

Western Story[★]

Every Week Magazine Mar. 9, 1929

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As Len sent his horse leaping around the corner, the animal crashed to earth.

from **PIRATES' TRAIL** by **CHARLES W. TYLER**

In Next Week's Issue of Western Story Magazine

THE GIANT KILLERS

By Howard J. Perry

The work wasn't dangerous, 'twas just plain dynamite. But it had to be done.

SAGEBRUSHED!

By Kenneth Perkins

Caught between an angry grizzly and its cubs, even the brave cowgirl was frightened.

A NIGHTMARE RIDE

By Derk Rider

Step lively on quicksand!

Also Features by

Arthur Preston Hankins
John Frederick

Ray Humphreys
And Others

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In This Week's Issue of

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

JOHN DOE'S FUNERAL

By Paul Ellsworth Triem

He had his enemy's "moll" and his loot in his own power—when suddenly he was forced to fight for both.

Another novelette about this popular hero.

BITING VENGEANCE

By Clinton Dangerfield

He faced a lion—mad, cantankerous—but his greed for gold made him hesitate to call for help.

THE DEATH ARROW

By Leslie Gordon Barnard

One minute it spelled power, wealth—the next, disaster.

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Herman Landon

Agatha Christie
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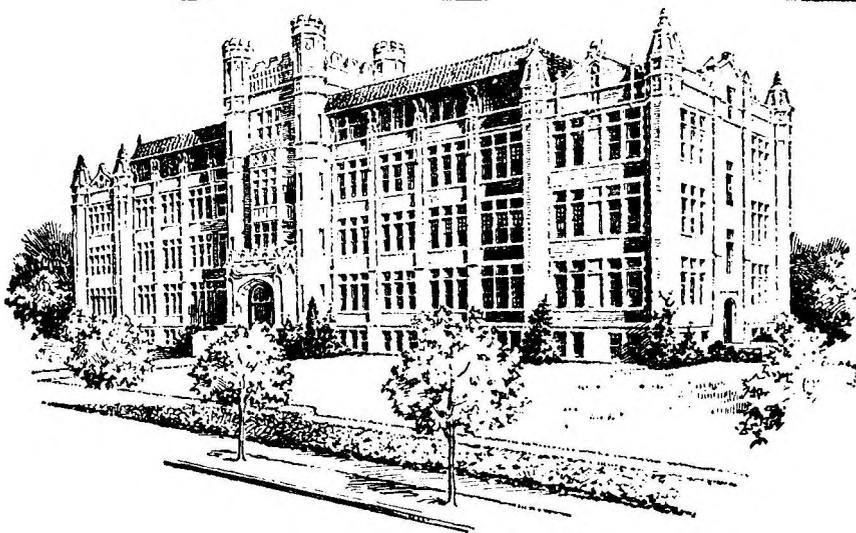
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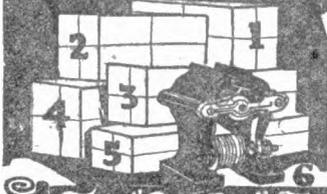
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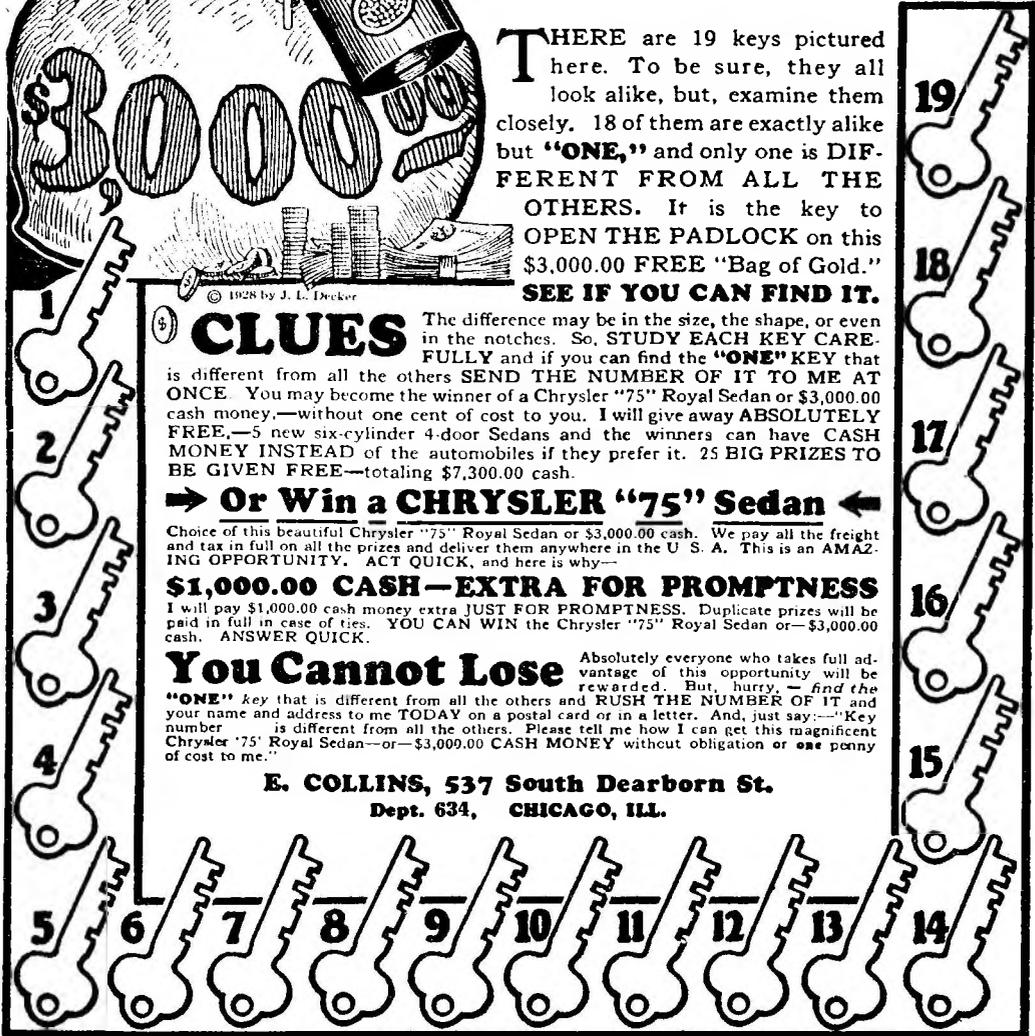
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his salary raised from \$15 a week to \$7,500 a year. . . . Wm. Shore of California made \$3,000 his first 5 months . . . and C. V. Champion of Illinois became president of his company at over \$10,000 a year!

Your Income Multiplied or You Pay Nothing

N. S. T. A. is now offering, to every man who wants to increase his income, an amazing Double Money-Back Bond. That assures you a definite stipulated addition to your income, within three months after your training is completed—over the course costs you nothing. This daring offer is possible only because of the success of thousands of members. Send coupon immediately for full details.

The Secret of Big Pay

How did they do it? What did the books show them? Just this—Every one of these men realized that Salesmanship offers BIGGER rewards and delivers them QUICKER than any other line of work under the sun. This vital book "The Secrets of Modern Dynamic Salesmanship" revealed to them the real TRUTH about the art of selling. It blasted dozens of old theories and told them exactly how the great sales records of nationally-known star salesmen have been achieved. And not only that, it outlined a simple plan that will enable almost any man to master scientific salesmanship without losing a day or dollar from his present position.

A Few Weeks—Then Bigger Pay

There was nothing "different" about these men when they started. Salesmanship is just like any other profession. It has certain fundamental rules and laws—that you can master just as easily as you learned the alphabet. And through the NATIONAL DEMONSTRATION METHOD—an exclusive feature of the N. S. T. A. system of SALESMANSHIP training—you can acquire

the equivalent of actual experience while studying.

Free to Every Man

If we were asking several dollars a copy for "The Secrets of Modern Dynamic Salesmanship" you might hesitate. But it is now FREE. So get your copy now. Learn the real facts about the selling profession, and about the tremendous demand for trained salesmen in every line, to fill city and traveling positions paying up to \$5,000 and \$10,000 a year. (Last year this association received calls for over 50,000 N. S. T. A. members from Wholesalers, Manufacturers and Jobbers.) A copy is yours for the asking, and your request entails no obligation. Simply fill out and mail the coupon above. Do it now!

NATIONAL SALESMEN'S TRAINING ASSOCIATION

Dept. 581-C, N. S. T. A. Bldg., CHICAGO, ILL.



Now Free
MAIL COUPON ABOVE

I Offer You a Day \$15 a Day



Make \$15 a day selling this wonderful new household article that has taken the country by storm. It is CED-O-BAG, a moth-proof, damp-proof, dust-proof, germ-proof storage bag for clothes, blankets and furs. It is the greatest, fastest selling household article that has come on the market for years. Every housewife wants one, buys on sight.

CED-O-BAGS are made from rubberized fabric which has been chemically treated. They are patented. Nothing else like them. Instead of a small, easily torn paper bag or a clumsy, expensive cedar chest, a CED-O-BAG provides adequate space for two to four garments. And yet, with all of these distinctive advantages, CED-O-BAGS are priced for quick sale.

Ced-O-Bags Offer Big Profits

There is a chance for you to clean up a lot of money in your town at once just by taking orders for CED-O-BAGS. L. H. Green went out and made a clear profit of \$12 in one afternoon. J. V. Davis took five orders in one evening and was \$5 richer. Edith Phillips made \$53 in one week's spare time (evenings). You can do as well or better.



No Experience Needed

You don't need experience or training. Every home in your town is a live prospect. All you have to do is show the housewife a CED-O-BAG and take her order. We deliver and collect. You

get your profits at once, and move on to the next house and take another order. Everyone buys. George Jones took 22 orders in two days' spare time and had a clear profit of \$22. Twenty-one agents report an average profit of \$3 an hour.

How Much Money Do You Want?

Would you like to make an extra \$100 or \$200 a month, in your spare time? Would you like to gather a lump sum of \$500 or \$600 in a couple of months? If you would, here is your chance. Mail me the coupon and I will tell you all about this money-making proposition. I will show you how you can make \$15 a day or more in this easy, pleasant, engaging work. I will show you the way to quick profits—big profits. Mail the coupon now.

C. E. Comer, The Comer Mfg. Co.
Dept. O-73 - - - - - Dayton, Ohio

Mail This Now

C. E. Comer, The Comer Mfg. Co.,
Dept. O-73, Dayton, Ohio.

Dear Sir: Please send me full details of your money-making proposition by which I can make \$15 a day in cash. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name.....

Address.....

\$8000^{in 4 Months} as REAL ESTATE SPECIALIST!

That's what Anthony C. Maurell made after getting my free book. Knew nothing about real estate until he learned my successful system. Men and women—young and old are making big money my way. No can you.

FREE BOOK Tells How
Start at home in spare time. Build immensely profitable business of your own. No capital or experience needed. Send now for full details and positive proof of amazing money-making success. Address President

American Business Builders, Inc., Dept. C-22, 18 East 18 St., New York



STOP TOBACCO



Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have. Make yourself free and happy with Tobacco Redeemer. Not a substitute, not habit forming. Write for free booklet telling of the deadly effect of tobacco and the positive, easy way to remove all craving in a few days.

FREE BOOK

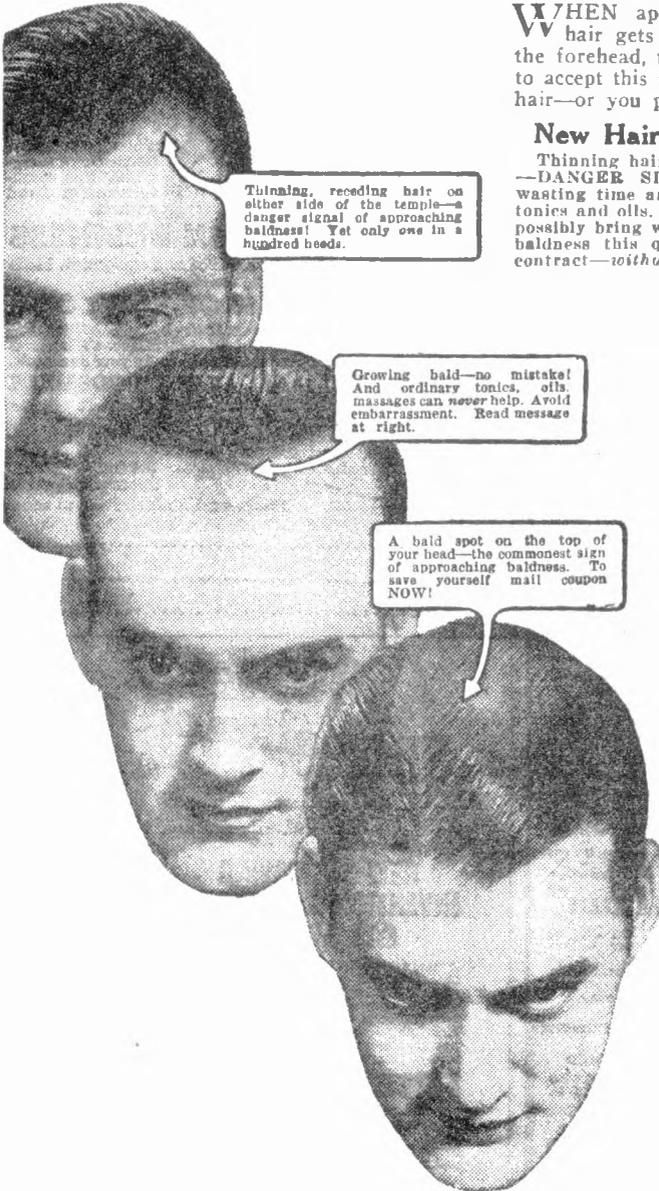
Newell Pharmaceutical Co.
Dept. 892, Clayton Mo.

WEAK, NERVOUS WOMEN

Rundown, miserable? If you suffer ovarian or bearing down pains, female troubles, irregular or painful periods, write Mrs. Ellen Lowell, social worker, 329 Mass., Kansas City, Mo., for a convenient home method whereby she and many others state they regained healthy, happy womanhood. This advice is free; she has nothing to sell.

Where do YOU want to Grow New Hair?

Decide NOW! Let me cover that spot with new hair in 30 days, or I'll mail you a check—I'll be the LOSER, not you!



Thinning, receding hair on either side of the temple—a danger signal of approaching baldness! Yet only one in a hundred heeds.

Growing bald—no mistake! And ordinary tonics, oils, massages can never help. Avoid embarrassment. Read message at right.

A bald spot on the top of your head—the commonest sign of approaching baldness. To save yourself mail coupon NOW!

WHEN approaching baldness threatens—when hair gets thinner and thinner on the temples, the forehead, the top of your head—that's the time to accept this no risk offer. I positively grow new hair—or you pay NOTHING!

New Hair in 30 Days—Or No Cost!

Thinning hair, falling hair, dandruff, dry scaly scalp—DANGER SIGNALS ALL! Stop delaying. Stop wasting time and money on ordinary salves, massages, tonics and oils, which you know from experience cannot possibly bring worth-while results! Save yourself from baldness this quick, easy way—through my iron-clad contract—without risk! For I GUARANTEE to end dandruff—stop falling hair—grow new healthy hair in 30 days—or I don't want a penny of your money!

Why does baldness begin to appear? Why do ordinary tonics fail to help? In most cases of baldness the hair roots are dormant—sleeping through lack of nourishment. And tonics fail to help simply because they treat only the surface skin. To make a tree grow you don't rub "growing fluid" on the bark. You get to the roots. That's the simple secret of my scientific treatment. It goes beneath the surface—nourishes dormant roots directly—stimulates them to new activity—encourages quick and healthy growth of new, vigorous hair.

At the Merke Institute, 5th Avenue, New York, many people have paid as high as \$100 for results secured. Now you can secure equally beneficial results at home for only a few cents a day—AT MY RISK. You grow new hair where you need new hair—or I pay, not you!

Coupon Brings FREE BOOK Explaining Treatment Fully!

Some cases of baldness are hopeless. I admit it. But so many thousands have benefited through my remarkable treatment that the facts are certainly worth knowing. Mail coupon for vitally interesting FREE booklet, giving the complete story—and, in addition, telling all about my iron-clad contract, which enables you to take the treatment without a penny's risk. No obligation. Sign and mail the coupon NOW! Allied Merke Institutes, Inc., Dept. 423, 512 Fifth Avenue, New York City.

Allied Merke Institutes, Inc.,
 Dept. 423, 512 Fifth Ave., New York City.
 Please send me—without cost or obligation—in plain wrapper, a copy of your book, "The New Way to Grow Hair," describing the Merke System.

Name.....
 (State whether Mr., Mrs. or Miss)

Address.....

City.....State.....

(My age is.....)

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send you these Ges- nine high quality, imported Drawing Instruments, 14 Other Tools and a Drafting Table—All included in my Home Training Course.

EMPLOYMENT

In These and Other Great Industries

Automobile—Electricity—Motor Bus—Aviation—Building Construction.

There are jobs for Draftsmen in all of these industries and in hundreds of others.

Aviation is expanding to enormous proportions.

Electricity is getting bigger every day. Motor Bus building is becoming a leading world industry.

Building of stores, homes, factories and office buildings is going on all the time. No structure can be erected without plans drawn by a draftsman. No machinery can be built without plans drawn by a draftsman.

I train you at home, in Drafting. Keep the job you have now while learning.

Earn As You Learn

I tell you how to start earning extra money a few weeks after beginning my training.

I will train you in drafting right where you are in your spare time. I have trained men who are making \$3,500.00 to \$9,000.00 a year. Get started now toward a better position, paying a good, straight salary, the year around. Comfortable surroundings. Inside work.

Employment Service

After training you I help you to get a job without charging you a cent for this service. Employers of Draftsmen come to me for men. Employers know they are not taking chances on men trained by me.

No Experience Necessary

You do not need to be a college man nor high school graduate to learn by this method. No previous experience necessary. I make a positive money back guarantee with you before I begin to train you.

If you are now earning less than

\$70⁰⁰ a WEEK

Write For My FREE "Pay-Raising Plan"



Mail this coupon at once. Get "My Pay-Raising Plan". It certainly points the way to success. You owe it to yourself to send for this book. Find out how I help you find big opportunities in practically all big industries. The book will come to you post paid and FREE. Mail the coupon for it today.

I train you at home!

Engineer Dobe

1951 Lawrence Ave., Div. 94-03, Chicago

Send me Free of all cost, "My Pay-Raising Plan". Also plan to earn money while learning to be a draftsman and proof of big money paying positions in great industries.

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

Post Office..... State.....

\$35100 CLEARED IN ONE DAY

So writes W. H. Adams of Ohio. Letter from California man reports \$11275 sales in three months; New Jersey \$4000 profits in two months; Pa. \$3000

profits in four months. Ira Shook \$365 sales in one day. Bram bought one outfit April 5 and 7 more by August. Iwata

bought one outfit and 10 more within a year.

J. R. Bert says "only thing I ever bought that equaled advertisement." John Culp

says: "Everything going lovely. Crispette

wrappers all over



town. It's a good old world after all." Kellog. \$700 ahead end of 2d week. Wholesale or retail. Big profits either way. No town too small. Business is pleasant, fascinating and dignified. You manufacture a food product.

WE START YOU IN BUSINESS

Furnish secret formulas, raw material and equipment. Little capital required; no experience needed.

BUILD A BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN

No limit to the sale of Crispettes. Everybody likes them. It's a delicious food confection. Write for facts about a business that will make you independent. Start now, in your own town.

PROFITS \$1000 MONTH EASILY POSSIBLE

Send coupon at once for illustrated book of facts. It contains many enthusiastic letters from others

—shows their places of business, tells how and when to start, and all information needed. Free.

Clip coupon now.

LONG-EAKINS CO.
340 High Street
Springfield, Ohio

Please send Book of Facts at once.

Name.....

Address.....

450 Miles on a Gallon of Gas!

According to a recent article by the president of the world's largest motor research corporation, there is enough energy in a gallon of gasoline if converted 100% in mechanical energy to run a four cylinder car 450 miles.

NEW GAS SAVING INVENTION ASTONISHES CAR OWNERS

A marvelous device, already installed on thousands of cars, has accomplished wonders in utilizing a portion of this waste energy and is producing mileage tests that seem unbelievable. Not only does it save gasoline, but it also creates more power, gives instant starting, quick pick-up, and eliminates carbon.



FREE SAMPLE and \$100 a Week

To obtain national distribution quickly, men are being appointed everywhere to help supply the tremendous demand. Free samples furnished to workers. Write today to E. Oliver, Pres., for this free sample and big money making offer.

WHIRLWIND MFG. CO.
999-897 Third St. Milwaukee, Wisc.

I'll Pay Your Bills



and give you a steady income for the rest of your life if you will take care of my business in your locality. No experience needed. Pleasant easy work can be handled in spare or full time.

No Investment Needed

I furnish all capital—I set you up in business, advertise you, and do everything to make you my successful and respected partner in your locality. Partner may be either man or woman.

All I ask is that you have ambition and can devote a few hours each day to distributing my famous products to friends and a list of established customers. High grade food products, teas, coffees, spices, extracts, things people must have to live.

Your Groceries at Wholesale

As my partner I furnish your groceries at wholesale. Big FREE supply contains over 32 full size packages of highest quality products. Quality backed by \$25,000.00 bond.

Iron-Clad Guarantee to YOU of \$15 a DAY Steady Income

I don't want you to take any chances. I guarantee your income. Send coupon at once for my signed guarantee of \$100.00 a week for full time or \$3.50 per hour for spare time work. I go 50-50 with my partners and give valuable premiums.

Easy for you to make big money I look out for welfare of my partners

\$42.13 in Six Hours

Jack Foster reports \$42.13 in six hours; Ruth Haufman with no previous experience made \$101.25 her first week. A. Pelletier earned \$117.50 the first five days. Hundreds of other partners doing as well.

I Furnish You Chrysler Coach



This is part of my FREE outfit to you, Chrysler closed car to use in our business—it is yours to keep—no contest.

C. W. VAN DE MARK, Pres. & Gen. Mgr.

Health-O Quality Products Co.

Dept. 1093-CC Health-O Bldg.

CINCINNATI, OHIO.

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SEND COUPON AT ONCE FOR APPLICATION

FREE FOOD PRODUCTS COUPON

C. W. Van de Mark
Health-O Quality Products Co.,
Dept. 1093-CC
Health-O Bldg., Cincinnati, O.

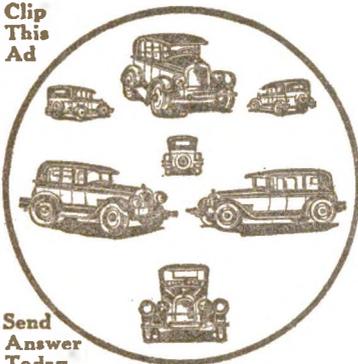
Without obligation on my part, send at once, application for territory and details of partnership offer, free food products.

Name

Address

City State

Clip This Ad



Send Answer Today

Win Nash Sedan Or \$2,750.00 in Cash

Someone who answers this ad will receive, absolutely free, a fully equipped 7-Passenger, Advanced Six Nash Sedan, or its full value in cash (\$2,000.00). We are also giving away a Dodge Sedan, a Brunswick Phonograph and many other valuable prizes—besides Hundreds of Dollars in Cash. This offer is open to anyone living in the U. S. A. outside of Chicago.

Solve This Puzzle

There are 7 cars in the circle. By drawing 3 straight lines you can put each one in a space by itself. When you do this send me your answer right away.

\$750.00 Extra for Promptness

In addition to the many valuable prizes and Hundreds of Dollars in Cash, we are also giving a Special Prize of \$750.00 in Cash for Promptness. First prize winner will receive \$2,750.00 in cash, or the Nash Sedan and \$750.00 in cash. In case of ties duplicate prizes will be awarded each one tying. Solve the puzzle right away and send me your answer together with your name and address plainly written. \$4,000.00 in prizes—EVERYBODY REWARDED.
John T. Adams, Mgr. Dept. 1423 323 S. Peoria St., Chicago, Ill.

See the World FREE!

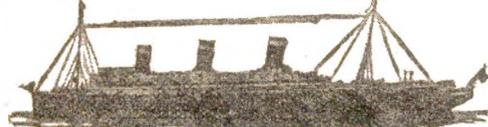


Taste Romance and Adventure In the Far Lands of the Earth.

How often you've longed to see for yourself the awe of Egypt's pyramids—the beauties of the gorgeous Mediterranean sunset—the squalor of China's ancient cities!

Spend a few years, or the rest of your life, tasting high adventure on the seven seas and in all the world's great ports—roving the earth's highways and byways! You can do it FREE—all your expenses paid—and earn a good salary besides!

Only one profession will carry you around the world at will, traveling like a gentleman, but that's the most interesting and pleasant work there is—Radio Operating! Easily and quickly learned, there's no other profession like it for the man who wants the experiences and pleasures of world-travel. Radio operators are needed—all sea-going ships like the one shown here must carry from one to half a dozen or more.



Take a Look Beyond the Skyline Without a Penny's Expense

Radio operators aboard ocean liners live luxuriously—they rank as officers of the ship. Meals, a private cabin, all other living needs are furnished free, and besides the operator draws a good salary. You can learn quickly and easily at home in your spare time to be a Radio operator through our practical training methods. Take a look at the FREE BOOK which tells how—mail coupon below.

This U. S. Government-recognized school has been training successful operators since 1914. Our graduates are all over the world. We maintain an Employment Department to put you on your own ship. The famous NACOMETER, a patented home code teacher given our students is recognized as the best and easiest way to learn the Radio code at home. A few short months, with the aid of the famous Naometer and our quick home training, and you too can be a fully qualified Radio operator, sitting in your cabin like the one shown above, bound out for Liverpool or Nagasaki! Read the Free Book that tells all about this fascinating profession and our practical Government-recognized methods of training you for it. Send coupon TODAY—no obligation. Special tuition offer now on, includes the Naometer, famous code teaching machine. Find out what Radio offers you. Act at once.

NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE
WASHINGTON, D. C.

SPECIAL OFFER COUPON

National Radio Institute,
Dept. 9-PX, Washington, D. C.

Gentlemen: Without obligating me in any way send me your free book and information about your Naometer, the Home Code teaching machine given with your course.

Name.....

Address.....

**TEST YOUR
ART
ability
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If you like to draw, test your natural sense of design, proportion, color, perspective, etc., with our Art Ability Questionnaire. Learn if your talent is worth developing. You will be frankly told what your score is.

Many Federal students are making \$2,000, \$4,000, \$5,000 and \$6,000 yearly. The Federal Course is recognized everywhere by art employers and buyers of commercial art. Learn at home in spare time, without previous training. *Personal, individual criticisms on your work.* Get this free test—send now for your Questionnaire.

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Your chance to get the education you missed. In spare time. New, easy, fascinating question and answer method. Endorsed by 12,000 High School Teachers. Equivalent to regular 4-year course. Certificate awarded. Write for FREE book "New Way to Get a High School Education at Home." TODAY. High School Home Study Bureau, Dept. 813 31 Union Square, N. Y. C.

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FREE
TRIAL

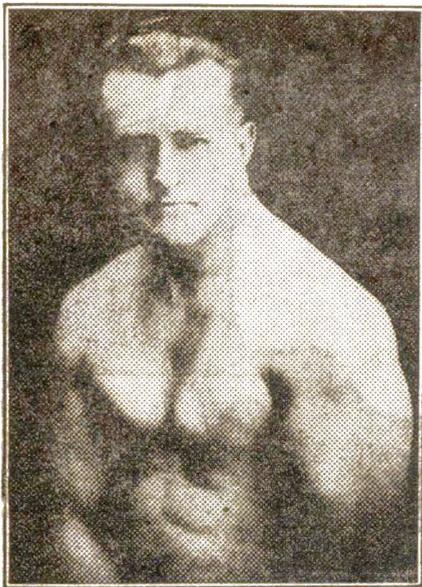
Theo. Audel & Co., 65 W. 23d St., New York, Dept. 818

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Your opportunity will never be bigger than your preparation. Prepare now and reap the rewards of early success. Free 64-Page Book Tell How. Write NOW for book you want, or mail coupon with your name, present position and address in margin today.

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LaSalle Extension University, Dept 365-R, Chicago



EARLE LIEDERMAN—The Muscle Builder
*Author of "Muscle Building," "Secrets of Wrestling,"
 "Secrets of Strength," "Men's Health," "Endurance," Etc.*

What Do Women Want Most?

Women want he-men for their husbands and sweethearts. None of this chorus-man stuff for the real girl. She wants to be proud of his physical make-up; proud of his figure in a bathing suit. She knows that it's the fellow that is full of pep and vitality that gets ahead in this world. He's got the physical backbone to back-up the mental decisions he makes. He'll win out every time.

Look Yourself Over!

How do you shape up? Are you giving yourself a square deal? Have you got those big rolling muscles that mean health and strength inside and out? The vitality that gives you the ambition to win out at everything you start? Make that girl admire you first and foremost for a real he-man, and the hardest part in winning her is over.

I Can Give It to You in 30 Days

In 30 days I can do you over so that she will hardly know you. I'll put a whole inch of solid muscle on each arm in 30 days, and two whole inches of rippling strength across your chest. I've done it for over a hundred thousand others, and I can do it for you. I don't care how weak and puny you are. I like to get them weak and puny, because it's the hopeless cases that I work with best. It gives me a lot of real joy just to see them develop and the surprised look in their eyes when they step before the mirror at the end of 30 days and see what a miracle I have worked for them.

You'll Be a He-Man from Now On!

And it's no temporary layer of muscle I put on you. It's there to stay! With these newly broadened shoulders, that perfect neck and great manly chest, you can maintain your self-respect in any society. Every woman will know that you are what every man should be—a forceful red-blooded he-man.

I Want You for 90 Days

If at the end of 30 days you think you have improved, wait till you see yourself at the end of 90 days. Then the friends you thought were strong will seem like children by comparison. I'm not called the Muscle Builder for nothing. My system scientifically builds real muscle faster than you ever imagined.

Watch Them Turn Around

Notice how every woman prefers the fellow who carries himself with head up. Notice how the broad-shouldered man always gets their eye. They want a dependable he-man when they make their choice—one who can protect them. And you can be that man.

Send for My New 64 Page Book

"Muscular Development"—It Is Free

And it's the peppiest piece of reading you ever laid your eyes on. And there's 48 full-page photos of myself and some of my prize-winning pupils. This is the finest art gallery of strong men ever assembled. Look them over. If you don't get a kick out of this book, you had better roll over—you're dead. Come on, then. Take out the old pen or pencil and sign your name and address to the coupon. If you haven't a stamp, a postal will do. But snap into it. Do it now.

EARLE LIEDERMAN, Dept. 3003, 305 Broadway, New York City

Earle Liederman, Dept. 3003 305 Broadway, New York City

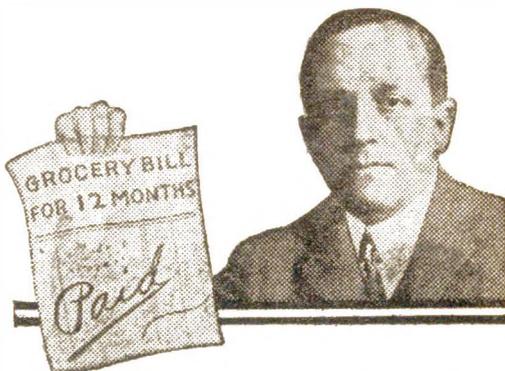
Dear Sir: Please send me, absolutely FREE and without any obligation on my part, whatever, a copy of your latest book, "Muscular Development."

Name.....Age.....

Street.....

City.....State.....

(Please write or print plainly)



Grocery Bills all Paid—and \$10 a Day besides

If you want plenty of money to pay all your grocery bills—and \$8 to \$10 in a day besides—just send me your name and I'll show you a new, easy way to get it. I'll give you the same chance I gave to Van Allen, of Illinois, who reports that he averages more than \$100 profit a week. You don't need any experience. G. Karnath, of Minnesota, writes, "Made \$20.35 the first 5 hours." Mrs. Hodges, of New York, says, "Never fail to make a profit of \$18 to \$20 a day." And right now I offer you the same opportunity I gave these people.

Big Profits for Easy Work

I am President of a million dollar Company. I distribute high-quality Groceries and other Household Necessities direct from factory to user through Authorized Local Representatives. Last year my customers bought fifteen million packages of my products. This put nearly two million dollars in the pockets of my Representatives. Now I invite you to share in these profits. I'll give you exclusive territory—help you make big money from the very start.

No Capital or Experience Needed

All you have to do is call on your friends and my established customers and take care of their orders. It is easy. I never sell to stores. You alone get the profit on all orders from your territory. YOU DON'T RISK A CENT. Keep your present job and start in spare time if you want to. You have everything to gain—not a penny to lose.

Don't send me any money—just mail the coupon. I'll send you my amazing new plan that offers plenty of money to pay all your grocery bills and \$8 to \$10 in a single day besides. And I will tell you how to get a newest model Ford Tudor Sedan without cost. Don't miss this opportunity. Mail coupon TODAY SURE.

MAIL THIS TODAY

Albert Mills, Pres., American Products Co.,
1203 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Tell me, without cost or obligation, about your wonderful new proposition that offers money to pay all my grocery bills and \$8 to \$10 in a day besides. Also explain your new Ford Offer.

Name

Address

© A. P. Co. (Print or Write Plainly)

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements

"What? Learn Music by Mail?" they laughed



"Yes," I cried, "and I'll bet money I can do it!"

ONE day after-lunch the office crowd was in the recreation-room, smoking and talking, while I thumbed through a magazine.

"Why so quiet, Joe," some one called to me. "Just reading an ad," I replied, "about a new way to learn music by mail. Says here any one can learn to play in a few months at home, without a teacher. Sounds easy."

"Ha, ha," laughed Fred Lawrence, "do you suppose they would say it was hard?" "Perhaps not," I came back, a bit peeved, "but it sounds so reasonable I thought I'd write them for their booklet."

Well, maybe I didn't get a razzing then! Fred Lawrence sneered: "The poor fellow really believes he can learn music by mail!"

"Yes, and I'll bet money I can do it!" I cried. But the crowd only laughed harder than ever.

During the few months that followed, Fred Lawrence never missed a chance to give me a sly dig about my bet. And the boys always got a good laugh, too. But I never said a word. I was waiting patiently for a chance to get the last laugh myself.

That gave the boys a good laugh. Some of them got on either side of me and with mock dignity started to escort me to the piano.

"Play 'The Varsity Drag,'" shouted Fred, thinking to embarrass me further. I heard a girl say, "Oh, let the poor fellow alone; can't you see he's mortified to death?"

The Last Laugh

I smiled to myself. This was certainly a wonderful setting for my little surprise party. Assuming a scared look, I began fingering the keys, and then, with a wonderful feeling of cool confidence, I broke right into the very selection Fred asked for. There was a sudden hush in the room as I made that old piano talk. But in a few minutes a fellow jumped to his feet and shouted, "Believe me, the boy is there! Let's dance!"

Tables and chairs were pushed aside, and soon the whole crowd was having a whale of a time. I played one peppy selection after another until I finished with "Crazy Rhythm" and the crowd stopped dancing and singing to applaud me. As I turned around to thank them, there was Fred holding a ten-spot right under my nose.

"Polks," he said, "I want to apologize to Joe. I bet him he couldn't learn to play by mail, and believe me, he sure deserves to win the money!"

"Learn to play by mail!" exclaimed a dozen people. "That sounds impossible! Tell us how you did it!"

I was only too glad to tell them how I'd always wanted to play but couldn't afford a teacher, and couldn't think of spending years in practice. I described how I had read the U. S. School of Music ad, and how Fred bet me I couldn't learn to play by mail.

"Polks," I continued, "it was the biggest surprise of my life when I got the first

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My Chance Arrives

Then came the office outing at Pine Grove. After lunch it rained, and we had to sit around inside. Suddenly some one spotted a piano in the corner. Fred Lawrence saw a fine chance to have some fun at my expense.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried, "our friend Joe, the music-master, has consented to give us a recital."

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Pirates' Trail— by Charles W. Tyler

Author of "Peelers in Peril," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THORP MCQUEEN.



ADUSTY and dilapidated wagon rattled noisily up the main street of San Marcos and creaked in toward the sidewalk in front of the squat red-brick

building that housed the bank.

The back of the vehicle contained a number of farming tools and an old saddle. A dog sat in a bit of available space on the seat, dignified and aloof.

A young man with lean, brown fea-

tures and a square jaw was driving. A battered, stained sombrero was pushed back on his head. A cigarette sagged from a corner of his mouth. His eyes, in which was a certain sullen defiance, considered the gold figures on the window of the bank, noting without particular interest the amount of the institution's capital and surplus.

The name of the man was Blaze Cody. He was typical of the men of the desert country; no different than others drawn to San Marcos because the town was their nearest source of supplies, of news, and amusement. And,

quite like those who made the fight to establish themselves on the small and scattered ranches that offered a means of independence, precarious though it was, he found himself drawn as though by a magnet to the sanctuary of Thorp McQueen.

Beside Blaze Cody was a woman: a youthful, girlish figure who sat in the battered conveyance like a queen on a throne. Once one looked into the face of Win Cody one forgot that she wore a faded calico dress and cotton stockings and run-down shoes. The brown hair and sparkling eyes and clean, tanned skin, the perfectly molded features, the pearllike teeth that lent charm to her smile, gave to her a certain vivid quality that lifted calico and patches above the commonplace.

The eyes of the woman studied the troubled face of the man beside her. She touched him lightly on the arm.

"Blaze," she said impetuously. "let me go in with you. I'll help you beard the lion in his den."

But the man shook his head. His reply was rough, impatient. "What could you do, kid him along? Fat chance of getting any favors out of that old jasper with a smile." He uttered a disdainful grunt; then added: "I ain't got where I have to get shelter behind a petticoat."

"Nobody is getting sheltered by petticoats any more that I know of," retorted Win Cody with spirit. "But there are a lot of women wearing pants nowadays. It's our ranch, and I have as much right to go in and see Mr. McQueen as you have."

"That's it, throw it up to me again because you do work outside!" said Blaze angrily. "I ain't asking you to."

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way, you fire-eater!" cried the woman. "You're getting to be an awful old crank."

"I got something to make me cranky," said the man petulantly. "If we don't get that loan we're dished."

"That's why I want to go and see McQueen with you," declared Win. "I guess I know how hard up we are."

"You stay here," ordered Blaze in a tone that encouraged no further argument. He thrust a leg over the side of the wagon and swung himself out over the high wheel. "I won't be gone very long."

Win Cody accepted the verdict with the usual feminine prerogative, which, however, was lost on Blaze as his high-heeled boots clicked up the steps of the bank.

In a dingy room at the rear of the bank sat Thorp McQueen. He was a thickset, formidable man of perhaps fifty. His features were well proportioned, with a certain smooth, hard spotlessness that bespoke frequent attention at the hands of one more adept than a San Marcos barber.

His hair was black, with faint traces here and there of gray. It was parted neatly in the middle and brushed with scrupulous care. His eyes were bleak and wintry—two colorless windows set behind half-closed lids. His mouth was hardly more than a slit, and from it he expelled words with but little lip movement. There was a very slight hawk-like arch to his nose.

Thorp McQueen possessed many characteristics of the aristocrat, but none of the thoroughbred. He was so unlike other men of the desert country that it seemed strange that he should have been content to confine his activities to Yermo County, and the sun-baked little town of San Marcos. That he was rich and powerful went without saying, for he had many interests.

He was not an easy man to approach, and those who sought loans from the San Marcos bank went about the task with considerable reluctance. On the other hand, there were men who had discovered with agreeable surprise that their applications received prompt and favorable attention. It was a strict rule

of McQueen that all obligations must be met promptly. The safety of the depositors as a whole demanded it, he was wont to point out. There were those who suffered because of the stringent manner in which the banker enforced this regulation.

Blaze Cody, upon entering the bank, nodded at Kurt Kraven, the cashier, with scant politeness. He jerked his head toward the door that led to a room in the rear. "McQueen in?" he demanded in a surly tone.

Kurt Kraven, slender, carefully attired, allowed his waspish countenance one faint flicker of recognition, that, by the broadest interpretation, might have been considered a smile. His mouth curled at one corner with a sardonic twist that reflected his utter contempt for the roughly dressed individual who had just entered. "I guess Mr. McQueen is expecting you, Cody." There was a slightly taunting inflection in the cashier's tone that was not entirely lost on Blaze.

"Yeh," said the latter with a trace of bitterness, "I reckon he is."

Kurt Kraven disappeared down a narrow passageway. He was gone some moments. When he reappeared, he indicated the door that led from the outer part of the room directly to the banker's private office. "All right, you can go in," he said in a tone that one might have used to a despised menial.

Blaze Cody's lips tightened a little, and he shot the cashier a look of hatred. However, he made no reply, but strode through the door beyond.

Thorp McQueen was sitting at his desk, deeply engrossed in some correspondence. He did not glance up, but continued his perusal of the typewritten sheets before him. Blaze sucked at his cigarette; then ground it out beneath his heel. Plainly ill at ease, he first allowed his eyes to rest on the man before him, and finally began a nervous survey of the room.

When Thorp McQueen had, as was his wont, given the visitor sufficient time to have become thoroughly impressed by the dignity of the institution represented and the importance of its president, he looked up and nodded.

"Hullo," was the terse greeting voiced by Blaze.

"You got the bank's notice about that interest on your mortgage, didn't you, Cody?" McQueen began. "And the note?"

Blaze steeled himself for the unpleasant task that confronted him. It was not his nature to fawn before any man, and Thorp McQueen least of all. He had never liked the banker, and it would have given him great satisfaction to have told this frozen-faced money grabber what he could do about collecting interest or principal. However, Blaze was married now, and there were certain responsibilities that went with this new venture, undertaken a little over a year before, that were not to be considered lightly.

He loved his wife, and because he did he had forsworn the sort of wild, free life that had claimed him before he had met Win. His attempt to establish himself on a small ranch with a few cattle as a beginning had not been particularly successful. On the contrary, it had every indication of becoming absolutely disastrous.

With his tongue well under control and his temper likewise, Blaze pointed out that he not only was without money to pay the interest that was due, but he needed an additional loan to carry him along until the few feeders he was fattening would be ready for market.

"All I want is enough to float me until fall," he explained. "A month, or six weeks, say. I had a run of tough luck, an' that stuff I turned into the back forty the other day will be a plumb loss if I try to get rid of it now. I figured to ship with the Broken Rafter outfit, but if yo're going to clamp down like

you was saying in that note the Codys are sunk."

Thorp McQueen drummed on the desk with his finger tips, while he looked patiently out of the window, waiting for the other to finish.

"You told me you'd see me through," Blaze went on, "and the way I figured it was you'd be covered no matter which way the crick run. I lost some stock, an' when Buzzard Tank dried up I was set for a pipe line right then. It was either that or put down a well, and there wa'n't time for that, even if I'd had money enough. I tell yuh, Mister McQueen, it's been a short grass year all around."

The banker thrust out his thin under lip, and his lids narrowed. Blaze instantly read refusal in the cold face of the other, and his heart sank. He found his glance traveling involuntarily to the window and the battered vehicle outside, with the girlish figure on the seat.

McQueen shook his head with pendulumlike deliberation, and considered the tanned youth before him apathetically, his gaze taking in the worn, high-heeled boots, the faded end-gate overalls, the patched shirt and stained sombrero.

"We're loaned up, Cody." The voice of the man at the desk was flinty. "And if we weren't, I couldn't give you any more time on either the mortgage or the note. It's a bad year. Presidential year always is. We're carrying too much paper right now, and we've got to turn some of it into cash."

"You mean you can't do anything?" demanded Blaze, unwilling to believe that he had heard aright.

"Another loan is out of the question."

"And you won't even give me more time to pay the interest on that mortgage?" Blaze Cody's brows furrowed.

"That's of secondary importance," McQueen stated. "But this note of yours that we hold must be taken up."

"I tell you, I haven't got the money!" expostulated Blaze in a sudden panic.

"You renewed it before, and told me not to worry about it because you'd look after me. I took you at your word."

The young rancher stared at the man before him, and like other men who had looked at McQueen, was afraid of what was behind that mask of a face.

"We won't go into that," said the banker brusquely. "I merely wanted to know what you intended to do about the matter before taking steps against you, Cody."

Blaze stiffened, while his eyes flashed ominously. His ever-ready fists clenched and he moved forward. "This is a dirty, rotten deal, McQueen!" he cried angrily, his better judgment swept away in a flood of fiery emotion. "Why didn't you give me some warning, instead of clamping down this a way? You ain't giving me a Chinaman's chance!"

"I sent you the usual notice," the banker said shortly.

"You didn't send it until after that note was due," accused Blaze.

"I sent it in time," declared McQueen, his voice growing ominous. "You didn't expect that I would come around and bring you violets for a couple of weeks, did you?"

"I got a good mind to bat you on the jaw!" Blaze flung out fiercely. "Confound you, you're out to get me."

The banker's fingers suddenly ceased their monotonous drumming. "It won't be healthy for you, Cody, if you start anything here," warned McQueen grimly. He jerked open the top drawer of his desk, and allowed his right hand to rest on a six-shooter within. With the forefinger of his left hand he touched a button that was concealed on the under edge of the desk top.

Kurt Kraven appeared in the doorway that led to the outer banking room almost instantly. He glanced from McQueen to Cody, and a sneer traced itself on his face.

"We have a bird here that is looking for trouble, I guess," the banker explained shortly. "I thought we'd better have a witness in case I had to resort to extreme measures."

"He must think he is a fighter," laughed Kraven jeeringly. "Somebody will take him for a ride yet."

"You get the money somewhere and come back to-morrow before closing time," directed McQueen with a malicious narrowing of his lids, "or you're going to get kicked off of that ranch of yours, bag and baggage. Go on, now; get out!"

CHAPTER II.

BLAZE CODY'S DILEMMA.

BLAZE CODY'S face became black with rage. A terrible look flamed in his eyes, and he ground his teeth. He looked from McQueen to Kraven, and back to the stony-faced banker. Only the fact that McQueen had a gun under his hand kept the rancher from attacking the banker with his fists.

With an effort that was openly apparent, he at last got himself under control.

"I'll get the money all right!" he cried. "You ain't going to get hold of my place as easy as you think you are. I'll show you something, don't you forget it, you crook!"

A tigerish expression came over McQueen's face. His fingers tightened about the butt of the weapon in the drawer. "If you don't shut your face and beat it," he warned, hunching his shoulders and leaning forward, "you'll probably get carried out of here."

Blaze was trembling now. Half reluctantly he turned to go. His eyes fell on the mocking face of the cashier.

"Some day I'll get you somewhere and knock that eternal smirk off your pasty face!" he threatened savagely.

"You ever try to put your hand on me," Kraven flung back, "and it will

be the last time you'll pull any rough stuff anywhere."

Blaze made no further retort, but jerked open the door and slammed out. The bookkeeper watched him curiously, and two or three people who had entered exchanged knowing glances.

As he stamped down the steps, Blaze flung out his hands in an eloquent gesture, signifying that his interview with Thorp McQueen had turned out disastrously.

"It's all off!" he called to his wife. "McQueen is going to call in our paper, and kick us out. But he don't know who he is up against. I know where I can get the money all right."

The woman slipped down and came to meet Blaze. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said.

"What could you expect of a skunk like that?" raged the man. "I thought it was too fine to last, that hombre telling me my credit was good right along! I don't know what's got into the fellow. He threatened me with a gun, Win!"

"I wish you had let me go in with you," the woman said. "You have an awful temper, and a man like that won't stand being roughed none."

Blaze continued his loud complaint, while he regarded the bank with black scowls. Win remonstrated, for a number of people had passed, and they had turned inquisitive eyes on the young rancher and indulged in low comment to one another.

"Please, Blaze, don't holler so. Folks are looking at us." Win's face reflected a troubled heart.

"I don't care for 'em!" cried the man. "And the whole town is going to hear about the dirty trick McQueen played on me. Wait and see."

"You'll only make a fool of yourself."

"Aw, shut up!" Blaze retorted rudely. "It's all right for you to fuss, but I'm the one that's got to get the money."

"It's our place," the women reminded

him, "and what hurts you hurts me, doesn't it? Come down to earth, Blaze. Standing here in the street yelling isn't going to help any."

The man turned his flushed face toward her. "Don't go preaching now; I won't stand it."

"I'm not preaching."

"All right, go to the store and get the grub; then wait for me. I'm going to see Ed Storm."

Sudden panic showed in the eyes of Win Cody. She clutched at the arm of her hot-tempered husband. "Please, Blaze," she pleaded breathlessly. "Please keep away from Storm. Everybody knows he's no good. You'll only get in trouble."

"Sure, I knew you'd put up a kick," Blaze cried passionately. "Next time I'll know enough to keep my mouth shut. A lot of fools have got an idea that just because Ed has got money he is a crook. Well, he ain't any more of one than McQueen, I'll tell you that." He dug a package of cigarette tobacco and a book of papers from his pocket. "I'm in trouble now, ain't I? You mind your business."

"You're my business," declared the woman with spirit.

"A darn poor business, I reckon," said Blaze bitterly. "You ought to be sorry you got in it."

"That's up to you and me," Win pointed out. "I want to help you out, but I don't like you to go to Ed Storm. You said yourself he wa'n't above dragging a long rope, or using a running iron to burn a brand on somebody's cows besides his own. The sheriff has been after him for bootlegging, too. You know you wouldn't get anything out of Storm, Blaze, unless you paid for it, or he thought he could use you."

Blaze brushed his wife's doubts and fears aside roughly, and stubbornly persisted in his determination to ask Ed Storm for help.

Storm was a burly young giant, some

thirty years old. He was brown and hard—a good-looking, reckless fellow whom restraint irked. He was inclined to be defiant of law or barbed wire that interfered with what he believed to be his personal liberties.

Storm, accompanied by Zeb Kendall, had driven up from Hell's Sink in the former's big car that afternoon. Blaze Cody, knowing that Storm was in San Marcos, now directed his steps toward McKelvie's Pool Room, confident that the other would be at this popular hang-out.

McKelvie's place, as the cigar store and pool room was called, did not have a particularly good reputation. Fist fights were a common occurrence, and there had been two or three affairs of late in which the participants had elected to "smoke it out," much to the annoyance of the citizens of San Marcos.

The men who frequented the pool room, for the most part, were not vicious characters, but rather loud-mouthed, hard-muscled young fellows of San Marcos and the surrounding country. McKelvie's offered entertainment and a social gathering place. However, it had been observed that a new element was putting in an appearance here with increasing regularity.

Tough, wise-cracking youths, with the stamp of cities on them invaded the town from time to time. They came in big, powerful cars, and lounged about the hotels, or shot pool at McKelvie's. No particular significance, however, was attached to this fact, for San Marcos was on a transcontinental highway, with motorists of all classes coming and going continuously. Strangers were more often considered collectively than individually, and if there were those who returned periodically, no one gave the matter a thought.

At McKelvie's, Blaze Cody attempted to soothe his injured feelings by gulping down a drink or two of bootleg liquor, which, provided one had the price, was

not difficult to obtain. The whisky, however, only served to loosen the tongue of the disgruntled rancher, and magnify the wrongs that he felt he had suffered at the hands of Thorp McQueen.

In a small room that opened off the pool hall, Blaze found Ed Storm. The latter was sitting at a table, engaged in earnest conversation with a number of men, all of whom were known to Blaze.

Storm, called to one side by Blaze, lent an indifferent ear at first. But as the young rancher poured out his bitter story the big man appeared to become increasingly interested. He knew McQueen but slightly, and while he had no reason to dislike the banker, he had always harbored an antagonistic feeling for the president of the San Marcos bank.

When Blaze had finished, Storm said gruffly: "Cody, if you want to throw in with me, I reckon I can help you out. I tell you this, though—there ain't no halfway business."

Blaze nodded. "I know." His blood-shot eyes searched the other man's heavy features. "I told Win you'd do something, but she's scared."

"If you're going to let your woman hand ride you," said Storm curtly, "it ain't no game to get in."

"I'm my own boss," Blaze declared.

"And you keep your tongue to yourself, too," Storm shot back. "The sheriff ain't a fool, and he'll make a play with his ear close to the ground. I'd sure be fretful if he heard the echo of a woman's voice; that pretty little girl of yours, in particular."

"He won't," declared Blaze; "I won't tell her. I'm just riding for your outfit in Hell's Sink, working out what I'll owe you, Storm."

When Blaze Cody left McKelvie's, a hard-faced youth with a slight cast in one eye left his seat on a bench at the rear of the pool room and went out to the street. On the sidewalk, Cross

Devoe paused to light a cigarette, while his furtive eyes followed the young rancher toward the battered wagon and the pretty woman in the faded calico dress.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOLDUP.

