Couldn't sleep." Pete paused at the edge of the lamplight, knowing what he had to do and knowing what the cost would probably be. "If that Rhodes hombre shows up around here, sheriff, I'll gut-shoot him just like I said. I've spent all the money for his water that I'm going to spend. Come on in."

Pete had pulled his gun, and went

into the house with it held along his thigh, keeping his body turned so that the Colt would not be seen by those inside. As he stepped through the door he said over his shoulder: "You can see what coffee tastes like made out of five-dollar water."

Pete had that one short glance into the room before he whirled and brought his gun up. Trigger was standing in front of the door that led into the lean-to, Rhodes at the other end of the room beside the stove. Pete had his choice, and he took Rhodes, his first bullet catching the fat man high in the chest and bouncing him against the wall. His second bullet smashed Rhodes' right arm. Then Pete whirled, and he would have fired at Trigger. He would have killed his brother the same as Trigger would have killed him. He had told himself that a dozen times during the minutes it had taken him to put away the horses and come back into the house.

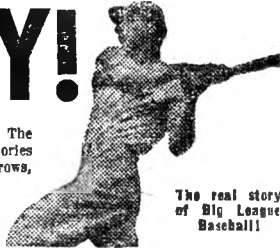
But Pete didn't have to shoot Trigger, and it was something for which he was forever grateful. Ed Maxton had plucked gun before he came into the room, and his first bullet caught the outlaw in the pit of the stomach. Pete, wheeling to face his brother, watched him fall. He heard Bud's scared cry, stepped over Trigger and went into the boy's room.

"It was Sam Rhodes, button," he said, putting an arm around Bud. "I don't guess we'll have any more trouble with him or his kid, either. You stay here. He's shot up purty bad. No use of you seeing him."

Pete stepped back into the big

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PHOTOS OF STARS





room, shutting the door behind him, and motioned for Maxton to come close.

"I don't want Bud to see Trigger," he whispered.

"He ain't dead," the sheriff said as they carried Trigger into the yard, "but he sure won't last more than a couple of minutes."

"What about Rhodes?"

"Plenty dead. That was good shooting, Pete."

There was a ghost of a smile on Trigger's lips as they laid him down in front of the shack. "It sure was, son," he whispered. "It's no fooling this time. I am gonna cash in. You take care of the kid. If it had come to a showdown, I don't reckon I could have done what me and Rhodes said we would."

Trigger's eyes were closed for a time then, and Pete wasn't sure he was alive.

"Rhodes wanted you off of here, Pete," Maxton explained, "because you're right below that break in the rimrock, and that's the only place a man can bring a horse down from the plateau for ten miles or more. You see, Rhodes ran a hideout for outlaws that wanted to make the long jump across the desert into Nevada or California. I reckon Trigger was sort of a field man for the outfit. Long as you was nesting here, you busted up a good proposition. I've

been watching Rhodes for a long time, but figgered I'd better give him plenty of rope so he'd hang himself, and he done it."

"Why didn't you bring your posse along?"

"Wasn't time, for one thing. Another reason was that I wanted to look the situation over. It was sort of a guess with me. I called to you, but I wouldn't have gone in if you hadn't pulled that gun out of your shirt."

"Rhodes figgered I couldn't kill a full-grown gopher," Pete told his brother.

Trigger had opened his eyes. "You got guts," he whispered. "More guts than I thought. I could have used you. I put on that act figgering you'd believe it and pull out like I wanted you to. I knew you wouldn't scare. There's enough reward on me to drill you a well. You see he gets it, sheriff."

"I sure will," said Maxton. "We need a well out here where folks won't have to pay five dollars a barrel for water."

Trigger died then, there in the dirt in front of the shack, and Pete, looking down at him, thought about the bloody, wasted years behind his brother, and then he thought about the well. It would be the one worthwhile thing Trigger Donner had ever done, and he had had to die to do it.

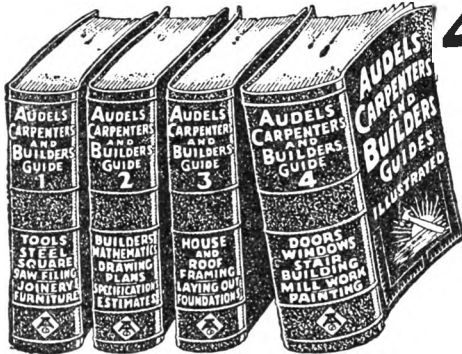
THE END

*Answers to Scrambled Words on page 114.*

1. caribou
2. oak
3. bison
4. placer
5. yoke
6. well
7. bucket
8. plank
9. wolverine
10. Apache
11. jackrabbit
12. barrel
13. stallion
14. neckerchief
15. knothole

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