NUMBER 7, the *Firefly*, westbound on the Pacific Coast and Transcontinental's Canyon Division, moved sinuously through the gray gloom of the steep-walled Mustang Pass, and began its winding descent into the weird fastness of Death Canyon.

A long gliding train of express, baggage, and mail cars, with sleepy-eyed Pullmans trailing in their wake. An ever-searching finger of silver illumination stabbed the night ahead, exploring the way. Twin bands of steel, the tall mast of a semaphore, a bridge, grotesquely carved red walls, a deserted ranch house—all were caught up by the white beam and flung for a fleeting moment onto the screen of the night.

The battling roar of the exhaust gradually lost its staccato sharpness and took on a lower, softer note as the heavy train, quickly gaining speed, passed the crest and slipped faster and faster down the grade.

Low stars and a silvery desert night formed a mighty curtain that served as a back drop for the setting. The props were high-flung, close-bordering silhouettes that lined the right of way. There were kneeling giants, elephants' heads, flat-topped pinnacles that stood like peons beneath high, broad sombreros, shrouded figures bowed before a towering altar, squaws squatting in a row—the sculpturing of the gods; freaks of erosion.

Great bronze buttresses were heaved upward against the sky. There were bulky parapets, jagged shoulders, hogbacks, black-mouth canyons, which combined to make Death Canyon a wild and picturesque land. It was a place of

enchantment, and yet was mysterious and fearsome. Within its confines were nooks and corners with strange names, and of which fearful tales were told. There was Bandit Bend, Corral Viejo—old corral—Los Coches, McCarty's and The Gap Where Water Sinks, a box canyon that led to Chagrin Valley. Hell's Sink lay to the north.

Sharp echoes were flung out now, mocking voices that mimicked the sounds of the train, and were tossed back and forth in a continuous racket, gradually fading as the *Firefly* sped on its way.

McCarty's loomed ahead, a flat place with a huddle of buildings. There was a water tank, a pump house, a number of dwellings assembled in a row under a long roof, and the telegraph office. A signal mast, its arms outstretched, towered above the squat and dingy station. Red eyes glimmered above, and below the lazy glow of the operator's lamp cast its mellow light through small, smutched panes.

Suddenly there was a new sound. It was the quick rattle of horses' hoofs in the shadows under a sheer wall of rock a short distance from the station. The telegraph operator heard the noise, and went to the door, expecting that some cowboys from the ranches of the surrounding country would ride up. The "graveyard trick" was a lonely time, and even a passing hail would relieve the monotony.

Hardly had the door opened when a rider flung himself out of the saddle at the edge of the platform. The operator, squinting into the gloom, suddenly found himself confronted by a masked man, in whose hand was a six-shooter. A terse command was his greeting instead of the expected hail of cowboys.

"Stick 'em up!" The voice was like a dash of icy water. "Reach for the rafters, and, boy, you want to reach quick!"

Dazed, frightened, the youthful tel-

egrapher obeyed. He had been reading a magazine of adventure, and with stunning swiftness the realm of fiction had been supplanted by raw reality.

A second rider appeared, and a rope was tossed over the operator's arms. He was bound and gagged, and placed in a small shed adjoining the station. A big man, apparently the leader of the gang, entered the telegraph office and gave a quick look around.

"I guess everything is all right," he said when he came out. "I don't see any train orders."

"No chance of the hoghead running that board, is there?" asked one of the band of sinister figures that had gathered beside the little OS office.

The big man laughed contemptuously. "This is one job where we ain't forgetting anything, so you don't have to fret; but if it's going to make you feel better I'll slip you the little tip that there is a fellow on the *Firefly* to pull the air if that eagle eye takes it into his head to go through."

Far up Death Canyon there was a low murmur, and a moment later a fleeting flash from the headlight of the approaching train. Quickly the speeding express drew nearer. The little group by the telegraph office sheltered themselves in the darkness on the far side of the building, and waited in grim silence.

The engineer of the *Firefly* dragged a long, shrill blast from the whistle. But as the dot of red at McCarty's held its ruddy glow instead of fading to a green eye, he eased the throttle in, a scowl on his face.

"If that ham brass pounder is asleep down there," the man on the right side of the cab promised himself aloud. "I'll skin him an' hang his hide on a nail."

"Red eye!" called the fireman, looking expectantly across at the engineer. "Red as fire and as big as your hat. And what would the hammer-headed dispatcher be handing us at McCarty's?"

The engineman made an air application. "I s'pose you know the safe in the express car is cram' full of money and they got a couple guards riding." He bawled the message across the cab, adorning the statement with proper railroad punctuation.

The fireman received the information with an impatient oath. "And we would have to get a red board to-night!" he cried disgustedly.

The brakes squealed, and the *Firefly* quickly lost speed. The door of a vestibule opened and the train conductor, lantern in hand, leaned out and peered ahead. One of the guards in the express car got to his feet and looked anxiously from one of the small lights in a door.

"What place is this?" There was a note of unrest in the man's tone.

The messenger joined the other, and squinted out into the night. "Death Canyon," he declared after a moment. "We're slowing up at McCarty's."

The second guard fondled his sawed-off shotgun. "This isn't a water stop or anything, is it?" he demanded.

The messenger shook his head, while his hand quite unconsciously caressed the holster at his hip. "Might be train orders," he speculated, "but they generally get 'em on a hoop on the fly."

Panting and hissing, the huge passenger hog pulling the *Firefly* came to a stop opposite the small telegraph office at McCarty's. The building was on the opposite side from the engineer, and he crossed the cab to hurl a sulphurous interrogation at the third-trick man.

A vague something suddenly laid hold of him, and an oath faded from his lips as a growling murmur of perplexity. Half a dozen running forms appeared within his range of vision. His startled eyes ransacked the telegraph office just beyond, but it was empty.

"There's something up, boy!" he blurted out to the fireman.

And as a seeming echo to his words,

there was a smashing tattoo of rapid-fire guns. A burst of shots and savage little darts of yellow stabbed the semi-gloom. The canyon echoes caught up the reports and flung them from crag to crag with terrifying sharpness, multiplying them until it seemed as though a pitched battle was in progress.

Glass crashed and a leaden hail beat against the steel sides of the cars. Low voices of command directed the movements of the attacking outlaws. A warning addressed to those aboard the *Firefly* rang out following the first volley.

"Everybody stay where you are! Stay right on the train!"

Another voice broke in, a harsh, snarling voice. It belonged to the bulky leader of the robbers. "You hombres in that express car open up and come a-running if you don't want a taste of dynamite. What do you say?"

"When we come, we'll come a-fighting!" was the answer one of the guards hurled back.

"All right, shoot the job!" cried the leader, waving his hand at a man near him who held a gunny sack. "We'll fog 'em out pretty quick."

The dynamite was placed against the door at one end of the express car, while the guns in the hands of the bandits kept up their grim *rat-a-tat-tat*, firing in short, menacing bursts. A few moments later there was a dull explosion that flung inward with terrific force the door that barred the way of the train robbers.

One of the guards was struck down by the bent and twisted mass that hurtled from its hinges. The other took refuge behind a pile of express matter and blazed at the open doorway in desperation. The express messenger, pistol drawn, crouched near the guard and waited.

There was a renewed burst of firing, the guns of the robbers being directed at the open door of the car. When the spasmodic and savage volleys lulled, the

voice of the leader could be heard above the cries that came from the Pullmans and the excited jabbering of the Mexican families beyond the station.

"The next time we shoot the works we'll blow you to kingdom come! Show yourselves, you rats!"

The messenger, a veteran, elected to stay. He shook his head in stubborn determination, and clutched the butt of his revolver with fierce resolve. "To heck with you, you murdering brutes!" he shouted. "I'll make it a fight."

"You're a fool!" the guard gasped out. "If your fighting pay includes getting blown to Hades with dynamite, mine don't." He jerked himself erect and raised his voice in surrender. "I quit!"

The big leader of the bandits laughed jeeringly. "Tell that fool in there with you to make his peace with Allah, and come out with your hands in the clouds. Make it fast, hombre!"

A snarling bandit, a seven-pound sub-machine gun gripped in his two hands and held at his hip, was beside the engine shouting commands at the men in the cab. The engineer and fireman blundered down from the gangway and the renegade herded them ahead of him back along the train.

The guard in the express car hastily scrambled out through the rent in the end of the big steel carrier, and with the train and engine crew, was driven toward the rear. Constantly the vicious, modern-type rapid-fire guns used by the robbers menaced them.

While one member of the gang covered the crew, the remaining robbers centered their attention on the express car and its valiant defender. After a short but terrible fire directed through the torn end of the car, two outlaws carefully ventured within, their progress marked by a searing leaden hail that poured from the hot muzzles of their weapons.

The messenger, his six-shooter empty,

wilted before the bursts from the one-hundred-shot drums of .45-caliber rapid-fire guns.

With the same unhurried and methodical precision that had marked their activities from the beginning, the bandits set about opening the safe in the express car. The knob of the combination was knocked off with a sledge, and a small amount of "soup" with a short fuse, or a "squib," completed the preparation for "shooting the can." There was a dull grunt, and the door of the safe flung outward with apparently little effort.

A few moments work with a bar, and the inner compartment was laid open. Within were several packages. These were sealed with blotches of wax, and were consigned to a bank at Amargosa. The leader of the train robbers ripped away a portion of the heavy wrapping of one of the compact bundles and exposed neatly arranged packets of yellow-backed bills.

The big man uttered a grunt of satisfaction and laughed from behind the white-silk kerchief that masked the lower half of his face. The sound was muffled, exultant.

"Thirty thousand in twenty-dollar notes!" he cried, after a quick examination of the loot he held. His eyes went to the remaining packages. "And more to come! Bring that gunny sack."

The bandit who had poured the soup and attached the squib eyed the bundle of yellowbacks greedily. "I always liked them babies," he asserted. "A twenty is real money, feller."

Quickly the six money packages were transferred to the sack. The robbers then prepared to withdraw, firing several parting shots as they moved away from the train. For a little, their voices could be heard at some point beyond the station. In a few moments there were jeering shouts and the sounds of galloping hoofs as the train robbers departed.

Speedily the dim outlines of the riders faded and were lost in the night, while quick, excited voices came from the train. The telegraph operator was released, but upon returning to the key it was discovered that the instruments were dead. The wires were open both east and west of McCarty's. The robbers had cut the lines of communication that connected Death Canyon with the outside world, thus assuring themselves of additional time to make good their retreat into the many hiding places that the vast desert country offered.

CHAPTER IV.

CLEWS AT MCCARTY'S.

THE sheriff of Yermo County, "Mysterious Dave" Matthers, was a lean, tanned man close to thirty. He was keen-eyed and soft-spoken. As an officer, he patrolled his domain of some twelve thousand square miles as efficiently as many a policeman does a few city blocks, which is not to say that he pounded his beat with the clocklike regularity of his metropolitan brother, but he maintained law and order with amazing competence.

He had been a cowboy and a ranger, and his education had included lengthy lonely periods when a cow "haws" had been his only companion. He was a born tracker, which is equivalent to saying that he possessed the fundamental attributes of a bloodhound. Unfortunate indeed was the fugitive when Dave Matthers cut his trail, for he knew the desert and the water holes, and he knew human nature.

In consequence, Mysterious Dave made an admirable detective, though there were times when he strayed from the accepted methods of the gum-shoe fraternity.

His slumbers having been rudely disturbed by the hoarse announcement of "Old Man" Van Sickle, proprietor of the Palomas Hotel, that the train dis-

patcher at Amargosa wanted to talk to him on the telephone, he quickly donned trousers and ran down to the hotel office. The man with the eye shade, sitting before the train sheet on the graveyard trick, promptly unburdened himself as he heard the voice of the sheriff at the other end of the wire.

"There's heck to pay, Matthers!" he cried. "No. 7 was stuck up about half an hour ago at McCarty's."

"No!" The sheriff got a fresh grip on his trousers, and frowned into the mouthpiece.

"Tied up the operator, dynamited the express car, and killed the messenger." the dispatcher hastened on. "Cleaned out the safe, cut the wires both sides of McCarty's, and beat it. They used machine guns to cow the crew and passengers."

"I'm a son of a gun! How long ago was this, did you say?"

"'Bout half an hour. The *Firefly* pulled on west to Cuchara. I was just talking to the conductor. Everything is open east, trunk lines and the whole blank business. We got to make a patch 'way 'round through South City and Calienta Junction."

"How much did they get?"

"Over a hundred thousand, and a good portion of it in twenty-dollar bills. It was consigned to the bank at Amargosa to make up the monthly pay roll for the railroad shops and that big construction job at the dam."

"Any guards?"

"Sure. Two."

"They get hurt?"

"One of 'em was hit by the door of the car when the train robbers blew it in. He's stove up some, but the other feller is all right."

"No. 6 gone yet?"

"No; she's late."

"Well, you might tell that express guard with a whole hide to catch No. 6 and go to San Marcos, if he ain't busy. Reckon he can give us some informa-

tion. I'll be at the Desert House for breakfast."

Dave Matthers next telephoned the foreman of the Tyson Land & Cattle Co. in Chagrin Valley, and briefly explained that there had been a holdup. He was organizing a posse, he stated, and would need half a dozen riders who were familiar with the Death Canyon country, and two extra mounts. Could the Broken Rafter have some cowboys and horses at McCarty's directly?

The foreman was emphatic in making the assertion that they "were r'arin' to go." Punchers and horses would be at McCarty's *my pronto*.

The sheriff then hastened back to his room and dressed. Twenty minutes later, accompanied by Deputy Sheriffs Len Taylor and "Telluride" Thompson, he slid in under the wheel of his big car, kicked at the starter, and swung east on the highway toward McCarty's.

The telegraph operator at the OS office in the red-walled canyon was reluctant to express any opinion concerning the identity of the robbers, though he was free in voicing the fact that he had private suspicions of his own, which he was keeping under his hat.

"They tied me up an' throwed me in the shed there like a sack of junk," the youthful Morse man stated in reply to the officers' queries. "An' that big stiff that was givin' all the orders told me if I went to shootin' off my mouth to the sheriff or anybody like a wise guy, he would come back personally some night and shove a .45 down my throat out of sight." His voice rose in a petulant plaint. "So little Billy don't know nothin' an' don't want to know nothin'. I had all the holdups I want in mine, an' I'm goin' to get transferred out of here or I'll know why."

Matthers turned a mildly speculative eye on the operator. "Shaw now, sonny," he drawled, "it would plumb spoil it if you was to tell us who the train robbers were, or who you thought

they were. We kind of like to work these things all out for ourselves; it makes it more interesting."

Telluride Thompson grunted. "Sorta 'pears like this here big hombre was afraid yuh might recognize him," he said. He roughed the bristles on his chin with his thumb, and considered the sullen-faced telegrapher. "I reckon the head robber was tall an' han'some, with a mole on his knee an' long lashes."

"Oh, sure!" jeered the youth. "You got him down fine, Sherlock. Watson, slip this wise-cracker another shot."

"You didn't get a good look at him, did you?" asked Matthers.

"How could I lamp the guy?" retorted the operator ungraciously. "It was dark, an' them birds worked fast. All I know is the feller was big and he——"

"His voice was familiar somehow," ventured the sheriff hopefully, interrupting the other to complete the sentence.

"No, it wa'n't, either!" the telegrapher snapped out with marked impatience. "That wa'n't what I was goin' to say at all. This guy was big an' rangy, an' he had a white handkerchief tied over the lower part of his face for a mask."

"Yes, I see," murmured Matthers. He added: "You bach it down here, young feller?"

The youth shook his head. "I stay at San Marcos. There ain't anybody here but a section boss, some Mex families, and a track walker."

"How long you been working this trick?"

"Six months or so. I won't be here in the darned hole six months more, though; I'm getting sick of it."

"I shouldn't wonder." The sheriff moved toward the door, his brows creased with a frown.

Telluride Thompson and Len Taylor had already left the cramped little telegraph office, and now stood conversing on the platform outside.

Telluride was a veteran of the desert, a man close to sixty-five. He carried his years lightly, like men whom the outdoors has seasoned rather than aged. He had a bald head, a scamed, leathery visage, and drooping, gray mustache. He was small of stature and wiry. Sharp little eyes peered out from beneath gray, shaggy brows.

The sky was rapidly turning from pink to crimson as the dawn lifted the veil of night. The shadows in the canyon were retreating into nooks and corners of the bald, red rims.

"Comin' light," Telluride said as the sheriff came from the telegraph office, "an' we can look around a little."

While Telluride and the sheriff traced the hoofprints of the train robbers' horses out across the track and through a wash, Len Taylor talked with the section boss and several Mexicans. However, he learned little.

Matthers and the deputy, soon convinced that the fleeing bandits had struck north toward Hell's Sink and the red badlands, were about to return to the station when the keen-eyed Telluride made a discovery. He squatted over the hoofprints of a horse, studying them carefully. He grunted and paused to roll a cigarette; then went from track to track, reading there a strange story, brief but startlingly important.

"Matthers," he said in his heavy, rumbling voice, when at last he had completed his examination, "two of them hawses was led, an' they wa'n't carryin' no riders."

The sheriff bent over a track. For a short distance just beyond the railroad's right of way two animals left hoofmarks in which the heels and toes were equally impressed. These, however, were quickly lost in a maze of imprints of galloping horses.

"Slidin' the groove for a few feet, Telluride," observed the sheriff, dropping into the vernacular of the veteran tracker who finds "sign" that is very

clear. "And now let's go back toward the station and see if there was any led mounts this side of where the horses were left during the holdup."

Back along the trail toward the tiny telegraph office the sheriff and Telluride Thompson worked. All hoofprints showed accented toe impressions. In places these merely indicated trotting horses. But there was a short distance where all the animals had walked. Here, too, hoofmarks were slightly deeper at the toe, revealing the fact that each mount carried a rider. The number of horses were seven, the same as beyond the railroad.

A short time after Matthers and Telluride had completed their examination of the tracks of the robbers' mounts, the riders from the Broken Rafter arrived. The cowboys listened with impatience to the brief story of the holdup. The fact that the fleeing bandits were armed with vicious rapid-fire guns in nowise dampened their enthusiasm. They chafed at even the brief delay necessary to plan the pursuit.

One of the punchers cut for sign, and came back to report to his companions, "Slidin' the groove for Hell's Sink shore as thunder!" he stated. "Come on, let's go!"

"Take your time, cowboy," advised the sheriff. "We are not in a bit of a hurry. It won't be helping us to run into an ambush of machine guns. We're not after ordinary outlaws now. These hombres are sure poison, an' they likely won't rattle none before they strike, like a square-shooting rattlesnake.

"Just one of those killers in ambush behind a rock could wipe out our little party in a jiffy, and eight riders is too much buzzard bait all in one chunk."

Telluride Thompson glanced at the sheriff. Neither had made any revelations concerning their discovery. He nodded sagely, and rolled a cigarette. "We shore want to tread light an' cautious," he pointed out, "fer as purty

as Hell's Sink is to them natechoor-lovin' mavericks who like their local color in great big raw bunches, it ain't no place to spend ferever starin' holler-skulled at the sky. So yuh ranahans that is cravin' fer action jist hobble yore baser emotions, or some gun-slingin' hombres out yander will prob'ly be lookin' at yuh over the sights of a couple or so ring-tailed, lead-ravelin' coffin riveters."

CHAPTER V.

TRACKS.

THE riders from the Broken Rafter were deputized by the sheriff, and placed in charge of Telluride Thompson. Two or three had brought rifles besides their six-shooters; the others were supplied with .30-30s by Matthers. Len Taylor was delegated to accompany the posse.

"I'll drift along to San Marcos," the sheriff said, his eye for an instant meeting that of Deputy Sheriff Thompson, "and see what additional information I can pick up."

The posse swung off north across the flat toward the gap in the distant canyon walls that was the gateway to the desolate reaches stretching away beyond.

Mysterious Dave Matthers returned to the spot where the outlaws had crossed the railroad. He walked east along the track for a mile. At the edge of a piñon-dotted shoulder, where a dirt road swung close to the right of way, he found that for which he had been looking. Tracks.

Two men had, apparently, walked along the ties from the direction of McCarty's, using care to leave no telltale footprints. However, at this point they had left the right of way and crossed the ditch to the road. Two distinct sets of tracks were visible. One pair left impressions showing small heels and pointed toes. These, the sheriff reasoned, had been made by a man wearing cowboy boots. The right boot had

left a clearly defined crescent-shaped mark, indicating a spot where the inside edge of the outer sole had worn through.

The second pair of tracks had been made by shoes of medium size. These, the imprints revealed, had had worn rubber heels, the left one of which had been chipped and broken on the inner edge.

Dave Matthers spent some time examining both sets of tracks, detailing in his mind certain peculiarities for future reference.

The tracks in the dust led across the road to a spot where a car had been left in a clump of piñons. The machine had been driven back to the two ruts that served as a road and headed toward the highway, some four miles distant.

The sheriff returned to the station and climbed into his car. The telegraph operator came to the platform and watched him with a half grin on his face and sneering contempt in his eyes.

"Huh! Old John Law runnin' around with his nose to the ground like a hound. Wonder what sort of a scent he got?"

At the point where the road from McCarty's joined the transcontinental highway south of Death Canyon, Matthers stopped and again searched the ground. The tire marks of the car coming from the direction of the railroad continued east toward San Marcos.

The sheriff paused to roll a cigarette, then climbed in under the wheel and drove on. He arrived at San Marcos shortly before seven o'clock. No. 6 was not due for half an hour or more, and he decided to wait and talk with the express guard before eating.

There was little activity in the town at this hour. A tourist's car rolled up in front of a gas station, and the attendant came hurrying from a restaurant across the street. A youth was sweeping the sidewalk in front of the drug store.

The sleepy-eyed night clerk of the

Desert House came and stood in the doorway, yawning. Upon discovering the sheriff's car parked at the curb, he glanced curiously up and down the street. Seeing Matthers a short distance away caused him to display a sudden interest in the matter. Something had happened, or the officer from Palomas would not be in San Marcos at this time of morning.

The clerk turned and called to the proprietor, who had just come downstairs. "The sheriff is out here. Wonder what's busted loose now? Bet he's after some bootleggers."

The owner of the Desert House, a round little man with pink cheeks and bulging eyes, shrugged his shoulders and grunted. He waddled out to the piazza and hailed the approaching officer.

"Mornin', Dave Matthers. Out airy, ain't ye?" Curiosity was reflected in the salutation.

The sheriff nodded, and regarded the other with a half-whimsical light in his gray eyes. "Howdy. Going to be warm." He paused; then he added, "I'll be in for breakfast directly. A feller will be here on No. 6, and I'll wait for him, I reckon."

At that moment a battered and dusty wagon came clattering noisily up the street. The driver was Blaze Cody. He was grimy and unshaven. His eyes were bloodshot, and there was in them a certain light of desperation and defiance. He slowed down near the hotel and drew toward the sidewalk, but as the sheriff turned around, the young ranch man jerked at the reins and drove on.

Blaze gave a short nod of salutation, while sudden alarm flashed across his face as he found the steady gaze of Dave Matthers fixed on him. He drove on down the street and turned a corner as though urged by the thought of a forgotten errand.

The sheriff's keen eyes lost nothing of all this.

The proprietor of the Desert House—Edom Moore—pursed his lips. "I heard Cody was goin' to lose his place," he said, making a smacking sound with his mouth after the manner of one who has delivered a particularly choice bit of gossip.

"Is that so?" Matthers was only indifferently interested, it seemed.

"E-yup." Edom Moore nodded his head emphatically. "I got it straight from them what knows."

"I reckon," drawled the sheriff. "You heard it from the druggist, who got it right from the garage man, who had it from his wife, and she——"

Mr. Moore leaned closer. "No, sir! You're wrong, Dave Matthers. Kurt Kraven boards here. He's cashier at the bank, an' he was tellin' me. I guess he oughta know. He says Cody can't meet his obligations, an' McQueen is goin' to shut down on him. Goin' to call in a lot of the risky paper 'round here, McQueen is. Got to pectect the deapos'ters. He gin Cody till to-day to raise money fer his note an' the int'rest on the mortgage. Blaze was wantin' to borry more money, an' Kurt 'lows they had a reg'lar set-to."

"Neighbor Kraven is right talkative, I take it," the sheriff observed dryly.

"Oh, everybody knows about Cody," declared the proprietor. "It ain't no secret that he's hard up. Don't amount to much, Blaze don't. I'm right sorry fer his wife. Win is a dog-gone up-an'-a-comin' leetle woman. Smart as a whip."

Matthers felt for his cigarette tobacco. Edom Moore shifted his weight from one foot to the other and leaned against the door jamb.

"McQueen took over the Lazy D Ranch a spell back," he went on. "Pinched old man Dale when beef was down, an' that's how another cowman bit the dust."

Matthers nodded. "I know."

"I dunno as you'd call it reel accommo-

datin'," said Edom, "but ye can't run a bank on sentiment"—nodding his head sagely. "That's what McQueen says."

The sheriff appeared not to hear, but his mind was working.

"Who's running the Lazy D?" asked Matthers.

"McQueen," said the other. "Mike Frame is his foreman. You knew him, didn't ye, sher'f?"

Matthers shook his head. "I heard Telluride Thompson say he came up from down below somewhere, but I never saw him."

"There's Frame now," said Edom, jerking his head to indicate a burly figure approaching.

The sheriff glanced toward the newcomer. He saw a man of perhaps forty-five, attired as a rancher. A wide-brimmed hat was settled firmly on his head, and beneath it was a cold, dark face set with agate-hard eyes. The jaw jutted at an aggressive angle, and the mouth was thin-lipped and cruel.

A thick neck and broad shoulders lent ready support to the first impression of size and strength. And yet, for all his bulk, Mike Frame moved with a liteness that was surprising. It was written in his face and corroborated by his general bearing that he was a braggart and a bully. People feared him as much as they hated him.

There was even a subdued note of deference in the voice of Edom Moore now. "Reckon he's comin' down fer breakfast. In town early." The proprietor of the Desert House raised his voice and called a greeting to the Lazy D foreman. "Mornin' to ye!"

Mike Frame's reply was a curt nod, while he fastened his eyes on the slender form of Dave Matthers in a cold scrutiny that was half curious, half contemptuous.

The sheriff deftly completed the task of rolling his cigarette, and ran his tongue along the brown-paper flap, his eyes examining the man before him.

He missed nothing in that momentary survey—noted the baggy coat, the vague suggestion of something hard and lumpy close to the armpit, the coarse trousers and cowboy boots.

The searching eye of the sheriff also saw something else. A footmark in the dust of the sidewalk behind Mike Frame showed a crescent-shaped scar where a part of the sole had been worn.

Dave tensed slightly, and he gazed straight at Mike Frame. Edom Moore, his mouth half open, sensed the fact that something was wrong. The introduction that was on his tongue died in an inarticulate mumble. With bulging eyes, he watched the face of the Lazy D man take on a purple tinge as the crisscross of fine veins on Mike Frame's cheeks suddenly became livid. A terrible look of rage flamed on the face of the foreman.

"Take a good look so you'll know me the next time yuh see me!" Mike Frame flung out with an oath.

Edom Moore forced himself forward, his eyes wide and startled. "Say, Mike!" he gasped. "Wait! Wait, now. This is the sheriff."

"I don't give a hoot if he is!" cried the other. "You'd think I owed the fellow money, the way he's eyin' me over. Just because he's got a little authority ain't no sign that he can give me his dirty looks."

The loud, angry voice of Mike Frame quickly brought the Desert House night clerk and one or two others.

The sheriff's lids narrowed a little and he watched the big man before him with a level gaze. "What were you doing in Death Canyon last night?" Matthers demanded.

The question brought a sudden start from Mike Frame, and he shot a hasty glance around him. In a moment, however, he had regained his self-confidence. His hands clenched, and he snarled out an oath as he lurched threateningly toward the sheriff.

CHAPTER VI.

MIKE FRAME'S THREAT.

NUMBER 7 was stuck up at McCarty's this morning," said Matthers, "and I found tracks in the road a mile east of the station that looked a whole pile like your footprints, Frame."

"Oh, yuh found tracks that looked like mine, did ye?" sneered the other. He stood, feet spread, leering defiantly at the sheriff. "What yuh goin' to do about it?"

"You admit you were in Death Canyon, then?"

"Sure I was in Death Canyon!" exclaimed the foreman snarlingly. He uttered a short, harsh laugh, and added: "Last week."

"Were you there last night?" the sheriff persisted.

"Say, yuh must think I am a greenhorn," retorted the other. "It's none o' your business where I was last night. But, I tell ye, Mr. Sheriff, if ye want to find out where I was an' what I was doin', yuh ask Thorp McQueen. He knows."

Edom Moore, having recovered somewhat from his first excitement, shouted the news. "Hey, the *Firefly* was held up at McCarty's!"

Instantly the word spread, and people hurried to the street corners for more details. A man, coming from the station, reported that the interrupted circuits were being patched around the breaks, and that the first reports of the train robbery were now beginning to burn the wires.

San Marcos became feverish with excitement. An extra from the West pulled in, and the crew supplemented the earlier meager reports with details of the looting of No. 7 and the killing of the express messenger.

Mike Frame, confronted by the sheriff and stung into a black rage by the officer's insinuation, was in a dangerous mood. With fingers spread, his whole

body rigid, he stood in a threatening attitude.

"I never saw yuh before, sheriff," he declared in a voice that was hoarse with anger, "an' I don't know nothin' about yuh, an' what's more I don't want to. Reckon you're a cheap four-flusher, but ye can't scare me none. Yuh the same as accused me of bein' mixed up in this here holdup. Some time I'll git ye fer it!"

"I wouldn't throw talk that a way, if I was you," advised Matthers, his lips tightening a little.

"Ye ain't got nothin' on me, hombre!" thundered the Lazy D foreman. "I got a clean bill, an' there is friends of mine who can make it mighty hot fer yuh next 'lection."

At that moment Kurt Kraven appeared in the door of the hotel. His eyes rested on the sheriff and Mike Frame facing each other in a threatening attitude. A look of consternation spread over his thin, pale face. Edom Moore turned and saw the cashier, and lumbered toward him, his hands waving excitedly.

"The *Firefly* was held up, Mr. Kraven," the hotel man exclaimed in a low tone. "The sheriff 'lows Mike was down that a way last night, an' is s'picious of him."

Kurt Kraven flung himself forward, his lips twisted in an expression of mingled alarm and derision. He pulled up in front of Matthers, his voice high-pitched and petulant.

"You want to look out, sheriff, and not make any serious charges until you are sure of your facts."

"I was just asking Mr. Frame some questions," Dave Matthers pointed out, eying the peevish-faced cashier tolerantly, "and he got on his high horse complete."

"I should think you would be organizing a posse to chase the robbers," cried Kraven, "instead of coming to San Marcos insulting innocent citizens."

"That sounds reasonable," the sheriff admitted. He turned and regarded Frame, while his eyes took on a steely glint. "Only innocent citizens don't usually start out freighting artillery this early in the morning."

"Ye tellin' me I got a gun?" cried the Lazy D foreman.

"I reckon," Matthers said softly.

"Well, then, I oughta use it!" shouted Frame, his rage momentarily getting the better of him.

"Hold on!" interposed the cashier in a panicky voice. "Hold on, Mike! Don't start anything." Kraven edged in between the two men, his back to Frame. To the sheriff, he said angrily: "If you want to know, there are men in this town that you could suspect of that train robbery and not be making a fool out of yourself."

"And who might they be, neighbor?" drawled Matthers.

"That's for you to find out," retorted Kurt Kraven. "But as for Mike here being mixed up in it, why, it's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of." The cashier laughed nervously. "I happen to know that he spent the night at Mr. McQueen's house." He waved his hand as though his statement dismissed the matter. "You'll have to guess again, sheriff."

A crowd had gathered in front of the Desert House. Among the excited townfolk were Ed Storm, Zeb Kendall, his foreman, and Blaze Cody. Storm, his bulk looming above those about him, was a conspicuous figure. His sombrero was set at a jaunty angle, and his tanned, handsome face was wreathed in a half-derisive grin. Boldness and audacity were reflected in his eyes and in his movements. His heavy voice boomed out now, its tone as noticeable as his huge frame.

"What's the matter, Matthers?" he called. "Yuh look worried." There was a taunt in the voice of Ed Storm.

The sheriff turned and swept the

other with a glance that was far from friendly. He nodded shortly.

"Reckon ye'll have them robbers eatin' supper behind bars, sher'f," continued Storm sarcastically.

"Yah!" exclaimed Mike Frame in a snarling voice. "He thought shore he had one of 'em jest now."

Matthers did not reply to Storm. He found it difficult to control his temper. There had been a sharp retort on his tongue, but he caught it in time. It would not do to let folks know that Storm got under his skin. He turned and silently elbowed his way through the crowd.

It was a well-known fact that there had been friction between Storm and the sheriff. They had come close to clashing more than once. Ed Storm's past was not without blemish, and at no time was he above suspicion in the eyes of the law. He was a fearless type of man, and one to whom adventure and danger offered irresistible appeal.

He had the reputation of being fast and deadly with a six-shooter. He did not avoid trouble. It had been said of him that he had bred his cows to produce calves with astonishing frequency, as the remarkable growth of his herd seemed to testify. Too, much of the liquor of moonshine variety that found its way into San Marcos and other towns of the desert country was believed to flow out of Hell's Sink.

Storm, however, had proved too smart for the sheriff's office and association detectives, with the result that there never had been sufficient evidence against him to make his arrest possible. His riders were all men after his own stamp, and typical offshoots of the country known as Hell's Sink.

At the outer edge of the crowd on the sidewalk in front of the Desert House, Matthers came face to face with Blaze Cody. Something about the young rancher drew the sheriff's attention, and he fixed his eyes on the other sharply.

Blaze, unshaven and surly, evaded the officer's scrutiny and turned away.

"Cody, I want to see you a minute," said Matthers.

Blaze gave a perceptible start, while a strange, hunted look appeared in his eyes. "Me?" he questioned, pausing with apparent reluctance.

The sheriff stepped close to the rancher, and his voice dropped. "Cody, what's this I been hearing? You going to lose your place?"

Blaze, his eyes wide and bloodshot, licked his dry lips. He was plainly flustered. "Who—who told you that?" he managed to ask, a hint of defiance in his voice.

"It don't make any difference who told me," retorted the sheriff. "If it's true, I'm sorry to hear it. You and your wife worked hard out there, I know."

"I—I don't know yet, for sure," Blaze stammered. "I'm going to try and borrow the money to-day." He gained courage. "McQueen played me a dirty trick, sheriff." His eyes grew dark with rage at the thought of the banker's attitude toward him. "And some time I'm going to get that smooth-tongued skunk."

"You can't afford to do anything you're going to be sorry for, Cody," Matthers reminded the other. "You'd just be making somebody I reckon you think a heap of mighty miserable."

The sheriff moved off, turning his steps toward the station, as No. 6 had whistled in the canyon to the west. Blaze Cody looked after the rangy form of the officer, a look of uncertainty in his eyes.

The express guard who had been on No. 7 at the time of the holdup found the sheriff waiting on the platform when he got off of the eastbound train. He came forward and introduced himself as soon as he had identified the officer.

"My name is Jim Smith," he said. "The dispatcher was talking to me on

the phone. He said you wanted to see me. I got No. 6 at Cuchara."

Matthers nodded. "Yes, I thought you might be able to give me some information about the train robbers. They sure hit you a jolt at McCarty's, I reckon."

"I'll say they did," replied the other. "I'd 'a' stuck and made a fight out of it, but when they started using dynamite and raking the car with machine guns, I thought it was time to quit." It was plain that the guard felt that this statement in defense of his surrender was called for.

The sheriff nodded. "Wa'n't much else you could do," he admitted. "Now, if it's agreeable to you, Mr. Smith, we'll drift over to Edom Moore's hotel and get a snack. Edom's wife fixes to serve some right smart hot cakes."

"I'm dog-gone hungry," said Jim Smith, "and that sounds good to me, sheriff."

As they walked toward the Desert House, Matthers listened to the express guard's account of the holdup. Jim Smith, it seemed, had certain impressions that he would carry in his mind for a long time. For example, there had been the vicious bursts of machine-gun fire, the shocking impact of the dynamite, and the terrible darts of yellow from hot muzzles. The *spang* of bullets, too, the savage crashing of bullets against the steel sides of the express car, and the snarling voices of the bandits were unforgettable.

As the two men seated themselves at a table, Matthers saw Mike Frame and Kurt Kraven enter the dining room. The pair took their places in a far corner. The Lazy D foreman, still wrathful, glanced toward the sheriff and his companion. He then made some remark to the cashier that caused the latter to voice a mild remonstrance.

"Sh! Take it easy now, Mr. Frame." Kurt Kraven raised an admonitory palm. "The sheriff thinks he is doing

all right, but I'll have Mr. McQueen see him. It won't do, of course, making rash accusations at random."

Cross Devoe, the gaunt youth who in recent weeks had come to be almost a fixture at McKelvie's Pool Room, slouched in and flung himself into a chair at the table adjoining the one at which sat Matthers and Jim Smith. The newcomer, his hard features in nowise beautified by the leering cast in one eye, surveyed the occupants of the dining room with a brief glance that reflected a sullen, vicious something entirely foreign to the atmosphere of the quiet little hotel.

Ed Storm swaggered in after a few moments. He glanced about him; then dropped into a chair at the table with Cross Devoe. He nodded at the youth. "Hello, feller! How are you this mornin'?"

The other allowed a twisted grin to flicker for an instant on his face, while he toyed nervously with knife and fork. "Aw, so-so."

Mike Frame glowered at the back of Storm's head. "It's a wonder that half-wit sheriff wouldn't arrest that big rustler."

Kurt Kraven looked straight into the eyes of the Lazy D foreman, his lips compressed, and nodded his head slowly. "Perhaps he will. If Storm will steal cattle, I guess he would hold up a train."

CHAPTER VII.

GUN TALK.

YOU get a close look at any of the train robbers?" the sheriff asked Jim Smith.

"I was pretty close to some of them at different times," said the guard.

"Think you would recognize any of the bandits if you saw them again?" As he spoke, Matthers prepared his steaming hot cakes, using generous helpings of butter and sirup.

"Well, now, I don't know," said the

guard. "They were masked, of course, and it was too dark to see any of them very good."

"I expect." The sheriff gulped down some black coffee.

Mrs. Moore, the stout, pleasant-faced wife of Edom, having a moment's respite from serving the hungry patrons of the popular Desert House dining room, paused beside the table at which sat the sheriff and Jim Smith.

"I declare," she said, "but it beats my time what things is comin' to, with all these robberies an' murders." Mrs. Moore wagged her head sadly. "My, I should think ye would be all wore out, sher'f!"

Matthers smiled. "It isn't as bad as that, mother," he replied. "I got some right smart deputies, and that takes quite a load off a feller's shoulders." He nodded at the express guard. "Mrs. Moore, meet Jim Smith. Jim was on the *firefly* when it was held up early this morning at McCarty's. He was one of the money guards." The sheriff's voice was raised slightly above its customary drawling softness of tone.

"Land sakes! I want to know." Mrs. Moore bowed stiffly. "I admire to meet ye, Mr. Smith. Wa'n't ye lucky, not to get shot?"

Instantly all eyes in the room were turned curiously on the man with the sheriff. Mrs. Moore moved away in response to the Chinese cook's announcement through the slide that two orders of hot cakes were ready.

The express guard sensing something unusual, turned a questioning gaze on the sheriff. The latter dropped his eyes and attacked his hot cakes. In a low tone, however, Matthers spoke to Jim Smith without raising his head.

"Smith, keep your ears open sharp. Don't look around. Go on eating, but see if you can recognize any of the voices you hear. Some of that train-robber outfit slid the groove for San Marcos instead of riding north with the

main bunch. Two of them, to be exact. I reckon they're not far away."

Jim Smith nodded his understanding, and began to tune his ears to each voice that came to him.

Two burly ranch men, having dropped in for their usual morning cup of black coffee, were engaged in a rather noisy argument concerning the merits of a horse. Mike Frame, watching Matthers and the express guard from the corner of his eye, was talking excitedly to Kurt Kraven. Now and then his voice rose sharply in spite of the cashier's remonstrances. His face was black.

Ed Storm and Cross Devoe could be heard reviling each other concerning some happening of little importance. The rumbling voice of the former was at a pitch above all others at times.

Suddenly Jim Smith laid down his knife and fork and gripped the edge of the table. His lids narrowed, and a look of intense hatred flamed in his eyes.

"Great Scott!" he breathed. "I must be hearing things." He shot the words at Dave Matthers in a sharp whisper.

The sheriff allowed his gaze to travel slowly about the room as he surveyed the men gathered there. The tensing of his nerves was reflected in a sudden clenching of his fingers.

"What is it, Smith?" His lips barely moved: his eyes were shot with a hard light.

"By all that's holy, sheriff," muttered the other in a guarded undertone. "I could swear that I was back at McCarty's, in the dark, listening to a big brute snarling out orders between bursts of those murderous rapid-fire guns." Jim Smith shook his head. "It must have been smoldering in my brain ever since we came over here—that darned something that brought back the scene down there in the canyon."

"You got a six-shooter?" Dave Matthers' face was like a grim mask.

Jim Smith nodded. "And r'aring to use it!" he ground out through his teeth.

Kurt Kraven, also, had seemed to perceive a suddenly tense situation. He had been looking past Mike Frame, his eyes fixed on Cross Devoe and Ed Storm. He shot a glance at Matthers now; then stared hard at Jim Smith. He looked away to find Devoe leering at him with lynxlike furtiveness.

Kraven said something to Frame in a low voice. The Lazy D foreman started, and his awkward hand brushed his coffee cup to the floor. A strange silence that had momentarily settled over the dining room was shattered by the falling bit of crockery. There was one terrible moment, and then the storm broke.

Jim Smith kicked back his chair and sprang to his feet, a savage triumph on his face. One of the ranchmen, whose watchful eye had never left the face of the sheriff, said something to his companion and jumped up.

Cross Devoe's face went livid, and he lurched erect, his right hand jammed into his right-hand coat pocket. Ed Storm swore explosively, and pushed himself violently away from the table.

A strange expression rippled across the pale face of the bank cashier, leaving a myriad of lines and little wrinkles that worked a peculiar transformation on a countenance usually undisturbed.

Mike Frame, slit-eyed, took in the scene, and sprang to his feet with a bellowed warning. His right hand flashed upward and a .45 appeared in it with amazing quickness.

Jim Smith's six-shooter leaped from a shoulder holster, but its movement was intercepted by a muffled report that came from the direction of the table at which Cross Devoe and Ed Storm had been sitting.

Mrs. Moore dropped two plates of hot cakes and screamed. Somewhere outside a man's voice uttered an excited shout. Running feet pounded in the street.

Instead of a peaceful little hotel din-

ing room, Edom Moore's place became an arsenal. Six-shooters appeared on all sides. In a bewildering instant the Desert House had become a battleground.

As his bulk reared erect, Ed Storm jerked out a six-gun. Mike Frame was swinging his .45 in front of him as though to forestall possible attack.

Jim Smith's body stiffened, and a look of surprise appeared in his eyes. His lips parted, but his voice died in a whisper. His gun sagged and fell to the floor. An instant later the express guard slumped on top of the weapon.

The sheriff's six-shooter had appeared in his hand even before Cross Devoe fired his fatal shot, but it was evident that Matthers' mind held a certain doubt. He hesitated, and his questioning gaze rested for a moment on Jim Smith. Then he heard the shot, and saw that the guard had been hit.

Cross Devoe, one side of his coat thrust forward by the automatic pistol which he gripped in his right hand, took a step backward. His clawlike fingers tightened again about the butt of the gun in his pocket. The unseen muzzle shifted from the swaying form of Jim Smith and now hungrily sought as a mark the body of Dave Matthers.

The sheriff saw the menacing bulge of the garment and realized that death lurked there. His .45 blazed instantly. The peak-faced gunman, wearing a jeering, twisted grin, lurched sideways. He groped toward the floor, his hands searching for a path through the blackness that had closed about him.

Ed Storm shouted: "In the name of Manitou, what ails yuh loco fools?"

Mike Frame, snarling and vengeful, cast about him with eyes shot with blood. But before he had decided to take part in the fight, he found the muzzle of the sheriff's gun covering him.

Matthers' steely eyes swept from the foreman to Ed Storm. "Put up your

guns," he commanded shortly, "or somebody is going to pick 'em off the floor."

Both men obeyed.

Half sheepishly the larger of the ranchmen, whose peace of mind had been rudely disturbed, slipped his six-shooter back into its shoulder holster. His companion turned a grim-faced, questioning stare on the sheriff.

"What is it all about?" he demanded.

Kurt Kraven's face was chalky. His eyes were blazing and his jaw set. "It's a beastly mess!" he cried. "What was that fool doing anyway, jumping up and pulling a gun like that? The trouble with you officers is that you're too nervous with your trigger fingers!"

Edom Moore appeared in the doorway that led to the office, his little eyes fairly popping from his head. "Thunderin' blazes!" he piped in a shrill voice. "What's ailin' ye danged gunpowder fools?"

"There's plenty ailin' two of 'em," declared Storm gruffly as he moved toward the door.

"Send for the marshal and coroner, Moore," directed the sheriff. The proprietor nodded in a dazed manner and retreated.

Storm, striding out of the hotel, was met by Blaze Cody. The latter was plainly in a nervous state. "What's the matter?" he asked anxiously.

Storm took Cody to one side. "Say," he demanded, "you ain't getting cold feet, are yuh?"

Blaze shook his head. "Not so yuh could notice it." His tone, however, was not convincing.

"Yuh better get out of town until this holdup business quiets down," advised Storm. "Two fellers just got shot, an' there may be more trouble."

"I got to stay until the bank opens and see McQueen," said Blaze. "But after that I'm goin' home."

"Yuh better drift over to the ranch directly," Storm advised.

Blaze nodded. "All right. I'll drive down to the Sink after dinner."

Storm found Zeb Kendall in the crowd that had collected on the piazza of the Desert House, and a few minutes later they were leaving San Marcos in Storm's big car.

CHAPTER VIII.

BLAZE CODY TAKES UP HIS NOTE.

NOTHING had so stirred San Marcos in a long time as the shooting in Edom Moore's hotel. There was, people felt, something sinister and mysterious about the double killing. Because the facts were not forthcoming from the sheriff, many rumors went from mouth to mouth.

Devoe was known to have had a few acquaintances in San Marcos; youths with whom he had played pool at McKelvie's. However, little was known about him. Why he had carried a gun, and entered the Desert House apparently quite prepared to use it, was a question that everybody was attempting to answer, but with doubtful success.

A hard-bitten youth, who had been seen in the company of Devoe from time to time, was, at the time of the shooting, seated behind the wheel of a powerful car across the street from the hotel. The engine of the machine had been kept running. As the sounds of the pistol shots shattered the morning quiet, the motor roared loudly, in apparent preparation for a hasty departure.

During the excitement that followed the shooting in the Desert House, the youth and the car disappeared, and they were not seen in San Marcos again.

Dave Matthers was more disturbed by the killing of Jim Smith than he liked to admit. He felt that, in a way, he was responsible for the death of the express guard. Yet, he could not have guessed that the affair would resolve itself into a savage duel with so little warning.

He had hoped to receive a verification that would confirm the suspicion aroused in him by the tracks that had led to San Marcos. However, the guard, evidently thrown into a rage by the voice he had recognized as belonging to the leader of the train robbers, had precipitated a fight at what proved to be an untimely moment.

This act in itself would not necessarily have been fateful if it had not been for the youth known as Cross Devoe. As to just what the gunman's connection with the holdup was, the sheriff found himself very much in doubt.

The fact that Ed Storm had been at the table with the killer aroused in Matthers a feeling of antagonism. Until then, he had not included Storm in his suspicions. The imprint of the worn boot in the street had been that of Mike Frame. And yet, the latter was with the bank cashier at the critical moment.

That the shooting of the express guard had been premeditated, the sheriff did not question, for it was quite evident that his presence in San Marcos so soon after the robbery was regarded by certain individuals as containing a distinct menace to their safety.

Too, the seemingly hurried departure of Storm and his foreman from San Marcos appeared suspicious on the face of it. Mike Frame, on the other hand, let it be known that he was remaining in town indefinitely—a statement that was augmented by other remarks far from complimentary to the sagacity and judgment of the sheriff of Yernoe County.

It was not until the bodies of the dead men had been removed to the back room of a local undertaking establishment that Matthers made a discovery. The youth known as Devoe, shuffling from this mortal sphere with his boots on, so to speak, thereby left behind a tell-tale clew for the inquisitive eye of the sheriff.

The gunman's shoes had rubber heels,

both of which were considerably worn. The left-shoe heel had been chipped and broken on the inner edge in such a manner that its imprint would have tallied very closely with the tracks the sheriff had discovered in the road east of McCarty's earlier that morning.

Under other circumstances, Matthers would have looked upon this as an important development, but a track that stopped at the body of a dead gunman was of doubtful consequence.

Though he questioned several men who admitted that they knew Devoc, the sheriff learned nothing of value, and he was quick to realize that further efforts along this line would be only a waste of time.

Thorp McQueen, hurrying downtown at an unusually early hour for him, met Matthers on the street. It was quite evident that the president of the San Marcos bank was in a peevish mood. He scowled at the sheriff and adopted an attitude of brusque and lordly intolerance.

"What's this I hear about your accusing Mike Frame of complicity in a train robbery, sheriff?"

"Oh, did you hear about that?" The voice of Dave Matthers was soft, and yet contained a note that should have warned Thorp McQueen not to become unduly censorious.

"Kraven was up to the house," the banker pointed out, "and if what he tells me is true, I'm of the opinion that you are taking a whole lot for granted. Mike Frame is, to be sure, a rough type of man, but he is also capable and honest. Furthermore, he is in *my* employ as foreman at the Lazy D, and I shall consider it a personal affront if you persist in your wholly unwarranted actions."

A slightly puzzled look appeared in Dave Matthers' eyes, and it was apparent that the banker's antagonism not only mystified but galled him.

"How long have you known this man Frame?" asked the sheriff.

"I have known him a sufficient time," declared McQueen in a grating tone, "to repose the utmost confidence in him. And I might add, as a man who is in close touch with the private affairs of a considerable number of people in and around San Marcos, I could, if I chose, put my finger on men who have, I believe, good and sufficient reasons for holding up a train."

"Now that is just what Mr. Kraven was telling me," said Matthers drawlingly. "Funny how great minds run in the same channels, McQueen."

"Personally, I can't see why you are dawdling in San Marcos when common sense should tell you that those train robbers will head straight for Hell's Sink."

Thorp McQueen's words left no doubt of his opinion of the sheriff's judgment.

Matthers eyed the big man whimsically. "I'm right sorry I didn't take up a correspondence course in detecting, Mr. McQueen," he said. "Reckon it would 'a' helped a heap, specially when it come to the matter of keeping up appearances."

"Rats!" Thorp McQueen's lip curled and he gazed at the sheriff with utter contempt. He flicked the ashes from his cigar and strode off.

A little before nine o'clock a dusty and dilapidated wagon rattled noisily up the main street of San Marcos, exactly as it had done some twenty-four hours previously, and came to a stop at the curb in front of the bank. As before, the back of the vehicle contained a number of farming tools, an old saddle, and a solemn-faced dog, riding in state.

Blaze Cody stepped down from the wagon. He stood for a moment eyeing the front of the red-brick structure, with its expanse of plate glass and imposing array of gold-lettered figures, announcing to the passer-by the amount of the capital and surplus of the San Marcos bank.

There was sullen defiance on the face of Blaze when he thrust open the door and stalked across the marble threshold. His shoulders had a slight swagger, and his eyes sought out Kurt Kraven with a fierce triumph.

The sallow-faced cashier had stood watching in his cage as the wagon rattled up, and the flame in his eyes seemed to burn brighter as Cody got down and stamped up the steps. He did not speak when the other entered, but waited with a sort of gloating anticipation for Blaze to make known his errand.

"I've come back!" Blaze flung out in a snarling voice. "Is that double-crossing old stiff in there?" He jerked his head toward the door that led to McQueen's private office at the rear of the bank.

A half smile flickered across Kraven's face. It contained, however, no warmth, but rather was a peculiar leer. Veins swelled on the young rancher's face. His every instinct revolted against the cashier. He had hated the other always, blindly, instinctively.

There were no depositors in the bank, and Kurt Kraven took advantage of this fact to inquire sneeringly: "Did you get the money to pay the interest and take up that note?"

Blaze nodded. "Yes, I did!" he said through his teeth. "And no thanks to you and McQueen. It's once that you got fooled."

"What did you do, steal it?" demanded Kraven.

Blaze, moving toward the door beyond, paused. "If you wa'n't behind that chicken wire, I'd smash your face!" he cried. "And some day I'll make a special trip to town to beat you up."

Kurt Kraven waved his hand airily. "Any time will do, but make your will before you start."

Thorp McQueen received Blaze coolly. It was apparent from the first that he regarded the rancher with suspicion. He had not believed that the

other could raise the money for the interest and the note, and he frowned forbiddingly as young Cody slammed into the room.

McQueen did not keep his visitor waiting, as was customary with him, while he examined papers of problematical importance. He was prepared to instantly take the offensive, if one were to judge by his aggressive posture. His fists were clenched, his jaw thrust forward, and his eyes burned with an austere flame.

"You back again, Cody?" he exclaimed.

"Yuh bet your life I am!" cried Blaze, jerking a sheaf of bills from an inner pocket of his coat. "How much is the interest on that mortgage and the note? Figger it up darned quick! I've got the money right here."

Thorp McQueen pursed his lips. "H'm! You have, have you?" He tilted slowly back in his chair, and his eyes became stony. He had intended to send for young Cody before the day was out, and make him a proposition. But the arrival of Blaze with the money forestalled the plan he had considered. A cold, mirthless smile played about the corners of his mouth. He drummed on the desk with his fingers, and nodded his satisfaction of the thing that drifted through his mind.

"Reckon yuh thought you had me where the hair is short," Blaze was saying hotly, "but this is once you don't put on the screws. You an' that putty-faced fellow out front!"

"You keep your mouth shut!" McQueen cried snarlingly.

"Try and make me!" Blaze retorted hotly, exultant because he had been able to beat the banker.

"By gad!" thundered Thorp McQueen, his face distorted by sudden rage. "Maybe you think you can come in here and get away with that kind of talk. I've got a good mind to teach you a lesson."

"All I want out of you is that note," Blaze flung back, "and a receipt for the interest. If yuh got anythin' bitin' you after that, come out in the street. You an' that jug-head of a Kraven both."

"Young man," said Thorp McQueen slowly, "you're going to see the time when you will wish you had kept your tongue between your teeth." His eyes were two balls of molten fire, sinister and malevolent.

Kurt Kraven came and stood in the doorway that led to the outer banking rooms. He watched Blaze Cody pay the money that was due for the interest on the mortgage and the amount of the note, watched silently, sneeringly, as McQueen wrote out a receipt and handed it, together with the note, to the hot-tempered rancher.

CHAPTER IX.

BLAZE CODY IN TROUBLE.

BLAZE CODY slammed the door of the bank so hard that the heavy glass was nearly shattered; then he turned and shook his fist at the red-brick structure.

"You're a bunch of crooks!" he cried. "To Hades with yuh now! You didn't kick me an' Win off the place, did yuh?" He strode toward the battered wagon at the curb and got in. "I'll say yuh didn't."

The dog looked at Blaze with wide, solemn eyes, seemingly sensing his master's antipathy.

The wagon rattled and reeled away up the street. Blaze, looking neither to the right nor to the left, drove madly out of San Marcos.

Win Cody had been in the back forty working some stock through a break in the wire. And because cows are always perverse when it comes to going back through the same hole in a fence through which they entered, the green field of alfalfa had suffered considerably.

The woman's face was flushed, and

there were tears of rage in her eyes as the last yearling rolled its tail and galloped bawling back to the outer pasture.

"Fool things!" she burst out, her nerves giving away at last. She reined her sweating horse to the barbed-wire barrier that led to the road, and swung off to struggle with the awkward contraption that served for a gate.

As Win Cody pulled herself into the saddle, she saw a vehicle approaching from the direction of San Marcos. She watched it anxiously for a moment; then spurred her mount toward the tiny ranch house that squatted on the brown earth a quarter of a mile down the road.

Panting and flushed, she pulled up by the corral just as Blaze drove into the yard. Win jumped from the horse and ran to greet him, a great relief on her face.

"Oh, Blaze, I've been terribly worried!" she cried. "Is everything all right?"

"Sure is."

Blaze got down and kissed the bright-eyed young creature that turned her anxious face up to him.

"Did you know that the *Firefly* was held up last night?" Win asked excitedly.

A scowl darkened the man's face. "How did yuh find that out?" he demanded roughly.

The woman, a sudden vague fear clutching at her heart, glanced sharply at Blaze. "Why—why, old 'Pop' Darling, of the Flatiron, came from town a little while ago, and he stopped to tell me about it. Wasn't it awful? Just think, using machine guns and dynamite! Oh, I hope the sheriff gets the murderous robbers."

"Huh!" grunted the man. "Machine guns stop 'em all right."

"Were you at Storm's ranch last night?" Win Cody put the interrogation in a tentative, half-fearful tone, while her troubled eyes searched the face of her young husband.

Blaze laughed shortly and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm ridin' for Ed until I square up for some of the money he loaned me." he replied, evading his wife's question.

"Blaze Cody!" gasped the woman. "You don't mean to tell me that Ed Storm advanced you the money for the interest and the note."

"He sure did." Blaze added impatiently: "Yuh always seem to have it in for Storm, Win. I reckon that shows who our friends are."

The girl was not satisfied. "Ed Storm is no good," she maintained stoutly. "And you know what kind of a name he has, just as well as I do, Blaze. Oh, why did you insist on going to him?"

"Aw, shut up!" cried Blaze snarlingly. "Yuh make me sick. Yuh always did bleat about Ed. 'Low he ain't no more of a crook than that danged Thorp McQueen. Say, maybe I didn't tell that ole blat where he got off at! He was sore as time, too. Him an' that skull-faced cashier."

"But how are you ever going to pay Storm back?" his wife persisted.

"I done told yuh once!" raged Blaze. "I'm goin' to ride for him. I tell yuh fight now, Win, if it hadn't been for him we'd lost the place."

"His men are all a tough bunch," Win said. "And Hell's Sink was never anything but a hole for outlaws to hide out in."

"Storm come pretty near bein' mixed up in a gun fight this mornin'," Blaze declared, a boastful note in his voice. "Feller by the name of Cross Devoe, a cock-eyed hombre that hung out at McKelvie's place, shot one of the express guards that was on No. 7 last night. The guard an' the sher'f was sittin' eatin' in the Desert House, an' Devoe lets him have it. Dave Matthers, he got Cross quick, I tell yuh. Storm, he jumps up an' throws down, but I reckon he didn't know who to shoot."

"What did he pull a gun for?" demanded Win.

"Oh, I don't know," Blaze answered carelessly. "He was sittin' at the table with Devoe. He told me all about it."

Win Cody frowned, and bit her lip. "Were you with Storm then?"

"Naw, I wa'n't with Storm!" snarled Blaze, waving his hands disgustedly. "Say, did yuh mend them overalls of mine? I got to go over to the Sink after dinner."

A car appeared. It was coming from San Marcos, and was moving swiftly, a swirling cloud of yellow dust in its wake. Blaze, glancing past Win, saw it, and the color faded from his face. His lips parted, but whatever word had been on his tongue died unuttered. A frightened look appeared in his eyes.

The woman, noting the sudden transformation, turned and looked down the road. It took her only a moment to identify the big machine and the man at the wheel.

"Why, it's the sheriff!" she exclaimed.

"Yeh," muttered Blaze, his eyes fixed on the approaching machine. "Wonder what he's doin' out this a way?"

The sheriff's car slowed down and turned into the yard. Win Cody walked toward the big automobile, sudden alarm reflected in her eyes. Blaze followed her slowly.

Dave Matthers smiled and nodded at the woman. His quick glance took in her trim figure, the overalls, the pretty tanned face, the wind-blown hair straying beneath the old sombrero. He also saw fear and doubt in the big brown eyes that were fixed on him questioningly.

"Morning, Mrs. Cody," greeted the sheriff. "Look as though you had been working."

"Howdy, sher'f." Win tried to smile and speak lightly, but it was a sad attempt. "Reckon you'll have to excuse my looks, but I was hazing those darned cows out of the alfalfa." She added,

in an apparent attempt to excuse the man beside her: "Blaze, he done got a job riding for Ed Storm and didn't get home to fix that north fence."

The rancher nodded at Matthers. "Got plenty work to home," he said, "but we—we're needin' a little ready money, so I hooked on with the Circle S for ca'f round-up."

The sheriff's glance traveled from Blaze to the pretty young woman beside him and back. His lids narrowed a little, and there was a slight tightening of his lips. Following an awkward pause, he said:

"Cody, you know I was speaking to you this morning about a rumor I had heard."

The man shot a sidelong glance at his wife, and nodded slowly. "Sure."

"You mentioned the fact that you were going to try and borrow the money to meet your obligation at the San Marcos bank. Were you successful?"

Blaze gulped; then he burst out: "Looka here, sher'f, what is the idea in yore questionin' me this a way?"

"Won't do you a mite of good to go an' get riled, Cody," Matthers said quietly. "So let's just go at this thing sensible. I heard you took up your note."

"I'd sure like to lay my hands on the sneaks that are tellin' all my business!" Blaze cried angrily. "I'd bust 'em one in the snoot!"

"Thorp McQueen was telling me," Matthers pointed out.

"Some day I'll—I'll smash that hombre right in the face!" the young rancher cried savagely.

"Where did you get the money to pay McQueen?" the sheriff asked.

"I—I borrowed it," answered Blaze a little defiantly.

"Who did you get it from?" Dave Matthers spoke sharply.

"Have—have I got to answer yuh that, sher'f?" Blaze asked, seemingly at bay.

"You have." The sheriff's voice was firm, hard.

Win Cody grew tense, her hands clenched. "Oh, what's it all about?" she cried in an agonized tone. "Sher'f, what are you questioning Blaze this a way for? You—you don't think he *stole* it, do you?"

"I'm giving you all the chance in the world to come clean, Cody," Matthers went on, ignoring the girl. "Either you got something to hide, or you haven't."

"I got the money from Ed Storm, if yuh want to know!"

"Why did Ed Storm give you around four hundred dollars?" the sheriff demanded. "Was it in payment for something you did for him?"

"It—it was a loan," stammered the flustered rancher.

"That's the truth, is it?"

"Well, I—he's goin' to let me work it out," stammered Blaze, dropping his eyes and kicking his toe in the dirt.

"Reckon you'd be surprised to know that the money you paid McQueen was stolen from No. 7 last night," Matthers said.

A cry of anguish broke from the trembling lips of Win Cody. "Oh, Blaze!" she sobbed. "Blaze!"

The young rancher's eyes widened in sudden, stark terror.

"Yuh don't mean that, sher'f?"

"McQueen showed J. L. Margot, a representative of the express company, and I some twenty-dollar bills after you left San Marcos," stated Matthers, "which same he allows you just paid in to clear the paper the bank held. There was twenty of these bills, and Margot identified them as part of the loot that was taken from the *Firefly* at McCarty's. It sure looks mighty bad, Cody."

Blaze fought to control a strange lump that rose in his throat, while he stared at the sheriff, finding it hard to believe his ears. He at last turned to face the agony and the reproach in the

misty eyes of his wife. It required some moments for him to sufficiently control his emotions to speak. When he did, his voice shook.

"Sher'f," he remonstrated, "there wa'n't a twenty-dollar bill in that money I paid McQueen a-tall. S'help me, that's the honest truth! An' if that hombre says there was, he's a liar. I'd just as soon tell him so to his face."

Matthers shook his head. "I'm powerful sorry, Cody, but I reckon you will have to go back to San Marcos with me. McQueen told me you paid him all in twenties. Kraven, the cashier, allows he witnessed the transaction, and says you seemed flush with yellowbacks."

"Y-you mean you're arrestin' Blaze, sher'f?" cried Win incredulously, clutching her husband by the arm.

"I reckon so," Matthers said quietly. "I sure hate to do it. Margot and Pat Scully, the road's special agent, they wanted to come out with me, but I figured there wa'n't any need of it. Don't like to make it any harder than it is. I allow to do everything I can for you."

Blaze turned to the woman. His face was white and haggard. "Win!" he gasped, and caught her tight in his arms. His rough manner was gone now, and tears filmed his eyes. He tried awkwardly to soothe her broken, gasping sobs.

"Don't yuh go back on me, Win!" he cried hoarsely. "I don't know nothin' about that holdup! Heaven is my witness! I tell yuh, McQueen is tryin' to job me, sher'f!" The man looked appealingly at the officer. "Yuh ask Ed Storm if it wa'n't five an' ten-dollar bills he give me."

"Sort of seems foolish for you to claim Thorp McQueen would want to frame you, don't it?" said the sheriff. He turned away.

"Oh, Blaze, why did yuh go and mix in with Ed Storm?" murmured the woman, her slender body shaken by sobs. There was no hint of reproach in her

voice, only grief because of the tragedy that had suddenly caught them in its grip. "Even if he was innocent, the sheriff would be suspicious, on account of the name he's got."

"Everythin' is goin' to be all right, Win," Blaze said, trying to appear confident. "Yuh don't want to worry none a-tall, sweetheart. I'll be free in a couple days. Yuh look after things, won't yuh? You an' ole Scout."

"Oh, I will!" breathed Win. "I'll work hard, an' pray right hard, Blaze, 'cause I love you—so much!"

Mysterious Dave Matthers walked around the Cody wagon slowly, to the accompaniment of Scout's barking remonstrance. He examined it closely.

"You over in Death Canyon this morning?" the sheriff asked when he rejoined the young rancher and his wife, his keen eyes fixing themselves on Blaze.

"I come through there on the way to town from the Circle S," the other admitted.

"Reckon we'll have to be going," Matthers said.

"You—you're not going to put handcuffs on him, are yuh?" the woman questioned quaveringly.

Dave Matthers shook his head. "Don't reckon it will be necessary, will it, Cody?"

Blaze smiled dubiously. "I 'low I got trouble enough without bein' a fugitive," he said.

His wife clung to him a moment as he kissed her good-by, then ran into the house that she might not see Blaze go.

The young rancher looked after her, then climbed wearily into the sheriff's car.

CHAPTER X.

CORRAL VIEJO.

WORD spread quickly in San Marcos that Blaze Cody had been arrested on suspicion of complicity in the train robbery at McCarty's. The sheriff, however, did not lock Blaze up, but

placed him in the custody of the marshal.

"Don't like to put a man behind the bars until it's proved up right certain that he's an outlaw," Matthers told the local officer. "Guess the county won't mind the expense of a night or two's lodging at the hotel. Have to send over his meals anyhow."

Pat Scully, veteran special agent of the Pacific Coast and Transcontinental Lines, nodded his understanding. He had been waiting at the Desert House for Matthers, in company with Margot, the express company's representative.

"Don't look like a bandit," Scully said, eying Blaze. "I won't mind associating with him a spell; will you, Margot?"

The thickset little man addressed, his penetrating gaze on Cody, shook his head. "Sort of would like to get acquainted with him," he declared.

Thorp McQueen, seeing the group on the piazza of the Desert House and the sheriff's car at the curb, came from the bank. He eyed Blaze with ill-concealed exultation.

"I see you got him, sheriff," said the banker. "You had courage to go after him alone."

Matthers glanced at McQueen, a whimsical light in his eyes. "Well, I sort of sneaked up on him," he said.

"You want me to hold the—er—evidence?" asked McQueen.

"For the present, yes," Margot spoke up.

"It will give me a lot of satisfaction to know that I was instrumental in helping trap one of the train robbers," declared the banker, his voice, it seemed to his listeners, particularly grating and unpleasant.

A few minutes later, the sheriff prepared to take his departure for Hell's Sink.

"Reckon I'll go out to the Circle S," he announced, "and see Ed Storm. Then I could get a horse an' cut for sign north; I might be able to pick up

the trail of Telluride Thompson and the boys from the Broken Rafter."

"Guess we'll wait here," said Pat Scully, looking very straight into the sheriff's eyes. "Going to be warm out there in the red hills of the Sink. An hour in the saddle would kill Margot and me."

The express company's representative agreed readily with the special agent. "Cool here on the piazza," he said, "and Mr. Moore has some nice comfortable chairs. Not a bad idea at all, Scully."

Thorp McQueen's lip curled, and he glanced disgustedly at the officers. "Well if you gentlemen have no work to do," he said meaningly. "I have. I'll see you later."

Mysterious Dave Matthers paused in his task of rolling a cigarette and cocked a droll eye at the sleek banker. "An' I always thought these here financiers had a soft snap," he drawled.

The sheriff drove direct from San Marcos to Ed Storm's ranch in a nook of the red, sculptured walls of Hell's Sink. The owner of the Circle S and a group of cowboys were saddling horses at a corral beyond the ranch house. Storm, seeing the sheriff climbing from the car, walked to meet him. The riders gathered in a little knot to watch, talking in low tones, their faces sullen and resentful.

Storm's eyes were flinty. When the sheriff of Yermo County came to Hell's Sink there was usually trouble, and as there had been a train robbery a short distance away, the air was unusually tense.

"Last time I saw you, sher'f, yuh was burnin' gunpowder," was Storm's greeting.

Matthers nodded curtly. "All your men present and accounted for, Storm?"

"Every dog-gone one!" declared the big man emphatically. "Yuh lookin' fer somebody?"

"Telluride Thompson, Len Taylor, and some Broken Rafter punchers cut

the trail of the train robbers in Death Canyon early this morning," stated the sheriff. "One of the riders is going to wait for me at Corral Viejo. I took the Red Mountain road for two reasons. It got me nearer Corral Viejo by car, and I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"That ain't sayin' I'm goin' to answer 'em," Storm said in a growling and defiant tone.

"Is Blaze Cody going to ride for you?" the sheriff demanded, his narrowed eyes fixed on the big Circle S owner.

"What's that got to do with it?" retorted Storm.

"A lot," Matthers declared. "Cody has been arrested on suspicion of being mixed up in that train robbery at McCarty's last night. Thorp McQueen furnished the evidence."

"He did, eh?" Storm's face grew dark. "What did the money-grabbin' fool say?"

"Cody allows you advanced him a sum of money to take up his note at the San Marcos bank," the sheriff went on, ignoring the other's query.

Ed Storm hesitated. A scowl was on his face and grim little muscular contractions rippled along his jaw. "Shore I give him the money!" he flung out at last. "What about it?"

"That's all I want to know just now," said Matthers. "Reckon you won't mind repeating that statement before witnesses if it's necessary, Storm."

"I'll repeat it on hot coals!" cried Storm. "Cody wa'n't mixed up in that train robbery at McCarty's no more than you was. What I want to know, by thunder, is how McQueen could git him arrested, sher'f?"

"Guess that will come out directly," Matthers answered, "but just now we'll let it rest." He spoke in a tone of finality, and the subject was closed.

Storm readily agreed to provide the sheriff with a saddle horse, and offered to send some of his riders to accompany

him to Corral Viejo. Matthers, however, declined the latter proposal with thanks. His journey to the Old Corral was, he pointed out, beset with uncertainty. If anything had happened that a messenger could not get there with word from Telluride Thompson, his subsequent movements would be governed quite by chance.

Privately, the sheriff was not inclined to place too much confidence in any of Storm's cowboys. They had been recruited from those adventurers of the range and border whom it behooved no one to trust to a greater extent than compelled to by absolute necessity.

It was not yet twelve o'clock when Mysterious Dave Matthers left the Circle S Ranch and galloped across the flats toward the dim and misty vales of the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk.

Corral Viejo—Old Corral. Its history, entered in red in the records of men, has been one of strife, of greed, conquest, hate. A desert crossroads it is, where the feet of redskin and white have mingled. Where pioneer and prospector, cowboy and outlaw, fugitive and adventurer, have built their camp fires, rested, filled their canteens, and gone on. Or, perhaps, where guns have flashed and men have died.

There is a water hole under the tules, a rambling pole corral, a doorless, windowless, flat-roofed house, the walls of which were laid up of flat rock.

Corral Viejo is situated on a little flat, with striated walls of red sandstone hemming it in. Several canyons open out from it, and the largest of these is filled with voices—the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk.

Hell's Sink is made up of a maze of deep canyons and high mesas. Many of its red gorges wind and twist on for a time, only to end abruptly against high-flung walls across the face of which no trails have ever been blazoned, or ever will be. Men, becoming confused

in this strange bad land, have died as they frantically sought to escape. Few are foolhardy enough to venture into the fastness of the Sink unless they know well the trails.

Telluride Thompson, leading the posse north from McCarty's, was soon convinced that the train robbers had not struck blindly into Hell's Sink. It was apparent to his trained eye that the outlaws were either familiar with the country, or had with them a rider who knew the place well.

The way is long that leads from McCarty's to Corral Viejo. It is a hard route for man or horse. There are sandy washes, areas of black lava rock, treacherous trails across sloping, shale-cut banks. The journey requires half a day's riding. The distance from Storm's ranch to Corral Viejo, however, can be covered by a horseman in a little over an hour.

Ever foremost in the mind of the quarled old Telluride Thompson as he headed his little cavalcade into Hell's Sink was the thought of the sub-machine guns of the train robbers. One man, hidden behind a boulder or beneath a shelving bank, might easily wipe out a close-bunched group of horsemen with one murderous burst of shots.

The sign was clear. So distinct were the tracks of the fleeing outlaws' mounts that the temptation was great to follow them at a lope. The silver-haired Telluride, however, read something else there, as the posse moved on into Hell's Sink. He saw, lurking behind every high-flung spire of red rock, behind creosote bush and sage and mesquite, a sinister black muzzle peeping watchfully down the back trail.

Telluride Thompson did not intend to lead the members of the posse into an ambush if it could be avoided. Hence he disdained to follow the "groove" at a headlong pace, strong as the temptation was. The Broken Rafter cowboys chafed at the leisurely advance.

"We shore won't ketch up with them hombres like this," one of the younger punchers complained.

"Son," said Telluride, "if we finally round up them pepper-box outlaws, it won't be the first time a mud turtle stuck its snoot under the wire ahead of a field of runnin' fools."

Len Taylor nodded his support of the old desert man's wisdom. "No good rushin' into somethin' where you'll prob'ly have to be carried out feet first," he commented.

"These yere hombres is cute as pizen water," Telluride went on. "Looks lovely, but raises hob with yore insides. Them bandits ain't crowdin' their hosses a mite, if yuh observe, an' they ain't doin' no dodgin' or doublin' back. Straight ahead, sliding the grove, an' keepin' an eye peeled fer dust down the trail, I betcha."

However, as the hours passed, the posse riders became more confident. The outlaws were traveling at a little faster pace now. There were longer stretches where their horses had loped. They were gaining on their pursuers.

With the noonday sun scorching down on them, Telluride Thompson and his men approached Corral Viejo, dust-covered and thirsty. The horses, scenting cool water there under the tules, quickened their pace. The riders swung onto the little flat at the mouth of the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk, and moved toward the old stone cabin at a trot.

The keen eyes of Telluride Thompson swept the spot questioningly. He saw the old pole corral, the sagging strands of rusty barbed wire that guarded the spring against being fouled by animals, the square, flat-roofed, abandoned structure with its windowless and doorless openings. Suddenly he reined in his horse. There was a vague something in the very air of the place that seemed to warn of impending danger.

"Take it easy, boys," cautioned Tellu-

ride in a low voice. "Take it easy now." The man's gaze rested on a road runner, that rambling clown of the desert, as it trotted around a corner of the stone cabin. Suddenly it veered sharply away and went darting toward a friendly greasewood clump.

Telluride Thompson's lids narrowed. "You boys stay here," he directed, "while I swing 'round t'other side of the spring an' see if I kin cut a trail. Reckon yuh had better not git any closer to that there ole stone cabin; it might be hidin' some of them lead chuckers."

"Just sort of act like we was stoppin' for a confab," said Deputy Sheriff Taylor. "Don't let on we suspect anything."

Telluride, swinging a wide arc, circled the old corral and again touched the trail near the mouth of the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk. He found fresh sign, which he examined carefully.

When he returned to the riders on the edge of the flat, his eyes were bleak and his face was that of the hunter when close to dangerous game.

"What did you find?" demanded Len Taylor.

"The tracks of walkin' hosses," said the other, watching the stone cabin from under the brim of his steeple-crowned hat. "Seven of 'em. Only three of the cayuses accents the hoofprints at the toe. Two hosses without riders were led from McCarty's. An' now two more led animals. Where the train robbers crossed that arroyo, here a mile back, the sign showed five men in saddle. Looks like a couple of 'em got left behind at Corral Viejo."

One of the Broken Rafter cowboys whistled softly, and cocked a respectful eye toward the abandoned building near the tules.

"Yuh don't s'pose them hombres are in this here ole buildin' right now, do yuh?" he said, reluctant to believe the quarry was so dangerously close.

"Reckon we'll find out directly," Telluride Thompson said grimly. "Done

tole Matthers I'd leave a messenger here to meet him. Might be a case of his findin' several hombres at Ole Corral waitin' fer him—an' the undertaker. So don't yuh young fools do nothin' yo're goin' to repent of."

Followed a brief plan of campaign. It was reasonable to suppose that the outlaws had trained glasses on their pursuers from certain high rims as they retreated into Hell's Sink. Very probably the idea of a machine-gun ambush had been conceived. For, having disposed of the menace close behind them, and free from the immediate danger of further pursuit, they would be granted ample time to lose themselves in the vast desert country.

It was outlaw brains against the wits of the law. Telluride Thompson quickly planned a bit of strategy, and as quickly set it in motion. The stone cabin had a door and two window openings that faced the spring and old corral. There had been no provision for windows or door in the three remaining walls.

"If them hombres figger this yere is a likely place for a fight," declared Telluride, "we will accommodate 'em *muuy pronto*. I'm jist hongry enough an' thirsty enough to feel dog-gone saucy." He glanced again at the cabin; then turned to the riders with him.

"Len, yuh take two of these cowboys an' swing 'round an' come up toward this yere layout from the back. Get out yore carbines an' git ready to shoot after yuh git in the wash beyond the spring. Me an' this bosted-snoot hombre"—indicating one of the Broken Rafter's old-time riders—"is goin' to swing wide to the left. Soon as we git under cover of that barranca, we'll leave our hosses an' work back this a way belly-fashion like snakes.

"Ye other three fellers start a wide circle that will fetch yuh 'round to the mouth of the canyon, an' wait. I suspicion that if some shootin' starts, the hombres whose broncs left tracks on the

trail yander will come back to help burn gunpowder. If yuh disport yoreselves behind some rocks, I reckon yuh kin hold forth a spell.

"If Len an' you two"—jerking his head at the riders selected by Deputy Sheriff Taylor—"draw our retirin' friends out in the open, me an' bosted-snoot Jake will complete inspire 'em with a few tricks an' fancy shots. Yuh ranahans ready?"

Grim nods gave ready answer, and a moment later the riders under Telluride Thompson divided and galloped away.

CHAPTER XI.

KILLERS.

TOPPING a rise just west of the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk, Mysterious Dave Matthers looked down on Corral Viejo. He swept the flat with a keen scrutiny, and suddenly reined his horse onto its haunches. There below was a strange scene.

Three horsemen were advancing toward the old stone cabin near the spring from the rear. They moved slowly, stopping at intervals, as though prompted by caution and uncertainty. At the edge of a gully, some one hundred yards from the front of the abandoned building, two figures lay flattened close to the earth behind a bushy creosote. A quarter of a mile away, near the widening mouth of the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk, were horsemen.

From his point of vantage, the sheriff had an unobstructed view of the flat below. However, the distance was too great for him to recognize the figures with the naked eye. As he took his field glasses from their case, he noticed a sudden movement at the doorway of the cabin.

Matthers, hastily raising the glasses to his eyes, found himself watching the swiftly unfolding drama of a battle between his own officers and two men who gripped at their hips the same type

of vicious sub-machine guns that had played so important a part in the looting of No. 7 in Death Canyon.

Telluride Thompson's crafty old brain had shrewdly guessed the skulking menace that was veiled by the ancient stone walls of the old cabin at Corral Viejo. That the deputy's suspicion was justified was quickly confirmed by the two heads that appeared at the window openings as the clattering hoofs of the posse's horses faded.

Having apparently satisfied themselves that the pursuers, after dividing, had ridden on, two men came from within. They were alert, furtive. Their attire was that of tenderfeet rather than of range riders. Each carried a slender-barreled sub-machine gun, with its two hand grips and cartridge drums.

The taller of the pair, a hard-faced youth of the type known as gangster, spoke snarlingly to his companion. "What got into them fools?"

The other, peering past the corner of the cabin, suddenly drew back. He uttered a surprised exclamation, and spoke a quick warning. "Three of 'em are workin' up the wash beyond the spring back there. Keep out of sight."

"Darn 'em!" cried the taller man. "They're suspicious, but we'll give 'em somethin' to be suspicious about."

Suddenly there was the sharp crack of a .30-30. The report shattered the desert silence, while the canyon walls rang. From the mouth of the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk came the bark of rebounding echoes.

One of the men in front of the stone cabin cried out and staggered against the building. The other jerked himself around, his eyes frantically searching for the unseen enemy. A burst of shots sent out a vicious *rat-a-tat-tat*, but whining missiles took their toll of creosote and sage only.

A din of echoes went crashing from canyon face to canyon face; then gradually died. Telluride Thompson, from

his position flat on the ground at the edge of a gully, lined the sights of his .30-30 carbine and pulled the trigger. The standing outlaw crumpled downward in spite of his efforts to remain erect. The weapon he gripped in his hands was spilled into the dirt.

Len Taylor and the two cowboys with him kicked home their spurs and raced their mounts toward the stone cabin. Dave Matthers' horse was sent hurtling down the steep-sided shoulder half on its haunches.

The taller of the two wounded train robbers, with the thud of hoofs in his ears, struggled to prop himself against the cabin. Weak from the shock of the bullet that had brought him down, he found that the seven-pound weapon taxed every ounce of his available strength to operate. And yet he managed to pull it toward him and raise its barrel.

With his teeth bared in a horrible leer, the bandit loosed a burst of .45-caliber bullets. As Len Taylor sent his horse leaping around the corner of the cabin, the animal crashed to earth with a half a dozen bullets in its body. The deputy was thrown clear, and suffered only a shaking up.

A Broken Rafter cowboy, racing up, emptied his six-shooter at the outlaw. The train robber suddenly went limp and lolled forward, the sub-machine gun cuddled in his lifeless arms. And the court of Judge Colt had passed sentence on one of the jeering renegades whose guns had snuffed out the life of the brave express messenger at McCarty's.

The stony trail in the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk rang with galloping hoofs, and three riders dashed onto the flat at Corral Viejo. Upon hearing the reports of the sub-machine guns, the remaining train robbers had sped back toward the cabin from their hiding place in a nook of the red-walled canyon, confident that the ambush had snared the posse in its grim mesh.

Riding headlong, the outlaws rounded a jutting shoulder, only to find themselves caught in a hollow square of grim-faced horsemen, with the unwavering muzzles of a half dozen carbines menacing them.

"Put up yore hands!" cried Telluride Thompson in his booming voice. "The game is all over fer you gents."

The remaining train robbers obeyed, consternation written in their faces. They had been outwitted and outplayed by Deputy Sheriff Telluride Thompson, to whom Dave Matthers had intrusted the task of tracking them down.

The sheriff, who had joined the riders of the posse at the stone cabin a few minutes before, nodded his satisfaction at the way the affair had turned out. "Well done, you horny-headed old tarantula. It sure wasn't my intention to send you up the trail without the solacing presence of your superior, but I, unfortunately, had business in San Marcos.

"I'm glad to see you had sense enough not to run into an ambush. Those sub-machine guns are two-fisted little brutes, and they would ventilate a hombre plenty."

"Thick in the head an' big in the feet," declared Telluride, eyeing the train robbers disdainfully. "Them hombres would jist run into a wall final an' batter their brains out anyhow. Humph! Nawthin' to it a-tall, sher'f. They laid down the sign an' we picked it up."

Matthers turned to the Broken Rafter riders. "You boys ever see any of these fellows before?"

"Shore have, sher'f," spoke up one of the punchers. "Two of 'em has been ridin' fer the ole Lazy D outfit. They hooked on since Mike Frame went there. The short cuss was 'reppin'' fer the Lazy D iron on ca'f round-up this spring. There was always some dudes hangin' 'round at the ranch, an' I 'low these are some of 'em."

Matthers nodded. He turned and

studied the faces of the train robbers curiously. After a moment, he addressed one of the bandits, a tanned, sullen-eyed youth who wore the clothes of a cowhand.

"You ride for the Lazy D then, son?"

"I did," replied the rider shortly.

"Who talked to you first about this train-robbery business?"

"I ain't sayin'." The rider glanced furtively at his companions, and licked his lips.

"Who was the big man who gave orders at McCarty's last night?" persisted Matthers. His glance took in the faces of the bandits, as though including them all in his query.

There was no answer.

"The express messenger on the *Firefly* was murdered by your machine-gun killers," the sheriff said slowly, "and a gunman of your modest little band shot the express guard in a hotel at San Marcos this morning. I don't know just how many of you hombres are going to get the noose, but it will be plenty——"

"Mike Frame!" blurted out the rider from the Lazy D. "He was the leader, sher'f—him an' a cock-eyed feller by the name of Cross Devoe."

"I thought so," Matthers said shortly. He turned to Telluride Thompson. "I found the tracks of Frame and Devoe a mile east of McCarty's. They parked their car in the piñons just off from the road."

"Yuh get 'em?" demanded Telluride.

"Devoe is dead," Matthers said. "I'll arrest Frame when I get back to San Marcos."

"Yuh reckon ye aire shore enough goin' to find him there, do ye?" asked Telluride skeptically.

"Pat Scully, special agent for the P. C. & T., is sitting tight in San Marcos," the sheriff pointed out briefly. "When I left, he and Margot were trying out Edom Moore's easy chairs on the piazza of the Desert House, to the amusement of the folks. But I reckon Mike Frame

won't get out of town without Pat on his back."

Len Taylor grinned. "No flies on you, Dave."

"The loot from the *Firefly* is in San Marcos," Matthers declared, "and as soon as I get back there, we're going to try and round up the leaders of this gang and get the money. I wanted to get confirmation that would check up with Mike Frame's footprints before the show-down. The big fellow isn't going to be taken without a fight, and you don't want to have to kill a man to find out you're wrong."

Telluride Thompson rolled a cigarette, his eyes squinted reflectively. "Slick as a greased hawg, wa'n't it?" he said. "Done figgered to draw the posse into Hell's Sink, an' give the leaders of the gang a chance to slip away to San Marcos with the loot. My!"

The wound of the gunman who sat huddled against the front wall of the old stone cabin was now given attention. Meanwhile the bandit was forced to listen to doubtful crumbs of comfort concerning the fact that he would recover, without doubt, and live to be hanged with all style and ceremony.

The prisoners were disarmed, and their feet tied beneath the bellies of their horses. The members of the posse examined the sub-machine guns with frank curiosity. The weapons were the first of their kind that the cowboys from the Broken Rafter had seen, and in consequence excited not a little comment of a characteristically humorous nature.

Matthers prepared immediately to depart with the wounded train robber for the Circle S Ranch.

"My car is back there at Ed Storm's place," he told his deputies. "I'll take this fellow along to San Marcos to a doctor. You follow with the prisoners and the body as it's convenient. I will send cars out from town as soon as I can, and trucks for the horses. You wait at the Circle S."

So ended the act. The grim play was done, and again peace and quiet settled over Corral Viejo and the Canyon Where Dead Men Talk.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHERIFF'S RETURN TO SAN MARCOS.

THE fact that Pat Scully, veteran special agent of the Pacific Coast and Transcontinental Lines, should spend some hours on the piazza of the Desert House and walking leisurely about town seemed to afford amusement for a number of people in San Marcos.

Kurt Kraven, returning from lunch, paused to join a group of men gathered in front of the bank. The cashier's face wore a sneer.

"Did you see the railroad's high-priced dick?" he cried derisively, waving his hand toward the figures on Edom Moore's hotel piazza. "Been over there playing checkers for the last two hours. The question in my mind is, who's the biggest fool, this man Scully, or the sheriff? Neither of them have showed any sense so far."

He then reviewed the part that Thorp McQueen had played in causing the arrest of Blaze Cody.

"An' they didn't even lock Cody up in the calaboose," said one in an aggrieved tone. "Why, he's only in the custody of the marshal. Livin' high at the Desert House, like a millionaire. Better than I could afford, I tell you."

"With any other sheriff," declared another, "he would've been hangin' from a limb 'fore this."

"Blaze Cody never acted to me like a feller to get mixed up in a gang of train robbers," spoke up a third, rallying in quick defense to the support of the young rancher. "Pretty square feller, I always found him."

Mike Frame said little. As time wore on, he became morose, his eyes filled with a strange, savage fire. He was alert and watchful unceasingly. Many

furtive glances he turned toward the obviously careless Pat Scully. A growing uneasiness possessed the burly foreman of the Lazy D. He came to feel that, perhaps, his imagination was playing him pranks. And yet, it seemed that the railroad detective was always hovering close enough for him to feel the eyes of the officer on him.

Now the special agent was hunched over a checkerboard on the hotel piazza, a casual eye occasionally roving up and down the street, and now he was idling before the cigar case at McKelvie's, or, again, he was one of a little knot of men on a street corner.

It had been Mike Frame's intention to return to the Lazy D early in the day. There was work to be attended to, and matters that would require his personal supervision. Too, McQueen had expressed the intention of driving out after banking hours to look over a small herd of thoroughbred stock that had been acquired recently. However, the foreman had a very pronounced feeling that if he departed for the Lazy D, the special agent would find some excuse to follow him.

There were urgent reasons why it would not do for officers to put in an appearance at the Lazy D at the present time. A roundabout trail that lay through Hell's Sink would end that afternoon, if the gods willed, at the gate of the Lazy D. It was a trail that tracked red from McCarty's and Corral Viejo, only to swing down out of the colorful hills and lose itself behind the shelter of the cow ranch and Mike Frame's cunning brain.

By mid-afternoon San Marcos had recovered somewhat from the first shock of the killing at the Desert House, and the news of the train robbery at McCarty's. People paused to get their breath and pick up the threads of normal existence again. There was a lull, which was merely an intermission until supper time. Then the many versions

of holdup and shooting would once more occupy the forefront of conversation at the evening meal in the homes of the little desert town.

Dave Matthers arrived in San Marcos shortly before three o'clock.

His coming created an immediate indefinable something that was closely akin to breathless suspense. There was in the atmosphere a tenseness that swept the town from the moment a voice cried: "Here comes the sheriff!"

Men stopped short to stare after the dusty machine that raced swiftly into town and halted with squealing brakes in front of the Desert House. Faces appeared at store windows, little groups dissolved magically, and people moved toward Edom Moore's hotel with one accord.

Suddenly a shrill note sounded the cry: "He's got one of 'em!"

Pat Scully sprang to his feet, upsetting the checkerboard, and rushed down the hotel steps. He was met at the curb by the sheriff, stern and hard-eyed.

"Where's Mike Frame?" Matthers shot at the special agent.

"Across the street in that garage," replied Scully. "What's the news?"

"Look out for that hombre in the car," directed the sheriff tersely. "He's got a bullet in his side. Get him to a doctor's office." Matthers glanced across the street; then added: "Telluride Thompson rounded up the train robbers at Corral Viejo. A couple Lazy D men among 'em, and one of 'em loosened his tongue." His words were like wind-driven hail. "Mike Frame's the man!"

Mysterious Dave Matthers turned and stepped into the street, his eyes fixed on the garage beyond. Mike Frame, coming from the interior of the building, did not see the sheriff immediately. A car, parked at the near-by curb, momentarily hid the figure of the approaching officer.

Frame's attention was drawn to the

crowd collecting in front of the Desert House. A premonition of danger gripped him, and he seized the arm of a man hurrying past.

"What's the matter over there?" he demanded snarlingly.

"Guess they got another one of the train robbers," was the excited reply as the man jerked away and started across the street.

Mike Frame stiffened, an oath on his lips. It was then that he saw and recognized the sheriff's car at the opposite curb. Almost in the same instant he glimpsed the approaching officer. His body stiffened, and he turned slowly to face the sheriff. His fingers spread like talons, and his right hand crept up toward the butt of a .45 beneath his left armpit. The man's face was black and ugly; his eyes were aflame with burning hatred.

The cold voice of Dave Matthers came to him as though from a distance, and yet the space between them was but a little over a dozen feet. Mike Frame was like a man in a trance. Sight and hearing were blurred by the sudden surge of violent emotions that burst within him. He read the menace in the attitude of the sheriff rather than in the cold command that cracked against his ear drums.

"Put up your hands, Frame!"

As he spoke, Matthers swept his six-shooter from its holster. The black muzzle came up in a flash, but even in that instant, Mike Frame's gun leaped into his hand.

The sidewalks emptied of humanity as though at the stroke of a broom in the hands of a witch. It had been a long time since six-shooters had seen daylight on Main Street, certainly not in the time that this thoroughfare had been paved.

Dave Matthers, tight-lipped, his eyes like shafts of chilled steel, watched the rage-distorted face of Mike Frame, and read there the outlaw's savage intent to

shoot it out. However, only one gun roared.

A bullet from the officer's weapon shattered the arm of the big leader of the train robbers before the muzzle completed its deadly arc from holster to target. Mike Frame's gun crashed to the sidewalk, and the man whose footprint had left its telltale clew there east of McCarty's stood pale and shaken close in the shadow of the gallows.

Dave Matthers whirled, as a new rush of townfolk centered on the scene of the second shooting that day, and his sharp eyes scanned their faces in a grim challenge. Somewhere in San Marcos there still were outlaws whose hands were besmirched with crimson stains.

It was certain that these men, if cornered, would show fight, for to them had been consigned the loot taken from the express car on No. 7. A gunman had already silenced the tongue of a damaging witness, and it was quite probable, the sheriff reasoned within himself, that another killer besides Cross Devoe was hovering in the vicinity.

Jim Smith had paid with his life for certain knowledge that he had possessed concerning the identity of the big leader of the train robbers, and it was to be expected that the remaining members of that vicious band would strike in mad desperation at the man who stood between them and safety.

CHAPTER XIII.

END OF THE PIRATES' TRAIL.

ONCE more Blaze Cody was confronted by the sheriff. During this brief interview, Dave Matthers made no reference to his conversation with Ed Storm at the Circle S Ranch. It seemed as though the officer was determined to break down the young rancher's stoutly maintained assertion concerning the money he had paid to Thorp McQueen.

"Do you still insist that you gave Mr.

McQueen five and ten-dollar bills instead of twenties?" demanded the sheriff, gazing straight into the eyes of Blaze Cody.

Trembling, white-lipped, but with unflinching stare, Blaze faced Matthers. "I told yuh the truth the first time yuh asked me that," he declared in a voice that shook with emotion. "I can't tell yuh any different now, or any other time, without lyin'."

"Would you repeat that in front of McQueen?" asked the sheriff.

Blaze Cody's hands clenched. "Yes, I will!" The words rang out sharply, while the eyes of the youth filled with tears of rage. "Darn him, he's tryin' to get me! But I ain't afraid of him; I just want to get one crack at him, that's all!"

"Cody," Matthers said accusingly, "you know just as well as I do that Ed Storm never paid you four hundred dollars advance wages. What did you do to earn it?"

"I—I ain't going to tell you any more about that," Blaze said stubbornly.

Pat Scully laughed shortly, and shook his head. "We'd better go to the bank and thrash this thing out over there," he declared, glancing meaningly at the sheriff.

Mike Frame had already been locked in a cell at the San Marcos jail. The wounded outlaw brought from Corral Viejo, guarded by the marshal and a special deputy, went on the operating table in a doctor's office.

Blaze Cody, in custody of the sheriff himself, was escorted to the bank. They were accompanied by Pat Scully and J. L. Margot, the express company's representative. Kurt Kraven, suave and polite, received them.

Blaze glared at the cashier, and in return received a malevolent leer.

In the room at the rear of the bank sat Thorp McQueen. He greeted his visitors with a smile, a bleak and wintry grimace that contained no welcome. It

was remarked later by the sheriff that "A coyote would have done as well."

"I see you have arrested Frame," began McQueen, open challenge in his tone. He considered Matthers with a look of supercilious tolerance. "Just what is your idea in this persecution of my foreman?"

"The train robbers have been rounded up in Hell's Sink," Matthers said crisply. "One of them implicated Mike Frame, which verified sign that I found near McCarty's."

"Did you get the loot?" asked McQueen, his eyes fixed on the sheriff's face intently.

Matthers shook his head, apparently reluctant to admit that the money packages had so far eluded him.

"Looks as though you had a pretty flimsy case then," McQueen said, apparently unwilling to let the opportunity pass without an attempt to discredit the sheriff.

"Well, now, I don't know," drawled Matthers. "Reckon we'll manage to make out somehow."

"I can see," declared the banker quickly, "that you are going to depend on me for the evidence to convict one of the bandits, at least." He scowled menacingly at Blaze Cody.

Dave Matthers turned to J. L. Margot. "You think you can identify the twenty-dollar bills Mr. McQueen showed us as part of the loot?"

The representative of the express company frowned. "I'm afraid that is going to be rather hard," he admitted. He glanced at McQueen. "Could I see once more those twenty-dollar bills you showed us a while ago?"

"Certainly." Thorp McQueen touched a button.

A moment later, Kurt Kraven appeared in the doorway. He glanced questioningly at the man seated at the desk.

"Bring me those twenties Cody paid in this morning," he directed.

The cashier nodded and returned toward the outer banking room, which contained the vault. He was gone a number of minutes. There was the sound of curtains being drawn and the click of a bolt, as the heavy outside door was secured.

"It's closing time," McQueen explained, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Kraven is locking up. We can go into this thing thoroughly, and without being disturbed. The cashier, of course, was a witness to the transaction this morning."

Pat Scully began whistling softly to himself, apparently very little concerned in the matter at hand. Margot fidgeted uneasily, and glanced at the sheriff. Blaze Cody's hands moved nervously. His face was drawn and haggard, and showed pale beneath the tan.

No one spoke, and a silence fell that contained a peculiar tenseness.

Kraven returned presently. In his hand was a long white envelope, which he tossed onto McQueen's desk. "There you are," he said in a grating voice.

The banker picked up the envelope and took a small sheaf of yellow-backed bills from it. These he tossed carelessly toward Margot. The latter picked up each bill and scrutinized it carefully. When he had finished his examination, there was a slight tightening at the corners of his mouth, and his lids narrowed. He looked at the sheriff, and nodded at the money.

Matthers, in turn, examined the bills. He fumbled in his pocket and at last brought to light a slip of paper on which several figures had been scrawled. These he compared with certain numbers on the twenty-dollar notes.

Thorp McQueen's fingers beat an endless tattoo on the desk. His eyes fixed themselves on the sheriff's face, and never left it, except to now and then dart to Margot.

Matthers and the latter exchanged glances. There was an awkward pause;

then the express company's representative said slowly:

"Mr. McQueen, these are not the same twenty-dollar bills that you showed us this morning!"

A sickly greenish cast spread over the face of Kurt Kraven. Almost instinctively, he shot a glance at the door that led to the outer banking room. He turned to find the cold eye of Pat Scully fixed on him. A vicious little movement of his lips showed a flash of his teeth. His hands clenched.

Thorp McQueen gasped. Then he pounded the desk with a savage fist. "Why, you're crazy!" he cried snarlingly. "Certainly they are the same twenties. What are you fellows trying to make out?"

Blaze Cody's face was a study. He blinked dazedly for an instant; then a slow light of understanding appeared in his eyes. His mouth opened, but words died unuttered. The startling developments of the past few minutes were too astounding for brain to master. His heart swelled with sudden happiness as his thoughts went to his wife, waiting alone at the ranch.

"When you showed us those twenty-dollar bills this forenoon," Margot went on, "Matthers and I memorized the last two figures of the numbers of several of those notes. I have found none of those bills here. Did you, sheriff?"

Matthers shook his head. "Not one." His steely eyes rested on Thorp McQueen. "Looks as though you overplayed your hand," he said quietly.

"You're not accusing me of being implicated in that train robbery, are you?" McQueen shouted. "Why, you thick-headed clown, you must have been drinking! You'll pay for it!"

"Reckon you might have got away with it," Matthers continued, "if you hadn't tried to fix the guilt on Cody. From looking at the cards you're holding, what do you aim to do—call, or throw down your hand?"

The banker turned fiercely to Kraven. "You idiot, did you get those twenties mixed up with the bank's money?"

"Maybe I did," the cashier admitted sullenly. "I'll look."

"Stay right where you are, partner," advised Matthers. "I'll take a look-see around myself." He moved toward the door that led to the banking room beyond.

In that instant, Kurt Kraven's right hand jerked upward, and from a specially constructed holster under his coat he pulled a shotgun pistol. It was an ugly weapon, a twenty-gauge affair in a shotgun frame, fitted with a pistol handle. The barrels, about eight inches in length, each carried a load of No. 0 Eastern buckshot.

Kraven, his face distorted with rage, uttered a half-maniacal laugh. With the shotgun pistol gripped in his clawlike hand, he swung it in a short, threatening arc before him.

"Stick 'em up!" The cashier hissed the command through his teeth. "Quick, or I'll blow your brains out!"

Kurt Kraven's desperate act, coming unexpectedly, caught the officers off their guard. Dave Matthers instantly realized that, because of his own reluctance to draw a gun, he had placed the others as well as himself in grave danger. He was not a man to use a six-shooter in making threatening gestures. When he pulled a .45 he used it. It was the code that he had been taught.

He eyed Kurt Kraven pityingly, and shook his head. "Those runty pepper-shakers have got a kick like dynamite. If you don't hold it with two hands, neighbor, you're going to blow a hole in the ceiling."

It was a fact that the cashier knew well. For an instant the murderous purpose in his heart was diverted by the quiet voice of the sheriff. Instinctively he brought up his left hand to grip the barrel of the shotgun pistol,

thus steadying it against its violent recoil.

Like a flash Dave Matthers' six-shooter leaped into his hand. Three close-blending reports jarred the room with their deafening roar. The impact of the bullet from the sheriff's gun flung the cashier halfway around and toppled him over a chair. The shotgun pistol emptied its double load of buckshot into the ceiling over the officer's head, smashing the plaster and filling the air with a choking cloud of white dust.

Already Thorp McQueen's left hand was moving slyly to open the drawer of the desk before him, while his right hand, tense and ready, waited only to seize the gun within. The sinister movement went unseen by all except Blaze Cody. Pat Scully and Margot had been watching Kraven and that terrible pistol with startled eyes.

Blaze knew from a previous experience what lay within the drawer of the banker's flat-topped desk, and his muscles instantly grew taut as his brain telegraphed a grim purpose that seemed to set fire to a system already racked to the utmost.

Like a fierce and cornered beast, Blaze hurled himself forward, the pent-up emotions of the past twenty-four hours at last released.

Thorp McQueen's six-shooter streaked from the drawer with a swiftness that seemed incredible. Its black muzzle swept upward and its brief arc sped in the wake of Blaze Cody's body. Yellow fire spat from the gun—and a small hole winked into existence in the opposite wall.

So close did the lead slug come that it snatched savagely at a flapping corner of the youngster's coat.

Already Pat Scully had swung his own six-shooter into action, only to discover that the form of Blaze Cody lined over the sight, between him and the berserk McQueen.

The bookkeeper, toiling over the red-

lined ledgers in the outer office, had left his stool at the first loud words that reached him. And with the terrifying roar of the guns, he jerked open the street door and fled.

Thin-spaced and breathless intervals, too fine for the mind to comprehend, spun their web between life and death, between the living, pulsing body of Blaze Cody and what might have been.

The youth's face was frozen in a terrible mask of hate, his eyes flamed with fury. His chance had come at last, and he swung his brawny fists recklessly. His left swept aside the yellow-mouthed six-shooter as it belched a second time, and his right came up from the tops of his boots and smashed Thorp McQueen fair in the mouth.

The man went over with his chair, a human avalanche riding him to the floor. The hot-barreled weapon was torn from his grasp and hurled aside, and the banker found himself being dragged to his feet amid the wreckage. Instinctively his legs lent support to his body, but the staying grip that had hauled him upright was suddenly released, and he felt a second jarring impact on his jaw.

Even as he crumpled over a friendly abyss, subconsciousness left the impression that his head was a football, buffeted by the mad feet of a passing army.

And Thorp McQueen, banker, master crook, black-souled and merciless, went out—cold.

Out of the mad confusion came a slow rehabilitation. And, though San Marcos bid fair to remain in a state of ferment for some days to come, facts were culled from the whole that materially cleared the atmosphere.

The money packages, stolen from the express car on No. 7 at McCarty's, were found in the vault of the San Marcos bank. And, as the sheriff pointed out, where could the robbers have cached their loot with greater security?

Kurt Kraven, it developed, had a long,

black record as a crook. This he had been careful to obscure by the adoption of various aliases as he traveled West. Educated, with long experience in the ways of the underworld, he had proved invaluable to Thorp McQueen as lieutenant and confidant in the delicate, crooked bank deals.

McQueen himself, with apparent means and position, had been enabled, after long and painstaking effort, to establish himself at the head of the San Marcos bank. This, however, it was proved, served only as a means by which he hoped to further his nefarious schemes of outlawry.

Mike Frame, McQueen had discovered in Sonora. Frame was a black-hearted desperado, both fearless and crafty. He was, McQueen soon decided, admirably suited to fill the position of foreman at the Lazy D Ranch by day, and at night act as outlaw chieftain.

Thorp McQueen, because of his position at the bank, had at his finger tips at all times, information concerning money shipments, and could thus plan robberies with care and precision. Also, he had intended to add to his personal holdings in the vicinity by snaring men in the borrowers' bog, allowing them, at times, ready loans, only to pinch them hard when they found their need for credit the greatest.

In Blaze Cody, McQueen had found a man whom it was easy to hate, and once hating, the passion for revenge was strong. Because of his own craven desires, he was ultimately trapped by the soft-voiced, dreamy-eyed sheriff.

Ed Storm, arriving in San Marcos shortly after the fight at the bank, sought out Dave Matthers, drew him to one side, and bluntly explained that he wanted to make a statement, which was in no wise to be considered a confession.

"Blaze Cody come to me yesterday mornin'," Storm began, in his big boom-

ing voice, "an' wanted to hook on"—the man's deep tones dropped abruptly to a hoarse whisper—"rum runnin'. Yuh ain't got to try an' look surprised, Matthers, 'cause yuh know jist as dang well as anybody that yuh been layin' fer me fer goin' on two months. Anyhow, take you hombres at Palomas, an' a couple of them jug-heads of Federal agents, I shore was put to it powerful hard to git a load of moonshine I had to Amargosa."

Dave Matthers smiled whimsically. "I reckon," he drawled.

"There was officers watchin' the roads fer my car," Ed Storm went on, "but they wa'n't lookin' none fer a dog-gone ole junk pile like that wagon of Cody's. I told the boy there was four hundred dollars in it if he'd put that stuff in Amargosa.

"Now that's how the land lays, but if yuh figger to make any arrests on the strength of what I jist said, I warn ye that I am the biggest liar west of New Mexico. I'll git up in court an' swear on a stack of Bibles as high as yore head that I never told yuh no such thing."

The sheriff eyed the big man a moment; then he held out his hand. "In consideration of the fact that you were trying to help out Cody, not to mention yourself," Matthers said, "I might remark that I'm as deaf as a skull-to-day. I couldn't hear a word you said, Storm. But, by the eternal gods, I sure expect to get my hearing back to-morrow, and my eyesight. If you don't mend your ways, and quit trying to irrigate the whole of Yermo County with bum whisky, you and I are going to lock horns directly."

"Now that's what I call bein' a square hombre," declared Storm. "I couldn't stand back and see the boy git accused of bein' mixed up in that train robbery, even if I did have to do some right smart explainin'."

"He has been cleared, anyway," the

sheriff said, "but we won't let that detract from your good intentions in coming forward and telling where he got that money to pay the bank."

A little later, Dave Matthers found time to drive Blaze Cody home.

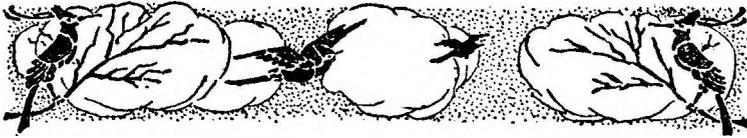
A leaping, barking dog, and a woman whose eyes shone like stars, greeted

them. There was a flash of calico, a close embrace, two names——

"Blaze!"

"Win!"

And Mysterious Dave Matthers felt that he had been repaid tenfold for the grim, dangerous hours that he had spent on the pirates' trail.



BIRDS OF THE WEST AND NORTH AMERICA

The Horned Lark

(*Otocoris Alpestris*)

ONE seldom thinks of birds, with the exception of some of the owl family, having horns. It seems a bit preposterous and, at the very least, unnecessary.

The tiny tufts worn by the horned lark are not noticeable except when the bird is aroused by fear or other excitement.

Along certain portions of the Atlantic seacoast or among the plains and hills of the Middle West, the horned lark may be found. From Labrador and other Northern haunts the bird migrates to the United States in flocks, arriving in late October or early November.

Scooping a little hole out of the earth, or hiding itself among the moss and lichens of a rock-bound coast, the horned lark lays from three to five eggs in a nest made of dried grasses. The cavity in which the material is laid is usually three inches wide and about the same depth, the top of the nest being level with the surface. The eggs are rather unusual in color, being dark and greenish or gray in hue, marked heavily with brown or gray spots. So close to the nest does the mother bird press herself that she can almost be stepped upon by a careless foot, since her coloring so perfectly blends with her surroundings.

The young soon outgrow the nest, but even when there is no longer room for comfort, they still do not learn to fly, but wander helplessly about, depending upon their parents to continue to feed them for several weeks. This is probably due to the fact that there is no particular necessity for their learning to fly, as they are born upon the ground, and seldom aspire to dizzy heights.

While the birds are still young enough to prefer the nest, the mother bird flies a crooked course when she has food for her charges and feels that danger lurks near. Quickly she feeds them and darts away.

Freshly plowed fields and marshes are havens for the food-seeking horned larks. Later, when the ground is frozen or covered with snow, they may be seen picking up seeds around the barnyard or wind-swept areas. In California, these birds are mostly vegetarians, but in other parts of the country they seem to have no objection to an insect diet and they thus prove a real benefit to the farmer.

The prairie horned lark which appears in the West circles upward while giving its song, and then sinks slowly toward the earth as he comes to the end of it. His song is considered very beautiful.



Peg Leg Plays Possum

by F. R. Buckley

Author of "Peg Leg Pays the Doctor's Fee," etc.



COME to think of it—I mean, come to think of it in the serious way a jasper does when he is confined to his International Emporium and Sheriff's Office with rheumatism—there really isn't anything so marvelous in Nature as just plain, ordinary man; you know, the animal that walks around on two legs and rolls his own cigarettes out of a muslin bag.

What I mean—the railroad companies talk a lot about the Grand Canyon, but you always know what the Grand Canyon is going to do next. Then I've been reading a book about the "Wonders of Life among the Ants," who I don't doubt are very clever for poor benighted insects, but why raise such a roar about them when right here in Three Pines we've got a society that's a whole lot more complicated than any ant hill, and that hasn't been half as much studied?

I dunno! Seems to me that just as soon as I get back the use of my right hand I'm going to start in and write a

book about men and women, so far as I've got to know anything about them in seventy-odd years on the planet. It isn't much, but it might prevent injury to people like this scientist that came down to study the ways of the lobo wolf, and offered "Pie-face" Lammermoor a dollar for saving his life.

What I mean—birds and dumb animals and rocks and suchlike are easy; an oriole's an oriole and builds its nest accordingly; and opossum is an opossum and will play dead better than the greatest actor could do it, but it never under any circumstances starts in to act like a mountain lion; so you know where you're at. But you take a man like this Jeremiah Biggs, for instance, that nobody would ever think of studying with a magnifying glass, and where are you?

With regard to his appearance, he was just an ordinary cowboy, about six feet in height, and broad in proportion; nice regular features, eyes blue and set wide apart; hair dark and lots of it, and complexion burned to the usual shade. He came from Montana, like

about a million other Texas punchers; he wore a rattlesnake band around his hat, and preferred blue neckcloths with yellow stripes; threw a goodish rope, and shot pretty well; and when he wanted to pick himself out a girl, proved just average enough to prefer one that had been picked already. This was Betty Burton, of the Bar O outfit, who was the same as to say engaged to George Barker of the Flying U.

So after he had met her at my store, and stood staring after her pony until it turned the corner at Four Mile, I thought it might be as well to take Mr. Biggs by the sleeve and pour a couple words of advice into his ear.

"Sonny," says I, "just look at me, will you? For a moment."

Well, it was a job for him to unglue his gaze from the prairie, empty as this now was; but he obliged. The thing that seemed particularly to take his attention was my whiskers.

"Yes," says I, "but leaving them out of consideration for the moment—you know I'm the storekeeper around here. Also the postmaster, the station master, the registrar of vital statistics, and the commissioner for deeds. But do you know what else I am?"

He had a long think, combined with another stare at the dundrearies.

"Yes, whiskers and all," says I. "Do try to remember."

"Why," says he, sort of coming out of the ether, "you're the sheriff, aren't you, Mr. Garfield?"

"There is no 'Aren't you' about it," I informed him. "A better expression would be 'And how!' Paste that in your hat. Write it in your memory book. But don't you ever so far forget yourself as to forget it. Ask your foreman there at Stony Springs how come his nose is all on one side. See if 'One-eye' Tomkins will tell you about his accident. Have a chat with 'Scar-face'——"

"What's this all about?" asks the

young man. "I just came in for a package of tobacco."

"And it will be ten cents," says I, handing it to him. "On the other hand, that's not all you're going out with."

"What else?" says he.

"You're taking home," says I, "a desire to see a great deal more of Miss Betty Burton."

Well, he blushed.

"What business is that of yours?"

"You'd be amazed. Ever hear of Mr. George Barker?"

"The fellow that cleaned up the——"

"Just so. The Temple of Chance at Longhorn City. He thought they'd done him out of fifty cents that was coming to him, and he took the place apart, nail by nail. Now, he considers this Miss Burton just as much his as the fifty cents was, and if you start endeavoring to do him out of her—but I'm sure I need say no more."

"I guess I can take care of myself!" says the young man angrily. You see how exactly he was like everybody else.

"Quite so," says I, leaning over the counter. "But the only thing is this: be sure you do it as not provided against in the statutes. In the heat of these arguments, especially with a jasper like Mr. Barker, one's liable to forget one's manners and start shooting or something; and what I'm pointing out to you is that I then have to load my aged bones onto a horse, and ride miles after you when I would much rather be at home; and finally get my feelings all harrowed up seeing you go to jail or get hanged. Catch me?"

He had another look at the whiskers.

"Because," says I, scratching them. "I should most certainly catch you. Ask this jasper that was called the 'Gray Ghost.' His address is the Federal Penitentiary, Fort Leavenworth, and he'll have nothing to do for the next twenty years but answer letters, except maybe he might make a few mail bags or chairs or something. Now, can I

sell you a stamp, or do I go back to my reading?"

"Go ahead with the book," says Mr. Biggs reflectively. "Good afternoon."

So he went, and I am compelled to say that he took my advice in the most charming manner; for which I was all the more obliged to him since the meeting between him and Barker took place in my store, just after I'd been out all night on a train-robbery case. There had been a kind of epidemic of small holdups, done by a lone hand very completely masked. This train robbery seemed to have been pulled off by the same jasper; and what with the annoyance, and the mental strain, and my rheumatism, which had started up again in consequence of my being out all night, I wasn't feeling in any shape to stop shooting bees. It was on a Saturday afternoon; all the boys were over, eating fruit and drinking sarsaparilla on the store floor; and Biggs was just starting to sing "La Paloma" in a very nice voice, when Barker came in.

"Where's that new guy from Stony Springs?" he asked nastily; and before I could say anything, Biggs stood up.

"Here he is."

"Oh," says Mr. Barker; and they had a good long look at one another. "I understand you're going for a ride this afternoon. Or at least that you've got a date to go; but, of course, you ain't going."

"No?" says Mr. Biggs. "Well, it's the first I've heard of it."

"Unless you cancel that date here and now," says Mr. Barker, waving at the telephone, "it won't be the last."

"No?" says Biggs. "Well, I'm glad of that. I crave to hear more. You sound so exactly like the rain pattering on a tin roof."

So they stood eye to eye.

"Fellow," says Barker. "Do you like daisy roots?"

"Never tasted them."

"Well, you'll be eatin' 'em soon, if

you're not careful," says Mr. Barker. Concerning whom I've got something to remark, until such time as I can write this here book about mankind. He sounded like a bear cat of the worst sort, and in fact he was one; but at the same time he was the kindest guy you ever heard of, this same Barker. He was sending about half his pay to an old mother in Corpus Christi, and there wasn't a sick person anywhere in the county that he wouldn't ride over and visit with, taking wild flowers along if it was a girl. Tie that combination among your ants.

"Yeah?" says Biggs.

"Uh-huh," says Mr. Barker; and with that he led off—a left hook that positively whistled.

Well, I used rather to pride myself on my description of fights, but after I had been doing these local chronicles for some years I found that while no doubt writing very readable material, I was doing myself in the eye as regards the sheriffship; because whole lots of jaspers would stage rip-roaring combats in convenient places, just on the off chance that Bill Garfield would write them up for the newspaper. So concerning this battle, which I was unable to interrupt owing to my rheumatism aforementioned, I will merely state that it was the usual toe-to-toe thing, and that I disapproved of it entirely except for one feature. That boy Biggs evidently had a kind heart and a good memory; because the scrap wasn't five minutes old when I saw him deliberately working his adversary toward the door, and away from my piles of canned goods. There wasn't from the first any question of shooting, which was all I had actually spoken about to him; this idea that maybe I didn't want my store torn to pieces was just his own invention, and I gave him full credit for it. He was a kind-hearted, nice, sympathetic, young man, I thought to myself; and didn't even change this opinion

when, having knocked Mr. Barker down the front veranda steps with a right to the nose, he took a running leap and landed on the fallen gentleman's chest.

That, I may mention, was the end of the fight. Biggs came in smiling, and asked if he could wash himself a little, and possibly pass a comb or so through his hair.

"Fact is," he said, glancing up from the washbasin to where four men were trying to resuscitate Mr. Barker, "I've got a date to go for a ride with a young lady."

Well, of course, that was the night when this lone-hand bandit turned up at the Circle S ranch house and shoved a gun through the sitting-room window and made Pa Sanderson hand out the whole proceeds of the sale of a thousand head. It was a mess all around, that affair. Nothing had been seen of the jasper but his forearm and his revolver; I was too crippled to go over to Circle S myself; and when I sent Jake Henson, my deputy, the first thing he did was to have his horse step in a gopher hole and throw him for a slight concussion of the alleged brain. So Ben Pokeson, the town marshal of Gold Creek, did the investigating; and made a report stating that if I kept better order in my county such events would be impossible. He was right there reporting, with me trying desperately to get out of my chair and reach the stove poker, when "Two-toes" Trotter came in with the news that some one had gone on the house of the Acacia National Bank cashier, and at a gun's point forced him to go down to the bank after closing hours and unlock the vault.

"Just one man?" says Ben Pokeson, looking hard at me.

"Yeah," says Two-toes, "but six thousand dollars."

And so it went on; one of the darkest weeks of my entire forty years as peace officer. I am not going to give

the details, for three reasons. First, they were given at the time—along with insulting editorial remarks—by the Longhorn City *Bugle*; second, I don't care to think about them; and third, this isn't a history of crime, but an instance of how peculiar humanity can be even when it doesn't try. Suffice it to say that of all the hogs I ever heard of, this bandit was the worst. He didn't seem to have any idea of moderation, or of leaving any plunder for any other criminals that might be in the district. Anywhere there was money was good enough for him, and on his way to and from jobs he would hold up casual passers-by and rob them of anything down to their last fifty cents.

For instance, "Pee-wee" Nicholson had a silver medal worth about a dollar and a half wholesale, but valued by Pee-wee just about on a par with his right arm; the lone bandit took that, although he had just robbed the Prairie Dog freight station of nigh onto a thousand bucks. It was terrible; and with me and Jake Henson laid by, the posses that went out most often ended up with a camp on the prairie playing euchre by the light of the fire. It was about this feature of their activities that Biggs came over to complain one afternoon; a spark having ignited about four acres of Stony Springs grass.

"All right," says I, trying to hoist myself up and finding my knee wouldn't bear me. "Listen, you. Bring my horse around front here, and pick me up and put me in the saddle. Once I'm there, I can stick on somehow. This jasper has got to be captured, and I'm the boy to do it."

"But listen——"

"Never mind listening!" I said in a variety of shriek. "Do you know that Pa Sanderson has complained to the governor of this State about my not being on the job? And do you know what the governor telephoned me fifteen minutes ago? Why, that if I didn't

have the man apprehended by to-morrow at three o'clock, he'd cancel my commission. I've been sitting here with never a son of a gun to talk to all morning, hoping somebody might help me out after all I've done for everybody; and here all my posses are doing is playing conflagrations with the State of Texas. Get me up, will ya?"

"They need somebody to keep 'em on the job," says Mr. Biggs, looking at me reflectively.

"And they're going to get somebody," says I. "Will you kindly——"

"No," says Biggs, scratching his chin. "You're in no fit state. Mr. Peg Leg Garfield. But if you'll make me a deputy, I guess maybe I can keep 'em in order. I used to be deputy in Shelby County, Montana; and then after that I was deputy for Sheriff John Jamieson down in Parsons City. And the boys kind of like me since that trouble with Barker. How about letting me try it once?"

Well, trying to get up under my own steam had shown me that if I did get onto my horse, my next deed would be to fall off on the other side; so I snatched at this straw because actually there wasn't anything else to snatch at.

"You think you can get him?" I asked.

"I'll try, anyhow," says Mr. Biggs, looking very handsome and determined. "That's more than these others seem to be doing."

"But you're an engaged man," says I, hoping he had an answer ready. "What'll Betty say if I get you killed or anything?"

"She could not love me, near so much, loved I not honor more," says Mr. Biggs. "Well, is that all right? Will you swear me in now?"

So I did; and, what's more, I was so affected by his manner that I actually told him to go to the cash drawer and feel around at the back and take out a small jeweler's box, probably all cov-

ered with dust if not cobwebs. This contained a wedding ring which I had ordered for Tommy McCarthy, and which he had never called for on account of having tried to lasso a moving train. It was engraved on the inside with the names "Tommy—Janet" and the date 1894; but as I pointed out to Biggs, it was worth seven dollars wholesale, and the inscription could easily be taken off.

Well, his gratitude was touching; he did everything but kiss me; and when he finally departed, it was with the statement that this lone bandit was just about to wish he had never been born.

And that very afternoon, in broad daylight, the rural mail carrier was held up just on the other side of Pine Forks, and robbed of his entire load. He came in at four thirty p. m., very scantily dressed indeed, with his left ear more or less battered, his eyes blacked, and several teeth missing, and remarked that anyhow he had given the bandit a run for his money.

"What's the use of that?" I bellowed. "You didn't get him, did you?"

"He knocked me out with the butt of a gun," says the mail man, exhibiting a two-inch cut on the top of his head. "But——"

"Call around the ranch houses," says I, trying to rise and finally giving it up as a bad job. "Get Jeremiah Biggs—he's out raising a posse for to-night. Keep on calling till you get him."

"But listen——" says the mail carrier. "I've got——"

"I don't care what you've got!" says I; and at this moment the telephone bell rang again. It was the governor; a guy I hadn't been in the Civil War with or anything; and what he had to say was enough to put the instrument out of order. The mail man had reported his loss at Prairie Dog before coming to me; the post office people had taken it up with Austin; and all the instructions I now got were to have this

bandit in custody by six that evening or forever become a civilian.

"I don't care to hear any more about it!" roars the executive gentleman; and hung up on me.

Well, of course I had an hour and a half; but on the other hand Three Pines is a large county, and Biggs, my only hope, was liable to be at any one of a dozen ranch houses or anywhere between any of them; it would take a good hour to reach him. But it used to be our motto in the Rangers never to surrender until actually dead; so I told the mail man to keep right on calling and picked up the stove poker to make sure he made it snappy. It is a matter of regret to me that I walloped him across the knuckles when he was just about to save my job for me; but life is like that.

"Ouch!" he howled. "You old goat!"

And he dropped on the floor a small box which he had drawn from his pocket. It was a jeweler's box, rather dusty; and on being opened it proved to contain a wedding ring engraved with the words "Tommy—Janet—1894."

"It jumped out of the bandit's breast pocket when I hit him in the ribs," says the mail man sulkily, "and if you don't think it's a clew, well, you're a bigger fool than I think you are. And that'd be going some."

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I sat there completely flabbergasted. I didn't even have enough sense or voice left to stop this postal jasper from starting to call up the ranch houses the way I'd told him; and as in a dream I heard the Circle S say that yes, he had been there; and the Bar T report not having seen him yet. Jeremiah Biggs, then, was the lone bandit, the guy that had been cleaning the county of everything that wasn't acetylene-welded to the landscape. There wasn't any doubt about it; the ring was absolute evidence; the mail man had actually seen

it hop out of his pocket during this holdup which he'd staged in the afternoon so as to be free to lead a posse looking for himself that night.

The next time I looked at the clock with enough consciousness to see what time it was, the fingers marked half past five; and still the mail man had no report on Biggs' whereabouts.

"Are you still wasting my telephone calls, you dolt?" I demanded of him; to which he replied that I had told him to; adding remarks which I will not here reproduce.

"In any case," says he in an injured manner, "I can lay off now. Here comes your man."

"Who? Biggs?" I gasped.

"Yeah, and in a hurry," says the mail man. "I suppose you don't mind if I take a bottle of your ginger ale?"

"Go ahead," says I, drawing the revolver I keep under my chair cushions, and disposing it conveniently under the blanket on my knees. "There's a pair of handcuffs hanging on a nail, back there. When I tell you to, would you mind taking those also, and putting them on anybody I may designate?"

"What?" says the mail man.

And at that moment, Mr. Jeremiah Biggs vaulted off his horse and came stalking into my store.

Now, I hope I have made it clear just what this young man had been doing, while at the same time wrangling beeves at forty dollars a month and getting set to marry a most respectable young lady of the district, who has since married Mr. George Barker, thereby showing her good sense. I think it is rarely that you find such a state of affairs among leopards, let us say, or the four-toed whoozits of the Ogwog Peninsula. If this were all, I think I should have proved what I started out to prove—that there are still some things we don't understand about our fellow men, and that it might pay somebody to study their peculiarities a little.

But stranger is to come. Gazing at Mr. Biggs with the interest I always feel in people I am about to arrest, I observed that his usually smiling face was angry looking; that his hands were clenched; and that, in short, the young man seemed to be laboring under a high, wide, and fancy indignation. It was the genuine emotion, too; he was just so mad he could have burst.

"Now, looka here, Mr. Garfield!" says he, in a tone very much like that used by the governor when talking about the mail robbery.

I focused the revolver on him—of course still under the blanket—and looked inquiring.

"You know where I've been all afternoon, don't you?" demanded Mr. Biggs.

"Indeed, yes," says I.

"I've been going around," says he, "trying to drum up a posse to catch this bandit for you. Isn't that the positive truth?"

"To some extent," says I, with the gun all ready. But bless you, he was far too furious to notice the reservation.

"Well, while I've been out," says he, "tryin' to protect the community from this jasper that's been robbing it, do

you know what's happened? About an hour ago, I was all hot and tired, and right near the Stony Springs ranch house, and I thought I'd pop in and get cleaned up a bit. Well, the first thing I did was to look in my war bag for my hairbrush. It was a nice brush—cost me four dollars in San Antonio, and I've only had it six months. Well, do you know what?"

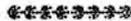
"No," says I, getting ready to unmask the gun and wink at the mail man. There was a scar on Mr. Biggs' cheek that the mail man seemed to recognize. I saw his eyes fixed on it—a scratch that might have been made by an ocotillo trailer, or might not.

"Well, while I was away," roars Mr. Biggs, "some darn thief went into the bunk house and stole it!"

"Serves you right," says I. "And I'm going to serve you righter, and by so doin', will save my job, increase my reputation, and give you employment with not the slightest chance, no matter what you do, of gettin' fired.

"And I've got you covered, good and plenty. So, Mr. Custodian-and-conveyer - of - U. - S. - letters - and - bundles kindly officiate with coupling irons."

Which same was done, firm and pronto.



A BACKSLIDING GLACIER

APPARENTLY weary of being an ice river, Nisqually Glacier, one of the most interesting natural features of Mount Rainier, is now well on its way to becoming a waterfall.

This glacier, which for ages had been forcing a slow and tortuous route for itself down the steep sides of Mount Rainier, seems to be executing a right-about turn. In forty years it has retreated half a mile, and, if it continues to back up the mountain, it is predicted that in another forty years this great, solid wall of ice may be a waterfall, several hundred feet high, by a quarter of a mile wide.

Each year, on July first, a mark is made, indicating the position of the glacier's southern extremity; for years this measurement has shown the backward trend of the ice river. Only last winter, it is estimated that the glacier retreated many feet, melting under the snowdrifts. If the predictions of scientists prove correct, many people of the present generation may live to watch that most fascinating of natural phenomena—the formation of a waterfall.



The Lost Anthill Mine

by Arthur Preston Hankins

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

AN easy victim to the clever plot of his wily and wicked old uncle, Esau Badger, young Radford Karval sets off to look for the lost Anthill Mine, a map of which, together with some letters and documents, have been ingeniously supplied him. The photograph of a beautiful young girl, "Merry" Rouné, is a further inducement. With Radford are two punchers and his old cook and general factotum, Philip Pardee, who is intrusted with the map. He hires also a guide, Henry Maitland, of whom Pardee is suspicious.

Badger, with his two Mexican helpers, plans to join the search party later and share the prize. Tom Fife, Badger's old enemy, and his gang, get wind of the expedition. Maitland proves treacherous, a dummy being found in his bunk, while a signal fire gives the location of Radford's party.

CHAPTER X.

THE PROMISED LAND.

THE following morning, Radford Karval's party was away at an early hour. Rad watched the guide, Henry Maitland, a silent, sun-scorched son of the outlands, innocent-looking enough, but now surrounded by an atmosphere of menace. Maitland's face was inscrutable, but Rad knew that he was a traitor, and that something must be done with him before many hours had passed.

When they camped at noon, much higher above the sea, Rad asked Pardee

for the map and slipped aside to give it another careful study.

It was an interesting map, very old, and the words written on it were in Spanish. Rad had taken the precaution to show it to an expert in old manuscripts before leaving San Francisco. This expert's opinion was that the lettering and drawing were at least a century old.

The map had been made, it was believed, by a group of Spanish pardres on their way to California from the heart of Mexico. The Anthill Mine—called "*Horniguero*" on the map—had been discovered by them during their journey. The terrible difficulties of mountains and deserts, and trouble with

hostile Indians, had turned them back eventually.

But the map showing where the mine might be rediscovered had been made and had gone with them back to their starting place. It appeared that they never had been able to undertake another journey into the new land, and that the map had remained in the City of Mexico for many years. Eventually, heaven only knew how, it had found its way into the eager hands of Esau Badger. But Rad believed he would never know the details of how that had come about.

He decided, after careful study, that he might be able to dispense with the services of his treacherous guide. Without him, it might take longer to find their way through the mountains to a point where they might sight the plateau; but Rad believed that a few days, one way or the other, would not make much difference. He was sure that they had plenty of supplies for a trip twice the length of the one ahead of them, and had wondered at his uncle's data in this respect. But he had followed instructions to the letter, for he had no desire to become stranded in the wilderness without sufficient food.

Yes, he would give Henry Maitland the gate immediately—as soon as the noon meal was over. Maitland had his own saddle horse and his own pack mule, the latter carrying ample supplies for his return. It would work no hardship on the guide, and they would be better off if they were rid of him.

Rad wondered about Tom File. How had this old enemy of his uncle discovered that he—Rad—had outfitted at Carpenter to search for the lost Anthill Mine? The instructions that Uncle Esau had left behind him—which had been written down for nobody in particular, it seemed—had warned whoever might take up the quest against this same Tom File and his alleged disreputable gang. And now, according to the

faithful Pardee, Rad had outfitted directly under Tom File's nose without being aware of it.

But perhaps Tom File was following, if he really was following, on mere guesswork. Perhaps it was no new thing for an expedition to outfit at Carpenter to search for the lost mine, and anybody outfitting there for any unknown purpose whatsoever would be carefully watched.

However that may have been, Rad decided to take no chances and to fire Henry Maitland when the party was ready to set out again.

Pardee presently called him in to dinner, and when the meal was over and they all had risen, Rad asked the guide to step aside with him.

"Maitland," he said, as the silent man complied, "I've decided to dispense with your services from this point on. Here's the amount agreed upon for the entire trip, so you have no kick coming."

The lean-faced guide shot him a swift glance, questioning, flashing. Then the bronzed skin went taut over his cheek bones and he essayed a sour smile.

"You're the doctor," he replied, with an indifferent shrug, as he reached out a hand to take the bills. "Well"—he stretched and yawned—"guess I'll be foggin' it back, then. I c'n reach Rodman's Ridge by nightfall. So long."

That was all. Not one question as to Rad's sudden change of plan, not one protest. It was the way of the West, Rad knew well. Just the same, Maitland's assumed indifference spelled guilt.

He at once rubbed down his animals, and threw on cross saddle and pack saddle. He swung aboard, and with a wave of the hand at Rad's curious followers, rode off toward the trees.

"And that," remarked Phil Pardee, "don't mean that we're rid of 'im, or rid of Tom File's gang either."

"No," admitted Rad, "but it's a step in the right direction. Let's saddle up and beat it."

Night found the party at an elevation of over eight thousand feet. They had dropped behind all landmarks and were in a veritable wilderness, primal but majestic in its solitude. Seated about the leaping camp fire after the evening meal, they speculated on the probable outcome of Maitland's return toward civilization.

"He could do one of two things to keep in touch with us," ventured Bill Noxie, the man with the mustard-colored skin: "He could drift back and pick up the File gang—if they're really after us—or he could trail us up by himself, signalin' to the gang when he got the chance which way we're goin'. No, I can't see as it did any good to can him, Rad."

If we only knew the confounded country," put in Lou Dailey, "one of us could drop behind and keep a lookout for him. But whatever bright little pupil does that is likely to git lost and not be able to ketch up with the outfit later."

"Unless we could manage to signal our course to him, as Maitland was signaling to File," suggested Rad.

"But them signals would do File's outfit jest as much good as they would your rear guard," objected Lou.

"Yes, you're right," Rad confessed. "I don't see that we can do anything except stagger along and forget the other fellows till they give us something more definite to worry about."

Thus did Radford Karval temporarily erase the distasteful matter from his mind.

Next day the going became rougher and rougher. The weary animals would struggle up one sharp rise, only to slide down its opposite side and begin the ascent of another one. They had left what scientists term the Canadian Zone, and were ascending into the Hudsonian, which constitutes the belt of forest just below timber line. They passed through districts of lodgepole pine, silver pine,

white-bark pine, and Alpine hemlock. And before night fell they were struggling up into the Arctic-Alpine Zone, comprising from an elevation ten thousand five hundred feet upward.

It was a strange land through which they passed the following day. The atmosphere was crystalline, breath-taking. Frequently, they were obliged to rest the animals, who then stood with heads down and sides heaving pitifully. The men themselves, when they walked to relieve their mounts, understood how these were suffering. Not being inured to the high altitude, they discovered that they could scarcely breathe in the thin air, and that the slightest effort set their hearts to pounding and their heads to swimming dizzily.

They now were crossing the lap of the lofty mountain toward whose summit they had been traveling. On the morrow Rad hoped to be able to look upon the country beyond it and sight the longed-for plateau.

The traveling next day was even harder, for they were still ascending into the quecrest land that any of them ever had invaded. The actinic quality of the light in this Boreal Zone was startling. It caused the few plants that the travelers came upon to show pure, rare colors such as they had never dreamed could exist. They were cushion plants, for the most part, spread out like rugs over the gaunt rocks, with their flower stalks rising from the center.

The party had entered a land of nothingness, where almost no wild life existed. It was cold, bleak, comfortless. Seemingly endless wastes of stones spread out on all sides of them. Here and there were patches of snow, so dazzlingly white that it pained the eye to look at them. Windswept reaches sprawled upward, to the right, and to the left. Dwarf willow trees, only a few inches in height but perfectly

formed, comprised about all that the animals could find to eat. The adventurers shivered with the cutting cold and gasped for breath.

Then about three o'clock in the afternoon Bill Noxie, who was in the lead, suddenly reined in his horse. They had just traversed a rocky pass, unfriendly and gaunt looking, and now Rad knew that Bill was confronted by something new.

He rode forward to the leader's side as Bill lifted a pointing arm.

Never before had Radford witnessed such a magnificent sight as was stretched below him. In negotiating the little pass, they had come unexpectedly to a point where the other side of the mountain lay in sight. In short, they had reached the spot where Henry Maitland was to have left them, according to the original schedule.

It seemed to Rad that all the mountains of the earth of lesser magnitude than the one on which they stood had been strewn below them. A thousand peaks, some bare, some timbered, some snow-clad, tumbled away into the ilimitable distance. It was like standing on top of the world and looking off over the remainder of creation.

And in the midst of this jumbled mass of peaks lay a high, level stretch, flat like a dance floor, seemingly bare even when viewed through binoculars, and colored like a lemon.

"At last!" Rad murmured. "The plateau! But can we ever get to it over that sea of peaks and canyons?"

Pardee rode to his side, took one brief glance, then spoke. "Come back through the pass with me, Rad," he said. "This is good, but there's something else I want you to see on the other side."

They rode back and looked down over the weary course that they had come—down to timber line and beyond. Rad trained his glasses.

"See it?" asked the cowboy-butler.

"Yes," said Rad, "I see it."

"It" was a thin plume of smoke rising straight toward the heavens, miles and miles behind them, a wispy, quivering signal ascending above the treetops—a signal to Tom File's gang notifying them that Rad's party was gazing upon the promised land.

Then suddenly Rad's glasses picked up a moving object comparatively close by. It appeared not over half a mile down the mountainside for an instant, and was gone almost immediately.

"Did you see that, Pard?" he gasped. "Somebody on a white horse passing between two masses of rocks?"

"Yeah," Pardee replied thoughtfully, his glasses still trained. "Looked to me like an Indian. Fancy-colored shirt, or somethin', and a lot o' hair."

"Either an Indian or a woman," Rad replied.

CHAPTER XI.

TOM FILE'S GANG.

IT was about three o'clock of the same afternoon that Rad's expedition sighted the lost plateau. Five men sat in their saddles on halted horses and strained their eager eyes up toward the distant, snow-capped peaks. A thin column of smoke, ascending straight aloft from the northeast side of the highest mountain, was the object of their interest.

"By Jiminy, that must be Hank Maitland sendin' us another signal!" remarked one of them. "Er else that kid's outfit has built 'emself a whoopin' big camp fire. And why would they be campin' at this time o' day?"

A tall, lank man with narrow, lizard hips—to quote Phil Pardee's description of the notorious Tom File—made answer, as he thoughtfully stroked his flowing "Alkali Ike" mustache.

"But Hank wouldn't be sendin' us a signal like that by daylight. He couldn't. They'd git onto 'im, wouldn't they?"

"He mighta worked it somehow," put in another of the quintet. "And here's an idee, Tom: Maybe they done crossed over the apron o' that mountain and are lookin' down at the country t'other side. And if that's the case, maybe they done set Hank Maitland adrift on this side. Wherefore, he could take a chance on sendin' us a signal."

"I say that's right," piped up another. "Hank's on his way back, and is sendin' us a signal to come on, to save us time."

Tom File continued thoughtfully to caress his enormous mustache. His gaunt, cadaverous face, with whisky pouches under the sorrowful-looking eyes, would have interested an illustrator looking for a model for the perfect Western bad man. He bestrode a rangy horse of a dirty gray color, his lizard hips—assuming that a lizard has hips—completely hidden by the high cantle of his heavy California saddle. But two enormous Colt six-shooters winged out on either side of him, proving that, though hidden, he had something to hang them on.

File's head, with its thin, greasy-looking brown hair, was bulletlike under a big black Stetson. The shrewd, calculating black eyes showed resolution and courage, for all their sorrowful aspect, as they narrowly watched the rising column of smoke. File's legs were so long that the pointed tapaderos, worn and brush-scarred, touched the grass under his horse's feet. His lean torso was resplendent in a calfskin vest, tanned with the hair on, which was white, with irregular black spots to break the snowy monotony.

"Look! Look!" cried the first speaker suddenly. "Maitland's slappin' a wet blanket over his snuffe. Look at the smoke come up in puffs."

"That settles it," casually remarked Tom File. "I told him to give us the Indian signal, if he got the chanct and if he thought that outfit was really head-

in' for the Anthill Mine country. Boys, they're our meat!"

"I certainly hope yeh're right, Tom," observed Giles Latty, File's most intimate friend and right-hand man. "Our grub's a-runnin' mighty low. I was be-ginnin' to b'lieve that kid had somethin' else on his chest besides the Anthill Mine."

"I was sure of what he was up to from the start," replied File in his slow, drawling, unemotional manner. "When I glimpsed that gal o' Badger's at Carpenter pipin' off the kid, I savvied what was up."

"But we ain't seen nothin' of Badger, have we?" returned Latty. "We read in the paper all about his disappearin'."

"We done talked all that over a number o' times," File mildly rebuked him. "I'm a-tellin' yeh, yeh never know about that old coot, Badger. He's about the slickest thing that was ever turned loose in these here United States. Maybe he's dead, and maybe he ain't. Yeh never read that his body was found, did yeh? I'll say not!"

"But," File continued, "even allowin' that he is dead, that wouldn't keep his gal from tryin' to find the lost mine, would it? On the other hand, his bein' bumped off might be the very thing that would start her out. Maybe he left her the map and papers."

"But she didn't mix with this fancy kid's outfit, File," Latty pointed out. "It was plain, from what yeh told me, that she was kinda spyin' on 'em."

"That's right, too," admitted Tom File. "I'm willin' to confess that the whole proceedin's have got me guessin', boys. All except one point. That is, that I'm sure that outfit has set out to look for the lost Anthill Mine."

"And I'm sure of some more, come to think of it. That is, that the kid who's at the head of it knows where he's goin'. That means he's got hold of Esau Badger's map. Who he is, or what he is, I don't savvy ner care."

"All I know is we're gonta git him before he gits to that plateau, take his outfit and the map away from him, and finish the thing ourselves. I been waitin' years for this chanct, fellas, and now it's come. There'll be plenty grub, Giles, after we've took the thing in hand. He took enough along to run a circus fer a week."

"What fer a lookin' jane is this gal o' Badger's?" asked another of the File gang.

Tom File turned slowly and burned him with his sorrowful, black eyes.

"Int'rested, eh?"

The man shrugged and looked uncomfortable.

"Well, I'll tell yeh this," said File: "She's about the purtiest thing the Lord ever let live. That'll give you some idea, Mark."

"Ever have any words with her, Tom?" asked Latty, who, by reason of his high position in the gang, was bolder with his flinty chieftain than the others.

"Nary a word," answered File. "Her ner Badger never had the least idee I know she's on earth. That's why I suspicion ole Badge ain't among the angels, and that he sent her to Carpenter to find out what was goin' on.

"Only time I ever saw this kid before was over to Trinidad, in Colorado. She was dealin' stud poker in a gambler's house, and Esau Badger was runnin' a roulette wheel in the same joint. I jest happened in, and had no idee old Badge was in the burg.

"I see the kid and asked about her. Any man would, she's so purty. They told me she was the gal o' one of the gamblers. And jest then ole Badge drifted in, and the fella that was informin' me says, 'That's the man.' Whereupon, I beat it pronto, not wantin' to meet up with Badge jest then.

"I floated outa Trinidad that same day, and Badge never even knowed I was in the town. But a man'd never forget that gal, once he'd set eyes on

her. And so when I see her at Carpenter—— Well, they's no more to be said. We're a day's ride behind that outfit, and we gotta be makin' time if we wanta overtake 'em between here and the plateau."

Calves pressed against horses' ribs, and the party moved forward, saddle-leather squeaking, spurs jingling, a hard-nicked bunch of border rough-necks, as picturesque as the old-time pirates of the Spanish Main.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ATTACK.

AS Rad Karval's twenty-mule pack train moved slowly down out of the Arctic-Alpine Zone into the less aloof Hudsonian, and on down again into the kindly Canadian, the spirits of the adventurers soared. The mountainous country through which they journeyed was a land of delight, despite the countless difficulties of travel that it presented. Colorful canyons, roaring, icy streams of water, mysterious forests, delectable meadows, offered an ever-changing panorama. Birds sang with abandon in the treetops. The four-footed life was plentiful, so that venison, quail, and jack rabbits were always to be had for a little effort, and helped conserve the dry staples in the pack.

Rad had set a course by the compass from the point where they had first glimpsed the forgotten plateau. It was south by west, a quarter west. They tried to travel in that direction, but many times were swung to the right or to the left by impenetrable patches of chaparral, or canyons that could not be crossed at the points where they encountered them.

However, Rad imagined that it would not be a difficult matter to strike the plateau once they were drawing close to it. He caught sight of it now and then from tall peaks which he would climb alone while the others were rest-

ing. But after two days' march he was unable to see it under any circumstances, so the party kept to the original course and plodded on hopefully.

Continually, Rad and Pardee wondered about the mysterious rider on a white horse that had appeared almost miraculously back there on the other side of the little pass. Pardee held on to the Indian theory, but Radford was positive that the rider was a woman.

He pointed out that California Indians are not given to fancy dress, as are the tribes of the inland Western States. And the shirt, or vest, or whatever body covering the strange rider had worn, was indisputably decorative and colorful.

Pardee, of course, knew nothing about the photograph that Rad was carrying. He, therefore, could not know that the subject of this photograph was dressed in a beaded, Indian shirt.

The mystery of that person who had appeared and disappeared so swiftly in the trail behind the party was profound. Rad was all the time tingling with suppressed excitement. Pardee's Indian theory was pure bosh. It could be no other than the strange girl of the photograph whom they had seen. And if this was true—which he fully believed—the mystery became deeper still.

If she—"Merry" Roane—were following his party, was she alone? Unthinkable! Then, who accompanied her? How had she learned that he was on his way to search for the lost Anthill Mine? Perhaps his uncle had written to her about him, and maybe she had read of his disappearance in the papers. Then, realizing that perhaps Rad would accede to the map and traveling instructions, she had gone to the starting point in order to get on his trail.

But he had seen nothing of her at Carpenter. He was sure of that. Women were scarce in the little desert town. And if there had been a thou-

sand on hand, he would have been able to pick out Merry Roane among them.

However, he recalled that he had failed to note Tom File, and it was now quite apparent that this notorious character was following them.

A guard was on watch over Rad's camp every night. They all took turns, Rad standing his trick with the others. For all Radford Karval knew, there might be a far shorter route to the plateau than the one he had taken. Tom File might know of such a route; and, once convinced that the plateau and the lost Anthill Mine were Rad's objectives, he could take this course and cut in ahead of them. Rad realized that his party had wandered grievously on many occasions. Almost any night they might be surprised by the gang and an attempt made to secure the directions and the map.

So much for Tom File and his cut-throats, as Pardee persisted in calling them. But what about the third party—the girl in the beaded skirt?

Whoever was on watch kept constantly alert for signs of either faction, and none of them had any cause to complain of days and nights made dull by the lack of suspense.

Rad went on guard at eight o'clock the third night after the expedition had left the pass. Bill Noxie would relieve him at half-past ten. With his six-shooter at his hip and a Winchester over his shoulder, the young man slowly paced about the little camp, listening to the night sounds of the forest, his ears ever attuned for something new and unfamiliar.

From afar came the low roar of the river where they had watered the stock and from which the camp had been supplied. They did not camp close to noisy streams now, for the sound of rushing water would make it easy for their trailers to steal upon them.

Twice Rad circled the camp, often stopping to listen. Then he made a

wider circle and took in the resting animals.

It seemed to him as he approached them, and spoke in a low voice to assure them, that they were unusually restless to-night. Only a few of them were lying down, and the others were moving about the corral, made by stringing rope from tree to tree, their ears pricked up, nervously tossing their heads occasionally.

He thought that perhaps some wild beast might have troubled them—a bear or a mountain lion. He watched them for some time in the faint moonlight, and then they seemed to settle down, their nervousness allayed.

So Rad left them and patrolled the camp once more, yawning, longing for half-past ten, because the day's travel had been extremely wearisome and trying.

Then, when the situation seemed quietest, everything began happening at once.

The sudden sharp snap of a brittle twig behind him brought him about, his Winchester dropping from his shoulder. But his thumb had not crooked itself over the hammer when a heavy weight crashed into him from behind, and he was borne to his knees before he knew it. From in front, a brutal fist shot into his face, and sparks flew before his eyes. His left eye had been hit, and he was temporarily blinded in both eyes. A hand was clapped across his mouth.

But he did not lose his presence of mind. Big hands gripped the Winchester, and were trying to wrench it from his grasp. And as another blow, from behind this time, struck him abaft the ear, he got the hammer back and pressed the trigger.

The rifle barked. Rad knew that the bullet had found no human target. He was almost blind; he could not aim; the rifle was not even fully in his possession. But he knew that the shot would

arouse the camp. This was his sole motive in firing.

The struggle was fierce, for Rad was not submitting meekly. He twisted the Winchester right and left in an effort to wrest it from the hands of his first assailant. Then suddenly he changed tactics and let it go, reaching for his six-shooter.

The holster on his hip was empty!

He heard shouts from the camp. His shot had aroused his men. Another blow from behind, and this time it was something harder than a fist that struck him. He collapsed with a groan. And as reason tottered, he had the vague knowledge that he was being lifted and borne along, through endless space, it seemed. Then everything went blank in his struggling mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAPTIVE.

WHEN he regained consciousness, Rad Karval found himself lying on his right side. It was still night, and he was still in the heavy timber. His head ached fearfully, and when he tried to rise to a sitting posture he found that it was not so easy.

His ankles and wrists were bound, the latter behind his back. He realized now that they were paining him. He waited a few minutes until his head was clearer, then managed to turn on his left side.

Immediately, there was a movement close at hand. Then came the flash of a lighted match. He heard low conversation between two men. Another match flared up, and its blaze was applied to some highly inflammable matter, for in a very short time a bright fire was burning.

Then one of the men came and stood over him. Rad could find out very little about him in the shuddering light of the small camp fire. The fellow spoke at once.

"Well," he asked gruffly, "how yeh feelin', kid?"

"Not so good," Rad replied candidly. "Untie me, please."

"Well, I don't know about that," said the other. "Orders was to keep yeh tied. But if yer wrists is hurtin', I'll loosen the knots a little."

"They are," Rad told him positively.

The man stooped behind him and carried out his own suggestion. Then he helped the young millionaire to a sitting posture.

"Who are you?" Rad immediately demanded.

The fellow shrugged. "No matter," he replied.

"Well, then, what's the grand idea?" asked Rad, though, of course, he knew well.

"Where's that map you fellas are carryin' with yeh?" came the bold counter-question. "We searched yeh, but it ain't in yer clothes. Which one of yeh's got it?"

"Find out!" Rad snapped bravely.

"Oh, that'll be done, don't worry! They's others attendin' to that little matter right now. But, seein' you are the boss o' the outfit, we thought maybe you was carryin' it. So we tried you first."

"Are you Tom File?"

"What's that? What do you know about Tom File?"

"Nicked you that time, didn't I?" Rad taunted. "I know quite a bit about Tom File and his disreputable gang."

"Disreputable, eh? Well, maybe so and maybe not. Tom File, since yeh savvy so much about him, has got a perfect right to that map. He'll get it, too, never worry!"

"That remains to be seen," Rad offered lightly.

"Cold?"

"Not particularly," Rad answered. Then, thinking that the man had had it in mind to move him nearer the fire, he changed his tune. "I could stand

to be closer to that blaze, though." He wanted to see the faces of his captors in the firelight.

"Give us a hand here, Mark," the fellow called readily to his companion.

Rad thought to himself: Mark, eh? That was a slip. But he said nothing.

"We don't want to be onreasonable," claimed the man, as his partner joined him.

They each placed a hand under one of Rad's shoulders and lifted him to his feet.

"Hop," admonished Mark.

And, with the two supporting him, Radford hopped awkwardly to the camp fire, where they lowered him to a sitting position.

"If you don't want to be unreasonable," he suggested, "you might untie my hands altogether. I'm mighty uncomfortable, to say the least. And I can't possibly get away with my ankles bound, and two of you to watch me."

"All right," said the first speaker. "I reckon they's sense in that."

Whereupon, he untied the young man's wrists, and Rad gratefully brought his arms to their normal position and began working them back and forth to stimulate circulation.

The two men squatted on their spurs on the other side of the blazing branches, and Rad eyed them narrowly while he chafed his wrists.

They were a hard-bitten pair, picturesque in Western garb, with a week's growth of whiskers on their faces and six-shooters at their hips. He at once decided that neither of them was the notorious Tom File.

He wondered what was happening, or what had happened, in his own camp, wherever it was. He believed that his shot had roused his men, and he gave Pardee credit for enough presence of mind to have hidden the map and directions at once. But perhaps the rest of the gang had attacked his party while these two were kidnaping him. They

might have been too quick for old Pardee. Rad felt that he had made a very poor stab at guarding his own expedition.

He wondered how long he had been unconscious. A great deal depended on that. But he decided that he must have been out for a considerable length of time, because of the camp fire of his captors. They would not have lighted one close to his camp, Rad reasoned. That meant that he had been carried far, and that an appreciable space of time had elapsed since he lost consciousness.

Then, if the others of the gang had been successful in getting the map from Pardee, why did they not join this pair?

The man called Mark and his confederate seemed to be listening for something continuously. Rad smiled grimly. They were expecting the coming of the others, and were mystified and disappointed. Perhaps loyal old Pard had got the better of them, after all.

Half an hour passed, with not another word between prisoner and captors. The hard faces of the gangsters revealed their anxiety more and more. Presently they drew closer together and began a whispered conversation. Rad noted their thoughtful looks, the occasional nodding or shaking of their heads.

Then Mark rose to his feet with an air that told the prisoner something had been decided upon. He hitched up his cartridge belt, spoke a few more low words to the other man, and stalked off through the trees.

Rad grinned at the remaining outlaw as the fellow looked at him curiously to see how he was taking Mark's departure.

"Things not going well?" Rad asked genially. "You were expecting somebody who has failed to arrive?"

The man grunted but made no answer.

Five minutes passed, ten minutes, fifteen. The grim forest was as silent as death. The fire leaped and danced merrily, and now and then the desperado laid on another stick to keep it going.

He had just leaned forward in this act, when suddenly Rad's blue eyes almost popped from their sockets. He was looking upon the strangest sight of his life.

Behind the bending outlaw, a figure was stealthily approaching. It was dressed in fringed chaparajos, boots, a gray Stetson with an ornate beaded band, and a rococo shirt of many colors, like Joseph's coat.

In the right hand of this figure hung a heavy Colt revolver. This person moved absolutely without a sound, yet with swiftness and determination.

The large black eyes were fixed on Rad, and they held a warning. The firelight played over a mass of bobbed black hair. The red lips were parted with the tenseness of the moment.

Then Rad's alluring girl of the photograph stooped directly behind the outlaw and reached out her left hand to snatch his six-shooter from its holster.

Mystery of mysteries, this picture girl had come to rescue him! Rad made ready to get upon his feet as quickly as possible if anything went wrong. Thank Heaven, his hands were free, at least!

And something did go wrong. As the girl's left hand went out, there came a shout from close at hand:

"Look out behind yeh, Giles!"

The outlaw turned his head in a flash. Then Radford was treated to the finest exhibition of quick thinking that he had ever witnessed. The squatting outlaw saw the reaching girl behind him. And instead of attempting to rise, or leap forward, he hurled himself straight backward, crashing against the girl and leveling her to the ground, flat on her back.

Rad had struggled to his feet. Two ridiculous hops brought him close to the prostrate man and girl. But before he could do anything at all with his hands, four men rushed in, two of them pinioning him from behind, the other two dashing at the prone figure of Merry Roane.

But Merry did not stay prone. She flipped herself to her feet with the agility of a trained gymnast, wheeled about, and shot into the forest like a deer.

The guns of the two who would have nailed her were out and leveled waist-high in the direction of her fleeing figure. But not a shot was fired.

CHAPTER XIV.

HIDE AND SEEK.

GET that girl!" yelled one of the men who were holding Rad.

The two gunmen awoke from their trance and loped off into the trees.

"Fat chance!" growled the other of Rad's captors. "She went outa here like an antelope leavin' cover. She's goin' the same way yet."

The two now continued to hold the helpless Rad, while they listened to the vague sounds of the chase. They could hear the other three thrashing around through the underbrush like bird dogs hunting for a crippled quail. Rad smiled grimly. He was willing to wager that they wouldn't see the girl again that night.

The searchers abandoned the quest in less than fifteen minutes. They returned, panting, to the camp fire.

"No use, chief," said one of them. "Like lookin' fer a needle in a haystack. That kid c'n run."

"What d'yeh mean, lettin' her slip up behind yeh like that, Giles?" returned a voice in a soft drawl. "And why'd yeh untie this fella's arms?"

Giles Latty shrugged. "How'd I know she was snoopin' 'round?" he de-

fended himself. "She's cat-footed, that jane. And as fer loosenin' this Ezra's arms, why, what's the use in hurtin' him unnecessary? We knowed, Mark and me, that he couldn't git away."

"Huh! If me and Luke and Ebb and Mark hadn't come jest when we did, she'd 'a' had yer six. Then she'd throwed down on yeh and make yeh be a good dog while this fella hog tied yeh. That there ain't no common ordinary girl. I wanta tell yeh. And what's she doin' here? How'd she git here? Who's with her?"

No one seemed able to answer these questions which the chief, Tom File, hurled at his subordinates. A silence fell.

The grip on Rad's left arm became viselike. "What do you know about it, young fella?" came the same voice in Radford's ear.

"Not speaking for publication," Rad instantly retorted.

"Oh! Well, maybe yeh'll feel like talkin' a little later on. They's ways and means o' makin' people talk, yeh know."

The speaker now dropped Rad's left arm and strode around in front of him, and for the first time the young man laid eyes on the notorious Tom File. Rad was impressed, to say the least.

"Boys," said File, "that there girl ain't up here in these mountains by herself. That's a cinch. We gotta be gettin' outa here, or else she'll be settin' whoever's with her on our trail. Git the brutes, Giles and Luke, and we'll move camp pronto."

"What happened, Tom?" asked Giles Latty. "Did yeh make it?"

"We didn't," File replied gloomily. "And how 'bout you? Was the map on the kid?"

Giles shook his head.

"I'll tell yer about my part later," File said. "Right now, we gotta git this here hostage of ourn to a safe place."

"Hostage!" Rad muttered. "Not so good!"

Rad was, of course, almost as unfamiliar with the strange girl's movements as were the File gang. He had been positive that it was she whom he had seen up there on the other side of the pass. The beaded Indian shirt had told him that. But who was with her, and what were her intentions, were as much of a puzzle to him as to his captors.

But it seemed certain that she harbored no animosity toward him. She had tried to free him from his careless guard. She was in no way connected with the File gang, and that made Rad's heart sing.

She was more beautiful, more romantic, more fascinating, even, than her photograph had shown. What was at the bottom of all this business, anyway? The girl must be after the map, of course, for there could be nothing else to bring her into this vast wilderness. But how—why——

In deepest disappointment, he gave up trying to solve the mystery.

Five minutes later, with Rad bound on the back of a horse, the party, now numbering six, rode hastily away through the grim, black trees.

Rad strained his ears as they rode for scraps of the conversation going on about him. He learned that the raid on his camp had been a total fizzle by reason of the shot that he had fired with his Winchester. The idea had been, he gathered, for Tom File, a man named Ingram Ebb, and another called Luke Calarrus, to surprise the camp at the same moment that Giles Latty and Mark—whose last name was Irrington—were capturing Rad.

But the three who had attempted to carry out the other part of the program had been a trifle late. Rad had fired his shot and warned his men while they were still some distance from the camp. Rad's followers had tumbled out of

their blankets, grabbed up their guns, and darted into the trees.

Not a shot had been fired, it seemed. The situation had been a deadlock from the moment that Rad's cow-punchers had deserted the camp. Neither faction dared to go near the fire. Darkness had hidden both parties. So, eventually, File and his companions had been obliged to withdraw, hoping to be able to gain their ends along other lines. These other lines, it now developed, constituted the holding of Rad as hostage in an effort to make his men deliver the map in payment for his freedom.

All in all, the outlaws still held the winning hand. But Rad had not forgotten Merry Roane. She represented an element that might yet prove disconcerting to the File gang.

They camped at dawn beside a sizable stream. They had worked their way down into a deep canyon and halted close to a tumultuous waterfall.

Rather poor tactics, Rad thought. He had religiously kept away from noisy waters ever since he realized that his party was being followed.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HOSTAGE.

THE File gang were worn out with the fierce activities of the night, and rolled into their blankets once they were settled in the camp near the waterfall. The man called Ingram Ebb was left on watch over Radford Karval.

Rad had seen nothing, since his capture, of his treacherous guide, Henry Maitland. So he assumed that the man, not being a regular member of the gang, had returned to Carpenter, since his work for File had been accomplished.

The eastern sky was lighting fast as Rad dropped asleep. And it seemed that he had not been permitted to slumber fifteen minutes when he was awakened by the movements of the gang.

They were up and cooking breakfast.

Rad estimated that it was about nine o'clock. His wrists, which had been retied, were loosened again when the meal was ready, and he was helped into the circle about the camp fire.

As they ate, Tom File talked in his serious, drawling manner. His subject was the possible outcome of the scheme to swap Radford, alive and healthy, for the coveted map. Apparently considering that the idea was to work out satisfactorily, he made no attempt to prevent Rad from hearing what he had to say.

"Git yer breakfasts settled," he started out, "and two of yeh'll go to their camp and tell 'em how the war broke out."

"Who, Tom?" Giles Latty asked.

"You and Luke Cabarrus," was the prompt reply.

"And we may git potted," Luke suggested.

"Carry a white rag tied to a stick, to let 'em know we're peaceable inclined," File explained.

"But what if they've moved camp and we can't find 'em?" came from Latty.

"They won't do that," returned the slim-hipped oracle. "They'll stick 'round in the neighborhood o' where the kid was caught."

A short silence closed in on this logical conclusion. It was Giles Latty who eventually broke it.

"What'll we tell 'em, Tom?" he asked.

"Jest tell 'em what yer got to tell 'em," File replied. "Jest tell 'em we got the kid, and they c'n have him in exchange for the map. Simple as ropin' a sleepin' burro. Give 'em half an hour to think it over, and tell 'em that, if they ain't reached a decision in that time, they'll never see the kid alive ag'in. An' tell 'em, too, we want all o' their outfit, except enough fer 'em to git back to Carpenter with."

Latty shook his head deprecatingly. "I wisht yeh'd go yerself, File," he said.

"But I won't," retorted File. "It'll

make her more impressive fer me, the leader, to kinda remain in the background."

After a period of staring moodily into vacancy, the chieftain added: "Yer oughta be back in an hour an' a half."

This last gave Radford food for thought. He decided that the gang had taken him by a circuitous route the night before, and that the camp by the waterfall was much closer to his own camp than he had been led to believe. Another slip on the part of his captors!

Giles Latty presently rose and stretched with healthy animalism. The man named Luke Cabarrus followed his example. And just before this pair started for their horses, Latty put the question to Tom File:

"And suppose they don't fall fer our bluff?"

Tom File's dark, morose eyes were looking straight at Rad as the man made answer:

"It ain't no bluff."

And Radford Karval believed it. However, he had not forgotten the girl in the shirt of many colors. Everything seemed to depend on her.

Giles and Luke were off presently, urging their weary horses up the canyon side. The trees and underbrush soon hid them.

The three remaining outlaws now gave the tin breakfast dishes "a lick and a promise," and afterward lazed and dozed in the warmth of the mounting sun. Rad, with nothing else to do, lay on his back and gazed up at the blue vault above, and wondered just how Philip Pardee would receive File's delegates.

Would Pardee surrender the map, or would he hold onto it and make an effort to outwit the outlaws? Rad did not want him to give into their demands. Somehow or other, his predicament did not greatly worry him. He could not help remembering the girl in the gay Indian shirt. He had the romantic belief

that, in the end, she would prove herself to be master of the situation.

The sun climbed his ancient ladder in the sky; the minutes dragged. The growing warmth brought out the pungent odors of the pines. Somewhere, a mountain quail was calling, sweet, clear, cool as dripping water. The waterfall roared monotonously, inducing drowsiness.

Presently, the lank Tom File, who for the past half hour had frequently consulted the dial of a large, nickel watch with a plaited leather fob, voiced concern over the absent ones.

"Them boys been gone a couple o' hours," he said querulously. "We ain't heard no shot, so they didn't meet up with any trouble. What's keepin' 'em, d'yeh reckon?"

"Maybe them fellas moved camp, after all, and Luke and Giles had ta trail 'em up," suggested Ebb.

Tom File shook his bullet head. "They wouldn't," he stated with brief positiveness.

When another half hour had dragged out its slow course, Ingram Ebb and Mark Irrington were tortured with the fidgets. Even the phlegmatic File looked his worried puzzlement, and arose and strolled up and down the canyon, his slender, big-jointed fingers locked behind his back.

Fifteen minutes more, and, with another quick glance at his watch, he stopped before his lounging satellites.

"Sumpin's went wrong," he proclaimed. "You two fellas git on yer hosses and look up them two. I'll watch the pris'ner."

Without protest, Irrington and Ebb rose lazily and went for their horses. A little later, with the skin wrinkling over their straining muscles, the animals were struggling up the steep slope that swept down to the creekside. Horses and riders disappeared.

Tom File gave his bound captive one unreadable look, then resumed his strid-

ing up and down the floor of the earth scar, deep in his own thoughts, aloof as Bonaparte on the eve of battle.

Radford Karval was, of course, as greatly puzzled as was the snipe-legged chieftain of the outlaw band. His puzzlement grew immeasurably as the half hours slipped by and neither of the deputations put in an appearance. For all his reserve, Tom File was now jerking at his slick, plaited watch fob at shorter and shorter intervals. Worry showed in his seamed, crafty face, and he twisted his flowing mustaches with growing petulance.

It was about half past twelve o'clock, Rad imagined, when the man reached the end of his endurance. He stopped suddenly before his prisoner, his thin, chapped legs spread belligerently, his mahogany face sullen with anger.

"Git up," he ordered hotly, and reached forth a hand to aid the bound man to obey.

"Haze yerself over to that there little oak, and no monkey business," came his next command.

Rad could do nothing but obey.

"Back up to her," ordered File, when Rad had reached the sapling.

When Rad complied, File jerked his still unbound hands behind him and linked them together once more. Then he made fast a rope to the one connecting Rad's wrists, and proceeded to tie him securely to the oak tree. With the free end of the rope, he secured his ankles to the tree's bole, then stood off and looked at him with satisfaction.

"No use to plunge around," he advised. "Yeh can't git loose. I gotta go and see what's happened to them boys, and yeh'll have to git along the best yeh can. If I don't come back, I reckon the coyotes'll have a feed." He grinned malevolently. "Be sure to rest easy, though," he added. "I'll come back. I never miss. So long."

And he strode rapidly up the creek, his big saddle hanging down his back,

its tapaderos flapping. Soon he rode into camp, mounted. Without glancing once at Rad, he spurred his gaunt horse up the hillside on the trail of his defaulting subordinates.

At last Rad, left entirely alone, began to realize the seriousness of the situation. What had detained the two sets of emissaries? Had Rad's faithful cow-punchers got the better of them, one at a time? Were they now waiting for the appearance of File himself, to treat him likewise? But even if they succeeded in capturing the leader without a shot being fired, Rad's position was still precarious. His men might force the File gang to lead them to him, provided they had got the better of them, but——

Rad's almost panicky thoughts were interrupted when suddenly he saw a movement that seemed out of place in the solemn immovability of the natural objects all about him. True, the crashing waterfall showed intense activity as it roared into the deep-green pool below it, but everything else was as rigid as concrete.

The motion that he had seen, too, was connected with the waterfall. Where it plunged, a horsetail of white foam, into the pool, his quick eye had caught a horizontal, gliding movement that seemed not a part of the mad, free downpour. It was as if a white shutter were being slowly drawn along behind the falls, almost as if a ghost were walking there, half shielded by the foaming waters. He watched it, fascinated.

Then an uncontrollable shout of astonishment burst from his parted lips. Around the edge of the white curtain of water appeared the head and neck of a snow-white horse. And next instant, out from the dark cavity behind the falls, rode Merry Roane, in her shirt of many colors, mounted on a magnificent white gelding, a triumphant smile on her red, bowed lips.

CHAPTER XVI.

LAUGHTER.

MERRY walked her sedate horse to the side of the dumfounded Rad and gracefully swung to the ground. Her big dark eyes gave him a friendly glance, and laughter lurked in their brown depths. Then it bubbled from her tantalizing lips, and one would have thought from her uncontrolled mirth that the greatest joke in history had just been perpetrated.

The rowels of her silver spurs whirling in the short grass, she stepped behind the bound man and laid her slim hands to the knots.

"This is—is extraordinary!" Rad managed to gasp at last, scarcely realizing what he said.

"Isn't it?"—and she laughed again, tugging at his bindings. "I'll have to cut this perfectly good linen lariat, Rad. Tom File's knots are too businesslike for me."

"Cut it, sure. Have you a knife?"

"Oh, yes. I come fully equipped. I'll have you loose in the twitch of a burro's paintbrush. Be patient."

"What do you—— What's the explanation of all this, anyway?" he ventured.

"I'm delivering you from the toils. Hold still, please."

"But I don't understand."

"Human beings seldom do. Especially men." Once more that merry trill of laughter, like linnets singing at mating time. "There! Now your ankles."

"Who are you?"

Miss Merrill Roane—"Merry," to you. You see, we're sorta cousins, Rad."

"That's not so bad. I didn't know it. You're a rather astonishing young woman, Cousin Merry. How did you manage to escape last night?"

"It was ridiculously simple. I just hid behind the bole of the first tree I came to and listened to the three men scouring the forest afar."

"You didn't run away at all, then?"

"Not on your life! Too crude. People are always chasing to the ends of the earth for something that is right under their noses. Psychology, Rad. At any moment while the three were beating the brush for me, I could have slipped in, patted the base three times, and yelled 'One, two, three for Merry Roane!'"

"And then?" he urged her on.

"I just waited till they moved off with you, then hurried to where old Pharos was hidden, got on him, and followed."

"When did you sneak behind the waterfall?"

"This morning, in broad daylight, when all of you were asleep or dozing. I came down the canyon. It was easy, with the waterfall so delightfully boisterous. But I got fearfully tired waiting under there—and a little moist. You've been free half a minute, young fellow. You'd better be on the move now."

"Where shall I go?" he asked. "What do I do?"

"Hurry up the canyon. The traveling's not very difficult, once you're above the waterfall. You won't need a horse. You've only about a mile and a half to walk."

"To where?"

"You'll recognize the place when you come to it. It's the slide down which you led your stock to water them last evening. Your own camp, of course, is abreast of it, back in the woods."

"I'm only that far from my own camp?"

She was standing in front of him now, her brown eyes dancing. She nodded in an exaggerated way, like a very young girl. "They led you all around Robin Hood's barn to confuse you. But you'd better be off, now."

"You're coming with me?"

She shook her bobbed head. "I have something else to attend to just at pres-

ent. But I'll see you later. Don't forget your smoke irons—they're over by those pack bags."

"But I don't want to go away from you like this," he protested pettishly. "You haven't explained anything—Merry."

"Be your age!" she laughed, as she swung into her big saddle.

Her wide-brimmed, pearl-gray Stetson was held securely on her head by a plaited throat latch, which was adorned with a horsetail tassel. Rad thought it looked like a little man's goatee. She grasped this tassel and pulled it three times, a humorous gesture that was to become quite familiar to him in days that followed. At the same time delightful little wrinkles twitched on each side of her pert brown nose as she admonished:

"Toddle along, now, and don't be so boyishly impatient. You haven't seen the last of me yet."

She leaned in the saddle and swung the white horse about on a dime. He gathered his great muscles and leaped up the canyon side in the direction that Tom File and his predecessors had taken.

When she had vanished in the timber, Rad recovered his rifle and revolver. Heaving a deep sigh, half of relief and half of befuddlement, he turned his face up the canyon and proceeded to scale the rocks that extended upward to the top of the falls.

"Well," he muttered, as he scrambled to the watercourse above, "that's a chapter that I won't soon forget. But what in the world is happening in this neck o' the woods, anyway?"

His thoughts were in a whirl as he toiled up the rock-tenoned canyon, crossing and recrossing the stream many times, jumping from rock to rock to preserve dry feet. Her voice, its intonation, her easy, confident manner, her choice of words, told him that Merry Roane was a girl of character

and refinement. She was even more comradely and delightful than he had imagined her to be during his moonings over her photograph. And more romantic. But what——

Oh, it was useless to ask himself the countless questions that were hammering in his brain. She had said he had not seen the last of her. For the present that must suffice.

He had been plunging on rapidly, not realizing that he was putting forth great effort, as one will when he works mechanically with his thoughts not on his task. He could not believe that he had left the waterfall a mile and a half below him, when he unexpectedly came upon the well-remembered slide, still showing the innumerable tracks of his mules and horses.

Were Phil Pardee and the others still in camp? What had happened that morning and throughout the night? Should he be cautious in approaching the spot? Why had not the mystery girl coached him as to what he ought to do?

Cousin Merry!

A short time later, carefully parting a screen of chaparral bushes, he peered in on his three retainers. Pardee was seated on a down tree placidly smoking a corn-cob pipe. Bill Noxie was cleaning his rifle. Lou Dailey was pouring rolled barley into nose bags, preparatory to feeding the mules and horses. Apparently the shavetails had heard the delightful rustling sound, for they were braying persuasively.

Radford stepped out into the open and surveyed his little army, a whimsical smile on his lips.

"Well," he remarked casually, quoting James Whitcomb Riley's boy character who ran away from home and returned next morning, "I see you've got the same old cat."

Lou Dailey was shocked into overflowing a nose bag with rolled barley, which rattled in a neat pyramid on the

ground. Bill Noxie dropped his cleaning rags. Phil Pardee scrambled to his feet after nearly falling off the log on which he sat. He lumbered across the ground and folded the young man in his arms, and tears gleamed in his old gray eyes.

"Rad!" he croaked. "Thank God yeh're back!"

"Well," drawled Rad, "you-all were taking my absence mighty calmly until just this moment."

"But we knew you was alive, Rad," protested Pardee. "And we'd been told to just lay low and wait, and not worry. But we did worry, o' course. And here yeh are. Boy, boy! It's good to see yeh!"

"Who slipped you those comforting words?" Rad asked, trying to appear sarcastic but emotionally upset by Pardee's sincerity.

"That girl, Rad—that girl in the beaded shirt. She rode in here, little after daybreak, on her white hoss and scairt us nearly all to death. Rad, she ain't any Indian."

"Oh, so it was she who relieved your minds! And what did she tell you to expect, Pard?"

"Nothin'—only that you'd be with us soon. Then she rode off, leavin' us to gab about her like three ole squaws. But, Rad——"

"Yes, Pard?"

"If I were in your place, I'd be mighty, mighty——"

That broke the somewhat strained situation, for Rad poked the faithful old retainer a stiff jolt on his wish-bone, so that his platitudinous warning ended in a crowlike croak. And while they were all shaking hands and laughing rather boyishly, Merry Roane herself rode in, her eyes smiling like trout pools reflecting oak leaves browned by autumn frosts.

Behind her marched five men, linked together like a chain gang with a lariat—the File outfit, with all hands mus-

tered, and Tom File bringing up the rear. On either side rode a dark-skinned, Spanish-looking man, one of them a Hercules, with muscles that bulged under his shirt sleeves.

And last of all, on a fine black horse, appeared a spectre that caused the jaws of Rad's party to sag in unbelief. This rider was Esau Badger, with his carefully trimmed, snow-white hair, his ghostly, hatchet face with its long, livid scar—Uncle Esau, calm, commanding, straight and military looking in the saddle, dressed to perfection, as always, but now in the picturesque garb of a dude rider of the West.

Unperturbed, the impenitent old scalawag urged his horse to the head of the procession and stopped him before his gaping nephew, whose legs were actually quaking. He leaned toward him in a dignified manner and extended a white, slim, well-kept hand.

"Radford, my boy," he said gravely, with the old impersonal smile of the carefully schooled gambler, "how do you find yourself this splendid afternoon?"

Then a peal of laughter rose to the leafy canopy overhead, and a wild canary joined in joyously. The laughter was Merry Roane's.

CHAPTER XVII.

"THESE BONES SHALL RISE AGAIN!"

RADFORD KARVAL and his men were rendered speechless by the seemingly miraculous appearance of Esau Badger. Rad himself was too helpless to do anything but stare from the face of the conscienceless old gambler to the laughing girl on the snow-white gelding. Uncle Esau's thin, hard lips were twitching, but he was too thoroughly the master of his emotions to make any other demonstration of his satisfaction over this novel coup of his.

When Rad did find his voice, he uttered what was probably the silliest remark he ever made.

"Then you weren't kidnaped and killed by the Spaniards, Uncle Esau?"

Whereupon Merry Roane laughed ringingly again.

"That," returned Esau Badger, "is the last thing these two kindly gentlemen would do, my boy. We three are like brothers, inseparable, devoted to one another. You, Rad, are the innocent victim of a remarkable and a humorous hoax, which I shall fully explain to you in good time. A mere matter of policy, my dear nephew, which you will understand and appreciate when it has been made clear to you. At present, however, we have another and a more important matter on our hands. I refer to the disposal of the estimable Mr. Thomas File and his blundering gang."

Rad sat down on a log. His knees were weak. Nevertheless, he was conscious of a growing resentment, and felt that his face was flushed. He was the butt of a huge joke. He felt that he was being made a fool of. But he held his tongue and awaited developments. There would be an accounting with Uncle Esau once the File gang were off their hands.

Uncle Esau had dismounted and was facing Tom File.

"Tom," he said, "you lose again. You don't play square. Neither do you play the game like a professional. Your technique is slipshod, your finesse abominable. You don't watch the game; you don't remember the cards. You're hopeless."

"Go on," said File gruffly. "Git it all outa yer system."

"Knowing me as you do," proceeded Esau Badger loftily, "you should have been hep that there was something in the wind when my nephew outfitted as he did at Carpenter. You should have known, all newspaper accounts to the contrary notwithstanding, that Esau Badger was the motive force behind this expedition."

"Go on! Go on!" growled File.

"There's no use to rub it in," returned Esau Badger graciously. "You've suffered enough. I figured out just how you would play your cards after you kidnaped my nephew. I knew you'd send two men to enter into negotiations for his release with Rad's followers. So all I had to do was to have my own men on hand and waylay them between your camp and Rad's.

"Barto here slipped up behind the first pair and knocked their heads together so hard that they were roped and gagged before they knew what it was all about. Neat way for one man to knock two men out at the same time, provided he has the strength.

"Then we waited for the second pair to come along. Not quite so easy this time, for one of 'em managed to drag out his gun. Then I edged into the proceedings with a slightly swifter draw, and he became a good dog before his six-shooter was hip-high.

"More patient waiting, and then the prize float came along. We were a little more cautious with you, Tom—if that will salve your wounded pride any. But you proved to be as easy as the others, once Bartolo had draped his rope about you.

"So here we all are. And now, Tom, I'm going to send you home. I'm going to let you have one pack animal, and he'll carry just enough grub to take you back to the desert. I'll allow you one rifle among the five of you, so that, if anything happens to your pack, you can shoot game for subsistence. That's about all, Tom, except that I'd advise you to play more poker. It keeps a fellow's brain clicking. Yours is gummed."

File thoughtfully stroked his flowing mustaches with a rope-bound hand. He proved that he could take defeat philosophically.

"Well," he drawled, "o' course this ain't the end of her. That there map o'

the lost mine rightfully b'longs to me, and I aim to have her. I won her from yeh, fair and square, in Chihuahua that time."

"Yes, Tom," chuckled Esau Badger, "in a way you won it. But you tried to slip a card off the bottom of the deck to make three kings, and I caught you at it. Then, when I called your attention to your irregular method of dealing, you went for your gun. But my gun was already out and in my lap, so nothing came of it. And, as my straight beat your three kings, I raked in the pot, and the map remained in my possession."

"Yes, an' you filled to that bobtail straight the same way I got my third king!" retorted File.

"But you didn't catch me at it," Uncle Esau placidly reminded him.

He turned to his wrathful nephew, who had been listening closely despite his boiling rage.

"Rad, have one of your men throw together enough supplies to last these birds to Carpenter," he told him. "Merry tells me they're running pretty low on everything, so be generous. Their guns and most of their stock are out there in the trees. Send another man down the creek to get the remaining animals—they're to go back with 'em. I want to see them on their way before three o'clock."

A sharp retort came to Rad's lips concerning the momentous question of who was giving commands, but he smothered it. After all, for the present, at least, to be rid of the File gang was the most important thing; and it mattered little who issued the orders that would bring this about. He nodded briefly to Bill Noxie and Lou Dailey, who went to work at once. Radford bided his time. When the gang was gone, he was willing to bet he would find out why his rascally uncle had made a fool of him.

And then he glanced slyly at Merry

Roane, who had dismounted and seated herself on a sack of barley, and was now idly flipping the lash of her quirt against the soft upper of one quilted boot. Her long, black eyebrows lifted, and the brown eyes shot a mischievous peep at him. She smiled, as if there were some profound secret between them, and Radford suddenly became as undecided as Sampson was when he heard the ominous snipping of Delilah's scissors.

They made a quiet gathering there in the deep woods. Nobody seemed to have anything to say. The bound outlaws looked at the ground and whispered occasionally among themselves. Phil Pardee smoked silently, and watched Esau Badger through slitted eyelids. The girl continued to tap her boot top, now and then stifled a yawn with a slim brown hand, but offered nothing to break the monotony of the occasion. Esau Badger paced back and forth, his hands behind his back, apparently deep in thought. Rad sulked. Bill Noxie continued his packing. Lou Dailey had ridden down the creek to get the animals that remained in the camp by the waterfall.

Activity began, however, with the return of Lou. The packed saddlebags were thrown on the back of one of the led horses and diamond-hitched by Lou and Bill. Next, the outlaws were freed of their bonds, and, after a space of cinch tightening, they mounted and made ready to ride away.

To be continued in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.



INSURANCE ON A TREE

A REDWOOD cypress tree, belonging to E. W. Seibert, of Paris, Missouri, is valued so highly by the owner that it is insured for the sum of a thousand dollars. It is probably the only tree in Missouri on which so large an amount of insurance is constantly carried. One half the policy is against fire and lightning, the other half against damage by the wind.

The tree is almost one hundred years old. The original sprout was brought to Paris from California. During the century of its development in Missouri, the tree has attained great size and shaded an honored area of Mr. Seibert's front yard.

File turned in his big saddle, and rested a hand on one of his lizard hips.

"All right, Badge," he announced. "You win this hand, so we'll be off. I reckon. But o' course yeh realize they's another deal."

Esau Badger silently nodded his snow-white head.

"Now that Winchester yeh kindly mentioned," suggested File.

"Oh, yes," chuckled Esau Badger. "I nearly forgot that. Remember that little pass up above the snow line. Tom, where you get the first glimpse of the plateau and the Anthill Country?"

File nodded silently.

"You'll find the rifle and a belt of cartridges hidden behind the biggest rock in that pass, Tom. Between here and there you'll have to struggle along as best you can. You see, Tom, I anticipated your plays several days ago. So long, old-timer."

Tom File nodded moodily, and, casting one venomous look at his victorious adversary, rode undramatically off at the head of his silent gang.

Then Esau Badger turned to his angry nephew, and, rubbing together his thin, tapering hands in satisfaction, bestowed upon that puzzled young man a benign smile.

"Well, Rad, it's good to see you again," he smirked oilyly. "And now shall we have a little confidential talk?"

"Yes," Rad returned between his teeth, "we'll have a little confidential talk!"



When Men are Men

By George Cory Franklin

Author of "Snow Crazy," etc.



HE next rider will be Stan Crawford on Lodgepole out of Chute Number 3," the announcer shouted into the megaphone.

A girl in one of the front boxes at the Monte Vista Ski Hi Stampede drew herself up, and looked contemptuously at the crowd of interested faces in the grand stand.

"Poor people," she said to her companion, "they think this circus-stunt stuff is the real thing! I'll bet that rider has ridden Lodgepole at every county rodeo that has been arranged for the benefit of tourists this summer."

Burton Van Herskine brushed an imaginary speck from his immaculate sport suit and twisted his mustache.

"Well, you would come," he complained. "I don't see why these things interest you."

June Meredith turned back to face the arena, her face flushed. "It's because I'd like just for once to see a real

honest fight between a square, up-and-up man, and a horse that wasn't trained to buck. Everything nowadays is fixed for the dear public."

"Pardon me, miss," a soft drawl came from the lips of a gray-haired man in the adjoining box, "but you're about to get your wish. Stanley Crawford is as honest a rider as ever chased a doggie out of the sand hills, and he never saw this Lodgepole hoss till fifteen minutes ago."

June's lip curled disdainfully. "Thank you," she said. "Who does this paragon ride for?"

The old cattleman looked at the bored, sophisticated expression of the girl through level, gray eyes. It was as if he saw deep into the hollow pretense and tinsel of the life with which this girl was familiar.

"The Crawfords haven't ever worked for anybody," he said, "but themselves; and that boy's not riskin' his neck on the worst hoss in the Rio Grande country because of the money prize. He

sure don't need that. He's doin' it for the very same reason that you're lookin' at him, because he loves a clean, square scrap."

The side of the chute slipped back and out into the open came a thousand pounds of twisting, struggling, fighting flesh that had never yet been successfully topped by any rider in the valley.

Stanley Crawford was employing every ounce of skill that he possessed in his battle with the horse. His movements were naturally graceful, as the result of long practice, yet even at this time there were no extra little superfluous motions or grand-stand plays. He was riding straight up, and "scratching" as provided in the association rules, but he was paying strict attention to business. Probably he had forgotten that there was an audience.

Lodgepole was not a cold-blooded, heady buckler like Steamboat, or Dynamite, or any other of the celebrated outlaws. He was a frantically scared bronco, striving with all the power and action of his race to escape from the feel, and smell, and grip, of the man who sat up there so easily, whose lithe body gave so gracefully to his every plunge, and whose muscles, underneath the graceful exterior, were yet taut and rigid as wire cables.

As if to convince Miss Meredith that this exhibition was not the usual circus performance, Lodgepole bucked straight toward where she sat, so that for the entire distance between the chute and the grand stand, June looked squarely at the bronzed face of the cowboy. Within ten feet of the box, the horse spun in the air, making almost a complete circle, and then, while his rider's brain still reeled from the effect of this dynamic force, he reversed the action and went the other way. As Lodgepole did this, he managed to work in that little extra quirk which had always before put his rider off balance and given him the advantage. Until now two

backward bucks after the reversed whirl had always been sufficient, and he had been able to crow-hop back to the corals, where that hateful flank cinch, put on there to make him buck harder, had been removed.

This rider was different. If the double whirl and the tricky kink bothered him, he did not give any evidence of it. Instead, as Lodgepole gave that treacherous backward buck, one of Stanley's spurs raked the horse from shoulder to flank. The surprised bronco stopped and stood perfectly still, jerked his head up, and stood kicking with first one foot and then the other like any foolish colt.

Crawford slid to the ground. The crowd rocked the grand stand with applause. By all the rules, the man who had successfully ridden Lodgepole should have swept the crowd a graceful bow and been showered with congratulations, but Crawford did nothing of the kind. Instead, he was looking straight into a pair of brown eyes that had widened a bit as June Meredith realized that she had had her wish to see a square, honest fight. Then—of all the audacity—he calmly and familiarly drew an eye down in an amazing wink, for all the world as if he and the girl had some secret of which the howling mob was ignorant. June gasped.

Stanley tilted his big hat back, grinned, and spun on his heel, paying absolutely no attention to the crowd, nor to the quick rush of color to the face of the girl.

This scene took place on the eighteenth of August. Three months later, November eighteenth, June sat beside a little stream at the edge of timberline, far back on the headwaters of Lost Trail Creek, holding Burton Van Herskine's head in her lap.

"You had better not wait any longer, June," said the man, stifling a groan. "It's no use to try. My left leg is broken, and I can't seem to use my right ankle. The storm is increasing in fury

every minute. It will soon be dark. You must get on your horse and go down toward the timber. You may find a ranch."

June bent over the man's face, and a tear dropped unheeded on his cheek. "You know I can't leave you here to— to—"

"I know, June, it's a rotten experience for you. Wish I could help you, but I'm just a washout, I guess. Leave me that pistol. I will wait until you are out of reach of the sound before I use it."

June was striving to find some way out of this predicament. "Wait a minute," she almost screamed. "I believe I see a way." She led the horses up close to where the man lay, stopping one on either side of him. "Now, get hold of the stirrups with your hands, while I hold the horses still. Pull yourself up until you can get hold of the saddle. I'll help you as soon as you get up even with the body of the horse."

After much tugging and pulling, Van Herskine was finally in the saddle. It was nearly night, and the wind was sweeping down from the high peaks above them. June tied both rifles onto her own saddle, and got on her horse. Burton groaned as the horse moved.

"I know it's awful," said June, "but you've just got to stand it till we can get down to the timber. The horses act like they knew this country. I'm going to let them pick their own trail."

As if furious at being cheated out of what had happened to be an easy victim, the storm king turned all his ferocious, screaming battalions down across the open space with such terrific force as to nearly sweep June's slight body from the saddle.

She rode back and pulled the collar of Burton's big canvas coat up around his head, buttoning the flap with numb fingers. She gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder. This act of June's seemed to still further enrage the bliz-

zard, which tore and twisted at the girl, while the cold struck through to the marrow, and the howling sounded like a mixture of a thousand siren whistles.

The horses turned to the right squarely to face the storm and held their heads low to keep the blinding snow out of their eyes. The blizzard the girl was now facing jerked the air from before her face, leaving a vacuum that set her gasping, struggling for breath which, when it reached her lungs, burned as if she had inhaled flame. June knew that she could not last long, even if there were shelter near. She was too much accustomed to outing trips to belittle the symptoms of the numbing unconsciousness which she knew presaged the death sleep.

Her horse reached the timber and turned squarely into the densest portion of it. Thick, swirling masses of snow overhead almost shut out the little remaining daylight. The girl looked back at the man humped helplessly over the horn of his saddle. The snow had packed upon his clothing until only by the outline could one realize that it was a human being which bestrode the horse.

The snow blown from the ridges above timberline had swept down into the spruce and piled up so that in the drifts June's horse plunged to force a way through. Dark nooks and crevices appeared under the windfalls, and vaguely June speculated on the possibility of making a camp in one of these. She had hunted in the far North and remembered how one night a guide had been caught out in a storm like this, and had lived through it, by burrowing under a snow-covered brush heap.

But Burton's leg must have attention. Van Herskine had risen many degrees in her estimation since his horse had fallen on him an hour ago. She had not believed the man capable of such an exhibition of cool courage as he had shown. It had been partly because she wanted to show him up to her own

heart, which had recently shown signs of relenting toward this spoiled child of fortune, that June had proposed this trip back into the haunts of the bighorn. She had not supposed he could be tempted away from the comforts of the Hot Spring Lodge, where their party had been staying in order that June and kindred spirits might have a try at the big cats and mountain lions that ranged along the Lost Trail rim rocks.

She was not sure now but that she loved this society man who had haunted her footsteps ever since she left college. At any rate, her conscience pricked her mightily that she had brought this trial, which might so easily result in death, upon Burton.

June was growing drowsy. She knew she was slipping into that sleep which would mean an easy death. The hard part of the struggle was over. She was fighting now, not for herself, but for the helpless man on the horse behind her.

The force of the wind was broken here in the heavy spruce forest, although its roaring and screeching continued above the tops of the trees. For several minutes now there had been faint pulsations of sound beating against the girl's ear drums. She supposed it was merely the throbbing of her own heart, but it grew louder. Could it be wolves? She had heard the guides say that there were a few lobos left in this part of Colorado. The sound stirred her blood to action. The horse pricked up his ears and hurried forward out of the forest around a bushy spruce, and almost into the dooryard of a long, log cabin.

A man stood in the doorway. June caught a glimpse of a roaring fire in a fireplace that looked to be six feet wide. Two big foxhounds came bounding through the snow, bawling as if they were following a fresh trail. The man came toward June. He asked no questions. June could not remember after-

ward that he spoke, but he lifted her gently from the saddle and carried her into a room that to the half-frozen girl seemed the most attractive she had ever seen. The man placed her in a great chair over which the hide of a silvertip bear had been thrown, and rushed out again in the storm, to return carrying Burton Van Herskine gently as a woman might have carried a half-grown child. June noticed even in her stupor how easily he carried Burton, whom he now laid on a bed.

The stranger did not hurry, and yet each movement made for efficiency. He seemed to sense intuitively Burton's condition, and hardly glanced at June as he removed hurriedly Van Herskine's outer clothing and carefully placed him in the bed.

"Your leg's broke, old man," he said. "Not bad, a straight, clean break. I can fix that. Your right ankle is dislocated. Can you stand it, if I give it a pull?"

Burton nodded, though his face went white with the pain, as the man pulled the joint into place.

"There, now lie still and rest a minute, while I see to this young lady. Are you hurt, miss?"

"N-no," shivered June.

"Here, drink this. Don't be afraid. It's pre-war; it won't hurt you." He poured old, mellow brandy into a glass. Without the slightest formality, he unlaced June's high-topped hunting boots and removed them. "Take off your stockings," he ordered, and vanished into the kitchen, to return almost before June could obey. He carried a dishpan full of snow. "Put your feet in that snow," he said coolly. "They are frosted a mite. Here's a crash towel, as soon as they quit stinging, rub them dry. I've got to get your horses out of the storm."

The stranger went out again. June heard him command the dogs to be quiet.

Van Herskine raised himself on one elbow. "All right, girlie?" he inquired.

June laughed a little hysterically. "I guess so, only I seem so weak, and sort of tingly. How are you?"

"Fine, now. By what sort of a miracle do you suppose we stumbled onto a man who is both a woodsman and a surgeon?"

"I don't know how we happened to find him, but I know him."

"What?" Burton was incredulous.

"Surely; his name is Stanley Crawford, and he rides outlaw horses for amusement."

Crawford came back in, stamping the snow from his feet, and went to Van Herskine first. "Feel any better?"

"I feel pretty good. Perhaps I should explain our plight. We were trying to get a picture of a band of bighorns in the Blue Pinnacles country. Miss Meredith is a big-game hunter. My name is Van Herskine. My horse slipped and fell, and I was such a dub that I failed to get out of his way."

Crawford shook his head. "A man doesn't have to be a dub to get caught that way. It happens to the best and oldest riders on the range. I'm glad you got her to my place. You wouldn't have lasted much longer, either one of you, but as it is, you are safe."

Crawford went through into another room, and June, peering in after him, saw him kneeling in front of another fireplace, lighting kindling and placing it crisscross, one stick upon another. The light shone on a brown, rugged face, frank, open, competent; a face one could trust, not only honest and truthful, but capable as well.

A good supper over, Crawford showed June into the adjoining room, now warm from the roaring open fire. "If you are used to camping, as Van Herskine says, you will make out here," he remarked.

June looked at a comfortable bed made up with blankets that smelled

sweet from the pine-laden air, at the walls hung with pelts and trophies, at the big fireplace, and turned to her host.

"Oh, this is heavenly!" she said. "I didn't know there were any more such places left on earth," and she might have added "and men like you," but she did not.

She lay for a long time snuggled warm and close in the blankets, and watched the fire die down to a great blue-and-red glow, while over the mountains the storm king reigned supreme, and the snow piled up in great drifts. She was strangely content, satisfied. It was as if she had been away on a long trip into a strange land where the customs, the life, even the food, and, yes, the people, did not harmonize with her tastes. She had come back to the glowing fire and the friendly shadows on the walls, and the protecting, strong man whose voice she could hear talking to Van Herskine in the next room. All these things were a part of her welcome. Yes, and the storm which had almost outwitted her; it, too, seemed a part of the life which she had known existed somewhere, but which she had despaired of ever finding.

Stanley Crawford was one of those rare individuals who, possessing sufficient money and property to allow him to live as he preferred, had sense enough and moral courage enough to make his good fortune work for his happiness, instead of yielding to the mesmerism of gold, and thereby wasting his youth in accumulating more.

The ranch upon which June Meredith and Burton Van Herskine had stumbled was a spot that Crawford had chosen because of its beauty and the abundance of game. The river which wound through the valley was well stocked with trout, and the warm sloughs fed by springs at the base of the cliffs, were not only the home of countless waterfowl but, by keeping the ice out of the river where they emptied

into it, enabled Crawford to catch trout in the winter time. He cut hay enough to feed the few head of cattle and horses he kept at this ranch from October till May. The main herd was taken to a ranch in the San Luis Valley and wintered there.

Stanley lived in his mountain home, working at the things he liked to do, made friends of the wild things, rejoiced in his freedom from conventional restraint, and imbibed from the rugged mountains, the untouched forests, the daily overcoming of obstacles, a dignity and self-reliance unknown to men in softer surroundings.

Before daylight the morning after June and Burton came to his home, Stanley was up, had built fires in the fireplaces, and fed his stock. The wind had ceased during the night, and now the snow fell in soft, feathery flakes that kept piling up almost to the tops of the fences.

Crawford smiled as he worked. Great joke on these city folks to get caught in here where they might not be able to get out for months! That girl sure was gritty. Pretty little thing, too. Probably she was engaged to marry Burton. Regular fellow, that Van Herskine! Not a whimper out of him because of that broken leg, or the hurt ankle. A man who can lie all night hurt that bad and not complain will do to take along. Oh, well, he would take good care of them, if they could put up with this manner of living. When the storm was over, he would see if he could break a road out. He had the best team on the river. He would put hay in the box on his bobs and make a bed for the injured man, and haul them to the valley.

Stanley was at work in the kitchen now. He would bet that girl never had a better breakfast than the one he was preparing for her. He smiled as he anticipated the surprise in her brown eyes when she saw the table. He went quietly to the bed where Van Herskine

lay. The man's eyes were closed, his face pale. A spasm of pain shot across his face, and he looked up at Stanley and tried a smile that broke in two and formed an entirely different expression.

"Leg hurt?"

"Some."

"I might as well tell you now, before Miss Meredith gets up, that the snow is deep and still coming fast. It may be weeks, perhaps months, before I can get you out. I'd better set that leg and splint it up."

"Sorry to bother you, old man. You're surely going to a lot of trouble for strangers."

"What difference does that make?" Crawford inquired, and went into his little shop to make splints.

June waked to find the fire which she had seen sink into a bed of glowing coals blazing brightly. The room was warm, comfortable. She hopped out of her nest, her feet sinking luxuriously in the soft, thick fur of a bearskin that had been placed beside her bed while she slept. She went to the window. The snow was now nearly halfway up the side of the house. June hurried to dress and go out into the room where Burton lay. She went to him, knelt beside the bed, and kissed him.

"Gee, June girl, I wish I'd got busted up two years ago," said Burton, taking her hand.

"How are you?" asked the girl.

"In Heaven, now. This wonderful chap we found has set my leg and bandaged it so that it doesn't hurt. He fixed my ankle, too."

Crawford came in, with a cheery, "Good morning, Miss Meredith, have you seen the forest?"

June went with him to the door and stood looking out at the snow-laden trees, their boughs bent low.. "It is too beautiful for words." She held out her hands toward the trees. "Oh, I love it," she said.

Crawford's eyes glistened. He knew

the emotion that had gripped the girl, and sympathized with it. "After breakfast we will go out into it, if you would like to," he told her.

Stanley pulled the table up beside the bed upon which Van Herskine lay, and arranged his pillows so that the injured man could feed himself. He watched June's face as he placed a platter of trout fried a golden brown on the table, and set a pot of coffee for her to pour. A look of contentment rewarded him. She prepared the food for Burton and placed the plate conveniently for him. This was unquestionably the happiest moment Burton Van Herskine had ever experienced.

"I'll have to leave you alone for a while," Crawford told them. "There's a bunch of cattle that must be put inside before the snow gets too deep."

"You would like to go with him, wouldn't you, June?" asked Van Herskine, remembering Crawford's promise to take the girl out.

"I wouldn't leave you alone," evaded June.

"But I want you to go," insisted Van Herskine. "Some way, I wouldn't be happy if you gave up any pleasure for me."

Could it be possible that this was the Burton Van Herskine she had known? June could hardly realize the change in the man. His insistent demands upon her time during the years that he had courted her had been one of the things she had rebelled against. She did want to go with Stanley out into the storm to help bring those cattle in to food and shelter.

"I've got a good, stout, sure-footed horse," said Stanley, "if you would like to go."

"I'd love it, more than anything else," cried June.

Crawford rode ahead, breaking through the drifts on a handsome, gray horse that was evidently as keen for the work as was his rider. June wondered

at the understanding between horse and rider, and how each deferred at times to the judgment of the other. The snow fell in great, feathery flakes in a stillness so profound that the rapping of a woodpecker on a dry tree at the back of the ranch rattled like the bark of a tiny machine gun. Crawford looked back into the radiant face of the girl.

"Like it?" he asked.

June's eyes sparkled, her face flushed. "It seems to me I never knew what happiness was before."

If either the girl or the man sensed what emotion caused the strange, vibrant exultation which had come to them, neither stopped to question it. Crawford laughed and pointed at a snowshoe rabbit huddled under a protecting bush, trusting to his immaculate coat to protect him.

"Isn't he beautiful?" breathed June. "He is actually whiter than the snow itself."

"Hardly that," Stanley replied. "There is a slightly yellow tinge to his fur, yet a month later when the animals that kill are hungry, he will be so nearly like the snow that you would not see him except for his brown eyes."

They found the cattle in the edge of a clump of spruce, huddled close under spreading branches, fat calves standing beside their mothers. Crawford rode close to them and turned back.

"We will ride through the drifted snow here once or twice, so as to make an easy trail for them to follow out," he told June.

The big gray turned, leaping gracefully past June into the trail directly behind her.

"My word, what a horse!" said the girl admiringly.

Crawford grinned. "Don't you recognize him?" he asked.

"You don't mean that he's the horse you rode at the stampede?"

"Sure is. Lodgepole wasn't any more good to them as an outlaw, so I

bought him. He's too good a horse for that life."

June was thinking deeply. Stanley did remember. He had not forgotten. The thrill which came to the girl should have warned her, but she was too much interested in the scene before her to analyze her own emotions. Crawford was pushing the lazy cattle out into the trail that their horses had broken. June rode beside him, swinging the quirt which Stanley handed to her, helping to drive the cattle out into the trail, laughing at their funny loads of snow. A playful calf stuck his face down into the feathery mass and looked up at her with such a saucy, comical face that the girl screamed with delight.

Once started for the ranch, the cattle strung out, following the broken path. June rode behind them, and Stanley behind her, watching her lithe young body sway gracefully to the motion of the horse.

June was a startling surprise to Crawford. The few women he had known were not lovers of the outdoors, or of outdoor sports. They would never think of being pals to a man whose love for nature was so intense that he would bury himself back here in the mountains for months at a time. She chatted merrily of big-game hunting in Alaska, of the mid-winter trapshoot at Pinehurst, of the tennis finals at San Diego. So that was where she got that supple, well-trained control of her muscles. She was an athlete and a trained shot with both shotgun and rifle. Like Crawford, her love of the outdoors was a passion with her, and she had played at the only games which parodied the real experience she was now enjoying.

As the cattle neared the ranch they remembered the comfortable sheds and well-filled hay racks, and began bawling and making a fearful din, standing still, instead of hurrying on to the protecting sheds.

"Aren't they silly?" laughed June.

"Why don't they go on, instead of stopping to bawl like that?"

"That's the cow of it," said Crawford. "Come on, we'll ride around them and open the gates. They'll come now when they get ready."

Lodgepole plunged through the snow at a swinging canter, and June's horse followed, the quick action still more stimulating her spirit. A vague sense of depression came over the girl when she saw the joy in Van Herskine's eyes as she and Stanley came in from their ride, shaking the loose snow from their coats and blowing on their numbed fingers.

"Have a good time?" asked the invalid a trifle wistfully.

"Oh, Burton, you can't know what it's like until you experience it," cried June enthusiastically. "To feel that you are actually accomplishing something worth while, and at the same time doing it in such an environment and on horseback! All that I ever did before seems unworthy pretense. This is real, fundamental. I understand now what it is in the stories of outdoor life that has always had such a strange appeal to me, and why I have been so disgusted with what was only play acting."

Burton watched the two as they tossed their heavy coats aside and began the preparation of the evening meal. When June came to him with a glass of water, her conscience smote her again as she saw the great happiness which shone in the eyes of the man she had that morning definitely decided to reward for his years of devotion.

That night the storm broke and the morning sun shone out on a world of dazzling beauty. Crawford was at work shoveling paths about the cabin when June came from her room. She went to Burton at once.

"You had a good night?" she inquired.

"Splendid. My leg hasn't hurt me at all."

His eyes glistened with a joy that made June's heart sink. During the night she had realized the reason for the strange sense of joy she had experienced in being under the protection of Stanley Crawford. Yet she could not bear to kill the hopes of this man whose eyes shouted his love for her. She did not kiss him this morning. She went out into the kitchen and began preparing breakfast. It was strange how different everything seemed to her. She hardly noticed when Stanley came and put two buckets of water on the bench.

"The dogs have a mountain lion treed over near the rim rocks," he said. "Hear them howl?"

June stepped to the door. From far away over the sparkling snow she could hear the hounds sending forth the cry which she knew meant game treed.

"Put on your heavy things," said Stanley. "I'll get the horses. A lion is the one animal I always try to get. They are the worst killers in the West. Every week each grown lion will kill either a deer, a mountain sheep, a colt, or a yearling calf. They are the outlaws of the range country."

In ten minutes, they were galloping across the fields, rifles lying across their saddles. Crawford led the way up a cross-arroyo and tied the horses in a small bunch of aspen bushes.

"Keep up the hill a little way and watch closely. You may get a shot," he directed. "I'll get down here where I can protect the dogs, if you don't kill the lion the first time."

The dogs were now howling furiously, leaping about the foot of a scrubby spruce.

June moved along the side hill, watching the tree. The lion, a large male, saw the girl and, knowing that this new enemy was greater than the dogs, he attempted to spring far away over their backs. He had not seen Crawford and, as nothing would have tempted the cowardly beast to attack a man, he actually

sprang straight down the hill on top of him.

The effect was the same as if the big cat had meant a deliberate attack upon Crawford. The dogs lost sight of their game, and Stanley had no opportunity to use his rifle. The lion bowled him over in the snow, striking, clawing, attempting to bite.

June was no novice at hunting big game. She had killed these cats before, and she knew that at close quarters the terrible talons of the lion were like keen knives. She dared not shoot, for fear of killing Crawford, but she ran in close, trying to club the beast with her rifle. The dogs rushed in. Crawford lay on his back, fighting the beast away with hands and feet. The lion's attention was partly attracted away from its victim by the dogs. For an instant, the big head with its glistening fangs was drawn back, and with the easy action of muscles trained by long tournaments at the traps, June's rifle sought the small tuft of hair at the base of the creature's brain, and cracked.

The lion sprang convulsively high in the air and fell on the snow. Instantly, June was on her knees beside Stanley, her hands pushing around him to lift him. Crawford raised himself. Their arms were unconsciously around each other. For an instant, they looked deep into each other's eyes, and then their lips met.

June went about the house dazed at the trick fate had played upon her. She who hated deception, who had made a god of simplicity and honesty, was living a lie. She harshly condemned herself for having impulsively given Van Herskine the encouragement upon which his happiness fed. A week of torture passed in this way. Each day she realized more and more that life in this place was what she desired above all else, and each hour her love for Crawford increased. To go back to the

play at outdoor life in which she had hitherto indulged seemed utterly distasteful, yet she could not bring herself to tell Van Herskine the truth.

Crawford, with the intense honesty of his nature, had never dreamed that after that one moment of admitted love there could be any outcome but marriage, and he went about his work with all the joy of an accepted lover. He was boyish, impulsive, inexpressibly happy.

June smiled sympathetically. "With all his courage and self-reliance, he is just a great big lovable boy," she thought.

Van Herskine called to her. She went, fearful that he had noticed what seemed so very apparent to her in her super-sensitive state.

"June, look at me," said the convalescent.

The girl turned toward him, busying herself in adjusting the bed clothing.

"It was a week ago yesterday that you kissed me," Burton said.

June's heart almost stopped beating. It was coming, this thing she had dreaded so.

"Crawford loves you, dear."

There it was out, in all its bold truthfulness. She dropped on her knees by the bed. Burton's hand rested now on her curls, as he added, "And you love him, and it is all as I would wish it to be."

June froze as if she had been struck a stunning blow.

"Wh-what do you mean?" she finally gasped.

"The day when I lay up there on the

mountain expecting to die," said Van Herskine soberly, "I guess I had some sort of clearer vision. They say that people condemned to die sometimes see things more clearly. I saw how wholly unsuited to each other we were. I like the luxuries and comforts of civilization. You are never so happy as when living next to the raw edge of the frontier. I gave you up that day and, in the giving, found something I did not know I possessed—character. The morning you came in here and kissed me you did not deceive me at all. That kiss was inspired purely by sisterly sympathy. I was so happy to know that I could give you up, like a man, that it made me unconscious of pain. As the days have gone by, and I have seen how things were going between you and Stanley, I have actually gloried in my strength. It is such experiences as this, my dear, that make us know ourselves."

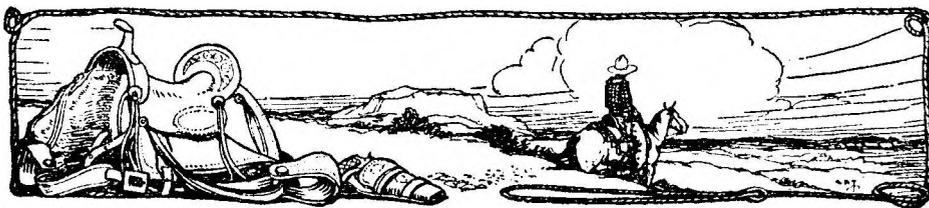
The door opened and Crawford came in with a great armful of wood.

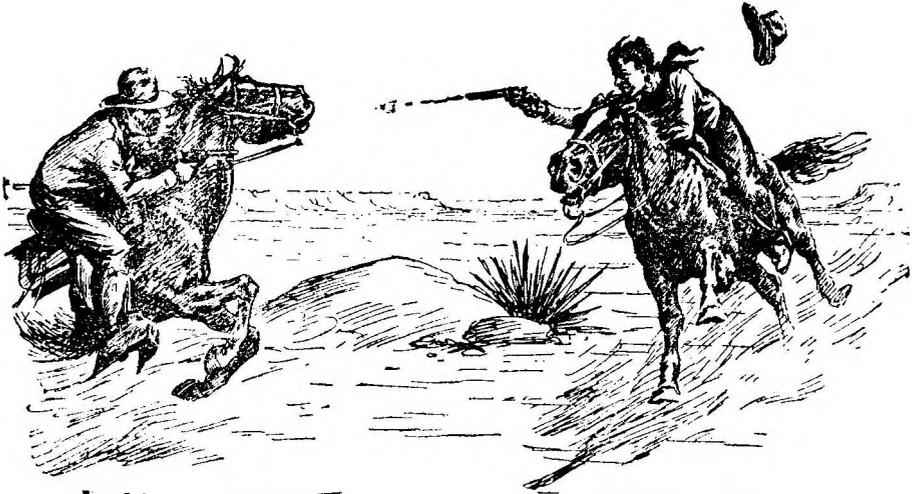
"Here, what are you two doing?" he demanded playfully.

June got up and stood facing him, her eyes glorious with happiness. "I am just finding out," she said, "that real men don't all wear buckskin."

Crawford piled his wood near the fireplace and came and stood beside the bed, one arm around June, his right hand grasping that of Burton.

"Men are a lot like horses," he said; "put 'em in a circus and they'll act up; give 'em a chance to act natural so they forget to pretend, and underneath they've all pretty much the same qualities."





The Winged Horse

by John Frederick

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

THE LAMB, a youth of many names, is hired by Colonel Loring to protect his range from the Montagues. The Lamb's horse is shot under him by the Montague gang. To avenge this, and their contemptuous treatment of his messenger, The Lamb penetrates the Montague stronghold, escapes by the aid of lovely Louise Patten, and rides off on Jimmy Montague's famous black stallion. He reaches the Loring ranch exhausted but triumphant, after a fierce contest with the horse for mastery.

Jack Milligan, an emissary from the Montagues, appears at the ranch and offers The Lamb his price. The latter accepts, after informing the colonel of his plan to learn the Montagues' schemes. A signal is arranged between them. The Lamb leaves. Jimmy Montague claims his stallion, but the animal refuses to go to him, and old Montague decides that the horse is now The Lamb's.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE ENEMY'S FORTRESS.

BY Monty Montague himself, this new recruit was ushered to a room. It was a small chamber in the second story, with deeply projecting eaves sheltering its window from snow and wind. Its smallness made it appear snug in spite of its barrenness; and there were in it merely a wooden cot and a chair. As for washing, bathing, shaving, there was a room in the basement of the house that looked like a laundry, and there "The Lamb" for the first time met the rest of the household.

They were as rough as bears. Razors

were not often used in the establishment, for the good reason that there was little warm water available to work up a lather, and by the time that a stiff beard had been properly prepared for shaving, the soap was apt to be frozen to the skin in rigorous weather. The result was that almost all the men wore natural beards which, being of equal length all over, inclined to make their faces round and owlish. Only here and there, as in the case of Jim Montague, was found a man to whom the beard gave an air of nobility.

They greeted The Lamb with a surly sort of respect, as though they knew that he was different from them, and that, nevertheless, he was a useful fellow to have about. The majority of

these men were actual members of the clan; and the others, without exception, hoped to gain a place in the family by marriage, or perhaps by being formally included among the Montagues. This was done after a well-established precedent, the lucky claimant receiving for his share a certain number of cows to start his herd, together with a proportionate number of weanlings, and a bull. Upon these animals he was allowed to put his own mark, above the marks of the Montagues. All increase in his own herd was returned to him. He could sell, or he could let the animals run. The property was large enough to accommodate several such herds; but it was the ambition of Monty Montague, the controlling genius of the family, to crush Loring and drive him from the range, not so much for the sake of appropriating the property of the colonel as to give greater room to the aspirations of the Montagues and their protégés. This family was a solid unit of a patriarchal mood.

They retained a patriarchal simplicity in their manners, too. They ate at one long table, which was loaded down with food, to be sure; but the food was nearly all meat. Vegetables were reserved for invalids and children; grown people were supposed to consume meat alone, and thrive on it; and the hard labor they performed enabled them to do this and keep fairly healthy. They all rode out early in the day; they worked until late; each, being a part owner or aspiring to be one, was tireless and alert. It was a silent house; for the men were either considering each his own task; or, returning from it, they were mute from the fatigue of a hard day's work.

They took their orders, when orders were necessary, from Monty, or from his son, "Big Jim," as he was called by the clan. These orders were terse and to the point. There was never any necessity of threatening a man because

of laziness or neglect. Instead of that, in some extreme case the old man himself would call the delinquent into his own room and there he would quietly mention the faults which had been observed, and point out that they must cease, or else there was no place for the man in the clan. That always was enough, with one exception, for there had been but a single case of expulsion in the whole history of the clan. As for the others, men who came remained forever, with the exception of a scattering who had been hired in times of great need and discharged immediately afterward.

There were a score of children about the place. Old Monty interested himself in them a great deal. He saw to it that every boy and girl had a pony to ride as soon as it was able to straddle a bare back. In summer he saw to it that the youngsters scattered across the range and lived as much like wild Indians as they chose. In the winter months, such as this season, he insisted that they should have instruction, and for that purpose a big room was selected, and there Louise Patten held her school. Her pupils ranged from six to sixteen, though no boy was kept at books after he was fourteen. At that time he was declared a man, able to take his place as a scout or as a Montague warrior; the day he definitely left the school, he was considered to have ended his novitiate.

Such a system of Arcadian simplicity caused the household and the clan to have much strength, and also many weaknesses. But the lack of law, and of submission to the law of the land, was replaced by the rules of the clan itself, and perfect obedience to them. These rules advanced the pleasant thought that nothing really was of importance except the welfare of the community. A theft or a crime on the outside, so long as it redounded to the strength or in some manner to the credit

of the tribe, was admirable rather than reprehensible.

The Lamb, a careful observer of all things, took note of his surroundings for several days.

During the time, hardly more than a monosyllable was spoken to him by the other people in the house who were at the age of discretion. Only some of the boys, who knew that he was a famous fighter, could not overcome their intense curiosity and admiration. They, when occasion served and no older person was observing, would slip up beside him and shyly enter into conversation, trying to draw out the hero and learn, as it were, some of the secrets of Achilles' might. They found The Lamb perfectly amiable; it was to his advantage to create as much good feeling as possible. Perhaps from one of these children he would learn enough to make his errand profitable to Colonel Loring.

But he felt that his progress was very slow. It never was suggested that he should join the other men in their work. It was accepted that he was a drone, valuable in his case for his sting in battle; the sooner the battle and the end of his usefulness, the better. Then they would throw him out.

The longer he lived here, not only did he come to doubt his own usefulness, but also he began to wonder more and more what there might be in this naked life that attracted men to live it. He determined that he would have a talk with Louise Patten, when he could. He saw her, from time to time, her pale face silent at the long table, or passing from one room to another, always deftly avoiding his eye.

He could guess that she despised him because he had become an adherent or paid retainer of the Montagues; but he was willing to endure her scorn, face to face, if he could gain her information. She, herself, had never a companion except some of the older girls she was

teaching. The young men, married or unmarried, never so much as glanced at her; all her friendship was given to a sleek, white bull terrier which followed her day and night. It was at her heels on the day when he accosted her in the grounds of the house.

He had made it a point, from his first coming, to stroll about the house and the land constantly so as to give himself a clear picture of every inch of the establishment; that might be the sort of knowledge which would be the most useful. After all, he was in the fortress of the enemy. Luckily, the arrangement was not so complicated that he had to put it down in drawing. He could trust his memory, but he wanted that memory to be accurate for use by day or night.

The house had been built on a naturally impregnable post. On three sides, there was a sharp descent of rock which never could be scaled without ropes or ladders. No matter how often The Lamb eyed the sheer walls, he could not find a path by which even a dog could climb or descend. On the fourth side, the neck of the promontory was cut by the ravine of the creek. Here the rock walls were not much more than fifty or sixty feet in height, but the creek itself was a formidable barrier. The water was neither very shallow nor very deep, but it came with the speed of volleyed arrows, rushing to white spray and foam upon the rocks. On the steep and narrow banks, here and there, was barely footing for a man, but no chance for him to run and leap. Therefore, the crossing of the creek was sure to be extremely precarious. It was the most natural precaution in the world which had caused Monty Montague to build the bridge, of the most simple type, strong and secure, but working on a great pivot so that it could be swung out or in, and locked in either position. Then the house was as secure as a ship at sea with a strong wind blowing.

Even these precautions were not enough to suit the Montagues, since the open wars with Colonel Loring began. And every night he had one or two men moving constantly about as guards. Sometimes half a dozen were put on watch, if danger seemed imminent.

As for plans of attacking the Montagues, The Lamb could not find one. He would have to wait until they revealed their plans to him. For that he hoped, if once he could win their trust.

He was rounding a thicket of brush, their ice-rimmed branches glistening in the sunless air, when he saw Louise Patten come briskly out from the trees, with the white terrier streaking before her, here and there. At the sight of The Lamb, the dog paused, and came to a challenging position before him. The Lamb took off his hat to the girl, but she gave him the slightest of nods and passed by, her eyes fixed straight before her.

The Lamb, nothing daunted, fell in at her side.

"There's a good view of old Mount Chandler beyond the firs, there," he suggested cheerfully. "The whole south side of him is plastered with white this morning."

She did not answer. They passed through the firs, and here he paused and stretched out his arm so that he blocked the narrow path as he pointed.

"You see?" said he.

The bull terrier growled softly, and looked up to his mistress for directions.

She in turn regarded The Lamb with the calmest of eyes.

"I want to go on," said she.

"Even the dog can understand that," admitted The Lamb. "But I want to talk to you."

She was silent, eying him without dread.

"There's reasons why you and me should open up and talk freer," suggested The Lamb.

"I don't see them," said she.

As he started to explain, she interrupted: "I don't want to talk to you. I want to go on."

"Sure you do," said The Lamb calmly. "But I want you to stay here. I'm busting with curiosity about you."

"I'm not curious about you," said she.

He nodded.

"Sure," said he. "I'm Benedict Arnold, or something like that, except that I ain't been made a general, yet. Maybe that'll come later. But I want to talk about you, not myself."

She hesitated. Then she nodded. "I've been rude enough," she said. "And I'm sorry for it. What can I tell you?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN EMERALD.

THE Lamb sighed with relief.

"This is a good deal easier than I thought it would be," he admitted. "When I seen you going by with a frosty eye, I thought I'd be up against trouble, talking to you. But here you are, pretty good-natured. I've noticed that before," breezed The Lamb.

"When a person has done a good turn for another, it's hard for him to get hard-hearted. Him that does the favor is the one that's bound by doin' it, the same as you seem to be, now!"

"What favor have I done for you?" she asked.

"Only showing me the way out, to the savin' of my neck."

She nodded.

"I suppose you can call that a favor," said she.

"Even a thing like me can't afford to chuck himself away, ma'am," said he.

At this, a slight flush appeared in her check.

"Are you proud of leaving your friends?" she asked.

"What friends? Loring's lot?"

"Yes."

"What friends were they of mine? They hired me for pretty good pay. Along comes some other folks and offer me a raise. What's wrong with taking it?"

"Is that the way you reason?" she asked, and her eyes wandered upon his face, like one who reads a strange book.

"I'm on the make," declared The Lamb; "I need cash and I intend to get it."

"You came here to find Big Jim and kill him," said she. "Now you're here to take his orders."

"Between the evening I came to find him and to-night, they's the difference between a dead mare and a livin' hoss. And they's four thousand dollars boot thrown in."

"Did you come here for Big Jim because he'd killed your horse?"

"I wanted trouble," admitted he. "But I suppose that we've talked enough about me. Everybody knows that I'm a hired man. But why are you here?"

"For board and lodging," said she. "And so many dollars a month. I like my work, too."

"Teaching?"

"Teaching, yes."

"You can't teach 'em nothin' but readin' and writin'," said he. "And what's that worth?"

Here she looked up at him suddenly, with a brightness in all her face.

"I think I know what you mean," said she.

"Of course you do. But what nails me to the mast more than anything else is why nobody pays no attention to you, here."

"Who?"

"The young gents. Even these here Comanches want squaws. But they don't seem to bother you none."

She seemed a little angered, at first, by this excessive frankness; but sud-

denly she laughed. And The Lamb smiled in his turn.

"Well, that clears the air," said she. "They don't pay any attention to me because they don't want me, of course."

"Does a trout rise to flies?" asked The Lamb. "Sure, except when the shadow of the rod is floatin' on the surface. Does a hoss try to stand on his nose in his feed box? Sure, except when he smells a snake in the oats. But why don't these gents make a rush for you? I dunno. They walk by like they was blind in the eye that was next to you."

She looked earnestly at The Lamb.

"There's no way to answer you," she said. "Of course, you see that!"

"Ain't there? I don't see," said The Lamb. "Here I am, miles outside of you and clean different. I'm a hired man. I'm just a pair of hired guns, as you might say. Couldn't you talk to a pair of guns?"

She smiled a little.

"You're talking yourself down," she said. "But I may as well tell you that it isn't pleasant for people who pay attention to me here. I should warn you, unless you've already heard. Big Jim doesn't like to have me noticed."

"He's the shadow of the rod on the water, and the snake in the feed box, eh?" murmured the Lamb. "I should've guessed that. But why do you stay here to be bullied by them? You was raised pretty good, or else you've had a lot of attention showed to you."

"Why do you say that?"

"By the language you daub," said he. "You can tell a cowboy by his boots and a girl by the way she talks. Besides, you got an emerald there that wasn't picked up at no counter sale."

The jewel was at her breast; it was the ornament in a golden pin, dark sea-green, with the sea's shadow of blue in it. She covered it hastily with her hand and stared at The Lamb. His keen, bright eyes searched her very soul; and

in between them pressed the terrier with a growl, as though he guessed at a crisis of some sort.

The girl quieted the dog with a word.

"What's his name?" asked The Lamb.

"His Lordship."

"Sure," said The Lamb. "By the way of his walkin' and talkin' a man could guess that. Here, old son. Here's my hand."

The dog bared his teeth.

"Be careful! Be careful!" cried the girl. "His Lordship is an ugly noble when his temper comes up."

"I never knew a dog to refuse my hand, ma'am," said The Lamb. "Look at His Lordship, now. He don't see anything wrong in my hand."

The dog growled, presently sniffed the hand, and now came a little closer to the stranger, his tail wagging in a small circle, as though it worked upon a spring.

"I've never seen him act that way before," admitted the girl.

"He'll act that way again, though," smiled The Lamb. "He's made friends with me. You take a fighting dog and he don't change. It's the same with a fighting man, ma'am. When he's made up his mind to be a friend, it's worth having him. Would you say no?"

She hesitated, filled with an odd anxiety, and The Lamb went on: "Look at you! I speak about an emerald that you're wearin', and you begin to get red and white in turns. Look here! That's a fighting dog, and he's our friend. I'm a fighting man, and I'm your friend. You live here like a wolf among dogs, or a dog among wolves. Why not talk out, ma'am?"

"Did you ever see this pin before?" she asked him suddenly.

"Jewels don't wear faces, for me, ma'am," said he.

She watched him with a sudden hunger of curiosity.

"Did you ever know Will Dunstan?" she asked.

The wind leaped across the valley and smote them, so that The Lamb bowed his head against it and clutched his hat. And yet the wind appeared to have caught him so much off balance that he staggered into it a little. It released him.

"That was a puff enough to sink a ship," said he. "I didn't catch what name you said?"

"Will Dunstan," she said. "Did you know him?"

"Dunstan? Dunstan?" asked he. "I knew a gent by name of Dunbar. He was a half-breed and——"

"No, no! There never was a trace of Indian blood in this man!"

"Dunstan?" murmured The Lamb. "I don't seem to quite place no name like that. But what did he look like, because gents have a way of changin' their names, when they go wanderin' around the range from place to place. That's because a name that might fit in pretty good in one place wouldn't be so very good in another, y'understand?"

She raised her head a little, and said in her quiet voice: "Will Dunstan was not that sort of man. Wherever he went, he couldn't have carried more than one name. His own name was the right name for him! He had no other, ever!"

"Ah, yes," said The Lamb. "He was a gent that you knowed pretty well, eh? When you've seen a hoss all the way from foal to saddle, you can pretty well know what he's like."

"I knew him less than a month," said she.

"Hello!" said The Lamb cheerfully. "Less than a month? I dunno that even a teacher can learn a man that quick!"

"I must go on," she said hastily.

"The emerald had something to do with this here Dunstan, did it?"

"He gave it to me."

The Lamb watched her with his keen eyes.

"Excuse me," said he, "if I've been makin' myself too much at home. This Dunstan is sort of on your mind, it seems."

"He gave me this," said she. "He was working here for the Montagues and——"

"Ah, then he was one of 'em, was he?"

"Will Dunstan?"

She paused to let the emotion pass from her.

"He was no Montague!" she said. "He gave me this. And the next day, he fell from the trail around the mountain, there, and they picked him up dead."

"It's a long time since?" asked The Lamb gently.

"It was last fall. The leaves were dropping, and it was just before the first snow fell," she answered. Then, hastily: "I have to finish my walk. I'll talk to you some other time, whenever you wish!"

She brushed past him and hurried down the path, swinging immediately out of sight.

The Lamb made as if to follow her, but changed his mind and sat down abruptly upon a stump of a felled tree. There he remained for a long time, looking before him with a blank face, as though he were struggling with a thought too great for utterance, too great for conception. At last his lips stirred to a faint muttering.

He got up, then, and looked around him with a glance both dark and guilty, as though he feared that other eyes might have looked upon him.

Then he turned down the path which rimmed the plateau, walking in a direction opposite to that which the girl had taken. He was, in fact, watched from the brush; for he hardly had started away before the brush parted and the dark face of Jack McGuire looked out,

with the soiled bandage drawn about his head.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"LEFTY" FARGO IS HEARD FROM.

FIVE minutes later, McGuire stepped before him and glowered.

"Old son," said The Lamb, "you always look at me like I'd stole your calf. What's the matter?"

McGuire merely hooked his thumb over his shoulder.

"The chief wants you inside."

"Thanks," said The Lamb.

He started on back to the house beside the other, shortening his step when McGuire showed signs of purposely falling behind.

"If you was a cook," said The Lamb, "the boys would sure turn out pronto when they heard you holler in the morning, and them that come late would look for poison in their beans the next time they fed. What's on your mind, 'Handsome'? Because I nicked you with that slug? Why, I was just shootin' at Montagues in general. I didn't pick out your face; I'd never had the fun of seein' it!"

Said Jack McGuire, with an ugly twitch of his lip:

"You and me don't come of the same breed and we don't run on the same trails. Leave me be. You'd best!"

To this The Lamb replied with a shrug of the shoulders, and then walked lightly on, with Jack McGuire bringing up the rear. In that position they appeared in the room of Monty Montague, and found Big Jim with his grandfather.

"Here I come," said The Lamb, "with the sheep dog behind me."

He sat down uninvited upon the arm of a chair and looked cheerfully upon the others.

"All right, Jack," said the younger Montague; and McGuire withdrew, reluctantly, as though he expected dour

proceedings and wished to be present at them.

"He's going to bite, one of these days," said The Lamb. "He's been getting his teeth ready for a long time to eat me up."

Monty Montague dismissed that subject with a gesture. Then he passed his fingers smoothly through his fluff of beard, and he nodded knowingly at The Lamb.

"You ain't had a bad time here, son?" he began.

"I been resting," said The Lamb, "and waiting for the trouble to start."

"It's started now," said Jim Montague.

The Lamb waited.

"You ain't camped on one homestead all your days?" suggested old Monty.

"No, I've sashayed up and down the range a good deal."

"You've met up with a few rough ones."

"Sure. I've met some that wore the leather side out."

"And what was the roughest?"

"One that shot my hoss, and rode her and me down afterward," said The Lamb. He did not look at Jim Montague, but his smile was most unpleasant.

Jim Montague smiled also, openly, and with great satisfaction.

Of these two smiles, Monty Montague was aware, though he appeared to be looking at the floor as he declared: "That's forgot! You two are friends, now, and going to stay put that way. Outside of my boy, here, you've met up with other rough ones?"

"There was 'Dutch' Binderloss in El Paso. He was as good with his left hand as he was with his right. I shot him through the right shoulder, and with his left hand he caught his gun while it was fallin' and put me in the hospital for a month!"

"What did you do to him?"

"Just that slug through the shoul-

der. I missed him with my second and my third."

"Bad luck!" said Jim Montague, with an evil sneer.

At this, The Lamb shrugged his shoulders.

"I ain't a fellow who's always won. I ain't that kind of a fairy tale!"

"You've had your ups and downs, eh?"

The Lamb laughed, and, in laughing, his boyishness appeared in the backward tilt of his head; and he sat like a boy on the arm of the chair, carelessly, his back humped, his attitude most ungraceful.

"I've had my ups and downs. I've just batted over five hundred; that's all. They ain't put me on the bench yet. But outside of the books, where are the pitchers that always win by shutouts?"

Jim Montague's nostrils flared and his eyes glittered. But the grandfather smiled with a genial understanding.

"You gotta hammer iron before it makes good steel," said he. "You've had the hammering, son, is that it?"

"I've had it, plenty," said the boy. He closed his eyes and groaned softly. "Ran into an Irish lad when I was a kid at school. He was smaller than me; and I wasn't as big as I thought. He pretty near tore me in two. I wore the marks of that lickin' for years!"

"Ever fight him again?"

"No, I never had the chance. He moved out of town while both my eyes was still closed. Fargo got him, finally, from what I heard."

"Fargo?"

"Sure. The great Fargo; him that they talk about so much. 'Lefty' Fargo."

"I've heard of him," said Jim Montague. "He's got a record behind him."

"Nobody has a longer one. But it's part talk, of course."

"How d'you mean?"

"Aw," said The Lamb with a shrug of his eloquent shoulders, "all of these

yarns about the 'deadeye Dicks' are part made up. This here Fargo—they tell how he takes a gun in each hand and smashes a couple of dimes at twenty yards with snapshots, one from each hand—*bang, bang!*"

He laughed.

"You don't believe it?" asked the old man.

"Sure I don't. I've been in too many gun fights, and I've seen too many. I was on hand when Harry Corson, and Jack Peters, and Lew Marquis, and Jemmy Bone all met up in Tombstone and shot it out."

"Aye that was a great fight!"

"Was it? Corson got killed and Bone got shot through the hip. That was all. And those four deadeye Dicks was all in one room together for pretty near ten minutes. They must've planted a hundred pounds of lead in the walls, and in the ceilings, and in the floors. They busted all the windows. The floor was flooded and smelled like a big mixed drink, because they'd potted most of the bottles behind the bar.

"After they got through, it looked like a bunch of Comanches had gone for that barroom with hatchets; but they hadn't! It was only four 'dead shots,' so called, that had been firing off their guns. One killed; one wounded! The lead they fired off, they could 've embalmed Corson in it!"

"Folks exaggerate. There ain't any doubt of that," said the elder Montague. "But Fargo is a pretty fair man, I'd say."

"Why, sure he is!"

"Have you met him?"

"Two years back."

"Friends?"

"Pretty fair. He put me under the table, that time."

"Drink?"

"A half-inch chunk of lead straight through the middle of me," said The Lamb. "Fargo, he ducked his head under the table and grinned at me. 'I'll

see you later, Kid,' said he. Meaning in Hades, some day, you understand? But I lived through it!"

He laid his hand on his breast and made a wry face, as though the agony of the wound, and the long hospital weeks of weariness, were rushing back upon his mind at that instant. Then he said: "But what's up?"

"We've got a letter from a gent that Colonel Loring has hired. Professional gun fighter."

"Does he tell you to hop right off of the range?" asked The Lamb.

"He wants to meet Jimmy, here, in the middle of the floor of Beacon Creek."

"If you went there, he'd never show his face, most likely," said The Lamb. "Unless he's a kid."

"What you mean by that?" put in the heavy bass of Jim Montague.

"You take 'em young—fifteen up to eighteen or nineteen—and a kid'll do any fool thing to get himself famous. He *likes* to fight! He ain't got any sore places to start aching on him. You take me," continued this veteran of one-and-twenty, "and when a cold wind hits me, it goes right through fifty channels. I feel like the side of an old barn—full of holes and cracks, where bullets and knives have punched through me. I feel like a transfer ticket that's been punched ten times, and folded and punched over again!"

"This is no crazy kid," said Monty Montague. "But he's the kind that will live up to his word. What's the matter up there at the colonel's shack, sendin' out challenges, this way? Do they think that the old storybook days of knights have come back, where gents fight for the sake of fighting? There was you, before!"

"I wanted to get Big Jim," said The Lamb. "I wanted him bad!"

He laughed with perfect good nature. "You going down to clean up this gent?" he asked.

"I'm not," said Big Jim. "I'm gunna accept. I've sent back my acceptance already. He's gunna be in the creek bed in an hour or so. But I don't expect to do the shootin' for my side."

"Who will, then?"

"Why not you, kid?"

The Lamb rose from the arm of the chair.

"I've got all kinds of fondness for you, Jim," said he. "I've got reason for having it. But you want me to go down there and play dummy for you? Thanks!"

Said Big Jim: "You lie around here and sleep soft and eat fat. What d'you do for yourself and us? Have you lifted your hand? For all we know, you might be a spy for Loring, right now, snoopin' around into our affairs!"

"Shut up!" commanded old Monty. "You gotta talk like a bull. You always gotta roar and paw around and raise such a dust that nobody can see what we're talkin' about. But listen to me, Al Lamb. You got a personal interest in that other man, because his name ain't nothing but Fargo."

"Lefty Fargo!" exclaimed the boy.

"It's Lefty, right enough. Loring has got so low that he has started in hirin' professional gun fighters to drive me off the range! He's got that killer, Fargo!"

The Lamb drew in his breath with a hiss.

"I'm gunna chuck a saddle on the black," said he, and left the room in haste.

CHAPTER XXV.

AND LEFTY APPEARS.

THE Lamb went to his own room first, and there he looked to his guns with the most loving care. He saw to it that his rifle was in perfect condition; that the cylinders of his revolvers spun like tops at a flick of the finger; and that the weight of the hammer was exactly right, so that it could be flipped

back by the thumb easily, and yet retain sufficient force to explode the cap of the cartridge when it fell. For this purpose, hardly a day went by that he did not adjust the spring, a little and perhaps sharpen the point. The fingering of the pianist is a delicate matter, for it deals with the souls of many notes to make them strong or small; but the fingering of a pair of Colts is infinitely more delicate, and it has to do with the preservation or the perishing of the life of men.

For an entire half hour, The Lamb worked intently. It was cold in his room; and into the damp chill of the apartment, a finger or two of icy wind penetrated from without. Yet he was dripping wet with the intensity of his application.

This was only the first of his preparations.

The slightest tremor might upset his aim. Therefore, he set about arming himself against the cold. He stripped to the waist and redressed, putting on two flannel shirts, then a closely knit sweater, and over this apparel he donned a coat lined with rabbit skin, loose and warm; last of all, he wore a slicker.

His hands were sheathed in two pairs of bulky woolen mittens, and he looked like a fat man when he left his room and went down to the stable.

There the news had gone before him. When he came to the stall of the black, he found Louise Patten and His Lordship lingering outside the door. The girl said nothing while the saddling went on, but the terrier ventured inside the stall and almost had his skull shattered by a crashing stroke of the stallion's forehoof. He leaped back with a growl and stood in the aisle, bristling, and making low thunder. Then his mistress said to The Lamb: "Why are you riding out to fight?"

He pulled up the last cinch without answering. Not that he wished to be

rude, but the question startled him a little. He turned his head to her.

She continued: "Is it for the money that the Montagues pay, or for the fun, or because you hate this Lefty Fargo?"

"The cash will do me," said he.

He led the big stallion into the aisle, as Jim Montague walked up to get his own horse. He passed them without a word, and with two separate looks, a keen one for the girl, a dark one for The Lamb.

The latter went out to the front of the barn and Louise Patten followed him.

"You'd better go back," said he. "Big Jim will be pretty cross if you waste any time on me."

She answered: "I'm trying to make up my mind. The money hasn't anything to do with it. It's only the game that counts with you!"

"You mean the hard job?" he answered.

"Yes."

"I could have stayed with Loring if I'd wanted that. There were enough on this side of the fence to keep me pretty busy, wouldn't you say?"

She frowned in deep perplexity, and stepping back from him she shook her head a little.

"Even the head of the clan is going," said she, and pointed to Monty Montague, coming down the drive bent into the wind, with his beard whipped over one shoulder. "I'm going along, too!"

She went back into the barn as Monty came up.

"You can go along out into the road," said he. "You'll find a couple of the boys waiting for you there. Me and Jim will be along behind you."

The Lamb pointed with his thumb.

"The girl says that she's coming, too."

The old man, at this, blinked a little. But he made no answer other than a nod, and went by The Lamb with an odd glint in his eyes, while the talker

swung into the saddle. It was like mounting to the back of a rock, to swing up on the black horse. There was no sway and give to him; he stood solid and massive as black basalt. And there were angles from which he looked more fit for the plow than for the saddle. The huge girth of him, for one thing, pried the knees wide. But the instant that he stepped out, all sense of ponderous bulk disappeared.

He jogged lightly as a pony down the driveway. When the full blast of the wind struck him as he drew out from the lee of the stable, he lowered and shook his head for an instant, then bounded into the air and flirted his heels like a colt, as though in defiance.

The Lamb laughed suddenly, and sent the big fellow bounding down the drive. The bridge shook and gave out hollow thunder as they rounded onto the roadway. Three huddled, wind-bowed forms waited for him there; three vretched mustangs shook their heads and slowly turned in at his side. Then he saw the sour face of Jack McGuire leading the party.

"We gotta walk on," yelled Jack into the teeth of the wind. "We're gunna have some more company."

The Lamb rode his horse closer to the dark-faced fellow.

"You're here with the boys to be the cotton batting, Jack. Is that it? The old man wouldn't ship a high-priced machine like me without packin' it pretty safe? And Jack is my life insurance!"

He had pitched his voice so that it cut easily into the wind. McGuire replied with a sudden roar of rage.

"Keep off of me!" he yelled. "I'm gunna do you a harm, one of these days, I tell ye!"

He sent his horse ahead with a start; but The Lamb laughed, and remained in line with the other two. They were the true range type—lean, thin-cheeked, supple as whalebone and as unbreakable by labor or by weather. They looked

curiously back at him with the wide, clear eyes that know no fear. They were not like McGuire. They never had pretended to be great gunmen and, therefore, they had no great fall to lament; but they were like ten thousand other stanch cattlemen—not at all on the hunt for trouble, but willing to meet all that came their way with capable hands. For his own part, The Lamb would rather have fought with a practiced bully and shot than cross one of these unpretending bulldogs who only knew how to bite, and not how to let go.

The wind fell, as they came under the shoulder of a hill; behind them they heard the crackling sound of hoofs upon the frozen road, and looking back, he saw that Big Jim was in his rear, and old Monty of the white beard, beside him, looking wonderfully small and youthful in spite of his white hair.

They came up fast, but never quite joined, keeping a hundred or more yards to the rear.

"This is like a funeral," said The Lamb to one of his two immediate companions, "and I dunno whether I'm the corpse or the chief mourner."

They looked at him with steady curiosity, because he could jest at such a time, and then the nearest one smiled faintly.

"They's apt to be *one* funeral to-day," said he, and nodded, and then laughed aloud with his thin lips held close, as one accustomed to ride against the wind.

That wind fell with unusual suddenness as they began to stretch across the range.

When The Lamb spoke of this change, one of the punchers chuckled. "The black hoss scared the wind away," said he.

For the stallion went into it with his ears flattened, and his head looking snaky and dangerous. The black clouds above them began to break, and though the sun could not get through, at

least it turned some tumbling masses into nebulous puffs and whirls of shining white, so that it looked as though cannon were pouring out white blasts of smoke in heaven.

It was mid-afternoon as they came to the edge of Beacon Creek. The appointed meeting place had a low bank upon either side; the bottom was flat as the floor of a room, and covered with large, round pebbles. And above the other bank, they saw the men of Colonel Loring, and the colonel himself among them.

When they were sighted, two riders started out down the slope of the farther side. One, by the bulk of him, was Muldoon. The other was a much smaller and rounder form—Lefty Fargo, beyond a doubt. And The Lamb raised his head like a dog which scents danger in the wind.

Old Monty Montague came up to the youngster and beckoned him forward.

"We gotta go down and chatter with them for a minute," said he. "They'll want to hear why you're substitutin'."

"Suppose they take a mind to finish you off, now that you're close up to them?" asked The Lamb.

"The big gent is Muldoon. He's an honest fool," said Monty. "Besides, I ain't the kind of a bone that'll be worth picking. It'll be plumb starvation before anybody risks breaking teeth to crack me for the marrow inside. Come along!"

They went down into the draw and met the other pair. Muldoon looked huger than ever. He was made almost on the scale of Jim Montague. And when he saw The Lamb he roared with anger. He wanted to know what double-crossing trick this could be. And old Montague gave him a proper answer too.

"You come up with the best scrapper on the range," said he, "and you want me to stack my closest heir agin' him.

That ain't right or nacheral. You bring me up a hired man. Here's The Lamb to meet up with him. Ain't that fair enough to suit you?"

"I've seen rats, and I've seen snakes," said Muldoon, "but I never seen nothin' as low as him! Him that bunked in with us, that ate our chuck, that seen the dirty Montague game played—him to double cross us! What's your price, you skunk?" asked Muldoon.

He shook his fist at The Lamb, and the latter shrugged his eloquent shoulders.

"You better keep your talk for a colder day to warm you up," said he. "I've got conversation with the other gent just now."

Muldoon glowered.

"You was a better man than me when you played straight, kid," said he. "Everybody seen it. I admit it myself. But now that you've turned crooked, you've turned yaller. I'd eat you up myself, except that here's a surer hand!"

He gestured, and Lefty Fargo came forward.

Fargo wore no slicker. He was dressed in a light coat, and his shirt was open at the throat. For Lefty Fargo, like a whale, was lined with fat against the temperature of cold seas. And he was fairly rounded and plumped out with what was beneath his skin. He had pale-red hair, and hazel eyes with a touch of red in them also. He now let his horse drift forward.

"It's The Doctor, after all!" exclaimed he. "Well, well, it's The Doctor himself!"

"It's the finish for you," said The Lamb with equal geniality. "You've ate your last steak and topped off your last coffee, old son."

"Fine!" said the gunman, and he laughed in an absurdly high, shrilling voice. It was like the shrill bark of a bull terrier. "When do we start?" asked he.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CONTEST.

THE famous Lefty Fargo always had a parboiled look, as though his skin was as delicate as a baby's, and as though the sun recently had peeled off the epidermis. It was painful to think of what that nose must feel when a finger touched it, or a towel, say. Even his pale eyebrows appeared to be sun-burned and painful. But his eyes were always cheerfully bright, and his smile was continually gay. The Lamb looked upon him with a hungry grimness; but Lefty Fargo's amiable nature was not at all perturbed by this, his smile continued, and his eyes remained as bright as ever.

"We start now," said The Lamb.

"How d'you want to begin?" asked Fargo.

"Partner," said The Lamb aimably, "it don't make no particular difference. I'm ready for you on hoss or foot, and with knife, or gun, or plain bare hands, Lefty."

The fat man smiled and nodded. In fact, he could not help laughing in great pleasure, and his shrill laughter rang and pulsed in the air. It ceased to have a human meaning, and began to stab the mind like the cry of an animal.

"I remember the last time that we met up, son," said he. "I said then that we'd meet ag'in. But I thought it'd be even lower down than this!"

"We met the last time. You stretched me out," said The Lamb thoughtfully. "But them days I was in school. You was my last teacher, old-timer."

"Was that a diploma that I gave you?" asked the fat man.

"I dunno," said The Lamb. "But since then, I've never been scratched by knife or gun, Lefty. And I've never been downed by hand or fist!"

"For a gent that stirs around, that says a considerable lot," admitted Lefty Fargo. "But things bein' so long dis-

tant. I sort of forget what I was teachin' when I was your professor."

"I'll tell you," said The Lamb. "The thing that you was teachin' to me that day was accuracy. I'd been workin' to burn up the world with my speed. I'd been flashin' my gun so dog-gone fast that it pretty near blinded even me. I used to get it out with such a hop that I didn't know where it was gunna go myself. Maybe you disremember that I got two shots, before you planted me. But your third was better than my one-two."

"Sometimes it turns out that way," said Lefty. "I take a likin' to you, kid. I took it to you that first time that we met. I was sorry, then, that we had to have words."

"Matter of fact," said The Lamb. "it's a dog-gone bad failin' of mine that I get pretty excited when any gent pulls five aces out of one pack. I dunno how it is, but it always makes me see red. I ain't changed, either!"

They smiled at each other with a grim understanding.

"We're gunna have a good chance to-day," said Fargo. "to find out if you really graduated. We're gunna find out how fast and straight you are!"

"We are," answered the boy. "I'm gunna write the answer on you, Lefty. Lord help your big heart; it's gunna stop thumpin' before night!"

Lefty frowned.

"I been interested in you, sort of," said he, with gravity and disapproval. "But the facts is, that I'm turnin' out disappointed before ever you pull a gun out of leather. You talk too much before the job starts. And you blow off a lot of hot air. I'm sorry, kid. But I gotta salt you down. We'll start right now."

"Oh, man," said Muldoon, "I hope that you blow the inside out of the double-crossin', yaller hound!"

"His whole insides is what I mean to get," said Lefty Fargo, and he laughed

again, that horribly high, shrill laughter. "What suits you, kid?" he demanded.

"I've left the naming to you," said The Lamb. "I've got a rifle, a Colt, and a knife. Or—bare hands. You hear me? Bare hands, Lefty!"

"I'm an old-fashioned worker," said Lefty. "A six-shooter always has been good enough for the range, and I dunno that it'll be out of place here."

"Lefty," answered The Lamb, "nothin' could please me more. It was with a Colt that you give me my last lesson."

"A Smith & Wesson," answered Lefty Fargo. "And that's what I pack to-day."

"The same one, I hope."

"The same one. It'll wear two notches for one man, it looks like."

"How d'you want the party served up?"

"Supposin'," said Fargo, "that we ride these hosses off fifty steps and at a given word we whirl 'em around and go for each other, with the guns talkin' on the way? How would that do?"

The Lamb blinked.

"Shootin' off the back of a hoss with a Colt," said he, "is pretty dog-gone inaccurate, Lefty, and you know it. I dunno that I want to spoil the black hoss, here!"

Fargo's lips curled in high disdain.

"If that don't suit you," said he, "you name the way."

"Anything *suits* me!" responded The Lamb. "You, Muldoon! You stand off and holler when we're to stop the hosses. Montague, suppose you holler when we're to begin?"

He jerked the stallion about; the big fellow spun as on a spring; and Lefty Fargo, who had been counting upon the superior agility of his own mustang, bit his lip. Then he turned in order.

They jogged their horses until the shout of Muldoon stopped them. To one side, Monty Montague sat his horse

in a lump; the wind parted his mist of beard. His old eyes flamed with a wild fire.

And The Lamb looked to him, as he stripped off the mittens from his hands. With the pressure of his knees and with a murmured word, he brought the stallion to a high tension beneath him, ready to whirl in a flash.

Then looking, instinctively before him, The Lamb saw a steer on the rim of the high ground, bunch-backed from the cold, head hanging. It had given up the attempt to paw through the encrustation of snow and now it stood waiting for death to weaken its knees. The Lamb understood, and he set his teeth hard. If death came to him, he prayed that it would come suddenly.

Like the howl of a wolf, old Monty Montague yelled:

"Shoot, you cowboys!"

The stallion whirled like a dodging cat; and, with guns ready, the big horse controlled only by his knees and the sway of his body, The Lamb found himself brought into line with his target at exactly the same instant that Lefty Fargo turned about to fire. At the speaking of their guns, the hat leaped from the head of The Lamb; he knew that his own first fire was wide; and then the horses lunged forward. Their galloping, as he had expected, made accurate shooting impossible. Two hornet sounds buzzed at his ear; and those quick deaths went by, while he noted with a mute admiration that Lefty Fargo was shooting for the head. For himself, the body would do!

But when he sent in his fourth shot, as the horses neared, the mustang of Lefty heaved itself into the air with striking forehoofs. He saw Lefty himself pitched far back in the saddle, with a yell of fear and surprise; while his own gun was poised, ready to drive the fatal ball home.

But the breadth of that helpless breast disarmed him. He dropped the long

barrel of his gun across the head of Lefty, instead, and shot by.

Looking back, he saw Lefty sluice like water from the saddle, then strike the ground, and tumble over and over upon it. He was back and dismounted beside him, instantly. It seemed to him that this whole affair was very largely a joke; a horrible jest. There was not high seriousness that should be about a struggle in which men fight for their lives. They had fired and missed, two experts as they were; and then one of them had been beaten out of the saddle by a bludgeon stroke!

But the fat man looked a serious enough spectacle. His face was patched with white and purple. His teeth were fixed in his lower lip so deep that the blood flowed in a steady stream, and his eyes glared fixedly up to the clouds of the sky.

Old Monty Montague rode up and looked down at the fallen man without dismounting.

"That's a fractured skull," he said, "and maybe the end of Lefty. Go back to Loring," he added to Muldoon, "and tell him that this is what will happen to all his hired gunmen, before the finish. This is the biggest scalp that we've took, and it's the beginning of the finish!"

Muldoon, on his knees beside the prostrate form, returned no answer to the old man, but he glowered sullenly up at The Lamb.

"You, and Lefty, and me," said he, "could've gone through 'em like a hot knife through butter. And there you are on the far side of the fence! Go back to your own kind, then, and Heaven forgive you!"

Loring and two more were coming down to the succor of their fallen champion. Therefore, The Lamb swung into the saddle on the black once more, and with old Montague, he returned up the steep slope to the waiting party on the bank. Then, looking to the side, he saw

Louise Patten on her pony, on the crest of a small hill from which she could command an excellent view of the creek bed. She had seen the whole battle, and suddenly The Lamb turned cold with shame.

The proceeding seemed most unheroic. He had gone out like a hired murderer, and tried to take life at the bidding of his employer. He looked deep into his own soul, at that moment, and what he saw made his heart fail.

He was indifferent to the praise which he met all around him. There was Milligan, looking more like a fox than ever, as he grinned and nodded.

"That maverick had to take the brand, after all," said Milligan to him.

And old Monty Montague stuck close to his side, and struck his champion on the shoulder with the flat of his hand.

"That's the last chance that they had, and they've used it up for nothin'!" said he. "Their boys were pretty down-hearted before. They'll be a sick lot of critters now! The time has come to shake the fruit off of the branch, kid, and you're the sun that's ripened it and got it ready to fall!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LAMB BURNS HIS BRIDGES.

THEY went straight back to the house and the procession grew on the way. It became a sort of flaunting triumph; there were a dozen men in that group; and then Louise Patten joined them, with His Lordship skipping over the snow crust, through which the horses broke.

She steered through the group and came up beside The Lamb smiling.

"That was a mighty fine thing!" said she to The Lamb. "I don't think any other man could have done just that!"

Said Big Jim, without enthusiasm: "I didn't know that you liked the knock down and drag out as much as this, Lou!"

"Shut up, Jimmy!" commanded his grandfather. He laughed, and his laughter was like his speaking voice, indescribably harsh and grating. "This here is the way to multiply a hero by two—giving him a chance to see a pretty girl smile!"

But she answered Jim Montague gravely: "It wasn't the beating of Fargo, Jim. But he could have shot that man and he didn't!"

"Shot him?" growled Big Jim. "His gun jammed on him, I suppose. So he beaned him with the barrel of it!"

"He changed his mind," said the girl firmly. "I saw!"

Big Jim was silent, looking with a curious interest from the girl to The Lamb, and back at her again, as though he were drawing a most potent deduction.

"Could you tell at that distance?" asked The Lamb.

"I thought I could," said she.

Old Monty Montague threw a clenched fist above his head. He laughed again.

"When you think how that flat face, that Loring, is gunna feel!" he broke out. "That's what's milk an' honey to me. Boys, it's the dog-gone end of this here trouble. Inside of a week we'll have 'em swept off the range. We'll have elbow room. They've lost their Lamb; they've lost their Lefty Fargo that cost 'em so much money. And old Loring has his back agin' the wall. He's got no more money. He's flat! He's flat! Jimmy, this is where we start our war council!"

But The Lamb looked aside in spite of this flattery and met the eyes of the girl; and she smiled back frankly at him. It seemed to him that he was enlarged and ennobled by that glance of hers. He looked at her no more, but inward on his own soul, and upon his own life, where he began to be aware of blemishes which never had troubled him before. All the scars, the brutal-

ity, a certain shiftiness at cards, a certain cruel cunning, he was aware of now; and he knew that others were aware also. What things the world could tell this girl about him, if it chose to gossip!

Blind to the ground before him, he let the stallion carry him on, and all the time he registered and named one by one the list of his ill doings. It seemed to him that his crimes were a sort of Tower of Babel, broad-based, and tapering to the top. For he could remember the beginning, when simply to be known as a very dangerous boy had been a delight to him, and when he had rejoiced in the whisper that ever trailed behind him when he walked among his fellows; he had grown up to a more narrow worship of violence. His creed had improved a little; it had lost some of its brutal scope; but growing smaller in field, it had been more burning, it had cut deeper.

These things would come to her ears about him—and she would never know that in this last adventure, at least, there had been a great purpose driving him on, something more than the mere blood lust. So it would be reported to her, and so it would appear—merely the passion for fight, which had drawn him away from his home and brought him into the midst of this feud!

Suddenly, they were at the house. He unsaddled the black horse in the stable, and found Big Jim waiting for him outside. The sky was a solid gray again. Thin snow was flying down, blown almost horizontal with the ground. It was far colder than the air through which it fell. It was so cold that it stung the skin like little flakes of fire where it touched. Big Jim walked beside him to the house, silent, head lowered a little in gloomy thought.

Only when he came to the rear door of the house he paused, and words came out of his bull throat.

"Look here, kid."

"Well?" said The Lamb.

"You got your start here, now. You've done pretty fine. The old man is for you. So am I. You gotta chance to have everything that you want. We'll fix you up. You can have what you want out of us. Land. Sows to stock it. Hard cash to start on the side. Which I don't mean by that, that you can have the whole world with a fence around it."

"What are you rulin' out?" asked The Lamb.

He looked up into the dark face and the contorted brows of the big fellow; and for almost the first time in his life, fear colder than the snow passed into the heart of The Lamb. Not that he doubted his ability to meet this man with weapons, but he felt in Jim Montague a dark sea of malevolence which would be capable of producing many marvels of sinister form.

"You can guess what I mean," said Big Jim. "She don't like me none too much. If I win the game with her, it'll only be because I keep the other aces out of the pack. You're an ace with her. I seen that to-day. So did you!"

He paused. And The Lamb, strive as he would, could not keep the color from mounting in his face. He wanted to turn his eyes away, but the grim regard of Montague held him.

"Mind you," said Jim Montague. "You've done fine so far. You've had the hoss out of me. You've got yourself talked about pretty famous. And that's all right. I don't mind that. Only, she's out, y'understand?"

He waited a little. And they stared at one another. It was to The Lamb as though he were facing drawn guns.

"Now," said Montague, "I'm gunna give you some time to think it over. It won't be worth while. Turn it back and forth and you'll see that I'm right!"

They went up the stairs together, in silence, through the big, dark house,

with the stale smell of cookery in the air. In the room of Monty they found the head of the clan in person, seated alone, filling his pipe and tamping down the tobacco extra hard.

He smiled at them. His toothless grin was like a horrible scar across his face; his eyes were absent, plotting mischief. He seemed to have the impish spirit of a child, united with the ancient experience of a long and evil life.

He finished his task as the two younger men sat down. He dusted the tobacco crumbs from his hands and lighted the pipe with care, saying in gasps, through the smoke:

"You two young fools. You look like poison at each other. You got woman on the brain. Like dogs that are dreamin' about a bone. Well, a dog can crack a bone and get at the marrow. There ain't any marrow in a woman. And there ain't anything to her. She's a face. And faces get old and wrinkled.

"But you take a young girl, there's a freshness about her, and a milky look to the eyes, and a sweet breath like a cow. And the young gents, they figger that she's a saint. I talk to you; I know. It ain't the woman that a man loves; it's his idea of her. Marriage is the noose with which a woman snags a man, and ties him, and puts her brand on him. And here are you two wantin' to cut each other's throat about that girl! Why, if there's gunna be trouble about her, I'll send her out of here. I'll give her a ticket to Chicago!"

"You leave your hands offn her," said Big Jim.

His grandfather glanced aside at him. There was a little pause, and then the old man said: "We want some ideas about how we're gunna handle this here job with Loring. You got any, Jim?"

And The Lamb wondered. His esteem for the formidable nature of Big Jim rose, for he saw that the grandfather respected this giant as a physical force, and also as a brain.

"You got the first speech," said Big Jim. "Lemme hear what you got to say. You're the oldest head here. Does he sit in on this deal?"

He turned a keen eye upon The Lamb, and the latter could see that jealousy was, for the moment, banished from the mind of Big Jim. He was simply a crafty fox, striving to work out a hard problem.

"What you think—after to-day?" asked the patriarch.

"If he's straight—sure; we need his head as bad as we need his guns."

"Go on," said Monty Montague. "He's a part of us, now. He's burned his bridges behind him, to-day!"

And he rubbed his hands together. Those hands were eternally blue with cold. Even the summer sun could not warm them.

After that, the old man continued:

"It seems to me like a pretty easy thing. Any night, now, we can start up the hills and put a net around the house. In a couple of days we'll have it!"

Big Jim grunted.

"Is that your idea?"

"It's simple," said the grandfather. "But that don't mean that it's bad."

"It *is* bad," said Big Jim.

"You young gents," said Monty Montague, "are always after something fancy."

"You're gettin' old," said Big Jim brutally. "I never seen how old, before this minute."

"You gotta prove that," said Monty angrily.

"Easy," answered the grandson.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE YOUNG MEN TALK.

ALL other things, young Al Lamb forgot in his intense interest in this struggle of two generations. They looked at each other, old and young, with the penetrating, cruel eyes of duel-

ists. Almost The Lamb forgot that he had at last a priceless opportunity to learn what he had come to this house for—information about the plans of the enemy.

"You think that your idea is worth something," sneered Big Jim. "I'm gunna show you what it's worth."

"You got a fancy idea," repeated the veteran. "You think that you'll play Napoleon. Lemme tell you—if you knew the facts, you'd find out that Napoleon was simple, too!"

"But not a fool, I guess."

"Am I a fool, young man?"

"You're old," said Big Jim. "You're too darn old!"

Then he went on: "Suppose we scatter out around the house of Loring, what'll happen the next day?"

"Why, most of the yaller-hearted dogs would come right over to us," said old Monty.

"Half of 'em would. But the other half would be enough for us," countered Jim.

"We'd range rifle bullets through them log walls, and through and through 'em!"

"Would you? They got them walls sand-bagged!" said Jim brusquely.

"Hai!" grunted the old man, and was gloomily silent, admitting this point against his plan.

"Behind them sandbags, they could lie snug and blow the life out of us if we tried to rush 'em."

"We'd have the Loring cows!"

"You can't get the Loring cows that way," said Big Jim. "You got an idea that there still ain't any law in this here country. There is!"

"A lot of law!" sneered Monty Montague. "Law is on the side of the gent with the most cows."

"Law ain't on the side of the gent that's got *all* the cows," said Big Jim. "Right now we got a lot of Loring stuff run into our herd. We got weaners, and all. It wouldn't take no expert to

see where a lot of those brands have been changed."

"I had experts run the irons on them calves," said the old man.

"A fine hand can put the irons one by one on a hundred calves, maybe," said Big Jim, "and no court of law could swear to what it had used to be. But a thousand is different; and two thousand is a lot more different. There's pretty sure to be a mistake, and one mistake would show up big."

The old man nodded.

"You got brains in that big ugly head of yours," said he.

"Leave the ugliness of my head alone, will you?"

"Aw, she wouldn't be stopped by that," said Monty Montague. "It ain't your homely phiz that would stop the girl, Jimmy."

"Leave her out, too!" boomed the young giant. "I'm talkin' business, now."

"Go ahead, then."

"We gotta be pretty smart. We gotta be foxes. You make a murder party out of this, and it's one thing. You make a cow raid out of it, and they'll have us in prison!"

Monty Montague grinned broadly and without much mirth.

"This here law—it prizes murder more'n cattle lifting?"

"Sure," said Big Jim. "It always has—when you take it on a big scale. I mean—you shoot one man and you get tried for murder. You take a gang and meet a gang—that's a cattle war—that's a battle. There ain't any murder about it—unless there's a lot of cow lifting alongside of it. Raid the house, and it's murder. Raid the range, and it's just another cattle war. The newspapers then gotta chance to talk a lot. Everybody is a hero that ain't dead. Everybody says that something has gotta be done to put down this here sort of business. And there you are. Nothin' is done at all!"

"You've been free and large, criticizin'," said Monty Montague. "Now lemme hear you step out and talk for yourself some. You can blame me, maybe, but that don't put you in heaven, nor halfway there, even!"

Big Jim knelt by the hearth. He took a stick, one end of which was burned, and began to make a sketch upon the floor. The paint fumed and boiled under the burning wood, and the stick point itself crumbled away, but Monty Montague made no protest. He leaned to the side in his chair and studied the map with a frown, and nursed the big bowl of his pipe in both his ancient hands.

"This here is the Loring house," said Big Jim. "Now, you look down here. This here is where the three hill ranges branch out. Is that right?"

"Sure. That's right."

"Where they meet makes two valleys."

"Of course! You don't have to tell me what that country is like. Loring has hogged the best part of the range, and no right to have it."

"A man has a right to what he can get—and keep!" said Big Jim, with the superiority of a more brutal attitude. "Look here. This is the Black Hills, nearest to you. There's the valley head between the end of 'em and the Capper Hills."

"I remember old Capper like yesterday," said the old man. "Him and me used to trout-fish, over in them same hills. He loved 'em. He swore that some day he'd strike gold rich in there. There was an old strike of porphyry that stuck it's head up above the rest of the rock, and old Capper, he used to say that——"

"What has that got to do with what I'm talkin' about?" demanded Big Jim.

The old man rambled on, nevertheless: "He used to swear that that streak of hills would make him rich. Well, he got rich there, well enough, if dyin'

and gettin' to the golden kingdom come is to get rich! Go on, Jimmy. You talk like you got some sense, to-day. Woman is all that's the matter with you. Get that girl pried out of your head, and you'd be fair-to-middlin' intelligent!"

Big Jim straightened up on his knee and looked with a dark forbearance upon his grandfather. Then he went on slowly.

"If you've finished your chatter, this is what comes next. Between the Capper Hills and the line of Mount Solomon, there's another valley head, ain't there?"

"There is, son."

"Where does the Loring range lie?" persisted Jim.

"Why, what he claims——"

"Darn what he claims! What has he got? Where does he run his cows?"

"Why, between the Capper Hills and the Black Hills on the one side, and Solomon Mountain on the other side."

"He won't run 'em much longer if I have my way," the boy assured him.

"Aye? That's good! I like to hear you talk that way, Jimmy. I like the whole way that you talk. I sort of like the attitude that you got about this here thing, son!" exclaimed old Montague with feeling.

The big fellow laughed fiercely and softly. "I know what you like! Fighting! You could live by it! Well, you're gunna have that, too! You're gunna have everything that you want, out of this here job! What've you been doin' all this time that you and Loring's been growlin' and snappin'?"

"Runnin' cattle off from each other, most of the time," said old Montague.

"What good was that?"

"No good. That's why I wanted to hit right from the heart of the business! Go after his house. And why not? No more trimmin's. But the meat nearest to the heart. That's what I want to do."

"I've showed where that was foolish.

Drop that right out of your head, if you got any sense."

"Well?" asked the old man patiently, submissively.

"Here's what we do. We wait for the crack of dawn. Then we ride down across the hills and we plant our boys straddlin' the throats of them two valleys. We plant 'em where there's easy hidin'. I take one half of the boys. And the kid, here—The Lamb—he takes the other half!"

His eyes kindled as he looked across at The Lamb. And the latter nodded and struck his hand upon his knee.

"I see it!" said he.

"Of course you do!" grunted Big Jim. "It's pretty clear now."

"Your between the house and the range," said old Monty slowly.

"That's it," broke in The Lamb. "And when the boys come driftin' in from the range, they're swallered one by one. And if there should have to be a shot or two fired, here and there, it wouldn't amount to nothin'. The wind would blow the noise away from the Loring house, mostly, and if it didn't, why, then, they would only think that one of the boys was comin' in and had took a crack at a coyote or a wolf, maybe!"

Big Jim sighed with content. "You see what I mean?" said he.

The dusk was gathering through the room, the sordid, swift evening of the winter day. It turned the corners black, and the air seemed stained with soot, through which the firelight struggled and made a yellow glow.

"I see what you mean," said old Monty. "And maybe you're right.

I've been at the head of things pretty near too long." He was silent, or muttering, for a moment. Then he jerked up his head: "If you was to work this right, Jimmy, I'd step down—I'd take a trip to Denver, or some place like that, maybe, and I'd let you have the running of things from this time forward!"

"If I'd had the running a long time ago," said Jim Montague, "it would've been a sight better for you, and me, and everybody else. You've dragged things out. You're old."

"Aye!" sighed the grandfather. "I'm old. There ain't any denyin' of that. I'm pretty old!"

The room fell into another thoughtful silence. For all of them were seeing those hills, white with the winter, and the battle that before long might choke the very throats of the two distant valleys.

"You ain't said much, kid," said Monty at last.

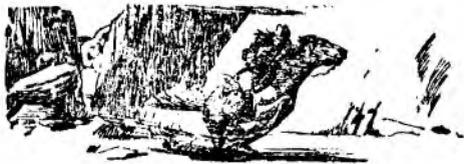
"He don't have to talk. He can do something much better than talk," said Jim.

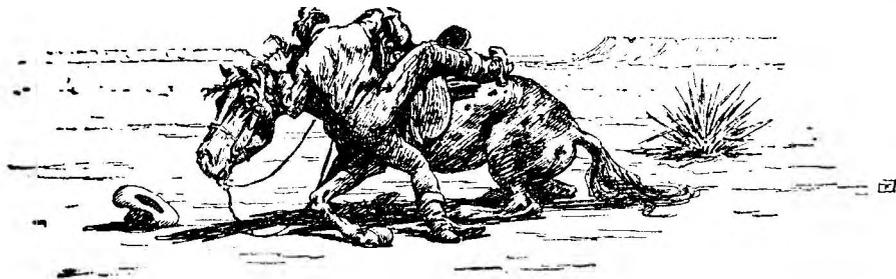
His voice rose into a sudden exultant booming.

"I'll tell you what. He can do better than talk. And if he won't be a fool, if he won't be a darn fool—if he'll work for me an' with me—I'll take in the whole range, here. I'll swaller it all. I'll make him rich. Him and me—we could clean up the whole range! We could swaller it!"

"Maybe you will," said Monty Montague. "I like to hear you young kids talk. Me, I've just broke the ground. Lemme see what you're gunna plant in it?"

To be continued in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.





The Gold Mine in the Sky

By Austin Hall

Author of "Riders Adrift," etc.



THE gold mine in the sky! There it was as clear as day! And altogether it was the most remarkable phenomenon that Bert Yelkins, mining engineer and expert on all matters of metallurgy, had ever witnessed. One minute he had been riding through the desolate sands of the great desert, half dead with heat and thirst, and the next he was looking into this mirage of lost hopes.

For that was what it was—a mirage.

Yes, but what a beautiful thing! The hazy atmosphere had opened and there in front of him was the picture of his dreams—a hillside, trees growing, and in between the great trunks the mouth of a mine shaft, with the dump in front and, down below, a rippling stream of crystal water. Bert Yelkins had seen many a mirage—they were common enough in the great wasteland—but none like this. It was so clear, and so minutely distinct.

A gold mine! And out of the sky.

Yelkins, practical man that he was, could not help thinking. His mind wandered in fancy; he could see himself a wandering Bedouin out on the plains of Araby, desert-swept and for-

lorn, looking up at such a sight. No wonder the poor Arab had believed in genii, spirits, and the beneficent providence of the great Allah. But, and that was the point, Bert Yelkins was a hard-headed engineer. He knew that he was looking at the truth, and that this miracle of the image was a transplantation brought about through the medium of converging heat levels and the laws of light. Somewhere within a hundred miles or so was this very mine shaft. He wondered where it could be.

And then his horse, the only relic of his four years' hardship, lifted his head, nickered, and began pawing the ground. And when his horse did that, Bert Yelkins generally took notice. Not that there was anything unusual in it for a horse; but because, with this particular animal, it had always been a medium of expression. Bert had purchased him three years before from an Indian who had claimed rightly that he was the smartest and surest stallion in the whole desert; adding also a strange tale of how he had been taken in the wilds, where he had roamed as a king of horses. And, whatever the extent of the Indian's veracity, Bert had found the creature to be the smartest animal he had ever known. He had

named him Pinto from his color, and taken him as a friend. Now, once more the animal tugged and pawed at the sand; nickering apparently at the mirage. Half mechanically, Bert Yelkins allowed him to go forward. And then he learned something more about this strange mirage.

Immediately after he left the big red stone from which it had first become visible, the mirage began to blur and shimmer. And, soon after, it was almost indistinct—a mere maze of objects dancing above the horizon. So, half-puzzled, he rode back to the big red rock, where, strangely enough, the thing became clear again. Bert Yelkins reined in his steed, and nodded his head.

"Focus," he announced. "Every mirage has one spot where it may be seen at its best advantage. And in this instance it seems to be this big red rock. Wonder how good a mine it is. I'll ask about it when I get to the next town."

However, Bert Yelkins, the engineer, could not help thinking. Four years he had spent in the wastelands; and during that time he had lost all the savings of his family. He had come into the desert certain that his knowledge of minerals and ledges would lead him to a fortune; and he had failed miserably. The only possession that he could claim was his horse Pinto, a rare animal, to be sure, but still only a horse. For three days now he had been riding, slowly, so as to save his mount; but always with a note of wonder at the creature's endurance. The mirage had started him thinking.

It was like a mockery—a dream.

After all these years given to the quest of gold, he was being laughed at by Fate. But, after all, life was like that.

But was it? Bert Yelkins did not know; he was too young to give up, and too red-blooded to be resentful.

Just now he was thinking of the town that lay over the horizon, where he hoped to obtain food and water before continuing his journey. Already, the mirage which he had seen had passed into a fleeting fancy of the grim, hot desert.

For two hours he rode, and then he trotted his horse into the burning little hamlet of Red Dog. The sun was almost to the meridian; and heat haze was shutting off all but the nearest part of the plain. Three men, relics of the desert, were sitting on the rickety veranda of the lone resort, and over on the other side of the street two others, of still rustier appearance, watched him guiding his mount toward the water trough. Next instant, the horse Pinto was shoving his head into the liquid up to his eyes, while Bert Yelkins hooked his leg over the saddle horn and waited.

It was time to roll a smoke and take in the lay of the town. One of the men on the porch yawned; a second stretched lazily; and a third pulled out a pipe; at the same moment the pinto, belly full, began splashing the water about in the trough. Whereupon, Bert Yelkins, mindful of the waste, reined him about, and headed for the hitching rail.

And then another thing happened in the train of the day's accidents. The man with the pipe looked at the horse and uttered a grunt; he got to his feet. Bert Yelkins was watching him, and he could not understand his sudden interest. The man was pointing with his finger.

"Pinto!" he was saying. "By heck! Heart-shaped on the right shoulder. Stranger, where did yuh get that thar horse?"

The question had come direct and suddenly, but Bert Yelkins had lived too long on the great desert to return a like answer. He knew that he had acquired the animal honestly, through

legal purchase, and that the whole transaction was his own personal business. And besides, he was thirsty and almighty hungry. Just now he was craving lemons, a good old dust cutter, and a ham sandwich; he had been thinking about them for hours.

"Where did I get him?" he answered, as he dismounted. "Well, my friend, if you want to know, I bought him. Look him over if you wish. You'll find he's quite an animal. When I get a bite to eat and something to drink I'll be out to talk to you."

Bert Yelkins never thought of the reason for the man's question. That was the strange part of it. What he was after, just then, was that sandwich and a lemonade, both honest-to-gosh and the real thing. In another minute he was getting both. He had seated himself at a little table and was looking into the eyes of an old prospector, though where the man had come from he could not have told. The first he knew was a streak of blue and a hand on the table as the old fellow sat down.

"Been prospecting, eh?" Bert heard him say. "Out thar in the desert. Hey? And ain't found nothin', have yuh?"

Which, of course, was the truth. Bert Yelkins was busy eating and drinking; at that very instant his mouth was full of lemonade, but as he swallowed it, he took in the picture—the little room, the tiny bar, and the rickety shade porch outside, while through the open window he could see the three men examining the horse. The two heavy fellows on the other side of the street had come across. He could hear them talking. That completed the picture—that and the burnt-out bartender over by the wall, together with this little man of unknown generations. Once more, the old man spoke; the words trailing off into an undertone.

"Prospecting. Ain't found nothing. Nothin'——"

And then Bert Yelkins remembered the mirage. He was feeling better; the lemonade had cooled him off, and the sandwich had refreshed him, but now the vision in the sky had set him to thinking. Perhaps this old man would know of a mine like that. Anyway it would be interesting to ask.

"No, dad," he said at last. "I didn't find a thing. Just as you say. Fact is, I went broke. And about all I got was dreams, false leads, and idle hopes. Looks like the Lord didn't mean me for a prospector. So I'm on my way out right now. And I'm a-going to keep on going. If it was finding gold mines in the sky, I might succeed; a mirage, you understand, up in the sky; above the horizon, like a picture. A beautiful mirage!"

He was half rambling, half serious, because, after all, he was expecting nothing to come out of it; therefore, he was doubly surprised to see the old man straighten up. Then he noticed the peculiar indefiniteness of the man's features—age uncertain, the cold-steel eyes, the set lips, and the shrewd flickering of the eyelids. But it was the old fellow's words which surprised him most. He heard him speaking.

"Holy mackerel! Yuh've seen it? Yes, I know. The mirage! Out thar by the big red rock! And so yuh've looked at the gold mine in the sky? Tell me!"

And with that to whet his curiosity, Bert Yelkins told what little he knew; altogether, he was scenting some sort of a romance—some weird tale of a long-lost mine. And before he left the desert he was willing to listen to one more story. The men outside were still examining the horse; the bartender was mixing another lemonade; Bert bought it, also a fresh sandwich. Then he sat down to listen.

"So yuh've seen the gold mine in the sky, eh?" asked the old-timer. "Well, then yuh're lucky. Because, my boy,

yuh've looked at the greatest mine that the world has ever known; but which only one man has ever touched; and that man has been dead for forty years. Yessir! No mistake and no exaggerating. Listen!"

And then he went on with the story:

"It was forty long years ago, when I was a kid, that Johnnie Donello found the Gold Mine in the Sky, though it wasn't called that then, of course! Yuh understand, all this country was booming in those days, and they were lots of strikes; only Johnnie's was the greatest of them all. Imagine, if you will, a man coming intuh town with four mules breaking their backs under a load of gold. Four of them! And each mule packing three hundred pounds! Gold at sixteen dollars an ounce! One little Italian with a closed mouth and an appetite for whisky, and all that gold! But where he got it, he would not say, except to wave his hands to the mountains. I remember the day, how men all went crazy, and how Johnnie sent the stuff away to the city, and how immediately afterwards he proceeded to get drunk, so drunk that he never again got sober! That's what I saw, and that's what I know. And I remember also how everybody tried to drag from him the secret of the mine's location. But not a thing could they get, except that the mine was on a hillside, between two trees, with a stream running directly below. But not one more word could they learn. I was a kid, as I say and I was hanging around watching everything. I saw Johnnie drunk each day, and he kept getting drunker. Of course, I didn't know the reason, but I learned, afterwards, that they were keeping him that way in the hope that they could make him talk. Only, they overdid themselves; and—well, they killed him. That's all. One day Johnnie Donello died. And when he died, the secret of the mine's location went with him.

"Just the same, everybody started out to look for it, and these old mountains were searched as never before. For months and for years, men hunted, without any one ever finding a trace or indication of the famous ledge. And that's the way it stood for twenty long years. until, one day, a young feller came in and said as how he had seen a mirage out by the big red rock, and how that mirage was none other than Johnnie Donello's lost mine. Of course, he was laughed at, at first; but when another man came in a few months later and reported that he had seen the same thing, we began tuh take notice. And, sure enough, we found that two or three times a year, and sometimes only once in two or three years, it could be seen. And it became one of the wonders of this here desert.

"It's only a mirage, of course; but we all know just exactly what those things are—how a place is picked up out of the mountains or along the shore of a stream and carried out into the desert. Lord knows how! Only it's so. They's lots of mirages; but they's only one place where yuh kin see Johnnie Donello's mine. It's there; and and because it's in a mirage, they got tuh calling it the gold mine in the sky. Everybody's hunted fer it; and I've spent all my life hoping. And they's only one clew—only one thing that they've——"

It was a strange story; but just at that instant Yelkins' attention was distracted by one of the men coming through the door; the others were still standing by the horse, talking. The old man's words had ceased abruptly; Bert thought he detected a glance—a subtle warning, from the newcomer. The old man had started up from his chair.

"Yuh want tuh sell that horse?" the newcomer said to Bert abruptly. "I'll give yuh two hundred dollars. Spot cash. Here she is."

But Bert was not exactly interested; he had seen the bartender give a meaning look to his companion. Yelkins was wondering why the old fellow had left the table. The bartender had taken the prospector by the shoulder and was leading him into another room. An argument was going on but what they were saying, he could not make out. However, he heard the man beside him.

"Two hundred dollars," he was repeating. "Cash. Here she is."

And with a deft gesture, the money was shoved out. But Yelkins backed away. He had no intention of selling. Not at any price. His horse Pinto was too much of a pal.

"All right," persisted the man. "I'll make it three hundred. How's that? Here she is."

From another room came a softer voice—that of the old man:

"Yeh," he was saying. "But it ain't fair. And I'm tellin' yuh I won't stand fer it. If it belongs tuh anybody, it belongs tuh him. He is——"

And then a door slammed, and there was no more sound. In another moment, the bartender returned and began pouring drinks. By that time, the horsebuyer had raised his ante again.

"Four," he said persuasively. "I'll make it four hundred dollars."

Altogether, Bert Yelkins did not know what it was about. During the past two hours several little things had happened—none of which he could understand—and he had the feeling, somehow, that he was being made a victim. But how? Certainly, he did not intend to sell his horse. His words were to that effect.

"Nope," he said. "Not for four hundred, not for six hundred. Nor for four thousand. In other words, my horse is not for sale. He's—well, he's a pet. That's why I won't sell him. I've lived with that stallion for three years. Got him from an Indian who caught him in the desert. But even if

he was wild once, he's not wild now. He loves me like a dog. I could sleep between his legs. He'll follow me around. Altogether, he isn't the kind of a horse that a man will sell. Sorry, my friend."

That seemed to settle it; although Bert noticed the look of disappointment in the man's face.

"Yeh," the fellow grunted. "Well, I'm sure sorry. I certainly like a pinto—in fact, any pinto; although that horse is the prettiest one I have ever seen. Anyway, I was a fool tuh offer yuh four hundred. Glad yuh refused it. How about a little drink?"

But Yelkins was a quick thinker; something was warning him; over behind the bar the lazy bartender suddenly displayed a renewed interest in life. He had picked up a bottle and was wiping it with a towel. As Bert approached, he shoved it over, with three glasses.

"My treat," he announced. "This is a little real stuff that I had ditched out in the back yard."

Why was this bartender so solicitous about treating? Bert Yelkins knew full well that he had a reason; furthermore, he remembered the words he had heard the old man speaking from the other room. "It ain't fair, and I'm telling yuh, I won't stand fer it."

He wouldn't stand for what?

Bert Yelkins wondered. To save his life, he could not understand why any one should attempt to rob him. All he had was his horse, a canteen, and a few dollars. Just the same, something warned him to turn around; as he did so, he caught sight of the men in the street. One of the villains who had crossed from the other side had caught his horse by the bridle and was leading him away. And that was enough. In two seconds, Yelkins was on the steps, his gun swinging.

"No, yuh don't," he cried. "What do you mean? A horse thief! Say?"

Evidently, the big man realized the penalty implied; he dropped the leading strap as though it had suddenly become red-hot. And just as suddenly, Bert Yelkins realized that he had had enough of the town of Red Dog. Next instant he was in the saddle again, riding away. Soon the town was a mere dot in the distance.

But out in the desert he had time to think. Why, just why, had they been so anxious to purchase his horse? In the end, he gave it up and began to think of home and the way out of the wastelands. Ahead of him lay the gray horizon, losing itself in a dim outline of far-off peaks. There was not a drop of water ahead of him, but that meant little when a man was astride of a desert horse of the caliber of the big pinto.

"Yes," said Bert, musingly. "They wanted my horse. Most likely, it was because he was one of these desert animals. A horse like Pinto ain't born very often. Hello! Looks like I've got company."

Sure enough, far behind him, he could see two riders coming along at an easy lop. And then, suddenly, he noticed another horseman. Three! All following. Only the first two were far in lead of the third.

"Huh!" exclaimed Bert. "Even if they did have evil intent, they couldn't catch me in a thousand years. Not while I'm on old Pinto! But just the same, I'd like to know their idea. In fact, I'd hanker to find out a lot of things."

And that led to thinking again, and naturally to the story of the lost Donello mine. Altogether, Bert wondered at the tale, knowing that it was true, and that, somewhere, this great treasure-trove was waiting for the finder to take. But still it was funny that, during all these many years, it had never been uncovered. Surely, it was a queer fate. A mine like that! And in a

mirage. If he could only have found it!"

But now there would be no chance.

The main thing was to get out of the desert. Halfway across the plain, he swerved his course toward the mountains along his left. And as he did so, the riders behind him suddenly disappeared. No doubt, they were making for the other pass. After that, he had the desert to himself. The afternoon drifted along and the sun approached the western rim; the mountains were almost in front of him. And then——

Bert Yelkins could never have told just what took place; one minute he had been riding along with not a soul in sight, and the next something like the sky falling had struck him on the head. When he regained consciousness, he was lying on his back blinking up at the stars of the desert. And even then, it was a long time before he could piece things together. All he knew was that there was a long gash across the scalp of his head, and that he was terribly thirsty. Some one must have struck him from ambush, and then he had fallen and lain there. The stars were twinkling dimly, and even as he watched, they began to fade; a light ran along the east. Evidently, it was almost daylight. As soon as it was light, he would try to find tracks and puzzle the thing out. In the meantime, he wanted a drink.

A drink!

That made him think again. Where was his canteen? Water? Yes, and he was alone. Some one had shot him, and now—— But why the shooting? The answer came like a flash. Whoever had shot him had wanted his horse.

Why?

Altogether, this desire for his horse was the strangest obsession that he had ever heard of. What was the special value of his horse, Pinto? And now that they had got the horse, where was his canteen? Surely, they would not

take that. He began stirring around, groping and feeling in the early light; and then, just when he was beginning to despair, he found it. No doubt, he had dropped it when he tumbled from the saddle. He remembered that he had it strapped around his shoulders, and that he had taken a drink just before he fell.

And then he stooped to pick it up.

Empty! The cork had been removed and there were but a few drops of water remaining. For a second his heart stood still; he was almost ready to quit.

"Lord!" he exclaimed. "What shall I do? Of all the luck! If there ever was a man plagued by adversity, it's me. I've—I've been a failure ever since I came to the desert. A dead failure. And I a mining engineer! I always had the feeling that the god of good fortune was holding back the big things on me, so as to present them all in a lump. But I was wrong. It was the god of misfortune. Yes. That's it. And now, after all my efforts, I've got to die out here like a dried-out toad."

But Bert was not the kind to die easily. Once he realized what he was really up against, he began immediately to strengthen his powers of resistance. The swallow of water in the canteen he treasured carefully, only wetting his lips. Then he looked toward the eastern sky. In ten minutes another day had blossomed; and very soon after, he discovered just how he had been ambushed. Evidently his assailants, knowing the country, had made a short cut, and had waited for him in a dry *baranca*. He found the place where they had hidden their horses; and when he went back he discovered where they had caught the pinto. The big horse had apparently endeavored to stay with his master—the tracks went round and round—but in the end he had been caught.

What were they going to do with him?

Then the sun came up—a rim of burning light at first; then a half ball, and finally a furnace of scorching flame. And almost immediately Bert Yelkins knew what he was up against. There are four kinds of days in the desert—hot, hotter, hottest, and superlative; and usually the first rays of the morning sun are the indicators of the day's coming madness. And in this instance, there was no mistaking the blazing heat that was soon to be. He was hoping to make the mountains; even though there was not a chance in a thousand. But he could not falter.

No, he had to go on.

And at first, it was not so hard, mainly because he was a man of splendid vigor, also one of an undying will. Likewise, he knew the rules of the deadly desert. His mind was the master, and he proposed to keep it so. For three hours he continued on his way, trudging along, teeth set, and every fiber of his being tuned to getting across. But after all, he was only human. His body was the same flesh as any other; and it had to answer to exactly the same laws. Each step and each movement required so much energy; and every instant the moisture was oozing from his pores. The body of a man is mostly water, and when that gets down to a certain degree, the end is not far off. One hour, two hours, three—and then he began to feel himself going under. First, his tongue began to thicken; then, spots ran in front of his eyes; he felt cold and hot by turns, and, last of all, he began seeing things. Yes, visions—cool, clear water—lily ponds—rushing streams—the mirages of fancy—the hallucinations of a fevered brain!

But still he did not give up. As long as there was life enough in him to move one finger, Bert Yelkins was the man to move it. The world became

black, and he went down to his hands and knees, fumbling and stumbling along until it seemed that he had really come to the end. And then——

He felt something! Something was touching his hand—something covered with coarse hair, and shaped like a piece of bone. Yes, it was right in front of him. And, simultaneously, he heard a noise—a nicker.

A horse!

And then hope opened the eyes of Bert Yelkins. It was the supreme moment—the reserve that Heaven gives a man for the last crisis—the hysterical frenzy that makes a man strong beyond his real self. Bert Yelkins stood up. He grasped the horse's leg, and as he did so a moist nostril was thrust against his face.

Pinto!

Was there ever such a horse? Up and up, he worked until he had found a stirrup. And then—once more Bert Yelkins called upon his will power. He remembered that his horse was trained. Glory be! Pinto would kneel. All he had to do was to tap him on the nose, and then he could climb into the saddle. One movement, and it was done. After that, things began to blur again. Bert recalled nothing but the motion, a swaying movement, and a vague fear that he could not hold his seat. Altogether, his riding was mechanical, merely intuitive.

That was all. And then, after what seemed an age, he opened his eyes again.

Something had happened; the burning sensation in his throat was gone; he was feeling fresh and revived; also he was seeing objects clearly—first, an old man; secondly, a horse—two of them in fact—and a stream of rippling water. A man was washing his forehead, and murmuring soothingly:

"There, there, my boy. Yuh'll be all right pretty soon. Lie still and take it easy. Yes, sir, he's a fine lad! And

we've found the Gold Mine in the Sky! Yessir. And such a horse! A horse like that is worth his weight in gold. Sure is."

It was all like a dream. Bert dropped off again: this time into a peaceful slumber. When he awoke, it was evening, and he was looking up in full consciousness at the same little prospector whom he had met at the town of Red Dog. The old man was smiling.

"Well, bubbie," he was saying, "yuh come out of it, didn't yuh? But it was sure tough, and yuh sure had a run fer yuhr money. But—and that's the fun of life—all good things come hard. Hey? But yuh've sure got it now. Take a look. That's it. Sit up! Notice these here trees? And that creek? And that hole in the hillside? Mebbe yuh kin tell me now where yuh're at? Hey? No? Well, then I'll tell yuh. Yuh're right where every man has wanted tuh be since the days of old Johnnie Donello. Yuh're at the Gold Mine in the Sky. And it's all yuhrs—every bit—the richest strike that any man ever knew. When yuh get up, I'll show yuh something."

The Gold Mine in the Sky!

Bert Yelkins could not understand, and it was not until an hour later that he could convince himself that he was not dreaming. He had heard the old man's story.

"Yes, sir," the old-timer had said. "Yuh see, those men had a very good reason for doing yuh out of yuhr horse. And yuh will remember that when I told yuh about Johnnie Donello's mine, I stopped in the middle of the story. Yuh will recall that I was saying as how there was one clew. Hey? Well, that clew was a pinto horse with a heart-shaped mark on the right flank. A horse in a mirage! But it was so. Six times during two years that horse, a splendid stallion, has been seen standing by the stream in the mirage. And

almost every man in these here parts had been on the lookout for him.

"Why?"

"Simply to get him and trail him to water. Those horses will go there every time. And, of course, he would lead them to the mine. But they never saw that horse in the flesh until the day yuh rode into Red Dog. And naturally, they would not tell yuh, because they wanted the mine for themselves. But yuh wouldn't sell. And I didn't have time to warn yuh, because they held me back. And then yuh rode away. But I knew those big men across the street—desperadoes both—and when they rode out after yuh, I set out behind them. Then yuh hit for the west pass, and they took to the hidden wash-out, to head yuh off. But I was too far behind to warn yuh.

"However, I heard them shoot, and saw yuh fall from yuhr horse. And I never dreamed but what they had killed yuh. So, instead of going to yuh, I followed them as they led the stallion. And then—well, I hate tuh talk about it, but I caught up with them and gave them their punishment for shooting

yuh. A little old-fashioned gun play. Yeh! And yuhr stallion got loose again, and headed straight back for yuh, like a dog. Yessir! He's sure a wonderful creature. And then I knew yuh wasn't dead at all. I saw yuh climbing into the saddle, and I knew that the big pinto was heading for water.

"A desert horse will do it every time, as I say.

"And I followed—straight to a high cliff and up a split pocket that would have fooled anybody in the world. Almost like a door in a wall; turning, and leading into this locked-in valley, with the water coming out of the rocks and going under them again. The shaft was here—and the trees! It was The Gold Mine in the Sky! Yessir. And she's all yuh's, my boy, all yuh's."

However, Bert Yelkins could not see it. The mine was all that it was said to be, but he was not the man to take credit of discovery. He turned to the little old prospector.

"Not all mine, dad," he said softly. "You had as much to do with it as I did. I'm taking half. The other share is yours. Hey?"

AN ARMY POST RETURNS TO ITS INDIAN OWNERS

FOR more than sixty-six years Fort Wingate, New Mexico, has been held by the United States army. This post is situated sixteen miles from Gallup, New Mexico, near the Pueblo village of Zuñi. It has, however, seen several migrations. It was originally established in 1862 on the Rio de Galto, twenty-one miles southwest of Mount Taylor, and in 1868 it was moved to the site of Fort Lyon at the headwaters of the Rio Puerco of the West.

In 1911 the army abandoned the post for all practical purposes, at which time the reservation was made a part of the Zuñi National Forest. It remained, nevertheless, subject to the jurisdiction of the war department. The army took advantage of its privilege in 1914 when the fort was occupied as a temporary refugee camp for the Mexicans who fled north during the border troubles.

With the exception of the refugee camp in 1914, no military activity has since taken place there. Of recent years, the department of the interior has used it for an Indian school for Navajo children. But now the United States army has definitely given back the military reservation to the Indians. It will be administered in the future by the department of the interior, acting as guardian for the Navajos, who occupy it.



Crooked Crossed

By Harley P. Lathrop

Author of "Too Big for a Stocking," etc.



BECAUSE, somewhere in France, Laredo had achieved a fine technique in the art of indirect machine-gun fire, and because later on he chose to offer this skill for sale, he eventually found himself a lieutenant in the Mexican army. Laredo's pay was high, for men of his specialty and caliber were extremely scarce in that neck of the woods. But, sad to relate, this pay came mostly in the form of vouchers. These, he soon learned, were worth little more than the paper on which they were printed. Not that this fact bothered Laredo to any marked extent. For, if the truth be told, it was an unsatisfied longing for more adventure rather than any great hope of pecuniary gain that had caused his enlistment in the first place.

When Laredo's term of service expired, he possessed quite a collection of pay slips. Meantime, the side on which he served had been slowly establishing itself in power and the indications were that in course of time his vouchers

would be redeemable at face value. At least he happened to have a brother officer who stood willing to gamble on the chance.

"Look thou, Laredo," this officer said, "my father once had vast holdings along the border. But now they are no more. *Confiscado*, you comprehend? All we have left is a herd of cows, two hundred odd. These are gathered close by San Felipe, which lies against the Rio Grande. So listen amigo mio. This herd I will trade you for your pay vouchers, and take a chance on their redemption. Me, I intend to remain an officer and, hence, will have no time for cows. Likewise will the bargain work to your advantage. For you can cross the cattle into your own country and perhaps in time become a *mucha grande caballero*. Who knows?"

Laredo wasted no time in consideration. Before becoming a soldier he had spent the largest part of his life working for one cattle outfit after another. So he knew the game, knew it well enough to realize that a penniless

puncher stood less than one chance in a hundred of ever achieving a herd of his own without substantial backing or some great stroke of luck. Laredo had no backing, but now, unbelievable as it seemed, luck apparently had banged him square in the eye.

"You're on," he said hastily, lest the other should change his mind.

Thus it came about that one spring evening less than a month later Laredo came riding into San Felipe.

If a man can feel very well pleased with himself and at the same time deeply perplexed, that describes Laredo's state exactly. What he had seen of the cattle showed them to be all his officer friend had represented, and transfer of the brand had been effected with no difficulty. So far, so good. Still, Laredo was prey to a feeling of indecision.

For one thing, just that afternoon he had found that an embargo had recently been placed against any live stock leaving Mexico. That this was a wise move on the part of those in authority he did not question, for it would serve to stop the steady drain of cattle out of an already depleted country. However, it was not this that gave rise to his perplexity. Rather, it was a sudden switch in his desires.

Long before his discharge he had felt a strong desire to return north of the Rio Grande. In other words, Laredo at this moment was just plain homesick.

"Once I'm out of this country, they'll have to hog tie and carry me in order to ever get me back," he assured himself time and time again.

That, however, was before he found himself a full-fledged cowman in his own right. Now, like any other cattle owner, his first thought was for the welfare of his live stock, and the profit they might be expected to yield at a modicum of expense. To himself, Laredo admitted that so far as cattle

country went, he was in the best on earth right here.

On his way into town he had passed a ranch, adjacent to the range over which his own cattle roamed, that fulfilled his every idea of what a ranch should be. The few cattle he saw about had made no impression on the grass. There was a comfortable adobe ranch house, sitting amid a grove of century-old trees. The corrals were substantial and convenient, water was plentiful, and there was plenty of barn room. Deeply carved in the stone arch which spanned the drive, was the name "Rancho Elenora." Compared with the semiarid, mesquite-infested territory lying north of the river, the Rancho Elenora was a veritable paradise.

"I'd be tempted to stay right here, providin' I could lease a similar outfit," Laredo reflected, letting an envious eye roam over the setting. "Yes, sir, I would sure camp down, for I could make some money there."

Laredo had never been in San Felipe before. The town was built around a plaza and the buildings were of adobe. Once it had been typical of that land of fiestas, fandangos, and cockfights, where purple nightfall heralds the cessation of all business and only the strum of the guitar and the low crooning of some smitten swain singing love songs breaks the solemn semitropic stillness. Once, both business houses and residences, following immemorial custom, had been flat-topped, their adobe brick walls plastered smooth with mud, sun baked to a restful brown.

But now, highly ornamented false second-story fronts hid the flat-topped roofs; brightly tinted stucco adorned the once drab walls, and electric lights burned garishly where formerly candles had been the sole source of illumination. Ancient stores, where in bygone years only leisurely bargaining took place, were now transformed into buzzing places of drinks, and gaming.

and entertainment. In other words San Felipe was now a modern border town bent on capitalizing its proximity to the river.

Laredo tied his horse to a hitch rail on the plaza side of the square and crossed the street to the awning-covered sidewalk. A half-dozen winking signs proclaimed the merits of as many different eating places.

While he hesitated, deliberating over which one to choose, a girl swung past in company with a man. Laredo observed that her hair and eyes were brown and that she was dressed in brown, with a hat to match. She was slender and could almost have walked under his outstretched arm. That was about all his glimpse registered, but, nevertheless, she attracted him greatly. And almost as strong was his instantaneous dislike for her companion.

He was a big man, big all over. But it was a flabby bigness, the sort attained by soft living and much eating. "Looks like an overfed toad," Laredo muttered. His eyes trailed their progress until they disappeared into a restaurant several doors down the street.

Now, Laredo had never followed a girl in all his life. Nor could he have explained just why, after seeing the pair disappear, he suddenly came to the conclusion this was the only restaurant in which he cared to eat.

Perhaps the goddess of luck was still gazing with an amiable eye on Laredo. Or again the little god of love may have had a hand in what followed. Who can tell? Anyway, when he entered the restaurant a moment later the only unoccupied table was one just across the aisle from the pair who had preceded him.

Through sheer force of habit, Laredo gave the waiter his order in Spanish. While he waited to be served he did not look once in the direction of the girl across the aisle, nor she at him, so far as he could determine. But

it was different with her companion. He began examining Laredo with frank curiosity, and presently he put his thoughts into words.

"Gaze on that spiggoty lieutenant at the next table, Jo," he said to the girl. "Now, there's a hard-looking specimen for you! I'll bet for half a cent he'd slit your throat from ear to ear."

His companion said: "Hush, Uncle Amos, perhaps he understands English. Also, I've asked you time and again not to refer to Mexicans as 'spiggotys.' They resent it, and with perfect right. Besides, I think that lieutenant is terribly nice looking."

Laredo chuckled. No doubt, he did look native, considering his black hair and eyes, a face tanned to deep olive from exposure to the semitropic sun, and the uniform which he yet wore.

Nevertheless, his dislike for the man called Amos was intensified by the un-called-for comment.

At length, with his meal only partly finished, Amos, after glancing at his watch, shoved back his chair. "I almost forgot, Jo," he said, "but I promised to meet that hombre who looks after the cattle at seven, and it's nearly that now. You go on with your dinner, and I'll see you later at the hotel." Jo nodded, and her companion left the room.

Laredo continued eating, now and then letting his glance stray across the way. Here was a girl! he thought after each glimpse.

Presently, her meal completed, she rose to leave, but was stopped by the waiter. From the ensuing conversation it became apparent to Laredo that Amos had neglected to pay the check before leaving, and that the girl had an insufficient amount in her purse. She attempted to explain, first in English, then in halting Spanish, that she would go to the hotel and return with the money.

Undoubtedly, the waiter had been

imposed on before. Most of the scum and ruffraff of the earth at some time or another sojourn in these border towns and their ways of obtaining meals are many and varied. So sad experience had taught the waiter that here, at least, fine feathers have little to do with making fine birds.

He spoke rudely. Thereupon, Laredo interfered. Asking what was the amount of the bill, he paid it from his own pocket. When the waiter retired, the girl turned to Laredo and in her faltering Spanish attempted to thank him. "My name," she ended, "is Josita Verde."

"Josephine Green," translated Laredo. "I'm pleased to meet you ma'am." In turn, he made known his own name.

The girl's eyes widened at his use of English and his Texas accent. "Why," she exclaimed, "you are an American! I never suspected it."

"Yes'm," smiled Laredo, "in spite of this uniform."

While drawing on her gloves, Miss Green appraised Laredo from head to foot. Evidently, she decided in his favor. "If you care to walk with me to the hotel, I will repay you at once," she said after a little hesitation.

Had she suggested that he accompany her to the north pole, Laredo would have assented as quickly and blessed his lucky stars for the chance. The more he saw of the girl the better he liked her. Moreover, he felt as much at ease in her presence as if she were a man, which was indeed strange. For heretofore, girls, nice girls, had invariably caused him an acute feeling of shyness.

"Are you on leave?" Jo asked as they walked along.

"No'm, I've quit the army," Laredo explained. "Just now I'm here seein' about some cattle I own."

"Why, how odd!" exclaimed Jo. "I am on the same identical errand."

It was Laredo's turn to be surprised. "You have cattle on this side of the river?" he questioned.

"Some, I hope," his companion answered. "You see," she went on, "father owned a ranch here for years. In fact, I was born here. But we sold off most of the stock and moved to the States when trouble developed in this country. Since then, the ranch has been in charge of a superintendent. Last fall, father died, and now Uncle Amos insists that the remaining cattle be sold. Later on, if possible, he will dispose of the land."

By this time they were approaching the hotel. Just outside, Jo espied her uncle in conversation with a squat, black-browed native, who, judging from his dress, Laredo took to be the superintendent referred to. She called her uncle over, and after introducing him, explained the difficulty from which Laredo had rescued her.

While Amos was reaching for his pocketbook, Laredo took stock of the man more closely. His dislike, if anything, increased. Amos was big, but, nevertheless, there was a furtive look about him. His eyes and ears both were unusually small and his lips, despite their pursy fullness, were as straight as slits in a blanket.

If I'm any judge, there's a bird who would skin a flea for its hide and tal-low, or rob a widow's mite box without a qualm, Laredo reflected.

After the two men had exchanged a few casual observations, Laredo excused himself on the plea of caring for his horse. He found lodging at a small native *posada* on a side street. His quarters were comfortable, but, nevertheless, he failed to sleep well that night. Visions of a slight, brown-haired, brown-eyed girl persisted in dancing before his eyes.

Laredo was up early the following morning, and, after breakfasting, took his way to the customhouse. He was

yet undecided whether to move his cattle across the river, or attempt to lease a ranch and remain on this side. Still, he figured, now was the proper time to see about a crossing permit. If one were obtainable, and later on he decided to move, all well and good. If not, no harm would result.

He had anticipated more or less argument with the authorities and possibly downright refusal. But, to his surprise, he was recognized and ushered into a private room.

"Of a certainty, lieutenant," the official told him when he stated his desires. "True, there is an embargo on cattle at present, but that applies to stock owned by citizens of this country. Moreover, your valorous conduct while in our army entitles you to any favor you desire. Without delay, amigo, you shall have a permit, allowing you to cross your cattle."

All very nice and courteous, Laredo decided. But when he passed into a waiting room, leading to the street after receiving his permit, he found there some one who did not share this opinion. Amos Green, having just come out second-best in an argument with another official, was storming up and down like an angry bull.

"Of all the crazy rules and regulations," he shouted the moment he espied Laredo, "this one takes the cake! Who ever heard of a person not being able to do as he wished with his own property?"

Laredo shrugged. "A government ruling is a hard thing to get around," he said dispassionately. "Me, I was lucky."

"Lucky?" questioned Amos. "Oh yes, I remember. Jo said you had some cattle over here also. Then you got a permit?"

"Yeh," acknowledged Laredo shortly. His dislike for this big man was as strong as ever.

"Well, I'm not through with this pee-

wee outfit yet," Amos loudly declared. "I'm going to have Jo's stuff bunched, and then we'll see further. And, by the way, where are your cattle located? That hombre Pedro who's in charge of Jo's ranch, claims that cowhands are scarce around here. I was wondering if we couldn't plan to gather both brands at the same time and in that way do with less help."

"My stuff is about ten miles south. It's mostly on open range below the Rancho Elenora," Laredo told him.

"Why, the Elenora is Jo's place!" cried Amos. "According to that, our stuff must be more or less mixed. What do you say to our working together?"

Laredo promptly agreed. The plan suited him in more ways than one. While he was as yet undecided about crossing to the American side, he intended in any event to get his brand together for a complete count. And by working with this other outfit he would materially reduce expenses. More than that, it would undoubtedly throw him more or less in the company of a certain brown-haired girl, which was a thing he ardently desired. So they spent the rest of the day making arrangements.

The following week was one of the most pleasant Laredo ever remembered spending. The cattle were not scattered enough to make the work arduous, and Jo Green rode with him every day. A dozen times he expressed aloud his admiration of the beautiful Rancho Elenora.

"I would like nothing better than to stay here myself," she told him.

"Why don't you, then?" he asked.

"Uncle would never consent to it," she explained. "As well as being trustee of dad's estate, he is my guardian. It is only two weeks, though, till I am twenty-one. I think that is why uncle is so anxious to see the cattle moved across and sold. He is afraid

I will absolutely refuse to move them when I have the authority."

Laredo pondered this. "What difference does it make to him?" he asked bluntly.

Jo looked troubled. "Uncle Amos claims that father owed him a great deal of money which the sale of these cattle will not nearly repay," she explained slowly.

"In other words, Amos means to get his and leave you broke!" commented Laredo in a bitter voice.

"He says he intends to give me an allowance until I can sell the ranch," Jo explained.

A sudden idea came into Laredo's mind. "Listen," he began, "instead of selling the place, why not lease it to me? I can't pay nearly what the lease would be worth until my herd increases in proportion, of course. But, at that the rent would yield you a nice income."

Jo's eyes sparkled. "Oh, I'd love to!" she exclaimed. "Then I could come and visit the ranch occasionally."

"Whenever you felt like it," concurred Laredo, his heart leaping at the thought.

"Suppose Uncle Amos objects?" Jo said doubtfully.

"Why should he know anything about it?" Laredo argued. "You will be of age before long, and then his trusteeship ends. Meantime, we can find a lawyer and have the lease drawn up. Then you can sign when you come of age."

"A dandy idea," agreed Jo, after a moment's consideration. "I'll tell you what. Father had a very close friend on the American side, a man named John Winters. He is president of a bank. We might ask his advice about a lawyer."

"Well, I'll go see him just as soon as the cattle are gathered," declared Laredo.

He thought this would be within the

next few days, but the elements took a hand, in the shape of torrential rains. This delayed work and, then, separating the two brands required more time than Laredo had expected. So it was ten days from the date of his conversation with Jo before he found an opportunity to cross to the American side.

He found John Winters one of his own sort, a retired cattleman turned banker.

"I think leasing you the ranch would be the wisest thing Jo could do," the banker assured Laredo. "Affairs are shaping up better every day below the border and one of these days she can sell at a fancy figure if she cares to. How about the remainder of the cattle? Are you to look after them as well?"

This furnished an opening for Laredo to explain Amos Green's intentions.

"Claims his brother owed him money, hey?" John Winters growled. "And aims to get it back while he's still trustee of the estate. Well, that's one way." The banker shot an appraising look at Laredo. "What do you think of the man?" he snapped.

"I think he's a crook," stated Laredo bluntly.

Winters nodded. "Shouldn't wonder. I knew Jo's father a long time and he was no hand to borrow money. Had sort of funny whims that way. Makes Amos' claim smell fishy to me. I reckon just out of curiosity I'll look up this brother's pedigree."

"I wish there was some way to prevent his selling the cattle," Laredo remarked. "Jo will be of age in a few days and then she can handle her own affairs. My opinion is that Amos is tryin' to frame her."

"While the framin's good," nodded John Winters. "But I don't guess he'll have much luck. The cattle are anchored across the river by that embargo. And there isn't a ghost of a

show of selling them over there. That much I know."

"Looks safe enough," admitted Laredo after a moment's thought.

"It is," declared the banker. "Now you go on back and, meantime, I'll see to fixin' up that lease. Soon as Jo comes of age, both you and she can sign it, and at the same time make some arrangements about her cattle."

Upon taking his way back, Laredo encountered Amos Green at the Mexican end of the bridge. It looked suspiciously as though Amos was awaiting his return.

The big man was in an angry state of mind and Laredo surmised that he was smarting under a second refusal for permission to cross Jo's cattle. Hailing Laredo like a long-lost friend, Amos suggested a drink, and led the way to a near-by café, where he selected an inconspicuous table.

"Son," he asked, as soon as they were seated, "didn't I hear your remark the other day that you'd remain on this side provided you could lease the Rancho Elenora?"

"I expect you did," acknowledged Laredo, wondering what Amos had up his sleeve.

"Well, I don't see anything to prevent it," said Amos, "provided you will let one hand wash the other."

"I fail to get you," said Laredo. He wanted to drive Amos out in the open.

"You still have the permit, allowing you to cross your herd?" Laredo nodded.

"Would you mind letting me look at it?"

Laredo produced the paper from an inside pocket and Amos read it from beginning to end. "Better than I hoped," he chuckled. "Even the space where the number of head is designated has been left blank."

"When they issued the permit, I didn't know just how many I would have to cross," explained Laredo.

"I see," nodded Amos. "Now, listen while I make you a proposition. If you'll turn this permit over to me, I'll lease you the Rancho Elenora for a period of five years. We'll call it an even trade."

Laredo cut short a surprised whistle. This was a much rarer proposition than he had anticipated. Amos must think him extremely simple, as well as crooked, for he doubted if it lay within a trustee's power to give a valid lease for a term longer than the trusteeship existed.

At length he shook his head. "I could hardly double cross the Mexican government that way," he protested. "Besides, if you tried to move your cattle on my permit, the trick would probably be discovered, and we'd both find ourselves in a pretty jack pot."

"Not a chance in a thousand," Amos declared positively. "I've investigated that end of it, and I'll tell you why. In the first place, there are only two possible crossing places for a forty-mile stretch up and down the river. One is the bridge and the other the Las Alamas ford. The authorities don't allow stock to cross the bridge, routing all herds by way of the ford. And, apparently, they are as lax about any inspection as they are hard-boiled about their rules. All that is necessary, provided one has a permit, is to notify the officials of the hour he intends to cross. In turn, they send word to the guard at the ford to allow a certain number of head passage at such and such a time. No brand inspector, no nothing. Savvy?"

Indeed, a slick scheme, with every possibility that it would work, Laredo reflected. And once on the American side, Amos should worry over any comeback! He would be safe and Laredo would be the one to suffer the consequences. The young man shook his head decisively.

However, Amos refused to take no

for an answer, advancing argument after argument. Finally, as a last resort, he offered Laredo a cash bonus of ten dollars a head after the cattle were disposed of on the American side, together with a lease on the Rancho Elenora for whatever length of time he might desire.

When at last Amos realized that Laredo's refusal was not governed by any desire to make the best possible bargain, his heavy face grew mottled. For a few moments, it appeared as though anger was to master him. But presently he gained control of himself and in a conciliatory tone asked Laredo what he intended doing the rest of the day.

"I sort of figured on huntin' up Miss Jo first and after that ridin' on out to where my cattle are at. I planned to brand a few calves in the mornin'," Laredo explained.

"Listen," said Amos, "if you won't consider this proposition, I've still another I'd like to lay before you. But just now, unfortunately, I have an engagement. And Jo is busy with some papers I wanted her to look over. So suppose you do this. Go on out and brand those calves this afternoon. Then when you've finished, come on over to the Elenora and spend the night. Jo and I are going out a little before sundown, and we'll have the evening to talk further. Would that suit you?"

It would, Laredo admitted to himself, even better than his previous plan. Some time during the evening he would find an opportunity to get Jo by herself and tell her the gist of his conversation with John Winters. So he said: "Sure. I'll show up at the rancho a while after dark."

"I'll be looking for you," Amos promised.

After separating his cattle from the Rancho Elenora stock, Laredo had moved them back to their original

range, leaving the herd in charge of an old vaquero. So, taking his way there, he cut out the calves and, with the vaquero's help began branding.

It was late before they finished their labors and dark had fallen when Laredo approached the Rancho Elenora. He rode under the ancient arch that marked the entrance, taking a bridle path that led to the corrals. The massive gates giving entrance to the pens were closed as usual. So, slipping from his saddle, Laredo dropped his reins and reached for the securing bar. As he leaned partly forward in the effort, he heard a mouselike, shuffling step, the hiss of some object rapidly descending, then everything turned black.

When Laredo regained consciousness, it was broad daylight. He had a ringing headache and there was a lump on the crown of his head the size of a billiard ball. He lay on the bare earthen floor of a small room whose only openings, save the door, were two small, barred apertures considerably higher than a man's head. The interior was partly filled with empty casks and dusty, cobwebbed bottles, so Laredo surmised that this room had once been used as a wine cellar.

For some minutes after awakening, his brain functioned slowly and he lay in a sort of stupor. At length, however, after several efforts, he gained his feet. As he expected, he found the door locked, and unaided escape impossible. Thereupon, he sat down and began to take stock of the situation.

Laredo's first thought was that he had been the victim of bandits who, after robbing Jo and her uncle, were interrupted by his coming. But the discovery of his money still intact, coupled with the fact that Jo and her uncle were not confined with him, caused him to abandon this conjecture as improbable. Next came the idea that the others had been captured to be held

for ransom, while he, not considered worth the trouble, had been disposed of in this summary manner. But he could pick a dozen flaws in this surmise. As yet a trifle dazed and weak from the vicious blow, he presently fell into a doze.

When next Laredo came to, it was mid-morning, and he was awakened by a violent pounding on the door, and a voice crying, "Laredo! Oh, Laredo!"

Laredo's heart gave a violent leap. Of all persons, Jo Green was the last one he expected to come to his rescue.

"Can you let me in?" she called, when he responded.

Now the door to this ancient wine room was fastened by a heavy lock, an old-fashioned, handmade affair which was secured to the inside of the door by heavy bolts. Upon his first examination, Laredo came to the conclusion that nothing, save a heavy iron bar, would prove strong enough to demolish it. After explaining this to the waiting girl, he heard her receding footsteps. Then, presently, she called again. Following her directions, his eyes sought one of the apertures and he perceived a length of iron pipe slide between the gratings. Upon securing this, it took but a moment for Laredo to wreck the lock and swing open the door.

For a full minute thereafter Jo Green stood wide-eyed, in silent, questioning horror. Nor was it any wonder. For just then Laredo looked more like an apparition than a man. His hair was matted around the lump left by the smashing blow that had struck him down; his clothes were stained and torn where he had been half dragged, half carried from the corral to the wine room, and, through the dirt and grime that streaked his face, he was as pale as a ghost.

Still weak from the blow and the exertion required to pry away the lock,

he wavered slightly where he stood. Taking him by the arm, Jo led the way to the ranch-house kitchen where, after seating him in a chair, she set about preparing coffee.

"I felt uneasy ever since yesterday afternoon when Uncle Amos, after saying you and he were going to spend the night out here, forbade me to come," she explained, as she bustled about. "When I woke up very early this morning, the feeling was stronger than ever. So, as soon as I could get a horse, I started out. Then when I arrived and found the ranch bare of men and cattle, saw your saddled horse wandering about the corrals, and the marks where some one had been dragged to the old wine room, I was indeed thankful I came. Now, tell me just what happened to you."

As quickly as possible, Laredo related all that had befallen him since crossing the bridge the previous day. "I guess my wits aren't working right yet," he confessed ruefully, "for I fail to make head or tail of what it's all about. I wasn't robbed, you know."

"Possibly not of money," exclaimed Jo. "But have you looked for your crossing permit? I told you, my cattle were gone."

Laredo's fingers went to an inside pocket and came away empty. "Of all the thickheads!" he muttered. "When Amos saw I wouldn't trade the permit, he lit on this plan of hijacking me and taking it by force. I reckon he's across the river with your stuff by this time."

"Probably," Jo agreed.

"Do you think he plans to sell 'em and light out?" Laredo questioned.

Jo shrugged. "I think he is working for his own interests rather than mine," she replied evenly.

The strong coffee was beginning to clear Laredo's head. "I reckon," he reflected, "that as long as this trusteeship remains in force, Amos can do with the cattle as he sees fit. Your only

salvation is to prevent their sale till you're of age and can take 'em over."

"I don't see any way," protested Jo. "Uncle Amos has succeeded in moving them to the American side, and buyers are plenty over there."

"Sure," agreed Laredo readily, "but there's this to consider. Cowmen, as a lot, are the squarest breed that walk. I'll guarantee I can go over there and explain just what's occurred and there won't be a one that will touch the herd with a ten-foot pole. Let's go, Jo. I got a little account to settle with that bird myself."

Noon found the two entering San Felipe, from where, after leaving their horses, they crossed to the American side afoot. They had decided on the way in, first to seek John Winters. He might have some valuable advice to offer.

The ex-cowman banker kissed Jo and shook Laredo's hand warmly. "I had decided to give you-all one mo' hour to show up," he told them. Then if you didn't appear, I was goin' across the river to institute a still hunt fo' you. Now, in order to satisfy an old man's curiosity, tell me how this man Amos managed to get those cows out of Mexico. I heard about eleven o'clock that he'd crossed 'em."

As quickly as possible, Laredo explained.

"Sort of caught you nappin', hey,?" John Winters chuckled. "What you plannin' to do now?"

"Spread word what sort of a bird Amos is and warn everybody against buyin' the stuff," Laredo answered.

"Well, I already done that," said the banker. "This fellow that brought word of their crossin' aimed to borrow money of me to buy 'em with. So I told him a little of what was up, enough, anyway, so he or any one else won't handle 'em."

"Good!" exclaimed Laredo. "That blocks Amos' selling game, anyway."

"From sellin' 'em hereabouts," the banker agreed. "Your uncle is a slick figurer and a fast worker," he said to Jo. "I just heard through one of the boys that he'd ordered a string of cars spotted and aims to ship the whole bunch to market in the mornin'."

"And there's no way to stop him?" cried Jo anxiously.

"I wouldn't go as far as to say that," Winters replied. Then he turned to Laredo. "Son," he directed, "step down the street a few blocks and you'll find a livery stable. Tell 'em to hitch up a buckboard for me and Jo and saddle up a hoss for you. Have 'em here at the bank in fifteen minutes."

When Laredo disappeared, the old man turned to Jo. "I reckon, honey," he began, and his voice was pitched in a tender tone, "you have decided yo're Uncle Amos is not all that he should be?"

"I'm afraid so," Jo said sadly.

"Well, I know it for a fact," John Winters assured her. "Fo' after that young man was in here the other day, I had Amos' pedigree looked up. He's a first-class skunk and has done you out of plenty already. Moreover, for the few days his trusteeship holds, he can do as he pleases with yore cattle, ship 'em, or anything. Now, supposin' by some hook or crook we could git them cattle back into Mexico where Amos won't dare go, after the trick he's pulled? What would you say to that?"

"If that were possible, I'd ask Laredo to look after them for me," Jo answered, with no hesitation.

"You'd trust him after bein' double crossed by yore uncle?" the banker pressed.

"Why, I'd trust him with my life," Jo cried impulsively.

A smile softened old John Winters' lips under his flowing mustache and his eyes were tender. "I reckon you'll have a chance one of these days, ef I know

young fellows," he commented. "An' I'm satisfied, too, you wouldn't make no mistake. Now you go out and get in the buckboard. Tell Laredo I'll be along in a minute, and then we'll start our journey."

After Jo left the room, John Winters rang up a certain number, and for some minutes carried on a conversation with the person at the other end of the wire. The talk was interposed with much chuckling and laughter.

When it was ended, he stepped outside and, clambering into the buckboard, took the reins and drove out of town, Laredo following.

It was possibly two miles from the center of the American town to the Las Alamas ford. About halfway, a rider who was loafing on the gallery of a ranch house beside the road, mounted his horse and joined them. The banker introduced him as Thad Hayward, and as he fell in beside the buckboard, Laredo caught the gleam of a badge pinned underneath the lapel of his coat.

At length the four arrived at the ford. A short distance back from the river, at some time or other, cattlemen had erected a wire corral inclosing half a dozen acres in which to pen crossed herds.

Amos Green was standing by the corral gates, engaged in conversation with a couple of cowmen, evidently newly arrived. Three or four Mexican hands whom Laredo recognized as the ones who had assisted in the previous gathering of the cattle, loitered in a group near by. They were peons of the lowest order, incapable of taking the initiative in any fashion, fitted only by birth and training to obey the dictates of a superior mind.

The banker stopped the buckboard beside the corral gate and nodded to the two cowmen:

"You boys figurin' to buy this stock?" he asked pleasantly, indicating the penned cows.

"Talkin' about it," one of them answered shortly.

"Well, I'd advise you not to, that is, less you want to get in trouble," the banker advised.

"What you mean?" the second man inquired.

"Quarantine laws," stated Winters distinctly.

With one accord both men started toward their horses, as if these two words settled any thought of further bargaining. Amos called to them to wait and then turned to the banker.

"If my niece has hired you to try and prevent my disposing of these cattle, you're barking up the wrong tree," he blustered. "As trustee, I hold full power over the disposition of her estate, although of late she seems to think otherwise."

While Amos was declaring himself, John Winters sat tugging softly at his mustache. "Nobody's disputin' that mister," he said calmly. "I was just advisin' these boys as a matter of self-protection. They happen to be operatin' on money I lend 'em. Hate to see 'em get in a jack pot."

"Well, they won't," declared Amos. "As I told you——"

During this conversation the man called Thad Hayward, had been inspecting the cattle critically from outside the fence. Now he rode up and interrupted Amos' harangue by tapping him on the shoulder. "I'll have to see your dipping certificate on this herd," he stated.

Amos' jaw dropped. "Dipping certificate?" he repeated.

"Section four, article two, laws of the United States Sanitary Board," John intoned rapidly. "Cattle from Mexico have to be dipped and carry a certificate of health before coming into this country. Look it up." He waited a moment, then turned to Laredo.

"Evidently, this man has no dipping certificate, so these cattle will have to

go back. Open the gate and tell the vaqueros to get busy," he directed.

Beside himself with anger, Amos watched while Laredo, with a commanding shout at the peon hands, flung open the run-around gates. Then, as the cattle began pouring forth, rage mastered him. He turned to Thad Hayward, and his hand went to his hip pocket.

"If you think——" he shouted.

Hayward, with a nonchalant gesture, slipped back the lapel of his coat to momentarily expose a gleaming badge. "Don't go for any gun," he advised coldly. "More'n one man has got in bad tryin' to buck an officer with a smoke stick."

Amos' hand came slowly upward to fumble with his belt. For a second, his eyes swept both old John Winters and his niece with a venomous look. Then, evidently deciding the game was up, with a muttered imprecation he strode off toward his horse.

From the buckboard, with Thad Hayward sitting his horse beside them, Jo and the old banker watched Laredo throw the herd back across the river. When their trail was marked only by a cloud of dust in the direction of Rancho Elenora, Jo turned to her companion.

"Wasn't it fortunate," she remarked, "that we got here in time to prevent

those two unsuspecting men from buying the cattle?"

"Humph! They didn't aim to buy." old John Winters said. "Thad planted them there after I talked to him over the telephone. We had to have some sort of a stage-settin', honey."

His meaning was entirely lost on Jo. "Well, anyway," she persisted, "it was fortunate for me that you happened to remember about this government regulation and could get in touch with the enforcement officer."

Over his shoulder, the old banker winked at Thad Hayward. "That line about cattle havin' to carry a health certificate was all bunk, Jo," he explained with a chuckle. "I've allus claimed an honest man can outcrook a crook without resortin' to force, any time he sets his mind to it. Now, I've proved it."

"But," protested Jo, "Mr. Hayward must have had authority to turn them back. He is an officer; I saw his badge."

"Sure, he is an officer," agreed the banker with another chuckle. "But I guess you jumped at conclusions, same as your Uncle Amos. Show her, Thad."

With a smile, the man on the horse threw back the lapel of his coat. The badge read: "Deputy Game Warden."



THE GOLD SEEKERS RETURN TO FRASER RIVER

THE old belief that at the rainbow's end one will find a pot of gold might be made to serve more prosaically by being applied to the river's bed. It is reported that the Fraser River, in British Columbia, after more than half a century of neglect, is coming once more into the limelight. The old gold-bearing bars of the river are being extensively prospected again and mining men predict a new era of intensive development of this famous stream. It is rich in mineral and not since the early sixties has it been so thoroughly prospected as now.



Strange Birds

by Ray Humphreys

Author of "Mules, Monkeys, Money and a Mix-up," etc.



THE sheriff of Monte Vista, Joe Cook, was lecturing his deputy "Shorty" McKay, on the evils of wasting time on minor cases when there were important matters to be solved—and just then the office door opened suddenly and in walked Arturo Lopez. Arturo was quite excited. He was out of breath. He waved his hands in the air and sputtered. His words came in gasps.

"Sher-reef, I am th' ashamed! I am th' mortified so! A feller—he look like me—he come to town an' go around about tryin' to sell th' beeg eagle!" exclaimed Arturo indignantly. "I no like eet at all! My friends they laugh an' theenk I play th' joke! Th' joke? Bah! I make th' beeg complaint!"

Sheriff Cook glowered at Lopez.

"Yuh make th' big noise, sure enough, Arturo!" snapped Sheriff Cook. "Yuh look like yuh been gallopin' ten miles on yuhr own laigs! What's all this about a eagle?"

Lopez shrugged and made an elaborate gesture with his hands. His face wore a pained expression. He explained again.

"A feller—who his name is I do not know or I should happy be to geeve heem a punch on th' nose—he come inter town an' try to sell th' beeg eagle!" repeated Lopez loudly. "He go to dees feller an' dat feller an' say, 'How much you geeve me fer th' beeg eagle?' an' everybodies theenk et ces me as say that! Ho, Arturo Lopez go to sell a beeg eagle, ha ha! But do not laugh, señor!"

Sheriff Cook scratched his head.

"What am I supposed to do, weep?"

he demanded, sarcastically. "Or throw a cat fit? Or mebbe go on a hunger strike? Or ask the governor to send the Colorado national guard down here? What ef a feller is tryin' to sell a big eagle, as yuh say, an' what ef he——"

"But he look like me!" screamed Arturo wildly.

"Who does—the eagle?"

"No, no—the feller—the impudent stranger!"

"Waal, what about that?" asked Sheriff Cook, motioning to Shorty to be silent. Shorty, it appeared, was just on the verge of butting in on the conversation. He kept his mouth closed, however, after the sheriff had signified that he would do all the talking there was to be done with Lopez. "We kain't arrest a man fer jus' lookin' like yuh, Lopez? That's his misfortune, an' while he must look awful, he kain't be jailed fer it! I feel sorry fer him—an' fer the eagle. I suppose yuh mean he's tryin' to sell a live eagle?"

"Sure!" cried the wrathful Lopez, smarting under the sheriff's kidding. "Now I make the beeg complaint! Why for that hombre make the large fool outta Arturo Lopez, eh? I no like eet! I want him arrest before I find heem an' tear him inter leetle pieces! I shall do the murder—what you call heem, sher-reef?—the homicider! Yes, I do eet unless you arrest heem. No stranger kin come in here an' try to sell eagle and make the great fool outta Arturo Lopez!"

The sheriff waved the irate Lopez away.

"Waal, we'll look inter it, Lopez, an' see what we kin do," said the sheriff coldly. "Mebbe he is peddin' without a license. Mebbe we kin hook him on that. But we kain't arrest him jus' because he is so unfortunate as to look like yuh——"

"But sher-reef——"

"Good-by, Lopez—an' close the door as yuh go out."

Lopez did more than close the door as he fumed out. He banged it. The sheriff grinned at Shorty and resumed his interrupted lecture.

"Thar's an example o' what I was tellin' yuh about minor cases," said the sheriff. "We could waste a lot o' time investigatin' crazy complaints like Lopez has jus' made ef we was foolish enough to do it. That's the point I was tryin' to make. Yesterday, when I got that telegram from the Denver police department sayin' that they had a tip that thar was to be a big robbery pulled off here shortly, an' warnin' us to be on the lookout, I look fer yuh, an' yuh're wastin' yuhr time tryin' to find out who set fire to Doc Healey's awnin'! Now, that probin' o' minor nonsense has to stop."

Shorty motioned toward the door that had just banged.

"This complaint that Lopez makes, boss," said Shorty, "I got a notion mebbe ain't no minor complaint. Lopez is a big man—fer a Mexican. Big by way o' influence among the local Mexes an' big by way o' physical size. Anybody lookin' like him must be unusual, an' no wonder he is peeved ef somebody is tryin' to impersonate him——"

The sheriff cut in with a roar.

"Thar yuh go, Shorty! Yuh'd willingly waste time runnin' down a Mexican that has done nuthin' but look like Lopez! That ain't no crime, as I told Lopez. We kain't bother with minor stuff when we got to figger out what about this Denver police robbery warnin'."

Shorty jumped to his feet.

"I'm duckin' out fer a package o' cigarettes, boss!" he explained. "I kin think better when I'm smokin'. Be right back. Excuse me!"

And Shorty was gone. The sheriff swore softly and leaned back in his chair. At that moment his eyes lit on

a package of cigarettes lying on the desk. The sheriff swore again.

"That's his store-made smokin's, an' the fool has run out fer more! Waal, that guy is hopeless! Wait until he comes back I'll rawhide him with a few choice words—jus' wait!"

The sheriff did just that—he just waited. It was fully forty minutes before the breathless Shorty returned. He sank into his chair without a word of explanation, excuse, or apology for his long absence. And to cap the climax, he immediately reached for the package of cigarettes that had been on the desk all the time and extracted one. He lit it, blew a smoke ring, and looked calmly at the waiting sheriff.

"Waal, boss?"

"Waal boss yuhrself!" snapped Sheriff Cook hotly. "Whar did yuh go fer cigarettes? Alamosa? Salida? Pueblo? An' why did yuh go? Yuh had a package o' cigarettes right here on the desk all the time."

"I met a feller I used to know," said Shorty, "an' I stopped to talk ter him fer a minnit, that was all. I fergot I did have some pills here. Now, as yuh was sayin' a minnit ago, boss, about wastin' time on minor cases. Ef yuh want to hear my opinion, I want to say——"

"I don't want to hear yuhr opinion," snapped Sheriff Cook. "I want to say to yuh that yuh're a locoed, half-witted worthless——"

The jingle of the telephone bell interrupted the sheriff's accusation. He put the receiver to his ear and a surprised look spread over his face as he listened. He gulped some incoherent reply into the telephone and banged down the receiver.

"That was Bill Hirsch, the jeweler!" cried the sheriff, to Shorty. "He says he's been robbed! Come on! I got no details. Hirsch is incoherent. We're runnin' over thar. I might have knowed it! I sit here tryin' to talk

some sense inter yuhr empty noodle an' the robbers strike! Come on! Are yuh glued to that cheer, Shorty?"

Bill Hirsch, the leading jeweler of the town, was on the verge of a collapse when Shorty and the sheriff elbowed their way through the crowd of curious in his store on Pecos Street. He brightened at sight of the sheriff, however, and he seized Cook by the arm.

"Nerve—pure, one-hundred-per-cent nerve!" exploded Hirsch frantically, as he clawed at the sheriff's sleeve. "I lost jus' five thousand dollars in fine diamonds, that's all! Imagine the nerve o' that guy! But go get him, sheriff, afore he gets away! The thief."

The sheriff forced Hirsch down into a chair.

"Now Hirsch, yuh're delirious!" cried the sheriff. "Yuh cool off an' tell us all about it. I kain't read yuhr mind as to who it was robbed yuh. Calm yuhrself, Hirsch! Pull yuhrself together, man! Shorty, yuh take down the description o' the robber Hirsch gives us."

"Description?" howled Hirsch. "Why, it was Arturo Lopez!"

"Arturo Lopez?" cried Sheriff Cook, mystified. "Yuh mean——"

"I mean it was Arturo Lopez," shouted the jeweler. "Don't stand thar gawkin' at me, sheriff. Go get Lopez! He came in an' asked to see my tray o' biggest diamonds. Sure, I know Lopez. I showed him the tray. He jus' grabbed up a handful o' the rocks an' turned an' walked away, talkin' to his friend, an' payin' no attention whatsoever to my shouts."

"To his friend?" interrupted the sheriff. "Then he had a guy——"

"A big eagle was with him," explained Hirsch excitedly. "It was perched on his arm. An awful big eagle! He kept talkin' to it. I didn't hear the eagle say nuthin' back. I was so excited. My big sparklers gone!

The nerve o' that Lopez! Go git him, sheriff!"

The sheriff gave Shorty a significant look.

"Hirsch, would yuh swear the man who robbed yuh was Lopez?" Sheriff Cook asked, and the jeweler nodded.

"Sure I will!"

"Then, fer a jeweler, yuh have a pore eye fer details," said the sheriff. "That wasn't Lopez at all. Lopez was just in to make complaint about somebody lookin' like him bein' in town tryin' to sell a eagle. I didn't pay much attention to Lopez at the time, but I guess he was right! It was the double fer Lopez that robbed yuh, Hirsch."

"Waal, go git him then!" cried the jeweler wretchedly.

"Shorty, go to the depot an' see that the hombre doesn't git out on that noon train," ordered the sheriff briskly. "After that, kinda look around town. A man lookin' like Lopez an' with a eagle shouldn't be hard to find. Telephone the ranches along the Gun Barrel Road, an' the Alamosa Road, an' the Denver Highway, spreadin' the alarm."

"Yes, sir!" said the deputy respectfully.

But after Shorty had departed the miserable Bill Hirsch grabbed the sheriff by the arm again. On second thought, Hirsch declared, he couldn't be mistaken about the man who had taken his diamonds. He insisted it was Arturo Lopez, and the more the sheriff argued, the louder Hirsch yelled. Finally, with the whole crowd of curious trailing along the sheriff escorted Hirsch straight to the Lone Pine Hotel, where, he knew, Lopez was accustomed to stay when in from his ranch. The clerk at the hotel grinned at the sheriff's first question.

"Is Arturo Lopez here?" he repeated laughing. "Sure, he's here! Kain't yuh hear him? That's his room right across the lobby thar. Number 4. He's in thar now—yuh kin hear him talkin'.

Tol' me a hour ago he was goin' to practice up on a speech he was goin' to deliver at some Mexican society dinner in Adobe to-morrow, an'——"

Sheriff Cook cocked an alert ear. Sure enough, he could hear the familiar voice of Arturo Lopez echoing from the near-by room.

"Yuh say he's been thar a hour practicin' his speech like that?" demanded the sheriff, facing the clerk. "Are yuh sure it's been a hour? Hirsch here thinks he saw Lopez in his store twenty minutes ago."

The clerk looked at the big clock on the wall.

"Arturo came in at exactly eleven o'clock," said the clerk. "He was kinda mad. He told me about complainin' at yuhr office that thar was a impostor in town impostorin' him. Said he had jus' come from yuhr office. Asked me not to let no one disturb him for an hour as he was goin' to practice up on a speech. I looked at the clock to see what time it was then. It was eleven. He went into his room an' I heard him lock the door, an' he's been ravin' ever since—over an hour, in fact—talkin' on the Mexican navy, the tariff, how to raise pinto beans, what to do until the doctor comes, treatment fer fevers an' colds, how to pick out a good saddle hoss; feedin' an' care o' swine an'——"

The sheriff turned to Hirsch.

"Hear that, Hirsch?" he asked. "I told yuh it couldn't 'a' been Arturo Lopez yuh saw. It was the feller looked like him."

"Let me have a look at Lopez!" said the jeweler.

Lopez opened the door in answer to the sheriff's knock. He stepped out into the lobby and appeared surprised to see the sheriff, Bill Hirsch, and the crowd of curious there. He smiled at the sheriff.

"Mebbe you ketch that bad hombre that impersonate Arturo Lopez, eh,

Meester Sher-reef?" he asked hopefully. "I theenk mebbe that is why you come to see me, eh? Sure, I will make the complaint an' testify against heem. Sure, ef that is what you weesh."

Hirsch stepped forward.

"Wasn't yuh in my store twenty minits ago, Lopez?" asked the jeweler dubiously, and Lopez stared in astonishment.

"In your store?" the Mexican repeated. "No!"

"Didn't yuh come in thar with a big eagle, an' walk out with a handful o' my diamonds, turnin' a deaf ear on my shouts, Lopez?"

"What? An eagle? A handful o' diamonds? Why, what you talk about, hombre?" cried the astonished Lopez. "You go crazy? Me with an eagle? Huh, what I tell you, sher-reef? That strange hombre——"

The sheriff nodded, with narrowed eyes.

"Ef the clerk here heard Lopez talkin' fer the las' hour, he couldn't have been in yuhr store, Hirsch," said the sheriff sadly. "Lopez hisself complained about this stranger, lookin' like him, an' with a eagle. It wasn't Lopez as robbed yuh, Hirsch. It was——"

"So, the stranger rob Meester Hirsch, eh?"

"Yep, so it seems, Lopez."

"Huh, what I tell you?" crowed the triumphant Lopez, shaking a finger at the sheriff. "You laugh when I report eet to you. You make the beeg joke. Now see! That feller git in trouble an' everybody theenk eet ees Arturo Lopez—me—who do the bad deed."

The sheriff laid a hand on Lopez's shoulder.

"I owe yuh an apology, Lopez, fer makin' light o' yuhr complaint," admitted Sheriff Cook. "But I am here to stand up fer yuh now. I'll set everybody right on it not bein' yuh who was the robber. Yuh yuhrself tipped me

off to the stranger, an', besides, yuh got a perfect alibi with the clerk here, an' I know the clerk ain't no fool. We ain't any o' us blamin' yuh, Lopez, fer what happened to Hirsch!"

"Waal, I should make the hope not!" cried Lopez.

Hirsch, barely understanding the situation, mumbled an apology as the sheriff finished. Then, leaving the blinking Lopez, the sheriff and Hirsch, with the crowd of curious tagging at their heels, left the hotel. Working on the theory that José Amigo, the editor of the local Mexican newspaper, might be able to furnish a clew to the strange Mexican's identity, the crowd, led by Sheriff Cook, trooped to Amigo's office. The editor, however, could throw but little light on the matter. He said that Shorty had been in some time before, asking questions about Arturo Lopez's "double."

"That is the fust I hear o' it," said Amigo, "so I send out my reporter, Ramon Checon, an' he find some peoples that saw the strange Mexican that so closely resemble Señor Lopez. The man an' his eagle was seen by Alfredo Pena, Tonita Cruze, Severo Encinias, Francisco Aranda, Perfecto Silva, an' Albino Montoya, an' jus' before yuh arrive I have a telephone call from Shorty an' I tell him names of persons who saw the stranger. That is all I know!"

"Thanks," growled the sheriff. "Yuh tell me one thing good, anyhow, an' that is that Shorty is workin' on the case, as I told him to do. He ain't gone to sleep. See yuh later, Amigo!"

Once out on the street again, Hirsch began to complain bitterly. He declared that by the time the sheriff and Shorty accomplished anything the robber would be far, far away. That made the sheriff mad, to have such a remark flung at him in the presence of the crowd. There was an argument forthwith.

"An' what should I do that I ain't doin', Hirsch?" demanded the angered sheriff. "I'm doin' all its humanely possible to do!"

"What about a posse?" countered Hirsch doggedly.

"An' whar would a posse go, Hirsch?"

"It could ride around an' look," said Hirsch, "an' that would be something. This searchin' the town is the bunk. That robber ain't lingerin' here to be caught so easy. Mebbe a lot o' men gallopin' up toward Squaw Mountain might help. Ain't no use lettin' that feller get a good start, like he's gettin', seems to me."

The sheriff pondered a moment. While there was little hope that a posse could locate the missing robber, still, there was some wisdom in the jeweler's remark. It was necessary that the sheriff make some kind of a showing. He turned to the crowd.

"Yuh men go grab hosses," he said, "an' meet up with me at my office in ten minnits. We'll start from thar. We'll look over some o' those mountain roads, by golly, as Mr. Hirsch suggests, an' we might find some trace o' the diamond robber. Get your hosses an' git down to the office in ten minnits, fellers. Get me?"

Then, with Hirsch still dogging him, the sheriff made for the office. Shorty was there, telephoning. The sheriff and the jeweler stepped in just in time to hear the last part of Shorty's conversation.

"An' ef yuh see that eagle, telephone me!" concluded Shorty. At that he hung up the receiver. The sheriff glowered at him.

"Huh!" said Sheriff Cook. "Yuh wastin' time ag'in, jus' as I accused yuh o' doin' no later than this mawnin', Shorty? Yuh tryin' to ketch a eagle instead o' the main crook? Who was yuh talkin' to about that eagle, Shorty—ef I may ask that question?"

"I was talkin' to Bert Clark on Blue Creek, boss."

"Had he seen a eagle?"

"No—but he's gonna look!"

"Bash!" fumed the sheriff. "What good will a eagle do us, even ef we should git the eagle that danged Mex diamond robber had? We kain't identify no eagle, kin we? An' the eagle ain't goin' to make no confession, is it? Seein' that yuh been wastin' yuhr time tracin' a eagle, I don't suppose fer a second that yuh got a line on the Mex hisself?"

Shorty shook his head.

"I didn't need no line on him, boss."

"No?"

"No, seein' I got him settin' back in the private office right now, handcuffed to the desk thar," said Shorty, with a grin. "It wasn't no trick at all to git him, sheriff. O' course, he denies that he's guilty, but what o' that? I got a list o' names o' folks who seen him from Amigo, the Mexican paper editor, an' then——"

"Yuh get my diamonds back?" shouted Hirsch wildly.

"Yuh got the robber, Shorty?" cried the sheriff, in amazement.

"Sure I got him," said Shorty. "I want yuh to take a look at him, Hirsch, an' kinda identify him. He was yellin' so loud I had to kinda gag him up so I could hear over the telephone."

Shorty opened the door to the private office. Hirsch and the sheriff, looking over Shorty's shoulder, saw a big Mexican sitting there, gagged and handcuffed to the mahogany desk.

"It's him—that's the man!" exclaimed the delighted Hirsch.

"Waal, I'll be jiggered!" whooped Sheriff Cook. "Ef that feller ain't a dead ringer fer Arturo Lopez I'll eat my Stetson, dust an' all! He could be Arturo's twin brother! Waal, we got yuh, smarty, an' it's a good thing we did before Arturo Lopez got to yuh. He would o' knifed yuh, brother, fer

impersonatin' him. I never thought that thar could be any other Mex in the world as ugly as Lopez, but yuh sure are! Yuh're uglier! What's yuh'r name, hombre?"

"He's gagged an' kain't answer." reminded Shorty.

"Oh, sure—I fergot," said the sheriff flushing. "Waal, un gag him, Shorty. Yuh didn't get the diamonds, I reckon? Huh! I thought so! Ungag him, an' we'll find whar he hid 'em, in blamed short order. Now, hombre, yuh better speak up pronto an' tell yuh'r story! Yuh'll go to jail, I reckon, to stay a while, but yuh're luckier than ef Lopez got hold o' yuh fust. Yuh've insulted Lopez by lookin' like him, an' injured him by pullin' that robbery an' havin' him falsely accused. Speak up! Whar are them rocks yuh took from Hirsch here, eh?"

Shorty relieved the prisoner of the gag.

"Fools!" howled the man. "I am Arturo Lopez!"

The sheriff and Hirsch jumped backward as if they had heard a rattler strike warning. The sheriff's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Yuh, Lopez?"

"O' course I am!" cried the captive. "No sooner had you left the hotel than this idiot, Shorty, come by an' put the handcuffs on me—on me—on Arturo Lopez! He say I am the holdup. I deny! What good it do me? He drag me here, chain me up, gag me! Ha, somebodies will feel sorry fer all this, sher-reef! I make the grand troubles. I have the good alibi. I am at the hotel when robbery go on, but——"

Shorty thoughtfully puffed on his cigarette.

"Then yuh won't confess yuh did the job, Lopez?" he asked.

"Confess?" yelled Lopez. "Me? No! Never!"

"Mebbe the eagle will," grinned Shorty. "But even ef the eagle won't,

I got an idear that yuh may, later, Lopez."

"Eagle?" screamed Lopez furiously. "I tell you, I had not an eagle! I tell you it was a man looked like me had eagle. Where are the diamonds ef I stole them? Where is the eagle ef I have eet? Do hotel clerk lie when he say I practice on the speech an' he hear me?"

Shorty shook his head, as the sheriff and Hirsch stared at him. It was all Greek to them. Hirsch, it appeared, was ready enough to believe Lopez guilty. He had thought so from the first. But the sheriff knew better. The sheriff found his voice finally.

"Shorty, yuh've made a horrible mistake. Lopez, here, couldn't have pulled that diamond job. We checked his alibi an'——"

The telephone rang.

"Yes, this is me!" said Shorty, answering it quickly. "That yuh, Bert? Yes? So, the eagle was thar, was he? Good! He confessed, eh? Fine! Good work, Bert, splendid! Thanks a heap. I'll be over later!"

Shorty put down the telephone.

"Waal," he drawled, "the jig's up, Lopez. The eagle confessed."

Lopez just blinked, but Sheriff Cook shot in a question.

"The eagle confessed?" he cried, in unbelief. "What eagle? Whar? How in thunder could a eagle confess anything? Shorty, yuh're eithar a whop-pin' liar or else yuh're plumb crazy!"

"Ef the eagle say anything, he lie!" put in Lopez quickly.

"Boss," said Shorty, "I'm surprised at yuh. Yuh, who was lecturin' me this mawnin' about wastin' my time on unimportant matters, an' now yuh been runnin' around fer hours chasin' a myth—a danged phantom as don't exist anywhars but in the kinda fertile brain o' Arturo Lopez here! I say 'kinda fertile,' because the scheme wasn't so wonderful after all—the

idear o' the double—the guy who looked like Lopez. Yuh see, boss, thar wasn't any such animal.

"I figgered it was funny when Lopez complained about a 'double' with an eagle botherin' an' humiliatin' him right here in town. I didn't believe thar could be a double fer Lopez, seein' how ugly he is! So when he went out, after complainin' to us here, I followed him, pretendin' to yuh I went fer cigarettes. I didn't dare tell yuh I was workin' on the Lopez case after yuh told me it was not important. I followed Lopez into a store an' he bought a package o' phonograph needles an' then went on to the hotel. Then I returned to the office.

"A little later the Hirsch robbery report came in. I figgered as soon as I heard Hirsch tell what happened that it was really Lopez an' not a impostor. Why? Waal, fer several reasons. Why should an eagle be mixed up in it? Why, to carry off the loot, o' course. An' why should an eagle carry off the loot? Waal, because the robber didn't dare keep it on him, secin' he, likely, wasn't goin' to try to flee. I decided to work fast. The Mexican editor told me who had seen the double o' Lopez, an' a swift check showed me that every one named was a close friend o' Lopez hisself. I sensed a conspiracy thar.

"I went to the hotel an' the clerk told me about the alibi o' Lopez speakin' a speech fer a whole hour while the robbery was bein' pulled, an' I smiled because that fitted in nice with the purchase I had seen him make o' phonograph needles. I saw a phonograph an' some funny-lookin' records

in his room. All he did was turn on a record o' his own—homemade—o' his own voice to fool the clerk, while he was doing the robbery. I reckon he went in an' out the winder. I arrested Lopez an' brought him here an' then telephoned Bert Clark, who lives on Blue Creek, right near Lopez's ranch. I asked Bert to go over an' see ef thar wasn't a pet eagle roostin' somewhar around the Lopez rancho. Bert jus' phoned back that there was, an' that the eagle had confessed."

Even the downcast Lopez, who had lost all hope as he had heard Shorty explain the arrest, lifted surprised eyes at that remark.

"The eagle confessed?" echoed Sheriff Cook, perplexed.

"Yes," said Shorty. "Bert caught him. Seems the eagle was quite tame an' roostin' on a fence whar it had jus' lit when Bert found it. Bert caught it—an' around one laig was a stout piece o' string, attached to a canvas bag, an' in the bag, Bert says, was a handful o' diamonds. A hand at the place told Bert that Lopez had trained the eagle to fly home from wharever it was released. The hand also said that Lopez had fired his foreman las' week an' that the foreman had gone to Denver. I reckon, boss, that it was the foreman, directly or indirectly, as tipped the Denver police about the comin' robbery in Monte Vista, as they warned us. Bert says Lopez an' his foreman were once purty thick, an' no doubt the foreman knew o' Lopez's plans an' talked in Denver to git even!"

'Strange birds!' said the sheriff. "Put Lopez in his cage!"





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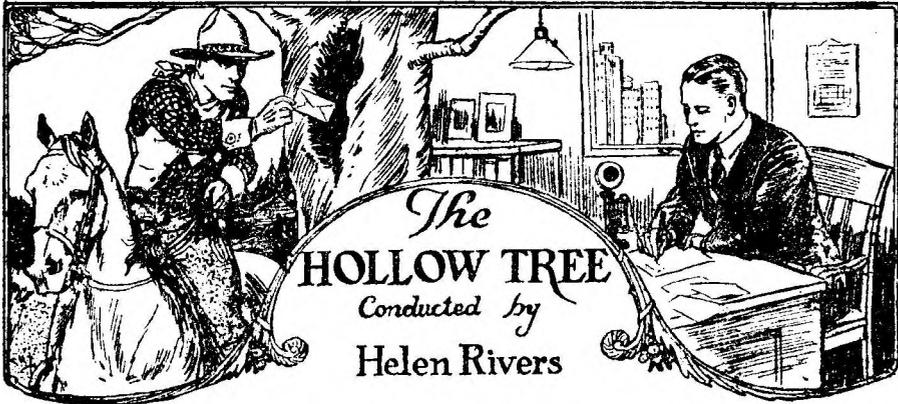
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Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you. It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

ON the edge of the great plains in western Texas, where the range land is drained by three branches of the River Concho, is San Angelo, in the heart of the stock country.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: A few years back, San Angelo was just one of the small ranch towns of west Texas. It is still the old ranch town of a few years ago, only now it has grown in size and importance. Out from San Angelo there are ranches varying in size from a thousand acres to twenty thousand and up to two hundred and fifty thousand acres.

The country around San Angelo is mostly flat ranch land, although we are at an elevation of two thousand five hundred feet above the sea level. This is a wonderful country. The summers are long, and usually the winters are short and mild. West Texas has only one drawback in my estimation—the sand storms that come in the spring. But they do not occur very often, nor last very long. San Angelo can boast of three branches of the Concho running through the town. The Concho is a tributary of the Colorado, which rises on the edge of the great plains of northwestern Texas.

To the south of us, two hundred miles, are the real mountains of Texas. Here, between the Pecos and the Rio Grande are the Guadalupe, Sierra Blanca, Eagle, Apache, Sierra Hueca, and Davis Mountains. I have a few

snaps of round-ups taken in the Davis Mountains, close to Alpine, Texas.

Now, folks, I am not a Southerner by birth, having been raised in the pine woods of the North, but Texas is my State by adoption, and I am here to stay. I have been through and lived in a great number of our wonderful States, but, folks, give me west Texas. A WEST TEXAS MRS.

Care of The Tree.

Trekking West.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I'm quite a jump east of the Rockies, and considerable off my home range, but I'm heading back to the wide-open spaces soon now, and I'll be needing a good pard, because I'm figuring strong on wrangling a little spread of my own.

I've spent considerable time in Arizona, and I've roamed some in New Mexico, and down in Texas, where the West begins. Yes, I was born in the good old Longhorn State. I've seen California, and dipped down into Mexico. I'm thinking it's about time I trekked back to the home range to wrangle my own spread.

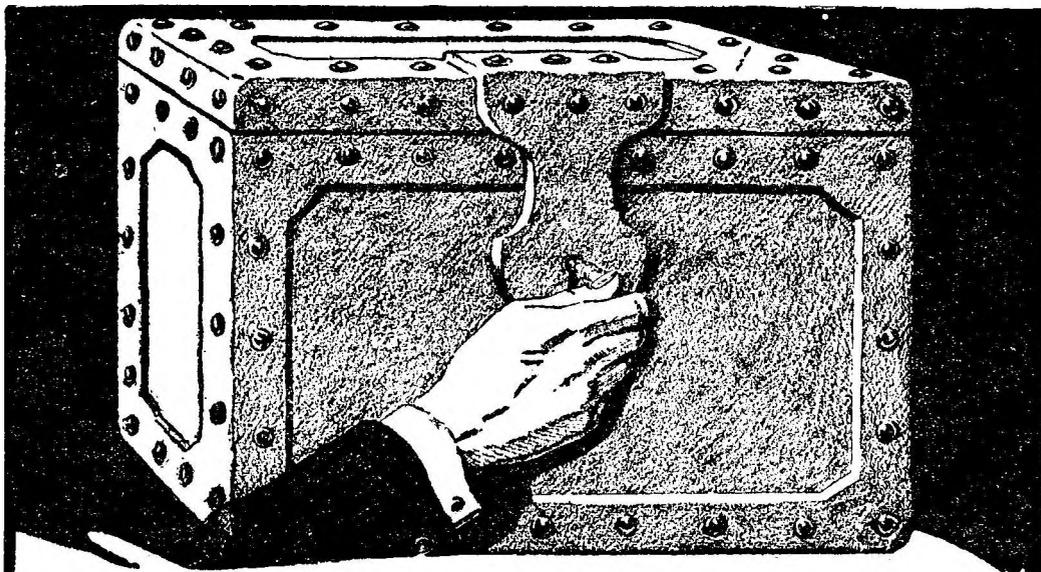
Pards, who treks with me?

TEXAS JACK.

Care of The Tree.

Wyoming's range.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: There are thousands of acres of free grazing land in Wyoming.



Unlocking For You the Age-Old Secrets of Magic

Baffling secrets of the world's greatest magicians—mysteries never before divulged—supernatural effects of the Orient—massive stage illusions—the most priceless, most treasured Secrets of the Magic Profession now—*for the first time*—disclosed to YOU in the great Tarbell Course in Magic. Learn to perform like a real magician in a short time—in your spare time—at home. Be the life of every party—the center of every crowd, wherever you go. Business and social success are YOURS when you know Magic. And it's EASY with the Tarbell System!

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Name

Address

City and State..... Age.....

Are there any hombres who want to come out here and run some stock on it? This Wyoming range is one of the best locations in the West for the successful raising of stock, and I'm looking for a pard who has an idea he'd like to make Wyoming his stomping ground and start a cattle ranch. I was raised on a ranch right here in Wyoming, and I've seen a good bit of the West outside of Wyoming as well. In fact, I've looked around a bit in more than forty of our States, and taken a *pasear* down into Old Mexico. But I'm right back where I started from, folks, and am here to tell you-all that the Wyoming range is good enough for me.

JESSE A. WIGHT.

Kirby, Wyoming.

Old-timer.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: When I was five years old, I came all the way from Missouri to Texas in a mule wagon. We were a month on the way, and finally landed on a ranch in Brown County. Although I was raised in central Texas, I've been all over the Longhorn State as well as half a dozen or so of the other Western States, but it's west Texas for me.

I'd like to hear from some of the old-timers of the West, and from everybody who's interested in the good old State of Texas.

M. H. SMITH.

Box 424, Nacogdoches, Texas.

The Northwest.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I'm a native of the Northwest—Oregon is my home. I've never strayed very far from the Northwestern range, which includes Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. I've been all over the aforesaid States, and strayed down into California and Nevada, but Oregon is my home range. I've worked at about everything, from braking on a railroad to herding sheep, and I'm here to tell you-all that I know the working conditions of our great Northwest pretty well. I was trained to spend most of my time inside of a cook shack, but I seldom follow my trade, for I like the outdoors and stock too well.

I'll be glad to hear from you folks who are interested in the Northwest.

ALEX DOWNING.

Care of The Tree.

Far from the Nebraska range.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Nebraska is where I was born, and where I would have liked to

have spent my seventeen years. Some day soon I'm going back there, and I'm going to hear the squeak of new saddle leather!

Cowboys of Nevada, ranchers of Nevada, and Gangsters from Nevada, I want to hear from you-all. My trail will soon lead out Nevada way.

RICHARD KAHLER.

Mifflinburg Park, Pennsylvania.



Are you looking for pals from the heart of the stock country? Then tell the Owl about it, and wear the little friend-maker Hollow Tree badge of friendship.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City, will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

Would-be Westerner.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Somewhere in that wide land of the West I know there is the sort of a pard I am looking for—one who loves to spend a night under a desert sky. As for myself, I'm an orphan, twenty-one, and I've turned my hand at most everything, including work in the harvest fields and lumber camps. Hombres, I hope you'll extend a hand of welcome to an Easterner.

FREDDIE SMELTZER.

53 South Avenue, Rochester, New York.

Paw Creek.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: My husband and I are anxious to go West as soon as possible, for my husband's health. We want to get into a climate that will cure weak lungs, and we'll probably want to have a small truck or poultry farm.

Please don't overlook us, folks, for we need your advice.

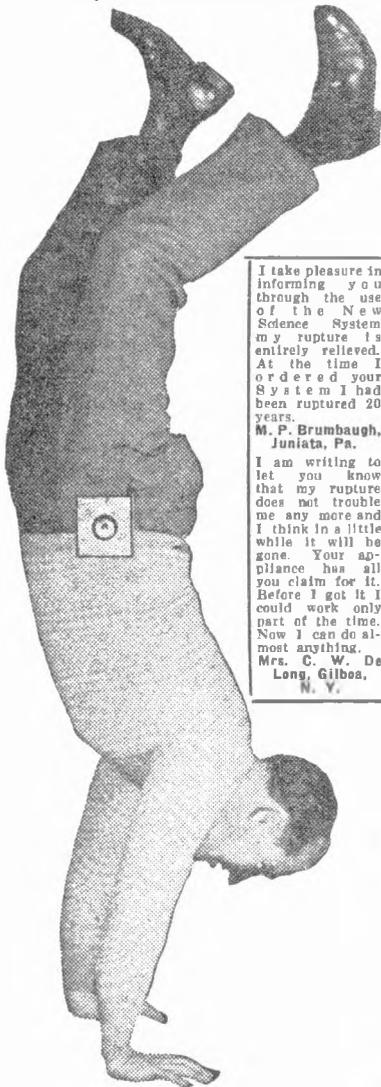
ZULA BAKER.

Paw Creek, North Carolina.

A Southern plantation.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I live on a plantation in Louisiana, but that doesn't mean that I don't know Western ranch life, for I have spent many summers on ranches in Texas and Utah. I love the Southern plantation life, but I think the ranch life is best. We are

Button Rupture Newest Way [Without Pressure]



I take pleasure in informing you through the use of the New Science System my rupture is entirely relieved. At the time I ordered your System I had been ruptured 20 years.

M. P. Brumbaugh,
Juniata, Pa.

I am writing to let you know that my rupture does not trouble me any more and I think in a little while it will be gone. Your appliance has all you claim for it. Before I got it I could work only part of the time. Now I can do almost anything.

Mrs. C. W. De Long,
Gilboa,
N. Y.

SCIENCE now advises discarding cruel steel springs, barbarous leg straps, and other harness that press against the rupture and thus prevent nature from healing it. A new sensible method has been perfected, after thousands of test cases, called Magic Dot—entirely different from any other way. Instead of “pressing” it “seals” rupture, and of course allows users to run, jump, bend and cough in perfect safety.

Breathes Air

With this 1-25th oz. device is a new kind of pad, air-porous and washable. It actually breathes air, and cannot slip off the rupture—a feature, you'll frankly admit, that is lacking in your present appliance. In fact, it is so superior and different that it is praised by physicians as “an entirely new departure.” Users report they have forgotten they are wearing it. But don't buy it yet.

See It First

By a special arrangement you can now have it sent to your home without obligation to wear it. Don't send a penny or order it now. Just mail the coupon for full description of “Magic Dot” and details of this unusual offer. Act now for quick relief. Write your name and address on the coupon and mail it today!

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(Print Address and Be Sure of Reply.)

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about four miles from the village, and everybody rides horseback hereabouts. I have a saddle horse that I call Silver, and we often get up as early as four o'clock in the morning and ride before breakfast.

I have some snaps of the Southern woods, with the big, moss-covered trees. I'll be glad to exchange them with the Gangsters if they wish. I'd like to hear from the girls of the Gang, from everywhere.

MARY FRANCES HUMPHREYS.

Route 4, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

On the shore of Lake Michigan.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: I'm a fifteen-year-old boy living in Two Rivers, Wisconsin. Two Rivers is a hundred miles south of Milwaukee, on the shore of Lake Michigan, and is seven miles south of Manitowoc.

I would like to have Pen Pals who are interested in collecting autographed photos, as I have a collection of several hundred of them.

DAVID BENSMAN.

Two Rivers, Wisconsin.

"Will you let an Arkansan join the Gang? My home is on a farm, in the hills of southern Arkansas. We do not have many near neighbors, and I confess it is lonesome sometimes." This Gangster is interested in exchanging snaps and post cards. Her address is Mary E. Cook, Wickes, Arkansas.

"I would like to hear from some one who lives on the Arizona desert," says Ruthie Worley, Box 572, Paducah, Texas. This Gangster is sixteen, and would like to exchange snaps with other Western girls.

"Am wondering if the old Owl will hoot for me, too. I am nineteen, and live in West Virginia. I'd like very much to get letters from the Philippine Islands, from Texas, Idaho, Missouri, and Arizona." This Gangster is Georgia Pitzenberger, Clifftop, West Virginia.

"I am planning to go to California some time and would like to take up poultry raising. Am a married man, and have four children. I have selected the vicinity of San Bernardino as a

likely locality. I'd like to hear what you folks around that part of the country have to say about it." Write to M. J. A. Shinnors, 28 Conklin Street, Poughkeepsie, New York, folks, and give him the advice he needs.

"Would like to get acquainted with some fellow Gangsters living in the West, as I am planning a trip out there this spring," says J. A. Welker. Address this Gangster at R. R. 1, St. Thomas, Pennsylvania.

"I would like to correspond with any one under twenty-one, as I am eighteen myself. I'd like to hear from South America, Spain, Egypt, or, in fact, from anywhere. I am a lonely sailor, at present stationed in Hawaii." This Gangster is Edward Sanderson, United States Submarine Base, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

"We live in the land of fruits and flowers, and we are very anxious to correspond with some of the hombres in the Pittsburgh steel mills, or any other large industrial plants," says G. W. Sullivan, Route 3, De Queen, Arkansas.

"Let's hear about your experiences with the rod, the trap, and the gun," says Harry Bell, Route 2, Boswell, Pennsylvania. This Gangster would like to hear from the boys of eighteen to twenty-five who are interested in hunting, fishing, and trapping.

The Saskatchewan prairies.

DEAR MISS RIVERS: Most folks know that Saskatchewan is noted as one of the best grain-growing countries in the North. I have spent three years right in the midst of this country. I am a young fellow, working my first year as grain buyer. My three years previous to this year were spent in learning a few things about grain, and during that time I helped to handle better than six hundred thousand bushels.

You folks who would like to hear from the Saskatchewan country, please get busy. I'm mighty lonesome for your letters, folks.

W. L. BERGERSEN.

Colgate, Saskatchewan, Canada.



WIN \$3,500.00!

Here's news for puzzle fans: C. W. Francis, Matilda Hixens, A. F. Holt, Miss Leola Markus, Alvin Smith won from \$1,400.00 to \$3,500.00 each in some of our last puzzles. Over 800 cash prizes awarded within a year. In Oct. 1928 alone we paid over \$11,000.00 in prizes and in the next few months will award between 300 and 400 cash prizes in our puzzles. Here's a new puzzle for you.

Find the "Different" Picture

Here are twelve pictures of Charlie Chaplin, the world famous United Artists star. No, they're not all alike, even though they look alike. Eleven of them are exactly alike, but one and only one is different from all the others. That's the real Charlie Chaplin. (Can you find him? The difference may be in the hat, shirt or tie.)

300 CASH PRIZES—300 prizes totaling over \$1,800.00. \$3,500.00 to the winner of first prize and duplicate prizes in case of ties. If you can find the "Different" figure you may be the one to get this great prize.

CERTIFICATE FOR \$1,000.00 TO APPLY ON GRAND PRIZE SENT AT ONCE AS BELOW IF YOU FIND "DIFFERENT" FIGURE

If you find the real Charlie Chaplin we will send, as soon as correct answer is received, certificate for \$1,000.00 to add to the first prize of \$2,500.00 if you win, and directions for getting largest prize. We spend over \$100,000.00 this way each year to advertise our products locally. No cost or obligation. Nothing to buy now, later or ever. Everyone rewarded if actively interested. Just send the number of the "different" Chaplin in a letter or on a postcard. That's all. Send no money.

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33x4 1/2	3.25	1.45
34x4 1/2	3.50	1.75
30x5	3.05	1.75
33x3	3.65	1.75
29x4.40	2.35	1.10
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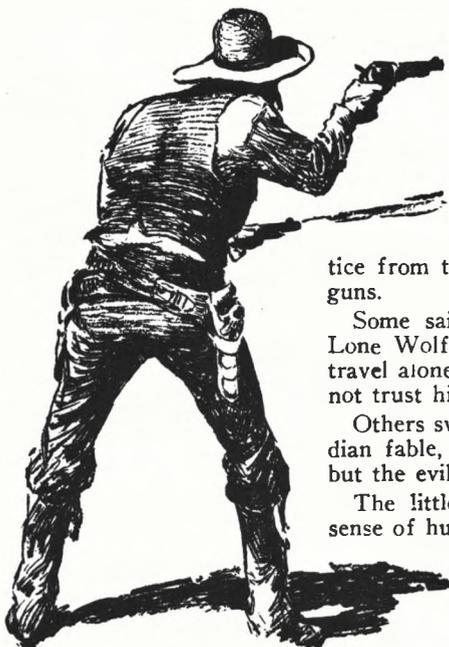
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